

BRIAN C. E. BUHL



THE REPOSSESSED GHOST



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GHOST**

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MY NAME IS MEL WALKER, and I steal cars for a living. I tell people I'm a repo man, though technically it isn't true. I work for a licensed repo man named Marshal. He gets the jobs and sends me out. I do all the work, and at the end of the day, he pays me under the table.

In this line of business, everyone has a specialty. I prefer the classics. There isn't as much molded plastic to destroy. Some older cars, all I have to do is pop the hood and jam a screwdriver across the starter solenoid. Then I'm off, windows down and wind in my face. There isn't as much money in the older cars, but without a tow truck or specialized tools, they're just more practical.

I've stolen dozens of cars, but there is one that stands out in my memory. It was a '74 Chevy Nova, baby blue, with chrome trim and gray interior. It wanted to pull a little to the right, but it purred like a jungle cat and floated like a steamboat. I've driven way fancier cars, but I remember the Nova because the night I stole it was the night my life changed forever.

I was cruising down the Louisiana freeway between Slidell and New Orleans. I had just pulled off the easiest job of my life, thanks to

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everyone celebrating Halloween. My heart pounded from the thrill of the getaway. I had a grin on my face that I couldn't wipe away. The night air felt cool, and the nearly full moon lit up the sky, bright enough to illuminate the bushy trees lining the narrow highway.

Some repo men partner up. One person acts as lookout while the other grabs the car. Or, in more dangerous situations, one might offer up a distraction. I didn't work that way. For one thing, I didn't know anyone else interested in breaking the law on a regular basis. Most guys my age are either just starting college or, if they're particularly slow, finishing high school. For another, I didn't make enough money on these jobs that I could afford to split it. I lived and worked comfortably alone.

Relishing my solitary getaway, I twisted the dial of the radio. The 40-year-old speakers squawked and chirped through inches of static. Not finding anything there, I shut it off and opened a window. Sharp evening air whipped my hair back and made my eyes water. I rolled the window back up and checked myself in the rear-view mirror.

That's when I saw her. A woman, sitting behind me in the back seat. She sat perfectly still, silent as a serial killer.

"Shit!" I screamed and jumped in my seat. The wheel jerked in my hands. Tires squealed. The heavy blue vehicle hitched towards the center of the road. I used both hands to grip the steering wheel, and both feet to stomp the brakes. The Nova spun and skidded off the road. Motes of dust swirled up in front of the car, dancing in the beams of the headlights.

With the car stopped on the shoulder, I sat for several moments, breathing hard. My heart thumped against my rib cage. I'm not normally what you'd call "high strung." I speak a little slower than most and smile a little faster than the rest. As the dirt cloud settled around the Nova, I wondered what made me so jumpy. Finding a strange woman in a stolen car is startling, but it shouldn't have made me lose control. Surprises are part of the job.

I sat still, listening to the steady hum of the engine. No other sounds in the car except my breathing and my heartbeat in my ears. Did I imagine the woman? I didn't want to look in the mirror to check, but just thinking about it pulled my eyes up. My heart skipped a beat. She still sat behind me, undisturbed by our spin out.

Something about her twisted my stomach in knots. Just a young woman in a simple dress, but seeing her made it hard to

breathe, like staring down from a great height, or coming face to face with a black widow. It took me a moment to realize why. I could see through her. As she sat there, patient as the grave, I could see the backseat through her transparent skin.

“Who ... Wha ...” I tried to speak, but I couldn’t think straight. Pure animal panic ran through me. Had I pissed myself? I let my hand slide to the inside of my crotch. Still dry, for now.

“You can see me?” the young woman asked, still not moving.

I nodded, unable to form words. I stared into my rear-view mirror, trying to accept the reality my eyes presented.

“You just sat there, ignoring me all night. I was starting to think no one could see me.”

In the dark of night, things tend to lose their color. Dark cars become universally black in the absence of light. Rainbows don’t exist in shadow. The woman in the backseat looked like she’d stepped out of an old black and white movie. Colorless, medium length hair touched her shoulders. She wore a dress of white and off-white. Light and shadow defined her pale skin. I took in all of the details of her, still seeing the coal gray vinyl of the backseat on the other side of her.

Some part of my brain began to rationalize. There had to be a reasonable explanation for everything. She must have been sleeping in the backseat when I stole the car. I could have overlooked her until she woke up and startled me. And her transparency? Her unnatural lack of color? An optical illusion, created by the rear-view mirror.

She couldn’t be a ghost. Ghosts weren’t real.

I turned to look at her directly and found the backseat empty. “Shit.”

Had I hallucinated her? I remembered hearing that runners can get high off endorphins and adrenaline. Maybe I was having a kind of repo man’s high. Or maybe someone slipped something into some of that Halloween candy I grabbed earlier at the bar. Whatever messed me up, I needed to come down off this bad trip.

I turned forward, preparing myself to put the car back on the road. I gripped the wheel and took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I checked my side mirrors, then glanced up to the rear-view mirror. There in the backseat sat the transparent stranger.

“What is wrong with you?” she asked. Her brow drew down in an angry V, and the set of her jaw marked her frustration.

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“No, you’re not there,” I said to the reflection. “You’re not real. You’re just in my imagination.”

She reached forward to touch me. Her fingers passed through my shoulder. Cold. Unnatural, like ice water sliding beneath my skin. The hairs on my arm and the back of my neck stood up as though I’d jammed a knife in a wall socket.

I screamed. I batted at the door handle. My clumsy fingers fumbled the door open and I fell out. The ground rushed to meet me. I found rough gravel. My knee landed on a sharp rock. My jeans tore and blood ran down my leg. It hurt, but I didn’t stop to examine it. I scrambled to my feet and ran. The headlights illuminated me from behind, casting my shrinking shadow into the branches of trees.

Leaning against a moss-covered telephone pole, I stopped and panted. The ache in my scraped knee throbbed in time with my heartbeat. I rubbed my shoulder, working to warm the spot where the ghost had touched me.

The cool night air chilled my nervous sweat, making me feel that much colder. I shivered, looking back towards the car. The Nova’s headlights shone back at me like accusations.

I tried to take stock of my situation. I stood in the middle of nowhere on a Thursday night. I didn’t own a cell phone. Other cars would eventually come by, but I didn’t like my chances of getting picked up. I didn’t want to have to try and explain why I left the car, still running, on the side of the road. If a cop showed up, I didn’t want to explain the car at all. The repo work I did existed in a legal gray area, as far as I knew. Without a proper license of my own, any conversation I had with the cops would lead to me going directly to jail.

“Come on, Mel,” I said to myself, still looking back at the car. “You don’t believe in ghosts. Pull yourself together.”

After a little while, I managed to cobble together a little courage. I limped back to the car. Before stepping in, I walked around it, looking through the windows to see if the ghost had disappeared. The car looked empty and abandoned, still rumbling in its throaty purr.

Careful not to look into the rear-view mirror, I sat back in the driver’s seat. I took several long, calming breaths, clinging to the scraps of courage that got me back in the vehicle. With the same deliberation as ripping off a band-aid, I looked up.

The woman in the back seat stared back at me, lips pressed together in a thin line. She frowned the way my ex-girlfriend frowned whenever I forgot something important. Great. Now my ghost passenger was angry.

“Will you please stop freaking out?” she said.

A frantic little laugh escaped me before I could clamp it down. I wanted to stay calm. I just didn’t see how. I felt the urge to get out of the car again, but resisted. I focused on my breathing while I kept my eyes on the reflection of the ghost.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “What do you want from me?”

“I just want you to calm down and talk with me.” She paused to take a deep breath. “I’m scared, and I can’t seem to leave. Please don’t leave me alone.”

My stomach twisted in a knot, out of sympathy this time instead of fear. I turned to look at her, and again, she disappeared. In the tiny backseat window, I could see her skewed reflection, more dim and insubstantial than what I’d seen before.

I turned back to the rear-view mirror where I could see her clearly. “It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

The ghost settled back into the vinyl and let out a brief sigh. “Thank you. My name’s Kate. Kate Lynnwood.”

“I’m Mel. How did you die, Kate?”

“I didn’t!” she said, her eyes wide and her voice growing shrill.

I could see my breath as mist. The windshield grew opaque as the interior of the car chilled.

“Are you sure?” I shivered.

Kate relaxed her shoulders and unclenched her fists. The air in the Nova warmed a little. I flipped on the heater and put my hands in front of the vent.

“I don’t know. The last thing I remember before waking up back here was leaving the library.”

Car lights cut through Kate’s face from behind. She melted away in a blaze of white light. The roar of tires on concrete caught up to the Nova, crescendoing then diminishing as the other car flew past. I blinked after it. As my eyes readjusted, Kate materialized in the mirror.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, still frowning.

I drew down my seatbelt and goosed the Nova back onto the

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road. I didn't want to be sitting there when the next car came along. They might stop to offer assistance. Or worse, they might stop to show me their badge.

"You said you can't seem to leave." I glanced up at Kate's reflection.

"When you ran off, I tried to go after you, but it ... it didn't work."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know! I went through the door. Then I was just here in the backseat again."

The air chilled. My skin crawled with goose flesh.

"Please, try to stay calm." I said, turning up the heater. I clenched my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering.

Kate took several slow breaths. As she relaxed, the Nova's heater began to cut through the cold air.

"I don't want to be dead," Kate said, her voice just above a whisper.

I've never thought much about the afterlife. My mom tried to make me go to church and read the Bible, but she had "cast her seeds on stony ground," as our old pastor might have said. I was never all that interested in my mortal soul. I didn't want to discover God's plan as much I wanted to find out what girls kept under their shirts and skirts.

Kate looked about my age. With unblemished skin and a nice figure, she looked like the kind of girl I would pursue with no hope of catching. If she weren't dead, we would have been having a completely different sort of conversation. Seeing her stuck in the backseat, knowing her life had ended, I found my heart going out to her in a different way.

"It'll be alright, Kate." As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt stupid. She was dead. Things would never be all right for her again.

We rode in silence for a while. I kept trying to think of something that I could say that would be comforting, but nothing came to mind. Occasionally, I'd feel a chill seep through my skin, cutting right to the bone. Whenever that would happen, I'd glance up to see her frowning or burying her face in her hands.

A man can get used to almost anything. As strange as the night had been, the shock of having an undead passenger in the car faded. I had a ghost in my backseat. I could live with that. I didn't

feel any of the blind terror that had gripped me earlier. Even the pain of my scraped knee faded to just an itchy, dull ache.

As I drove, I studied Kate in the mirror. She looked out the window and watched the countryside go by. Ghost or not, the person I saw in my rear-view mirror was just a regular girl, sitting and waiting through a road trip.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"I'm from Sacramento, but I've been studying in New Orleans," she answered. She said *Orleans* the way so many tourists do, with a long *e* and the accent on the wrong syllable. She talked with a West Coast accent, quicker and more clipped than my Southern drawl.

"What are you studying?"

"Officially I'm undecided." Kate leaned back in her seat, still looking out the window. "I had been leaning towards pre-law, but I don't know if I want to be a lawyer anymore. I was thinking about switching to public health, but it might be too big a shift at this point."

"You're going to school in New Orleans?"

"I'm a sophomore at Tulane."

"And the last thing you remember is leaving the school library?"

Kate closed her eyes and wrinkled her nose as she tried to remember. A cute face. I thought again about how much I would have liked to have made her acquaintance before she died.

"No," she said at last. She sounded worried. "I remember being in this car. I couldn't move. I might have been tied up, laying face down on this seat."

I pulled off the road again and drove up close to the bushes and trees lining the highway. I found an opening in the foliage. I contemplated taking the Nova through and hiding the car on the other side. I couldn't see what was beyond the bushes, though, so I backed into an opening and put the car in park. Getting the car stuck would be worse than getting seen.

"What are you doing?" Kate asked.

"Nothing." I turned on the dome light and fumbled around in the toolbox next to me in the passenger seat. "I just want to check out the backseat."

I sat up and brandished my long, black handled flashlight as though I'd drawn a magic sword. I looked back into the mirror. Kate's voice filled my ears mid-sentence.

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“— a while, and I don’t see anything.”

“What? Kate, I can only hear you when I can see you.”

She let out a sigh. “I was just saying there’s nothing to see back here.”

“Maybe not from where you’re sitting.” I got out and leaned into the backseat, resting my weight on my uninjured knee. “I just want to see for myself.”

I shined the light on the floor and panned it around the seat where I thought Kate had been sitting. The carpet was a much darker gray than the vinyl. When I put my hand on the floor, I expected it to feel wet and tacky with blood. Instead it felt stiff, and a little bit gritty. I panned the light to the seat. It looked dry, but there were circular areas in the material more faded than the rest.

“I think you bled back here,” I said.

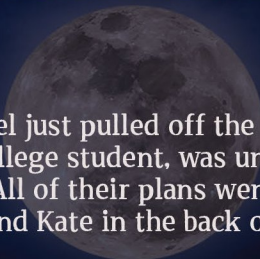
I leaned further into the car. The flashlight slipped from my grip and I lurched forward to grab it. As I did, I slapped my right hand onto the seat to catch my weight.

That evening, I had stolen a car, seen a ghost, spun out, and nearly crashed my most recent repo. But that was nothing compared to what happened when my hand touched the car seat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from sunny Sacramento, California, Brian C. E. Buhl is trying to save the world. Formerly enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, Brian now spends most of his time writing software for the solar industry. When he's not engineering technical solutions, he can sometimes be found playing saxophone with local community bands. Also, he writes science fiction and fantasy.

DO YOU THINK GHOSTS HAUNT ONLY HOUSES?



As a repo man, Mel just pulled off the smoothest take of his life. Kate, a college student, was undecided on which major to pursue. All of their plans went out the window the night Mel found Kate in the back of a '74 Nova.

When Mel becomes a suspect in Kate's murder, he must leave his life behind and make a new start in Sacramento, where he and Kate meet other people with supernatural gifts. But not everything is sunshine and roses in California. Awakening to power comes at a cost, and all ghosts eventually become monsters.

Can Mel trust these new friends in Sacramento? Can he help Kate find some peace without landing himself in jail?

The fateful night Mel slipped behind the wheel of an old Chevy, it wasn't just the car that became repossessed.



Hailing from sunny Sacramento, California, Brian Buhl is trying to save the world. Formerly enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, Brian now spends most of his time writing software for the solar industry. When he's not engineering technical solutions, he can sometimes be found playing saxophone with local community bands. Also, he writes science fiction and fantasy. You can read more about his journey as a writer at briancebuhl.com.