Nothing in This World is Safe
by StHoltzmann

Summary

A year after the Battle of Times Square, Holtzmann encounters two new things: a poltergeist with unusual and dangerous abilities, and a woman who wants to write a book about the Ghostbusters.

Notes

I took a chance and came up with an OC for this one; I hope she'll be sufficiently interesting and hold her own with the Ghostbusters.

This is in a totally different continuity from New Toys, though it's probably the same Holtzmann as in What You Have Shown Me. Expect fluff, smut, and angst in this series.

Note: Many references in this story come right out of Ghosts From Our Past, the actual real-world tie-in book. I suggest buying it if you can--it's fun, it's great source material, and you'll be supporting the Ghostbusters franchise as well as the author of the book, who's obviously a Ghostbusters geek like rest of us.
One Year Later - Autumn, 2015

The poltergeist, even though it wasn’t much of a menace, was getting on Holtzmann’s last nerve. Patty was cranky about the amount of vintage 1940s glassware that had already been destroyed—half by the ‘geist, half by proton streams just missing the little asshole—and Erin was starting to slow. Abby was still acting as though she had limitless energy, possibly having consumed the Energizer Bunny for breakfast, but Holtzmann could see her clenching her jaw.

The thing moved too fast, and Patty wouldn’t let Holtzmann use any grenades or other area-of-effect devices. So here they stood, weapons lowered for the moment, watching the nasty blue glow zipping in and out of the carefully arranged toys and knick-knacks on the mantelpiece. The whole apartment they were in was both vintage and vintage-themed. Holtzmann couldn’t bring herself to care too much about the collectibles; they weren’t original to the place, just brought in by the 40s-obsessed hipster couple that had hired them. But to Patty, a vintage object was a vintage object. It still had a history, even if its history wasn’t here.

(Of course, it was true that Holtzmann herself had a lot of old things throughout her apartment. But those were part of scientific history, and she had found each of them herself—not bought them in a lot from a interior designer like these people had. Completely different.)

“You sure we’re doing less damage with the wands than with a couple grenades?” Holtzmann asked Patty out of the side of her mouth, keeping an eye on the poltergeist.

Patty huffed. “That’s the third time you’ve asked me that.”

“But you haven’t given me the right answer yet,” Holtzmann said, reasonably.

“Oh my god, Holtzy. Really?” Patty did not look impressed with Holtzmann’s logic.

“Shhh, you guys. I think it’s trying to possess an object!” said Abby, her ponytail almost quivering with excitement.

“Wow! That’s a new thing, right? Isn’t that a new thing? I mean, something—” Erin made uninterpretable gestures with her free hand as she visibly searched for a verb.

“Leveling up right in front of us?” Holtzmann suggested.

“Sure. Yes,” said Erin, after a second. “I need to get some data on this.” She fished in her pocket. Holtzmann supposed she was looking for her data recorder, though maybe she was just hungry and had a cookie in there. Holtzmann could go for a cookie, unless it had raisins.

They watched as the ball of energy very clearly tried to push itself into a hideous cymbal-clanging monkey toy. “It’s a sitting duck! Sitting monkey! Monkeyduck!” said Holtzmann. She raised her proton wand and blasted it. The poltergeist launched itself away just as the energy struck the toy, exploding it into a mess of gears and charred fake fur.

“Whooops,” said Holtzmann, glancing at Patty.
Patty shook her head. “Gonna give you a pass on that one. Those things are scary enough without being possessed.”

A clicking from the hearth drew their attention. The spirit had successfully launched itself into a tin robot toy. It moved forward and then started to vibrate. “I think we might wanna get down,” Patty said. It seemed pretty obvious that the toy was about to launch itself at them.

Abby caught Holtzmann’s eye, and Holtzmann nodded.

Sure enough, the toy quickly became airborne. As the other two flattened themselves, Abby and Holtzmann dropped to their knees and aimed at the toy as it passed harmlessly over their heads. Holtzmann’s eyes widened and she felt time slowing. Why hadn’t she noticed the bulbous glass chandelier overhead? The one, in fact, that their beams were just about to explode into. The one that Abby was directly under. “Abby!” Holtzmann yelled. She threw her shoulder and then her bodyweight into Abby, hoping her momentum would carry them out of the path.

The light fixture sparked and crashed into the polished wood floor. Holtzmann turned her head away from it as glass splinters shot away from its impact site. Finally, there was silence. “You OK, Abs?”

“I would be if you’d get your knee out of my kidney,” Abby grumbled, muffled. Holtzmann grinned and rolled off of her, away from the glass.

“Holtz, you got a little cut there on your cheek,” said Patty, not even mentioning the chandelier. “That better be the worst of it.”

Holtzmann brushed her knuckles across her cheek and took a look. Just a little blood. Must be a really small cut.

Erin clucked her tongue. “Don’t touch it till you know there’s no glass in it!”

Holtzmann gave it an experimental poke. “Nope, no glass in it.”

“You just defeated the entire point of—never mind. I’m glad you were wearing goggles. Now, where’d that twerp get to?” Erin got up and looked around.

Holtzmann helped haul Abby to her feet. She glanced between the living room, where the fireplace was, and the kitchen on the other side of the dining room. No sign of the specter. Holtzmann sighed. “It skedaddled. Again. I have two questions now. One, why is this thing so fast? I feel like it’s cheating. And two: Hey, Abby, do we get overtime pay?”

Patty laughed. “Never mind Abby. You better ask the mayor about that one.”

A scratching sound came from the living room. Everyone froze, and then turned around slowly. There was movement in the corner of the room.

There was a sudden bang, and Erin jumped.

“Cabinet,” explained Holtzmann, pointing. There was a set of shelves built into the wall, with a cabinet door on the bottom. It had just banged shut—because a small, frightened calico cat had climbed out of it.

“Wow. You would think they would have told us they just up and left their pet behind! Some people…” Patty sounded outraged, but her volume was low. Holtzmann appreciated that Patty was probably trying to not scare the cat.
The cat took a couple of hesitant steps toward them.

“Um…” Erin jerked her chin toward the ceiling. The ghost was rapidly flowing along the edge of the ceiling, and then it shot to the floor, right in front of the cat.

“No no no no! Not the cat! You asshole.” Holtzmann was offended.

“Well, we can’t shoot it with the cat there.” Abby sneezed. “But if it’s jumped from no possession to a tin toy and it’s about to jump into an animal, I think we can guess what its next step is going to be.” Abby glared at it as it circled the cat.

“One of us? Not cool!” Patty sounded a little shaken. "All right, I'm starting to reconsider my position on your messed-up desire for explosions, Holtz."

Without hesitation, Holtzmann reached into the pocket on her left thigh. “I’m gonna need you guys to go into the hall, or into another room. And fast. It’s just about to hop into its furry ride.”

“Because why?” demanded Abby.

“Because I want to test the Phantasmic Flashbang!” That didn’t seem to clear things up for them—perhaps Holtzmann hadn’t gotten around to mentioning that project to them. She wasn’t sure. “I’m positive that this goodie only affects ghosts. But when it zips out of Kitty, fewer targets—AKA hosts—would be a good thing.”

Three sets of narrowed eyes stared at her.

“Well, and also, I’m only 98% sure that it won’t affect flesh and blood. But if I’m wrong—pffft—I’ve got goggles, and the cat’ll be OK. After a while. So git!”

The others huffed and backed towards the door, muttering.

Holtzmann turned back towards the fireplace. Sure enough, the cat’s eyes were turning a ghostly blue, though the ghost’s vapors were still floating around it. Now, while it was still betwixt and between, would be the best time. Holtzmann held the flashbang in her teeth and dragged out the trap from the bag on her back. Moving as fast as she could, and not taking her eyes off of the cat, she pushed the trap out on to the floor and set her foot on the pedal.

“Here, kitty kitty!” She flicked the pin out of the device, crouched down, and rolled it right across the floor. It came to rest a couple of feet away from the cat. Holtzmann had just enough time to take a breath, and then it glowed green and went off.

Energy rippled away from the blast, but it wasn’t the blinding glare of a regular flashbang. There was an invisible and yet perceptible flux in the air surrounding it, and Holtzmann saw blue particles exploding out of the cat. At the same time, there was a blast of psychosonic energy. Holtzmann briefly felt her eardrums.

That was definitely not supposed to happen.

But then, in an eerie silence, it was time to hit the poltergeist—or whatever it had become—as it coalesced and flew directly at Holtzmann. She was sure it intended to possess her, but its straight-on approach gave her the decisecnd that she needed to aim and fire her proton wand directly at it.

And she had it! It was a little bit of a struggle to drag it closer to the trap, but that just made the moment when she mashed the pedal and it was sucked in even more satisfying.
“Sorry, li’l guy-slash-girl,” Holtzmann said to the cat, which was pawing at its ears. Her own voice sounded extremely far away. Yeah, she was going to have to sort that out later.

Abby popped up in front of her. She was visibly yelling, but Holtzmann had to read her lips. “We’re all deaf! Was it supposed to do that?” Erin, behind Abby, nodded. Apparently she wanted to know, too.

Holtzmann shook her head and shrugged. The point was, the ghost was in the trap, right? She pointed at it. And the cat was OK. She pointed at the cat, too, which—clearly peeved, but not injured, by the events—was beginning to give itself a bath, and then she gave Abby two thumbs up.

Abby rolled her eyes and grudgingly offered her thumbs-up as well.

Patty came back into the apartment. She didn’t yell, just made gestures, like they were playing charades. Holtzmann was not very good at charades, seeing as she never guessed correctly. But everyone insisted that she play, and then they didn’t even seem to be keeping score, partly because the others were usually crying with laughter at her guesses. And that was why she always played. She liked seeing them laugh.

Patty was clear enough, though. She gestured in the direction of the other apartments surrounding them, plus a floor up and a floor down, then pointed at her ears, shook her head, and made an X with her arms. Everybody in that range was deaf too? Holtzmann made an “oops” face. The flashbang was definitely in need of some recalibration. But it still was a success, and Holtzmann was pretty sure the hearing impairment would wear off by dinnertime. She patted Erin on the head and slung her arms around Patty’s and Abby’s shoulders.

Damn, she loved a good bust. (Internally, Holtzmann waggled her eyebrows at herself.)

The best part of the whole thing was that Holtzmann wouldn’t be able to hear their protests, instructions, and demands on the way home. She grinned. It was going to be a great drive.

By the time they got back into HQ, their hearing was slowly returning. They gathered around their conference table for their usual debriefing.

"We gotta do something about that whole possession thing," Patty said. "I doubt that smacking thing is gonna work twice."

"I was thinking—maybe you and I could work on it?" Erin suggested tentatively. "I've got my and Abby's theories, and the data we have so far, and you could find past records and see if any of them sound legitimate. Especially ones where the ghost was expelled and the person survived. Qualitative data and case studies do have their uses..."

"Yes! Let's do it." Patty and Erin high-fived.

"Keep us posted," said Abby, and Holtzmann just nodded. She didn’t want any of them to be possessed ever again. When Erin and Patty came up with usable information, she’d start building something that would let them repel future attempts. She made a couple of mental notes and then turned her focus back to the others.

After the debriefing was done and Holtzmann had done her usual equipment check with each of them, Abby sent them all home. “Take a break tonight,” she said, giving them all pointed looks. “That’s an order!”

Various forms of sass were returned to her, and they went their separate ways.
Holtzmann tromped down the stairs to her dark, faintly musty, and completely illegal basement apartment. It was huge, nearly the size of the entire footprint of the building above it. That building was undergoing a years-long restoration and remodeling, and in the meantime, Holtzmann had enough room for her stuff and her second lab, without any pesky intrusions or adult supervision.

She dropped her bag somewhere between the door and her workshop area, and took a seat at her desk. She fiddled with an old circular slide rule for a moment. She felt restless.

Holtzmann did not like taking breaks.

She was aware that breaks were useful; there was research to support that. Despite her studyholic ways in undergrad, she’d learned during grad school that regular physical movement helped her mind stay sharper longer every day. Nowadays, she kept weights and a punching bag at home, and a resistance band in her desk at HQ. (Not to mention doing the occasional spontaneous dance routine.) And those habits had proved more useful than expected, given the surprising physical demands of her current career.

A change of scenery was good too. She’d gotten ideas from salt shakers, bicycling jerseys, graffiti, and pigeons, among other things that she wouldn’t have seen in the lab. Junk store excursions were the best kind of long break, because she could find useful parts and replenish her clothes. (Her clothes tended to accrue damage over time. When she started working with Abby, it got to a point where Abby would ask her to change before they left the lab. Now, whenever she was thrifting, she made sure to grab whatever looked like it was comfortable, would fit, and wouldn’t completely offend her taste, which was often inexplicable even to herself.)

So she did all of those things periodically, somewhat arbitrarily. If she waited until she felt like she needed to, it’d just never happen.

The others seemed a little bit more comfortable with breaks for the sake of breaks. Probably healthy, Holtzmann supposed. She’d join them for games or movie night, though she always had something in her hands to do at the same time. Patty was similar. They’d never discussed it, but Holtzmann had noticed that Patty was usually updating their social media or skimming article databases whenever a movie was on.

But occasionally, Holtzmann could tell that she needed a break. To transition from one thing to another, to decompress and refocus, or just to give her overheated noggin a cool-off period. Maybe "and," not "or." She was wired from the bust, physically and neurochemically overstimulated. Too unfocused to get useful work done on any projects right away.

The most compact and efficient break that she’d discovered so far, considering time and effort relative to efficacy, involved a vibrator. A quick, uncomplicated orgasm was a good way to reboot her brain, so that was on tonight’s docket.

Holtzmann spun her desk chair around and sat on it backwards, à la Commander Riker. She turned on her desktop computer—a necessary annoyance for enough processor power—and grabbed a cloth bag out of a desk drawer. She pulled the small teal vibrator out of it, set the bag on the desk, and rested the toy on top of the bag. She swiveled back and forth for a moment. Fantasizing was not really her strong suit. (Well, fantasizing about inventions, but that was different. Mostly.) Lately she’d had a tendency to think of hands on her skin and a soft mouth on hers, and that was… inconvenient. Not something she wanted to encourage.

A couple of years back, Abby had come into their Higgins Institute lab and caught Holtzmann dancing. She watched for a while, then switched off the stereo and said, “That is a lot of pelvic
action, Holtz. Is that some kind of cry for help? There must be a bunch of lesbian Tinder-type apps, right? Or you could just stroll into a club and immediately find someone to go home with. I feel pretty sure about this.”

Holtzmann had made a wincing face. “I have enough projects right now. And they’re fun ones. I don’t need to add ‘awkward social interaction’ to my to-do list.”

“Yeah, I guess I’d be a hypocrite if I argued with you. Get your coat. We’re going to Babeland.”

And after she had assured Holtzmann that this was not, in fact, a bar, that’s just what they did.

So now Holtzmann had this gadget and a few others. She’d been meaning to make her own at some point, but simple mechanical projects couldn’t really compete with the delicious combination of things involved in ‘busting equipment. At least she’d modified this one. She’d opened it up and reprogrammed it (and overclocked it a little, of course), so that it had a custom routine that controlled rhythm and intensity over a precisely calculated amount of time.

Holtzmann poked around in a browser for a minute or two. She wasn’t sure what she was looking for, and she needed to not waste time on this. She clicked around an image search until one made her pause. Hmm. Not a thing she’d ever sought out, but appealing.

She kept her eyes on the looping GIF and reached out to grab the vibrator. She thumbed it on and then reached into her pants to slip it into her underwear. She shifted her hips and felt it nestle into place. It had a small round body that fit easily in even her small palm; that part touched the sensitive skin at the opening to her vagina. It also had two long prongs that didn’t just conduct vibration, but had vibrating elements within them. That gave stimulation to her clitoris on three sides, and was part of why it was satisfying even with a quick single usage.

The GIF was simple. It was in an industrial warehouse setting. A woman was attached, upright, to a wall via an elaborate structure of metal rods and pipes. Her wrists were trapped up by her shoulders. Weights were attached to her nipples via clamps. She was blindfolded, and it was just possible to see that she was also wearing heavy-duty orange earplugs. Her feet were spread apart, and between them, a simple mechanism was topped with a dildo. From the flush on her cheeks and the way her mouth was slightly open, it seemed clear that the woman had already become aroused through whatever had happened before this sequence was filmed.

At the beginning of the GIF, the tip of the mechanism hovered just below the woman. A hand (probably a woman’s, Holtzmann thought) reached out and pressed a button on the floor, attached to the wire leading into the base of the mechanism. It immediately started hammering into the woman. Her head jerked back, she bit her lip, and the weights swung, pulling on her breasts.

Then there was clearly an edit, and another woman—fully clothed, wearing a suit—was in the frame, back to the camera. She pushed a Hitachi Magic Wand firmly against the restrained woman’s vulva. Her body began to buck, as well as it could given her range of movement, and then the loop started over.

Holtzmann wrapped her arms around the chair back, still staring intently at the image. Holtzmann supposed that both of the women were attractive, but she was more fascinated by the situation. Did the woman have a way to stop if she didn’t want to keep going? Without auditory or visual input, where was her focus—only on physical sensations? What would it be like to not have to make any decisions, not have to periodically remember to check on what you were doing with your body, not have to check other people’s faces to see if you were responding appropriately enough, not try to steer your mind back from worrying about whether the more efficient energy source would increase the weight or the reliability of a certain alloy, not have to rehearse what to say next or devise a quip?
Would it be terrible or wonderful to shut down the multi-processors of her brain while she was still awake?

She didn’t know. But the GIF was certainly working for Holtzmann’s purpose of ushering in a swift orgasm. She slipped one hand under the layers of her jacket, vest, and shirt to find a nipple. Admittedly, her own hands never felt as good on her breasts as other women’s had, but she’d always been good at making do. Eyes still on the screen, she pushed her other hand down under her soft woven trousers and pressed her fingers between her legs, over the boxers. That increased the pressure on her clitoris, just as the intensity setting on the vibrator spiked. And her hips had started moving without her even noticing. She felt her breath become more shallow and her blood rush to her face.

What would it be like to put so much control into another woman’s hands? The thought appeared in Holtzmann’s head before she could stop it. She gritted her teeth and pictured a new, improved, perfect flashbang exploding into the ether. Explosion imagery, Holtzmann had found, was a guaranteed way to push through to a climax.

And it worked.

Holtzmann held her breath for a moment as the orgasm shot through her, intense and fast.

Then she exhaled sharply and closed the GIF without saving the link. It raised too many questions.

Holtzmann rubbed the back of her neck and then withdrew the vibrator. She went to wash it off and wash her face. Break time was over. Time to get to work on that new and improved flashbang.

And it seemed like the break had worked. By the time she had crossed from the bathroom to her drafting desk, a dozen possible avenues for improvement were already crowding her mind.

Hours later, Holtzmann felt her phone buzz. It was 2 AM, and she’d scheduled a reminder to tell her that there was some kind of appointment tomorrow at 9 AM. That was what the reminder said, actually: Some kind of appointment. It was an Abby thing, and she didn’t remember what it was, but Abby wanted them there. Hence the early bedtime. Holtzmann got up, got herself a small glass of water, went into her bedroom, and stripped down. Usually layers made her comfortable, but this was her own place, and so it was different. Especially under a sheet, a sheet-blanket, and a down comforter. She climbed under the covers and took half of a trazodone with her glass of water. This didn’t bother her. If a project was missing an element that it needed to succeed, she acquired it and added it. If her brain was missing whatever it needed to stop chewing things over at night, when it needed to be restoring itself, then she provided that. Simple.

Holtzmann turned off the lights and arranged her pillows correctly. She hoped that she wouldn’t dream tonight, unless her dreams gave her useful ideas.

In the early morning sunlight, a woman stood on the sidewalk outside of the Ghostbusters’ firehouse headquarters. She had a serious look, with strong eyebrows that gave the impression of being frequently drawn together. She had a medium, vaguely olive skin tone, and short black hair (with a shock of pastel bangs)—the kind of person who got a lot of uninvited, yet pointed, questions about her ancestry. Vintage-looking round glasses gave her a bit of an owlish look, compounded by the scarf wound around her neck and her long grey jacket. She was hold a battered leather document case to her chest, and if anyone had been near enough to see her gloved hands, they would have noticed that her fingers were shaking slightly.

Her name was Joey Betancourt, and she had traveled to twenty-seven countries, where she had spent
time in war zones, catacombs, and mausoleums (not to mention a holding cell or two). She had been in questionably maintained helicopters, on rope bridges made of vine, in a canoe powered by an old VW engine, and, once, in a vintage Soviet-era submarine. She had been locked in an ancient, musty archive in Salisbury overnight. She had come out to her mother.

She had never before been as scared as she was at that moment, facing the Ghostbusters’ cartoonish logo.

And she was not there about a ghost.

Joey knew that her phone call to the Ghostbusters a couple of days ago had been strange; her request must have really thrown their receptionist, because it seemed he had no idea what to do with her. Dr. Yates had been more helpful, even if she had sounded distracted, and agreed that they’d meet with Joey. As Dr. Yates was hanging up, Joey had caught someone in the background laughing and saying, “We oughtta just start her with Holtz, and see if she runs away.” She didn’t know what that meant, but it didn’t really matter: the fact was that she was terrified of meeting the Ghostbusters, and also afraid that they would deny her request. And then what?

“You can do this,” she told herself. Convincing herself to call them had been hard, but she had done it, and they had answered, and now she couldn’t back out. She pressed the buzzer.

“Ghostbusters. How may I direct your call?” said a cheerful male voice.

“Dangit, Kevin, that’s the intercom! Not the phone! Oh, here, give it to me—“

“Dr. Yates?” asked Joey.


Joey soon found herself sitting opposite Dr. Yates at her desk. Dr. Yates introduced her very quickly to the other Ghostbusters, told her to call them all by their first names, and then got down to business. The other three returned to working at their desks, but they were very obviously listening in. (The questionably qualified receptionist was not; Joey could see that he was happily playing tic-tac-toe against himself. And losing.)

“So, I wasn’t really clear on what you wanted to talk to us about,” Abby said, looking at a post-it note with Joey’s name on it.

“Well, I wanted to interview you for a—for a couple of different reasons. I’m a writer. I specialize in narrative nonfiction and literary nonfiction. You know, that’s like The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, or The Devil in the White City—“

“Oh man,” said Patty, without looking up from what she was reading. “That was a good one. Freaky, but good.”

Abby nodded. “OK…”

“I would love to write the story of the Ghostbusters. I think you deserve better than the trashy books that got published practically overnight after…after the incident. And I’ve gotten the impression that you’re all far too busy to be writing.”

“True,” said Abby.

Erin turned her chair around, toward Abby and Joey. “We’re supposed to stay as discreet as we can, though. None of us want Ms. Lynch marching in and shutting us down.”
“Well, I was thinking of a long-term project. I’m sure there’s going to be a lot more to the Ghostbusters story—you’re just getting started! Here, I brought my resume and C.V., so you know that I’m not just a random fangirl. Not that I’m not a big fan—I am.” Joey stopped herself from babbling and took the papers out of her document holder.

Abby glanced over Joey’s papers. “Oh, you write as J. Betancourt? Patty, haven’t I seen—“

“Hold up,” said Patty. She got up from her note- and book-strewn desk, went upstairs, and returned with a stack of five hardcover books. *Queering Spacetime, Library at War, The Search: From Tesla to Breakthrough Starshot, The DMZ is Cosplay,* and *MissRepresentation.* “I don’t want to be rude, but if you have time and you feel like signing these, I sure would appreciate it. I’m a big fan, too.”

She grinned.

“That’s so nice of you! Of course I will. Don’t let me forget before I go,” Joey said, flushing a little.

“Well, I think we’ll have to think about your idea.” Abby visibly ignored the faint “awww, but I wanna be in a boooook” coming from Holtzmann’s direction. “And there was something else?”

Joey took a deep breath. “Thing is—and I hope you all will keep this in confidence—I also write under a pseudonym. I love writing nonfiction, and sometimes it wins awards or whatever, but the money I get from it barely covers my travel and research, not to mention occasionally getting bailed out of somewhere. So to actually put those bottom layers into Maslow’s hierarchy—you know, food, clothing, shelter—I write contemporary fantasy and paranormal romance novels, as Alexis Bettany. I mean, I’m not saying those aren’t fun to write too, because they are, but…”

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“Well, I think we’ll have to think about your idea.” Abby visibly ignored the faint “awww, but I wanna be in a boooook” coming from Holtzmann’s direction. “And there was something else?”

Joey took a deep breath. “Thing is—and I hope you all will keep this in confidence—I also write under a pseudonym. I love writing nonfiction, and sometimes it wins awards or whatever, but the money I get from it barely covers my travel and research, not to mention occasionally getting bailed out of somewhere. So to actually put those bottom layers into Maslow’s hierarchy—you know, food, clothing, shelter—I write contemporary fantasy and paranormal romance novels, as Alexis Bettany. I mean, I’m not saying those aren’t fun to write too, because they are, but…”

Patty suddenly got up and went upstairs again.

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“Okay, I’m still lost. And…” asked Abby.
do have actual steady day jobs: they're tenured journalism professors or whatever, or it's their third career and they have savings in the bank. It's not your fault that my so-called 'day job' is writing novels.”

Holtzmann pushed herself past Abby’s desk on her wheeled stool. “Personally, I appreciate the fact that you’re thinking about the metaphysical implications, even if it is for purposes of sexy ghost stories.” She winked at Joey and whizzed past them.

“Um…thanks. Well, let me sign those books for Patty, and I’ll be on my way. Thanks for talking to me.”

Afterwards, Holtzmann showed Joey out. As the engineer held the door open for Joey, she said, “So, you were actually in Times Square that night?”

Joey nodded. “I saw you guys, too. I owe the Ghostbusters on a personal level, on top of how everyone owes you. I fell over a smashed streetlight, broke my elbow, and got a pretty bad cut on my arm.” She rubbed the discolored, jagged line on her forearm. “I was running away from some horrible thing that was chasing me, and it was hard to see where I was going. I had nightmares for a while, but they always ended OK, because in real life, when I couldn’t get up and the thing was right up on me…one of you showed up. I don’t know who it was—I could hardly see straight—but whoever it was, they whipped that thing away from me. I got myself into a doorway and stayed there till the sun reappeared and some EMTs found me. I was very lucky.”

“Oh, that was me,” said Holtzmann, leaning on the door and giving Joey an easy, saucy grin. “I remember your…hair. Glad to be of service.” Holtzmann saluted and turned back into the firehouse. Joey couldn’t help staring after her. She wasn’t sure if Holtzmann was joking or telling the truth.

As the door fell closed, Joey overheard Holtzmann’s voice. "Hey Patty, can I borrow that one?"

"You better treat it real good," Patty said in a menacing tone. "I'd better not see it anywhere near that —“ And the door clicked shut, leaving Joey to frantically hope that it was Queering Spacetime or The Search and not Grave Sins. She wasn’t sure she could handle the thought of any of the Ghostbusters reading her paranormally incorrect erotica. This week was going to be…interesting.

Chapter End Notes

There’s a lot of groundwork-laying in this chapter, but I’d love to hear what you think so far. I’m trying a bunch of new things, including extended Holtzmann POV, and I hope they’re working. As always, I live for (and deeply appreciate) your comments!
Grave Sins

Chapter Summary

Pizza is consumed. Garlic knots are grabbed. Then Holtzmann reads a bit of a paranormal erotic romance novel. No, really.

Chapter Notes

Yes, hello, I'm still here and still working on this along with All The Things! Thank you for your patience, and thanks so much for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dinnertime. The Ghostbusters were gathered around the big table in the firehouse's putative kitchen. It had, inevitably, just become an extension of the general research-lab-office free-for-all. This was fine by Holtzmann; after all, every room at her own place was multi-purpose.

Holtzmann lunged for a piece of pizza, started to bring it to her mouth, and then stopped. Hadn’t they forgotten to do something? She waved her slice in the air. “You guys! Are we gonna vote on getting me into a book?”

“When was the last time we actually voted on anything? Maybe when that slimy green thing rushed us with the Ectomobile?” Erin grumbled. “And where’s my salad?” She searched through the pizza boxes as though her salad would be under them.

“Oh, that was yours? I figured they messed up the order. I sent it back,” said Abby, deadpan.

Erin stared at Abby, and her mouth started to tighten. “You—“

Patty laughed and picked up the boxed salad from a crate labeled DANGER, which also provided a flat surface for two liters of orange soda and a mountain of red pepper packets—which were all Holtzmann’s. “Come on, baby,” said Patty. “You know better.”

Erin sniffed, but then sighed and visibly relaxed. “You are correct. Never mind—you all saw nothing.” She took her salad with exaggerated dignity. “Anyway, about Ms. Betancourt—”

"Erin, don't get too wigged out," said Patty. "I think we can--"

"No, no. I actually like the idea! I think she takes us seriously," Erin said.

"OK, salad anxiety aside, you really have loosened up," Abby observed. Erin, with a piece of romaine stuck to her nose, did a little shimmy.

Patty clapped. “Yes! And obviously I’ve got no problems with having her around. I’ll try not to bug her too much. Only thing I’m worried about—“

“How much is going to be on the record, right?” Abby rubbed her chin.
“You got it. I mean, I read her books; I know she writes up things that aren’t always flattering—and that’s OK, that’s human. I’m more worried about…I guess you could say technical details? Stuff that might not be good for certain other people to know about. You know, like, I dunno, a crazy dude who reads paranormal books. I don’t want to bet that there’s not two of those in the world. You hear me?”

Holtzmann dumped red pepper on her pizza and took a bite. Apparently she’d snagged a slice of the combo pizza. Better luck getting pepperoni on her next grab…

“Ah…yes.” Abby’s eyes flicked to the shelf where a stack of *Ghosts From Our Past* sat next to an economy-size pack of paper towels. “You figure she’d be OK leaving some details out?”

Patty nodded. “Yeah, she’s covered some really touchy subjects before, like stuff that could get people killed. But I’m just saying, we should bring it up.”

“Best to be clear,” said Erin. Holtzmann noticed that she’d put her salad aside after a few bites and was about to be face-deep in the meat-lover’s special.

“So, I guess we’re all good with giving her a try,” Abby said.

Holtzmann cleared her throat. “Nobody asked Kevin.” It was true.

“Oh! Hold on.” Erin put her pizza down on a plate and hurriedly wiped her fingers on a napkin, then picked up her phone. After a moment, she said, “Kevin? Hiiiii…hey, how would you feel about being in a book? …Um, OK. Cool. I think.” She hung up, eyebrows creased.

Abby gave her the well? look, and Erin shrugged. “Well, he said ‘sounds good, boss,’ but I honestly couldn’t tell if that was actually Kevin on the phone or if that’s … um, just the newest thing he’s accidentally set his voice mail greeting to.”

Holtzmann winked. “Close enough.”

“I’ll make sure he gets it when he comes in tomorrow morning,” Erin said.

“Good luck,” said Abby doubtfully. “Anyhow, I’ll send Joey a text, and when she comes in, we’ll point Holtzy at her and see whether she can handle the actual behind-the-scenes madness. War zones are one thing, but Holtzy’s lab is another. Just break ‘er in.” Erin coughed, and Abby added, “BUT. Don’t set her—or anything else—on fire, OK?”

“I’ll turn on all the charm.” Holtzmann gave them a huge, benevolent grin.

“Jesus, Holtzmann, we don’t need to get that good of a look at your chomped-up pizza,” Abby griped. “Minimal manners, is that so much to ask…” She threw a wadded-up napkin at Holtzmann and got Holtzmann right on the bridge of her glasses.

“Meh,” said Holtzmann, willing away a flinch by pouring soda into her mouth right from the bottle. It fizzed all over her tongue. “This’ll wash it all down. Happy, Miss Manners?”

“There is orange soda trickling down your chin! Man, I think I lost my appetite…” Now it was Patty’s turn to complain. She scrunched up her face dramatically.

Holtzmann trusted that they were joking. Well, mostly joking. “Garlic knots, garlic knots, does whatever a garlic knot does!” sang Holtzmann, dangling the bag in front of Patty. It was unopened and had Patty’s name on it. Holtzmann could practically taste the butter wafting away from the stained paper.
Holtzmann sighed and sat up in her bed. She’d taken the medication, but she was still having trouble
falling asleep. Probably better not to stay in bed and get more and more annoyed. Then again, if she
got up and walked around, she’d find something to work on…and she did want to be at the firehouse
in the morning, to see what was going to happen. She’d already washed her face again, combed out
her hair again, changed from a tank top into a soft old t-shirt, and switched out pajama bottoms for
just boxers, so…Holtzmann rubbed her face and sighed, then got out of bed.

Eventually she found herself in her so-called “living room.” She flicked on a single, soft light, and
wandered around. Her computer and drafting table were both calling to her, and there was a can of
glow-in-the-dark paint in a closet just begging to be used on something, but surely there was a less
sleep-destructive activity that she could do.

Maybe…put a few things away? It’d make Erin and Patty happy. Halfheartedly, she picked up her
backpack from where she’d dropped it between the living room and the kitchen, and looked for a
slightly less in-the-way place to put it. One of the outer pockets was unzipped—oops—and what was
that in it? Grave Sins.

Oh yeah.

Holtzmann took it out of the backpack with a degree of caution. She didn’t want to upset Patty by
damaging something that she valued.

She pushed some blueprints and old Sunday comics to one end of the sofa and settled down with her
feet on the sofa’s back and her head on the sofa’s arm. Joey had signed it on the title page: For Patty
— I just want you to know that I had nothing to do with the title of this one! Love and facepalms,
"Alexis Bettany."

Holtzmann laughed and fished around the bottom of the sofa until she found a bag of pretzels. She
debated for a moment whether to just skim through and look for the sexy bits, or start at the end and
see if it’d have a good ending. But that didn’t seem fair to Joey. She’d start with page one.

At the end of the second chapter, Holtz stared at the shadowed ceiling for a moment, tapping the
book’s spine against her teeth. Joey’s version of ghosts did not really resemble Holtzmann’s
experiences with them, nor her research. But this book had been written a few years ago, when not
many people realized that ghosts were real. Well, not that the average New Yorker got the picture
even now, but anyway—fewer people had known then. And Joey seemed to have a decent grasp of
basic science. Still, the idea of ghosts being not just sentient but sapient, with free will and emotions,
was a little disturbing. If that were true in this world, well…huh. That’d be a pickle.

Holtzmann nodded to herself. She could read on with no reservations if she told herself that the book
took place in a fantasy alternate world. To be fair, this was something that she told herself about most
fiction. It even worked on Dan Brown, so it’d be more than enough for Joey "Alexis Bettany"
Betancourt.

It was in the middle of the fourth chapter that things heated up, if that was even the right phrase for
spectral erotica. Holtzmann shifted around and finally settled back with one foot on the floor and the
other on the sofa arm. That was better…She stuffed a cushion behind her back and read on.

“OK, I admit that you’re beautiful and fun to talk to. But you’re not real,” Sam said to
the woman sitting next to her. She could see the velvet upholstery of her sofa right
through the figure. Faintly, but still. “And I should stop talking to you, whatever you
“I really am real,” the woman said. “And I told you: I’m Estelle.”

Sam shook her head. “I need to call my doctor,” she mumbled. “But not now, because it’s 10 PM. In the morning, when she’s at work. First thing.”

“I certainly won’t stop you,” said Estelle. “Take care of your health. But what can I do to prove to you that I’m real? I’d miss chatting, and I think you would too.”

Sam started to reply, but then stopped. There didn’t seem to be a good outcome here. Either Estelle wasn’t real, and Sam’s run-of-the-mill depression and anxiety had taken a dramatic left turn, or she was real, and … there was a ghost living in the charming little Craftsman fixer-upper that Sam hadn’t even finished fixing up. Hell, she still had half a dozen bookcases to build. Those were real. This couldn’t be.

Estelle glanced at Sam, her green eyes far too vivid to be normal. “If you don’t have any suggestions, then…may I touch you?”

Sam felt her own eyes widen. “Uh…sure.” Oh, what had she just said?

One part of Sam’s brain was yelling at her for not shrinking away, but the rest of her attention was fixated on Estelle’s translucent, soft brown fingers reaching for Sam’s exposed arm. Estelle’s hand settled on Sam’s skin, and the sensation made Sam close her eyes for a fraction of a second. The ghost’s touch was soft, like rose petals and kittens’ ears and butterfly wings and other gentle cliches. It was cool, but not icy. And it felt real, though not quite solid.

And then there was the very detectable response in Sam’s own body; an electric, hungry response. Hesitantly, Sam put her other hand on top of Estelle’s. “Jesus,” she whispered. “You are real.” Under Sam’s fingertips, Estelle didn’t feel like a regular woman; there was a yielding quality to her hand that should have made Sam run screaming. But Estelle didn’t feel dead, either. There was still a pulse of vibrancy—if not of life.

Estelle turned her hand over so that their fingers were touching, and Sam shivered. “Is that good or bad?” asked Estelle.

Sam wasn’t sure which part Estelle was asking about, but there was only one answer anyway. “Good…I think.” Sam withdrew her hand, trembling slightly, and poured herself a shot of whiskey from the vintage sideboard next to the sofa. She gulped it down, slammed the glass back down, and put her hands into Estelle’s. “What other parts of you can be solid?” she asked, before she was able to think about it too hard.

Estelle looked right into Sam’s eyes. “You’re not impaired, are you? Because I’m not going to take advantage of you.”

You are a ghost, thought Sam. You wouldn’t have to get me drunk if you wanted to take advantage of me. “Thank you for checking, but I’m fine.” The universe has gone completely off the rails, but I’m fine.

Estelle nodded. “Any part of me can be solid enough, or … not.” She raised an eyebrow at Sam. “But let’s start with my mouth.” She pulled Sam toward her and their lips met.

Sam definitely rated Estelle’s lips—and shortly thereafter, her tongue—as solid enough.
The kiss made Sam tingly, in more than the usual ways. Like standing next to a lightning rod right before a strike.

Estelle pulled back and tilted her head at Sam. “More?” she asked. “Can I interest you in seeing how the rest of me interacts with the rest of you?”

Sam answered by kissing Estelle back, only remembering to actually murmur “Yes” midway through the kiss. A moment later, she felt a cool touch across both nipples, right against her skin despite the fact that she still hadn’t taken off her bra or her shirt. “Fuck!” she gasped. “That’s a—a good talent!”

“It means you can leave your clothes on if you want. But the view is better for me if you don’t.” Estelle grinned wickedly and tugged up on Sam’s shirt. Sam assisted, and then started to reach behind her for her bra. “Here’s another way I can use that talent,” said Estelle. “This’ll be a little weird the first time, so…let me know.” Very slowly, she passed her hands through Sam’s torso. Sam was startled, but it didn’t feel bad—a little tingly and cool, was all. Sam felt her bra come unhooked, and then it flew across the room.

“That was definitely odd,” Sam said.

“Too weird?” Estelle sat back.

“Not yet,” said Sam. She started toward Estelle’s top button, but stopped when Estelle threw her head back and laughed.

Estelle kissed Sam’s fingers and said “That would be silly.” Then her clothes dissolved and she was naked. Whatever “naked” meant, anyway, when the lady in question was noncorporeal.

“What else can you do with those talents?” Sam asked.

“Well,” said Estelle. “I can be in more than one place at once.” She winked.

The next thing Sam knew, she felt gentle, cool—yet intense—pinches of both of her nipples and, at the same time, fingers trailing down her back to the base of her spine. “That’s…that’s a pretty good trick,” she admitted. From her point of view, Estelle hadn’t even moved. She moved her own hands toward Estelle’s chest. “Can I touch you? Do you feel things? Oh, shit. I’m sorry. Was that a rude question?” She could just barely see through Estelle’s chest. What was she thinking, making as though to touch it? Surely she ought to be running away.

Estelle shook her head. “Not rude. I can feel things, not quite the same as you.” She grinned. “My favorite part is making somebody else feel good, but you can touch too.”

“Oh, good.” Sam kissed Estelle’s mouth again with her own warm lips and tongue. As she felt ghostly fingers drifting down her abdomen, Sam reached for Estelle’s breasts.

She wanted to melt into Estelle. She definitely did not want to run away.

“Whaaaat? You can’t end the chapter there!” Holtzmann complained. The bag of pretzels had been sitting, abandoned, in her lap ever since she’d gotten to that section. Now she popped a a pretzel into her mouth and tongued it thoughtfully for a moment. “I’ve got the weirdest boner,” Holtzmann said to herself. She bit down on the pretzel while it was upright, resulting in a delightful crunch, and opened the book again.
Early the next morning, Joey got a text. She read it and whooped, almost spilling her coffee into her oatmeal. She entered and then quickly deleted a bunch of party popper emoji. *Be there ASAP, if that's OK,* she replied to Abby. She wasn’t sure she needed the coffee anymore—she was 100% awake now, and couldn’t wait to get started.

*Take your time,* Abby replied. *I told Holtz to come in early and play tour guide, but she hasn’t read any of my texts. Guess she’s sleeping in.*

Huh. Joey shrugged to herself and headed to her closet. What *did* one wear to fit in at the Ghostbusters office…?

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so a lot of that was story-within-a-story, sorry about that! I know what's next, and I've already started it. Yuletide is at hand, but still, with luck, the next update won't take *quite* as long. Let's be real, I'm anxious to move along to a) sexytimes and b) angstytimes. We'll get there, though the road be long and fluffy.

I think this is the most I've written from Holtz's point of view so far. I'm trying to keep her IC, though of course, she's going to veer off into my own headcanons. Hopefully, I can bring you with me.

Your thoughts and comments are always appreciated!

P. S. *Here's the cover of Grave Sins, because why not.*
Holtzmann woke up to a loud clatter. She leapt up to defend herself, couch cushion at the ready—or, well, she meant to leap up, but instead she staggered and then slowly toppled onto the floor. Her right arm and leg were buzzing in agony; she’d cut off the circulation by falling asleep in a completely suboptimal position after finishing *Grave Sins* and giving herself a quick handie. Not a completely unusual situation, to be sure. Just unusual reading material.

She gave herself a moment. From where she lay, she could see her phone on the kitchen floor. She had a vague memory of leaving it on top of the fridge last night. Ah—that was what the noise had been. It must have gotten so many text and voice alerts that it had vibrated itself onto the floor.

She blew air through her lips, resulting in a loud, self-directed raspberry. Abby was probably not super happy right now.

Patty, wearing about a dozen different colors at maximum saturation and making it look *damn* good, greeted Joey at the front door. “Hey, Holtz isn’t in yet, so—“

“That’s OK,” said Joey. She’d been wanting to talk to Patty anyway. She followed Patty in and found a hook to hang her messenger bag and coat on. “One of my favorite things in life is talking to the archive-keepers of the world, and I would bet this bag of hot David’s bagels that you’re the archivist around here.”

Patty grinned. “You’d win that bet—so wait, does that mean you’re keeping the bagels?”

“Guess I didn’t think that one through. In that case, they’re now a bribe.” Joey, with only a slight pang of regret, handed the piping-hot carbs to Patty.

“You’re going to fit right in,” Patty said, opening the bag and giving it a huff. “Mm, the language of food. Ha—that’s a book, you know. A real good one. Dan Jurafsky—you ever met him?” She
gestured up the stairs, continuing to chat about nonfiction and her current research projects. Abby waved at them as they headed for the second floor.

“Technically half of this area is mine,” Patty grumbled. “Holtz keeps creeping into my space, like some kind of invasive species of weed that you just can’t stay mad at.”

“That’s a lot of books! Oh my god…is that a rolling ladder?”

“YES. Is that the greatest thing you’ve ever seen or what?” Patty put her hands on her hips and gazed up at the wall of shelves that reached all the way to the ceiling, a satisfied grin on her face.

“Better than pockets on a skirt!” said Joey, unable to keep the nerdy glee out of her voice. “Don’t suppose you have a secret passageway behind one of the shelves?”

“Man, I wanted to. Pull the one book out, it swings back and there’s a little reading hidey-hole. But I can guarantee that Holtzmann would take it over. Holtz loves a good hidey-hole…Maybe if we built two?”

Joey laughed and took a closer look at the shelves. “Wow. This is a really wide-ranging collection. Feynman’s lectures over here, Aarne and Thompson and Uther over there, Roxane Gay over there…”

“But you must have a ton of books too, right?”

Joey shook her head. “No, I share a place with a bunch of other people. I’m away often enough that it doesn’t make sense to have a bigger place—not to mention how unpredictable my income is, ugh—so I only keep really important books, sentimental value or whatever. Most of my reading is on a Kindle.”

Patty sniffed. “It’s just not the same. But I guess it has some advantages, especially if you’re traveling.”

“Yeah.” Joey looked around. Besides the towering book collection, there was a wide desk, with a laptop and even more books spread across it. There was an eye-catching purple fainting couch and a couple of oversized armchairs around a coffee table.

The coffee table had photos under the glass top: Patty and the other Ghostbusters, people who were probably Patty’s relatives, people who were probably the Ghostbusters’ happy customers, Patty carrying a visibly tipsy Erin wearing a New Year 2015 tiara, the Mayor (distinctly unhappy, while being kissed on each cheek by Patty and Holtzmann at what looked like a disastrous Christmas party), and others she couldn’t even guess at, like a guy holding up a bag of delivery Chinese food. There were knickknacks everywhere: a bronze Statue of Liberty, a ghost-shaped paperweight covered with cut-glass crystals, an antique type case filled with tiny ceramic animals, a signed basketball, a collection of vintage funeral home hand fans…and then there were the dozen filing cabinets, each painted a different, vivid color.

“How a seat and ask me what you want to know,” said Patty.

Joey made for one of the velvety-looking armchairs. “Well, could you just start by telling me about your archives. What have you been keeping track of, and how?”

“Hmm. Well, long story long: After the Rowan thing wrapped up and we settled in here, there was kind of a … I don’t know, a big old pause. Not much going on. Of course, the other girls always got somethin’ cooking, so I was like, fine, ladies! I’ll find my own damn project! I got together some background history on each of us. And then I documented all the papers and blueprints and all that
from when we were first getting started. And everything I could find from the research that led up to it. I even scanned every page of Abby and Erin’s book—I mean, the one that Rowan marked up.”

Patty made a *yuck* face and then continued. “So that’s all on this hard drive here. I mean, Holtzmann is right; I have to own up to my nerdery.” She shrugged. “But I’m just not a computer geek! So I was doing a lot of Youtube tutorials and Metafilter asks and hitting up my cousin’s baby girl, who does computer security stuff for some big financial company. I think I did an OK job. So, like, the hard drive isn’t connected to the internet. I put together a closed private network, and set up encrypted connections between our devices.”

Patty laughed and shook her head. “Listen to me, sounding like I know what I’m doing. It does get backed up to a cloud service, but it’s pretty well encrypted before that happens. But I also got us up and running on social media, and I’ve put some of the fun stuff on there. I’m not playing it *too* straight—don’t want to get in trouble with Da Mayor—but we’ve got some fans.”

“I’m impressed,” said Joey. It reminded her of setups that she’d seen in resistance fighters’ underground headquarters or in secretive tech startups. “Most people would have just stuck everything in Dropbox and called it a day.”

Patty shook her head. “That’s not my style. If I don’t know how to do something and I need to do it, I’m gonna teach myself.” She sighed. “Though I also used that so-called downtime to get my master’s done. Erin found out I’d gone on leave right after I got hired by the MTA, because I needed to work and even finishing the MA wouldn’t have really helped with *that*. And next thing I knew, she’d gone and talked me into finishing it. But it’s all good, ‘cause the mayor’s office covered the tuition.” Patty did a little shimmy.

“Oh yeah? What’s your master’s in?”

“Public history,” said Patty. “I guess you probably know what that is. Community-focused, but then I got into archiving and preservation too. Someday, I think I’d like to start a museum here. A museum of ghostbusting.”

“I think that’d be amazing. Well, I don’t know how much access you guys will feel comfortable giving me, but I’d love to look at the files at some point.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll have to check with everyone else. But you can take a look at this—“ Patty got up, reached into the the hot pink filing cabinet, and pulled out a large scrapbook. “This is our first yearbook. Sorry about all the stickers…Holtzmann went completely nuts in Paper Source. She didn’t even know 3-D stickers were a thing, let alone archival quality 3-D stickers. I think she kind of fell in love with the whole scrapbooking section, you know? She bought a *looooot* of novelty paper. None of which I’ve seen since she bought it, I gotta say. Anyway, why don’t you take a flip through it? Holtz has gotta drag herself in here at some point soon.”

“Sounds good. Thanks!”

Patty jerked her thumb toward her desk and books, gave a grin, and went off in that direction.

Joey smiled back. It felt impossible to not be in a good mood around Patty. She opened up the scrapbook in her lap, and laughed at the ridiculous photo of the four women that was attached to the front page. They were all covered in green slime, and grinning wildly, except Erin, who had clearly been caught between a grimace and a laugh when the photo was taken. She carefully turned the page.

Some time later, halfway through the scrapbook, Joey groaned and smacked her forehead with the
heel of her hand.

“Uh…you OK over there?” asked Patty, lifting a headphone off of one ear.

“Ha, sorry. I just realized that I was having too much fun looking at the photos and all these comments, so I have to start over.”

“Oh, I got you. Yeah, I don’t know how Abby and Holtzmann got their hands on my metallic Gelly Rolls—"

Out of nowhere, a voice interrupted Patty. “That’s what she said!”

Joey jumped in her seat, and Holtzmann peered over the back. She winked at Joey.

“Baby, that don’t even make sense. You gotta try harder than that,” said Patty firmly.

“Harder? That’s—"

“Oh my lord.” Patty pushed her headphones down around her neck, got up, and dragged Holtzmann toward the other side of the room. “You have a job to do today, you know.”

“Yes, yeah. Top o’the mornin’ to ya, Miss Joey,” Holtzmann said, not resisting Patty at all.

“It’s not really morning anymore, is it!” Abby yelled from the stairwell.

“It’s still antemeridian,” Holtzmann objected. Patty shook her head and let go of her.

“Eleven fifty-eight is NOT MORNING BY ANY REASONABLE DEFINITION!” Abby shouted back.

Holtzmann scratched the back of her neck and looked at Joey. Her mouth quirked down. “Sorry, I overslept.”

“No problem. I waited on this one interviewee for four and a half days,” Joey said. It was true. Of course, that interviewee had been a head of state, but whatever. Ultimately, he’d turned out to have the personality of wet cardboard, and that certainly wasn’t something that she could say of Holtzmann. She put the scrapbook down. “Thanks, Patty. I’ll be back for more.”

Patty nodded and made a shooing gesture. Joey took the hint and followed Holtzmann into the thickets of machinery that made up her lab.

The next 90 minutes made virtually no sense to Joey. She tried to take notes on her tablet, but she was glad that she had her pocket digital recorder with her. Not that she was sure she’d be able to make heads or tails of it later, but Holtzmann was talking way too fast, and she kept thrusting things in Joey’s hands, usually without any obvious (to Joey) connection to what she was talking about. What Joey could understand was fascinating, but whenever Joey said “Oh, cool!” or “That’s amazing!” or even “It does?” it seemed to just make Holtzmann more energetic. She’d bounce, Tigger-like, to the next thing and shoot off a rapid-fire explanation that Joey didn’t understand.

Holtzmann had been dialed up to 11 within the first half hour, and by now Joey was pretty sure that the dial was broken.

For that matter, it was impossible to tell when Holtzmann was joking. She sounded serious about ridiculous things, and vice versa. It didn’t seem likely that the rice-cooker-looking thing in the corner would, if Joey had bumped into it any harder, really have kicked off “an honest-to-god actual China syndrome! We’re talking kilometers into the Earth, disaster movie style!”
But then again, Holtzmann had seemed no less serious when she’d pointed at another contraption and said “The data from that would’ve won a Sakurai prize for sure, if the committee hadn’t been so offended by my Niels Bohr puns. Well, and the limerick.” She’d paused and squinted. “Limericks.” Which, clearly, couldn’t be true.

“Um. Holtzmann?” Joey could finally think for a moment, because Holtzmann had dived into a storage closet. Thinking, however, meant that she had also realized that she was holding a lit Bunsen burner with both hands. She couldn’t see anywhere to put it down within the short range of the tubing attached to it—every surface near her was covered in alarming-looking parts and equipment. And she could not remember how to turn it off. It’d been way, way too long since high school chem class. “Holtzmann!”

“What?” Holtzmann stuck her head out of the closet, and just looked at Joey curiously.

“Um…this?” Joey gestured at the Bunsen burner with her chin.

“Ohhh…huh, what was I gonna do with that?”

Holtzmann reached for it and Joey reflexively held it out toward her. The gas line jerked and the burner started to bobble out of Joey’s hands, but she caught it. “Good thing I caught it by the base,” Joey said cheerfully, only then feeling the wash of adrenaline go through her.

And a split second later, “Ow!” Joey smelled burning hair. Shit.

Holtzmann grabbed the burner, turned it off with a twist, and put it on top of an overturned bucket nearby. Then she peered into Joey’s face. No one should look that good in those ridiculous goggles, Joey found herself thinking.

She heard running footsteps. Abby appeared in the doorway and sniffed. “Holtz! That’d better be you on fire!”

“Ummmm…nope.” Holtzmann stood back and glanced sidelong at Joey. “But NPD, no foul, right?”

“That’s ‘no permanent damage,’” Abby explained. “And I’m sorry you even needed to learn that.”

Joey pulled out her pill case from the pocket of her jeans and used the mirror inside the lid to take a look. The left side of her left eyebrow was gone, and the skin there was a little red. Just a little. And her bangs on that side had gotten a bit of a weird trim. “No permanent damage,” she confirmed.

“I have no idea what you think you were doing, Holtz,” said Abby, fists on her hips. “But you could have given her one of your thirty-eight pairs of goggles.”


Patty, leaning on the wall, shook her head. “Sorry I didn’t get here a minute ago,” she said to Abby. “I had the good headphones on.”

Behind them, Erin peeked into the room. Joey heard her whisper faintly, “Oh my god, now what?”

“No, no, everyone relax,” Joey said. “It was entirely my fault.” Well, more or less.

Abby, Erin, and Patty stared at her skeptically, and even Holtzmann cocked her head to one side.

“I really am fine!” Joey insisted.

Holtzmann waggled her own eyebrows. “You certainly are. Hey, if you want, I could even out your
bangs for you. And your eyebrow will grow back.”

“Yeah, it’s happened before. And this time I have an eyebrow pencil. I mean, normally I don’t have my makeup kit on me when this sort of thing happens, so we’re ahead of the game, really… at least it’s not likely to happen again here, right? Nobody’s bombing anyone.”

“Noooo comment,” said Abby.

Erin leaned over and patted Joey on the shoulder, and then very seriously said, “Do not let her cut your hair.”

“I… won’t?” Joey smiled, but she actually did feel a little shaky. Her guard had been down; she hadn’t really been in field research mode. Maybe she needed to recalibrate her safety expectations. Or just climb out of the rabbit hole. Very little made sense here.

“Yeah, so, we’re probably gonna make you sign a waiver if you decide you want to keep working on this project,” Abby said. Joey didn’t think she was joking, so she just nodded. “And make Holtzmann give you safety goggles and dosimetry—a radiation badge—if you spend much time in the lab. Holtzmann! You gotta pay more attention when we’ve got newbies in here.”

“Maaaybe I’m not firing on all cylinders today,” Holtzmann admitted, briefly sheepish. Then she perked up. “Ha! I guess this date was too hot. Eh? If you’re still speaking to me, let’s go get caffeinated. And have lunch.” She patted her stomach, looking faintly startled as though she’d just remembered that eating was a thing. Joey wondered if she’d even had breakfast.

“…Sure,” said Joey. “Can I, uh… can I borrow some sharp scissors first?”

The coffee shop was all hand-painted lettering, exposed brick, and steel pipe; the sort of place that people might expect Joey to fit into naturally. And she could fake it well enough, but painfully hip places always made Joey feel intensely awkward. She was a little surprised that it was Holtzmann’s kind of place, but then again, she was still a little confused as to the other woman’s personality. Holtzmann seemed to be intensely awkward and to be perfectly self-possessed, at the same time. How did Holtzmann pull that off?

Maybe, Joey thought, Holtzmann’s fashion sense—tweed and kitsch in a blender—meant she was some kind of hipster, and this was her natural habitat… Joey cast an eye over Holtzmann’s scuffed oxfords, completely different socks, striped trousers, jacquard dress shirt, long scarf, weird metal pendant, and tweed vest—with its label sticking up at the nape of her neck. And the banged-up goggles, identical to ones Joey had seen on industrial workers all over eastern Europe and western Asia. And Holtzmann’s hair, pinned into a knot at the back of her head with mismatched hairpins: not artfully, but genuinely haphazardly. And her canvas crossbody bag, stained and—charred, maybe?—but covered in vintage NASA and new SpaceX patches. Patches actually being used to patch holes.

Nah, Joey didn’t think Holtzmann was trying to be cool; she just came by it naturally.

The barista, a teenager with a shaved head and wood-framed glasses, spotted them as they came in, and vaulted over the marble bar. She gave Holtzmann a huge hug. “Hey, Holtz! Who’s your frieeeennd?”

“This is Joey. She’s writing a book about me,” Holtzmann said cheerily. “Basically.”
“Uh, sort of. Hi, nice to meet you…”

“Gaby. Ignore the ‘Gabriela’ on the name tag. Nice to meet you too! Anyone Holtz will put up with is a friend of mine. What should I hook you guys up with today?”

Holtzman slid into a booth and sat on it lengthwise, legs stretched out along the seat. “I can pay, you know,” she said. Her eyes slid to Joey. “Well. I could if I’d remembered my wallet.”

Joey shrugged. This seemed to happen to her a lot. “I can cover it.” Technically. If Holtzmann ordered a croissant, though, Joey’s account might be overdrawn. She tried not to think about lunch.

“No, you don’t have to—Holtzmann’s drinks are always on the house. She…Well, I wouldn’t be here without her.”

Holtzmann coughed. “Ridiculous. No, this place owes me because I’ve given you guys a bunch of kickass ideas for this place! Most of which you’ve ignored.”

“Nitroglycerin-brewed coffee is not a thing!” someone yelled from the back.

“It wasn’t exactly nitrogly—you know what, never mind. Give me something with a lot of different syrups in it!”

“Ah, the usual. And Joey? Yours is on the house too. Holtzmann guest policy…which I just invented.”

“Double ristretto,” said Joey.

“Will do.” Gaby headed back to the espresso bar. Joey wondered what her connection to Holtzmann was. She seemed too young, by fifteen years or so, to be a friendly ex. Maybe something to find out, somewhere down the line.

“I wiki’d you,” Holtzmann said abruptly. She hauled her laptop out of the bag, opened it, and showed it to Joey.

Joey tried not to wince at how Holtzmann was gripping the computer by the top edge of the screen. “You—”

“Looked you up. On the wikis. You’re a polymath!”

“Polym—oh no.” Joey pushed her glasses up her nose a bit and squinted at the Wikipedia entry. She felt her cheeks redden and hoped it wasn’t enough for Holtzmann to notice. Thank goodness her skin wasn’t as pale as the other woman’s. “It actually says that! Ugh…I’ll cop to polyglot, I guess. But other than that, I’m more of a professional dilettante.”

“Three bachelor’s degrees and two minors?”

“Well, exactly. Yeah, that’s kinda my point. I know a little about a lot of things. And it’s not like I went to college three times. I had a scholarship—they still existed at the turn of the millennium, lucky me—and I spent five years in college. If you’ve got that and you’re happy in libraries, aren’t above a little horse-trading of electives, and have zero social life…It’s amazing how much you can do when you never go out.”

“Mmhmm.” Holtzmann set the laptop back down in front of her, adjusted her yellow-lensed glasses, and chewed on her lower lip. “And the master’s degree?”
“Ehhh, that doesn’t count. I only did that because they had a portfolio/project option. I mean, I never went for any kind of PhD. I honestly cannot abide academic writing, so no graduate-level theses or dissertations for me, thank you. Not my skill set.” Joey was being honest, and didn’t regret not trying for a PhD, but she also felt very small, intellectually, in front of Holtzmann.

Holtzmann shrugged. “You don’t need any particular cereal box prize to be a polymath. Patty definitely qualified before we even met her, y’know? You’re a polymath. I’m gonna give you the official stamp.”

Joey didn’t even have time to react before Holtzmann had grabbed Joey’s arm and started writing on it with a felt-tip pen. “Uh. What are you doing?”

But Holtzmann didn’t answer, tongue stuck between her teeth and eyes focused on her work. Joey could see the birdlike bones of Holtzmann’s fingers working. Their apparent delicacy contradicted the strength Joey felt in her callused grip.

Holtzmann released Joey’s arm, and Joey read: ★!!!FUCKIN’ POLYMATH!!!★

“Um,” said Joey.

“…Ohhh, I should have filed a request first, huh.” Holtzmann awkwardly tugged on her earlobe. “My, um, colleagues are just kinda used to it.”

Gaby cleared her throat and put their drinks on the table. “Ma’am, is this woman bothering you?” she asked Joey, with a cocked eyebrow.

“Ha. No, it’s OK. It’s OK.” Joey was genuinely not sure if Holtzmann was testing her, fucking with her, or just…acting natural. She wasn’t sure which possibility was most alarming, for that matter. Either way, she could take whatever Holtzmann dished out.

Gaby nodded and left them alone.

“Good thing I didn’t grab the silver Sharpie,” Holtzmann said, cheerfully. “You want me to sign this?”

“…Why not.”

“Hi Abby! Hi Erin! We’re back,” Holtzmann announced. Well, she was back again. Before they’d finished at the coffeehouse, Holtzmann had finally remembered Joey’s financial predicament, and had sprinted back to the firehouse to get some cash from Patty. She had promised Patty that she would skip her cheesesteaks this week, or at least actually find her wallet and buy them herself. Joey seemed not to have noticed that Holtzmann had been “in the bathroom” a long time, and didn’t question her when she said she’d found a twenty in a pocket. Though now it occurred to Holtzmann that if she had actually checked through all of her pockets in all of her layers, she might have found some cash in less time than it had taken to run to HQ and back. Oh well.

Erin glanced up from her desk. “What’s up next?”

“I’m ready to conclude the introduction to my lab and move onto the good stuff! If Ms. Betancourt is up to it…”

“That was…the introduction?” Joey blinked rapidly. “I—I think I need to go back for more coffee.
Do they do IVs? Never mind. Yeah, of course I’m ready for more! I’m barely warmed up myself.” She pulled out her tablet and brandished it at Holtzmann.

“ Barely warmed up? Sooo…you’re saying our first two dates weren’t hot enough?”

“Our—uh. No, no, they weren’t that hot. I don’t see any wildfires, flamethrowers, or incendiary devices around here, so…” Joey gave an exaggerated yawn. “I’m not even sure why I got out of bed this morning.”

Pretty good, pretty good. “You’re mouthy. I like that. I bet you haven’t changed the oil on a mobile nuke, though. We can change that. Are we getting warmer now?”

“Holtzmann, you’re a menace!” Joey proclaimed.

“And you’re a girl who knows how to give a compliment.” Holtzmann bowed appreciatively.

Abby stared at them, version 4.2 of her analyzer helmet askew and unfastened on her head. “Really? You two are out of sight for one hour and now you’re a double act?”

“Yes. No. Maybe,” Holtzmann said. Let Abby wonder!

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to let Patty take things back over,” said Abby. “Too much exposure to Holtzmann can be dangerous,” she informed Joey. “And you don’t have your dosimetry yet.”

Holtzmann tried not to visibly deflate. She knew Abby was kidding about her being dangerous, but…well, whatever. She did have an enormous to-do list. More like a list of lists. There were a lot of things on it calling her name.

“But…Holtzmann was going to explain ethereal polarization when we got back. I want to see how it works with the PKE sink,” Joey protested.

Holtzmann couldn’t stop a grin. Joey had been listening to her! Usually Holtzmann didn’t bother to look for signs of comprehension when she was explaining things. Half the time, it was just to think through a topic herself. The rest of the time, it was her listeners’ job to sink or swim. She had been watching Joey, though, and while the writer clearly couldn’t really keep up with the science, she did grasp more than Holtzmann had expected (and had clearly read Ghosts from Our Past).

On the other hand, Holtzmann did have all those things she wanted to work on. Mark III of the proton pack was never to be spoken of again. And that meant Mark IV was overdue. Way overdue. Some ideas had begun tickling the back of her brain while she was explaining other things to Joey, and she needed to be away from people to visualize them and spin them around, see what they might be good for. Her fingers began to itch. Yeah, going back to work would be good. How had she gotten so distracted, anyway?

“Oh, lord. Whatever. Go on.” Abby made shooing motions at them.

Holtzmann froze, conflicted. She didn’t know what to do. Not her favorite feeling, not by a long shot.

Then Erin got up from her desk and stepped in.

“I think Abby’s suggestion earlier was a good one,” she said. “Why don’t I get Joey set up with dosimetry and safety gear, and then give her a quick tour of what Abby and I are doing. That way, she’ll have an overview of what all four of us are doing.”
“I’m good either way,” said Joey. She smiled at Holtzmann and then looked at Erin. “I wouldn’t say no to some safety gear.”

Holtzmann felt herself relax. She jammed her hands into her pockets. “Always keep ’em wanting more,” she said. She nodded to Joey and gave in to the sweet relief of the path up to her lab, by herself.

The first thing that Holtzmann wanted to tackle was an idea for attenuating the distortion and defocusing of the plasma beam. That would then reduce the unwieldy length of the total wand package. In fact, as she ran her fingers over some of her favorite welding equipment, her ideas were coming more and more into focus. A few minutes at the workbench, and she'd be able to run a test. Normal people would run a simulation or three first, she supposed.

Holtzmann snorted to herself and kicked the door to the lab open. Simulations were for kids.

Erin handed Joey a pair of goggles, and Joey tried them on. The first pair had been a little too small.

“These seem fine. Thanks,” she said, and she tucked them into a pocket. These had clear lenses, not yellow ones like Holtzmann’s.

“Sure,” said Erin, and she closed up the locker where the goggles and dosimetry badges were kept. Abby glanced over at them from her desk and gave them a distracted thumbs-up. She was clearly focused on fiddling with the helmet attached to her head and intermittently checking the data streaming across her laptop screen.

“I hope you’re not too weirded out by all this,” said Patty. She was wandering around the office doing stretches and reading The Death and Life of American Cities. “I didn’t get the safety memo until after Times Square, and then I was retroactively real weirded out.”

“You didn’t actually file that OSHA complaint, did you?” asked Erin. She was smiling, but Joey thought she heard a touch of actual anxiety in Erin’s voice.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Patty grinned. She turned a page and said no more.

Erin sighed. “Anyway, Holtzmann is a bit of a menace, but not on purpose. She just has different priorities, I guess you could say.” Sotto voce, she added, “and Abby let her get away with far too much for far too long! I don’t want to cramp her style, because we need all of her creativity and fire, but—well, not so much with the literal fire. And worse.”

Without looking up from her book, Patty nodded solemnly.

“I…I see. Um, speaking of which, is Holtzmann always like that? I don’t mean charmingly reckless, I mean…” Joey gestured vaguely with her hands and then topped it off with a wink and a smirk. She wasn’t sure if Erin or Patty, who still lingered nearby, would get what she meant.

“Gonna let you take that one, baby,” said Patty, with a faint smile.

“Ah.” Erin smoothed her already perfectly ironed collar. “Well. Yes. Don’t take it personally, either one way or the other.”

Patty coughed. “Basically, she’s like that with everyone, but especially new people, people she knows really well, people she likes, and people she doesn’t like. So I guess that’s basically
everyone.” She glanced at Erin. “Not to mention people she thinks have a stick up their ass, and people who get particularly flustered by it. You know, like a cat who figures out that you’re allergic to cats?”

“Don’t look at me when you say that,” Erin protested.

“Good to know,” said Joey.

“Yeah, it took me a while to get her to stop kissing my hand,” Patty mused. “It’s cute and all, but it’s like that one time in the butler cafe in Tokyo. It just makes me feel awkward as heck.”

“The butler—you know what, I’m just going to ask later.” Erin turned back to Joey. “Shall we see if Abby’s up to helping me explain what we’re working on?”

“Sure,” said Joey. Erin made a “hold on” gesture and went to talk to Abby.

“If she asks if you want to see the dance, say no,” Patty whispered in Joey’s ear, before wandering away again.

Once again, Joey wasn’t sure what was a joke and what wasn’t. Maybe all of it was a joke? Maybe none of it was? On the one hand, the place was mostly like a real office. Papers and filing cabinets. A conference table. Coffee cups. Laptops. A huge printer-copier with torn-open packs of paper next to it. Normal sounds, too, like the phone ringing in the background, and the murmur of their reception’s voice. All pretty ordinary stuff. But then there were all the strange things that they said. (And that Holtzmann had already shown her.)

Joey sighed. When they were all a little more comfortable together, she’d start pinning them down on what was real and what wasn’t, but for now, they were still getting to know each other. It was going pretty well, but she knew from past experience that you couldn’t rush the trust thing.

“Abby,” called Erin as they approached her desk. “Are you up for doing a little, say, Cliff’s Notes version of our project?”

“Ahhh…sure. Just let me adjust this setting a bit—”

And that was when the alarm went off. Red lights along the wall flashed, and a map of NYC suddenly came down along a wall behind the conference table in the back. A green spot glowed on it, off to the left.

“Oh yeah, that’s my baby,” yelled Patty. She put her books down on the table and ran over to the map.

“Training Kevin to use that took months off my life,” grumbled Erin. “But Patty was right. It really was an excellent idea.”

Abby stripped off the helmet quickly, stood up and put an arm around Erin. “Time for us get suited up. Joey, you might want to just…stay back.”

Abby wasn’t kidding. Joey flattened herself around the wall as the three Ghostbusters sprinted around the room: getting a report from the receptionist, grabbing items from here and there, and changing into their jumpsuits. They did this sort of behind their desks, but not really; Joey had the impression they wouldn’t have bothered if she hadn’t been around.

“Not there!” shouted Abby, suddenly glancing Joey's way. Joey heard a noise and looked up. A metal cabinet was lowering above her head. She dashed to the other side of the room and saw that
the cabinet held their proton packs and some other equipment that Joey couldn’t identify. The three women ran for it and shouldered their packs.

One was left. The label read HOLTZMANN. Oh—Joey recognized the sidearms built into that pack and only that pack. Holtzmann had not been joking when she’d claimed that she was the one who rescued Joey.

Joey pulled on her jacket and slung her bag over her shoulder. Where was Holtzmann, anyway?

Holtzmann was well into the weeds of a proton pack’s quadropole assembly. It was currently disassembled, spread across the workbench along with an array of potential new materials. Hmmm, so many choices, and all of them deeeelightful.

…Why did it smell like sushi?

It took her a moment to realize that the bust alarm was going off. It wasn’t as loud in the second floor lab area as it was in the rest of the firehouse, so as to avoid startling her and causing a repeat of the June Incident. But it had an additional component here, devised by Patty based on something she’d read: a tiny release of aerosolized allyl isothiocyanate—wasabi, essentially. It definitely grabbed Holtzmann’s attention, ensuring that she wouldn’t work through a call, and that thus they would avoid a repeat of the July Incident.

“Aw, shitsnacks,” Holtzmann grumbled. Of course she was stoked for a bust, but she’d have to stabilize some of the components before she got up. The minimum level of danger on what she could leave sitting around had expanded beyond the original parameters of “instant liquefaction or worse,” and now it was a real pain in the ass.

But what if…she simply popped the volatile bits in a ghost trap? Sure, why not. Time was of the essence, after all.

Holtzmann did just that, then ran down the stairs. She kept stopping to take off things that she couldn’t wear under the coveralls or that bugged her too much to wear under them, leaving the steps behind her strewn with her shoes, vest, scarf, and dress shirt. She reached the bottom of the stairs wearing just her camisole, leggings, and socks. And the necklace, of course; that never really came off.

“Sorry I’m late to the party!” Holtzmann jumped into her coveralls and started trying to put on the proton pack while hopping on one foot and trying to work the leg of the coveralls up on the other.

“Can I help?”

“Uhhh—sure?”

Then Joey was trying to tug the shoulders of the jumpsuit, trapped under the proton pack, so that the front could be closed, and then carefully get the straps into the right place. Holtzmann didn’t really know Joey well enough to feel 100% comfortable having Joey’s hands on her skin (Holtzmann touching her was an entirely different thing, naturally). But this freed up Holtzmann to tug at the pant legs and zip up the front of the uniform, so it was cool.

Erin looked at her watch. “Could be better, Holtz.”

“No probs! I’ll make up a couple minutes on the drive!”
Erin blanched and started to say something, but Joey interrupted. “I’m coming with you.” She pointed to her messenger bag. “I brought the good camera today just in case. I wasn’t planning to take it out in the firehouse yet, but this I have to capture!”

Holtzmann was already nodding and tugging on her boots, but she stopped when she saw the concerned faces the other three were making.

“I don’t think our liability insurance would cover this,” Erin started.

“It’s really not safe,” Abby said at the same time.

“Trust me: do something safer and more fun, like go hang out in the subway at 3 AM,” said Patty.

“You guys. I have my own insurance, and I’ve been in worse situations. And it’s not like I haven’t seen ghosts before!” Joey’s dark eyes were gleaming. She looked ready to go.

Patty glanced at the map. “Y’all, we do not have time to discuss this. The bust is clear out in Staten Island.”

Abby sighed. “Stuff her in the Ecto and we’ll explain why it’s not OK on the way.”

Joey grinned. Holtzmann recognized the expression—she was pretty sure she made it herself when she got the rest of them to make a tiny concession that she intended to fully exploit.

“Why don’t you ride up front?” suggested Erin to Joey, gesturing toward the garage.

Holtzmann laughed and fastened her gloves as she jogged past them. Her driving was a perfectly pragmatic approach to the situation, but she was well aware that it terrified the others. She glanced over her shoulder and sang back to them, “Oh, Erin, you’re so cute when you’re evil!”

Chapter End Notes

Looks like some action coming up! Or..."action"? Ho ho ho. Alas, there will probably be at least 2.5 weeks before the next update, because I have to give and grade some finals AND start and finish my Yuletide story. But I'll do my best to get back to it.

Thank you for your patience and comments! <3

10 points if you can guess who Gaby is and which other story she appears in!

- ERRATA -

_The Language of Food_ by Dan Jurafsky (some entries can be read for free on his [blog](#))

_Wasabi fire alarm_, winner of an [Ig Nobel Prize](#) (you bet your ass Holtzmann subscribes to, and probably writes for, their sponsor--the [Annals of Improbable Research](#))

NOTE - ORIGINAL CHAPTER TITLE: Hot Enough For Ya?
There's something strange happening at a Staten Island historic site. Joey tags along as the Ghostbusters go into action.

I wanted to post this now in order to try to salvage *something* of this New Year's Day. It may be a little less polished than usual!

Holtzmann brought the Ecto-3 to a sudden stop in front of an extremely old-looking house. Maybe even pre-colonial, Joey thought. They hadn’t talked much about their destination on the way over.

“You OK? You were pretty quiet.” Erin held Joey’s door open for her. Holtzmann and Abby were already unloading their gear from the back of the vehicle.

“I didn’t really have a chance to say anything,” Joey pointed out. It was true that the ride had been mildly nausea-inducing. But while Patty concentrated on her phone and Holtzmann drove, Erin and Abby had distracted Joey pretty well by vividly describing the various horrible fates that a newbie civilian might face at a bust. “Anyway, I know a long-tail boat operator outside of Bangkok who could give Holtzmann a run for her money. Picture…kind of a pointy canoe, with a VW diesel engine strapped to it. On a stick.”

Erin shuddered. “Please don’t give her any ideas. C’mon, you can at least go up to the door with us.”

Joey grinned. You took what you could get in these situations, and eventually you worked your way further in.

Erin got herself geared up, and Joey followed the four women toward the house. Erin looked good in the jumpsuit. Actually, all of them did. But more importantly, the jumpsuits looked genuinely functional, with large pockets and gussets. Joey briefly entertained the idea of getting a knockoff made for fieldwork, one of these days when she had extra money again. She didn’t want a copy of Holtzmann’s giant silver duffel bag, though—it was flashy, and it looked annoyingly bulky. Holtzmann looked even smaller in contrast to the bag, but she shouldered it with swagger anyway.

It had taken them nearly thirty minutes to get here, including crossing the Verranzo-Narrows bridge (though it should have taken an hour, for a driver with even a barely functional sense of self-preservation). Still, thirty minutes? That seemed like a long time in an emergency. Surely busts couldn’t be all that dangerous, if they could spend that long getting somewhere. Maybe the mayor ought to get them a helicopter.

She aired this thought to Abby as they approached a sign reading HUGUENOT-BRETON HOUSE. Abby grinned ruefully, and Joey noticed that she had cute dimples, too, just like
Holtzmann and Patty. "That'd be nice," Abby said, "I'd totally fight Holtzmann to be the one to get the pilot's license..."

"Here we are at this incredible historic site, and I'm gonna be airsick," announced Patty. "Airsick! Right here on the damn historic sidewalk." She glared at Joey.

"...but no, I can't imagine the mayor endorsing that. Besides the cost, that'd be pretty darned high visibility. The highest."

"Nobody's died yet because we didn't make it in time, though heaven knows someday one of us may die due to our efforts to make it in time." Erin coughed pointedly toward Holtzmann, but Holtzmann was charging ahead of them like a small child running toward a puppy. "People do get hurt, though, and things get smashed, when it's a Class II or up. And then there's the whole possession thing--"

Erin was cut off by the door opening, but Joey caught that Patty was about to interrupt her anyway. Hmmm. Clearly something going on there.

"Well hey there, hot stuff," Holtzmann said to the woman who opened the door. Holtzmann doffed an invisible hat.

("Why did we let her get in front?" Erin groaned.)

Abby pushed past Holtzmann. "Sorry, ma'am. Ms. Navarro, yes? The caretaker?"

Joey craned her neck, but couldn't quite see in. Too many Ghostbusters in the way.

"Ah, yes. I'm glad you're here. The sun is getting low."

"Could I see your ID?" asked Erin. "Thanks. We have some paperwork for you, just the standard kind of thing, you know...Great. Thanks. Could you go over the details of the incidents with us?"

Ms. Navarro told a brief story that, despite the caretaker's matter-of-fact tone, raised goosebumps on Joey's arms. She focused on taking notes as the woman spoke. Four days ago, as the caretaker was closing up at dusk, it began: trails of glowing mist that arose and then faded away when she walked through them. As she did her final walk-through of the house, she had been startled by repeated knocking sounds that seemed to jump around the house—and the knocks came not just from the walls, but from under the floors.

At this point in the story, Abby interjected "Huh, that's just a Class I entity!" as though Ms. Navarro would know that that meant. Joey had read a (very hard to get) copy of *Ghosts from Our Past*, so she at least had a vague idea of what it was. She jotted it down in parentheses: *(AY: Class I).*

Ms. Navarro had visited a nurse practitioner friend immediately afterward, rather sensibly, but showed no signs of any physical ailments. Everything was fine the next day till dusk began to fall. Earlier than the previous night's incident, Ms. Navarro was confronted with spectral hands reaching up from the floor, and twice, while she was attempting to take photos, her tablet was knocked out of her hands through some invisible force. She heard a distant, muttering voice fading in and out around her as she walked through the house. *(AY: Class II?)*

On the third day, again slightly earlier than the previous two days, the caretaker saw a faintly glowing figure disappearing around each corner as she approached. It was humanlike, but its lower half faded away into nothing. The voice was louder, though still no more intelligible. And this time, her tablet was torn from her hands and smashed against the wall. When Ms. Navarro suddenly started her engine to drive away, she saw a more intensely glowing figure standing at the door of the house. It looked far more recognizably human, with a distinct face and old-fashioned clothes. When
she got home, she found a disgusting greenish slime on the back of her car. *(EG + AB: Class II moving to Class III?!)*

Ms. Navarro had finally accepted that something supernatural was happening, and to keep the house’s controversial new restoration project from being derailed due to negative publicity, she eventually talked herself into calling the Ghostbusters.

“And here is some paperwork for you,” Ms. Navarro said. “You must understand: this is one of the oldest houses in New York. It’s almost 350 years old. You *cannot* damage it—at least, not any more than it’s already damaged. Yes, we’ve just started restoring it, but we can’t easily replace materials this old. Take a walk through the house, please, and be extremely careful. Do you understand?”

Brief silence, broken by Patty: “Yes, ma’am. I—uh, we understand the significance of this site. Don’t we, ladies?” There was a steely undertone to her voice.

The other Ghostbusters quickly nodded, and they signed the papers. Joey could see Holtzmann fidgeting.

“What about her?” asked Ms. Navarro sharply.

“Oh, her?” Abby glanced back at Joey. “That’s Joey. She…she’s a writer. She just came along for the ride. We’d like you to wait outside with her, Ms. Navarro. Liability issues, you know.”

“I certainly do.”

Well, that was a clever move. Now Joey would have a lot more trouble finding a way to get in. She realized that might actually have to stay outside.

“All right, let’s get this show on the road!” Abby adjusted the pack on her shoulders and started forward, but was stopped short when Patty hooked a finger into her collar.

*After we follow Ms. Navarro’s instructions,*” Patty said.

“…Right.”

The door closed behind them, leaving Ms. Navarro and Joey standing awkwardly outside of the white-walled house.

“Nice to meet you,” said the caretaker, finally. She wore a tailored blue shirt and cigarette pants, with a pair of silver studs in her ears. With her close-cropped silver hair, she looked a lot like a soft butch version of a middle-aged Lena Horne. Joey could see why Holtzmann had called her hot stuff. Or, heck, maybe looks weren’t even part of the Holtzmann equation when it came to choosing her flirting targets. Who knew.

“Likewise,” said Joey. She needed a pretext to at least *look* inside, so she turned back toward the house and gestured to the window on the left. “So how’s the house laid out? What’s this room on the left? Is it OK if I take photos?” She pulled her good camera out and slung it around her neck.

Ms. Navarro took the bait and gestured Joey toward the nearest window. “It’s a public site, so feel free to take photos of the grounds and interior. Just…no publicity on the paranormal thing right now, are we clear?”
Holtzmann felt her skin prickling. The PKE meter wasn’t even spinning yet; more like she was just really ready for things to kick off. They’d done the initial tour as requested. Erin always wanted to anyway, on the rare occasions when they had the luxury of strolling around a place before leaping into spectral combat. But now, it was time for the critter to show itself. She hefted her proton wand in her hands.

“Don’t jiggle it,” Abby admonished her. They stepped under the low, bare wood lintel dividing the oldest part of the house from the slightly newer part of the house. Abby and Holtzmann were in front, with Erin and Patty behind. The PKE meter continued to do nothing.

“I’m not. I’m adjusting it. That’s different.” Then, under her breath, “I’ll jiggle my own equipment any time I want.” Holtzmann felt a little bit of dampness under the palms of her busting gloves. They were a lot heaver and thicker than the ones she usually wore around the lab. Maybe that was another thing to look into. Materials science! Not an area she knew a ton about, but now that she thought of it, the field might hold a lot of potential for ghostbusting gear potential.

“Come on, come on,” urged Patty. “I want to get this over with and go home, where it’s not creepy and chilly and dark. I mean, I’ve been wanting to see this place, but not like this!”

Holtzmann danced from foot to foot as Abby proceeded carefully toward the next door, holding her meter. “Hold up, I think I got something.” Sure enough, the meter was lighting up.

“Which way, which way?”

“Shh, Holtzy—you hear that?” Patty swept her flashlight around the room.

“The floorboards creaking? Yeah, been hearing that since we got here.”

“Oh. Well…yeah.”

Holtzmann reached behind her to give Patty’s stomach a little pat, but she kept her eyes on Abby.

“Maybe this way.” Abby shook the PKE meter a little, as though she could get a clearer reading that way.

Holtzmann stifled a tsk. True, you could get better readings with a little shaking/thwacking/percussive maintenance for some of their equipment, but not for the PKE meter… hmm. Was that a sound? Not a floorboard, not the wind, but a barely audible keening.

“Holtzmann…come back to this plane of existence, please.”

Holtzmann shook herself. Erin was looking at her. “You went all quiet and, um, you know, listen-y.”

“…Yeah. You guys don’t hear that?”

Erin narrowed her eyes at Holtzmann, but then she nodded and pointed out toward the opposite wall. “From that direction, right? I hear it now.”

“Well, that’s the direction the PKE meter is sort of shrugging in,” said Abby. “Let’s go.”

They eventually found themselves outside, in the open area behind the house. A cold, blue-tinted streetlight was attached to a wooden post in the far left corner of the clearing. Between the light and the building, there was a pile of dirt. Directly across from them, and to the right of the light, was a
fallen wall made of large, rounded stones.

“Hey, this is good. If it manifests out here, we won’t have to worry about damaging the buildings,” Patty said.

Abby gave Patty a look.

“I’m just sayi—” They all jumped as blue light flared in the clearing. A specter rushed toward them, moving so quickly that Holtzmann couldn’t even get a good look at it. It circled behind them in a glowing streak, and as it hurtled through the building behind them, they heard the floorboards and windows clatter. “That was not our fault,” Patty muttered under her breath.

The ectoplastic manifestation drifted down, hovering midway between them and the ruined wall. It was at least a Class III entity. Floating, full-torso, possibly animating, possibly anchored, but no evidence for the latter two yet, or for its corporeality vs. vaporousness. And it definitely had potential to be a Class IV. Old-timey skirts, a distinct face, hair writhing around its head…and dark pits for its eyes.

Something was off about the specter. It blurred every second or so, which was a funky new thing that Holtzmann hadn’t seen before. Exciting! She glanced quickly at Abby’s gear to be sure that the data recorders clipped to her waistband were on. Good. They’d have crunchy, delicious data when they were done.

Holtzmann slid her bag off of her shoulder and unzipped it so that the trap would be easy to grab. Then she stepped out, proton wand pointed at the ghost. “Everybody ready?”

Patty grabbed her by the shoulder. “Hold on though! I did some research in the car. I can find out who this is, and maybe we could just fix their unfinished business and they could move on up! Abby and Erin, didn’t you write that in your book? If you get a Class IV identity established…?”

Erin nodded and whispered back, “That’s our hypothesis. Because of resonance, right, and the interaction of—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know the theories.” Holtzmann squinted at the hovering specter. Sometimes she failed at reading body language, but she knew violent anger when she saw it. On the other hand, banishing an entity by resolving a resonance issue would be a new thing, with even more tasty data. “’K. I’ll go introduce myself properly, and then invite it to a tea party.”

“Hey, don’t just run off.” Abby put a hand on Holtzmann’s arm. She looked over at Erin and Patty. “Hmm. I guess if the restoration work has already started, something could’ve gotten disturbed.” The others nodded. “OK. Fine. Holtz, go for it. Patty, see what you can do. Erin and I will keep it in our sights.”

Patty nodded and started typing into her phone, muttering about bodices and headstones and Huguenots and other arcana.

Holtzmann lowered her proton wand and strolled closer to the specter. The area surrounding it seemed extra dark somehow. “Hey, lady. My name’s Holtzmann. What’s yours? You got a problem we can help you with? You lose something?”

The entity just stared at her. It reminded her a bit of that amazing first encounter with Gertie, but this entity looked older and far less glamorous. And it was dressed a little like a scullery maid from a Renaissance Faire play, not like an evil Victorian party girl. No smirk, either. “Hey, uh, Patty?” Holtzmann didn’t take her eyes off of the ghost. “Would our chickie speak English?”
“…Probably not,” Patty called back. “But you’re not really speaking to it anyway, is what I think. Just some kind of basic psychic communication. So it don’t matter one bit. Speak Esperanto if you want to. Or Klingon. I bet you know Klingon.”

“Hmm, interesting theory,” said Erin. “Really interesting. It might fit with the argument that they’re not really sentient, or at least not sapient.”

“Shhh. Let’s see what happens.” Abby cleared her throat and added “and anyway that argument is dumb and wrong, because—”

Holtzmann quit listening to them and addressed the entity again. “Right. So, whatcha want?”

The ghost’s eyeless sockets turned toward the pile of dirt.

“Holtz!” Patty again. “Name might be Tourneur, Jeannette Tourneur. Could be Marie though. And hey! These early Dutch guys did their burials on their own property. No Uncle Bill for them! So maybe bones, or some kind of inconspicuous grave marker? We’re talking real basic. We don’t even think they did gravestones origin—”

“Roger! Thanks, Pats!”

“OK, Erin and me are gonna check the dirtpile,” Abby said. “Holtz, see if you can get the ghost to say something.”

Holtzmann nodded. But something was going on with the specter. It kept rapidly twitching toward the dirtpile, and then twitching back in the direction of the Ghostbusters, like a dog that couldn’t decide between sausages on one side and hamburgers on the other. That metaphor is not encouraging, she informed herself. Ghostbusters are not ghost kibble.

“Guys, I’m not sure—” Holtz began. That was when the ghost moved back—a surprise move, as far as Holtzmann was concerned—so that it was hovering over the ruined wall. There was a tiny pause. What the hell was it doing?

Things clicked together in her brain, and she realized: the stone wall. It wanted the stones.

“Duck!” Holtz yelled. She whipped around to see if the others had gotten the message. Abby and Erin were frozen, just a few steps out from Patty, and Patty was still looking at her phone. Holtzmann heard scraping and rattling behind her. “GET DOWN!”

A howling sound arose out of the darkness. Before Holtzmann could even see if the others were safe, and before she could whirl around to fire at the ghost, the air was knocked out of her lungs. Her vision went black and starry.

Well, that’s a blunt object impact. She knew what those felt like. And it had lifted her off of her feet. That wasn’t great. This part would be over in a moment, though; she would tuck in her arms to avoid breaking her fall with her hands, because she needed those, but either way, landing was definitely gonna—

Holtzmann landed hard and rolled once or twice. Yep, sure enough, it hurt like hell.

She was lying face down. Her hands and arms seemed to be functional. Her right shoulder and side were in pain, but not in an ER kind of way. Her feet were…in something soft? And something was beeping faintly. And she had to get up and stop the ghost and see if her girls were OK.

Holtzmann reminded herself to breathe as she got up onto her hands and knees and then clambered
to her feet. It was irritating in these situations, how slow body parts could be to respond sometimes.

She got her wand back into her hands and then stepped back involuntarily. Abby, Erin, and Patty were crouched against the wall of the house, firing their proton wands at the specter but not really reaching it, because the clearing was a hellacious tornado of swirling stones. That was how she’d been hit from the side, Holtzmann realized.

She could see that they were yelling to each other, trying to make a plan, but it was impossible to hear anything over the roar of the stone vortex. The others seemed OK, but the slow, steady movement of the ghost toward them meant that they wouldn’t be for long. Probably it was using so much kinetic energy to animate the stones—oh yeah, tick the box on “animating,” for sure—that it couldn’t move quickly.

Holtzmann braced herself, fired up her wand, and aimed at the specter.

Almost immediately, she realized two things: One, even if the proton beam broke apart some of the stones, there were just too many. The odds of any significant portion of the energy getting through to the ghost were virtually nil. Maybe with enough time, but that brought her to thing number two: Her pack had been damaged. It was beeping in the code that meant the cryocooler tube had been compromised. If the cryocooler went, the pack would overheat, and that meant—well. It meant the sort of thing that, if described, would make Erin do the confused “are you serious or messing with me, because I’m freaked out either way” face, and make Abby’s nostrils flare, and make Patty do the “someday you’re going to get us all killed” headshake.

She couldn’t let that happen. She needed to save her last shot, and do something else to get the specter distracted enough that the others could successfully take it down. Maybe she could get it to use its kinetic energy some other way.

Time had slowed for Holtzmann as all of these things ran haphazardly through her head. As she released the controls on the proton wand and let it return to its holder, she felt something hard pressing against the sole of her right boot, in the dirt pile. She reached down for it impulsively. If nothing else, maybe she could throw a rock herself.

It was a rounded rock, satisfyingly palm-sized. And in the brightness of the LED bulb, she could just make out the faintest of indentations, worn away to almost nothing. Initials: JT, and a rough shape that she realized was a death’s head.

If it was all psychic communication anyway, maybe the ghost would be able to understand her over the roar. “HEY! Jeannette! Is this what you’re looking for?” She waved the small stone over her head. (Ouch—stretching up made her side throb.) “Courtesy call for Ms. Tourneur! Please come to the nearest freaky glowing courtesy phone!”

The tornado of stones around the ghost slowed a little. Holtzmann heard Abby yelling. “Holtz! What the heck are you doing?”

Holtzmann took a deep breath. (Ouch.) She trusted Abby and the others to figure it out. “C’mon, girl! C’mon!” The ghost started moving toward her, and as it increased its speed, the tornado started to break apart and the stones started to drift toward the ground.

Holtzmann slid the little engraved one down the front of her uniform, where it rested awkwardly inside her sports bra. She started backing away from the ghost as fast as she could manage. If the others followed and got it caught in their beams in time, maybe she’d be able to run back and trap it. If not…she’d have to see just how much she could squeeze out of her proton pack without catching her teammates in the consequences. Still jogging backwards, Holtzmann pulled out her wand and
lifted it toward the oncoming ghost.

Chapter End Notes

More to come within 3–4 days, I hope. I wouldn't usually break it off here, but hey, imperfect progress is probably the best we can hope for right now anyway.
The Ghostbusters take on a violent spirit, Joey tries to convince them she can handle herself, and Holtzmann drives the Ecto. Awkward conversations abound.

“Stay here, ma’am!” Joey hoped she sounded authoritative enough that Ms. Navarro wouldn’t follow her. But between the flash of eerie light and the sound of an angry rockslide, there was no way that Joey was going to keep waiting out front. She pelted down the gravel driveway, one hand gripping her camera.

“Holy fuck!” Times Square had been otherworldly and overwhelming, difficult to process. This was something else entirely. Joey took a burst of photos from the edge of the clearing.

In the clearing, a ghost that looked like it had lain quiet for three or more centuries was moving toward Holtzmann, who was backing quickly away from it—out of the circle of harsh light from the light post above, toward the surrounding shadows. Three crackling, twisting proton beams ripped the air between the other three Ghostbusters and their target, causing a few rocks that were drifting in the air to explode into fragments.

Then their combined fiery energy broke through the stones and reached its target. The ghost writhed in the grip of the beams, but it kept moving toward Holtzmann. The team, holding tightly onto their wands, advanced toward it. But why wasn’t Holtzmann shooting it?

“What the—Hey! Get out of here,” Holtzmann yelled. Even though Joey couldn’t see her eyes—she was several yards away, and the lenses of her safety glasses only reflected the ghostly battle—Holtzmann was visibly startled. She looked as though she’d forgotten that Joey existed till just that moment.

Patty, who was a little closer to Joey, glanced over at her. “Oh come on! Get your butt moving!”

Joey pretended she hadn’t heard and moved up to crouch behind what was left of a stone wall. She adjusted her camera settings to account for the weird lighting situation in front of her and took more photos.

Holtzmann stopped moving back and took aim at the ghost. “This one’s really got a wild hair up its ass! She’s not going in the box. Amp it up! 3…2…1—let’s go!”

“Take ‘er down!” Abby shouted, and they let loose. The crackling energy of the beams fluctuated wildly as they leaned into their shots. The ghost wailed and thrashed, and Joey dropped her camera to cover her ears. The shriek was like a spike right through her ears and into her brain. (Thank goodness for neck straps.)

Holtzmann’s beam, a little weaker than the others, lit up the short distance between her and the ghost. “Almost there!”
“Pistol time, maybe?” Erin shouted, sounding anxious.

“Nah! I think we’re goo—”

The wailing got even louder. Joey pressed her ears between one hand and her shoulder and tried to take a few more photos. The ghost was being stretched, pulled, distorted, like a reflection breaking apart. It lashed from one direction to another. Erin yelled something directly at Joey, but this time, Joey really couldn’t hear her.

The ghost, looming toward Joey’s position, burst apart. Too late, she realized why Erin had shouted at her. Joey curled her body over her camera, and then…splat.

Finally, there was quiet. Just for a moment, and then Erin said, “Don’t lift your head yet if you don’t want it in your mouth and eyes. Hang on.” A moment later, Joey felt gentle hands wrap a towel around her head. Then there was a cold and terrible slickness moving down the nape of her neck, like a blob of forgotten, malevolent hair gel. She straightened up carefully.

“Well, it could be worse,” said Abby, looking her over.

“Trust me, I know.” Erin, sounding tired, handed Joey another towel. “Looks like it missed your camera. That shirt’s probably a goner, though. Your jeans…well, it depends on how much you like them. For now, we’ll just wipe you down and then pull the protector over the front seat.”

“Does this happen a lot?” Joey wiped herself off as well as she could. The ectoplasm was obnoxiously clingy, and she really wanted to ask if it was dangerous. They weren’t acting like it was, but who knew where their standards for “dangerous” were set.

“Ectoplasm? Yeah. Random civilians interrupting our operation? Not so much. People usually have the good sense to run,” Abby said, pointedly. She stowed her wand back in her pack and put her hands on her hips.

“I got some good photos, I think.” Joey opted to ignore Abby’s clear message. “I’m not a pro or anything, but to misquote the saying, the best camerawoman is the one you’ve got on location.”

“We are definitely gonna have to have a talk, though.” Patty frowned at Joey and Joey couldn’t help ducking her head a little. “But man, I wish Jeannette hadn’t gone off like that. I wanted to try out the whole ‘resolving unfinished business’ thing. Put that little proto-grave-marker somewhere nice or whatever, see if she’d sashay off into the light.”

Holtzmann approached them. She looked at Joey as though she were about to say something, but then she spoke to Abby instead. “I’m here for my scolding.”

“What, about Jo—ohhh, your wand. Yeah, we’re gonna have to talk about that too. I saw that something was going on with it.” Abby stepped around to look at Holtzmann’s proton pack and then sucked air through her teeth. “Jesus, Holtz. What the heck were you thinking? Come on, let’s get everything except the safety systems powered down.”

“The packs aren’t very safe when they’re damaged,” Erin said quietly to Joey. “I mean, or when they’re not, but you know, it’s worse when they’re damaged.”

“Betcha didn’t know that, did you? There are a lot of risks here you’re not even seeing.” Abby looked over Holtzmann’s shoulder at Joey. “I guarantee this isn’t like any setting you’ve done research in before.”

Joey nodded. She was beginning to realize that.
Abby nodded back, and then she steered Holtzmann over to the giant silver duffel bag. “You guys go wrap up with Ms. Navarro. And tell her she’s just going to have to live with that damaged wall.”

Joey followed Patty and Erin back up the driveway. “So, um…what are some of the other risks that I don’t know about? Is possession one of ‘em?” (Joey’s Rules, number 14: Always follow up on whatever people avoid talking about.)

“Um. Yeah,” said Patty. “Any living thing around can be a target, if it’s a ghost with those particular skills.”

“Abby and I researched it when we wrote our book, but it was pretty hard to sort out the real possessions from the people who just wanted to tell their neighbors how they really felt and get away with it.” Erin glanced at Patty. “But we got some…new data last year.”

“Yeeeah. Firsthand, for some of us. I don’t recommend it personally. But I’ve been using that info to go back through all the cases that Abby and Erin looked at. And also, let’s be real, I’m bringing another perspective to the old cases, you know? There are sociocultural roles that possession can play, depending on the historical contexts, that Drs. Gilbert and Yates didn’t take into account. ‘Cause they don’t have that background.”

“I love it when you talk humanities.” Erin grinned at Patty.

“I told y’all you needed me. Didn’t I tell you?”

Then it was time to listen to the two Ghostbusters explain the situation to Ms. Navarro and have her sign off on the paperwork. As they finished, Holtzmann and Abby came up the driveway. Holtzmann reached into her uniform and pulled out a small stone.

“You want this? It used to mark her grave. But I’m pretty sure it’s just a rock now. Not a spectral anchor.” Holtzmann held the stone out to Ms. Navarro. “Probably.”

“Ah…I’m just going to pretend I never saw that,” said Ms. Navarro. She looked ashen. “But it really is all over?”

“72-hour guarantee!” Holtzmann grinned so brightly that Joey was surprised there wasn’t a spark and a “ting!” sound effect from her teeth.

“Well, then. Thank you. And good night.”

“So, am I nuts, or was that bust kind of like the Aldridge Mansion thing I saw in the scrapbook?” Joey was perched in the front seat, clearly trying not to touch anything that didn’t have a protective covering. Holtzmann appreciated that, however useless it might be.

“You’re not nuts—” began Abby, but Holtzmann interrupted her.

“Not for that reason. You’re nuts for coming out back to spectate!” Holtzmann leaned over (ouch) and stage-whispered to Joey. “But I like nuttiness. It’s practically a requirement to hang out with us, anyway.” Nobody yelled at her to keep her eyes on the road, which was surprising. They must be thoroughly distracted, Holtzmann thought.
“Ahem. We’ll get back to that. Yes, of course, it’s kind of like the Aldridge Mansion case. We’ve had three like that.”

“Four if you count the creepy museum in that guy’s basement,” said Patty. She made a face.

“Right.” Abby took her glasses off and started to clean them on the collar of her uniform. Erin sighed and passed her a microfiber cloth. “But yeah. It’s not a coincidence. To quote myself—or was it you, Erin? I forget: ‘The older the home, the more likely it is to be haunted, simply by virtue of the greater number of residents who’ve inhabited the structure.’ Though it’s not quite as simple as that. Emotions accrue, too, in places that have experienced events such as battles, murders, betrayals—that kind of thing.”

“Ah, right. I remember that from the book. That part made sense. There were a lot of parts that I didn’t really understand, though. I don’t have the right qualifications.” Joey shrugged, which resulted in a squishing noise. “I should reread it.”

“I’m impressed that you tracked it down. We have to double-check and make sure there aren’t other copies out there,” said Erin. “But we can go over it with you and help it make more sense.”

“Will we?” Abby sounded cranky. “First we have to decide if we want Joey sticking around.” Holtzmann glanced in the rear view mirror and made eye contact with Patty. They’d need to make sure she had dinner as soon as they got back. They could eat and debrief at the same time.

There was an awkward silence. Holtzmann slung the Ecto through an intersection, ignoring the red light and the flash of the red light camera. There weren’t any cars coming, and besides, she’d coated their license plate with a unnoticeable paint that kept it from showing on camera. Yup, keeping the ol’ Ecto subtle and on the QT. If some municipal nerd went to the effort of tracking them down anyway, they’d have Jennifer Lynch to contend with. Holtzmann chuckled to herself and turned on the radio to WNYU. You never knew what you’d get there. She hummed along for a moment to the Botswanan heavy metal song before she realized that the others were still tense. No, no, no. That was not good.

“So, seems like a couple of our last busts have been kinda funny. And not haha-funny.” Holtzmann illustrated with her best animatronic clown laugh.

“Please don’t ever do that again,” said Patty. “But you’re right. That poltergeist that was too big for its britches, plus this bitch tonight.”

“Yeah, it was like she was leveling up every day, like she was off on her chocobo in the plains grinding…” Abby mused.

“Was that even English?” Patty patted Abby on the head.

Abby swatted her away. “Never mind. Yeah. There’s some weird changing of attributes and classes, way too fast.”

Erin made a hmning noise. “Maybe they’re not changing; maybe they’re just kind of staying subtle at first. Testing the waters.”

“No, no. First of all, that’d take planning. Non-You-Know-Who Ghosts don’t plan. Secondly, although yes, we’re working on our new taxonomy, since the Kemp system is definitely outdated, there’s never been a report of an entity jumping from II to IV practically overnight.”

“Unless you consider—”
Joey was quiet, too, as the other three shared their opinions about what was going on. That was what it was like to have deep knowledge of a subject, she supposed. The Ghostbusters had physical skills, engineering skills, and intellectual skills, all focused on a single, vital purpose. Joey, on the other hand, could…write down what people like them did. She sighed, feeling squelchy and useless.

She would have to convince the Ghostbusters that she wasn’t useless, but she’d have to convince herself first. Either way, though, she would have to at least find a reason for them to continue to allow her access.

Back at HQ, Holtzmann darted off to “just swap out the cryocooler from the Mark III prototype real quick.” Abby and Patty headed up to the kitchen, and Erin helped Joey get herself cleaned up by pointing her to a shower and then, when she was done, discreetly handing her a set of clothes. Joey pulled on the red “Zhu’s Authentic Hong Kong Cuisine” t-shirt, bright gold and navy U Mich sweatshirt, and pair of forest green sweatpants. Not really Joey’s usual look—there was no black, at all—but delightfully warm and dry.

When she came out, the others were sitting around the kitchen table, talking and making notes on paper and on various devices. Erin and Abby were comparing notes with each other and talking nonstop. They all looked intent, but comfortable and relaxed.

Patty, Abby, and Erin had changed back into their regular clothes. Holtzmann just had her jumpsuit peeled partway down, with the sleeves loosely tied at her waist. She was wearing a wine-colored camisole, with her neon-colored sports bra peeking out from under the camisole’s straps. Joey wondered if her toned arms were just from carrying their gear around, or if she went to the gym. (That, admittedly, was hard to picture.) Anyway, Joey had a feeling that the kitchen table got more use than their conference table on the lower floor did.

Chinese takeout containers were scattered around, and Joey saw scallion pancakes, potstickers, veggie buns, just for starters. She took a good sniff and suddenly felt incredibly hungry.

“Almost done with our debrief,” said Patty. She handed Joey a plate and nodded toward the food. “You look a lot more human now. Some food will do you right.”

“So, uh, how did you like my all-in-one soap and shampoo? It’s specially formulated to get off ectoplasm.” Erin smiled a little at Joey. “Sorry about the smell though.”

“The smell’s not bad, exactly…just. Um. Unique. Anyway, thanks, I feel much better. And hungry.” There was a lot of food, so Joey went ahead and filled up her plate.

“Now, Joey, I have a question for you.” Patty looked at her very seriously.

Joey sat down. Uh-oh. Here it came.

“You know how at the end of Grave Sins, Sam’s house burns down because of that one asshole
dude, and she has to move away, and she doesn’t even get to say goodbye to Estelle? Man! As a reader I was just like, sweet lord! Are you trying to kill me? You’re breaking my goddamn heart! But then Estelle shows up…”

“Oh, yeah!” Holtzmann clapped and pointed at Patty. “Estelle shows up at the new place, like ‘hey honey, I’m hooome!’”

Joey tried to keep her face neutral, though in contrast to what emotion, she wasn’t sure. She was relieved they weren’t yelling at her, and distinctly pleased by Patty’s emotional connection to the book, and extremely embarrassed that any of them—but especially Holtzmann, somehow—had read it.

“Right. So did you get that idea from somewhere, a folktale or something?” Patty bit into a pork bun.

“Oh. Um, not that I’m aware of. It just seemed like the best ending to me. It’s light paranormal romance. Gotta have happy endings.”

Holtzmann was eating an unsliced scallion pancake with both hands, but that didn’t stop her from waggling her eyebrows lasciviously.

C’mon, just roll with it, Joey told herself. Her flirting is harmless. She shrugged and grinned. “Both types of happy endings, yes.”

Holtzmann winked and swallowed her bite of pancake. “Our ghost tonight might’ve been anchored to either that little grave marker or to the house. Bummer that we didn’t get to find out. So you were basically saying Estelle was anchored to ‘her home,’ and after she fell in love with Sam, Sam became her home, wherever they were. But the idea of her, I guess, not her physical body. Right?”

“I mean…I didn’t know the term ‘anchored’ then, because I hadn’t read your book, but yeah. That was the idea.”

“Hmm, that’s a real interesting hypothesis. I kinda want to play around with that idea, see if it’s got legs.” Holtzmann scratched her chin, somehow not noticing the noodle hanging out of the corner of her mouth. Then she coughed, made a brief face, and slurped the noodle in. “Is that why you were asking, Pats?”

“What? Nah. I just thought it was real sweet.”

“It is real sweet.” Holtzmann crinkled her nose at Joey, who couldn’t tell whether that meant she was pleased or disgusted.

Eventually, the conversation died down. Joey weighed her choices: should she just go ahead and address the problem or should she wait and hope that they forgot about it? She drained her cup of tea. Better to get out in front of it.

“I need to tell you all something.” Joey took a breath. “I’m not going to apologize for going out back to watch the bust.”

Erin’s eyebrows raised. Abby and Patty just looked at her silently. Holtzmann leaned forward, elbows on the table, and rested her chin on her hands. A hint of an expression crossed her face and was gone. Irritation? Pain? Impatience? Joey couldn’t tell.

Well, too late to quit now. “That’s what I do. You guys bust ghosts. You do things normal people wouldn’t do. You take risks, but they’re thoughtful risks.” (At this point, Patty glanced at Holtzmann and stifled a snort.) “Well, so do I. Sometimes I write about quilting bees and cosplay contests.
Sometimes I write about experimental rocket systems and freshly-erupted civil wars. And sure, sometimes I’m a participant-observer—you can ask Patty what that means—but either way, it’s my job to get as close to the action as I can without screwing things up. I don’t sit on the quilters’ laps or do yoga in the middle of the testing ground. Being smart enough to stay out of the way is critical to my writing. I can see that ghostbusting is dangerous, and messy—” (“Amen,” chorused Erin and Patty.) “— but the more I understand what you’re doing, the better I’ll be able to do my job.”

Joey sat back in her folding chair. That was more than she’d expected to say. She’d almost convinced herself that she knew what she was doing.

Erin glanced at Abby. “Abby, I think she’s right. We’re being a little unfair.” Patty nodded thoughtfully.

Abby looked down at a pork bun and frowned. “Still though. We didn’t know you were going to be there. It could have thrown us off our game.”

“Maybe—I mean, you know, maybe we could just about it in advance, and explain some basic precautions, and maybe prepare that waiver…” suggested Erin.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m OK with that.” Patty grinned and flashed a peace sign.

“Waiver thingie, precaution stuff.” Holtzmann, mouth full of dumpling, gave a thumbs up.

“Well…all right. I mean, I really hate it when people try to stop us. I really, really hate it. So yeah, we can try to make it work.” Abby offered her hand to Joey, and they shook.

After dinner and debriefing was done, Holtzmann leaned over to Joey (ouch, dammit). “It’s a mite bit nippy out there, Miz Betancourt, and it’s awful dark. May I have the pleasure of givin’ you a ride home in mah buggy?”

Joey blinked.

“By which I mean the Ecto,” Holtzmann clarified.

“Oh. Um, sure. Thanks! Let me change and get my stuff.”

“I’ll go get the horses ready,” Holtzmann said. She grinned. The day was was working out OK after all.

She jogged—ouch. She walked down the stairs to the lab, carefully picking up her discarded clothing from earlier, and undid her jumpsuit. It was a little cold in just her underwear, despite the leggings, but it wouldn’t last long. Though it did look like putting on her clothes was going to take a little bit longer than usual. She pulled up her undershirt and looked down at her side. “That’s gonna turn all sorts of pretty colors,” she told herself. “Guess that beach babe bikini bash is off the list.” She moved her arm and shoulder around. That, at least, felt better. No worse than when they’d been moving in and Patty had casually handed her an enormous box, densely packed with books, to carry up the stairs. Probably revenge for having to share the floor, now that she thought of it.

Holtzmann was halfway dressed when there was a cough at the entry to the lab. She knew that sound: she’d been busted by Abby. She sighed—or, well, she started to, but ouch, again—and
turned around.

“Bruised ribs?” It didn’t sound like a question.

“Minor.” Holtzmann buttoned up her shirt. It really was minor; she’d be okay in a couple of weeks.

“Not cracked? Nothing internal?”

“Based on comparison to previous empirical evidence, Dr. Yates, no. I’m afraid the patient will live.”

“I’d say be a little more careful, but I guess there’s not much you can do about a surprise rock tornado attack.”


Abby came over and tied Holtzmann’s scarf loosely around her neck. Then, gently, Abby mock-punched her in the shoulder. “You take some pain medicine, OK? You still gotta breathe.” She held out a bottle to Holtzmann. At least she didn’t have an ice pack, too; Holtzmann hated how they felt. Abby used to just tell her to take medicine or get an ice pack or put on some antibiotic, but after a couple of years, she’d just started handing whatever it was to Holtzmann. Vaguely, Holtzmann felt this was probably a little unfair to Abby, but Abby seemed to like doing it, so.

“OK, Mom.” Holtzmann grinned and Abby smiled and shook her head.

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Joey had just been telling the Ghostbusters to trust her judgement, and yet here she was, willingly getting into the Ectomobile again. She laughed at herself and swung into the front seat. She was wrung out and grateful for a ride, any ride.

Someone had taken the seat protector off and cleaned it up. She wondered if they traded off all the menial tasks that seemed to be involved in ghostbusting, or what. Maybe Kevin did some of them? But it seemed like he kind of wandered in and out. That was another behind-the-scenes detail she needed to check into.

Holtzmann slid into the driver’s seat, flashed Joey a grin, and accelerated out of the chilly garage into the dark night. “OK, so, you wanna know more about how ghosts work so you can write your books, right?” she said, with no preamble.

“Yeah. I mean, I’m picking up some things already.”

“There’s a book called *Fiends with Benefits*. Don’t know how legit it is, but Abby and Erin cited it in *Ghosts from Our Past*. You might get a kick out of it. Now.” Holtzmann drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, and Joey caught herself watching. What was it about leather gloves of any kind? They just made any woman look like a badass. Though Holtzmann actually was a badass, so… double effectiveness?

Joey’s wandering thoughts were brought to a sudden halt as Holtzmann continued. “I was thinking: what kind of smooth sexytime moves would I pull if I were ghostly? Category one: internal stimulation. So what are the relevant paranormal properties in terms of physicality?”

Oh, crap. A pop quiz? She searched her memory. “Um…ethereal, vaporous, and corporeal?”
“Gold star. So you have your Estelle switch between ethereal and corporeal, right? That gives us, like, a laundry list of possibilities, starting with perfect G-spot access, and that’s totally the route I’d take. Suck it, Cosmo! Ghost-Holtz would be the ghost with the most, am I right?” Holtzmann turned a corner and someone honked at them.

“Y-yeah, I guess so.” Joey felt her cheeks heating slightly already. As Alexis Bettany, Joey (in disguise) had discussed her sex scenes with enthusiastic fans at signings before. But she didn’t collaborate with anybody on them. It was too intimate. So her face just got more flushed as Holtzmann blithely described what Ghost-Holtz would do with an imaginary lover.

“Though you’d have to be careful,” Holtzmann mused. “If Ghost-Holtz introduced her whole hand by way of entering ethereally and then switching to corporeality—not all class IVs are capable of this, but let’s assume—what would happen to the surrounding tissue?” Holtzmann had become very animated. She thrust her left fist up and down and then clamped over her left hand with her right hand. Leaving, Joey noted, zero hands on the steering wheel. Holtzmann navigated around a bicyclist with her knees and thighs and then, to Joey’s relief, she put her hands back where they belonged.

“That’s…um…something I didn’t really address, I guess. The thing about the paranormal in fiction is that it’s basically magic. So I could just pretend that, I don’t know, a ghost’s…uh, fingers could just build out from the inside, and push the—the tissue gently out of the way.” Joey licked her lips. Her mouth felt dry, and she felt around in her bag for her water bottle.

“That’d be cool. I wonder if a ghost with enough fine control over their corporeality could actually do that? Ghost-Holtz would have to test on, like, pillows or tubs of ice cream or something. But that brings us to a big problem: your ghosts have to be sentient and sapient, right?”

Joey nodded. “Yeah, I’d like to hear more about that, in lay terms. Any evidence you have. But even if it’s not accurate, that part is non-negotiable. I’m not writing about sex with anything that can’t actually give consent.”

“Natch. Well, we’ve had enough of that dry philosophical/theoretical dispute for today. And it’s not my area.” Holtzmann squinted at a traffic light in the distance and floored the accelerator. “Ooh! I wonder what a composite entity could get up to.”

“A what?”

“It’s in their book, but I think it’s only mentioned once. It’s a ghost made of ‘multiple, interconnected entities.’” She made finger quotes. “We’ve never seen one. I mean, we don’t think the balloon guys and stuff at Times Square count. Composite entities might be a class IV. Potentially, you could have, y’know, the ghosts of a punk band, or something, all together. Possibilities, right?” There went Holtzmann’s eyebrows again. “Or they could totally be class V or even VI. So not exactly human-looking. Not a metaspecter, unless having sex with a godlike entity is your hook, but interdimensional, maybe, or I don’t know, multiple tentacles or something. Ohohohohoho! Tentacles.” She said it like it was a punchline.

“I, uh…that might be a little bit out of my comfort zone.”

“Comfort zones are boring! Danger zones are where it’s at,” Holtzmann announced. Then she tilted her head. “No, never mind, they’re both great. I guess mine have just merged.”

The Ecto lurched forward. “Anyway, back to a group-of-people composite. All the bonuses of a multi-way bangfest, but none of the problems with physics. The Pauli exclusion principle doesn’t apply to ghosts, baby!” Holtzmann bounced up and down in her seat a little. “Ah, I’m a genius! Just
imagine it.” (\textit{Oh god, I’m trying not to!} thought Joey.) “Start small: Tongues. Everywhere.”

Holtzmann made a purring noise, and Joey stared out the window, searching for something boring and unsexy to look at. Unfortunately, her brain was already fizzing, and nothing she spotted made things any worse. Ads and signs flicked by:

\textit{Thirsty?}

\textit{COMING SOON}

\textit{It’s Our Pleasure}

\textit{We Lick The Competition}

\textit{Quick Service!}

\textit{EAT OUT TONIGHT}

Phở King

For fuck’s sake. That last one \textit{had} to be intentional. Joey looked at her hands instead.

Holtzmann continued, cheerfully and relentlessly. “Tongues on your ears, and your mouth, and your neck, and the backs of your knees, and definitely in your—”

“I get the picture!” Joey said quickly. She did. Too well. Joey pressed her thighs together. “Hey, my street is comi—I mean, we’re getting close to my street.”

“Ah, too bad. I was just getting warmed up. I could’ve kept going all night.” Holtzmann beamed at her. Worst of all, she didn’t actually appear to be doing the flirty banter thing this time—she seemed oblivious and sincere. Joey bit the inside of her cheek and didn’t let go till they arrived at her building and Holtzmann took off again.

Chapter End Notes

You’ll never guess what happens next!

\textbf{REFERENCES}


\textbf{ORIGINAL TITLE OF CHAPTER:} Dangerous & Messy
Call Me

Chapter Summary

Joey and Holtzmann are in two different places but, unbeknownst to them, in very similar states of mind. If only they’d put their phones down and get busy...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Joey closed the door of her apartment behind her and immediately facepalmed. Good grief. She was a grown woman! She had written a sexy article or two before and not lost her grip. The research for that *Atlantic* article about the Berkeley dominatrix co-op had been very interesting, but she hadn’t melted down in front of any of the employee-owners.

“Bad day?”

Joey jumped. Her roommates were usually out in the evening, which left Joey alone and able to focus on writing. But there was Viv, standing in the kitchenette with a bowl of hot soup. “Hey, Viv. Not really, just kind of draining. You OK?”

Viv gestured at their bowl and sat down at the all-purpose table that straddled the area between the small living room and the tiny kitchen. “I felt a little icky earlier, so I thought I’d come home and take a nap. Now it’s time for soup. If that does the trick and I perk up, I’ll be heading out. You look like you need a drink, though. There’s some of that disgusting sour Belgian stuff you like in there.”

“Uh, I’m not sure I have beer money right now.”

“Theo picked it up on sale, and it’s not like anyone else is gonna drink it. Shut up and take it.” Viv pointed insistently toward the fridge.

“Well, in that case.” Joey grabbed a bottle and saluted them. “I ought to get to work, and this will definitely help.”

There was no room for a desk in Joey’s room, so she usually worked on her bed. She had a bulletin board and some small metal shelves hung on the wall, and that was where her paper references went. As much as possible, she kept her materials on her computer and online. Paper was bulky.

Joey changed into a soft, worn t-shirt from Loveboat, the lesbian bookstore in Taipei where she’d originally met Viv, and a pair of loose cotton shorts. Ignoring the lingering warmth between her legs, she grabbed her graphics tablet from a shelf, flopped onto the bed, and opened her laptop. The *Ghostbusters* had never really gotten the recognition that they had earned, in Joey’s opinion, and she thought they’d appreciate some good shots of them in action. She supplied some of her own photos for her books; she made up for not being a pro by having a decent eye and a quality camera. And taking a *lot* of shots.

She took a drink and flipped through the photos she’d taken. The crazy lighting of the proton streams looked good, and the team looked good—fucking heroic, to be precise—but the ghost was only a smear of light. Damn! She’d forgotten about that part of Abby and Erin’s book. Either video or film
was better at showing actual paranormal activity than digital stills.

Well, next time. Joey took another drink and dug into the files, working on finding and editing the best possible shot of the team working together, and then individual shots showing them each doing their thing.

Around halfway through, she put some music on. One of the “writer lies” that got Joey through her work was pretending that she didn’t need music to work. Then, when she started to run out of steam, she’d put the music on, and she’d get a burst of energy. Switching back to the photo editing screen, she saw a photo of Holtzmann caught in a goofy expression. She remembered Holtzmann tuning into African metal in the car and rocking out to it in the driver’s seat, and Joey had to laugh. Holtzmann was definitely something.

It was approaching midnight when her phone lit up. Who was video-calling her? Her friends, scattered as they were around the world, all knew she hated that.

_Probably: J Holtzmann_, declared her phone.

Huh. She answered.

“Hey, I’ve gone blind!” Holtzmann peered around the screen, distorting her face as she got really, really close to the camera. “Is this actually Joey? Oh wait, hold on.” Her voice got low and breathy, and she leered into the phone. “What’re ya wearing? Ha! Sorry, always wanted to do that.”

Joey glanced down at herself. Holtzmann was still in her camisole and uniform, with her goggles pushed up on her forehead. Joey was, technically, clothed. Whatever, right? She ran her fingers through her bangs and turned on the camera. “I’m here. What’s up?”

“I just figured out how to reinforce the cryocooler without adding weight! And it’s even pretty stable…Oh, whoops. I was supposed to take care of that other thing.” Holtzmann peered off-screen. Then the view wobbled and there was a thunk, and all Joey could see was a ceiling. It didn’t look like anywhere in their HQ—was Holtzmann at home? Joey was pretty sure that at least Abby actually lived in the firehouse, and somehow, “Holtzmann’s home” was a strange thought.

Joey heard footsteps and the sound of something opening. There was a _fwumpf_! followed by a string of creative cursing. (Something something “koala butt?”)

“Um…Holtzmann?”

“Oh hey! Joey!” Holtzmann’s face appeared over the phone and she picked it up again, propped it against something, and sat on a stool. “I didn’t finish something earlier, so I took it home to fix it, and then I thought of something else. The good news is, it took care of itself! Now I don’t have to figure out what to do with it.”

Joey had so many questions. But maybe next time. “So, uh, you were calling about something?”

“Yes! The sentience and sapience question. If the answer’s yes, it’s good news for your stories, and maybe not so great for us. Because can you murder a ghost? Now I wanna know. I’m going to capture some readings of human brain activity—electrical impulses and stuff, right? I don’t do _brains_, but I do electricity!” Holtzmann waved a mysterious piece of technology in front of the camera and beamed. “And then I’ll look for the same kinds of signals from run-of-the-mill ghosts. Good, right?”

Joey nodded. “Yeah, that’d be interesting. I can always handwave it if they turn out to be purely instinctual, though.”
“True, true. Anyway, I don’t want to be too forward, but can I scan your brain? I bet it’s gorgeous.” Holtzmann fluttered her eyelashes at Joey.

Joey’s mouth opened and closed. She slugged the remaining swallow of beer. There was really only one way to reply to that—meet Holtzmann at her level. “Excuse me? You haven’t even introduced me to your mother yet.”

There was a second where Holtzmann just didn’t react. Shit. Was that too much? Was her mom recently deceased or something? Then Holtzmann smiled and said, “Thing is, I will get some data from us, but I don’t know how messed up our brains are. Especially Abby’s, with that helmet thing she’s still dickicking around with. Ha! ‘Abby Normal,’ amirite? Man, I love Gene Wilder. Anyway, Kevin’s brain is obviously a non-starter. Yours would help us get a comparison. I could just make a brainwave-reading gun and fire it out the window, but that seems a little rude. Although—”

“No need for that! It’s fine. Sure. Whenever you want.”

Holtzmann spun the stool around once. “Sweet. So I was thinking, could a talented ghost just manipulate their lover’s brain directly? Like, Ghost-Holtz could just tweak brain activity, and then, KAPOOOWWWW!” Her hands flew away from her face in a slo-mo explosion. “Orgasms on tap. Think about it.”

Oh, Joey was. “Amazing.”

“You should make a note of that!” Holtzmann hopped up on a counter behind her and twisted her feet back and forth on the stool’s seat.

“So, uh, what kind of data would you get from recording a possession? I’ve written a few possession scenes,” Joey said. It was true, and maybe she’d shake loose something about whatever it was they weren’t talking about. “One was an incorporeal ghost who finally made love to her fiancee by possessing her and having her, ummm…touch herself. Another one was, OK, a little like that Patrick Swayze movie. In this case it was a love triangle, and one of the living people let the ghost possess them.” Joey’s dry mouth seemed to be back. She took another drink. “All consensual, of course. But anyway, would there be two sets of brain activity in one person, or…?”

Holtzmann’s eyebrows drew together, and she shifted on her perch. “I guess there might be. Never encountered a recreational possession though. Murderous? Yeah. One—well, two—of us got possessed once, by an actually definitely intelligent ghost—special case, don’t imagine that’ll be repeated. I can’t imagine how bad it would be to be someone’s puppet, to have to hurt your friends.” Holtzmann looked genuinely downcast, and Joey regretted pushing it. Well, sort of. There was definitely some critical, formative Ghostbusters tale that she’d have to pry out eventually. “The fewer possessions we encounter, the better. Anyway, I bet Patty didn’t pick up those books.” Holtzmann bit her lip thoughtfully. “I might wanna, though. I have a couple not-so-great memories I wouldn’t mind rewriting. I wonder—if Ghost-Holtz were tweaking someone’s brain chemicals, or possessing them, could I give them an orgasm in, like, their spleen? No, scratch that. Maybe in their elbows? Or lips? The ones up here, I mean.” She made an absurd kissy face. “Or literally all over?”

“You’re thinking about this a lot, aren’t you.”

“It’s so different from what I usually theorize about! It makes my brain all tingly,” Holtzmann wriggled a little on the counter, then hopped off again. “Anyway, that’s it. Ciao!” And the call ended.

“Ciao…” Joey said, in a bit of a daze.
Viv knocked on the door. “I don’t know what’s going on in there, but I think you need another one of these.”

Joey shook herself and leaned over to open the door. Viv handed her another bottle. “I managed to recharge. Heading out now.”

“OK. Thanks!” She closed the door and a moment later heard them leave. Yeah, the second bottle was a good idea. Joey opened it and sat back on her bed. Holtzmann looked back at her from the editing app. *That’s a handsome neck,* Joey thought.

For fuck’s sake. She took another drink and closed the laptop. Her cheeks were warm. *You,* she informed herself, *are just in need of a date. But I’m too busy and too broke for dates, and I’m too old for one-night stands. Even thinking about it was exhausting.*

But that was what toys were for. Joey reached for her jewelry pouch and pulled out the only one that she kept around. Traveling internationally with sex toys was a fraught proposition, and anyway, she needed to keep her belongings to a minimum. So she had this: a striking metal pendant, like a thick silver nail with a rounded top, or maybe a long, thin bullet. It looked innocuously fashionable. It was even chargeable by USB, so no long power cord and no need to carry batteries around.

Joey yanked it off of the chain, lay back against the wall, and pulled aside her shorts. She was just going to go directly for the prize tonight. First, she’d move the vibrating metal crosswise around her inner labia, to get things warmed up—though things were definitely already a little warmed up. She pressed the button till she hit her favorite setting. The toy had a much deeper vibration than it looked like it could manage, and it felt perfect. Joey closed her eyes and felt some of the odd tension of the day start to ease as her face began to flush more. She shifted her hips back and forth, spreading the sensations around.

And that was when her phone went off again. Joey swore and switched off the vibrator. She lunged forward to look at her phone: It was Holtzmann, again. Joey wiped her fingers on her shorts, stuffed a pillow on her lap, and answered. *You’re an idiot,* she informed herself.

The incoming video was all wild blonde curls, pink lips, tongue, and dimples. Holtzmann was talking right into the camera. “I remembered something cool! We were talking about anchors earlier, right? Couple months ago, this woman cornered me in a bar while I was playing Galaga and insisted on telling me all about her roommate’s haunted dildo.”

“Her wha?”

“Hey, do you have a fever? You look kinda flushed.”

So much for the slight camouflage her skin tone usually afforded her. Joey shifted awkwardly. Unfortunately, this reminded her that while the vibrator was off, it wasn’t gone. It was still sitting in her shorts. “I was just…uh…doing some yoga. You said haunted dildo?” It was hard to even say the word with a professional, neutral expression, and she felt her flush deepen.

“Right, right! The way she told it, it sounded like there was an entity anchored to the dildo. Can you imagine? Casper the sex toy! That’s just wrong. Anyway, it’d flop itself out of the bedside stand and onto her roommate’s pillow. And it would vibrate on its own, but it was a honest-to-god dildo. No motor. But her roommate liked it because it was quiet—again, no motor—and apparently it did a good job? But then sometimes it’d just go dead.” Holtzmann’s eyes crossed and her tongue flopped out to the side.

“Now that’s evil,” Joey said. Kind of like, oh, interrupting someone by calling them during their
alone time. “Was she for real, though?”

“You’re thinking the whole thing was actually her roommate wanting to be all ‘oh! Goodness me! I don’t know how that got there! What even is a dildo?!’ but nah, it was Evergreen College—she wasn’t shy about her sex toys. And the woman said she saw it. I was like. Lady. OK. Cute story, but where’s the dildo?”

“Right, naturally.” How strange Joey’s recent conversations had gotten over such a short period of time.

“And she said oh, her roommate threw it out when she graduated, because she was moving back in with her family. And sure, it was quiet, but the whole ‘mind of its own’ thing around her mom and dad and brothers? Not OK. So I said wow, thanks for telling me this story and not bringing the dildo. Never mind sexual frustration! Research frustration, ughhh.” Holtzmann picked up the neckline of her camisole and bit it, rolling her eyes at the ceiling. Joey caught a flash of her stomach, and what looked like a bad bruise on her side. Joey also noticed that Holtzmann’s bra straps were no longer visible.

“Damn, I hope she at least bought you a drink,” Joey said. “No leads on where the dildo might actually be, though?”

“It’s STILL OUT THERE SOMEWHERE! Ghost dildo at large, stop the presses. I’m gonna find it someday. So there’s a cool story you can put in your next book. OK, bye!”

Joey pressed her hands to her face and stared at the black screen of her phone. “What is even happening?” she mumbled out loud.

Anyway, she had unfinished business to take care of, and somehow it hadn’t been totally derailed by the phone call. She leaned back and shifted the metal tip of the vibrator up to her clit.

Talking to Joey was fun. Holtzmann danced around her apartment for a moment, with no music, and then got herself a bottle of beer.

Today had been pretty good after all. A very intriguing ghost, arguments averted, Joey’s interest in everything…There’d been hardly anything boring. A little bit of ouch, but it could’ve been worse. She instructed herself to tell Patty thanks for making her take those self-defense classes. Knowing how to fall was coming in pretty handy! A warm—not hot—bath would take the rest of the edge off.

Holtzmann started the water running and set a folding chair next to the clawfoot tub. After considering a moment, she went back into the kitchen and felt around on top of the fridge till she found a UCSC coaster that read PROUD UCSC PARENT, but, more importantly, also depicted their mascot: a proud banana slug. She put the coaster and her phone on the chair and then set the bottle on the coaster. “Classy,” she told herself. “So classy. I hope this joint doesn't have a dress code.”

Holtzmann left her clothes in a heap on the bathroom tile and turned off the light, so that just a little light came in from the main room. She slid down into the warm water with a sigh, and then angled herself (carefully) so that her shoulder was under the surface. She had, in fact, taken the pain medication rather than leaving it somewhere and forgetting about it, but the warm water felt so nice.

Overhead, the ceiling was covered with glow-in-the-dark stars and swirls of glowing paint.
Holtzmann grinned up at them. She hadn’t made realistic constellations; ultimately, she’d decided that the fact that they would never change when they should would be more irritating than having a complete fantasy sky. Between one cluster of stars and another, she’d painted a little rocketship, with a single, wild-haired figure in it. She waved at mini-Holtzmann.

Bath time was never wasted time. Something about the unstructured time with no distractions meant that sooner or later, the idea factory switched gears from random things that might or might not be useful to a steady stream of solutions, new hypotheses, and inspiration.

Usually. Tonight, not quite so much. Water flowed between Holtzmann’s thighs as she shifted restlessly. The bath wasn’t working quite the way it usually did. *What’s up, brain?* Not that it ever answered in a useful way. Holtzmann bit the pad of her thumb thoughtfully, and as soon as her tongue brushed her skin, she realized: She was turned on.

Well, that happened after busts sometimes. This one had been short, true, but exciting. And somehow, even with all the events between then and now, she was still ready. The only question was: manual or automatic?

It was warm in the tub and Holtzmann didn’t want to leave. Left-handed was always a little more difficult than right-handed, but it would be OK. She laid back and kicked her right leg over the edge of the tub. Now she had good access.

She started by gently cupping her mons in the palm of her hand, then rubbing it just a little. It responded well to pressure, so now it was buzzing with warmth. Her fingers drifted down between the lips of her vulva, and she wasn’t surprised to find that they were already relaxed and ready for her. She ran her fingers along the inside of her labia on one side and then the other, using a light, gentle stroke that still managed to make her ache inside. Mostly in a good way. Her fingertips slipped past wetness of an entirely different quality from the water surrounding her.

Holtzmann let herself close her eyes and make a little noise, though that always made her self-conscious even though no one was there. But then she interrupted her own soft groan with “Ohhh hey!”

She sat up. Water sloshed over the sides of the tub, just missing her phone. Ignoring the disappointed tingling in her crotch, she leaned over the edge of the tub and grabbed her phone. Then she remembered to grab a towel and wipe off her hand (well, and then the phone). She tapped Joey’s name and waited. There were definitely a couple of things she’d forgotten to tell Joey earlier.

Or, wait, was it too late now? Should she have texted? How was anyone supposed to guess these things?

But Joey answered. There was a rustling and Joey’s face rotated as she sat up. Her curly rainbow bangs looked cute, going everywhere at once, and she had an interesting, heavy-lidded look. This was also kind of cute.

“Sorry, Joey, had you just fallen asleep? Well, you’re here now, so I have two things I gotta tell you: First, about the brain scan. You don’t have to fast or anything, OK? Take your normal meds or vitamins or whatever. Second…wait, do you remember what it was?”

“Holtzmann, you called me.” There was a pause while Holtzmann considered this. It was, in fact, true. Joey added, “Anyway, I wasn’t asleep. Also…um, are you taking a bath?” She tilted her head.

Oh. Holtzmann looked more carefully at the little preview image of her on the screen. She had her arms over the edge of the tub so that her phone was safer; it was a little uncomfortable on her ribs,
but she had drowned her phone and then had to admit it to a very unimpressed Abby too many times. Luckily for the whole social mores thing, this meant that only her arms and upper chest were visible.

“Yeah. Sometimes it feels nice. Uh…sorry?”

“No, it’s fine. Just like calling my friends in high school, minus the video. Wait, you’re not so young that you Facetimed in high school, are you? You just called your friends like normal, right?”

“Sure.” Well, that wasn’t literally true—what high school? what friends? But that wasn’t the point. “I was a couple years into grad school when iPhones came out.”

“Ah, phew. Um…so did you remember the other thing?”

“Nnnnope. You gonna be up for a while? I’ll call you if I think of it.”

“Another hour or so. I want to finish this project.”

“‘K.” Holtzmann ended the call and sank back into the water.

Where had she been? Oh, yeah. Warming up. Her left hand made its way down between her legs again.

She ran her index and middle finger around the sensitive edges of her clitoral hood and felt flashes of pleasure, but she knew it could feel better. Why was it that someone else’s fingers could feel so much more electric on her skin? There had to be a biomechanical or biochemical reason. Was it because her proprioceptors spoiled the effects? Was it the lack of foreknowledge? (And did that mean blindfolds and earplugs would turn up the electricity? From the shiver thinking about that gave her, she guessed the answer was yes.) Someday she’d get more data on the weird machine that was her own body…and maybe data on someone else’s.

No. Brain back to the present, where Holtzmann was enough for herself. She circled her entire vulva with her fingers, sliding right over her clit. Her head dropped back to rest on the back edge of the tub, and she closed her eyes. Time for her left middle finger to get a workout.

Nothing fancy, only her fingertip pressing just so—not too heavy, not too light—in increasingly fast circles, with the heel of her hand pushing into her mons. Her whole body felt flushed. She was almost there. It already felt good; so good, just good, nothing to puzzle out or question. She made her fingers work harder; her hip muscles tightened and she rose partly out of the water. Holtzmann bit her lip and tried not to think of someone facing her, the fingers of one hand working her clit, and the other hand brushing her mouth, pushing fingers in to touch her tongue. No, no, not that, think of something else. Anything at all. Anything that didn't raise questions and anything that wouldn't stop —

The eerie, shivering glissando of the 1970s “Ghost Story” theme burst into the warm air. Holtzmann shuddered and came hard. Her thighs spasmed and water droplets splashed into the air. She gasped and gripped the rounded edge of the tub with her right hand as the orgasm crested and faded. Then she tried to catch her breath, grab for a towel, and answer Joey’s call before it went to voice mail.

Hmm. Joey wondered whether Holtzmann was going to answer her call. Maybe the Ghostbuster was working on something, or even asleep.
“H—hiii, Joey.” There she was, leaning one elbow on the edge of her tub and obviously trying to look casual. That wasn’t working: Holtzmann looked slightly wild-eyed, her cheeks were pink, and she had droplets of water all over her face and those biceps of hers.

“Oh, you OK, Holtzmann?”

They stared at each other for a moment. Then Holtzmann broke eye contact, looked offscreen, and said, “Slipped reaching for the towel. And uh. I had a beer?”

“Ah. Me too. Beer, I mean. Well, I think I know what you forgot earlier: we didn’t make any plans. Could I go over to HQ tomorrow? Or is that something I should text Abby about?”

“Yes! Well, no. Maybe? We should probably make some kind of a ‘schedule.’” Holtzmann made awkward, one-handed air quotes. “Tomorrow we gotta chat with the mayor. That’ll take WAY longer than necessary. So I guess we’ll see you the day after that.”

After the call ended, Joey put her phone on Do Not Disturb and got ready for bed. She fell asleep quickly, and she dreamed in fragments of the Technicolor hell-carnival of that day-turned-night in Times Square. Her camera flashed, and photos spun around her in a whirlwind. But aside from that, it still wasn’t quite her old nightmares. Those had been instilled with fear, but this dream was different: fraught and promising and charged all at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

I'm trying to get one or two chapters ahead on writing, since my free time is going to shrink pretty soon here. Also, the next chapter is a bit of a lull and is even more character-development-oriented, so I hope this tides people over a little bit. But the chapter after that should have some...how to put this...action. Of one kind or another.

I realize this is developing more slowly than the typical fic. That's just how I write! So for those of you who are still reading: thanks for your patience. You're the best.

- ERRATA -

"Ghost Story" theme, 1971

Not that Taipei Love Boat--THIS one

P. S. I warned people on Tumblr about this, but just so you know: I'll be renaming a couple of the previous chapters to be slightly less goofy.
Strange & Complex Orbits

Chapter Summary

This one's mostly about hanging out, plus tinkering and eating. Holtzmann does not set anything on fire.

Chapter Notes

jfc, what a week it's been, huh? Oh well, I'm still plugging away at this! I hope you all enjoy the technobabble in this one (it's semi-meaningful, I hope, if not correct or realistic).

P. S. You can take a look at the waiver referred to in the third section at my tumblr. :D

Holtzmann was glad that the meeting with the mayor was over and done with. Finally, she was back in her lab. True, Not-The-Jaws-Mayor was fun to tweak, and his reactions to things made her laugh—and whenever the Ghostbusters came in, the mayor and Jennifer always seemed to be having a very interesting conversation. Today, they’d caught the mayor, baffled, talking to Jennifer. “So you recreate a computer from 1984? On a computer from 2015? To play a video game from 1984? Why would anyone do that? Would I put a Yugo engine in my Lexus? No, I would not, because I am not an idiot.” Jennifer had folded her arms as though she was about to lecture the mayor when the Ghostbusters’ arrival interrupted her. It was a shame—Holtzmann was dying to hear the rest.

The meeting had followed the standard template. The mayor had made some suggestions. Jennifer had tried to modulate them. Abby had been placatory, Erin defensive, and Patty confident. Holtzmann had mostly listened, or turned over projects in her mind. She was certainly not “daydreaming,” as Abby had muttered as she elbowed Holtzmann in the ribs. Luckily, she was seated on Holtzmann’s left at the time. Holtzmann had also asked several particularly incisive questions, but she had been unimpressed with the quality of the answers she received.

Holtzmann adjusted the loupe on her goggles and opened the casing of the revised phantasmic flashbang. It still needed work, but she’d get there. So what if she wound up going temporarily deaf a few more times in the alley? And so what if their incurious, anti-science, philistine neighbors kvetched again? Though life would definitely be better if she had access to naval firing ranges in the middle of nowhere, like the Mythbusters did. “Lucky bastards,” she grumbled.

At least the steel tube was reusable, so she didn’t have to keep making new ones. Holtzmann stood up, stretched, and drummed her fingers on the workbench. For a moment she thought about tomorrow’s planned brain scans. She hoped to ultimately find a clear separation between human and ghost data, which—ah, wait. Separation.

Graphene! It was such a good idea that Holtzmann actually said “omg” out loud.

Graphene: super fast, super selective, and thus very promising in novel separation technology.
research at the moment. Using graphene combined with catalytic metal nanoparticles (what a
euphonious phrase!), Holtzmann could effectively enhance the accelerated proton transport, targeting
the specter without letting other atoms and molecules through. Would that point her in the right
direction to reduce the disruptive effects of the energy release in the real world, in air and
(particularly) in fluids? (Humans: very sloshy.)

She didn’t know, but she was definitely going to have a great time finding out. Holtzmann struck a
pose with a large T-square and announced “That’s how it’s done!” to the air. Then she scrambled
back onto her stool to make some notes while the idea was still fresh.

A few minutes later, Holtzmann heard a tap on the wall. She held up a finger, meaning “just a sec”—
as opposed to a flapping hand, meaning “not now, busy”, or a middle finger, meaning “now is pretty
much the worst time you could choose, unless you relish the thought of turning to ash from the inside
out, in which case go right ahead and interrupt.” There was an explanatory chart taped just outside
the door. In fact, Patty had adopted the same code for when she was reading, though in her case, the
middle finger meant “unless you want to witness the firepower of a fully armed and operational Patty
Tolan.”

Holtzmann circled what she’d just written and drew an arrow connecting it to the calculations on the
back of the page; then she glanced up. It was Abby.

“Holtz.”

Holtzmann detected a certain serious note in Abby’s voice. She took a moment to push her goggles
up to her hairline. Then she flipped down and carefully smoothed the pages of the notepad before
she turned to fully face Abby.

“Abs,” she replied, exactly matching Abby’s tone.

“Sorry to bug ya.” Abby seemed to be trying to sound lighter. “I was working on that compact PKE
meter we were talking about, and I was just thinking about the other day with the poltergeist, you
know, with the cat? And the chandelier? And then the Huguenot-Breton bust, with your damaged
pack and all.”

“Yeah? You're welcome.”

“Hmmmm.” Abby pushed her glasses back up her nose. “Well, I appreciate not being crushed under a
chandelier or pulverized by flying rocks for sure. But I’m a little worried about the particular moves
you chose with your, um, phantasmic flashbang, and also with the proton pack. I’m not here to give
you a hard time, and you know that, right? And I also don't want to debate what else we could have
done, or your testing protocols. We all know THAT ship has sailed.” Abby smiled, and she seemed
to mean it, but she still seemed uncomfortable. “Just…”

Holtzmann was uncomfortable too, half because Abby was uncomfortable, and half because
whatever this was was taking so long. What did Abby want? Holtzmann had told her before that
making a time machine and fixing things that had already happened was beyond her current skill set.

“I guess I mean just in case it’s a warning sign that you're getting depressed, orrrr a little hypomanic.
Or something. Just in case! Something to keep an eye on, is all. OK?” Abby moved a little closer to
Holtzmann. Holtzmann could see that Abby wanted to give her a little pat or something, but she was
going to wait for Holtzmann to make the first move.

Things had reached a point once, in their earlier labmate days, where Abby had successfully argued
that it was in both of their best interests for her to know a little more about Holtzmann’s mental
health. (What an arbitrary distinction. Neurochemistry was physical. Mental health and physical health were the same thing. Why were people so obsessed with meaningless categories?) Holtzmann had drawn the line at discussing certain personal history aspects that might—or hey, might not—underlie some of her neurological differences, though. For the most part, she didn’t regret telling Abby about the sleep thing and the ADHD thing and the … the more complex other stuff. But sometimes, she didn’t like being reminded, and sometimes, Abby seemed a little too vigilant. But she cared.

Holtzmann exhaled sharply through her nose. “Sure. I got it. But everything’s cool, my babies, everything’s cool.” Sure enough, Abby laughed. Holtzmann found Abby's love for her terrible Conan O'Brien impressions inexplicable, but reliable. “Anyway, they’re all calculated risks. Slow your roll, OK?” They were calculated risks. More or less. Well, guesstimated, maybe? But that probably wasn’t what Abby needed to hear right now.

Holtzmann hugged Abby around her shoulders, and Abby reached up to squeeze her arm. “I’ll slow my roll if you slow yours,” Abby said.

Oh, stubborn Abby. Extra adorbs. Extra frustrating. Holtzmann glanced away, toward her notes, so Abby wouldn’t see her press her lips together. She didn't want Abby to feel bad. Then she gave Abby a thumbs-up. “Mutual roll-slowing, check. I need to finish up here and get the brain-scanning setup shipshape and Bristol fashion, ‘K?”

“I’m gonna drag you down for dinner,” Abby said, heading out of the lab. “For some reason I wanna make sushi, so I’m off to the store.”

Holtzmann saluted Abby’s back and returned to her bench.

Joey glanced at her phone. There was a text from Abby, suggesting that she head over around 10 AM the next morning. “P. S. Bring your signing pen,” Abby texted a moment later. “Got a waiver here with your name on it.”

She spent most of the day tentatively poking at some half-formed new romance novel ideas. 351 words of notes was more than she’d written in months, so she counted it a win and let herself temporarily ignore the fact that it was nowhere near enough. And she sent an email to her fiction agent, who was probably wondering whether she was still alive.

The high point of the day came that night. Joey was pulling out clothes for the next day: a blue oxford-cloth shirt, a favorite sweater—old, to be sure, but it had cool buttons on the shoulders, and the green color flattered her hair and eyes—and a pair of dark jeans. Not too skinny, partly because she wasn’t (quite) a millennial, and partly because she wasn’t sure if there might be more busting adventures. And a pair of boots that she could run in. Just in case.

That was when her phone lit up. She had a deposit! Joey dropped the socks she’d just selected and checked her account. It was an e-check from her nonfiction agent, mostly made of royalties from a couple of her oldest books. The amount wasn’t huge, to be sure, and most of it was already spoken for in her budget. But it gave her a little breathing room, and that was a relief.
Joey made sure that she arrived at headquarters right on time. Abby greeted her immediately with a clipboard and the waiver. “It’s just based on the one we use for clients,” explained Abby. She waved Joey past Kevin and into the main office, where each of the Ghostbusters had a basic workspace, in addition to their semi-private setups elsewhere in the building. She pointed Joey to an empty desk and chair that hadn’t been there the day before yesterday, and Joey sat down and skimmed the form. It was a bit of a mess, with white-out all over and modifications in red felt-tip pen.

“I got it started on the typewriter.” Erin was sitting at her computer, stabbing at the keys with her mouth pursed. She clicked her mouse, and a rainbow toroid shape exploded in the middle of a screen full of formulas and numbers. “Somebody deleted the original PDF, and we haven’t gotten around to recreating it. Lucky we have plenty of copies…But it would have at least looked neat if I’d been allowed to finish it.”

Holtzmann slouched into the main office, hands in the pockets of her baggy tweed slacks. “Signing over your firstborn to us, Joey? Excellent move. You won’t regret it.” Holtzmann grinned and brushed past Joey to sit down at her desk, where she immediately put her feet up on top of a stack of papers. “Anyway, Erin left that form just sitting around, clearly abandoned. So Abby and me finished it for her. You’re welcome, Erin!”

Patty turned around from her desk and sighed. “I’ll make us a new PDF. Just remind me.”

Joey signed the waiver and started to hand it to Abby, but Holtzmann intercepted it. She pulled an honest-to-goodness oversized magnifying glass, the kind with brass fittings and a wooden handle, out of one of the enormous pockets on her lab coat. Then she made a show of inspecting Joey’s signature. She brought the magnifying glass over to Joey’s hand, still holding the pen, and peered around some more. Joey suppressed a giggle.

“It’s legit,” announced Holtzmann. Abby shook her head at her and took the clipboard back.

Joey started to get up from the desk, but Abby shook her head. “We dug—well, we had Kevin dig—that out of storage for ya. If you’re going to do the ‘embedded’ thing with us, you need your own space. I think the springs on that chair are busted, but Holtz can probably fix it.”

Joey’s mouth fell slightly open. She was surprised, and appreciative, and before she could express any of that, Holtzmann started laughing.

“Now what?” Abby gave Holtzmann a look.

Holtzmann kicked her feet on her desk, sending papers everywhere. “Emb—” She laughed too hard to finish, and then she snorted, which made her start laughing again. “Embedded! That’s what she —”

“NNNNNOPE.” Abby got behind Holtzmann’s chair and promptly spun her away from the desk and down the hall. Holtzmann’s laughter echoed after them.

“Huh,” said Joey.

“Welcome to your typical firehouse Wednesday,” said Erin with a sigh, but the corners of her lips were turned up.

“It’s not too late to run.” Patty grinned.

As a kid, Joey’d had a friend who had three sisters, and unlike most of the larger families Joey had
known, that friend and her sisters were essentially a close-knit, name-calling, shoulder-crying, sarcastic, loving, unstoppable girl gang. The Ghostbusters reminded her of those four sisters. And she’d always liked hanging around with them.

“I think it is too late.” Joey took her laptop out of her bag and put it on the desk. Hey, that felt pretty good. She had to admit that she’d missed having a real desk. “I’m starting to like it around here.”

Abby rolled the chair back into the room. She was sitting on it now, with Holtzmann looking quite prim and serious on her lap. Well, as much as any adult could look in that position, anyway.

“I don’t know what your schedule is today, but if you guys have a minute before you go back to doing your things, could you come over and check this out for a moment?” Joey opened her computer and turned up the brightness.

“Patty don’t do free tech support.” Patty winked and strolled over, and the others joined her.

“I thought you might like to look at some of these photos. The conditions weren’t great, but before things went sideways, I got a few good snaps in.”

There was a quiet moment as Joey flicked through some of the photos.

“Oh, go back, go back!” Patty leaned over Joey’s shoulder and pointed. “Look at that, we look like total badasses!”

Erin scoffed lightly. “You guys do. I don’t think anyone would ever call Erin Gilbert a badass.”

“Hold on.” Joey skimmed forward to a photo of just Erin: jaw clenched, proton wand thrust forward, fire in her eyes. “Take a look at that.”

“Daaaaaamn, Erin!” Patty exclaimed, and Holtzmann and Abby made noises of agreement.

“Hit me,” said Holtzmann. Joey looked over and saw Holtzmann holding her hand up for a high five, but Erin wasn’t responding. Joey took a closer look—were Erin’s eyes wet?

Abby picked up Erin’s wrist and gently made her high-five Holtzmann, then hugged her. “You were always a badass,” she said quietly to Erin. “You just forgot for a little while.”

Erin sniffled and took a linen handkerchief out of her pocket. “…I do look like a badass there. That’s—that’s a really good photo, Joey.”

It was a little awkward, having somehow instigated this emotional reaction among the four of them, but not really having any idea why. “You’re the one doing all the work there,” Joey pointed out. “I’ve always thought all of you were badasses, anyway.”

“Awww.” Abby punched her on the shoulder lightly.

Patty pointed at the screen. “Come on, let’s see the rest of them.”

Holtzmann felt her stomach growl and her attention to her materials testing waver. Lunchtime was approaching, so maybe instead of waiting for Abby or Patty to come collar her, she’d wander down to the big office. She had the vague idea that Joey had spent the last hour or so doing some
scheduling with the others. Holtzmann figured she’d play her own scheduling with Joey by ear. It wasn’t that she was morally opposed to calendars or anything, just that projects had their own strange biorhythms and complex orbits. And they didn’t tell Holtzmann their plans in advance.

She stood, stretched, and re-buttoned her waistcoat. Maybe she would just take another look at the magnetoencephalography device she’d built over the last twenty-four hours. Its working name was P.BAD, for paranormal brain activity detector. Abby might veto that, but it would always be P.BAD in Holtzmann’s heart.

There were a lot of ways to detect and record brain activity, and Holtzmann had explored the entire acronym buffet. PET, fMRI, and some of the others were useless to her, since they relied on blood flow in the brain. Specters, unless they were painting angry messages on walls with it, tended to be bloodless. But once she’d dug into the specs for MEG, which (obviously) relied on magnetic fields, things had started to look up. Neuroscience was definitely not her field, but the superconducting quantum interference devices—SQUIDs, the most delightful acronym—used in MEG devices were right up her alley. SERF was inarguably less cool namewise, but spin exchange relaxation-free magnetometers? Also speaking Holtzmann’s language.

Her P.BAD was based on SERF technology, since that was more compact than MEG from the get-go, but of course, she’d gone several steps further. Princeton’s SERF magnometer, which had caused Holtzmann to repeatedly and loudly question their design and material choices as she read up on it, would look enormous and clumsy next to Holtzmann’s P.BAD. For the core of the build, she had used parts from the same spare proton pack that she’d previously cannibalized for its cryocooler. A dash of potassium vapor, a little more this’n’that, and now she had a working model that looked like an old-fashioned salon hairdryer. Mostly because she had encased it in an old-fashioned salon hairdryer. “Thank you, Our Lady of Dumpsters,” murmured Holtzmann as she stroked its cover.

Given time and the limitations of the materials that were on hand, Holtzmann hadn’t been able to come up with anything that she could test on any of their trapped ghosts. It would have to be able to penetrate the trap casing, but she’d made the casing to be pretty much impenetrable. Thwarted by herself, again! And ever since the Wrong Door Incident, they’d all agreed that there needed to be both very good reasons and a unanimous vote before they ever released another ghost on purpose.

There’d been another tradeoff: in order to focus primarily on making it reasonably safe for Joey, she’d wound up with what she still considered an oversized device. To get it down to something she could transport to a bust and use remotely—though that raised the question of how many hands she was going to need in total—it would need to be a lot smaller. But! She’d accomplish that next. How, exactly? She know she could, but she wasn’t sure how yet, and that was awesome.

“Holtz! Lunch decision time!” Abby yelled.

Holtzmann patted P.BAD one more time and grinned.

“What’ll it be?” asked Abby once everyone was back in the main office—minus Kevin, who’d gone off to a charity Hide-and-Seek-athon, or so he’d claimed.

Joey’d had a good morning, getting more of Patty’s multidisciplinary take on the Ghostbusters
operation. Since she’d seen them in action, some parts of the puzzle were fitting together. If they had
time today, she’d talk with Erin about ghost behavior and PPSD (post-paranormal stress disorder).
Otherwise, that was on the calendar for tomorrow. Today was lunch and then the brain scan. And
speaking of lunch…

Joey cleared her throat. “Let me take you guys out for lunch. You’ve fed me several times, and
despite the non-apology, I know I might’ve taken hours off of your lives with the surprise
appearance the other day. And you’re letting me practically move in here.” She gestured at her desk
and the paper calendar they’d tacked up on the wall.

The Ghostbusters looked at each other. Finally, Erin smoothed the front of her elegant blouse, with
its many tiny buttons, and said, “That is such a nice thought, Joey. I think I speak for all of us when I
say that we really appreciate it. And, well, I don’t want to be rude, but…”

“Ya broke!” sang Holtzmann.

Erin’s face turned red. She put her hands on her hips and glared at her colleague.

Abby shrugged. “What? She’s right, isn’t she?”

“Uh, well, not exactly?” Joey shuffled some of the papers on the desk. Her desk. “I mean, it’s more
of a projected future cash flow issue.”

Holtzmann cleared her throat. “Koffthat'swhatbrokeiskoff. Koff.”

“Well, I mean, I’m not penniless. And I got a royalty check yesterday! Given that I’m not J. K.
Rowling, or Stephen King, or Nora Roberts, I’m still not going be taking you to Lotus Leaf or Per
Se or whatever. But I can definitely manage somewhere around here without damaging my budget.”

“You sure?” Patty eyed her skeptically.

Joey stood up and grabbed her messenger bag. “Last one into the Korean place isn’t allowed to order
kimchi manduguk!”

“Screw you guys, I’m having lunch!” Abby shot out of her seat, linked her arm with Joey’s, and
started pulling her through the door. Joey laughed and they marched out.

When the five of them arrived at the restaurant, there was some maneuvering as they squeezed in the
doorso that they entered two and then three at a time, making sure nobody was last. Joey was
laughing so hard that she had trouble catching her breath as they sat down at their booth. A server
ignored their giggles and handed out menus.

Joey was squeezed between Patty on one side and Holtzmann on the other. Abby and Erin sat across
from them. As they leaned their heads together to help each other interpret the menu, Joey caught a
glimpse of what they must have looked like in high school. It was cute. She wondered if they’d ever
dated.

Their order was sent in without any of the $45+ dishes on the back of the menu, despite some
Teasing. The food was excellent, and Abby loved her kimchi dumpling soup. Patty, Joey noted, had
an enviable ease with the traditional flattish metal chopsticks. The Ghostbusters reminisced about the
stress and excitement of their chaotic early days as a team, and even told a story about how they’d
hired Kevin (which sounded like a tall tale if Joey’d ever heard one). Then Holtzmann slung an arm
around Joey’s neck and started explaining her brain scan project, in a great deal of excited technical
detail. Joey gave Abby an alarmed look, and when Abby cocked a head at her, Joey attempted to
nod subtly toward Holtzmann’s arm. No, not the brain scan, Abby. This!
Abby made a tiny but dismissive shrug. OK. More generic Holtzmann weirdness. Just when Joey thought she’d gotten used to it…

Holtzmann paused her monologue for a sip of tea with her other hand. Patty expressed her strong opinions regarding whether corn tea deserved to be called “tea,” and then they were off on a diversion about the best, worst, and weirdest forms of tea.

When they trailed off, having reached a hard impasse on the topic of sweet tea, Joey remembered something. She dug a business card out of her wallet and passed it toward Erin. “Between the possession research you guys were talking about the other day and Holtzmann’s brain scanning stuff, it occurred to me that you might want to talk to Dr. Miriam Chen. She’s a neuroscientist over at NYU, and she’s been a resource for me on several projects. And—confidentially—she’s pretty interested in parapsychology. She said I could put you guys in touch.”

Holtzmann snatched the card out of Erin’s hands and took a photo, then put it back. “Very interesting,” she said.

“Ahem. Thanks, Joey. That could be extremely useful!” Erin’s eyes were bright. “We might have to mine your other contacts sometime. I mean, the ones who would be OK with that, you know.”

“Sure,” said Joey. “If this were the 1980s, I’d have a huge Rolodex.”

“Aw, they all say that,” Holtzmann mumbled reflexively.

Patty shook her head, then smiled. “Hey, before we head back, I got something too. The Cooper-Hewitt Museum has a new gallery that opened pretty recently, while we were all busy at the end of last year. ‘Models and Prototypes.’ It looks historical and technological and damn pretty.” Holtzmann clapped her hands—withdraw ing her arm from Joey’s back at last—and bounced up and down next to Joey. “But wait, there’s more! They have a Pixar exhibit that just opened. And it occurred to me, why not invite everybody? Erin and I both have memberships. We can all get in free! You get a ticket, and you get a ticket, and—”

There was general excitement, which struck Joey as adorable. “We all saw Inside Out together this summer,” Patty explained to Joey. “Turns out we’re all Pixar fans. So, you want to come along?”

Joey hesitated. Was that a sincere invitation? She needed to integrate herself into their workdays, of course; she had to, in order to do her research. But she really wasn’t trying to push herself into their social and private lives. Was Patty just asking her in order to be polite? She stalled for time. “Uh, I’m not sure…”

Holtzmann nudged Joey’s shoulder with her own shoulder. “You should come,” she said, and when Joey looked over at her, she was smiling enough that her nose was crinkling. Holtzmann did not strike Joey as someone who made a show of fake politeness unless forced to, so Joey nodded. “OK, Patty. Thank you. I would love to.”

“All right then. Let’s go right after work, OK, y’all?”

“Great! Now can you pony up, Joey, so we can get out of here and I can stick your brain in a magnet?”

“…I would like nothing more.”
The brain scan went well enough. Joey didn’t run screaming, so that was good, and there was no smoke or fire, so that was also good. Holtzmann hadn’t expected any, not really anyway, and she had tested it on herself and Kevin with no problems, but still. Good data so far, and she’d finish getting her human baseline later with Erin, Patty, and Abby. Really, if the six of them, with their very different brains, had anything in common, then it was probably something that all human brains did. So until museum time, it was back to noodling on how to make a P.P.BAD—a portable one—and the flashbang, and hardening the cryocooler units.

Plenty to keep her occupied, and to keep her mind off—wait, what, exactly? Holtzmann frowned at herself, then shrugged and pulled her goggles down.

After an entertaining time at the museum (they didn’t get thrown out, though Joey was briefly afraid that they would be), the five women found themselves at a kind of pub not too far away. “Behold, yonder sign promises both beer and cheese,” Holtzmann had explained as she dragged them toward it. “This is a no-lose proposition. And probably also where I wanna go when I die.”

Between beers and cheeses, Joey found herself still talking shop. But then again, so were the others. “So how did you get your hands on Ghosts From Our Past, Joey?” asked Erin. “You might’ve noticed that the ones at the firehouse are redacted, like some of our files.”

“Why is that, anyway?” Joey ate a spoonful of cheese. She agreed with Holtzmann: this was the good life.

“Well, because there’s information in there that can, and has, been used for evil,” Erin said. She twisted her napkin anxiously. “What we thought was just theory turned out to be more of a recipe for a weapon, I guess you could say.”

Holtzmann laughed. “You didn’t think that Rowan guy figured out how to summon ghosts all by himself, didja? I mean, he was smart, considering, but not that smart.”

“I don’t think I still know the whole story of what happened, and that’s one story I’d really like you guys to tell. But not in a noisy bar, please. At any rate, Erin, I got the book in an international used bookstore in Taiwan.”

“Wow, Taiwan? That’s far.” Erin grimaced. “Well, I see why we missed it, but that’s very worrying.”

Abby rubbed her face. “Hell. OK, we need to go over the numbers of what was printed and sold very carefully, without leaving any room for error this time. We already took the digital ones down, you know. I mean, we’d only sold a couple anyway, and the people who’d bought them were happy to have them deleted in exchange for $10 in Amazon credit.” She huffed into her mug of draft root beer. “Too happy, if you ask me.”

“And the mayor hired a PI to track down the handful of weirdos—‘scuse me, I mean, people who
had hard copies. They got reimbursed and the books got destroyed. But somewhere along the line I
guess we missed one.” Patty shared the worried expression that Abby and Erin were wearing.

Holtzmann? She was doing calculations on a placemat and softly cackling to herself.

Joey thought for a moment. “So, is Rowan why there are still so many ghosts here? I mean, as far as
I know, no other place of the world I’ve visited has this much actual, verifiable paranormal activity.”

“Pretty good inference.” Abby nodded. “We think he might have slightly but permanently weakened
the durable but not impenetrable barrier between our reality and the ghost dimension. Not only did a
few ghosts get left behind, ones beyond the pull of the closing vortex, but in addition, we theorize
that this may have strengthened some of the normal ghosts that were already here. Those might have
continued to go unnoticed for centuries, if not for—”

“Hush up now, Abby. Does this look like a lecture hall to you? No? Well then, shut up and try this.
It’s cheese soup, Abby!” Patty pushed her bowl over. “Cheese soup!”

Chapter End Notes

Things are developing, even if they're not clear yet. The next couple of chapters are a
little more dramatic, though! Chapter 8 is about 75% done, so once I finish it, I'll start
Chapter 9, and when Chapter 9 is done, I'll upload Chapter 8. :D

Not gonna lie, it feels a little ridiculous to be working on fanfic--and even my Actual
Novel projects--in the world as it is right now. That feeling just keeps getting stronger
and stronger. Sometimes it's hard to find any value in frivolous escapism at all. But I
keep reminding myself we need breaks too. (Just like Holtzmann does.) And I guess
anything that helps us keep going--or really, just keep it together at a totally basic level--
is worthwhile. I guess I've said most of that before, but my mind keeps coming back to
it.
Death Avenue

Chapter Summary

Time passes and is summed up! Glances are exchanged! NYC history is related! Nerds are everywhere! And, action!

Chapter Notes

Alternate title: "Unholy Fusion"

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Joey saw a lot of the Ghostbusters in the next few weeks. Not every day, but most days, and the line between work time and social time blurred for Joey the way it apparently had, long ago, for the Ghostbusters. Joey went along with it—her roommates were just her roommates, not her close friends, and her actual friends were scattered around the world. So it wasn't as though she was neglecting anyone.

There was a bit of a lull in busts, which meant that Joey had time to listen to each of the women's individual (thoroughly bizarre) stories of the Rowan incident that had led up to the Battle of Times Square. She had a few more dreams about it, but they remained just strange and not nightmarish. The one bust they did go on was mostly memorable for the rich hot chocolate with whipped cream that they had afterwards, during the postmortem debriefing. "It's tradition," Abby had noted. "Extremely irregular tradition, but still."

She sat out of the way in Abby and Erin's lab while they argued over the naming scheme for their unfinished paranormal taxonomy, and in Patty's library while she and Erin double-high-fived over a positive identification of a thwarted possession in 1938 Prague, and in a corner of Holtzmann's lab while Holtzmann perfected her new phantasmic flashbang and worked on the condensing of the P.BAD. She took a lot of notes on things she didn't understand, but during their off-time lounging around the kitchen or out at dinner or sprawled out at Erin's place watching increasingly odd Hong Kong supernatural adventure films, the Ghostbusters helped her annotate what she'd written down.

At Patty's urging, rather than go home every time the Ghostbusters were busy or at a meeting, Joey sometimes stayed at her desk and worked on some nonfiction articles and a couple of new romance ideas. The ghost stories were still not going anywhere in particular, but Patty had supplied plenty of research material on other supernatural phenomena that—probably—didn't exist at all. Safer territory, Joey thought, and her editor didn't object, so she kept writing. (Well, and sometimes she helped Kevin do his job. She just couldn't stop herself sometimes.)

On this particular late afternoon, Joey was listening to Holtzmann and Abby, who were seated at the kitchen table with their laptops and notebooks, discuss the notion of a possession deflector of some kind. Joey supposed it was, technically, an argument, and they were both emphatic and enthusiastic, but they weren't attacking each other—just the ideas. Joey had rarely ever seen two people who could debate conflicting concepts with so little animus. And it wasn't some kind of "scientists are
Vulcans and communicate using pure logic" thing at all; Joey had seen any number of esteemed scientists tear each other apart in the most childish and vicious of ways. It was clear that Abby and Holtz really cared about finding the best approach together, and that they'd been working together this way for a long time.

It was actually really sweet.

Also, it was clear that they were very, very motivated. Something personal was going on.

Joey took notes as well as she could. Although they were approaching the notion of possession-blocking only from a theoretical point at the moment, Holtzmann (of course) kept dragging the engineering aspects in. Then Abby would steer them back to their theories of how possession worked and didn't work, with references to the research that Patty and Erin had been doing (with, unofficially, some help from Joey).

Finally, they each wrote some notes with new ideas to follow up on, and Abby went downstairs. Holtzmann got up with a 1982 World's Fair mug and headed for the coffeemaker. The mug had held orange soda at the beginning of the discussion, and Joey hoped it was completely empty, because it didn't look like Holtzmann was going to rinse it out. Joey couldn't decide which was more pleasing: her view of Holtzmann right now, rummaging around under the sink for the coffee filters, or the way Holtzmann's eyes had flashed fire when she'd gotten a new idea a few minutes ago. Nah, who was she kidding? It was definitely the latter. Joey had been reading more into the Ghostbusters' pre-GB history, and when she had come across a phrase in the letters section of a journal describing Holtzmann as "a wizard, a technological genius the likes of which comes along only once in a century at best; an unholy fusion of Einstein and Tesla and Noether," it had given her what she could only identify as feels. Or possibly just "heart-eyes," if she were really honest with herself. (She had ignored the sentence immediately following it, which began "It is a profound shame that she has engaged her extraordinary talents in the depths of fringe science…")

"Ahem," said Holtzmann. "Is there a ghost or something over here? Because if so, you gotta tell me."

Joey felt her eyes widen. Fuck—she had actually been staring at Holtzmann. Where had her brain gotten to? "Uh—I just—" She had to change the subject. "So, there were some hidden undercurrents in that conversation. Could you tell me what was going on?" Well, that was definitely not the smoothest way to approach that possibly sensitive topic. But it was too late. "Ah." Holtzmann turned around again and pressed buttons on the complicated-looking coffeemaker. (Was that a hand crank?) "Why don't you…why don't you ask Patty if she's willing to talk about it? If she'd rather not, or if she seems uncomfortable, then let me know. She had a better view than I did." Holtzmann laughed, then sobered. "Patty was the hero there, anyway. And hey." Holtzmann glanced over her shoulder at Joey, very briefly. "Do me a favor and don't bug Abs about it, OK?"

I'll try not to, was what Joey intended to reply. Another research rule of hers was to never just flat-out close down any road of inquiry. But instead, what she said was, "I won't," and she wrote down a reminder to talk to Patty tomorrow.

"Y'all," said Patty, looking up from her phone. "Any of you been to New York Fan Con, the big one?"

Holtzmann made a sad face. "I heard they had Gillian Anderson a couple years ago. Too bad I was
"buried in research—"

"And broke," Abby noted.

"—or I would've gone and swept her off her feet." Holtzmann smirked at Abby.

"They have a lot of crazy-ass costumes, promos for big movies, and stuff like that. My niece Tamara goes to that kind of thing—she's a cosplayer. Anyway, how normal do you think it would be for those nerds to start tweeting about a ghost in the halls? Look, there's even some video."

Joey joined the others in looking over Patty’s shoulder. The video was shaky and short, but it did look like—past somebody’s elaborate winged armor—there was a familiar kind of glow moving in the background.

“Can you text your niece?” Erin asked. She fiddled with the tiny buttons on her cuffs anxiously.

“Already on it…huh. Tamara said she thought it was some kind of 4chan-asshole-type thing, an organized hoax or whatever. Rumors that a couple of people got hurt, but she says there are always weird rumors. Or she said maybe it's a super-swanky promo from Sony or whoever. But she says now that I'm asking, she's worried."

Joey took out her phone and flicked through the con's hashtag. "Do you guys go out when you're not called? And how can you tell whether there's really something on?"

Abby had her tablet out now and was checking some other videos. "Yeah, if someone doesn't call us, we have to do a lot of paperwork—well, I mean, poor li'l Erin has to do a lot of paperwork—to get reimbursed by the city. Oh, but look at this video."

"Don't tell anyone, but I actually like the paperwork," Erin whispered toward Joey. Then she looked over Abby's shoulder at the video, and her lips thinned.

"Well, we decide whether to go based on whether the information we're getting fits together and makes sense, and on how much panic there is." Abby glanced up at Erin and some kind of unspoken communication passed between them.

"Well, there's hella panic," said Holtzmann. Her expression—anticipatory, on the verge of smiling—didn't fit with the tight mouths and furrowed brows of the others. It occurred to Joey that this wasn't the first time that more than Holtzmann’s socks had been mismatched.

"Don't say 'hella,'" said Erin. "It's not even a word."

Holtzmann opened her mouth to argue, but Patty interrupted. "But does this info actually make sense? 'Cause it's not adding up to me."

Abby nodded. "Yeah. We've got a bunch of conflicting reports. Some mentions of a—a—well, they were mostly saying a Victorian policeman, but now more tweets are saying 'spooky train conductor,' and 'something with a lot of … teeth and legs.' I dunno, maybe it is a Sony promo, or something for an ARG, or…"

"A what now?" asked Erin.

Patty broke in. "Hey, wait up now. A train conductor?" She rubbed her face and grabbed her own laptop. Her nails clicked on the keys, and then she looked up. "Oh yeah. You guys…Death Avenue."
Joey didn't know what that was, and neither did the other two, as far as she could tell, but it certainly didn't sound good. And before anyone could ask about it, Erin pointed urgently at the Twitter feed on Abby's tablet. "I think people are getting hurt!"

Patty's phone chimed rapidly, several times in a row. "Tamara says get down there—aaand there's Tamara's mama yelling at me, right on time—and—"

Abby reached over to the wall and mashed a button. "Get moving!"

The routine Joey had already seen a couple of times played out again, with a couple of differences. One, Holtzmann ran out and leapt up the stairs (three at a time, judging from the thudding sounds). Two, there was an edge of urgency in the air that hadn't been there the other times. Three, although the map didn’t come down this time, Joey now knew which parts of the room to avoid. She got out of the way, strapped on her messenger bag, and pulled on a pair of gloves and an old leather jacket one of her roommates had given her. (More resistant to permanent slime damage, Joey guessed, and maybe a little bit of protection in case she had to hit the ground sometime.) She had two cameras in her bag, one a high-quality film camera, and the other her usual digital camera for video. She was ready.

Holtzmann bounced back into the room and got into her gear. She had the current version of the P.PBAD around her neck, which did not look comfortable to Joey at all. It was the size of a reasonably large shoebox, but much, much heavier, not being made of cardboard. "Move it, people! We gotta protect the nerds."

"And Tamara." Patty, in the middle of pulling on her boots, glared at Holtzmann.

"Tamara's a nerd. We are all nerds here."
"Holtzmann said matter-of-factly. "But! Obviously right now Tamara is the most important nerd."

"You just want to give your P.PBAD a field test." Abby grinned at Holtzmann and started hopping toward the door, with one boot on and the other halfway on.

"That’s number two on my list," Holtzmann admitted, and then she pushed ahead of Abby to get to the garage.

"Naw, Holtzy just wants to put the moves on Natalie Dormer," grumbled Patty. She headed for the car.

Joey was still not sure how exactly Holtzmann had managed to park the Ecto, or whether it would still be there when they got back, but they hit the ground running as soon as they'd thrown on their packs, and she had to run to catch up. There were a lot of people, though at least more seemed to be going out of the convention center than going in. Capes, elaborate wigs, and oversized fantasy weapons abounded.

"There's no point in telling them to get out," Patty said, not even a little winded. "They never listen. That won't stop Erin, though."

And sure enough, Erin was waving her arms and yelling "Get out! Get out!" as she ran. Her face was turning red.

Joey had to smile as she dashed after them toward a side entrance. Their deal now was that she could accompany them on a bust, but she had to do her best to stay about 15 meters away from the action. And if any of them yelled "Scram!", that was her prompt to leave the area entirely. She wasn't crazy about it, but it was the best she could talk them into. For now.
"Hey! Where's your badges?" someone with a staff shirt yelled at them as they pounded into the beige halls of the exhibition center.

"Pull the fire alarm, Joey!" Abby shouted over her shoulder. "It's OK—I texted the mayor!"

Joey veered aside as soon as she spotted one, and gave it a yank. Lights started flashing and an alarm sounded. Convention security started to shout and direct fans out, but now the Ghostbusters were swimming upstream, into a flood of overexcited cosplayers.

"Service corridor!" Patty waved her phone, which was showing the floor plan to the building. She yanked a door open and they darted through it. When it fell shut behind them, silence filled the corridor. It felt like a relief to Joey, for a moment, but as they jogged forward, it started to feel eerie.

Then she realized why. "Uh…guys…what happened to the fire alarm?"

"Spectral interference," Erin said. "We haven't worked out how, but it's a thing that happens. Anyway, it means Tamara was right about where the manifestations are right now."

"Course she was," said Patty. "Your ears will probably pop when we get closer, Joey. Don't worry about it."

There was no signal that Joey noticed, but after a short time, the Ghostbusters slowed to a more cautious walk. Abby and Holtzmann were in front, with the two taller women behind them (and Joey trailing after). They slid out their proton wands, each team member keeping an eye on a different angle ahead of them. "Three things," said Patty very quietly. "First, I've been thinking we ought to actually learn something about, y'know, procedures soldiers and people like that take when they go down halls or enter rooms in a combat zone. Tactics 'n' shit."

"Smart." Abby was also quiet and alert. "Liiiiitle creepy, but smart."

"I'll do some research. Second. Holtzmann, are you really OK with that thing there? Because you don't look OK." Patty tapped the device around Holtzmann's neck.

Holtzmann scoffed. "I don't gots T-rex arms, Pats! I can reach around it. Plus, Holtzy's been working out." She kissed her right bicep, but it was so awkward to do with the P.PBAD getting in the way that it immediately undermined her point.

"Hmm. All right, point 3. Death Avenue. What was it? You guys don't know, huh. It was part of a train line that ran through here, 1800s to the 1930s or 40s. It was tenements back then. The Powers that Be didn't give a shit about the folks out here in Hell's Kitchen. Some of the sources from back then said the train already killed maybe three, four hundred people by 1900."

"Three or four hundred?" Abby glanced back at Patty, eyes wide. "Actually killed killed?"

"Yeah. Mostly kids," Patty grimaced. "It was real bad. I'm talking decapitation and stuff. I'm skipping the gory details, OK, but…I mean, the Times back then wrote something about how it was like a sacrifice, or something…hmm…Oh yeah. 'Sacrificed to a monster that menaced them night and day,' it said."

"Jesus," whispered Erin. "I had no idea."

Joey had never heard of Death Avenue before, either. But New York was like Tokyo or London that way; even though NYC was young in comparison, all of those cities lived within endless layers of stories.
"Also, some of this land was owned by Donald Trump before it got bought for this convention center, so bad karma there too, y'know?" Patty added.

Joey felt her eardrums fluctuate. "Uh…"

Abby held up her hand. They were approaching a pair of swinging doors. "Yeah, we're close. This is the catering storage area that Tamara told Patty she was hiding in. Patty, she doing OK?"

"She's not texting back. Hopefully she's just too busy getting out of here." Patty slid her phone into the pocket on her chest. "Sooner we get this over with…"

"You stay out of the way, Joey," said Erin. "And don't come in till we say so."

"Yes, ma'am."

Holtzmann stepped into the catering room. The lights were on low, maybe part of the fire alarm response. Best thing to do in an emergency was make people panic with seizure-inducing lights and paralyzingly loud alarms, right? Holtzmann thought she'd like a few words with whatever engineers came up with that bright idea originally.

She saw stacks of tables and chairs, and a number of steel cabinets in the back. It was a pretty big room, with a kind of extra space lined with cabinets off to the right. A little hard to get a clear idea of the layout, with stuff everywhere. But she didn't see anything yet, and Abby's PKE meter was only spinning lazily.

"Helloooo?"

No answer.

"Seems OK for now," said Abby. "Patty, you wanna…"

Patty nodded and pushed the door open a little. "Come on in, Joey, but stay near the door or out of the way."

Holtzmann looked over to see Joey come in and press herself into a corner near the door. Good. Sensible. Well, to the extent that coming into a room with a maybe-ghost or two was sensible at all, anyway. Lol.

"Tamara?" Patty called.

Holtzmann thought she heard a creak from the cabinets, but then the PKE meter took off.

"Get ready!" yelled Abby.

Green and blue energy swirled around the wall at the back of the room, and Joey’s camera started to click. A figure emerged out of it: a man in an old-fashioned uniform. Or, more accurately, about .75 —maybe .73 of a man. The right part of his upper torso, including half of his head, was missing, as though sheared off. He walked toward them slowly, purposefully, clicking a pocket watch in his left hand. And he was shrieking, despite his lack of a mouth.

"Trap," said Abby, but Holtzmann was already pulling it out. The P.PBAD poked her uncomfortably in her right breast as she dropped the trap on the floor. At least her bruised ribs had healed by now and weren’t also getting in the way.
"Fire!" Abby and Holtzmann aimed their wands right down the middle, careful not to intersect. Erin and Patty fired from each side.

"Oh, beautiful!" Holtzmann felt her hair whipping around her face, and she grinned. Better than any day at the beach! Actually, beaches sucked—sunburn, sand in your equipment, not enough power outlets—so that was a bad comparison, but anyway. They'd hit the conductor ghost with synchronized precision, and it was working. "Just a little more!" She attempted to mash the P.PBAD button with her chin, and on her third try, she got it. Then she glanced over to see if Joey was OK. She was, though she had two cameras out now. Holtzmann was going to flash her a thumbs-up—but, wait, hold on. Both of her hands were occupied with the proton wand. That was why she'd had to activate the P.PBAD with her chin. She settled for a wink.

And then a quick lurch to the left, as a series of chairs slammed into the walls behind them. But the team was good. They wrangled the ghost into immobility within seconds.

"Can we box this dude up now?" Patty shouted.

Hell to the yeah, they could. Holtzmann stomped the trap, and with a screaming rush of energy, the ghost was sucked in. She slammed it shut and shouted, "Yeah! That was textbook, ladies! Or it would be, if there were a textbook, and if there were, we would have written it, so come to think of it, I guess anything we do is textbook. But that was an awesome textbook! I...think I lost my train of thought there. Anyway you guys rule."

"That was pretty open-and-shut, wasn't it?" Joey said from the corner. Holtzmann looked at her. Now she could safely give Joey that thumbs up—and another one for the joke.

Abby groaned. "Dammit. The last thing we need around here is more puns."

Erin tilted her head, as though she'd missed it. Holtzmann figured she was just pretending in order to hide how much she secretly loved terrible jokes. "Well, you're right that this was a very straightforward capture," Erin said.

"Didn't even break a sweat," added Patty, brushing her shoulders off.

"Kind of a letdown, tee-bee-aitch," said Holtzmann. She swapped out Abby's empty trap with her own full one. The traps made satisfying clicks as they were correctly aligned and put into place.

Patty tsked at Holtzmann. "How many times I gotta tell you? Plane flights, dental appointments, court visits, Mayor stuff, busts: simple and boring is good, OK?"

"Y'know what, boring might be off the menu for a bit," said Abby. The PKE meter had gone wild.

"Ah, the sequel!" Holtzmann was stoked to see what this teeth-and-legs thing actually was.

The entity ripped into the room from the floor, sending chairs flying. The other four all ducked, which was good. Holtzmann gave the thing the ol’ up-and-down. It did have a lot of teeth—it had a lot of mouths. It was an amazing segmented green glob of mouths, sharp teeth, and ... hmm, well, limbs. Not all legs. Some of those were arms, and some of them had too many joints to be either legs or arms. It wasn't using them to move; it was hovering, with its arms grasping toward them. Kind of like No-Face, if it'd been in a terrible Star Trek transporter incident with some Orion girls. Class V for sure.

It screamed at them, an angry disharmony pouring from all of its mouths. Holtzmann's spine tingled.

"That is sooo cool!" She had never seen or heard anything like it. Patty was going to complain about
this thing for weeks, she just knew it, and Erin was probably very pale. But the important thing was that they were all in the process of squeezing their triggers.

The camera kept clicking. Not bad, Joey. Really, the writer was pretty calm for someone who was completely unarmed.

They hit the entity with their beams—again, well synchronized and aimed. Nice, nice. What was the PBAD data from this thing going to look like? It probably had origins in multiple humans, some agglutination of pain and deaths, but their working definition was that Class Vs were completely detached from their origins, and so far they only had speculation as to whether these specters manifested from accumulated negative psychic energy at a single site, or if they were composites of individuals, like a literal Katamari Damacy, though if Erin's latest wide-spectrum analysis of—

It screamed louder and then, worse, it began to laugh. More chairs flew at them, and its hands came lashing out of it toward them on lengthened arms.

"Cabinets," yelled Patty. Yeah, not a bad idea; the storage area would at least provide some shelter, and it was a pass-through, so they wouldn't be trapped. They made a dash for it, and Patty grabbed Joey along the way. They wound up crouched against the cabinet doors, making smaller targets of themselves.

The thing—Holtzmann mentally dubbed it Mouthy—chuckled and growled.

Holtzmann could feel the tense bodies of Abby in front of her and Erin behind her. "Is this the part where I reference Jurassic Park?" Holtzmann whispered.

"You know, that guy doesn't know anything about chaos theory," grumbled Abby.

"Or any other form of science he writes about," added Erin. Joey and Patty quietly agreed.

"What? Who? I was talking about Jeff Goldblum," Abby said. Holtzmann heard Joey try to stifle a laugh.

"What is it doing out there?" Erin put an anxious hand on Holtzmann's shoulder, and Holtzmann didn't shrug it off.

"It's…I honestly think it's just waiting for us," Abby made a thinking noise that Holtzmann knew well. "We're going to have to figure out a plan of attack."

"Try one more time to get it in the trap," suggested Patty. "If it ain't in the mood…"

"Then just blow that sucker up," finished Abby. "Yeah."

"Ummm…guys?"

They glanced back at Joey. The cabinet door was open, and a petite young Black woman, maybe 18 or so and dressed as Dee from Rat Queens—Holtzmann knew, because Gaby at the coffeehouse had been lending them to her—was peeking out.

"Aunt Patricia?"

"You must be freaked out. Yeah, it's your Aunt Pats." Patty leaned back and gave Tamara a tight hug with one arm, not letting go of her proton wand with the other.

"That thing keeps coming and going in here. I tried to get out but it came after me."
"Good thinking hiding, baby. Where does it go when it leaves?"

"Mostly up, I guess?"

"Hmm. Good observing, baby." Patty released Tamara and reached for her phone.

"There's just an atrium above us," said Holtzmann, "and then the green roof. Stairs're that way. What? I saw the floor plans. Hug your niece some more."

They heard glass shattering from the main part of the room.

"It sounds really pissed," said Tamara. "Worse than before."

"OK, Joey, you get Tamara out of here while we give it a good dose of proton beams, all right? Can you do that for Patty?"

"Yes, of course." Joey stowed her cameras in her bag and held her hand out to Tamara. "Joey. Nice to meet you, Tamara."

Tamara shook her hand and crawled out to crouch beside Joey.

"You take care of my girl," said Patty. "Her mama won't ever forgive me if something happens to her."

"Count of three," said Abby. "One…" They stood. "Two…" They tightened their grips on their wands. "Three!" Holtzmann was already swinging out into the main room, wand blazing. In the noise and chaos, she could just catch their silhouettes, Joey holding Tamara's hand tightly as they ran through the door.

Joey had a pretty good sense of direction; it was pretty much a necessity for field research, especially in places with no cell phone service. She ran with Tamara down the corridors back toward the entrance they'd come in. When they neared the street, they slowed and caught their breath.

"You got a ride, or should we call—"

"I came in on the subway; I'll take it home," Tamara said. "I'm definitely not going to be the weirdest-looking person on that train. It's fine." She took a deep breath.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just…I'm not being much of a badass today. Or an adult."

"I gotta disagree," Joey said firmly. "The Ghostbusters were still debating whether there was anything happening when you texted Patty. They got there a lot earlier than they would have if you hadn't. You may have saved lives."

Tamara shrugged, but smiled. "All right, fine, I'll take it. Look, I can tell you want to go back in there. You're crazy just like my auntie." She grinned. "Anyway, I am an adult—I'm in my second year at SUNY, you know—I've got it from here. You go watch Aunt Patty's back, ‘K?" She held her hand out.

Joey hesitated. "OK, it's a deal."

Tamara smacked her palm. Then, as Joey headed back toward the convention center, Tamara yelled after her. "Y'all be careful in there!" She sounded just like Patty.
The police and emergency services presence was a lot bigger than it had been a few minutes ago, and now they were between her and the entry to the building. “Dammit...” Abby had said she’d texted the Mayor on the way over, so hopefully the city personnel knew what they were doing, but Joey doubted she’d added "and oh yeah, we have a hanger-on, wave her through," particularly since it hadn't sounded like it would be great for the Mayor to know about her Ghostbusters documentation efforts. Still, she needed to get back in. This was a wilder, more dangerous, and more interesting bust than any she'd encountered so far, and she really wanted to document it. And, well, she wanted to make sure they had it handled (she was steadfastly ignoring the fact that she had no way of helping if they didn’t). She had to get through ASAP.

Joey straightened her collar and her glasses. There was a cluster of paramedics and police off to one side, or there was a single police officer on the other. Usually one person at a time was easier to bluff her way past, but the cop looked like a standard-issue white guy. Normally she'd casually look around till she found an isolated gatekeeper who appeared to have something in common with Joey, but there wasn't time. She headed for Officer McWhiteGuy.

As she approached, she kept her eyes off of him and her stride purposeful. When he took a step toward her, she finally glanced toward him, keeping a poker face. She nodded and didn't slow down.

"Ma'am. Wait." He stepped into her path. "We're evacuating and locking down this building. No one in or out."

"I'm with the Ghostbusters, officer," she said calmly.

He looked over. "Yeah, I don't think so. There's only four Ghostbusters. Well, and that one dude. The beefcake."

Ha. Well, they might have something common. Could she argue him into letting her in? Maybe, but there wasn't time. "Sorry, sir. I don't have time for this conversation." She tucked her chin and sprinted for the entryway. The officer lunged for her, and she felt his hands slide off the edge of her jacket. So long as he wasn't the type of cop who would tase her—or worse—she was getting away.

And...Joey swore again, under her breath. All of the open entryways had metal gates that were starting lower. With two cameras strapped to her, she wasn't going to be trying any kind of action-movie dive under the gate. She'd just have to put some muscle into it.

Joey pushed her legs to go faster, and just managed to duck under. As soon as she got around a corner, she stopped for just a second, to throw back some water. Then she pelted down the hall. She'd zip by the catering room to see if they were still there, and then she'd head for the stairs that Holtzmann had indicated, as fast as she could.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 9 is complete! I'll probably upload it as soon as I get a full outline for Chapter 10—which may be very soon--but I'm going to try not to upload Chapter 10 until I actually write Chapter 11.

But I think you'll like Chapter 9.

- Errata -
Death Avenue was a real thing, though there was more than one and the details are jumbled, so I just pasted together some of the details. And it really was near the Javits Center where NYCC is held, though the building I'm describing isn't exactly the Javits Center, and I don't want NYCC to sue me.

**Emmy Noether** was a female Jewish mathematician and physicist from Bavaria. She was brilliant and although she was mistreated in many ways by her times (among other things, she had to flee the rising Nazi movement in 1933), she left a huge mark in the field of physics and mathematics. Einstein was a big fan, and I think it's a shame that we don't all grow up knowing her name.
The Kinetic Energy of Colliding Bodies

Chapter Summary

Things Happen in this chapter. (Boy, do they ever.)

Holtzmann gets hype.

Also, there's karaoke.

Chapter Notes

I just couldn't wait on posting this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Of course it's locked," grumbled Abby. "You know, I don't even think the roof is totally open to the public yet. Only by special invitation."

"I gotcher stinkin' invitation right here. Move over." Holtzmann stepped up and pulled out a tool from a pocket.

"Is that a sonic screwdriver?" asked Patty. Abby cocked an eyebrow at her and she leaned against the concrete wall of the stairwell. "What?"

"...Nothin'. Isn't that cheating, Holtz?"

"You say 'cheating,' but you mean 'efficient.'" Holtzmann put the electronic lockpick to work on the keyhole, but she had a feeling that wasn't going to cut it. There was a keypad as well, so this was only going to work if they hadn't set up the keypad successfully. Wouldn't be the first time though…

She tried the handle. "No joy. Stand back, ladies…No, no, more back. More back. You know what? Just go down to the landing. You can't handle what Holtzy is serving today."

There was the inevitable eternity of the half-second in which the others—well, she didn't know. Decided whether to believe her? Searched for the punchline? Suffered parser errors? And then they went back down the stairs.

Holtzmann hopped down a few steps herself, raised her proton wand over her head, and aimed it at the lock. Well, the door. Let's be real, she thought. It wasn't exactly sharpshooting.

"Fire in the hole!"

The beam hit, and the whole metal door blew backwards in pieces. Proton beam energy crackled around the door frame.

"Wooo! Come on, let's see what's out there." Holtzmann, feeling good, even gave Abby a couple of seconds to catch up with her before she stepped through to the roof.
Well, given the smell of scorched metal and the draft of outside air, Joey had found the right stairwell. She dashed up to the top of the stairs and saw the four women standing back to back, as though waiting for something to happen. The green roof, with pathways woven through it and skylights in the form of glass pyramids jutting up here and there, was quiet and serene despite the distant sound of sirens below.

"There!" Patty yelled. She pointed toward a heaving green monstrosity that was slowly arising through the roof.

"Grit your teeth and tighten your girdle, Erin. We're 'bout to kill some plants," warned Holtzmann.

Erin rolled her eyes at Holtzmann, Abby nodded, and they rearranged themselves into a line facing the rising apparition. Joey took her chances and dashed out from the entryway to kneel behind a large HVAC unit closer to the action.

"Wait until there's enough to target," Abby instructed the others. ". . . OK! OK! Let 'er rip!"

The four proton beams lashed out once again, and the entity's mouths roared. Joey took some more photos. The lighting up on the roof was much better than it had been downstairs, even if the sun was getting low.

"Top quality work," said Holtzmann. Joey could see her grin, all dimples and teeth. The others, jaws clenched, didn't share it. But Joey felt herself smiling as well.

"Are we going to get this one in the box too?" Erin sounded both anxious and hopeful.

"Seems like—whoa." Holtzmann let her finger off the trigger as the entity leapt on top of one of the pyramids. It gripped the glass with half a dozen taloned feet and leered at them, tongues lolling out of the mouths. Then it shot out an arm at them, reaching meters across the roof with its claws—toward their faces.

The Ghostbusters dodged. The claws hit empty air and struck a clump of ornamental grass. Dirt and plants exploded outwards as though a landmine had been set off.

"Was that our one try?" asked Patty, glancing around. "I mean, I'm feeling like it's not in the mood."

"That was RUDE, Mouthy!" Holtzmann shook a gloved finger at the entity, which was scuttling down the pyramid. "VERY rude!"

"Oh no, don't give it a name." Patty groaned. "You know even if it does follow you home, you cannot keep it."

Did they ever stop bantering? Joey wondered if that was how they kept themselves focused. None of them came from combat backgrounds, as far as Joey knew, and they hadn't been at the job that long. They couldn't be jaded to the entities that faced them down yet.

"You guys hate fun," Holtzmann complained. Then she brightened. "Let's really put our backs into it this time, OK?"

Erin gave a determined nod. "I want to give it a darned good try before we give up. I so want to look at this thing in a containment unit. Even if it is hideous."

As they raised their wands again, Joey took some video of the entity. It was pretty hideous. So many mouths, so many limbs. And no eyes, though Joey wasn't sure whether adding eyes would make it
more or less disturbing.

She zoomed out as they took aim at the entity. It made another, smaller jump, but not a big enough one to disrupt the proton beams, and they kept their streams steady. It leapt again and they still kept firing.

"Umm, glass—" began Erin. "Mouthy's" last jump had taken it to one of the small glass skylights, immediately in front of a much larger one. But they'd all already fired.

Glass shards burst into the air. Joey swung back behind the HVAC box, and the Ghostbusters hit the ground.

"E—everyone OK?" asked Erin, her voice shaking a little. "I'm fine. Hopefully there was no one under that skylight."

"Couple scratches," said Abby. "Clean though. Patty, Holtzy, same?"

"Yeah, but now I'm real mad. Holtz?"

"Nothing a Care Bears iron-on patch won't take care of. And maybe a little ouch from this overgrown Polaroid camera on my chest. But you guys! Eye protection! Gotta protect the ol' peepers." Holtzmann pointed to her safety glasses. "And you guys call me a risk-taker."

"I know you're just being an ass, but you do have a point. Anyway, everyone watch out for this patch of ground," said Abby. They started to climb to their feet.

Joey was watching Mouthy. It cackled to itself and started to move back to the surface. Or—up onto the glass? Joey sucked air through her teeth. She stood up and pointed. "Guys! Guys! It's splitting in two!"

Holtzmann, making eye contact with Joey, gave her a tiny wave. The others stared at the entity.

"That is new," said Abby. "I don't like it."

The two Mouthys split again, so that there were four. Joey, suddenly remembering fifth-grade math, was relieved when it stopped there, and they didn't wind up with 8 and so on, but that was cold comfort. On top of that, the mini-Mouthys were only slightly smaller than the original had been, and they were a lot faster. The four were hopping, leaping and dashing everywhere, and they were starting to lash out at the Ghostbusters.

"Oh hell no, this is NOT OK," said Patty. She looked as though she'd just found Holtzmann eating her personal supply of strawberry yogurt.

"Time to switch instruments," Holtzmann murmured, eyes on the mini-Mouthys. "Mouthy's going down." Joey raised her eyebrows and focused the camera on her. Holtzmann had enthused to her about the other weapons and devices she'd made for them, but despite repeatedly trying to clarify, Joey was still not sure which were real and which were planned and which were purely pipe dreams. In fact, when she'd checked with the others, they'd had a long argument over whether items like the Proton Cutlass and the Neo-Jemisin Cyclone Jet Proton Cannon were already in the prototyping stage, were physically impossible, or were just Holtzmann describing something from a cartoon she'd fallen asleep while watching. At any rate, Joey hadn't seen any of them in action yet. (Someday, she hoped, she'd get to witness one of the legendary alleyway testing sessions she'd heard so much about.)

Holtzmann thrust the wand into its place on her back and smacked a button on a high-tech-looking
armband. She reached her hands back and two devices popped into her hands. These she raised up against her shoulders. They weren't guns, not ballistic firearms anyway; though they did look a little like a cross between a flare gun and a flintlock pistol. They were attached by wires or cords to the proton pack, and Joey supposed that like almost all of Holtzmann's devices, they required unfathomable amounts of energy.

Holtzmann took a step forward. She leveled the guns and strode toward one of the creatures, firing off a staccato series of crackling orange and violet pulses. Her hair lifted wildly around her head, framing her with fire in the setting sun like an angry angel.

And Joey's brain quit taking notes. She couldn't really see anything other than Holtzmann. God, she cut such a figure. Fearless, confident; she could have been twenty feet tall. With a muscular grace Joey hadn't anticipated, Holtzmann dropped to one knee, dodged a clawed limb grasping over her head, shot at the monster, pivoted, fired off another shot at a second one of the phantasms, rose back to her feet, and continued her charge.

Joey realized that she had let go of the cameras and had one hand pressed to her mouth and the other to her breastbone. It wasn't purely the heart-stopping effects of Holtzmann's performance; she had also just remembered a little more clearly that dark day in Times Square. It had definitely been Holtzmann, with the proton-whip pistols that Holtzmann had showed her—but not demonstrated—in the weapons tour.

Joey took a breath and turned to cover some of the other action. Patty was taking a proton blaster off of a holster on her leg, and the others were switching weapons as well. When Joey rotated back toward Holtzmann, she was startled to see that Holtzmann—and a mini-Mouthy—were both a lot closer to her than before. The Mouthy shot flaring green tongues out of both sides of itself, attacking both of them at the same time. Joey ducked and the tongue struck the cover of the HVAC unit, leaving a scorch mark. She heard Holtzmann curse; then the Ghostbuster backed away from Joey and fired repeatedly at the apparition. Its limbs flailed and, having learned her lesson, Joey rolled around the corner of the unit. And just in time. With a discordant howl, the entity burst apart, drenching the roof between Joey and Holtzmann with ectoplasm. Relieved, Joey stood up.

Holtzmann thrust a gun, straight-armed, right at Joey, and she ducked again, immediately. Holtz fired once over Joey’s head and—judging from the “Dammit, Holtzmann!” that she shouted at herself—missed. Then a second violet bolt sizzled across, and a clawed green arm dropped to the ground right in front of Joey’s feet (and then promptly turned into a puddle of ectoplasm). Joey felt herself blanch. Maybe she should just stay down. Well, mostly down—there were too many good shots to miss them all.

Holtzmann nodded at Joey and, before Joey could nod back, turned away and fired, arms stretched out to either side, with both weapons in opposite directions. Joey wondered if Holtzmann had been watching too many John Woo movies, but it wasn’t just theatrics. Her proton bolts were hitting their targets. Joey could already tell that these photos were going to be amazing.

Then Holtzmann swung around and jumped up onto one of the smaller skylights to fire both weapons in support of Patty's efforts against a skittering mini-Mouthy. Patty got it cornered between her line of fire and Holtzmann's, and blew it into a cloud of slime with her blaster. "Yeah!" Patty yelled, and Holtzmann gave a fist pump.

But Joey heard Holtzmann curse again as she jumped back down to the surface of the roof. She let one of her sidearms retract, and then she struggled with the strap to the P.PBAD. It looked like it was getting in her way after all, maybe slowing her or even throwing off her aim. Joey eyed Holtzmann's exposed position. Joey had taken risks in dangerous situations before, but ghosts were so unpredictable that she didn’t feel like she could adequately assess this one. Well, it wasn’t as though
her questionable cover was actually keeping her safe, anyway. She stripped off her cameras and sprinted over to Holtzmann, holding her hands out toward the P.PBAD.

"Give it to me—we’ll get it off you and I’ll get you some data."

"But you don't—"

"I was there practically the whole time you were building it! I know how to use it. I mean, more or less."

"Fuck yeah." Holtzmann wrestled the device off and thrust it into Joey's hands. It was heavy, and she thought she felt a faint tingling in her fingers, but that part was probably her imagination. Or maybe it was just where her fingers and Holtzmann's had brushed against each other.

Probably just the radioactivity though.

Abby made shooing motions at Joey between rounds of firing grenades, and Joey dashed back to her position. There was nothing stopping the two remaining Mouthys from coming in her direction, but so far, they seemed pretty fixated on the Ghostbusters—and vice versa, since each remaining Mouthy had a pair of Ghostbusters on it. At the far end of the roof from Joey, Patty and Erin took on one with their respective sidearms, and closer, near a taller skylight, Abby and Holtzmann were handling the other. Joey quickly focused her digital videocamera on the distant fight and set it on top of the metal box. Then she turned the other way, activated the P.PBAD, and took up her film camera again.

Not only was Holtzmann continuing to display heretofore unimagined physical skills, but Abby was no slouch either. She didn't have Holtzmann's flair, but she had a kind of grounded ferocity that made Joey think she wouldn't really want to get into a fistfight with the shorter woman. The Mouthy was trying to get away from them, but although it was able to dodge some of their shots, it wasn't able to get far. But they hadn't been able to take it down yet.

"Tough little bastard!" Abby grumbled.

From behind her, Joey heard an aerial squelching noise: the third mini-Mouthy being rendered into ectoplasm. "Yessss!" That was Erin. Joey glanced back and saw Patty and Erin high-five each other.

"Crap! Holtz!" Abby took a step back. Joey squinted at the Mouthy. Holy shit. Was it…getting bigger?

"It's gonna split again!" Holtzmann yelled.

"This is my least favorite kind of boss fight!" Abby planted her feet and took aim at it again. "Get it before it summons a goddamn healer!"

"DFA? Please? DFA?"

Joey thought she heard Abby mutter "I shouldn't encourage you…" before she flipped a switch on her own weapon and yelled "Do it!"

Abby jumped from side to side, preventing the monstrosity from darting away. It was still growing, and Joey thought she could see seams starting to form in it. If it was really going to split again, it wasn't going to be just into two. At least Patty and Erin had spotted the growing threat, so backup was on the way. But what if it split into a dozen creatures? Or more? Joey shivered.

Holtzmann broke off from the fight and ran around behind the pyramid. What was she doing? Joey strained to see.
There she was! Holtzmann was running up the back side of the pyramid; at the same time, Abby fired a burst of multiple grenades. Holtzmann yelled “Death from above!”, launched herself into the air like a kid leaping off a cliff into a swimming hole, and fired a barrage of orange and purple blasts straight down at the entity. As Holtzmann landed in a crouch, the monstrosity exploded in a burst of ectoplasm—or most of it did. One part had already detached enough that, though half-formed, it was able to lash out with spindly clawed arms at both Abby and Holtzmann.

But Patty and Erin had arrived. Simultaneously, they fired on the remnant, and it dissolved into slime.

"YEAH!!!!" Holtzmann let out a triumphant whoop that Joey figured probably reached all the way to Brooklyn. Both Holtz and Abby were covered in ectoplasm, but they both had huge grins on their faces.

Patty and Erin, wearing matching grins, reached out to slap the others' palms. "Ow!" Abby and Holtzmann said in unison.

Abby scrunched up her nose and glared at the ectoplasm puddle, and then, for good measure, flipped it off with both hands. "Get in line, ghosts! We've got more where that came from!" She tugged at her uniform, which was torn across her upper arm, and then looked at Holtzmann. "You too?"

"Kinda looks like a burn, huh." Holtzmann bumped fists and then hips with Abby. "Band-aid buddies!"

"Seriously?" Erin said crossly.

"Don't look so worried, Erin, it's not a big deal!" Abby grinned. “Come on, we were awesome. You were awesome!"

"I'm gonna remember you said that when you two suddenly decide you're too hurt to do the recycling and take your turn with the dishes tomorrow." Patty tried to look serious and failed.

"So much weird new stuff! So much ass-kicking!" Holtzmann whooped again. She made six-shooter motions with her sidearms (and, inevitably, accompanied this with “pow-pow-pow” sound effects), then let them retract into her pack. "Whaddy'a think, Joey?"

Joey turned off the P.PBAD and took a step toward them. "I thought it was…" What? Incredible? Action-packed? Impressive? Kinda hot? No, wait, mental strikethrough on that one. She wound up just gesturing. "I'm not sure I have the words."

"Well, you better come up with something. You're the writer," pointed out Patty, with a wink.

"Free hugs!" shouted Holtzmann out of nowhere, lurching toward Erin and Patty—who were still mostly ectoplasm free—and Joey.

Patty shook her head. "Holtzy! Take a breath, baby. No sliming your friends! Man, I'm gonna pull out the protectors on all the seats just to be safe. You two are nasty."

"You know it." Holtzmann wagged her eyebrows at Patty and then looked at Joey. "Speaking of which, Joey, how'd you handle my unit?"

"Um. I, uh…handled it just fine, thank you very much. I mean, it seemed to be working."

"Oh, I can't wait to get my hands on this data," Erin said.
“Does it hafta be tonight though?” Holtzmann was dancing from foot to foot, flicking off ectoplasm in a rhythm nobody else could hear.

“I’m surprised at you, Holtzmann.” Abby cocked her head.

“I’m 5.25×10^{32} electronvolts in a one-pint jar! I got too much energy to sit at a computer, Abs. Let’s go do something fun.”

“Wait, you can’t say th—you’re mixing units and and you’re…that just doesn’t make sense, Holtzmann!” Erin pressed her fingertips to her temples.

“Holtz doesn’t make sense,” Patty said. “Except for the fun thing. I want to let off some steam too.”

“Postmortem first,” said Abby. "No shortcuts. Then I guess we could skip the cocoa and get some dinner—“

Erin said "Dancing!" Patty shouted "Beer!" And Holtzmann yelled "Karaoke!"

"Uh…I'll make an itinerary. Let's get out of here before the news choppers show up, OK?” Abby pointed insistently at the door.

Holtzmann bounced out of the shower feeling just as energetic as when she'd gone in. Fizzy, even. The others were obviously feeling it too. They sped through the debriefing, though without missing any of the many, many details, and got the data stored and backed up. Holtzmann was tempted by the data, at least as much as Erin was. But she wasn't ready to stop moving yet. ("Nobody ever said 'no dancing during debriefings,'” she’d had to point out earlier.)

Abby had rapidly realized that she wasn't the best choice to draw up an itinerary of dinner ("somewhere loud and fun," Patty had said, but then she’d totally vetoed both Chuck E. Cheese's and Planet Hollywood, so Holtzmann wasn't sure they were even serious) and a bar and karaoke and dancing. In the end, Patty had taken over the planning.

They took a taxi to dinner. Holtzmann thought that Patty and Joey made pretty good seats, even though Joey had turned a little red when Holtzmann requested her services as seatbelt. It had started as a joke, but Holtzmann had to admit she'd never had quite such a nice seatbelt before.

Dinner was good, even if there were no animatronic animals to stealthily take apart, and Holtzmann had a lemonade that came with cotton candy, so she couldn't complain. They talked about a ridiculous range of things, and Holtzmann mostly listened, but there was a lot of laughter and Holtzmann noticed that when Joey really lost it, she'd toss her head back and howl with laughter and then bury her face in her hands, so all you could see was the light brown skin of her hands and the rainbow of her bangs. After Holtzmann noticed that, she managed to make it happen seven more times. It would have been eight if Patty hadn't decided it was time to move on. ("I think even in here, the other tables are getting a little mad," Patty observed. Holtzmann thought the other tables were losers.)

Patty, being Patty, managed to find them a place with good beer and good karaoke. Holtzmann had sung her way through "Timebomb," "Godzilla," "Run (I'm a Natural Disaster)," "Brick House," "All This and Heaven Too," "Gold Guns Girls," and "Jolene" before she realized it was probably not her turn anymore and that all of her friends—except Abby, who’d been her audience before—were staring at her.

"I didn't know you could sing," Joey said as Holtzmann returned to the table. She lifted her glass to
"Mouth, tongue, vocal cords, resonant cavities," Holtzmann pointed out. "Anyone can sing!"

"Anyone can sing," said Abby to the others. "Holtzmann can sing. When she wants to. Who's next? Hey, Joey, you've been quiet."

"I'm...I'm not a confident singer in front of other people," Joey confessed.

"All right, then you get up there—everyone get up there. It's Spice Girls time," Abby said, leaping to her feet.


"We'll get there."

And they did, and then Holtzmann wound up singing a duet with Joey—who was a good enough singer as far as Holtzmann was concerned—and another.

Sometime around 10:30, they moved on to the club that Patty had picked out. "Used to be a church," Patty told them. "You can still see a lot of the original features. I'll point 'em out to you when we get in. And, it's 'ladies+ night,' by which I do not mean ladies get in free and there's an extra helping of Phil-Erin's-ex clones. I mean it's just for people who aren't dudes." Holtzmann reminded herself to see if she could upgrade Patty's sidearms in between other projects.

Holtzmann also approved of the thumping, high-tempo music and the fact that they pretty much had their own little corner of the floor. Erin did her little hands thing, and Abby did her Abby thing, and Patty was magnificent as usual, and Joey was...Joey was not a particularly demonstrative dancer, but Holtzmann liked the way she moved. Her glasses were off and her eyes were nearly closed, so that all Holtzmann could see were Joey's dark lashes. Her lips were slightly parted, and she looked as though she were lost in a dream.

Midnight came and went, and finally, Patty came over to Joey with Abby and Erin draped on either side of her. They all looked sweaty but happy. "I think we're beat," she said. "You heading out or staying?"

"Already? For real? You guys need to eat your Wheaties." Holtzmann made a mental check on herself: she didn't feel mentally or physically tired at all.

"I'm not tired either," said Joey. "I haven't done this in a while, but it feels good."

"Well, you two kids have fun then." Abby waved at them. "Late start tomorrow, OK, everyone? See ya tomorrow afternoon, 2ish."

Patty hustled Abby and Erin out of the club; Holtzmann caught a couple of impressed glances directed Patty's way. People were jealous! Nice.

A slow song started up, and Holtzmann realized that two women were coming toward them from different directions. Joey was being approached by a woman with a purple undercut, wearing a nearly transparent black blouse under an iridescent sequined bomber jacket—and, okay, it was possible that the other woman, with the braids and the bow tie and the tight jeans, was actually heading toward Holtzmann.

Was she in the mood to dance with strangers? It was a rare mood, but it struck sometimes.
Tonight wasn’t it. Holtzmann turned to Joey. "M'm'selle…” She extended her hand to Joey, and Joey didn’t hesitate to step into Holtzmann’s arms. The other two women, stopping in their tracks, caught each other's eye, and soon they were doing their own thing.

Holtzmann had kinda meant to let go of Joey once they were safe, but Joey was a nice mix of strong and soft and Holtzmann didn't really want to let go. The fizzy feeling she’d had since their triumph on the roof was still there, and if anything, it was becoming effervescent in the whirling lights and darkness of the club. Holtzmann wasn't thinking about the data or her projects at all, not even as a background process—and it felt good. Weird, but good.

The next song was retro 90s, dark and sexual. Was it Tool or Nine Inch Nails? Holtzmann didn't know, but she did know that Joey hadn't let go of her hips.

So. Joey was, apparently, dirty dancing with Holtzmann to a song she had listened to in high school. What was even going on anymore? She had no idea, but she didn't want the rush of the last few hours to fade. And god, Holtzmann could really, really use her hips.

When the song ended, Joey found herself standing against a wall by the stairs up to the mezzanine. A choir loft, Patty had said. Holtzmann was standing so close to her that their noses almost touched, and when the lights flashed across her face, Joey could see deep into Holtzmann’s eyes, despite her yellow glasses. (She hadn't taken them off in the club, but Joey thought they might serve some kind of purpose—modulating the lights or something—and also, seriously, Holtzmann looked damn good in them.)

Joey felt drunk. Drunk like she was nineteen again and looking to make out with somebody. She definitely wasn't drunk, though. She'd only had one beer at karaoke, same as Holtzmann, and they'd both switched to sodas after that. So she was "sober," technically, but "sober" was at the entire opposite end of the spectrum from how she felt.

"Maintenance closet makeout?” said Holtzmann, moving her lips closer to Joey's ear. Joey could practically feel herself vibrating.

"Mai—oh.” Maybe the whole night was a fever dream; maybe she'd gotten sick at the bust and was tossing and moaning on the Ghostbusters' sofa right now. But to hell with it. There was literally one thing she wanted right then, and Holtzmann had read her mind. "Let's go."

Singing “maintenance closet makeout” to herself, Holtzmann grabbed Joey’s hand. Joey felt her palm tingle as they ran up the stairs to the fairly empty mezzanine, where Holtzmann crouched over a door with some kind of tool. Joey figured that she was probably up to no good and moved to block her from view. And then, Holtzmann swung the door open. Of course Holtzmann could pick locks. Of course.

Then Holtzmann was pulling her into the darkness and they were crashing into a mountain of packaged paper towels, and Holtzmann was pressing her up against the shelves—how did she do that, she was so small!—and then Holtzmann's tongue was in her mouth and Holtzmann's thigh was between Joey's legs and Joey thought she was going to pass out.

Instead she pushed her hands up inside the back of Holtzmann's vest and under her paisley shirt. Her skin felt like satin, a little cool to the touch. But Holtzmann's mouth was hot, and Joey pressed her closer as though it was possible to make the kiss even deeper. It was hard to believe that she was touching Holtzmann’s skin, and that their mouths were locked together. It was making her feel off-balance. What was even happening? Joey felt Holtzmann's fingers on the back of her neck, pulling them together harder. Oh, god, and then she could feel Holtzmann's breasts against her own, and
they felt like magic.

As though on exactly the same wavelength, Holtzmann pulled back a little and ran her hands up Joey's sides, coming to a rest at either side of her breasts. Joey had left her jacket somewhere—hopefully HQ, not the taxi or something—and her long-sleeved t-shirt was thin. And so was her bra. So when Holtzmann rapidly circled her thumbs toward Joey's nipples, Joey could feel it in HD. And Holtzmann could probably feel Joey's goosebumps right through the fabric.

Holtzmann leaned in for another series of heated kisses, and her thigh pressed harder between Joey's legs, shoving the seam of Joey's jeans up into her underwear. And she felt it—oh, did she feel it. She gasped right into Holtzmann's mouth, and she could feel one side of Holtzmann's lips pull up into a lopsided grin. Then Holtzmann shifted and began kissing Joey's neck, hard. Her tongue trailed down Joey's skin and Joey shivered—but two can play at that game, she thought, and leaned forward until she could reach Holtzmann's ear with her own tongue. Holtzmann made a huffing noise against Joey's throat, and then she surged forward, clamping her mouth hard right on the spot between the base of Joey's throat and her collarbone. Joey could feel the tip of Holtzmann's tongue, and then teeth and then suction, hot and wet and painful in the best way. Holtzmann wasn't letting go, and Joey was definitely going to get a teenage-style hickey. And she didn't care. By now she wasn't wondering what was happening anymore; nothing existed outside of the closet and Holtzmann’s arms and Joey’s own electrified skin.

She felt for Holtzmann's chest. Her fingers passed across the cold metal of the pendant Holtzmann always had on, then down across her sternum, feeling the buttons interrupting the fabric of her shirt. Maybe that didn’t have to stay on…but for now, Joey’s hand had reached her destination. Oh, she was soft there. Joey found herself stroking one of Holtzmann's firm and muscular arms with her other hand. Joey didn't have a type when it came to bodies—fluffy, lanky, it didn't matter—but Holtzmann's contrasts were delightful. And her tongue was only making Joey feel more intoxicated. Joey still couldn't see anything; all she could hear over the muffled bass thump of the club was their ragged breathing and the sounds of their mouths. But even the sounds of the club faded away, and Joey forgot about the closet, and there was just Holtzmann.

Joey felt fingers against the skin at her waist. Holtzmann had hooked her thumbs into Joey's waistband. She yanked Joey close again, and Joey staggered a little—partly from the abrupt movement, partly because her knees were weak. She had both hands in Holtzmann's hair, and Holtzmann's fingertips had just begun to move into the front of Joey's jeans, when Holtzmann's phone lit up from her vest pocket and the _X-Files_ theme began to play. "Argh," grumbled Holtzmann into Joey's chest. She thrust one hand into her pocket and the ringtone was cut off. Then both hands were back on Joey. Joey felt Holtzmann's fingers slide around to her back and slip under her underwear. Holtzmann's hand was right on Joey's ass, and she tightened her fingers. Her other hand drifted toward the front of Joey's jeans, and then…Holtzmann got a text.

"Fuck!" One hand still gripping Joey's ass, Holtzmann checked her phone. "Abby. She says something was beeping in the lab, and now there's a klaxon going off, and—I gotta go, she's freaking out." And then neither of her hands were on Joey anymore.

"Oh. I...yeah, OK." Joey's voice sounded strange to her.

Holtzmann buttoned her vest with one hand and typed a reply to Abby with the other. The light of her screen was reflected on her wet lips. "You okay getting home?"

"Yeah, it's just NYC in the wee hours. I'll catch a bus. No big deal." She smiled at Holtzmann as best she could and made herself quit staring at Holtzmann's beautiful mouth. Now that they'd been interrupted, she was having to forestall a loud chorus of screaming questions in her head.
"I better see you in one piece tomorrow then, buster. Gotta jet!"

Holtzmann dashed out. Joey slipped out after her a moment later, still in a daze. She locked and closed the door behind her and leaned on it for a moment. “Now what?” she asked herself. There was no research she could do that would answer that question for her.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I already broke my new rule! Chapter 10 is outlined, though, and so is Chapter 11. I wanted to go ahead and post this early, though. Y'see, maybe reminding you that I did something nice one time will make you less mad at me when you read Chapter 10...

I hope the combat/busting scenes made sense. I'm still teaching myself to write action scenes.

P. S. I'm gonna have to make a Holtzmann karaoke playlist on Spotify. Suggestions? Let me know! (Also, a soundtrack playlist for NiTWiS is in the works.)
Chapter Summary

"The data in this chapter is SUPER hot you guys." -- Holtzmann, probably

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Those alarms better not go off again.” Abby, standing in her bathrobe at the entrance to Holtzmann’s lab area, was rumpled and grouchy.

“I took care of it! See, the sound of silence.” Holtzmann twirled with her arms out.

“Well…right. So you fixed the problem?”

Quickly, Holtzmann considered. If the problem were to be defined as “the alarms are going off but nothing was actually critical yet,” then yes. She had raised the bottom limit for triggering the alarms. A good fix. “Yup. Won’t happen again.”

“Well, good. I’m going back to bed and you better do the same. See you around 2. 2 PM.” Abby grumped back up the stairs.

Holtzmann reminded herself that she was trying to keep her brain-gears oiled by getting at least six hours of sleep a night. So she probably ought to do as Abby said and go.

And she did manage to get herself down to the bottom level, and almost to the door, which was where she saw Joey’s jacket hanging on a hook. It was an old black leather jacket, more simply cut than Holtzmann’s. It felt nice under her fingers. Holtzmann stroked a cuff absently and thought of the P.PBAD upstairs, waiting for her to analyze its data. She’d already put it off much longer than she usually would have. Maybe getting a start on it now wouldn’t be a bad idea. She could always take a nap later, and catch up on her sleep. She was already at HQ, after all…why waste more time traveling back and forth?

If Joey would do her the favor of carrying the device on the next few busts, it would make Holtzmann’s job easier. But it’d be better if she had some protection against whatever might conceivably leak from it if it were damaged. Holtzmann turned over the jacket as she climbed the stairs back to the lab. The jacket was a little big for Joey, so it was doable. A bit of body armor could be added easily enough, too. Wouldn’t stop a motivated ghost, but at least it might block glass shards or prevent the kind of road rash you got when a ghost threw you down a street.

She put the jacket down next to the P.PBAD and her computer and thought for a moment. Unless it was garbage—and it might be—the data would be something she could spend an indefinite amount of time on. The jacket, on the other hand, was a lot more straightforward, and she had enough useful scraps from her recent materials experiments that she wouldn’t even have to go find anything. And, if she was honest with herself, making things with her hands was always more appealing than dealing with data.

Holtzmann dragged out the industrial sewing machine from its spot under a workbench and set it up.
She could hear the inner voice she’d dubbed Tiny Erin (as of last year) peppering her with questions: Holtzmann, why is this your top priority? Holtzmann, isn’t the data more important? Holtzmann, what exactly happened at the dance club earlier? Holtzmann, didn’t you say were better off alone?

She started removing the lining with a seam ripper. The answers, she told herself as the threads popped under her fingers, were: 1. Why not. 2. I’m getting to it. 3. Fun. 4. Nothing has changed.

She nodded to herself. Time to get out the heat gun.

Holtzmann finished the jacket sometime around 4 AM. She swiveled back and forth on her stool and held it up. It looked pretty good, and it ought to offer its wearer decent protection. More protection for all of them was something that they really needed to look into, one of these days. She held the jacket up to check it one more time, and reflexively gave it a sniff. She’d managed to save a couple projects of Abby’s by smelling something that shouldn’t have been there, which was how Abby had noticed that—apparently—Holtzmann’s sense of smell was weirdly acute, especially for things you weren’t actually supposed to be able to smell. Technically, it was probably a perceptual disorder. Some kind of abnormally increased signal between her olfactory receptors and her olfactory cortex. But then again, just being intelligent made a person abnormal, Holtzmann told herself. Like the button said, normal is boring.

This time, her olfactory receptors returned neither an alert or an all-clear. Instead, she got…Oh. Joey. And the scent memory was strong, as though Holtzmann was pressed up against her again.

What if Joey got mad at her for altering the jacket without permission? Sometimes people didn’t seem to like the improvements Holtzmann made for them. But Joey had said it was a castoff. So it was probably OK. But…but…

Holtzmann put the jacket down and got up. She paced around the lab restlessly for a minute, then leaned over a table. She shook her head at herself, smiled wryly, and tried to get her thoughts in order, but found herself just worrying at her earlobe with her fingers. Tiny Erin wanted her to think about what happened at the club, but Holtzmann was in charge, and Holtzmann was pretty clear on the fact that they’d just had a few minutes of fun. Like a pair of normal adolescents might at a normal party.

Many things were in the Do Not Disturb section of Holtzmann’s brain. So many things. It was an efficient system, like putting ghosts in a containment unit. If something couldn’t be dealt with right now, trap it and stow it. This was just another thing that could be isolated and put away.

Holtzmann chewed on her lip and stood up again. She counted on her fingers and realized that she hadn’t eaten in around 8 hours. If she was feeling a little off-balance, that was probably why. She used to have timers set to remind her about that sort of thing, but she’d been better at it in the last few years. Well, no need to disturb Abby by going up to the third floor. She had a lab fridge, and there was a stash of snacks—some of which even had protein in them—back in her sleep nook.

She snagged a bottle of orange soda out of the fridge and crawled into the pile of blankets. She was just going to have some jerky and some Cap’n Crunch, and then she was going to tackle the data.

Too late, Holtzmann realized she should have taken her laptop with her to occupy her little grey cells. She was gnawing on the jerky, letting her tongue feel all of its weird textures, but her brain was apparently having issues with its containment protocols.

One, she liked Joey. But that was fine. She liked lots of people. She liked Kevin, in a certain way. She even kind of liked Bennie and Jennifer.
Two, she’d been sort of wanting to … make out with someone, for a while. But that was fine too. She wanted to visit another solar system, and she wanted to know what it was like to be a ghost, but they weren’t on her actual to-do list, for good reasons.

Three, she didn’t want anyone to get mad at her, or to disrupt her relationship with…with any of her friends. But Joey was an adult, and very well-traveled and what not, and she was probably good at the casual fun thing. Maybe even one of those “girl in every port” types. Probably no problem there either.

Four, she was … she was … lonely, filled in her brain, helpfully. “Nuh-uh,” she said out loud, around a mouthful of cereal. There was no way anyone with a squad like her squad could be lonely. They accepted her, mostly, and they cared about each other, and they supported each other. And, she told herself, that was really more than a person like her could ever even hope for. She didn’t actually need anything else. She’d tried for something else in the past, before her life changed forever at the Aldridge Mansion, and it had never worked for very long. Just long enough to leave her more messed up than when she went in. Never on the outside; she kept her swagger up no matter what, and everyone assumed that Holtzmann was always the dumper and never the dump-ee. (And she often was the one who broke things off, when she knew that a girlfriend was heading toward a breakup before the girlfriend even did.) There was no number four.

So, much like cold fusion at a stodgy R-1 university, this was not a particularly rewarding area in which to explore. Got it, brain?

There. That put the lid on that.

Holtzmann leaned her head against the wall. She felt weighted down and bone-weary. It didn’t really make sense; it had definitely been a full day, but she still had exciting work to get to, and she’d just eaten. And yet her batteries were fully drained. She hoped she wasn’t getting sick; she didn’t have time for that. Maybe she would just rest her head on the pile of blankets for a while, till her second or third wind kicked in.

Holtzmann woke briefly sometime around 6 AM, aware only that she’d been dreaming of hands and mouths and unzipped jackets with nothing worn underneath. She turned over and burrowed deeper into the blankets. She woke up again around 8, irritated, sure she was already late for something, and muttering “Fuck!” just like she’d done every day for the final three years of grad school. She felt distinctly hung over, even though she knew she couldn’t be. She staggered to the bathroom. The firehouse was silent; Abby must still be asleep, she figured, and even if Abby had forgotten to text Kevin, he wouldn’t be in till later anyway. She probably had a few hours to work on the data.

She glanced down at herself. She was still wearing her vest, the vest that—nope. And the shirt that—nnmnope.

In her head, Holtzmann played the gif of Stitch dragging his paws down his face in frustration. She supposed the data could wait another 7 minutes for her to take a shower and put on some different clothes from the pile next to the blankets. Then it would be a new day and she could dig into the data with a clean start.

Holtzmann had been showered, dressed, and well dug in to the data for a couple of hours when Abby knocked on the wall of the lab. “You weren’t here all night, were you?” Holtzmann followed Abby’s gaze to the spot on the floor where Holtzmann had shed yesterday’s clothes. Abby, of course, was uninventively but impeccably dressed, in a gray button-down and a dark purple cardigan.
“You wanna see the cool stuff I’ve coaxed out of the data so far?”

“So was that a yes, you were here all night?”

“Are you saying you don’t want to hear my brilliant discoveries?”

“Holtzmann. You gonna give me an answer? I’m not playing the question game.”

“Lucky for you, ‘cause if you were, you would’ve just lost.” Holtzmann licked her finger and scored a tally point in the air. She grinned and focused on her computer screen again. Just let it go, Abby... Let it go.

Abby frowned at her. “I can’t lose a game I’m not even playing, Rosencrantz.”

“Well, if War Games taught us anything…it’s that you’re right. Anyway, I’m not Rosencrantz; I’m Guildenstern.” Holtzmann shook a finger at Abby.

“Oh my god, you are the most annoying human being in the universe.” Abby rolled her eyes and came all the way in to the lab.

Holtzmann made herself smile. Abby didn’t mean it. She didn’t mean it. Not really.

“Kidding, Holtzy.” Abby looked at her anxiously and Holtzmann felt her shoulders relax. “If you don’t want to talk about it, it’s OK. I know you’ve been doing pretty well at the sleep thing in general, so that’s great. And I brought you a cinnamon roll.” She’d been hiding a plate behind her back the whole time, and swept it out with drama. “But you might wanna come upstairs so you can have bacon and coffee with it.”

Holtzmann followed her to the kitchen, laptop tucked under one arm, papers tucked under the other arm, and cinnamon roll firmly clenched in her teeth. She still needed to catch up on lost time. Bite of coffee, bite of bacon, crunch the numbers, bite of cinnamon roll, gulp of coffee, listen to what the data was telling her. Repeat. She was almost done with a section when she finally realized that Abby was saying her name, and maybe had been for a while.

“Holtz. Holtz. Oh, there you are. You have a cream cheese frosting mustache, but don’t worry, it looks good on you. And in case you haven’t noticed, we have a group text from Jennifer.”

“Gross.”

“Holtzmann!”

Holtzmann grinned at her unrepentantly. “It’s not like it’s gonna be good news, is it. My hands are greasy—you read it.”

“Well if you ate bacon with a fork like a normal—“

“Inefficient.”


“Dead of suspense at the age of 31, Dr. Jillian Holtzmann leaves behind her four chinchillas, three colleagues, and—“

“Shush your face. She says, quote, ‘A little bird emoji told me that a certain writer has been spending a lot of clock face emoji at HQ. I know I can count on U to reply & reassure me that she is NOT
planning on publishing anything. And then I won’t have to bother U-Know-Who.’” Abby pronounced every U as “oo” and Holtzmann tried not to laugh. “Hope 2 ear emoji from U soon.’ Sheesh, OK, I’ll write her back.” Abby’s forehead creased as she typed into her phone. “And she’s typing…’ All right, I believe U. But U need 2 keep an eye emoji on her. And fax emoji—’ who knew there was a fax emoji?! ‘—me a copy of that waiver. Liability insurance, U know. Winking-kissy-face emoji, no-sign emoji, ghost emoji, green heart emoji.’ Bleh.”

“Bleh,” agreed Holtzmann. “Also, she totally stole the green heart thing from Patty. Stop biting Patty’s style, Jennifer!” She licked her fingers and her upper lip off. “Back to work. This stuff is getting juicy.”

“You have fun now.”

Joey had spent most of the (late) morning wavering over whether to text Holtzmann. But what was she going to say? She would rather die than write some kind of soap opera/rom com cliche.

*We need to talk about what happened last night.*

*Did last night mean anything to you?*

*Does what happened last night change our relationship?*

*About last night…*

Definitely not.

Joey took off her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. She had a slight headache, and her “brunch” of a tuna sandwich, leftover veggie curry, and orange juice was proving hard to get through.

It wasn’t that she’d never had a random makeout session with somebody before, as an adult. A few times, not many. A dance club in Zagreb. The middle of a Pride parade in Taipei. That sort of thing. Just when she was feeling touch-starved, a hazard of long periods doing research in unfamiliar places. But always with strangers: they would part with a squeeze and a smile. Never with anyone she knew or was going to see all the time, let alone a colleague or a friend. So that made things strange, and she didn’t know what to do about it.

Never mind. Time to get dressed, like some kind of functional adult. Joey found herself reaching for comfort: an oversized old plaid shirt, a long light cable-knit pullover, a pea coat, thick and soft leggings, and her well-worn boots. The leggings were probably a bad idea if there were a bust, but oh well.

Oh—and one more thing. Joey tilted her head back and looked at herself in the mirror. Yeah, there was a hickey there. She brushed it with her fingertips and felt a rush of complicated feelings that she didn’t really want to examine too closely. Instead, she dug around until she found a long scarf she could loop her neck a few times. She did have a turtleneck, but that brought back too many memories of awkward, furtive encounters in high-school makeouts. So, a scarf it was. And then maybe a little writing, if she could get her head together, since she still had an hour until she had to leave.

Joey was sitting at the kitchen table, fiddling with a new story outline. She’d thought up the characters of two rival witches and a succubus, but she was having trouble getting to the requisite happy ending. Well, OT3s were a thing, right? While she was pondering the idea, she got a text. A Holtzmann text. *Can’t wait any longer! Get over here Joey!*
Her mouth was dry. She licked her lips and finished her coffee. Did Holtzmann want to continue where they’d left off? Had things ended suddenly last night because Holtzmann had been expecting to just keep going the next time they met? Should she change into something nicer? No, not that last one; she needed to leave right away. She brushed her teeth in a hurry and then, shakily, she put on the good lipstick. She didn’t actually know if Holtzmann noticed or cared for that type of thing. But this one had been a splurge purchase, for formal occasions, and it always made her lips feel good. And she could use the extra boost.

At least her headache had gone away on its own. Joey grabbed her bag, her gloves, and an umbrella and dashed out toward the subway station. As she approached the wet stairs, she suddenly stopped. A woman ran into her and flipped her off.

The rain was coming down hard on her umbrella. But she wasn’t thinking about whether she should have put on her raincoat. She had just been hit by a realization, or rather the uncovering of a realization she had been carefully overlooking. The fact was, Joey Betancourt really, really wanted to date Jillian Holtzmann.

Joey left her umbrella near the door, but she didn’t see her leather jacket on the hooks nearby. Uh-oh. Where had she left it, then?

Kevin was at his desk, chewing gum and hunting-and-pecking his way through a document. She was about to risk interrupting him when Holtzmann clattered down the stairs. Were those bi-colored bowling shoes? They sure looked like it. Oh, Holtz.

Holtzmann took a couple more steps down, and they locked eyes. Joey’s breath was caught in her throat. She had no idea what might come out of Holtzmann’s mouth.

“Situation room! Now!” And Holtzmann ran back up the stairs.

Joey blinked. What?

The door opened behind her, and Patty, bearing an umbrella brightly printed with a rainbow of city lights, came in, grumbling about the rain and typical vague but urgent text messages.

“Patty, do we have a situation room? I mean, do you guys?”

“You got the right to use the first-person plural pronoun, J.” Patty flashed her a smile and then shook her head. “And no, we don’t, but Holtzmann means the big conference table in the back there.”

Of course Patty knew that had been Holtzmann talking. “But Holtzmann went upstairs…”

“Getting something out of the lab, probably. You know her. C’mon—“

Erin slipped in. She shook her umbrella off outside of the door, and then carefully hung her trench coat near the radiator. “Am I the last one here? What the heck. How did that happen?”

“World’s gone mad,” Patty agreed in a serious tone. “Mass hysteria, cats and dogs living together—“

Erin batted Patty on the arm and Patty’s straight face cracked into laughter. Still laughing, she gestured them back to the conference table. Joey followed. So, everyone had gotten a text. And thus, she was still in limbo. Or possibly hell. There was just no telling.

“Come sit next to me, baby girl,” said Patty. “We’ll be the humanities corner. I mean, not that I haven’t been doing my physics and engineering homework, and not that I don’t love a science book,
but I feel like this is gonna be a little more *them* than *us*, you know?”

Joey took her offer. Patty always felt like a good person to be around.

Abby joined them shortly, still eating her chili, and then Holtzmann arrived with a stack of laptops and papers. “Oh, I’ve got good stuff for your guys. Abby, for you; Erin and Patty, for you, and I’ll put mine up on the screen so everyone can see, ‘K? Ahhhh I’m so stoked!” She struck a series of pro-wrestler-style poses.

“You’ve got dark circles under your eyes.” Erin made a sad face at Holtzmann. “How late did you get back last night?”

Holtzmann’s eyes slid to Joey and back. Joey deployed her best poker face. “Look, there’s no off switch on the genius machine. As you know, Dr. Gilbert!” Holtzmann cleared her throat and opened her laptop. “OK, so…*IT’S DATA SHOW AND TELL TIHHIME!*” she sang. “We have the usual data we get from the proton packs, plus we have the new hotness from the P.PBAD. But I’m gonna just do the Cliff’s Notes for Poets version.”

Joey straightened her glasses and looked at the screen. She couldn’t make much of it, but she could tell that it showed a comparison of two sets of data. Each set was represented with a rainbow-hued, 3D graphic consisting of spiky peaks, and one set looked like it might be more coherent than the other.

“P.PBAD. You’ve gotta do something about that acronym.” Abby shook her head.

“Uh-huh. So we have two sources of data. One, we got Mr. Conductor. Mr. Conductor would’ve been an ideal subject but, unfortch, my data is crap. I mean, I did dig through the crap—“

“Phrasing!” Patty made a *yuck!* face.

“—and got what I could out of it. My guess is that interference from the particle accelerator fuzzed up the signal, to use the technical terminology. The P.PBAD is still a *little* bit janky. Also a technical term, by the way. But! Joey used it on Mr. Mouthy, and although Mouthy wasn’t humanoid, we got a nice clear signal.” Holtzmann doffed her padded motorcycle goggles toward Joey as though tipping a hat to her. “I wanna do this a couple more times, hopefully on people-lookin’ ghosties and not mouth-and-limb globs. So…you up to handling my junk again?” She quirked her eyebrows at Joey.

Joey had to take a moment. Was that normal, indiscriminately-aimed Holtzmann banter? Or was that actual flirting now? Or was that an acknowledgement that yes, a thing had happened? She needed a Holtz-to-Earth translator.

And now she had taken so long that the others were looking at her. Fuck. “It’s safe in my hands,” she managed.

“Super! Preliminary results: Despite the noisy data, our two friends had pretty similar signals. But we’re talking indicators for basic goal-directed actions, like animals—hey, did you guys see the video where the raven—OK, OK, anyway. Minimal intelligence. Mostly signals for instincts or reflex. In fact, the readouts are hyper and spiky, way more like invertebrates than humans or cats or whatever. Our brain waves are more smooth.” Holtz meowed and made inept hula-like gestures with her hands. “I mean, if you can even call the data brain waves, since there’s no brain. Just electrical signals. And even plants have that! So, conclusion: these guys do not have human brain activity.”

“That’s what we’ve always theorized was the case for ordinary ghosts.” Erin beamed and held out her hand for a high five from Abby.
“Gold staaaars. But that’s not even the cool part! There’s a particular signature I coaxed out. It’s not anything you’d ever see in a human. I got it 100% sure on Mouthy. 50% sure on Mr. Conductor. And if that’s a ‘HI, MY NAME IS GHOST’ marker, then we can exploit the hell out of that!”

“Oh! Yes!” Erin lit up, then glanced over at Joey. “See, when there’s PKE everywhere in a setting, it’s impossible to pinpoint, say, a possessed subject from the background PKE. And a possessing ghost might not even generate that much PKE anyway. So if we have a distinct signal, one per entity…”

“We might at least be able to notice when someone’s possessed,” Patty added. Holtzmann clapped and pointed at her. Patty gave her a thumbs up. “That would be real damn useful.”

“We could even add it to the dosimetry badges someday, if we can miniaturize it enough. That’ll take some time, but it’s promising. And it’s something to look into with the possession prophylactic device. Good work, Holtzmann,” said Abby.

“That’s what y’all are calling it now? What’s wrong with ‘shield’? Or ‘deflector’ if you’re fancy?” Patty held up her hands. “I mean, OK, whatever you want to name it is fine with me, if you come up with one that works. ‘Prophylactic’ though, I swear to God…” Patty trailed off, muttering about how they didn’t need to just hand jokes directly to Holtzmann, when Holtz already found too many on her own.

“A+ to all of you! But! That’s not even the really cool part. There was a surprise.” Holtzmann pulled something out of one of the pockets of her lab jacket. There was a loud pop! and then confetti showered down everywhere. “Both of the entities have a thread of spectral energy—I mean real spectral energy, OK, not the astronomy stuff—that trails off to somewhere else. Probably not Michigan, though. But the clearer data I got from Mouthy has a constant directional source. And I have No! Idea! What! It! Means!” Holtzmann set off another confetti popper and danced in front of the screen, grinning.

Patty’s brow knitted. “So you were like ‘yay’ at the thing that might let us block possession attempts, and this possibly totally irrelevant mystery info is like ‘RAISE THE ROOF!’ I see how it is.”

Holtzmann fingergunned Patty. “Yes ma’am!”

“Don’t you ma’am me, Miss Thing,” Patty began.

“Dibs on this project,” said Abby. “I mean…on top of the possession prophylactic. Deflector. Whatever. We should all be on that one.”

“Share?” asked Erin. She and Abby shook hands.

“So uh…obviously I’m a little out of my depth here, but what would you be looking for? Do you think someone might have been controlling, uh, Mouchy?” Joey hoped that wasn’t a stupid question.

Abby and Erin glanced at each other. Finally, Abby spoke. “Like Rowan did with his Miffed Deadbro Army? I mean, I guess it’s a possibility.”

“There cannot be another dude out there like that one,” Patty said firmly. “Man, I don’t even want to think about it.” She slouched down in her chair, muttering again—something about Febreze and how it didn’t really work on “hot dogs and regret.” Patty had a way with words, Joey thought. Maybe someday she could get a blurb for a book cover from Patty, if her editor would go for that.

“It’s a darn shame we don’t have data like this from any of the other busts the last few months. If any of the other kinda oddball ones had the same kind of energy trail, then we’d have an Event on our
hands. I’m not gonna call an all hands on deck yet, but I am raising the threat alert. To…uh…” Abby yelled toward the front. “What’s our threat level, Kevin?”

“Um, magenta. Because you said that’s a real color. And you told me to take your word for it.”

“Well, I’m changing it! Raise the threat level to green and silver stripes!”

“Ooh! I’m going to the paper store, bye guys!”

“He loves an excuse to buy fancy paper,” Abby explained.

Ah, thought Joey. Maybe that was where Holtzmann’s novelty paper purchases that Patty had mentioned on her first day had gone. Joey tried to picture Holtzmann trying to teach Kevin to scrapbook or do origami and had to swallow a laugh.

“There’s no actual threat alert scale,” Abby added. “But, for real, I want everyone to keep your eyes open, even though it’s way more likely that we’ve just run into a string of new entity types and behaviors.”

“Right. We know we haven’t seen everything yet. And we know the old Kemp taxonomy was insufficient, but our new one isn’t quite complete. And we know our ghostly interaction table isn’t thorough, and we don’t have a good system for dual-coding entities or encounters. So, I agree, Dr. Yates. It’s most likely that these are unconnected events.” Erin nodded solemnly at Abby.

“Yeah, but…so close together?” Patty narrowed her eyes.

“Probability dictates that the improbable is inevitable,” remarked Holtzmann. She tapped the side of her goggles.

There was a long pause.

“OK, babe, I love you, but which position was that supposed to support?” Patty smiled wryly and drummed her perfect pink nails on the table. “Because that’s about as clear as mud.”

Holtzmann grinned and shrugged. “That part is left as an exercise to the reader.”

“OK, OK. Science as a verb time!” declared Abby. “Holtz, was that the highlights? Can we go upstairs and get our hands on the data, and divvy up the next steps?”

“Yes please,” said Erin. Her eyes were bright. “No way either of you are working on the spectral energy trail alone.”

“Fight me!” Abby bounced up, fists at the ready. “Just kidding. Come on, Ghost Girl, let’s go get our hands dirty.”

Holtzmann was already halfway up the stairs.

Dammit. Was Joey ever going to get a moment alone with Holtzmann? Assuming she didn’t talk herself out of it—and there were a lot of reasons to, like the fact that she didn’t know if Holtzmann was really interested, and the fact that (even if Holtz was interested) Joey didn’t know how long she’d be in NYC, and the fact that she couldn’t hold a candle to the inferno of Holtzmann’s intellect—she wanted to ask Holtzmann on a date, and she didn’t want to do it in front of everyone else.

“Looks like it’s just us,” Patty said, as she and Joey were left with only the spinning of the others’ chairs. “I’ll look around, hit JSTOR and some of my fave archives, see anyone’s written about
ghosts with, like, tethers. Leashes. Heel, ghostie! I mean, I just don’t know… But you look like you got something else on your mind.”

True, but mostly not things she wanted to talk to Patty about. However, there was one thing. She turned to face Patty. “Yeah. A couple days ago, Holtzmann said that if I wanted to know more about the possession incident, you were the one to ask. She didn’t really say why, other than to say that you were the hero that day.”

Patty pulled out a compact, checked her deep rose-colored lipstick, and poked a wayward burgundy braid back into place. “I don’t know why she’d say that. About bein’ a hero, I mean. Holtzmann just barely got away with her life, and Abby—well, if Abby hadn’t been fighting off the possession from inside, I wouldn’t have done much good. OK. Let me rewind, but this can’t go in your book unless the others all agree. I’m sorry, I know that’s not cool, but that’s just how it’s gotta be.”


Patty tilted her head at Joey. “Now, what was that flickering across your face just then, hon?”

Damn. Hopefully her earlier poker face had been more successful. “It’s just that normally, when I’m working on nonfiction, my standard operating procedure is to push back against restrictions. I mean, I’ll drop it if the person is serious, sure. And maybe I tend to drop it a little earlier than some of my colleagues in the field. But if I never push, I never get anything useful, you know? Facts are a dime a dozen. Insight, perspective, emotions—people are way too self-conscious about that stuff, but that’s the core of narrative nonfiction.” Joey shook her head. “But I don’t feel right pushing you, so…go ahead. I guess we can always talk about it with the others later, if it’s necessary.”

“Hmm. You like us too much to poke us, huh?” Patty laughed. “We like you too. But now I wanna know something. Are you—are you compromising your, I dunno, your integrity as a journalist by hanging out with us and all?” She leaned forward; not confrontational, just clearly very interested.

“Holtzmann was right. We really are alike…gotta know what goes on behind the scenes, how things work, all the time. No matter the subject.” They bumped fists. “Well, the short answer is no: I’m not a journalist or even an academic, right? Narrative nonfiction has personality in it. It’s not neutral. So if you guys, like, paid me to temp for Kevin, or if we all start a side hustle together, or if I’m your bridesmaid, I’d mention that in the intro, or even in the narrative. A little like cultural anthropology, except a) no IRB, b) no formal rules, and c) way less colonialism. I hope.”

“I get you.” Patty nodded thoughtfully. “Narrative nonfiction has authorship in it. That’s kinda the point, and a big reason why I like it. I mean, it’s not the only kind of nonfiction I read, but it does suck you in a little bit more. So, it’s OK if you’re part of the narrative.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, then.” Patty took a gulp of tea and then related the story of how Rowan had possessed Abby, used her body to attack their equipment and then Patty, and ultimately nearly murdered Holtzmann by thrusting her through an upper-story window.

“Holy fucking shit,” said Joey, once she’d taken a moment to really think about it. She shivered. “I hope you guys got counseling afterwards.”

“Man, there was just so much stuff happening. I don’t know how well any of us even got a chance to process it. Erin has a bad history with therapy, and I think the rest of us just thought about what a pain in the ass it’d be to find a paranormal-friendly shrink and gave up.”
“It sounds like you’re the only one who really has a clear picture of what happened.”

“Yeah, I guess…Abby doesn’t remember most of it, though I guarantee you she was fighting back inside the whole time. Patty got a good right arm, OK, but I think Abby was there with the assist.”

“Either way, it would have been a horrible tragedy without you. I mean, not just then—the whole city…”

Patty shrugged. “Hey, who knows. Seriously though, I’m glad she doesn’t remember it too well. Like, I don’t think she has any idea that she tried to snap my neck.”

“Fuck. She did?”

“Yeah, she was all Steven Seagal up on my head.” Patty mimed with her hands, and Joey tried not to flinch. “And hey—Holtzmann doesn’t know about that either, seeing as she was hanging out the window at the time, so don’t you dare tell her. She doesn’t show it much, but she was pretty shook, and that’s not gonna help.”

“I mean, anyone would be upset by all that.” Joey looked at Patty’s face. There was definitely a piece that Joey was missing. “Or was she shaken up in some particular way?”

Patty hmmmmed to herself. “I’ll try to explain without breaking anyone’s confidence, but this part is real personal, and you better not even think about talking about it with the others. Or anyone else.”

“I swear on my father’s grave,” Joey said.

Patty raised her eyebrows. “Uh-huh. I heard that type of line before. No offense, but is your dad actually even—”

“Yeah, he is. It’s also something he used to say when he was serious, so…it’s kinda comforting, if that’s not too weird.”

“You’re a weirdo. No wonder Holtz likes having you around.” She squeezed Joey’s shoulder and leaned back in her chair. Joey tried to keep her mind focused on whatever Patty was about to say, and not chasing down the rabbit hole of what it meant if Holtz liked having her around. “Sorry about your dad. So, normally, I wouldn’t even think of bringing this stuff up, but you’re easy to talk to. And I don’t think that’s just your story-prying mojo at work. I appreciate your being respectful and just listening. So, thing is, Holtzmann’s past is complicated. I don’t know all of it; Abby doesn’t know all of it. I don’t think that’s all of it. I don’t think anyone except Holtzy does, and she’s a grade-A compartmentalizer.”

Patty glanced away, and then kept going. “I can understand that, though. And I’m definitely not going to share the details I do have with you—that’s her choice to make—but she’s got a lot of pain back there, and one thing that clearly hits a nerve real bad is…how to put it? I guess the idea of hurting someone you love, if that doesn’t sound too daytime-TV. When we run into something that involves some asshole hurting someone they’re supposed to love, and doing it on purpose, it puts a fire in her. Like that one case where a dude was seriously gaslighting his wife by pretending he wasn’t aware of the ghost in their house. Holtzy went to town on his ass.”

Joey nodded. That made sense for anyone, really, but if Holtzmann had, well, abuse or something in her background…yeah. Oh, Holtz. If someone had asked Joey to guess Holtzmann’s background before, she would have reflexively imagined magnet schools, science fair glory, brilliant and supportive parents, chemistry sets, science camp. Because that was where geniuses came from, right?

Only she knew that wasn’t true. Deep down, Patty’s revelation rang true to Joey. There was hurt layered under Holtzmann’s wit and cheerful swagger, and now Joey wondered how she hadn’t seen
Patty looked Joey in the eyes for a moment, as though confirming to herself that she could trust her. “But the thing that I’m pretty sure just puts an icy knife right through her twisted, brilliant little heart is the idea of ever doing something like that herself. I mean, you might not think so, given how she treats us like lab rats, but that’s different. Her ultimate goal is helping us, and I don’t know, she holds us in some kind of high regard, like we’re up to her speed all the time. And she just doesn’t see danger levels the way normal people do. It’s just love, weirdo love, that she’s showing. But the idea of losing control and hurting someone—and being possessed is the ultimate loss of control, right?—really freaks her out. Maybe it’s the only thing that does, I don’t know. So that topic, possession, is a rough one for her, and for Abby, in particular.”

Joey had to suppress another shiver. “I hadn’t really thought about how invasive and horrifying it would actually be before. No wonder you guys have been working on it so much.”

“Yeah, we usually make faster progress, but this one is sticky. Particularly since how the hell are we supposed to test any of our ideas out? Ugh.”

“Thanks for telling me, Patty. I’ll keep it here—“ Joey patted her chest. “—And I’ll try to be sensitive when I’m asking about those projects.”

“Good. That’s good. Now, I’m guessing you know your way around JSTOR…”

Chapter End Notes

The good news: The next chapter is complete, and I'll upload it in a couple of days (once Chapter 12 has a little more meat on its bones).

The bad news: If you think you're annoyed with me NOW...just wait for Chapter 11.

I'm gonna go ahead and start edging toward the exit.
Lex Parsimoniae

Chapter Summary

Research geekery and good times.
And then something that none of them saw coming.

Chapter Notes

I feel like I should put some kind of warning here, but I can't figure out how to without spoilers. I will say that Chapter 12 will not arrive on the heels of the previous chapter like this one did. It's outlined, but not written yet.

I guess the question is, how much do you trust me?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Up in the lab, things were going well for Holtzmann. She had been pleased to turn over her data analyses to Erin and Abby, and though they were all still putatively discussing their projects together, she had already started thinking about the mechanical engineering side of things. The building side. Sure, she wasn't really at the point where a normal engineer would be designing things to build yet, but that had never stopped her. Sometimes starting with a vision of the end project, or even a rough and dirty build of it, got her where she wanted to be faster.

"This is good, you guys. I think we're really getting somewhere!" Abby punched the air. "We should be able to split up now and work on our individual pieces. But the next steps are going to involve some heavy lifting—literally and metaphorically. So, dinnertime?"

"I heard Patty saying she was craving tom kha gai earlier. So, Thai food?" Erin looked up from her laptop.

"I remember when you wouldn't even eat Pace Picante, let alone Thai food or kimchi." Abby reached over, put her hands on either side of Erin's cheeks, and squished her ever so slightly.

Erin wrinkled her nose and battled feebly at Abby, but she was beaming. "OK, I'll go order."

Holtzmann and Abby kept working in a comfortable silence. The last few weeks had been so full of new discoveries. New ghost tricks, new data, new…lots of things. It was pretty great. And they were on the verge of so much more. Even though Holtzmann had only recently finished the more compact version of the PKE meter, she was stoked at the idea of being able to replace it with something better. And it wasn't like the miniaturization strategies she'd developed for that project weren't going to come in handy.

Abby sniffed the air and closed her laptop. "Can your schnoz confirm that I'm not imagining that? That's dinner, right?"

It was pretty normal for Holtzmann to miss whatever was going on the background—even smells, if
she wasn’t on the lookout for them—but Patty inevitably yelled at whoever was lingering at their work and not coming down for dinner. And Holtzmann knew Patty was still in the firehouse, because she'd dashed in and taken stacks of books downstairs several times. "You're right. And no dinner bell. Jinkies! Let's go investigate, Daphne." She scrawled herself a note and stuck it on her prototype sketches, so she’d know where to pick up.

When they got downstairs, they found Erin sitting at Kevin's empty desk, with the delivery food in front of her. Holtzmann cocked her head, and Erin put a finger to her lips and gestured toward the conference table in the back. Patty's hair was just visible over the stacks of books she'd brought down, and the top of Joey's head could only be spotted when she reached for something. "They're so cute," whispered Erin.

"I think we can rule out the adnei hasadeh despite the umbilical cord thing," Joey was saying.

"Yeah, agreed. And the silver cord thing is off the list, too. Man, I hate the way some of these New Age writers just mash everything together."

"So that leaves us with…"

"The scans of that commonplace book from the 1660s, the penny dreadful from the 1880s, and that story from Mughal India. The good news is, I finally dug up the translation that one article mentioned. But the bad news is…it's not in English, just in modern Urdu."

"You take the Latin one; I'll take the Urdu one."

"For real? You can read Urdu?"

"I mean, not flawlessly, but...yeah, it was kinda necessary at one point. And it's a useful language to know."

Their hands met above the table with a loud smack. "Damn, girl, OK!"

"Where'd you pick up Latin?" asked Joey after a moment.

"Catholic school. I'll show you a picture of me in uniform sometime. It's ridiculous. But yeah, unlike the other kids, I really studied it. If you know Latin, you can read all kinds of cool historical documents. I always did have a thing for primary sources."

"Hell yeah, Patty! OK, back to skimming this." There was a pause. "Well, I'd have to check with a specialist, but yeah, we've got something that sounds like either a ghost or a demon, or something in-between—I'm not sure; I don't know much about Mughal beliefs. Plus, the author claims the story is originally from Mongolia, or maybe...uh...Afghanistan? But the thing was summoned by a sorcerer, and it had an invisible rope connecting it to the sorcerer. All the way from the city it was wreaking havoc in up to the mountaintop—I think that’s mountaintop—lair of the sorcerer. You know, extrapolating a little, I think this bit here is referring to ectoplasm, and here, he seems to be poetically describing an AP-xH shift. So that's a ghost, right?"

"Nice," Holtzmann said, under her breath.

"Yeah! I think I got a ghost here, too. A few of 'em in a village, and an old woman who said she could see pale vittas hyacinthinas—I mean, pale ribbons, connecting them to a distant estate, which had some alchemy fanboy aristocrat living there. A rival of the local gentry. The writer figures the alchemist was generally doing the dark arts thing and summoned the ghosts to frighten the villagers. Pretty feeble ghosts, though. Didn't do much and they would just disappear after a while, leaving a little goo behind. Now, why can't our ghosts do that? Anyway, there was a harsh winter—well, the
1600s had a lot of those, no surprise there—and Lord McGothDude died of a fever, and there weren't any more ghosts after that."

"Definitely a lot of overlap in those two stories. …Patty? Do you feel like we're being watched?"

Their heads rose above the books. Holtzmann grinned at them.

"Dinner's here," said Abby. "We just didn't want to interrupt you guys."

"Yeah, we're actually getting somewhere!" Joey stood up and stretched. "Patty had us on the right track from the get-go. There was just a lot of grunt work digging through all the potential hits. We've got a lot left to do still." She looked good in that sweater, Holtzmann thought. Not to mention how soft and snuggly it looked.

"I'm a little worried about where 'somewhere' is, though, you feel me?" Patty picked up a bag of food and headed toward the kitchen.

Abby and Erin followed her. Erin glanced around worriedly and said, "We're back to somebody actually summoning ghosts?"

"Yeah. But we don't 100% know if this energy trail thing is for real yet, right? Or if it actually goes somewhere. Or if any other entities got it too, right? 'Cause we only have one and a half data sets. So don't panic, babe."

Holtzmann waved Joey to go ahead of her. "Good work," she said, as they climbed the stairs. Joey almost missed a step, and Holtzmann caught her hand and elbow in her own hands. They both stopped still, and their eyes met. Joey's eyes were warm and brown, hard to look away from. And Holtzmann felt sparks where their skin touched, blazing from her fingertips to…well, never mind where to.

"Hey," Joey started, and Holtzmann felt every muscle in her body tense.

"Come on, it's already getting cold!" Patty yelled. "Hurry up!"

Joey bit her lip (cute, Holtzmann thought) and went on into the kitchen.

Over dinner, Patty and Joey couldn't stop talking about their research. Joey's mouth was full of pad thai and Patty was refilling her bowl with tom kha gai again and they were still talking, just like Holtzmann did when she was onto something. (She only noticed because Erin had gently pointed out Holtzmann's own talking-with-her-mouth-full thing a couple of times, and Abby had told Erin that the firehouse was a No Etiquette Zone. Except for egregious violations, whatever those were.)

Erin asked questions, and Abby cracked jokes, and eventually the conversation turned and Abby and Erin were explaining their own progress. Holtzmann thought about jumping in with her own progress, because it was pretty exciting stuff, but sometimes it was nice just to watch everyone else. For a moment, an unpleasant thought intruded. It was like looking at a full Ghostbusters team…that just didn't have a Holtzmann. If she weren't there…they'd still do OK, right? Abby could build stuff pretty well, and Erin was still learning to think outside of the box. Not as far outside of the box as Holtzmann, by far, but she'd probably get there if she needed to. And Patty's scientific knowledge seemed to grow daily. Plus there was Joey, who was already fitting in. They'd manage if, or more likely, when, something happened to her.

That was comforting, but it was a comfort that was drifting into a dark place. Holtzmann gave a hard yank to the steering wheel of her brain. She was still in the room, and it was more like they resembled a group of five at the moment. That was a warmer thought.
Holtzmann leaned her elbows on the table and took a bite of sticky rice. She liked the feel of the grains against her tongue, soft and rough at the same time, and then the contrast of the slippery mango. Hmmm. Maybe, if Joey was going to keep hanging out with them, she needed something better than a bit of protection. (Oh yeah, the jacket—she needed to give Joey the jacket later tonight.) The first possession deflector might go to her; after all, she had no other way to fight off a ghost. On the other hand, it might be better if she had something to defend herself with. Patty had trusted Joey with her niece's safety, and it had worked out, but it would have been better if Joey'd had something to fight back with. Holtzmann wasn't sure the other three would go for it, though. But it wouldn't be a proton pack. Something smaller, less dangerous, and less destructive. Maybe more "discreet." Not really Holtzmann's style, discretion, but there was something invigorating about designing and building within constraints. Time constraints, space constraints, materials constraints… Counterintuitively, it seemed to make her brain range further afield to find solutions, and she loved that feeling of reaching for more. So. For this project—

Joey's phone buzzed. "Who is calling me?" She wiped off her fingers and picked it up. Her eyes widened. "I—I have to take this, sorry." She dashed to the stairwell and answered her phone in a bright voice. "Hi, Alison! Wha—oh, you are?…Of course." She looked back into the kitchen, practically radiating stress and tension. "Tonight? Ah…no, no, sure, it's fine. Yeah! I'll be right there."

The Ghostbusters glanced at each other. Holtzmann rubbed her chin. Somebody was making Joey upset, though she was doing a pretty good job of keeping it out of her voice.

Joey came back in, but she seemed to be at a loss for words. "'Sup, Joey?" Holtzmann waved at her. "Was that your movie star ex? Does she want you to elope to Granada?"

"Haaa…yeah, right. No, it's my nonfiction editor. She's been at the London office a lot lately but she's here tonight, and she…uh. She wants to talk in person." Joey drained her Thai ice tea without sitting back down. Holtzmann thought her hands were shaking, ever so slightly. "My guess is that the book I've already got in the pipeline is getting cancelled."

Patty raised her eyebrows. "You gonna be OK? You need one of us to come with you?"

Joey smiled at Patty. "That's really nice of you. But no, it'd just be awkward. I've been kind of expecting this. There's just been one delay after another, and we had trouble getting the rights to some critical photos, and, well, it's been a while since I heard from Alison. So I'm braced for it. Thanks, though."

Erin gestured at Joey, and when Joey gave her a blank look, Erin gestured again, more anxiously. "If that's ASL, you gotta work on your accent," said Holtzmann.

Erin sighed. "Your hair is sticking up a little, Joey."

"Oh! Thanks. OK, sorry to eat and run. I guess I'll see you at 10 tomorrow?"

Abby raised her bowl of soup in a salute. "Yup. Take care, OK?"

Joey nodded and headed for the stairs, but then she glanced back at Holtzmann, and they made direct eye contact again. She looked like she was about to say something, but then she just shook her head, gave Holtzmann the tiniest of smiles, and disappeared down the staircase. Holtzmann ran her fingers along the chain of her necklace and stared at nothing in particular. She felt things shifting inside her chest—strange, unidentifiable things. Not ghosts or monsters, but something more disturbing.
Holtzmann was up before the sun. She'd fallen asleep unusually early the night before, and in her own bed. The exhaustion she was feeling had overwhelmed the effort of ignoring the back burners of her mind, maybe. But she'd woken up restless, and it seemed like there was a break in the rain, so she had decided to head out for a scavenging prowl before diving back into the lab.

It was chilly despite her layers, and she wasn't finding much—some vintage vacuum tubes in the original packaging, a roll of penguin wrapping paper, a baggie full of resistors, two Gargoyle drinking glasses, a 1959 Blaupunkt Granada radio. And she could smell rain after all, in the predawn breeze—she didn't know how long she'd be able to stay out. But there was still something about the atmosphere of the wee hours that she enjoyed. Quiet, isolated, full of potential. Abby had accompanied her a few times, back in the old days, but she was not particularly enthused about scrambling over chain-link fences and sorting through bags of trash. But Joey, it occurred to Holtzmann, had probably been in far stranger situations and still had a good time. It might be fun to ask her along sometime.

Holtzmann waited at the curb for a fleet of delivery trucks to pass so she could cross the street. One by one, their lights streamed past her in the darkness. She found her phone in her hands without thinking about it. Well, she couldn't text Joey and invite her to come now. Right? Probably right. Patty would tell her not to, probably. Holtzmann didn't really know much about the other woman's sleeping habits, or how late her editor had kept her out, or anything. But…Holtzmann put the phone away and rubbed her face with the back of her hands (the palms of her gloves were a little sticky). She had a somewhat clearer head than she'd had the previous day, and her brain was telling her that she had missed something. What was it?

Then her eyes widened. Oh. It was possible that Joey might have taken the concluding event of their night out…some sort of way. The wrong way.

What was the wrong way, though?

If Joey figured that it had just been the result of high spirits and sexy beats, well, she'd be right, but hopefully not insulted. If she thought Holtzmann had, on some level, specifically wanted to make out with Joey…well, then she'd be…huh.

"Lady. If you wanna admire that pile of bricks over there, that's your business, but give a guy with a handtruck a break and move off the curb cut, will ya?"

Holtzmann glanced at the speaker, a man in a turban with a benign smile that didn't match his grumpy words. Ah, she was in someone's way again. On purpose was one thing, but accidentally was another. "Right, cap'n," she said. "Moving on." She jammed her hands in the pockets of her scavenging overalls and crossed the street, still thinking.

The wrong way for Joey to take it would be…anything that made Joey upset with Holtzmann.

The right way would be the answer that made Joey still happy to hang out with her.

But Holtzmann didn't really know what answer would be safe and—ideally—also true, if Joey did something like ask her about the other night. And Joey might, now that Holtzmann thought of it. It seemed like something that people would do. She felt sweat trickle down the back of her shirt, under her overalls.

Holtzmann turned the corner to the last set of alleys she had on her list, and nearly bumped into a New York Post truck. The Post was useful to her because sometimes their weirder stories were actually connected to supernatural activity. But the owners were assholes and they printed wildly irresponsible stuff. Holtzmann hated to give them money, particularly ever since their lurid article on
Erin's nose-breaking incident. Gaby saved copies up for her at the coffeehouse, when patrons left their papers behind with their muffin crumbs. But there was no one around, no signs of security cameras, and the papers were just sitting there, bundled up on pallets. Holtzmann shrugged, swiped one, and finished her rounds.

The sky was still mostly dark when Holtzmann let herself into the firehouse. Abby was still sleeping. Patty was probably still at home. Once in a while, Erin would show up early, when she wanted to concentrate on something by herself. But the building was still and quiet—except, of course, for the pleasing clicks, whirrs, and beeps of Holtzmann's lab. Holtzmann made herself some coffee in the lab rather than the kitchen. When the percolation was sufficient, she filled up a mug (one of the good ones, with a hand-painted image of Uhura giving a wink), pulled out a box of Cheerios (health food!), and took a perch on a stool. She pretty much had to make herself drink at least the first half of her coffee right away if she was in the lab, otherwise it'd all be cold before she remembered it. Not that she hadn't drunk a lot of room-temperature coffee in her time. But it was definitely better hot.

Holtzmann flicked open the tabloid and spread it on a workbench. She drank her coffee, popped fistfuls of crunchy cereal into her mouth, and swiveled back and forth while she read. There was some funny stuff, and some stupid stuff, and plenty of enraging stuff. No hints of anything paranormal. But then she hit the Metro section, and a wave of cold swept through her gut. The headline read:

**FRAUDULENT "GHOST-BUSTERS" LIVING LARGE WITH CITY $$$ ON PIZZA AND BOOZE!!!**

And there was a photo, in full color. She could see a stack of pizza boxes, with Erin caught mid-lunge as she reached to open the top one. Holtzmann was dancing in the background (she gave herself a nod of approval for her slick moves). Patty and Abby were laughing uproariously and toasting each other with beer bottles. Holtzmann tried to remember which day that had been, but honestly, it was a fairly regular occurrence, and she couldn't place it.

Worse, the photo had obviously been taken from inside HQ. **Inside HQ.**

She tried to make herself read the article, but it was typical Post nonsense and didn't have any real content. But the photo. Who could have taken the photo? And who would have sold it to a tabloid? Her stomach clenched. She couldn't follow the equation to its solution; she kept looping back to the beginning.

She could throw the paper away. Shred it. Burn it. Test a weapon on it. Then she wouldn't have to deal with it. But that wasn't true. She would still know. And she'd have to somehow deal with the evidence that…no. Just get rid of it. Get rid of it and forget that, apparently, …no.

Holtzmann was still in the same place twenty minutes later when Erin stuck her head in to say good morning. "Good mo…what's up with this total lack of facial expression?" Erin passed her hand across her face in imitation of the comedy/tragedy masks, and gave an anxious chuckle. "Is that what happens when you don't finish your coffee? Huh?" Erin's brows knit as she tried to more fully get Holtzmann's attention, but Holtzmann couldn't find any switches to flip, let alone the specific one for reassuring awkward Erin. "Hey…what're you reading there?"

She reached for the paper, and Holtzmann let it go. Erin slid it over to herself with her fingertips. As though she'd been released, Holtzmann got off of her seat and went to another workbench. She leaned on it with both hands and tried to breathe evenly. In, out. In, out. Look, there was the label-maker that she had bought last year. She hadn't used it yet, but she did have a dozen different colors of labels. Maybe she could label things in the lab with how dangerous they were, so the others would
know when to panic if she wasn't there. Maybe not, though. Not much in the lab stayed at a consistent level of danger over a week. The grease pencils, maybe. Maybe. Nothing in the lab could just be outright labeled "safe."

The lab did have a bunch of things that would make very satisfying sounds, though, if thrown, or kicked, or set off.

"Oh hell," blurted Erin, behind her. "Oh! Sorry, I—but fucking hell."

Holtzmann heard Abby coming down the stairs, and she was definitely not happy either. "I just texted Patty to come in early," she said as she stomped in. "I got woken up by a weird message from Jenn—what's going on in here? Erin, you look like you just saw a ghost—ha! I crack myself up. No, but you do look pretty freakin' flipped out. And Holtz, why are you standing like that? Are you—are you trying not to throw up?"

Erin held up the tabloid. "Did Ms. Lynch say anything about the *NY Post*?"

"Yeah, yeah she did…God! Are you kidding me? What is this B.S.? And that photo—how the heck did they…" Abby's nostrils flared and she sat down heavily on Holtzmann's abandoned stool. "OK. Soon as Patty gets here, we gotta talk. We'll get this sorted out."

Holtzmann cleared her throat. "Can we…can we go somewhere else to talk? Not the lab."

Abby looked over at her, and Holtzmann thought she saw understanding in her best friend's eyes. "Yeeehah. Too much volatile stuff in here, eh? C'mon upstairs. It's warmer up there anyway."

They wound up sitting around the table, with the tabloid spread open. Holtzmann wasn't looking at it anymore, and for that matter, the other two seemed to be avoiding it as well. Abby got up and made coffee for everyone and oatmeal for herself, and finally Patty showed up. Abby explained. Patty took the paper, looked at it for a moment, and then tossed it down on the table.

There was a moment while they all looked at each other. Erin's pale fingers were pressed to her mouth. Abby's cheeks were a little red. Patty was shaking her head.

Holtzmann took a pair of glasses out of her pocket, the ones with the side shields and the hinges, and put them on. She stroked one of the curved earpieces with her thumb.

There was probably going to be an argument. She sat back from the table a little.

"OK, I don't wanna say it, but somebody's got to. This photo. It has to be Joey's." Patty grimaced. "Right?"

Abby rubbed her forehead. "That's what Jennifer's text said, plus that she was very, very disappointed in us, and that the Mayor would be having words with us. Ugh. But I don't want to believe that it was Joey. She seems so nice."

"Yeah, I thought so too, but she's human. And humans will do some really shitty things when they need cash," Patty pointed out.

"Oh…They would've paid for this photo?" Abby sighed and put her head down on her arms.

"Sure," said Patty. "I mean, if the *Post* wanted some new targets, someone they hadn't kicked around in a while. Or if someone—if someone came to them with a story."

"Don't you think it seems unlike her? I mean, I know I'm not the world's best judge of character."
Erin glanced at each of them, her eyes big. "A financial crisis is one thing, even if her book was
canceled, but…"

"A *big* thing, babe. You ever had to choose between electricity and groceries?"

Erin shook her head.

Patty laughed wryly. "Didn't think so. I mean, I've had a pretty damn good life, but things were tight
when I started grad school. Part of how I wound up at the MTA. You do what you gotta do."

"So, if it's Joey—I mean, I guess that's not an 'if' anymore. But Patty, you sound like maybe it's
understandable." Abby looked at Patty hopefully.

"OK, yeah, no. Understandable and *acceptable* are two different things. Two real different things.
I'm not OK with this, and I don't think any of us should be." Patty glanced at Holtzmann. Holtzmann
still didn't say anything, just looked down and adjusted the chain on her necklace.

"God. I hope Bradley doesn't shut us down over this. Is there any other reasonable explanation?"
asked Erin, sounding tired.

A line grew in Abby's forehead. "Maybe someone hacked into—"

Holtzmann took a breath and rattled off: "*Lex parsimoniae. Pluralitas non est ponenda sine
necessitate.*"


Patty cleared her throat. "The law of parsimony. Plurality should not be posited without necessity."

"Or as it's called on the streets, Occam's Razor," concluded Holtzmann. "That idea did a lot of
damage to our beloved metaphysical and paranormal sciences, but you know what? Sometimes it's
just what the doctor called for. The simplest explanation, with the fewest unknowns and the least
amount of additional explanations, is that…" She ran out of words.

"I'll say it. I'm the one who brought her into the firehouse." Abby poked a finger at the newspaper.
"Joey took this photo and sold it to the *Post*. So. What are we gonna do about it?"

The debate started, and Holtzmann tuned out. After a couple of minutes she made a quiet exit and
went back to her lab. The urge to blow everything up had mostly subsided, and things just made
more sense when she was there.

Eventually, Patty came down to the library. She took out some books and put others back, then
crossed the divider—the line where a literal firewall could come down if it had to—to stand near
Holtzmann. "Thought I should let you know. We're just gonna have Joey come over here when she
was planning to anyway, in about an hour, show her the paper and give her a chance to explain. And
if there's no good explanation, like her grandma's being held for ransom by the mob or something,
we're just ending the relationship. No-drama-Obama-style. Is that all right with you?"

*All right* didn't seem to have much meaning at the moment. "It's an appropriate course of action,"
Holtzmann said.

"Man, your face is so blank it's scaring the shit out of me. Ain't *none* of this OK, Holtz. You can be
upset." She rubbed her face. "All right now. I'm going to go tell Abby, and she's going to take her
shower and get dressed, and we'll get this crap over with."
"'K." Holtzmann opened a cabinet and pulled out an abandoned project from the summer. "Gonna get some work done."

"If you say so. I'll be back in my den in a few. Yell if you need me."

Patty left, and for a few minutes, Holtzmann just stared at the tangle of wires and metal parts in front of her. She couldn't actually remember what this project was meant to be.

But she could still take it apart. She reached for her favorite screwdriver.

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Joey let herself into the firehouse right at 10 AM. Despite her coat and umbrella, she was damp, thanks to the irritating drizzle that had started as she left her editor's office—well, the bar after the office meeting—last night. The rain had been coming and going ever since. And she had a faint headache, probably from the red wine Alison had bought. At least she didn't have bad news from the meeting to share with the Ghostbusters, and pretty soon she'd get hot coffee and find out what Holtzmann had gotten up to since last night. (And try harder to find a moment alone with her. Plus, far less importantly, see if she could find her missing leather jacket.) She shook off her umbrella and propped it against the wall to dry.

"Come join us at the table." Abby was in the back at the conference table, along with everything else. And, Joey's instincts and experience told her, something bad had happened.

As she headed for a seat, she took a good look at their faces and what was out on the table, to see if there were any clues. Everyone looked all right, if not happy. Abby, her lips in a thin line, was grim. Erin was fretfully twisting a pencil around in her fingers. Patty and Holtzmann were both unreadable, and given how expressive their faces usually were, that was pretty disturbing.

The only thing on the table was a copy of the *NY Post*. Joey was baffled. Had Kevin gotten hurt? Was a client suing? Was the mayor mad at them?

"Ms. Betancourt." Joey had never heard such a sharp edge in Abby's tone before. "Care to explain this?" She opened the tabloid, pushed it toward Joey, and stabbed her finger toward a particular page.

Joey took in the headline and the photo. "Shit, that's awful! But—what—why?" She glanced at them, still baffled, but with a growing sense that the ground was about to crumble beneath her.

"Why'd you do this and sell it to the goddamn *Post*, Joey?" Patty took a deep breath and spread her hands out, palms down. "We're all adults here. Just give us an honest explanation, OK?"

"I know there has to be a good explanation, right, Joey?" Erin leaned forward. "Don't feel bad, we've all messed up! Or at least I have. Big time. Aha...ha...what I mean is, we can probably fix this. Right, guys? If you just tell us what happened, Joey."

Holtzmann didn't add anything, but Joey felt the burn of her blue eyes as Holtzmann just *looked* at her.

"I...I don't have one! I mean, I'd love to help you guys find out who did this, and how, but it wasn't me! I wouldn't do something like that. I mean, the *Post*, seriously? It's garbage! I'd pay money to not be published by them." Joey was trying for levity, but she felt her throat clenching. She had gotten herself out of all kinds of trouble over the years, but even though no one was pointing a gun at her, threatening to revoke her visa, or about to smash her laptop, she was choking on her words. All she could think of to say was exactly what would a guilty person say, even though she hadn't done anything. She felt dizzy. "Seriously, why would I do something like that? We've been a great team! I
Patty was just shaking her head. Disappointment was etched across her face, and Abby's, and Erin's. Holtzmann, face still blank, had broken her gaze, and was now just looking away, in the general direction of the floor.

"This is your last chance to explain yourself," said Abby. "Come on. The photo was taken from inside HQ. There's only one person who could have done that. So just…tell us."

Joey was trying to catch Holtzmann's attention. "Hey, Holtzmann. It wasn't me. Please, Holtz, just listen!"

Holtzmann's eyes flickered toward Joey for a fraction of a second. Joey realized that she probably hadn't called her Holtz before. But it didn't make a difference. She wouldn't meet Joey's eyes.

"We'd be happy to listen if you had anything to tell us, but it seems like you don't." Abby stood. She gestured toward the door. "We're revoking your access to HQ, and to any of us. We're not going to go complain to your editor or anything, but you do need to leave. Don't come back. And don't use any of the material you gathered on us. Clear?"

Joey felt her head starting to throb on one side. Great—a migraine. She stood, and tried to speak without her voice shaking. "I didn't take that photo. And I didn't sell anything to the Post. But it doesn't seem like I can prove that right now, so I'm going to leave. But I'm leaving under protest."

She made herself walk to the door and pick up her umbrella. There was total silence until, as the door closed behind her, she heard Patty saying, "I wish she would've just told us."

The rain had, in some fit of New York perversity, stopped. Sunlight was glaring off of the wet asphalt, and the resulting pain made her eyes water. (That was it. Yes, just the migraine. Not anything else.) Joey didn't know if she wanted to go back and camp out on the firehouse's doorstep or run as far away from it as possible. Either way, she had to dig out her sunglasses and get her medication out of her pillbox before she did anything. "Excellent timing," she muttered to her brain.

She swallowed the pill and switched her glasses, but before she could take a step toward the subway—the only sensible choice—the door to the firehouse was flung open. Holtzmann ran out. Her face was flushed and her hair was even more rebellious than usual, as though she'd just run up and down the stairs. She came to a halt a few steps away from Joey, but between the metal-shielded glasses and the way she was looking somewhere past Joey and off to the side, Joey couldn't see her eyes. But she could see that Holtzmann's eyebrows were pinched together in distress.

"Here. This is yours."

Holtzmann flung something at Joey. Joey caught it, but just barely, and staggered back a little from the force of it. It was…it was her jacket. More or less.

"I messed it up. Sorry." Holtzmann pivoted on a booted heel and was back inside the firehouse before Joey could draw a breath.

The only thing Joey could do was go home.

Chapter End Notes
This combination of gleefully malevolent cackling and desperately apologetic guilt is QUITE a feeling. Fic authors, you know the drug.

You know where to send the hate mail, right?

(if you can't get it all out here, stholtzmann on tumblr & now on gmail)

I love you all...really...I just have a funny way of showing it.

Anyway, my dear readers, I do want to get to Chapter 12 sooner rather than later to the extent possible. I have a lot of other writing and work projects (oh hi, midterms) to do, so your comments and reactions are the best fuel to get me there! <3
Chapter Summary

Holtzmann makes a series of poor decisions, and we learn how it is that 1 = 0.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Joey! Joey, come on, come out, it's Halloween today!"

Joey rolled over on her bed and stuck her tongue out at the ceiling. She had managed to forget about it. She'd spent the last couple of days trying to write. Other than a walk to the corner grocery, she'd hardly left.

"I'm staying in." She got up and opened the door so that Viv would know that she really was alive.

"You're not coming to the thing tonight? It's a fundraiser. And it ought to be a good time. I talked Nikkoli and Ella into coming too."

"The thing?"

"I pushed a flyer under your door. And I sent you a FB invite."

Joey glanced down. There was indeed a piece of paper on the floor, which she'd probably stepped on a dozen times already. "Oh, oops. I'm sorry, I totally missed that. And I've been kind of offline a little." Joey had really only used her phone to confirm—repeatedly—that none of the Ghostbusters had texted her. "But no, I...really don't want to go out."

"Hey, that's your call." Viv shrugged. "But at least come help Nikkoli and me suffer through the morning. We're not used to it...we need help."

"Uh-huh." Joey shuffled into the kitchen. Nikkoli was at the stove, wearing low-slung sweats and not much else other than his tattoos. He gave her a quick wave with his spatula.

"Nikkoli's making omelets. Some nonsense about protein. Sit down and have some coffee—oh, and thanks for restocking the fridge. Are you—"

"Yeah, don't worry about it. I saw my editor last week, and things are looking up...financially, anyway. More money in my account, and all that. And I'm on a waiting list for a really cool thing that I can't talk about yet. And which I ought to be way more excited about than I am. Joey rubbed her face and took a gulp of coffee. "Who knows, I may be moving on at some point." NYC wasn't home, anyway—nowhere was—but it was probably time to start considering her options.

Viv nodded. She tapped a French-manicured nail against her teeth. "So. Girl trouble."

Joey choked on her coffee and grabbed for the roll of paper towels on the table. Viv arched an eyebrow at her, and Joey sighed. Wiping her mouth, she said, "That's both one hundred percent true and not even close to covering it."
"Damn, that sounds extra messy." Nikkoli arched his eyebrows as he set down their omelets.

"You could say that. Viv, seriously, how did you know?" They didn't even know each other all that well; Viv and Joey were just acquaintances who had happened to be in need of roommates in NYC at the same time.

Viv cut into her omelet and regarded the cheese, mushrooms, and egg on her fork. Then she smiled and gave a kind of sitting curtsy. "Black girl mag—trans girl magi—black trans girl magic! J/k, no magic involved this time. It really couldn't be any more obvious."

Nikkoli sat on the counter and ate his breakfast. "Anything we can help with?"

Joey shook her head. "Not really, but thanks for the food. You guys have a good time tonight, OK?"

"Think about getting a change of scenery, Jo," advised Viv as she stood and stretched.

Once they'd left to go do event prep, Joey stayed at the table for a few minutes. Sooner or later she'd have to contact the Ghostbusters herself. She had suddenly become persona non grata with interview subjects before. Sometimes they came around after a couple of days, but sometimes she had work hard to get back in their good graces. But at that moment, she felt like she was on shakier ground.

Well, at any rate, Viv's suggestion was a good one. Joey did feel like she was hitting that point where she'd been indoors and sedentary too long, so maybe it would be a good idea for her to go write in a cafe somewhere. She wanted to be back at the apartment well before Halloween shenanigans started, though. Joey was definitely not feeling it.

"Get up and go put on some clothes," she said aloud to herself. She pulled off her t-shirt as she headed back into her room to find something to wear.

And then there it was, Nikkoli's old moto jacket. She hadn't really looked at it since Holtzmann had… had given it back to her.

She held it up. Holtzmann had completely redone the interior of the jacket. It was lined with something flexible underneath the fabric. And there was what she could only call armor, firmer and thicker, at the joints and down the spine, but still lighter and less bulky than typical motorcycle armor. The jacket had been a little too big for her before—Joey wasn't nearly as tiny as Holtzmann, but Nikkoli was tall and sturdily-built—and she wondered how it would fit now.

Joey slipped it on. She closed her eyes for a moment as the cool fabric lining brushed the bare skin of her breasts. Yeah, it would fit pretty much perfectly on top of clothes, and she even had a good range of motion despite the armor. How much work had Holtzmann put into this? And why?

She pulled the jacket across her chest like a hug, and regretted that she would have to put a shirt between it and her in order to go out.

"Ah…ffffffffffuck." Joey dropped her chin to her chest and groaned. She had headed out, with no particular destination, in search of a cafe. And now she was at Oddcoffee, the coffeehouse that Holtzmann had taken her to after the scorched eyebrow incident, and several times since. Ghostbusters HQ was only a few blocks away. She ought to leave right away, she told herself.

She drifted past the coffeehouse window and glanced in. None of the Ghostbusters were in there. But Gaby, the barista that knew Holtzmann, was. They made eye contact. Gaby nodded at her, face neutral and serious despite the fact that she was in costume.
Maybe going in would be OK. Joey pulled the door open, and Gaby said, "Welcome back."

"Th—thanks. Is it...is it OK if I get a drink and work in here for a while?"

Gaby squinted at her. "Allá tú. Eh? Pero like, what exactly are you asking?"

Joey put her hands on the coolness of the granite counter. "I don't know if you...if you heard anything."

"Yeah. Abby came in, like, a couple hours after they talked to you, I guess. And she was here again getting lattes for everyone this morning, and we talked a little more. I'd been wondering where Holtzmann was." Gaby started adjusting pastries in the display case.

Joey desperately wanted to ask if Gaby had heard anything about how Holtzmann was doing, but she just couldn't force herself to actually do it. Right now she was just glad that Gaby was still speaking to her. "I have to get in touch with them, because what they think happened isn't what happened. I mean, I don't know what happened, but I know what didn't happen." Words, what even were they?

"I like you, Joey, and up to this point you've seemed to be good for Holtzmann. I'm not emotionally caught up in this situation, so although of course I'm always gonna take Holtz's 'side,' what that actually means might be more complicated than just getting mad at you myself. Not to mention that there's a difference between, like, trusting someone and believing that they're infallible, you know? Feel free to come in. I'm not going to hassle you."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. In that case, I'd like a triple mocha, please."

Joey set herself up in a corner and tried to get to work. She didn't quite have what it took for banging out new words, but she had enough brain cells to do line edits, at least. It was oddly comforting to be in a place that she associated so strongly with Holtzmann, though she realized that she had subconsciously chosen a table that she'd never sat at before.

Gaby put the mocha down. "Oye, real talk, OK? Are you looking to bump into the Ghostbusters, or to avoid them, right now?"

Joey sniffed the steam arising from the mocha. It smelled amazing. "I—I think I'd rather not run into them. Not yet." She glanced around the coffeehouse. She had chosen poorly if that was her goal.

"I get it. Well, if you're here after 8 and before 11:00 in the morning, or between 5 and 7 pm, you ought to be OK. I want you and them both to do what's best for you right now, all right?" Gaby, despite her youth and the glittery, dark, antlered Halloween floral crown circling her shaved head, sound positively grandmotherly.

"Thanks." Joey suddenly felt like she was going to cry. Up to that point, she hadn't really cried over the the mess that she was in. Why now? She distracted herself by looking at the orange and black rhinestones lining Gaby's name tag. "Hey, it doesn't say Gabriela anymore."

"Good eye. New boss—Shayne, you'll like her—and a better name policy." Gaby gave her a thumbs up and headed back to the counter, where a customer awaited.

Joey set a reminder on her phone to leave by 11 and put on her headphones to get something done.

Around 10:45, she started to get nervous, so she packed up. While she was putting her cup into the bin of dirty dishes, she paused. A thought had occurred to her. "Gaby, if you have a sec—"
"Yeah, what's up?" Gaby came over, still washing a glass.

"I guess this is a long shot, but you don't have any leftover papers from October 26th, do you?"

Gaby nodded thoughtfully. "Usually I wouldn't, but yeah, I kept a couple of those after I heard. Let me duck into the back."

She came out a moment later and handed a paper to Joey. It had a coffee ring on the front page. Joey thanked her, folded it and put it away in her bag, and left.

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Third day in a row of completely missing her minimum sleep goals. Holtzmann sighed and turned off her alarm. Abby had made her go home the day that—the other day, even though Holtzmann would have been a lot happier just working overnight. She had grudgingly gone home; at that point peaceful sleep had finally started to sound appealing, so she'd taken her medication. But it hadn't been strong enough to stand up to her inner turmoil that night. She had, instead, stayed up in her basement lab, and worked on ways to make their equipment more sensitive to spectral energy trails. Abby hadn't said anything to her when Holtzmann came in at her usual time the next morning. Then the night before last, Holtzmann had managed to fall asleep around four in the morning. But she showed up on time again. Abby had definitely noticed—she'd brought in potent lattes from Oddcoffee—but she still hadn't said anything. In fact, Patty had glanced at Abby and then shushed Erin when she had started to say something. Holtzmann didn't really know what was going on with them, but she was grateful for the reprieve.

Or, more likely, the postponement. There was no way that Abby's forbearance would continue today. Holtzmann got up and washed her face in her sink. Yeah, she definitely looked exactly as though she'd had maybe six or seven hours of sleep in a 72-hour period. She pondered trying to swipe some of Erin's makeup when she got there. She'd seen Erin cover up dark circles before, but she didn't really know how to do it herself, and anyway…if they noticed, there'd probably be even more questions. Well, Holtzmann managed to use some of her time productively, so she'd just redirect them to talking about that.

She got into the shower. After a few minutes, she shook herself. She'd caught herself leaning her head against the wall, eyes drifting shut. That wouldn't do. Holtzmann grabbed for the bottle of shampoo shaped like James P. "Sulley" Sullivan and opened it with her teeth. The bracing scent of "Scary Berry" flooded into the air. She was going to to wash her hair, brush her teeth, and make sure her hair did a thing that she liked—no particular thing, as usual. Just one she liked.

Holtzmann's plan went all right, at least initially. It had taken her a little bit too long to do her hair, because the pins just weren't cooperating with her fingers, but she'd done it, and she'd managed to find a whole outfit of almost entirely clean clothing that was also stuff she liked to wear and was pretty grown-up-looking. Or whatever the apparently vast difference was between denim overalls and a crop-top versus a button-down shirt and a vest and a jacket and tweed trousers. "If you can't dazzle them with brilliance," Holtzmann told herself, "baffle them with bullshit." Good ol' W.C.

For the first few hours, Holtzmann made some good progress, tinkering with some sensors to turn up their sensitivity. As she fiddled with different materials, she imagined an iris widening, letting in more light. The problem was in testing what she was doing. It wasn't light she was after; it was spectral energy, and it wouldn't escape a ghost trap or containment unit. But even Holtzmann didn't want to let a ghost out—it had been a bad idea when Erin had done it, and it was still a bad idea. Although…maybe a teeny-tiny one…

While Abby and Erin were arguing over the ethics of downloading a relevant dissertation from the
CERN document server using faked credentials, Holtzmann turned her attention to her other projects. She was making a dent on the long list, but that still left a lot. (Though it wasn't like the list had an end. She didn't intend to ever actually run out of projects.) Like the P.PBAD's casing and other details. More sensitive receptors would help with miniaturizing it, of course, but there was the rest of it to shrink down as well. And that needed to go back on the priority list if...if there wasn't a good way to bring the current, bulky model along on busts. So she needed to work on it.

Maybe not right now though.

For reasons.

Holtzmann felt a little fuzzy. It had already been a long day and it was only 11 AM. The lattes Abby had brought them this morning had worn off pretty thoroughly, and the coffeemaker had been Kevinned: he'd gone up to the kitchen an hour or two ago to "make more coffee," and although the coffeepot was full of a liquid, it hadn't been coffee.

"What is it?" Erin had asked. Even she had hesitated to touch it.

There'd been a pause, and then Abby had answered, "It's green. Holtzmann, wasn't that your line?"

Holtzmann had actually thought she'd said it out loud, but apparently she'd just thought it.

Anyway, there was no coffee to be had there. Did she have a box of Maxim instant cappuccino stuffed in with her snacks somewhere? Tearing open a couple of the little Korean paper tubes of powdered coffee, sugar, and creamer and just eating 'em was a cheap trick, but not a bad one.

"Holtz. Holtz!" Abby was trying to get her attention.

Holtzmann's head snapped up. She'd been, apparently, just standing over the P.PBAD, staring at it. "Present!"

"Can you come solder this for me?"

"Ah, calling the expert in, eh?" Holtzmann straightened and brushed off her shoulders modestly.

Abby positioned a light over the the worktable, and Erin started to move the magnifier in front of Holtzmann. Holtzmann waved her off. "These things aren't just for flair," she said, pointing to the loupe set that was attached to her goggles. "Although you gotta admit they're pretty..." Pretty sexy would be her normal line, but it just wouldn't come out. She coughed. "Pretty stylin', right?" She winked at Erin, and Erin, with a faint smile, just shook her head.

"You see what we're trying to do here, right?" Abby tapped the plans she'd printed out.

Holtzmann admired her enthusiasm for hardware, even though it wasn't really Abby's specialty, but... "Ay caramba, Abby, you need to call me in before you get started. This thing is more crowded than a Lexington Avenue train."

Abby made a short hmph. Holtzmann wondered for a moment if she'd let more crankiness leak through than she had meant to, but then she bent over the PCB and picked up the soldering iron from its stand. She swiped the tip across a damp sponge and then hesitated for a moment. Her eyes were a little blurry, and she didn't want to have to put everything down and make a show of removing her goggles and rubbing her eyes. So she just blinked rapidly till it went away.

Better. Holtzmann touched the now shiny tip to the solder in her other hand and the lead on the board. She held everything there for a second. "All done." She stood up and started to slide the iron
back into its holder, but she bobbled it. She grabbed for the handle before it went flying toward Erin's or Abby's face. She didn't have a good grip on it, though, so she automatically reached to steady it with her other hand. That was where the tip was, though, and it was still hot—which didn't manage to surface in her brain until she felt an intrusion of pain in her left palm.

"Jesus!" said Abby. She caught up the iron herself and stowed it away safely.

"Are you OK?" asked Erin. Her worry lines creased sharply.

"I'm…uh…Ah." Holtzmann looked at her hand, then held it out toward them. "See, these gloves aren't just for haute couture either. I wear 'em for a reason." Holtzmann felt a surge of embarrassment, but tamped it down. She stood up, pushed past her colleagues, stripped off the glove, and tossed it in the trash. Then she sauntered over to a cabinet and got out a replacement.

"I'm glad your hand is OK," Abby said slowly. Holtzmann could hear the mom-friend tone creeping into her voice. "But Holtz, are you OK?"

"Seriously, I've seen explosions and all sorts of accidents in here, but I've never ever seen you do anything other than work magic with a soldering iron," added Erin. "Are you feeli—"

"I need some air," said Holtzmann. That was a thing people said, right? She pulled on the glove and avoided their prodding, judgey eyes. "I'm going to take a walk. Back later."

"Holtzmann!" Gaby zoomed out from behind the counter. Holtzmann braced for impact: Gaby was an enthusiastic hugger, though at least she telegraphed it so a person could dodge or wave her off.

"Missed ya," Gaby said.

Holtzmann hugged her back. She felt tears heating her eyes. What the hell. *Why now, traitorous lacrimal glands!* Holtzmann stepped back and gave a loud, scale-climbing sneeze to cover for the wetness of her eyes.

Gaby took a look at her. "Are you here for caffeine? Because…" She paused, and Holtzmann began to worry about what she was going to say next. "Pero no, like, coffee is not what you need. You need sleep. Actually, a lot of sleep. No more caffeine today, babe. It's just gonna make sleeping harder."

Holtzmann rolled her eyes, but she knew Gaby was right. "Fine, tyrant. Give me some of your finest leaf water."

Gaby smiled and turned to look at the shelves behind the counter. She stood on her toes and pulled out an apothecary jar, from which she scooped some alarmingly vegetal-looking tea into a small pot. She went about brewing it studiously, and without looking up, she said, "You just missed ya girl Joey."

*She is not my girl. "How…How was she?"* Holtzmann couldn't help but ask.

"Eh. You know what, though, she was wearing a leather jacket. I mean, I think I remember seeing her wear it a few times before. This time it looked different, like someone had altered it. And like, I'm pretty sure I would recognize Holtzmann handiwork anywhere. So it's something you fixed up for her, right?"

Joey was wearing the jacket that Holtzmann had thrown at her. What did *that* mean? Holtzmann had no idea. Grasping for something to say, Holtzmann came up with, "Did you comp her coffee?"
"Huh? Nah, she paid for it. Pretty nice tip, too."

Holtzmann felt an unpleasant sensation in her stomach and her mouth.

She had a question to ask. Analytically, it was the precise right question to ask.

So, why was she hesitating?

Holtzmann traced a circle with her finger on the cool, smooth counter. Around and around and around. Then: "How did her cash flow situation look?"

Gaby cocked an eyebrow at her and set the teapot and a cup down on a small tray. "Dunno what you mean."

"Come on, Gaby," Holtzmann said. "I know you checked her wallet without even meaning to. It's an automatic process."

Gaby flushed and look down at the the teapot.

Holtzmann felt her skin go prickly. She didn't typically bring up Gaby's past, and she had no idea how to deal with the fact she'd just done so.

It was probably a time for an apology. "Sorry, I—"

Gaby interrupted her and pushed the tray in her direction. "OK. Yeah. I looked. Her wallet was pretty thick. Not, like, international tourist cash thick, but she's deffo not broke. Why? … Oh, I get it. You figure she got a good payout for that photo thing?"

Holtzmann shrugged and fiddled with the handle of the teacup. "Seems like the obvious conclusion."

Gaby grumbled something under her breath and then gave Holtzmann a sharp look. "I'm kinda surprised you'd ever settle for an 'obvious' conclusion." She turned away to replace the apothecary jar on its shelf, and started straightening some of the others. "Need anything else?" she said, without looking back at Holtzmann.

Holtzmann knew when she'd been dismissed, even though Gaby'd never done it to her before. She took the tea tray and headed for a back corner.

Just sipping the tea, which tasted like stars and velvet, wasn't a great idea, because thoughts. But Holtzmann had a notebook with her in a pocket, natch, so she took it out and started writing down ideas and sketches for whichever projects popped into her head. Eventually, the tea was gone, and she realized that even though none of the girls had texted her (a kindness for sure), she couldn't skip out and go home. It was Halloween and Patty was insistent that the barrier thinned then. She figured something would go down that night, so she and Abby had planned an evening of games and sugar in the firehouse. Everybody was on call.

Well, maybe she'd have a chance to get some crunchier data. They needed more. She'd drag the P.PBAD along and maybe set it down somewhere with a good angle on the action, like Jo—like they'd done that one time. If there were any calls.

Holtzmann got up and bused her own table, then headed for the door. "Cool glitter antlers, Gaby," she said over her shoulder.

Gaby looked up at her and gave her a small smile. "Come back in tomorrow. The Halloween stuff gets taken down at close tonight, and I get to decorate before we open on the 1st. Booyah! And
Holtzmann rolled out of bed and stared at her phone. Waking up had been rough, like punching her way past a hundred ninjas while climbing a dozen flights of stairs in the dark rough, but the insistent harsh chiming from her phone had done it. "Hope you're happy, Gaby," she grumbled, rubbing her eyes.

She finally managed to focus on the screen. There was a text from a name she hadn't thought about in a couple years: Lena, from grad school, or rather from a summer research position on the West Coast during grad school. Lena was one of the few people from back then who was still interesting to talk to, once in a while, when she passed through NYC. She worked for a solar-powered auto company or something like that. Last time she'd come through, she'd asked if Holtzmann wanted to meet up at a club's bondage theme night. Holtzmann had said no—she had made out with Lena once or twice, and she'd made out with other people in Lena's vicinity a couple times, and so she didn't know what Lena would expect from her. It was easier to swagger past the expectations of people who didn't have history with Holtzmann than those who did. And grad school had been a weird time. (As opposed to all those normal times she'd had, right? She laughed at herself.)

Hey Holtz. Last I heard, you were in NYC. Remember GirlParty? From that summer in grad school? It's still around. I'm bringing it to New York, just a one-off.

I don't know what you're up to these days. (Are you even ON Facebook?) But in case you're in the mood, GirlParty NYC will be this Friday night, 9 PM. Bring something sweet if you can.

...powdered sugar shaken up with Pringles does not count, ok, in case you forgot

GirlParty. Friday. That sounded like a terrible idea, so Holtzmann carefully didn't put it in her calendar. That guaranteed she wouldn't remember it.

But halfway into a non-nonalcoholic root beer on Friday night, she did.

Holtzmann figured she'd earned that root-beer beer, because she'd been sent home on "vacation" by the combined force of Abby, Patty, and Erin the previous day. There hadn't been any busts on Halloween night, but there had been a couple of days later. Holtzmann had slung the P.PBAD on and hustled them to the location, then followed her own plan to set it down somewhere—in this case, propped up on a large metal recycling bin in the alley behind the old brick tenement that was hosting the apparition. And it had...not really worked, in a couple of different ways.

First of all, the specter was full of piss and vinegar, and pretty violent, so they'd aimed to bust it quickly. This annoyed Holtzmann because more time = more data. Then the recycling bin got jostled by Abby backing away from the apparition to get a clear shot at it, which knocked Holtzmann's device to the asphalt and caused Holtzmann to swear at Abby. It would've been so much easier if they'd had—if they'd had a fifth party member. Then, when Holtzmann took her eyes off of their opponent in order to pick up the P.PBAD, make sure it wasn't damaged, and put it somewhere more stable, the damn ghost had reached right over her, picked up the recycling bin, and flung it at them. This resulted in an utterly broken P.PBAD, skinned knees for Holtzmann, and both a smashed-up wand and a sprained wrist for Abby. They'd trapped the damn thing pretty quickly after that, but it wasn't a good bust. Holtzmann salvaged enough data from her device to see that the ghost had the "HI MY NAME IS GHOST" signature, and no directional spectral energy trail whatsoever. Semi-useful, but not great. And Holtzmann couldn't find enough apologies for Abby.

Worst of all, Abby wasn't mad at her. She was tender and nurturing. In fact, the other three had
practically staged an intervention, which was to say that at breakfast the next day they had gently suggested that she needed some time off and more sleep and maybe to confide in someone.

HA!

What she needed was a good project with no baggage. Time off? Fuck. She'd thought they knew her better than that, especially Abby. Then again, maybe Holtzmann's patented bravado had held up better than she'd dared dream over the last few years.

Whatever. She'd gritted her teeth and gotten some sleep and done some noodling in the home lab. And she had to admit she was less mistake-prone than she'd been previously. How had she let herself get so fucked up? Well, tomorrow, she was going back to work, and they weren't stopping her. She texted Abby to tell her so.

But tonight? She'd take their advice and get out of her basement home and go do something recreational. Take that!

Holtzmann finished off the bottle while she rooted around through a pile of her clothes in her bedroom. She'd never worn anything particularly different to GirlParty from what she usually wore. Maybe the good scarf, the one that was made of silk and long enough to tie like a tie. And that vintage military jacket. She got admiring comments from random lovely queer ladies and nb peeps every time she wore it.

Holtzmann slipped on the jacket and checked the knot on her scarf in the large piece of unframed mirror that was leaning against the wall in her home lab. It was for a project that she hadn't gotten to yet, but it did prove useful for making sure she hadn't forgotten anything in the morning. Like, oh, pants or that sort of thing.

Trousers, check: plum-colored corduroy. Socks, check: one a blue and peach argyle, the other covered in spiraling black, thorny vines with bright flowers. Torso coverage, check: a chambray button-down, with the scarf; a fitted forest-green brocade vest with a bronze jackalope-head brooch on the lapel. Then the jacket.

Ah—shoes. Right, that was why she could still see her socks. She bent over and pulled on the fancy boots she'd thrifted the spring before last.

Then her lightest glasses, the ones with the smoky gray 50s-style frames, and she was done.

"I'd bang you," Holtzmann said to her reflection. She shot finger guns at herself. Ready to go.

This is still a terrible idea, she imagined her reflection shouting after her as she opened door into the dark, chilly stairwell that led up to the street. "You're not the boss of me," she whispered as she locked the door.

"Hi!" Lena opened the door, with pleasure evident in her voice. She was wearing some kind of dangerous black lace concoction that looked as though she'd peeled it right off of a WicDiv cover. "I honestly didn't think you'd come. Are you up for a hug tonight?"

"Yeah." Lena was a good hugger. Holtzmann leaned into it. Lena's neck smelled like almond extract and vanilla.

Holtzmann could feel Lena's muscles suddenly tense. She gently pushed Holtzmann back, and
looked her up and down. "God, that jacket and that vest flatter the hell out of you. Very nice." Then she cocked her head to one side. "But. H. Are you buzzed? You know that's against the rules."

Busted. "One bottle…that rounds to zero beers if you're counting in tens. Or the nearest two. Although then some people would say that's half, so I oughtta round up, but statistically speaking, rounding to even avoids an upward bias. And OK, OK, I hear you, both zero and two are even, so that doesn't really work. Zero is an even even, because it's the zeroth even, and two is an odd even, so zero is more even than two is, y'see. Oh, fine, then. We can round to the nearest three. All prime numbers are basically the same anyway. And it was an hour ago. Ish."

"Never bullshit a bullshitter." Lena sighed. "I get the feeling that you're here for a reason, and not just because you're bored. Look, because it's you, you can come in—"

Holtzmann took a step forward, but Lena didn't budge. She stared down directly into Holtzmann's eyes.

"—but you have to sober up completely first. Go help out in the kitchen for…let's say, thirty—no, a full sixty minutes. I always forget how teensy you are. And drink some water. All right?"

Holtzmann knew Lena was 100% correct, but her jaw was clenched as she nodded and stepped inside. She wasn't there to listen to Tiny Erin or anyone doing a bad impression of Tiny Erin. She was there to get as close as possible to shutting off her brain entirely.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long! I'm working on a paranormal science novel and some wlw erotic romance stories (I figured I'd take a hint from Joey, lol). But here's a bonus for your patience: a little commissioned portrait of Joey. Let me know what you think of it! A Holtzmann portrait will come eventually too.

Chapter 13 is outlined but not written; however, it's been knocking around in my head all month, so maybe it'll just write itself.
The Gun on the Dance Floor

Chapter Summary

Holtzmann is looking for something in the shadows. Is she looking for the wrong thing, or in the wrong place, or both? And what happens if she finds something there?

Meanwhile, the lines blur among strangers, lovers, and friends.

Chapter Notes

Two warnings before you jump in! First, this chapter finally earns its E-rating. Second, this chapter is almost 11,000 words long! Usually, I'd go ahead and break it, but I just didn't think that would be fair in this case.

Anyway, thanks for staying with me, and I hope you enjoy it!

_I am the gun on the dance floor_
_Muzzle in ribs, pushed out the door_
_Don't really care where I've seen you before_
_Tied to my chair, pressing for more_

Suggested listening: _"Tied to My Chair," Varnish._

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Holtzmann made her way through the dimly lit living room of the expensive-looking condo. Flickering LED candles scattered around the glossy space gave the interior some atmosphere. _Fake fire is for dudes_, Holtzmann thought, but whatever. Attendees in various stages and flavors of dress were chatting and glancing sidelong at each other; hands were on knees and thighs, but not much more yet. There were a couple of platters of cupcakes out, and trays of flutes of sparkling fruit juices. And there was the name tag table. Holtzmann picked up a SHE/HER tag and picked out a glittery blue pen with which to write HOLTZ, and then outlined it with a neon-green highlighter. She folded her jacket over her arm and smacked the name tag haphazardly across her lapel.

The rules were displayed in a sparkling frame, lit by a tiny spotlight. It looked like Lena hadn't really changed her formula, but Holtzmann approved of that, at least. It was a good formula. Sugar, women and some nonbinary people, a little education and entertainment to give structure, _very_ clear rules about consent, and places to nope out whenever necessary. Like the kitchen, which was a designated flirt-and-fondle-free zone.

_This kitchen might have better equipment than my lab._ So fancy—and probably one reason Lena had chosen to hold the event at this particular residence. Two ovens, lots of marble counter space, the works.
Holtzmann had brought boxes of mochi—peanut butter ones and chocolate ones with whole strawberries inside. She'd almost forgotten about the sweets tithe entirely, but then her cab had gone past a Japanese confectionery just as the "OPEN" sign had switched off. But she'd been able to cajole the two boxes out of the amused owner after all. She added them to a stack of other plastic containers and pink boxes. Someone who enjoyed doing that kind of thing would arrange them on a pretty tiered cake stand and write the ingredients on chalk signs. So, that part of her responsibility was done. She put her jacket and her backpack, with its supplies that she didn't know whether she'd find herself wanting to use, under a counter and looked around.

"Hey," said a small, round woman somewhere around Holtzmann's age. She was staffing the Kitchen-Aid and she had a ponytail dyed the colors of the bi pride flag. She was cute. "You looking for a kitchen job?"

"You bet."

"How do you feel about scooping dough and putting it on this cookie sheet?"

"Cool." Holtzmann got to work. She liked the feel of the little scoop when she depressed the level on the handle, and the slightly gritty resistance of the classic chocolate chip cookie dough. She dropped a scoop into her mouth and just winked when she got a look from the serious-looking, angular older person plating the cookies. If salmonella was going to get her, she figured, it would have happened a long, long time ago. "I dig the frilly apron and leather blazer/pants thing you got going on there," she said to them.

"No flirting in the kitchen," they said, but they half-smiled.

"That wasn't flirting; that was just breathing," Holtzmann said. She stayed with the scoop until the repetition started to make her mind wander away from the various entertaining things she could see happening in the other rooms. What was she here for tonight? A little consensual voyeurism? Random makeouts? Brainless banging? Something…different? What was the real reason why—

Holtzmann interrupted her own train of thought. "I need a task change— anyone want to take over? Anybody want anything?"

"Yeah," said the one with the ponytail. "It's kinda warm in here. Can you go over to the bartender and just get us a tray of whatever?"

A change of scenery. Even better! Holtzmann flashed a salute and headed for the bar between the living room and the dining room. Lena usually hired someone to make mocktails and other non-alcoholic drinks; making out was thirsty work.

The bartender was wearing a tight black shirt with a purple star logo across her chest. She had light brown skin, with freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her hair reminded Holtzmann of—well, of Joey's. It was cut short but with a sweep of royal blue bangs, and she wore sharp, glittery black eyeliner and matte plum-colored lipstick. Holtzmann looked at her nametag. "Shayne…have we met? I think I would've remembered ya though."

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"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Shayne, the name that launched a dozen lesbian TV characters. Well, it's my real name, dammit, and I had it first."

"Huh. OK, I guess that's why."

She nodded at Holtzmann. "What can I get you?"

"An assorted tray, for our hardworking pâtissiers." Holtzmann switched to her best French accent
halfway through. It was terrible, she knew, but at least it was really thick.

"Oh, oui, tout de suite," the bartender replied. "That's all the French I know, so..." She winked and started mixing drinks. "I got an espresso machine here too if you want some of that."

"Hit me," said Holtzmann. Soon the delicious scent of espresso—if only it tasted like it smelled, thought Holtzmann—reached her nose. Holtzmann leaned on the counter to wait for it, but then her eyebrows furrowed. The scent was familiar. Much more familiar than Shayne's name. Holtzmann drummed her fingers on the bar for a moment. In front of her, there was a spread of business cards representing various attendees' enterprises. Holtzmann recognized one right away: an antlered deer head rising out of the steam from a cup of coffee. Oddcoffee!

"Waaaaait a minute," Holtzmann said. She pushed her glasses up her nose and then banged her fist on the counter. "Gaby's new boss! The one she likes! Abby told me about you."

"Now that's nice to hear. Yeah, I'm the new owner." Shayne squinted at Holtzmann. Her gaze traveled from Holtzmann's bi-colored shoes to the topmost curl of her hair, and then rested on her name tag. "Ah, I should have known. You're the legendary Holtz, one half of the legendary Holtzmann and Patty superhero duo."

"Legend in the flesh, at your service. But Patty did a lot of the work, the legal stuff, you know, for..." Holtzmann trailed off. Crap! How much had Gaby told Shayne?

"Don't worry, I heard the full story. I like to get to know my employees, when they don't mind. So other than coffee, what're you looking for tonight? I moved out here from Seattle a few months ago, but being at Oddcoffee has got me pretty hooked into to the community already. So I could make some recs. I mean...I'd rec myself, but I feel like that might get awkward." She floated several marshmallows with heart cut-outs on top of Holtzmann's drink and pushed it toward her.

"...Yeah, too bad. I'm looking for...uh. Hmm." Holtzmann took a cautious sip of the drink. It wasn't too hot, just perfectly drinkable, so she took a bigger gulp. Just as she started to answer Shayne, Holtzmann realized she had a foam moustache. She licked it off. "I just don't want to think, I want..." Her eyes slid to the living room, where the educational portion of the evening was underway. At that moment, a butch woman with enviable biceps was demonstrating a series of knots on a blushing, even more well-muscled volunteer. It was hotter than the plasma you could make with the Z machine at Sandia, and that was over two billion kelvins.

Shayne followed her gaze. "Ah. A domme?" Holtzmann shrugged noncommittally. Shayne gave a cocktail shaker a good workout, looking thoughtful. "First time? I know a couple ladies who'd love to get their hands on you, but I think we need someone with a little more...let's say, sensitivity." She gestured toward the back of the dining room with a cherry. "You see the Lana Kane lookalike over there, the one just watching? That's Cerise. When you're done in the kitchen, let me know and I'll make the introductions."

Holtzmann took a look at Cerise, who didn't seem to notice their attention from across the room. If Lena's outfit had been all lace and filigree, Cerise's was the opposite, almost defiantly spartan. She wore a figure-hugging, long-sleeved crop top, a pair of simply-cut boyshorts, utterly opaque thigh-high stockings, and a pair of tall boots with the slightest of wedges. Everything was black except for a deep blue silk scarf wrapped around her neck and trailing over her breasts. Her natural hair was arranged in a kind of French twist, and her posture was perfect. In fact, she seemed like not just Lena's sartorial opposite, but about as unlike Holtzmann herself as it was possible to get.

"Roger that," said Holtzmann. She picked up the fully loaded tray and hoped she didn't trip over anything, then strolled back into the kitchen.
When her time of exile was up—and before anyone realized that she'd used up all of the pearl dragees and rainbow star sprinkles on just one single tray of cookies—Holtzmann headed out of the kitchen. The atmosphere had gotten headier; the air was warmer than it was before. Lena was sitting on the edge of a sofa with her arms loosely wrapped around another woman's waist. Holtzmann caught her eye and gave her an elaborate bow. Lena smiled back, wryly, and made shooing motions at her.

Holtzmann headed for the bar. Maybe she had been a tiny bit tipsy earlier. She felt a little more clearheaded now, but there was still way too much churning in her brain-meats. The nice thing was that nothing in the condo felt particularly real, or even part of Holtzmann's normal dimension. And so maybe she was on the right track to turn everything off for a bit, be someone that she wasn't usually.

Holtzmann had met a stone butch in college who'd tried to convince Holtzmann that she was one as well. The other woman was intelligent and interesting, but she was completely wrong in this case. Holtzmann just really liked making other women respond to her. Figuring out how to get them to happily lose themselves was a different, delightfully problem set every time. On the handful of occasions when she'd been, however briefly, with someone who understood her well enough, she'd enjoyed being on the receiving end well enough—as long as there wasn't any pressure to achieve any particular goal.

It was so complicated, though, and when things went wrong, or some well-meaning partner was dead-set on making sure she got off...well, no data was lost, nothing was eaten by acid, nothing imploded, no nuclear chain reactions were set off, but it felt worse. It just usually wasn't worth it, and so, that part of her was usually switched off. No pun intended, she told herself.

Ah—it wasn't just Shayne at the bar. Cerise was there too. God, she just glowed with charisma. A few women had told Holtzmann that she herself was charismatic, over the years, and Holtzmann had never, ever known what to make of it. Surely they hadn't regarded her the same way she couldn't help but regard Cerise.

Holtzmann ran her fingers through her hair as she approached the bar. She looked up at Cerise. The woman was impossibly tall. "My cat would climb you like a Christmas tree," Holtzmann observed with a smirk. Calling Glitch "her" cat was probably an overstatement, but it wasn't like Cerise was going to meet him.

"You could climb me like a kitten up a Christmas tree." Cerise gave Holtzmann a leisurely grin.

"Nice accent," Holtzmann said. "Where'd you get it?" Patty probably could have figured out what part of the British Isles it was from, or for that matter, so could—stop it, brain.

"Well, you see, they were handing them out for free when I was born." Holtzmann thought, but the fact was that she really wouldn't.

"Um...well, so this is Holtzmann," Shayne said. "And this is Cerise. Just Cerise, right?"

"Yeah, I don't do the archaic titles thing." Cerise held out her hand and Holtzmann shook it. Her palm was cool and smooth, though Holtzmann didn't feel any sparks. Good, she told herself. Sparks were not what she was there for. "Just so you know, I don't do humiliation—"

I'd like to see you try, Holtzmann thought, but the fact was that she really wouldn't.

"—so other than that, would you like to negotiate, look over a list, or go omakase?"

She hadn't expected a pop quiz. What was she supposed to say? "I don't want to make any choices at all," Holtzmann blurted. She didn't think she'd ever uttered such a phrase before.
Cerise looked at her and then at Shayne. Shayne nodded. "I figured that since you do the classics so well, and you have better people-reading skills than anyone I know, you'd be perfect."

"Hmm. If you're sure," said Cerise, turning to Holtzmann.

Holtzmann, feeling small and unarmed, gave her cockiest grin. "Bring it on."

Joey was definitely over the whole Holt—uh, Ghostbusters debacle. And she was proving it to her well-meaning, but currently a little bit meddling, roommates by joining them at the soft open for some new late-night hipster Hong Kong-style cafe near a couple of the better clubs in the area. Nikkoli and Viv had a gig to cover the event, which was newsworthy because the cafe was owned by a recently out former HK pop star and his longtime boyfriend.

Ella and Joey were just along for the ride, but Joey had to admit that the food was fantastic. Plus, Ella had pointed out, there was the additional seasoning of the fact that the cafe wasn’t owned by the usual white people Colombusing all over, and then profiting from, other cultures’ centuries of inventiveness. Like sesame oil, it made everything taste better.

Maybe, Joey thought, she could do some interviews of similar successful businesses in North America and western Europe. Was there a book in it? Probably not, but it was an idea to tuck away.

Joey smiled at Ella—there was no point in chatting; it was too lively—and wrapped her hands around a delicate blue-and-white cup of milk tea. She watched the other guests, who seemed to be having a good time. The Ghostbusters would probably like this place, she thought. Patty would thrive on the energy of the crowd, and probably have some culinary history to bust out. Abby would see "flight of wontons" on the menu and fall in love with the place immediately. Erin would probably be fascinated by the tea options. And…I wonder what Holtzmann's doing right now. Holed up somewhere, tinkering with something strange and dangerous, Joey figured.

"Dammit!" Joey swore under her breath. She gulped down the rest of the tea too quickly and burnt her tongue.

Holtzmann was alone in one of the private bedrooms with Cerise. The lights were low; in the background, a woman’s voice alternately purred and growled through a song. Cerise sat on the edge of the bed, crossed one leg over another and cast a look over Holtzmann. Holtzmann froze for a second under the other woman's gaze. She’d heard of people describing eyeliner as "winged," but Cerise's was so sharp, it was more like a knife edge. Holtzmann was agnostic about makeup on other women—it was their business, as far as she was concerned. But it did add to Cerise's general air, a sort of Janus coin of invitation and intimidation. Maybe Cerise was the one who could send her into the same drifting, thought-free space as the women she'd seen in those videos.

"I think I'm going to leave your clothes right where they are. Waistcoat and all," Cerise said thoughtfully. Holtzmann wasn't sure if she felt disappointed or relieved, and that, itself, was intimidating. "For now, that is. I have other ways of getting through armor. Right then. We'll be using physical safewords. And I'll be checking in with you, too. One finger or one tap of your foot is a red. I'll stop immediately. Two fingers, two taps, I'll slow down or ease up. Three, green light, all's well, carry on. Got it?"

"Easy as ichi, ni, san," Holtzmann said. She leaned against the door as nonchalantly as possible.
"Show me."

What, was Holtzmann in kindergarten? She ran through the simple gestures and their significance. "Not to blow my own horn, if you know what I mean, but I'm a certified scientific genius. And I can count to three. It was required for my doctorate, you know. Soooo, why did I have to do that? And why not a safeword? Linguistics is not my field, but is that not where the name, y'know, comes from?"

"If you need it, I want it to happen fast, and everything's faster if you've practiced it before. And why nonverbal? Because, my sweet girl, you like to try to take control of a situation—or detach yourself, perhaps—by talking. Wisecracking. And we'll have none of that." Before Holtzmann could ask what Cerise meant, she rose and pointed at a sturdy, old-fashioned wooden chair. "Sit."

Holtzmann had signed up for this, hadn't she? She went to the chair and started to give it a good Rikering, but Cerise made the tiniest shake of her head. Holtzmann bit her lip and attempted to sit in the chair more or less normally. Cerise smoothly pulled off the long blue silk scarf that had been wrapped around her neck. "You're going to look so good in this color," she purred, while tying a series of knots. A split second later, she had combined those knots into one larger one. She rubbed her thumb across Holtzmann's lower lip, and Holtzmann parted her lips without thinking about it. Cerise slid her thumb into Holtzmann's mouth.

Holtzmann felt the texture of Cerise's skin against her tongue. She tasted, faintly, of strawberry. And then, before Holtzmann had realized what was happening, Cerise slid out her thumb and slipped in the large knot. It pressed down against her tongue and pulled her jaw open. She felt the silk dampening in her mouth, and then the ends of the scarf, smooth and cold, against her cheeks. Cerise tied the scarf firmly just under the small bun at the back of Holtzmann's head.

This was all promisingly distracting. There were so many different sensations happening already, plenty of things to occupy her attention. Cerise came back around to stand front of Holtzmann, who had to crane her head back to make eye contact.

"Check in," she said, and Holtzmann gave her the green light. Cerise smiled down at her knowingly. "You're wet already, aren't you?"

She was, although she hadn't noticed till Cerise said so. What about it? she tried to say with her eyes, but she could feel an uncharacteristic blush heating her cheeks.

Cerise's smile widened. She reached down to caress Holtzmann's face, giving Holtzmann an excellent view of the curves of her chest under the restraining black fabric. She leaned in toward Holtzmann's ear, pressing a breast against her shoulder. Apparently she had noticed Holtzmann's line of sight.

"I would so, so love to blindfold you," she whispered. "I would like to blindfold you, and plug your ears, and make you forget about every form of sensory input except this one." She drew a finger down Holtzmann's jaw, and then down across her left breast. She gave Holtzmann's nipple a quick, sharp pinch, and Holtzmann bit into the gag. "In fact, I'd dare say that's what you need. But baby steps, sweetie."

She stood back up and Holtzmann made herself focus. Cerise had never stopped smiling. Holtzmann had never seen a smile that conveyed such authority, despite Cerise's soft-looking lips. "Open your legs," Cerise said, and Holtzmann, who had never responded well to taking orders, did. She wanted to analyze how she was feeling, and how all of this was working, and … but it was hard to think. Which was the whole point, she reminded herself.
"Can I trust you to keep those legs open and still? I can tell you're a squirmer."

Holtzmann was not a *squirmer*, she was just energetic, dammit. But even as she started to narrow her eyes at Cerise, she realized that no, she was a squirmer, and they both knew it. Could she keep still? She didn't know, but she'd try, and it would be a better thing to put her brain to than again trying to figure out how she'd been so wrong, how they'd all been so wrong—*fuck*. Holtzmann nodded.

"Lovely. But I don't think I quite trust those hands. Bring them back behind you, won't you?"

Holtzmann hesitated for a second, then put her hands behind her. She was still wearing layers of clothing, but she felt like she was naked in a snowstorm, or maybe the middle of the Sahara. Behind her again, Cerise pushed up Holtzmann's sleeves. It was a weirdly intimate gesture, and Holtzmann suppressed a shiver. "Check in," Cerise said immediately, and Holtzmann guessed she hadn't suppressed it well enough. Green light, again. Cerise said, "Good." Holtzmann felt the backs of Cerise's fingers stroking the mostly smooth and soft skin of her inner forearms and wrists.

Holtzmann's pulse sped up. She was *so* aroused, and barely anything had happened yet. Cerise took her hands away from Holtzmann's, and Holtzmann just held them there, wondering. Cerise reached around and ran her fingers up Holtzmann's thighs. Holtzmann felt this so clearly that it was difficult to remember that she was still wearing her slacks. There was a pause, and a soft sound, and the scent of leather. Then, the actual sensation of leather, cool but quickly warming, firm against Holtzmann's right wrist. She heard and felt the working of the cold metal buckles. "Your wrists are so tiny," Cerise murmured. "I'm afraid that these don't close any smaller. I hope that's tight enough for your satisfaction." She laid her fingers against Holtzmann's, touching the hand that was now trapped.

"You're not reacting," Cerise said. Holtzmann closed her eyes, glad that Cerise couldn't see her face. She wasn't reacting because she didn't have any idea whatsoever of how to react. But she wanted this to work so, so badly. Holtzmann flashed a firm three fingers against Cerise's. "All right then."

Cerise removed her hands and caught up Holtzmann's other wrist, working the straps faster this time. It was a unique sensation. So basic, but so layered. She could feel the pressure against her wrists with exquisite clarity. Her pulse thudded in her ears. It felt—how did it feel? Holtzmann squeezed her eyes closed even tighter. She could almost taste the floating darkness, a plane of purely physical existence. It was so, *so* close. She slumped forward, dropping her head. She felt the tension from her arms, tugged by the weight of her body—an alien force caught against the immovable barrier of the chair. She felt the openness of her thighs. The filling of her mouth.

It could almost add up to freedom.

"*Check in.*" Had Cerise had to repeat herself? Holtzmann forced three fingers to unfold. She hadn't even realized her hands were clenched.

It could *almost* add up to freedom.

But not quite. The darkness behind her eyelids shattered, and she was pierced by fear. It wasn't an old fear dredged up again; she had never been in a position like this, for good or ill, but it was sharp. She never gave control to anyone freely anymore; she had erred by letting Joey command a hidden part of her heart. And now she had given someone power over her body. But Holtzmann was no quitter. She wasn't giving up on it. It would—

"I'm sorry," said Cerise. She untied the gag, gently pulled it out, and then drew Holtzmann's hands into her lap. It wasn't until then that Holtzmann realized that Cerise had undone the cuffs.

Holtzmann opened her eyes to see Cerise kneeling next to her. She handed Holtzmann a glass of
water. Holtzmann took a sip—she had to, her mouth felt strange—and then protested, "I was OK. I gave you the green light!"

Cerise shook her head. "Your fingers were shaking. I won't generally override an experienced play partner, but you were not OK." She stood up. "I'm afraid this isn't quite what you need. I'm very sorry. But keep in mind that it's not your fault." She stood, opened the door to a bathroom, and switched on the light in it. "Take as much time as you need to get yourself grounded. And then maybe go home, find someone you trust, and tell them you need a hug and no questions." She smiled gently, and a little sadly, at Holtzmann, and then let herself out.

Holtzmann felt her shoulders draw together. She put her head in her hands. "I thought you said you didn't do humiliation," she mumbled. She took a deep breath and went to wash off her face.

A few minutes later, Holtzmann strolled confidently out of the bedroom. She had no idea what to do next, but nobody else needed to know that. She went in the direction of where she'd left her jacket and backpack.

Cerise was lingering near the entry to the kitchen. Holtzmann nearly pivoted and walked the other way, but Cerise had already seen her. Holtzmann threw her shoulders back and didn't miss a stride.

"Hullo again." Cerise handed Holtzmann a card, and added, quietly, "For the record, I'm happy to try again someday, but you know, you can also get to that place—or something like it—by being in my position. You can still forget about everything and everyone except your partner. And you would, I think, appreciate the engineering of a scene, both psychological and mechanical. But you mustn't do it until you've righted your ship a bit. Now, if you'd ever like to talk, once you have got things figured out, send me a message." She passed Holtzmann a cookie. "I'd be happy to help guide you.”

Holtzmann was torn between intrigue and unidentifiable turmoil. She did not want a goddamn cookie, but she took it, and the card, and didn't say anything. A few moments ago, with the gag in, she hadn't been physically able to say anything, but now…now she still couldn't.

"Last call for sharing a car to Babylon," someone shouted from a cluster of women near the front door. Holtzmann had overheard people talking about it before: Babylon, a weekly event with a rep for being a hook-up zone, held in a club that was maybe the last remnant of an old queer party zone in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. A relic of another era. She squinted. She didn't know anyone in the group. Even though she usually felt the opposite, right at that moment, a group of strangers was inherently far more appealing than staying where she was.

Holtzmann caught up her backpack and her jacket from under the counter. "One more!" She dashed toward the door without looking back.

"OK, the hipster quotient is way too high now!" Ella practically had to scream into Joey's ear. "Nik and Viv have to stay, but we don't!" Joey nodded assent and they escaped the press of people into the cool night air.

"That's much better. I mean, I could eat another dozen of those dan tat—I'd say they're just like my mom makes 'em, but Mom buys hers like everyone else does. I grabbed one for the road, though!" Ella ate her egg tart in two bits as they went past the line of people still waiting to get in. "Want to go to a club for a couple hours? There's one a couple blocks away that's pretty mellow, and a friend just texted me that she's there."

Eh. "Why not," Joey said.
Joey followed Ella up the sidewalk, which was busy with people heading in several different directions. Most of the block seemed to have trendy new establishments like the cafe, but the next building along their path was a sketchy-looking dance club. A faded plastic banner, reading "Babylon" and covered in lipstick kiss clip art, flapped above an awning.

Joey stopped short. A car had just stopped at the curb ahead of them. A knot of women tumbled out. At the center of the tangle was a familiar-looking, petite blond woman. She had her right hand down the jeans of one woman, and her other hand up the back of another woman's shirt. They didn't look drunk, exactly, but they were clearly out for a wild time.

It might not be Holtzmann. Joey had "seen" Holtzmann a dozen times since she'd been kicked out of the firehouse, and it was never ever her. But…nobody else dressed like that, or carried that kind of backpack, or swaggered like that. There was a little something strange and unfamiliar about the body language, but still.

The knot broke apart. One woman headed for the door into the club; a pair went away from Joey, up the sidewalk toward another club with a long line, and one headed toward the cafe. The remaining woman was backlit in the headlights of another car arriving. She was silhouetted in sharp profile, looking up at the sign on the wall above the door, for just a moment. Joey's heart skipped a beat. It was absolutely Holtzmann.

Holtzmann lifted her chin and plunged into the club.

Ella paused and looked back at Joey. "Oh my god, don't worry, we're not going in there. I am way too old for that kind of shit."

Joey still couldn't quite move. Ella looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "I mean, you can if you want. I'm not gonna judge. And hey, maybe it'd be good for you. For real, I don't mind going to 2064 by myself. My other friend is waiting for me anyway. You want to stay here?"

Joey didn't know what to do and didn't trust herself to say something coherent, so she just nodded and mumbled "OK, see you." Ella gave her a wave and headed further up the street.

The woman at the door didn't even wait for Joey to open her wallet before waving her in. Not that Joey looked 19, but still—it was that kind of place, apparently. She pushed her wallet back into her jeans and went in.

Holtzmann stepped out of the questionable bathroom, where she'd made a quick adjustment for maximum efficiency. She hit the club floor with a stalking stride. People could probably tell by looking at her that she wasn't there to dance. Most of the women who made eye contact with her dropped their gazes quickly. But there was one who kept glancing back at her. In her heels, she was Holtzmann's height, and she had red hair and wide eyes. She was wearing a style of skirt that Erin probably would have had a specific name for, and an off-the-shoulder shirt that showed a peek at criss-crossed straps underneath. Not that Holtzmann really cared what she was wearing; it could have been a red panda kigurumi for all that it mattered.

Holtzmann strutted over to where the woman stood between the bar and the stairs. "How badly do you want to get fucked right now?" she said. The other woman tentatively reached toward her, as though to put her arm around Holtzmann's waist or something. Holtzmann stepped in close and grabbed her chin. "I'm calling the shots. So tell me, 100% or not?"

"One—one hundred percent," the woman said. She raked her teeth across her lower lip and looked at Holtzmann. "More than that."
Holtzmann released her and didn't even argue about the math. "Take off your shoes. Then give me something to call you. I don't care if it's your name." She felt as though she was channeling someone else. Not Cerise, no. Maybe someone from one of those videos she hadn't been able to stop watching, ever since that one gif the night before she met—*shut the fucking fuck up.*

The woman stepped out of her shoes and looked around for something to do with them. Holtzmann grabbed them and tossed them into a corner under the stairs. Now their gazes were even.

"Oh my *god,*" the woman said. Her eyes brightened. "C—call me Alice…please.*

Holtzmann grabbed her chin again and pulled Alice in for a hard kiss. Alice's eyelids fluttered. "Harder…please?" she whispered, so Holtzmann wrapped one hand around the back of Alice's head and crushed their mouths together.

Holtzmann pulled back abruptly. "Take your shirt off," she said. She knew it wasn't going to work; she was just testing the parameters, looking for the limits.

"Right here?" Alice glanced around. A few people were dancing in the general area; not right next to them, but close enough to see them even in the spasmodically-lit darkness.

"Yes. If you want to keep going," Holtzmann said, and crossed her arms. It was like being on auto-pilot, she thought, and it was great.

Alice hesitated for a second, then yanked off her shirt, revealing a bralette made of straps and sheer mesh. A couple of women nearby laughed and applauded. Holtzmann couldn't believe it had worked. She grinned lopsidedly.

Joey wasn't sure what she was seeing. Well, she *was;* what had just happened was unmistakable, but. Still. It didn't seem like the woman with Holtzmann was her girlfriend. Quite the contrary, in fact. She guessed they were strangers. Was that worse or better? Joey had seen Holtzmann grab the other woman and kiss her in a way that made Joey's pulse quicken. And then, clearly in response to a command, the woman had pulled off her shirt, right there in the middle of the club.

Yes, it was dark, and the tacky UV lights along the walls and the colored lights raking the room mostly made things harder rather than easier to see. But the two women had been splashed in blue-green light, and it had been easy enough to see the pair—even if the light had made them look more like ghosts than humans. Joey shivered and turned away. She was both aroused, and distressed, an unfamiliar sensation.

And she didn't want to see what happened next. It was time to leave.

Holtzmann took a look at Alice and grinned. She reached out and pulled the woman to her by the nipples, causing Alice to squeak. Then it was Holtzmann's turn to be surprised. Alice had slipped a hand down to Holtzmann's crotch, managing to go right for the equipment Holtzmann had strapped to herself in the restroom.

"I told you, I'm in charge. You gotta ask for permission." Just like Joey hadn't, when—and then, before she knew what she was doing, Holtzmann had slapped Alice. Not hard. Still, though. For a moment, she wavered inside. She wasn't a person who hurt other people on purpose. Was she?

"You can do it again if you want," said Alice, looking right at Holtzmann with something like adoration.
Holtzmann reached around and slapped Alice's ass instead. "Better?"

"You can…you can go harder," Alice said. "If you want. Please."

"Oh yeah?" Holtzmann grabbed Alice's wrists and pulled her to a stool at the end of the bar, then jerked her over it. Holtzmann had never seriously spanked anybody, only playfully. She left the skirt where it was and brought her hand down on Alice's ass. Alice yelped. Holtzmann's hand stung a little, but it was strangely satisfying. She could feel the curve between Alice's legs, and that was where she aimed the edge of her hand when she brought it down again. The bartender glanced over at them, and then, with no change of expression, moved to the far end of the bar.

"Don't stop," said Alice. Holtzmann thought maybe she could make Alice regret saying that. She put the muscles in her arms to good use, rapidly, one strike after another. Alice dissolved into moaning.

Holtzmann was going to get bored with it, she could tell. Sooner or later, her mind was going to wander. And she still felt like a loaded weapon with nowhere to aim. She pulled Alice's head up by the hair. "Is that the kind of thing you want?"

"Y-yeah." Alice's face was bright red. "Oh yes. Yes, I—"

Holtzmann pushed the skirt up a little higher—it didn't have to go far—and stroked a finger roughly across where Alice's crotch was exposed. "Shut up," she hissed. What the hell, Holtzmann. Where was any of this coming from? It didn't matter. She was detaching from the place she was in; she was going somewhere icy and hot and bright and dark and empty. A safe place to explode into nothing. That was where she wanted to be. She wrenched Alice up and and pushed her over to the space under the stairs, which was partly filled with some heavy boxes of a useful size and height. The lights couldn't reach this nook, and Holtzmann thought they'd probably be hard to see. Though even if someone saw them—even if someone took a fucking photo—it wouldn't be too hard to claim it wasn't her. Unlike the undeniable authenticity of the one in the paper.

Holtzmann was sick of having a one-track mind that was on the wrong track. She turned her attention back to Alice. "You really want it, huh?" Holtzmann smirked and grabbed Alice's breasts, hard. They were pleasing to grip, though she kind of preferred the feel of softer ones, like…dammit. No. She was going to stay in that other place, where she didn't have to think and couldn't be hurt.

She squeezed Alice's breasts with all the muscles in her fingers, and Alice arched toward her. Holtzmann grabbed her hair—close to the scalp, so it couldn't really have hurt, but Alice still gave a soft cry as Holtzmann bent her back and kissed her again, harshly, pushing her tongue into Alice's wet, soft mouth. Holtzmann kept Alice's head pulled back and nipped her right under the jaw. She wanted to bite down on Alice's neck and suck until she screamed, and she almost did, but she caught herself at the last moment. "I wanna leave a mark," she growled.

"Please," Alice choked out. Holtzmann licked the length of her neck and then, just as she felt Alice's body ever-so-slightly relax, she put her teeth on Alice's throat. Just hard enough that Alice could feel it. Really feel it, given the noise she made and how her body tense up again. Holtzmann sucked against the soft skin of her throat relentlessly, imagining a blossom of purple and red under her mouth. Alice was reduced to making completely incoherent sounds.

"Please," Alice choked out. Holtzmann licked the length of her neck and then, just as she felt Alice's body ever-so-slightly relax, she put her teeth on Alice's throat. Just hard enough that Alice could feel it. Really feel it, given the noise she made and how her body tense up again. Holtzmann sucked against the soft skin of her throat relentlessly, imagining a blossom of purple and red under her mouth. Alice was reduced to making completely incoherent sounds.

Holtzmann stood and, since she'd had her knees bent and Alice bent back against her arm, Alice dropped to the floor. It was just a few inches, but she gave a surprised whimper and then looked up at Holtzmann again. Holtzmann could barely make out the other woman's face, and yet her enraptured expression was clear. By now Holtzmann felt almost as though she were watching herself, or watching someone else operating her body. She unzipped her trousers and maneuvered out the strap-on that had been held back by her underwear.
"Suck my cock," she said. This particular thing she had done before. It had been a silly joke the first time, but there was something about it that was unspeakably hot. Alice leaned forward and opened her mouth. Holtzmann grabbed her head and pushed the hard silicone to the back of her throat. "No, don't look at the floor," she ordered. She wanted to be able to see the strain and the need in Alice's eyes. She used one hand to push and tug Alice's head in and out, till she was satisfied that Alice's lips had to be a little bruised.

Holtzmann's entire crotch was throbbing. She let the other woman go. "Get up," she said, and grinned as Alice scrambled to her feet. She put her hands on Alice's waist. "Jump up a bit," she ordered, and Alice did.

Alice was perched on the box at the perfect height. Holtzmann yanked Alice's underwear down to dangle around one ankle. Skirts: so convenient on other women. She hadn't appreciated them this much since her freshman year. She stepped closer to Alice till their faces were almost touching, and looked right into Alice's eyes as she moved her hand up Alice's thigh. She paused when she got to the other woman's vulva and slid her other hand up Alice's throat, gripping it ever so lightly. Alice's head dropped back, her eyes half-lidded. "Please..." Alice said again. It seemed to be her favorite word. Holtzmann could feel Alice's wetness already, even with her fingers still on the outside. She thrust a finger into Alice.

Alice rocked her hips forward. Holtzmann pulled her finger out and put it against Alice's lips. "That's later. None of that for now." Alice nodded and Holtzmann pushed her finger into Alice's mouth. Alice's tongue responded immediately, flicking against her finger and then licking the length of it. Holtzmann's lids almost dropped as well; the slick, soft, rough texture of a woman's tongue was a sensation that she had desperately missed. She dropped her hand from Alice's throat and pushed two fingers in, nodding approvingly when Alice didn't move this time. She explored Alice's mouth with her fingers—so much different tactile input there—and rocked her fingers in and out until Alice was starting to pant.

Holtzmann withdrew both of her hands. "Now are you ready to get fucked?" She grinned, letting her teeth show.

"Oh my god, please, please!"

Holtzmann drew Alice to the edge of the box and wrapped the other woman's legs around her waist. She pulled Alice off of the box and onto the dildo, inserting the length of it in one fast move.

"Gah! Ah..." Alice took a shuddering breath and clenched her fingers against Holtzmann's back.

"Now you can move," Holtzmann whispered into her ear, and bit her earlobe sharply.

She went slowly for just a moment, Holtzmann thrusting up and Alice rocking into her. Then Holtzmann spun around and pushed her back up against the wall, legs still wrapped tightly around Holtzmann's waist. She needed Newton's third law on her side; she wanted to slam into Alice against a hard surface that would push back against them. She leaned into it, putting all of her muscles behind the thrusts. Alice pushed back against her with every upward movement. Her eyes had practically rolled back into her head already and she was gasping rhythmically. Holtzmann wondered if she was one of those women who could come just from vaginal stimulation.

"More, more—harder—please," gasped Alice. Holtzmann rammed her into the wall several times with all the strength that she could muster. She thought that Alice was getting close. Time for a change of strategy. She backed away from the wall and carried Alice back over to the boxes in a couple of swift steps, then pushed her off the strap-on. Alice let out another whimper.
Holtzmann grabbed Alice's shoulder and rolled her over on the box, onto her stomach with her legs hanging down. Her hair was spilled wildly across her shoulders, and her ass was thoroughly exposed. Holtzmann spanked her three times, hard, and then lifted her up and slid the dildo into Alice's vagina again. Alice raised her head, and Holtzmann pushed her back down. She took her hand off of Alice's neck to pull her hands to her back and pin her wrists. Holtzmann reached her other hand around to Alice's clitoris, using her forearm to keep her pressed back onto the strap-on.

"Yes—yes—oh please, can you…" Alice began, muffled.

"Oh, I aim to finish what I began." Holtzmann began thrusting away against the box. It was easier to really get into it from this angle. How hard could she go? She didn't hold back; she took out everything on Alice's body, and while sweat streaked down Holtzmann's face, Alice only begged for more. She started to make hard circles over Alice's clitoris.

Alice groaned and pushed back against Holtzmann. Holtzmann, somehow, couldn't hear the pounding music, but she could hear Alice's cries getting louder and louder. She tried to arch back, but Holtzmann wouldn't let her. Without dropping the rhythm, Holtzmann curled her palm harder against Alice's mons, and then Alice was shouting and quivering and coming.

Holtzmann was as close as she'd ever been to coming from wearing a strap-on, but she knew it wouldn't happen. And that wasn't something she wanted to share with Alice, or whoever she was, anyway. She withdrew quickly and roughly, wiped the strap-off with a handkerchief, stowed it, retrieved her bag, and exited the club all in a blurry rush, leaving Alice panting and half-naked under the stairs. She hailed a cab and spoke as little as possible, hoping that she could carry the cloud of welcome nothingness around her all the way home.

Joey had taken herself home, had a short and very conflicted session with her little necklace vibrator, and gone to bed. As she drifted in and out of an uneasy half-sleep, she kept picturing Holtzmann's rough dominance over the girl in the club. Was that a thing Holtzmann did in public on the regular? Sure, they'd had their own frenzied makeout that one time, but that had been high spirits. Drunk on victory—a totally different vibe. The scene at the club just didn't seem like her.

But then again, Joey had thought more than once that a mere flash of Holtzmann's dimple could make girls fall at her feet. Joey would, in fact, be delighted to fall at Holtzmann's feet, even though it seemed like the sort of thing that'd just make Holtzmann laugh and crinkle her nose.

For a moment Joey wondered if Holtzmann was doing OK—emotionally speaking, or maybe psychologically. What if she'd been hit particularly hard by what the Ghostbusters had perceived as Joey's selling them out? No, not likely; Joey was flattering herself. There could be something far more serious going on. Had they gotten in genuine trouble with the mayor's office? Had something happened to one of the other Ghostbusters?

Joey fell into a restless sleep and dreamt of writhing neon ghosts.

Holtzmann stared at her shadowed ceiling. She had used a vibrator last night and had a set of explosive orgasms, taken her meds, arranged her pillows, and fallen asleep. Slept pretty well. And then even woke up on time. But whatever magic she had briefly accessed the previous night was gone, and the things that scraped against the blackboard of her mind were back. Louder now, and worse.

She burrowed deeper into her blankets, not ready to leave their safety. The memory of last night was like a badly wired photon grenade found wobbling on her desk. She needed to do something with
it…but that would involve touching it.

_You fucked up_, she told herself, and scrunched her eyes closed for a moment. _Yeah, Joey fucked up, but now you fucked up. No big surprise, 'cause what you are is a fuck-up._ She thought about how careful Cerise had been with consent and comfort. Probably, "Alice" had gotten exactly what she wanted, and Holtzmann had briefly found the place she was looking for, but...

But she wasn't going to take that road again. There was a point in the testing stage, sometimes, where Holtzmann could suddenly feel the knife-edge of the balance between success and failure. When it was just her or her equipment at stake, it was a rush. Last night had been a different, sharper edge to walk, and it was only luck—not calculations, expertise, or even a hunch—that had kept her from coming down on the wrong side of it. _Stop dicking around with euphemisms_, she told herself, rolling over and tucking her head down. _You were this close to actually hurting someone on purpose._ _There's no fucking excuse._

Holtzmann took a long, unsteady breath.

This was probably the sort of thing people went to therapy for. But it was too complicated. What she needed was just to get back on track. Go fall in love with her lab again. Stick to her little firehouse family. Stay away from the unsettling corners of her brain.

She sighed and pulled a pillow over her face, imagining Cerise looking at her in disappointment and shaking her head. Holtzmann _could_ text her and actually learn something, learn to do something right (if, of course, she even deserved Cerise's help at this point). But there wasn't any point if she wouldn't ever have anyone to…to participate.

Right. She was going to get out of bed, shower, and head to HQ to get to work on languishing projects. And she'd do it with a grin. Her little family knew her better than anyone else did, but the grin had fooled them before.

Many times.

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It hardly felt like morning outside, Joey thought, with fog smeared across everything. And it wasn't helping her wake up or feel less muddled. She dragged herself through the doors of Oddcoffee. It had become sort of a lifeline for her. She knew that if she was going to get ready to move on, it wouldn't help to prolong the process too much, or to keep revisiting things.

But here she was.

The inside was decorated with glittery marigolds, black roses, and calaveras, and La Catrina had been drawn in elaborate chalks on a blackboard near the front counter. And a little skeleton figure, holding a coffee cup and dressed in what had clearly been a Starbucks apron before it had been altered with the Oddcoffee logo, posed next to the front register. Gaby's work, Joey felt sure.

She got her drink—two shots in the dark, they'd called it at her university's coffeehouse, but it was called a depth charge at Oddcoffee—and sat at a small table close to the bar, trying to write. Sort of. When she ordered her third one, Gaby arched an eyebrow. "Oyé, girlfriend, that makes six shots of espresso and three cups of coffee in an hour. I'm cutting you off after this one. Unless you tell me what's up."

Joey got up and leaned on the counter to watch Gaby make the drink. It was quiet in the coffeeshop today, other than the music. Snarly post-punk with female vocals and a dark edge was the choice of
the day, and that was fine with Joey. "I couldn't sleep, that's all. It's...complicated," she said.

Gaby set the cup in front of Joey. "Holtz again? Then it's probably gonna be complicated. Come on, get it off your chest."

"All right, Auntie Gaby, all right."

Gaby swatted at her with a towel and made a "get on with it" gesture.

Joey lowered her voice. "I...honestly, I've been trying to make my peace with things and move on. Maybe literally move. But I saw Holtz last night, by accident—she didn't see me. And I'm all confused again. I don't want to go into detail, but she was in a club—Babylon—with someone, and the way she was acting...it didn't seem like her."

"Uh, what does that mean?"

"I don't want to say too much; I don't think she meant anyone she knew to see. But on the other hand, anyone there could see her. It was honestly kind of exhibitionistic. And...rough."

Gaby's eyebrows shot straight up, and she set down the milk-frothing pitcher that she had been drying. "You sure it was Holtz?"

Joey leaned her chin on her hand with a sigh. "It's Holtzmann, Gaby. She's unmistakable."

The younger woman nodded. "Fair. And yeah, no, I don't want details. But that totally doesn't sound like her. And Babylon, I mean...Shayne has warned me about that place. For real though, I didn't even think Holtz would've known about it."

"She was, uh...with some other people at first," Joey said.

"Huh." Gaby looked at Joey. "You're actually super upset about this, huh?"

"I mean...I don't know. She's an adult, she can do what she wants, right? But I wondered if she was OK. And I wondered if the Ghostbusters were OK. And I wanted—" Joey stopped herself. She didn't need to tell Gaby that she had wanted to be the one with Holtzmann.

Though, judging from the softening expression on Gaby's face, she seemed to have understood anyway. She reached over and squeezed Joey's shoulder. "The Ghostbusters are all right. The mayor yelled at 'em, I hear, but they didn't get shut down or anything. I saw Patty and Abby both yesterday, even. Is Holtz OK? I don't know. There's a lot more going on in there than you might think. I mean, besides the genius. It's not all good stuff."

That was a little hard to reconcile with Holtzmann's general attitude, but at the same time, it wasn't like Joey hadn't picked up on it before.

"Anyway, I still think you guys were good for each other. And this whatever it is going on now is super bad. For both of you. If you want to run, I mean, I'm not gonna judge. Done it myself a couple of times. Once it was even a good idea. But you gotta decide, get yourself out of purgatory. Stay, and figure this thing out, or actually move on. So what're you gonna do?"

Joey took a gulp of the deep, masochistically bitter coffee to stall for time. It felt like the metaphorical slap in the face of the previous night had cleared her head a bit. At first, she'd just felt disoriented. Now, she felt galvanized. It was suddenly utterly clear: she still wanted what she wanted right before everything went sideways.
"I'm gonna fucking figure it out. I mean, I'm a writer. I do research. When I hit a bump in the road, I figure it out. I don't sit around and moan about it." Joey sighed, momentum suddenly lost. "But... ughhh. It's just different with—"

"With people you actually know. I hear ya. All right, what's your first step? You want me to nudge you through this?"

"I wouldn't mind the moral support, but..." Joey gestured at the front door and the register, even though there were no customers waiting at the moment.

"Hang on." Gaby ducked into the back and came out a moment later followed by her boss. "I'm going to take my break early, let the head honcho have a swing at the registers." She went to remove her apron.

"Uh, sorry." Joey said. She'd seen Shayne around the coffeehouse a few times now, but they hadn't really talked.

Shayne glanced across the counter and smiled. "It's no problem," she said. "I only have the vaguest idea of what's going on—and don't tell me, it's not my business—but if it helps two of Gaby's favorite customers, I'm all for it." She moved up to the front counter.

Gaby took a seat at Joey's table and put a plate of pastries on the table. "Pan de muerto. It's still good. Really nice with coffee, too. It's only like my second year celebrating. My—my family wasn't into it. Evangelicals, y'know. Anyway, what's the game plan here?"

Joey nodded and didn't pry. She took a piece of bread. It smelled like orange water and sugar. "All right. Well, start with the evidence, right?" She pulled the still-folded newspaper out of her bag.

"You never actually looked at it, huh."

Joey ran her fingers through her bangs, letting herself be distracted by the rainbow colors of her own hair. "I just couldn't. But I'm done with that." She smoothed the paper out and, with a tiny wince at the headline, inspected the photo.

Gaby leaned over it and looked at it closely. "Man, it's so...spotty."

"It's newsprint, my child. You see, in the olden days of yore—"

"Oh my god, Joey, shut up."

Joey let out a shaky laugh. It was a little strange to have a coffeehouse where the people knew her. She'd certainly cultivated such relationships before, for research purposes. But this one had just grown all by itself. Focus, Joey. "But yes, the resolution of this photo isn't very good." She opened her laptop and dug up the story on the Post's website. The image was small, though, and opening the image by itself didn't provide a full-res version as she'd hoped. And it had no useful metadata. "I wonder if I could get my hands on the original file somehow. That would be even better. Hmmm." Was this something that she could ask her roommates for help on? They'd seen a little more of each other lately. And Viv and Nikkoli both did traditional media coverage sometimes.

She chewed on some sweet bread and texted them both.

*Sorry about flaking last night. Hope it went well for you guys.*

*Do either of you know anyone who works at/for the Post sometimes, who might be willing to do you a slightly sketchy favor?*
"All right, now to wait—" but Nikkoli was typing a reply already.

I sure do. I keep telling him to quit working for the bastards, but he always goes on about "rent" and "food" and "hella bills" and stuff. sadlol. Whatcha need?

Joey told him, and then updated Gaby on the situation. She encouraged Gaby to go make use of the rest of her break, since there was no telling how long it'd take Nikki's friend to get back to them. "It could be hours. Or tomorrow."

"Not going anywhere till I have to," insisted Gaby. "Might get Shayne to pop some popcorn, though."

"Rude," said Joey, but she smiled. She felt warmer than she had when she'd come in, so she took off Holtzmann's jacket—it was her jacket, of course, but she thought of it as Holtzmann's now—and pushed up the sleeves of her shirt.

"Ouch," Gaby said, looking at Joey's arm. "Oh shit, sorry. That was totally rude."

"It's OK," said Joey. Gaby had spotted the scar on her arm. "I fell and hit some broken concrete—I was being chased by a ghost. In Times Square. Holtzmann…Holtzmann saved me. I didn't know it was her at the time." Holtzmann's name felt strange on Joey's tongue, as though she'd forgotten how to say it.

"Destino." Gaby winked.

"Yeah, sure. Klutziness, more like."

"So tell me more about your books and stuff," Gaby said. It was a transparent attempt to distract Joey from waiting nervously for a reply, and Joey did her best to let it work.

Twenty minutes later, Joey's phone lit up. "It's from Nik," she said, trying not to be too hopeful. There was no guarantee there'd be anything useful in the file even if they got it.

Check your email.

She switched into her email. There it was, a huge RAW file. She texted her thanks to Nikkoli as quickly as she could and then opened the photo.

"Whoa, it's fuckin' enormous," Gaby exclaimed.

"Yeah, that's a pro camera for you," said Joey. "Let's see what the metadata has for us." She looked over the lines and lines of information. "Well, it doesn't have a name—this is the image exactly as shot. But it's got the serial number of the camera, and all the information about the lens and stuff. What a weird choice of lens…I guess whoever shot the photo wanted to be inconspicuous. Anyway, I mean, I can prove that's not the serial number of my camera, but…"

"The kind of asshole who'd pull this shit is the kind of person who'd use a different camera on purpose, right? If they thought someone was going to check."

"Yeah, so if it'd been me…" Joey made a face. "It's not exactly an airtight alibi."

"Well, I'm back on," said Gaby, standing up. "But let me know if you figure anything out."

Joey nodded and turned the brightness of her screen all the way up. "I haven't really spent any time looking at this photo, so before I give up, I'm going to inspect every damn pixel."
Gaby flashed her a salute. *I bet you picked that up from Holtzmann,* Joey thought, but she didn't say anything. She rubbed her eyes, put her glasses back on, and started inspecting the photo.

Joey was hardly done with the second quadrant when Shayne set a cup of tea down on her table. "It's got a little caffeine. Not too much, because Gaby said so. But you look like you need a lift."

"T-thanks," Joey said. *You're all being so kind to me.*

"That's what happens when you develop community," Shayne pointed out, and Joey felt her cheeks heat. Apparently she had said that last thought out loud. Shayne smiled and disappeared into the back, and Joey was saved from having to reply.

She drank some tea and rested her eyes for a moment. *This is a waste of time,* she thought. *I should be looking on Craigslist for a room in … wherever. Somewhere that's not here.* But no, she wasn't going to give up yet, or be so ungrateful for Gaby's and Shayne's help. She pinched the bridge of her nose and leaned back toward the screen.

"The fuck," she said out loud, a little while later. There was a hand on the edge of a desk at the top of the photo. It didn't belong to any of the Ghostbusters or Kevin. She glanced at the newspaper. The hand was in the newspaper photo, but it was small and blurry—and printed right on the fold. She scrolled to the left a little bit and searched. There—that gray shape, almost lost in the dark shadow of the desk. That was part of a boot. And now that she knew what to look for, she could tell it was one of her boots, the ones she could run in. The ones she was wearing at that moment in the coffeehouse. Her head snapped up and she looked for Gaby, but she was ringing somebody up.

Joey picked up her laptop and went over to the counter. She could wait till Gaby finished making the drink. For one thing, what was she going to do with this information? Just text Holtzmann? *Why the hell not.* She fumbled her phone out, typed a message, and sent it before she could talk herself out of it.

A moment later, she frowned at her phone. No "delivered," but also no error. Holtzmann must have blocked her, and Joey didn't blame her for it. Well, why not try Abby—Abby seemed to be more or less in charge, so going to her would make sense. But she got the same result. And for Erin, and for Patty. Joey didn't have Kevin's number, and even if she had, she didn't think it would help. "Damn."

Gaby came over and Joey showed her what she'd found. "I guess, since they've all blocked me—understandably—I guess I could just try going over there."

Gaby made a face. "Yeah, that's gonna end well. Look. Let me text Holtz. 'K?"

Joey hesitated. Was it OK to accept this much help? Or to drag other people into her problems? Maybe not just "other people," though. Community, Shayne had said. Right? Joey's mouth was suddenly dry. She licked her lips and said, "Yes, please, if you really don't mind." Gaby's text would at least get through.

Gaby typed a long message. She crossed her fingers and sent it, and they waited.

"Huh," Gaby said. She frowned. "Holtz is usually faster than this. But she might have lost her phone again, or maybe something's about to explode. Or they could be on a bust."

"Sure," said Joey. She finished her tea and stared at the leaf bits left in the cup, listening to her pulse pound in her ears and wishing she could read the future.

"Ah!" Gaby typed a response. "It was a short one. It just said 'Tell her to come to HQ plz.' And FYI, I already told her you were on your way."
Joey's heartbeat was now both fast and loud. She shoved her laptop back in her bag and pulled Holtzmann's jacket back on. She felt even more scared than she had that first day when she approached the firehouse; the stakes were even higher now than they'd been then. "I—OK. Yes. That's what I'm doing. Tell her—tell her I'll be there as soon as I can."

Chapter End Notes

If you're still reading, thank you! I really appreciate it, and I appreciate hearing from you and knowing you're out there.

NB: I think it's clear from the framing that Holtzmann's choices at Babylon are terrible choices, but just in case it's not: they're terrible choices!!! do not do!!! (One starting place for not making those terrible choices is Bondage 101 (NSFW) at Autostraddle.)

As for Chapter 14: I can't jump into it right away. I need to rejigger my outline ("outline") for the rest of the story. If I use it as is, the whole fic is going to be massively long. Too long.

("That's what she--")
("DAMMIT HOLTZMANN!")

Ahem. I mean, I would really like to finish it this year! So I might wind up cutting some potential chapters. Redoing the outline will take some time if I do it right, though. I'll try my best to not make it take too long!

Feel free to check in with me, ask questions, make a comment you didn't want to leave publicly, or whatever, on tumblr or by email (same username at gmail). And hey! You will not be bothering me; I'll be delighted to hear from you.
Heart Full of Mushroom Clouds

Chapter Summary

It's time for a reunion. And a lot of soul-searching. After that, will it all be smooth sailing?

You already know the answer to that.

Chapter Notes

I LIVE! If you've been reading along as these have been posted, I appreciate you very much and I'm sorry it took so long. The good news is that you don't have to wait for Chapter 15, as it'll be up almost immediately.

I start out with blue prints and building blocks
I stack them up so high you can't see the top
I calculate the best ways to make it fall
Before I swing the wrecking ball
I can't help but break it down
I've got a heart that's full of mushroom clouds
When it's self-destructive
Like I'm wired to delete
Anything that might be good for me
'Til I'm left with nothing
'Cause I pushed the button

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Holtzmann fumbled the ties of her shoelaces as another text came in. Gaby again. J will show you but those pix aren't hers. She's IN the photo.

"Is there a word that means 'shit' and 'woohoo'? Wooshit? Shithoo?" Holtzmann asked herself as she made fast knots. "I guess 'fuck.' Fuck means everything. Well! Fuck me." She pounded down the stairs and ran right into Erin. Folders shot into the air and paper rained down around them.

"Holtz! Where are you going? You can't go outside in just a tank top and slacks, it's—" Erin started.

"Soz, no time," Holtz said, pushing past Erin and her concern. "It's Joey. We're assholes. It's not her photo. Gaby says so. Bye!"

"Gaby—Joey—wha—?"

Holtzmann got the door open and sprinted out of the firehouse. Had she closed the lid on the microcentrifuge? Probably. Proooooobably.

Joey was halfway to the firehouse when she saw a figure charging toward her, fingers splayed and
limbs at right angles like some kind of possessed Usain Bolt. She hardly had a second to realize that it was Holtzmann before Holtz hugged her and spun her around with such momentum that Joey, despite being the larger woman, was nearly lifted off of her feet. She found herself laughing, and Holtzmann crinkled her nose back at Joey before suddenly stilling and looking up at Joey warily.

"So, on a scale of sleepy kitten to The Incredible Hulk, how pissed are ya?"

"How—oh, how mad am I? I'm not—" Huh. That wasn't strictly true, Joey realized, as the adrenaline faded a little. "Y'know, I'm actually a little cranky about this whole thing." She shrugged. Her heart was still pounding. "It'll wear off."

"That's it?" Holtzmann smiled so widely that a rare double dimple appeared.

"It might even be gone already." Joey felt like a solar panel after storm clouds were swept away. Holtzmann's smile was infusing her with happiness.

Holtzmann grabbed for her hand to pull her back to the firehouse, but Joey just squeezed it hard and didn't move.

"Wait. I gotta ask you something right now."

"I owe you a good answer, so go for it," Holtzmann said lightly. Joey registered Holtzmann's shoulders drawing in a little, and she figured that Holtz was anticipating some kind of uncomfortable question about why she hadn't believed Joey, or whatever. Well, boy was she going to be surprised.

"OK. I don't want there to be any misunderstanding, like because we've eaten dinner and gone out for coffee and stuff together plenty of times or whatever—" (Stop babbling!) "—uh. Sorry. I'll just go for it directly. Hey. Holtz, will you go out with me?"

Holtzmann just looked puzzled. "Go out with you, like…not back to the firehouse?"

Somehow Joey had still managed to not be clear enough. "I want to date you, Holtzmann. Would—uh…would you like to date me? I mean, together? Date each other? Smoooooth, Betancourt."

Holtzmann released Joey's hand and fell back a little. This wasn't going at all how Joey had hoped it would. Though, to be fair, she couldn't tell exactly how it was going. Was Holtzmann just surprised? Or was Holtzmann just trying to figure out how to let her down easy, without pointing out that Joey didn't have a hope of ever keeping up with her? Or—oh, no, last night hadn't been a weird dream; it had been real. That was Holtzmann's girlfriend on the dance floor at Babylon, or at least her hookup. She probably had a dozen girls whenever she wanted them. She didn't need Joey. Fuck.

Holtzmann scratched her neck, adjusted her glasses, and blew a curl away from one eye. Her cheeks were reddening; she looked more flustered than Joey had ever seen her. "I, uh…I need a little time."

"Oh." Joey tried to keep her face from falling. "OK. Sure, I understand." If I were you I wouldn't settle for a normal human like me either.

"But that—that's not a no." Holtzmann hooked her right foot behind her left ankle. She looked miserable.

It might not have been a 'no,' but it certainly wasn't a 'yes.' "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. I shouldn't have asked." For whatever reason, Joey hadn't expected it to go this badly. She'd known that Holtzmann might turn her down, but she'd assumed that Holtzmann would have done it with a joke and a wink.
"What I mean is, l-let's talk again in two weeks. OK? Remind me. Things kinda get away from me if I don't plan a follow-up. But I gotta get my head on straight first. Heh…though…my head's never been 'straight.'" Holtzmann laughed weakly, and Joey made an attempt to laugh with her.

"So, uh, c'mon. P. sure I closed the microcentrifuge, but I think I left my soldering iron on." Holtzmann turned toward the firehouse and reached her hand back for Joey's. Joey hesitated. Was Holtzmann just operating on autopilot, just being friendly? Would she flinch away? Joey took a breath of cold air and gently wrapped her fingers around Holtzmann's. God, Holtz's finger bones were like bird bones compared to Joey's, but she could feel the strength in them. And the warmth, despite Holtzmann's completely inappropriate clothing. (Though the tank top did show off her shoulders and arms nicely.)

Electricity coursed into Joey's heart and right through her core. Did Holtz feel it?

Holtzmann's fingers twitched, just slightly, and then she was tugging Joey into a run.

"You left your soldering iron on," Patty said to Holtzmann, as soon as Holtzmann crossed the threshold.

"See, you've done it so often that now they're all in the habit of checking, too." Abby gestured to Erin and Patty. The other three Ghostbusters and Kev were all downstairs, which they hadn't been when Holtzmann had left. For that matter, Erin was sitting "casually" on the arm of the lobby sofa, something Holtzmann had never seen her do before. And she had an issue of Physics Review open. Upside down.

Suspicious.

"Oh. Whoops." Holtzmann had honestly thought she was just making an excuse to change the subject and get Joey back to HQ. She let go of Joey's hand and closed the door behind them. Her palm and fingers were tingling, and she hated it.

There was an increasingly awkward pause, finally broken when Joey said, "Uh, hi. Um, I just came by to show you this." She shook out the pages of the newspaper and spread it open on Kevin's desk. ("Sorry, is that OK?" she asked, and Kevin shrugged cheerfully. "I'm not using it," he said.)

Erin, Patty, and Abby got up and moved closer, visibly awkward. Abby and Erin started to say something at the same moment, apologized, did it again, and then fell silent.

Holtzmann herself couldn't decide whether to move forward or not. The air was thick and she wasn't sure she could breathe; she wanted to run upstairs to the lab and stay there till this was over. But she made herself stay. She'd seen the photo in her mind's eye more than once in the last few days and had felt an aversion to looking at it again…and yet. She had obviously missed something, some point of data, and even though now her heart had broken its protective code of silence and was telling her that Joey hadn't been the source of the photo, she still needed to see what the missing element was.

"That's me, there," Joey said. She took a pen from a cup on Kevin's desk and tapped part of the photo. Fuck! Just like when Einstein looked at Planck's formula and posited that quanta were photons or when Arago decided to actually try Fresnel's business with the disc and the light, now that Holtzmann saw it, it was perfectly obvious.

Erin glanced at her and Holtzmann realized that she had said "fuck!" out loud. Holtzmann shrugged.

"What am I looking at?" Erin asked hesitantly.
"Her boot, Erin, it's right there. She's in the dang photo." Abby shook her head and stepped back. "For someone who spent so many years of her life looking at closeups of orb photos, I can sure be unobservant. So uh. We owe you an apology."

"Damn straight we do," Patty grumbled. "This is just like the alibi clock story…Sorry, you can google that later. We should've questioned this the way we question, you know, physics 'n' shit."

"I'm sorry too. It just hit us hard, I guess, and we haven't ever had to deal with anything like this, you know? I needed someone to yell at," said Abby. She made a face.

Erin looked stricken. She clasped both hands to her mouth and gasped an apology through her fingers. Holtzmann wondered if she was going to cry (and then Abby grabbed a tissue and gave it to Erin).

"I should've stuck to my guns," said Joey. "I mean, I'm pretty good at that. Normally. But, I don't know, it's different from just doing my job. I—I really like you guys." She glanced at Holtzmann through her dark eyelashes; Holtzmann dodged her gaze by stepping forward and decisively folding the newspaper closed.

"Hey, we like you too," said Erin. She smiled, a bit wetly, at Joey, whose face had gone all soft. Holtzmann bit the inside of her cheek.

"Yeah we do. I missed you, baby." Patty gave Joey a big hug. "JSTOR changed their search interface and I didn't have anybody to complain to!"

"We all missed you," said Abby, with a meaningful glance at Holtzmann. Really, Abby? Really? Rude. Holtzmann was already wearing her protective lab glasses, but they suddenly felt insufficient. She was beginning to wonder how comfortable it would be to put the motorcycle goggles on top of them. Suddenly feeling bare in her tank top, Holtzmann rubbed her arms.

Now Joey's eyes were wet, too. And Holtzmann realized that alone, out of the four of them, she hadn't apologized. "Sorry" was certainly a word she was familiar with. It was useful for tossing over her shoulder after she'd (successfully) done something that somebody else didn't want her to do. But I'm sorry was different, and it was caught in her throat.

Ah, for the love of Lovelace…Holtzmann jammed her hands into her pockets and ordered herself not to start backing away from the desk.

"How can we make it up to you?" asked Abby.

Joey waved her hands as though batting away gnats. "Honestly, let's just forget it ever happened. Can we just get back to normal?"

Yes. That was a great plan, and although her throat was still closed, Holtzmann thoroughly endorsed it.

"Ain't nothin' normal around here and you know it!" Patty grinned, and Joey matched it. "But we still gotta figure out who did take the damn photo, and why, and if it's connected to, you know. All the extra weirdness."

"Yeah, yeah, we don't gotta do that today," retorted Abby. "Come up to the kitchen, Joey. We're gonna have second breakfast." She gestured to everyone and then headed toward the stairs

"Your love language is food, isn't it," commented Erin, catching up with her.
"We've known each other for how long, and you're just figuring it out?"

"Food is everybody's love language. I mean, if they're lucky," said Patty. "You go ahead, Holtz, I'm gonna get our girl here situated. That coat's going to be too warm in about ninety seconds."

Holtzmann nodded and tried to keep the relief from showing on her face. She wasn't ready to be alone with Joey. (Kevin was there, but that didn't count.) There was too much to figure out. She waved at Patty and Joey, then felt ridiculous, but hid it by adding an elaborate parting bow before she hit the stairs, three at a time.

Joey tried not to sigh as Holtzmann disappeared. Kevin gave her a sunny grin, and she put a smile on in return.

"You were in the paper!" said Kevin. "That's cool!"

"You're in there too, baby boy," Patty pointed out.

"Yeah, well, that makes sense, 'cause I'm an actor. Joey, I'm glad you're back! You took a really long coffee break!"

Joey choked on nothing. "I—uh—I sure did!"

"That's what Holtzmann told him," Patty said. She watched Joey take off her coat and hang it up. As they moved closer to the stairs, she whispered into Joey's ear: "You ever seen a sad golden retriever? Well, that was him, until she explained."

"Is—is he okay," asked Joey. She was seriously beginning to wonder.

Patty shrugged. "He takes care of himself fine. He just—well, everyone here is on kind of on their own wavelength, you get me? His is just…uh…in a totally different range, you know?"

Joey nodded. Good enough, she supposed.

"But he wasn't the only sad lil puppy around here. Holtzy was…Look, kid. I'm not gonna talk behind anyone's back. Just don't feel bad if she's kind of distant or extra weird, OK? She's been acting extra strange for a minute. I think this whole thing has done a number on our girl. And, you know? If she didn't care, then she wouldn't be so out of whack. So remember that, all right?"

Joey hugged Patty. She couldn't explain what she was feeling herself, but there was a little easing of the pain in her chest. "Thank you, Patty. Now, about JSTOR: what the hell were they thinking?"

"Right?" Patty waved Joey up the stairs.

They vented all the way into the kitchen, where Abby had gotten out the electric griddle for pancakes and Erin was pulling out mugs for hot chocolate; they were chattering to each other. Holtzmann had apparently made a swift detour and was now wearing two layers over the tank top: a Mars rover t-shirt and an oversized satin bomber jacket. The jacket was electric blue and shocking violet, probably from the 70s, with an outrageously sequined roller derby emblem on the back. Very Holtzmann, Joey thought. Someone would pay hundreds of dollars for it online, and yet Holtzmann had probably fished it out of the bottom of the dollar pile at the worst thrift shop in NYC.

Holtzmann was quietly washing dishes. Joey considered whether to sit at the table or—

Joey took a breath and approached the sink, not getting too close to Holtzmann—even though it
almost hurt to be this far away from her when she was right there. "Can I help, or you got it?" She wanted to give Holtzmann an easy out.

Holtzmann pushed a stray curl out of her eyes with a soapy forearm. She glanced at Joey, then licked her lips. "I, uh…um. Sure."

*RIP me,* thought Joey. That tongue. Joey pushed her thoughts down, smiled and picked up a hand towel, which she held out to Holtzmann.

"Yessss." Holtzmann grinned suddenly and handed the sponge to Joey. Joey smiled back. Holtzmann liked the fast achievement of drying dishes more than the tedium of washing them. Or at least, that had been the case ever since there had been a ban imposed by the others on dishwashing experiments by Holtzmann. (A ban necessitated by the river of soap bubbles that had filled the kitchen and eventually flowed out the window, down the side of the firehouse, and on down the street.) Holtzmann had, apparently, considered that occurrence to be a win—she did love bubbles.

Joey considered blowing a couple of the bubbles currently floating above the dishes toward Holtzmann, but she didn't want to push it. It was just nice standing next to her, even if Joey did tingle for a moment whenever their hips awkwardly bumped.

Batter sizzled on the griddle. Abby waved a bottle of something at Joey and said, "Here's my secret pancake ingredient I told you I'd never share: it's lemon peel. Just a little. Goes great with the ricotta…" She paused. "Hey, wait, who put Joey to work? You don't make your own apology dinner!"

"I'd rather help," said Joey. "It feels less weird."

Patty, who had an armful of different flavored syrups, nudged Abby. "Let her be," she said.

"All right, all right."

Pancakes and cocoa went a long way toward making everything feel normal again, and it didn't sting quite as much when the topic of the photo, inevitably, came up again. Patty grabbed a bottle of blackberry syrup and handed it to Joey, saying "Try this, we just got it a couple of days ago. It's real good. Now, I know what Abby said earlier, but c'mon, ladies, we all need to know. Who the hell took that photo, and why did they think that was OK?"

Joey thought for a moment. "It must have been the pizza guy. There was pizza in the photo, right?"

"Oh yeah," said Kevin, who was leaning against the fridge. He had a whipped-cream moustache. "The pizza guy took some photos. He had a camera under his jacket. I thought, whoa, cool. He has two jobs and he's an artist. Just like me!"

Abby and Erin facepalmed simultaneously. "Nice synching," Holtzmann observed out of the corner of her mouth. She was using the rest of her mouth to drink her hot chocolate through a Twizzler. Joey kept thinking that Holtzmann was looking at her, but whenever she glanced over, Holtzmann's eyes were anywhere other than meeting Joey's.

Patty put her mug down with a bang. "Kevin! You couldn't have told us before?"

"Wha—oh, is that why you were all sad? But I like the photos."


"Next time you see anything weird going around here, you let us know!" Abby said firmly. Kevin
nodded enthusiastically, but Erin and Joey both couldn't help giving her a look. Abby sighed. "Well...we'll see how that works out."

"Back on track, y'all. So it was the pizza guy," Patty said. She reached over to the counter to grab the coffee carafe, and poured a little into her coffee. She offered the carafe to Joey, but Joey shook her head. Between the amount of caffeine she'd had at Oddcoffee and the sensation of sparking electrical wires in her stomach, she already felt like she might just vibrate into some other plane of existence. Maybe even the one where the ghosts came from.

"How do we know he was really the pizza guy?" Erin asked, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"What if it was fake pizza?" Kevin grimaced and rubbed his stomach. "Ooh, my stomach hurts. What if we've been poisoned?"

"Kev, that's because you ate all of the first three pancake batches I made! It's not—oh, go downstairs and have some Tums." Abby shook her head.

"Good idea, boss." Kevin trotted out.

"I hate to say it, but he kinda has a point. The dude did have on a uniform, and he did have our pizza order." Patty shrugged and tapped her nails on the edge of the table. "But I've seen a lot of 1 AM Law & Order reruns, and who knows, maybe sometimes people do knock out the delivery person and take their uniforms."

"Is there anyone who's mad at you guys?" Joey asked. Other than the mayor's office itself, which seemed to exist in a perpetual love/hate cycle when it came to the Ghostbusters.

Simultaneously, Erin said "no," Abby said "yes," Patty said "oh hell yes," and Holtzmann made a dismissive farting noise with her mouth.

Abby gave both Erin and Holtzmann a disgusted look, then turned, businesslike, to Joey. "Of course there is, but nothing unusual or, you know, acute. The only weird thing lately is all the weird things that've been going on with busts. Although I gotta admit, we're not even 100% in agreement about that. It's not like we have enough of a baseline to be sure about what's weird and what isn't, you know? Maybe our first year was weird and this year has been normal."

Erin pursed her lips. "Holtzmann, what about the spectral energy trace you were doing? There was some possibility that it might lead back to someone, right?" She glanced at Patty.

"Man, I already stated my opinion of this hypothesis. If there are more dudes in the Hot Dogs and Regret Corps, I don't wanna know about them." Patty huffed, then shrugged in surrender. "I mean you all know I'm lyin'. If someone else is out there doing the ghost puppeteer thing, we've gotta know."

Erin shuddered and whispered urgently, "Never say ghost puppeteer again, OK, Patty?"

"All right, all right," Abby said. "So maybe our guy wasn't legit. Joey, on the second round of pancakes you mentioned that you had some connection at that piece of garbage newspaper. Those assholes didn't put a name credit on the photo, right? But somebody there's gotta know. Can you—"

"I feel obligated to point out that it's not my connection, it's my roommate's." Joey picked at a crumb on her plate. How much could she bug Nikkoli? This was important, though, and it wasn't just about her. That part was over. "I'll see if he can help."

Things felt fairly normal in the firehouse, although Holtzmann disappeared into her lab after they
finished eating. She was mumbling something about the anti-possession device. To be fair, Holtzmann had randomly disappeared into and emerged from her lab as long as Joey had known her, of course, but…

Around 1 or 2 in the afternoon, Joey's phone buzzed. "Ah, crap. I have an appointment with my agent. Gotta talk about this possible new project, though it's kind of a long shot. Things are going pretty OK on the writing and budget front, by the way."

Abby looked up from her desk and grinned. "That's good to hear."

Erin said, "But you'll be back? I mean, with the regular schedule? And you're sticking around New York, right?"

Joey thought for a moment. "I'll definitely be back, and the regular schedule is fine. And I don't have any plans to move on. But I can't say what the future will hold, you know?"

"We get it," said Patty. "Nobody knows that. You have a good meeting, all right? Must be nice to have normal meetings sometimes."

Joey put on her jacket. "I'll probably die of boredom. All right, see you guys tomorrow."

It felt so good to say that.

Holtzmann's insides felt like a super-powered science fair volcano. Joey was back! Joey hadn't—wouldn't—do anything to hurt them. She didn't even seem to be particularly mad at them. And she liked Holtzmann. Or anyway, she wanted to go on a date. Which was great and also terrible.

Holtzmann cut through a piece of sheet metal and shook her head. Joey had asked her out. It should've been easy enough to laugh it off, tell her that the lab would get jealous, or that Holtzmann had an image to maintain, or didn't want to break her fans' hearts, or…But nothing had come out, nothing other than the sincere and horrendously awkward truth. "Butts," Holtzmann muttered. She'd been doing fine on her own until recently, and then things had just fallen apart.

The previous night had hovered around the edges of every thought Holtzmann had had all day. "Made some poor life choices there," she scolded herself. The old litany in her head was back, too: I fucked up. I fucked up. I'm a fuck-up. What do I do? I fuck up everything. She pushed up her safety goggles, which were fogging over. Why now? Why had last night been the breaking point, and why had things broken in that particular direction? And why, in the middle of the chaos in Holtzmann's heart, was Joey back now? What would Holtzmann ever find to say to her? Don't date me, I'm a fuck-up. It had been true even before last night. And if Joey knew about that, she wouldn't want to date Holtzmann anyway.

For a moment Holtzmann considered just telling her. That would put a stop to things. But although her imagination usually roamed as far as she would let it, she was utterly incapable of imagining that conversation.

She laid her cheek on the edge of the workbench for a moment, focusing on the cold feel of the metal and the grain of the wood, then the smell of graphite and metal shavings. Her arms dangled down on either side. After a minute, she slowly straightened up, and then decisively pulled her goggles back down. "Stick with what you're good at, kid," she said, and forced herself to focus on the project in front of her.

Over the next few hours, Holtzmann made some good progress on the possession prophylactic device. It was getting close to field-testable, suboptimal as that testing option was. Not that it was
dangerous; it was probably no worse than wearing a photon pack for more than ninety-three minutes and fifty-two seconds. More like...there was no way to attract a ghost to attempt possession, and if there were, the others probably wouldn't let Holtzmann try it. (Although that was an avenue to look into...) On the other hand, it was kind of a win-win. No possession attempts during a bust was a good thing. An attempt that was prevented by the device would be a good thing. The only bad result was a successful possession despite the device, which obviously would've happened anyway.

*In situ* testing would have to work for now. The device was going to be even more difficult to test in the lab than the spectral energy detector. Though that actually meant it would be more impossible than impossible...Holtzmann had to laugh at herself. She was definitely going to have to figure out more sophisticated testing conditions. She could already hear the protests of the others—no, wait, that was Abby, knocking on something metal.

Holtzmann spun around on her chair. "Abs! Don't touch that so—aahh—just put it down...gently." She waved her hands descriptively at Abby.

"What? It's just a—oh." Abby put the part down carefully. "Didn't we talk about labeling things?"

"It's so subjective," Holtzmann said. "For example, that there is 100% safe. As long as you don't smack it up, it's fine."

Abby pinched her nose. "I should really know better. Anyway, Holtz, you've been down here almost 9 hours. There's no crisis going on. Shouldn't you take a break—I mean, get a snack or something, at least? C'mon."

Holtzmann rolled her shoulders and cracked her spine. She had been sitting there a while. And she kept thinking there was something she should do at home, besides taking home a couple of parts for her latest personal project. But there were still things to do here. But... "I think I'm gonna go home," Holtzmann blurted. She did a mental double take at herself.

"Whoa. Are you OK? Are you getting sick? Is something bothering you?" Abby came closer, put a hand on Holtzmann's shoulder, and peered into her goggles.

"I'm good. I think I'm just done for the day." *Oh, Abby.* Such a good heart...too good to explain some things to. Holtzmann gently bumped her forehead against Abby's, then hopped up. "Yeah. Gonna go home and catch up on some sleep."

Ah, whoops...a little lie. Those used to slip out all the time, but in the last couple of years, Holtzmann had managed to restrict them to comedic purposes only. It wasn't *really* a lie though. She could still get to sleep earlier than usual.

"Wow, well, don't let me stop you." Abby gave Holtzmann a quick hug, and Holtzmann, not sure whether she deserved anyone's hugs, leaned into it anyway.

New Yorkers mostly kept to themselves on the subway, but sometimes, it seemed they just couldn't resist when it came to staring at Holtzmann. She pulled her goggles down and her collar up, slid further down into her seat, propped up her feet on the one in front of her, and kept doing what she was doing. That happened to be poking at the prototype for her new project with one hand and making notes in an old notebook using the other. Eventually, she heard whispering—which, again, pretty normal, but there was an urgent edge to it. She glanced up without moving her head. A couple of teens across from her were staring at her and fiddling with their phones as though trying to take a photo. What was she doing that was so—oh. The prototype sort of looked like what it sort of was: a compact shotgun. Not a kinetic-energy-type gun at all, no way, but they wouldn't know that.
Holtzmann put it away and swung out of her seat without looking at them, and got off at the next stop even though it was the station before hers.

She stomped up the stairs, angry at herself. She could have just grinned at the kids and channeled Bill Nye, showed them what she was working on, maybe gotten them interested in paranormal science. Instead she'd run away.

As Holtzmann emerged onto the street, she sighed. The streetlights illuminated an unpleasantly cold drizzle, but she had (of course) waterproofed her bag, so at least something would be OK tonight.

Holtzmann made dinner from a kebab that she bought on the long walk home, pulling the chunks of meat off with her teeth, and a cup of spicy, slippery-in-her-mouth mango from another street cart. She told herself that Abby would be proud of the nutritional value of her dinner, but those sellers had just happened to be the only ones who hadn't packed up and gone home. She could've wound up with a fudge-filled Belgian waffle, if that had been all there was, and she kind of wished she had.

Luckily, Holtzmann found a package of jumbo Reese's Cups in her freezer at home. She ran her tongue over the fluted edges of the first frozen peanut butter cup as she headed into her lab. It was chilly in her basement apartment; the thermodynamics of the huge, illegal space were against her. She turned on a heater that she'd installed under a workbench, and Glitch manifested out of nowhere and into her lap. "No peanut butter for you," she admonished, stroking the black cat's forehead with her thumb. "I know you're just here to suck away my thermal energy. S'OK, kitty. You may be totally amoral, but you still love me. Or my body heat." Glitch purred in assent.

Holtzmann tipped her head back and let the rest of the peanut butter cup fall all the way into her mouth. All right. Time to do some real work on the wireless proton mini-shotgun. She was sure it was going to work, and man, would they be surprised.

She made progress on the weapon over the next hour or two, but it was slow going because she had to keep wrenching her focus back to what she was working on. Finally, with a loud thunk!, Holtzmann laid a pair of aviation snips down on her work table. Glitch raised her head, gave Holtzmann a disapproving look, and jumped off of her lap to go wherever it was in the apartment that the cat usually hid out. Holtzmann sighed, was immediately irritated with herself for having sighed again, got up, turned off the music on her scavenged stereo, and went into the living room to drop herself on the sofa.

Erin, talking about herself, had once told Holtzmann that being cold could physiologically make depression or loneliness worse. And Holtzmann had made a mental note of it, not that she'd let Erin know that. So now she lunged over the arm of the sofa for a blanket, eventually coming up with a chenille throw and a heavy quilt that someone had made out of t-shirts from bands that Holtzmann had never heard of. She kept meaning to look them up.

"Stylin'," Holtzmann told herself, glancing down at her cocoon of warmth. She wriggled her hands out and stared at her phone. In fact, the thing she'd been needing to do at home was consult an expert, someone who could tell her how to fix things the same way she'd told Bennie how to fix his delivery bike and make it even better. (Not that he'd listened.)

The thought of actually asking for advice made her stomach clench. The only person she'd ever trusted for that was Rebecca Gorin. But there was no way in hell she was texting Gorin about this. "Big ol' bag of nope, nopetopus sashimi for one please..."

Ugh. Holtzmann gritted her teeth and sent a message to Lena. Shayne might've been a better choice, but Holtzmann didn't have her number, and anyway...nah.
hey lena, I need to talk to someone about something that I screwed up. That was fine, but how to explain further? Holtzmann wasn't even sure what she wanted. She flopped around the sofa in an effort to find a snack without actually having to get out of her nest of blankets. Finally, bent all the way over the other arm of the sofa, she located a jar of knockoff cheeseballs. "Bring back the blue can, it makes 'em taste better," she grumbled. "It's just science, beeches!"

Holtzmann threw herself back into the cushions, causing a small explosion of cheeseballs. "Whoops, shoulda checked the lid…Oh yeah, whatchu lookin' at, cat?" Of course Glitch had wandered back in just in time to witness that. Even her cat thought she was a screwup…She tossed a cheeseball at Glitch, who licked it thoroughly, cleaned her paws and whiskers in satisfaction, and bounded off with her tail held high. "Note to self: cheeseballs fix everything."

If only.

Her phone gave a muffled ping from somewhere in the blankets. Eventually, she found it. Lena had replied.

Wow, hearing from you twice in a week?

...

Is it about a girl?

Sweet zombie cheeses, why did everyone always know? Why? And it wasn't, not really, not in the way Lena thought. Right? Holtzmann started to type an explanation, then stopped and deleted everything.

Sort of. It's complicated. I need to talk to someone who knows about...

About...about...

Y'know someone like Cerise. From the party. But not Cerise. Someone else.

Lena took a moment to reply, and then:

OK. Some kind of bdsm thing gone wrong, I guess. Don't worry, missteps are inevitable when you're new to anything

Lena was still typing, but Holtzmann snorted to herself. There were fun learning mistakes that made big booms instead of small-to-medium-size poofs, and sometimes momentarily annoying mistakes that necessitated a bandage or two. Those were OK. Then there were the mistakes where the consequences were on other people. Those were not OK. As much as she might joke about safety in the lab, and even though she'd set Erin's desk a little bit on fire that one time (only a little bit!), she normally did whatever she had to do to prevent other people from getting hurt. Except...

Lena continued: but lbr, you need to talk to Cerise. She gave you her card, right? And you've already met her. H, c'mon, you need to talk to someone who already knows something about you. Even a little bit.

Holtzmann stared at her phone. Lena was probably right, but at the same time, it felt like acknowledgment that Holtzmann was extraordinarily messed up. It was true, but...well, half the time she was convinced that everyone already knew, anyway, and they were just barely tolerating her existence.
The other half of the time, she believed her own propaganda. And it was great.

I don’t...

Maybe this is a bad idea, I shouldn't have bugged ya. Get back to your jet-setting ways, girl, ignore me.

Holtzmann reached to turn off the screen, but Lena was a fast typist.

You are literally the least ignorable person in the world (that's a compliment, shut up). Cerise is the person you need to talk to, for real. You don't want to get advice from some rando creeper on reddit, do you? Hell NO.

So you text her.

Like this: "Hey, Cerise. Lena sent me. I need advice about a sensitive issue. Can you help me out?"

But.

You pay her, OK? It's business. And you're calling on both her professional expertise and her emotional labor. Got it?

Sorry, I gotta run, my prospective new clients have probably gotten the lounge to send a search party to the bathroom by now, lol.

Holtzmann pictured Lena hiding in some swanky, marble-covered bathroom just to help her out. Fuck everything. Now she'd somehow entangled Lena in her life. Holtzmann hoped she didn't pass through town again anytime soon; she didn't want to have to explain any more of this. Quickly, Holtzmann replied:

Duly noted, thx. Knock 'em dead.

Was she really going to do this? Yeah, she was. The usual routine would've been to pack everything down inside again and wait for the urge to pass. But Holtzmann felt like things—what things, she wasn't sure, but things—were about to go critical, and not in the fun way. She ate double fistfuls of cheeseballs to fortify herself before she started composing her text Cerise.

Holtzmann took a deep breath, tacked on an offer of payment via whatever app Cerise preferred, hit send, and then drew the blankets up over her head. She breathed the warm, stale, dark air, like she hadn't done in...decades, probably. Better not to think about it.

She did and didn't want a response. Time drew itself out.

Finally, she threw the blankets down from her face and breathed in the cool, relatively fresh air. She needed a comforting, non-sexual distraction. Like petting the cat. (Non-euphemistically.) Maybe this would be the one occasion on which Glitch would answer to her name.

But, to Holtzmann's complete lack of surprise, it wasn't.

Joey's meeting with her publisher went well. There were a few more signs that the project for which she was waitlisted (Antarctica!) might happen, which was exciting but could be potentially complicating. She just couldn't think about it right now. She had dinner in her apartment with Ella; Joey was secretly relieved that Viv and Nik were out, because Ella's response to picking up on Joey's confusing mood was to just hang out companionably and quietly. They'd eaten Ella's sriracha.
spaghetti, which kept them warm as a cold rain started to spatter their windows, and Ella had put on *The Great British Bake-Off* so that they could watch and eat and use their laptops without having to say anything. They'd only done this a couple of times before, but Joey was starting to think that maybe they should do it more often, if Joey stuck around anyway. Viv and Nik would have wanted to know everything. And who knows, Joey thought, maybe they would've been helpful, but at the moment, she just couldn't deal.

Ella was catching up on webcomics. Joey tried to work on the shapeshifter romance that her agent had lined up for her, a pinch-hit for a writer who'd been unable to turn in their manuscript for an entry series. But in every sex scene, the rough, redheaded monster-hunter protagonist (with a secret, of course) gradually turned into a dark-haired writer with rainbow bangs, and the shy, stocky, white-haired were-bobcat kept turning into a maddeningly brilliant blond scientist. Would Holtzmann be amused if she knew? Aghast? Smug? Joey didn't know, but anyway, it couldn't keep happening.

She closed her laptop. "I've gotta go to bed. Thanks, Ella. For all this."

Ella gave her a thumbs up. "Any time, babe."

But Joey couldn't sleep, and wound up working on the scene again in bed.

Bhreagh clenched her fists. How had she wound up here, snowed in at this hiking cabin in the middle of the Tahoe wilderness? With this goddamn person? "At least I've got you trapped now," Bhreagh growled. She knew she was looming over Savannah, who shrank back. Savannah was scared of her. And that was good, because Savannah was smarter than she was. Bhreagh was barely armed, there was no cell phone signal, and she could tell she was about to lose her temper and bust out the accusation throbbing in her gut. And if Savannah attacked her…Well, Bhreagh was confident she could take them on, but she was wearing her favorite jeans and a real Pendleton flannel shirt.

Savannah backed away from her and sat down on a wooden bench. They laughed nervously and gestured at the door. "Wh—what do you mean? The snow's got us both trapped. Why would you want to trap your friendly neighbor?"

Bhreagh stepped closer to them. "'Friendly,' huh? That's what you wanted me to think when we were at the bar, and I was telling you all about the hunt I'm on? And then later, when the band came on—" And they had slow-danced, and found themselves in a maintenance closet…

"I thought we were having fun…" Savannah reached out as though to touch Bhreagh's arm, and Bhreagh knocked their hand away.

"I guess you were, all right. Toying with your prey, huh? Baby, I'm never the prey."

"What are you talking about, Red?" Savannah's blue eyes were wide, and their wild, short white hair fairly glowed in the light of the fireplace. They were unreasonably pretty and it made Bhreagh even angrier. She couldn't keep it back.

"It's Bhreagh, dammit! It's not that hard to say: VREE-A. And nice try distracting me, but you fail. You're the Apple Hill murderer! You're a damned bobcat, at least when you want to be. And you've killed four innocent people!" She jabbed her finger toward Savannah's chest. Savannah caught her hand; they weren't as strong as Bhreagh, but they were fast.

"Don't do this," they said. Now they genuinely looked like they were about to cry.
"Please don't do this. I...all right, it's true, this isn't my only shape. But that doesn't mean I'm a murderer! I buy my steak at Safeway just like you do, babe."

Whoops. Out of character. Savannah's eyes weren't supposed to be blue, either. Joey shook her head and flopped back onto her pillows for a moment, then sat up and continued.

"Sure, whatever. I'm bringing you back to the Council when we get out of here, and there ain't a damn thing you can do about that."

They were standing so close that their breasts almost touched. Bhreagh's pulse quickened. Then she realized she hadn't freed herself from Savannah's (admittedly gentle) grip. She tugged her wrist away easily.

"We can go over everything. I can tell you where I was. Bhreagh, I'm the same person you danced with. I'm not a monster."

_We're all monsters_, Bhreagh thought. _Some are just furrier than others._ "It won't change anything, but there's nothin' else to do, so knock yourself out. Tomorrow we go down the mountain."

Savannah sniffed the air and shrugged. "We'll see about that."

It was the third day of being stuck in the cabin arguing with her pint-sized nemesis. Bhreagh sighed and sat down at the crude wooden table with a thump. "I think it's getting colder, but we gotta use less wood," she said. "I guess all the arguing is going to have to keep us warm, huh? Still nothin' else to do. Not getting you anywhere, though." She wasn't going to admit that Savannah had managed to make her second-guess her own conclusions about the murders.

Savannah was stretched out on the floor, on their back. Their irritatingly beautiful gold eyes peered up at Bhreagh through pale lashes. "Nothing else to do? Really? Because I feel like there might be something. Something you're interested in, even."

Bhreagh couldn't bear to blush in front of her damned saucy opponent—as a redhead, it'd be painfully obvious. A flush of anger, though, was all right. She shoved herself out of the chair and hit the floor, knees on either side of Savannah's ribcage. Her knife flashed into her hand and she pressed its cold blade against their tawny throat. "Don't play games with me. I don't like games."

Brazenly, ignoring the knife at their throat, Savannah reached up and slid their fingers into Bhreagh's hair. "There's a difference between fun and games. I'd rather have my fun like this. I don't hurt people for fun." They pulled Bhreagh's face down to them until their mouths were an inch apart, and whispered, "Do you?"

Bhreagh gritted her teeth. "Only if they ask me to," she growled.

"Oh, A+ growling, good job. I could almost believe you're one of us." Savannah grinned, flashing their white teeth. "Did that make you mad, Red? You wanna do something about it? Feel free to hurt me any way you want." They pawed at their neck. "Just not with this, OK? It's a bit much for a first date."

OK, well, Savannah was supposed to be shy, but Joey was going to run with this version. If only because Joey couldn't imagine Holtz acting like that.
Bhreagh sheathed the knife. "Oh yeah? Let's see how you like this." She got to her feet and then scooped Savannah up, like they weighed nothing. Truth was, they were stockier and stronger and thus heavier than they looked, but Bhreagh wasn't going to let that show.

Savannah made a tiny yelp but didn't protest. Bhreagh pulled the bench out from the wall and thrust Savannah down so that their tits and torso were pressed against the length of it, their knees were on the floor, and their ass was in the air. "Don't worry, you're going to stay plenty warm," Bhreagh said. She crouched behind them, pulled down their lace-printed, fleece-lined leggings, and shoveled up their oversized sweater.

"Wow, you're really going for it, huh? This is going to be more fun than I was expecting." Savannah craned their head back to take a look, and grinned. "Maybe my cabin fever is contagious."

"I think you oughtta be quiet. Because otherwise, I've got a nice red paisley handkerchief here with your name on it." Bhreagh yanked down Savannah's floral panties and put her hand on the rosy tan skin of Savannah's ass. It was soft under Bhreagh's rough palm.

"What are you waiting for?" Savannah wriggled their ass and Bhreagh hit her target with a resounding slap, fingers curved for maximum sound impact. Savannah twitched, and Bhreagh smiled. Savannah seemed to think they were in charge, but they were wrong. (Yeah, Bhreagh was turned on, but Savannah didn't need to know that.)

"You got anything else you wanna say? One more strike and you're out."

"Oh…did we start already? Huh, I didn't no—"

Bhreagh didn't let Savannah finish their sentence. She hit them again, palm flat this time, putting a little more muscle into it. That ought to have stung pretty good, she figured. She took out her handkerchief as promised, rolled one of her leather gloves into the middle of it, and reached around to run her fingertips along Savannah's lips. They made a faint noise and their lips parted. Their tongue darted out to lick Bhreagh's fingers and she felt herself grow even more wet. But instead of pressing her fingers into Savannah's mouth, tempting as that was, she shoved in the impromptu gag. "Don't say I didn't warn you," she said, as she tied the ends of the bandana firmly at the base of their skull.

Savannah made half-hearted swats in Bhreagh's direction. Their eyes were fairly glowing. They were enjoying this way too much… Bhreagh spanked Savannah again, ten quick strokes with her whole arm into it, rising in intensity. Savannah made a distinct purring sound.

Bhreagh ground her teeth and tried to ignore the throbbing inside her own pants. She could at least reduce their trouble-making options. She stripped off her own plain woolen scarf (oddly enough, she was feeling pretty warm herself) and caught Savannah's wrists, which were dwarfed by Bhreagh's hands. Quickly, she wound the scarf around and between their wrists, and tied a square knot: it'd hold well, but it was easy to undo. Savannah wriggled and then purred again.

Bhreagh thrust her hands between Savannah's chest and the bench, and pinched their nipples hard. They bucked under her, and Bhreagh was rewarded with a surprised squeak. She leaned back and put her arm into it again, a fast series of strikes hitting Savannah right where her asscheeks exposed her pussy. And she kept it up, varying the
exact location and intensity of the hits but not letting the pace drop.

She could see the exact moment when Savannah's saucy wriggling act came to an end. Their face was slack; their right cheek was resting against the bench and their eyes were half-closed. A little drool escaped from the corners of their pink lips and they moaned. Their ass blazed scarlet. Savannah was completely helpless at last. They were also about the most beautiful sight Bhreagh'd ever seen, but that was beside the point, and she was going to forget about it.

"I hope that was a good warmup," Bhreagh said. Her voice came out thick, but with luck that came off as menacing and not as evidence that she had the hots for Savannah. She stood and started to unbuckle her well-worn leather belt. "Now we're ready to get started."

Eh. I'll fix it in the morning, she thought. At least she had the last line for the cabin scene in mind: "You realize I could've left any time I wanted, right? I don't get snowed in. I'm a heckin' bobcat." So it should be easy to finish. And although she'd inadvertently gotten herself turned on—a risk of the profession, she supposed—she finally felt tired enough to sleep.

A time lapse of Holtzmann's conversation with Cerise would have showed Holtzmann in every conceivable position that a small, flexible person burrito'd in a blanket on a sofa could take. Cerise, who had insisted on a video call, had remained in one place the entire time, sitting in an office chair and wearing a white shirt that was unreasonably crisp considering the time of night (not that Holtzmann owned a clothes iron, but even Erin got rumpled eventually). She wasn't particularly nice or gentle in her advice, but she was kind. How had she pulled that off? Maybe the accent helped. And she still radiated charisma even in the light of her desk lamp. Holtzmann wondered if charisma could be quantified.

Over the course of the conversation—well, professional consultation, really, which made Holtzmann feel a little less weird about the whole thing—the following had been determined:

Holtzmann had indeed Grade A Number One fucked up.

The list of ways in which Holtzmann had fucked up was very, very long. Or to be more precise, the list of un-fucked-up things that Cerise would have advised doing instead was very, very long.

Fucking up is an action, not a state of being. (Holtzmann objected but could tell they wouldn't get anywhere if she didn't pretend to go along with it.)

One cannot unfuck what has been fucked up, but one can fix whatever can be fixed and then do better next time.

Holtzmann's wondering whether Alice was all right was a correct step in fixing what could be fixed.

Cerise would discreetly contact Shayne to see if she knew any of the staff at Babylon, and thus possibly get information about Alice's wellbeing. She would inform Holtzmann, and then they would decide what to do next. (At least Alice is probably not in a coma, Holtzmann thought to herself, but she managed not to say that to Cerise—thus avoiding the Inevitable Questions.)

Cerise was still willing to tutor Holtzmann if Holtzmann ever wanted her to. (Holtzmann couldn't say she imagined that being useful anytime soon, but she didn't shut Cerise down completely.)

And finally, Holtzmann had learned that Cerise was very, very good at asking questions and pulling out backstory.
"Are you sure you don't have an MFT?" she asked, laughing in an attempt to dodge more questions about Joey, who she'd somehow spilled almost everything about. Adding blankets hadn't helped the feeling that her skin had been scraped raw, but at the same time, it didn't hurt as much as she'd expected. Cerise's care, like Abby's had been and then Erin's and Patty's, was almost overwhelming. Cerise raised a perfectly defined eyebrow. "Who says I don't? In fact, my clinical psychology dissertation defense is in two weeks, so this appointment can't go on all night, I'm afraid. I think we've covered quite a bit. But you've got homework."

"I do?"

"Yes. There's someone you need to apologize to."

Holtzmann propped the phone in a corner of the sofa. Alice, yes, but not until Cerise got some data. "...Joey?"

"No. You."

"I…what?" Holtzmann slid off the sofa and rested her chin on one of the cushions.

Cerise peered down at her from the phone screen. "Yes. First, for neglecting yourself. Second, for whatever you've said to yourself since last night. All right? And although it's technically not in the scope of this call, I suggest talking to Joey. You pick the topic, but do talk to her."

Holtzmann sighed and rubbed her face. "I'll think about it."

For the next few days, Joey found herself in a kind of equilibrium with Holtzmann. (Or something. Holtz, Joey thought, would know exactly what orbital analogy to make.) They were able to work and eat and generally be in the same physical place. Holtzmann had loosened up a little, but Joey didn't think she was imagining that the way that Holtz's flirtatiousness with the others had increased. Or the way that Holtzmann was doing a lot of just listening and watching when they were all together. It was OK, though. Pretty much OK.

Joey definitely didn't have a countdown app with a target date of two weeks from the day she'd tried to ask Holtzmann out. Definitely didn't.

It was early afternoon on a bright but chilly Tuesday (T minus 4 days, 8 hours, 22 minutes and 29 seconds). Joey'd had errands and other work the previous day and hadn't gone to the firehouse; today, the Ghostbusters were supposed to meet with the mayor in the morning, so Joey was aiming to arrive at HQ around 2:30. Just as she got on her bus, she got a text from Abby.

So today has gotten pretty dang complicated! The mayor postponed us to 2:45. Erin, Patty, & me are on our way there.

Turns out Kevin's birthday is today (personally I'm not convinced he didn't come out of a vat, but sure)

And Holtzmann's got it into her head that he MUST HAVE a cake from some place called Witching Flours, and she wants to go get it

Can you go make sure she's ok doing that, and then babysit her at the bakery

Holtz must not be allowed in a bakery unsupervised
This was accompanied by the biohazard warning emoji, a row of flying dollars, and then a cheerful slice of cake. Joey blinked at her phone. OK, but where's Holtzmann?

Abby replied right away: *I sent Holtz home yesterday bc I'm p sure she was getting sick, but she swears she's fine today*

*I mean it's no tragedy that she's missing the meeting. I think all parties would agree lol*

*Anyway here's her address, sorry, it's probably the opposite direction from you*

*gtg, Jennifer's getting anxious. Later!*

Joey's heart beat faster. She was going to Holtz's place? What would it be like? Well, probably like her lab—the chaos created by genius. For a moment she pictured herself knocking on the door with a bouquet of flowers. But that was ridiculous. She'd agreed to wait, for one thing. And besides, Holtzmann probably didn't even like flowers. Too normal. Maybe a Venus flytrap? "I'm too basic for this girl," Joey muttered into her scarf. Then she flushed, realizing that other people could hear her. But it was just the bus; a little muttering to yourself didn't merit any attention.

And, in fact, it was the wrong bus, if she was now going to Holtzmann's address. Whoops. Joey got off the bus and corrected her course.

The building that Joey eventually found herself in front of was enormous, and probably old underneath the layers of scaffolding and tarp. It was clearly not a building that anyone was living in.

Leaves crunched under Joey's feet as she looked around first the left and then the right corners of the building. Had Abby pranked her? She considered texting Holtzmann, but she wanted to figure it out herself. Transposed numbers, maybe, or…Wait. She could just barely see a radiation hazard sticker on a door at the bottom of a stairwell on the right side of the building. Maybe she was in the right place after all. She ran down the stairs, which smelled as though they hadn't experienced sunlight any time in the last century, and rapped on the metal door, which was painted an off-putting shade of institutional grey-green.

After a moment, a reply came, shouted through the door: "Nobody's here!"

Joey smiled to herself. She was in the right place. She didn't know how Holtzmann would react to her presence, but, well. Nothing to do but find out. "Hey, Nobody! It's Joey! Abby sent me over!"

Immediately, there was the sound of someone starting to undo a latch. And then there was a *long* pause. The warmth Joey had felt a moment before drained away. Was Holtzmann going to let her in? Just when she'd drawn breath to ask what was up, the door finally opened. Holtzmann was half-wearing the classic biker jacket that made Joey want to gnaw on her scarf every time she saw Holtzmann in it. She looked perfectly healthy and ready to head out. "Um. Uh…Abby wanted me to come see if you're doing all right. I mean, you look fine." (*So fine, Joey managed not to add.*)

"Yeah, I powered through it." Holtzmann flexed and grinned, and Joey relaxed a little. She tried not to obviously peer into the room behind Holtzmann, but it was hard to avoid getting a quick impression of blankets, books, and unidentifiable equipment. And snack packaging. Lots of snack packaging.

Joey twitched in surprise as something warm and furry twined around her boots. "You have a cat?"

"Well, a cat lives here anyway. That's Glitch," Holtzmann said. She shrugged her jacket on all the
way and then scooped up the cat. Holtzmann regarded Glitch very seriously for a moment, eye to eye, and then set the cat down on the sofa inside. Joey could see a little more of —oh noooo, was that a couple more of her romance novels peeking out from under a blanket? And were they bookmarked? (If by "bookmark" you meant scraps of foil, chopstick wrappers, a strip of rainbow-colored cable, haphazardly bent pieces of wire, a Chick tract, and something made of cloth that looked suspiciously like a "do not remove" tag from a mattress, anyway.) Joey wondered if those marked the sex scenes or the places where she'd gotten her paranormal details wrong. Or both.

Holtzmann pulled on her gloves, hauled on her backpack, and gave Joey a thumbs up. "It's cake time!"

Holtzmann locked the door to her place. Her backpack was heavy, and she had been totally thrown by Joey's sudden appearance, but she felt lighter than she had in a while. Yesterday, Cerise had contacted her about "Alice." Alice was fine; the encounter at Babylon had ticked some kind of fantasy off of her wish list. She didn't plan on ever going to Babylon again, and neither wanted nor needed to talk to Holtzmann. Cerise had delivered the information without a smile. "You got lucky, and so did Alice. I hope you will stop raking yourself over the coals for it—although if you like hot coals, you can always schedule temperature play with yours truly—and take it as a hard lesson lightly earned." So, surely, she could put that behind her.

Joey went up the stairs ahead of her, and, although it was difficult to avoid, Holtzmann tried not to stare at the other woman's ass. Even if Babylon had never happened, she would still have a conundrum in front of her. The other day, Joey had offered Holtzmann something that she wanted, as hard as she'd been working for the last few years to pretend she didn't want anyone anymore. (Potentially offering, anyway, she corrected herself. There was no guarantee a date wouldn't be a full-scale disaster. And not the fun kind, either.) But if you tested something a few times and it was always an utter failure, you moved on and abandoned that line of inquiry, right? And she had a string of spectacular failures to point to.

Well…normal people gave up when things didn't work. Not Holtzmann, not if it was science. She figured out ways to do things, that was her whole deal. Right? So maybe she shouldn't give up.

But this wasn't science, not at all.

Joey turned back to her, her face glowing in the mid-afternoon autumn light. "Where are we going?"

"This bakery that Patty's been stalking on Instagram. They made a Mars rover cake! And a Laputa cake with 'clouds.' Chemistry plus structural engineering for the win! C'mon, this way."

Holtzmann kicked up leaves and watched them swirl around her shoes as they walked toward the bus stop. She kept talking on autopilot about Witching Flour's creations and her speculations about their methods. What her brain was working on, though, was how strange it felt to have Joey there, at her front door, in her neighborhood. She glanced sidelong at Joey, who was smiling through her glasses, nose almost buried in her scarf. What would it be like to let someone in?

Yeah, the others had visited her place once or twice, for whatever reason, but that wasn't the same. Although she loved them, and that was the only reason they even knew her address.

And that was another thing. She had, for the first time in her life, four—five—good working relationships. Friends. Six or seven if you counted Kevin and Glitch. Unbelievable.

Her experience, however limited, with girlfriends was that they were (bafflingly) charmed by her at first. The tactics that Holtzmann used to get by in the world were catnip, or kryptonite, or whatever,
to some women. A lot of women, if she were honest.

It was a different story as soon as she relaxed around them. Sometimes, they were immediately disappointed, and it was over. That was the best possible outcome, actually. If it didn't end quickly, it was never long until she realized that the other woman would only wind up hurt. Not physically, not like at CERN, but it didn't matter, did it? Life presented an endless array of ways to feel pain and cause damage. She might as well be made of knives, for the inevitability with which she hurt them if she didn't leave first, or nudged them into leaving before the potential for pain had started to deepen.

Other people couldn't understand her priorities; even the other Ghostbusters were puzzled by her choices on the regular. Sometimes she needed to turn away in the middle of a conversation, even if her colleague was telling her something private and important, to find out if changing the composition of an alloy would fix everything. Or she needed to keep testing a piece of equipment despite some arbitrary holiday occurring, or whatever.

And there was more. Sometimes she just couldn't do some normal thing that she'd done the previous day without even thinking about it. Sometimes she needed the volume all the way up; sometimes she needed to sit alone under blankets in the dark. Sometimes the brush of a lover's fingers across her cheek in the morning felt like a wire brush.

People don't like it when you flinch away from them.

*I'm so tired of this data loop*, Holtzmann thought. *Snap out of it!* She consciously wrenched her thoughts into the isolated compartment of her brain that they weren't supposed to escape from, before they missed their stop. Just barely.

Good enough.

Chapter End Notes

The title and quote are from *I Pushed the Button* by Stephanie Mabey. The whole album is pretty good (and I think she may be a nerrrd). Anyway, if you're still out there, I'd love to hear from you!

P. S. *Alibi clock.*
Chapter Summary

Cake, with a scoop of ectoplasm and a helping of angst.

(You know what's great, is long emotional talky scenes cut with action. Right? Right? Guys...?)

Chapter Notes

All you think of lately is getting underneath me
All I’m dreaming lately is how to get you underneath me
Here comes the heat before we meet a little bit closer
Here comes the spark before the dark
Come a little closer

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Joey tried not to be amused by Holtzmann's disappointment when she found out that they couldn't just walk in and buy the elaborate cake of her dreams, and that the displays in the window weren't really edible. She was cute (well, extra cute) when she tried to cajole someone into doing something. In the end, they were able to buy a square cake ("it's a rectangular prism!" corrected Holtzmann, as Joey texted Abby) with a complex geometric design stenciled on top. The metallic and pearlescent colors were enough to pacify Holtzmann a little, particularly once she grilled the owner over how the colors were made.

The door to the little shop closed behind them with a jingle of bells. "Cake victory dance!" declared Holtzmann. She performed a ridiculous jig, spinning around Joey and gesturing extravagantly at the cake.
Joey couldn't help giggling. "Well, we're not taking this on the bus or the train," Joey said, looking doubtfully down at the tall box in her arms. "How far away are we from ho—hhhhhhheadquarters?" She cringed internally and hoped Holtzmann hadn't noticed her slip.

Holtzmann glanced at her phone. "3.2 kilometers."

"That's like what, half an hour or so on foot? I guess we should get a…" Joey reconsidered. It was nice just hanging out with Holtzmann. In fact, Joey had almost forgotten the timer running down on the phone in her pocket. "We don't have to be there till 5, right? And it's not too cold. We could just walk."

Holtzmann tilted her head, unreadable. "Walk?"

"Oh…uh, I mean, you probably have stuff to do. Right? Never mind."

"True, no rest for the wacky! But if we walk we'll go past the new Octothorpe Building." Holtzmann shouldered her backpack as though about to set out in the Alps. "Let's hoof it."

They took off, Holtzmann whistling something that Joey eventually recognized as the ending from Buckaroo Banzai. Joey smiled wryly. "Banzai had nothing on you," she said. "I bet Penny would take the upgrade in a heartbeat."

Holtzmann's whistling trailed off, and there was an awkward moment of silence as they threaded their way around other people in a bottlenecked stretch of sidewalk under construction scaffolding. Joey threaded, that is, protecting the cake; Holtzmann just sauntered straight through them. As small as she was, other people got out of her way. When they rejoined each other, Holtzmann went on a ramble about superstitions involving whistling, and the quaint notion that only lesbians whistled, and other whistling folklore that she'd learned from Patty. Then she moved on to the physics of whistling, throwing around phrases like "acoustic resonance like whoa" and "super-duper pressure oscillations."

Eventually they reached the construction project that Holtzmann wanted to see. "Hey, looks like the site is open," Holtzmann said, with a grin.

Someone else might have pointed out that a gap between overlapping sections of board didn't mean "open," but certainly not Joey. Holtzmann slipped through and Joey followed.

Between the low angle of the sun and the height of the surrounding buildings, the construction site was entirely in deep shadow. The concrete around them was cold, and Joey shivered. She looked around. "It's a…sort of weird, angular parking garage?" Architecturally avant-garde, anyway, that was for sure.

"No, no, not that. If you look right over there, you'll see the latest intelligent excavator straight from Japan. It uses AI and GPS/GNSS data to do automated 3D digging. It's got tasty little stroke-sensing hydraulics on the boom and whatnot, and all sorts of other bells and whistles. It's not even for sale yet. The construction company has connections, see. I normally work pretty small but man, the potential for building—" and Holtzmann was off and running, verbally speaking. Joey just tried to keep up. "I don't have an heavy equipment operating license," concluded Holtzmann, "or rather, I don't anymore, but it's not like I forgot how. The question is, is this doohickey the kind of thing you can even leave a key in?"

"Holtz, wait, I think they have cameras—" Joey started, and Holtzmann froze. Her eyes went wide. She pointed past Joey.
"Patty was right about this being a bad place to build something." Holtzmann whooped with glee. "A Class I floating vaporous entity. Nothing to worry about."

Joey carefully looked over her shoulder. "Fuck!" There was a roiling blob of bile-green fog between them and the gap where they'd entered.

Holtzmann waved at it, then stuck her hands in her pockets and strolled toward it. "Maybe it's frie—"

Although the ghost didn't move toward them, it heaved, and then a glowing green fireball streaked past them and shattered the glass windows of the excavator. "Well, that was unexpected! Neat!"

"Holtz, what do we do? We don't have any gear!" Somehow this situation had never occurred to Joey.

Holtzmann looked surprised, too. Her hand twitched over her shoulder toward her backpack, but then she met Joey's eyes for a fraction of a second and shook her head. "No time to play. We need to get out." She glanced around the courtyard, and her face confirmed what Joey thought: there weren't any obvious ways out, other than going right past the ghost. "C'mon, let's try the excavator! Smash our way out!" Holtzmann dashed over to it and hauled herself up the side.

"Holtz, don't get cut!"

Holtzmann waggled her glove-covered hands at Joey. "Safety glass is for dudes!" She dived into the cabin of the excavator. Joey jumped behind the machine just as another fireball whizzed over its top. She heard muffled cursing from inside the equipment, and a moment later, Holtzmann tumbled out of the door above Joey's head. "Damn thing's all digital. I don't even think it has a key, I think you gotta start it with software. Ugh, gonna leave an angry Yelp review!"

The excavator rocked and they backed away from it. "We gotta fight back. I need cover and like three minutes!" Holtzmann said urgently. She pointed toward the parking garage. Joey couldn't tell whether she was frantic or stoked.

"We'll get trapped!" Joey objected.

"What else is there? Come on!"

Holtzmann had a point. Joey clutched the cake and ran into the byzantine structure alongside Holtzmann.

"Pffft! That is one slow-ass ghost!" Holtzmann said as they ran into the garage. It was dark inside; minimal emergency LEDs cast sharply focused circles of unsettling blue light. "Joey, get down!" She grabbed the back of Joey's jacket and wrenched Joey toward her. The smell of ozone bloomed around them as a loud crackling sound lashed past Joey's right shoulder. The fireball slammed into a curving wall ahead of them, leaving a ghostly light that illuminated a large splatter of ectoplasm with a scorch mark at its center.

Joey regained her footing. "Too bad the fireballs are so fast." Her voice came out calmer than she'd expected.

"Is everything—"

"I've still got my grip on the cake." Joey had one hand knotted in the handles of the bag and the other arm wrapped protectively around the box.

"No, I meant—c'mon. Down there!" Holtz gestured and Joey nodded.
At least getting around the curve would put them out of the ghost's line of fire for a moment. They raced down the staccato darkness of the ramp, footsteps echoing. Holtzmann, without breaking stride, produced a flashlight out of a jacket pocket and pointed it ahead of them. Joey scanned for a hiding place as well as she could. Then the beam traced a jagged path across a section of wall, and its light was briefly swallowed.

"Holtz! Here?" Joey jerked her chin toward the wall and Holtzmann spun around to shine her light into a narrow alcove. Joey made a face. Maybe not there. The alcove didn't seem to serve any purpose, other than to be a really strange size. It had less room in it than she'd thought. "I don't think we can even fit. I hate this architect," Joey grumbled.

"I bet they're award-winning, too." Holtzmann matched her grumble.

Behind and above them, they heard the sound of the fireballs, and they saw a green flicker light up the now-distant top of the ramp.

"Gimme the cake," Holtzmann said. "Come on!"

Joey handed it to her automatically before realizing that for all she knew, Holtzmann was just going to have a snack (ghost be damned). But Holtzmann just set it on the smooth floor and slid it into the back of the alcove. Joey opened her mouth to protest. "Can't have you getting zapped over a cake that isn't even more than one tier," Holtzmann said, managing to also 1) wink and 2) grab Joey by the shoulders and wrangle her into the narrow space. "Be vewy, vewy quiet."

They were jammed into the gap chest-to-chest, as far back as they could go. Holtzmann clicked off her flashlight. Joey tried to breathe quietly, but her heart was pounding in her ears. She could feel Holtzmann's chest rising and falling. Joey couldn't see Holtzmann's eyes in the darkness, couldn't see anything other than the narrow rectangle of blue and dark grey at the opening. It was hard not to remember the time they'd tumbled into the maintenance closet, though it felt as though it had been years ago instead of months. She closed her eyes and concentrated on being still. But even with her eyes shut, she could see the bolt of green light that seared past their hiding place.

But Holtzmann was there. They were going to be OK.

Joey's breasts rested just above Holtzmann's, and there was an electric line starting there and running down their waists and thighs, where they were connected. Holtzmann could feel every involuntary twitch Joey made. She kept her eyes fixed firmly on the small opening to the rest of the garage, but she was scared. This wasn't like a bust. More like being chased and trapped, like when...Well, she wasn't helpless now. They were going to get out, and the other Ghostbusters would be amazed by the epic story, and Joey would be impressed, and...

If the ghost didn't immediately spot them and flood their nook with eerie flames, anyway. Holtzmann was itching to get into her backpack, but it was pressed between her and the wall. Its contents pushed into her vertebrae. If she'd been alone, there was no question, she'd already be pushing her luck. But Joey was here and if the damn thing would just float on by them, go deeper into the garage and disappear, then they could just get out. Come back and do it properly, with the whole gang. So as boring as it was, it was worth rolling the dice and waiting.

Time passed, really slowly and in the right order. Holtzmann wanted to flop around in irritation. But the ghost finally made its way past them, without even pausing. Holtzmann waited a little longer and then sighed in relief. "I think it's gone," she whispered, and (somewhat reluctantly) wriggled her way free of Joey.
She peeked down the passageway and immediately twitched back into their hiding place. Keeping her voice as low as possible, she said, "Slowface is not gone. It's just turning around, reeeeeeeally slowly, at the far end. I don't think it knows exactly where we are, but it knows we're on this level. If we run for it, it's got a straight shot. But it's way down there. We have a little time." She couldn't help a grin. "Guess we're having an unscheduled field test."

"A what?"

Holtzmann felt for Joey's hand in the dark, ignored the tingling sensation, and pressed her flashlight into Joey's hand. "Give me a little light—just a little."

With a minimum of rustling, Joey turned on the light, pointing it away from the opening and cupping her free hand over the business end. "What are we doing?"

Holtzmann eased off her backpack and squatted over it. "Down here." It was a little more awkward for Joey, but she managed to kneel on the concrete too. "This." Holtzmann pulled out the pieces of the wireless proton mini-shotgun that she'd been working on. "My little extracurricular project." She glanced over at Joey, who shifted and glanced up at her, looking hopeful.

Joey wrapped the flashlight in her scarf, dimming the light, and set it down. Then she wriggled awkwardly out of her jacket, spreading it between them. She patted it and Holtzmann carefully, quietly dumped the parts onto the jacket. Holtzmann's fingers traced the shoulder of the jacket, feeling where the leather had been burnt away by the fireball to leave only the armor she'd added. There was a trace of sticky ectoplasm.

"Gonna have to repair that, but the armor did all right. Score one for me! Hey, Joey…why did you keep wearing it? After I threw it at you and all." Oops. Well, that had just slipped out, hadn't it. Joey tensed and looked over at her. Holtzmann couldn't quite make out what her brown eyes were saying, but Joey had flushed so hard that Holtzmann could see it despite the shadows across her face. "I…it was the closest I could…uh. Look, if the shielding works, could I run out of here and get the others? There's no signal in this concrete mess."

"What? No!" Holtzmann couldn't help but picture Joey facing a bombardment of fireballs, and flinched. "Not if you want to keep your legs or your head or you know, other important parts. We gotta focus up here." But it was herself that Holtzmann needed to tell. Look at all this nice, challenging, interesting, fun science. She had to focus on that. If that meant the back of her brain was working on something she'd explicitly told it not to, well, let it.

Holtzmann grabbed two pieces and started rapidly fitting them together, narrating what she was doing and her hopes for the shotgun's performance. Finally, she fitted the heavy, dense battery into it. "It's mostly charged, but y'know, power's always an issue, so…" She hauled out a tangle of power banks and a heavily frankensteined set of adaptors that had never been meant to work together.

Joey hissed softly between her teeth and lunged to grab some of them before they clanked together. Holtzmann grinned at her.

Holtzmann leaned toward the edge of the wall again and peeked. The ghost was still distant. She drew her head back and two bolts of green fire tore past. "That'll spice up the work." She fitted the final adapter into the underside of the butt of the gun and reached for the power switch, but then paused and regarded the weapon. "Y'know, I was planning for solo testing. I did put on shielding…I mean, I didn't test it, but at least it's there. But this might shorten your life expectancy by a little. Not very much. Maybe not even at all!"
Joey grinned back at her. "Not as much as a fireball to the head, right?"

Holtzmann choked back a laugh, and nodded.

"Then it's OK."

Holtzmann hit the switch and a high-pitched whine made both of them wince. A green bar began to light up along the side, one tick at a time.

"It's going to find us," Joey said, not losing her savoir faire. At least, not so that Holtzmann could see.

"In a minute it won't matter. We're gonna give it something to remember." Holtzmann stood and raised the shotgun to her shoulder—or attempted to. "Ah, fuck. How'm I supposed to aim with the world's jankiest, heaviest cell phone charms hanging off here?"

There was a minuscule pause. "Duct tape," they said simultaneously.

"I've got a bit in my wallet," Joey offered.

_Babe. Of course you do._ "There's a whole roll in my backpack." Holtzmann kicked it with her toe and Joey got it out.

"Are we really taping batteries to a gun?" asked Joey. She got to her feet and started to pull off a length of tape.

Holtzmann snorted. "I've duct-taped weirder things to weirder things. Just try and evenly distribute 'em—here, no, don't block that. Yeah, good." It was nice having Joey's hands working with hers.

She pushed her glasses up on her nose, raised the gun again (this time successfully), and took a breath. _Please. Of all the things in your life that you could fuck up, not this one. Not this one._ She flashed a grin at Joey. "Ready, steady, go!"

Joey pressed herself against the wall to give Holtzmann as much room as she could. Holtz was so cool, just dizzyingly cool. More cool than she would have thought anyone could fit in such a small package.

Holtzmann leaned out and fired a burst of twisting blue and pink energy toward the ghost. "Oof!" The—well, Joey supposed Holtzmann would say it wasn't technically recoil, but whatever it was—the kickback threw Holtzmann's shoulder back and made her stagger into the wall. The high-pitched whine started to build up again.

"You OK?" Joey asked, trying not to sound as worried as she felt. _Please be careful, Holtz. This isn't a firing range._

Holtzmann grumbled genially. "Aiming is way off. Gonna have to fix that, and everything else too. Better luck this time." The whine hit a peak. "Bend your knees, Holtzmann," she instructed herself, and then she took another shot. "Yeah! Take that! Whooooops."

Holtzmann retreated just as another fireball tore past. "Got one hit!" The whine built up again; this time she knelt, and then fired again. "Ha! That's two! Oh, shit!"

She pushed Joey into the back of the alcove and wedged herself between Joey and the wall again. A barrage of ghostly green bolts flew past; one splashed into the edge of the wall and left a glowing
gouge and a black mark. Holtzmann tossed Joey a half-cocked grin. "'What?! Ghost is evolving!'"

Joey hoped neither the stars in her eyes nor the fear in her heart showed. "It's not just shooting in straight lines anymore? How far away is it?"

Holtzmann closed her eyes for a brief moment. As chill as she appeared to be, sweat was beading on her forehead. Joey wanted to kiss it away, but instead she wriggled a handkerchief out of her pocket. She held it up and Holtzmann shrugged, keeping the shotgun pointed at the floor, so Joey brushed away several wild strands of hair and carefully wiped away the sweat before it got into Holtz's eyes. She told herself that if Holtzmann noticed her hand shaking, she'd surely chalk it up to the adrenaline.

"Far enough for another set of shots at least. It seems to be moving faster, but the knockback on this shotgun is pretty decent," Holtzmann said. "That's the good news. And since for some reason people always wanna know, the bad news is that yeah, Slowface seems to be changing its firing angles now. But my rough calculations say that won't be a big deal right away. You want to know the other bad news?"

"The other—well, not really, but tell me."

"I gotta charge up between sets of shots, and I don't actually know how many sets I'm going to get out of this thing. We're damaging Slowface, but I don't know how many shots it's going to take to splat it."

"Ah."

A moment passed where they just breathed together. Joey could feel the tension throughout Holtzmann's body.

Abruptly, Holtzmann looked down at her gun and asked, "Why'd you stick around?"

Joey would've drawn back if she could have, but there was nowhere to go. What was Holtzmann asking? "I—I kind of didn't stick around. I mean, I gave up too easily."

Holtzmann met her gaze. Even in the dim light, even through Holtzmann's lenses, her eyes were intense. "You didn't give up on us, though. You came back. Even though…"

"I never really gave up on you," Joey said, finally. She knew she could've edited that sentence before it came out of her mouth, to be less ambiguous about "you" was, and she just chose not to. "I've put up with worse for less. A lot less. And things happen. If I…if I care, then, you know. I don't expect everything to be simple."

Joey was acutely aware of the way their legs were pressing into each other. The whine from the gun became unbearable. Holtzmann leaned out and fired, her eyes barely leaving Joey's face.

"Nothing's simple around me," Holtzmann said, with almost no inflection.

"Good things are usually complex, in my experience." Now Joey wished they'd made it clear what exactly they were talking about.

Holtzmann fired again. She grunted as her arm jerked back, and then crammed herself into the alcove. Fireballs sailed past again; this time two or three hit the edge, and Joey couldn't help pulling Holtzmann toward her, even though there was only a tiny amount of extra space.

"Your arm and shoulder…"
"…Are gonna survive," Holtzmann said. "Last shot this round."

Joey watched Holtzmann brace and take the third shot. She was magnificent: fearless, determined, endlessly competent, and beautiful. And a genius.

*Never thought I'd fall in love with a superhero.*

Holtzmann rolled back into their hiding place. She thought maybe the ghost's rate of fire had increased, but the ghost itself was also weakening. Maybe they could pull it off. Holtzmann's heart was pounding, partly from the exertion of the firefight and partly because the back of her brain had finished its puzzling and had a conclusion. Why now? Why was her brain so wayward? Joey was still calm as ever, at least.

"C'mere." Joey gestured toward Holtzmann's chest and for a panicky moment, Holtzmann didn't know what she wanted. But then she nodded at the scarf in her hand. "We don't need to hide the light anymore, so let's give this a try."

Holtzmann nodded, not sure what she was agreeing to, and Joey folded the scarf and gently slipped her hands into Holtzmann's jacket. "Maybe this'll help with the kickback."

"I, uh…that's smart. But I don't think it's gonna stay. I'm all right though."

"Are you wearing a bra or anything?"

"*Excuse* me, Miss Betancourt?"

"Because a strap would be helpful."

"Oh. Uh, yeah. Go ahead, that's very…practical."

Moving even more cautiously, Joey unbuttoned the top buttons of Holtzmann's striped shirt. Her warm fingers brushed Holtzmann's skin gingerly and then carefully lifted the strap of her bra. "Sorry. Is this OK?"

"It's fine." It was fine…like house burning down around her ears fine. Joey's touch didn't hurt the bruises that Holtzmann knew were blooming, but it still seared. Holtzmann was tremendously glad that she had to wait for the full charge again. She wasn't sure if she'd be able to shoot straight otherwise.

"Maybe that'll make recovery a little less bad," Joey said, withdrawing her hands. "I wish I could do something useful here. You don't have a second one of those stashed away somewhere, do you?"

"I wish."

"Oh well, I didn't think so. I'm sorry I'm not very useful. Please don't get hurt, OK?"

"Roger that." Holtzmann swallowed. "And you are useful. There's no one I'd rather get stuck in a narrow concrete passageway with while fighting off a ghost and protecting a cake."

Joey grinned, which made her warm brown eyes even warmer. "I bet you say that to all the girls."

Holtzmann let out a whuff of air, and she felt a lock of hair float up from her forehead and settle back down. "There aren't other girls," she said, with a half-grin to make it not sound so serious.

Joey's eyebrows narrowed ever so slightly, like she was parsing the meaning of *other*. Damn, it was
tricky sometimes, talking to a writer. Was Joey picking up on what Holtzmann 100% meant but but also 100% didn't want to say? Did Holtzmann even want her to?

Holtzmann's back-brain presented its conclusions to her: She wanted this. It wasn't that having a girlfriend was more of a relationship than a deep friendship (honestly, so far in her life it'd been the opposite). It was just something that she wanted. But she still didn't want whatever it was that she'd had with women before. She'd previously concluded that there wasn't anything else, so it wasn't worth the toll on her time, energy, emotional reserves, and sense of self.

But Joey had stuck around, and then she'd come back, and that already made her different from anyone who wasn't a Ghostbuster.

So, maybe, it was worth… a pilot study. A test run.

The problem was still the same one variable as always, though: Holtzmann herself. Nothing had changed there.

"How much garbage are you willing to put up with?" she asked Joey.

Joey blinked. "What?"

"See, I do that, I have a whole discussion in my head and then I blurt something out. Usually, you know, I just keep going. Make everyone else work to keep up with me, or not, either way. But that's the sort of garbage you have to put up with on a daily—multiple-times-a-daily—basis just to be in the same vicinity as me. Paying for my cheesesteaks is nothing compared to that or everything else, you know?" Holtzmann took a breath. "Here is some other garbage stuff that I, as a garbage person, would inflict on you. Take notes; if you make it to the final exam, it's gonna be a doozy."

Joey's face was raw with some kind of emotion that Holtzmann didn't know the name of. Holtzmann did know that her mouth was running away with her, but her frantic energy only built as the whine from the shotgun picked up pace again. "I can't actually list all the ways that I fuck up, but I fuck up a lot. There's a lot of things I don't have a handle on. I mean, you must have picked up to some degree, right? You're observant. I try really hard not to be a mess from fifty paces, but the closer up you get, the harder it is to avoid the garbage pile."

"I—you're not—"

Holtzmann felt a surge of perverse anger. Why wouldn't Joey listen to her? "I was sad a while back. Upset. Lonely. Whatever." The words felt fake in her mouth. "I didn't get drunk or call a therapist or ask the 'busters for hugs or eat a tub of ice cream or even cry into the damn cat's fur. That's what non-garbage people do. Smash a project, even. I've done that before. I'll do it again. But fuck all that, apparently! I couldn't do anything that normal. You wanna know what I did? I went to this shitpile called Babylon, and I—"

"Holt."

Holtzmann, with a full head of steam, was rarely knocked off her tracks by anyone. But Joey's face, with her mouth drawn into a straight line, and her eyes suddenly not soft anymore, did it. "Wha— what?"

"Look, I saw you—" Joey started, and Holtzmann's world ended. She felt all of the blood leave her face, and without any conscious thought at all, her next move was to try to lunge out of their hiding place—time to stop pussyfooting around and get rid of the ghost, and get the hell out of there, and—

But Joey had Holtzmann's leg caught between hers, and Holtzmann was suddenly reminded that
Joey was taller and bigger than she was. "Please stop," Joey said. "I don't know what happened. I only saw—a little. You'd just gone in. And I shouldn't have been there. I followed you in from the sidewalk, which is…gross, and creepy. So I'm sorry I did that. But I left. And I don't care what happened next. You don't have to tell me. I don't care. I. Don't. Care."

Joey had seen something. Before she had asked Holtzmann out. Before.

And yet.

Still.

A series of green fireballs hammered the edge of the wall again

"This asshole is the worst!" Holtzman yelled. She untangled herself from Joey's legs and moved out to take her shots. No, she wasn't going to let Slowface get either one of them. This time she dodged while the gun recharged, instead of going back in, and landed all three shots. Its grip on their reality was loosening; it was so close to going, but damned if that didn't seem to have zero effect on the frequency or power of its fireballs. She sprinted back into the alcove, panting.

"Please be careful out there," Joey said, reaching toward Holtzmann's shoulder and then letting her hand drop. "Maybe I could divert it—"

"Nope. Get your own Slowface!" Holtzmann winked and then ran her free hand through her hair with a deep breath. "Hypothetical situation: You finally grok the magnitude of this mess and realize you don't wanna deal with it. Which, fair. Do you—"

"Holtzmann. No. I mean, I don't know where my life will take me next. But if you and I were dating—we are talking about dating, right?—and we decided to…to end it, for whatever reason, I wouldn't leave you guys. Unless you wanted me to. I'm pretty good at staying friends with my exes. But how are we talking 'exes' when we haven't even—"

Holtzmann did her best to choke off the tiny flame of hope that was jetting up in her heart. She looked at her gun so she wouldn't have to look at Joey's painfully sincere face. The charge indicator was blinking. Shit. She slid to the floor and started digging through her backpack. They were going to have to make some quick decisions in a moment. As she dug, she discovered that she was still talking. "What if I hurt you, Joey? One way or another. What if you're the next one who winds up in a coma?"

Joey knelt beside her, a puzzled expression on her face. "I signed a waiver, didn't I? C'mon, Holtz, you've read my CV. You know I take good risks for good reasons. And I can take care of myself."

A huge fireball exploded right outside of their hiding place; its outer perimeter broached the entry, and Holtzmann smelled ectoplasm and ozone. And scorched concrete, or anyway, apparently that's what that smell was. Holtzmann wanted a nap. Joey was making her heart swell, but their situation was making her heart clench like a fist. Managing either feeling would've been exhausting. Keeping both feelings down so that she could function—kind of necessary at the moment!—was almost more than she could handle. Buck up, kid, she told herself. Life finds a way.

"I mean I guess we can launch a preliminary trial, then," Holtzmann said, in a rush. She grinned tightly. "If we survive this." Though it was true that on some level, it might be a relief to just not have to deal with that trial. She tried to push that thought away, too. The containment unit was getting crowded. "Unfortunately this prototype is about done for. I can get one more shot off, maybe. So…"
Joey wasted a precious millisecond just staring at her. Holtzmann didn't know which statement she was reacting to, or if she'd even understood anything Holtzmann had just said. Then she dove into her own bag and brought out a palm-sized power bank. "Would this help at all?"

Ah. It made sense that she'd carry one, given her line of work, so why hadn't Holtzmann thought of asking her for help? "Let me jam it in there." That's what she said.

Joey was gathering up her things. She seemed to have figured out that they were going to have to run for it. Then she thrust her jacket toward Holtzmann. "You're the one taking the risks. You ought to wear this."

"No!" Holtzmann pushed it back toward her. "Uh, I mean…you wear it, just concentrate on getting out. It's too big for me, anyway. This thing is hard enough to aim as it is. C'mon, move it."

Joey made a face, then smiled, not in an entirely convincing way. "You gotta stop saving me like this. A girl could get used to it." She put the jacket on, strapped her bag across her, and grabbed the cake box. Holtzmann stood and shrugged into her backpack. The shotgun was whining furiously, and Holtzmann tightened her grip on it.

"Stay back for a mo'. After the next volley, run for the hills. As much distance as you can. Don't stop. I mean it, don't stop. I'll be right behind you. If you stop I'm going to trip over you and we're both gonna regret it." She poked Joey in the shoulder. "Capsice?"

They locked eyes and for a moment, Holtzmann thought Joey was going to argue with her, but much to her relief, Joey nodded.

Holtzmann counted under her breath. Then a series of enormous green fireballs filled the entryway. They both flinched back, just centimeters from being hit. The instant the flame began to fade, she stuck her head out. The ghost roamed over the garage floor, and it was much closer than she wanted it to be. But even though it was faster now, its movements were still as vague as they'd been before. She jerked her head at Joey to get moving.

As Joey stepped out, her hand brushed against Holtzmann's free hand, and Holtzmann felt a tiny squeeze of her fingers. Then Joey was off, pelting toward the ramp. Holtzmann followed, glancing behind her. As soon as she put a little more distance between herself and Not-as-slow-as-it-used-to-be-face, and got close to a curve, she'd find out if there was any juice left.

Joey heard Holtzmann yell "Duck left!" and she did, brushing against the wall. A set of fireballs streamed past. She risked a quick look back. She didn't like running ahead of Holtz like this, and she wasn't going to let anything happen to her if she could help it.

The green glow cast by the ghost was just visible around the beginning of the ramp's curve behind them—but then she blinked, and the ghost was bearing down on them in its indirect way, not exactly slow anymore and much more menacing than it had seemed previously.

Holtzmann caught Joey's elbow with her free hand and urged her forward. "Keep going!" She fired back over her shoulder without looking. The glow, which had gotten close enough that they could now see their own shadows stretching out before them, shrunk and pulsed as her shot landed, but it was still there. "Damn!"

They ran hard. Through the pounding of her heart and their feet, Joey could hear the grating whine of the gun, now fluctuating wildly. Did that mean there were no shots left? Joey tried to put it out of her mind and focus only on reaching the daylight ahead of them. They were almost there, for
whatever good it would do them.

Holtzmann whirled around but kept moving, running backwards. "One more shot. Maybe. Gotta make it count." Abruptly, right at the exit, she dropped to one knee and took careful aim.

"Holtz!" Joey found she'd stopped running without any conscious thought. "What are you doing?" Holtz was out in the open, not moving: an easy target for the ghost.

But Holtzmann was entirely focused on Slowface. She fired the gun. A fiercely magenta- and cobalt-colored bolt shot directly into the center of the ghost. Then everything happened at once, in slow motion. Holtzmann's shoulder was wrenched backwards. A mass of fireballs flew directly at Holtzmann's head. The ghost started to burst apart. And the erratic whine of Holtzmann's gun turned into a horrible screaming sound. Cracks spread along its barrel and it started to glow.

Joey dropped the cake and threw herself at Holtzmann, flattening her against the concrete. Holtzmann yelped and dropped the gun, and Joey kicked it away, down the ramp, as hard as she could. The fireballs flew right over them; Joey could feel her bangs lifting in the passage of the uncanny energy. She curled herself around Holtzmann, turning her back to the parking garage ramp, and squeezed her eyes shut. She felt Holtzmann wriggle in confused protest, and then a terrific explosion roared behind them. Something battered against her back. Bilious chartreuse light flooded everything around them and then subsided.

There was a moment of silence in which Joey couldn't hear anything except the faint ringing of her ears. Then she felt Holtzmann shaking, and realized she was shaking, too. Joey let go, thinking to make sure Holtzmann was okay, and saw that Holtzmann was, in fact, laughing. Her cheek was scraped and bleeding, but otherwise, ignoring the gray dust on her forehead and in her hair, she looked intact.

Holtzmann flopped over onto her back, still laughing, and grabbed Joey's hand. "Sorry about your battery pack, Joey," she gasped. "That was one hell of a field test!"

Joey started laughing too, although she wasn't sure what was so funny. Lying there on the sun-warmed pavement, laughing, with her hand in Holtz's, just felt good. "I'm never lending you anything ever again," she said. "I mean I'll just give it to you and not worry about getting it back. OK?"

"Fair," Holtzmann giggled. "Oh, shit." She sat straight up and looked down at Joey. "You're bleeding. Are you OK?"


"Eh, it's gonna hurt, but whatever. I'll let Doctor Abby do her thing when we get back." Holtzmann pushed Joey into a half turn and ran her hands down the back of her jacket. "The leather's kinda gone. The good news is that the armor worked; the bad news is that you're not gonna be wearing this for a while. Also, I'm gonna want to run some blood tests on you. Just to be on the safe side. You idiot!" Holtzmann laughed again, but this time with a ragged edge to it. She rearranged herself so that she was facing Joey, and punched her in the shoulder. "You saved my life. That was a dumb move! Don't do that again."

"Make me," retorted Joey. Flushed with adrenaline, she punched Holtzmann back. Not too hard, and not in her injured shoulder. "Anyway, you promised me a preliminary trial, which I think means that you asked me out, and for that we both gotta be alive."
"Ah, hell. You do know how to sweet-talk a girl." Holtzmann reached a hand out to Joey's face. "Can I—"

Joey caught Holtzmann's hand and pressed the gloved palm to her cheek, the one that wasn't bleeding. She nodded. The next thing she knew, Holtzmann's mouth was on hers. She leaned into it and wrapped her arms around Holtzmann. The mix of relief, adrenaline, happiness, and arousal running through her was dizzying, but it was OK. She didn't have to get up or go anywhere or do anything. She didn't really know how she'd wound up here, with this incandescent genius and her tongue in Joey's mouth; she hadn't done anything to deserve it, but she didn't want it to end.

"Shit," Holtzmann said, or something like it, given where her tongue was at the moment.

_*Oh my god, my heart can't take this. Wh-what?*_

"Two things," said Holtzmann. She scrambled to her feet and dragged Joey up with her. She gave Joey a huge, dimpled smile. "Three things. One, we're probably both gonna regret this. OK? Just had to get that out there." She kissed Joey again, and Joey just blinked at her. "Two, the cake is on the ground."

"Oh, damn." Joey reluctantly let go of Holtzmann's hand and picked up the box. She peeked into it. "The frosting appears to have…uh."

"Suffered rapid deceleration trauma? Oh well, we're taking it to HQ anyway. Whoops, three things. Three is: Sirens. Maybe two kilometers away. Let's get the hell out of here. Abby and Erin can clear things up later. I don't wanna stand around chatting with the fuzz all afternoon."

Joey nodded. Hesitantly, she reached for Holtzmann's hand again. Holtzmann grinned wryly and shook her head, as though resigned to something, and took Joey's hand. It took them a while to coordinate walking that way, but by the time they arrived at HQ, they'd gotten it figured out.

As they approached the firehouse, Holtzmann checked in with herself and realized she had no idea how she was actually feeling. She seemed to be experiencing every possible emotion at once. Fear, triumph, anticipation, resignation, pessimism, optimism, anxiety, happiness, and at least two different flavors of excitement. It was pretty close to overwhelming. She glanced at Joey's bright face and told herself to focus on feeling good for now. She had definitely earned it. Right?

They crammed themselves through the door still holding hands.

"GUYS! Are you back? We have a cake, but it's busted. And also, speaking of busted, did Joey and I just singlehandedly bust a super freaky Type I on steroids? Hell yes we did."

Patty, Erin, Abby, and Kevin all stared at them from the office area. Patty's eyebrows rose toward her hairline. Abby and Erin had the same expression they usually wore when Holtzmann accidentally started an explanation of a new idea at the halfway point instead of the beginning. Kevin looked thoughtful. Then he said, "Cake? Whose birthday is it? Is it a surprise? Also, are you guys stuck together?" He gestured at their hands with a staple remover.

"Whaaaaa—? No, see?" Holtzmann freed her hand and wagged her fingers, then slung her arm around Joey's waist and shoved her fingers into the back pocket of Joey's jeans.

Patty's eyebrows reached new heights. "Yeah, let's come back to the ghost later. Although…you guys are bleeding."

"I'm getting the first aid kit," said Abby quickly. "But yeah, tell us about the bust later. Who cares
about ghosts anyway?" Erin nodded emphatically.

"What's gotten into you guys?" asked Holtzmann. "Ohhhh. Yeah, we're dating now. Can you three ladies come upstairs and help me with this cake?"

4 cans of randomly-colored frosting later, they had assembled something approximating a cake. The original frosting had been scraped off of the cake and (mostly) the box. The others hadn't asked too many questions about Joey and Holtzmann before moving on to the bust debriefing, though Holtzmann found that they kept maneuvering to make sure that she and Joey were side-by-side. And that had turned out to be kind of nice. Instead of trying to pretend they hadn't bumped hips or whatever, they could grin at each other. There had been a couple of discreet kissing-away-errant-frosting incidents, too. It was pleasant and low-key. Already more successful than a lot of Holtzmann's romantic encounters had been…

"Ready?" said Erin. She had bought a set of those cake candles that use trace amounts of various minerals to create differently colored flames.

"Ooh ooh ooh, can I—" Holtzmann dearly wanted to light those candles.

Patty shook her head with a grin and passed the lighter to Joey, who passed it to Holtzmann.

"Aw, I mean, just with this? I got some better stuff upstairs—"

"Probably enough pyrotechnics for one day, don't you think?" said Joey. "I mean, at least of that kind."

Holtzmann waggled her eyebrows extravagantly. The one time she'd almost gotten to know Joey's body and what she liked, they'd been rudely interrupted. It was data collection that she had to admit she was looking forward to resuming.

"Oh my god just light the candles like a normal person," exclaimed Abby. "KEVIN! Get up here."

Holtzmann sighed and lit the candles.

After assorted mysterious noises from the office, Kevin came up the stairs and into the kitchen. "Uh, guys, your food is on fire."

"Happy birthday, Kevin!" they all yelled.

Kevin, as it turned out, was both surprised that it was his birthday they were celebrating and that they had somehow known exactly what he liked. "Cake is gross. Just eat a dish sponge, you know? Frosting, that's what I'm talking about!" He had taken the bowl of scraped-off icing for his own, and was happily eating it.

Eventually, the sun slipped below the horizon and Kevin, beaming and full of sugar, went back to his desk. Patty turned down the lights and switched on the rainbow LED ropes that she'd strung around the ceiling for Halloween and never taken down. After a while, she and the others drifted downstairs, and Holtzmann found herself sitting at the table with Joey.

"You realize this means our 'dateaversary' is going to be on Kevin's birthday," Joey said in a teasing tone. The multihued light cast a rosy softness over her face. There was a crumb on her lower lip and for a moment, that distracted Holtzmann so much that she couldn't process what Joey was saying. Dateaversary? Was that a thing?

"You mean, like. To celebrate a year. 365 days," Holtzmann said. Good job, Holtzmann. For your
next trick, you can recite the alphabet. "Of dating."

Joey shrugged. "I mean, it's been a long time since I observed one myself."

"I..." Holtzmann fell silent. A year? It was hard to picture.

Joey looked at her and then gave her a gentle hug. "Sorry. No pressure."

Was she going to be this vulnerable all the time around Joey? She resolved not to be. But... "Are you sure about this? I mean, really sure?"

Joey's forehead creased. She gently put her hands on Holtzmann's cheeks, slowly enough that Holtzmann could have stopped her if she'd wanted to. Joey looked right into Holtzmann's eyes and held her gaze steadily. Holtzmann wasn't sure if she couldn't look away from Joey's face, or if she just didn't want to, but either way, she didn't dodge. "Holtzmann. Listen to me. I like you. I really like you. I've met lots of people and you know, most of them are OK, but you, I like."

Holtzmann blinked rapidly. A particularly foolhardy ex had told Holtzmann that she loved her, about a week after they'd met. Not that it hadn't been gratifying, under the terror it had induced in her, but it hadn't felt like this. Like...like someone had dropped a boulder into the bottom of a deep well. She knew Abby and the others liked her, and maybe a couple of other people did, but hearing it was different. Qualitatively different.

"Holtz. Really. Even when I left, I didn't stop liking you. I've liked you from basically the moment we met. You're funny, you're kind, you're interested in everything, you talk to me like I'm your intellectual equal, which—ha!" Joey laughed drily. Holtzmann tried to interrupt her, but Joey shook her head and kept talking. "I like you, full stop. And I have a proven track record of still liking people after we...we've broken up. OK? I just like you and nothing is going to change that. Can you believe me?"

Holtzmann was at a loss for words. If she said anything, it wouldn't be cool or even calm. She solved her problem by leaning in and kissing that crumb away. Joey kissed her back, and finally, Holtzmann said, "It shames me to say it, as a profesh scientist, but I'm gonna take your word for it."

Joey lit up, a sweet smile that Holtzmann hadn't ever seen before. More kissing was probably in order, she decided. At some point she was going to have to figure out an actual date to ask Joey on, but she'd have to get help from the others for that. Later.

"You still got that P.PBAD around?" asked Joey.

"I want to, though."

"Well, good, because the P.PBAD Mark III is ready for you." Holtzmann headed for the lab and
Joey followed close behind her. The Mark III was about the size of an old Polaroid camera, unlike the Mark II, which...well, they had all agreed not to talk about it. The new ceiling tile was better, anyway. "See, the Mark III is lighter and awesomer. Here's the deets." Holtzmann showed her the operations and Joey nodded.

"Got it." Joey grabbed it and gamely strapped it around her neck. She started for the door and Holtzmann caught her hand. She pulled Joey close and leaned into her, pushing Joey into the wall next to the door. It was a cheap trick, but she loved it, and she could tell that Joey liked it, too.

Holtzmann pulled Joey's head down to her. She was mindful of the alarm, but more kissing was in order. She couldn't help sliding her hands under Joey's shirt and up her side. Electricity shot through her fingers, up her arms, through her heart, and directly into her pants.

"Holtz," murmured Joey breathlessly. "I can hardly stand up, but shouldn't we be getting ready for the bust?"

"Why do you think I'm this turned on?" Holtzmann said. She grinned, feeling a surge of confidence. "This is going to be off-the-charts awesome."

Joey laughed and slipped her own fingers down Holtzmann's back, just past the waist of her trousers. Then she used her position to try to roll Holtzmann toward the door, and Holtzmann let her do it.

"Holtzmann! Where the hell are you?" shouted Abby as they headed down the stairs.

"Abby! They're—" Patty, telling Abby something and trying not to be heard.

"Oh. Ohhh. Uh—I mean—take your time!" Abby yelled. "But hurry up with it!"

Holtzmann pelted to the bottom of the stairs, not letting go of Joey's hand. "I'm here! We're here! We're both here! Me and my girlfriend! We are stoked and ready to rumble!" She whooped, and her little family just beamed at her.

Then it was the usual giddy rush of getting geared up and tumbling into the Ectomobile, ready to head out to who knows what. It was a little different this time, though. It felt different. As Holtzmann gunned the engine, she glanced at Joey's smiling face in the rear-view mirror and winked at her. Joey blew her a kiss in return. It was ridiculous how that made her heart want to explode.

They sped out into the night, sirens screaming, and Holtzmann just hoped that she wasn't making a terrible mistake.

Chapter End Notes

Title and lyrics from Tegan and Sara, "Closer."

I rushed to put up 14 and 15 because it's been such a long wait (hence the lazy titles), so I'm sorry if there are more typos or other errors than usual. I'll try not to make it months and months till the next chapter. This story actually still has a lot left in it. (That plot that's limping along in the background, for one thing...)

Thanks again for sticking with me. Your comments help keep me going!
"The first time that Joey slept with Holtzmann didn't happen the way she might have expected."

Warning: Unusually high schmoop levels have been detected in this area. Please wear appropriate protective gear.

The first time that Joey slept with Holtzmann didn't happen the way she might have expected.

The bust that had rudely dragged them out of HQ was another tricky one, starring nasties that—according to Erin's long rant on the way back—clearly hadn't bothered to read *Ghost from Our Past* or even *Tobin's Spirit Guide*. ("Aren't you taking this a little too personally, Erin honey?" Patty had asked. "I mean, sure, some phantasmic funny business has been going on for a minute, but I don't think they're doing it just to spite you." Erin had grumbled for another twelve blocks but had eventually conceded the point.)
Joey'd done her best with the Mark III detector. It was definitely easier to handle than the older model, and she hoped whatever it had found would help them figure out what the funny business was. But not tonight. Hopefully.

When they staggered back into the firehouse, they were starving, exhausted, and covered in ectoplasm. No one had escaped this time. Erin shooed them into the showers over their half-hearted protests; Joey felt too tired to want to stand up and scrub herself but also too disgusting to not try to get clean. She managed somehow, and eventually found herself clean and clothed, sort of—wearing a t-shirt of Patty's and a stretchy pair of Erin's sweatpants (Was that...was that a crease down each leg? *Have these sweatpants been*... ironed? *Is that even a thing?* Joey wondered fuzzily.) Then Abby herded them all into the kitchen.

"Who knew cake didn't qualify as dinner?" Holtzmann complained. She draped herself across the table dramatically, face down, and closed her eyes. Joey plopped down next to her and hesitantly rested her hand on Holtzmann's arm. Holtz made a Yoda-like noise and feebly patted Joey's hand. Joey figured that was approval. Probably.

"Everyone. Literally everyone knew that," Abby said, with no zip to it whatsoever. She was wearing a pair of old-fashioned flannel pajamas printed with bowls of ramen. She rooted around in the freezer for a moment and pulled out an assortment of frozen pierogis, burritos, and other items in the protein-encased-in-carbs genre. "Y'know what, I'm just gonna heat these all up and put them on the table. Any objections?"

Tired head-shakes all around. Abby nodded and got the microwave going.

Patty, in a silk robe and a pair of truly astonishing rose-colored faux fur slippers, leaned back in her chair. She took a swallow of her beer and looked over Joey and Holtz. "Man, you two look like shit."

"It's true," said Erin, and then, apparently too tired to even get flustered like she usually might have after making the tiniest faux pas, just shrugged and re-tied the belt on her fluffy plaid robe. In response, Holtz gave a thumbs-up without raising her head. It* was* true. Abby had intercepted them right after their showers and insisted on applying some antibiotic ointment to their scraped cheeks ("God only knows what happens when you get ectoplasm in an open cut!" she had fussed). And they'd been on two busts in one day, not to mention through a bit of an emotional wringer.

Erin *tsked* to herself, put the first few items out of the microwave onto a plate, and brought them over to Joey and Holtzmann. "Eat something and then please, please don't look at the data tonight," she said.

Holtz raised her head sharply, like a hound who'd just caught a scent. "Ooh...data!"

"Dammit, Erin!" Patty and Abby both glared at her.

Fortunately, though, Holtzmann was distracted by the smell of the pepperoni-stuffed pierogi in front of her, and she pounced on it with both hands. She was so pretty. Even with dark circles under each eye and her scraped-up cheek and her hair damp and—well, maybe especially—just wearing a black cotton camisole and a pair of star-speckled blue boxer shorts...she was beautiful. Joey wouldn't mind just watching her eat all night.

Abby sat down next to Joey and pushed another large plate of food into the middle of the table. Then she elbowed Joey in the ribs. "Don't forget to eat, kid."
Everyone ate in silence for a while. The other three occasionally stared at Joey and Holtzmann, with a mix of curiosity and tenderness and wariness, as though regarding a pair of baby animals of a species that they had never seen before. Reasonable, Joey supposed, given what she'd picked up about Holtzmann's history thus far. She wondered when the last time they'd seen Holtz in a relationship was, or if any of them even had.

Holtz had dropped her head back to the table, turned sideways, and was eating like that. Joey couldn't really imagine how that was working, physiologically speaking, but it was only a minor entry on the extensive list of Holtzmann mysteries. Without really thinking about it, she found herself gently stroking Holtz's hair.

Holtzmann froze for a second and her eyes slid up to Joey. Then she smiled around her mouthful of pierogi and closed her eyes. Joey kept her hand there and hoped she would remember any of this the next day.

"All right," Abby said, after a reasonable amount of food had been eaten. "I don't think any of you are going home tonight. You three all have beds here, so no falling asleep in your armchair, Patty, or the lab, Erin, or…"

"We knooooowww, Mommmmm." Holtzmann dragged herself upright.

Abby stuck out her tongue. "Let me finish. Joey, you better stay here too. I'll just, uh…let you two figure out that arrangement." She flapped her hands in their direction. "Get some sleep, everybody! No business till noon."

Holtzmann stood up, stuck a pork bun in her mouth, and held her hand out. Joey took it like it was the most natural and ordinary thing in the world, and followed Holtzmann…

To the lab.

Of course. Joey should have known. "Holtz…" she started.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm just going to hook it up, OK? It's all automated. Pull the data off, run some basic…thingamajiggies. Voila! Hands-free." Holtzmann picked up the Mark III and waved it at her. "I sleep in here, anyway."

Ah. Naturally. Joey was literally aching for sleep, but there was a little spark in Holtzmann's eyes that made her very hard to deny.

"I'll be done in two shakes of a dead lamb's tail," Holtz assured her as she pulled out cables from a drawer and started putting things together. "Which, if we're being literal, is 20 nanoseconds, y'see, because nuclear physicists are a little bit nuts. One step in the chain reaction of a nuclear explosion—about how much time you normally need for each little bitty neutron's fission event—is one shake. So if you shake it like a Polaroid picture, that'd be a lot of shakes, definitely enough for a few explosions if you do it for the whole song. I'm not sure Outkast really thought that one through. Blame the Manhattan Project, OK? I mean, also for that."

Joey rubbed her eyes. That had almost made sense, which was worrying. "Sure."

Holtzmann had to admit that it was taking a little longer than 20 nanoseconds, but she had said she wasn't being literal. When she noticed Joey nodding off, she pointed her to the bed and mound of blankets that lived in a kind of micro-room at the back of the lab. Holtzmann had insisted on her sleeping space and bathroom on her side of the second floor, for times when she couldn't spare the seconds to go to next closest one—and just in case she ever had to to bring down the firewall. Abby
had been deeply skeptical that Holtzmann wasn't just looking for a way to never have to leave the lab. But she wasn't, not really.

Not until Joey had sleepily headed in the direction of the bed did Holtzmann realize that she had just told her girlfriend to get in her bed.

Welp.

Holtzmann picked up her glasses from where they'd hit the floor a moment ago, when her fingers had gone nerveless at the realization. Now what? Were there expectations that she was screwing up? (Almost certainly.) Were things going to get awkward? (They always did.) She was definitely too tired to negotiate any delicate social situations. Once the data had uploaded and she'd verified that it was good, she'd just have to go in and see exactly where Joey was sleeping, and then try to puzzle out what that meant. And what she herself should do in response, and how to not seem uninterested but also not seem too interested because she didn't want Joey to feel any pressure to do or not do anything and oh sweet baby Newton.

Also, why the fuck was every single normal everyday phrase that was actually necessary for talking about basic functions like sleep also a way of saying SEXYTIMES? "For fuck's sake, English," Holtzmann muttered under her breath. "I keep telling you to get your shit together."

She pushed the glasses back onto her face. She couldn't afford to panic about sleeping arrangements right now; she had data to verify.

*Deep breaths, kid.*

Holtzmann caught her eyes drifting shut a few times, but eventually, she was able to confirm that the data looked good and clear. She grabbed her laptop and started the process of cross-indexing with the previous data, but she had to type her own password into the server so many times to get it correct that she actually did need to stop for the night. She yawned and got to her feet.

When she peeked around the corner, she was surprised to see that Joey was still up—sort of. Joey was wedged semi-upright into the corner where the bed met the wall, and she had her computer in her lap. Her glasses were off, set on top of the metal drum that served as a nightstand, and she was rubbing her eyes.

Holtzmann tossed away all of the social calculus that she'd scribbled on the napkin of her brain and threw herself onto the bed. Joey made a startled noise and Holtzmann pushed herself back and up, wriggling into the space between Joey's chest and her computer. She made a mental note to thank Glitch the cat for that trick. Later.

"Can I borrow that?" Holtzmann asked, already reaching for the laptop.

"I don't think I could refuse you anything right now," Joey said, looking down at her. Holtzmann bent her head back and leaned up to kiss Joey's chin. Joey's bra-less breasts pressed, soft and warm, against Holtzmann's neck, and Holtzmann nearly forgot what she was doing.

She took the laptop and balanced it precariously on her stomach. "Look!" This time she got her password right on the first try, and a few more keystrokes later, a map of NYC opened. Fine lines were slowly crawling across it, from the various bust sites to...to somewhere maybe further away than Holtzmann would've guessed, or at last that was how the trajectories looked. Her vision blurred and she blinked. "See? We're getting somewhere."

"That's great." Joey kissed the top of her head. It felt nice.
Holtzmann sighed—a contented sigh, a sigh like putting on a favorite old shirt or getting a coveted new part in the mail—and closed the laptop.

"Are you actually done?" Joey sounded tired but affectionate.

"Yeah, actually done. Done in. Done for." She let go of the computer and Joey tucked it into her bag, then pushed the bag away.

Holtzmann yawned and took off her glasses and her necklace without repositioning herself. She wasn't entirely sure that she was really here, nestled between Joey's thighs and in her own bed. (Well, her ancillary bed, but still.) Maybe her brain was just too exhausted to raise any of its usual objections. Maybe that was a good thing.

Joey put one arm across Holtzmann's upper chest and stroked her hair with the other. Holtzmann wanted to purr. She could really, really get used to that sensation.

"I wonder if this is how my cat feels," she mumbled. She put a hand on Joey's arm where it crossed her chest, and reached out with the other for the remote that she kept next to the bed. "I wanna turn off the lights, just for a bit. My eyes hurt. We can turn 'em back on in a little while and figure out the sleeping arrangements, 'K?"

"Uh…sure. I mean, it's up to you."

Holtzmann paused, thumb on the button, and let her fingertips trace a scar that wandered along Joey's forearm. It was still discolored and a little bit raised. "Can I ask…what's this?"

"What? Oh, that. You haven't…? Ah." Joey shifted a little behind Holtzmann, a funny sensation but not a bad one. "It's where my arm got messed up. When we sort of met, from that day in Times Square, when I fell and then…then you were there."

"Oh." Holtzmann kissed Joey's arm, then clicked off the lights. "Sorry for being tardy to the party."

Joey snorted softly. "You are ridiculous. By which I mean, there's nothing to apologize for. You were there, weren't you? And I got away with just this scar, which is nothing. Not to mention? Worth it."

Holtzmann felt her cheeks warm. She coughed and stared up into the darkness. She wasn't sure what to say to that, so she said, "Hey, good job with the data collection today." Then she couldn't help ruminating aloud on the potential, where the traces might converge and what they might find there. It was OK, Joey was plainly humoring her; at some point she'd run out of gas and they'd get the sleeping arrangements situated, but she just couldn't bring herself to interrupt the warmth she was feeling, not yet. Not yet…

Joey blinked her eyes open. Where was she? She hadn't gotten that disorienting sensation on waking up in a strange place in years, because nowhere really counted as home and thus everywhere was equally strange. And yet—oh. She'd fallen asleep still wedged into the bed, propped up by a few pillows, and with Holtzmann…

The warm weight of Holtzmann was still right there, now curled up against her chest. One of her legs bent around Joey's left thigh, and now Joey vaguely remembered tugging some blankets up over them at some point.

So yesterday had happened, and last night. And now this was happening. Joey wondered if it were possible to die out of sheer contentment. She was smiling without any conscious effort.
She couldn't tell what time it was. The only window in the lab was in the little bedroom area, but it had dark curtains, and all she could tell from the soft light filtering in was that it wasn't nighttime anymore. But it didn't matter. She was determined not to move a muscle, not even to reach for her phone, until Holtzmann stirred. The only problem was going to be resisting the urge to touch Holtz's hair or stroke her cheek.

Joey had written several scenes in several paranormal romance novels where one character viewed another in sleep and remarked to themselves about how the object of their affection's face became sweet and blissful, with no trace of worry or stress. That wasn't quite true for Holtzmann, who still had a tiny crease between her eyebrows. But still, with no glasses and *most* of the muscles in her face relaxed, she looked different, as though she had dropped a mask. Joey didn't need her phone or anything else. It would be enough just to look at Holtz until she woke up.

Eventually, Holtzmann shifted and made a soft sound into Joey's chest. Joey smiled and brushed back a curl from Holtz's small, pink ear. Then she bent down to give that ear the kiss that it so plainly needed.

"Whaaa—" Holtzmann scrambled away and hit her back against the wall, narrowly missing knocking her head right into Joey's. Her fists were clenched and her eyes were wide.

"I'm sorry! I thought you were awake. Oh, Holtz, I'm sorry!" Joey swallowed. "It's me, Joey." Even though it was difficult, she kept her hands back and didn't reach out toward Holtz. Just in case there was something more complicated going on than her just being startled awake.

Holtzmann's eyes fixed on Joey, and then she relaxed and let out a breath. "Oh. I…I guess I was dreaming. Must've been a tense dream! Or maybe that fantasy where I'm Chun Li and—Never mind. Are you hungry? Because I'm starving."

"I'm hungry too," Joey said. "But do we have to get up right away?"

Holtzmann raised an eyebrow.

"Ack. Joey blinked rapidly. "Uh. I just meant…it was nice, when I woke up and you were here. And since I just startled you and you didn't get to wake up like that, maybe a do-over would be nice. And it's kind of chilly out there, and we have blankets…"

"Hmm, yes." Holtzmann puffed on an imaginary pipe and adjusted an invisible monocle, then nodded. "I find your argument compelling." She scooted back over to Joey and put herself where she'd been when they fell asleep, with her back against Joey's chest, and Joey drew up the covers. Holtzmann let out a long breath and grinned up at Joey. "OK, yeah, this is pretty good."

"No second thoughts so far?" Joey asked, without thinking.

Holtzmann's eyes flickered and then she shrugged. "Insufficient data."

It would have to do for now. Joey let her cheek rest on Holtzmann's soft hair. They lay there in a warm, pleasant haze for a while. But she wasn't really surprised when Holtzmann finally wriggled away, bounded out of bed, and put her hands on her hips in a superhero pose.

"Time for *science!* I can't wait to see the final results," Holtzmann said. "Gonna drag the laptop up to the kitchen. Though…I guess first I'll put on some clothes."

"Can I watch?" *Wow, seriously? Get a grip!* Joey scolded herself. What if Holtz—

"Watch me put on clothes? You absolute pervert! I like it." Holtzmann stretched and vanished in the
direction of the bathroom.

Well, then.

But when she came back, she had fairly obviously slipped on a bra under the camisole. Maybe she wasn't quite as blasé as Joey had thought. As Holtzmann started digging around under the bed, apparently for clean clothing, her body language was noticeably stiffer than it had been before. Joey didn't know what to think. But that was reasonable, wasn't it, because it was a strange situation.

"Sorry if I'm being weird. I…I'm not actually sure how to act. We seem to be doing things out of order," Joey confessed. Waking up with a casual fling after sex was one thing. Dating someone—she still couldn't believe Holtzmann had just casually called Joey her girlfriend last night—was another thing. And they hadn't actually had sex. But they had slept together. What did any of it add up to?

Holtzmann tossed some clothes onto the bed. She buttoned herself into a vintage-looking, embroidered Western shirt, and tilted her head at Joey. "I'm glad it's not just me," she said, with a wink that probably would have read as cocky to anyone else, but—to Joey's eyes—seemed to convey a sense of relief. "Although doing things in order is unimaginative. Rigid hierarchies? Definitely for dudes."

Joey smiled. Well, that was all right then. She handed Holtz the pair of lavender-grey herringbone tweed trousers from the bed. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, OK? Tell me if you're ever uncomfortable."

Holtzmann hopped around the floor in a comic attempt to get the trousers on. Finally, she staggered over near Joey and buttoned the fly. She adopted a hushed British accent, and said, "Like most creatures of its genus, a Holtzmann is only comfortable when she is in her natural habitat. Any time a Holtzmann is found outside of a lab or a bust, she is on unsteady footing, although she will betray no sign of weakness to the lurking velociraptors." Holtzmann laughed and dropped her Attenborough imitation. "Y'know? If I tell you every time, it's gonna get old real fast. You wanna pet these pants? They're highly pettable pants."

Joey didn't need to be told twice. She gently stroked the side of Holtzmann's hips with the backs of her fingers. The soft tweed did feel good, but not as good as touching Holtzmann's skin felt. Despite yesterday and last night, though, Joey wasn't sure where she should and shouldn't touch, or…

"Are…are you uncomfortable?" Holtzmann sounded puzzled. She pulled Joey up and pushed her hands into the back pockets of Holtzmann's trousers. Their bodies pressed into each other and Joey felt that lance of electricity again.

"I just don't know what I'm doing," Joey said. "You make me feel…" She felt Holtzmann's abdominal muscles tighten slightly, and hurried to finish her statement. "You make me feel like I don't want to screw anything up, but also like I want to just…do everything, right now, all at once."

Holtzmann softened and leaned into Joey. "We'll make it up as we go. It's a fine tradition around here. The only way to fly." The corners of her lips lifted as her eyes met Joey's, and she tilted her head for a swift, gentle kiss that left Joey unsteady. "And now if I don't go look at the results, I'm gonna explode. Dig around and see if there's anything you can wear, OK? Wouldn't want to scandalize the mother hens. Wellll…I mean…they're fun to scandalize, so that's your call. You know where to find me."

Abby called a meeting for the afternoon. Joey sat a little out of the way at their conference table, tablet out and ready to take notes. Holtzmann and Erin were fussing around the laptop at the front of
the room. Abby and Patty were waiting patiently. Joey fiddled with the buttons on the clean shirt she'd found in one of Holtzmann's piles. It was oversized enough relative to Holtz that she probably wore it as a jacket. Joey had thought it was just big enough to fit when she put it on, but now she was having second thoughts.

The suitability of the shirt was a better thing to think about than the kissability of Holtzmann's lips, anyway. She needed to be able to concentrate on the presentation that Holtz and Erin were about to make. Right?

Right.

"I call laser pointer!" said Holtzmann. She danced from foot to foot and did a little spin. Joey felt her eyes cross trying to watch her.

"Well, don't blind anyone," said Erin. "Again." She smiled fondly at Holtzmann and picked up a remote. "Is everyone ready?"

"Yup, ready!" Joey said, a little too quickly, but nobody noticed. She tried her best to concentrate on the news, but she kept getting lost in the pleasure of watching Holtz do her thing. Eventually, Erin reached a point in the presentation where they paused, clearly about to announce big news. Joey tried to snap herself out of her warm dreaminess.

"So, what all this adds up to good news or bad news, depending on your perspective and which way you bet," Erin said. Her eyes shone in the bright light of the LED projector. "The verdict is in. These anomalous incidents? The data is proof: They're connected."

"Yussssss," muttered Abby.

"This is not OK," proclaimed Patty. "Nope! I call a do-over."

"Numbers don't lie," Erin started, but she was interrupted by "Yes they do, because people" from Patty and a shrugged "Can confirm" from Holtzmann.

"Fine, yes, data and data interpretation comes from humans and humans—what was your sociological terminology, Patty?—oh yes, humans are a 'hot mess.' But I really do think this data's good. Check it out, you'll see." She dove right into the details (with enthusiastic verbal footnotes from Holtzmann and a lot of excited exclamations from Abby). Patty clearly understood way more than Joey did, but finally, Patty waved Erin off.

"I get it. So they're all confirmed to be coming from one source. What do we know about the source?"

"And can we nuke it from orbit?" added Abby. ("It's the only way to be sure," replied Patty, and they high-fived each other.)

"Not yet," said Holtzmann. "And it's not in the city at all. It's somewhere almost due north of here, maybe 250, 350 km away. 150-200 miles. Ish."

There was a long pause.

Finally, Patty spoke. "So, wait. Let me make sure I have this right. What you're telling us is...the Big Bad is in Schenectady?!!"

Holtzmann had been sneaking glances at Joey's face during the whole presentation, which was how
Erin had wound up getting to say the best parts. But Holtzmann couldn't really tell what Joey was thinking. Actually, she wasn't sure if Joey was even listening to the presentation. Usually the writer was fully attentive even when things got technical, but today…Maybe she was bored? Or having second thoughts?

At least Joey was as surprised at the geographic data as the rest of them. But then she got a text, and her face lit up. What, Holtzmann wondered, did Joey look like when Holtzmann texted her? Did she smile, or…

"It's Nik," Joey said. "He's got the answer for us about the fake pizza guy photographer. He has a request, though."

Abby's eyes started to narrow, and Joey quickly added, "He just wants to meet you guys, that's all."

"Oh, well, sure then!" Abby grinned. "Have him set it up with Kevin. Uh…and give him my number in case that doesn't work."

"Got it." Joey read another text and shook her head. "Well, the info isn't that useful, sorry. It's just a known rando photog who pulls slightly scummy bits like this whenever he needs some extra cash and doesn't have any assignments. Nobody hired him or anything."

Abby made a fart noise with her mouth. "Well, that's kinda irritating. Could've been a good clue."

"At least we have the directional lead, though," Erin reminded her.

"Right. Well, we've got a meeting with Jennifer Lynch after this, and deliveries all day tomorrow—I mean, we could let Kev sign for them, but—"

"That's sweet but no," Holtzmann said. She did want to actually get her goodies. She also didn't want to have to explain to an increasingly grumpy series of government people in suits how Kevin had accidently put a rather large amount of thorium up for sale on eBay. Not again, anyway.

"Wednesday, then. Road trip to Schenectady?" Patty suggested. "And I'm driving."

"Then I get to choose the snacks," Holtzmann retorted. She was going to have to make two lists, one for snacks and one for all the equipment they were going to need.

"Sounds like we have a plan," said Erin. Erin did love a plan.

The others started getting up. Joey made eye contact with Holtzmann and came over, helping her pick up things that could really be left just where they were. But Holtzmann didn't mind.

"Get ready to learn all about Patty's taste in music! This roadtrip is going to be a good time. A little slow, if Patty's driving instead of me, your local Formula One champion, but a good time."

"I—I'm looking forward to it." Joey sat on the edge of the table and squeezed her tablet to her chest. Holtzmann noticed for the first time how her shirt gaped on Joey. It was kind of cute. But then Joey noticed her noticing, and Holtzmann almost died on the spot.

"I guess you're not going to be borrowing any of my bras," Holtzmann said, as breezily as she could manage.

"Well, yeah, but I mean…no complaints there." Joey's eyes were mischievous behind her glasses. "Though I probably should put on something that I won't inevitably pop the buttons on, especially because this shirt isn't mine. I thought I'd head home when you leave for your meeting."
"I guess I do have to show up for this meeting. I missed...a few." Holtzmann shifted her hips and worked her way in so that she was standing between Joey's legs. "I feel like there are other things I could be doing, though."

Joey laughed. "Things, huh?" She glanced over her shoulder and Holtzmann was puzzled for a moment. Ah—Joey was checking to see if any of the others were around. They weren't.

Holtzmann put her hands on the table on either side of Joey's hips and looked her in the eyes. Maybe things were turning around. Joey was back. They had exciting new leads to investigate—science-wise, that was. And yes, also, there was this undiscovered country. New frontier. Whatever. Holtzmann might not be great at navigating relationships, but she was aces at making new discoveries.

"You're smirking," Joey observed. "You have a very smug dimple. Right...here." She gave Holtzmann a fleeting kiss on the cheek.

"Shall I pick you up at eight, then?" Whoops. It had come out on a total impulse, but Holtzmann hoped it didn't sound that way.

"What?"

Holtzmann cocked an eyebrow. "For our date."

"Oh! We have a date?" Joey smiled, a tiny smile that quickly blossomed into a wide grin. She tugged on Holtzmann's collar. "White tie, I assume?"

Oh. What were they going to do on their date? People liked to know these things, probably. But Holtzmann had no idea. "Definitely not white tie. I mean, you've met me."

"True, true, but..." Joey got a faraway look in her eyes. "Ah, you'd look amazing. Anyway, I see Abby lurking and conspicuously trying not to glance in here. You'd better get going. Text me?"

"You got it, babe."

Joey slipped off of the table and there was a moment where they kind of just bobbled uncertainly at each other. Then Joey said, "Can I—can I kiss you goodbye? Or rather, see ya later?"

Ah, asking permission. That was....Nice. That was nice. "C'mere, 'gator."

The goodbye/see-ya-later kiss was nice too. Holtzmann ignored Abby and saw Joey to the front door, where they repeated the experiment for replicability and received gratifyingly consistent results.

Holtzmann closed the door behind her and turned around. She filled her lungs with air and shouted. Yeah, she was small, but she could project when she wanted to. "Abby! Tell Jennifer we're going to be late! Erin! Get me a paper bag, I think I'm having a panic attack. Patty! Come be my rock. We're having an emergency meeting and if you wanna know why, it's because I have a date and—"

From upstairs, Patty whooped, but then let Holtzmann finish.

"—sweet zombie Schroedinger, I need all the help I can get."

Chapter End Notes
Hello! Still out there? Good.

Yay, they literally slept together! (I am a little bit sorry for the misdirection there, but not very.)
So, who wants them to *euphemistically* sleep together?

And what do you think our wise women will come up with for a date? I already know what Holtz is going to decide on, but you know...Speculation is free.

- ERRATA -

The bit about "two shakes of a dead lamb's tail" is *entirely true*.

*Thorium* is real (and can be used in nuclear reactors) and yes, it IS named after a certain god of thunder.
Chapter Summary

Well, this is an easy one: It's Holtzmann and Joey's first date! Will the other Ghostbusters' advice prove to be sound? Will Viv and Ella manage to invite themselves along? How many bad jokes will Holtz make? And who's going home with whom—or will Holtz chicken out at the last minute?

Chapter Notes

Thanks to PieHeda for a certain suggestion. And uh. We just went over 100k. I don't even know what to say about that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I call this session of the War Council to order,” said Abby. She banged a spoon on the kitchen table. “God, I wish I could have a beer.”

“Coffee’s all you’re getting. I need you sharp, Abs!” Holtzmann was sitting on top of the table, cross-legged, and Erin hadn’t even said anything about it. “So here’s the sitch. Iiiii just asked Joey on a date, an actual date, which is a thing we haven’t done yet and not really a specialty of mine and I don’t want to blow this and what if she decides she hates me and how do I even? With another person? is basically my question, and you know, there is some research, but I’ve looked at it before and it honestly never did me any damn good—and I was going to joke that I’m good at ending relationships not beginning them but actually I suck at that too, because either I just avoid them forever or—more likely!—they’re the ones who end it anyway, the handful of times I’ve tried, and obviously the one constant variable here is me, so probably the optimal solution is, you know, the only winning move is not to play, so what if I just cancel—”
“Holtzy, baby, you’re babbling. Erin, give her that paper bag.” Patty put a hand on Holtzmann’s knee.

“Here it is.” Erin really had gotten a small paper bag and brought it up. That was sweet. Maybe she kept one in her desk drawer.


“All right now, Holtzy, you’re doing good now,” Patty said. Abby and Erin smiled encouragingly. “We got your back, that’s what we do! So you need some good first date ideas?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I guess so. But—” She flapped her hands and bits of paper bag confetti flew into the air. “Not just good ideas. The *best* ideas. And I have all you brilliant minds gathered here, so who wants to go first?” She straightened up and looked around expectantly.

“Huh! Don’t look at me,” Abby said. “I’ve been on a relationship vacation for a while. But, I mean, you know some stuff she likes to do, right? She likes the drinks at Oddcoffee, and she’s into museums, and she likes bookstores. Restaurants. Stuff like that. Just…do some of those things.”

Holtzmann thought for a moment. Those were all things she wouldn’t mind doing more of with Joey, at all. But they didn’t seem right for tonight. “Ehhh…I wanna do something new, I guess. Not a regular hangout kind of thing like we always do. Am I crazy? No, don’t answer that.”

Patty nodded. She’d pulled out her laptop and was tapping away at it. “I think you’re on the right track, believe it or not. Come back to me though, I’m working an idea.”

Everyone looked at Erin. She glanced nervously from side to side and took a long sip of coffee. “Well. *Good* first date ideas. I…” She tilted her head. “Well, there was…oh. No. OK, there was the time that…hmm. Nope. Uh. How would you feel about some counterexamples? Things not to do.”

Holtzmann glanced at Patty. She was still working; in fact, she’d put on her glasses, so she was really serious about it. *Never interrupt a genius.* “OK, sure, go ahead, Erin.”

“All right. Well, first of all, don’t show her any nude photos of your exes.”

“I—I think I got that covered. Pun super intended.”

“Don’t go camping overnight. Definitely not on any land that turns out to belong to someone. And um. Don’t put up your tent in a low spot. Especially not during a rainy season. And/or bear season.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

“Also do not recommend spearfishing. Not like with a *ph* in *phishing*. Actual fishing. With a spear. And especially not if you plan to drink a lot and you know you get seasick and you’ve just eaten six pastrami eggrolls and your date has on a really nice silk blouse with little silver anchor buttons that she bought just for the date.”

“Erin.”

“Hmm. No bringing parents on the date. Particularly if you’re both over 25.”

“Um.”
“And speaking of which, no surprise babysitting. Or surprise housecleaning. Or surprise mandatory animal costumes. Or hiding your date behind you when you get introduced to another woman at a faculty dinner. Or ordering a Kobe beef dinner for yourself and only a side salad for your date without asking and then also announcing to the whole restaurant to stop your date if she orders a soda that’s not diet and—”

Holtzmann winced. “Erin! You’re killing me here.”

Erin stopped and looked around. “Why are you all—oh. You’re going to tell me all that isn’t normal, aren’t you.”

Patty was staring at Erin in dropped-jaw horror. “I mean…maybe one or two incredibly bad first date stories, everybody’s got those, but dear lord, you win the ‘saddest dating history’ pageant hands-down.”

Erin sighed. “I’m joining Abby on the relationship vacation train. Just remembering all of those was exhausting.”

“Girl, you don’t have to put up with shit. You want to get started again, come and talk to me first. All right, Holtz, I’m ready.”

“Whatcha got for me?”

“Well, look here.” Patty spun her laptop around. “What I did is I got all the files for Joey’s books, the romance novels she writes using her pseudonym. I cracked the DRM on ‘em back when I got ‘em, like always, and I cross-indexed them. Filtered out all the most common words in English, put together this list of words that show up a bunch. I figure those might be things she’s interested in. I do this kind of thing for nonfiction a lot, analyzing ghost stories or whatever, but why not for fiction?”

“You’re so cool, Patty!” Holtzmann said. She nuzzled Patty’s shoulder.

Patty harrumphed, pushed Holtzmann off of her, and grumbled, “Now I know I’ve gone full nerd.” But she looked pleased.

Abby pushed her glasses up and leaned over for a better look herself. “Your research skills are pretty hot, Patty, admit it.”

“Shut up.”

Holtzmann read some of the terms aloud. “Carousel…antiquarian books…pasta…graveyards…snow…quirky museum…alleyway…vintage…folklore…tamales—tamales? I dig it…bakery…forest…typewriter…waterfall…blindfold…” Well, well. She’d only had a chance to read a handful of Joey’s books so far, but maybe she ought to schedule time for the rest. It could be enlightening.

“Whooooops, I tried to filter those terms out,” Patty said. “I mean. They could be useful, don’t get me wrong—and no judging here, you know. I mean, they’re my books. But I figure there’s no telling which of those words are because she likes ‘em and which are just what sells, right? But uh. You want the original data file…just ask.” She winked.

“Nice. OK, so what I’m hearing is I should take her to a quirky vintage book and typewriter museum down an alleyway, then go eat pasta tamales on a carousel for dinner, and then dessert at a bakery behind a waterfall in a forest. In the snow. Right?”

“If you find a bakery behind a waterfall in a forest, you better take all of us,” Abby said.
“Amen to that,” said Patty. “Honestly, though, babe…I can’t believe I’m saying this to you, of all people, but just…be yourself. Joey likes you the way you are. She likes you a lot. You don’t have to think up the perfect date. Just think of something that you’d enjoy doing with her, and…do that. Be you.”

Erin and Abby nodded emphatically. Holtzmann looked down at the table, and then up at the ceiling, and then nowhere in particular. How had she ended up with this, the most supportive family in the world? Even if they were lovingly misguided. “I love you guys, but…I’ve never been a nun until this year. I have data and your hypothesis is not supported by the empirical evidence. It’s just…not.” She’d reached for a joke but hadn’t found one, and her voice had just trailed off.

Abby sighed. “It’s not like testing materials, Holtz. Or, I mean, it kind of is, I guess. It doesn’t work until it does work. Or look at us. We didn’t have the right colleagues and co-workers till we found each other. Right, guys?”

“Don’t look at me, I got along with my co-workers just fine,” said Patty. “But you got a point.”

“She does,” agreed Erin. “We’re all delighted to know you. And I know you tone yourself down around us, sometimes, but we like you all the time. Even when you set my desk on fire.”

“You can’t prove—yeah, OK, right, I already confessed to that.” Holtzmann picked at the buttons on her shirt for a moment. “Are you guys sure about this?”

“You gotta trust us, Holtz.” Abby got out of her seat and put her hands on Holtzmann’s shoulder. “You gotta trust us, and you gotta trust Joey. She’s lucky to be dating you. We know it, she knows it—we just need you to get it through your thick skull and into your genius brain.”

“Get outta here,” Holtzmann said, and she hated that her voice was rough. Abby squeezed her shoulders gently and let her go. She ducked her head and rubbed the back of her neck. “OK. I… I’ll think about it.” She clambered down from the table. “You guys are on the hook for bail, though, I’m just sayin’. Don’t we have somewhere to be?”

Holtzmann didn’t pay much attention to their unofficial-official meetings on a normal day, and during that meeting she was thoroughly checked out as Jennifer went on and on. There were a lot of things that would be fun to do with Joey, that Joey would like, but they were mostly variations on things that they’d already done together as a group. Holtzmann wanted to do something different, something that was just hers. She was daring herself to let Joey into something. But what?

It was halfway through their meeting that Holtzmann slapped the table at the bland sports bar, stood up, and said, “I’ve got it!”

Jennifer gave one of her familiar confused and slightly pained but polite smiles. “You’ve got the new triplicate requisition forms?”

“What? No. Something important.”

“Oh, you figured it out, huh?” Patty tugged Holtzmann back into her seat. “You planning on telling us?”

“Nope,” Holtzmann said. She crossed her arms. “You’ll only try to talk me out of it. But it’s perfect.”

She took out her phone and motioned for them to get back to their boring business.

Hey Joey. Wear something you don’t mind getting dirty or messed up. I mean, I'll see if I can come
up with something, but like just in case.

Joey wrote back quickly. Well, that’s intriguing.

Holtzmann snapped a quick photo of her own smug grin and sent it to Joey. I know. Maybe grab a disco nap, too. She drummed her fingers on the table. How soon till they got back to HQ? She had a couple of things to do.

Viv peered in through Joey’s open door, then literally pointed and laughed at her.

“What?!” Joey had every piece of her small collection of clothes strewn around her in her room.

Viv cinched her robe tighter, apparently afraid of laughing herself right out of it. “You are such a first-date cliche, it’s hilarious. Or, wait, did you start writing YA novels? Are you getting into character?”

Joey threw a pair of socks at Viv. “You’re the worst. No, yeah, it is a first date, but…she said to wear something I didn’t mind getting dirty.”

“Ooooh.” Viv came in and perched on the edge of Joey’s bed. “Yes, yes, I know, not like that. So what’s the problem?”

Joey gestured helplessly. “All the moving around I do—most of my clothes are meant to last. Stuff I can wear in more than one situation. And clothes I wear in the field somewhere dicey usually don’t make it home.”

“You’re saying you don’t have anything ratty enough?”

Joey groaned. What an embarrassing conversation. “I guess I am.”

“And you wouldn’t want anything too ratty, because date. Right? Ella! Get your ass in here.”

Ella stuck her head around the door. “Is Viv big-sistering you, Joey? I can tell her to go away.”

“No, I mean…” Joey sighed and explained again.

“OK. We got this,” Ella said. She looked Joey over. “Give us a minute.”

“Wait—”

But they’d already put their heads together and then vanished to their respective rooms. Five minutes later, they reappeared, arms full.

“All right. I know the three of us are very different sizes and shapes, but all of this stuff is stretchy or, you know, forgiving. This is my Tim Gunn moment,” Viv said, grinning brilliantly. “We’re going to make it work!”

“But…” Joey sat down on the bed, a little overwhelmed. Over the last few months, they’d all been getting more involved in each other’s lives. It was weirdly nice, but now Viv and Ella were really going above and beyond. “This is really kind of you two, but…I mean, ruining your clothes is worse than ruining mine!”

Ella rolled her eyes. “If you ever kept up with my Insta—we go through clothes fast, OK? Nothing here wasn’t going to Housing Works at some point anyway, next month if not this month.” She was almost convincing. “Our mission: Find something that fits, you won’t freeze in, you can move
around in, and that, you know. You’re comfortable and look good in.” Ella leaned in till her nose was almost touching Joey’s. “Let us help youuuu.”

“OK, OK!” Joey raised her hands in surrender. She wasn’t sure how only two people were able to compose a swarm, but Ella and Viv managed it. When they were done, Joey was wearing snug fleece-lined leggings, a long woolen vest over an asymmetric sweater, and a funnel-necked canvas utility jacket. Viv pulled a loosely crocheted cap in aurora borealis colors off of a hook and put it on Joey’s head.

Viv looked her over with satisfaction. “I’m into this. It says ‘Post-apocalyptic practicality, but make it fashion.’”

Ella nodded. “You look like you’re ready for anything.”

Joey adjusted the hat. “I think I’d better be.” Impulsively, she hugged them. “Thank you, I owe you one. You’re good friends-slash-roommates.”

Viv snickered. “I forgot to tell you there is a price: Ella and I are going to be doing some very important work in the living room when your date gets here, and you won’t be asking us to leave.”

At 7:55, there was a match-in-the-gas-tank knock on the front door.

Viv and Ella threw themselves at the sofa and attempted to arrange themselves into what were probably supposed to be casual positions. “You got yourself an early girl, Joey?” inquired Viv.

Joey shrugged. She wasn’t sure. “Impatient, maybe. Yeah, that seems about right.” She opened the door and was immediately pulled forward by the neckline, directly down to Holtzmann’s mouth. When she tried to straighten, she nearly fell over. The kiss had made her wobbly all over.

“Hi,” said Holtzmann. She hadn’t really changed clothes, just put on a fitted vest and a neck scarf. If anything, she looked even more dashing than she had earlier that day.

“You look good. But didn’t you say clothes we didn’t mind getting dirty?”

“Oh…yeah, I mean, technically that’s all of my clothes? But also I borrowed a couple of plain jumpsuits from Patty. So that’ll help.”

*With what?!* Joey wondered, but Holtzmann had brought her other hand out from behind her back. She had a little cardboard drink holder with two tall Oddcoffee cups in it.

“I’m not really into dead flowers,” Holtzmann said. “But Patty and Erin said I should bring something and that a Venus fly trap probably wasn’t appropriate. And Gaby said this was a combination of flavors that you would like. It’s more hot chocolate than coffee, but there’s a little caffeine in there to put some pep in your step.”

*I don’t feel like I’m going to have any problems there,* Joey thought. But hot chocolate sounded great anyway. “Thank you, that’s really sweet.” She took her cup. “Hmm, it has two lids. Let me just recycle—”

There was a message in green Sharpie under the lid.

Holtzmann’s eyebrows popped up. “Not me,” she said.

The message read:
“I like this ‘Gaby’ and ‘Shayne’ already,” Viv said. Inevitably, she and Ella were hovering over Joey’s shoulder.

“You seem all right too,” Ella added, to Holtzmann. “So far.”

Joey shook her head. “Holtz, let’s get out of here before they decide they need to come along.”

“Don’t wait up, ladies,” said Holtzmann. She winked at them and Joey pulled the door shut behind her.

Holtzmann jogged down the stairs with Joey right behind her. That had gone OK. Hadn’t it? Joey seemed happy with the drinks, anyway, and she had complimented Holtzmann’s clothes. Oh no, maybe Holtzmann should have said something back, but Joey always looked nice, so—

“So…jumpsuits?” Joey asked.

“Oh…yeah, you’ll see.” Holtzmann tugged Joey into the dark alley where the utility van that Jennifer had finally bought them waited, illegally parked.

“Oh, the van! I’ve never been in it.”

“Yeah, it’s just for moving heavy things. The Ecto’s back at HQ in case something comes up. Although, you know, if something does and it’s a big deal, we’ll have to take a raincheck.”

“‘Course. But what would we be taking a raincheck on?”

“Ah, well.” Holtzmann opened the door for Joey and then climbed into the driver’s side. She turned on the engine to get the heater running. Now that she had to explain what they were doing, she was second-guessing herself. She could change it. Maybe go to the Strand. But there were the jumpsuits to explain. And her original plan was definitely more her than just going to a bookstore. C’mon.

“We’re going dumpster diving. For parts, I mean. And ideas. I don’t have a shopping list, I just like seeing what’s out there. It’s not exactly dinner at the Ritz, but…”

Joey was quiet for a second and Holtzmann held her breath. Then Joey put her hand on Holtzmann’s thigh and leaned toward her. “Abby said you didn’t let anybody else go with you on scavenging runs.”

Holtzmann found it hard to compose a reply, given the distressingly short distance between Joey’s fingers and her own crotch. “Uhhh…that’s true, but…I don’t know. Yeah. It’s my thing, is why I like doing it by myself. But that’s also why I wanted to do it with you.” She cleared her throat and managed a grin. “Or maybe I just want to throw you in the deep end and see how your backstroke is.”

“I get it. And—I’m honored. For real.”

“You don’t want to do something else instead? The Strand is open ’til 10:30—”

Joey got closer and slowly moved in for a kiss. Holtzmann didn’t object to that at all. It was a sweet, soft kiss, not a hard passionate one, but she still felt it everywhere. “Let’s go explore some garbage,” Joey said with a smile.
“You got it. And hey. I guess Abby gave you a couple tips on—on not startling me. But you don’t have to give me warning, OK? Unless I can’t see you. You can just…uh, go for it.” Holtzmann felt her cheeks turning red but then Joey was giving her another kiss, and at least she had a reason to be flushed.

“Get your seatbelt on, babe,” Holtzmann said. “I plan to end this night with you in one piece.”

At first Joey asked a lot of questions about what she should be looking for, but that seemed to just throw Holtzmann off, and Joey started to worry that she was going to ruin things. So, she tried just watching Holtzmann dig around for a while, and came up with a new strategy. Joey started just picking up random objects that seemed interesting and holding them where Holtzmann could see them. This seemed to work better, and Joey even got a couple of items approved. Although after a while things got quiet, and Joey wasn’t sure Holtzmann even remembered she was there until Holtz concluded that this dumpster was tapped out and was ready to move on.

Then Joey ran across a box full of pastel, alpaca-shaped salt and pepper shakers, except every salt shaker was intact and every pepper shaker had its head broken off. She couldn’t help laughing. “Holtz!” She held up one of each.

“Whaaaaa?” Holtzmann discarded a VHS tape that she had apparently been considering, and made her way over to the bin Joey was looking in. She snickered. “OK, I want one.” She fished out two intact alpacas and handed one to Joey. After that, the useful-stuff-finding took a back seat to a weird-stuff arms race, resulting in a constantly increasing amount of giggling.

Joey found an intact and unfaded New Kids on the Block poster. Holtzmann found twenty copies of printed and bound, X-rated hockey fan fiction. A complete set of the Milli Vanilli oeuvre. A terra cotta turtle on a skateboard. A framed photo of a parakeet. A pair of Birkenstocks with legos glued inside the soles. A guide to the 31 most scenic alleyways of Lithuania. Holtzmann thought of ridiculous potential uses for each item, and pretty soon Joey’s stomach was starting to cramp from laughing.

“Oh, hey, look at the time!” Holtzmann put down an astroturf-covered toilet seat still in its original packaging. “You want some ice cream?”

“What?” It wasn’t freezing outside, but Joey felt chilly whenever she stopped moving around for more than a few minutes. Her roommates had done a good job with her outfit, and the jumpsuit helped, but it was November in New York.

“Some Big Gay Ice Cream, maybe?” Holtzmann winked.

“Oh man. Yes. Now you’re talking. I would take a mermaid sundae right now. And some coffee. Or, even better, an affogayto, if those are on the menu yet. Yesss.” There had definitely been espresso in that Oddcoffee hot chocolate, but it had worn off by now.

They peeled off their jumpsuits and tossed them in the back of the van. “Do you usually wear a jumpsuit to go dumpster diving?” Joey asked. It didn’t seem super Holtzmann-like.

“Ha, no. Like I said, all my clothes are fine for getting dirty in…But Patty thought you might appreciate one. And then she told me maybe I ought to do the same, being on a date and all, so I took her advice. I do kinda like this shirt.”

“I like it too.” Joey could see her breath in the air. She was a lot colder now that the jumpsuit was off.
Holtzmann locked the back doors of the van and glanced at Joey. “I gotta get your jacket repaired. Or rebuilt, more like. And try to keep it intact this time. OK?”

Joey shrugged. “Can’t make any promises. Keeping your skin intact is more important than any jacket, even one you made me. Even if it is the best jacket in the world.” It was all true.

Holtzmann snorted and patted Joey on the cheek. “Come on, they close in an hour.”

It turned out that they weren’t quite done. Ice cream was more of a pit stop than anything. Joey was game for some more dumpster-diving, though: it was fun to be out doing something with Holtzmann that was productive in some way but where the danger was limited to being spotted by an overzealous security guard.

By the time Holtzmann announced that they were done, Joey had managed to wind up with several serious smudges of oil on her face. She scrubbed at them in the rear-view mirror while Holtzmann finished strapping down some of the larger items.

“No you have anything to—oh, never mind, I don’t know why I’m asking.”

Holtzmann laughed as she got behind the wheel. “It’s not a bad look. Very rakish. You look like you’ve been up to no good.”

“It’s true that I’ve been up to no good.” Joey said. “But I think I’m a little too squishy to pull off ‘rakish.”’

“You can pull off whatever you want,” Holtzmann said, and winked. Then she facepalmed. “I was actually just about to offer you my bathroom if you wanted to clean up. Ignore the proximity of the offer to the double entendre, por favor. I mean, you don’t have to come over—it’s probably better if you don’t, I don’t normally have anyone over, and it’s a wreck. It’s not really even an actual ‘apartment,’ technically. It is closer than HQ, and we wouldn’t wake Abby up, and it’s a lot closer than your place, but it’s OK, I can take you home first. Actually I think even Abby’s only been in my place like once. It was an emergency. And this isn’t an emergency, so—”

“If you really don’t mind, I would like to wash up. I feel kind of gross. But not if I’d be intruding—I’ve definitely carried more dirt around for a lot longer than this. Bathroom sinks are hard to come by in some parts of the world.” Joey wasn’t sure at all what Holtzmann was thinking, but she hoped that she’d at least given her an out.

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“Ah, I see you’re well versed in the classics.” Holtzmann smiled and gunned the engine.

Holtzmann paced in front of her sofa while Joey was scrubbing up in the bathroom. She had briefly shown Joey the lab, and Joey had exclaimed over it appropriately. Now she didn’t know what she wanted to happen next. Well, that wasn’t totally true. She knew what she didn’t want to happen next: for the night to be over.

What if I just want to cuddle on the couch, she texted Patty in desperation.

Don’t feel bad, you take your time, Patty replied right away. It must be a history documentary
marathon night, Holtzmann thought, if Patty was still up. *Take your shoes off, leave your clothes on, and get out some snacks and something to drink. There ya go: instant social cues*

BLESS, Holtzmann replied. Though their shoes were already off, because: dumpsters.

When Joey came out, Holtzmann had taken off her vest, scraped off the sofa and surrounding area as best she could, and gotten out the least strangely flavored bottles of soda and the least stale bags of snacks that she could find. “Hey, uh...if you got nothing better to do—”

“Hell yes, I’d like to hang out some more.” Joey apparently didn’t need to be told twice. She sat cross-legged on the sofa. Glitch appeared—Holtzmann had always suspected that cats, or at least Glitch, had access to portal technology—and settled on Joey’s lap. He gave Holtzmann a smug grin, as though he’d just claimed dibs.

Joey greeted him solemnly and let him sniff her fingertip. Truly, a woman who knew how to talk to a cat.

“He’s into you,” Holtzmann said. “Good taste.”

“Clearly, given who he’s chosen to live with.” Joey grinned up at Holtzmann and Holtzmann plopped down next to her on the sofa.

“Oh, hey, you wanna hear a cat joke?” Holtzmann offered.

“Sure.”

“There are two kittens on a roof. Which one falls off first? Don't worry, it lands on its feet.”

“Uh...”

“The one with the tiniest µ!”

“...Uh...the tiniest mew?”

“Yeah, you know, µ sounds like mew and...uh. It’s funny because that’s the coefficient of friction. That kitten would slide off more easily.” Holtzmann untied her scarf and fiddled with it. *Whoops.* “Sorry, I guess that’s not very funny.”

“I get it now! And I learned something. Although I’m going to say that you might want to recategorize that from 'cat jokes' to 'physics jokes.'” Joey laughed and made a tiny mew. Glitch gave her a baffled look.

“Fair.”

There was a brief pause in which they both realized they didn’t know what came next. Then Joey said, “Hey, have you ever seen *Kikaida?* The super-earnest, super-ridiculous live-action 70s one, I mean. I used to watch it when I was in Hawaii for a while, and then I found it on late-night TV in San Francisco.”

*YouTube to the rescue. An hour or two later, they had seen bits of Kikaida, How It’s Made, Master of Epic: The Animation Age, Look Around You, Pitagora Switchi, The Secret Life of Machines, and You Suck At Cooking.*

“So, was the egg murdered or not?” Holtzmann wondered aloud. She had managed to evict Glitch and put her own head where he’d been. This was not entirely un-arousing, but she’d been doing a
pretty good job of keeping her mind off it so far. She wasn’t entirely sure why she was trying to keep
her mind off of it, but…Anyway, arousal aside, cuddling like this felt deliciously good.

Joey laughed and brushed Holtzmann’s hair away from where it had fallen over her forehead. Then
Joey leaned over closer to her mouth, and Holtzmann wriggled up toward her. There was probably
orange cheese powder on Holtzmann’s face somewhere, but hopefully Joey didn’t care.

Their tongues met and Holtzmann felt electricity rolling through her whole body. Joey ran a hand
down Holtzmann’s side. Holtzmann took off her glasses and reached up to Joey’s hair. Then she
changed position, sitting up as she gently pulled Joey’s head down. Now Joey was lying mostly on
her back and Holtzmann was kneeling over her on the cushions at her head. She kissed Joey’s chin,
then under her chin. She wanted to kiss and maybe lick Joey’s throat, sternum, and stomach, but
there were so many layers. If she lifted or pushed them away…

Joey reached up and trailed her fingers along Holtzmann’s stomach. Her touch felt like fire.
Holtzmann swallowed and sat back. She hadn’t felt any impulse to stop when they were back in the
firehouse before the bust yesterday, but…well. Sex hadn’t really been on the table—as it were—at
that moment. Now it could happen and she didn’t know what she wanted. The last few hours had
already been a cascade of opening rusty, locked doors, letting Joey in. Maybe her nerve was finally
failing her.

Holtzmann grabbed a rhubarb soda off of the crate that was serving as a coffee table and took a gulp.
No beer for her, not tonight. She put her glasses back on and cast a sideways look at Joey. “I should
probably follow through on that offer to drive you home,” she said.

Joey coughed and sat up. “It’s kind of far—let me just get a taxi. I mean, I’d like you to come in
sometime, but it’s small and everyone’s home tonight. Not that I thought you were inviting yourself
over...Just that there’s no need for all that driving, and it’d be simpler for me to get a taxi.”

Holtzmann would have to take her at her word. She wasn’t sure if she felt disappointed or relieved.
She did try one more time to convince Joey to let her drive her home, but Joey was firm. “OK, OK.”
Holtzmann conceded. Mixed feelings! All the mixed feelings. And what if she’d hurt Joey’s feelings,
or sent the message that she was bored, or—? But she dutifully stood up and brushed the crumbs off
of her pants, and gave Joey a hand up.

Joey got her shoes on and picked up her bag from the floor. She stuffed her hat into a jacket pocket.
“Do I get a goodnight kiss?”

“If you think you’ll be able to stand upright afterwards, yes.” Wink. Yes, good. Light banter: much
easier than actually expressing herself. Is it still considered sublimation if you just channel the lust
into flirting?

Joey slid her arms around Holtzmann and gave her a long, deep kiss. Holtzmann wondered a) why
there were so many nerve endings in the lips, evolutionarily speaking, and b) whether she herself
was going to be able to stay upright.

"I had so much fun," Joey said, looking right into Holtzmann's eyes. She seemed to really mean it.
Maybe she did mean it.

“…Would you do it again?”

"In a heartbeat," Joey answered right away. "Are you asking me out again?"

Holtzmann tossed her hair out of her eyes. "I might be."
"Then I accept. But you'll have to give me a chance to return the favor at some point. Although tonight's adventure is going to be a tough act to follow." Joey hoisted her bag onto her shoulder. "All right," she said. "I guess I'll try to grab a few hours of sleep."

"Yeah, I guess the others would probably like it if we're well-rested for that road trip." Holtzmann rolled her eyes.

Joey laughed and nodded. "Right. See you soon, Holtz." She pulled the door open and took a step into the dark, phone in hand. Joey really was about to leave, and they each really were about to re-enter the normal world.

Holtzmann's brain was fine with this.

Mostly.

Sort of.

Increasingly less so.

Her heart wanted Joey to stay. And the rest of her body—the rest of her body was a hot, needy, insistent, single-minded choir.

Holtzmann came to a decision. She grabbed Joey's hand before she got any further away—lightly, but firmly—and said, "Stay."

Holtzmann just hoped it sounded like a cool, confident request, and not at all like the plea that it was.

Chapter End Notes

I broke up chapter 17 & 18 because this one is getting long, and because it'll read better when the whole thing is completed. If you're seeing this literally the moment I post it, hang on for a second and the other half will be up!

- ERRATA -

Look Around You
Kikaida (teaser only)
How It's Made
Master of Epic: The Animation Age
Pitagora Suitchi
The Secret Life of Machines
You Suck At Cooking
Coefficient of friction. At least Holtz didn't then go on to make a COF/cough joke, amirite
Chapter Summary

There's a first time for everything.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is about literally one thing.
One thing and some relationship stuff.
One thing, some relationship stuff, and some emotional baggage.
Amongst the things in this chapter are...I'll come in again.

The below image is censored since part of the whole charm of ao3 is that it looks innocent from a distance. The image itself isn't explicit but maybe isn't sfw. See the full version here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Stay” was just one word, but it meant everything to Joey at that moment. Her hand tingled where Holtzmann had grabbed it. Joey pulled the door shut, dropped her bag, and enveloped Holtzmann in her arms again. There was a frenzied moment of hot mouths and tongues, and then Joey pulled back a little and looked into Holtzmann’s suddenly intense blue gaze.

“Are you s—”

“Yes, for pete’s sake!” Holtzmann kissed her again and then said, “Oh. And you, are you sure—”
“Obviously! But thank you for asking.”

“I might be a little out of pra—mmmf!” Joey filled Holtzmann’s anxious mouth with her tongue and soon enough Holtz’s small and clever hands were slipping under her clothing. She bent forward and Holtzmann managed to tug off the jacket, the vest, and the sweater all at once, leaving just Joey’s t-shirt, leggings, and underwear.

“That’s a good start,” Holtz said. Joey reached for Holtzmann’s waistcoat and Holtz let her unbutton it, but stopped her hands before they got to her shirt buttons. “Maybe not yet,” she said, an apologetic tone—which Joey was definitely not used to hearing—in her voice.

“All right, anything you say,” Joey said. Literally anything, just tell me. She kissed along Holtz’s jawline and Holtz closed her eyes for a moment.

“Bedroom’s that way,” Holtzmann said, wrapping one arm around Joey’s waist and pointing.

Joey nodded, but they didn’t actually make it that far right away. Holtzmann was kissing Joey like they were sharing oxygen, her hands on Joey’s cheeks and her fingers edging into Joey’s hair. They stumbled into a crate and then tumbled onto the sofa, with Holtzmann’s knees on either side of Joey’s hips. If anyone had come in at that moment, Joey thought, she probably would have killed them. All of her patience had flown away from her; she wanted Holtzmann right now. “Please, Holtzy…”

Holtzmann pushed Joey’s t-shirt up and over her head. There was a brief moment in which Joey couldn’t see, and Holtz used that moment to lick from her sternum to her throat, and then nipped her neck. Joey groaned and Holtzmann pulled the shirt away from her hands to throw it on the floor. “How do I get these off you?” She reached down and pulled her thumb along the seam between Joey’s legs, where her pulse beat insistently.

“Oh…Let me.” Leggings were not sexy to remove, but she started to wriggle them off. Maddeningly, Holtzmann refused to move completely off of her, so she had to contort herself, and every time a body part came close to Holtz’s mouth, it got kissed, licked, or nibbled. This didn’t make taking off the leggings any easier. But finally they got it managed. Holtzmann bent to kiss below Joey’s navel, above the edge of her underwear, and Joey shifted her position, dizzy with want.

Holtzmann tugged Joey to her feet and grabbed her hand. This time they almost made it to Holtzmann’s messy bed, but there was a moment where they were kissing again and Joey found herself pressed against the wall, with her cheek on the cool concrete. “Just stay there,” Holtzmann ordered. Joey felt herself grow wetter. Did Holtz have a dominant streak? Joey would like to see how that would play out, if she got a chance, but at the moment Holtz just undid her bra and reached around to hold her breasts.

“Damn,” Holtzmann said. She pressed her chest and face against Joey’s bare back, and Joey’s nipples brushed across the cold, hard wall—which only made the nipples get harder. “They feel even better than I’d imagined.” She hooked a finger in the back of Joey’s panties and tugged them up for a moment. Joey pressed her thighs together to pacify her hungry clitoris, but Holtzmann reached between her legs and wiggled them apart. Joey leaned her forehead on the wall and wondered how long she could keep standing. Then she felt hot breath on the insides of her thighs, and soft hair brushed her skin. When she looked down, Holtzmann was kneeling there. She kissed and sucked her way up from Joey’s knee to the edge of her underwear. Then she reached up and started pulling the panties down. Joey was happy to assist, and then Holtzmann was pulling her into the bed.

Joey fell onto the mattress, entangled with Holtzmann’s legs. They were both on their sides, facing each other, faces only a few inches apart. There was enough light for Joey to look at Holtzmann’s
face for a moment: the almost always quirked lips that were now softly parted, the flush in her cheeks, the Cheshire ghost of a dimple. And…”Can I…?” She hesitantly reached for Holtzmann’s glasses.

Holtzmann didn’t respond for a moment, and then she nodded, minutely. She seemed to hold her breath as Joey gently lifted them off of her face and put them beside the bed.

Now Joey could really look into Holtz’s slightly tilted blue eyes. There were little red marks on either side of Holtzmann’s nose, and Joey brushed them gently with her fingertips. She ran her fingers down Holtzmann’s cheeks and the side of her neck, stopping when she reached the blouse. She didn’t want to pressure Holtzmann into anything she didn’t want to do tonight, but god, she wanted more. She wanted Holtzmann’s skin under her mouth.

Holtz seemed to read her mind. She took Joey’s hands and moved them to the buttons of her shirt. Joey kept eye contact with her and peppered her face with kisses as she carefully opened one button at a time. When the shirt was fully unbuttoned, she pushed it down Holtzmann’s shoulders. There was a camisole and an athletic bra beneath.

Holtz just watched her quietly. Joey leaned in to kiss one strong shoulder and then the other. She ran her thumbs over Holtzmann’s collarbones and then Holtzmann pulled off the camisole herself. Joey stroked between Holtzmann’s breasts. She told herself that she wouldn’t try to take Holtz’s bra off; she would occupy herself with Holtzmann’s earlobes, jawline, and neck, and see what happened next.

Joey gasped mid-lick as Holtzmann’s hands found her breasts again, cupping them, and her fingers found Joey’s nipples. Holtzmann just stroked them lightly at first, but when Joey pressed herself into Holtz’s hands, she grew bolder. First she scraped her short nails across the nipples, pressing into the sensitive skin, and Joey couldn’t help moaning. Then an experimental pinch or two, lightly, and then harder. Joey gasped and raked her teeth across the skin over Holtzmann’s trapezius muscle, between her neck and her shoulder, and was rewarded with a tiny pleased noise.

Holtzmann sat up and tore off her bra. She pulled Joey to her and Joey felt her heartbeat pounding against Holtzmann’s bare skin. Her nipples pressed into Holtz’s breasts. It was intoxicating. She wanted to pull Holtzmann’s hands down to her vulva, but she also didn’t want to break the contact. It felt like sexual electricity, yes, but also a shocking and warming intimacy, a profound sense of rightness. Something that Joey would do anything to hold onto. They stayed that way for what felt like several minutes, breathing together, and then Holtzmann pushed her fingers up the hair on the back of Joey’s head and licked her earlobe. Shivers of goosebumps flowed across Joey’s skin.

Holtzmann gently shoved her back onto the mattress and used her fingers and tongue to make a slow, methodical study of Joey’s body, finding tingly, sensitive spots inside Joey’s elbows and ankles and the backs of her knees that she hadn’t even known were there. She wondered how wet it was possible for her to get, but apparently, she hadn’t reached that limit.

She caught Holtzmann and held her gently while Joey brought her mouth up to Holtzmann’s breasts. The small, round nipples were like pearls against her tongue. She lapped at them until Holtzmann started to make the most wonderfully pleasing noises and finally pulled away to complete her investigation of Joey’s skin.

The fabric of Holtzmann’s tweed trousers brushed against Joey’s thighs as she moved, both rough and soft like the patches of calloused skin on Holtz’s palms. Without even meaning to, Joey plucked at Holtzmann’s oversized belt buckle. Holtzmann looked at Joey and put her hands over Joey’s for a moment. She seemed to be thinking.
Holtzmann shook the curls back from her face. She rested her fingers on Joey’s lips, then traced a line from Joey’s stomach to where her pubic hair began. Then she said, in a low voice that Joey had never heard her use before, “What would you like me to do next?”

“I—” Joey found it hard to organize words. What didn’t she want to happen next? “I’d like your fingers inside me. Please, Holtz. Or…you know. Something else. If you…” She didn’t know if Holtz was the strap-on type. But if she was...

“My eloquent writer.” The playfulness was back in Holtzmann’s voice. “So…my fingers? Inside you?” She brought her fingers back to Joey’s mouth and Joey darted her tongue out. “Like this?” She pushed a finger into Joey’s mouth and Joey groaned. She had always been weak for that, and so even though it wasn’t all that she was craving, she wanted more. She licked Holtzmann’s finger and Holtz inserted another, playing with her tongue at first and then rhythmically stroking in and out. Joey’s lips hummed with pleasure.

Holtzmann withdrew her fingers abruptly, a strange expression on her face and her gaze elsewhere. Joey bit her lower lip, flush with blood. What was Holtzmann thinking? Joey caressed her face. “Hey, Holtz. Holtzy.”

Holtzmann refocused and Joey caught a glimpse of fear in her eyes. “Joey, I…”

“It’s OK, Holtz, everything is OK.” She kissed Holtzmann on the forehead. “We can stop, we can keep going. We’re safe here.”

“I want you to be safe with me,” Holtzmann said. She closed her eyes for a moment and Joey reached up to stroke her hair. She didn’t know what Holtzmann was working through, but she was going to let her do it.

“I feel safe right now,” Joey said softly. “Safe and very happy to be where I am right now.” She brought Holtzmann’s hands up to her mouth and kissed Holtzmann’s fingers.

Holtzmann opened her eyes again; they seemed huge and vulnerable. There was a little crease between her eyebrows. “You know you can tell me, any time, and I’ll stop.”

“I know.” Joey smiled up at Holtzmann and Holtzmann bent swiftly to her mouth, kissing her fiercely. Joey pushed herself into it, and when Holtz finally pulled back to breathe, Joey said, “Don’t your fingers have somewhere to be?” She arched her hips toward Holtzmann.

Holtzmann smiled wolfishly and adjusted her position. She pressed her fingers against Joey’s mound and then stroked around the slippery walls of her labia. Joey strained not to just push herself up onto Holtzmann’s fingers, to let her take her time.

Holtzmann ran a finger across Joey’s clitoris, which was pounding wildly along with her heartbeat, and Joey whimpered. Holtzmann’s grin only got wider, and she returned to the inner labia. “I think we can skip one and go right to two, don’t you?” and before she had even finished her rhetorical question, she had slipped in both fingers up to the knuckles.

“Ah!” Joey was happy, although not at all satisfied. Holtzmann felt so good. She rocked her hips up and Holtzmann stroked into her, with her thumb pressed against Joey’s clitoris.

“You said ‘something else’ was fine, too, right?” Holtzmann inquired after a while.

Joey nodded emphatically.

“Wait here.”
Joey stifled a cry of no! as Holtzmann gently withdrew her fingers and disappeared around a corner. She had a brief image Holtz returning with some wild, glowing, steampunk contraption, and she nearly laughed out loud. She squeezed her thighs together and wriggled in impatient agony. She had a good idea of what was coming, and she ached for it, but she still felt bereft, without a Holtzmann.

Holtzmann reappeared. She dropped her trousers and Joey leaned up on her elbows to get a better look at her, to see just what she’d gone to get. Holtz was wearing a pair of dark navy low-rise briefs with a circular opening in the middle, out of which grew a stylized blue dildo of just the right size to be enticing but not intimidating. “Coquelet du jour,” Holtzmann said, gesturing at it. “Does madame approve?”

“Oh yes,” said Joey. Holtzmann crawled up the bed toward her. “Does that mean there are more… items on the menu?”

“There are,” Holtzmann acknowledged. “Although the menu hasn’t been opened in quite a while.”

“I’m glad it’s open now.”

Holtzmann bent down toward Joey’s mouth and whispered, “Tell me when the cock is too much.” She wrapped one arm around Joey and lifted Joey’s hips toward her own. She slipped her tongue into Joey’s mouth at the same moment as she guided the dildo into Joey’s vagina. Joey gripped Holtzmann’s shoulder. When it came to strap-on sex, she always especially liked that initial entry part, but it felt extra good for no reason other than the fact that the woman behind the slow thrust was Holtzmann.

Holtzmann started to slow her inward progress. Joey ran a hand down her back to Holtzmann’s ass, then pulled her closer and lifted her own hips to encourage Holtz to keep going until it was all the way in.

“Is that good?” Holtz asked.

“It’s beyond good,” Joey said. It wasn’t so much the inches of silicone; it was the connection, the way that even though the dildo was an object, a tool, it was now a part of Holtz. She wanted to be filled with Holtzmann.

Holtzmann started thrusting slowly, angling the base of her cock so that it moved across Joey’s outer labia. She kept one hand under Joey’s hips, firmly gripping her ass, and moved the other up to Joey’s hair. She stroked it and then gently pushed Joey’s head back until her throat was exposed. She leaned in to tongue her way down Joey’s jugular vein, and the shift of her weight moved the dildo in deeper. Joey found that she was making soft sounds without any intention to, but she also couldn’t stop them.

Holtzmann sucked gently on the skin below the corner of Joey’s jaw and then spoke, huskily, into Joey’s ear. “I’ve been wanting this. You. I’ve been wanting to have you like this.” The wet, warm air of Holtzmann’s breath tickled Joey’s earlobes, and crackling electricity ran down her neck. She couldn’t even muster a response, just a groan, but Holtzmann’s lips curved into a smile and she kissed her way back down Joey’s neck and torso, stopping to pay attention to each breast with her teeth and tongue. Joey touched any part of Holtzmann that she could reach, mindful to stay away from the underwear. That wasn’t easy to resist, but if she was reading Holtzmann’s signals correctly, Holtz just wasn’t ready for that. But she caressed Holtz’s hair, face, ears, chest, and even her back, and as Holtz sometimes leaned into it or almost purred, she kept going.

Holtzmann’s free hand reached Joey’s vulva, above where she’d entered her. “Faster?”
“Yes, Holtz, faster!”

Holtzmann put her body into it, thrusting faster, using her hips and cock to make more than just in-and-out motions inside of Joey. With her other hand, she pressed circles into Joey’s clitoris, moving at different pressures and speeds until Joey breathed “Ahhh…” Then Holtzmann immediately stopped switching it up and kept that movement constant.

Joey couldn’t decide whether to keep her eyes open or closed. She wanted to watch Holtzmann move above her. A little sweat ran down her jaw and past her collarbone toward her breast. Holtzmann, her expression intent, didn’t take her eyes off of Joey, watching her face and her body react. Joey wanted to drink in every moment of Holtzmann’s face, but cresting waves rising from deep inside her made the decision on her behalf and she closed her eyes tightly.

“Holtz—Holtzmann—nngh…!”

“Don’t worry, Joey, I won’t stop.” Holtzmann’s voice was throaty, a little unsteady, and full of promise. Joey groaned at the sound of it. In the darkness behind her eyes, Holtzmann’s voice blended with the slowly blossoming light beginning to spread from deep inside. Holtzmann, ever observant, kept talking. “I want to fill you up, Joey, until you can’t take any more, until you come right here on my cock and in my hand. And then I want to do it again. Can you do that for me?”

Joey choked out a “Yes, Holtz!” and then she was lifted on the foaming crest of a white-hot wave. She grasped at nothing, just too full of bursting light to keep it all inside of her, and then she found Holtzmann’s shoulders and clung to them as though she would be swept away.

“Holy fuck, Holtzmann,” she gasped into Holtzmann’s neck. She shuddered around the dildo. Holtzmann stroked her clitoris a few more times until Joey shook her head no, and then Holtz clasped her arms around her. She covered Joey’s face with kisses and then buried her head in Joey’s shoulder.

“Was that OK?” Holtzmann asked, her voice muffled.

“Couldn’t you tell? No, that’s unfair, I’m sorry. It was amazing. You’re amazing. You’re wonderful.”

They looked at each other for a moment. Joey couldn’t resist running her thumb across Holtzmann’s flushed lips. Holtzmann pressed her cheek into Joey’s hand. “Before you ask,” Holtz said, “yes, I’m also having a good time. An extremely good time.”

Then Holtzmann shifted her hips and the dildo moved inside of Joey. “I wasn’t kidding about ‘again,’” Holtz said. “Are you…”

“Yes, but what about you, though?” Holtz had just said she was having a good time, yes. But Joey hated the thought of Holtzmann’s body being neglected.

Holtzmann shook her head and a couple of curls flopped over her eyes, making her look younger and smaller. But she lifted her chin and winked. “We’re not there yet. If you’re willing to wait…”

“Anything for you.”

Holtzmann grinned a broad, wicked grin. “In that case, maybe two more.”

And she was true to her word, once more with the dildo and a final time with just fingers.

Afterwards, Joey lay in Holtzmann’s arms. “This is unfair,” Joey complained. She poked the soft
underside of Holtzmann’s forearm. “How can one woman be so good at everything?”

Holtzmann laughed sharply. “Trust me, I’m bad at plenty of things. Oh, but if my girl says I’m a seeeeexxxxuallll geeeeneiuussss”—pronounced with far too much tongue action—“it must be true!”

“It is true, Holtz.”

She gave Holtz what was meant to be a quick, cheerful kiss, but it wound up being long and deep and sweet. Then they just cuddled silently for a while, cozy and content and half-awake.

Before they fell completely asleep, a question occurred to Joey. “On this…’menu,’” she began.

Holtzmann perked up. “Ye-esss?”

“Does it offer anything made…you know…in-house?”

Holtzmann blinked. “No one’s ever asked that before. I mean, not that there have been a lot, but … I doubt most of ‘em would’ve let me … No, there isn’t.” Joey made a sad face and Holtzmann’s eyes gleamed. “Yet.”

The first thing Holtzmann did after Joey left in the morning was use a vibrator.

The second thing she did was send a message to Cerise, asking the cost of tuition and when they could start.

The third thing she did was get some fresh paper onto her drafting board.

This was going to be a good project.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm, I don't think I've ever written such a ... focused chapter. I hope it was worth the (um...18-chapter-long) wait.

Is this the end? Hell no, the plot is still happening. We have a road trip to take (pack your favorite tropes and hop in!). And then there's the rest of that menu.

Not to mention the ominous main title of the fic.

Anyway, the next chapters will not be up right away. I have an immovable deadline for a novel draft, and that takes precedence. But I hope to squeeze in words on Chapter 19+ anyway. Much love for everyone's patience, and please let me know what you thought! (Never feel bad about commenting with just a word or two. I appreciate those comments just as much as the epic ones.)

- DISCLAIMER -
This is fantasy sex. Always wash your hands, practice safe sex, stay hydrated, get tested, etc. etc.

- ERRATA -
The title of this being a line in an Avicii song is a coincidence--it's one of the songs on
the Nothing In This World Is Safe playlist at Spotify.
Don't Stop Me Now

Chapter Summary

Yeah, I'm a rocket ship on my way to Mars
On a collision course
I am a satellite, I'm out of control
I am a sex machine, ready to reload
Like an atom bomb about to
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh explode
- "Don't Stop Me Now," Queen

It's a road trip! The Ghostbusters head to Schenectady to investigate their spectral energy mystery, accompanied by Joey.

Chapter Notes

Apologies in advance for a chapter that's more rambling and less well edited than usual. I wanted to get something out before the year ended, and it's faster to write verbosely than succinctly. I hope it's still at least a bit of fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Holtzmann didn’t see much of Joey on Tuesday. Instead, there were a bunch of deliveries to wait around on, including a bunch of biomedical tech coming in on Dr. Miriam Chen’s recommendation. Chen was the neuroscientist source that Joey had put them in touch with a while back, and she’d been extremely helpful with suggestions for getting the possession prophylactic device to the next level. She even had some awesomely far-out ideas for an approach to possession reversal. Maybe Holtzmann would have an upgraded anti-possession model to test soon, although the problem of how to test it was still...a problem.

While she was waiting, she spent some time in the lab fine-tuning the handheld anomalous PKE tracker, to help them follow the spectral traces that they'd find on their road trip to Schenectady tomorrow. And, OK, she also spent a few minutes at the drafting table thinking up possible ways to fulfill Joey’s request for a homebrew sex toy. (Toy? Hmm. Maybe implement. Or device. Or—yesss, contraption. Sex contraption! That sounded like a name of a band that Holtzmann would definitely listen to, unless it was all dudes, in which case she would definitely not listen to it.)

Holtzmann was also wondering what on earth she was going to do for their second date, since she had somehow gotten herself on the hook for that. It would have to be Thursday, if she could wait that long.

The multi-track drifting of Holtzman's brain was interrupted by Kevin’s voice on the intercom, saying something about “a lot of huge foxes” at the loading dock. Foxes? Boxes! The equipment was there! She ran down the stairs and found Erin signing the delivery forms.

“This stuff is enormous, Holtz! And there’s so much paperwork! What is it?”
“The paperwork? That’s your Thanksgiving present. I know how you love it!” Holtzmann grabbed a platform hand truck and steered it over to where the delivery person waited. “Good thing we have that freight elevator now…”

“Thanksgiving presents aren’t—That’s not—I meant the equipment, Holtz!” Erin frowned at her over the clipboard.

“I filed a request!”

“If you mean the post-it note that you stuck to the inside—the inside!—of my favorite mug, I didn’t see it until after I poured the coffee. So after that, it was illegible. That is not how you file a request.”

“Eh, it was probably illegible before that,” Holtzmann said. “So don’t feel bad! Seriously though, it’s all that biomedical stuff I told you about.”

Erin shook her head, massaged her wrist, and continued signing things. “Oh. Well, I hope it’s useful. No more ‘Busters trying to kill each other would be great.’

Holtzmann lost her breath for a moment, feeling Abby’s—Rowan’s—fingers around her neck again. She coughed, forcing air out of her throat, and took a deep breath. It was OK. Erin didn’t get it, but it wasn’t her fault. She hadn’t been there. Possession was still an abstract threat to her. And it was Holtzmann’s problem, not Erin’s, that no matter how many times Holtzmann thought she was totally over it, sometimes a fragment of memory would still sneak up on her like that.

At least it didn’t happen at night anymore.

While Holtzmann lugged boxes around and made sure she’d gotten everything she ordered, she contemplated Patty’s database of frequent words from Joey’s novels. Of course she’d asked for the file, and promptly gotten it, but she wasn’t sure how to decide whether the data actually told her anything or not. She shoved a box into the storage closet and wandered over the stack of books near her drafting board.

Holtzmann picked up one of Joey’s pseudonymously-written romance novels, which she’d bought in paperback after returning Patty’s collection to her, and flipped through it. This one included a beautiful description of a small bookstore in Dublin and a tea cafe in Tokyo, and as Holtzmann skinned it, she realized something: She knew Joey. Pretty well, at this point. Sure, this was commercial romance fiction, as Patty had pointed out, and thus some of the writing choices were undoubtedly just popular tropes, but some passages of the text felt different to Holtzmann. Warmer, more personal. She would bet her most-beloved multimeter that not only were the bookstore and the cafe real places, but that they were places that Joey had been to and loved.

Holtzmann dug out a stale Twizzler from the half-open pack that she’d jammed under a particulate matter monitor in order to keep it level. She started chewing on it absentely, and picked up some more of the books, meaning to just flip through them on her way over to the cart with—yay?—more boxes, but when Erin knocked, Holtzmann was sitting atop the uppermost box, still reading.

“Hey. Everything in order?”

Whoops. There were still a lot of boxes left. “So far so good.”

Erin nodded and lingered in the doorway for a moment, hands clasped in front of her. Holtzmann cocked an eyebrow and slid her glasses down her nose. “Penny—no, adjusting for inflation…dollar for your thoughts?”
“Oh, nothing, I just…” Erin ducked her head and looked down toward her feet. “It’s dumb, but…I feel like something bad is on the way. I mean, I don’t believe in premonitions, of course! But you know, ghosts are real, so who knows—maybe premonitions come from subconscious analysis, or folds in time, or…” Erin’s voice trailed off. “Or maybe it’s just…”

Holtzmann slid down to the floor. She had been about to make a joke about magic 8-balls, but Erin’s mouth was pinched, and although she was actually several inches taller than Holtzmann, she seemed very small. “Just what?” Holtzmann asked.

“I don’t know, I guess—when things in my life seem to be going well, it usually turns out that actually they aren’t and they haven’t been all along, or I do something to ruin it, or something,” Erin said. She’d started twisting her hands. “I can’t decide which is more likely. Maybe something really terrible is coming, something to do with these anomalous entities. Or maybe I’m just afraid that good things never last. Or maybe I’m going to mess everything up. I tried to talk to Abby about it but she just tried to reassure me that she’d forgiven me and all. Which was really nice, but…"

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna tell you that,” Holtzmann said. Erin looked at her with a flash of hurt, and then laughed shakily in response to the goofy face Holtzmann was making. Phew.

Holtzmann held her arms out and Erin came over for a tight hug. “Aw, Er.” Holtzmann patted her auburn ponytail. “Look, if the weird ghosts get weirder and nastier, it’s OK. We’re leveling up in kickassitude and I’m upgrading our gear 24/7. And you’re not going to screw anything up, but if you did, we’d have your back. You know that, right?”

Erin pulled back and sniffled. “Yeah, I know. All right. I’m probably just being silly.”

Holtzmann shook her head. “I didn’t say that. You’re worth listening to, ‘K? Repeat that in front of a mirror a hundred times a day till you get it. So your hunches rate some attention. I’m gonna keep an eye out for extra weirdness.”

“Oh, shoot. Really? That…uh…that means a lot to me,” Erin said. She smiled, a little steadier than before. “All right, I’ll get out of your hair. Have fun with the boxes!” She headed back toward the stairs, and Holtzmann counted down from 3 on her fingers. Right on schedule, Erin’s voice floated up to her: “But not too much fun!”

Holtzmann laughed and went back to work.

Eventually, she got most of the equipment into the right place. Then she moved the pile of books back to a shelf. She’d definitely learned a few things, between Patty’s list and flipping the books. Holtzmann now had a long list of potential places and activities—“dates” still sounded weird, even in her head—that she was pretty sure Joey would love.

And yeah, Holtzmann was also fairly confident that she was picking up on a personal interest in kink.

The only problem was that Holtzmann couldn’t tell whether Joey was interested in dominating, being dominated, or both. Not for sure. But the other night—no, fuck, last night. Technically this morning. This morning had made Holtzmann think that maybe it was the latter.

Which would be awfully convenient.

Tonight Holtzmann had a long Skype lesson scheduled with Cerise, and tomorrow she’d have another. It was hard for her to hope that anything would come out of it, either a method for making her brain shut up during sex or something to share with Joey—let alone both. But she was hoping
anyway.

The decision at hand, though, was the date one. And she had all of these ideas that Joey would love. At the same time, though, she still had a perverse urge to make Joey kind of, well…run the gauntlet? That wasn’t right, but…something. Show her, again, one more time, what the deal was.

Holtzmann didn’t trust this impulse. This, she thought, was probably good.

But she also didn’t trust the impulse to do known-safe activities, because…

Because that wasn’t her.

Holtzmann wasn’t safe.

“Nothing in this lab is safe,” she muttered to herself, shoving her rolling chair away from the shelves. "That includes me."

She rubbed her face, exhausted even though it felt like she’d done hardly anything so far today. Puzzling this stuff out was draining.

It wasn’t that Holtzmann wanted to test Joey. That was some straight-people garbage she didn’t want any part of. More like….hmm. Like she didn’t want Joey to not fully understand what spending time with her was like. They’d spent a lot of time together, but still, most of it had been around other people. Being pulled into each other’s gravity alone, only orbiting each other, was completely different.

Holtzmann had zero understanding of what mysterious forces of the universe had resulted in her having three people right there—four if you counted Kevin—who were willing to spend time with her of their own accord. The fact that there was a fifth was almost too much, and it kept her internal pressure gauge vacillating wildly between extreme happiness and a deep, dark sense of foreboding.

But she had taken Joey dumpster-diving with her, and they’d both survived, and Joey was willing to do it again—and more shockingly, Holtzmann herself was, too.

Well, she’d figure out the date thing. Right now Holtzmann had more suggestions from Dr. Chen sitting in her inbox, and they were good ones. Great ones, even! Dr. Chen was sharp. Holtzmann’s brain was starting to seethe with ideas. Mostly for the new anti-possession gadget, but also a burgeoning thought about making Joey something she could use to protect herself. Not the full gear, which would send Jennifer and the mayor’s office into a tizzy—which would be hilarious, but also irritating, and might jeopardize Joey’s presence at HQ—and also wasn’t really anything Joey had signed up to deal with. But something, in case things did go sideways just as Erin feared. A sidearm, for emergencies. Just a one-shot, even. Better than nothing.

Holtzmann dove into a supply cabinet and ripped two giant piece of papers off of a pad. She liked how the paper felt under her fingers and the noise that it made—so much, in fact, that she already had a stack of ready-to-use sheets that she’d torn off recreationally. But both of these projects justified their own fresh sheets. Right? One for the sidearm, one for the anti-possession device, which was still at the top of her priority list. (How many projects did she have going right now? Abby would probably want her to make an actual list at some point. But she didn’t have to do that right now.) She hummed to herself and danced back and forth a little in front of her drafting table, debating the form factor that she wanted this new iteration of the anti-possession device to have. Then she found a pencil in a Reading Rainbow lunchbox, licked it, and set herself to sketching on the paper.
WEDNESDAY

Joey and the Ghostbusters hadn’t left on their roadtrip to Schenectady with a full tank, so they had to pull off the highway midway for a pit stop. When Joey came out of the convenience store, the scene around the Ectomobile was more chaotic than when she’d gone in. Holtzmann had the gas pump in one hand and a paper map flattened against the car with the other. The map was flapping around Patty’s face, and she was attempting to smack it down.

“It’ll be fine, they’ll love it,” Holtzmann was saying. She struggled with the map—which in Joey’s estimation was nearly as wide as Holtzmann was tall—and Joey lunged forward just in time to prevent Holtz from emphasizing her point by waving around the still-running pump handle. Luckily, Joey didn’t drop the drinks she was carrying.

Holtzmann didn’t even notice; she just made a shh gesture at Patty. Joey nudged Holtz aside, feeling a tingle where their hips touched, and finished filling up the gas tank herself.

“Didn’t you say you were gonna convert this thing to used cooking oil, or dirty bathwater, or something?” Patty asked.

“It’s on the list!” Holtzmann said. “Metaphorically speaking, anyway. I keep thinking of better ways to do it, so—oh, hi, Abby!”

Abby, who’d just come out of the convenience store with a bottled latte, blinked at her. “Uh, hi. So where are we gonna start tracking? What’s our plan?” Abby asked. Behind her, Erin clutched an oversized drink cup festooned with exploding planets, labeled SWEET’N’ BUTTERY’N’ SPICY END-OF-THE-WORLD-FLAVORED FREEZIN’ SWIRLNADO™, and a paper box reading DIPPIN’ DEVIL PIZZABURGER TAQUITOS™. Ah. So that was what their whispered debate in the other side of the store had been about.

Patty and Holtzmann glanced at each other and then back to Abby, who said, “Oh, I know, I told Erin not to get either of those gross things, but she said she’d never been allowed to buy anything at a gas station when she was a kid, and so…I didn’t have the heart to stop her.”

“You didn’t get me one of those monstrosities?” Holtzmann asked. “I—I thought you loved me.”

“I got you an Icee,” Joey said, though she was pretty distracted by Holtzmann’s pouting lower lip. “I didn’t know what flavors you’d want so I just made it 50% blue and 50% everything else.”

“My favorite! I am sufficiently mollified,” Holtzmann declared. She reached for the drink, and the map flapped around.

Patty huffed. “Get control of your cape there, Doctor Strange. Back to Abby’s question: Obviously the main plan is that I’m going to drive around and y’all are going to do your work to narrow down the location. Holtzy and I worked out a route. But then I was telling Holtzy about the General Electric Realty District and now she really, really wants to go.”

“Reeeeeeallyyyyy wants to go,” Holtzmann said, vibrating like an overexcited corgi. “Here.” She pressed a finger down on the map.

It didn’t look like anywhere special. “What’s there?” Joey asked. Abby and Erin both shrugged blankly.

“Houses!” Holtzmann beamed at them. Erin squinted at her, and Holtz clarified. “Specifically Charles Proteus Steinmetz’s, Albert Hull’s, Chester Rice’s, and Irving Langmuir’s.” She grinned.
“Not Steinmetz, they tore his house and lab down,” Patty corrected.

The first name was definitely familiar. The others…

Patty ticked them off on her fingers. “That’s Steinmetz, the scientist who brought you alternating current. Hull, who invented the magnetron. Rice, who bounced radio waves off some cars in his neighborhood and proved the viability of radar. And Langmuir, first industrial chemist to win the chemistry Nobel.”

Holtzmann grumbled something about Nobels being overrated, and started ticking off a list of the committees’ biases under her breath, but her enthusiasm didn’t seem to be diminished.

“Oooh,” said Erin. “That’s a heck of a neighborhood! Now I want to go too. After we’ve finished our tracking, of course.”

“Back in the car!” said Patty. "Don't even try me, Holtz. We all agreed I'd drive!" She got in and turned up her roadtrip playlist, which had so far proven to be a strange but fun combination featuring Biv DeVoe, Sarah Vaughan, Lisa Loeb, The Weeknd, Janelle Monáe, Gloria Jones, Queen, and (of course), Stevie Nicks. Eclectic, just like Patty.

On the road again, they passed by the Catskills on the left. Some of the trees still clung to their autumn leaves. Occasionally, on the other side of the Ecto, through the bare branches, Joey could sometimes make out the morning sun glinting on the Hudson. She relaxed into the music, and Holtz started dancing in her seat. When another Queen song came on, everyone started singing, and they didn't stop when the next song started. Not everybody remembered the words to all of the songs, but they made up for it in volume and talent. Feeling outclassed, Joey tried to sing a little bit more softly than the others. During a lull in the vocals, Joey said, "You guys are all good singers. How did I not know this?"

"If the ghosts ever get bored and go away, we're gonna become an idol group," Patty announced, kicking off an argument over who'd be the cute one, the sexy one, the cool one, the wacky one. As far as Joey was concerned, Holtz was all four, but the mental picture they were painting made her dissolve in giggles. By the time they passed through Climax, they were all choking with laughter, and the town's name didn't help them calm down.

They skirted Albany and approached Schenectady. When the instruments came out, everyone quieted and focused, more or less, on their work. After quite a lot of driving around Schenectady, all they’d figured out in terms of tracking was that they’d probably overshot their goal. The spectral energy signature was registering more toward the southeast, out of town.

The Ectomobile idled in a back alley while they decided what to do. “Let’s just go visit the GE District and then head back,” Patty said.

Abby nodded. “If we don’t spend too long there, we can make it back to Manhattan by dinner.”

“We could get there even earlier if you’d let me dr—” Holtzmann began.

“NO!” the other Ghostbusters said.

Joey was literally along for the ride, so anything was fine with her. Unfortunately she now had to sit with Erin between her and Holtz, because apparently Patty had PDA rules when she was driving the Ecto, and Holtz kept breaking them (and forgetting about the equipment she was supposed to be using). But Holtz was still there, and they had their phones, and even if Joey wasn’t sure whether Holtz was sexting her or trolling her due to all the inexplicable emoji and GIFs littering her messages,
it was still something.

Patty got her selfies with the others outside of the historical houses, and there was a lot of reading of Wikipedia passages aloud to each other. Just as they'd finally gotten back into the Ectomobile and started debating the best route back home, Erin got a text.

“When we concluded that the energy signature wasn’t coming from here, I texted my old grad school roommate, who teaches at Rensselaer Polytechnical Institute. They want to get coffee, and meet everybody, if that’s OK,” Erin said. “And not to make fun of us, I promise. They’re really nice.”

“Tell them to make it an early dinner,” Patty said, “and we’re on. I’m not driving all the way back to Manhattan on an empty stomach, and I’m not having dinner at some Dunkin’ Donuts on the Thruway, either.”

Abby clapped. “Hear, hear.”

“Huh. Rensselaer’s east of here, right?” Joey asked. “Southeast?”

“Yup,” Patty said. “I figure that’s why Erin texted them. Hey, ask them if anything weird has happened on campus in the time frame we’re looking at.”

“Will do,” Erin said. Texts went back and forth for a couple of minutes. Joey rolled down the window on her side and breathed in the air for a moment. Someone was burning leaves somewhere, far enough away that it was only a hit of smokiness on the late afternoon breeze. It smelled like autumn, and not anything like NYC.

“Air too fresh! Not enough exhaust,” Holtzmann mock-complained. Her legs were kicked up over the back of the front seat, boots resting dangerously near Abby’s head. Holtz reached over Erin and swatted ineffectually at Joey. “My lungs can’t cope!”

“You poor thing. Stay strong,” Joey said. She caught Holtzmann’s hand and patted it. Holtzmann snorted and awkwardly laced her fingers into Joey’s. Joey wanted to nibble Holtz’s inkstained pink fingertips, but…

Erin cleared her throat and they snatched their hands back. “All right,” Erin said. “We’re all set. And—ohhh, they say yes, something strange happened around then. But they’d rather talk about it in person.”

“Awesome possum!” Holtzmann said. She sat up. “I would enjoy a nice juicy lead for dinner.” She mimed primly cutting off a bite of steak and chewing it.

“Amen. But don’t get your hopes up.” Abby put on her seatbelt. “From what I hear, plenty of weird stuff happens at RPI. Probably just business as usual.”

They wound up at an Italian place not too far from the RPI campus. It didn't smell to Joey like an Italian-Italian restaurant, but it smelled damned good, and that was all that mattered. Holtzmann ordered a giant basket of garlic knots as her entire dinner, but Joey managed to get her to eat a slice of pizza that Abby couldn't finish and some fried eggplant from Joey's own plate.

Erin’s friend, Bex, had seemed stressed at first, but then chatty, like they welcomed the distraction. And they seemed genuinely pleased to see Erin again. Erin got all twitchy and overly chatty with nervous anxiety, like she didn't know what to do with people being happy to see her.

Bex, who’d recently gotten tenure, told them about an adjunct named Megan Carey who had run a
series of workshops for undergrads about superstitions and science. The fact was, Bex said, that Rensselaer had a small but enthusiastic contingent—including Bex themself—of scientists who followed everything the Ghostbusters did.

“You’ve got quite a few fans in the faculty,” Bex continued, sipping their wine with a gleam in their eye. “It pisses the other faculty off. Megan’s workshops were pretty good in general, though, a really good fit for the Science, Technology, and Society degree program. Yay critical thinking and all that. But she kind of militantly doesn’t believe in ghosts, so…that was a thing. She got into more arguments than is probably wise for an adjunct, you know? Still, a lot of the straight old white cis dude professors—you know the type—were on her side, and either way, no one was expecting her to just…walk away at the beginning of the semester, right after this one ghost-debunking workshop that had been hyped a lot. She cancelled it midway through, cancelled the next day of class, and then she was just gone.”

“Around when was that?” Erin asked.

Bex checked their phone and showed them the date.

Erin, Abby, and Patty exchanged glances. That was before Joey had found her place in the firehouse, but based on the notes Joey had taken, it was maybe around the start of the various anomalies the Ghostbusters had been working to figure out.

“Is she missing missing?” Joey asked.

Bex shrugged. “Doesn't seem like it. Her roommates said she showed up before dawn, shoved her things into her suitcase, and left. She emailed her notes and plans to the person who took over her course. I heard she'd put an autoresponder on her email and won't reply to anyone, but it seems like she's still alive.”

“You think she had a stalker or something?” Patty asked. “Lord knows a lot of campuses aren't what you'd call responsive in those cases.”

“I don't think so. I mean, it can't be ruled out, but I hadn't heard anything like that.”

"No signs of illness?” asked Erin, and Bex shook their head.

Holtzmann was drawing something on a napkin with one hand and tracing what might have been numbers on Joey’s thigh with her other hand, under the tablecloth. Maybe she was doing calculations for some idea or other, but her fingers kept drifting further and further up, and Joey had to work fiercely in order to concentrate.

The only contact information Bex was able to give them was Megan’s email address at Rensselaer. Joey wondered if Megan was checking it, wherever she was. Either way, some asshole dude, a sudden illness, a family emergency, burnout: any of these seemed more likely than a connection to the spectral energy. *This whole thing is kind of a weak lead,* she thought to herself.

Holtzmann cleared her throat. “Is it just me, or is this kind of a weak lead?”

Abby elbowed Holtz, who shrugged. “I could see it all over on Joey’s face. Couldn’t you?”

Joey wiped her mouth with a napkin and gave Holtz the stinkeye.

“Oh, whoops,” Holtzmann said. “That was supposed to be inside voice, huh. But—”

“It’s OK. Lead on what?” Bex asked, and Patty quickly and diplomatically filled them in, without
“So you think Megan…” Bex began.

“We don’t know anything,” Joey said cautiously. “The information about Ms. Carey is interesting, but Holtz was right; I was thinking it was a weak lead. It’s probably more likely that something was going on behind the scenes that Ms. Carey just hadn’t shared with anyone. She might have even just gotten burned out and quit—it happens.” She thought for a moment. “But the ghost-debunking angle is a pretty big coincidence if that’s the case. And I’d really like to find out what happened with that last workshop.”

Holtzmann laid her pencil down and rested her chin on her hand, eyes bright and focused on Joey. Joey could read a kind of hunger on Holtz’s face, a hunger which had nothing to do with the buttery garlic knots between them. Under the table, her other hand crept up Joey’s thigh and then wedged itself between her legs. Joey squeezed her legs together a little bit, squishing Holtz’s hand, and Holtzmann grinned toothily at her. Joey gave her an innocent smile in return and hoped the others were oblivious.

“Well, Joey, you’re the closest thing this team has to an investigator—or at least, an investigator of people who are still alive,” Patty said, “so what do you suggest?”

Joey coughed. Focus, focus! There was more to the world than Holtzmann’s small, strong, clever fingers. Regrettably. “Uhhh—I guess if nothing else, it’d be good to talk to people who worked directly with Megan. Her colleagues, her dean, anyone who happened to be at that last workshop, or even helped schedule and promote it…”

Bex hmmed. “Well, there’s only a few weeks left in the semester. I can give you contact info, but people are pretty busy now, and they might not be able to make time—oh. You know what…How quickly can you all get your hands on formalwear? Not exactly white tie, but black tie.”

There was a pause, and then all five of them said, with varying levels of distress, “Why?”

“RPI is hosting a new science award, for work by women and nonbinary people working in the frontiers of science. I know, it’s controversial—especially with those types I mentioned earlier—but I support it. Well, I more than support it; I chair the awards committee. The actual ceremony is this weekend, and I can absolutely get you invitations. Pretty much everyone in science at RPI will be there for the dinner and ceremony, and there’ll even be undergrads at the reception.”

“But—” Erin started.

Bex waved a hand. “Erin, it’s OK, I promise. I told you, a fair number of the RPI STEM faculty are fans! There’s even some talk of establishing a parapsychology department, or at least a concentration. There’ll be some haters, but I’ll steer you away from them, and plenty of people will be thrilled to meet you.”

“Oh, that’s perfect,” Joey said. “I’ve been to way too many awards banquets—that’s not a brag, I always go even though I never win, because free dinner, right?—and attendees never really have anything to actually talk about. So people should be pretty receptive to chatting, and it ought to be pretty easy to get useful information. Easier than if we emailed them directly, even.”

Holtzmann, having put on a bland face that Joey was sure would eventually make the Ghostbusters very suspicious, wiggled her fingers between Joey’s legs, pressing against her until she parted her thighs a bit again. Holtz pushed against the seam of her jeans, and Joey fumbled to take a gulp of water to cover up the tiny gasp that she hadn’t been able to fully stifle. As casually as she could, she
put her hand under the tablecloth and gently, reluctantly drew Holtz’s hand back to her thigh. She wrapped her fingers around Holtz’s and smiled at her. She didn’t want Holtz to feel unwanted, but at the same time, Joey could hardly be expected to function, or keep her own hands off of Holtz, if that went on.

“Unfortunately the formal dress code is nonnegotiable,” Bex said. “That was out of my hands entirely. I think it’s gross and gatekeepery as hell. At least I got them to set up a fund—ah, sorry, you don’t want to hear about our internal politics. You think you can pull it off?”

“Sure we can,” Erin said brightly. “Nooo problem!”

Bex eyed her. “Yeah?” Joey had a feeling that a story—or several stories—from Erin’s grad school years lurked behind the slightly unconvinced tone of Bex’s voice.

Erin grimaced. “I mean—”

“We’ll get it figured out,” Patty said. “We unlock the mysteries of the universe for breakfast. I figure we can put together a few formal outfits. And bill it to the city—just like this dinner.” She took the check folder and put their business credit card in it.

“Are you sure this is OK?” Erin asked Bex. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

Bex grinned at Erin. “What are friends for, huh?”

“Oh—” Erin’s eyes widened and then she smiled, her cheeks pink. “Well, uh—I guess so!” Maybe poor Erin had never really been sure whether she and Bex were friends.

“I can’t wait to see this. All right, well then, thanks for dinner! I need to get back to grading—and I’ll see you on Saturday!”

When they arrived back at the firehouse, Holtzmann waited till everyone else had gone inside. Then she slid over and brushed her fingers through Joey’s rainbow bangs, letting herself revel in the softness of Joey’s hair. “I love those guys, but the chaperoning was driving me crazy. Well. Even crazier.”

Holtzmann wasn’t sure which of them started the kiss. She had meant to, but it seemed to just happen by itself. Joey’s lips were urgent; her tongue slipped into Holtzmann’s mouth right away. Maybe Joey had been wanting her all day, too.

Joey pulled back a little bit. “It’s been a problem,” she agreed.

“I’m—sorry about dinner earlier,” Holtzmann said. She swallowed. “I think maybe—I shouldn’t have done that?”

Joey gave a tiny, frustrated sigh and buried her face in the side of Holtzmann’s neck. “I totally encouraged you,” she said, muffled. She licked Holtzmann’s neck, and Holtzmann shivered. “But maybe not with other people around, next time.”

“…I screwed up.”

“I feel you getting all tense,” Joey said. “Don’t. It’s OK. I couldn’t resist either. I like your fingers, and your hand, and you.”

Holtzmann tried to make the muscles in her shoulders relax. She stroked the short hair on the back of
Joey’s head. It was very pettable, like stroking her cat. Though petting Glitch had never felt so good. Joey made a happy noise and a pang of alarm went through Holtzmann at how nice it was to hear. She caught sight of herself in the rearview mirror: face open, lips slightly parted, eyes soft. *Is this OK?* she silently asked her reflection, and a crease appeared between her eyebrows.

Joey looked up at her. “You got plans tonight?”


“In Queens?”

“You’d be surprised at how many hidden places there are in Queens. I know a place with a cool abandoned railroad, trees, and nobody. I mean, you can tell from the graffiti that people hang out in some parts of it, but there are other places that no one ever goes.” Holtzmann stroked Joey’s thigh, wishing the denim weren’t there. “Honestly, Patty told me about it.”

“You don’t seem like the picnic type,” Joey said. “I mean—I’m down with it, I just—”

“First of all,” Holtzmann said, with a dramatic, injured huff, “...you’re completely right.” She laughed. “I want to test out something I’m building. That’s my hidden agenda, OK? I normally use the roof or the basement, but the railroad track will give me more range. You bring dessert; I’ll bring dinner. Still down with it?” Holtzmann had no idea what dinner was going to be, but the others would help her sort that out. Being able to count on them was a good feeling. Maybe the fact that she had support for this...this whatever it was would make a difference.

“Huh. Well, yeah, of course. Is there—is there anything else I should bring?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, a fire extinguisher?”

“Ha! You’re adorable.” Holtzmann kissed Joey on the forehead. “As if a fire extinguisher would do any good—uhhh, I mean, no. Just yourself. And dessert! Very important.”

“Got it,” Joey said.

Holtzmann grinned and tried to pull Joey up to her lap, but someone’s elbow hit something, and every alarm in the Ecto went off. Green and orange lights flashed, a horn blared, bells rang, and the siren wailed its distinctly-un-American wail.

*Fuck.* Holtzmann lunged awkwardly into the front seat and mashed buttons. Nothing worked. She’d put a cancel-all somewhere, right? Where the hell was it? “One of these must—”

“Are you guys OK?” Abby yelled from the doorway.

“Leave the lovebirds alone,” Patty scolded.

“I GOT THIS!” shouted Kevin, from somewhere unseen.

“Uh oh,” Holtzmann said, at the same time as Joey groaned.

There was a *chirp chirp* from somewhere, a mundane sound exactly like the one for the locks on the Prius Erin had rented last year. The Ectomobile settled back into silence.

“That...that should not be—how did he—” Holtzmann sputtered. “What the quivering gelatinous
Joey grinned, climbed off of her, opened the door, got out, and held the door for Holtzmann.

“Thank you,” Holtzmann said. Joey had read the abrupt shift in her priorities, and if Holtzmann weren’t so busy scrambling out of the vehicle and sprinting for the door into the firehouse, she might’ve savored the warm and unfamiliar feeling it gave her. “KEVIN!”

“See you tomorrow,” Joey called after her, laughter in her voice.

“Don’t forget dessert!” Holtzmann shouted over her shoulder. She grinned. It was going to be a good Thursday, if she didn't boil over with wanting first.

Chapter End Notes

The next bit is mostly written, but not entirely. If I don't get it posted before New Year's Day, then happy new year--I hope 2019 is better for everyone. Thank you all so much for still being here, still reading, and still commenting.

P. S. Here's "Don't Stop Me Now." Which Ghostbuster do you think was the first to comment on the nerdy lyrics and the fact that Brian May is a literal astrophysicist? I think it honestly could have been any of them. Maybe even all four of them at once.
You’re right,” Joey said. “This is a great place for a picnic, even in November. I think I’ve missed being out of Manhattan. Even the trip to Schenectady was refreshing, in a weird way.” It had been a good twenty minutes of walking since they’d seen the last signs of human presence—some half-hearted graffiti—and although they were in Queens, it felt like the middle of nowhere. Even more the middle of nowhere than “Queens” implied. Joey hadn’t realized she’d needed it till they were there.

Railroad tracks stretched into the distance past the small clearing where they’d stopped. The ground was softened by a thick layer of fallen leaves. The branches of not-quite-yet bare trees reached into the sky around them, and here and there green vines gave a sense of life.

Holtzmann started to plop her giant silver duffel bag down, but then visibly thought better of it and set it down gently. She shrugged another huge bag off of her shoulder and quickly pulled out a couple of thick, heavy blankets. She gestured for Joey to sit down, and then sort of dithered back and forth for a moment.

Joey sat down and checked her own bag to make sure dessert was still OK. She’d roped her roommates into helping her make piles of chocolate-dipped, star-sprinkled Pringles, and she was hoping the chips were mostly intact.

And they were. Joey smiled up at Holtz and waited for her to figure out her next step.

“Uh—are you cold?” Holtz asked.

“No, I’ve got layers on. And it’s a nice day. Should be fine even when the sun sets. Though I guess that’ll be any minute now. November days are short.”

Holtzmann mumbled something about axial tilt and eyed the silver duffel. “How hungry are you?”

“It’s still early, so I’m good either way,” Joey said agreeably. What was Holtz up to? “Something else you wanted to do first?”

Holtzmann waggled her eyebrows. “Someone I wanted to do first—OK, well, maybe not here. Yeah, I wanna do the test first. But I think I gotta explain some things.”

Joey nodded and patted the blanket, inviting Holtz to sit, but she just shook her head and paced around for a moment. She was wearing layers too—a ribbed turtleneck straight out of the late 70s, an embroidered button-down shirt, a dark blue scarf with rainbow stripes, and a vintage military jacket made of heavy wool, with bright red cuffs.

Finally Holtz jammed her hands in her pockets and turned to Joey. “So, this isn’t a beta test, or even
an alpha test. More like a zero test. I don’t… I don’t normally do those with anyone else around.”

“In case it doesn’t work?”

Holtz’s hands were out of her pockets again. She unwound the scarf from her neck and wrapped it around her hands, then settled it back around her neck. “In case it doesn’t do anything at all, because that’s boring when there’s an audience. Or in case, you know… In case its only function turns out to be ‘explode in the user’s face.’”

Holtzmann grinned, but the grin faltered and a line appeared between her eyebrows. She said, “I can’t tell the others this, but sometimes I get kinda worried, that—you know, what do they think of me? I know they’re my family, and they… uh, they love me. Still though. Do they think I’m dangerous, do they think I don’t care? All I want to do is make things—OK, and learn things— and stop people from getting hurt. I don’t want any of my experiments to hurt any of them. I mean, what’s a few scorchmarks among friends, sure, but you know, this stuff! It’s serious business. It’s one thing if I get turned inside out, but…” She trailed off. “Wow, where’d all that come from? Sorry.”

“Aw, Holtz, I—” There was definitely a story behind the tone in Holtzmann’s voice, and Joey wanted to follow up on it. But they’d only been dating for—well. Not even a week. It could wait. Joey scooted toward Holtzmann and reached up to take her hand. Holtz’s exposed fingertips were cold even through the leather of Joey’s own gloves. “I’m pretty sure they know you care. Even if they joke about it sometimes. I mean, just think about their personalities—they’re going to tell you with no hesitation if they have a concern about something. Right? They have faith in you. I have faith in you.”

Holtzmann’s face disappeared into her scarf for a moment, with just her wild curls escaping over the top.

“I don’t know if you should,” she said, re-emerging. But her eyes were starting to gleam. “You sure you’re ready for this? I forgot to bring a waiver…”

“I’m ready for anything,” Joey said, and she meant it as more than just a double entendre.

“All right, well… you’re a grown woman. Put these on over your glasses.” Holtzmann passed a pair of safety glasses down to Joey. “And if you see me running, run faster, OK?”

“Got it,” Joey said seriously. “You going to tell me what it is?”

“Let’s see if it works first,” Holtzmann said.

“That’s what she said.”

Holtzmann let out a bark of surprised laughter. “Quit stealin’ my lines. And stay there, OK?” She crouched by the duffel and pulled out several things: a flexible contraption that looked like an extremely chunky, multipart bracelet; a bulky item that Joey recognized as a Holtz-built power source; and, most mysteriously of all, a baseball-sized globe that glowed ectoplasm-green.

Holtz went about 10 yards down the train track. She set the power source down, plugged in a cord running to the gadget, and wrapped the gadget around her left wrist and hand. She ran the fingers of her right hand through her hair, straightened her shoulders, and took the glowing sphere out of her pocket. She glanced at Joey over her shoulder, grinned, and wound up for a pitch.

Holtz would look adorable in a baseball uniform, Joey thought.
Holtzmann slung the ball through the air, away from Joey, and quickly pressed a trigger. The ball burst into a large ragged blob that hung in the air, like a ghost with no particular form had been frozen in time. “Cool, huh?” yelled Holtzmann. “Neutralized ectoplasmic suspension! A real target to shoot at!”

“Nice!” Joey shouted back.

“Here we go!” Holtzmann thrust her left hand out and did something. A bolt of crackling orange and purple energy flew out toward the target. It hit the ectoplasm with a poof of sparks. The area where it had hit dissolved, leaving a large hole to one side of the blob. A faint plink! indicated that something had just fallen to the ground.

“Wooooo!” Holtzmann did an absurd dance. She dragged the power source a few feet back towards Joey and danced a little bit more, moving her pelvis around in alarming ways.

“What is it?” Joey asked.

“My sexy victory dance! Want me to teach it to you?”

“No, I—god, that shouldn’t be sexy, but it is. How. And what are your hips even doing,” Joey said. Focus! “But uhh, I mean, what’s the new gadget?”

“Oh! Yeah. Wrist-mounted muon darts! It’s gonna be battery powered, so it’s compact and less—you know, volatile—and it works for up close and far away. It’s—uhh, it’s for you.”

“Wait, for me?”

“Yeah.” Holtzmann ducked her head and rubbed the back of her neck—fortunately, using her right hand and not the one with the darts. “I—we wanted you to have some way to defend yourself. At busts. Just in case.”

“Oh, wow, that’s…I feel all warm and fuzzy.”

“That’s the radiation. Just kidding. It’s shielded like whoa. All right, let me get rid of the rest of it.” Holtzmann dashed back to her previous location and fired two darts, one right after the other, at the remaining ectoplasmic suspension.

Joey heard Holtz say “Aw hell” at the same time that she noticed the two darts were twisting around each other, then spinning together in a rapidly-growing spiky ball of purple energy, shedding sparks all the way. It was larger than the green ectoplasm blob by the time the darts collided with their target. A silent explosion blossomed and Joey scrambled to her feet just as Holtzmann hit the ground.

“Are you O—”

“Never better…” Holtzmann grumbled, as she stood. She didn’t start running, so Joey dashed over to Holtz and took her hand. Holtzmann shook her off, cranky, and said “When I dive, you dive!”

“I—I’ll try next time,” Joey said. It would’ve been the smart thing to do, but Holtz made her forget the wisest course of action on the regular.

There was a strange light on Holtzmann’s face. Literally, not metaphorically: the same shifting light was dazzling Joey’s eyes. Holtzmann’s expression cleared as they both glanced up, and at the same time, they softly said “Oh!”

Flowing up from the original target area, and then stretching just overhead for nearly 30 meters, was
something that looked very much like the Northern Lights that Joey had once seen in Iceland, or a nebula in deep space, or maybe both mixed together. The ribbons and tendrils of multihued light glowed even against the backdrop of the sunset.

“At least it’s not so far up that anyone else is going to see it…right?” Joey asked.

Holtzmann eyed it and did some math under her breath. “Yeah, it should be out of eyeshot. And I might’ve stuck a few motion detectors on some trees around the perimeter while you weren’t looking, in case anyone gets nosy. Not gonna ask if it’s safe?”

It honestly hadn’t occurred to Joey to ask. “You’d already be hauling me out of here it weren’t.”

“I don’t know everything,” Holtz said, a bit sharply. She fished a brick-sized gadget out of a pocket, somehow, and turned it on. Joey stood back and just watched.

Holtz scanned the area, muttering to herself. Finally, she sighed and pushed her glasses up on her forehead. “Wow, this really isn’t working out.”

For a moment Joey thought she meant them, instead of the muon darts, but she told herself that was silly. Wasn’t it? “What’d you find out?”

“The second dart was fired too close after the first one, and it reversed the polarity of the field, which caused a particle cascade—what I mean is, I need to put a tiny little delay in there. It’ll feel instant, won’t interfere with aim, but it ought to be just enough.”

“And the light show?”

Holtzmann shrugged. “I’m not going to say it’s safe, but most likely, it’ll decay over the next couple hours. There’s an incredibly small chance that it could start a new cascade instead. But I reckon I could stop it with another well-timed dart. Probably.” She rubbed her eyes and put her glasses back on. “You should go, to be on the safe side.”

Joey snorted softly. She grabbed Holtzmann’s free hand and dragged her back to the blankets. “Holtz. Have you met me? I’m not really a ‘safe side’ person. I came here to hang out with you and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“You sure?” Holtz let Joey pull her down. “What if—”

“Look, I’ve been in riskier situations than this. Don’t flatter yourself too much.” Joey grinned at Holtz, hoping she’d understand. When Holtzmann gave her a tiny smile in return, Joey kissed her on the cheek.

Holtzmann flopped back on the blankets. She was about to cross her arms behind her head so she could more easily keep an eye on the potentially problematic light show, but Joey slipped in, sat cross-legged, and cradled Holtz’s head in her lap. “That’s an upgrade,” Holtzmann said. She tilted her head back and looked at Joey’s face. Joey grinned and leaned over her. Her breasts squished into Holtzmann’s face. “Oh man,” Holtzmann mumbled against the softness of Joey’s cardigan. “Now we’re flying first class.” What if she never moved, and just lived there, forever?

“Too bad I’m blocking your view.” Joey sat back again and Holtzmann sighed into the sudden rush of cool night air.
“Being responsible sucks.” Holtzmann made an exaggerated sad face. “Also, I’m really bad at it,” she added, under her breath.

“No, you’re not,” Joey said. “You’re doing good, OK? Anyway, look at it; it’s beautiful. The—the whatever that is. And your face, too.”

Holtzmann choked. She had to sit up in order to breathe properly again. “Very smooth, Betancourt. Very smooth.”

Joey made the tiniest of displeased expressions. “I mean it—” she began, earnestly.

“I know you do.” That was part of what made it hard to deal with. Time to change the subject. “You hungry yet?”

“For…food?”

“It’s open to interpretation,” Holtzmann said, almost reflexively.

Joey answered by bending forward again. Her tongue slid coolly against Holtzmann’s ear, and Holtzmann shivered. She wrapped her fingers in Joey’s hair and tugged her down until their lips and tongues found each other. For a hot, dark, wet moment, Holtz’s world contracted to just Joey. Then Joey pulled back. “Sorry…” she said, not sounding it.

Holtzmann let her head settle back into Joey’s lap and stared up at the shimmering disaster. At least it was fading, maybe. Slowly. She would need to turn on a lantern in a few minutes.

Joey tilted her head back too, and Holtzmann’s gaze drifted down to the light brown skin of her neck. “Joey?”

“Yes, Holtz?”

“How do you feel about kink?”

“Oh—what?” Joey blinked down at her.

Holtzmann was glad Joey couldn’t feel her heart rate as it skyrocketed. What if she’d misread Joey, both literally and figuratively? Shit. She hadn’t even meant to ask that—either that way, or right at that particular moment.

Holtzmann grinned and blew a curl off of her forehead. “Do I need to fetch the ammonium carbonate?”

“The—“

“Smelling salts.”

“Ah.” Joey laughed and pushed her fingers through her colorful bangs. “No. I’m no fair maiden, as Martha Jones said once. I mean, you—I know you read some of the novels.”

“Yeah, but Patty says—”

“It’s true, you can’t assume a romance novelist is into anything they write about. But if you had to guess, what would you say?”

Holtzmann shifted—there was a lump of grass or something that she could feel even through the thick blanket—then rolled over and sat up, facing Joey. “My hypothesis? You’re into most of what
you write about.”

“I mean, I’m not into literal werewolves. Unless there’s something you want to tell me?”

Holtzmann smiled and lavishly tongued her own canines. “Lycanthropes are seriously scientifically unlikely. That’s not a straight answer, though.”

“I don’t have any straight answers, pun fully intended,” Joey said, then held up her hands. “But yeah. You’re basically correct. Maybe not everything, but pretty close? I got lucky—enough people share my tastes that I can pay my rent on it.”

“Win-win. So, yes to the BD and the SM, huh?”

“Is this just that famously insatiable Holtz curiosity at work, or…?”

“Preliminary studies, let’s say,” Holtzmann said. This was encouraging, maybe? But she still wasn’t sure how Joey would feel about exploring kink with her, or—oh.

Even Holtzmann could read the look Joey was giving her, a sideways glance through dark lashes. Joey, apparently unconsciously, played with her lower lip for a moment, and Holtzmann couldn’t look away. Then Joey said, as though to herself, “I wondered, the other night…I wondered if you might have a dominant streak, and…well, I wondered how that might play out.” The tone of her voice made Holtzmann picture a woman in front of a chocolate shop window, wondering if the truffles were as good as they looked—and who didn’t want to leave until she found out.

You’ve been reading too many of her romance novels, Holtzmann told herself. But…all right. This was good. Like, winning lottery ticket good, and she knew the exact odds against that.

“It’s a new field of study for me,” Holtzmann said. “Literally. I’m—I’m studying. Is that weird? I don’t care if it’s weird. I plan on acing these classes.”

“I have no doubt,” Joey said, without a trace of humor in her voice. Her tone was layered, complex; her eyes were fixed on Holtzmann despite the shifting colors playing across her face.

Holtzmann tried to look at her the way Cerise would. What was Joey’s face saying?

Joey’s expression was…was the expression of a woman who wanted something, and didn’t want to wait for it.

Well, fuck. Now Holtzmann didn’t want to wait either, but she wasn’t ready yet. And she had already learned it wasn’t OK to take shortcuts with this stuff. Reckless was OK; harmful wasn’t.

“We are not going to Bonetown tonight,” Holtzmann said, sternly.

Joey huffed a laugh, but somehow, the mood wasn’t broken.

Well, then. “What if…what if I told you to do something for me, right now?”

Holtz could see Joey’s breath quicken. “Anything. Just tell me.”

Adrenaline shot through Holtzmann’s body, followed by a wave of arousal. And something she had definitely not felt that night at the club when she’d fucked up so badly—some kind of…what was it? Recognition? Appreciation?

No. Gratitude.
Gratitude with a little spark of tension, like when her fellow Ghostbusters picked up a weapon she’d made and trusted it to protect them.

Like that and also absolutely entirely unlike that.

What could Holtzmann do to provide a pathway for the energy that was building in Joey, without… without blowing the circuits? And without taking her own eyes off the damn light show?

She took a breath. She really need to not just blurt something out, for once.

“I’d like you to...to stand up, let me look at you, and—uh, and follow my directions. Just for a minute.” Holtzmann was going to have to work on her lines, that was for sure. But there was one more thing to add: “Is—is that something you can do?”

“Here?” Joey asked, but not like she was reluctant; more like she wanted to be sure Holtzmann was really OK with it.

Holtzmann shrugged. “I put up some sensors. We should know before anyone’s too close. Give me a ‘nope’ if you’re not feeling something.”

Yup, definitely going to have to work on her lines.

“In that case, fuck yes.” Joey got to her feet and stood facing Holtzmann, with the glowing ectoplasmic accident behind her. She’d automatically adopted a formal posture, shoulders back. Even under Joey’s heavy navy pea coat, Holtzmann could see her breasts rise and fall slightly with her breath. She looked vulnerable, anticipatory, and strong all at once.

Holtzmann wondered what she’d gotten herself into.

Joey tried to remember to breathe. Holtzmann leaned back on her elbows and just looked at her. Right into her eyes, holding the gaze slightly longer than Joey thought she could bear. Then Holtzmann searched her face, lingering on her mouth.

Holtz’s sharp gaze moved slowly, down to the heavy scarf around Joey’s neck, then to where its ends fell between her breasts.

And Holtz didn’t say a word. This quiet intensity was so unlike typical Holtz that Joey’s thoughts were a jumble; she didn’t know how to react. Though her confusion was becoming a moot point rather quickly, as it was already being overridden by the pulse that had started beating between her legs.

Joey shifted, rubbing her thighs together, and Holtzmann pointed a finger at her. “Did I say to move?”

“N—no.” Joey went back to her previous stance.

“I’m not done with this view,” Holtzmann said. She continued her slow visual inspection of Joey.

Joey might’ve felt judged, if it weren’t for the way Holtzmann’s smile was slowly growing. The dimple in her right cheek had deepened, too, from the ghost of a shadow it had been when she started.

An eternity later, Holtzmann instructed Joey to turn around, slowly. Holtzmann let out a happy sigh.
as she did. Joey had certainly been looked over and complimented by a woman or three before, but she’d never been…what was this, appreciation? Yeah, she’d never been appreciated like this.

When she completed her turn, she met Holtzmann’s eyes again. Holtz had sat up while Joey was faced away from her, and now she was leaning her chin on one hand. Despite the fact that Joey was standing and Holtzmann was on the ground, Holtz managed to maintain a commanding aura. There was genuinely nothing she couldn’t do, was there?

Joey didn’t know how she’d found herself here, locking eyes with the most extraordinary woman in the world. All she could do was offer a silent plea to the universe that she’d be allowed to stay in Holtzmann’s orbit as long as she could.

“Hey,” Holtz said. “Come back from wherever you are. You good?”

Joey swallowed and nodded.

“Let’s do a mindfulness exercise. Get you back in your body.” Holtzmann quirked an eyebrow and grinned. “Just stop or nope if you need to. This is supposed to be…” She caught her tongue between her teeth, nearly causing Joey to fall over, and searched for the right word. “You know. Good.”

“It—it is,” Joey said. Fuck. Holtzmann hadn’t even touched her, and still Joey was about to die from want.

“Sweet. Well…”

Holtzmann tapped her lower lip with an index finger, trying to look thoughtful while she scrambled to figure out what to do.

_Fuck._ She was so bad at this. It was nice that Joey was humoring her, and hadn’t even laughed at her yet, but Holtzmann wanted to be good at this already. Learning how to do new things that involved other people was rough; it wasn’t nearly as fun as …

OK. No. She _was_ having fun; she was just stressed about whether Joey was having fun. And Joey had just given Holtzmann verbal affirmation of that, so the other thing that Holtz should do was observe her again. Not just drink Joey in, but make observations.

Joey’s mouth, which defaulted to serious, was curved in a slight smile. Not a laughing smile, an unconscious one that she probably didn’t even know was there. Anticipatory. Her muscles weren’t quite taut, but she was poised on the edge of movement, ready to react. Her arms were by her sides, but the fingertips of her right hand kept straying to the outside seam of her jeans, making tiny strokes across the fabric. It was hard to tell, in the prismatic light, whether she was flushed.

Either way, there was clear evidence that Joey was neither amused nor bored, but aroused.

Did that mean Holtzmann _didn’t_ suck at this? “Huge if true,” Holtzmann almost muttered aloud, but she caught herself.

“Let’s see how much thermal energy you’re generating.” Holtzmann said. She had no idea if Joey was going to go along with this, but: “Open up those layers.” She remained where she was and gestured dismissively toward the cardigan Joey was wearing under her peacoat.

Joey glanced down at herself and then back over at Holtzmann. Then she smiled, unwound her scarf, tossed it to the edge of the blanket, and unbuttoned her cardigan. They both looked at the flannel button-up that Joey was wearing beneath it.
“You wearing an undershirt?” Holtzmann asked.

Joey shook her head. “Just a bra.”

“Let me see.” Not that Holtzmann hadn’t already seen Joey’s actual breasts. This was different, though. “If you’re all right,” she added hastily.

Joey unbuttoned her shirt and pulled it open, just a little. This uncovered the skin from the base of her throat to her stomach, interrupted only by her bra where it rested flat against her breastbone. Ribbons of rainbow light played across Joey’s skin, and Holtzmann really, really wanted to lick it, but she also needed to calm the fuck down.

“Let me get some empirical data,” Holtzmann suggested. “Stay there.” She dug around in her bag and pulled out a handheld thermal imaging camera. She’d never used it for anything other than mysteriously beating Abby at hide and seek, but she’d never gotten rid of it, either. She stood up and pointed it at Joey. “It’s a shame I don’t have a baseline, because I’m reading a lot of heat…here.” The camera was pointed between Joey’s thighs, where there was a bright spot on the heat map.

The number on the display ticked up a fraction of a fraction of a degree, and Holtzmann laughed despite herself. “No one should be turned on by this,” she said, waving the camera. “Why are you putting up with me? What is wrong with you?”

Oh.

She hadn’t meant to say that. But hopefully the laugh had covered the fear behind the questions.

“I guess you just got lucky,” Joey said. The corner of her mouth drew up in a grin.

“I guess I did,” Holtzmann said, and it came out much more seriously than she’d intended.

Time to change the subject. “May I touch?”

“I wish you would,” Joey said.

Holtzmann dropped the device and stepped in to slide her left arm around Joey’s waist, under her layers. “I like touching you,” she said, like some sort of besotted teenager who was still discovering the wonders of making out. Maybe Holtzmann could invent something that would stop her from saying stupid things, but then again, it’d be easier to just take a vow of silence.

“I like being touched by you,” Joey said in a breathy sigh, as though Holtzmann had actually said something sexy and cool. At a loss, Holtzmann bent to kiss the place where Joey’s neck and shoulder met. Joey made a soft noise, and goosebumps rose under Holtzmann’s fingers on her back.

Holtzmann hadn’t figured out how to actually end this, and she had to, because she needed more time talking with Cerise before doing any of the other things she’d started dreaming of doing. She pulled back and shoved her hands into her pockets. Then she remembered something else that was in her bag, something that might solve the problem. “Close your eyes,” she said, “and don’t move.”

The first thing Joey felt after she closed her eyes was Holtzmann’s hands on her shoulders, and then the blazing wet heat of Holtzmann’s tongue dipping just below Joey’s waistband and all the way up her sternum to her throat. She quivered, and Holtzmann let go of her.
Joey groaned. “Holtz, you’re killing me.” The path that Holtzmann’s tongue had traced turned cold in the crisp air. She shivered.

“Can’t say I didn’t warn you,” Holtzmann said. “Wait till Saturday. It’ll be worth it.” Joey thought she heard a muttered “I hope.” Then there was rustling from Holtzmann’s bag.

Did Joey dare hope that Holtz had brought something more appropriate—inappropriate, whatever—than the thermal imaging camera?

“Open your mouth.”

Joey jumped. She hadn’t even heard Holtzmann move. But maybe Holtz had changed her mind! Joey opened her mouth, anticipating what Holtzmann might put in there. Her fingers? A toy?

Something settled on Joey’s tongue. Holtzmann gave her the gentlest tap on her chin, and she closed her mouth. Holtz’s small and clever fingers moved against Joey’s skin, carefully buttoning her shirt closed again.

The thing in her mouth softened against her tongue. It was…it was…

Joey’s eyes flew open as Holtzmann finished the top button and pulled back with a smirk. “Holtz—is that a Reese’s cup?”

“The queen of the mass-produced candy bars,” Holtzmann informed her.

“You are a tease,” Joey complained. Not that she wasn’t going to eat the Reese’s cup, because she was.

Holtzmann shrugged. “That’s show biz.”

Joey ate the peanut butter cup and then licked her lips. “You’re just going to leave me in this state?”

Holtzmann gave a sunny smile and tugged Joey back down to the blankets. “Let’s eat, OK? I swear I brought actual food.”

Did that go OK? Maybe it hadn’t been a total disaster. Joey didn’t seem to actually be mad at Holtzmann, so that was good.

Holtzmann started pulling things out of the bag that had also held the blankets, starting with two giant thermoses. She handed them to Joey.

Joey unscrewed a lid and sniffed the steam that rose out. She laughed. “Soup, huh? I sense Abby’s hand in this.”

Holtzmann grinned. “Yeah. But this one is all me.” She passed an old She-Ra lunchbox to Joey. “Take a peek.”

Joey opened the metal lid and looked inside. “Uh, OK…I see two cheese sandwiches cut into rectangles.”

“Latch it back up, and then press on her sword.” Holtzmann watched Joey, eager to see her reaction. She loved this part of making new things.
Joey pressed the sword and it clicked into the lid. There was a faint *FWOOMP!* She looked at Holtzmann hesitantly and Holtzmann nodded. “It’s supposed to do that. Open it again.”

Joey did. “Oh!” Her face lit up and she inhaled the scent arising from inside the lunchbox. “They grilled themselves! That’s amazing. Oh my god, they smell so good. How did you do that?”

Holtzmann hoped that her relief that the gadget had actually worked correctly and not burnt the sandwiches to a crisp—or, like in the first version, somehow frozen them—didn’t show on her face. “I’d tell you but they’d get cold. Come on, try ‘em with the soup.”

It didn’t take them long to finish the sandwiches, followed by the astonishing Pringles that Joey had brought.

Joey brushed crumbs off of her lap and started to clear things away. “Best picnic ever. All the other girlfriends might as well go home, because no one else is on your level.”

Had Joey used that word for her before—*girlfriend*? Holtz had used it, but this was the first time she’d heard it come out of Joey’s mouth. It didn’t make Holtzmann cringe, like she might have expected. It felt…nice.

“I don’t know,” Holtzmann said, regarding her chocolate-covered fingers. “You may have ruined me for normal Pringles. I’m a fallen woman.”

Joey reached toward Holtzmann’s hand and raised a questioning eyebrow. Holtzmann nodded, and next thing she knew, her fingers were in Joey’s mouth. It felt *unreasonably* good. She tried to keep her eyes from rolling back in her head as Joey licked each of her fingers clean.

“OK,” she gasped, as Joey finished, “just—just don’t ever do that in the lab.”

“I know,” Joey said. “Nothing in the lab is safe, I remember.” She held out a wet wipe—Joey’s bag had lots of useful things in it, too, which was pretty hot—and smiled.

“Looks like we’re done here. The incident’s over,” Holtzmann said, trying to get her mind rather than her anatomy back in control. She got up and waved at the night sky, now unlit by any ectoplasmic suspension. “We ought to go before you turn into a popsicle.”

Joey finished packing up her things and wound her scarf around her neck. “Would I be a tasty popsicle?”

Holtzmann crammed the blanket back into the silver duffel. Then she grabbed the ends of Joey’s scarf and pulled her over, so close that their foreheads and noses touched. “That was extremely dorky.”

“I know.” Joey’s breath was visible in the cold air. “You didn’t answer the question.”

“You would be a very tasty popsicle, you dork.”

“Thank you, other dork.” Joey kissed Holtzmann on the mouth, laughing, and Holtzmann kissed her back until they’d both stopped laughing and were falling into the kiss instead.

“We should go,” Holtzmann said. Ugh, being responsible was the worst.

“Yeah.”

Holtzmann took Joey’s hand and they picked their way through the trees, back to the world of
sidewalks and streetlights.

“You think we’re going to learn anything useful about all the spectral weirdness at RPI on Saturday?” Joey asked, as they stood at the bus stop.

“Sure as hell hope so,” Holtzmann said. She should probably be thinking about that instead of what she was going to ask during her cram session with Cerise. “Either way, I plan to be sure you get something out of it.”

“Oh? I don’t suppose you’d give me a hint…”

Their bus turned the corner and headed for the bus stop. Holtzmann didn’t actually have an answer prepared, but she had to say *something*.

Holtzmann slipped Joey one more kiss as the bus arrived. “Spoilers, sweetie.”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to wait to post this till I had the next chapter ready to go. However, plot twist: I'm moving to New York. Not the city, the state, but I'm still totally telling everyone it's because I'm just that much of a Ghostbusters fan. Maybe someone will believe it.

Anyway, yeah, so I'm moving all the way across this continent. That means my tiny clawed-out bits of writing time are mostly focused on the novel. I figured I would get this up anyway. Odds are good that the next chapter will come to you from NY.

At any rate, I'm always grateful that anyone is still reading. Thank you.

ERRATA

I've taken some liberties with it but where they are is based on the Queens Way/Rockaway Beach railroad.

Title from "All I Want is to Be Your Girl" by Holly Miranda. (It has an odd video, not sure I recommend it--CW: circus and related archetypes/stereotypes, questionable gender stuff. Or you can just listen and read the lyrics at Genius.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!