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that they live on long after the last page is turned."

—Luanne Rice, *New York Times* bestselling author

R.I.P.  
ELIZA  
HART



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

alyssa sheinmel

**D I P**  
**R I P**  
**ELIZA**  
**HADT**

alyssa sheinmel



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# ELIZA

## life after death

They say it doesn't hurt when you die.

*Dying is easy, comedy is hard.*

I know that expression's about acting, but the fact remains that at some point in human history someone started selling the myth that dying is painless: a slipping-off, a falling-asleep. When I was four years old, my grandmother died and I asked my mom if it hurt and she said no quickly, easily, like the answer was obvious.

I don't think she even knew that she was lying.

But now I know she was.

I know because I died recently.

So recently, in fact, that my hair is still wet and my teeth are still chattering and there are bruises up and down my sides and across my back.

I don't think I'll ever heal. I don't think dead flesh *can* heal. But seriously, am I expected to spend the rest of eternity with blue marks dancing up and down the left side of

my rib cage, a sick sort of tattoo, a reminder of how much it hurt?

I was never particularly religious, but I did believe in the afterlife. Not in *heaven* exactly, but I believed that something came after. If it was possible for there to be a present—life on earth and all that—I didn't really see why there couldn't be something beyond the present. In physics class last year, when Mr. Wilkins droned on and on about the law of conservation of energy, I'm pretty sure I was the only one who took it as proof of life after death.

The point is, it hurts. Don't let them tell you any different. Pressure on your lungs, heart pounding so fast it feels like it's about to burst out of your chest. Your lungs fight for breath, some breath, any breath, just the littlest bit of breath, surely some air can fit around this weight, no nothing, nothing, all oxygen is denied you.

Your body fights to live, live, live, as though it's been training for this all along.

Your heart is beating harder than it's ever pounded before, reminding you of your flesh and blood and bones.

Your temperature drops.

Your skin is so cold that it hurts when the wind blows.

Your hair is frozen into sharp little icicles that feel like pinpricks against your face.

You're suddenly more aware than ever before that the heart is a muscle, because it's every bit as sore as your legs after a long run, your shoulders after a long swim.

Every heartbeat aches. And then, finally, at last, your pulse  
slows:

giving up,

giving in,

letting go.

It hurts. Believe me. I know what I'm talking about.

# ELLIE

wednesday, march 16

I'm supposed to imagine I'm someplace big.

I try to imagine I'm Julie Andrews flinging her arms open wide on a mountaintop in *The Sound of Music*. Or Julie Andrews floating over the rooftops of London in *Mary Poppins*. But I'm not Julie Andrews. I'm Ellie James Sokoloff and I'm about to drown.

Except that technically, my feet are firmly planted on dry ground. Still, I take a deep breath and hold it. Dr. Allen (therapist number two) always said that would only make things worse. *Don't hold your breath!* she shouted every time she stuffed me into the closet in her office, which wasn't an office at all but just a room in the apartment she shared with her husband and kids on the East Side of Manhattan. (Sometimes I'd bump into her kids after a session and I knew they were laughing at my sweat-soaked, tear-stained skin. At the girl who couldn't even play hide-and-seek without having a panic attack.)

Dr. Allen never understood that I *have* to hold my breath. My brain—well, part of my brain, the conscious part, the logical part—knows I'm not actually underwater, but my lungs have other ideas. Nothing the logical part of my brain says can convince my lungs that they're safe.

I never had all those symptoms you read about (and believe me I read it all): the walls closing in, the sensation that the room is getting smaller. That's what the doctors described to my parents when they explained what my phobia felt like. I've given up trying to explain that it's different for me, that whenever a door closes in a windowless room—an elevator, a closet, a bathroom—my lungs behave like I'm twenty thousand leagues under the sea, with no escape in sight.

I shut my eyes tight and try to visualize a mountaintop, but my mind's eye is blank. Sweat is pooling on the back of my neck and my heart is pounding so hard that I'm surprised I can even hear it when the front door to our suite opens and closes.

I don't want my roommate to see me like this. Even though the door to my room is shut and Sam's never come in without knocking (come to think of it, I'm not sure he's come in *with* knocking), I fumble for the knob and burst out of the closet.

Sam shouts out some greeting I don't really hear because I'm still gasping for breath. Even now, safely in my bedroom,

gazing out the enormous window overlooking the ocean, my lungs feel just the slightest bit wet, like if I'm not careful I could still drown from the inside out.

Sam shouts again. "I know you're in there, I hear you breathing."

Not breathing. Panting. God, what must Sam think I'm doing in here? If I were a different girl, he'd think I had someone in here with me. But he knows I'm alone, because I'm always alone. I lean back against the closet door, safely shut behind me.

I was ten when Mom started saying, *You're too old for this sort of thing*. My brother Wes—half brother, second marriage and all that—was five at the time and never had any of my problems, which I think made Mom feel like this was all my fault, or at least my father's. She seemed confident that it wasn't hers now that Wes had proven that she could produce a perfectly healthy and sane child.

After Dr. Allen there was a man named Dr. Grace, and then a woman who insisted I call her Dr. Laura (even though Laura was her first name), who tried to hypnotize me. When that didn't work, she suggested acupuncture, but my parents—who didn't agree on much—agreed that if Eastern medicine was effective, it would have been covered by our health insurance plan.

Sam's still talking from the other side of the door.

"What?" I manage finally. It comes out like a grunt, my voice several octaves lower than usual. I walk to the mirror

above my dresser. My dark brown hair is sticking up around my face, my pale skin dotted with freckles courtesy of the California sunshine. I smooth my straight hair back into a ponytail and wipe away what's left of my tears. Sam and I have lived in this two-bedroom suite for almost seven months, and he's never seen me have an attack. So far, no one on this campus has. (Knock wood.)

I open my door and step out into the common area between our bedrooms. Sam's long dreadlocks are twisted into a messy boy bun. He's so tall that sometimes I think he keeps his hair long simply because no one can reach up above his shoulders to cut it. Which is absurd. You sit down to get your hair cut, obviously.

When I first saw his name (Sam Whitker) next to mine on the dorm assignments, I assumed that it was Sam as in *Samantha*, not Sam as in *Samuel*, which is obviously Sam as in *male*. But our progressive little school has no problem with coed living arrangements, it's right there in the catalog. *At Ventana Ranch, we believe in gender-neutral dormitories.*

There was a form you could fill out requesting single-sex accommodations if you weren't comfortable with coed living arrangements. (And another form your parents could fill out if *they* weren't comfortable with it.) I didn't fill out that form because I thought that once I got here I would become the laid-back California girl I was always meant to be.

Sam and I were thrown together because a computer spit us out as compatible. Though Sam told me once that he

barely even filled out his roommate questionnaire. He assumed everything would work out because he's the kind of person—smart, handsome, friendly—for whom everything always has. (Sam is the kind of person who never studies but never gets a grade below an A-minus.) So we were randomly paired off like some kind of vicious social experiment or old-school reality show: *Find out what happens when a computer matches you up and you stop being polite and start being real.*

“Someone is stealing the redwoods,” he says soberly.

“A person can't steal a redwood tree.” I walk over to our itchy dorm-issue couch and retrieve my laptop. I was in the middle of working on a paper when I decided to take a break to test my claustrophobia by locking myself in the closet. “Redwoods are literally the biggest living things on earth.” I try to imagine someone sneaking a three-hundred-foot tree off campus.

“Not the whole tree, Elizabeth.” I sigh. Sam refuses to call me Ellie like everyone else. Not that anyone calls me much of anything here. “Just the—you know, the knobby, knuckly parts. They're called burls, technically.” Sam holds out his phone to show me a picture so that I can see what he's talking about. “I snapped it earlier. One of the trees right next to Hiking Trail C.”

The hiking trails that snake across campus are known by letters: A for the easiest, then B and C and so on. Though all the middle letters are missing. (And you'd think A would be

the hardest, since we're all students here and As are hard to come by.)

I take the phone and peer at Sam's picture. Someone took an ax and hacked into the side of one of the redwoods, ripping its bark to shreds. I never would've thought the word *butchered* could apply to a tree, but that's what this is. Pieces of rust-colored bark litter the forest floor like drops of blood. The area is ringed with yellow tape, like the scene of a murder in a movie.

There's something about seeing a mutilated tree that makes me realize how *alive* it is. Or was.

I hand Sam his phone back, our fingers almost but not quite touching. (I can't remember the last time I really touched anyone. When my parents hugged me good-bye at the airport before I flew out here?) "Why would someone do that?"

"You can sell the wood," Sam explains.

"There's a black market for wood?"

Sam nods. "Pretty damn lucrative, apparently. I looked it up. It's called burl-poaching. The older trees are the only ones with burls. People use that part to make fancy coffee tables and clocks. The poaching's been happening for years, but it's getting worse lately." Sam reads from an article on his phone. "The trees in this region are known as coast redwoods. These evergreens include the tallest trees on earth, reaching up to 379 feet. Coast redwoods only grow on a narrow strip of approximately 470 miles in the Pacific

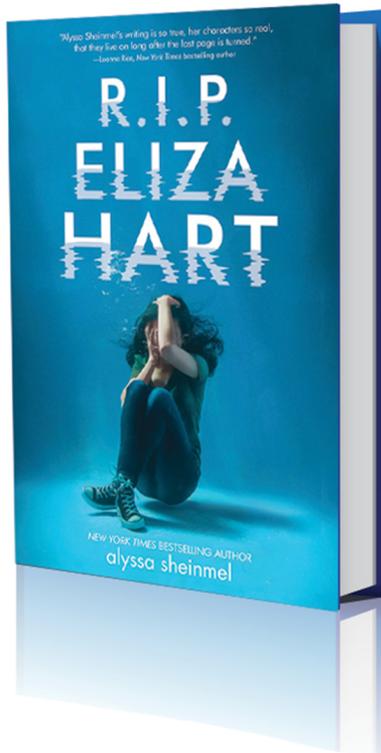
Northwest, so their wood is rare and valuable. It's prized among builders not just for its beauty, but also because it's lightweight and resistant to decay and fire." Sam looks up and adds, "Then it says that burl-poaching supposedly got popular among meth-heads looking to make a quick buck."

I shake my head. The damage that was done to that tree was brutal, but it certainly didn't look *quick*. "They think meth-heads are sneaking onto the campus?"

Sam shrugs, sliding his phone back into his pocket. "They don't know."

The sound of sirens fills the air.

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until one day she is found dead—now Ellie must find out what happened to her  
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