

THE HUSHED

K. R. BLAIR



**BLACK
STONE**
PUBLISHING

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ONE

I knew Sarah would die.

I saw it in her eyes the moment she arrived at the Boneyard. I could see it in the way she talked and the way she pulled at the sleeves of her government-issued windbreaker jacket.

She smiled too much. Tucked the dark hair behind her ear and tilted her head, like if she tried hard enough, the world would forget she wasn't human. But I knew that underneath all her warmth, it had already started. She wanted to tell . . . to utter the words that would erase her from the world. We're secrets wound into human skin, after all. Telling secrets is what we were created to do. Once the thought starts, it grows. A sickness of syllables that plants an itch somewhere deep in the chest. From the tightness on her face, I could see that the sentence was starting to spin together like a ball of sparks in her mouth.

But even knowing what would happen didn't make me ready for it. I'm never ready for it. And I sure as hell didn't want it to happen. I liked Sarah.

There was a sense of inevitability about it that coated my lungs with a thick, inky dread. It lessened over those six months she stayed at the Boneyard. Six months of the sound of her hairdryer in the bathroom at five in the morning. Of her singing while waiting for the toaster.

But for some reason, I wasn't thinking about it when it happened. Maybe it was because it was one of the first cold nights after a long North Carolina summer, and she was so excited to be able to wear the chunky gray scarf we found on sale at Target.

Maybe it was because there hadn't been a Haunt attack for a month, so we were able to avoid the bad publicity those brought on. It had been a while since we'd needed to cover over spray-painted skulls and crossbones on our front porch—the ones we could always expect as retaliation for some shit the Haunt pulled.

Or maybe it's just because you never really expect someone to die in the middle of a homecoming game.



The bass was deep, rattling the aluminum of the bleachers as I tugged at my jacket and looked around. The field below was drenched in floodlights, and the bleachers on both sides were filling up.

It was a fall night, the kind that follows a day that still held onto summer but carried a chill on its edges. And it was windier at the top of the bleachers than I'd expected.

"I hate this," I whispered.

"I told you to bring a bigger jacket," Rory replied, unwrapping a piece of gum.

"I'm not even cold," I grumbled back. There were too many faces around us—too many new people. "I hate being trapped in the middle of a row. This is going to be a nightmare if I have to pee."

Rory popped the gum in her mouth. "Do you have to pee?"

I was still for a second as I considered. "I don't know."

"You don't know if you have to pee?" she asked.

"Jury's still out," I replied. Rory gave me a sideways glance, a smile playing on her lips. "Come on. This is good ol' American fun. Nostalgia. Crosstown rivalries."

"It can't be called nostalgia if we've never done it before," I corrected her quietly. She rolled her eyes at me.

“No one else knows that,” she whispered back flippantly. Almost hopefully. By the time she finished the sentence, I could tell she didn’t believe it any more than I did. We looked over our shoulders, a habit that felt like breathing.

We were Hushed. We looked human, but we weren’t, and all it took was one human with a sharp eye to recognize us from the registration office or Gravedigger databases. Our presence among the regular womb-comers was unwelcome at best, and things could quickly get ugly.

A blip of color flashed in the corner of my eye, and I turned just in time to see Sarah on the edge of the field, her emerald ribbon whipping around under the lights. She did that often, appearing just when I felt like the panic I kept even-keeled in my chest was about to start sloshing over. She was the reason Rory and I were there, two ancient anomalies tucked away at a high school football game.

She was one of us, but when the Haunt got the government to agree to let our kind play school sports with regular humans, she was ready. She wanted to be a cheerleader—to fly and smile and tell others they should *be aggressive be be aggressive*.

We could all tell that the cheer coach didn’t want to let her try out last month. It was one thing to let us register for school, but letting a Hushed be a cheerleader seemed a special kind of insult. As much as they might have wanted to, they weren’t going to tell her no. The Haunt for Jackals was an ever-present threat. They couldn’t be everywhere, but it *felt* like they were. Any given act against Hushed could be the catalyst for retaliation. They’d found out about discrimination toward Hushed that happened on oil rigs in the middle of oceans. They’d avenged a Hushed that was killed on a wilderness retreat in the middle of Tongass National Forest. The Haunt for Jackals could be watching, always looking for unlikely people to make examples of. So, Sarah got to cheer. Still. It didn’t mean the team was happy about it.

I watched as Sarah practiced along the sideline, hyping herself up for her first game. A girl with dark skin and a french braid tied with the same ribbon joined her, but the other girls pretended she didn’t even exist. I smiled and waved at her, scooting closer to the railing as

I surveyed the almost-full bleachers. “I’m so glad we didn’t stir at high school age. This is brutal,” Rory said quietly.

“I think I do have to pee,” I whispered.

“You do not.”

“Oh, good. Never mind, then,” I shot back.

Rory smirked, and I felt myself smiling too. Rory was my best friend . . . one of the only people who could make me feel safe about going out among the humans. She was easy with them. Even the ones who knew what we were almost seemed to forget when she ran a hand through her hair and laughed like she’d been a kid once. Like she didn’t wake up naked in the dirt a few years ago like the rest of us.

Someone below laughed. It was more like a cackle, which broke off into a stifled snort. I looked down over the left side of the bleachers. Jason Bell stood below me near the fence that led to the parking lot, wearing his black Gravedigger jacket. I shouldn’t have been surprised that he was there. He graduated three years prior, but everyone was at the homecoming game. Rearden Falls was that type of town. Even if it wasn’t, though, Jason Bell was still the kind of creep would have nothing better to do on a Friday night than lurk around the high school where he peaked. My eyes fixed on the Gravedigger insignia on his jacket—the one that was supposed to be illegal. They’d been labeled as a domestic terror organization by the Department of Justice the year before, when several chapters in major cities couldn’t hide the blood on their hands anymore. Not like Gravediggers were ever really trying to pretend that they didn’t have one goal: they liked to kill Hushed. They saw it as righting some sort of cosmic wrong—putting secrets back in the grave where they belonged. And they had more sympathizers than anyone wanted to admit. They were allowed to be blatant about their desire to snuff us out . . . as long as no one could prove they actually did it.

Jason cackled, and I bristled at the sound. I knew him, and his brother Marcus—they were well-known in Rearden Falls, and they made sure to know the specifics of every registered Hushed in the area. I peered down at them through the metal posts of the bleachers, a sort of morbid fascination pulling me to watch as he slung his arm around

Tansy O'Mare, his twentysomething girlfriend. She was from South Rearden, the part of town where syringes washed up when it rained and most of the houses could be put on wheels. Lucky for her, she was pretty enough for Jason to overlook that. Her bleached hair fell in thick waves down her shoulders, and she teetered slightly on her black leather ankle-breakers. There was another kid with them. He had a bowl cut and a Gravedigger insignia—a skull and crossbones—on his backpack. *Bury the Bones*, it said underneath. And that was the ironic truth that no Gravedigger wanted to really think about: the Gravediggers only exist because we do. We gave them purpose. I stared at the words until they went blurry. *Bury the Bones*.

“Nice,” I muttered, finally nudging Rory and motioning to the scene below. I needed to let her know they were there. We were already watching our backs, but now the threat was more specific.

“Well, if you do have to pee, I vote you just do it over the railing, and make sure to get them in the splash zone,” she mused.

“How long do you think we’d have if we pissed on the president of the Gravediggers’s little brother?”

“It’s not about the number of breaths you take, but the moments that take your breath away, isn’t that the saying?” Rory said softly.

“I’m deleting Instagram off your phone.”

I watched them, feeling strangely detached as Rory turned back to the field. Jason had a scab on his cheekbone. I’m sure he wanted people to think it was from a fight, but my money was on it being from him picking at his cystic acne. The tag on Tansy’s T-shirt was hanging out.

“I should have used the extra-hold hair spray on Sarah,” Rory said, more to herself than to me. “It looks like her bangs are already starting to fall.”

“She looks great,” I said as I turned back to Sarah, and I meant it. She looked happy, and I smiled as I looked at her. She wanted to be a cheerleader, and she was one. Sometimes, joy seemed simple.

The lights dimmed, and there was a deafening roar as a senior cheerleader with legs longer than my entire body jumped onto the center of the small, scaffolded stage situated at the fifty-yard line and grabbed the mic, squinting into the spotlight.

“Welcome to the homecoming game!” the girl shouted into the mic, doubling over in exaggerated giggles and *oh stop its* when her friends erupted in shouts of “GO TARA!”

Rory mimed tossing her hair over her shoulder as she waved to imaginary fans, and I joined her, doing a fake queen’s wave.

I couldn’t tell if we were petty for picking on a high schooler while being semi-functional pseudo-adults—it’s not like stirring as a twenty-year-old was that different than stirring as a seventeen-year-old, despite the cultural gulf between high school and college—or totally within our rights as we were both technically only three years old.

“Okay. So, as we all know, we lost Coach Lahey last spring.” The girl’s smile faded into a caricature of somber respect, and the whole field quieted.

“He was the pioneer of the football program here at Rearden Falls High, and all of us in the athletic department spent the summer repainting the locker rooms in his honor. We had this made”—the girl gestured to two quarterbacks in silver and green jerseys as they walked out onto the field, carrying a wooden plaque between them—“and his wife, Marian Lahey, has flown out from South Beach, Florida, to be here as we dedicate this field to his memory!”

No. No, no, no.

“Eerie,” Rory breathed, and her voice sounded very far away.

The whole stadium erupted into applause and the spotlight swiveled to the eastern side of the field. An older woman in a silver jumpsuit covered in emerald ribbons walked onto the grass, flanked by football players.

I braced my hands on the metal railing next to me and swung my legs over as Rory scrambled to her feet, straining to keep her eyes on Sarah through the crowd.

Sarah was standing on the opposite side of the field with the other cheerleaders, next to a table with an orange Gatorade jug and some paper cups. I saw her lean on it, her thin fingers gripping the edge. She looked up into the bleachers, her eyes narrowed against the light. She was looking for us.

Marian Lahey moved slowly through the crowd, stopping to give kisses and shake hands.

I saw Sarah's lips move as she searched for me in the crowd. *Eerie*, she mouthed my name. Her eyes were wide and terrified.

Rory started shoving her way down the bleachers, but I knew she'd never make it in time. With one movement, I loosened my grip on the metal and slid down the supporting beam.

I crashed into the concrete harder than I thought I would, and pricks of pain shot up my legs.

"Shit," I whispered, shoving off the rail and turning, readying myself for a full sprint.

Instead, I found myself staring at Jason, Tansy, and the other wannabe Gravedigger, who were all staring at me with wide, amused expressions as I muttered *shit shit shit* over and over and tried to regain the feeling in my shins.

"Oh, hey, Boney," Jason said, turning to fully block my path toward the field. *Boney* was their clever name for us since we were the skeletons in their closets. "Where you headed?"

Over his shoulder, I saw Sarah take another step. Then another. She was walking toward the stage.

I didn't have time for a fight. I ran forward, shoving past Jason. He didn't stop me, but Tansy's boot caught my foot and sent me sprawling to the ground. A sharp ache shot up my wrist, and I gasped.

I rolled over and scuttled back just as Tansy leaned down.

"Sorry. I didn't see you there. Maybe it's because you're not supposed to exist?" She might be white trash, but she knew she could bully me anyway. She straightened, and Jason let out another cackling laugh as his hand snaked around her waist. I knew I should be more afraid of them, but I could only think of Sarah.

I shoved myself up to my knees and sprinted into the thick ocean of bodies, the soles of my shoes sticking on spilled soda.

I couldn't see Marian through the crowd, but I saw Sarah, her eyes fixed forward as she took the stairs to the stage. The crowd was still applauding and cheering, and my voice was lost, a whisper against the din.

My shoulders barely made a dent as I shoved as hard as I could, ducking under elbows as I went.

My terror roiled and bubbled, the adrenaline in me burning hotter with every second. I willed it to make me sharper, to turn me into something that would draw blood. I begged my lungs to turn that fear into something useful, but it died somewhere on the back of my tongue and crawled past my lips as nothing but a limp plea.

The closer I got to the stage, the more the crowd thickened. Yearbook photographers stood with their cameras up as they tried to get the perfect shot.

I clawed through, pulling at shirt collars and not caring if I raked over skin. Panic bit at my chest.

“What the hell?” a lacrosse player yelled as I shoved the side of her face, positioning my body between her and a basketball player. Finally, my voice caught the breath in my chest, flaring up like a spark meeting a gas leak.

“SARAH! NO!” I screamed. I screamed so hard I thought I might turn inside out. I screamed until I felt something pop behind my eyeball.

The cheerleader holding the microphone looked confused when Sarah reached for it.

“*MOVE!*” I screamed. “SARAH!”

I heard Sarah’s breath over the PA. Her breathing was ragged, and the *whoosh whoosh* came harsh through the speakers. The spotlight tilted, illuminating her as she stood, the mic in her shaking hand.

“Coach Lahey didn’t love you, Marian. You were right that he was having an affair with Nancy.”

I stopped as the words fell over the crowd. Marian turned, looking up, her pale blue eyes narrowing and then widening as she found Sarah on the stage. A heavy silence fell over the field.

I shoved hard, one more time, pushing through the last line of still bodies.

“In your husband’s email, you’ll find the login information for two secret bank accounts. He never wanted you to find them.”

I reached the top of the stairs just as she finished. She turned to me, swaying on her feet, her expression elated. The floodlights caught the

shine of the glitter on her eyelids. It had been ninety-nine cents on an endcap at the pharmacy.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” she whispered after she’d let the microphone drop from her hand.

Then she crumpled to the stage, and I lunged forward to catch her. My small frame was no match for the weight of sudden death, and we both went down. I barely managed to keep her head from smashing against the edge of the metal, like it mattered. My leg twisted beneath me at a strange angle.

I put my hand to her cheek. In my mind, I said her name over and over like they do in the movies, like this was a mistake I could reverse for her. Like dying was a hallway and she could look over her shoulder and change her mind if only she heard me.

Not today. It didn’t make sense. She was supposed to dance to some awful techno mash-up and make right angles with her arms and wink at the crowd and tell them to *be aggressive be be aggressive*. She wasn’t supposed to be here, looking up and seeing nothing.

The collar of her cheerleading outfit was high, but I could still see the black tendrils that spread upward under the skin of her neck, the smudged ink at the end of the last sentence she’d ever say. A Hushed that does its job falls back into darkness. You tell your secret to your Wounded—the person that needs to hear it most—and then you stop breathing. I’ve seen it before. I’ve seen it dozens of times.

Rory careened up the opposite stairs, sliding on her knees.

“No,” she cried, running her hand over Sarah’s forehead.

I don’t know when I realized the sound had stopped and that a deep and unnatural silence had made something out of nothing around us. But I know when I looked up, I saw a thousand faces staring at us from the darkness. Their expressions were tight with fury and horror and everything in between.

The crowd parted, and Marian walked through, her bright eyes fixed on Sarah’s form. She came up to the front of the stage, and some heavy floral perfume wafted up with her. The spotlight made a halo of her white hair.

“A Hushed,” Marian whispered, sniffing and wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

I nodded. Sirens sounded from somewhere behind me.

“My husband swore I was just imagining things,” Marian said, shifting slightly and tilting her head like she wanted to look at Sarah from a different angle.

Sarah’s head felt heavy against my forearm and my leg was falling asleep, but I didn’t move.

“He died six months ago,” Marian said, examining the body. It was quiet then, and I could almost hear the realizations clicking into place one by one, like heavy metal cogs in a clock. “The Hushed are supposed to tell their secrets. What took this one so long?” she asked, her voice exposing the sharp edge of her pain.

“Her name was Sarah,” I said.

Marian’s expression darkened as the sirens grew louder. They were on the street behind the gym.

“Hushed don’t have names,” Marian said, turning away.

One basketball player put an arm around her shoulders and led her through the crowd.

Voices started again, an angry rumble.

Rory met my eyes over Sarah’s body as the paramedics came in through the space between the bleachers. They ambled, there was no rush.

They lifted her from me, and I watched her head flop back. Her hair smelled like Aqua Net. The black had worked its way over her jawline. One of the silver ribbons from her ponytail stayed tangled in my fingers, coming undone. I clenched it in my fist as Rory and I followed the paramedics out. They didn’t cover her up, and it felt like everyone was taking a piece of her as they watched—a detail for a story they’d tell later but would never think of again after that. Rory and I walked behind them, even though we knew what would happen. They’d take her back to the lab, where they’d confirm that she was a Hushed. They’d make a note for Internment statistics, and then we’d never see her body again.

Behind us, the boom of the speakers squeaked back to life as Tara the cheerleader took the mic again and explained that they’d need to

reschedule the game. Sarah was an unexpected rain out; Sarah was a bout of the flu taking out half the team. Sarah was a shrug and a *what are you gonna do?* Things like Sarah happened.

We watched the ambulance roll away, its lights flashing soundlessly. The wind whipped against the three impressive thirty-foot emerald-and-silver balloon arches that led to the stadium.

As Rory and I walked under them toward the parking lot on our way home, we cut all of them loose.