

Tail of the Comet

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At 11 p.m. Lucille Gorski found herself standing in a cemetery next to a monument proclaiming, “Herein Lies Phineas McGee, Who Left When He Had the Chance.”

“What do you think that means?” she asked her boyfriend, Marty, who was setting up his equipment.

“I guess the dude was glad to check out.”

“Very funny, Marty, but don’t be a wise guy. I’ve already done one ghost hunt tonight.”

Lucille was referring to earlier when Marty had brought his ghost hunting equipment to Alex Youngblood’s house, a kid who’d recently been murdered on the bike path. Convinced he’d seen Alex’s ghostly image wandering around at his vigil three nights before, Marty was hoping to catch Alex before he left for the Great Beyond.

In this sense, you could say Lucille’s night began the actual night of the shooting. She was about to plug into Cage the Elephant when a flash sparked outside her bedroom window, followed almost simultaneously by a loud bang. Once, about two years ago, she’d seen lightning, with its accompanying thunder, rend a tree. That’s what she thought the flash was until she realized the night sky was quiet and star-filled. The next day when she heard Alex had been shot, everything fell into place—the flash, the sound—because her house was no more than a quarter of a mile from where the murder occurred.

Murder. A strange word for Lucille’s upscale community, though Marty seemed as excited about it as a coyote chancing upon raw road

kill. To Marty, a dead body meant a fresh ghost, and much to Lucille's unhappiness, Marty, her brilliant, and let's face it, cool-looking boyfriend, had decided to put all his energy into catching what he called Alex's "spirit force" before it broke its earthly coils.

"Are you going to help me, Lucille?" Marty asked, pointing to something he called an Electromagnetic Field Detector.

"I think you're way beyond help, Marty," she said.

He looked puzzled, as if trying to decide whether she was serious. Then his eyes left hers, traveling down and finally resting upon her Converse high-tops.

"You know, Lucille," he said matter-of-factly, "you really have great legs. Don't know why you always wear jeans."

It was not unlike Marty to shift gears between topics, so Lucille always had to be on guard.

"You don't like the way I dress?" she asked.

"What?" Marty said.

"You were saying something about my legs."

"Yeah, I like them, but I'd like it better if we could get this stuff set up."

"Wouldn't you have a better chance of catching Alex if we went back to his house?" Lucille asked.

"I'm not interested just in him anymore. I'm after the tail of the comet."

"I'm afraid to ask."

He set up his tripod, and placed his infrared camcorder on top of it. "It's like when a comet flames out and drags all this cool shit behind it. Well, all these dead people under all these tombstones . . ."

"Thanks for reminding me, Marty . . ."

". . . well, when Alex passes through the Vortex, they'll all want to get another glimpse of the living, thinking they might worm their way back into our lives. I guess I'm saying that because of the way Alex died, the natural order of things has been messed up, and some of the dead have probably already passed through. Don't tell me you can't feel it."

According to Marty, the Vortex, shaped like a funnel, was a gateway to the Other Side.

"Why would Phineas want to come back?" Lucille said. "He's been dead for three hundred years. Could you imagine him wandering into a Pilates class by mistake?"

"Very funny, Lucille. I find your irreverence for the dead sexy, though this probably isn't the best place to get them mad. They're not known for their sense of humor."

"Why's that?"

"Envy of the living, of course."

Lucille was about to respond but then thought better. She'd already gotten her father to extend her curfew, so she didn't want to prod Marty into one of his long paranormal lectures or they'd be there all night. Instead, she helped assemble his equipment, then awaited his usual invocation to the dead: "Dear Lord, what we are about to do, we do in the interest of science. We ask for your blessing or protection if our presence brings forth any minions of evil."

She sat down next to Phineas McGee's tombstone, and Marty turned some dials and joined her. It was a beautiful night, low humidity and a full moon, so perfectly round you could imagine the eye of God pressed tightly against it.

"What are you expecting this time?" Lucille said, trying to seem interested, even though she knew nothing would happen for the next hour or so, and then they'd go home.

"Something or nothing," Marty said, "but at least we're together, huh?"

"Yeah, Marty, you really know how to treat a girl."

"But you're not 'a girl.' You're Lucille. If you were 'a girl' you'd be afraid of cemeteries. You'd be home painting your toenails. That's why I have trouble seeing you going out with Ryan Holt."

"Marty . . ."

"I'm just saying."

"Well, don't."

Earlier that day Marty had discovered that she'd dated Ryan Holt, a guy Marty thought was a jerk, and since then, he'd been harping on it, even though the guy had been killed in a car accident last winter. Lucille knew the information Marty wanted, and it bothered her that he thought, even for a moment, that she was his property.

"Okay," Marty said, "but you'll have to do penance for dating that guy, like telling me every day I have a large penis."

"Not going to work, Marty."

"What?"

"If I tell you you have a large penis, you'll want to know what I'm comparing it to."

"You're a real piece of work, Lucille," Marty said, "and I mean that as a compliment."

Lucille grabbed his hand. He *really* was good-looking. He had deep-set blue eyes, a strong nose, and a slightly elongated chin, and when he

smiled, a little dimple seemed to explode on his left cheek. He could get most anything with that smile, and she found herself jealous when he flashed it around other girls, especially ones like Dory Scheff.

Not so, Lucille, who was always willing to battle almost anyone, as she did when she'd gotten into it with Dory at Alex's vigil. She didn't dislike Dory because she was rich or beautiful. She disliked her because Dory thought her beauty and money made her better than everyone else. Lucille knew that if she ever decided to wear her contacts and have her hair and nails done, she could be a real head-turner. That was made clear at the prom when Marty raved over her Japanese hairstyle with its long bangs that highlighted her eyes, and her tight red silk dress and red patent leather shoes. She didn't have to look around to know she was getting attention, and what she loved about Marty was that after she went back to her black jeans, black Converse sneakers, and T-shirts, he was okay with it. They had made their statement to the cool kids without having to say a word.

"Shhhh," Marty said.

"Shhhh, what?"

"Look over by that stone wall."

Two eyes inflamed by moonlight appeared, and Lucille wondered if Phineas McGee had returned to drag them to wherever three-hundred-year-old dead guys live. But then the eyes moved slowly out of the woods, attached to the body of a gaunt coyote.

"Will it hurt us?"

"No," Marty said, "but at least I know my instruments are working." He pointed to the lights on the EMF detector flashing on-and-off like bulbs on a miniature pinball machine.

The coyote sat down about thirty feet away, ignoring them. It glanced left, then right, as if it sensed a good meal scurrying through the wood's ground cover. Then it leaped over the stone wall and was gone.

Lucille locked her arm inside Marty's.

"Don't worry. I think they're afraid of people," Marty said. "It's the guy wandering around who shot Alex that makes me nervous."

"Did you know Alex?" Lucille asked.

"A little. He was on my Pop Warner and Little League teams when we were kids."

"I didn't know you used to play sports."

Marty frowned. "They were fun back then. Now it's just the usual jerks trying to exclude people. My dad said the way to beat them was to outwork them, but why bother, especially when there are more interesting things to do. I didn't see myself getting eighteen guys together to play baseball after high school, anyway."

"That's how many guys are on the field?"

"You're kidding, right, Lucille?"

"No, I'm not."

"You mean your parents never made you play sports?"

"My mom wanted me to be a cheerleader for the middle-school basketball team."

Marty started to laugh.

"So you see the problem."

"Oh, yeah."

"You know, I don't mind talking about her," Lucille said.

"Well, that's a change."

"From what?"

Marty looked like he was trying to suppress a smile.

"What's your problem?" Lucille said.

"Look, Lucille, every time we talk about your mom, you get severely pissed off." Lucille inched herself away from him, and Marty laughed. "I rest my case."

"You know what really stinks?" she said. "Sitting in a goddam cemetery while you decide to give me a bad time about my mother."

"Actually, I didn't bring her up," Marty said. Then he slid over next to her. "What's going on, Lucille?"

"I don't want to talk about it now," she said.

"Sure you do. Let it rip, so we can be quiet for a while. There aren't many rules to ghost hunting, but everyone agrees they won't appear if people are making a racket."

Lucille felt herself smile. "You promise not to defend her?"

"I don't even know her."

"I love you, Marty, but you got this thing about being nice to everyone. Some people are assholes, and you have to let them know it."

"That's your job, Lucille, and you're really good at it." He clasped his hands together as if in prayer, took a deep breath, and said, "So what's going on with your mom?"

"My father says I need to spend more time with her," Lucille confessed.

"Might be a good idea."

"I can't stand her house, or her new husband, and dig this, she's pregnant."

"Ah," Marty said. "It makes sense you're upset."

"Don't psychoanalyze me, Marty."

"I'm just saying."

Lucille felt herself about to cry and couldn't figure out why. "She's just so goddam happy that it's not fair. My dad's a cool guy. I mean he's a respected professor. Maybe he doesn't make a lot of money but he's a great guy."

"It was probably more than money. I've heard people break up for a bunch of reasons."

"Not her. When they'd have fights, she'd say, 'Make more money.' One night she kept screaming it over and over again. My dad just sat in the kitchen with a glass of wine, while I felt like punching her in the face. And so now she's got her rich guy . . ."

"And her new family," Marty interrupted.

"That's not the problem, Marty."

"Just putting it out there. Who knows, maybe a new kid will change things."

Lucille threw up her hands in frustration. "Obviously, I can't talk to you about this, especially because your parents are so fucking happy."

Marty slid next to her again and placed his palm on her back, then gently scratched between her shoulder blades. "Well, I'll go with you if you want. Maybe I can beat up the guy."

They both laughed at that comment, then sat quietly until they were surprised by an approaching bicyclist. The bike's headlamp was lit, and it was moving towards them, stopping about fifty feet away. The rider got off and removed his helmet. Lucille couldn't distinguish the rider's features but he was tall and broad and appeared to be wearing a holster.

"He's got a gun," she whispered.

The man pointed a flashlight in their direction. "Just stay calm," he said.

Lucille tried to cooperate but her heart felt a size too big for her chest.

"Is that you, Marty?" the man said, coming out of the shadows.

Marty stood. "Oh, hi, Mr. Watts."

Mr. Watts was a hunky ex-gym teacher who looked like Bradley Cooper. After two years of screaming at high school kids to do pushups, he had joined the local police force. He'd obviously been assigned to night patrol, most likely because of the shooting.

"Does your father know you're here, Marty?" Officer Watts said.

"No, but it wouldn't surprise him," Marty said. "Would you mind not shining that flashlight in my face, Mr. Watts?"

"Sure," Officer Watts said, turning off the light. He looked at the equipment, seeming to realize that they hadn't come to the cemetery to make out.

"I can explain," Marty said, and he calmly began a mini lecture on ghost hunting.

Lucille expected Officer Watts to collapse into laughter, but he seemed interested, even asking Marty a few questions. When Marty finished, Officer Watts said, "You're a cool kid, Marty."

"Thanks."

"You always had interesting ideas in my health class, and you were polite. Some of those other guys could've used a kick in the ass."

"Thanks again, Mr. Watts."

"Having said that, I think you should pack up. Then I'll walk you kids home. I can get a squad car if it makes things easier."

"Probably not a good idea to have a police car pull up to the town solicitor's house with his kid in it," Marty said.

Officer Watts nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right."

Lucille helped Marty to stuff the equipment into his backpack, and everyone was set to leave when Marty said, "I have to say something first. It'll probably sound strange."

This was the part of ghost hunting Lucille really hated. "You didn't say it at Alex's house," she reminded him.

"That wasn't a cemetery."

"Aw, come on, Marty."

Officer Watts seemed to be losing his patience.

"It's just a little prayer, Mr. Watts. Some ghost hunters believe that evil spirits sometimes follow people home from cemeteries, and not all of these ghosts are nice guys."

Lucille was waiting for Officer Watts to pull out his gun and put Marty out of his misery, but instead, he looked uneasily around the graveyard, and said, "Okay, so what's next?"

"We hold hands and I say a few words. It's kind of a prayer."

"Or we can just go home," Lucille said.

Lucille and Marty looked to Officer Watts for guidance. He probed the inside of his cheek with his tongue. "Okay, Marty, say your prayer, but this has to stay between us three, okay?"

Lucille and Marty agreed, then they all held hands, creating a small circle. After telling all evil spirits, in the name of God, to stay put, Marty lowered his head and said:

*St. Michael, the Archangel,
defend us in battle.*

*Be our protection
against the wickedness
and snares of the devil.
By the power of God,
cast into hell
Satan and all other evil spirits,
who prowl the world
seeking the ruin of souls.
Amen.*

Lucille cringed as each word came out. She hoped she didn't have the misfortune of running into Officer Watts for a while, and she guessed he felt the same.

When Marty finished, they let go of each other's hands, and Officer Watts said, "You know, Marty, you should have your own TV show. You can really scare the hell out of people."

"Thanks, Mr. Watts," Marty said. He was beaming, and although Lucille felt like smacking him upside his head, more than anything, she was glad someone was taking him seriously.

"Sure you don't want me to follow you?" Officer Watts said.

"We'll be okay," Marty said.

"Don't hang around, though."

"We won't," Marty said, and then he and Lucille grabbed Marty's stuff and headed home.

Later that evening, Marty called her as Lucille was sitting on her back porch, watching an old *Walking Dead* episode on her tablet while mosquitoes unhappily vanished into a nearby zapper shaped like a lantern.

“Just wanted to thank you for tonight,” Marty said.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know I’m a pain in the ass, but I really think I’m going to do something important someday.”

“But not with ghosts, right?”

“I dunno. I just don’t want you to think I’m an idiot.” There was a long pause, then he said, “I guess I’m trying to say I love you, Lucille.”

“Even if I made out with Ryan Holt?”

“I’m serious, okay?”

“Sorry, Marty. I’m not used to you saying that very often.”

“But I mean it. Right now, I’m kind of angry you can’t be here, you know, spend the night.”

Lucille knew exactly how he felt. “I love you, too, Marty, but can we leave it at that? Sometimes talking about this stuff ruins things.”

“You really are something, Lucille.”

“Yeah, all I have to do is figure out what it is.”

After the conversation Lucille sat for a while. She was tired from her trip to the cemetery but she couldn’t relax enough to go to bed. A hurt that had morphed into a dull ache over the last few years was rising again deep inside her. Her mother’s house was only a fifteen minute walk away. She knew what she was about to do would make her feel worse. But she was, after all, Lucille.

First, she checked to see if her father was asleep. Then she threw on a black hoodie. She didn’t want to take the sidewalks or side streets at midnight. That was a sure way to run into Officer Watts again, and she feared he wouldn’t be so laid back this time. So she jogged onto a path that cut through the woods behind her house, ending a block

from her mother's. She wasn't worried because from any place on the path, houses were no more than thirty to fifty yards away. Worst case scenario, she could run to one of them. And from what? A coyote? A fisher cat? A stray dog she might spook?

The night had cooled off, so she pulled the hood up over her head, glancing periodically to the left or right, as dead leaves and twigs crunched under her sneakers. She heard a dog bark and the squawk of a window being lowered. The first part of her walk was straight and level, then she reached a small incline and a bend that was faintly lit from the back-yard flood lights of nearby houses. When she made the turn, she was surprised by a large kid with a shaved head who was sitting on the ground with his back against a tree, drinking from a six-pack of beer. She thought to run, but it wasn't her nature to do that.

"Well, well, well," the kid said, standing up. It was Adam Igoe. He was a football player, a guy Lucille always thought looked like one of those G. I. Joe action figures. He was wearing jeans and work boots and nothing but a plain white T-shirt on top. He raised the bottle of beer to his lips in such a way that his right bicep flexed. She noticed thick strands of dark hair coating his knuckles, as if his body had compensated for the lack of hair on his head.

Lucille almost laughed, but even she was afraid of Adam. All he needed were a few tattoos of snakes on his head and he'd be ready for the UFC after graduation.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

"I'm not worried," Lucille said.

"Gorski, right?"

"Yeah."

"You know what I remember about you?"

"Nope."

"Before you started going out with the film guy, we were both at this party when one of my friends grabbed your ass and you punched him in the face."

Lucille smiled, remembering the incident, but she wasn't sure where he was going with this.

"You want a beer," he said, trying to be friendly.

"No, I'm in a hurry."

"Where're you goin'?"

Oh, what the hell. "To my mother's."

"Well, Gorski, let me finish this beer and I'll walk you outta these woods." He took a long suck on his bottle, then tossed it into some bushes.

"You going to leave the rest here?" she said.

"No, I'll come back later."

"Aren't you afraid someone will steal them?"

"No, you and me are the only ones crazy enough to be here at midnight."

So there she was, Lucille Gorski, being escorted by a kid who was only a few genes from being a Neanderthal.

She and Adam never said a word until they reached her destination. She thanked him and, with everything else that had happened that night, she wouldn't have been surprised if he knelt down and kissed her hand.

"You're okay, Gorski," Adam said, before going back for his stash.

"If anyone ever fucks with you, let me know."

Lucille said she would, then watched as he lumbered into darkness.

After he left, she stayed close to the fringe of the woods until she reached her mother's backyard. All the lights were off, so she sat next to a shed that had a shovel leaning against it. She wrapped her arms around her knees and thought about the couple sleeping inside, imagining her unborn sibling coming to life inside her mother's womb.

She was angry and sad at the same time, wanting to leave but unable to move. She was surprised when a light came on in the living room, and then another, and another, until she could spot her mother pouring a glass of water from the kitchen sink. She was wearing a thin white nightgown that broke above her knees. Lucille watched as her mother bent over, then rubbed her stomach with her free hand before walking toward the kitchen window from where she looked out onto the backyard. She seemed to be staring right at Lucille, but darkness was Lucille's friend that night. After finishing her glass of water, her mother sat at the kitchen table, and Lucille wished she could see her face better. Was she happy, sad, or just tired? Disappointed, she stood to leave, but then nearly fell to her knees, surprised by a grief she'd been holding in for a long time. She felt like crying, but even more than that, she wanted her mother to hug her and to never let go.

Oh, how she wanted that.

But she was Lucille Gorski, and that girl wasn't about to give in. □