

*Lithia Park*  
A NOVEL

*Ra Lynn Lonewalker*

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## *Prologue*

*I*f you listen carefully, you can hear Lithia Park murmuring in an ancient voice that seems to hold all secrets. Often the voice comes as a cold vibration pulsating through the air, bringing a stronger chill with every word.

The delicate veil between realities in Lithia Park gently releases the observer from the cares of life and the boredom of a complicated, overly critical, self-centered, noisy society. In Lithia Park we pause, and our rushing about, our sorrows and anxieties fade into a long-awaited hush.

If you are lucky, you might see trailing lights and shadows normally invisible to the naked eye. The energy is strong here. It bends and distorts the illusion we call reality and opens doorways from the aether, allowing spirits to walk between this world and the next. Glittering, mysterious, and crafty, it is watchful of who enters the park.

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The park tells its old stories in flashes of lights, shimmering white luminous forms, and ghostly figures that walk the park's paths and trails, then dissolve into thin air.

Can all this be true?

Some say that when all is quiet and most of us are sleeping, footprints of souls long departed line the paths lacing the park together. Others speak of spirits sliding between trees or hiding behind bushes and shrubs, waiting for a particular person to happen by. You may see the park as empty. You probably won't see the shadows tracking your footsteps, but if you listen carefully enough, you might hear someone call your name from the emptiness.

Do spirits have any significance, or are they just glimpses, random encounters that can't be rationally explained in everyday language?

Beyond the ghosts, beyond the park's casual appearance, lie the deeper mysteries. We must be patient and remain observant to spot the symbols hidden here and there. Those who are patient and attentive may notice the secret codes woven into the park—symbols and codes revealing that the park is dynamic, forever shifting with spiritual energy.

How to see the spirits that inhabit Lithia Park? How to see the hidden symbols and codes, the secrets of Lithia Park? How to hear the murmuring voices?

First, we must set foot in the park, make contact with the ground itself. We are invited to come in, to

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touch the trees, feel the grass, smell the flowers, and see the flowing water. In Lithia Park, we are permitted to find union with something greater, to feel the pulse in the ground beneath our feet. Standing in this park, we are closer to the soul of our planet. We are in a place that allows us to reach into other dimensions, a place where we can interact with the spirits.

Here we find the essence of Mother Earth, which places us in the universe and gives us the ability to tune in to the three octaves of awareness—the solar spiritual octave, the lunar dream octave, and the earthly physical octave. (Some people call these realms, but the word “octave” reminds us that the so-called realms are contiguous.) Thanks to the earth’s own magic we can move from the earthly to the lunar and further up into the spirit octave or realm. And if we accept Mother Earth’s powers, we can access our planet’s true magic in places like Lithia Park.

### *Sacred space.*

What is sacred space but that space honored by our consciousness? Yes, all space is sacred, yet when a particular space is defined as a *temenos*, it is a precinct of spiritual significance. Remarkable things happen here. Our consciousness and energy become more highly defined and connected to the whole. In sacred space, we find a focal point where the human being communicates with higher spirits. This is where we can mingle with those who have gone before us.

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Sacred space has seven cardinal points that we must acknowledge before we can commune. These are Above, Below, East, South, West, North, and Within, the seventh point that lies within the individual. It is true that within every one of us there is a spiritual gateway that connects our awareness first to the planet and the land and then, ultimately, to the universe. This awareness is, alas, lost to most of us today. We don't know how to find our abilities that are connected to our spirit. We're too busy being human and doing what human beings do to make a living. We don't have time to notice our own energy.

But walk away from the rush of the corporeal, mundane world. Come to Lithia Park and find yourself here, where the spirits might touch you, where they might see you for who you really are. Hush! Close your eyes. Let the moment be. Dance with the shadows in this place where fear will find you, where your secret dreams are the music that guides you. As you dance encircled by the beauties of the haunting spirits, you may sense that you've changed. Whatever you dread, whatever you conceal, whatever you bring to the park that exists deep inside your mind, the park will commune with that "whatever." And from this experience you will realize that something exceptional is happening.

Whatever you adore, whatever you offer, whatever you believe you need to live will twist, warp, and

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change here in Lithia Park. Say goodbye to your pride, let your strength dissolve, and allow yourself to be vulnerable here. In the moment of apprehension as the shadows have gathered around you, know that the spirits see you. Know that it's your innocent *self* they want.

Here in this park that spins out of time, where the image of the divine is a tree, you very well might stumble onto real magic and meet the vast supernatural. Hidden here in the park, away from the bustle and noise of the modern city where the faces never seem to smile and where the masses isolate themselves behind doors, away from those crowded cities of confusing crossroads that always lead back to the drudgery of work... here is a place where magic is at work. Here is where spirits are alive and dancing.



*Lithia Park*



## *Chapter 1*

*W*inter had come to Ashland, Oregon. The leaves had fallen from the trees, and the blue skies had turned gray. Ruby Birk chased Yukon, her dog, down the street. He slipped through a break in an old chain-link fence obscured by a weak-stemmed vine, one of those common vines found in southern Oregon that grow thick on fences.

Yukon was acting odd. He was usually mindful of Ruby and listened to her. He always followed her, never tried to lead. And he hardly ever ran off in pursuit of anything. But today he had suddenly taken off after nothing and ran like a bolt of lightning as if chasing something, though clearly there was nothing running in front of him. Ruby hadn't known the break in the fence existed, so she was surprised when Yukon disappeared.

Ruby was by no means fit to be running after her dog. Besides the fact that she wasn't at all athletic,

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her clothes were cumbersome, and her heavy black boots felt like dead weight that kept her rhythm to more of a fast walk than a run. As she ran, she felt an uncanny feeling somewhere between humiliation and uncertainty.

Was anyone watching?

She spotted the break in the fence and forced herself through it. Just behind the overgrown fence a hidden and obviously forgotten stone staircase descended to the Butler-Perozzi Fountain. Ruby had been to the park many times, but she had never before entered the park through the fence at the top of the staircase.

Something inside her stirred when she first discovered the fountain. It was fresh and strange for her. She would never have guessed that, once upon a time, the fountain was the jewel of the park, the crumbling stone steps she descended, the main entrance.

She came to the peaceful park nearly every day, and almost always with Yukon in tow, as he enjoyed it as much as she. The park was near her home, giving her an easy escape from the world she felt unrelated to. She considered her instability in the “real world” as a direct cause for her dissatisfaction with the state of her current life. She couldn’t trust her world, and so lived life through a pattern of isolation.

Yet, despite her loneliness, she trusted her solitude.

Today, however, thanks to Yukon running off into the cold winter mist, Lithia Park was an unscheduled

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stop. *At least it's empty!* Ruby told herself. She wanted to be alone here. Whatever Yukon was up to, she didn't mind because being alone gave her an opportunity to be free, to be here with nature. *Maybe that's what her dog was doing, too*, she thought. Enjoying the freedom to run without his leash. People often got annoyed seeing a dog running wild. Ruby was conscious of this and usually kept him on his leash. But today? Today was an exception.

The peace the park gave her seemed to open her mind to her celestial-self, the unseen but necessary element of her being that enjoyed the solitude. Her quiet side awakened here.

A breeze welcomed her. It was vibrant with the tingling purity of the winter's cold and laden with the wholesome, welcoming scent of pine, plus hints of frankincense, mastic, and other spices. But these scents made her feel... well... peculiar.

The absence of people meant all she could hear was the wind blowing dry leaves across the snow-covered ground. It had been an unusually cold season this year after four warm, dry winters. The Mount Ashland ski resort near the city hadn't even opened for ski season last year because of the west coast drought. This year, however, the snow was falling in late October, kept falling through November, and continued to fall now in early December, along with the temperature.

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Shivering in her inadequate overcoat, Ruby looked around the park. One bright ray of sunshine had broken through the cloud cover, making the park look like an enchanted kingdom.

Ruby continued following Yukon, who was still running free in the park. Only Yukon really cared about her. If not for him, she would feel even more lost. He kept her grounded.

Lately, she had nothing to look forward to. Mounting debts, fear, and depression filled her life. There was never enough money. The weight of what she owed almost made her knees buckle, while demands for payment grew and grew.

Her old overcoat, which she had bought at a second-hand store for eight bucks, hung loosely on her shoulders. Under one arm she held her old, cracked, leather portfolio stuffed with her work—sketches, paintings, random drawings, and notes for art she might create in the future. Being an artist hadn't paid as well as she had naively expected. She maintained hope that her art would earn her a living, but her dreams of becoming a famous artist had vanished long ago.

### *Dreams.*

Youthful dreams had faded as she grew older. She was now thirty-eight years old, middle-aged in her own mind, and the way time was moving it wouldn't be too long before she waned into old age. The thought

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of getting old scared her. She was certain that her dreams of painting in Florence, Paris, or Prague, or visiting the Mediterranean lands and walking hand-in-hand with a lover, had passed her by long ago.

She said the word *artist* aloud, and the sound of it brought the impression of isolated brilliance, a person with a hallowed aura, someone whose angelic hands massaged life into a masterpiece. When other people said *The Artist*, though, they usually meant an entertainer, an actor, a television celebrity, the lead singer in a band. That wasn't *her* kind of *artist*. The public declared that these modern-day so-called artists were the *true artists*, celebrities that lived on high, seated next to the angels that offered them mysterious gifts to distinguish them from ordinary humans. Ruby often wondered if her kind of *artist* was dead, and if so, for how long. A hundred years? More? She looked around the silent, empty park. *Is this*, she asked herself, *where my dreams come to die?*

Suddenly Yukon caught her attention. He was running around in the snow, sniffing and hiking his leg every once in a while to leave his mark. He was a mix of Malamute and gray wolf, with a fawn coat and a dark mask that held two different-colored eyes, one blue and one brown. His manner was playful and gentle, if a tad rambunctious. Ruby often joked that his different-colored eyes helped him understand the world better than any human could because, she

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claimed, the blue eye saw the spiritual world while the brown eye saw the physical one.

While her mind fumbled through her almost constant thoughts of art, debt, and her rotten life, she also realized that she was hungry and suffering, though not from the coldness of the winter, nor from the destitution she felt to her core almost every day. She hungered for mental sustenance, for something that would pull her out of the storms of her harsh psychological winter. She often imagined herself motionless, frozen, empty of both joy and inspiration. In such moods, she predicted that spring would never come. She feared that she would be stuck in a winter both literal and psychological for the rest of her life.

Even though she always told people she was an artist, she had yet to convince herself. Her greatest fear was that a critic (which, to an artist, is everyone) would call her a fake. It didn't take much for her to believe she was only going through the motions of being an artist. *After all, she'd tell herself, real artists know what they're doing. They're entitled to feel good about themselves and their work.* But not her. If only she were certain she was an artist, then she wouldn't hold her work in such low esteem. If only she were creative enough to paint something no one had seen before... If only she could paint something people would want to buy... If only her art could make a living for her... If only....

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She gave Yukon the one long whistle that let him know that he was free to run around, then headed toward a second flight of fractured and weathered stone steps. These steps stood directly in front of the fountain and led down to the park grounds. To her left, she noticed, someone had cleared away the snow to reveal a brass plaque. She paused to read it before going on. The plaque gave a brief history of the fountain and the park, which had been established in 1892, four hundred years after Christopher Columbus had arrived in the New World. The land had originally been designated as a city park; however, it only became noteworthy after John McLaren, who also designed the Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, designed Lithia Park in 1914. The fountain, sculpted by A. Frilli of Florence, Italy, had been added in 1916.

Reading the fountain's history struck a chord in Ruby. It made her curious about this fountain. She walked closer to examine and appreciate the skill that had gone into creating it. The wind dropped, and the great silence of the park surrounded her. The fountain, a true piece of art, stood as a testament to the men who had created it and the park in which it sat, men who were now long dead. But it did not reveal the secrets of their lives... their fears, debts, good fortune, courage, or weaknesses. It was, she thought, a statement set in marble, declaring that its

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designers' souls had existed not only for the park, or for Ashland, but for the whole world.

*That's why artists create their work, isn't it, she thought. To show the world.*

She walked around the fountain and gasped at the sight of recent vandalism on its west side. *Who would be so disrespectful?* Someone had bashed the decorative marble base with something heavy, like a sledgehammer, and broken off big chunks of it. And then there was the tag, a spray-painted urban glyph perhaps marking some wannabe crew's territory. Whatever the tag meant, it certainly didn't belong on this beautiful piece of art. *Disgraceful!*

Frowning, she continued walking around the fountain as a damp mist rose and swirled around her. A few dried leaves danced within the swirling air while she stood quiet and unafraid. As she watched the leaves, she saw the air outline a figure that developed into a flickering image of a man. The sight of the fuzzy figure made her eyes go wide. A strangled shriek tore through the air, startling her further until she recognized the scream as her own. The image vanished along with her cry, leaving her bewildered and staring at the area where the leaves still swirled.

She shook herself, feeling completely ridiculous. *Surely I imagined the whole thing.* Yukon had returned and sat grinning and panting apparently unconcerned

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by the commotion. Shaking her head, Ruby turned and went down the stairs and into the park.

A gust of wind blew at her, and within it she heard a voice.

*Ruby? Ruby Birk!*

The voice was simultaneously ghostly and soothing. Her heart slowed, and her whole body relaxed. She turned and looked back up the steps for the source of the call. The fountain suddenly looked different. There was something about it she couldn't quite identify. And that voice she'd heard... familiar, but so strange. In it she heard more than someone just calling her name. She heard—or felt—a connection. Yes, she had *felt* it. A connection to a place, to someone, to—

She had an impulse.

Feeling compelled to sketch the fountain, she turned and looked for the best place to sit and rough out a draft. An idea crept into her mind, slowly at first, but then it gained momentum. She walked down the hill a bit so she could see the fountain from a wider perspective. Sitting on a park bench, she opened her portfolio and pulled out a blank sheet of sketch paper and a charcoal pencil. She was ready to make her first stroke, but she felt a little light-headed, unable to orient herself to the reality around her. Her mind tripped over the ghostly image by the fountain and the voice she'd heard. She closed her eyes and shook her head, then straightened, opened her eyes

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again, and looked at the charcoal pencil in her hand. Her new idea was different from the kind of art she had been doing for many years. Her usual style was dark. She enjoyed drawing and painting graveyards, headstones, and mausoleums. But now she wanted to draw the park as it had looked in the beginning. A historical perspective piece. The beauty of the park and its fountain had inspired her to recreate John McLaren's park as it had been in his day.

*Was life easier in 1914?*

Ruby considered John McLaren. He must have had a robust constitution. She was certain he was different from her. Whereas she always doubted her ability to draw and paint, he must have been strong and confident. He had sculpted the land here into a beautiful piece of art, knowing it would satisfy the minds and souls of all who visited.

*He must have been proud of his work. Prouder than me.*

Ruby had little to show for the work she had done. Every day, she wondered if she was doing something anyone would ever care about. Every day, she lived under the spell of that powerful word, *DOUBT*. Being an artist of no reputation meant that every day she battled doubt just to get a drawing on paper or a painting on canvas. She had created many works of art, and she even believed that she had talent, but when it came to selling her work, she rarely succeeded.

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In this day and age, it was money that seemed to be the measure of success. Pay was the validation of a person's craft.

Oh, how she wished she had faith, validation, and legitimacy—and the confidence of a successful artist.

She looked again at the fountain. *Did Mr. A. Frilli ever feel the doubt I feel?*

*Life seems to get harder every day. I just don't belong to this world.* Even though Edgar Allen Poe was a writer and she a painter, she often felt they shared the same path in life. She knew from studying his life and work in college that he too had struggled as a writer in his time. Although he was published, he was, like her, not well known and made very little money from his work. He had his own battles with depression. What she feared most was that her journey through life would be cut short as his had been. Edgar was said to have taken his own life at the age of forty because of his failures.

*That's only three years older than I am. Will I live that long?*

Often isolated, cold, empty, and fearing she was going mad, Ruby thought about her suicide. Yes, she called it her suicide. She had ownership of it. Sometimes she wanted to die, but she never had the courage to go through with it. But living... living was like sinking into black water, drowning forever. She had decided that if she became so broke that she

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had to live on the streets, that would be the time to end her life. If it came to that, would anyone even remember her?

Anyone who knew her would have said Ruby wasn't normal. She neither looked nor thought like other women her age. What made her so different? Ruby believed it was her soul. Her soul demanded she create art. Her soul that wouldn't allow her to be or become *normal*. Her soul had called her, had possessed her and persuaded her to take up the brush and paint on canvases she'd stretched with her own hands over the frames she'd made with scrap wood, using an old hammer and nails. Her soul demanded that she drag a charcoal pencil over paper, paper that she herself made from wood pulp that she got for free from a sawmill up the road.

Her soul, if it was aware of anything, knew she was an artist. Not merely "an artist," but an old-fashioned artist, the kind that makes her own supplies. Yes, her soul knew. Her mind, on the other hand, knew nothing of the kind. It argued with her soul. Her mind did all the doubting. Oftentimes, it was a struggle for her to understand which one—her soul or her mind—was in control. She understood that her mind had repeatedly out-reasoned her soul, had chained it up with links of logic, had imprisoned it in a prison of popular teachings. Indeed, it was her mind that took control when she created art. And it was her mind that forced

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her to calculate, gauge, and scrutinize every step of the process, almost to the point of overwhelming her soul altogether.

She gazed down at her hand, still holding the charcoal pencil, then gave a short whistle for Yukon to come closer so she could keep an eye on him. She could see him in the distance, jumping around, full of fun, as if someone were playing with him. There wasn't, as far as she could tell, but the dog was jumping higher and wagging his tail far more than he did when he was playing by himself. She whistled again, and he came and sat down next to her.

"Who are you playing with?" she asked him. After what happened earlier, she wasn't sure who or what might be in the park. "Are you seeing things, too? You're a goofy dog, and I'm goofy in the head!" He continued to wag his tail, and she could swear he was smiling.

With an effort, she pushed her logical thought process aside and laid her first stroke down, then swept the heel of her hand across the line to smudge it. She looked around. The park was still vacant, thanks to the freezing cold. Her logical mind took advantage of this by cursing at her for sitting outside on such a day, yet her soul felt a tingle, a spark. She blinked and tried to focus on drawing.

*And that voice....*

Stroke by stroke, she began to sketch the park as she imagined it had been a century ago when John

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McLaren was creating it. She roughed out what she saw in her mind—a warm summer day, the great sycamore trees glowing green with warmth while they provided cool shade for anyone standing beneath them.

She drew almost mechanically at first. This was how she usually started a new project: disciplined, focused on technique rather than inspiration. But today... today something was... *different*. She was looking at a past era, so her imagination seemed to be more active than usual. She began feeling as if her hands were moving without her guidance. Her soulful mind had taken over, casting off technique and just creating without thinking about it. She relaxed into the flow of drawing. Then her hand did it. Her hand drew the thing she was always reluctant to draw. It wasn't much of a thing, just a bare outline, and yet there it was, plain and simple.

She'd drawn a person.

The figure stood at the top of the hill where, in time, the fountain would stand.

Years ago, in art school, she had tried to paint a portrait. She had been proud of her first real attempt at portraiture, had thought she was seeing her raw ability in it. Her instructor had been deeply critical, however, to the point that his so-called constructive criticism became twisted, hurtful words, leaving her with no confidence in her ability to draw or paint people.

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“Your shadows are not nearly warm enough,” he’d shouted. “What kind of idiot would make them so pale and gray! Your subjects’ flesh tones are harsh and false. It would appear, Miss Birk, that you have no talent for portraits. Hold up your canvas for the class to see.” He called out, “Attention, class! Please take the time to come and look at this portrait. This is exactly what you should *not* do. You should try to match the basis of color as you have it against your model’s face and neck. Do you see what I mean? This is too weak, too off-putting.” He stood taller, puffed out his chest and raised his voice. “Class, you must understand once and for all that weakness, either in conception or execution, is an unpardonable sin in oil.”

From that day on, Ruby had resigned herself to never drawing the human form.

That had happened a dozen years ago, at least, and she was still angry with herself for never getting over the pain and embarrassment of that instructor’s rant.

Now, as she looked down again at what her hand had drawn, she took a deep breath and held it. The figure was more a shadow than a detailed portrait, yet it seemed to her that the spell her art instructor had cast on her imagination had somehow just been shattered. She gave the drawing a nod and a satisfied smile, then tucked the paper into her portfolio, pocketed her charcoal pencil, and rubbed her hands

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together. Even though it was just past noon, she was freezing, and the cold was forcing her to get moving again. Feeling a little odd, she whistled for Yukon, who had wandered off again.

As she tried to comb her hair with her fingers, a gust of wind brought her that mysterious, spicy fragrance again, that wonderful scent she had smelled when she'd entered the park. Her imagination began to wander, eventually stumbling upon the mysterious voice again. The fragrance and the voice were both strangely familiar, but she still couldn't place how she knew them. She coaxed her mind to follow them and began chasing memories through a mental labyrinth. She'd been sketching as this was occurring, and thought, *If I keep this up, maybe I'll figure out why they feel so familiar.*

Suddenly, she felt a jolt charging through her body. She looked around.

It had quit snowing.

The voice spoke again. *Ruby.*

The park was empty.

Her heart racing, she hit a metaphorical pause button and stood perfectly still, facing forward. Strangely, she felt like she was being tickled, and began to giggle. Her left hand came up and pushed back her cherry-chocolate hair, which had fallen down and veiled her face. She didn't know why, but she felt giddy.

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*There is no one here. Am I losing my mind? Surely this isn't really happening! Maybe my sanity's waning from hunger. But is it my body, or my mind that hungers?*

She heard the voice again.