

HAPPILY EVER
AFTERLIFE

Ghostcoming!

by Orli Zuravicky

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Thank you to my parents for supporting me and believing in me—
but mostly for simply being there, always.

Thank you to Kirsten Hall for making this magic possible, to Abby McAden and Jenne Abramowitz for believing in the paranormal, and to Amanda Maciel for spot-on editorial instincts and making *my* happily ever afterlife a reality.

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Chapter One

Mr. Perfect Ghost Boy

It's taken me a while to believe it, but the truth of the matter is that I'm dead and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it.

That's right, I'm dead.

Done-zo.

Goner.

A ghost of my former living, breathing self. LITERALLY.

It's not like a woe-is-me thing, I promise. I'm not going to get all sappy and start crying about how much I miss my life, mainly because:

1. I can't *actually* produce tears anymore. (I've tried, believe me.)
2. According to the first Rule of Limbo, I won't ever be able to remember what happened to me, so why bother getting all worked up.

And . . .

3. Because there's no use in crying over spilled blood.

Ha-ha, get it? Blood . . . you know, 'cause I'm dead?

Sorry, just trying out a little ghostly humor.

"Have a seat, Lucy. I'll be right with you," the Limbo Central guidance counselor, Ms. Keaner, says, poking her head out of her office in the administration building of my new middle school.

"Okay, thanks," I say, and head over to the waiting area.

Anyway, I don't mean to be grim (oops, I did it again), just the opposite, actually. I mean, what's funnier than finding out you're a ghost AND that you're stuck repeating your first day of middle school at the same time? Looks like NOTHING will get me out of middle school—not even being dead.

I plop down in one of the comfy armchairs, but instead of plopping, I fall completely THROUGH the chair and crash-land with a big *THUD*. That's right, through the chair.

This day is the worst.

"Chin up, doll. You'll get the hang of it sooner or later," the secretary at the front desk squeaks, looking up from the chart she's reading. She has curly blond hair, red lips, and cat's-eye reading glasses with a silver chain that lets the glasses

rest around her neck when she's not wearing them. She looks like she just stepped out of an old movie. "You can't sit because, well, look at you! Right now, you're basically a hologram."

"Yeah," I say, looking down and through myself. She's completely right. I *am* basically a hologram. A mist in the shape of my old self. What it would look like if the *idea* of me got up and started walking around. "It's not as cool as I always thought it would be," I say. "Being a hologram, I mean."

There's a momentary pause, but she says nothing, so I continue. "So . . . do I just have to stand up for the rest of my life—I mean, death?"

"Afterlife, dear. It's less drab."

"Okay . . . so, do I just have to stand up for the rest of my afterlife?"

"You can pretend to sit until you get the hang of it," she remarks, but it's clear from her tone that it's all pretty much just for show. "People find pretending less awkward, you know, in public."

"Excellent. Less awkward is definitely what I'm going for. Thank you," I say, and I situate myself about an inch over the cushion of the chair in a seated position. I look down at the table next to me and see a handful of magazines fanned out. *Celebrity Ghosts*, *HEALTH & SHAPeshifting*, *Paranormal Style*. I notice *Medium* magazine's headline—"Limbo's Top Ten Most Wanted Apparitions"—and reach for it. I want to

take my mind off of what is happening right now and pretend for a moment that things are normal. Then I remember that I can reach all I want but I can't touch.

I'm distracted by the creaking sound of the main door as two loud girl ghosts walk into the administration office. They are both categorically less invisible than I am, and as they waltz in, the scent of trouble fills the room like a bag of burnt microwave popcorn. They look completely normal and are touching the ground with their feet.

I'm immediately envious. I lose my concentration and before I know it . . . *SPLAT!* I fall straight through the chair again.

"I thought ballerinas were supposed to be *graceful*," the prettier girl remarks, looking right at me. She has long black hair with bangs cut straight across her forehead, cherry-red lips, and blue eyes. "But she's even sadder than I expected—tights, tutu, and all!" she continues, laughing to her friend.

Did I forget to mention that I look like I just broke out of a Russian music box? Yeah. One minute I'm practicing for my ballet recital—that much I remember—and the next thing I know, here I am stuck permanently in a black leotard, pink tights, pointe shoes, and a white tutu.

"Little miss goodie *toe* shoes," the blue-eyed mean girl concludes.

"I know I can't sit as well as I used to," I call out, "but I can still hear just fine."