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—SUSAN MEISSNER, Award-winning author of *Secrets of a Charmed Life*

L I F E

A F T E R

A NOVEL

KATIE  
GANSBERT

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Praise for  
*Life After*

“Ganshert uses masterful pacing, engaging characters, and believable dialogue to bring readers along . . . tackling big issues powerfully.”

—*Publishers Weekly* Starred Review

“Another emotionally gripping page-turner from Katie Ganshert, a novelist who consistently writes with honesty and insight. *Life After* plumbs the depths of all that gives our existence meaning. Well done.”

—SUSAN MEISSNER, award-winning author of *Secrets of a Charmed Life*

“Katie Ganshert is a skilled writer who wrestles earnestly with the clashing forces of faith and fear. *Life After* will hook you on the first page.”

—LISA WINGATE, national best-selling author  
of *Before We Were Yours*

“Katie Ganshert has made her mark by writing compelling stories about resiliency and faith. In her latest, she draws us through the aftermath of trauma, examining the soul’s miraculous ability to not just survive but to thrive—even in the wake of tremendous suffering. The result is an emotional journey that prompts us to question the greater purpose behind every moment we are given.”

—JULIE CANTRELL, *New York Times* and *USA Today*  
best-selling author of *The Feathered Bone*

“*Life After* grabbed me instantly with its brilliant prose, then immersed me in its pages with a story that went straight to my heart and refused to let go. Not that I wanted it to. Katie Ganshert has crafted a tale you will remember months after you finish. Highly recommended.”

—JAMES L. RUBART, best-selling author of *The Five Times I Met Myself*

“Ganshert emerges as a proven, skilled storyteller in *Life After*. This high-concept, intriguing story will have you pondering the characters long after you finish the last page. From start to finish, you won’t want to put it down.”

—RACHEL HAUCK, *New York Times* best-selling author

“Katie Ganshert is one of my favorites! Her novels are rich in authentic characters, beautiful prose, and emotional plot lines. She’s a tremendously gifted storyteller.”

—BECKY WADE, Carol Award–winning author  
of *Undeniably Yours*

L I F E  
A F T E R

**BOOKS BY KATIE GANSHERT**

*The Art of Losing Yourself*

*A Broken Kind of Beautiful*

*Wishing on Willows*

*Wildflowers from Winter*

L I F E  
A F T E R

A NOVEL

KATIE  
GANSHERT



WATERBROOK

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## LIFE AFTER

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To Mom, Dad, and Peggy.  
*For everything.*



Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?

ROMANS 11:34

## P R O L O G U E

We rarely know when death will come. Some are warned in sickness—like the track of dirt that runs around the edge of a baseball field, cautioning outfielders that they are running out of room. The end is near. But others—many others—meet death without any warning at all, in an unforeseen moment that wrenches consciousness in two, separating the living from the dead.

That's how it would come on this particular evening for twenty-two individuals.

A darkened sky released sheets of overzealous, unwelcome flakes into the air. The wind caught them up and blew them sideways. The same wind tore strands of hair from the woman's ponytail and whipped them about like flickering candle flames. She clutched a box tightly to her chest, the contents rattling, as she hurried up the cement steps.

With her chin burrowed deep into her scarf and eyes lowered, the woman didn't see the man as she reached the platform. She didn't see him stare at the train. She didn't see him as he exhaled a cloudy breath. And she didn't see him when he spun around.

The two collided, as lives sometimes do.

The woman tottered and fell, the box upending. She landed hard on the snow-covered cement, auburn hair spilling about her face.

The man moved to her, pulled her up. "Are you okay?"

"I-I think so."

He scrambled to collect the scattered contents—a handful of business cards, a spiral-bound notebook, a balled-up T-shirt, an opened bag of Tootsie Pops, and a picture frame.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No, it was my fault. I wasn't looking. I didn't want to . . ." Her words swirled off into the wind. She tucked her hair behind her ear, her attention moving to the broken picture frame he held in his hand.

He shook pieces of glass into the snow, then returned the framed photo to the box and handed it over. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine." And yet she was unable to hide the wince that came with her words.

The railcar waited behind him, its doors open.

She hugged the box to her chest and stepped forward, before they closed. Before she had to wait for the next train to come along.

Dry air washed over her face and neck. The doors slid shut. The railcar released its brakes. A voice distorted with static sounded over the intercom as the train lurched forward. She steadied herself against a nearby pole and stared out the window. The man stood beneath the awning, watching the train slide past as snow and wind swirled in a frantic dance across the sky.

Circles of pain radiated from her backside. She brushed a patch of white clinging to her coat and glanced down the railcar. Her attention caught on a lady with hair like her own, sitting close by, clutching an expensive-looking handbag while she dabbed her cheeks with a crumpled pink tissue.

As if sensing the attention, the lady's watery eyes rose up to meet the woman's.

Flushing, she turned away. The car wasn't too full, so she slid onto an empty seat a couple rows ahead, setting the box beside her.

Cold stuck to her skin. Her teeth chattered. She yearned for a hot cup of tea. A long soak in a warm bath. Something that might chase away the coldness that had seeped inside her bones long before she stepped outside.

She removed the five-by-seven picture frame from the box and flicked a sliver of glass from the photograph when someone tapped her shoulder.

It was a man.

He sat behind her wearing a green-mesh John Deere hat with a straight bill, like he'd never bothered to break it in. His back was hunched with age. "Crazy weather this evening."

She nodded.

“Last time we got this much snow this late in the year, I had more hair up here.” He took off his cap and with a chuckle, rubbed the top of his shiny brown head. “They say when all’s said and done, we could get up to a foot.”

The woman’s lips pinched in the corners—a polite but discouraging smile.

Maybe if she had known that this would be the old man’s last conversation, she would have done a better job. Maybe if she had known, she would have been more attentive. At the very least, she could have shown a glimmer of kindness.

But she didn’t know. None of them did.

Not the girl with the pixie haircut and the pair of tattooed butterflies rising on the nape of her neck. Not the Latino boy slumped down in his seat, earbuds jammed inside his ears. Not the harassed-looking mother trying to corral a wild young child. Not the businessman tapping the keys on his opened laptop. Not the crying wisp of a lady with the crumpled pink tissue. Not the old man who smelled of analgesic cream and bacon and prattled on about snowstorms in March.

Not the woman with the box, whose phone began buzzing. She gave the gentleman an apologetic look and pulled the phone out of her pocket. A text message lit the screen:

R u alive?

A short huff.

She slipped off her mother’s ring and stared at the familiar design. If she hadn’t done that—if she would have just given it a twist instead of removing it altogether—maybe some things would have turned out differently. But she did take it off. She turned it over in her hand, clasped it inside her palm. And then she tapped out a text with trembling thumbs. It was a message that would never be sent. One that would be lost with all the other things that were lost on that day. Halfway through her typed reply, a second ticked from one to zero.

Fate detonated.

An explosion of heat blasted through the air.

Windows shattered.

Metal twisted.

Stars burst like kaleidoscopes behind the woman's eyes, and life as she knew it disappeared completely.

## O N E

Sirens wailed.

A woman screamed.

Impossible heat reached out heavy fingers and dug into her flesh, pulling her into darkness. Charred gloves circled her wrists and dragged her from the wreckage as flames swallowed the world.

Autumn Manning jolted awake.

Sweat dripped down her back as she shoved away the sounds, kicking them off like an unwanted blanket. She pushed at the sheets covering her legs and tore at her face, clawing at tubes that were no longer there. Tubes that had been removed months and months ago.

Panic swelled.

It scratched up her chest, heaving her upright in bed.

It was just a nightmare. Fiery wreckage didn't engulf her. There was no hospital or beeping monitors. She was in her apartment bedroom, where all was quiet and still and safe.

The clock on her nightstand read 3:36 a.m.—an hour most people didn't care to know. But 3:00 a.m. and Autumn had become well acquainted. At 3:00, sleep turned into a will-o'-the-wisp—teasing her as it danced forever out of reach.

It was better not to chase it at all.

She swung her legs around and shoved her feet into a pair of slippers, slid her arms into the robe hanging on one of her bedposts and shuffled past the closet that made her family worry.

Ten minutes later, Autumn was curled up in an armchair with a hot cup of tea, flipping through options on Netflix, trying to ignore the ghosts that called to her from down the hall. She had promised her sister that she would stop, that she would find a way to let all of this go.

But the dead were loudest at night.

Ribbons of steam curled up toward her chin. Autumn selected an

episode of *Gilmore Girls* and turned her attention to the jigsaw puzzle scattered across the coffee table. The more things she could distract herself with, the better.

Television, tea, puzzle.

This one was called “Forest Gnome” and was extra difficult, given that most of the pieces were the same shade of barky brown. Mindlessly, she picked at a cuticle as she searched for a piece of the gnome’s hat.

Pick, pick, pick until her skin stung.

She stuck her thumb in her mouth and sucked, then pulled it free and watched as red beaded up into a droplet of blood. If she didn’t cover it, she would continue picking—an unflattering habit she developed as a girl.

“*Stop picking, my love,*” her mother would say, peeking at her in the rearview mirror of their Buick LeSabre. “*Your nails look dreadful.*”

Autumn headed to the bathroom, where she wrapped her thumb in a lime-green Band-Aid and stared at her reflection in the mirror. A straight scar slashed across her temple. A feathery one peppered her right jawline like white stubble—so vague now a person had to squint to see it. There was another on her shoulder where she’d had surgery—this scar more serious looking than the others. But that was it. The only outward sign that she’d survived anything at all.

Three faint scars, where skin had been savagely torn but stretched and bound together again.

*Gilmore Girls* banter filtered down the hallway.

Autumn knew she should return to her chair and her tea and work on the puzzle while Taylor Doose tried bringing the citizens of Stars Hollow to order. When the episode ended, she could clean out her refrigerator—scrub it with baking soda and vinegar until she found a way to remove the mysterious sour smell that came and went in whiffs without any rhyme or reason. When that was through, she could lace up her shoes and go on an early-morning run.

But temptation was hard to resist at three in the morning.

She was impossibly drawn to the things she promised to throw away.

With resignation, she grabbed a pair of scissors, the copy of the *Tribune* featuring the articles she read before bed, and the binder from the top shelf of the hall closet. She pressed her back against the wall and slid to the floor, where she cut out the newest headline.

### Tragedy on the Tracks: One Year Later

The alliteration grated. It had always grated, causing a grimace whenever she saw or read it.

The commission board in charge of erecting a memorial had worked with a local artist to design a fountain. They'd settled on a large steel phoenix, taking flight from the water. A symbol of hope. Beauty from ashes. A symbol Autumn had yet to see unfold in real life. Even the beauty of justice eluded her.

The bomber, Benjamin Havel, was still on the loose.

The ground surrounding the fountain was embedded with twenty-two red bricks, each one inscribed with a name. Nearby a plaque explained all that it represented. It was a plaque that would remain largely unread, and eventually, the fountain would be nothing more than a wet trash can for unwanted pennies and stale gum.

Autumn sighed.

Was Chad right? Had she turned cynical?

She finished cutting out the article, trying not to think about the voice mail from the chairman of the board, inviting her to cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony. Or her sister Claire's disbelief when Autumn told her she wouldn't be going.

"You're really not going?" she'd asked.

"Trust me," Autumn had said. "Those families don't want me there."

Why would they? To them, she was salt in a wound. A bitter reminder. A cruel question mark. *Why did that woman survive when my husband (wife, dad, mom, son, daughter, friend) didn't? What's so special about her?*

Autumn didn't want to see the questions that haunted her reflected in

wet eyes. And she refused to be a mascot. If she went, she would be a distraction. A spectacle. The focal point. The memorial wasn't about her. It was about them—the ones who hadn't survived.

She didn't need to cut a ribbon to pay her respects.

She did that every day.

Every night.

While the city slept, she paid them over and over again.

Her attention wandered to the binder in her lap. She paged past the stack of obituaries—all of which had been written and published while she was still unconscious. By the time she opened her eyes, the dead were already buried. Autumn had to Google their names to read their stories, and gather old newspapers from libraries for physical, tangible records. To her family's dismay, she turned into a morbid kid collecting a set of tragic baseball cards, determined to gather her favorite players. Only instead of a bonus stick of bubblegum with each find, she got a knife to the gut.

She turned past each one of them until she reached the letters—all from one address. They began arriving a few days after she woke up and the media descended.

At first, the letters just confused her.

Eventually it became clear. Autumn understood what it was like when your mind fixated on something. When it gnawed and gnawed like a dog with a bone. That must be it. For reasons she thought she understood, she had become that bone.

She got up from her spot in the hallway. She didn't think as she powered up her Mac, and she didn't think as she logged onto a fake Facebook account, and she didn't think as she typed names and hashtags into the search bar. Always the same ones. It had become a tick. A compulsion. Like picking at her cuticles. She had to do it, even though it never made her feel any better. Not when her searches produced something new and not when she discovered accounts had finally been deleted. No matter what Autumn found, all of it ended the same way—her, sitting there, nursing the wounds all the picking left behind, not a Band-Aid in sight.

Three hundred and sixty-five days.

One whole year since the people inside the binder had ceased living.

Twelve months with the same question as her constant, vigilant companion. The same question her two-year old niece had begun asking repeatedly a couple of weeks ago.

*Why? Why? Why?*

With a deep breath, Autumn picked up a nearby pencil and snagged a piece of paper and tried—for the hundredth time—to write a letter back.