

Wicked

A PRETTY LITTLE LIARS NOVEL

SARA SHEPARD

HARPERTEEN

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The sun also shines on the wicked

-SENECA

INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW. . . .

Wouldn't it be nice to know exactly what people are thinking? If everyone's heads were like those clear Marc Jacobs totes, their opinions as visible as a set of car keys or a tube of Hard Candy lip gloss? You'd know what the student casting director *really* meant when she said, "Good job," after your *South Pacific* audition. Or that your cute mixed doubles partner thinks your butt looks hot in your Lacoste tennis skirt. And, best of all, you wouldn't have to guess whether your best friend was mad that you ditched her for the hot senior with the crinkly-eyed smile at the New Year's Eve party. You'd just peek into her head and know.

Unfortunately, everyone's heads are locked tighter than the Pentagon. Sometimes people give away clues to what's going on inside—like the casting director's grimace when you missed that high A-sharp, or how your best friend frostily ignored all your texts on January 1. But

more often than not, the most telling signs go unnoticed. In fact, four years ago, a certain Rosewood golden boy dropped a huge hint about something horrible going on inside his nasty little head. But people barely raised an eyebrow.

Maybe if someone had, a certain beautiful girl would still be alive.

The bike racks outside Rosewood Day overflowed with colorful twenty-one-speeds, a limited edition Trek that Noel Kahn's father had gotten directly from Lance Armstrong's publicist, and a candy pink Razor scooter, shined to a sparkle. Seconds after the last bell of the day sounded and the sixth-grade class began to pour into the commons, a frizzy-haired girl skipped clumsily to the rack, gave the scooter an affectionate pat, and began to undo the bright yellow Kryptonite U-lock around its handlebars.

A flyer flapping against the stone wall caught her eye. "Guys," she called to her three friends by the water fountains. "C'mere."

"What is it, Mona?" Phi Templeton was busy untangling the string of her new butterfly-shaped Duncan yo-yo.

Mona Vanderwaal pointed at the piece of paper. "Look!"

Chassey Bledsoe shoved her purple cat-eye glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Whoa."

Jenna Cavanaugh bit a baby pink fingernail. "This is huge," she said in her sweet, high-pitched voice.

A gust of wind kicked up a few stray leaves from a carefully raked pile. It was mid-September, a few weeks into the new school year, and autumn was officially here. Every year, tourists from up and down the East Coast drove to Rosewood, Pennsylvania, to see the brilliant red, orange, yellow, and purple fall foliage. It was like something in the air made the leaves there extra gorgeous. Whatever it was made everything else in Rosewood extra gorgeous, too. Shiny-coated golden retrievers that loped around the town's well-kept dog parks. Pink-cheeked babies carefully nestled in their Burberry-by-Maclaren strollers. And buff, glowing soccer players running up and down the practice fields of Rosewood Day, the town's most venerable private school.

Aria Montgomery watched Mona and the others from her favorite spot on the school's low stone wall, her Moleskine journal open on her lap. Art was Aria's last class of the day, and her teacher, Mrs. Cross, let her roam the Rosewood Day grounds and sketch whatever she liked. Mrs. Cross insisted it was because Aria was such a superior artist, but Aria suspected it was actually because she made her teacher uncomfortable. After all, Aria was the only girl in the class who didn't chatter with friends during Art Slide Day or flirt with boys when they were working on pastel still lifes. Aria wished she had friends, too, but that didn't mean Mrs. Cross had to banish her from the classroom.

Scott Chin, another sixth-grader, saw the flyer next. "Sweet." He turned to his friend Hanna Marin, who was

fiddling with the brand-new sterling-silver cuff bracelet her father had just bought her as an *I'm sorry Mom and I are fighting again* present. "Han, look!" He nudged Hanna's ribs.

"Don't *do* that," Hanna snapped, recoiling. Even though she was almost positive Scott was gay—he liked looking through Hanna's *Teen Vogues* almost more than she did—she hated when he touched her doughy, yucky stomach. She glanced at the flyer, raising her eyebrows in surprise. "Huh."

Spencer Hastings was walking with Kirsten Cullen, chattering about Youth League field hockey. They almost bumped into dorky Mona Vanderwaal, whose Razor scooter was blocking the path. Then Spencer noticed the flyer. Her mouth dropped open. "Tomorrow?"

Emily Fields nearly missed the flyer, too, but her closest swimming friend, Gemma Curran, looked over. "Em!" she cried, pointing at the sign.

Emily's eyes danced over the headline. She shivered with excitement.

By now, practically every Rosewood Day sixth-grader was gathered around the bike rack, gawking at the piece of paper. Aria slid off the wall and squinted at the flyer's big block letters.

Time Capsule Starts Tomorrow, it announced. *Get ready! This is your chance to be immortalized!*

The nub of charcoal slipped from Aria's fingers. The Time Capsule game had been a school tradition since

1899, the year Rosewood Day was founded. The school forbade anyone younger than sixth grade to play, so finally getting to participate was as big a rite of passage as a girl buying her first Victoria's Secret bra . . . or a guy, well, getting excited over his first Victoria's Secret catalogue.

Everyone knew the game's rules—they'd been passed down by older brothers and sisters, outlined on MySpace blogs, and scribbled on the title pages of library books. Each year, the Rosewood Day administration cut up pieces of a Rosewood Day flag and had specially selected older students hide them in places around Rosewood. Cryptic clues leading to each piece were posted in the school lobby. Whoever found a piece was honored in an all-school assembly and got to decorate it however they wanted, and all the reunited pieces were sewn back together and buried in a time capsule behind the soccer fields. Needless to say, finding a piece of the Time Capsule flag was a *huge* deal.

"Are you going to play?" Gemma asked Emily, zipping up her Upper Main Line YMCA swimming parka to her chin.

"I guess so." Emily giggled nervously. "But do you think we have a shot? I hear they always hide the clues in the high school. I've only been in there twice."

Hanna was thinking the same thing. She hadn't even been in the high school *once*. Everything about high school intimidated her—especially the beautiful girls who went there. Whenever Hanna went to Saks at the King James

Mall with her mom, there would inevitably be a group of Rosewood Day high school cheerleaders gathered at the makeup counter. Hanna always covertly watched them from behind a rack of clothes, admiring how their low-slung jeans fit perfectly around their hips, how their hair hung straight and shiny down their backs, and how their smooth, peachy skin was blemish-free even without foundation. Before she went to sleep every night, Hanna prayed that she would wake up a beautiful Rosewood Day cheerleader, too, but every morning it was the same old Hanna in her heart-shaped makeup mirror, her hair poop brown, her skin blotchy, and her arms like chunky sausages.

“At least you know Melissa,” Kirsten murmured to Spencer, also overhearing what Emily said. “Maybe she was one of the people who hid a piece of the flag.”

Spencer shook her head. “I would’ve heard about it already.” It was as much an honor to be selected to hide a piece of the Time Capsule flag as it was to find one, and Spencer’s sister, Melissa, never failed to brag about her Rosewood Day responsibilities—especially when her family played Star Power, the game where they went around the table describing their most ambitious accomplishment of the day.

The school’s heavy double doors opened, and the remaining sixth-graders spilled out, including a group of kids that seemed to have walked right out of a page of a J. Crew catalogue. Aria returned to the stone wall

and pretended to be busy sketching. She didn't want to make eye contact with any of them again—a few days ago, Naomi Zeigler had caught her staring and cawed, “What, are you in *love* with us?” These were the sixth-grade elite, after all—or, as Aria called them, the Typical Rosewoods.

Every single one of the Typical Rosewoods lived in gated mansions, multi-acre-spanning compounds, or luxurious converted barns with horse stables and ten-car garages. They were such cookie cutters: the boys played soccer and had ultra-short haircuts; the girls had the exact same laughs, wore matching shades of Laura Mercier lip plumper, and carried Dooney & Bourke logo bags. If Aria squinted, she couldn't tell one Typical Rosewood from another.

Except for Alison DiLaurentis. No one mistook Alison for anyone else, ever.

And it was Alison leading the crowd down the school's stone path, her blond hair streaming behind her, her sapphire blue eyes sparkling, her ankles steady in her three-inch platforms. Naomi Zeigler and Riley Wolfe, her two closest confidantes, followed directly behind her, hanging on her every move. People had been bowing down to Ali ever since she'd moved to Rosewood in third grade.

Ali approached Emily and the other swimmers and stopped short. Emily was afraid Ali was going to tease them all about their dry, greenish-tinted, chlorine-damaged hair—*again*—but Ali's attention was elsewhere. A sneaky smile crept over her face as she read the flyer. With a quick flip of

her wrist, she tore the paper off the wall and spun around to face her friends.

“My brother’s hiding one of the pieces of the flag tonight,” she said, loud enough for everyone else in the commons to hear. “He already promised to tell me where it is.”

Everyone began to murmur. Hanna nodded with awe—she admired Ali even more than the older cheerleaders. Spencer, on the other hand, seethed. Ali’s brother wasn’t supposed to *tell* her where he was hiding his Time Capsule piece. That was cheating! Aria’s charcoal crayon flew furiously over her sketchbook, her eyes fixed on Ali’s heart-shaped face. And Emily’s nose tickled with the lingering vanilla scent of Ali’s perfume—it was as heavenly as standing in the doorway of a bakery.

The older students began to descend the high school’s majestic stone steps across the commons, interrupting Ali’s big announcement. Tall, aloof girls and preppy, handsome guys ambled past the sixth-graders, heading for their cars in the auxiliary lot. Ali watched them coolly, fanning her face with the Time Capsule flyer. A couple of puny sophomores, white iPod headphones dangling from their ears, looked downright intimidated by Ali as they unlocked their ten-speeds from the rack. Naomi and Riley snorted at them.

Then a tall blond junior noticed Ali and stopped. “What up, Al?”

“Nothing.” Ali pursed her lips and stood up straighter. “What’s up with you, *Eee?*”

Scott Chin elbowed Hanna, and Hanna blushed. With his tanned, gorgeous face, curly blond hair, and stunning, soulful hazel eyes, Ian Thomas—*Eee*—was second on Hanna’s All-Time Hottie list, just under Sean Ackard, the boy she’d crushed on since they were on the same kickball team in third grade. It was unclear how Ian and Ali knew one another, but the gossip said upperclassmen invited Ali to their A-list parties, despite the fact that she was a lot younger.

Ian leaned against the bike racks. “Did I hear you saying you know where a piece of the Time Capsule flag is?”

Ali’s cheeks pinkened. “Why, is someone jealous?” She shot him a saucy grin.

Ian shook his head. “I’d keep it down, if I were you. Someone might try and steal your piece from you. It’s part of the game, you know.”

Ali laughed, as if the idea was incomprehensible, but a wrinkle formed between her eyes. Ian was right—stealing someone’s piece of the flag was perfectly legal, etched in the Time Capsule Official Rule Book that Principal Appleton kept in a locked drawer of his desk. Last year, a ninth-grade goth boy had stolen a piece that was dangling out of a senior crew member’s gear bag. Two years ago, an eighth-grade band girl had snuck into the school’s dance studio and stolen *two* pieces from two beautiful, thin ballerinas. The Stealing Clause, as it was known, leveled the playing field even more—if you weren’t smart enough to figure out the clues that would allow you to find the

pieces, then maybe you were cunning enough to snag one from someone's locker.

Spencer gazed at Ali's perturbed expression, a thought slowly forming in her mind. *I should steal Ali's piece of the flag.* More than likely, everyone else in sixth grade would simply let Ali find the piece *completely unfairly*, and no one would dare to take it away from her. Spencer was tired of Ali getting everything handed to her so easily.

The same idea formed in Emily's mind. *Imagine if I stole it from Ali*, she thought, shuddering with an unidentifiable emotion. What would she say to Ali if she trapped her alone?

Could I steal it from Ali? Hanna bit an already nubby fingernail. Only . . . she'd never stolen anything in her life. If she did, would Ali invite Hanna into her circle?

How awesome would it be to steal it from Ali? Aria thought too, her hand still moving over her sketchbook. Imagine, a Typical Rosewood dethroned . . . by someone like Aria. Poor Ali would have to go searching for another piece by actually reading the clues and using her brain for once.

"I'm not worried," Ali broke the silence. "No one would dare steal it from me. Once I get the piece, it's going to be on me at all times." She gave Ian a suggestive wink, and with a flip of her skirt, she added, "The only way someone is going to get it from me is if they kill me first."

Ian leaned forward. "Well, if that's what it takes."

A muscle under Ali's eye twitched, and her skin paled.

Naomi Zeigler's smile wilted. There was a chilly grimace on Ian's face, but then he flashed an irresistible *I'm just kidding* smile.

Someone coughed, making Ian and Ali look over. Ali's brother, Jason, was walking straight up to Ian from the high school steps. His mouth tight and his shoulders hunched, it seemed like Jason had overheard.

"What did you just say?" Jason stopped less than a few feet from Ian's face. A crisp wind blew a few stray golden hairs up off his forehead.

Ian rocked back and forth in his black Vans. "Nothing. We were just fooling around."

Jason's eyes darkened. "You sure about that?"

"Jason!" Ali hissed, indignant. She stepped between them. "What's up your butt?"

Jason glared at Ali, then at the Time Capsule flyer in her hand, then back at Ian. The rest of the crowd exchanged confused glances, not sure whether this was a fake fight or something more serious. Ian and Jason were the same age, and both played varsity soccer. Maybe this was a pissing contest because Ian had stolen Jason's opportunity for a goal in yesterday's game against Pritchard Prep.

When Ian didn't answer, Jason smacked his arms to his sides. "Fine. Whatever." He wheeled around, stomped to a black, late-sixties sedan that had pulled into the bus lane, and slumped in the passenger seat. "Just go," he said to the driver as he slammed the car door. The car sputtered to life, coughed up a cloud of noxious-smelling

exhaust, and squealed away from the curb. Ian shrugged and sauntered away, grinning victoriously.

Ali ran her hands through her hair. For a split second, her expression seemed a little off, like something had slipped out of her control. But it quickly passed. “Hot tub at my house?” she chirped to her posse, looping her elbow around Naomi’s. Her friends followed her to the woods behind the school, a shortcut back to her house. A now-familiar piece of paper peeked out of the side pocket of Ali’s yellow satchel. *Time Capsule Starts Tomorrow*, it said. *Get ready.*

Get ready, indeed.

A few short weeks later, after most of the Time Capsule pieces were found and buried, the members of Ali’s inner circle changed. All of a sudden, the regulars were ousted, and others took their places. Ali had found four new BFFs—Spencer, Hanna, Emily, and Aria.

None of Ali’s new friends questioned why she’d chosen *them* out of the entire sixth grade class—they didn’t want to jinx things. Now and then, they thought about pre-Ali moments—how miserable they’d been, how lost they’d felt, how certain that they’d never mean anything at Rosewood Day. They thought about specific moments, too, including that day Time Capsule was announced. Once or twice they recalled what Ian had said to Ali, and how uncharacteristically worried Ali had seemed. Very little faded her, after all.

For the most part, they shrugged off thoughts like that—it was more fun to think about their future than dwell on the past. They were now *the* girls of Rosewood Day, and with that came a lot of thrilling responsibility. They had a lot of good times to look forward to.

But maybe they shouldn't have forgotten that day so quickly. And maybe Jason should've tried a bit harder to keep Ali safe. Because, well, we all know what happened. Just a short year and a half later, Ian made good on his promise.

He killed Ali for real.

1

DEAD AND BURIED

Emily Fields leaned back on the chestnut brown leather couch, picking at the chlorine-dried skin around her thumb. Her old best friends, Aria Montgomery, Spencer Hastings, and Hanna Marin, sat next to her, sipping Godiva hot chocolate from striped ceramic mugs. They were all in Spencer's family's media room, which was filled with state-of-the-art electronics, a seven-foot movie screen, and surround-sound speakers. A large basket of Baked Tostitos sat on the coffee table, but none of them had touched it.

A woman named Marion Graves was perched on the checkered love seat across from them, a flattened, folded-up trash bag on her lap. While the girls were in ratty jeans, cashmere sweats, or, in Aria's case, a beat-up denim miniskirt over a pair of tomato red long johns, Marion was in an expensive-looking deep blue wool blazer and matching pleated skirt. Her dark brown hair shone, and her skin smelled of lavender moisturizer.

“Okay.” Marion smiled at Emily and the others. “Last time we met, I asked you guys to bring in certain items. Let’s put them all on the coffee table.”

Emily offered a pink patent leather change purse with a swirly *E* monogram on the pocket. Aria reached into her yak-fur tote and pulled out a creased, yellowed drawing. Hanna tossed out a folded-up piece of paper that looked like a note. And Spencer carefully laid down a black-and-white photograph along with a frayed blue rope bracelet. Emily’s eyes filled with tears—she recognized the bracelet instantly. Ali had made one for each of them the summer after The Jenna Thing happened. It was supposed to bind them together in friendship, to remind them never to tell that they’d been the ones who’d accidentally blinded Jenna Cavanaugh. Little did they know that the *real* Jenna Thing was a secret Ali was keeping from *them*, not something they all were keeping from the rest of the world. It turned out that Jenna had asked Ali to set off the firework and blame it on her stepbrother, Toby. This fact was one of the many heartbreaking things they’d discovered about Ali after she’d died.

Emily swallowed hard. The leaden ball that had been lodged in the middle of her chest since September began to throb.

It was the day after New Year’s. School started again tomorrow, and Emily prayed this semester would be a little less action-packed than the last. Practically the minute she and her old friends stepped through Rosewood Day’s

stone archway to start eleventh grade, each had received mysterious notes from someone known simply as A. At first, they all thought—in Emily’s case, *hoped*—that A might be Alison, their long-lost best friend, but then workers found Ali’s body in a cemented-over hole in Ali’s old backyard. The notes continued, prying deeper and deeper into their darkest secrets, and two dizzying months later, they found out that A was Mona Vanderwaal. In middle school, Mona had been a *Fear Factor*–obsessed dork who spied on Emily, Ali, and the others during their regular Friday night sleepovers, but once Ali disappeared, Mona transformed into a queen bee—and became Hanna’s best friend. This fall, Mona had stolen Alison’s diary, read all the secrets Ali had written about her friends, and set out to destroy their lives just as she believed Emily, Ali, and the others had ruined hers. Not only had they teased her, but sparks from the firework that blinded Jenna had burned Mona, too. The night Mona plunged to her death down Falling Man Quarry—almost bringing Spencer with her—the police also arrested Ian Thomas, Ali’s super-secret older boyfriend, for Ali’s murder. Ian’s trial was set to start at the end of that week. Emily and the others would have to testify against him, and while getting up on the witness stand was going to be a million times scarier than when Emily had had to sing a solo part at the Rosewood Day Holiday Concert, at least it would mean the ordeal would really, truly be over.

Because all of that was *way* too much for four teenage girls to handle, their parents had decided to call

in professional help. Enter Marion, the very best grief counselor in the Philadelphia area. This was the third Sunday Emily and her friends had met with her. This particular session was dedicated to the girls letting go of the many horrible things that had happened.

Marion smoothed her skirt over her knees as she looked at the objects they'd laid on the table. "All of these things remind you of Alison, right?"

Everyone nodded. Marion shook open a black garbage bag. "Let's put everything in here. After I leave, I want you girls to bury it in Spencer's backyard. This ritual will symbolize laying Alison to rest. And with her, you'll be burying all the harmful negativity that surrounded your friendship with her."

Marion always peppered her speech with New Age phrases like *harmful negativity* and *the spiritual need for closure* and *confronting the grieving process*. Last session, they'd had to chant, *Ali's death is not my fault*, again and again and drink stinky green tea that was supposed to "cleanse" their guilt chakras. Marion urged them to chant things into the mirror, too, stuff like, *A is dead and never coming back*, and, *No one else wants to hurt me*. Emily longed for the mantras to work—what she wanted more than anything in the entire world was for her life to be normal again.

"Okay, everyone up," Marion said, holding out the trash bag. "Let's do this."

They all stood. Emily's bottom lip quivered as she eyed the pink change purse, a gift from Ali when they'd become friends in sixth grade. Maybe she should've brought

something else to this purging session, like one of Ali's old school pictures—she had a million copies of those. Marion fixed her eyes on Emily and nudged her chin toward the bag. With a sob, Emily dropped the change purse in.

Aria picked up the pencil drawing she'd brought, a sketch of Ali standing outside Rosewood Day. "I drew this before we were even friends."

Spencer gingerly held the edges of the Jenna Thing bracelet between her index finger and thumb as if it were covered in snot. "Good-*bye*," she whispered firmly. Hanna rolled her eyes as she tossed in her folded-up piece of paper. She didn't bother explaining what it was.

Emily watched as Spencer picked up the black-and-white photo. It was a candid of Ali standing next to a much younger-looking Noel Kahn. Both were laughing. There was something familiar about it. Emily grabbed Spencer's arm before she could drop it in the bag as well.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Yearbook, before they tossed me out," Spencer admitted sheepishly. "Remember how they did that whole spread of Ali pictures? This was on the cutting room floor."

"Don't throw that in," Emily said, ignoring Marion's stern look. "It's a really good picture of her."

Spencer raised an eyebrow but wordlessly put the photo on the mahogany credenza next to a large, wrought-iron statue of the Eiffel Tower. Out of all Ali's old friends, Emily was definitely having the toughest time handling Ali's death. It was just that she'd never had a best friend

like Ali, before or since. It didn't help, either, that Ali had also been Emily's first love, the very first girl she'd ever kissed. If it were up to Emily, she wouldn't be burying Ali at all. She was perfectly fine with keeping her Ali memorabilia on her nightstand forever and ever.

"We good?" Marion pursed her merlot-colored lips. She cinched the bag tight and handed it to Spencer. "Promise me you'll bury this. It will help. Honest. And I think you girls should meet Tuesday afternoon, okay? It's your first week back at school, and I want you to stay connected and check up on one another. Can you all do that for me?"

Everyone nodded glumly. They followed Marion out of the media room, down the Hastingses' grand marble hall, and into the foyer. Marion said good-bye and climbed into her navy Range Rover, turning on the wipers to knock the excess snow off her windshield.

The big grandfather clock in the foyer began to strike the hour. Spencer shut the door and turned around to face Emily and the others. The trash bag's red plastic ties dangled from her wrist. "Well?" Spencer said. "Should we bury this?"

"Where?" Emily asked quietly.

"What about by the barn?" Aria suggested, picking at a hole in her red leggings. "It's appropriate, right? It's the last place we . . . saw her."

Emily nodded, a huge lump in her throat. "What do you think, Hanna?"

"Whatever," Hanna mumbled in a monotone, as if she'd rather have been anywhere else.

Everyone pulled on their coats and boots and tromped through the Hastingses' snowy yard to the back of the property. They were silent the whole way. Although they'd grown close again during A's awful notes, Emily hadn't seen much of her old friends since Ian's arraignment. Emily had tried to arrange outings at the King James Mall, and even between-classes meetings at Steam, Rosewood Day's coffee bar, but the others hadn't seem interested. She suspected they were avoiding one another for the same reasons they'd drifted apart after Ali went missing—it was just too weird to be together.

The old DiLaurentis house was on their right. The trees and shrubs that divided the yards were bare, and there was a crusty layer of ice on Ali's back porch. The Ali Shrine, which consisted of candles, stuffed animals, flowers, and curling photos, was still on the front curb, but the news vans and camera crews that had camped out for a month after Ali's body had been found had thankfully vanished. These days, the media were hanging around the Rosewood courthouse and the Chester County prison, hoping to get more news about Ian Thomas's upcoming trial.

The house was also the new home of Maya St. Germain, Emily's ex. The St. Germain's Acura SUV was in the driveway, which meant they'd moved back in—the family had steered clear of the house during the height of the media circus. Emily felt a pang as she looked at the cheerful wreath on the front door and the overflowing garbage bags of Christmas wrapping paper at the curb.

When they were together, she and Maya had discussed what they'd get each other for Christmas—Maya wanted tripped-out, DJ-style headphones, and Emily wanted an iPod shuffle. Breaking up with Maya had been for the best, but it felt strange to be completely disconnected from Maya's life.

The others were ahead of her, approaching the back of the two yards. Emily jogged to catch up, her big toe dipping in a muddy slush puddle. To the left was Spencer's barn, the site of their very last sleepover. It bordered the thick woods that stretched for more than a mile. To the right of the barn was the partially dug hole in the DiLaurentises' old yard where Ali's body had been found. Some of the yellow police tape had fallen down and was now half-buried in the snow, but there were a lot of fresh footprints, probably belonging to curious gawkers.

Emily's heart pounded as she dared to look at the hole. It was so *dark*. Her eyes filled with tears as she imagined Ian savagely shoving Ali down there, leaving her to die.

"It's crazy, isn't it?" Aria remarked quietly, looking into the hole, too. "Ali was here all along."

"It's a good thing you remembered, Spence," Hanna said, shivering in the frigid, late-afternoon air. "Otherwise, Ian would still be out there."

Aria paled, looking worried. Emily bit her fingernail. The night of Ian's arrest, they'd told the cops that everything they needed to know about what happened that night were in Ali's diary—her very last entry was about how she was

planning to meet up with Ian, her secret boyfriend, the night of their seventh-grade sleepover. Ali had given Ian an ultimatum—either he break up with Spencer’s sister, Melissa, or Ali was going to tell the world they were in love.

But what really convinced the cops was the repressed memory Spencer had recalled from that night. After Spencer and Ali had fought outside the Hastingses’ barn, Ali had run to someone—Ian. It was the last anyone saw of Ali, ever, and everyone assumed exactly what happened next. Emily would never forget how Ian had stumbled into the courtroom the day of his arraignment and dared to plead innocent to Ali’s murder. After the judge ordered Ian to prison without bail and the bailiffs walked him back down the aisle, she caught Ian shooting them a searing, bitter glare. *You girls picked the wrong person to mess with*, his look seemed to say, loud and clear. It was obvious that he blamed them for his arrest.

Emily let out a little whimper and Spencer looked at her sternly. “*Stop*. We’re not supposed to dwell on Ian . . . or any of this.” She stopped at the back of the property, pulling her blue and white Fair Isle earflap hat farther down her forehead. “Is this a good spot?”

Emily blew on her fingers as the others nodded numbly. Spencer began to dig up mounds of half-frozen dirt with the shovel she’d grabbed from the garage. After the hole was sufficiently deep, Spencer dropped the trash bag inside. It made a heavy plop in the snow. They all kicked the dirt and snow back on top of it.

“Well?” Spencer leaned against the shovel. “Should we say something?”

They all looked at one another. “Bye, Ali,” Emily said finally, her eyes filling with tears for about the millionth time that month.

Aria glanced at her, and then smiled. “Bye, Ali,” she echoed. She looked at Hanna next. Hanna shrugged, but then said, “Bye, Ali.”

As Aria took her hand, Emily felt . . . better. Her stomach unknotted and her neck relaxed. Suddenly it smelled so good back here, like fresh flowers. She felt that Ali—the sweet, wonderful Ali from her memories—was here, telling them that everything would be okay.

She glanced at the others. They all had placid smiles on their faces, as if they sensed something too. Maybe Marion was right. Maybe there was something to this ritual. It was time to put the whole dreadful fall to rest—Ali’s killer had been caught, and the whole A nightmare was behind them. The only thing left to do was look toward a calmer, happier future.

The sun was sinking through the trees fast, turning the sky and snowdrifts a milky lavender. The Hastingses’ windmill slowly rotated in the breeze, and a group of squirrels began fighting near a large pine. *If one of the squirrels climbs the tree, things have settled down for good*, Emily said to herself, playing the superstitious game she’d relied on for years. And just like that, a squirrel scampered up the pine, all the way to the top.

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