



GALLOWGATE

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Sebastian was *not* excited for the first day of sixth grade.

As he trudged down the sidewalk in the early-morning heat, all he could think about was how he would much rather be indoors. In the AC. Ideally playing a video game or reading a graphic novel. Despite the warmth, he wore a knit cap over his choppy, bone-white hair, hoping it would help him blend in. He'd tried coloring his hair a normal shade more times than he could count, but the color never stuck. Ghosts weren't the only thing he'd been cursed with; after his parents died, his hair had gone white from shock. With his white hair and skin that never seemed to hold a tan, his aunt sometimes called him a little ghost in the winter months.

His classmates laughed and gossiped as they all walked toward the middle school. He overheard stories of campouts and sleepovers, vacations and summer drama.

None of them stopped to ask him if he'd done anything exciting or gone anywhere cool. No one asked how Aunt Dahlia was doing, or if he'd had—you know—any more *episodes*.

That was fine with him. It was better to be ignored.

He knew it was naive to hope that a new school would mean a new start, when he was with the same kids he'd known his entire life. But he still hoped it.

He needed this year to be different. This year, *he* needed to be different.

He was a few blocks from school when he saw it. *Her*.

A girl in a blue dress, about his age, facing away from him. She stood in the middle of the road, staring up at the clouds.

Sebastian stopped and looked up. But there wasn't anything interesting up there—no planes or UFOs or comets hurtling to the earth. Just big fluffy clouds and an open blue expanse. He wondered who the girl was, if she was new here.

He looked back down just in time to see the car squealing around the corner, half a block away from the girl.

The girl who was still looking up at the clouds.

“Look out!” Sebastian screamed. He took a step forward, toward the street, but it was too late.

Without even slowing, the car slammed right into the girl.

And continued driving.

Right through her.

It was then, and only then, when the car was past and she still stood in the exact same spot, that she turned around to face Sebastian.

His heart froze in his throat.

She didn't have any eyes, and her mouth was a jagged slash above her chin.

Sebastian yelped.

The girl stared at him sightlessly for a moment, that horrible mouth turning down into a crooked frown. As if considering him, and not at all liking what she saw.

“What you staring at, Freak Show?” someone jeered behind him.

Sebastian turned and realized everyone else on the street had stopped to stare at him.

The blood drained from his face as he realized what had happened.

He looked back to the street, but the girl was gone. Of course she was gone. She had never been there to begin with. Not really.

She was a ghost.

“I said,” the same kid—an older boy named Billy Horwath—persisted, “what are you staring at, *freak?*”

Sebastian swallowed.

Took a hesitant step back . . .

And tripped off the curb, stumbling into the street.

Thankfully, there weren’t any cars coming, but he still felt stupid as he fell back on his butt.

That broke the spell. Billy and the rest of Sebastian’s classmates erupted into laughter, and Sebastian knew their excited chatter was no longer about summer break.

Billy looked down at him, something close to pity in his eyes. For a brief moment, Sebastian thought Billy would help him up. They’d been in Scouts together, years ago. Friends, almost. But Billy just turned and left, leaving Sebastian in the street.

Sebastian picked himself up and brushed himself off and pushed himself forward. He sensed someone watching him from across the street, but when he looked, there was no one there.

By the time he got to the front doors, all he knew for certain was that everyone in the middle school was going to hear what had happened. Everyone who knew him would be reminded why they avoided him, and anyone who didn’t would quickly learn why they should.

Sebastian Wight thinks he sees ghosts.

Sebastian Wight is a freak.

So much for a new start.