



THE
GHOST
RUNNER

Blair Richmond
*Author of *Out of Breath**

THE
GHOST
RUNNER

THE GHOST RUNNER

a novel by

Blair Richmond



www.AshlandCreekPress.com

“Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.”

— William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

Part One:
I See Dead People

One

In a small town, you're always bumping into people you know. Normally, that's a good thing: It's nice to walk down Main Street and see friendly faces, share a few pleasantries, maybe even exchange the latest gossip.

But what if there's someone you'd rather not see, someone you're hoping to avoid?

Someone you never want to see again?

In a small town like Lithia, the more you try to avoid someone, the more likely you are to see that person everywhere you turn.

Like Roman.

I see him everywhere.

I see him browsing in the bookstore, sitting at outdoor cafés, walking through the town square with his fellow actors. I see him driving through town in his black BMW, its windows tinted so I can never tell whether he's looking at me or at the road.

And though I can't prove it, sometimes I sense that he's watching me, studying me from a distance. I never actually catch

him in the act, which makes me feel as though it's all in my head. I worry that what I had first wished for months ago—his absence from my life—has instead fueled an obsession. That, by trying *not* to see him all over town, I end up seeing him even where he is not. Every day, I find myself glancing over my shoulder at people I think might be Roman, only to make eye contact with strangers.

The other day, as I worked the register at Lithia Runners, I saw Roman standing out on the sidewalk, staring in through the windows. For once, it was actually him, and I thought he was looking at me. I waited for him to enter the store—to say something, anything, even though I'd told him never to speak to me again. I turned away for a moment, to hand a receipt to a customer, and when I looked back, he was gone.

In a small town, just because a guy never speaks to you again doesn't mean you won't ever see him again. And again. And again.

Even on the days I don't see Roman—not in the flesh, that is—I still see his face. He appears on dozens of posters advertising the Lithia Theater Company's new season of plays: his perfectly sculpted face, eyes of deep sapphire, an expression that doesn't need to smile to attract attention, including mine. As the theater's star performer, Roman gazes out at us—at me—from storefront windows and from banners on light posts. I am surrounded by images of him.

And, in a sense, I am tortured by him.

It didn't used to be that way.

Eight months ago, before I won Cloudline—that brutal trail race to the top of Mount Lithia—I thought I was in love with Roman. I was a runaway who had been fortunate enough to land in this town, to find a job at Lithia Runners and a cottage to rent

behind my boss's house, all thanks to my boss's fiancée, Stacey. She took pity on me, talked David into hiring me, gave me an opportunity to build a life here. And before I knew it, I'd not only started a new life but fallen in love. Or so I thought.

Nothing in Lithia is what it seems. The two men I thought I loved have one similarity—they are both vampires—but otherwise they couldn't be more different. Roman is dark and stoic, an actor who carries more than a century of pain on his broad shoulders and who hides himself within his latest role, whatever it may be. And Alex is bright and optimistic; he has given up on violence, on drinking blood, instead thriving on the sap of trees and nuts and berries—a vegan, like me, a vampire who is, ironically, more like me than most humans I meet.

But even as I turned my back on Roman for Alex—I wanted to surround myself with good, and Alex was all things good—my heart was still pulled toward Roman. I can't explain it, even to myself: Maybe it was my desire to convert him, to lead him on the path toward a nonviolent life. Or maybe it was his darkly handsome presence, his mansion up on the hill. I wasn't the first to be drawn in by his good looks and mysterious past.

The day I ran Cloudline changed everything. I was determined to win that day, running in memory of Stacey, who couldn't run the race herself. She'd introduced me to the running trails, taken me to my first Shakespeare play, given me a new pair of running shoes. She was supposed to have been running with me, to have been planning her wedding to David. But one day, when she and I were high above Lithia, running on the Lost Mine Trail in training for Cloudline, a bear took her life.

At least, that's what everyone believed.

Well, almost everyone.

By the time I crossed the finish line at the top of Mount Lithia, the pleasure of winning the race for Stacey came with the terrifying realization that it had not been a bear who killed her after all. It had been Roman.

I confronted him, and he confessed. He said he was sorry, and I believed him. I did. He asked me to forgive him—but I couldn't. That I could not do.

I also realized something else during that time: My mother, who died when I was a girl—also believed to have been attacked by a bear—had been killed by Roman, too. He denied it, but how could I believe him? Whatever trust we'd had between us, if we ever did, was gone.

There was nothing I could do to punish Roman—he was beyond the law, even if I could find someone who believed me. I wanted him to suffer as I'd suffered all those years, growing up without a mother, with a father who didn't want me. But Roman was untouchable—except for one thing.

Me. He still loved me.

And the only way I knew how to hurt him was never to see him again.

And so that was my plan.

Unfortunately, in this town, that's easier said than done.

During the cold and rainy winter months after Cloudline, the theater was closed, the streets empty—and it was easy to avoid Roman. It helped that I turned my attention to Alex. We jogged together in the evenings. We shared lunches at the Lithia Food Co-Op during our work breaks. I felt safe with him as we wandered through the foggy forests in the dying light of evening,

and I felt connected to him as we shopped for groceries together. Alex and I have too much in common not to be together.

It wasn't until a couple of months ago that I noticed how much time had passed without any bear attacks in the hills, without any tourists or passersby going missing. I knew Roman's friend Victor was gone, and for a while I thought perhaps Roman was, too. Entire days would pass when I could forget that there were vampires in Lithia, that my boyfriend was one of them, that there were dangers in the hills far worse than any bear or cougar could deliver. In other words, my life started to feel normal again.

Until now.

The envelope arrives on a midsummer day at the store. It's July, and the town is bustling with tourists, most of them visiting for the theater. In addition to the two indoor stages, a large outdoor stage is now open nightly, seating more than a thousand eager fans. Others come to Lithia for the hiking, the river rafting, the smells and sounds of the forests that surround us.

The warm weather seems to cheer everyone, particularly the locals, who have endured a long, gloomy winter and spring. But I've had trouble smiling ever since the posters started going up around town, reminding me of Roman. Every time I see his face, I find myself reliving the painful mistakes I've made, not only here in Lithia but long before that.

It's David who gives me the envelope. I think he can tell something's been bothering me lately, but he doesn't ask, which is fine with me. I'm used to dealing with things on my own, and quietly, and this is one of the reasons I enjoy working for David. He gives me my space, and I give him his. We work closely together but in our own separate worlds; he stoically grieves the loss of

Stacey while I quietly carry the guilt over the knowledge of why she's gone. I can never tell David that Roman killed Stacey—it would only ease my pain while doubling his, and he has suffered too much already. Me, I can handle pain. I've developed a high threshold, perhaps the only benefit of losing a mother as a child and surviving an angry, alcoholic father. That's why I won Cloudline, I tell myself. Because I can handle pain. And that's why I know I can avoid Roman forever, despite having a heart that feels differently.

I'm in the back, cleaning up the mess David has made of the shoes in the storage room, when he calls me to the front. He hands me an envelope with my name on it.

"What's this?" I ask.

"I just found it here on the counter," he says. "Someone must've left it for you. I didn't even hear the doorbell go off."

I study the envelope. My name is handwritten in calligraphy, with a fountain pen. There's nothing else on it, no clue as to where it came from. I shove the envelope into my pocket as if it's nothing and return to the storage room.

Once there, I open the envelope. Inside is a ticket to that evening's performance of *Othello*. Nothing else. Just one ticket.

Later, when I return to the front of the store, David asks me what was in the envelope.

"Oh, nothing."

Not only is David unaware of what Roman did, he is unaware of Lithia's vampires altogether. So it's best to say nothing at all.

I assume the ticket is from Roman, as he's playing the role of Othello this season—but I can't be certain. I remember last fall, the first night I saw him, back when he was playing Hamlet. He

looked out into the audience and held my gaze—or at least I’d thought so at the time.

Now, I imagine he remembers that, too. That he’s thinking of doing the same thing. Using his leading role to win himself a second chance with me.

That night, as we close the store, I give the ticket to David.

“What’s this?” he asks.

“A friend had an extra ticket to *Othello* tonight, and I can’t go.”

“That’s quite a friend you have,” he says when he sees that it’s a front-row center seat. “Thank you.”

I lock up after David leaves, and I walk home feeling unusually calm and relaxed. I know that when the curtain goes up, there is only one place Roman can be—onstage—and that for the next few hours I am free.

Two

The following week, another envelope arrives.

Once again, I open it in private and find another ticket to another performance of *Othello*.

I give the ticket to Alex. He resists at first, offering to buy another so I can go with him. I tell him I've already seen it, and when he tries to convince me to see it a second time, I tell him I'm not feeling well, and that ends it.

Most of all, I'm hoping this will put an end to Roman's generosity, or whatever it is—seeing Alex seated where he expects to see me.

But the following week, yet another envelope arrives.

One ticket. Front row. *Othello*.

This time, I decide to go. I do love the theater. More important, I'm not going to let Roman back into my life, no matter how many tickets he dispenses. It's time he learns that. I'm tired of letting these opportunities to take in a little culture pass me by—and maybe if he sees me in the theater and realizes that it doesn't change anything, he'll finally move on.

I leave work early, but not before changing into my one decent outfit in the back. Getting dressed up for the theater puts me in a happy mood, and I blend into the buzzing crowd in the courtyard, losing myself in all the eager chatter. I find myself enjoying the experience, forgetting my day-to-day life for a few minutes, as if I am one of the visiting tourists. Inside, the theater is packed, and I take a deep breath as the house lights go down and the stage lights come up.

Sure enough, in the second scene, there's Roman onstage, playing the role of Othello, a tragic role, much like Hamlet, and it's hard not to feel sympathy for him—the character, not the actor. But what I notice most about this evening in the dark is that not once does he look at me, or even in my direction. When I first saw Roman, nearly a year ago, the look he gave me from the stage had pierced right through me, changed me somehow. And, in a sense, it was a look that ruined me, left me hungry to get it back again.

And now I find myself waiting for it, and at the same time hoping it never arrives. Roman must know I'm there, must know exactly where I'm seated, and yet it appears as if he is deliberately avoiding eye contact. Even as I stand and applaud at the end, when the house lights are up and the actors and audience can see one another eye to eye—even then, Roman does not seek me out. Maybe he actually has moved on, and I'm the one living in the past.

I leave the theater vaguely confused, but I don't wait around for him after the show. I go straight home.

Over the following weeks, more tickets arrive. I use two of them, even though they're both repeat performances. I've discovered that with Shakespeare, you learn something new

during each performance. A line of dialogue that you missed the first time. The turn of a phrase. And then there is the theater itself. I love the moments before the play begins, the buzz of murmuring voices in the darkness, the anticipation of something exciting about to happen, a world about to open right before us. And then the stage lights go up, and I can forget about my life and bask in the energy emanating from the stage like sunshine, warming me.

A ticket arrives for *The Glass Menagerie*. The theater company is known for producing not just Shakespeare but other famous works as well. I've never seen a play by Tennessee Williams, and this is the rationale I use when I return to the theater. And, as a sign of personal growth, I make a point of not checking to see what role Roman is playing—because Lithia's theater is repertory, most actors appear in at least two productions—and if Roman can feign disinterest in me during these productions, I can return the favor.

Or so I think.

I'm seated in the front row, off to the right. After the lights go up, I feel a rush of air as a person slips into the empty seat next to mine. I feel the urge to give the person a reproachful look for being late, for distracting everyone around us, but I am soon caught up in the play.

After a number of scene changes, actors coming and going, I realize that I have not yet seen Roman take the stage. And as time progresses, I begin to wonder if he is even in this play. In the dark, I open up the program and squint at the actors' names. I can't find his anywhere.

I wonder why he would send me a ticket to a play he's not even acting in. Could it be that he was not the one sending me these

tickets all along? My heart is turning over on itself, wondering which way to go, each direction leading only to more confusion. Either he sent me the tickets to torment me in some strange way, or he has never sent me any tickets and is tormenting me in some other strange way.

And then I notice eyes on my face, from the right. That person next to me—the one I dared not look at for fear of giving the evil eye—this person’s eyes are now on me. An intense gaze I can feel as if it’s a touch.

How can I be so sure? Do eyes carry weight, like the touch of a finger? Maybe. I’ve had times in life when I was looking up at a house only to lock eyes with a person at the window, giving both of us a jolt. And then I would wonder how I knew that person was looking at me. There are senses we don’t understand. That’s what Roman said once.

Roman.

And then it all becomes clear. I turn my head to the right, and there he is. He’s been seated next to me all this time. His eyes glinting. The jerk.

The lights come up, signaling intermission, and I leap to my feet.

“You’re leaving?” Roman asks. “So soon?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“I don’t care about *your* feelings.”

“I’m talking about the actors,” he says. “They will return to the stage and notice an empty seat. Not the best way to instill confidence.”

“They can’t see that in the dark.”

“Of course they can,” he says. “I should know.”

I pause. I don't want to let him win this argument, though I know he's right. Besides, I was actually enjoying the play and want to know how it ends.

"I'm here for the play, that's all," I say. "No funny business."

"Of course not."

I sit back down. Even though he's true to his word and doesn't so much as lean over toward me, I feel an electricity flowing through my arm, the one only a few inches from his. I've taken the armrest, and he keeps his own hands in his lap, arms by his sides. The play resumes, and I'm utterly unable to concentrate on it. Roman consumes my thoughts. The way he tricked me here, though I was a willing participant. I could have given the ticket away, as I'd done before, but I didn't. Maybe a part of me hoped to see him. Maybe.

After the lights go up for the last time and the applause dies down, I turn and make my way toward the exit. I can feel Roman behind me, but I don't turn around.

I duck into the ladies' room and linger by the sink, waiting for the crowds to disperse. Finally, I leave the theater and enter the nearly empty courtyard, taking a deep breath of the cool night air and letting it out in a sigh of relief.

But as I begin to walk home, I realize I'm not alone on these dark streets.

Roman calls out to me. "Katherine, please wait a moment."

I turn and wait. When he approaches, I only stare at him. I've already broken my promise to stay away from him, and I don't want to break another one by talking to him.

"I miss you," he says.

I don't answer.

“Katherine, please.”

“Is that all?” I tap my left foot as if I’m waiting for him to finish.

“No. I can’t stop thinking about you. Every morning, your face is all I see. At night, if I can sleep, it’s only because I imagine you there, with me. When will you forgive me?”

“I’ll never forgive you. You took Stacey from me. And my mother.”

“I did not kill your mother.”

“Oh? Then who did?”

He says nothing.

“I figured as much,” I say. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m with Alex now.”

I watch his eyes glow red, like smoldering embers hit by the wind. And I don’t care if he’s angry. I want him to hurt. I want him to feel what I’ve been feeling.

“Alex is a good man,” he says.

I look at him closely. Not what I expected him to say. Perhaps he’s trying a different tack.

“He’ll take care of you.”

“I don’t need taking care of,” I say.

“Everybody needs someone to watch over them. I was hoping that person would be me. Katherine, I’ll ask you one more time—what else can I do?”

“You already know the answer to that question.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I see,” he says. “You want me to be like Alex.”

“I want you to stop the killing.”

“In other words, you want me to be someone else.”

“I want you to be better.”

“You want me to change.”

“Yes.”

“Katherine, you don’t understand. I can’t change.”

“Then I can’t be with you, Roman. Not ever.”

The words fall hard upon him. I swear I can see his shoulders slump as if they’re exerting pressure on him. And I almost feel guilty, despite everything he’s done to me, to this town, to my mother. Despite all the violence, intentional or not, I still feel guilty—because I’m hurting him. Inflicting pain of a different sort.

I walk past him, my arm brushing his sleeve, the same arm that rested next to his for three hours, and I expect him to reach out. To swing me around and kiss me, embrace me, beg me not to leave.

Instead, he lets me pass. And I keep walking until I have nearly turned the corner.

“Katherine, there’s something you should know about your mother.”

I stop and turn. “What? What do I need to know anymore?”

His lips are open, his face strained, as if he’s trying to speak but can’t. He almost looks helpless standing there.

“What is it, Roman?”

“I’m sorry you lost her,” he says. “I’m so very sorry. Nobody will ever be able to give you back that lost time.”

“I know that. Is that your idea of an apology?”

“I won’t bother you again,” he says. Then he walks back toward the park, and I watch him until he is out of sight. For once, I believe him.



Over the next week, I find myself waiting—though I don’t even know what it is I’m waiting for. Another ticket to arrive. Roman’s face in the window of the store. His voice calling out to me in the street. But there’s nothing.

I don’t see or hear from him at all.

I should feel relieved, but instead I feel unsettled; then I scold myself for feeling that way. *This is what you wanted*, I remind myself. *He’s leaving you alone, just like you wanted*.

Then I realize what it is. I haven’t seen him in days—but it’s not only that I haven’t seen him in person. I haven’t seen his face posted on buses or in shop windows either.

He’s disappeared.

I’m working at the store when this hits me, and at lunch I wander through town, my eyes searching for a poster with his face on it. The *Othello* posters are gone. There is no evidence that Roman ever existed at all.

I begin to wonder if the previous months, if Roman himself, could be nothing more than some sort of dream.

When I return to Lithia Runners, I decide to ask David. “I noticed that there aren’t as many theater posters around as usual,” I say, as casually as possible.

“You didn’t hear?” he says.

“Hear what?”

“Roman quit the theater.”

“He what?”

“Quit. Just like that. No advance notice. No nothing. Just packed up and left town.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was. He really stuck it to the theater. You don’t just do that sort of thing. They’ve been scrambling to get his understudy up to speed, and then they need to shift the other understudies around—it’s a logistical nightmare. Some people come from miles around just to see him. No one’s happy about it, that’s for sure.”

“So that’s why the posters are gone.”

“I took ours down this morning. Theater called and told me they’re printing up a new batch, sans Roman.”

“Did he tell anyone where he was going?” I ask.

“Nope. He just vanished. I hear that he left during the night and taped his resignation letter to the door of the theater. It’s odd. He’s been in Lithia for years. Everyone thought he was happy here. It’s bad news for us, too. As a runner, he was one of our best customers.”

I say nothing. What can I say? That I might be the reason he’s gone? That Roman took my mother from me, took David’s fiancée from him, has been secretly terrorizing this town for years, even decades? What can be said anymore? None of those who were taken can be brought back. And now Roman himself is gone. Maybe this is how it’s meant to be.

“When was the last time you saw Roman?” David asks.

“I—I can’t remember,” I say.

“Oh, well, it’s a shame. Just do me a favor. If and when you ever decide to leave Lithia Runners, give me two weeks’ notice, okay?” He grins.

“Okay.” I smile back.

The rest of the day is a blur of shoe boxes and fittings and receipts. All the while I feel a hole inside me filling with guilt

and anger and regret. This is not how I wanted things to end with Roman—I wanted him to leave me alone, not leave town. Or maybe I'm just flattering myself. Maybe it has nothing to do with me at all.

Still, I can't help but think that it does.

That evening, after David is gone and the store is locked, I vacuum the carpets. The peace and quiet, normally something I welcome, torments me. I think of that last evening at the theater, over and over again. What else could I have done? Should I have agreed to forgive him, if for nothing else but to save the theater season? But I couldn't have known he'd leave—it doesn't make sense. Roman is not one to give up, not usually. But now, it appears he has.

I empty the trash behind the counter and pause by the recycle bin in the back room. In it, torn in half, is the *Othello* poster with Roman's face on it. I fish it out of the can and take it home. I tape it back together, then wonder what I'm doing.

I roll the poster up and stuff it into my sock drawer. I feel better with it hidden away, but I'm bothered by what compelled me to salvage it. Maybe I just need to remind myself of everything that happened.

Or maybe I miss him.

The Ghost Runner is forthcoming
from Ashland Creek Press in November 2012.

If you'd like a review copy, please contact Midge Raymond at
midge@ashlandcreekpress.com.

To join our mailing list, visit
<http://www.ashlandcreekpress.com/subscribe.html>



www.AshlandCreekPress.com