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HAPPENS

TO ME

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# IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO ME

**Alex Finlay**



*An Aries Book*

An Aries book

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*For Trace*

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# PROLOGUE

## LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

“We don’t have to ...” Ryan says in a whisper.

Alison doesn’t reply as she drives her father’s pristine BMW sedan down the dirt road, rocks kicking under the tires. She just gives Ryan a half smile and pulls into a secluded opening in the trees that the kids call Lovers’ Lane in some ironic tribute to teenage make-out spots in old horror movies.

She kills the headlights and they sit there in the dark, the only sound a rumble of thunder in the distance and the chirp of crickets.

Without a word, she reaches to the back seat and grabs the rucksack. It undoubtedly will have a blanket, bug spray ... condoms.

Ryan follows her outside to their favorite spot under a large oak tree, the same place where they had their first kiss freshman year, which seems like a lifetime ago—a fog of prom and homecoming dances, football and basketball games, SAT prep courses and college applications. Ali shakes out the blanket and spreads it on the grass. It’s one of those summer nights filled with humidity and hope.

Ryan feels a tiny tremble in his hands, no, in his whole body. He’s been waiting for this night—*aching* for this night—for so long. Yet somehow he’s reluctant, weirdly hesitant.

That disappears when she leans in, kisses him, and electricity roars through every nerve.

Another rumble comes from the sky. The tree’s leaves rattle in the wind.

“I know we don’t *have* to,” she says in his ear, as she lowers them to the blanket.

Goose bumps rise on his neck and ripple down his arms, but Ali must sense he’s holding back. She pulls away. “Everything okay?”

Ryan examines her face, which is shrouded in shadows, but he can make out her elegant features—the wide-set eyes, angular jawline ... those lips ...

“It just feels like the end, not the beginning, of something,” he says. “A

goodbye.”

She smiles. One of her exasperated smiles. “You’re gonna blow this for yourself, Dodge.”

He smiles back in the dark. It was Ali who’d come up with the nickname that will probably follow him the rest of his life. They first met in algebra class in ninth grade. She was the new kid in town. He was the star of the basketball team—a six-four freshman playing first-string varsity, for god’s sake—but she wasn’t impressed. He asked if he could copy her homework. It was both resourceful, since he doesn’t have a math brain, and a lazy effort at flirting.

Ali was having none of it: “Just because you can dodge around that basketball court doesn’t mean everything’s going to be handed to you.” And just like that, he was “Dodge.” And every November through March thereafter, the crowd would chant it from the bleachers:

*Dodge ... Dodge ... Dodge ...*

Her voice breaks the thought. “It’s not goodbye, we’re just going to different colleges. We’ll make it.”

They both leave tomorrow. She’s headed to Bard to study art; he’s off to K-State to ride the bench. He’s a great shooting guard—but only Leavenworth, Kansas, great, not Division I great.

“Your parents made it,” she adds. She’s always been fascinated by his mom and dad, a couple since high school and still lusting after each other. Ryan once told Ali that for years he thought his father, a factory worker at the Great Western plant, had some type of medical training because whenever his mom had an ailment—a sore back, a stubbed toe, a paper cut—his dad would say, “I have the cure,” and his mother would blush, and giggle, and say, “You do, do you?” Ryan remembers the horror he felt in middle school when he realized what his father’s *cure* referred to.

A large raindrop lands on his cheek. Then another. Then there’s a flash in the sky.

“I think the gods are telling us something.” He starts to stand up, but she clutches his arm.

“Stay ...”

He’s tempted, the blood running hot through his veins at the thought of her naked and dripping wet. But the image is shattered by a loud boom, followed by a jagged stroke of lightning less than fifty yards away.

It would be a good way to die, for sure, but even Ali is realizing that

tonight is not meant to be.

As the rain comes down in torrents, they race back to the car. They're both drenched, her vintage Bon Jovi concert tee clinging to her body. They're laughing, a nervous laugh infused with disappointment—and relief, perhaps.

In the car's overhead light, she's so pretty with her hair matted, makeup running, that he leans over and kisses her.

Ali pulls him close and with yearning. She stops a moment. "You're shivering," she says.

"It's from the rain," he says, but it isn't.

She then pulls her T-shirt over her head and says, "I have the cure."

The next moments remain a haze.

A whoosh of the car door ripping open.

A scream.

A crushing blow to the head.

Then it's morning.

Ryan is outside on the wet grass.

The car is gone.

And so is Ali.

# PART 1

## MONTEPULCIANO, ITALY

It's been five years and she's the first woman—first person—to make Ryan smile.

“Why do you want to be a lawyer?” Nora Watanabe asks.

They sit at a tall table at the bar—the only place walking distance from their bed-and-breakfast. It's barely ten o'clock, but the place is clearing out. Everything in Montepulciano closes early, even the bars and nightclubs.

“What, are we on a job interview?” Ryan replies, smiling at her tenacity. It's the third time she's asked. Across the room he sees their classmate Eddie striking out with Italian women who are pretending not to speak English.

Nora narrows her eyes, offers a faint smile of her own.

If Ryan answers her question neither of them will be smiling. The idea to attend law school started five years ago with the criminal defense lawyer Ryan's dad hired when the questions from the police became more pointed: *Had you and Alison been fighting? Were you breaking up? Why didn't you call the police immediately? How could you not see anything?*

They were fair inquiries. There were no clues, no leads, no trace of Ali or her father's BMW.

Over time, the investigators grew impatient, outwardly suspicious. *You're a big guy, why didn't you put up a fight? How could someone just take her?*

But it was their last question—*What did you do to her, Ryan?*—that alarmed Ryan's dad enough that they hired Marty Salinger. Marty came into the interrogation room, told the police Ryan was done talking, and to arrest him or let him go.

They let him go.

But he wasn't free. Not from the suspicions. Not from his own guilt over failing to protect her. Not from his inability to deliver the authorities one viable clue.

Ryan even went to a hypnotist. In the session, he'd recovered a nanosecond of a memory. A face. A plain face, one that the sketch artist threw up his

hands over. And there was the vision of two hands—each one missing the pinky finger—dragging Ryan out of the car. The therapist termed it more of a nightmare, a guilt-fueled image of a monster, than a memory.

Ryan is spared Nora's further interrogation when Eddie plops down on the stool next to them. Ryan agreed to come out tonight only because the others in their group are tiring of Eddie. They're the elite few in their 1L class who made it on to *The Georgetown Law Journal*, a student-run publication for the best and brightest that no one reads. An alumnus donor funds the summer trip every year as a bonding experience for the new editorial staff members with the highest grades. Ryan initially declined the invitation, he found it all a bit too privileged, but was pressured to come by his roommate. Eddie begged him. Said the others wouldn't hang out with him unless Ryan came along.

"I hate Italy," Eddie says, glancing at the women who had shot him down. He's been grouching this way the entire trip, an example of why people find Eddie annoying, if not problematic.

Nora appraises Ryan and Eddie like she's unclear why the two are friends. Ryan isn't quite sure himself. Other than the fact his roommate needs a friend. Ryan's been there.

They make the perilous walk back to the B and B along the roadside path. The area has no streetlamps, and cars and scooters drive unreasonably fast on the narrow motorway carved into the rolling hills.

"Is one Mexican restaurant in all of Tuscany too much to ask?" Eddie says as they walk, their shoes crunching in the gravel. "I just want a taco, is that so wrong?"

Nora gives Ryan a sidelong glance but doesn't say anything.

"And what's with the no ice in drinks, no air conditioning? It's so hot."

Ryan and Nora walk far enough ahead so that they can no longer hear what Eddie's saying. They climb the steep hill that leads into the medieval town.

Like the bar, most of the restaurants and shops are closed at this hour, but there are kids playing in the piazza. A young boy kicks a soccer ball to Ryan, who stops it with his foot, then kicks it back. Nora laughs when the kid points at Ryan and says, "*Gigante! Gigante!*"

Ryan holds up his hands and growls, walking at them like Frankenstein. All the kids run away shrieking with delight.

"The giant," Nora says. "It fits."

Ryan offers a fleeting smile. He's used to nicknames. In high school they called him Dodge. Later, in his first game at Kansas State, the opposing team

shouted a less friendly name from the bleachers:

*Kil-ler ... Kil-ler ... Kil-ler ...*

The harassment was unrelenting. And not just from rival teams. From podcasts. From true crime shows. From internet trolls. So Ryan stopped playing basketball, changed his name from Ryan Richardson to Ryan Smith, and transferred to a new college. He thought the public flogging would end last year when authorities announced that they'd found DNA evidence linking Alison's abduction to the Missouri River Killer. MRK admitted to slaughtering eight women he'd abducted in towns along the river but denied taking Ali. Then his fellow inmates shanked him thirty-seven times, closing the case, and leaving that fucking cloud of suspicion over Ryan.

Ryan's phone glows with an incoming call. He scans the notification. It's from his father, seven hours behind back in Kansas and probably just checking in. Ryan lets the call go to voicemail. He'll call him back.

At the B and B, a converted Tuscan farmhouse on a working vineyard, Ryan says good night to Nora. She holds his gaze a long moment, evaluating him.

"You're not fooling anyone," she says at last.

Ryan feels an instinctive wave of panic. His breath is caught in the back of his throat, waiting, praying her next words aren't about his real name, about his missing high-school girlfriend.

"I know why you want to be a lawyer," Nora says, eyeing Eddie, who pushes through the door into the common area. There's another long pause. "So you can help people." She walks down the hallway to her room, calling, "Good night," over her shoulder.

Right behind Eddie a small group bounces inside led by Aiden and Jake, two other classmates on the trip. On brand, they're too loud, too drunk. And they have four college-age women with them.

"Ryan! Bro!" Aiden says. He grabs Ryan's hand, does the aggressive pull-into-a-shoulder-hug thing.

Aiden gestures to the young women, who likewise have had a few too many. "I want you to meet ..." He pauses, like he's realizing he doesn't remember their names. "Meet our new friends. They're from California."

"We're hitting the pool," Jake adds. "You should join us."

The girls agree.

"Eddie, you too, bro!"

Ryan nods. "We'll meet you over there," he says with no intention of



going swimming. Nothing's worse than being with a group of drunk people when you're sober. But it's easier to agree than to deal with Aiden and Jake. The duo are Kappa Something-or-Other alums who became fast friends the first day of law school. It's shocking they're both so damn smart.

The group stumbles off. One of the young women drags her hand along Ryan's arm as she walks past. "You should come ..."

Eddie shakes his head. "To be you for just one day."

Ryan frowns.

"Where's Nora?" Eddie asks.

"She went to bed."

"And why aren't you there *with* her?"

Ryan frowns again.

"I don't get you, man," Eddie says, watching out the window at the silhouettes stripping off their clothes as they run through the grass to the infinity pool. "The girls fall all over you, hell, the boys do too. I'd kill for just one day in the life."

"Maybe you'd have better luck if you let people get to know you. Just be yourself," Ryan replies.

"Dude, I *am* being myself."

Ryan smiles. "Maybe you should be a little *less* yourself."

Eddie nods like it's good advice.

"You should go swimming," Ryan says, looking out at the group now splashing around in the blue glow of the pool lights.

Eddie thinks about it. "Nah, I'm not getting in the water with the Chlamydia Brothers." Eddie's charming nickname for Aiden and Jake. "Not enough chlorine in the world for that."

"Good night, Eddie," Ryan says. He starts toward his room.

Eddie calls out to him, "I really gotta see this girl someday."

Ryan turns, curious. "What girl?"

"The one you're so hung up on."

\*

Inside his room, Ryan pulls off his shirt. It's oppressively hot. Eddie's not wrong about the air conditioning. He sees that his dad left a voicemail. The guy still can't send a text like a normal person.

Ryan's about to play the message when he spots something on the floor, an envelope, like someone had slipped it under the door. He opens it and his heart trips:

*I need to see you. Tomorrow, 10 a.m. at the Palazzo.  
I know who you are.*

## LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

Poppy McGee wakes with a towering figure glaring down at her. On the frayed poster in her childhood bedroom, Beyoncé wears a sequined mini, holds her legs in a wide stance, hands on hips, casting a sultry gaze.

Poppy used to have that confidence. But after three years in the Army she fears she's lost her groove. It doesn't help that she's back home, sleeping in bright pink sheets with Queen Bey looking disappointed in her.

She gets up, showers, dresses, and stares at herself in the mirror hanging from the back of her door. Her new uniform is an ugly shade of brown and doesn't fit well. At five-one, she looks like a kid dressing up as a UPS driver with a sidearm. She tucks a strand of her long red hair back in the bun, straightens the name tag: DEPUTY SHERIFF MCGEE.

She didn't want the job. Didn't want to come back to this town. But after her abrupt military discharge, her options were limited. And someone needed to take care of her father after Mom died unexpectedly. Poppy had been on the phone with her, their daily call, when her mom said, *I don't feel so good*. And that was that. A stroke. A year before Poppy's twenty-first birthday; a year after Dad's cancer diagnosis.

The hits, as they say, keep coming.

She takes a last look in the mirror, straightens her spine, and heads out of her room.

In the kitchen, she's surprised that her father is up, sitting at the table. He looks tired and weak and ashen. Her older brother, Dash, has stopped by too. There's a grease-stained McDonald's bag on the table, and a handwritten sheet of spiral notebook paper that says: *Congratulations!*

"What's all this?" she says.

"It's your first day ..." Dash says.

Her dad coughs, and Poppy gives her brother a look. This is why she came back. Dash has no judgment about her father's health, about anything, really. The first clue is that he's a grown-ass man and still goes by his high-school

basketball nickname.

“Let’s get you back in bed, Dad,” Poppy says.

“To hell with that,” her father says, reaching for the McDonald’s bag, retrieving a breakfast sandwich, and putting it on the plate in her spot at the table.

“Yeah, chill, Serpico,” Dash says.

“Who the hell is Serpico?” She doesn’t wait for him to reply. She sits at the table and unwraps the McMuffin.

As they eat, Dash jabbars on, her father laughing. Whatever his faults, Dash has their father’s heart, he always has.

When they’re finished, Dash piles his plate in the sink. Poppy says, “I hope this celebration includes cleaning up.”

Dash smiles. It’s an endearing smile that has gotten him through life. He is endearing, if she’s honest about it. Unreliable, but endearing, with his kind heart and Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo* persona, complete with the scruff on his chin. And who’s she to judge? Dash makes good money at the car dealership and isn’t living in his old bedroom.

“I got ya, Sis. Now get on down to the station house. Before we defund you people.”

Her dad laughs too hard, breaking into a coughing jag. The dishes will be there when she returns, she knows, but she decides to let it go.

After getting her father back in bed, moving the chunky cordless landline phone to the nightstand, and telling him to call if he needs anything, she heads out.

The heat hits her like a brick wall. Summer in Kansas would give hell a run for its money. In more ways than one. She drives her father’s Ford Escort down the main street and parks in the garage under the station. It’s a small force, *inexperienced*, the sheriff said during the Zoom interview. He claimed she’d be a welcome addition, with her military police experience.

The inside of the station house is even more sweltering. The woman working the front desk seems to know Poppy is coming, stands up. Explains that the air conditioner is out and that it isn’t always this awful, sweetie. Margaret is her name. Everyone’s so happy Poppy’s there, she says. Says that Poppy’s sweet big brother—a local celebrity after his single season in the NBA who now uses his charm to sell cars—gave her nephew a great deal on an F-150.

Poppy’s office is decent enough. It has pressed-wood furniture, but it’s