

CITY OF GHOSTS

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CHAPTER ONE

People think that ghosts only come out at night, or on Halloween, when the world is dark and the walls are thin. But the truth is, ghosts are everywhere. In the bread aisle at your grocery store, in the middle of your grandmother's garden, in the front seat on your bus.

Just because you can't see them doesn't mean they aren't there.

I'm sitting in History class when I feel the *tap-tap-tap* on my shoulder, like drops of rain. Some people call it intuition, others second sight. That tickle at the edge of your senses, telling you there's something *more*.

This isn't the first time I've felt it—not by a long shot. Not even the first time I've felt it here at my school. I've tried to ignore it—I always do—but it's no use. It wears away at my focus, and I know the only way to make it stop is to give in. Go and see for myself.

From across the room, Jacob catches my eye and shakes his head. *He* can't feel that *tap-tap-tap*, but he knows me well enough to know when *I* do.

I shift in my seat, forcing myself to focus on the front of the classroom. Mr. Meyer is valiantly trying to teach, despite the fact it's the last week of school before summer vacation.

". . . Toward the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, US troops . . ." my teacher drones on. Nobody can sit still, let alone pay attention. Derek and Will are sleeping with their eyes open, Matt is working on his latest paper football. Alice and Melanie are making a list.

Alice and Melanie are *popular kids.*

You can tell because they look like copies—same shiny hair, same perfect teeth, same painted nails—where I'm all elbows and knees, round cheeks, and curly brown hair. I don't even own nail polish.

I know you're supposed to *want* to be one of the popular kids, but the truth is, I never have. It just seems like it would be exhausting, trying to keep up with all the rules. Smile, but not too wide. Laugh, but not too loud.

Wear the right clothes, play the right sports, care about things, but never care too much.

(Jacob and I have rules, too, but those are different.)

As if on cue, Jacob stands up and makes his way toward Melanie's desk. *He* could be a popular kid, I think, with his floppy blond hair, bright blue eyes, and good humor.

He shoots me a devilish look before perching on the edge of her desk.

He *could* be, but there's just one problem.

Jacob's dead.

"'Things we need for movie night . . . '" he reads aloud from Melanie's paper. But I'm the only one who can hear him. Melanie folds another sheet, an invitation—I can tell by the capital letters, the pink pen—and reaches forward to pass it to Jenna, who sits in front of her. As Melanie does this, her hand goes straight through Jacob's chest.

He looks down, as if offended, then hops off the desk.

Tap-tap-tap goes the feeling in my head, like a whisper I can't quite hear. Impatient, I check the clock on the wall, waiting for the lunch bell.

Jacob meanders over to Alice's desk next, examining the many multicolored pens she keeps lined up across the top. He leans in close and gingerly brings one of his fingers to the pens, all his focus narrowed on the nearest one as he pokes it.

But the pen doesn't move.

In the movies, poltergeists can lift televisions and slide beds across the floor. But the truth is, it takes a *lot* of spirit power for a ghost to reach across the Veil—the curtain between their world and ours. And the ghosts that do have that kind of strength, they tend to be really old and not very nice. The living may take strength from love and hope, but the dead grow strong on darker things. On pain and anger and regret.

Jacob furrows his brow as he tries—and fails—to flick Matt's paper football.

I'm glad he's not made of all that stuff.

I don't actually know how long Jacob's been *dead* (I think the word quietly, because I know he doesn't like it). It can't have been *that* long, since there's nothing retro about him—he's got on a superhero T-shirt, dark jeans, and high-tops—but he doesn't talk about what

happened, and I don't ask. Friends deserve a little privacy—even if he can read my mind. I can't read his, but all things considered, I would rather be alive and not psychic than psychic and a ghost.

He looks up at the word *ghost* and clears his throat. "I prefer the phrase 'corporeally challenged.'"

I roll my eyes because he knows I don't like it when he reads my mind without asking. Yes, it's a weird side effect of our relationship, but come on. Boundaries!

"It's not my fault you think so loud," Jacob replies with a smirk.

I snort, and a few students glance my way. I sink lower in my chair, my sneakers knocking against my book bag on the floor. The invitation Melanie passed to Jenna makes its way around the room. It doesn't stop at my desk. I don't mind.

Summer is almost here, and that means fresh air and sunshine and books to read for fun. It means the annual family trek down to the rented beach house on Long Island so Mom and Dad can work on their next book.

But most of all, it means no hauntings.

I don't know what it is about the beach house—maybe

the fact that it's so new, or the way it sits on a calm stretch of shore—but there seem to be far fewer ghosts down there than here in upstate New York. Which means that as soon as school's out, I get six full weeks of sun and sand and good nights' sleep.

Six weeks without the *tap-tap-tap* of restless spirits.

Six weeks of feeling *almost normal*.

I can't wait for the break.

I can't wait . . . and yet, the moment the bell rings, I'm up, backpack on one shoulder and purple camera strap on the other, letting my feet carry me toward that persistent *tap-tap-tap*.

"Crazy idea," says Jacob, falling into step beside me, "but we *could* just go to lunch."

It's Meat Loaf Thursday, I think, careful not to answer out loud. *I'd rather face the ghosts*.

"Hey, now," he says. But we both know Jacob's not a *normal* ghost, just like I'm not a normal girl. Not anymore. There was an accident. A bike. A frozen river. Long story short, he saved my life.

"Yeah, I'm practically a superhero," Jacob says, right before a locker swings open in his face. I wince, but he passes straight through the door. It's not that I *forget* what Jacob is—it's pretty hard to forget when your best friend is invisible to everyone else. But it's amazing what you can get accustomed to.

And it says something that the fact that Jacob's been haunting me for the past year isn't even the strangest part of my life.

We hit the split in the hall. Left goes to the cafeteria. Right goes to the stairs.

"Last chance for normal," Jacob warns, but he's got that crooked grin when he says it. We both know we passed normal a long time ago.

We go right.

Down the stairs and along another hall, against the flow of lunchtime traffic, and with each turn, the *tap-tap-tap* gets stronger, turning into a pull, like a rope. I don't even have to think about where to go. In fact, it's easier if I *stop* thinking and just let it reel me in.

It draws me to the doors of the auditorium. Jacob

shoves his hands in his pockets and mutters something about bad ideas, and I remind him he didn't have to come, even though I'm glad he did.

"Ninth rule of friendship," he says, "ghost-watching is a two-person sport."

"That it is," I say, snapping the cap off my camera lens. It's a clunky old beast, this camera, a manual with a busted viewfinder and black-and-white film, hanging off my shoulder on its thick purple strap.

If a teacher catches me in the auditorium, I'll say I was taking photos for the school paper. Even though all the clubs have ended for the year . . .

And I never worked for the paper.

I push open the auditorium doors and step inside. The theater is huge, with a high ceiling and heavy red curtains that hide the stage from view.

Suddenly, I realize why the *tap-tap-tap* has led me here. Every school has stories. Ways to explain that creaking sound in the boys' bathroom, that cold spot at the back of the English room, the smell of smoke in the auditorium.

My school's the same. The only difference is that when I hear a ghost story, I get to find out if it's real. Most of the time it's not.

A creaky sound is just a door with bad hinges.

A cold feeling is just a draft.

But as I follow the *tap-tap-tap* down the theater aisle and up onto the stage, I know there's something to this particular story.

It's the one about a boy who died in a play.

Apparently, a long, long time ago, when the school first opened, there was a fire in the second act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The set went up in flames, but everyone got out—or so they thought.

Until they found the boy under the trapdoor.

Jacob shivers beside me, and I roll my eyes. For a ghost, he scares so easily.

"Have you ever thought," he says, "that you don't scare easily enough?"

But I scare just as easily as anyone. Believe it or not, I don't *want* to spend my time searching for ghosts. It's just that if they're *there*, I can't ignore them. It's like

knowing there's someone standing right behind you and being told not to turn around. You can feel their breath on your neck, and every second you don't look, your mind just makes it worse because in the end, what you don't see is always scarier than what you do.

I climb onto the stage, Jacob at my heels. I can feel him hesitating, his own reluctance dragging me back as I pull up a corner of the heavy red curtain and slip backstage. Jacob follows, passing straight through the curtain.

It's dark here—so dark it takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the various props and benches scattered across the stage. A thin ribbon of light comes from beneath the curtain. It's quiet, but there's an eerie sense of motion. The faint groan of sandbags settling on their hinges. The whisper of air beneath the floorboards. The rustle of what I hope is paper and not rats.

I know that some of the older kids in school dare each other to go back here. To put their ear to the floor and listen for the boy who didn't make it. I heard them bragging about it once in the hall, how long they'd each

lasted. One minute. Two. Five. Some claim they heard the boy's voice. Others say they smelled smoke, heard the footsteps of fleeing children. But it's hard to know where the rumors end and the truth picks up.

Nobody dared *me* to come here. They didn't have to. When your parents write books about paranormal activity, people assume you're weird enough to go on your own.

I guess they're right.

I'm halfway across the darkened stage when I trip over something and stumble forward. Jacob's hand shoots out to catch me, but his fingers go through my arm, and I bang my knee on the wooden floor. My palm smacks hard, and I'm surprised when the floor bounces a little, until I realize I'm on top of the trapdoor.

The *tap-tap-tap* grows more insistent under my hands. Something dances at the edge of my sight: a thin gray curtain caught in a constant breeze. Different from the heavy red stage curtain. This one, no one else can see.

The Veil.

The boundary between this world and somewhere

else, between the living and the dead. This is what I'm looking for.

Jacob shifts his weight from foot to foot. "Let's get this over with."

I get back to my feet.

"Ghost five," I say, for luck. A ghost five is like a high five for friends who can't really touch. It's basically just me putting out my hand and him pretending to hit it, both of us murmuring a soft "smack" sound on contact.

"Oof," says Jacob, pulling his hand away, "you hit too hard."

I laugh. He's such a dork sometimes. But the laughter makes space in my chest, clears out the fear and nerves as I reach for the Veil.

I've seen people on TV—"ghost whisperers"—talk about crossing over, connecting with the other side like it's flipping a switch or opening a door. But for me, it's this—finding the part in the curtain, catching hold of the fabric, and pulling.

Sometimes, when there's nothing to find, the Veil is barely there, more smoke than cloth and hard to catch

hold of. But when a place is haunted—*really* haunted—the fabric twists around me, practically pulling me through.

Right here, right now, it dances between my fingers, waiting to be caught.

I grab hold of the curtain, take a deep breath, and pull.