Ghostly Blue by Amber Fortune

1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2.
You did it. Breathe.
I slowed, took my headphones out, and gulped down the rest of my bottled water. Three miles in less than thirty minutes. Not much by some standards, but it was my fastest run yet.

Crunch.
I whipped my head around, sure there was someone following me. The street behind me was empty, not even a sign of glaring headlights in the distance. I kept walking and glancing over my shoulder, trying to distinguish a person in the shadows of the houses and trees behind me. Nothing.

This is why you shouldn’t run at night, I thought. It freaks you out. I turned down my street and kept walking. With no streetlights, only the illumination from bedroom lamps and televisions in the passing houses, I was growing exceedingly uncomfortable. I pulled out my phone and pointed the light at my feet.

A groan sounded in my left ear, long and snarling. Without even turning around to look, I broke into a sprint.

The moment I finally reached my driveway and skidded up the porch steps, I slammed and locked the front door behind me. I collapsed onto the couch, breathing hard, watching the living room curtains flutter. Slowly I began to catch my breath.

Another groan came, seemingly just behind me. That’s not possible, I thought. I sat as if inanimate, electric with adrenaline. The groan came again, low and raspy, an animalistic whisper. I tried to scream, but all the escaped was a terrified wheeze. Warm breathe enveloped the nape of my neck, another groan accompanying it. The smell of burnt hair crept up to my nose. Starting just under my shoulder blade and roughly moving upwards, the sensation of bony fingers scratched their way up my shoulder. I sat unmoving, lips clamped shut. The acrid burnt smell grew stronger. My vision blurred as my eyes watered. I shot up from the couch, ready to run, only to be forced back down by the unyielding grip on my shoulder. I whipped my head around, expecting all manner of ghouls to be holding me down.

Nothing. Nothing was there. I massaged my shoulder, confused.

“Maddie…” Once again I felt those bony fingers, this time at the crown of
my head, stroking my hair down to my neck. I whirled again, only to find nothing there. A hissing noise sounded across the room, and the pictures on the opposite wall all immediately fell to the floor. I felt my breath hitch in my chest. “Maddie…” I looked down at my other hand, willed it to stop shaking. My limbs felt so weighed down, moving was unfathomable. “Maddiiiiieee…” The sound of my name became a taunt. I didn’t turn my head this time- I knew nothing would be there.

“What do you want?” Despite my fear, my voice came out clear and firm. No answer came, but the acrid smell of burnt flesh pervaded the room. I knew that smell. It brought back a rush of memories from a year prior, when my family’s house burned down. My sister Trisha had never made it out- and in a way, I hadn’t really either. The pulse in my wrist throbbed with anxiety. I had cut off everything and everyone after the fire- I’d felt like half of me was lost. I still felt that way.

“Trisha?” My voice wavered even though I had willed it not to. As another groan came accompanied by a new wave of the stench, I fought off nausea and reached up to unlock the deadbolt. No, this isn’t Trisha. Your sister is dead. This isn’t real. I felt the bony fingers intertwine themselves in my thick, dark curls. Steeling myself to the inevitable pain, I yanked forward from the touch, feeling the fingers tear at my hair. I slipped outside, yanking the door shut behind me, tripping down the stairs, sure that I felt skeletal fingers brush my ankle. All I could see was the neighbor’s house in front mine, lit up and beckoning. They can help me, I thought. Get me to a hospital or something. Something’s wrong with me. I flew across the yard, barely feeling when my feet hit the asphalt of the street that separated me from salvation. I glanced over my shoulder as I ran, glimpsing the silhouette of someone peeking out the curtains of the living room.

“See you soon, Maddie…” It was a mere whisper in my ear. I tripped and skidded on my knees to the middle of the street, looking up just in time to see the ghostly blue headlights careening towards me.