

## **The Popcorn Thief**

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<http://markferrari.com/>

## Chapter One

FRANKLIN'S ALARM RANG TOO DAMN EARLY, as it did every morning. Still, he didn't dawdle, or indulge himself by hitting the snooze button. Instead, he got out of his narrow bed, pulled the tan sheets up to make it neat, then walked through the dim bedroom to his tiny bathroom for a shower and his weekly shave, scraping carefully against his dark skin for the few errant hairs.

Putting on his brown Kroger uniform, Franklin hummed to himself, pleased that his weekly workouts with the Ab-Buster were keeping him in shape, just like the man on the TV had promised. He didn't pull the shades of his bedroom windows up until he was ready to leave the sanctuary of his room: He never knew what kind of ghosts might be waiting for him out there.

This morning, though, his view of his field of popping corn was unobstructed by any ghostly visitors. He spent some time looking at the front stalks. He only had five long rows, twenty stalks per row, and each one was precious to him. Winds had been light the night before, and he didn't see any damage. Broad green leaves grew out evenly from the tall stalks, and nestled in between them were the fluffy tassels of the best popping corn in all of Kentucky.

Yellow corn, of course. Franklin didn't go in for fancy strawberry corn, or that black kernel stuff. He grew grade A, American popping corn, using a hybrid seed that he'd paid good money for so it would mostly pop up into butterfly flakes, that were longer and more tender than the mushroom-shaped flakes.

And this year, he was gonna beat Karl Metzger, his old high school rival. Franklin's corn would finally win the blue-ribbon prize for the best popping corn at the Kentucky State Fair. He'd be able to hang that ribbon right there, above his dresser, between the pictures of his long dead papa and his recently dead mama. Make them both proud.

Satisfied, Franklin finally opened the door to his bedroom. He didn't know why the ghosts couldn't cross the threshold—maybe because no one but him had ever been in there, not since Mama had died, and she hadn't been in there that often. Still, he kept the door closed, as he didn't want to see their faces staring at him in the dark.

Sunlight beamed against the living room windows. The couch and overstuffed armchair lurked as dark shapes against the wall. It was gonna be a hot one today. Franklin left the shades down to give the house an edge against the heat. He turned on the ancient TV sitting on the even more ancient bureau to listen to the farm report as he made his way into the kitchen.

"Morning, Mama," Franklin said to the ghost sitting at his kitchen table.

Mama didn't say anything, as usual. She looked the same, her hair all done up nice, her good gold hoops hanging from her ears, wearing her best Sunday church dress. Being a ghost had faded out her black skin, brought out freckles across her nose that Franklin had never seen.

But it hadn't dimmed the glare that she frequently gave Franklin, like she did that morning.

Franklin tried not to take it to heart. He reasoned that being a ghost was hard on a body, particularly someone like his mama, who'd worked at the local beauty salon in town just so

she'd have people to talk with all day. Not being able to say a word or touch anything—not even push a piece of paper across the table—had to be difficult.

“Corn’s looking good this morning,” Franklin told her as he got the peanut butter out of the top cupboard and the bread out of the breadbox sitting in the corner of the green linoleum counter. “I’ll go out and check the fields when I get home. There’s some weeds that need pulling.” He got an egg out of the fridge, and reached for his lard.

He paused.

The cover of the mason jar wasn’t tightly screwed on. It just rested there, with the lid seal off kilter.

“Mama, did you do this?” Franklin asked as he pulled the jar out.

She didn’t reply.

“God—dang it!” Franklin said, unwilling to swear in front of Mama, even though she was a ghost.

Franklin had only opened that jar of lard last week; now, it was mostly empty.

Mama still glared at him.

This was Franklin’s special lard, rendered down, white and pure from Sweet Bess, the pig he’d slaughtered earlier that spring. Sweet Bess had been anything but sweet. She’d been barely tame, rummaging in the woods next door for her food and only coming to the pen when the cold winter rains started. She was also a killer. Any chicken or small animal stupid enough to challenge her got eaten by her. This made her meat extremely sweet, smelling almost like perfume when Franklin cooked up her bacon.

Ghosts loved anything salty, would lick it up like a cat with cream. And though good lard would never go bad sitting out, Franklin kept it tightly sealed in the fridge.

So how the heck did a ghost get to it? He’d never met one who had the strength to open a jar. No ghost had ever haunted the refrigerator before, either.

“Mama, who was the greedy ghost?” Franklin asked, looking directly at her, hoping she’d give him some clue. “’Cause they ain’t here now.” All of the ghosts who haunted Franklin tended to stick around until he’d done his duty and helped them pass on, leave this earth and move to wherever it was that they was supposed to be.

Mama had never showed any intention of doing anything but sitting at Franklin’s kitchen table for the rest of her death. She’d been sitting there for almost a year now.

But Mama didn’t say anything, just glared at him like she did when he made a mistake that was, according to her, “too stupid for words.”

So Franklin went back to fixing his breakfast—a fried-egg-and-peanut-butter sandwich. He screwed the lid on tight on the tiny bit of lard left and put the jar back in the fridge, hoping there’d be enough for his popcorn later that night. It wasn’t corn he’d grown, he’d already run through that, and this crop had at least another couple of weeks before it’d be ripe. The first time he’d put Sweet Bess’ lard on popping corn he’d nearly licked the bowl clean, but Mama had been staring disapprovingly at him from across the table.

He still didn't understand how a ghost had opened that jar. Or how it'd gotten into the fridge.

The weather report from the TV confirmed that it would be a hot one. Franklin finished his breakfast, washed his dishes, brushed his teeth, then got ready to go.

"I'll be home usual time, Mama," Franklin called out as he left the house. Then he stopped and checked over his shoulder just in case, but no one was passing by the driveway, which was open to the quiet street.

Not that it would have mattered—everyone in town already thought Franklin was crazy. Some of them even knew he sometimes talked with ghosts: Mama had bragged on him at the shop more than once. She'd always told him that it was important for him to do his duty to the poor folks who were stuck between worlds, even when it sometimes meant trespassing or asking strange questions.

From the front shed, Franklin got out his bike. He checked the chain, thinking that maybe that strong ghost had gone after anything greasy. It looked fine, though. No ghosts had messed with it.

Though Franklin could drive, cars were expensive, plus, he didn't like to take chances like that. If a ghost suddenly popped up while he was riding his bike, he could just fall over. In a car, he might hurt someone else.

Franklin didn't have to share the lane with any cars. He waved at Mrs. Wilkerson, out watering her geraniums, before he turned onto the bigger street. Here, he rode along the gravel edge, hearing his mama's voice, warning him how dangerous Stevens Road was. Cars whizzed by, nearly blowing him over.

But there was nothing for it. Franklin pedaled the two miles as fast as he could, huffing up the small hills, then coasting down the other side of the rolling street. The chorus of cicadas blasted him on either side. Fields of tall sorghum blocked his view of anything else, followed by neat rows of tobacco. The sky above him paled in the heat, with high clouds to the west.

From Stevens Street, Franklin turned onto the shoulder of the four-lane highway. Just as it narrowed down to two lanes, he passed by Metzger's Farm stand, with people already waiting in line.

Franklin pedaled by furiously. Everything that Karl Metzger turned his hand to grew bigger and better tasting than whatever Franklin tried. But Franklin was still going to beat him this year, get that blue ribbon prize for himself. His corn was growing well, and he had plenty of time to experiment with drying it, removing the perfect amount of moisture so each kernel would pop up tender with great wings.

The highway became Jacobson Avenue, and Franklin steered over to the sidewalk. Though he liked the shade of the trees, they also broke up the sidewalk, making it dangerous to ride along. Franklin tried to concentrate on it, and not spill over (again), but his thoughts kept going back to the ghost and the lard.

What was he dealing with? It must be a mighty strong ghost. Why hadn't it stuck around, to let Franklin know what it needed in order to pass on and stop haunting him?

As Franklin pedaled hard up Main Street, he shivered once, like something had just walked over his grave.

That ghost was something different.

And different was never good.

\* \* \*

Franklin didn't mind the tomato stains down the front of his brown Kroger uniform, or the dirt on his knees from kneeling to stock cans of sweet corn on the lower shelves. However, he'd also had to uncrate a box of that awful men's body wash, and of course, one of the bottles hadn't been sealed right. He could barely stand himself as he biked home as fast as he could, bumping over the broken sidewalks then along the four-lane highway, trying to create a breeze to blow the stink off him.

He didn't know if ghosts could smell or not. He figured they couldn't, though, so he wasn't worried what Mama would think.

If she'd been alive, she might have accused him of rolling in a back alley with some cat in heat, despite Franklin never having a girlfriend. He couldn't imagine bringing home any girl that Mama wouldn't rip to shreds.

Franklin rushed into the kitchen, intending on going straight to the shower. "Mama, I—"

He stopped when he saw Mama had company.

Or rather, he had another ghost, sitting at the kitchen table with Mama.

None of his other visitors had ever dared. What made her special?

She'd been as black as Franklin when she'd been alive. He wondered if she'd worked with Mama at the beauty parlor 'cause she had bleached blond hair that curled softly around her face, the obvious result of hours of work and product. Her once-bright red lips framed perfect teeth, and the color on her long nails matched her mouth. She didn't look much older than Franklin either, which was a shame—he hated it when people passed on early.

She also had some power, as she clicked those nails impatiently on the table, the only sound in the whole house.

*Click. Click. Click.*

Was this his greedy ghost from the night before?

Most of the time, Franklin only got impressions of what a ghost wanted, their *intent*. He rarely got a name, but hers came through, shining like her hair.

*Gloria.*

"Miss Gloria, it's nice to meet you," Franklin said. He would have been polite to her whether Mama had been sitting there or not—she'd raised him to do the right thing.

He didn't expect a reply, and he didn't get one.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

Nothing came, no hint of a place Gloria wanted to go to, or something she needed doing before she passed.

That surprised Franklin: Since her name had come through so loud, he'd figured her purpose would come as well. "Well, ladies, if you'll excuse me, I have to freshen up before dinner."

Both Mama and Gloria glared at him, as if this was too obvious.

Maybe ghosts did have a sense of smell.

If it had been just Mama, Franklin would have taken off his shirt in the kitchen and thrown it down the stairs to the basement right then. But that wasn't right, undressing like that in front of a strange female ghost like Gloria. So Franklin went back to his room to change.

Nothing was different there: The bed still had the sheets pulled up, his photo of Papa (who'd died when Franklin was two) and one of him and Mama still hung on the wall above his dresser, an empty space between them, where his blue ribbon would go. Franklin threw the offensive shirt into the laundry basket, then gathered up the rest of his dirty clothes. It was only Monday, and he generally did laundry on Tuesday, but this shirt couldn't wait.

He looked out at his field. He'd go pull weeds after he put a load in the washer.

Mama and Gloria hadn't moved from the kitchen table. They almost looked like mother and daughter, except that Mama would have called Gloria's shirt indecent. The top button was undone and it strained across her chest. If Gloria had worked for Mama, Mama would have made her go home and change.

Franklin started the washer, with extra vinegar for taking the smell out of the shirt, then eagerly went outside.

The air still held the afternoon heat, but the shade from the trees out back promised the coolness of the evening. The taller stalks of corn reached their heads up high to catch the last of the sun's rays. Scents of warm earth and growing things floated up to Franklin. The slightest wind set the corn to rustling.

Franklin looked out from his field to the land next door. It was sitting fallow, the For Sale sign weathered. The State Fair prize wasn't enough money to buy it, but maybe, with that money, he could talk Mr. Averson into lowering the price. Franklin had a bit saved, left over from Mama's insurance money—most of which he'd used to pay off the house, so he only owed taxes on it every year.

But wishes weren't fishes, like what Mama would say.

Franklin knelt down between the rows and pulled up one some ragweed. He wouldn't ever spray—he'd heard too many horror stories of farmers ruining their food crop with the wrong weed killer. He made a note to get the long-handled dandelion digger later when he spotted a couple of those ragged leaves.

Franklin stood after a bit, wiping his brow with his kerchief. Weeding wasn't hard work, but it was constant. He took that as a good sign—everything was growing so well in his tiny field this year. He was sure to win that prize, finally.

A chill went down Franklin's back, not caused by any wind. When he turned, he jumped and took a step back. He hadn't expected Gloria to be standing so close.

"How can I help you?" Franklin asked. It was always best to be polite, especially with ghosts

out in the corn field. They always gained strength there. Franklin had stopped going out into his field at night years before: Too many ghosts followed him there, trying to push their *intent* on him, enough so that he felt his skin turn sticky.

Gloria just glared at the stalks, as if somehow they'd done her wrong.

"Were you married to a farmer?" Franklin guessed.

Gloria shook her head. Sadness flowed out from her, like water from a broken hose.

Finally, they were getting somewhere. It was always a good sign when a ghost started reacting to Franklin: It meant they were looking for his help; that they might be thinking about passing on.

Mama had yet to react to anything Franklin said. He was afraid she intended to haunt him until *he* died.

"But you loved a farm—a farmer?" Franklin asked.

Gloria gave a hesitant nod.

Franklin sighed. This was gonna get messy. Ghosts with love on their mind were the hardest to satisfy. He hated this part of his duty to the ghosts, trying to figure out what a person that couldn't really talk wanted, who often wouldn't even respond when he did ask a question.

"Did he love you back?" Franklin held himself ready to bolt, but Gloria didn't do more than glare at him.

"So he loved you," Franklin said, relieved.

But Gloria didn't agree to that either. Instead, she shook her head at his corn and faded out of sight.

What did that mean? Had the farmer loved her? Or not?

And why did they have to come bother him about it?

Franklin sighed and returned to his crop, to the easier cycle of growing and watering and trimming just right, so much better than the complicated dance of the living and the dead.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Gloria didn't return until Franklin was getting his bike out of the front shed. Clouds filled the sky, and the sticky air made Franklin feel as though he hadn't dried off after his shower. It would storm that afternoon. At least his crop was well enough established that unless it hailed, the stalks could withstand a strong wind.

"Good morning, Miss Gloria," Franklin said softly after making sure that no one walked on the empty lane out in front of the property. "Can I give you a lift into town?"

He'd done that before. Seemed like a ghost could ride on the basket, between the handlebars. Only two weeks before, he'd given a ride to a little girl (too young) with pigtails and a simple dress, who'd wanted a lift to the county judicial center just up the street from the Kroger so she could go harass the drunk who'd mowed her down.

Gloria took one look at his bike then raised one immaculately plucked eyebrow.

The *Are you kidding me?* came through loud and clear.

With a quick shiver, Gloria disappeared.

Franklin groaned. She was going to haunt him all day at the Kroger, he just knew it.

Was she strong enough to pull down a shelf? She was stronger than most ghosts, able to click her fingernails against the kitchen table. Franklin wasn't looking forward to finding out.

\* \* \*

Franklin coasted his bike wearily down Main Street. The good news was that Gloria hadn't been strong enough to knock things off shelves. She was, however, a bad influence on kids. Somehow, just being near her was enough to make the younger ones cry and the older ones pick fights. Twice today, Franklin had had to stop teenagers from throwing cabbages or potatoes or whatever was handy at each other.

The storm promised by the dark clouds and heated air hadn't come. Wetness pressed down on Franklin as he cut across to Jacobson. He'd need another shower when he got home, though it wouldn't matter. He felt like he was riding through one already.

To lift his spirits, Franklin rode across Jacobson and up Stewart, turning north, heading toward what he called the sculpture garden. The Sorrels were from Los Angeles, come to his small town of Katherinesville to retire. Adrianna called herself an artist, while her husband, Ray, indulged her. She filled their yard with "found art": fallen tree branches wired together into tall, eerie men; pieces of glass collected from the highway and pasted together into stars; even plastic bags tied together and dyed, turned into colorful streamers.

Once a year, the Sorrels had a huge picnic. They invited all their neighbors and at least half the town to come and eat at their place. Tables ran the length of the yard, filled with fresh rolls, heaps of sliced ham, potato salad and coleslaw and corn on the cob and green beans and everything else neighbors brought to share, with ice cream at the end.

Gossip was that the Sorrels were some kind of Hollywood behind-the-scenes royalty. But they acted like regular folk—well, mostly—and if the gate door was open, Franklin would stop and chat for a while.

But the gate was firmly shut that afternoon. They did have a new piece hanging on the wooden fence, a strange metal cabinet with tiny plastic dolls pasted around the edges, framing it.

Was that really art? Franklin had no idea. He found beauty in his fields, in fresh growing things, in neat stacks of apples or well packed rows of carrots at the store.

And in the clean lines of kernels, after they'd been dried, ready to be popped.

Franklin headed north for a few more blocks. The houses were a mixture of old and new. Some of the buildings were colonial, made out of brick and tall, with many chimneys and clean, steep tin roofs. Some were more modern: rectangular and one story, from the '50s, like Franklin's. Green Kentucky bluegrass covered the yards. Despite the dry summer, purple flowering pawpaw trees bloomed overhead, brightening the day.

Just as Franklin had seen enough and was turning back toward Jacobsen, Gloria appeared, not two feet in front of him.

Though Franklin knew he couldn't hurt her, he still automatically swerved onto the grass edging the side of the street. His tires skidded, and Franklin fell.

"Dang it!" Franklin said as he stood up, brushing off his Kroger uniform. A green and black smear went down one pants leg. He was gonna have to do laundry twice this week if this kept up.

When Franklin looked up, Gloria stood unmoving like a sign post, one hand pointing away from Jacobson, up the street, farther into the neighborhood.

With a sigh, Franklin got back on his bike and pedaled the direction Gloria indicated. She appeared again, pointing him this way and that. Where was she wanting him to get to? How long was this going to take? His stomach rumbled. Not too long, hopefully.

Finally, Gloria stopped at the end of a dead-end street, in front of two ramshackle houses, and pointed to a trail going up between them.

Franklin shook his head as he got off his bike. It was bad enough that ghosts haunted his place. He hated it when they made him trespass.

But at least the houses looked dark, the owners not home. Trash lay piled up on the front porch of the one, with blue sheets of plastic covering the windows. Broken toys lay in front of the other.

Hopefully, neither of them had a dog in their backyard.

Franklin looked up and down the street. He didn't see anyone else there, waiting or watching. Damn it. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and walked his bike up the trail Gloria was pointing to.

The backyards of the two houses were cleaner than the fronts. This was where the folks here lived, with lots of benches, chairs, and tables for them to gather at. They shared a long barrel smoker, and the smell of their recent BBQ made Franklin's mouth water.

Past the yards was a fallow field, full of brambles and sharp leaved weeds. Franklin pushed his way through, not bothering to untangle vines from the wire wheels of his bike. Hopefully no one minded his trespassing. Maybe, though, this would be the last of Gloria's haunting.

Finally, Gloria pointed Franklin toward a field.

Was this her farmer's field? Maybe he really could help her pass this afternoon.

Plus, corn grew in this field. Franklin happily walked into it. The stalks were tall, well groomed, and healthy. He judged the crop to be a little behind his rows: Maybe the farmer hadn't watered as much as Franklin had.

Gloria joined Franklin, marching angrily down the stalks toward a taller plant. Was there a particular place in the field that she cared about? Had something happened here?

Then Gloria stopped, holding out her hands in front of her.

Even from a few feet away, Franklin felt the wave of power that Gloria pushed out of her palms. She grew darker, less ghostly, as she pressed her will against a single ear of corn. But it wasn't hate that drove her, no.

It was fear.

What made her so scared of that corn?

Finally, Gloria got her prize, and a single ear dropped off the stalk and onto the ground. Gloria glared at Franklin, pointed at him, then down at the ear of corn.

Despite the heat, Franklin got a cold chill up his spine. He checked over his shoulder, but he didn't see another ghost. He scanned carefully, closely, but all he saw was more stalks of corn.

However, something else lurked there; a silent watcher. He just knew they weren't alone. Maybe some spirit haunted these fields.

With great reluctance, Franklin walked forward and picked up the ear of corn.

As soon as Franklin touched it, he knew Gloria's *intent*: She wanted him to steal this corn, steal all of this farmer's crop.

What had that farmer done to her, that she wanted Franklin to ruin his livelihood? It must have been real bad. If she'd been alive, she would have been shaking with fear. Something about this corn and this field scared her worse than any ghosts could have.

"I'm sorry," Franklin said, as gently as he could. "I can't do it. I can't steal this corn for you. You're gonna have to find something else to help you pass on." He'd never help a ghost to that extent. Not even if the person they was mad at had done something horrible. Gloria was just gonna have to find another way.

Gloria tipped her head back, turning her eyes up to the sky, then opening her mouth and screaming. Her face held sheer agony, like all the pinchers of hell was grabbing at her.

Franklin had never seen such a display.

Then Gloria marched over to Franklin and *pushed* at him, trying to get him to do her will, to leave all the stalks bare, dry, and leafless, like gravestone markers in the field.

"I can't," Franklin said, backing away, his skin feeling like it was being wrapped in sticky cobwebs. Gloria was strong, but no ghost was strong enough to force the living to their will.

Gloria stopped, paused, and gave a sly smile.

Suddenly, Franklin knew who owned this field: Karl Metzger, his rival for the Kentucky State Fair blue ribbon prize for growing the best popping corn. The man who had everything Franklin wanted. His old rival.

Franklin dropped the ear of corn he'd been holding, like it was suddenly hot enough to pop all on its own. He raced with his bike along the long row and bolted out of the field, onto the highway, then pedaled like mad back toward town.

How could Gloria think he'd be so...so...dastardly as that? It just wasn't right.

Franklin would never do something like that, particularly not to a rival. He wanted to win that prize, wanted that blue ribbon so badly—but he'd do it on his own terms. He'd never stoop to cheating that way.

As Franklin got to his side of town, turning off the four-lane highway onto Stevens, the clouds opened up and blinded him with rain.

It didn't matter to Franklin that he had to walk his bike the rest of the way home due to the downpour, that Mama glared at him all through dinner, that he had to use the last of Sweet Bess' lard melted over his popcorn that night: he was content, 'cause he knew he'd done the right

thing.

He also knew this was far from over.

## Chapter Two

WINDS TORE AT THE HOUSE ALL NIGHT, and thunder shook the trees. Franklin stayed in the sanctuary of his room, resigned to checking the damage in the morning. Mama had always told him that fretting didn't do no good. That night, Franklin tried to follow her advice, but his eyes kept popping open when the light flashed against his dark shade.

The next morning, clear blue sky gazed down on Franklin, washed clean from the rain the night before. Smells of wet earth and grass filled the air. Only Mama sat at the kitchen table that morning, her look less angry, more pensive.

All of Franklin's corn stalks had survived. They'd been knocked around a bit—the ground at the foot of a few of the stalks was loose, and they leaned forward a little, like a giant hand had been pushing at them—but for the most part, they were all good. He pushed the stalks back up and stomped on the wet earth, making it hold them more firm again. He plucked up a few weeds, pulling them easily out of the wet dirt.

Quiet wind rustled the leaves. Standing in between the stalks, Franklin couldn't see the house, or the yard—nothing but rows of corn. Peace filled him. He wished he could bottle it up and keep it with him when he needed it most, like the fireflies he'd captured as a boy, using them as nightlights for his room.

A feeling of stillness beyond the quiet of the morning told Franklin that he wasn't alone. When he looked up, he saw Gloria standing at the end of one of the rows. With a contemptuous hand, Gloria smacked one of his ears of corn. Power rippled from her, through the stalks and Franklin's chest.

Franklin rushed over to the ear Gloria hit. He didn't see anything wrong with it: It was still firmly attached to the stalk, not suddenly iced over or filled with bugs or some other nightmare that only ghosts could give him.

When Franklin looked back at Gloria, she merely pointed at him, her *intent* clear: This was merely a warning. More damage was on the way if he didn't help her.

Franklin gulped. "Miss Gloria, I can't steal Karl's crop. That wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be gentlemanly. There's gotta be something else I can do, that'll help you." Franklin wasn't gonna steal Karl's corn. Karl was his competitor. He didn't hate Karl. He envied him.

Gloria pressed her lips together tightly, but she didn't push any more *intent* at Franklin.

Her disappointment was obvious, though.

She disappeared before Franklin could say much else.

But what could he have said? He wasn't a thief.

\* \* \*

Later that night, after dinner, Gloria appeared in the kitchen again, sitting at the table beside Mama. Franklin wondered if they talked with each other in a way he couldn't hear, as they kept looking at each other, Mama with her hair up and her good church clothes, Gloria with her

perfect blond curls, too-tight shirt, and long red nails that she kept clicking on the table.

They did seem to be in agreement about one thing: They kept glaring at Franklin, first separately, then together.

Well, maybe some more of Sweet Bess' lard would gentle Gloria.

Franklin went down to the basement, then stepped into the root cellar for another one of his jars. The darkness of the basement never bothered him much: He'd grown up seeing ghosts, having them give him nightmares. A little darkness wasn't ever scary after that. He liked how cool it was down there. Most of the basement had a concrete floor, but the root cellar's floor was dirt and smelled like his fields. A steep wooden staircase took up one wall, leading up to closed shutter doors. Deep shelves lined the walls, and Franklin had some spices hanging from the ceiling, gifts from his cousin Lexine.

Only a half dozen jars of plain rendered lard remained, along with some of the snow white, rendered leaf lard from around Bess' kidneys that he had stored in the freezer. He'd use the latter for making pies to bring to the Sorrels' picnic later that year, as it was pure and had no scent of pork.

Franklin hadn't planned on opening another jar so soon. He justified it to himself by telling himself that it was for Gloria. Maybe he could please her enough with that, so she'd figure out something else for him to do, instead of stealing Karl's crop.

However, neither Gloria or Mama seemed interested in the jar when Franklin held it up to show them. After cracking it open, Franklin approached the table slowly, so as not to spook Gloria: He didn't want her disappearing or going after his crop.

Inch by slow inch, Franklin held out the open jar for Gloria. Would she understand what he was offering?

Puzzled, Gloria sniffed at the lard, then curled her nose up at the smell of it and disappeared.

Damn it! Why didn't she want the lard? She'd certainly been going after it earlier.

Mama moved her hand from the table for the first time since she'd started haunting Franklin.

Startled, Franklin held himself absolutely still. What was Mama about to tell him?

Slowly, Mama raised up three fingers. *Intent* oozed from her, like butter melting over popcorn.

There were three ghosts haunting Franklin: Mama, Gloria, and another, unnamed, unseen ghost.

And Mama was worried about her boy.

An unseen ghost haunting Franklin? That just didn't seem right. Ghosts haunted Franklin because they needed his help. They'd been doing it since he was a boy. Mama had always told him it was his duty. And he sure hadn't done anything to make a ghost want revenge or come after him.

Maybe the ghost was just ornery enough to haunt Franklin without wanting his help. But that still didn't seem right. And it wouldn't worry Mama, not that much.

What was this other ghost? And what did it really want?

\* \* \*

On his lunch break the next day at the Kroger, Franklin hurriedly ate his sandwich and went to find Charlene, the store manager.

“Hey darlin’,” Charlene said, welcoming Franklin into the little security booth on the balcony of the store. “What can I do you for?”

The room held a half-dozen TV screens, all black and white, showing different places in the store, like the liquor coolers in the back, the two cashiers up front, and the baby and diaper aisle—they’d had a problem recently with formula going missing. Like the rest of the store, the room smelled like old wood and dust: The building was a turn-of-the-century store front, gutted and converted into a more modern store.

Franklin had never felt comfortable up there, spying on everyone. Charlene always struck him as a little too keen on security.

Charlene’s uniform was a long-sleeved white shirt with the Kroger logo over her right breast pocket, black trousers, and a utility belt that rivaled any comic book character’s. She cut her brown curly hair short and always wore what Mama called “work makeup”—just enough to make her pretty, but never enough to be noticed. Fortunately, Mama had never tried to set Franklin up with Charlene. Franklin had always assumed it wasn’t because Charlene was white, but because of her size: She was taller and wider than Franklin (who wasn’t a small man) and at least twice as strong.

“Figured I’d come and catch up on the local gossip,” Franklin said with a grin, holding out his bribe: half a bowl of the fresh blueberries that had just come in, drowning in cream.

“You know I don’t gossip,” Charlene admonished as she took the bowl with one hand, while indicating that Franklin should sit on the other chair in her “command center.” “Thank you,” she added with a shy smile.

“Then maybe you can catch me up on the news,” Franklin said.

“Well, you know the Whittiers?” Charlene started. “They live up near the big Baptist church, off Fifth. So Jimmy—you know Jimmy, the dry cleaner—he was saying...”

Franklin nodded, letting Charlene spin her tales. The problem wasn’t ever getting Charlene talking, but getting her to stop. It was why he’d come to see her at the end of his break, not the beginning.

“So, have any bad people been killed on the highway recently?” Franklin asked when he felt he could get a word in.

“No, no, not that I could say,” Charlene said. She put the empty bowl back on the desk in front of her. “You sure are a gruesome thing, ain’t ya? Always asking about who’s dying.”

Franklin shrugged and tried to act casual. “Just an interest of mine,” he said truthfully.

“The only big news we’ve had is that some big developer, a businessman, has gone missing. He was supposed to call into his office yesterday, on Monday, and didn’t,” Charlene said.

“What do you mean, missing?” Franklin asked, wondering. A developer—that might make a

hungry ghost, particularly if he was looking to buy up anything in their little sleepy town.

“You can’t say a word to anyone else,” Charlene said, leaning forward and lowering her voice. “I heard it on the scanner.”

Charlene kept a police scanner in her car, and sometimes followed Sheriff Thompson or went out to where there was trouble. Not that it was illegal, but the sheriff and his deputies didn’t like Charlene much. She insisted it was because they were threatened she’d do their jobs so much better, if only she’d gone into law enforcement instead of business.

“I promise I won’t tell a soul,” Franklin assured her.

“So this guy—Jackson, I think his name is—came here to see about building a resort.”

“Here?” Franklin scoffed. “There’s nothing here.” Katherinesville was a historic town. It had its share of colonial buildings, and the third floor of the eye clinic had been the old opera house and still showed plays. But it wasn’t as fancy or preserved as the bigger towns, like Bardstown or Harrodsburg. The countryside was pretty enough, but so was most of Kentucky.

“Ah, but what if he diverted Wolf River?”

“Could they do that?” Franklin asked, astonished. What would happen to his taxes if the town became prosperous? Could he still afford to live there, or buy the property next to his? “I sure hope they don’t.”

“Well, that’s just the gossip,” Charlene said with a grin. “Anyway, he met with some of the local bigwigs, like the Sorrels and the county governor and the mayor. Then he wanted to poke around, get some of the ‘flavor’ of the area.”

Franklin snickered. “Flavor. I’ll say.” Why did city folks think places like Katherinesville were so quaint? When Charlene didn’t go on, he added, “So what happened to him?”

“He disappeared. Never made it to his plane. His rental car wasn’t returned. He hasn’t checked his email, or called into his office.”

“Couldn’t they find him on his phone or something? Triangulate?” Franklin asked.

“You been watching too many cop shows on TV. That only works if there’s a signal. Can you get reception out in the middle of your field?”

Franklin shook his head *no*. He didn’t have a fancy, smart phone—as Mama had said, those things made you dumb. But he did have a cell phone that he could use, when he remembered to charge it. But Charlene was right—it was useless out in the middle of his field.

“So they can’t find him. Or track him. He’s just fallen off the face of the earth. People are speculating that the deal he wanted to make went bad.”

“Or maybe not,” Franklin replied. “If he’s really that busy and important, maybe he just wanted to take some time off.”

“Maybe,” Charlene said, nodding. “But I bet there’s been foul play.”

“Now who’s been watching too much TV?” Franklin teased. He stood up and gathered their bowls. “I appreciate the news,” he added. “But my break’s about over.”

As Franklin headed out, Charlene called after him, “You want me to tell you if they bring a fancy crew out just to track one man?”

“Sure thing,” Franklin said, though he had a better tracking device than any of the equipment he saw on those shows on TV.

He had his cousin Lexine.

\* \* \*

Franklin tugged on his gloves and reached for the first head of red leaf lettuce. Stocking lettuce wasn't as bad as cleaning out the wet rack where the lettuces was displayed, even if he didn't like trimming leaves off the heads, particularly when they were slimy. He kept his knife sharp, so it was a bit easier.

But he'd forgotten to turn off the sprayer, so of course, the next time he reached back to set a head of lettuce in the wet rack his glove and arm all got wet.

“Dang it,” Franklin said under his breath so no one else would hear. He didn't have any paper towels on his cart, either. He marched down to the end of the display and turned off the sprayer, then went back to break room to pat down his arm.

By the time he came back, Gloria stood there, smirking, as two brothers, Mark and Louis, flung stringy, slimy lettuce cuttings at each other.

“Mark! Louis!” Franklin bellowed.

The boys stopped mid-throw and looked guilty. “We're sorry Mr. Kanly, sir,” Mark said as he realized that there were bits of slimy lettuce on the floor, as well as dripping off the front of the vegetable case.

“Don't tell our mom,” Louis begged.

Franklin sighed. Luckily, he'd brought the paper towels with him. “You go find her, then,” he said gruffly as he bent down to wipe up the gunk on the floor.

The boys skedaddled. Franklin didn't feel too badly about them—they'd clearly been under the influence of Gloria. No need to warn their mother, Mrs. Mason. She already had enough on her hands, with four boys. His mama had always said that she was lucky she'd only had the one, 'cause she swore that more than one would have sent her clear around the bend.

Franklin finished cleaning up and had started trimming lettuce leaves again when Mr. Sorrel came up, a mere loaf of bread and a small pack of cheese sitting morosely in his wire cart. He wore a loud red-and-yellow print shirt with cartoon figures Franklin didn't recognize, beige shorts, white socks and sandals. His white hair was perfectly styled and filled his whole head, despite his seventy-plus years. He had a bland face, the kind you'd forget in an hour, unless he found you interesting and suddenly focused his gray-blue eyes on you and you'd realize just how smart he was.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Sorrel,” Franklin said politely.

“You can call me Ray,” Mr. Sorrel responded, as he always did.

And outside of the store, Franklin would. But not at work, where he needed to show more respect.

“So how've you been?” Mr. Sorrel asked politely.

“Can’t complain,” Franklin said, more or less honestly. He had a troublesome ghost, no, three, haunting him, but he still had a roof over his head and the best popping corn in the state growing in his backyard. “How about yourself?”

“I’m glad I ran into you,” Mr. Sorrel said. “Your mama, God rest her soul, used to tell fortunes at the beauty parlor, right?”

Franklin nodded warily. “She had a tarot deck that she’d use. Or regular house cards, sometimes. It was just to keep the girls at the parlor entertained.” Mama didn’t have a gift, not really. Not like Franklin or Lexine.

Though sometimes, Franklin wondered. Mrs. Leslie had been a regular at the beauty parlor for years. Then she stopped going abruptly, and went the next county over for her weekly appointment.

At Mama’s funeral, Mrs. Leslie came and cried on Franklin’s shoulder about how his mama had been right about everything she’d said, everything the cards had said, but Mrs. Leslie hadn’t had the courage to go back.

“And you help people too, don’t you?” Mr. Sorrel said, his gray-blue eyes suddenly piercing and sharp.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Franklin said, not willing to go into his business—particularly not here at the store. Who knew if Charlene was watching or not?

“People say you talk to ghosts,” Mr. Sorrel said.

“People say a lot of things,” Franklin replied, trimming another head, unwilling to just outright lie. Mama didn’t like it when he lied.

“We seem to be having some kind of haunting at the house,” Mr. Sorrel said. “Could you stop by tonight? After work? At least come by and say hello to Adrianna.”

Franklin looked up from his work. Mr. Sorrel didn’t seem scared, at least.

“I can stop by,” Franklin said slowly. “But I ain’t saying anything to any ghosts.” If Mr. Sorrel was being haunted, it was probably for something he’d done at some point.

Ghosts didn’t just haunt people for fun.

\* \* \*

Franklin rested his bike against the wooden fence of the Sorrels’ place. Nothing new had been added to the collection of art there, though the metal cabinet had lost a couple of doll heads, making it a little more creepy, with just the doll bodies framing it.

The doorbell next to the gate had been switched out since the last time Franklin had been there: The round, lighted button now sat at the heart of green-blue brass swirls, like a pearl at the bottom of the sea. Franklin pushed it gently, hoping that maybe the Sorrels weren’t home, and he could be on his way.

The gate buzzed and unlocked, swinging open almost immediately. Franklin debated leaving his bike just leaning against the fence, but he wanted to make sure it was still there when he left, so he pushed it through the gate and leaned it against the wall just inside.

Cheery yellow daisies made out of clothespins lined the white stone walkway. Children's pinwheels spun merrily beside them. A tall silver statue of a man, made from hubcaps, stood hunched next to the door of the low, one-story house, his arms extended, holding a hubcap filled with water for the birds.

Mr. Sorrel—Ray—came out the door. Adrianna floated beside him, wearing a dress made of white and purple scarves, like what Franklin had seen singers wear in music videos. The skirt flared out, like the cloth was lighter than air.

"Franklin!" Adrianna called, skipping over to him and clutching hold of his arm.

Normally, Franklin didn't care for folks touching him. But Adrianna, she was in a class not meant for other folks. Her hazel eyes shone clear today above her freckled nose, while her brown hair hung down loose and clean, past her shoulders.

"Good afternoon, Miss Adrianna," Franklin said, lightly patting the hands wrapped around his bicep.

"How you doing today?" Adrianna asked.

"I'm doing just fine," Franklin said. He couldn't help but smile at her. "How have you been?"

"All Ray's fish died again. In the koi pond, out back," Adrianna said. She gave a delicate shiver. "The water all ran out. Ray says there isn't a leak."

"No leak," Ray confirmed. "The plug keeps getting pulled."

Franklin didn't want to point out that it was unlikely that a ghost could have done it—not unless that ghost was real mad. Most didn't have the strength.

But a ghost like Gloria might be able to. Or maybe even his unseen visitor, the one strong enough to open a jar of lard.

Were either of them haunting more than just Franklin? Did Gloria have something against Ray too?

"Why don't you show me?" Franklin said.

"Good!" Adrianna exclaimed. "I told Ray that you could help. I don't have the sight, not like you. But you have it, right?"

"Let's just see what we can see," Franklin said, not admitting nothing to nobody.

Adrianna tugged Franklin along the path, leaving Ray in their wake. "What do you think of the new design?" she asked proudly.

"New design?" Franklin asked, confused.

"The path! Now it follows all the spirit-power lines."

"Ah," Franklin said, looking down. New grass lined the edge. The path had been laboriously moved about two feet to the left. "Very nice," he said when it was obvious Adrianna was looking for a reply.

"See?" Adrianna beamed over Franklin's shoulder at Ray. "I told you we should do it."

"Yes, dear," Ray said in a long-suffering voice.

"He doesn't really mean that," Adrianna confided in Franklin. "He feels better walking this path as well."

“Yes, ma’am,” Franklin said. It was always best to just agree with Adrianna. Especially when he didn’t understand half of what she said.

In addition to the tree men wired together from fallen branches stood several other statues: A half-complete mermaid that Franklin guessed was pieced together out of found glass; what looked like a goat man, up on his hind legs, made out of balls of twine; a long streaming V of dark birds dangled from dark rope that linked one tree to the next; and a collection of outboard motors all painted blue and white, sitting on top of fancy pillars.

They curved around the yard, circling through the statues, before they reached the pond, a plain concrete ring about three feet deep, with just a touch of water still remaining in the bottom. It looked clean, was a pretty blue, and stank of dead fish.

“Where’s the plug?” Franklin asked Ray. He didn’t see any ghosts, but that didn’t mean there hadn’t been there earlier.

“Let me show you,” Ray said.

Franklin gently rolled away Adrianna’s hands and followed Ray as he stepped over the concrete lip.

The plug sat at the center of the bottom of the pond. It looked like an oversized bathtub plug, made of black rubber with a brass ring through the top of it and a chain. Franklin tugged on the chain, but it didn’t come up easily. He tugged again, putting more muscle into it.

“You said the plug gets pulled up at night? This plug?” Franklin tugged again, finally getting the plug to release.

“Yes, almost every night,” Ray said.

“It’s the spirits, right?” Adrianna asked. “They don’t like us trapping living things. I told you, Ray.”

It couldn’t have been a ghost. No ghost that Franklin had ever met had the strength to pull up that plug.

And he really didn’t want to meet a ghost who had that kind of strength and will.

“We shouldn’t trap live things,” Adrianna said. “The spirits don’t like it. Right, Franklin?”

Why was Adrianna staring at him like that?

But she was right. “Spirits don’t like you trapping living things,” Franklin admitted. It was why he didn’t have a pet, not a hound or even a turtle: The ghosts would put a hole in the screen door for them to get out, push on any cage door until it was ajar.

“So it’s the spirits pulling the plug,” Adrianna said earnestly. “It must be the spirits. It can’t be anyone else, right, Franklin?”

Franklin looked up at Adrianna, who kept staring at him, then back at Ray.

“You don’t like the fish being trapped either, do you, Miss Adrianna?” Franklin asked gently.

“No, but Ray likes ’em. So it must be the *spirits* that want them free,” Adrianna said again.

While Mama may have accused Franklin of not being the brightest bulb in the pack, even he could see what was happening here.

Adrianna was pulling the plug at night, and blaming it on ghosts.

“Now, Ray,” Franklin said, stopping until the man looked at him. “Adrianna is right. Spirits don’t like you trapping living things. Free spirits. Of all kinds,” he said, glancing up at Adrianna, then back at Ray. “They might love you, but trapping living things make ’em kind of nuts.”

Ray looked up at Adrianna and sighed. “Well, I’ll be—” He stopped, and paused. “All right. I hear ya. Free spirits will be free, and free everything around them, won’t they?” He stuck his hand out for Franklin to shake, then lowered his voice to a whisper. “I appreciate your discretion in this. No one needs to know just how free a spirit Adrianna is.”

Franklin grinned at Ray. “I won’t tell anyone but Mama.”

To read the rest of *The Popcorn Thief*, visit [Book View Café](#).

## **About the Author**

LEAH CUTTER CURRENTLY LIVES IN SEATTLE—the land of coffee and fog. However, she's also lived all over the world and held the requisite odd writer jobs such as working on an archeology dig in England, teaching English in Taiwan, and bartending in Thailand.

She writes fantasy set in exotic times and locations such as Tang dynasty China, WWII Budapest, rural Louisiana, and the Oregon coast.

Her short fiction includes fantasy, mystery, science fiction, and horror, and has been published in magazines as well as anthologies and on the web.

Read more stories by Leah Cutter at [www.KnottedRoadPress.com](http://www.KnottedRoadPress.com).

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