



GHOST TAMER

MEREDITH R. LYONS

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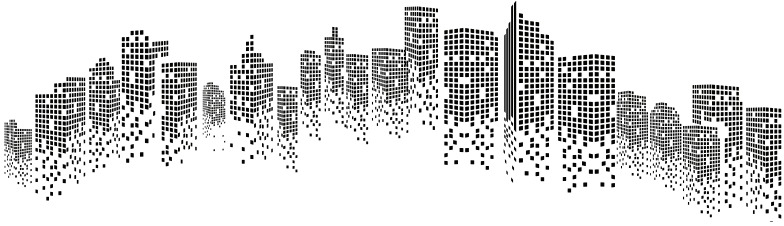
*For my Momza,
who knew this day would come.*

*For Erin, for Jason, for Jake.
Each of you is remembered within these pages.*

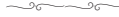
*For all who have lost someone indelibly
lodged in their soul.*







1



“IT’S COMING. LET’S RUN.”

Joe and I sprinted through the thick snowflakes toward the El platform, pounding up the salt strewn stairs two at a time. Scanned our passes lickety-split and leapt onto the very first car just as the warning bell chimed and the doors glided shut.

“Winners.” Joe held his gloved hand up without turning around and I smacked my mittened palm against his for a muffled high five. He pointed to the front of the car. “Hey, Raely, your favorite seats. Must be your lucky day, girl!”

“Excellent!” I clamped onto my friend’s shoulder and wove after him through the passengers as the elevated train bobbed and swayed.

It was a few hours after the rush, and the train was not uncomfortably packed. Joe and I lucked into those first two seats at the front behind the driver. I loved being able to see out to the tracks in front. Made it almost like a carnival ride. As soon as I was settled in my seat, leaning back against the side window, Joe launched into an

impassioned critique of my stand-up set. We were both out of breath from our sprint. Still buzzing from the adrenaline of recent stage time.

“I mean, you have to feel good about that bit with the birthday cup,” he said. “That one is solid . . .” We had just finished five-minute solo sets at an early evening open mic. I liked the earlier ones, fewer people. Although Joe was trying to get me to commit to a ‘real’ one—8 p.m. or later, true show time—sometime before spring.

Other passengers surrounding us in our little section of the train stood either reading or plugged into music or podcasts. Everyone created their own space. Joe’s ardent critique of my set didn’t register to the average commuter, although a few smiled to themselves, glancing over at him, perhaps catching some of his clever turns of phrase. Since he was in flow, he was still standing, gesticulating, while I gazed up at him.

I flung my legs across the seat he had not yet taken and studied him. He was one of those guys who would always be okay. He could easily transition from his office job to any bohemian shenanigans that he may get the urge to dabble in with a simple change of clothes and an alteration of mousse pattern. His set had been perfect. He’d nailed every bit. And for some reason, he always wanted me to do just as well.

“Okay, now you do mine,” he demanded, one gloved hand gripping the upright post as he swayed with the train, the fluorescent overhead lights gilding his dirty-blond hair, bleaching him into overexposure. “What did you think? Where do I need to tighten it up? I thought the part about the reunion email was a little *meh* . . .”

“Joe, none of it was ‘*meh*.’” I’d spent much of his set resisting the urge to tell the people next to me, *That’s my best friend up there*. “I think you should just go for the whole ten minutes next time. It was spot-on. The audience was with you the entire time. I think they were disappointed when you were done, honestly.”

“I still think if we got into Second City, it would take our skills to the next level.” He scooted a little closer as the train made another stop,

but only a few people pushed through the doors before they slid shut again. “Improv is an essential skill.”

“Oh, for sure,” I said. “I just don’t know that I’m—”

“Stop saying you don’t think you’re ready, you never think you’re ready for anything. You just need to *do*.” He leaned toward me, grinning and pointing. The train jostled, but he swayed with it. I couldn’t help but smile back. City lights flashed by in the windows behind him as we sped through the Chicago Loop, leaving the near south side. The tiny squares of high-rise windows carved bright, symmetrical specks into the dark winter sky.

It had finally stopped snowing. I peeked out the front window. The train gobbled up the line of track before us ever more quickly as it picked up speed.

“So,” I nudged his leg with my boot. “We’re done with our sets, no more secrets. What’s the big, exciting thing you’re doing this weekend that trumps game night? I was ready to clean up at Telestrations.”

Joe’s smile broadened. He smacked my boots, pushing them to the floor, and took the seat, leaning toward me. “I’m proposing to Mia.”

I straighten away from the window. “Shut. UP!”

He grinned and grasped a finger of his glove, wiggling his hand free and reaching for an inside coat pocket. “Wanna see it?”

“Yes, I wanna see it! Oh my God! Joe!” I scooted closer, a silly grin spilling over my face, and extended my palm. I loved Mia. And I loved who Joe was *with* Mia. Joe grinned back at me and unfastened the first two buttons of his coat to access the pocket.

The full moon gilded the metal of the tracks ahead of us as the train whipped toward the river, to the turn just ahead. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“Joe,” I said, catching his eye. “The train is going too fast.”

We turned away from each other, gazes locked on the front window. The curve was looming. Shiny, bright metal, arcing gracefully to the left. And the train wasn’t slowing down. My heart expanded,

uncomfortably filling my chest. Electricity shot through my limbs. Our car sped forward relentlessly.

My eyes found Joe's. The metallic taste of fear coated the back of my tongue. I meant to say that we should grab on to something, even as my body compelled both hands to grasp the railing of the seat beside me. Joe opened his mouth to say something and then . . .

There was a wrench. A screaming of metal fighting metal. The train tore off the rails. For one second, we were all suspended together. As if existing inside a gasp. Not a human sound. Conversation ceased. Silence was our collective scream.

Then chaos. Everyone yelled, cried, cursed. The lights strobed, then cut out. Every body and bag on the train hurtled toward the front of the car, tagging every metal guardrail along the way. Gravity found us again with a sickening crunch.

Pain sliced into my side, but I couldn't move. Couldn't make space. Pressure increased. I couldn't breathe. Panic clawed at my ribcage. I wanted to fight but there was nothing to defeat. No air to breath. I couldn't move. Nowhere to go.

Blackness.

When consciousness found me again, I was disoriented.

My head hurt. My lungs heaved as if I had been underwater. I wheezed like a drowning victim. Someone pulled at me. Under my arms. Hauling. My feet were caught. Yanked free.

A yelp died escaping my throat. I struggled to open my eyes, my eyelids impossibly heavy.

"Joe?" Raspy. Rusty voice.

"I'm getting you outside. They'll find you more easily outside. You need to stay very still."

I wrenched my eyes open. I watched my legs being pulled through the shattered window of the train as if they belonged to someone else. My booted feet thudding to the ground. Dragging trenches through the fresh powder. I had never given thought to how big the trains were

when I rode them every day, but now, seeing one crashed in the snow, it was like a blue whale.

“Joe . . .” I croaked.

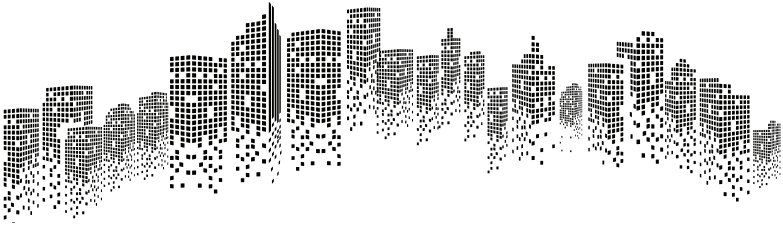
“You need to think about surviving. You’re hurt. You need to stay relaxed and then you need to do what the medical people say. Look up. Look up and stay calm.”

He laid me down in the fresh snow and I looked up. I could see the moon. Full. I could even see a few stars. *Never see stars in Chicago. Not downtown.*

I heard sirens. Helicopters. Someone was in trouble. I knew I should help. But I was so tired. Lying in the snow and looking up seemed the right thing to do.

The edges of my vision blurred. Whoever had been pulling me was no longer nearby. I heard voices. Turned my head to the side. It seemed to take a long time. The world went in and out of focus. I saw people. Lights. Lots of lights, painting the glittering snow with pulses of pink. I wondered why I didn’t feel cold. I didn’t feel anything. A crimson semi-circle blossomed through the snow at my left side. The bloom slowly grew. It was beautiful. Red against the white.

People. Running closer. Boots spraying the fresh snow. Shouting, lights flashing, the whirring of the helicopters throbbed against my eardrums. I pulled my gaze back to the train to search for Joe. I tried to call for him, but my mouth wouldn’t move.



2



DAYS IN THE HOSPITAL PASSED BY IN A BLUR. I'd had surgery and was going to have a ginormous scar on my left side, sure to be very attractive come bikini season and fun to explain the next time I managed to sustain a relationship to 'that stage.'

I was the only one in the first car to survive.

My mom drove up from the suburbs immediately and had the sense to contact the personal injury lawyers I used to work for part-time.

No one would tell me anything about Joe. Not that I was conscious much at first. They waited until I was 'out of the woods' to break the news that he hadn't made it. Apparently, that kind of shock can affect the healing process.

Mom was neatly Tetris-ing flowers and get-well cards into a box she had coaxed from hospital staff, which had *lubricating jelly* stamped on the side. Mia had just left. Her visit had been awkward and painful with neither of us knowing how to talk to each other. Now I slumped in

my wheelchair, exhausted and hollowed out from that halting attempt at conversation, cocooned in my invisible blanket of grief and pain, a stuffed Pooh Bear wedged next to me.

When mom had placed it in my lap, I'd rolled my eyes and reminded her that I was twenty-six but tucked him under my arm when she turned her back.

Another nurse finished a chatty farewell with Mom—who, of course, had befriended with the entire staff by now. She reminded me to take it easy and swept out of the room with my recently autographed discharge papers.

"Where's that tall dude with the shaggy hair? Is he coming to say goodbye, too?" I sounded crabby. But crabby was one of my more pleasant moods lately.

"Who?" Mom didn't look up from her packing.

"That guy. He came here like . . . three or four times? Usually during the night? I figured he was a night shift person. He never stayed long or did anything useful, but he sure did come by a lot. What?"

She had stopped packing and was staring at me, brow furrowed. She looked much too concerned to be merely trying to come up with someone's name.

"What?" I repeated.

"The first few nights after surgery you talked to yourself sometimes. We assumed you were . . . sleep-talking, like you used to do when you were little. You would ask about Joe or—"

"So, you never saw that guy?"

"I think you must have been imagining it. You've had a lot of morphine."

She nodded to the stack of get-well cards in her hand and resumed collecting bouquets.

Exhaustion pulled at me. The ever-present ache in my chest flared, reminding me that Joe was dead. In the end, I didn't care who had visited, and so I let it go.



THREE WEEKS LATER, I limped up the well-salted sidewalk to my lawyer's River North office, buzzed the receptionist from the street-level intercom, and announced myself. After yanking the door open, I debated taking the stairs up to the second story, decided to heed the throbbing ache in my leg, and opted for the elevator. I was on track for a full recovery, they said, but it sure was taking a hell of a long time.

Minutes later I was in the small, familiar conference room with a bottle of water in my hand and a notepad on the shiny wooden table in front of me. I'd worked part time for Dubin and Cantor for almost three years and still came in to help occasionally if they were short-handed. They'd apparently managed to grab the cases of a few more of the survivors in adjacent cars. And some of the . . . not survivors. Anyway, it was nice to have lawyers you trusted.

James Cantor, my former boss, came striding in. He was short, athletic, and energetic, with an accordion file under one arm and a coffee in hand. I managed to wrestle a weak smile from somewhere to meet his blast of energy. Normally, I blasted right along in tandem.

"Raely! You look tons better. How do you feel? You feel like crap, right? Yeah, well, just keep putting one foot in front of the other. I promise you. Night and day. You may not feel it yet, but you're healing."

"Thanks," I said, the corner of my mouth creeping up the left side of my face. I hauled my latest batch of medical records out of my messenger bag. "My ortho has started emailing me these directly, so I printed them off at the comedy club."

"Excellent!" He dived for the records. "So you don't need copies? Great. I'll have Helen enter them. Hey, you want a coffee? You look like you could use a coffee. Fake plant milk, right? Helen!"

Helen shuffled in briskly, a warm grin already in place. Her iron gray hair and sensible sweater-and-skirt ensemble contrasted with James's artfully faded jeans and black button up—rolled to the elbows,

of course. He gave her my coffee order, which I knew was coming out of a Keurig, so I didn't feel too guilty about it, and passed her the records.

"Yeah, I guess the doc likes me. Is it true love? Or am I merely a fascinating case? We may never know," I said. Helen chuckled and trotted off.

James teased a folder out from the large accordion file with 'Raely Videc' printed on the side in large block letters. So strange to see one with my name on it.

"Got your police report back and even have photos of the scene."

"Really? Wow, that was fast." I accepted my coffee from Helen with a nod of thanks and scooted closer to the table.

"Yeah, so, we gotta work on your statement. I know you were in shock and it's completely understandable that your memory may be hazy or incomplete." He carefully spread the papers and photographs across the shiny table, placing each 8 x 10 as if it belonged in a specific spot.

"I don't think my memories were too hazy." I took a gulp of coffee, summoning patience. We'd had several versions of this conversation before.

"You said you were pulled from the car."

"I was pulled from the car."

"You said someone pulled you out through the window of the car and dragged you away from the rest of the train."

"Yeah. 'Cause that's what happened."

He pushed a photograph toward me. I spun it around and slid it closer. It was an aerial view of the wreck, obviously taken from a helicopter. Maybe stills from a video. I could see the smashed front car, the second car dangling, and the third car teetering. I could see myself. A lone, tiny figure, limbs splayed like a snow angel, a crimson blotch at my side. I forced my emotions into a little box. Stuffed them into my mental basement. I would deal with them later. Or never. Never was fine.

“Yes, look.” I jammed my finger at the photo, pushing it to the space between us, suppressed emotion thickening my Chitown accent. “You can see drag marks from my legs. I was sitting on the opposite side of the train. How could I have been thrown from the window on *this* side? There woulda been glass all over me. I woulda hit my head or something.”

“Look here.” As James circled his finger over the snow surrounding my body, his accent broadened in response to mine.

I glared at the section he indicated, then clung to a polite tone with effort. “I don’t see anything.”

“Precisely.”

What was he talking about?

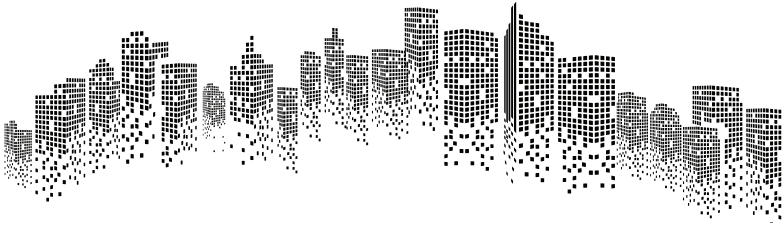
“What *don’t* you see?”

My brow furrowed. I looked at the photo, then shook my head.

James leaned forward, palms on the table. “Footprints.”

My breath caught. I snatched the photograph off the table. Held it close to my nose and scanned. He was right. Other than the trenches my feet had dug into the powder and the craters pocked by fallen debris, the snow was perfect.

“The paramedics came immediately after this was taken. You can see them off to the side. They saw no one nearby. If someone had pulled you from the train, there would be footprints somewhere.”



3



MY FIRST NIGHT SHIFT BACK AT THE CLUB WAS A TUESDAY. AS SOON AS my physical therapist cleared me for long-term standing, I'd called up George Rosen, the owner. He put me on the floor that week. I did the weekday shifts while my leg was still sore. Less running around. Even at a comedy club, working behind the bar can get intense during breaks between sets.

On my first Friday night shift, I was working with Luck, my favorite fellow drink-slinger. He had been there a while but never gave you the impression that he was 'too senior' to do side work or help a coworker in the weeds.

He was a comic himself, as were most of us in some iteration, and his set wasn't half bad. It didn't hurt that he was easy on the eyes. He had perennially bronze skin, short, dark curls, and light gray eyes. And a killer understated callback joke for every conversation that would have you chuckling when it popped into your head two days later. If I had an option, and Luck was either on the schedule or doing a set,

that's the night I'd choose. Luck was always down to hang out afterward, too. A not-so-small bonus.

During the first two hours of the shift, my heart felt lighter than it had since the accident. The easy banter with patrons and Luck—who seemed just as happy to have me back on Fridays as I was to be there—the feeling of doing something normal, and the *almost* complete absence of pain . . . it was a balm. There were even stretches of time where I didn't consciously mourn Joe.

I spotted the shaggy-haired hospital guy at the end of the bar. I gave him a small smile and a wave to let him know I'd be down there when it was his turn. His hair looked more anime than shaggy in this light. Perhaps he'd applied product for a night out.

"Hey!" I raised my voice over the din of the crowd once I'd taken care of customers ahead of him. "From the hospital, right? Nice to see you in the real world."

He stared back at me like I had grown three heads.

My professional dazzling smile dropped a watt or two. "Well, what can I get you?"

"Are you talking to me?" said the guy behind him. I started to tell him to wait his turn, but as he squished his way up to the bar, giving his order, he *walked right through* the anime-haired guy.

My blood turned to ice and a dull roaring filled my ears as Anime shook his head and backed away. Through at least one other person. It took tremendous effort to wrench my focus back to the man in front of me and ask him to repeat his order.

Maybe it was a blessing that my thirty-second chat with Anime had put me one inch away from the weeds. I was forced to concentrate on taking orders and slinging drinks until the next set started. Luck was working furiously, too.

I waited until the next act was going strong—an experienced standup, thank God, because he had the crowd fully contained within seconds—and told Luck that I needed some air. I got his blessing,

pulled a bottle of warm water from one of the cases in the storage closet as I passed, and pushed open the stage door to the alley, being careful to leave the worn, wooden doorstop in its jam to avoid being locked out. I plunked down on the steps with a raspy exhale, sipped my tepid water, and tried to think through what I had just seen. Some kind of PTSD effect, maybe?

I put my water bottle on the step beside me, closed my eyes and pressed the heels of my hands into them. I was wearing contacts, so I had to be careful, but sometimes I still enjoyed seeing the little stars I could create. When I lifted my face, he was there.

I closed my eyes. Assessed the position of my contact lenses and found them to be fine. I blinked several times upon reopening. He was still there. There had to be a logical explanation for this. He looked totally normal; I must have imagined him misting through people.

I stared him right in the eye, grabbed my water bottle, and took a pull. Sad that it was not whiskey. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

He glanced around, settled his gaze back on me, then took a step forward.

I dropped the bottle and jerked to a standing position. Neither of us watched it clunk down the remaining two steps, splashing its contents over the concrete, and rolling to a stop at his feet.

“You can see me?” he asked, tilting his head as if *I* were the one behaving oddly.

“No fucking shit, Sherlock, now why are you stalking me?” I edged up a step closer to the door, never taking my eyes off him.

He blinked. Stuck his hands in his pockets. It was then that I noticed he was wearing dark jeans and a light jacket in the middle of winter. No scarf. No gloves. Not even a hipster hat.

“I’m not stalking you.” He looked just as confused as I felt. Applause erupted from the theatre at my back. The set was done. “You need to go back to work.” He stepped backward and *vanished into the building across the alley*. I started hyperventilating.

Luck threw open the door, thankfully a full two inches shy of knocking me off the steps. “Hey, Raely, I need you. Full house.” He flashed me a smile and darted back inside. I shook myself, grabbed the door before it slammed shut and followed. I forced myself to focus on work until I was done. Then I had a few drinks with Luck and the comics to try and numb myself.



I TREATED MYSELF to a Lyft once I was comfortably anesthetized.

Some voice in the back of my head told me that it wasn't safe to be hobbling around on public transportation in the snow with a bum leg, regardless of whether less-than-corporeal, anime-looking men were in fact stalking me. I felt under my coat for the little canister of pepper spray that my mom had tucked into my stocking every year since I moved into the city. *They expire, you know.*

Fat lot of good it would do in my jeans pocket under all my layers.

I moved it to the pocket of my coat and kept my hand wrapped around it, telling myself I was going to start carrying it everywhere, at the ready. Maybe go over those palm-strike maneuvers that I'd learned in that self-defense class until I had this figured out.

Figured out what, exactly?

I tried to settle my whiskey-flavored thoughts into a coherent line as my Lyft driver fiddled with the radio. I'd stared out the window after the barest of polite greetings to avoid her feeling like she had to make small talk with me to get that top-star rating. I idly wondered if she carried pepper spray.

I definitely saw this guy at the hospital. My brain had moved this issue to Priority One. It made sense from a self-preservation standpoint, but mainly it gave me a break from my previous Priority One—survivor's guilt and crushing sadness. *It was definitely the same guy at the club tonight.* And he had definitely vanished through solid people, and

at least one wall. All of which had appeared to go unnoticed by anyone else. He'd spoken to me, though. And he *looked* solid enough. That is, until he collided with someone or something else.

I was avoiding it. Avoiding labeling him a ghost. But . . . I had no better word. So, why would a ghost haunt me at the hospital and comedy club? Was he someone who had been on the train with me? Someone who hadn't made it?

I only half paid attention as I thanked the driver and clomped up the walk to my apartment. I gave her the full star rating and a generous tip for being out so late. When I looked up from my phone, I saw a girl in shorts and a T-shirt peering into the windows on the lower level.

"Oh, hey, are you locked out?" I fished my keys out of my coat pocket. She had to be freezing.

She whipped around. The shock on her face made me pause.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I get off work late." I gestured toward the building, making sure to show my keys. Maybe I was slurring. Maybe I sounded like some drunk asshole, and she thought I was making fun of her. "I live here too. Are you locked out?"

She shook her head, one side of her mouth quirked up as if she were trying not to smile. She staggered back onto the snowy lawn and ran around the side of the building.

"The fuck . . ." I breathed. She hadn't even been wearing shoes! To run off through the snow barefoot . . . I looked at the ground where she had run from the window. No footprints.

I didn't remember unlocking the front door or hurtling up the stairs. I didn't remember throwing the deadbolt, locking the doorknob, and putting the chain on my door. In the morning, I would have trouble opening the door before I remembered. I would also laugh at myself for thinking a deadbolt was going to keep out ghosts.

I threw on every light in the place as I stumbled through the motions of preparing for bed, simultaneously terrified to end up there. Defenseless. In the dark. *Maybe I'm seeing things. Maybe I should call*

the doctor. Make that appointment. In the end, I pulled Blitz, my disgruntled black-and-white cat, into bed with me. I even bribed him with cheese so he'd stay. He had no interest in cuddling, but I wanted him in the room. Cats could sense ghosts, right?

I tried to tell myself that I was tired. Drunk. That I had imagined the girl outside. Hadn't looked closely enough for the footprints. That I just needed to sleep. Sleep would fix my brain. I just needed to take better care of myself, that's all. Some sleep. Less booze. Some good, healthy food tomorrow. I found a book that I'd read a million times and lost myself in the familiar story. Blitz eventually deigned to curl up between my feet. At some point, I fell asleep, the book dropping from my fingers.

I woke up before dawn and he was there. Standing in the corner of my room. Watching me while Blitz washed his paws without a hint of concern.

I squeezed my eyes shut as adrenaline surged through me. *Nonononono NO! This isn't real.* I opened my eyes, and he hadn't moved. My chest caved. The adrenaline dissipated as quickly as it had come and left me enervated.

A strange guy in my bedroom, stalking me, and I didn't feel an overwhelming sense of terror or an instinctive desire to scream; instead, I felt a bottomless well of despair.

Funny.

I pushed myself into a sitting position, careful not to disrupt Blitz out of long-ingrained habit. A heavy, dark sadness pressed on my heart. Some distant part of my brain clocked that as abnormal. I dismissed it. No time for that.

"Why are you here?" My voice sounded dull and tired, even to myself. I thought of the pepper spray, resting in a dish on the nightstand, but didn't so much as look at it. What was the point? "What do you want from me?"

He stiffened and blinked. "I don't understand."

A bark of laughter leapt from my throat, startling Blitz and Anime. “You’re in my *bedroom*. You’ve been following me around, and I wake up and you’re staring at me like a . . . a . . . I don’t know, but it’s creepy as fuck and I’m tired and I hurt everywhere and I just want to know what the hell you *want*.”

My voice broke on the last word. I thought I might cry as the weight on my heart continued to press down, but my eyes were dry. Blitz resumed bathing himself as if there were no strange intruder, badly in need of a comb, hanging out in a shadowy corner of my bedroom.

“I don’t understand how you can see me. How you can hear me. You never did before.”

The weight gradually lifted, replaced by a slowly spreading numbness. I looked him in the eye. Dark, like his hair, but I couldn’t tell the color. “What?” The word crept out of me, barely audible.

“I thought in the hospital that it was temporary, because you came so close to death. Or the drugs . . . but something permanent must have shifted.” His eyebrows drew together. Two dark slashes above his eyes, a small crinkle deepening between them. “I’ve been with you for . . . years. You never saw me before.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Drunk. I’m still drunk. Please let me still be drunk. Asleep. Yes. I’m having a nightmare.

I felt Blitz kneading the covers next to my legs and flinched. I opened my eyes, focusing on the cat. Calmly purring. I could still see him, the . . . ghost, peripherally. My arms began to shake, and my eyes started to burn. *No. Do not show fear.*

My snarky subconscious piped up: *He’s a ghost, not an angry dog.*

So helpful. Still, I forced a few deep breaths into my lungs and dragged my eyes back up to his. I made myself take a real look at him. I was pretty good at reading people, surely ghosts were at least . . . person-lite.

His eyes were wide—I still couldn’t discern their color in the darkness of the corner he had pressed himself into—but they were fixed on

me. He hunched against the wall like a lanky crescent moon. Hands in the pockets of his jacket. It looked just like a jacket a friend of mine once had in high school. I'd always envied it—cargo chic, he had called it, utilitarian, but fitted. Robbie had to alter his thrift store finds in the costume shop during lunch. Anime's jeans reminded me of photographs of my dad in the '70s. Worn blue converse peaked out from underneath them. He didn't seem threatening.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He flinched, I snorted.

"What?"

"Your name? Do you . . . do gh—. You know what? Let's start with what you are."

The left corner of his mouth twitched up, and he ducked his head. Christ. A shy ghost? I squinted, but in the pre-dawn light, I couldn't tell if he was blushing. Smart-ass internal voice quipped about having conversations with spirits in the dark. I reached over and smacked my bedside lamp. Warm orange light spilled into the room.

He blinked. "I like that thing."

Surprise bubbled against my sternum. I glanced back at the lamp. It was in the shape of a bare silver tree, little fairy lights at the ends of each branch. I found it charming also. "Thank y— Hang on. I refuse to have polite conversation with a strange entity in my bedroom that declines to give me a straight goddamn answer."

"Entity?" His eyebrows floated up to disappear behind his messy fringe.

"Cut the crap, Casper. Tell me what you are and what your name is, and then get the hell out of my life forever."

He curled up into himself and slid down the wall to the ground as if I had hurt his feelings. I shook my head and grabbed the glass of water from my nightstand. I took a big gulp, still keeping an eye on him in my periphery. My arms were still trembling, but the fear had been blunted by a myriad of other unpleasant emotions. I wanted to yell at

him. Tell him that I was tired, that this was *my bedroom*, and for him to be acting like I was the one being mean was completely inappropriate. I was also done with being the only one talking. Determined to wait him out, I sipped my water and gripped the edge of my comforter as if it were woven from threads of my patience.

After an eternity, broken only by the sleepy purrs of Blitz, who was now curled in my lap, the sulky spirit lifted his forehead from his arms and looked up at me, as if checking to see if I were going to throw something at him. In fairness, I had considered throwing the rest of my water on him to see if perhaps he might melt, but I merely raised my eyebrows.

He uncurled enough to sit cross-legged on the floor. He looked about my age, but then, I'd never been great at guessing ages. He muttered something.

"What's that?" My voice sounded loud even to me in the dead silence of what was probably near sunrise.

"I said I don't know my name, and I'm not entirely sure what I am. All I know is I've been with you as long as I can remember." He spoke to his fingers as he clasped and unclasped them.

"Well, things have changed," I said, exhaustion peeling away any tactful filters that might normally have been in place. "I can see you now, and we seem to be conversing. I need something to call you and we have to establish some ground rules while we figure out this . . . situation."

A beat. He stopped fidgeting.

"Okay," he said. "You called me Casper. Is that a name I can use?"

Deep inside, a more awake version of myself probably smiled. "Casper is absurdly perfect. If you're a friendly ghost. For the purposes of this discussion, let's assume you are."

He nodded. He even smiled a little. Sat up straighter. "I think I am some kind of ghost," he said, as if pleased to be diagnosed. Almost as if he were saying, "I think I am lactose intolerant."

“Wouldn’t you know?” I asked. “I feel like that’s a thing you know about yourself.”

He shrugged. “Most ghosts do know that they’re ghosts. And know what they want and where they came from. I probably am a ghost; I just don’t remember where I came from.”

“Since you’ve apparently interacted with *other* ghosts, let’s just say you’re definitely a ghost. Cool?”

He nodded. He seemed happy with this.

I shook my head. “Alright, Casper, rule number one: You can’t be hanging around me all the time. Especially not in my bedroom watching me sleep.”

He shot onto his knees with lightning speed, thrusting upturned palms toward me. “How else am I supposed to keep you *safe*? Sorry.”

I’d flung the water glass spasmodically in his direction and leapt to my feet in a tangle of sheets and cat. My heart was still thudding loudly as I removed an offended Blitz’s claws from my oversized T-shirt and set him gently back upon the bed, my eyes narrowed on Casper. “No sudden movements. Please.”

I bent to retrieve the glass. It had rolled to a stop against the bed frame after splashing its remaining contents over the wall and window. I set it back on the nightstand and leaned against the wall opposite him, still standing.

“Let’s back up to the keeping me safe thing. What exactly are you keeping me safe from?”

He shrugged, now fiddling with his shoelaces. “Just . . . anything. Most of the time it’s not hard. I can just remind you to look if you’re about to bump into something or tell you that going down the alley is a bad idea and you should go the other way—”

“How would you tell me to not go down an alley, for example?”

He looked up, deadpan. “Hey, don’t go down that alley.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, so you would talk to me, and I wouldn’t hear you but . . .”

“But most of the time, you would do what I said, yeah. Sometimes you ignored me and did stupid stuff anyway.”

“What sage advice of yours have I ignored to my great misfortune?”

“Hey, this isn’t a good part of the woods to poop in.”

“Oh, so you know what poison ivy looks like?”

“Better than you, apparently.”

“Wait, you watched me—”

“No! Gross, once it was obvious you were ignoring me, I took off for a while.”

“Okay, you can come on long trail runs.” My heart sank. “Once I’m able to run again.”

The corners of his mouth twitched upward.

I pushed my injuries out of mind. “Does everyone have little ghost protectors following them around? Yelling warnings at them when they’re about to do stupid things?”

His smile vanished, and his eyes dropped to the floor again. “No. Hardly anyone. Some people have spirits—ghosts, whatever you want to call it—following them, but usually they’re just watching. They don’t try to help them. Most of the time, warning you is enough. But when your train crashed I . . . had to get more involved.”

My spine locked. The air left the room. My hand drifted up to press against my mouth. He remained seated, peered up at me through his messy hair. I dropped to my knees. With effort, I pulled my hand down, pressing it flat to the floor. “*You* pulled me out,” I whispered.

He nodded.

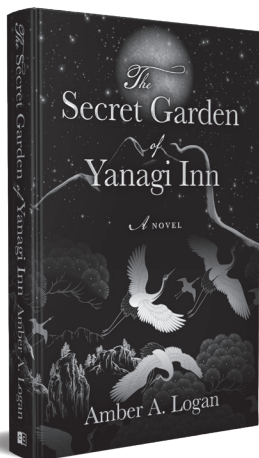
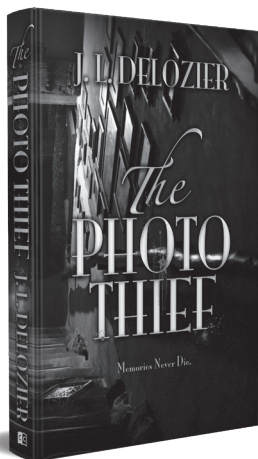
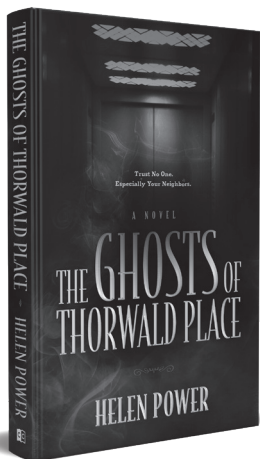
“I heard you talking to me. And no one believed me because there were no footprints.”

He scrubbed his hands through his hair, making it messier against all odds. “Maybe something happened when I touched you. I’ve never done that before.”

“How could you drag me out of a wrecked train and not leave any footprints?”



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