



THE  
WITCH  
STONE  
GHOSTS

Emily Randall-Jones

Chicken  
House

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*For Daisy and Bertie.  
I'm proud every minute to be your mum.*

# 1

*If I'm honest, Autumn thought, I'd quite like to be the same as everybody else.*

She was standing on an underground tube station platform with a gentleman in a top hat on one side of her and a woman in overalls on the other. They were talking at the same time, because both were competing for her attention.

Anyone alive watching Autumn would've seen a small twelve-year-old girl with large, sea-tinted eyes and wild dark curls stuffed under a mustard bobble hat. Anyone alive would have assumed Autumn was absorbed in her book, when in fact she'd read the same sentence forty-three times because Overalls Ghost was singing Second World War songs in her ear and Top Hat Ghost was moaning

about King Edward VII.

A guttural roar and a flash of lights and the tube train rumbled through the tunnel. The carriage doors swept open with a *beep* and Autumn dashed nimbly inside, squeezing herself into a corner. The ghosts, unable to leave the station, chased the train the length of the platform as it departed, *swooshing* through waiting commuters and stone pillars until they stopped dead at an advert for skin cream.

*Phew.* There were too many passengers squashed together with bulky coats and bags for a ghost to reach her here. She briefly considered just going round on the tube all day instead of going to school, but they'd call Mum – again – and she'd have to make up a reason – again – and quite frankly it was easier to just show up and hope nobody noticed her.

The tube juddered. Stuffing the decoy book back into her school bag, Autumn pulled out a pen and brown notebook and scribbled as best she could without fully extending her elbows.

ARCHWAY TUBE STATION, SOUTHBOUND PLATFORM

- Overalls Ghost
- Top Hat Ghost

She decided to omit ‘both told me to beware’ because recently ghosts had loved telling her to beware. It was one of their things and hardly worth noting any more.

In the past six months she’d had to stop walking to school because of Wailing Park Ghost, stop getting the bus because of Conductor Ghost that kept asking for her ticket, and use a different tube station because Christian the Tufnell Park Ghost had been particularly noisy about the upcoming apocalypse. Granted, he was one of her usuals. But he’d been a lot chattier recently.

But it wouldn’t get to her today. Today was special. She would go through anything to get to that evening, because *finally* Dad was coming home.

He’d been leading the West Country birding tours for over a month now. He’d never ventured as far as Devon or Cornwall before, and even though he’d stopped by a phone box once a week or so (Mum thought mobile phones sent information to the government and had banned them) – ‘Wrynecks today, it’s migration time!’, ‘Went to a pub with a well for a table!’ – they’d not heard much and she missed the very bones of him. Tonight they were

cycling to Hampstead Heath to spot barn owls by moonlight and eat sandwiches under the stars.

Dad was coming home.

She hugged that thought to her chest like a hot-water bottle.