

## PRAISE FOR THE LOVE OF MY AFTERLIFE

"This book has it all. Humor, heart, and a heroine I was desperately rooting for. Kirsty Greenwood has a new fan!"

-New York Times bestselling author Colleen Hoover

"Kirsty Greenwood's *The Love of My Afterlife* is an utterly charming romcom that is as hilarious as it is poignant. Reading this book is like receiving a big hug from a dear friend."

-Carley Fortune, New York Times bestselling author of Every Summer After

"Confident and hilarious, I lost a whole day to this book and I don't regret a second. Gave me *The Good Place* crossed with *The Dead Romantics* and *The Ex Hex* vibes; quirky and romantic and oh-so-gorgeously memorable—I only wish I'd written it first!"

-New York Times bestselling author Josie Silver

"If I died in the middle of reading *The Love of My Afterlife*, I hope I'd have the wherewithal to bring it to the afterlife waiting room with me! I had the best time reading this book and needed to know how everything was going to turn out for Delphie.... I'm going to be telling every person in my life to read this book."

-Alicia Thompson, USA Today bestselling author of Love in the Time of Serial Killers

"I think the challenge in writing rom-coms can be to have the laughs interspersed in a story that has real heart—Kirsty does this with aplomb." —*New York Times* bestselling author Sophie Cousens

"A brilliant tongue-in-cheek romp that turns Meant-To-Be on its head. Complicated, dreamy, and hilarious, Kirsty Greenwood can make a romantic out of death itself. *The Love of My Afterlife* is *Where's Waldo* for soulmates, and it's *perfect*."

-Ashley Poston, New York Times bestselling author of The Dead Romantics

*"The Love of My Afterlife* is a gorgeously addictive romp of a romantic comedy with added magic. I adored it."

-Clare Pooley, New York Times bestselling author of The Authenticity Project

"I smiled throughout Kirsty Greenwood's delightful *The Love of My Afterlife*, cheering along at Delphie's madcap romp through London in search of a magic kiss that would, literally, give her another chance at life. An enchanting story of found family, laugh-out-loud chaos, the magic of discovering purpose, and a truly dreamy love story. I adored every page!"

-Uzma Jalaluddin, international bestselling author of Three Holidays and a Wedding

"Nobody does smart, sexy, relatable romantic comedy like Kirsty Greenwood. *The Love of My Afterlife* made me cackle like a maniac, but it's packed with gut-punching raw emotion, too, and so much beautiful truth. Reading it is like hanging out with your funniest and cleverest best friend—I never wanted it to end."

–Isabelle Broom



Berkley Romance New York

#### BERKLEY ROMANCE

#### Published by Berkley

#### An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

penguinrandomhouse.com



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Greenwood, Kirsty, 1982- author.

Title: The love of my afterlife / Kirsty Greenwood.

Description: First edition. | New York: Berkley Romance, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023050033 (print) | LCCN 2023050034 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593816134 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593870341 (epub)

Subjects: LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PR6107.R4445 L68 2024 (print) | LCC PR6107.R4445 (ebook) | DDC 823/.92dc23/eng/20231214

> LC record available at <u>https://lccn.loc.gov/2023050033</u> LC ebook record available at <u>https://lccn.loc.gov/2023050034</u>

> > Ebook ISBN 9780593816141

Cover design and illustration by Vi-An Nguyen

Title page art: Cloud background © AM\_art / Shutterstock Book design by Alison Cnockaert, adapted for ebook by Molly Jeszke

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Acknowledgments About the Author

For my little sister, Nic.

A true ride-or-die friend and the most fearless and mischievous accomplice I will ever know.

## THIS CANNOT BE HOW I DIE.

It really, *really* can't.

Naturally I know not everyone is blessed with the whole old-lady-from-*Titanic* option; drifting off into a toasty sleep, memories of making love to a peak Leonardo DiCaprio there to soften the blow of perishing. But choking to death at the age of twenty-seven? Delphie, *no*.

As I gasp for air, my brain seems unable to compute how I might save myself from this horror show and instead fixates entirely on the mortifying circumstances via which it's playing out.

For a start I'm choking on a burger. Not even a premium or homemade burger but a cheap microwaveable one I grabbed from the corner shop after work. And then there are the clothes I'm wearing as I choke: pickle-green socks paired with the worst of all my nightwear—an over-washed, oversized atrocity with a cartoon of a grinning star above the slogan *Honey, It's Time to Sparkle and Shine!* My TV is paused a quarter way through *The Tinder Swindler,* and my laptop is lit with one solitary tab: a Google page on which I have enquired, "Are microwaveable burgers real meat?"

Who's going to find me in this state? My despicable downstairs neighbour Cooper, who will definitely sneer when he sees my nightie? The police? Rummaging through my private belongings, hunting for evidence of possible foul play? They'd have a tricky time finding anyone with a motive, considering I only know three people in all of London—Leanne and her mum, Jan, from the pharmacy where I work, and old Mr. Yoon from next door.

Oh god, what if it's old Mr. Yoon who discovers me? That must not happen—his heart is way too fragile to handle something as grim as this. Sweet Mr. Yoon! If I'm gone, there won't be anyone to check he's properly extinguished his cigarettes before he goes to sleep. And who will make him a breakfast that isn't just a bowl of boring old cardboardy All-Bran?

At the thought of Mr. Yoon gazing sorrowfully into his cereal cupboard, I fling myself over to a rickety kitchen chair and slam my body over the top in a bid to self-Heimlich. I once saw Miranda on *Sex and the City* do this, and she survived, shaken but emotionally wiser for the experience.

I bash my diaphragm down onto the chair over and over again. Then I clasp my hands together and thump myself in the stomach. Ow. Nothing. Am I punching myself in the correct place? I do it again, this time a little lower. And then again, higher up. It's not working! This chunk of bun and possibly not-real meat is lodged in my gullet and I believe it intends to stay there. Shit.

I race from one side of my tiny living room to the other, searching for something, anything at all that might help me. My beloved *Broad City* baseball cap hanging from the hook on my front door? Useless! Box of unopened Blackwing pencils on the kitchen table? *Come* on, *Delphie!* My eyes zero in on my phone, peeking out from beneath a sofa cushion. I grab it to call an ambulance, but my hands are trembling so much that I can't get a grip. The phone tumbles to the floor, skidding under the edge of my TV stand to live with an entire habitat of dust plus an antidepressant I dropped last month and never quite got around to retrieving.

Argh. Everything's going dark around the edges. My tongue feels weird, heavy, like it's lolling. Is my tongue *lolling*? My knees collapse and I flail theatrically to the ground, head landing with a thud on the lovely soft stripy rug I spent the last three months saving up for.

Oh god.

I think...I think this is actually *it*?

My grand finale. My expiration date. The End. Here lies Delphie Denise Bookham. She died just as she lived: alone, perplexed, wearing something a bit shit.

~

**"OPEN YOUR EYES...THAT'S IT. TIME TO COME TO...** Time to awaken...Aha, there you are! Hey, darling girl."

The stranger's voice is female, a wisp of melodic Irish cadence softening the edges. My eyes fly open. A woman smiles maniacally, small upturned nose barely an inch from mine. I take her in: springy butter-blond curls drawn into a high ponytail, voguish gold specs making the earnest green eyes she's using to openly gawk at me look twice their size. She's wearing an orange lipstick that's bled onto her large teeth, both rows fully exposed to form said maniacal smile. I squeeze my eyes shut. Then I open them again, try desperately to get my bearings. My insides immediately make a fuss when I realise that I'm not in my apartment, where I pretty much always am, but sitting in a strange plastic chair, legs propped up on a floral upholstered buffet like a nana.

Where am I right now?

Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy" echoes from some unknown direction, the reverberation of it eerie and dreamlike. Wide-eyed, I scan the room: pale blue painted walls, a row of aqua-green washing machines lined up in front of me, spinning and gurgling and puffing out warm lavender-scented air at even intervals. Hold up. Is this a launderette? What the hell am I doing in a *launderette*? How did I get here? *When* did I get here?

Above the washers I spot a large framed photo of the bespectacled woman. She's doing a double thumbs-up, her smile at pageant-winner wattage. My gaze slides from the picture on the wall, back to the real-life version crouched beside my chair. She beams like she could not be more delighted to see me. Then she gives me a double thumbs-up exactly like the one in the photo.

Who is this? Where am I? "Uh...uh..."

My panicked brain refuses to assist me in delivering the questions aloud.

"Clever, right?" The woman grins. "No-one ever gets scared in a launderette! Seemed smart to offset such an objectively terrifying moment with the most calming environment I could imagine. And this is it—a lobby that looks and feels like a cosy little launderette! When I was younger and things got a little *ARGH LIFE IS SO HARD*, *WAH WAH WAH*, I'd take myself off to the local outfit and watch all the machines spinning around and around for hours. All those blossomy smells, all those sloshy sounds? *So* comforting, don't you think?"

I flinch as the woman jumps up from her squat, proudly flinging her arms around the room like she's a game show host about to reveal the grand prize.

"The blue on the walls is identical to the colour of the sky just before the sun sets in the last week of June. Took me an age to find the exact right chromaticity. It's this paint shade called Dehydrated Goose, discontinued in ninety-two. But I knew a guy who knew a gal who knew a guy who knew the right guy, and yeah, I eventually pulled it off." She presses her lips together and thrusts her hands into the pockets of her mustard dungarees, swinging lightly from side to side. "The Higher-Ups made it *quite* clear they wanted a cleaner, more 'professional' aesthetic, but I said to them, I said, 'Guys, you can't expect me to be a top-tier Afterlife Therapist without allowing me full autonomy over the environment in which I therapize the deceased. I mean, come on, guys.'...Idiots. Idiots everywhere! It's a gorgeous shade though, isn't it?" She gazes up at the walls, sighs happily, and runs her teeth over her bottom lip, dragging off a bunch more lipstick in the process. "It almost changes hue with the light. Sometimes a chalky lilac grey. Sometimes denim blue. Like the eyes of Jamie Fraser. You know Jamie Fraser? From the Outlander books? What a ride. He's in my top-ten fictional romantic leads. Maybe actually top five. Maybe even top—"

"The deceased?" I manage to cut in.

"Oh yeah...You're dead, sweetie. I'm sorry." She rubs my shoulder gamely.

"What? No...I...Is this a dream?"

I urge my brain to wake itself up. This is the oddest dream I've ever had, and I once dreamed I ran a struggling hair salon with Tramp from *Lady and the Tramp*.

"You choked, remember?" the chatty woman tells me. "On a microwave burger? They *are* real meat, by the way. One hundred percent beef, or as I like to call it, *bœuf*. I recently started learning French in between client arrivals. Not that I'm bored or anything. Not really. Could things pick up a little around here?" She shrugs a smooth, tanned shoulder, mouth bunching up to the side. "Sure. But better a steady trickle of Deads than an ambush, I guess."

### Deads?

My gut spirals as I suddenly remember what happened in my apartment. The choking. I press a hand to my throat and start gasping for air.

"Oh, it's okay. You're totally fine," the woman soothes, crouching back down so that she's eye level with me. "All corporeal physical ailments are eliminated as soon as you arrive here. But the emotional transition period from living to not living can be...tricky. That's where I come in. I'm Merritt, twenty-eight years old—always will be—and my absolute favourite things are curry and romance novels, the hotter the better on both accounts. I'm your assigned Afterlife Therapist."

She shoves out her hand to shake mine and I notice that she's wearing a different statement ring on every finger. One of them is a vintage-looking diamond rose, another is thick black enamel with a skull and crossbones dotted out in rubies. On her thumb is a silver band that reads *Half Agony/Half Hope*. It's like she dipped her digits in a lost property box and didn't much care what came out. I can only stare, so she picks my limp hand up from where it dangles off the armrest and yanks it so enthusiastically that I sort of wobble back and forth in the chair.

"It's my job to make sure you get settled in, don't freak out too much, answer any questions you may have, etc. etc. I will be your main point of contact going forward. Sound good? *Oui?*"

No. No it does not sound good at all. Non.

"I'm amazing at my job, don't worry," Merritt continues breezily. "I started at Evermore—that's what we call it here—about six months after I died. I'm now the youngest woman to be made a full Afterlife Therapist. Most of the other therapists are old cronies in their sixties and seventies, but I guess I just showed a natural affinity for the role. Plus I'm ambitious as fuck."

"Help," I whisper.

"The other therapists don't like it one bit—a hot young woman making waves. They steal all the incoming Deads away before I can get my hands on them." She looks down at her feet for a second, which I notice are shoeless, toenails painted Coca-Cola red. "I could run circles around everyone here if I was just given a fair chance," she mutters grimly. "Anyway, I won't bore you with all that. The point is that two of those old gobshites are on vacation right now, so they didn't get a chance to steal you! You're my first arrival in a whole week! Yay for me. Boo-hoo for you, obviously. But for me? Brilliant."

I watch dumbly as Merritt marches towards a door on the opposite side of the room, a flick of her forefinger indicating that I should follow her.

"Where...where are we going?" I ask, my entire body now trembling so much that the words come out with a vibrato so rapid I sound like Jessie J.

"My office, of course. I can't conduct the enrolment here in the lobby, can I? What if another Dead arrives while you're in the middle of answering an intimate question? Awkward. If there's one thing people always said about me back on Earth, it was that I was a very professional person. Privacy first. Don't fret. I've got you, babe." She sings the last bit in a Cher voice.

Merritt opens up the door, and I'm somewhat comforted to discover that it leads to a very nice, relatively normal-looking office. There are candles everywhere, the flames a warm shimmering pink colour. In the middle of the room stands a glass desk, covered with knickknacks, including three totally thriving plants, a waving Japanese lucky cat, and a desk tidy which is empty because the pens it's supposed to be holding are scattered haphazardly across the desk. On the far wall, there's a floor-to-ceiling bookcase absolutely stuffed with books, their spines all the colours of the rainbow. Every single one seems to be a romance novel. Titles like *The Proposal, A Match Made in Devon,* and *The Bride Test.* Merritt sees me looking and selects one of them —a pretty cloth-covered hardback of *Persuasion* by Jane Austen. She presses it to her chest and closes her eyes blissfully, like she's cuddling a puppy. "You can totally borrow anything you like," she says, sliding the book back onto the shelf and dancing her fingers lovingly across the surrounding spines.

"Um, thanks."

Merritt sniffs the air, exhaling audibly. "Roses and black currants. My signature scent." She points to a flickering white candle on a little wooden table. "Gorgeous, right? We have a Diptyque store at Evermore. *C'est magnifique*. Ooh, we must find you a signature scent too. I bet you're a honeysuckle girl, am I right? Prone to introspection, sensitive heart but with a rich inner world. Plenty of passion bubbling beneath the surface."

I blink. What the fuck is happening right now? What is this place?

Merritt throws me a benevolent smile. "Okay. I can see you're perturbed, which...absolutely. This situation is batshit, I know. When I first arrived here, I literally spewed. Why don't you take a seat, rest your bones a moment."

She indicates a white leather spinny chair in front of her desk and then, before I can rest, bones or otherwise, she claps her hands decisively.

"Right! Excellent. Okay." She plucks a clipboard from her desk and scans the paper atop it. "First question is...Would you like to see your life flash before your eyes?"

"Ex-excuse me?" My teeth have started to chatter.

"I *said*, would you like to see your life flash before your eyes? We never used to offer the service, but of course Hollywood gave humans the impression that they got to see their lives pass before their eyes when they expire. And while I love me a well-trodden trope, that one is simply not based in reality. We had a few complaints from disgruntled Deads on arrival, so now we offer it, if you want it. Totally up to you, no presh."

I feel cold. Why is it so cold? I spot a furry blanket draped on one of the other chairs. I grab it and wrap it tightly around my shoulders, bunching it beneath my chin.

"So...do you want it or not?" Merritt repeats, fingernail tapping on the back of the clipboard.

"Uh...um..." I bleat, fingering the corner of the blanket. "Can I go home now?"

Merritt sighs lightly. "Shall we just say yes about the life-flashing-beforeyour-eyes bit? This is the only chance you'll get to see it. If I don't show you now and you change your mind later, then you'll probably be in a mood with me, and that's no way for us to start an everlasting friendship."

I watch open-mouthed as Merritt disappears into a closet before wheeling out a white metal trolley, on which there is a big grey nineties TV and a DVD player. "It doesn't last for too long," she says. "We show what we feel are the most relevant clips, otherwise it would be a massive snoozefest, and while technically we have eternity at our disposal, nobody's got time for that kind of navel-gazing. Like, what's done is done, you know?"

I can only stare as Merritt presses play. Is the DVD already in? Is the player just for show? I'm so confused.

"Here we go!" Merritt says. "Delphie Denise Bookham. This...was...YOUR LIFE!"

**TO A SOUNDTRACK OF STEVIE WONDER'S "ISN'T SHE** Lovely," Merritt's video fades in on an adorable montage of moments from my idyllic childhood. Way before Dad got bored of us and left. Before Mum got a new boyfriend and ran away to join an artists' commune in Texas. This was back when life was as close to perfect as it could be.

I drink in the clips, suddenly terrified to miss a single detail. Look how the three of us cartwheel and roly-poly through long, daisy-dotted grass, snuggle together on a Sunday morning, draw pictures of made-up sea creatures, and dance on the bed to Aretha Franklin. There's Mum letting me try out her shiny cherry-flavoured lip gloss and laughing as I immediately lick it off and ask for more. There I am hanging out at various birthday parties, surrounded by other children, laughing, bright-eyed, cheeky-faced, and chattering nonstop. In a few of the clips, I see Gen, my childhood best friend, our arms flung around each other, the pair of us giggling naughtily at some now forgotten mischief. I look away from the screen, a flicker of shame and sadness sparking in my chest.

"My god," Merritt says, pressing a hand to her cheek. "I thought I was a teen nerd, but you are something else! So cute."

Celine Dion's "All by Myself" starts to play as the video transitions into a clip of me sitting alone at the dining table of our home—the flat I still live in —in West London. I'm carefully cutting out pictures from the *TV Guide* 

magazine and arranging them into collages. At the time I thought my collages were super cool and artistic. I see now they were actually rather odd.

I have all the accoutrements of an awkward teen: the rashy face, the thick glasses, the braces, and a wad of cotton wool poking out of one ear on account of the chronic ear infections I couldn't seem to shake off. The clips fade into each other—me at the kitchen table making my collages, drawing soap stars, wincing as I put in my eardrops, tucking myself into bed. Night after night.

"Sad." Merritt shakes her head.

She's right. It does look sad. It didn't feel sad at the time, when I was drawing and collaging alone. Did it?

The video melts into my time at Bayswater High School. I shrug off the furry blanket as my entire body immediately goes hot. The back of my head starts to thump.

"Can we fast-forward this bit, please?" I ask, knowing that every single memory of that time is a bad one. Those same memories still keep me awake at night.

"'Fraid not," Merritt says. "Once it's on, it's on."

My chest tightens as the screen flickers onto an image of fifteen-year-old me. My skin has cleared up now. The thick jam-jar glasses have been swapped for something lighter, and the braces have successfully straightened out my wonky teeth. My wavy red hair fans out over my shoulders, pretty against the bottle green of Bayswater High's uniform.

I'm pencil sketching in an empty classroom, occasionally taking bites of the cheese sandwich I'd made myself that morning. And then, there she is. Gen Hartley. My childhood best friend, the girl I loved the most, the primary architect of pretty much all my trauma. She slams into the classroom accompanied by her boyfriend Ryan Sweeting. It's almost comedic how on the nose they look, Gen with her shiny curtain of golden-coloured hair, thick layers of blue mascara, tiny skirt. Ryan, handsome and tall for his age, wearing the school rugby kit, his blond hair shaved close to his scalp. If this were a teen movie you'd immediately identify them as the mean kids.