

Phantom

by Carling McQuinn

Somewhere between last summer and this summer, Sophie and I lost that sister language of shared too-short denim shorts and cropped tank tops, of trading back-and-forth the sort of outfits that had Dad eyeing us suspiciously and Mom pretending not to notice. Instead, we got this blanketing sort of quiet between us, and now I think I run hot-blooded; I'm stuck with every inch of the skin we used to share. These days, Sophie is always disappearing inside oversized crewnecks and too-baggy jeans, shrugging when I remind her it's July. That we live in Texas.

Tonight, in the light blue dress Mom guilt-tripped Sophie into wearing, my older sister looks nearly transparent, the dim light of her favorite restaurant reducing her to skinny arms and goosebumps. The air-conditioning is weak enough that sweat is slippery between the chair and my thighs, yet I can feel her shivering next to me.

My enchiladas sit heavy in my stomach.

No one comments on how Sophie has succeeded only to push her tacos around on her plate. I cross one leg over the other and try not to think about the cake event that will, inevitably, come next.

"So? Seventeen?" Mom prompts Sophie, but for some reason Mom's looking at me, the green eyes we all share glinting like a shark's. There is lipstick on her teeth that I can't stop staring at. "Don't you feel older?"

Sophie raises one eyebrow. "I can watch rated R movies in theaters by myself now," she says. "Hooray."

I twist the napkin in my lap, back and forth. "Smartass," I mutter.

Mom sips her margarita. "Aren't you going to finish those tacos, Sophie?"

Back at home, we sit stiff-backed at the dining room table with the chocolate cake Dad baked this morning sitting like communion before us. The pink balloons tied to Sophie's chair are slightly deflated and droop above her head. I watch as she wraps a size XL hoodie around her dress, dark hair already in a top knot, and blows out the seventeen candles. It takes her five tries, like there isn't enough air in her lungs.

I know what comes next. I don't want to be here for it again. The dark wood of the table seems to go on for miles. I wish she would grow up.

Mom cuts four slices of cake, and I lick the frosting off the candles still embedded in my piece before taking a bite.

"Bit heavy on the salt," Dad says.

"I think it's fine," Mom says.

Sophie looks at the cake like it's come alive and threatened slow murder. She pushes it away and mumbles, "I'm still full from dinner."

"What dinner?" I ask.

Mom shoots me a glare. "Sophie, honey, what your sister means is, I think we need to talk about trying something more, besides the therapy. It's just," she says, "this isn't working."

One of the balloons above Sophie's head hangs so low the static makes her baby hairs stand upright. I consider bopping it out of the way, just to have an excuse to get up.

The next breath I take makes the air feel viscous.

"What isn't working?" Sophie asks.

I can't tell if she's being serious or not, and it makes me want to scream. I gesture with my fork at her slice of cake. "You aren't."

"It's necessary," Mom continues, "to examine all our options here."

Sophie stands up and her chair squeaks against the floor. "I'm tired. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

I think I'm the only one who notices the unwrapped gift boxes perched on the kitchen counter.

Sophie is almost through her first week of what Mom, while perched on the corner of my bed, told me is a form of treatment called partial hospitalization. It turns out, according to Google, there is a scientific explanation for why Sophie is so unfailingly cold, because apparently, it's one of the side effects of her starving herself.

She's still allowed to sleep at home, Mom explained to me, *so it's really not as scary as it sounds*.

Still sounds scary as shit, actually. When I try the words *my sister has an eating disorder* on my tongue, they don't fit right. Not Sophie, the sister with the laugh that sounds like butter and honey. Sounded. Butter and honey that now she'd avoid with the same enthusiasm she once used to convince Mom to buy us ice cream as big as our heads as kids.

Today, Mom informs me, is family day, so put your shoes on, Luna, we're leaving in five minutes.

As I sit in the backseat behind Mom and Dad, this all seems pointless, the freeway turning Austin into concrete and exit signs. I wonder what went so wrong in my sister's head that might still go wrong in mine. *Selfish*—meaning both of us—rings like imaginary church bells.

"You okay back there?" Dad asks, peering over his shoulder as Mom pulls into the parking lot.

"I'm glad you're coming," Mom says, "Sophie needs your support."

"You're a very good sister, Luna," Dad adds.

I roll my eyes.

The waiting room of the Eating Recovery Center is pleasant and generic, with slightly-uncomfortable chairs and a receptionist office with no receptionist in sight. Faintly, I smell disinfectant and some sort of lavender candle that is likely supposed to be calming but is instead almost nauseating. Mom and Dad venture inside on their own first, explaining siblings aren't allowed yet, so I sit criss-cross applesauce in one of the chairs and thumb through Instagram. Everything about this place is bland.

There's a little boy, maybe ten, sitting across from me and playing on his phone, who catches me studying him. "What's your name?" he asks, and I feel the need to hush him, even though we're the only ones here.

"Luna," I say. "You?"

"Did you know that means moon in Spanish?"

I cross my arms. "You didn't answer my question."

He frowns, creases forming on his forehead. There is a smudge of chocolate on the corner of his mouth, and he has these wide eyes that dart across my face. I wonder if he knows what's going on. Do I?

"My mom says I shouldn't give my name to strangers," he says.

I nod. I still have twenty minutes before Mom said she'd come get me. "Do you have a sibling in there, too?" I jerk my head towards the door where my parents disappeared.

"My big brother. Can't tell you his name either, sorry, but he's tall and skinny and then got a lot skinnier."

"Yeah," I say, "my sister too."

"Did she get all quiet all of a sudden? Like someone turned down her volume so low that you can't hear her anymore? That's what happened to my brother."

I nod.

"He makes me sad," the boy says. "I never know what to say to him now."

"I know. Like, why'd they have to go and ruin everything, you know?"

The boy frowns. "Ruin?"

"Luna, honey, why don't you ride with Sophie on the way home?" Mom asks as we step out of the frigid air-conditioning and into another sweltering Texas evening.

Sophie and I are standing on either side of our parents, her with her gray sweatpants and purple hoodie, me in my shorts and a t-shirt. She didn't look so out of place inside, among all those other teenagers hiding their too-sharp angles in the forgiving bunches of oversized clothing. The sun is setting, making the world all yellow and pink, the dulled-down color of a fading bruise.

"Yeah, okay," I respond, joining Sophie as she walks to her car. My sister, who has become a phantom.

I learned the little boy's name is Liam and his brother's name is Robbie and Robbie was sitting right next to Sophie in the meeting room. We perched haphazardly on chairs and couches and Sophie was knitting with this thick purple yarn that I'd never seen before and there were blankets bunched on surfaces like expensive decor. Sophie talked about not feeling sick enough to be there. She talked about feeling too sick to be there. She made this joke to me about our high school algebra teacher and I choked out a laugh. School feels so far away.

All of them were rail-thin, wisps of humans, just like my sister. I know those bodies shouldn't be what I remember, that the point of visiting was to remind myself of all the things besides that, but they all have this transfixing quality to them, ghostly. It made it hard to look away. I'd never tell Sophie or Mom or Dad any of this because I know it's not what I'm supposed to think, but I can't help it. They're otherworldly, I think as I duck into the passenger seat, and disconcerting.

"What'd you think of all us anorexics?" Sophie asks. She plugs her phone into the aux cord and starts playing her indie playlist that I always loved but now seems too normal and too *Sophie* for this version of herself.

I flinch. "Don't say it like that."

"Why, does it make you uncomfortable that they're just as sick as I am?"

"Does it make *you* uncomfortable?"

Sophie shrugs as she reverses out of her parking spot, finger tapping on the wheel. Then she laughs, low and gravelly, and it sounds nothing like butter or honey. "Why are you so afraid of me, Luna? I'm still your sister."

"That's the thing, though." My voice gets louder. "My sister wouldn't blow away in the wind."

She stares straight ahead at the dark road. "I won't blow away," she says, but it's like she's trying to convince herself. Now, she won't look at me, because just like that, I've smothered whatever weak spark she'd mustered for my sake.

When we get home, I suggest Sophie and I watch a movie together, but she shakes her head. "I'm tired," she says.

"Of course you are."

"What?"

We're in the kitchen, and it's just the two of us, now that Mom and Dad have gone upstairs. Sophie looks like it takes all of her willpower to stay standing.

"Do you remember what it was like to have fun?" I ask.

She frowns, hand gripping the edge of the counter. "I don't understand, Luna."

"You're sick and I get it, okay? But—" I'm raising my voice and it feels like taking off a muzzle. I gulp air in gasps. "We've all dropped our lives, just thrown them to the side, fuck it if they shatter while we're not looking, because Sophie decided she didn't want to eat anymore, but oh my *God*, do you know how selfish that makes you?"

My sister sways on her feet. Her heavy-lidded stare is dead. "No," she says. "You don't get it."

"I miss my sister."

"Not this again."

"I wish you would go back to who you were before."

Sophie squeezes her eyes shut, her shoulders rising and falling slowly. Something wet glitters down her cheeks in the dim kitchen lights. She rests her head against the cabinets. "Me too, Luna," she says. "Holy shit, me too."

I feel heavier, like saying those words did nothing; like they got stuck in my throat, a lump I now force myself to swallow back. I sit down next to her.

She cries. It's my fault and I know it.

The next week, Mom has to go in early for work and Dad is out of town visiting my grandparents. This means that, for today, it is my responsibility to get my sister out of bed and into the car.

Sunlight drifts through her windows and casts rectangles of light on her white comforter when I peer through her cracked door. She's sleeping in one of the few slivers of shadow, just a stain of dark hair and cheekbones. Everything in her room is put away, empty desk, clean floor, only her backpack propped up on her chair.

"Phantom" by Carling McQuinn

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I take a small step into the room; it smells like absence here, like a lack of things. Sophie sleeps like the dead.

"Sophie?" I say.

She rolls over, mumbling to herself, a flash of pale shoulder.

"*Sophie*," I repeat.

Slowly, she props herself up. She's in a black tank top that hangs limp against her body and, as she squints into the bright room, all I can see is collarbones and skin stretched taught over them. She glares at me, eyes still half-asleep.

"I'm not going today," she tells me.

"Don't you have to?"

"Well, I'm not." She flops back down and pulls her pillow over her head. "Go away."

I look around, like something in her room will help, like the plain white furniture and collection of sweatpants will save us. I think I'm going to throw up; it's the humid Texas air and smell of burnt toast from Mom's breakfast coming in from the hallway and this room that is at once so bright and so dark. I think of the little boy Liam in the waiting room, and what the hell people like us are supposed to do when our sisters and brothers retreat within their paper-thin skin and refuse and refuse and refuse.

It's not that I don't care. It's that I don't know where my sister went and getting her back seems like grabbing a ghost by the hand. There just isn't enough substance.

"Sophie, damn it, please. Get *up*!" I try, but I can't seem to put enough authority into my voice.

She shoves her pillow away. "There's no point, anyway, Luna," she says, "do you even know what we do all day? We eat. We do therapy and one-on-one therapy and group therapy and then we eat and then we eat and then *we eat* and that's fucking it."

I take a step forward into her room.

"Everyone talks in soft voices," she continues, "and we sit under weighted blankets, and we can't use our phones, and we have to stare at everyone else who's just as sick as we are, and mealtimes last an hour and we're monitored every goddamn second of it, and I'm dragging myself out of bed just to do all that *again*."

"Getting better is not just for your sake, you know."

She croaks a laugh. "You've made that clear."

"Sophie, I—"

"Jesus, Luna, fuck off!"

Sophie doesn't go in today.

It's something about Texas summers that make me feel trapped, like every time I step outside the air bakes out of my lungs. Sunshine feels like sunburns and cracked dirt, and as I hide in the corner of shade outside the grocery store, I can't get enough oxygen. My skin feels too tight.

Mom said she'd just be a minute. She's stopping in HEB to grab the missing ingredients for dinner tonight, because now, after this morning and what I managed not to do, Sophie has no choice but to eat with us, and apparently that means Mom has to cook us a feast. Somehow, I

think as I lean against the rough concrete of the grocery store, standing here is better than spending another minute in that house. Mom says I need to treat Sophie like I did before, and I cling to *before* like the last tendrils of a fading dream, but I don't think that girl exists anymore. I hate this new sister, and I know it's not fair, but she has gone so far away.

I've spent the summer rereading my favorite books, the stupid vampire romance novels that Sophie used to make fun of me relentlessly for. I like the repetition, the sameness of each chapter, the way I know it can't change. Sophie hasn't mentioned them this time, though, and I'm starting to worry she just won't.

It feels like things are beginning to split in two. There's who I am around Sophie and then who I am around everyone else, around the friends who ask what I've been up to this summer and to whom I respond with an ambiguous *nothing, really*. It's been easier to pretend when I'm outside the house and pretend when I'm inside the house; I'm either how I've always been or who Sophie is turning me into. Life didn't used to be this scary. Last week, at my friend's house, I did my best to look like I knew where I was going and what I was doing and like I remembered how to breathe. It's just, my sister has always been there, making fun of me, slap-happy together and laughing until tears start to leak, comfortable with silence on slow Sunday mornings. Now, that feels like one of those memories that I made up in a dream.

The blast of air-conditioned air reaches me before Mom does. She carries two paper HEB bags, her car keys jingling on her finger.

"Got everything?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"You realize even if you make the best meal of her life, she still won't want it, right?" Mom doesn't look at me. "Have some sensitivity."

Sophie starts crying at dinner. We sit at the table for almost two hours. It makes my skin itch.

The next week, when Sophie gets back home from treatment, she knocks on my door. I turn as she pads across my carpet, each step feather-light, and settles onto the edge of my bed. I almost tell her to go away, but Sophie folds herself inwards, like she's trying to disappear within her sweatshirt, so I stay quiet.

"I'm so clearly not okay, Luna," she says as she toys with the edge of my blanket, "and people ask me that goddamn question—*are you okay?*—all day. Like, what, do they expect that I am?"

I stare at a spot on the ground. Eye contact is too much.

"Anyway," she continues, "what about you? Are you okay?"

I glance at her, confused. Her green eyes are so wide I swear they're going to swallow something, and I'm not sure what but I'm hoping it's not me. "I didn't think you cared," I say.

"I do. Of course I do."

We're sitting in silence in my bedroom, but somehow, together, it feels like we're flying, like we're out of control. "I don't know if I'm okay," I say. "I'm just—claustrophobic. Do you think it's possible to feel claustrophobic, even when there's nothing around you for miles? Like, claustrophobic from too much space?"

"Absolutely."

I close my eyes. "This is all so confusing."

It's just the sound of the air-conditioning for so long I think we're lapsing into another one of our suffocating silences. "I want to get better, Luna, I promise, but sometimes, I think it's impossible," she says finally. "And I feel it, you know, the distance that's growing between us, like I'm drifting from you—from reality, really."

"I'm sorry," I say, "for being so scared."

She shakes her head. "I'm scared, too. I'm losing myself and I'm watching it happen but I just can't get it to stop. It was like I was slipping, and at first it was only inches at a time, but then I got deeper and deeper and all of a sudden I couldn't slow down. There's nothing for me to hold onto anymore."

Though we're sitting here at night, just lamplight and heartbeats, when I open my eyes, I can make out my sister's face, eyes shining with unspilled tears. She reaches across the bed and squeezes my hand once.

"I know," I say, "but I won't let go."

I listen to her breaths. They're steady, like metronomes, one after the other.