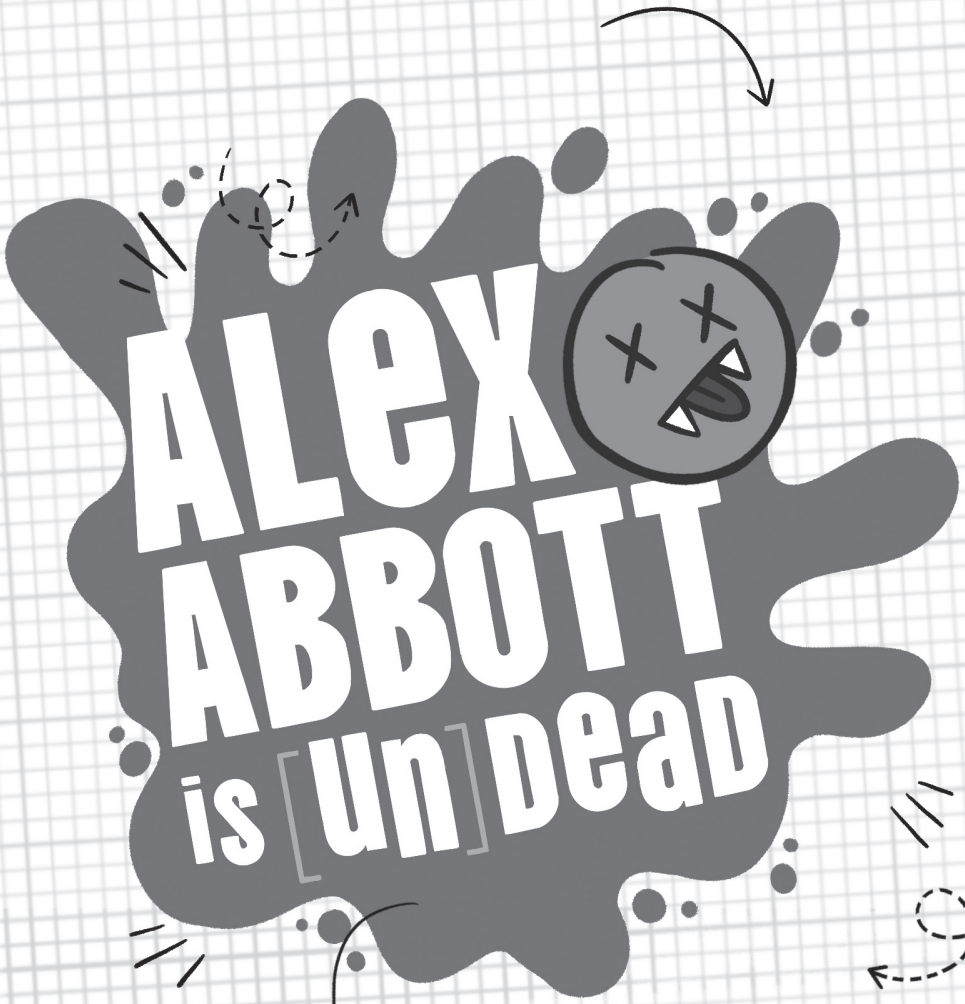
LOUISE AUSTIN



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For Mark, Amy, Robyn and Elsie,
with whom I share all my best adventures.



This is the diary of

Alex Abbott



Thursday 18 January

Even though I've been a vampire for three months, two weeks and one day, Mum still drags me out of bed every morning to go to school. It hasn't got me out of doing homework either. You'd think she'd have some sympathy for her only child, what with me having tragically died and everything. NOPE.

I got one measly day off sick before she was all, 'Alex, I hate seeing you mope about. It'll be good for you to carry on as normal.'

Hardly anyone knows I've become a vampire, and Mum says it should stay a secret, because people wouldn't understand. I haven't even told Archie or Mia, my two best friends, so I have to be careful to act like a normal, alive person who sleeps and

eats and stuff, which can be tricky. I won't grow or change, while my friends keep getting bigger. Soon they'll all be riding the *Terrorcoaster* while I'm stuck holding the bags.

'We'll cope with it one day at a time,' says Mum. But my last growth spurt was AGES ago, which means I was already one of the smallest in my class, even though I turned eleven back in September. I'll be minuscule at secondary school, and that's only eight months away.

Dad's more worried about my *emotional wellbeing*. 'You're repressing your feelings,' he says.



Dad's a psychologist so he's really big on mental health. Sounds good, right? Well it's not, because he's making me fill this whole diary. I expressed some *very* strong feelings about having to do extra work just because I died – surely I've been through enough? – but apparently I need quiet activities now I no longer need to sleep.

'What about gaming?' I suggested helpfully. But he was having none of it.

He pushed his glasses right up to the top of his nose, so I could tell he meant business. 'Alex, you need to process your trauma, and journaling can be a really healing way of doing that.'

Yawn.

I can still do most of the stuff I did when I was alive, and I've faced what I can't do – admitted it's agony to see hot, crispy chips or towering ice-cream sundaes knowing I can't eat them. And it's lonely wandering about at night now I don't sleep.





But I can't bear even trying to put the whole enormous, horrible truth into words.

How scared I am about Mia and Archie growing up and leaving me behind.

They'll grow up and drive cars and get jobs. Have families.

One day their kids'll look older than me.

Then one day they'll be gone.

While I'm stuck like this – between life and death – FOREVER. 

Alone.

Just me and Big Pup, and he's already old and faded from being cuddled to sleep every night when I was small.

No amount of *journaling* will make everything OK.

But I can't exactly tell anyone what happened, so I might as well write about it.



Three Months, Two Weeks and One Day Ago

It was a Tuesday breaktime. Mum had given me one of the chocolate-chip snack bars because she'd run out of the healthy ones the school recommends, which was lucky, as it was the last proper food I ever ate. A bunch of us were playing dodgeball and Jessica King heard us laughing. Green eyes fixed on our fun, she stalked over, auburn bunches bouncing.

'Hi, guys. Can I play too?' she asked with a flutter of her eyelashes.

'It's Zac's ball, so it's up to him,' said Archie (he loves a playground rule).

'That's OK with you, right, Zac?' she said, snatching the ball before he could answer.

Zac took a step back. Jessica King's about half his size, but he knows when to surrender. 'Uh, sure, I guess,' he mumbled.

Jessica King *has* to win, so as soon as the game stopped going her way, she chucked Zac's brand-new ball over the fence.

'Oops!' she said with a little giggle. 'Zac, I am *so* sorry!'

Zac loved that ball.

Hot anger rose from the pit of my stomach until my cheeks started to burn. Mia took one look at my face and steered me away before I could speak, Archie trailing behind us.

'Don't argue with Jessica King,' she hissed under her breath. 'It always ends badly!'

My hands balled into fists. 'She gets away with everything.'

Mia tucked a sheet of black hair behind her ear and gave me a sympathetic shrug. Archie was staring at the ground; he hates any sort of argument.

My flash of anger faded as we left Jessica behind. 'Thanks, Mia.'

She grinned. 'Someone has to save you from yourself.'

I stuck my tongue out at her, because she was right, but I wasn't about to admit it. 'I just wish we could make Zac feel better.'

At some schools, I bet losing your ball over the fence doesn't matter, but at Draihampton Primary it's a DISASTER because we have horrible neighbours who hate kids.

Old Mr Tilbury pops our balls on purpose and throws them back all sad and deflated. He watches his garden like a hawk and he's on the phone to Dr Forbes if we bend a single blade of his manicured grass. Which means another boring assembly on how 'kindness is a core school value' – a rule that doesn't apply to our ball-murdering neighbours.

The Hill family hooligan, fifteen-year-old Lyall, spray-paints our balls to look like heads, then impales them on the spikes they've added to their section of the fence. They peer over all creepy and weird until the caretaker takes them down.

But Jessica King didn't throw Zac's ball into those gardens; she threw it into the third one – the untended, forgotten one, with the house that has actual bars on the windows. That house stars in all our Halloween stories because it's clearly haunted. Its overgrown, weed-covered garden is a total ball graveyard.

My brain started whirring. 'Maybe we can make everything better without having to deal with Jessica King …'



Mia raised an eyebrow at me. 'Is this one of your plans?'

'No! Well, yes,' I admitted, 'but it's actually a really good one!'

Mia sighed. 'Is it the kind of plan Archie can hear?'

'Good point. Archie, we're about to break the rules.'

Archie finally looked up, but he wasn't happy; his hands flexed and straightened.

'Only to help Zac,' I explained. 'But if you'd rather not, we could meet you at the benches in ten minutes?'

Archie looked back at the ground and ran his fingers through his unruly curls. 'Can I help in some other way?'

Mia leaned in and whispered in my ear.



I smiled. 'Look, Arch, Mr Douglas is on duty. I bet you could distract him with questions about tonight's match . . .'

Mr Douglas is actually pretty cool (for a teacher). He's also our hockey coach, so Archie marched

across the playground to talk tactics.

'Distraction sorted. What's the plan?' asked Mia.

'I'm going over the fence.' I waited for her to gasp at my brilliance, but instead she put her hands on her hips.

'What? That's not a plan, that's ridiculous. It's way too high.' Mia's the practical one in our trio. I should have listened to her, but I didn't.

'You can give me a boost. Come on – Zac's our friend. And I wouldn't just get *his* ball; there must be thirty or forty over there and we'll be heroes for chucking them all back.'

'How will you get back over?'

I grinned – Mia was thinking about the details, which meant my plan had totally won her round. 'I can find something to climb on. Stop worrying.'

I dragged Mia to the far side of the playground and made her give me a leg-up. I pulled myself onto the fence using one of the spikes at the corner of the Hill garden and perched on top. About fifteen pigeons took off from the roof of

the haunted house, which made me glance up. Surely a haunted house ought to have crows or ravens, not a massive gang of fat pigeons? A straggler stared at me accusingly from the wonky chimney pot before flapping clumsily into a nearby tree. The fence wobbled and I grabbed the spike to get my balance, heart racing.





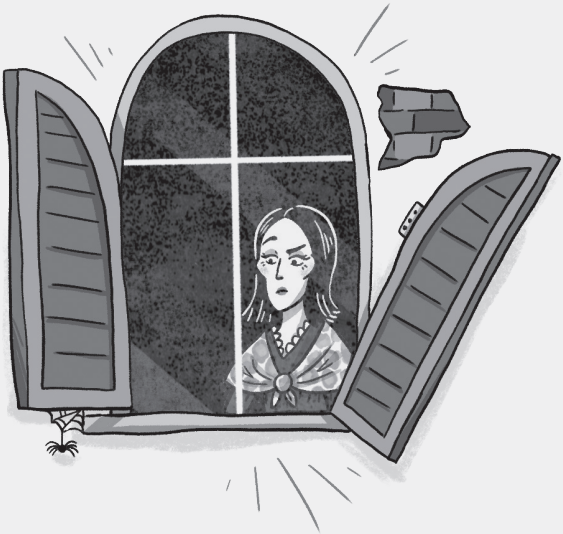


'Careful!' called Mia. 'It's not safe up there. Come down.'

'I'm fine – relax,' I said, my eyes scanning the garden. 'Just got to find a good landing spot.'

The sun disappeared behind a cloud and a shiver rippled through me. That's when I saw the ghostly face pressed to the glass of the murky window. Its skin glowed almost white against the shadows and its dark eyes bored right into me.





The shock turned my legs to jelly. The fence felt like it was tilting, but it was me that was swaying: I was losing my balance. I gripped the rough wooden slats, splinters digging into my fingers as the ground came rushing towards me. I heard Mia scream as I toppled head first into the tangled brambles.
Pain burst through my head and everything went black.

Three Months, Two Weeks and No Days Ago

I opened my eyes to find myself tucked up in my own bed. That felt reassuringly normal, but my parents were hovering about, which was not. At least the shattering pain in my head had gone. I ran my fingers over my forehead, searching for the huge lump my fall must have given me.

Nothing.

Not the slightest bruise or graze.

I blinked. Everything was too bright and super detailed, like when the TV gets upgraded and it's way better, but you don't like it yet.

I screwed my eyes closed to escape the information overload. 'Mum? Dad?' I croaked, trying to lift my head from my pillow. 'What happened?'

There was a too-long silence, so I braved the stinging light again. Their eyes were glassy with red

rims and they both avoided my gaze.

I sat up. 'What's the matter?' I asked.

Something was VERY wrong. Normally I'd be too hot to stay under the covers for long, but there was no cosy warmth in my duvet. I could feel the softness of the worn cotton, but no body heat. I tried one of Dad's slow-breathing techniques, but it didn't work. AT ALL. Panicking, I grabbed Mum's hand. She flinched.

'You're scaring me. What's going on?' I asked.

Mum took a deep breath and clasped my hand between hers. 'Sweetheart,' she began. 'There's … You're …' A tear escaped and she dashed for the bedroom door. 'Just got to check on something,' she choked, and ran down the stairs. Even from my room, I could hear her sobbing in the kitchen as she put the kettle on.

Dad had to explain. And I probably didn't listen as well as I should have. When someone tells you that you've been turned into a vampire, it's hard to focus on the finer details. 

They only gave me a couple of hours to get my head round being undead before dragging me into the living room to talk about my new 'life'. These are the main things I learned about myself:



Awesome things

* Super-fast speed (as in, I'd leave Olympic champions in the dust)
* Incredibly high jumping (like some kind of human grasshopper)
* Can lift really heavy stuff (I'm talking like a piano, not just some potatoes)
* Can see and hear from miles away
* Never get tired
* If I fall over, it won't hurt
* Won't get old and wrinkled
* Won't ever die (I already have)

Rubbish things

* Won't get any taller
* Can't have food or drinks, except the weird 'soup' my parents make for me
* No sleep, so nights will be boring and lonely
* Can't flex about my new powers as they have to be kept secret
* Still have to do schoolwork
* No chocolate EVER again
* Extra work, like this boring journal
* Everyone else will get old and die

I still look much the same, but being undead *feels* different. I'm less connected to my body. It's more like a machine, strong and functional but detached and cold. No warmth in hugs. And although pain is *obviously* a bad thing, without it the world feels further away, like I'm in a hyper-realistic video game.

As for what actually happened, this is everything I know:

I was killed by the corner of a rusty wheelbarrow (don't dive head first into anything sharp and metal – wheelbarrow one, Alex nil).

The ghostly face at the window turned out to be a vampire called Frances Rowthorne. She'd found me after I'd hit my head, couldn't revive me, so made me undead and then delivered me back home to bed.*

She removed everyone's memories. This was helpful, for three important reasons:

1. My death was really embarrassing and pointless, so I'm glad it's a secret.
2. It would have been really hard to explain why I was back at school by Thursday if everyone remembered seeing me die on Tuesday.
3. I'd have been in really big trouble for climbing over that fence.

* I've just noticed that this rhymes. Now I can tell Dad I wrote a poem about what happened; he'll love that.

Skip Back to Today

It's been three and a half months since 'the incident' and I've managed to carry on much like I always did. Frances Rowthorne keeps sending me pages and pages of handwritten notes about the supernatural world that I've stashed in a big box under my bed, but I'm not reading any of it because:

1. it's like a boring encyclopaedia and

2. I don't want to learn about vampire stuff; I just want to be a normal kid. The only thing I want from Frances Rowthorne is a cure.





About the Author

Louise Austin is a reformed lawyer from Kent who is the mother of three book-devourers and a devoted servant to her fluffy white cavapoo. A graduate of the University of Oxford, she is passionate about encouraging a love of reading and works part-time in a primary school, where she haunts the book corner, helping kids discover new stories. Her writing was selected for SCBWI Undiscovered Voices 2024 and won the Cornerstones PWA Prize for most promising longlisted manuscript in the Bath Children's Novel Awards 2022.

About the Illustrator

Katie Kear is an illustrator currently living in the beautiful Cotswolds with her partner and Pembroke Welsh Corgi who's called Toastie, because if a burnt loaf of bread grew little legs and a whole lot of personality, it'd be him!

She graduated from the University of Gloucestershire with a First Class degree in Illustration, and loves drawing, adventures in nature, stationery and finding new inspirational artists!