

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric scene. In the foreground, turbulent, dark blue-green waves crash against the shore. In the middle ground, a lighthouse sits atop a dark, rocky cliff. The lighthouse is illuminated from within, casting a warm, yellowish glow from its lantern room. Several bright, jagged lightning bolts strike down from a dark, stormy sky, illuminating the scene with a blue-white light. The overall mood is ominous and mysterious.

# THE ATLAS OF CURSED PLACES

## SKELETON TOWER

VANESSA ACTON

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THE ATLAS OF  
CURSED  PLACES

SKELETON TOWER

VANESSA ACTON

*darbycreek*

MINNEAPOLIS

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For A.W., J.C., and C.C.—great  
sidekicks for jaunts to cursed places





## CHAPTER 1

“I’ll give you the short version: the girl dies at the end.”

Morgan says this without looking up from her phone. She must be playing a downloaded game, because I know she’s not getting any service out here. We’ve been on this twisting, narrow coastal “highway” for two hours, and it’s a complete dead zone. Steep cliffs directly to our left. Super-dense trees on our right. Every so often I’ll see an old-fashioned call box hiding in those trees, a few yards beyond the road. So in case the ancient family minivan

breaks down, we can use one of those things to call for a tow. But as far as cell service goes, forget it. Which is why I'm bored enough to talk to my older sister about the series finale of *Reckoning*.

"Which one dies?" I ask. "The hot girl or the one who does magic?"

"I think they're both hot," says Morgan, eyes still glued to her screen. "Everyone on that show is hot. I would date anyone in the cast."

The minivan swerves, following a sharp bend in the road. I slide sideways in the backseat. My seatbelt digs into my collarbone. This has been happening every five seconds since we got on this road. My stomach is losing patience. "Mom, can you maybe ease up on the gas when you get to a curve like that?"

"Relax, Jason," my mom says from the driver's seat. My parents' motto. Just relax. Don't worry about taking a turn too fast and plunging off the side of a cliff, into the Pacific Ocean.

I glance out the window but can't see much because the fog is so thick. Try leaving

your shower running for about a year, with the bathroom door closed and no fan. Then try driving through that kind of mist at sixty miles an hour. On a road shaped like a kindergartner's scribble. With basically three feet of clearance between that road and the edge of a cliff. And *then* try to relax.

“OK, but seriously, tell me what happens in the finale,” I say to Morgan. “I don’t care about spoilers. Who knows when I’ll get to watch it myself?”

Finally Morgan looks up from her phone. “They’ll have Internet at the lighthouse, won’t they?” She aims the question at Mom and Dad.

“We didn’t ask about that,” says Mom. Of course they didn’t. When was the last time Mom and Dad ever considered anything practical?

The road twists again. This time I hold on to the side door so that I won’t lurch the other way and slam into Morgan.

“But who needs Internet when you’re living the dream?” adds Dad.