

THE GHOSTS OF THORWALD PLACE by Helen Power EXCERPT

Chapter 3

It takes forever for someone to find my body. At six, the elevator is called to the fourth floor, and an early riser greets the sight of my body with a shrill scream. He stumbles backward, clutching his briefcase to his chest. I get the impression that he's never discovered a grisly crime scene before. I, on the other hand, am enveloped in the cool indifference that seems to accompany death.

He staggers back to his apartment, shrieking hysterically all the way. Several of his neighbors rush out into the hall. Each person is in various stages of undress. A pregnant woman wearing a silk bathrobe and only one slipper. A man whose face is coated in shaving cream, save for a single bare strip down his left cheek. The look of horror on their faces would have been amusing if I were in the mood for dark humor. The elevator doors slide shut, and I am launched to another floor, where I startle another early commuter. The elevator doors close on the stunned woman's face, lurching toward its next stop. I'm destined for repetition. Perhaps *this* is hell.

The police finally arrive, call the elevator to the ground floor, and put it out of service. I have now informally met a quarter of the building's occupants, which is more than I met in the two years I lived here. A handful of police officers form a perimeter, trying to block the sight of my corpse from the prying eyes of my nosey neighbors. I hover by the elevator door as forensic investigators get to work examining my corpse. I try not to watch—disgusted by the sight of my limp body, which is coated in blood that has begun to cake—but the process is mesmerizing. The flash of cameras, the murmur of voices, and the hypnotic movement of pencils as they scribble in pristine, white notebooks. The forensic experts step gingerly around the scene, careful not to disturb anything, as they scrutinize my body from all angles. As they work, I can't stop staring at my face. My eyes are still open and glazed over with a milky white sheen. My skin is nearly white, a shocking contrast to the deep crimson gash across my neck. My lips are parted in a soundless scream. A forensic investigator in a white bodysuit

steps in front of me, cutting off my view. Relief floods through me, and I turn away before the sight of my own corpse enthralls me once again. I know I gained consciousness only minutes after my death, because blood was still dripping where the arterial spray arched across the walls, looking as if an artist had decided to add a splash of color to the monochromatic gray. I was reluctant to leave my body, but I had no idea what else to do. I had no moment of shock, no moment of revelation where I realized I was dead. I knew it from the instant I opened my eyes and saw the world from the other side. A world which looks different in death. Everything is a little grayer, a little faded. Voices and sounds have a slight echo. It's as though I'm experiencing everything through a thin film—some indescribable substance that separates the world of the living from mine.

But why am I still here? My body has been found; the police are clearly investigating. It won't take long for them to figure out it was he who killed me. I leave the elevator and glance around the lobby. I don't see any obvious doorways or bright lights to follow. How will I know where to go? I bite back the pang of disappointment when I realize that none of my lost loved ones are here to welcome me. No husband. No parents. No Grumpelstiltskin, my childhood dog. Where are they, and how do I find my way to them?

I'm self-aware enough to know that I've always feared the unknown, and it's obvious that this hasn't changed in death. Instead of searching for my escape, I stay locked in place, eyes glued to the crime scene investigators. After what feels like an eternity, the medical examiner deposits my body into a black bag and wheels it out of the building. I begin to follow. Maybe if I slip back into my body, I'll awaken, and everyone will laugh, like this was all just one big misunderstanding.

I'll spend the rest of my days wearing a scarf, elegantly positioned to hide my gaping neck wound, like the girl in that urban legend.

I slam into an invisible wall about a dozen feet from the elevator. Slightly disoriented, I shake my head. I press forward.

Again, I'm stopped by an imperceptible force. I reach out, and my hand flattens midair. I run my hand along this invisible barrier, but it seems to run as high as I can reach and down to the marble floor.

I follow the barrier, tracing my hand along it. It cuts across the entire lobby, but not in a straight line. It's slightly curved. Beyond the wall, I can see the medical examiner exit the building with my body, leaving my soul behind. I slam a hand against the invisible wall once again, but there's no give.

My attention is drawn by the sound of a familiar grating voice. Elias Strickland, the concierge, is speaking with a police officer who looks like he's desperate to leave. The invisible wall can wait. I approach the pair to eavesdrop.

"We have excellent security here," Elias says. His perpetually nasal voice is exacerbated by the tears that stream down his face. "How could this have happened? My residents will want an explanation immediately."

"We have someone reviewing the security footage of the exits. If the killer left the building, we'll have them on film," the police officer says.

"If they left the building? Are you saying they might still *be here*?" Elias tugs at his cheap tie.

The killer might still be in the building. I look around and notice for the first time that the residents aren't allowed to simply leave. Police officers guard the front door, questioning each individual before they allow them to go to work or to the spa or to do whatever they think is more important than mourning my death.

"What can you tell me about the victim? Ms. Rachel Anne Drake?" the police officer asks.

"Well . . ." Elias runs a hand through his thinning, brown hair. "She is—was—an odd one. She rarely spoke to anyone. She kept to herself. I think I was her only friend in the building."

I stare at him, just now realizing that the tears streaming down his face are for me. I feel a pang of guilt. I've never considered us "friends." I interact with him once every few weeks—only when I have mail to pick up or complaints about the security guards.

Elias continues, "She even had her groceries delivered. I haven't seen her leave the building in months."

The police officer suddenly looks interested. He pulls a small, wire-bound notebook from his pocket and uncaps his pen.

"Do you think it's possible that she may have been hiding from someone?"

"Possibly . . . She was always really interested in the security in the building. Like that was the main reason why she moved here, not the fabulous party room or the services I provide as *concierge*." I wince in pity as he says the word with a dreadful French accent. He should have picked a line of work that he could pronounce.

"Did she have any visitors?"

"There was a man who used to come around, but I haven't seen him in a few months," Elias says. At the police officer's prompting, he continues on to describe him. I realize he's talking about Luke.

The police officer asks a few follow-up questions, and I'm surprised by just how much Elias knows. He knows the date and time of my weekly grocery deliveries, that once every couple of weeks I'll treat myself to pizza delivered from the greasy place down the street, and that I get a haul of books delivered every time BMV Books has a sale.

"Well, if you think of anything else, please contact us immediately." I peer over the police officer's shoulder to look at the scribbles in his notebook, but he's used a shorthand that I can't decipher.

A nearly identical police officer emerges from the security office holding a flash drive. He glances at the concierge, then turns to his partner and begins speaking rapid French.

"The video doesn't show anybody leaving the building between one and two this morning. But apparently, there was a power outage for about five minutes, and the killer could have left during that window."

"No! That power outage happened *before* I died. The power came back, and *then* he killed me." I blink and glance around. I hadn't thought I'd be able to speak.

It makes no difference. Neither police officer reacts to the sound of my voice. I look at Elias, but he's watching the officers intently. I turn my attention to the rest of the people milling about, but none of them seem to have heard me either. But I'm not yet discouraged.

I approach the pot-bellied man standing the closest to the crime scene tape. He cranes his neck to see into the elevator.

"THERE'S NOTHING TO SEE HERE!" I shout into his face. He doesn't react. I try to shake him, but my hands fall through his fleshy body. I feel nothing—no chill, no warmth—as I slide my hands through him. I examine his face, but it's clear that he doesn't sense me in the slightest.

I strategically progress through the lobby, shouting at each bystander, attempting to reach them through any means.

I try everything I can remember having seen in movies about ghosts—from waving my hands through their heads to shouting obscenities in their ears. No one reacts. No one so much as shivers.

I'm angry, disappointed, and beginning to feel helpless. I brace myself, preparing to do my calming breathing technique, but there are no symptoms of a panic attack. My body is overcome by the numbness of being incorporeal. I could get used to this. I suppose I'll have to.

I glance around, noticing that the police officers have long gone, and they've been replaced by a cleaning crew of four burly men who are crammed into the elevator. They've already bleached the walls in an attempt to remove all trace of my messy execution. The lobby is nearly empty now. Only

Elias stands at his station, compulsively wringing his hands in between fielding calls from curious residents and the media.

I survey the expansive, high-ceilinged lobby. Unlike the rest of the building, it was designed with the sole purpose of impressing visitors. The floors are marble, polished to near perfection. The wallpaper is a pale blue with gold foil accents in the shape of falling leaves. A hefty, ornate clock is the only decoration on the stretch of the wall across from the front desk. There are two wing chairs and a sofa positioned underneath it. It serves as a sort of waiting area, though in my two years living in this building, I've never seen a single person sitting out here.

I can only access half of the lobby, so I need to find a way around this invisible barrier. I approach the elevator and look down the hall to the right. I tentatively step through the wall. I'm in the guest suite that's reserved for visitors of building residents. The bed is neatly made, with the corners of the bedspread tucked tightly. There's a lounge area sparsely decorated with cool tones. A gray, leather couch is angled toward an impressively-sized TV.

The room is windowless, but a single painting of a blue sky over a grassy field hangs on the wall opposite the door, creating the illusion of something beyond.

I stride across the plain gray rug and easily pass through this wall as well. I'm in the ground-level parking garage, which is located below the building. I continue to walk until I slam against the barrier. It doesn't hurt, but it's disorienting.

I place my hand on the barrier and follow it around until I reach the wall twenty feet from where I entered. The barrier is clearly circular. Is it meant to keep me contained? I shake my head at that thought, then I continue to follow the barrier through the wall, out of the garage, and into the library.

With gorgeous oak-paneled walls and towering bookshelves, the building's library is quite a sight to behold. The leather couches look comfortable, with antique copper lamps strategically positioned between them. I've been down here several times over the last two years, but I never dawdle. I usually grab a handful of books and hurry back upstairs to the safety of my apartment, where I can actually relax and enjoy my reading.

I walk through the room divider into the "party" area. The dim overhead lights reveal a bar in the corner, which is framed by tall mirrors, making the room seem larger than it actually is. I scan the rest of the room. Circular tables are set up around a polished dance floor. I quickly hit another barrier only a few feet into the room.

I follow this barrier, clockwise, until I've made an entire lap of the enclosure. I was right. It *is* a circle. There are no breaks or gaps in the wall; nothing I can slip through to escape. What is this barrier? Who put it here? I have so many questions and no one to answer them.

Back in the lobby, the cleaning crew has finished their sterilization of the elevator. A starchy-looking woman stands in Elias' face, complaining loudly about the inconvenience of having only one operating elevator. I'm glad that my death is nothing more than a disruption to her "busy" life. Shouldn't she be disturbed that a brutal murder occurred hours ago in that very elevator? That the killer hasn't even been caught? Hell, she should be worried that it's haunted.

She spins on her heel and leaves a bedraggled Elias in her wake. She scowls at the cleaners, who are gathering their supplies and politely averting their eyes from her shrewd gaze. She presses the elevator button and boards the other one, which was already idling on this floor. She didn't even have to wait five seconds. I'd love to see what a *convenient* elevator experience is like for her.

After she's left, Elias tips the cleaners and reactivates the elevator. The doors slide shut, as if sealing my fate.

A man in snug jogging shorts strolls into the building, salutes Elias, and heads to the elevators. Elias nods and returns to his station. I decide to head over toward him to see what exactly he keeps behind the desk. It lies just beyond the invisible wall, so I might be able to see what he always stares at so intently on his computer.

Just as I reach the edge of the invisible barrier, a powerful sensation of vertigo overcomes me. My skin begins to crawl. I stare down at my arms in astonishment. My entire body is vaporizing, shredding into a million pieces, wisps of flesh fading into the world around me. I squeeze my eyes shut tightly, willing the end to come quickly.