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The ghost had been with Sadie for as long as she could remember.

When she got an American Girl doll from her cousin at her fifth birthday party and the candles blew themselves out.

When she was invited to her first sleepover in third grade and the projector playing the in-class movie short-circuited.

When the boy next to her on the bleachers hugged her at their elementary school graduation and the gym doors banged open, filling the whole place with air too cold for a late-May afternoon.

The ghost had been with her every day she spent with Anna, too.

If Sadie had understood how strong it had grown by then, maybe she never would have let herself have a best friend in the first place. Maybe Anna would still be alive.

But she wasn't. And that's what Sadie was thinking

about, sitting at her desk in social studies, when a nervous-looking sixth grader arrived with a note from the office.

That the only friend she'd ever had was dead. And it was all her fault.

"Sadie," her teacher said. "Counselor."

Eighteen pairs of eyes swiveled to fix on Sadie. Someone giggled. She felt her cheeks go red as she closed her notebook.

Most kids in her position would worry this might mess up their chances of making friends at a new school. Sadie worried about the opposite. That someone would notice her because of this. That they'd decide she was worth talking to. Inviting somewhere. That it would all start over again.

"Bring a pass when you come back!" Mr. Miller called before the door closed and left Sadie standing in the silent hallway.

On the way to the counselor's office, she considered making a run for it. Walking home, or waiting the next hour and a half out in the nurse's office. Counselors were the worst—and she'd seen enough of them to know. But skipping class would worry her dad, and worried dads tended to schedule *more* counselor appointments.

Or worse, therapist appointments.

Or *worse*, child psychologist appointments.

So Corfield Middle School's Mrs. Fitz—as the cheerful nameplate on her office door read—was the lesser of many evils. And choosing the lesser evil was another thing Sadie knew all too much about.

The door to Mrs. Fitz’s office was closed, and there was another girl in the waiting room. Sadie had seen her around school—she was hard to miss with her bubble-gum-pink hair and bright-colored clothes. Her face was pixie-like above the book she was reading. A little mischievous.

Today the girl wore bright red pants covered with patches and sparkly purple sneakers—an outfit that said she didn’t mind standing out.

Sadie, on the other hand, had dressed specifically *not* to be noticed. Faded jeans. A plain, long-sleeved white T-shirt. Her hair had always been dull. Regular old brown, not quite wavy, not quite straight. Her mom had been Mexican—she’d left before Sadie started kindergarten, and her dad never really talked about why. Sadie hadn’t gotten the chance to inherit much from her, and it seemed like even her body knew it. Her skin was more like her dad’s. Pale-ish and freckled-ish. Nothing that would inspire flowery adjectives.

Only her shoes had any character, and that was because she had doodled all over them before her decision to become invisible.

Across the room, the other girl lowered her book. “I like your shoes!” she said.

“Thanks.” Monosyllables. No eye contact. This was how Sadie kept the ghost at bay.

“What are you in for?” the girl asked, undeterred.

If Sadie hadn’t been through all this before, she might have been tempted to sit closer. Make a joke about

Mr. Miller's obsession with hall passes, or how small and nervous the sixth graders looked.

But she knew how the ghost felt about friendships. Even potential ones. So Sadie shrugged in response, her arms crossed over her chest.

"My summons wasn't specific, either," the girl said. She held up her note and smiled. "I'm hoping it's a trick, and they'll tell me the principal is a vampire or something. Maybe they'll give me a wooden stake and ask me to lead the rebellion."

This was such a surprising answer that Sadie giggled without thinking. A small sound. Quiet, and stifled immediately.

It was enough. First, there was a hissing in her ears. Like wind stirring leaves on a deserted street at nighttime. The air went cold, raising goose bumps on Sadie's arms.

Above them, a fluorescent bulb that had been steadily humming a moment before began to buzz like an electric meat knife. The light flickered. A weird, staccato pattern.

Then came the worst part. The feeling, crawling like icy fingers across her skin, that she was being watched. And that whoever was doing the watching didn't like what they saw . . .

Sadie's body seized up. *Run*, said every one of her buzzing, jangling nerves. She had to make sure this girl didn't meet the same fate as—

"Sadie?" The sound of her name coincided with the opening of the office door. Mrs. Fitz's curly red hair and too-wide smile filled the doorway. "Come in! And,

Charlotte, hang tight—I want to talk to you about your club snacks shortly.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” the girl said with a salute.

Sadie slowly got to her feet, noting the steady light now coming from the lamp. The temperature returning to normal. She was clammy, covered in goose bumps, and vaguely nauseated, but everyone was alive. That was something.

She followed Mrs. Fitz inside.

Sadie remembered the counselor’s office from her first-day visit last month. The couch facing the desk, the sunny student artwork hanging on the walls. Mrs. Fitz’s perma-smile and her sweatshirt with cute little animals on it.

The main difference was that this time Sadie and Mrs. Fitz weren’t alone in the office. Perched awkwardly on the couch in an outfit that said “this is my work lunch break” was Sadie’s father.

Sadie’s dad worked in billing for the local hospital. He ate at the cafeteria when he got a lunch break at all. So this wasn’t a casual check-in. It was an intervention.

“Have a seat, Sadie,” Mrs. Fitz said. She settled behind her desk as Sadie sat on the opposite end of the couch.

Would Mrs. Fitz make something of that? Sadie wondered. The fact that she hadn’t sat close to her dad? This was why she hated these kinds of things. When you were already “troubled,” adults were always looking for evidence that things were worse than they seemed. Every word, every action was under a microscope as they rooted

around for the broken thing inside you messing everything up.

“Hey, kiddo,” her dad said. He wouldn’t meet her eyes. “Sorry about all this, I just—”

Mrs. Fitz cut in: “We just thought we’d all sit down for a little check-in.” She cast a meaningful look at Sadie’s dad. “You’ve been here about a month, Sadie. Why don’t you tell us how you think things are going?”

“Like . . . at school?” Sadie asked. She had seen too many counselors to give away any more than she was being forced to.

“At school, at home, whatever you want to share with us.”

“It’s been fine,” Sadie said. “I’m keeping up on my homework.”

“Great!” Mrs. Fitz said. “And what about the kids in your classes? Have they been welcoming? I know it can be hard, starting at a new school.”

“Everyone’s fine,” Sadie said with a shrug. Inside, she felt like a rubber band. Stretching until the moment before it snapped and left a big red welt on the back of your thumb.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Mrs. Fitz said. Sadie’s dad stayed quiet on her other side.

The rubber band stretched some more in the awkward silence that followed.

Any minute now.

“Well, Sadie, I called your dad here today because some of your teachers have noticed you don’t seem to

have made many social connections here at Corfield. We know having a community of peers and friends can be a really important part of succeeding at a new school, so we wanted to talk to you about how we can support you with that goal in mind.”

Sadie refused to meet Mrs. Fitz’s eyes. She glowered at her dad instead.

“It’s not a big deal,” Sadie said when it became clear he didn’t intend to rescue her. “I’m new. I came in the middle of a semester. People already have their groups and stuff.”

“Of course, the adjustment can be difficult,” Mrs. Fitz said. “But your teachers have noticed that you seem to go *out of your way* to avoid social connections. Even with students who approach you. That’s what’s concerning us.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just, like, shy, I guess. But I’ll try harder to make friends. Is that all?”

For the first time since she’d entered the room, Sadie’s dad looked at her. “I know it’s hard,” he said. “After everything that happened at your old school. It might feel . . . disloyal to make a new friend after Anna.”

The sound of her name snapped Sadie’s rubber band at last. Images came back to her in a rush: Anna, shoving a whole handful of cheesy popcorn in her mouth. Anna, racing ahead of Sadie on the bike path, singing at the top of her lungs.

Anna, on the last day Sadie ever saw her, hurt in her eyes and—

But she couldn’t think about that day. She never wanted to think about it again. So, like she had a hundred

times before, Sadie forced the memories out. She focused on her heartbeat, and the sound of the air conditioner, and the lopsided sun staring at her from a painting on the wall.

“It isn’t about her,” Sadie said when she had gotten herself under control. “I’ve just been focusing on school. Trying to catch up. I’ll make more of an effort, I promise.”

The pitying eyes of her dad and Mrs. Fitz said they didn’t believe her. That this wasn’t over.

“When you lose someone, it can be hard not to worry that getting close to someone new might mean getting hurt again,” Mrs. Fitz said gently. “Or you may feel guilty that you’re living your life, making new friends, finding joy when the person you lost can’t be here to experience it with you.”

“It’s not that, either,” Sadie said forcefully. This time, it was the truth. She didn’t feel guilty because Anna wasn’t here to experience life. She felt guilty because she had ignored the ghost. Because the ghost had *killed* Anna. She felt guilty because she *was* guilty.

“We just want you to be happy,” her dad said. “Maybe I was wrong not to get you a new therapist when we moved from Arizona. I really think you might benefit from a little more—”

“No,” Sadie said. She got to her feet. “It’s fine. I’m good. All fixed. I’ll make friends, okay? Just give me one more chance.”

The truth was, she wasn’t fine. She missed Arizona every day. She didn’t want to live in stupid flat south-

ern Idaho in this weird small town where her father had grown up. Where her parents had met.

Her dad had talked cheerfully about “moving home” as they packed up their house in the desert. But this wasn’t Sadie’s home, even if she’d been born here. They’d moved for her mom’s job when she was only a baby. Arizona was the only real home Sadie had ever had.

She didn’t want to be a thousand miles from the last place she’d known her mother. The last place she’d seen Anna alive . . .

But what she didn’t want even more than that was to spend three days a week talking about her problems to a too-cheerful stranger. Not when she couldn’t ever tell the truth about the worst problem of all.

Not when all she wanted to do was make sure nothing bad ever happened again.

Her dad seemed reluctant to agree, but Mrs. Fitz got to her feet, too. “I actually just had a wonderful idea,” she said.

Sadie and her dad looked at the counselor with matching suspicious expressions.

“Charlotte!” Mrs. Fitz called. “Can you come in here?”

Panic rose again in Sadie’s throat, but there was nothing to do. Nowhere to run without looking even more “troubled” than they already believed she was. So she just watched in horror as the door opened and the waiting-room girl with her bubble-gum hair bounced inside.

“Sadie Rivera, meet Charlotte Prewitt,” said Mrs. Fitz.

“We’ve already met!” Charlotte said. “Well, sort of. Hi, Sadie!”

With her dad and Mrs. Fitz both watching for signs of antisocial behavior, Sadie gave her a strained smile. “Hey, Charlotte.”

“Charlotte’s here to talk about special permission to have snacks in the library during her after-school graphic novel club,” Mrs. Fitz explained. “And Sadie here wants to get more involved in the Corfield social scene. Are you all thinking what I’m thinking?”

Charlotte turned to Sadie. “Do you like graphic novels?”

Sadie was sure her smile looked more like a grimace by now. “I’ve . . . never really read one”—her dad’s brow furrowed—“but they seem cool.”

“A lot of our members were pretty new to the scene when they joined,” said Charlotte. “And we’re always looking for more people! We meet Tuesdays and Thursdays, so the next one is tomorrow if you want to come check it out!”

Every muscle in Sadie’s body was tense. She felt cold all through. She couldn’t even laugh at this girl’s joke without the lights going out. What would happen if she accepted an invitation to her club?

I don’t want to join, she thought desperately. It’s just to get them off my back. It doesn’t mean anything. “Sure,” Sadie said through gritted teeth. “Tomorrow it is.”

Whether the ghost had understood her plea or not, the lights stayed on.

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