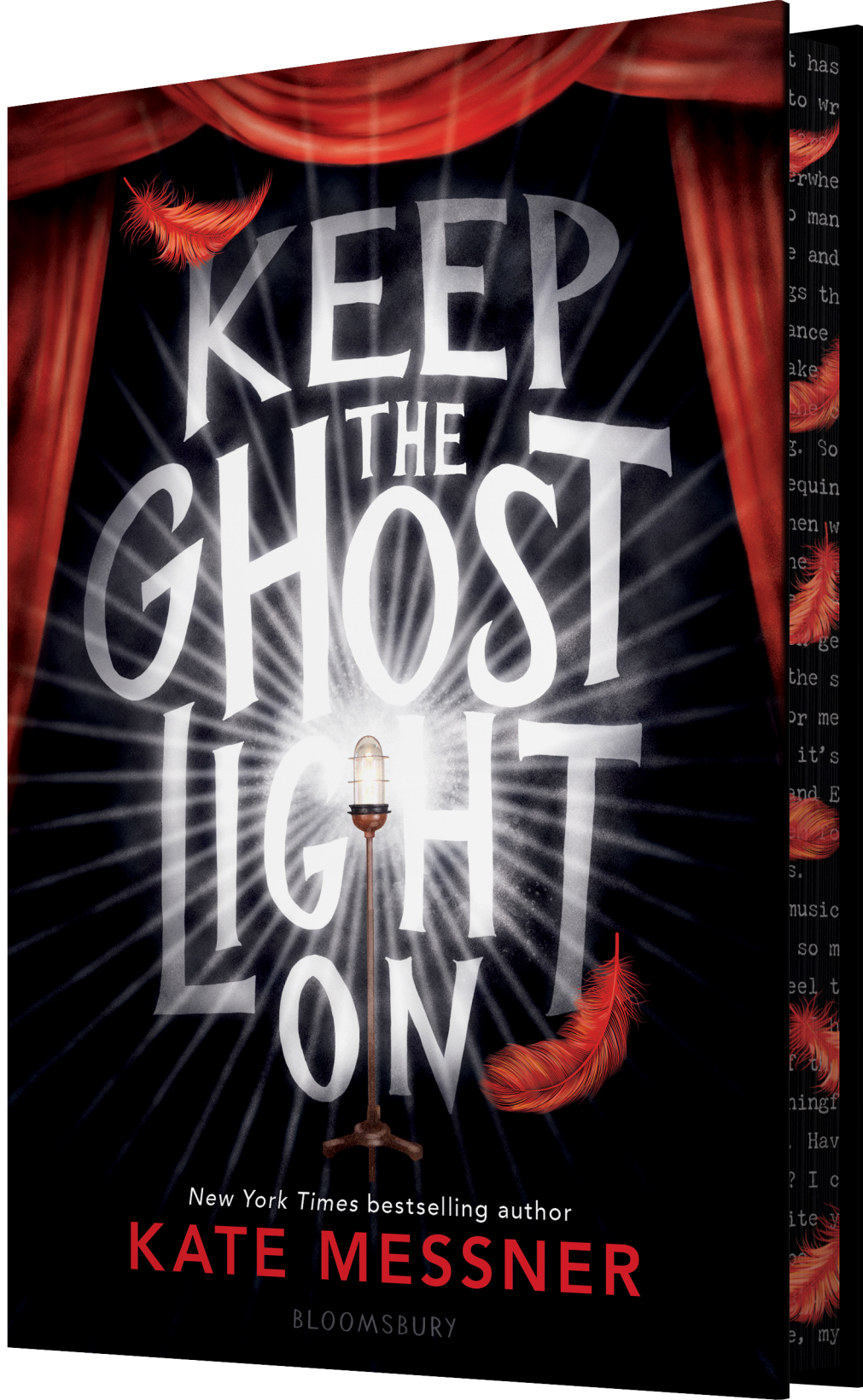




KEEP THE GHOST LIGHT ON

New York Times bestselling author

KATE MESSNER

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KEEP THE GHOST LIGHT ON

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*If you'd like to perform or listen to the songs
from this story, you can find both sheet music
and audio files at bit.ly/ktglo.*

*Many thanks to composer
and Broadway music director Haley Bennett
for writing music to go along with the lyrics.*

*For all the theater kids . . .
and in memory of Jacob Lewis,
who brought stories to life.
—K. M.*

KEEP
THE
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ON

A NOTE ON THE SHOW

This story is not about ghosts. It is about someone young and haunted who plunges into the promise of a darkened theater, hoping to escape awhile.

But theaters don't always keep promises. And neither, it seems, do I.

So yes, there will be ghosts after all.

THE CAST

DAPHNE (13) is tall and willowy, with shoulder-length brown hair and slightly uneven bangs that often hide her blue eyes. She has a beautiful singing voice, a nervous laugh, and a penchant for wearing boots, even in August. At any mention of her father, math class, or Mason, she exits stage left.

FELIX (13) is a little shorter than Daphne, wiry but muscular, with friendly brown eyes, light brown skin, and brown-black curls that try to hide his big ears. He wears a vintage New York Yankees baseball cap. There will be costume changes, but the hat is part of all of them.

LUNA (12) is short, strong, and sturdy, with a thick blond French braid from which a few frizzy curls always escape. She is serious, focused, and always in motion, as if she fears what might catch up if she rests.

THE GHOSTS do not wish to be introduced at this time.

ACT I

Scene 1

Lights up on a quiet stage illuminated by a single light bulb in a wire cage, perched atop a pole with three cast-iron legs. A ghost light, which, depending on who you ask, serves one of three purposes:

- ✧ *To scare us away.*
- ✧ *To keep us company while the theater is quiet.*
- ✧ *To keep night janitors from stumbling over sets in the dark.*

You may draw your own conclusions.

But I will tell you that I have never feared the light.

I am not looking for company.

And this place hasn't been cleaned in months.

But perhaps the ghost light has another purpose: to hold space for silenced voices. What if it can preserve a scene, frozen in time during the longest of intermissions?

And what if there is still time for the curtain to rise again?

Center stage: a faint fog hovers, drifting first one way, then another. There's a CLICK and a JANGLING OF KEYS.

The fog disappears into the rafters.

All that remains is a threadbare red sofa. A dining table with four chairs, one pulled out as if someone is late for supper.

(A brief aside: Stage directions should be short—no more than five lines. I know this; I'm no novice. But too many unwritten rules pass through decades unquestioned, and I have questions. Regardless, this singular story can take place only in this precise moment in time, within these historic walls. So indulge me, if you will, as we return to the stage.)

Push brooms lounge against the wall. A toolbox yawns open by the curtain. There is a shelf heaped with extra lumber, and below it, a cast of empty costumes on a rack.

A fire extinguisher waits on the wall nearby. Because you can't be too careful. Old wood burns fast, especially when it's fed with stolen words.

LUNA *(from offstage)*

I told you there'd be a light.

DAPHNE, LUNA, and FELIX enter, looking out on three tiers

of empty seats, plush red velvet cushions draped with sheets of protective plastic. Beneath them is a worn dark-green carpet, patterned with faded flowers and tired vines.

(Another brief aside: Perhaps you noticed that we've left the stage. It is true that ordinary stage directions concern themselves only with what can be seen and heard from audience seats. But this is not an ordinary play. And I am too fond of the intertwining greens of the carpet not to mention them; even faded, they remind me of home.)

The balcony's brass rail clings to months-old fingerprints from the last time this place saw life. A crumpled pale-blue surgical mask rests on the worn carpet.

Beside the exit door is a golden wall sconce clutching four white candles, and below that, a framed black-and-white photograph of a young woman in a sequined dancing dress. Her hair falls in dark ringlets around her face, and her eyes are cast to one side. A hint of a smile plays at her lips.

No one knows her name. But they will.

CHAPTER 1

The Prettiest Girl in New York

Daphne's blue army boot snags the cord from the ghost light. "This is a hazard, Luna. Can we get real lights?"

"Hold on." Luna disappears into the velvet curtain folds. A moment later the house lights come on. "There. We have to leave the ghost light on, though. It's tradition."

Daphne brushes her hair from her eyes and looks out over the empty, plastic-draped seats. When Luna first showed up with the keys to the Travis Theater—secreted away from her stage-manager neighbor's apartment where she was supposed to be feeding the cat—it sounded exciting and fun. An escape from all Daphne's ugly memories of March. But this was just a dusty, depressing reminder of everything they lost when the pandemic shut down the world.

Half of Daphne's friends had escaped the city for the

summer and forgot to come back. Even people who stayed weren't around much. Isa and Rachel couldn't do anything with anybody, for fear of getting their grandparents sick.

The one good thing about catching the virus with Mom last spring was that Daphne had more freedom now. Luna's and Felix's families had already been sick, too, so at least the three of them were allowed to hang out.

Daphne had met Luna in kindergarten, when Luna first started staying with her grandmother after school. They'd been best friends forever, at least until last spring.

But Daphne only knows three things about Felix.

1. He did *not* want to dissect the frog in seventh-grade science (they were lab partners, and Daphne had to do the cutting).
2. He plays baseball and always wears a vintage New York Yankees cap. His great-great-grandfather played left field.
3. He loves costume design. He and Daphne went to the same summer theater camp after sixth grade. Their first show together was *Beauty and the Beast*. So this play with Luna will be their second.

"Okay!" Luna pulls three scripts from her backpack. "Felix, I know you're in this for the costumes"—she steers him away from the backstage rack where he's sizing up a vintage tuxedo—"but right now, you're Clifton Henderson.

He's forty-two in the opening scene, so try to look older. More dignified." She frowns. "Also taller."

Felix rises on tiptoes in his green high-tops. "I'm six foot three in spirit."

Daphne looks down at her script. "My name is *Gertrude*? Can't I have a glamorous name like . . . I don't know . . . Natalia or Adele?"

"Her name was Gertrude." Luna shrugs. "It's in the diary."

"Oh, well if the *diary* says so . . ." Daphne rolls her eyes.

Last year, she and Luna had started writing a musical together, a punk rock version of *Cinderella*. Luna was in charge of dialogue, and Daphne wrote song lyrics.

But halfway through the first act, Daphne got a little distracted with her new drama group and a lot distracted with Mason. Then Luna found an old diary in a box her grandma brought home from some dead Broadway guy's estate auction and decided she'd ditch *Cinderella* and write about him instead. She spent all spring and summer writing this play for a competition that she's convinced is going to get her into a great high school. With the deadline just two months away, she's even more intense than usual.

"Ready to start?" Luna glances at her watch. "We should be out of here by three to be safe."

Daphne can't believe how carefully Luna has this all planned. She actually set up a camera in her bedroom window, five floors up across the street, to record the

stage door comings and goings for a week. That's how she knows a private security guard is the only person who goes inside now that her neighbor is in the hospital. He makes three rounds a day—at seven in the morning, four in the afternoon, and midnight.

“Act one, scene one.” Luna waves Daphne and Felix to their places. “We have one hour.”

“Perfect,” Felix says. “We can go check out costumes at four.”

“There's a rental place open?” Daphne assumed they'd do this play in street clothes, but the thought of wearing a great costume makes Luna's dead-guy diary a lot more interesting.

Luna nods. “Felix's uncle runs the Theater Development Fund costume collection in Queens. He said we can reserve some pieces. They have real showgirl dresses and stuff. But we *need* to get reading. Okay, Gertrude?”

Daphne salutes her. “You had me at showgirl dresses.” Costumes aside, this theater is cool, and it's not like she'll ever have another chance to perform on a Broadway stage. After what happened with Mason in March, she can never even go back to drama club. And she's through writing lyrics, too. But sometimes they sneak into her head anyway.

*In this secret-play lead, dressed in sequins
and beads
I can still play the part of a dancer,*

*But can a girl who loves songs, then did every-
thing wrong
be okay again?
I don't have the answer . . .*

“What’s that you’re humming?” Felix asks.

“Nothing.” Daphne hides behind her bangs. Why can’t she turn off the part of her brain that misses drama club so much? Being here with Luna and Felix isn’t helping. She shouldn’t have come.

“Luna, I don’t think I can do this.”

“But you said you’d help!” Luna sighs. “Also, I miss you.”

“I’m right here,” Daphne says, but she knows what Luna means. Daphne pretty much vanished into her bedroom after school shut down last spring. She’d still be holed up there, alone with her secret, if Luna hadn’t nagged her to come help with this play.

“Please?” Luna holds up her script. “This is no fun alone.”

Daphne hears the old Luna in her voice. The one she used to write with while they drank hot chocolate and ate popcorn. The one who laughed with her about the buttery fingerprints on their keyboards. The Luna she used to share everything with.

And Daphne can’t say no to that Luna. “Okay.”

“Here, a little inspiration.” Felix plucks a floppy leopard-print hat from a dusty rack and plops it on Daphne’s head.

She sneezes. But already, the costume makes her want to tell a story.

“Bless you.”

“Gosh, thank you, sir . . .” Daphne bats her eyelashes. “I’m just a poor farm girl from Pennsylvania. Whatever will I do in this great big theater with the famous Clifton Henderson?”

A door slams backstage.

Luna gasps. “Hide!” she whispers, and drops behind the sofa.

Felix pulls out a length of curtain. “Here!”

Daphne slides in beside him in a heavy fold of velvet. She holds her breath. Listens for footsteps.

It’s quiet.

It’s also close.

Close enough to remind Daphne of the fourth thing she knows about Felix. He had a crush on her at theater camp—Isa and Rachel had teased her about it.

Now, standing in the dark curtain folds, she can feel the warmth of his arm against hers and wonders if he notices, too.

But that’s a stupid thing to wonder. She pulls her arm away.

The theater stays quiet.

She whispers to Felix, “Do you think they’re gone?”

“Probably,” he whispers back. “But I kind of like this curtain situation. Quality fabric, good company, and—”

Daphne pushes her way out of the folds, back to center stage.

Luna stands and dusts off her knees. “Guess the door didn’t latch when we came in. Okay . . .” She puts her hands on Daphne’s shoulders and steers her to a spot near the sofa. “You just arrived in New York. You’re eighteen, and you need work, so your cousin who dances in the Henderson Follies set up this meeting. Remember?”

Daphne’s supposed to have read the script Luna emailed, but she didn’t. “Remind me what the Follies are?”

“Like a variety show in the days before Broadway musicals took off. Think dancing girls, comedy, music . . .” Luna points Felix to the sofa. “Pretend that’s your desk, and stand to greet her when she comes to the door.” Luna climbs down from the stage and sinks into a plastic-covered front-row seat. “Take it from the top!”

Daphne isn’t sure which side of the imaginary door she’s supposed to be on, but she raises her hand. “Knock, knock.”

The stage directions call for Felix to “stride purposefully to open the door.” Instead he lounges on the couch and calls, “Who’s there?”

“Felix, come on.” Luna is not amused.

Daphne is. “Anita.”

“Anita who?” asks Felix.

“Anita better name than Gertrude.”

“You *guys*!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Felix sits up. “I’m ready.”

Daphne knocks again. This time Felix strides the way he’s supposed to and lets her in.

“I have an appointment with Mr. Clifton Henderson,” Daphne reads.

The house lights go off. Then come back on.

Felix looks up.

“Keep going!” Luna calls.

“That’s me.” Felix tips his faded baseball cap as if it’s a top hat. “And you are?”

“Miss Gertrude Dobrowski.” Daphne tries not to make a face at the name.

“Well, Miss Gertrude Dobrowski,” Felix reads. “I’d say this is my lucky day.”

Luna silently mouths the words along with him. Does she know every line by heart? Daphne can’t help wishing she’d been around to help write this.

“And why is this your lucky day?” Daphne asks.

“Because the prettiest girl in New York just showed up on my doorstep.”

“*Seriously?*” Daphne looks over at Luna. “This makes me sound like a lost kitten.”

“You sort of are,” Luna says.

“How empowering.”

“We *have* to keep ‘the prettiest girl in New York,’” Luna says. “It’s the title of his most famous show.”

Daphne skims the page until she finds the first song, where Gertrude is longing to leave the farm where she grew up.

*I know how to tie up the rosemary sprigs
How to harvest the barley for beer.*

*I know how to feed chickens and how to slop pigs
What I don't know is how to stay here.*

"Luna, you wrote these lyrics?" That used to be Daphne's job. "They're really good."

Luna shakes her head. "You're the lyricist. I tried writing some, but they're cheesy. This song is from Henderson's original play." She checks the time on her phone. "Can we *please* get reading?"

Daphne goes back to her script. "Well, aren't we a pair then? The prettiest girl in New York and the most talented playwright in—"

The lights flicker again.

Daphne looks at Luna. "How old is this theater?"

"It was built in 1903."

"And still has original electricity, apparently," Felix says. "Rats have probably been chewing these wires since March."

"Right? I didn't survive COVID only to die in a tragic theater fire." Daphne puts her hands up to frame an imaginary tombstone. "Here lies Gertrude, who had an unfortunate name but dreamed big dreams. Alas, she perished before she could audition for the amazing Clifton Henderson."

The lights flicker once more and go out.

ACT I

Scene 2

The curtain rises on the stage of the Travis Theater. The ghost light glows on, casting eerie shadows on the floor. A broom handle reaches out like a bony arm. Costume racks morph into slouching beasts. The fog returns and nestles in the curtain creases.

DAPHNE

I'm outta here.

LUNA

But we didn't even get through a scene.

LUNA runs backstage and fiddles with the control panel until the house lights return.

LUNA

Daphne, please? This is *important*. And I really feel like I have a chance. The Clifton Henderson story is just the kind of project the jury usually—

The lights go out. Except for the ghost light, which pulses brighter as a faint TAPPING comes from above.

(A note on the tapping: It's not loud enough. Not yet.)

I have tried to make myself known before, at other shows with other crowds. But songs always filled the space I might have occupied. Laughter and lights shone too bright for a spirit to break through. To be heard.

Broadway has never gone so dark for so long. Orchestras and actors played to packed houses through two world wars, even through the other great illness a century ago. This unsettling silence is new. It has sent more than one spirit wandering in search of the music that used to fill our nights.

And who knows how long this pause might last? How long will the ghost light burn, quiet and alone? This may be my only chance. So I draw upon the history that haunts this stage, the stories that have seeped into the velvet seats. The swell of strings at the delicate flick of a conductor's baton. The artfully written lines, perfectly delivered. The laughter and the applause—oh, the applause.

I gather every sparkling memory, scattered like glitter in the dust. They fill me, strengthen me.)

The TAPPING grows louder.

FELIX

What is that?

LUNA

Probably mice. It's an old building.

FELIX

Pretty big mice.

DAPHNE (*shuddering*)

Aren't a bunch of Broadway theaters supposed to be haunted? My neighbor used to give ghost tours . . . it sorta feels like we're *in* one of them.

LUNA

It's probably raccoons on the roof. Let's finish.

The ghost light flickers again.

DAPHNE

Nope. You can stay here with the ghosts and tap-dancing raccoons. I'm done.

DAPHNE heads for the door.

FELIX

We could go over to the costume collection now.

LUNA

Fine. We can finish the scene tomorrow.

As LUNA and FELIX follow DAPHNE to the door, a single red feather wafts down from the rafters. DAPHNE freezes, watches it drift, until it lands silently in her outstretched hand.

CHAPTER 2

Sequins and Sparkles

Daphne bursts out onto 51st Street and breathes in the warm August air. She hadn't realized how cold the old theater felt, as if the dampness of last March were still trapped inside. "If you want me to read again, Luna, it's gotta be somewhere else."

Luna runs to catch up. "Just because of the raccoons or whatever?"

"And this creepy red feather?" Daphne opens her palm. It looks more tired than ghostly now.

"Must be left over from some show's special effects." Luna pulls a surgical mask from her pocket and leads them down to the subway. "Theaters are old and drafty. Stuff gets stirred up."

"Maybe." But Daphne feels the chill of the theater the whole train ride to Queens.



Outside the costume collection warehouse is a tent where they have to get their temperatures taken to prove they're not sick. Then Felix's uncle Stephen ushers them inside.

"You're early! But that's good—more time to browse."

"Has it been quiet with the pandemic?" Felix asks.

"It was in March, when everyone here was laid off." Uncle Stephen leads them down a hall lined with old Broadway posters. "But nothing stops creative people from creating. Within weeks after the theaters shut down, we started getting requests for costume rentals. People want waist-up outfits for online performances." He opens another door. "Here we are."

"Wow." Daphne has seen costume closets before but nothing like this. The racks go on forever. "How many costumes are in here?"

"About a hundred thousand, right?" Felix smiles under his mask. This place must be like a candy store for him.

Uncle Stephen nods. "All donated. Some are grouped by show—we have *Cinderella* on that top tier, *Peter and the Starcatcher* over there—but it's mostly organized by the type of costume. This whole row is distressed clothing—perfect for *Les Mis*—and we've got evening gowns and togas and military garb, you name it." He wheels a metal clothing rack over to them. "You can start pulling anything you think you'd like to use."

"I'm on the hunt for an early-twentieth-century suit for Clifton." Turns out Felix was practically raised here and

knows his way around. He wheels the rack down the first aisle, then turns back to Daphne and Luna. “Showgirls are in aisle six.”

Luna trots off in that direction, but Daphne stops to look at everything. The racks stretch to the ceiling, three tiers of costumes with ladders to reach the higher ones. At the end of each row is a panel listing the costumes. Row one has *Grease*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Oliver*, plus twentieth-century shirts and pants. Row two has *Annie*—Daphne spots the red dresses right away—along with *West Side Story* and *South Pacific*.

The wall at the end is full of shelves stuffed with every kind of shoe imaginable, and just around the corner—Daphne’s hyperventilating a little now—an entire room full of boots! Cowboy boots and go-go boots and riding boots and at least three pairs of red, high-heeled *Kinky Boots* boots.

“See those?” Felix reappears beside her and points to a tall black pair on a high shelf. “Hamilton.”

“Whoa,” Daphne whispers. It’s like the Hollywood Walk of Fame but with boots.

“Did you find the showgirl stuff?” Felix asks.

“Not yet.” Daphne keeps getting distracted by boxes full of ladies’ hats and hangers draped with heavy knits that look like suits of armor. She lingers over a box of vintage handbags, then hurries past a rack of feather boas—the red ones remind her too much of the ghost-feather in her pocket—until finally, Felix leads her down an aisle with

sailor uniforms, fairy-tale townspeople outfits, and show-girl dresses.

Daphne pulls a long, red beaded gown from the rack. “It’s so heavy!”

Felix nods. “Rhinestones add up.” He tips his head. “It’s a little long. Might be tough to hem with all the beading. We’re not allowed to do any cutting. What about”—he shuffles through half a dozen hangers and pulls out a sparkly blue dress with black and silver beading—“this one!”

It’s gorgeous. Daphne finds a mirror and holds it up to see the color against her skin. The blue matches her eyes. The neckline isn’t too low. The length is right. She twirls a little, and the weight of the beads gives the skirt a nice swoosh.

She turns back to Felix, expecting him to be looking through more costumes, but instead, he’s watching her.

It’s awkward. Daphne turns away, back toward the mirror. But there he is, still looking at her in its reflection.

Not in a creepy way. And not in the flirty way Mason used to look at her. It’s different, and it reminds Daphne of something Felix said when they were doing *Beauty and the Beast*. How a costume designer’s job isn’t just about how the clothes look; it’s about creating the perfect costume for each unique actor—one that helps them *become* their character.

That’s why Felix is watching her. He isn’t checking her out to see how she looks. He wants to know if this costume fits who she is on the *inside*.

Daphne takes one more twirl with the dress. It feels good against her skin. She loves the silk and shine of the fabric and the weight of care someone put into the stitches, sewing on each sparkling sequin.

Felix smiles and steps toward her. He leans in, and for a second, Daphne wonders if he's going to kiss her, but instead he reaches for her wrist.

"The sleeves are long but we can pin them." He steps back to look at her again. "How are you feeling about this one?"

"Uh . . . good?" She can't tell him that when his hand brushed hers just now, she felt it all the way up her arm, a thousand tiny pinpricks of electricity. That when he looks at her like that, her whole body floods with warmth. That it rushes up her neck to her face until her cheeks burn so hot they probably match the first dress now, but still, she can't help smiling. "It's perfect."

It really is. She can tell a story in this dress.

Felix nods slowly. Then he holds up his phone and breaks the spell. "Okay if I grab a picture? It'll help me figure out the rest of your ensemble later."

"Sure, I guess." Something about staring into the lens of his cracked iPhone reminds Daphne she's not a show-girl or a Broadway star. She's an almost-eighth grader who did the stupidest thing ever last year and maybe Felix doesn't know about it yet, but he'll find out when school starts in three weeks. Then he'll never look at her that way again, so he might as well stop now.

Daphne wishes she had some of that knitted armor to hide behind. Instead, she lets her bangs fall over her eyes, flashes a too-big school-picture-day smile and says, “Cheese!”

Felix laughs, takes the photo, and adds the dress to the rack as Luna careens around the corner, holding an enormous headpiece.

“Can you believe this?” It’s at least three feet wide, with green and blue feathers fanning out from a rhinestone-studded helmet-thing. She puts it on Daphne’s head.

It weighs a ton. “How did they dance in these?”

“Hair clips, bobby pins, and elastic.” Felix reaches out to pull a strap under Daphne’s chin, and his finger brushes her cheek.

*Feathers of blue and feathers of green,
If he’s king of the costumes then I’ll be his—*

Nope.

Daphne takes off the headpiece. She can’t like Felix. Maybe he still likes her, and yes, he’s cute and sweet and makes people feel good in their costumes, but she’s not doing this. Not when he’s just going to find out what happened at drama club in March. She looks down at her phone.

“I have to be home by five.” That’s a lie—Mom won’t be home for hours—but she doesn’t trust her feelings. Better to leave before she feels them again.

ACT I

Scene 3

DAPHNE, LUNA, and FELIX stand in a sea of costumes, racks crowded with satins, sequins, and silks. LUNA and FELIX watch as DAPHNE walks briskly toward the door, past a rolling rack with two costumes: a 1920s-era suit and a sparkling blue gown. A faint fog drifts along the floor, barely stirring its hemline. It is dazzling. An excellent choice for dancing.

LUNA (*calling after DAPHNE*)

Don't forget to work on your "I Want" song for our musical theater elective! They're due on the first day of school. And we should read through the rest of act one tomorrow!

DAPHNE: (*opening the door*)

Sure!

(A note on the girls: Though Daphne is quick to agree, I sense the friction between them. The bonds that hold this trio feel fragile, as if they might blow apart when autumn winds arrive. And what if these young players never return to the Travis Theater? What of my story then?)

Who will tell it?

Though I've just met them, I already know it must be one of the girls. The one called Luna feels most confident and curious, and perhaps I would be wise to stake my bets on her. But something draws me to Daphne. Her spirit feels achingly familiar. The longing beneath the laugh. The secret behind the smile. The lies.

Besides, she caught the feather.)

DAPHNE exits. The fog slips silently out the door behind her.

CHAPTER 3

Ghosts of the Stage

By the time Daphne gets off the train, the sun is low in the sky, and a not-quite-September wind is blowing leaves and candy wrappers around the subway entrance. She zips up her dad's NYU sweatshirt and plunges her fists deep in the pockets. He left a bunch of clothes at the apartment when he moved upstate a year ago. Daphne wears this and his jean jacket sometimes. When she pulls up the collar, she can still smell the cologne she and Mom gave him for Christmas two years ago.

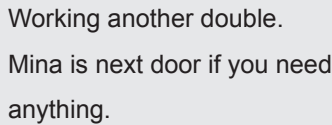
He doesn't wear it anymore. Daphne noticed when she visited him before the pandemic. The house he and his girlfriend rent north of Albany is so different from their apartment here. All cedar shakes and farmhouse blues instead of glass and steel and river views. It's weird how a person could like something just fine until they changed

their mind one day and wanted something totally different, so they left.

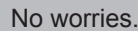
Daphne's phone vibrates in her pocket and her heart jumps with hope for a second. But it's only Mom.



MOM



Working another double.
Mina is next door if you need anything.



No worries.

She doesn't want to stress Mom out. All the sick people at the hospital are doing a great job of that already. But the closer Daphne gets to home, the more she doesn't want to be there alone. Not after the theater.

Because what *was* that?

She thinks back to those Broadway ghost tours her neighbor Eloise used to lead. If Eloise were here, she'd know if there were supposed to be ghosts at the Travis Theater, but she left the city months ago like everybody else.

Daphne checks the fridge for leftovers, but Mom brought home pizza last night, and Daphne hasn't been able to look at a slice since March. She makes peanut butter toast, goes to her room, and opens her laptop. A

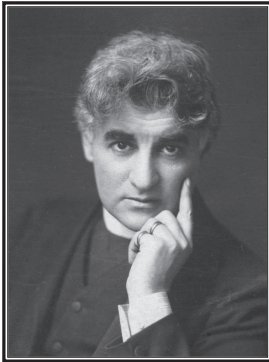
search for “Broadway ghosts” pulls up a bunch of theater spirits, all of whom the internet promises are harmless.

A pretty actress named Olive Thomas supposedly haunts the New Amsterdam Theatre, but the worst she does is creep people out by crossing the stage and disappearing into walls.



Olive Thomas

The ghost of Broadway producer David Belasco sometimes hangs out at his theater on West 44th, along with another spirit known only as the Blue Lady, who opens and closes the occasional door.



David Belasco

a musician who hangs out in the orchestra pit, and an acrobat who swings and screams from the rafters when the theater is empty. Supposedly, the ghost of actress Judy Garland pops in once in a while, too.

Daphne saves some of the photos so she can compare them



Judy Garland

if their maybe-ghost at the Travis ever decides to show its face. She reads through two more Broadway ghost pages, but there's no mention of tap-dancing spirits. No mention of spooky red feathers. No mention of the Travis Theater at all.

The feather still rests on Daphne's desk, and the tapping echoes in her mind. She can't shake the feel of the theater, like something was trapped in there.

Daphne shivers. She's not going tomorrow. If Luna wants her to read again, they can meet somewhere else.

Daphne finishes her toast and opens the document where she started her "I Want" song for the musical theater elective. She signed up for it so long ago, before everything happened with drama and Mason, and she can't imagine being in that class now. But she should probably write something just in case she changes her mind.

What does she want? Daphne stares at the blank screen. It's not that she doesn't have anything to say. It's that she has too much.

She closes the laptop and picks up a notebook and pen.

What do I want? The list is too long.

You mean what do I want that can fit in a song?

I don't even know where to begin.

What do I want? The question's all wrong.

What did I want before ~~Mason~~ he came along?

Before my whole life revolved around him?

I wanted walks with Luna through Central Park
And cartwheels all over the lawn.
I wanted flashlight poems to read in the dark
And writing all night until dawn.

I wanted to audition for *Into the Woods*
To see my name up in lights!
I'd try out for Little Red Riding Hood—
But that was all before that night.

Now I can't want the same things as before—
Can't even remember what I wanted them for.
I can hardly remember me.

You'd think it would be easy to reopen that door
What do I want? I don't know anymore.
I miss the girl that I used to be.

She wanted to imagine that her future was bright
She wanted space to make her own choice.
She wanted time to explore and to dream and to write
And the chance to use her own voice.

She wanted to write songs that enchanted the crowd
Like in *Wicked* and *Come from Away*.
She wanted her parents to applaud and feel proud—
And she wanted her dad to stay.

ACT I

Scene 4

Lights up on a small bedroom with a twin bed pushed against an exposed brick wall. It's made up with a royal blue comforter with bright golden sunflowers and has built-in drawers underneath. A shelf on the other wall holds a framed Phantom of the Opera playbill, a stack of poetry books, and a stuffed animal sloth with its arms wrapped around a Math League trophy. A small desk holds a laptop, notebook, and painted flowerpot full of pens. Beside it is an office chair with a purple NYU sweatshirt draped over the back. DAPHNE climbs into bed and shuts off her lamp as a faint fog drifts in from under the door. DAPHNE frets under the covers.

(Do her own ghosts haunt her tonight, or does she sense my presence? Even when a spirit cannot be seen or heard, there is an almost imperceptible change in the air when we are near. Maybe you've walked into a room or passed a graveyard and felt it—the slightest shift in temperature, the faintest whiff of rotting leaves. Sometimes nothing more than a tickle at the back of your neck that says perhaps it would be best to close the door or cross the street. But Daphne is home alone, trapped here with her memories and me.)

DAPHNE tosses and turns, drifting fitfully to sleep as the curtain closes.

A moment later DAPHNE walks out on stage in front of the curtain in her pajamas. Hazy, ethereal lighting and fog make it clear she is dreaming. Suddenly, MASON and drama club members EMMY, KALENA, AMAYA, BEN, and MAEVE pour onto the stage, all in street clothes, laughing and talking. They ignore DAPHNE as if she is invisible. She watches as they gather around MASON, looking at his phone.

EMMY

She's a seventh grader. How do you even *know* her?

KALENA

She's in our math class. Girl-genius, year ahead of her grade.

AMAYA

Ah—an alge-brat.

KALENA

Songwriter, too. She wrote her own lyrics for her audition, and they were solid. She's like some seventh-grade girl version of Lin-Manuel Miranda.

MAEVE (*pointing to MASON'S phone*)

Okay, but look what she texted him!

DAPHNE

Hey!

They ignore her. A few red feathers waft down from above.

MAEVE (*reading from phone in a swoony, exaggerated voice*)

“Hey, Mason . . . what’s up?”

DAPHNE

Don’t read that!

More red feathers fall around DAPHNE.

MAEVE (*still reading*)

“Whatcha doing this weekend?”

MASON (*laughing*)

You guys . . .

MAEVE

Maybe she’ll write you a *song*, Mason.

The red feathers rain down on DAPHNE.

DAPHNE (*coughing amid the feathers*)

Those were private messages!

BEN

Dude, she texted you *twelve times*.

MASON

Can't help it if the ladies like me.

MAEVE

Oohh! Listen to this one . . .

DAPHNE

Stop!

DAPHNE breaks out COUGHING, pulling feathers from her mouth, and runs from the stage. MASON and the others follow, laughing.

The curtain opens now on DAPHNE, in bed as morning sunlight pours through the window. A PHONE ALARM goes off. She sits up, turns off the alarm, and coughs. She looks around the room, takes a deep breath, and stands. She starts toward the door, but something on the floor by the bed catches her eye. Slowly, she backtracks and bends to pick it up.

A single red feather.

CHAPTER 4

Feathers and Phantoms

Daphne stares. Her throat tickles with the memory of feathers from her dream. She swallows hard. It doesn't help.

This isn't real.

She brought the feather home from the theater. In the pocket of Dad's sweatshirt, right? It must have fallen out and drifted across the room while she was moving around, getting ready for bed.

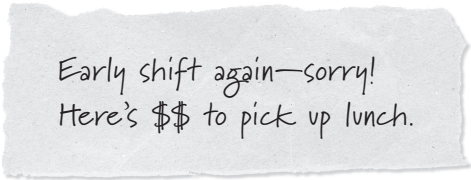
Daphne sets the feather on her nightstand, walks to her desk, and reaches into the pocket of Dad's sweatshirt. Something tickles her fingers.

As she pulls out the feather, an invisible breeze lifts the other one from the nightstand and carries it on silent breath across the room. It settles in Daphne's outstretched hand beside its twin as a quiet tapping comes from the

ceiling. It's muted, almost inaudible, but even at a whisper-tap, there's no mistaking the sound from the theater.

Daphne runs to her mother's room, but the bed is empty and made.

"Mom?" she calls down the hall. There's no answer, but she finds a twenty on the kitchen counter with a note.

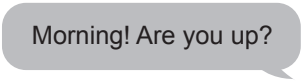


Early shift again—sorry!
Here's \$\$ to pick up lunch.

Daphne runs to her room and grabs her phone. Mom can't answer texts at work, but maybe Dad is around.



DAD



Morning! Are you up?

The phone rings in her hands.

"Dad!"

"Hey, pumpkin!" His voice is staticky. "Can't text you back because we're heading out for a hike and I'm driving. But say hi to everybody, you're on speakerphone!"

Daphne's heart sinks. "Oh . . . hi."

"Hiiiiii!" From the chorus, she picks out his girlfriend Amy's voice and at least two of her three daughters.

"Everything okay?"

“Yeah,” Daphne begins. “I just—”

“Good. Listen, I’m about to lose you in the mountains. I’ll call you Saturday like always, okay?”

“Okay,” Daphne says, as if there’s a choice. She should have remembered she’s only his Saturday daughter now.

There’s a *thunk* from the kitchen, and Daphne’s heart leaps into her throat. But then Mom appears in her doorway.

“Oh, hey! You’re up. Had to come back because I forgot my badge.” Mom holds it up. “I should see you for dinner if all goes well.”

“Before you leave . . .” Daphne hesitates. “Did you hear anything this morning?”

“Other than my alarm going off too early?”

“Just like . . . tapping?”

Mom shakes her head. “Probably the radiators. You know how these old buildings are.”

Daphne nods. She doesn’t know how old radiators work, but seeing Mom on her way to deal with real-world nightmares at the hospital is enough to make Daphne let go of the ghost story she’s been spinning.

“Have a good day.”

“You too!”

The door closes, and Daphne finds a yogurt in the fridge. The tapping must have been in her dream; it’s weird how things can blur out of one world into the other while you’re waking up. The feathers were probably stuck together in her pocket. There could have been two, right?

She tells herself there could have.

Daphne showers and weaves her hair into two French braids. Braids are orderly, like math. Daphne still likes both, even though she dropped her advanced class the same day she quit drama club last March.

She turns to make her bed, and there's a new feather on her pillow. Red, like the others, a scarlet bloodstain against the quilted white sham.

Daphne picks it up.

"Who are you?" she whispers.

The only answer comes from above.

Tap. Tap-tap-tap.

Tap-tap.

Daphne's heart races. She tries to explain it away. The third feather must have come from the theater, too. The tapping was the radiator. Or upstairs neighbors dancing. Every New York City building has at least one dancer who rehearses on their hardwood floors at dawn.

But even as the tapping grows louder, Daphne knows no radiator sounds like that. Knows there are no upstairs neighbors, since Meg and Annalise moved into their parents' basement upstate after the theaters went dark. That apartment's been empty since March.

Except for whatever is up there now.

Tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Tap-tap.

Daphne stands on her desk chair as if being closer to the sound can make it make sense. But it's not coming

from above—it's coming from everywhere. The walls. The floor. The window.

Tap-tap.

Tap-tap-tap.

She presses her hands over her ears, but it won't be muffled. Is it inside her head?

Maybe she's getting sick again. Mom said some people with COVID get hallucinations so vivid they feel real. One lady was convinced she'd taken a whole overseas vacation while she was in her hospital bed the whole time.

Daphne rushes to the bathroom, opens the medicine cabinet, and grabs the thermometer to check her temperature.

98.8

Tap.

Tap-tap.

Daphne runs to the hall. She pulls on her cowboy boots, grabs her keys, and slams the door behind her. She stands there trembling. Listening.

The tapping is gone. For now.

She takes the elevator to the lobby, hurries past Eddie the doorman, steps into the late-August sun, and heads for the park. She can't stop looking behind her. As if she could *see* the sound of the ghost and make sure it's not catching up.

When she gets to the park, she sits down on a bench.

Now what? If she'd brought her laptop, she could sit at an outdoor café and work on her "I Want" song, but there's no way she's going back for it now.

Daphne's phone dings in her pocket, and her heart jumps before she can remind it not to. Will she *ever* stop hoping it's Mason?

LUNA

Hey! We're at the theater & we need our Gertrude.

Nope. Daphne starts to reply but Luna's still typing.

Pleeeeeeassse? It's fine today—no weird lights or noises.

Daphne starts to text back that she's not coming. But clouds have hidden the sun. It's supposed to rain soon, and she needs to go somewhere.

Is it unreasonable to hope that if something followed her home from the theater it might follow her back there, too? What if the ghost is lost? What if it *wants* to be back at the Travis?

A little kid on the playground bursts out laughing, and Daphne can't help feeling like it's at her. It's silly to think she could return a ghost to a theater the way she'd taken her birthday phone back to the Apple store to swap for a different color. It's silly to be thinking about ghosts at all.

The feathers. The tapping. There has to be an explanation.

When the playground kid wanders off with her nanny, Daphne claims a swing and sits down to think. She takes a deep breath, then another.

Her gaze falls on a feather in a puddle by the seesaw.

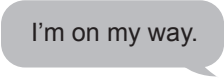
It's white and gray. *Ordinary seagull colors*, she tells herself. *See?*

Until another feather drifts from the sky and lands beside it.

Daphne's breath catches in her throat.

Blood red. And not a cardinal in sight.

She texts Luna back.



I'm on my way.

SCAN FOR ORIGINAL MUSIC AND LYRICS
TO ACCOMPANY THE STORY!



“I’ve read a lot of ghost stories. But this one will haunt me for a long time. How do I know? I read it a week ago—and I still have chills!”

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“Beautifully written and brimming with realistic friendship dynamics, fascinating history, and themes of bravery and empathy, this is one ghost story that belongs in every middle grade library!”

—**LINDSAY CURRIE**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
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“In her clever multimodal style, Messner sets a spooky stage . . . Toss in a spine-chilling mystery and an unrequited crush and you’ve got a page-turner sure to dazzle readers from the first bars of the overture to the final curtain call.”

—**MEGAN E. FREEMAN**,
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“A fun and absorbing novel about the magic of theater, the tenacity of ghosts, and the power of reclaiming your voice.”

—**ANNE URSU**, author of *Not Quite a Ghost*