



DEAD FAKE

BLEAK HAVEN BOOK 1

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1

My uncle wasn't always a murderer.

In the photos hidden deep in our attic, there's a smiling man, a kind man. A man who would play with three-year-old me for hours without complaint until, eventually, *I* was the one to grow bored.

My favorite picture shows the two of us in my grandparents' living room, a toy crocodile in his hand, its jaws closed around my tiny finger.

His other hand covers his mouth, his eyebrows raised in surprise while I beam at him.

If one of the so-called experts got hold of this, they would call it a "warning sign." They'd say my uncle got a kick out of scaring children, and claim he was channeling his "inner monster" by playing with plastic ones.

I'd argue that, no matter what he did to the Fairbournes three years later, he loved us without question. No way was I some gateway drug for a psychopath.

Uncle Miles played with me because there was good in

him. It's the same reason he raced to help whenever Mom needed something fixed. The same reason every single person in town smiled as he walked past.

Whatever made him break into the Fairbournes' house and paint their white bricks red, it was more complicated than being pure evil.

I'd ask him if I could. But that night ended with four dead bodies.

They found Shareen Fairbourne in the hallway, with a mail-slot-size slash across her throat.

Her husband, Grant, was in the kitchen, his skull fragments stuck to the blood-soaked hammer glistening on the countertop, and a pair of crossed-out eyes freshly carved into his right forearm.

Their daughter, Maggie, was smothered as she slept, while her younger brother, Archie, cowered in his closet, untouched but forever scarred.

There were so many photos of the Fairbournes that no two news reports were the same. There was Shareen hosting countless charity events, the neck my uncle would later slit adorned with pearls or diamonds or rubies. There was Grant, sole heir to the tech company he sold two weeks after his father's death, so flush with cash that he cut the ribbon on practically every renovated building in Bleak Haven. And there were Maggie and Archie, always in the background, his fingers forced under itchy collars, while she smiled almost as convincingly as her mom.

I learned every horrific detail of that night from the constant news cycle and the journalists shouting my name. Not just mine. All of ours.

When you're related to a murderer, everyone wants a piece

of you. I think, deep down, they hope you are messed up, too. They want to see if whatever twisted glitch made one person do the unthinkable lurks behind the eyes of his kin.

I've cried about it. I've shed entire oceans. But I'm done letting that horrible night define me. Now I deal in facts. Neck. Head. Eyes. And heart.

That was how Uncle Miles died. A single stab wound to the organ everyone assumes had always been rotten.

He was face down in the Fairbournes' backyard, bleeding out from the one good lunge Grant managed before his head was caved in.

He still clung to the weapon that killed my uncle. The crime-scene investigators had to pry it from his hand.

Was he proud of what he'd done and, in contrast, was Uncle Miles ashamed? Even as he tore through that house, killing whoever he found, he tossed each weapon aside as if he wanted no part of it.

If that's true, maybe there was a tiny piece of the person I knew buried deep in the monster he became. Because he *was* a monster and I hate him for that, but, although I can only whisper this when I'm alone in the dark, he wasn't entirely bad.

All I'm saying is even in Bleak Haven, *especially* in Bleak Haven, not everything is as it seems.

2

“How was your ‘date?’” Mason asks as he stuffs more books into his already crammed locker.

I glare at him, then reply, “You’ve answered your own question.”

“Another one?” he says.

“Another one.”

“Seriously! When will people get tired of googling you?”

“It’s better to be safe than sorry,” Willow adds. “I’ve done background checks on everyone I’ve ever met.”

“Everyone?” I ask

My best friend grips my shoulders and says, “Ava! You, of all people, should know that *no one* can be trusted. I don’t blame your potential soulmates for wanting to know everything they possibly can about you before you meet.”

“Isn’t that . . . the point of meeting? To get to know each other?”

“It *used* to be. But it didn’t exactly work for my parents . . . or yours . . . or yours.”

“Mine are still very much married,” Mason says.

“And very much unhappy.”

Mason and Willow fake fight while I peer down the school corridor, waving to Kash as he heads toward the newspaper office, beckoning for me to follow.

My stomach aches as he approaches a group of freshmen blocking his way, mumbling an apology as they edge aside just enough for him to squeeze past. Then I think of the confident kid he was back in elementary school and my heart quickens.

If things were different, dating out-of-towners wouldn't be necessary. If my uncle hadn't killed the closest thing Bleak Haven had to royalty, maybe more boys around here would be interested in me for me—not run a mile when I catch their eye, or try to hook up just to score with a “horror whore.”

I've seen photos of the toilet stalls. I know what they say about me. You can paint over graffiti but our history is everlasting.

“So that's it, then,” I say. “I'm destined to be a cat mom.”

“Or,” Willow says, “you embrace the fact that, whoever you meet, they are going to know who you are.”

“That's fine. If they *like* who I am. But this one . . . *every* one . . . every question they ask is about *him*. ‘Was he angry all the time?’ ‘What was his favorite scary movie?’ ‘Did he tell you what he was going to do?’

“I was six! Do they really think my uncle revealed his plans for mass murder over Thanksgiving?”

“Plus, kids have famously big mouths,” Mason says. “Your secrets are never safe with them.”

“Exactly. I don't mind if someone knows who I am. I *want* them to know. But everyone is either scared of me or creepily fascinated with my family, and I'm sick of it.”

“So screw them!” Mason says. “Solo artists have full creative control.”

Willow shakes her head. “Finding your person is magical.”

“Watching you and *your* person being ‘magical’ is stomach-churning,” Mason replies.

Willow has been dating Conor Abbot since last summer and Mason isn’t a fan.

His eyes glint as she huffs and heads for homeroom. “She knows I don’t mean it. But seriously, Ava, there are more important things than finding someone. I think part of you wants to change your story—from horror to romance.”

“Yes!” I shout. “That’s exactly what I want to do.”

“Or, like Willow said, you could embrace it. It happened. People are interested. Play to your strengths.”

“No. I want someone who . . .”

“Looks and sounds like Kash Ellison?”

“Screw you.”

“Impossible,” Mason says with a smirk. “I’m just saying that we’ve grown up with the stories. Bleak Haven is cursed. Awful shit happens here. But it’s what, ten years since your uncle snapped? Give the next generation what they want. Tell them enough to keep them interested and then dazzle them with your brilliance. Eventually, they won’t care about your uncle’s story. They’ll be too caught up in yours.”

I squeeze Mason’s hand and smile.

I’m lucky to have real friends, especially at a school where cliques change like the weather.

It’s hard to keep up with who’s in love, in like, in hate. But that’s fine when Mason and Willow are my constants.

“I should go,” I say.

Mason points at the office door with a flourish. “You don’t want to keep your editor waiting.”

I kiss his cheek and head inside, where Kash is sitting on one of the two battered leather chairs that we rescued from the dumpsters when the teachers’ lounge got a makeover.

“Hey,” he says over the sound of keyboard taps. “You should see this. I’m writing it up . . . just in case.”

Kash’s chair creaks as it spins, his eyes filling my vision.

I’m used to him speaking with his back turned because, as he likes to tell me, “There is always another story to write.”

That’s how we work, in this glorified closet rebranded as the command center for *The Lighthouse*—Bleak Haven High’s bimonthly newspaper.

We each have a wall to stare at, a desk to fill, a lamp that gets so hot I prefer the glow of my laptop and the erratic tick of the overhead fluorescent light.

On his screen, I read the headline:

Murder Warning!

Then the first line:

How do you report a killing before it’s happened?

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“I have no idea. It’s probably nothing but . . . someone slid this under the door. I found it this morning.”

Kash hands me a red envelope and I pull out a tattered piece of paper that reads:

*Who wants to play Swipe to Die?
Soon everyone will see the first kill.*

“And you’re writing a story on it?”

“No,” he replies. “Maybe. I don’t know. I’m riffing for now. I wanted your advice.”

“My advice is: Take it to Principal Whitlock. And tell him to show the sheriff.”

“It’s just words,” Kash mumbles, his eyes widening as he realizes what he’s said.

I can’t help grinning, because here is the only guy with the talent and the passion to get a school paper off the ground in a town that avoids the news, and he’s telling me words don’t matter.

Then a storm stirs in my mind as I think of the notes left on our doorstep in the first few months after my uncle’s killing spree: neatly written threats tied with coarse string around tiny cardboard boxes.

When I found the first one, I didn’t notice the blood seeping onto the porch. That’s why I tore it open without calling for Mom, my scream shattering the silence as a dead rat landed at my feet.

She ran to me while the rest of the street doubled down on their distance, watching through the safety of their closed windows, as if our entire family was cursed. As Mom read the note, rage and sorrow swirled in her eyes, then she scooped the gutted corpse off the ground with a shovel and I never asked where it went.

I did keep the letter though, fishing it from the garbage and piecing it back together as I tried to fill the gaps in my mother’s explanations. She hadn’t told me yet—exactly what Miles

had done—but whoever wrote the note said my uncle would rot in hell alongside Bleak Haven's other monsters.

After that, whenever a box arrived for us, Mom lifted it off the front porch with barbecue tongs and dropped it straight in the trash. For a while, I carefully slid the notes from under the string but, once I went back to second grade, the worst of my classmates gave me all the vitriol I could take.

“Are you okay?” Kash asks.

I nod and watch him until he looks away. He's the first boy I ever kissed, back when that didn't mean much. Only, to me it meant the world.

When every other kid stepped back like I was contagious, Kash held my hand in crowded hallways. When the mean-girls-in-waiting whispered about my family, he pecked me proudly on the cheek.

I asked him once, “Why are you so nice to me?” and he grinned and said, “Because you've done nothing wrong.”

That was when I almost told him: that I would grow up to be a detective and prove Miles's innocence. Because the more people reminded me how evil my uncle was, the more I remembered his kindness, falling deeper into memories I refused to be tarnished by what came next.

How can someone be so good to one person and so terrible to others? All these years later, I still don't know. But I'm going to find out.

I watch Kash's hands hover over his keyboard and wonder when he stopped liking me like that. But I guess we all change, because back then the thought of high school terrified me. I assumed the dead rats and the bullying would follow me forever, unaware that people's anger at even the worst crimes ultimately turns to fascination.

“If we run this, there are only two possible outcomes,” I say. “One: Nothing happens and we look dumb for turning it into a story. Two: It’s real. Someone dies. And we underestimated the warning.”

I skim the rest of Kash’s story, then say, “Let’s be honest. Nothing in this town is half-hearted. If someone says a murder is coming . . . they’re telling the truth.”

3

I squint as I open the office door, the bright light of the hallway washing over us while I wait for the sound to follow. But something strange is happening, because where there is usually a thrum of excited chatter, now there's only a murmur.

Our classmates huddle around the bulletin boards that hang evenly between the banks of lockers and at either end of the corridor.

It's where our requests for feature pieces or guest articles are usually ignored, where the drama kids learn their roles and the social committee searches for new lackeys. But, when we reach the nearest one, all those faded sheets are lost beneath something else.

People point their phones at the QR code but it's the words above it that I'm interested in.

ARE YOU READY TO BE MURDERED?

"I think it's too late to take this to the principal," Kash says, his arm brushing mine as he holds out his cell.

“What are you doing?”

“Seeing what this is all about.”

He scans the code before I can stop him, then we stare at the website it’s taken us to: www.swipe_to_die.com.

Kash enters his name then clicks Go.

Question 1—How long would you last in a slasher movie?

1. Gutted in the opening scene
2. First kill after the character intros
3. A midpoint murder
4. The big finale

When I glance around, everyone is answering the same questions, and I wonder when they became so stupid. But a piece of me gets it completely. They are obsessed with this stuff and now, finally, they can feed that obsession.

They used to study Bleak Haven’s dark history, or dare one another to ask about my uncle, but now they can race through some multiple-choice quiz on a dodgy website and . . .

“Okay,” Kash says.

I look back at his phone.

Congratulations. You have answered all five questions.

Swipe to Die.

A blood-soaked hand flashes in the left corner, Kash’s finger hovering over it.

“Do it,” someone says, then someone else, everyone challenging one another to be the first. Because they’ve suddenly stopped tapping their phones. Every single person in the hall-

way has simultaneously realized how dumb this is, and a fragile sense of relief rests on my shoulders.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” a girl mutters, and I ignore the eyes that find me in the crowd before darting away.

“It would make a great story,” Kash whispers. “If we were the only ones brave enough to swipe. Then everyone would pick up a copy of the next edition to see what all the fuss is about. We could do a print run today.”

“Too late.” I point at Zoe Whaite, whose coven is squealing and slapping palms, then Mark Prentice, holding his phone aloft like a trophy.

All around us, people are swiping, their screens going black before a single word comes into focus.

Soon!

I knock Kash’s hand away then snatch his phone.

“What are you doing?!” he asks.

“Being careful.”

“You can’t just . . . keep my cell.”

“I *can* until you come to your senses. Whatever is happening, whatever ‘soon’ means, let’s watch from a safe distance, okay?”

“You mean, let someone else get the scoop?”

Teachers appear from their rooms, confusion turning to annoyance as they shout us to class, and I panic, placing the phone back into Kash’s outstretched hand.

I don’t correct him. He thinks everything can be turned into a story, neatly summed up in a few hundred words. Instead, I head to first period, ignoring the excited chatter of all

the people who signed up for some unknown mystery because it's better than the alternative—perpetual boredom.

“You all are vibrant today,” Ms. Swift says, hushing the class with a flick of her arm.

Our English teacher uses words that make me cringe, because my classmates are not “vibrant.” They are reckless.

She catches my eye, her lips suddenly flat, and I focus on the declarations of young love and absent-minded doodles left on my desk by all the people who were here before me.

Nothing is new in this school. Our parents sat behind these exact desks; their parents trod the same creaking floorboards in the gym. Even the paint that the janitors use every summer is somehow peeling by November, as though hidden fingers carve tiny peeholes in every room.

Ms. Swift went here. So did my mom, and my uncle. But you wouldn't know that from the yearbooks. In the only copy I could find, hidden in the depths of the library, their twin faces were scratched out.

I could understand Uncle Miles. But the only thing Mom did wrong was share a womb with a monster.

The lesson washes over me, Ms. Swift knowing better than to throw questions my way. It's not until we stand to leave that she touches my arm and says, “It's probably nothing to worry about.”

“You've seen them?”

She chuckles and shrugs. “They're everywhere, Ava. Someone has used a lot of printer ink.”

“And you're leaving them up?”

Ms. Swift's sigh is long and heavy. “The kids in this town will do what they want. I could rip every flyer off the wall, but that would only get them more worked up. It's better to let

the ones who want to be involved do just that. And the rest of us . . .”

She closes her eyes and I glance at the edge of the scar creeping past her collar.

“Why do you still live in Bleak Haven?” I ask.

My teacher’s eyes spring open. “Why do you?”

“Because I’m sixteen.”

“Fair point. Maybe part of me is still sixteen, too.”

I nod and leave, waiting awkwardly by the water fountain until Mason and Willow arrive. When they do, he rubs clay from the tips of his fingers, while she slowly breaks free of the trance everyone suffers during first-period history with Ms. Han.

I watch more people rushing to the flyers and wonder when they appeared. Were they there when we arrived at school, almost invisible until the first person to notice caused a scurry?

“Tell me you didn’t scan it,” I say.

“We didn’t,” Mason replies, smiling like a puppy who wants a treat.

“He wanted to, though,” Willow adds. “You should be proud of him. I kept repeating ‘What would Ava say?’”

“What *would* I say?”

“You’d say: ‘Don’t be a dickhead.’”

The three of us laugh, our arms linked as we walk past the crowds still clamoring around every corkboard.

“Kash scanned it,” I say. “We’ll find out what’s happening soon enough.”

We head toward the main entrance then stand for a few seconds by the memorial wall—every high school kid who has ever been killed in this town grinning down at us as Willow subtly checks her phone and Mason’s lips move soundlessly.

I stare into the eyes of Maggie Fairbourne and clench my fists as my arms tremble. Then I quickly take in the other framed photos surrounding hers. Ms. Swift's former friends fill almost an entire line and I wonder how she can walk past them every day.

I try to imagine *my* friends up there before vomit stings my throat.

Nine years, three hundred and forty-three days—that's how long it's been since a new face was slid into one of those silver frames. Kids have died, unexpectedly, tragically, horribly, but it takes a certain kind of death to make it onto this wall.

As I reach for Willow's hand, I see the teenagers who drowned in Corpse Creek fourteen years ago, the ones torn apart at the mini mall way back in 1987, the victims of four serial killers, and I wipe away the only tear I'll allow myself to shed today.

"Are you okay?" Mason asks.

I nod and let them lead me away as I think of city hall, where Bleak Haven's other memorial wall, not limited to high school kids, has no space for pictures, only the names of all our dead.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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