

Spectral Encounters:
The Latin American Immigrant and other Ghosts of England

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Abstract

This novel and its critical companion express the unacknowledged presence of the Latin American immigrant in England in terms of the ghost. *Penumbra* is the story of Samuel, a Costa Rican immigrant settling in contemporary England, and narrates his encounters with literal and figurative ghosts. My research draws from the Derridean concept of hauntology and the critical approach developed from it to specify the challenges the ghost can pose to the dichotomies of presence and absence, as well as past and present. I map these challenges within the encounters of the Latin American immigrant with different cultural subjects in England to point out instances of Othering and postcolonial melancholia. What the novel depicts is a complex modern globalised England that tends to romanticise its Victorian past, that clings to certain aspects of this particular era. In *Penumbra*, these ideas filter through the everyday experiences and fantastical visions of a foreign narrator who struggles to reconcile his confounded expectations with the reality of the country. This project has a microsociological focus. Its subject is a migrant individual adjusting to ghostliness in England, rather than Latin America as an ethnic group. The fiction explores the mechanisms of the Latin American protagonist for coping with such ghosts and emphasises the relevance of his anecdotal narrative for breaking it. My treatment of the spectre as a metaphor for the Latin American exposes the practices and everyday-life occurrences that make this subject invisible, voiceless, and liminal. This series of ghostly encounters pace the development of the main character, but what moves the plot forward is the protagonist's awareness of his own ghostliness.

The critical companion to the novel has four parts. The first one delineates the challenges hauntology poses to the concepts of presence and time, on which I base the rest of my analysis. I introduce two modalities of the ghost, the sensuous presence to

which I connect the term ‘spectre’, and the symbolic modality which I identify with the term ‘ghost’. Part Two localises the hauntological argument of presence within the context of the Latin American immigrant in contemporary England in order to justify the characterisation of my protagonist. I examine the reasons for the inconspicuousness of the Latin American, looking at the historical relations between Europe and Central America, and more specifically between England and Costa Rica. I introduce my term of *ghosting* to refer to the practices that render the Latin American Other invisible. The central idea of Part Three is the challenge of hauntology to our concept of time, specifically, the solidity of the present. I analyse the impact of the returning past, not only on the foreign protagonist of *Penumbra* but also on the country as a whole. I concentrate most of my literary analysis on Part Four of the critical section. This last section focuses on the ghost as an instrument and subject of my creative practice. I study the themes of presence and time other authors have explored through a ghostly filter and compare them to my rendition. I locate my fiction in relation to other ghost literature. I conclude with the idea that both the sensuous and symbolic modalities of the ghost are complementary to each other and together make for a strong conceit of the invisibility of the Latin American immigrant in England.

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Penumbra

Part I

Chapter One

I was sitting on a bench on Platform One of a small rail station I'd never been. *Manton-Leen*, the white sign across the tracks said. God knows where that was. The architecture of the station was not exciting, no beautiful cast-iron pillars, no centenarian masonry, no historical visuals that I recognised. The roof was zinc and simple, the aluminium beams holding it, unadorned. I couldn't tell how long I'd been there, but it must have been a while, judging by the pain on my arse. I shifted and watched the 10:10 service to Sheffield arrive and leave. Watching the trains go by had become very soothing. A guy like me, who wasn't going anywhere was invulnerable to all those small triggers of stress pestering other travellers. I carried no luggage, didn't have to catch a connection or hurry for a seat. I was never going to be late for anything. I was neither the bearded cyclist with the bike on his shoulder, boarding the 10:20 to Leeds. I wasn't the woman in knee-high boots tap-tap-taping, as she scurried into the 10:38 to Doncaster just a second before the doors closed. I wasn't the father of three with a baby in his arms and a desperate look, who kept asking one of his children to "stop asking already!" They would get to Durham when they got there.

I wasn't getting to any of those places. Watching people depart gave me a strange sense of loneliness, of delayed parting, as sense of the unbridgeable distance between us. Fine by me. I didn't need a nana in Durham, or a party to attend in Doncaster. Time was mine to enjoy the view of the toiling locomotives, dragging all that dead weight, and of the emptiness between arrivals and departures.

If only my head emptied like the station. That was the downside of the quiet moments: they left too much space for my thoughts. For thoughts of Lori. For thoughts of Zoe.

They arrived in my mind with every train that left. Unlike the trains, these women didn't come one after the other. There was no schedule to their arrivals. They kept appearing simultaneously, pulling my memory in different directions. In that sense, they were more like the trains that didn't stop at the station. They were the high-speed juggernauts that went by, thundering from London to Edinburgh. Anyone stepping in front of them would be shattered. Anyone else would've gone mad, trying to cope with Lori and Zoe that morning. Anyone else would've needed them to slow down, to take turns like the sluggish diesel engines that stopped at the station. Not me.

Being with Zoe and Lori wasn't a matter of scheduling, of being in time or out of time. I was in both at once. It wasn't a matter of being in one place either, here in Audbridge or back at home in Costa Rica. I was in both at once. It was truly a matter of focus, of choosing to see whom I wanted to see.

They don't know each other. Zoe and Lori have never met, though the three of us have been together since the beginning.

I landed in the UK on a Thursday evening. I had been online, trying to rent a flat from overseas for about a month, but they just wouldn't let me rent a place without viewing it first, so I booked three nights in a hostel which I thought were enough to find a more permanent place. I was wrong, of course, and couldn't even arrange a viewing within that time. I was also lucky, though, because staying at that hostel I met a guy called Sanjay who worked at the reception. I told him about my troubles while he was setting me up for two more nights in the hostel and that got him talking about agency fees and what a rip-off they were.

‘The problem,’ I told Sanjay, ‘The problem is you can’t do shit without a postcode here. I can’t open a bank account, can’t get my CV right.’

‘Can’t register with a GP,’ added Sanjay, pouting. He always looked as if he were pouting. His mouth was too small or his cheeks too chubby, so his lower lip kept sliding forwards.

‘Exactly,’ I said, though I didn’t quite remember what GP stood for at that moment.

What I didn’t tell Sanjay was that I’d just been to a shop, looking for a new pair of headphones. One guy at the register handed them to me while another one was taking my data for the receipt. He asked me for something I didn’t quite get. He asked again if I’d got *something* I didn’t understand, so I replied I didn’t. Then he and the other idiot behind the counter laughed. I figured out later he was asking me for my postcode. They laughed at me for not understanding – whatever, mate – what really stung was the irony that I’d answered right when I said I didn’t have one.

Sanjay never heard the story, but he must have had an idea of what I was going through because, the next time I ran into him, he handed me the number of a guy who would probably let me something straight up.

The landlord sounded nice over the phone. He had a bit of Indian underneath his English accent. That helped. It made him sound slightly familiar, though I didn’t know a single word in Hindi, or Bengali, or Kannada. I couldn’t really tell one language from another, but in the end it didn’t matter. It was the difference I liked, the subtle accent on top of an accent, that distinctiveness of intonation. It sounded so foreign yet so familiar – soothing. He had a studio flat on Moorgate Street available. It sounded small, but it fitted my budget, and I couldn’t afford an even longer stay in the hostel, just to waste time viewing houses. I told myself that any cheap flat would work and played dumb to

the *risk* of not going through an agency. I got the impression I was supposed to feel scared, but I'd never heard about letting agents before.

Mr Patel was quite nice in person too. He was an English bloke of Indian descent. His parents had immigrated before he was born. He must have been in his early thirties, probably just a few years older than me, but I called him Mr Patel because, no matter how much I tried, I could never pronounce his forename right. I knew it was spelt G-h-a-n-a-s-h-y-a-m, *Ghanashyam*, and after hearing it a few times, I got the 'Ghana' part was not pronounced like the African country in English but like 'ña-na' in *mañana* in Spanish. Mr Patel disagreed and said it was a different sound. I didn't argue with him and continued calling him by his surname, which now he and everybody else in England pronounced with a British ring to it.

We met the day I moved in. He came over to sign the tenancy agreement and give me the keys. My new flat was on the first floor above a closed-down takeaway. It took Mr Patel about forty seconds to show me the whole place. You could see it all, standing in one spot. Everything looked like it was forty years old, the white Wilko wallpaper was lifting up in places, stiff from being painted over and over again, but nothing too bad. It had what I needed, a small kitchen, toilet, faucets that didn't leak, a bed I didn't have to fold up into a wardrobe. There was even a large bookshelf by the bed, kind of a mock-up wall. If I filled it up with books, it would give some impression of privacy.

After signing the contract, Mr Patel and I chatted for a while. He was surprised, intrigued, I should say, about how little luggage I was carrying.

'You're not running away from anything, are you?' he asked and I couldn't tell if he was joking.

'Oh no,' I said. 'Not at all.'

You came to find someone.

‘I came to find someone.’ The words slipped out of nowhere. I found myself saying them before I could think of them. ‘A girl.’

‘Oh!’ Mr Patel sounded interested.

I tried to steer him off topic, telling him I didn’t have much, that I’d sold my stuff back home and that I was spending my life savings, migrating to the UK.

Nervousness often made me too honest, too quick for confidences.

He must have noticed I was embarrassed and dropped the subject. I was wearing my Frankenstein T-shirt, a black one with a bright-green picture of Boris Karloff as the Monster and the phrase ‘It’s Alive!’ below it. Mr Patel read it aloud and laughed. He said it was clever and that he liked it. He asked me if I had read the book or if I was a fan of the movies. I told him I loved both and that Mary Shelley’s was probably my favourite novel of all times.

‘I haven’t read it in quite a while,’ I said. ‘I haven’t read anything in a while, to be honest.’

‘Better get to it then,’ said Patel. ‘You don’t want to lose the habit. My daughter, Yamuna, used to read books all the time when she was little. All the time. She’s fourteen now and all she ever does is watch television and play with her phone.’

When he said goodbye, Patel called me Mr Frankenstein and reminded me to get back to reading. He didn’t need to, really. Getting access to books I couldn’t find at home was one of my reasons for coming to England. Mr Patel also wished me good luck finding that girl.

Zoe stole a book from me back in Costa Rica. It was some silly guidebook about the country. I liked it because it was in English. She liked it because it was about

beaches, and coffee plantations, and volcanic lagoons, and some other stuff she wanted to see on her trip. She took it with her the day she left. I resented parting with it.

I had developed a thing for books. In my early teens I thought England was all about the Premier League and what they were calling the ‘Second British Invasion’ on MTV – Spice Girls, Oasis, Robbie Williams, stuff like that. Then when I turned eighteen, I read *Great Expectations* and became addicted to Victorian literature. I learnt much about England from there. Surely things had changed over the years, but I had a strong feeling that England was still Victorian at its core. Why not? It was largely its public image, the touristic stuff that reached home. The aging Queen, Mary Poppins, BBC dramas, and all that. What I learnt in books piled on top of that soft pop base, and I thought I had Britain figured out.

Zoe did not look Victorian when I met her. She was wearing denim shorts and sandals. She said she came from England, and I was so thrilled I asked ‘Oh, so you’re British!’ She smiled and said she was. She smiled at me once, blushing in the heat, and I was done for.

Lori, however, always looked the part, and it wasn’t simply a matter of her clothes or how she wore her hair up all the time. It was her manners, her posture. It was how she seemed to float as she moved. It was that tone she used with me that made me feel I was being both reprimanded and seduced at once.

Meeting Lori was an unlikely event. Everything about her, everything around her was a sort of fiction, something closer to the England I’d been expecting when I booked my flight to Audbridge. She was Victorian fiction, and that’s exactly how things got started between Lori and me, all because of a book. A tattered old book with nice clean margins.

I picked up a copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from the floor of my flat two days after I moved in. The book had lost its jacket, and the years had left a mark on its cover. The worn-down fabric was stretched in patches, showing gaps between the threads. Much of the original red had turned pink, and the pink white. On it was a bright green post-it. 'Hope you enjoy it. My daughter won't read it.' Mr Patel had pushed it through the letterbox.

Before I left Costa Rica, I told myself I wasn't going to seek Zoe out desperately. I couldn't let myself think that she was the only reason I was migrating North. Besides, I didn't even know if she still lived in Audbridge. It had been a couple of months since we'd last spoken. I wasn't going to try to force my luck. If it happened, if I found her, I would take that as a sign, as a pat in the back from the universe.

That second day since I'd moved into my flat. I decided to have my afternoon coffee at the *Mulberry Tree*. It was a pub near the neighbourhood sufficiently well-lit and quiet enough during the day to sit down and read. I found a corner table near the heater. Pen in hand, I was ready to start reading my new book.

I'd always needed a pen to read a story. My grandfather abandoned his family long before I met him, and my father died before I could make a memory of him, but great-aunt Olga always said I should be glad they passed on two little treasures to me, a Spanish passport and a knack for appreciating literature. Writing notes on the margins of books was part of that legacy. I had grown up reading books they had littered with notes. It wasn't just smart notes; it was personal stuff too. If I was a boy in a William Faulkner novel, I would say 'my father is a book,' my grandpa too. I knew them better in paperback format than in human shape. So I picked up the habit of composing marginalia from an early age. I would write down how a character reminded me of someone I knew in real life, like Lennie from *Of Mice and Men*, who was the living

image of innocence and reminded me of my aunt in her last year. She had had a series of strokes. All that nonsense I jotted down, my thoughts, impressions, and swearing, it made me part of the story. I thought of it as a record of my past, proof that I existed. I had never owned a diary, but my thoughts and memories were spread out in hundreds of pages of God-knows how many books.

Mr Patel's gift was completely clean of nonsense on the margins. When I took the green post-it off its cover, the book was free of anyone else. A virgin book, it contained the author's words and no one else's. I looked down at the hardcover in my hands and got the feeling I was holding something important, something pristine. So I made a pact – yes, a pact with the book. I promised I wasn't going to alter that unspoiled state, that I was going to preserve its integrity, so whenever I or whoever picked it up in the future, we would only read Frankenstein's story and no one else's. I was going to keep myself out of it. Coming to England was a chance to start doing things differently.

I put the pen down on the table, had a sip of coffee and began to read.

The first couple of pages were a joy to read, but when I turned page 15 everything got ruined. I couldn't continue with the sentence on the next page; my eyes went to the opposite corner of the following page. There was a word, hand-written, hanging from the corner of page 17 like a long-legged spider smashed against the paper. I didn't read the word; I saw it and recorded it in my head like a picture.

HELP

'What?' I snapped. 'You have got to be kidding me.'

Somebody had already written on the margins. I tried rubbing it off, but it was written in ink. 'Fuck me.'

There was an older couple two tables way. They'd heard me swearing and were looking at me with a mixture of alarm and disgust. I sank on my chair.

The waiter must have heard me too. He came by and said, 'Hi, you alright over here?'

'Everything's great,' I said, grinning. He gave a quick glance at the older couple and said to me. 'You let me know if you need anything else. Alright?' There was a certain sulkiness about him that made me feel even more embarrassed.

I could have sworn I heard a woman say, *leave*.

The book went into my bag. I finished my coffee and left as fast and quietly as I could.

I took the book out as soon as I was back in my flat. I needed to see that margin again. I needed to make sure I hadn't imagined that word. I flipped the book open and there it was: *help*, awkwardly written in long uneven capital letters. The lines were stroked twice or more. It made the word seem like straw stems bundled together. I wanted to set fire to them. I wanted to burn the word out of existence, so I could have my beautiful clean margins back. The H stretched all the way up to the page number. The page number. I gasped. I was looking at page 20. Back in the pub, I hadn't made it past 17. I slowly turned the pages, going back to the beginning. Dreading, knowing, but not wanting to know, that at the top of page 17 there was the word again, *help*.

I shouted a long bilingual combination of fucks, Jesuses, and hells. I didn't mind making a scene when no one was watching.

I had to start over. One by one, I checked each page, top to bottom. If there were other markings, I'd find them. I turned the first pages forcefully, taking my anger out on the book. I ran my finger hard down the paper, as if I was punishing it for being so

naughty. The tantrum lasted about one-hundred pages. Then I took a pause and made myself some more coffee. I checked the rest of the novel calmer and found no more notes.

It was late when I finished, so I tossed the book onto the bookshelf and went to bed. I had too much to do settling in Audbridge to be worrying about things like that. I had a job to find. I had to buy a damn pillow. I squeezed the folded towel I'd been using instead and went to sleep.

I caught sight of the book the next morning while I was having my cereal. I couldn't help it. One, two, three quick glances with the Cheerios crunching inside my head. The pinkish spine had nothing written on it, but I could see letters anyway. It wasn't the title, mind you, just an 'H' at first. Crunch, crunch, crunch, I chewed and imagined the rest of the word appearing, *help*. I shook my head and the letters vanished. I went to check the book anyway, rubbed the worn spine with my thumbnail. Nothing there. It went backwards onto the shelf so that I could only see the pages, but the damage was already done. A bit like a squint straight at the sun, I kept seeing it once I'd moved my eyes away.

The image stuck even after I'd left the flat. The plan for the day was checking out the job fair at Audbridge Arena, and I saw it reflected on the glass doors while I was queuing at the entrance. It popped every time I took a break, as if everything else I was doing during the day was just a momentary distraction from the book lying on the shelf.

The fair itself was something new. Awful too. I walked through the door all excited with a smile on my face, but the energy washed off little by little as I moved among the stalls, leaving my CV and knowing that job wasn't for me. It felt like begging. I'd never experienced that before.

There were some twenty stands set up around the lobby of the arena. The first table as you walked in was the RAF's. They wouldn't have taken me even if I'd talked to them. I'd never held a gun in my life, nor did I want to. Neither of the two uniformed men looked at me and I tried to repay the favour. We didn't have an army in Costa Rica, and I'd always felt awkward around military personnel. I skipped over to the next stand and talked to a recruiter for Care UK. It was a chance to make a real difference, she said, which was nice, but the whole thing reminded me too much of my aunt Olga. I'd just retired from the senior-care business, and I wasn't ready to toss myself back in. All the posters on her stand showed people smiling. An ecstatic senior lady showing some sheet of paper to her nurse, the same face of a girl reading her acceptance letter to college or looking at her first pay check. I couldn't buy any of that. Besides, the recruiter said I needed a car, and I didn't have one. Just the thought of driving on the other side of the road gave me the chills. So I thanked the woman, handed her a copy of my CV, just in case, and kept looking.

I stepped by a couple more stalls, hospitality jobs, nothing exciting. Then I took a breather and there was my copy of *Frankenstein*, fresh in my mind, as if I'd just had it in my hands.

HELP

I shook the image off, talking to a woman in another stall. She represented a charity and was looking for event planners.

'Have you got any experience organising events?' she asked.

I didn't.

'Any event, meetings, gatherings, weddings, parties?'

I said I was sorry but no. Then she asked about transferable skills and I told her I'd worked at a call centre, doing customer service. She mentioned I'd be meeting lots

of people, doing lots of talking, which actually worked against her because, whenever I was forced to talk to others, I got all self-conscious and afraid of language. That messed up my English and then I was done.

She wrote down my name on a list and took my data. I had one last copy of my CV but I didn't give it to her.

Walking out of that job fair was the first time I seriously asked myself what the hell I'd been thinking when I moved to England.

If I'd gone home feeling defeated like that, I would have probably given up. But I ambled around the city centre for a short while and stumbled upon a Waterstone's. I initially went in just to check out the shop. The three-storey building was the largest bookshop I'd seen, filled to the rim with stuff I would love to read – back home, the English literature section in most bookshops was one shelf of Penguin classics. I gravitated towards the Neo-Victorian section and picked up a copy of Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. I turned it around a couple of times, searching for the sticker with the price. Only then did I realise I'd never been to a place where the books were sold at the actual price printed on the back. After I'd paid for it, I asked the guy behind the counter whether there were any openings. He wasn't enthusiastic at all when he told me they weren't hiring at the moment and that they usually gave the jobs to students or people with experience.

'It's a hard one to get,' he said, 'Last year we got over one-hundred applications for one job.'

That was fine. At least I knew the truth, and the brighter side was that I didn't think about *Frankenstein* while I was in the bookshop. It only came back to me once I walked out of the building.

I was thinking about it when I discovered an Oxfam bookshop down the street. My wallet was already feeling much lighter, but still I went in. I had no idea books were so cheap in there. Nothing had prepared me to resist the temptation of the low prices. Dickens, Blake, Wells, Verne, and Austen, I bought seven books for less than the £20 I'd spent in Waterstones.

I held my loot close to my chest as I strolled home. I regretted nothing.

Back in the flat, I lined the books up on the top shelf, so beautiful, unmarked, unspoiled. I ran my finger across the spines. Then my hand shot sidewise, a half-conscious move, and grabbed the book Patel had given me. The weight was something else. The book made itself noticed. I snorted and kept it in my hand for a moment, swapped it from one hand to the other.

That was the book I wanted to read. Damn it, the others could wait.

I laid it face down on my left palm and flipped through the pages, the yellowing paper spreading its scent up to my nostrils. It wasn't old damp smell. It was sweet and delicate, somewhat smoked. Vanilla. And just like that I was hooked.

Standing right there in front of the bookshelf, I picked up where I'd stopped before. I saw the word on page 17, then the one on 20. I was okay with those. But then, I saw the rest.

One page after another, the word help, help, help. At times a couple of pages apart. At other times, several of them swarming on one page. I kept looking. The uneven letters became more and more uniform, the awkward handwriting more legible. Then new words began to appear. 'Don't,' 'dead,' the letter 'I,' and the worst, the creepiest of all words, the last one I would have wanted to see: Samuel.

Patel! I thought. It must have been him. He had given me the book as part of some joke. They did sell special invisible inks that appear on the paper after a while. It

had to be Patel's sick idea of a gag. Had he been in the flat while I was away? No one else had access. And he seemed like such a nice person when we first met.

I picked up my phone and dialled my landlord's number.

One calling tone, and my eyes were on the margins.

Two calling tones. Something seemed odd.

Three tones.

I took a pen and a bus ticket lying on the kitchen counter. Then I wrote my name on it.

Tone.

I placed the ticket against the page.

They matched. The tracing of the 's', the 'a' not fully closed, the cursive style of the 'm'. It was my handwriting.

'Hi, Samuel. You alright?' Mr Patel answered. His voice was deep as if he were just waking up.

It was *my* handwriting.

'Hello? Samuel?'

'Yeah, hi. Mr— Mr Patel,' I replied. I asked him something about the rent and transferring money to his account. The conversation was short.

My handwriting.

Page after page it became more obvious *I* had written the words. Soon they appeared in combinations: *Sam, Help, Samuel; Don't, Fear, Dead, Samuel; Dead, Sam, Help*. Then there were phrases, and the margins grew fuller and fuller. With every page I turned, the writing was more consistent. By page 40, there were full sentences. Just two, mind you. Two sentences and then it stopped.

I died my first week in Audbridge. I didn't see the tram coming.

Chapter Two

I died my first week in Audbridge.

After reading that, I felt my death was overdue. The words had power. They convinced me they were true, though I knew they were nonsense, a bit like catechism. I believed them and didn't at the same time.

The following day was a Thursday, the seventh day since I'd arrived in Audbridge. My first thought waking up was that it was my last day to die. I sat up on the bed and said out loud, 'Last chance,' as if cynicism could hide the fear from myself.

I got up and grabbed the book from the shelf without even looking at it. I was going to march straight to the window and toss it out. 'Good riddance,' I said as I slammed the window open, but it was too soon to speak. Just as I swung the book forwards, I hesitated.

You shan't. You shan't.

I shan't? The words in my head made the book heavier. The throw was poor. My poorest ever. My old PE teacher would have laughed. Anyone watching would've laughed as the book barely made it out the window. I shut the window and slid down back against the wall.

I thought for a while, sitting on the floor. First about repatriation. My insurance policy covered it – that wasn't the problem – but I wasn't sure anyone would show up to claim my body. I had a few relatives whom I hadn't seen in ages. They didn't even know I was in England. My best friend, Vanessa, had moved to New Jersey a couple years back. Surely she was too busy living the dream. We never really spoke anymore. Nay. If I died, I was becoming a public health issue straight away. No way around that.

I thought about Zoe then. Not telling her I was coming was a mistake. She and I had kept in contact after she came back from holiday in Costa Rica. We shared an interest on each other's lives, but we weren't in a long-distance relationship, or anything like that. I hadn't spoken to her since Aunt Olga died. That had been five months back.

I opened my window again and glanced out into Audbridge. Zoe was out there. I had a feeling. I looked for a while at the rows and rows of brick houses down the hill.

There.

I glanced down and discovered my copy of *Frankenstein* right there on the bushes. Then I remembered I had scribbled two sentences on it. While the first one was about *when* I died, the second one described *how*. *I didn't see the tram coming*. That was quite specific, wasn't it? So specific that it was liberating. Of all the shapes and forms my death could take, of all the means it could use, I only had to worry about that one. I wasn't going to slip and fall in the tub or choke on an olive. I was going to die hit by the tram, the book said. Easy.

In the heart of town, no less than five different tracks converged on Market Avenue, where I had stayed earlier in the week. The tracks merged and split up again in the space of half a block. I probably crossed that street fifty times on my first couple of days in Audbridge. Fifty missed chances for the tram.

I looked down at the book on the bushes. It seemed like such a waste.

The book isn't the real problem.

No, it wasn't, I told myself. The problem was the tram.

I heard myself saying that and felt silly. I wasn't going to get hit by the tram. For some reason, my anxiety began building. I needed to move. I'd wasted half-a-day inside my flat. I needed to act. I needed to walk, to find Zoe and start over. I wasn't

getting anywhere staying put. So I figured I'd leave the flat and simply stay away from the tram. The book was still on the bushes just outside my front door. I pushed it through the letterbox before I left.

It was my misfortune that Audbridge City had an excellent tram service. A total of forty-seven trams ran back and forward along miles and miles. Even better, route four to Hockney had stops at Holy Trinity and High Road, I could see both electronic signs from one corner of my street, and at the other end, the street ran straight onto route one along Castle Road. I was flanked from both sides.

I walked to the corner and squinted down the road as far as I could. The city centre was just there, at the bottom of the hill. I sighed. Everything I could need or want was behind tram lines. I took half a step back towards the flat, but before fully turning like a coward, I stretched my sight once more towards the unattainable buildings downtown. Two spiky towers came into view, new only because I'd neglected to see them before. A church.

I could use a miracle.

Down at the bottom of the hill, I must have stood before Market Avenue for a quarter of an hour before I approached the edge of the sidewalk. It might as well have been barbwire fences instead of rails on the ground. What I noticed right then was that there appeared to be no street. The avenue was a deceptive death trap. There was no difference between the brick pavement of the sidewalk and the road. I only noticed because a van was driving by. The whole space seemed like a pedestrian area, but the tram stops were just a few meters away. A sharp pain shot up from the pit of my stomach to my head. It straightened my spine, the sudden realisation that this was the place. This was the terrible spot where I died.

On my side of the street, there was a pub called the *Black Dragon*, next to it the British Heart Foundation, and a perfume boutique. I kept walking up and down the invisible border, trying not to look suspicious, which probably made me more suspicious. I followed the street past another pub, then a card shop. I stared at the smartphones displayed at CeX for a while. Damn it, I had no other options. I had to shake the fear off and get across.

All lives must reach an end, but I seemed to have missed mine before. For what it was worth, I could try to catch it again. To see it this time.

If I did go for good, I hoped it was quick.

If I went for good, I hoped I didn't come back.

I walked towards the tracks, casual, head down towards the ground. When my feet went in between the steel rails, I raised eyes and imagined the tram coming. An engine possessed, heading forward, bells ringing, ploughing into one unaware ambler after another. I kept looking as I walked. My aunt Olga used to say I could make anything happen if I tried hard enough. Surely she hadn't meant I could make a tram materialise, but when I turned my head to the other side, the 15:10 service from Hockney was approaching the stop. The bells, the horn, they were real. They were crying for me.

Time seemed to expand. I had enough of it to watch the tram coming and to realise that it wasn't going to kill me. It couldn't because I'd seen it first, and that wasn't what it said in the book. I stepped back and watched the carriages pass before me, so close that I could feel the breeze of the metal chassis cutting through the cold air.

Eyes narrow, hair wild waving in the wind, I waited for another near-death tram to clear the way.

Then I crossed the road and sought the towers.

St Mary's church walk was about two meters broad. One glance at the stony alley and even someone as unacquainted as me could tell it belonged in another era. It was a sliver cut between a great Georgian house – seemingly a bank now – and a modern business building. The four-storey walls made it seem narrower than it actually was. I tried spreading my arms to touch both walls and was short by a foot. The passage bent to the right, so I couldn't see where it ended, but there was enough green back there to suggest the walk went through the church's graveyard. It was the kind of alley I would avoid at all costs back at home, the perfect place for getting mugged, or worse. But in Audbridge, St Mary's was behind *The Ivy Brasserie* and this was the way to church.

I didn't have to go into the church, now that I'd made it past the tram lines, but as I went by the ruined gravestones, I could hear my aunt Olga warning me that there was no explicit evidence that lighting a candle and saying a prayer for me to do well on my high-school midterms actually worked – but it did, always. Every little thing helped.

I'd never seen anything like the inside of that church. The dying sun came in through the stained glass windows, casting a diffused layer of colour on the east walls. I had seen great old churches before, raised from Roman ruins in Anglo-Saxon times, damaged and rebuilt by the Normans, burned, and rebuilt a couple more times. But I'd never come inside a church where they were hosting a craft fair.

A middle-aged man welcomed me at the entrance and pointed out there were baskets, pottery, beaded jewellery, Christmas decorations, scarves and hats – both hand sewn and crocheted.

'Jesus,' I said, without even realising the irony, 'A market at the temple.'

The man took no offense, or didn't understand me. 'We also have breakfast rolls and homemade soup over there!' he said, pointing at a set of tables. They were also running a cafe.

I told him I just wanted to light a candle, if that was alright, and he showed me to one of the chapels.

I waited until the man had left and took a minute to absorb the silence of the cold stone walls. Some eight tealights rested on a black metallic rack by the altar. The flames had died and left behind black and crispy wick stubs. I let a pound coin rattle in the collection box and picked a new candle from below. The problem was that I couldn't find any matches, nothing to light my candle with. I was about to walk out when I thought I saw a tiny orange glow in one of the candles on the rack. I leaned closely to it and distinguished the thinnest thread of smoke coming from the wick. When I blew gently on it, the flame came back to life. I chuckled and glanced around, all excited as if I would find someone to tell, but there was no one. I lit my tealight with that flame just before it went out for good. A tiny miracle, my favourite kind.

One more day, I told myself. I could manage one more day and then lead the rest of my life in peace.

Chapter Three

Lori seeped into my life so obliquely, so pervasively that I couldn't single out the moment we met, whether she introduced herself as an image, or a word, or something I felt or heard. Lori and I spoke the same language. It was English, but as spoken in my mind. Sometimes we understood each other before a single word was spoken.

Out here in Audbridge is another story. It truly is another story. At times words got in the way between Zoe and me. I could live with that. At least I could tell apart my first conversation with her. I could tell *her* apart from me.

I thought I had the language requirements in the bag before I came to the UK. Back home, we were mostly accustomed to US accents. Everybody knew the British spoke differently, but many of us from America who lacked travel experience believed that the English go around excusing themselves and chatting with that posh enunciation they were famous for, like that butler in Downton Abbey. It was also a common belief that English conversations would always have someone saying 'lovely' at some point. That one was kind of true, from time to time.

'Excuse me' was the first thing Zoe said to me when we saw each other again. You couldn't blame her, though, given the circumstances.

I had just walked out of St Mary's and was experiencing a sudden burst of confidence and an unprecedented desire for conversation. I had faced my nearly real death. I had ignited fire just by willing it. I wasn't just going to sit in front of the computer and ruin the rest of the day going through the classifieds. There would be no work done on my CV that afternoon.

'Excuse me – excuse me! Do you know the time?' I asked a short, chubby man passing by.

‘Half-three,’ he replied, without breaking his pace.

I didn’t instantly get that *half-three* meant *three-thirty*, but at least I thought fast enough to thank the back of his head.

It was a tiny, spontaneous thing, but it felt good to speak to him. When I first arrived in England, I was petrified of talking to people. I had struggled with shyness my whole life, but the difference now – what turned the simplest things into a task – was that I didn’t understand what people said way too often. It probably worsened after the first time I ate at Subway on my second day in Audbridge. ‘Turkey breast and ham,’ I mouthed as I queued, ‘Turkey breast and ham, turkey breast and ham,’ until I got a right and steady rhythm like a train’s. When my turn came, I delivered the line and it all went well, for a second only, because then the guy behind the counter asked me if I wanted a ‘foot-long’. I had never heard that phrase in my life. I couldn’t connect the sounds to words. I blanked, and he repeated. I replied I just wanted a sandwich. ‘A big one,’ I clarified and tried to show him the size by holding both hands up in front of my face. He chuckled. Months after that, I still got sweaty palms whenever I queued to buy a sandwich. I could still hear the laugh of the sandwich guy.

But that day – that day out on the street I was inspired. I hadn’t memorised what I was going to say to that chubby man passing by. I didn’t monitor my accent or my vocabulary. It was liberating and made me want more.

That was when I saw another tram approaching. There was a tingling on my palms.

Perhaps you could run the ultimate risk? There was something devilishly tempting about the idea. I was going to take the risk. I was going to ride that tram all the way to wherever it was going.

I hurried to the stop, heart pumping with such impatience that I could feel it squeeze inside my chest. I boarded the carriage so forcefully that I must have groaned. I hugged one of the posts and remained standing as the doors closed. I smiled with satisfaction. I'd proven something to myself. I'd found my courage and kept moving. And as it turned out, I was meant to.

The tram was only half full. But there could have been fifty grey-eyed blondes crowding the carriage and I still would have recognised her face, her gorgeous face, serious and somewhat austere right then, the way most single commuters looked when it was chilly outside. *Zoe.*

My first instinct was to look away, trying to hide my face. I glanced over my shoulder and confirmed she wasn't a vision. Zoe had that European air. Her mum was Polish by birth, but she'd moved to England some fifteen years before Zoe was born. My heart kept on racing.

Breathe.

The seat in front of her was available. One miracle after another.

Deep breaths.

I was going for it.

'I hope you're not on your way to work?' I said, taking the seat facing her. I was probably gasping, out of breath.

'Excuse me?' she replied. Her hair was tied back into a high ponytail, just like the last time I saw her.

'I just said I hope you're not going to work. It's such a nice afternoon.'

She looked out the window to the pale light of the city and seemed to disagree.

'Alright,' she said.

It wasn't until then that she looked at me properly. Her eyes widened and almost immediately narrowed with disbelief. 'Samuel?'

'Remember me?' I said, slightly leaning forward so that she could see my face better. And she reached out and softly touched my cheek, just for a moment. She drew it back when she realised what she was doing, fast as if my face was a burning hob.

'Yes! I remember you.' Her expression changed for the better. 'Samuel. What are you doing here?'

'It was about time I saw this part of the world.' I told her I had arrived that week and that it had been one of the strangest in my life. Slightly scary too.

'Scary?' asked Zoe.

'I'm just beginning to figure out how things work around here. By the way, do you know who I have to pay for the ride?' I asked, fumbling inside my pocket for coins.

'What, the tram fair?' She leaned closer, enough for me to get a whiff of her flowery perfume. 'You haven't got a ticket?'

She made it sound naughty. Right then a collage of images flashed before my eyes: the ticket machines by the stops and the dozens of 'pay before you board' posters. I copied Zoe and lowered my voice. 'What happens if you don't have a ticket?'

'You get thrown off,' said Zoe. She was keeping a straight face.

'What? While the tram's moving?' I meant it as a joke, but she didn't laugh.

'Well, of course.'

Free riding the tram was apparently a bigger offence than I had thought. I searched around for inspectors, trying not to move my head. Then my eyes went up to the CCTV camera. 'I'm ticketless. I feel naked.'

Then she laughed. I wasn't joking that time but I laughed along with her.

'I better get off in the next stop, then, before the tram police catches me.'

She nodded and sat back.

We were still in the city centre, but the street outside didn't look familiar. 'Care to join me for a drink?' I asked, taking Zoe by surprise.

'Sorry, what?'

'I was just wondering if you'd like to go for a drink – or something.'

I caught a glimpse of the old woman sitting next to her raising her eyebrows. Zoe looked as if she were thinking of a polite way to decline my offer. 'Sorry, I really should get home. Besides here's your stop.'

The tram was arriving at the next stop. 'Yeah,' I said. 'I better get off now before they throw me out.'

I stood up, but immediately felt forced to sit back down.

'You're not getting off?' asked Zoe, surprised. 'The inspector may come in at any moment.'

You shall chance it.

'I'll chance it,' I said. The lady next to Zoe raised her eyebrows again and smiled. If only Zoe seemed that interested.

'It'd be worth the risk if I get you to join me for a drink or a cup of coffee.'

I thought I would tell her I'd come half-way around the world just to see her. But it seemed too dramatic and it was only partially true.

She is already thinking that and that you are mad for it.

Zoe watched the doors close and glimpsed back and around as the tram started forwards.

'I remember the first time I saw you.'

'At the beach?' Zoe glanced back again. She seemed tense.

'Before that. On the way there.'

‘Yes, of course. The coach ride. I was nervous whether I was in the right coach. You were really sweet. It’s all coming back to me.’ Remembering the day seemed to relax Zoe.

‘I was on the aisle seat,’ I said, ‘and you asked for the seat next to me.’

The memory overtook me, and for a moment, I forgot where I was. There was only Zoe’s image reflected on the window of the coach, as captivating as if I was seeing it for the first time, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open.

‘You felt asleep during the ride. You turned to the side, but I could see your reflection on the window. So whenever I glanced out, I caught a sight of you.

Zoe was showing me some interest.

‘And every time I lingered just a bit more. As much as my decency allowed.’

‘What?’ replied Zoe, with such an English pitch. She was either flattered or annoyed. I couldn’t figure which, but at least she was showing interest.

I was trying to explain myself, doing my best to avoid the word ‘stalker’, when an image took shape in my head out of nowhere. *Yellow fields*.

‘You were just one of those sights you stumble upon by accident, like when you’re on a country road and the trees yield way to a great open field, and it’s completely yellow with rapeseed flowers; it’s almost like the sun is bouncing off of them, warming your face, and you try not to wink because you know you’re going to drive past it in a moment. You were one of those sights you can’t miss a second of. Because that’s probably how long you’ll get to appreciate them.’

Zoe looked uncertain, perhaps curious.

‘More over drinks,’ I said, smiling as charmingly as I could.

Zoe noticed the lady next to her who was quite blatantly eavesdropping. She gestured to Zoe to take my offer.

There was a smirk. ‘Alright,’ she said, looking out the window. The scant remaining brightness of the day caught in her eyes. ‘I know a pub nearby.’

The next stop came before the inspector, and we both got off together.

The pub was a bit of an Irish cliché – I loved that. In a block where all buildings were red brick, this pub had a wooden front painted green from top to bottom. The large gold letters above the door read *Raglan Road*, which I was later told was the title of an Irish folksong from the 70s, apparently a big deal, a legendary deal according to the barkeeper.

They had maybe six taps of different ales. I tried reading the labels quickly, but I knew none of them and had no idea how to pronounce their names, so I surrendered to the enticing power of the many signs, coasters, and posters around the bar and asked for a Guinness. Happy with not making a fool of myself mispronouncing Marmoset, or Smithwick's, I asked Zoe what she wanted. She asked for an Earl Grey tea, which at the time I thought was some English version of a Long Island tea. I was surprised when they served her a cup of actual tea, so steamy, so sober and demure that it made me feel like a drunk, holding my stout. I didn't even know they served tea in those places.

Life in Britain became clearer once I found Zoe. That day I began learning words like ‘stout’ and ‘pint,’ and the cutest little thing called ‘a half-pint.’ It made me happy when Zoe asked for one of those after finishing her tea. She put the small glass on a Guinness coaster and gently pushed it across the table next to my full pint glass. I told Zoe that it suited her. She picked it up and put her lips on the rim. What started as a charming, little sip became a big gulp. ‘Suits me more now,’ she said.

Zoe pronounced words like ‘nothing’ and ‘thanks’ with an *f* instead of *th*. To me it made her sound even cuter. In the beginning, I thought it was a sort of a lisp thing, but

then I found out saying ‘somefing’ or ‘teef’ was just a part of her accent and that thousands of other people from all around had it. She didn’t do it all the time, though.

‘So how come you came here?’ she asked. ‘Planning to work? Study?’

I finished swallowing my beer. ‘My priority at the moment is finding a job, but I wouldn’t mind making some friends.’

‘Seems you are on the right path. You found me.’ We toasted to that. ‘Have you met many people?’

‘To be totally honest, you are only the second person I’ve had a real conversation with. The other one is my landlord.’

I wasn’t asking for pity when I said that, but I didn’t mind Zoe’s hand squeezing my shoulder while she told me not to worry.

‘Another Guinness?’ she asked.

‘Do you even have to ask?’

She insisted on buying that round. I was only too happy to let her do it, not just because of the beer she bought me, but because it was the first time in months I watched her walk away and back again. Watching Zoe walk was one of those things that gave life meaning. It wasn’t a dirty thing, not always, not then. Just getting the whole picture of her – it was captivating.

When she was back, Zoe asked me what kind of job I had in mind. I told her I wasn’t looking for anything too grand. Any decent job would have done, really. I just wanted to explore a different path. ‘What I need is a fresh start,’ I said.

‘I remember you were studying English at uni. I can’t remember the sort of job you had. Something to do with a call centre was it?’

‘The past year, I was practically a full-time carer. Did some customer service before that. I’m done with that.’

‘Oh, was it your mum you were looking after?’

‘My Aunt. My great-aunt.’ I had a good look at the ceiling. ‘She passed.’

‘Sam, I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s alright. It’s been two months now.’ I tried to smile. ‘And here I am, doing things I never thought I would do.’

‘I’m glad you are,’ said Zoe, her hand on my shoulder and a gaze that disarmed me.

Zoe could have engaged into the whole interview routine. She could’ve started prying about my past and ruined the night, but she was always great at reading my face. She wasn’t the average girl.

She squeezed my shoulder hard and let go.

‘You know, we need a dishwasher at the inn.’ She told me about this place called *The Grey Lady* where she worked.

‘If you’re interested, I could talk to Rachel and have you over. Rachel is the manager.’

I said it sounded like a great idea, and before I could get a hold of what was happening, she was calling the manager on the phone. When Rachel answered, Zoe went into a sort of fast, accentuated chatter. Most of it was beyond my listening-comprehension skills – it made me wonder right then how much of what I said she could grasp. The bits of the conversation I managed to understand went like: ‘Hey Rach, remember that dishwasher opening you mentioned early?... *Kitchen porter*, yes, that. I found you someone perfect for it. He’s quite eager to start right away... Yeah, his name is Sam... Tomorrow. Alright, I’ll let him know. Ta.’

Zoe hung up and grinned at me. ‘Looks like you may have another excuse to keep admiring this view,’ she joked, posing with a hand behind her head.

I laughed and thanked her plentifully.

‘Now seriously,’ said Zoe. ‘I was thinking about what you said before about watching a rapeseed field from the car.’

‘Oh yeah,’ I said. That had come out of nowhere. I would’ve forgotten it if Zoe hadn’t brought it up again. ‘The beautiful sight that you lose after a few seconds.’

‘That’s just what I was going to say.’ Her grey eyes opened wide. ‘You don’t have to lose it. You can always tell whoever’s at the wheel to stop the car and then watch it for as long as you want.’

I sipped my beer. ‘He won’t do it. He won’t stop the car.’

‘And why is that exactly?’

‘Because he is missing it, Zoe. Because he is driving. He’s not looking at the rapeseed field like you are. All he cares about is probably making a good time or something.’

‘What if you’re driving yourself?’

I thought. ‘Then you probably wouldn’t be paying it half the attention it deserves. Unless...’

‘Yeah?’

‘Unless you are, and then you end up crashing.’

‘Hmm,’ said Zoe. Her eyes were on me but her mind was somewhere else. ‘You may be onto something.’ She searched her purse for a pen and a small notebook, a tiny one really, on which she wrote a couple of sentences.

Aside from being a waitress at *The Grey Lady*, Zoe was a writer, a song writer, and she was always on the hunt for new lyrics. As I would soon realise, these pauses to scribble notes about ‘life’ were a common thing of hers.

‘Do you write about everything that happens in your life?’

‘My life is a bunch of sentences I never say. I walk around thinking one after another. They disappear almost instantly... like a rapeseed field!’ She grabbed my arm with excitement. The ales must have gone to her head too because she left her hand there.

‘An author writes thousands of sentences in her head and “puts down” only a few,’ she said and sat back. ‘Put down... as if the word was murdered on the page.’

‘Or maybe the sentences try to murder us.’ I thought about telling Zoe about the trams and the marginalia in my book. The word *Frankenstein* was on the tip of my tongue.

Not yet. Not yet. I thought I heard a whisper.

I didn’t let the word out.

‘Believe me, with the reviews I’ve gotten, it’s pretty clear I’m the one doing the damage to language.’

I told her I would have to be the judge of that. ‘Maybe I’ll hear you sing some day?’

She hesitated. ‘Maybe. Play your cards right.’

It was past eleven when they called for last orders. The bell ringing at the bar should’ve been my signal to freak out. The day was nearly gone and with it my death was failing to meet its deadline, but I became momentarily immune to all that seemingly self-imposed anxiety. The reason was that, with the bell, Zoe said she better go home, and that was enough to fill up my head. That was ‘the Zoe effect’. She made the rest of the world dumb against the sound of her voice.

‘I really enjoyed talking to you tonight,’ said Zoe as I walked her to her stop.

I thought I had earned a good-night kiss – at least one on the cheek – but she just gave me that awkward British shrug and wave.

‘Hope I see you around, Sam.’

She stepped into the tram and waved at me from her seat as the wheels began to turn.

It was past midnight and I still was alive.

My front door would not open completely that night. I thought the book I had tossed in earlier through the letterbox was wedged beneath it somehow. But when I managed to slide inside the flat, I discovered the book was closed and barely touching the door. I bent down to pick it up, but I couldn’t. It was as if it was too heavy to move. I took a breath and tried to lift it up again, now making more of an effort, and that time I nearly fell back with the book in my hand. It was as light as it should have always been.

Perhaps I had drunk too much.

I started up the stairs and something else began to bother me. I had the impression that the scene of the rapeseed field I’d pictured earlier for Zoe came from something I’d read in *Frankenstein*.

I sat down on the edge of my bed and scanned a few pages without really hoping to find anything. I was too tired to read, so I thought I’d write myself a note to remind me to keep looking. I grabbed a pen and wrote ‘yellow fields’ on the margin. Better said, that’s what I thought I was writing, for once I pulled my hand away from the paper what I’d really written was a name. *Zoe*.

Below were the words, *QUID PRO QUO*.

‘What the hell is going on here?’ I grunted and slapped the book close as I got up on my feet.

I looked around the empty room as if I would find an explanation, almost expecting something else to break the silence. I had some sort of episode, an anxiety

spell. I tossed the book on the floor and paced to the kitchen and back, trying to cope with that strange tickling of the palms, that uneasy stomach, that feeling I couldn't pin down. It was that same elusive sensation that compelled me to grab my pen and open the book again.

Who are you? I scribbled.

I wrote again, *Who are you?*

Anyone would have believed it foolish, but I began writing the question a third time. The pen screeched on the paper but something else came out. One single word.

Help.

Chapter Four

My first thought when Lori began talking to me through the book was that she was some sort of demon. I dreamt about her and pictured the kind of demonic presence other kids and I talked about during catechism recess, those malign spectres haunting cousins or acquaintances. Nobody had really seen one, but apparently, we had all heard about them from a first-hand witness. The other kids would picture horny devils with lustrous crimson skins, or ghouls, or hooped monsters, but I never gave that spirit a definite shape. To me it was a shadow most of the time. That was Lori, some sort of absence made palpable, a blackness that bellowed in my dreams as a child, who had long been forgotten, but somehow, years later, was making it once again into my sleep.

With dawn, the adult urgency of getting a job pushed my childhood fears away. My appointment with the manager of *The Grey Lady Inn* was at 7:30 in the morning, and I didn't have time to let my imagination wonder.

There was one thought I couldn't get rid of as I walked all the way to 18 Collin Street. I kept wondering what was so bizarrely luring about the book, so inexplicably overpowering, that had made me reluctant to part from it.

I pressed my hand against my rucksack and felt my copy of *Frankenstein*. There's no way I could have known I was already hooked on Lori.

The sunshine through the window was catching Rachel's curls, making them cartoon-red. 'There is plenty of outside seating for the summer,' she said, looking at the courtyard. 'You will see. It gets very crowded then.'

It was a sluggish Friday morning and there were hardly any customers at the Inn. That was what we all called *The Grey Lady*, though technically it wasn't really an inn. It used to offer rooms upstairs, but Rachel said they had stopped renting them out some thirty years ago. Rachel was only thirty-six, but when she talked about the Inn, she sounded like she had worked there for that long.

Rachel turned and continued showing me around. In her words, they had gone for a convivial atmosphere with the warm colours, wood floors and rugs. They'd made a feature of the large fireplace in the main dining area. It was the only part of the interior where they had the bricks exposed. Two arches connected the chimney with a column on each side, and they'd placed a bench under each of them to create a cosy, enclosed booth on each side of the fireplace. There were some twenty dark wood tables around and booths with green, buttoned seats along the walls.

After showing me the dining area, Rachel walked me to the bar and the kitchen. She introduced me to James and Beth, who were the only staff there so early. They all seemed to get along very well. Rachel knew how to relate to them. She knew every possible job at the Inn. Then she took me to the pot wash. No one was there, but there were dishes soaking in the sink.

'I promised Marco Friday mornings off,' said Rachel. He was the other kitchen porter. 'His kid's got swimming lessons.'

She took her time describing what I would be doing. I remember trying to push the image of plates buried in the ground out of my head while she was showing me how to properly load the 'soiled crockery' into the dishwasher. The job was fairly straightforward, and the pay was £7 per hour, not bad at all, I thought, converting the pounds to dollars and those to *colones*. The real amount didn't increase, but the cyphers went up with every conversion. It sounded like good money.

Rachel took me to her office to sign the contract. It was a small room with a desk and a computer, and probably a hundred poppies. Rachel was obsessed with poppies. They were in her mousepad and her chair cushion. She had them on pencils, paperweights, and framed in a picture. Zoe said she had a poppy tattooed near her clavicle.

Rachel asked me to fill some online forms on her computer. 'It's for the company's records,' she explained. It was always the same story whenever I had to fill one of those. Name, gender, nationality, those were easy answers for me, but then came the question of ethnicity. I clicked on the arrow and the list opened: Arab, Asian or Asian British (which split in Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani). I scrolled down some more and there was 'Asian other'. The B's were combinations of Black; C was for Chinese; G for Gypsy or Traveller; W was for White combined with all of the above, and the list ended with the simple 'White' by itself. I scrolled all the way down the list and then back up. My process was always the same, I went through the list, saying 'not this,' 'not this,' 'not this,' over and over until I was usually left with two options: 'Other' and 'Other mixed background.' Sometimes I chose one, sometimes the other. I didn't really get the difference. I could have gone for any of them that day at Rachel's office. Zoe's voice floated into the room while I was at it.

You could often hear Zoe coming before she entered the room. She usually sang or at least hummed while she walked, as if her legs were wired directly to that musical part of her brain. That day, it was some lullaby I couldn't determine. Her voice faded as she smiled at me, and I tried my kindest funny face on her.

'You wanted to tell me something?' asked Rachel.

Zoe nodded, grinning friskily. Her ponytail was still swinging as she said something about the week's rotation.

‘You can add Samuel to the rota,’ said Rachel. ‘He’s all onboard.’

Zoe congratulated me and it made me proud.

Rachel said I could start working that same day. Marco would be in at 11, and if I had the time, I could stay and he’d fill me in with the details of the job.

I said I’d wait.

As we were leaving her office, Rachel said she needed to take my picture for a nametag, but that was going to have to wait. She was late for a meeting.

‘Feel free to stick around and wait for Marco.’

‘I will,’ I said. ‘I happen to have brought a book to read.’

Rachel gave me the thumbs up and grabbed her purse. She was about to leave when a sudden thought rushed to my head.

Rachel.

‘Oh, Rachel’ I said.

‘Yeah?’

I blanked for a moment.

Zoe.

‘Maybe Zoe could do it. Maybe she could take my picture?’

‘Straighten up,’ said Zoe, ready with the camera.

I was sitting against the white wall. ‘I thought I was straight already,’ I replied, shifting and pushing my shoulders back.

‘Great, now straighten your head. Look at me.’

‘I am looking at you!’

‘Look at me straight, babe.’

She came close and gently set my head straight.

Zoe always had her hair wrapped in a ponytail at work. Sometimes a strand of it would get loose and she had to push it back behind her ear. There was something in that small gesture, something arresting about that little twist of her wrist, that no matter whether we were a foot apart or ten, or if she was outside in the courtyard and I was watching her through the window like a weirdo, whenever she made that gesture, I felt I didn't want anything else in the world except her.

As she leaned forward to set my face straight, her strand of golden hair swung free, and the world was turned off around her. She stepped back to take the picture, but I let my head drop to the side again, just so that she'd come close again. It was a game we played a couple of times... before she got too annoyed.

Zoe printed and laminated my badge. The picture was dreadful, not because Zoe had done a bad job, but the circles around my eyes gave away the bad night's sleep I'd had. Still, I felt proud when she gave it to me. It may sound naïve but I got some sense of belonging. And it was *real*. A couple of days before, I had a similar feeling when I got my first letter through my letterbox. I thought it was something to be proud about, some sort of acknowledgement that I was here, that I had made it. The emotion lasted only a few seconds, only until I picked the letter up and saw it was addressed to Ms Ursula Kakrakas, the previous tenant. Damn you, Kakrakas, you could have updated your postal address.

Zoe laughed when I told her the story. 'Well, congratulations. Welcome to the tribe.'

'I wanna make it up to you. You're the only reason I'm getting this job.'

'You mean I am *one* of the reasons.'

‘Let me take you out for dinner...’ I considered. ‘With my first paycheck. Let me take you out for a fancy dinner when I get my first wage. It’s an occasion to celebrate.’

We shook on it.

Zoe. I could have eloped with her right there and then. If you found a woman that could turn the world off around her with a simple flick of the wrist, you kept her.

She is one of the reasons.

I was waiting for the other dishwasher on one of the comfy lounge couches of the Inn. I must have nodded off for a second. I only realised I’d fallen asleep when a woman’s voice shook me awake. ‘She is *one* of the reasons.’ I could have sworn she sounded annoyed.

I looked around and the only customer was far away near the bar. Zoe wasn’t around. No one was.

I reached for my rucksack and took my book out. I had let my pen between two random pages, and when I opened it, I could scarcely believe my eyes. There was the sentence I’d just heard. One. Of. The. Reasons. Right there on the left corner. I rubbed the page with disbelief. The letters were inked and real.

And I suppose you are another reason? I scribbled, having no idea to whom I was writing.

I watched closely, but nothing happened at first. Lori’s words could never be seen forming on the page. They didn’t fade in slowly as if they were magic. They appeared whole, fully finished. Even if I was staring at the page, they would find a breach in my attention and take shape in an instant. They always make me doubt whether they had always been there.

Quid pro quo, wrote the invisible hand.

Who are you? What's your name? I wrote.

There was, actually, a certain magic involved with that first time I saw her name. It was also the first time I heard it, whispered inside my head by no inner voice of mine but by a sweeter one, a tender feminine voice, that tasted of vanilla in the mouth.

Lori.

Chapter Five

From the beginning, I knew that hearing voices in my head was not a good sign. No matter how lovely they sounded. I tried my best to keep myself busy and distracted. I attempted reading other titles – even went back to writing notes on the margins about myself. I bought more books, got pickier and collected nicer editions in better shape but always as old as I could find. It was a foolish effort. None could match that strange connection I'd felt with my *Frankenstein*. None of them had Lori.

So I tried something else and did exactly what I'd told myself I wouldn't do when I landed in England: hang out with people who reminded me of what I'd left behind.

I'd stumbled upon a flyer for a 'Latina Evening' during my second week. Audbridge's Latin Society was holding it. The name of the group confused me, 'Latin' by itself. I once met a Romanian guy who wouldn't stop talking about the Latin ancestry of his country. But there was little chance the *Latin* Society wasn't actually a *Latin American* society. I knew that because there was a couple dancing *salsa* or something drawn on the flyer right beneath the title. That washed some of my enthusiasm away. I didn't dance and I hated dancing parties. That had made socialising extra annoying during high school. Tough. Now I was going back to that.

A trumpet was playing on top of the timbales and the bongos, as I opened the door of the bar, and I knew immediately it was the wrong place for me. There was no band, but the music was just as loud. A few couples were dancing, that unmistakable Latino hip, one, two, three, hip. They had a banner standing in a corner. It had a map of Continental America from Tijuana to Cabo de Hornos. I supposed it was kind of a beacon for more people to join in. They were about ten at the moment. It was hard to

say without staring. I was watching from a distance and I didn't want to be noticed. When the song was over, a fast cumbia tune started, and I was out of there. I had nothing bad to say about that music or people who enjoyed dancing to it, but I definitively hadn't come to Audbridge to mourn what I'd never enjoyed in the first place.

That's it, I thought, standing outside the front door of the bar. I could go now, knowing I'd given it a try. I was just about to start walking when a guy on my right spoke to me.

'You got fire, buddy?' he asked and I knew, before I even looked at him, that he'd come from my side of the world. He was a small husky man. I told him I didn't have a lighter, and that was long enough for him to make the connection between my face, accent, and the thing happening inside the bar.

'You speak Spanish?' was the last thing he said in English.

'Yes—*si, si,*' I replied, and the rest of the conversation continued in Spanish.

Antonio was in his thirties, perhaps. His curly beard grew in patches and was thicker below his mouth. He had migrated from Colombia eight years before and had been living in Audbridge for three. He had met his Peruvian wife down in London. Then she'd found a better job here. They both liked Audbridge better than the capital, he said. There was less traffic and noise. I didn't get all that gossip, standing cold outside the bar. It took Antonio only about a minute to convince me to join him around the corner for a bite.

I bought a small portion of the chicken Pad Thai Antonio recommended. It came out steaming in an aluminium container which burnt my fingers, carrying it from the counter to the bar by the window where we sat.

‘Gosh this is delicious,’ I said as soon as I’d had my first taste of those crunchy spring onions and peanuts and wonderfully sweet-salty noodles.

‘It’s a good find, innit?’

‘A great find.’

‘Of course, it’s not *ceviche*, right?’ said Antonio. Then he started giving me the address of a place where I could get that and Colombian *empanadas* and *arepas* – if I ever was around Bristol. I doubted that very much but said nothing about it.

‘Do you miss Colombia?’

He nodded, with a little sadness that was quickly drown in relentless resignation. Antonio was one of those people who migrated due to ‘economic circumstances’. He didn’t go too deep into it but made it clear he was in England to work. He missed the people, the close contact. He started talking about other Latin American friends, people who were at the bar when I left – people who’d come to study and married someone British, people who’d left family behind, refugees, and asylum seekers, all sorts of friends.

‘Would you go back if you had the chance?’ I asked.

With his mouth he said, ‘Work is here.’ With his eyes, *home is there*.

Antonio invited me to come back with him to the Latin American event at the bar, but I said I had to be somewhere else.

We exchanged social media information before we said our goodbyes, and he reminded me to keep informed about the society’s events. ‘Don’t miss out,’ he said just before disappearing around the corner.

I couldn’t go back to his friends. Talking to them would have been embarrassing. I’d been too lucky. Anything I said would have seemed like I was rubbing it in their faces. I’d had a free pass into England with my EU passport. A job

had practically dropped into my lap during my first week. I had food on my plate, a flat. I had escaped agency fees! And even if I managed to avoid mentioning all of that, hearing their stories would make me feel odd. I couldn't think of anything I'd sacrificed when I left. No one had forced me to migrate, and I had the absolute certainty that I wouldn't be any better if I'd stayed at home. I couldn't tell them any of that, and I didn't feel like lying about it. No, I wasn't going back to his friends.

That night was the second time I stepped into a church in England, my first nocturnal visit ever. Conscious that it was absolutely too early to go back home, I decided to take the long way back, then took a detour from that as well. I went on following the shouts and laughs of revellers until I arrived at a narrow street of bicentennial buildings. There must have been six bars on that street, and people walked up and down, going in and out and away, or simply stood up in groups talking and smoking. I strode by as casually as I managed. It seemed I was the only one minding the cold. I was looking away from some girl snorting coke when I noticed the church on the other side of the street, its main tower dark and solemn against the moonlit clouds. There was no clue to its name on the street sign, no bronze plaque, nothing identifying the building except the three-foot letters lit half way up the spire. *Raven's Nest*, read the sign. It was a bar.

'You've got to be kidding me,' I whispered.

The lively gloominess of the building pulled me close. This time it wasn't fear that compelled me to enter. I had no irrational death anxiety, no miracle in mind to plead for. Any divine spirit guiding me to Zoe that night would have been acting unrequested.

Her voice drifted towards me in a cloud as I stood before the church, a note sustained for two wonderful seconds, surrounding me, shrouding me from the world.

She was singing 'Moon River'. I crossed the stone arch of the entrance right in the part about the two drifters going off.

The church's high vaulted ceilings, its tall stained glass windows, all of its gothic features had been designed to humble parishioners as they walked in. Whoever designed the interiors of the bar had carried along with the idea. They had kept the aisle in the middle, but tall tables with stools replaced the old pews, and instead of an altar there was the bar at the end of it.

Zoe was performing in the left corner, next to the gaming machine. The window behind her was illuminated from outside, showing the WWI memorial in the stained glass. She was standing by herself, with the aquamarine and turquoise glow hugging her silhouette from behind. Her eyes were closed, those long thick eyelashes kissing. I went closer and leaned against one of the stone pillars. A minute later, Zoe glanced over. I made an effort not to flinch but probably made it worse by trying. She carried on, making that face of hers – one third hurt, one third jaded, one third plain gorgeous – the face that melted stuff inside my chest. Her next song was something by Ella Fitzgerald, and I got another glance from her. This time I was quite certain that she had spotted me among the audience.

Zoe met me halfway to the stage when she was done performing. She must have been very excited because she hugged me tight.

'I'm so glad to see you here,' she said.

'Me too. And to think I nearly missed it. How come you didn't tell me you were singing tonight?'

'Well...' she bit her lip. 'Come on over. Are you here with anyone?' She looked around. 'Come sit with us.'

Zoe introduced me to some four of her friends. The only name that stuck was Priya, and I remembered it because of the embarrassment I went through that night. It began as soon as I'd greeted everyone. I excused myself to go get a drink, and Priya, a small, lively woman with black hair reaching down to her waist, stood up and said she was coming along.

The large iron chandelier suspended above the bar made the liquor bottles beneath sparkle. The bar was hexagonal and technically you could order from any side, but all the customers and barkeepers were crowding the same spot. As we waited there, Priya kept asking me what I wanted to drink and insisted on getting it for me. In my head, tagging along and buying me a drink felt like she was hitting on me. Then as we were waiting for her cocktails, she started asking me questions and being really nice, and I was getting all confused. She must have known I was after Zoe. Just in case it wasn't as obvious as I thought, I told her the story about how I'd met Zoe in Costa Rica and how I'd found her on the tram here in Audbridge. Priya acted surprised and asked me when I had arrived. She seemed more interested about my life in Costa Rica than anything I could tell her about Zoe and I. She kept asking me questions and all I could think was, *man, this girl really fancies me.*

Of course Priya did not like me that way. I was quite embarrassed later on when I realised the dynamics of etiquette over here. I wasn't aware of the custom for friends to get drinks by rounds and take turns buying them. You couldn't do that where I came from. There would always be the one guy taking advantage. Last to buy, first to leave. Actually, there would probably be more than one of those guys sitting at my table back home. That night at the *Raven's Nest*, it never occurred to me that Priya wasn't just buying *me* a drink; she was taking her turn as part of the group.

And all that interest, all that attention I was getting from her, I was wrong about that too.

‘Priya is a writer,’ said Zoe back at the table. ‘She just finished her first book.’

‘Whoa. Nice,’ I replied.

Priya said it was still at the publisher’s. Soon to be released. I asked what kind of book it was, and she said it was travel writing.

‘Oh,’ was the best that came out of me. It was foolish of me to expect something Romantic, something Gothic, something I would choose.

‘Borneo,’ answered Priya to another one of her friends. I’d missed the question.

Someone joked that he could use a few days lost without a cell phone in a tropical jungle. It sounded like nails on a chalkboard to me. I’d always hated the word *jungle*. It made places seem so wild, so opposite to civilisation, so frontier. Call it rainforest, cloud forest, not jungle. Never jungle.

I didn’t bring it up. I started thinking about Priya’s questions about Costa Rica, and at that very moment, they all made sense. She just wanted more data about another tropical tourist destination.

No one at the table was looking or talking to me, but I blushed. I took a big gulp of my beer and made myself dizzy. Better keep quiet, I thought. I didn’t want to look like an idiot in front of Zoe, or her friends.

I may have over done it with the silence. I couldn’t tell how long I kept my mouth shut, but one of Zoe’s friends went home before I spoke again. It was around that time that Zoe asked me to join her outside.

There was no gloomy graveyard around the back. The stony court was actually very nice despite the cold. Fairy lights wired among the bushes paid homage to fireflies

long extinguished. There must have been a dozen tables. Just one was still being used and a couple people gathered around the heaters, blowing smoke in the neon red glow.

‘You okay?’ asked Zoey. ‘You seem a bit quiet.’

I almost explained it to her. The lag. The complication of forming sentences in a different language added to the constant sense of bewilderment, cultural adjustment, and worsened by my massive blanks about everyday stuff. Just earlier that night, someone had brought up Jeremy Kyle, and I spent the first half of their conversation, trying to remember whether he was the politician or the TV host. Then I couldn’t follow the rest. I almost told Zoe, but it wasn’t the right moment.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about tonight,’ she said. ‘I thought I didn’t want you to see me up there. I—I usually get very nervous.’

I told her she had nothing to be nervous about and that she’d been amazing.

‘But when I saw you standing there. Watching me. Your smile so – honest and kind. Your face, it was soothing.’

‘This face?’ I joked and she laughed.

She pressed close to me and whispered, ‘Thank you for coming.’ Then she kissed me softly.

Part II

Chapter Six

I could've sworn I could keep musing over Lori and Zoe indefinitely, but a little Spanish interference was enough to ruin my concentration and bring me back to the present and the train station. A single word set off the landslide. The inescapable familiarity of Spanish woke me, a constant dripping of the language seeping through the permeable cover of my thoughts. Drop by drop, by drop. One word at a time until the sentences rained down.

A couple had sat next to me on the bench. They sounded Chilean to my ear. They both had bright brown eyes and hooked noses, from the side, similar enough to believe them siblings. His hair was closely shaved on the sides and sticking up at the top, like a footballer's. Hers had highlights and was wrapped in a tight ponytail. They were having a heated argument. She was shouting and he was hearing it for someone else's screwup. From what I could grasp, they'd tried to pay their bus fare with a Scottish fiver and the driver hadn't accepted it.

They were loud enough for a guy over the next platform across the rail tracks to hear them. He shook his bald head, mouthing something at them. At us, really. I couldn't hear him, but with that mean face of his, he must have been saying something like, you fucking immigrants and your fucking language. Fuck off back to your own country.

Someone had said that to me one night when I was walking back to my flat. This old fellow came by and asked me something I didn't get. Either he was drunk or had a seriously thick accent. It was beyond my capabilities to tell. He repeated his question twice before telling me to fuck off. Back when it happened – it must have been

within my first month around – I felt ashamed for not understanding what he was saying. Now I would have told him to fuck off right back.

The Chilean couple didn't seem to mind the bald guy. They didn't seem to mind me either. Not until the lad's suitcase tilted down my way and fell next to my foot. The aluminium handle made a racket against the concrete floor. The bag was heavy. I knew because I'd done the same before and stuffed sixteen kilograms in a carry-on that kept falling forwards all the time. The guy hurried to pick it up and apologised to me in English.

'It's alright.' I replied. It must have come out with an accent, but he didn't seem to recognise it.

Most of us could detect the trace of Spanish when another Latin American spoke English. Even if we couldn't determine where exactly they were from, we would be able to tell their first language. It was the long, open vowels, most likely. Some people's accents were harder to detect than others. It depended on how much you'd learnt to hide it. I constantly tried.

Perhaps I should've said something else, something in Spanish. The classic *hola* with a smile, and let the chips fall. I just needed to give them enough time to look at my face and realise I was Latino as well. That bald guy across the tracks seemed to establish a connection pretty easily. We must have looked like a matching set from a distance.

No, no, no, I thought. I didn't need to meet them. Actually, I was most likely better off without them. The truth is that, since I arrived in the UK, the more people I met, the more difficult everything got. If I'd had to deal with just one or two complications, just the language, or the politics, or the fucking pub etiquette, Zoe or

Lori – just one of them – I would have been alright. But I had met too many people. I had added too many cogwheels to my machine. And they didn't match.

Before my first date with Zoe, I had a date with a giraffe. Lori would have killed me if she'd heard me say it like that, but that was exactly what happened that day, a particularly odd day, for which I couldn't entirely blame the giraffe.

I had promised Zoe I'd take her out with my first paycheck. That landed on a Thursday and we agreed to have dinner the following night. I had an early shift that day and went home straight afterwards to get ready. I wasn't seeing Zoe until seven, but I was too excited to wait. I put on my M&S shirt, H&M Jacket, JD trainers, and TK Maxx trousers, the whole high-street ensemble. It was my first time wearing all England-bought clothes. Even my underwear was from Sainsbury's. I felt substantiated, empowered. There was a certain Englishness about the look – forget the gentleman in a tailored cashmere suit, carrying a long broly. *I* was the modern image of Britain. The only thing left to do was showing it off on the street and seeing how well I blended-in.

I was going down James's Street when I saw the animal's neck towering above the heads of passers-by. From a distance, I couldn't tell what it was. That giraffe wasn't native of any African savanna. It was endemic fauna of the city of Audbridge. Its skin wasn't the distinctive tan and cream spotted pattern, but silver and iridescent metal. It was one of those things that were hard to recognise at first glance, the kind that would lure me closer. I walked towards it until that moment of epiphany struck, when I told myself, 'Oh, look at that. It's a giraffe.'

It was standing at the door of a shop, a fine specimen – four solid legs that reached up to my chest and a neck that kept going far beyond. Even if it wasn't as tall as a real giraffe, it must have reached at least three feet above my head, and it gazed down at me, flirting with long, burnished eyelashes. From up close, I could see the sculpture was hollow, a sheer illusion of robustness. A metallic frame held in place the thin aluminium plates that made its skin. These were oddly shaped and uneven, like the pieces of a puzzle, and seemed to float around each other without really touching. From up close, I could see the wires holding everything together.

I was standing in front of an antique shop. I knew that because of the window display. Tucked in a corner, a headless mannequin had a hat on and a matching floral dress that evoked the nineteen-fifties; a Zenith transistor radio rested on a battered milking stool, and three different tea sets had been laid on, in front of, and beside a dressing table. Like every time I'd been to an antique shop, I didn't go in because I had something to buy in mind. I went in because I was curious.

Atkinson's was a proper antique shop. A bell rang when the door opened. I'd only seen that in the movies. To the left, the shopkeeper said hello, to the right, a staged chaos. There were tables with boxes with more boxes in them, and buttons, and old vinyl, iron fittings, house numbers, and toy cars, picture frames, stamps. There were wooden what-nots full of china, tools hanging on the walls, and models and tin cans dangling from the ceiling. They were all in apparent disarray but perfectly visible and clean.

I stepped through the aisles of teeming shelves and display cases. I was told private dealers rented those. Some got the whole display case, some just a shelf. I wondered briefly what I would stuff in three cubic feet. Nothing interesting. Nothing valuable, really.

It was more interesting to think about what other people had put in. If you were like me and browsed without any real intent to buy, you could see past the merchandise and discover what the dealer was like as a person. That guy liked militaria; that one, pop art; that other one thought Barbie dolls were of importance. That other person had no idea.

At times when I was around antiques, I suffered from a kind of mild anxiety that kept me looking for a special item, something that sang to me. That was a habit I picked up from my aunt Olga. She was the kind of person who loved buying presents for other people but rarely ever got anything for herself. As a child, I absolutely loved that quality of hers, purely because it kept the presents coming. 'It's not singing to me,' aunt Olga would say as an excuse for not buying herself stuff. I used to imagine her trying to hear the music whenever she leaned close to a rack in a shop or to a window display. What she was actually doing, I figured out as a teenager, was checking out price tags. Then on, whenever she leaned forwards and shook her head to the silence, all I could think about was her selflessness, her empty wallet. Then on, her presents became haunted by a sort of guilt. She died and I never asked her if she'd ever really heard the music. I never got into the habit of buying presents for other people, but I would always be on the look for items that sang to me. I would buy stuff that didn't sing too; I wasn't crazy.

That day at Atkinson's, I was searching without knowing what I was trying to find. I had to feel my way round. Pick something up, give it a three-sixty, and put it back. My usual routine. I was going through some old theatre posters when I noticed a desk calendar, one of those Victorian perpetual calendars, not that I knew what it was when I saw it on the shelf. It was an ornate brass box with three small slits showing the linen scrolls inside, one for each, the day of the week, the date, and month. It had small

knobs sticking out. They reminded me of a violin's pegbox. An industrial ornate pegbox, that's the sort of thing that sang to me.

I instinctively reached for it, but my fingers had barely touched the brass when something like electricity shocked me away. The sensation wasn't truly tactile; I didn't feel it with my fingertips but in my brain. The image of a woman flashed before me. It was more like fragments of several images. They came and went so fast that they all merged into a single picture, not like a Picasso but as a sort of memory, as if I couldn't see them for what they were but as they had been, as a record of something I hadn't seen live. The woman I saw was young with dark hair. I struggled, trying to put together her face. It was like I had been too close to see her well. My memories of her were like those crooked unintended photos, when someone accidentally pressed the shutter button and all that got captured were bits of someone's shoes or elbow from a weird angle. I had a clearer image of her dress, tight at the waist, suffocating like a corset, with a voluminous skirt, a pale colour, maybe lilac, with a pattern. It could have been vines.

I jumped back and knocked down a floor lamp behind me. It must have made quite a racket as it fell. When I glanced around, several eyes were on me, including the unforgiving eyes of the woman behind the counter. I was expecting the calendar to be on fire, or burst open, or at the very least knocked down, but it rested on the shelf as still as it had been before. I had barely touched it.

The lamp I knocked down was basically a foot-long metal tube on a base with two other tubes fastened together by wingnuts. It looked like a robot arm. Had I dropped it any other day, it wouldn't have suffered any damage, but it happened that there was a replica World War II helmet lying around nearby, and the shade of the

lamp, which was a bowl of slightly flimsier metal, had bashed on it, leaving a dent. The mark was quite noticeable.

One by one, I pulled the banknotes from my wallet. Fifty-five quid, my stupidity had set me back. I put the lamp on the counter and grazed the dented lampshade with the back of my finger while the woman fetched me the change. The front door opened right then, and its bell accompanied the most unexpected yet familiar jingle. The sound of an aluminium skillet banging against a cooking pot was instantly recognisable. It was such a precise noise, not a gong, not a drum; it was kitchenware. In a place like Atkinson's, it was the sound of madness approaching.

The clanging came from a man's mess kit, hanging from the back of his belt. Yes, a mess kit, a major one with pots and skillets. I stared at him as he paced towards me. Was I seeing things again? He was a colonial explorer, for heaven's sake, like the ones in old sepia photographs, handlebar moustache, posing with their rifle against a background of palm trees and indigenous people. He had a beige bush jacket on and trousers that matched, leather boots and a white pith helmet. I first saw him as a product of my fancy, but each step he took, each clink and clang, made him more real and evermore strange.

When he had come close enough, I reached for his arm. The fabric was coarse to the touch. He leaned close and looked at me straight in the eye—only a few people had done that since I arrived in England.

He could have been an arse about it, most people don't like to be touched by strangers. But he simply said, 'Hello,' with a puzzled look. And then, 'Aren't you going to take that?' He pointed at the woman behind the counter, who was holding my change in her hand. I took it from her and sighed a thank you.

‘Afternoon,’ said the explorer to the woman. He was loud and made me drop my change. Up to that point I wasn’t sure if I was hallucinating this character. ‘My name is Stephen. I called you earlier about the giraffe outside?’

It was only when the woman began talking to him that I became a-hundred percent confident this colonial explorer was real. The two of them haggled over the price as I slowly sneaked away. The woman came down twenty pounds off the ticket price, and they both seemed happy about the purchase.

Opposite Atkinson’s, a sliver of afternoon sunshine ignited the orange and yellows of the maple leaves. I sat on a bench by the tree, trying to assimilate what had happened in the shop. I started with the man. He was obviously just wearing a costume. He wasn’t a colonial explorer; he was just some guy called Stephen, *dressed* as one. That was solved. But I couldn’t avoid connecting him to the woman I’d seen a moment earlier. Was she related to the Lori from my book?

I was still sitting on the freezing bench when the explorer came out of the shop. He’d brought a trolley and laboriously placed the giraffe on it, his aluminium accessories banging as he leaned forward and backward. It wasn’t just a skillet and a pot he was carrying. He had lids and utensils, at least two plates and cups, a full-service kit dangling from his waist. It was a unique costume, somewhat authentic but cartoony at the same time. He tied the sculpture secure and went off.

A nineteenth-century expeditioner pulling a metallic giraffe wasn’t a common sight, at least not where I’d come from. My decision to follow him wasn’t even conscious. I realised I’d been tailing him only when I looked around the street and couldn’t figure out where I was. Even then, I kept walking behind him, thinking about how lucky I was, living in a country where a man could put on his period clothes and

wheel his giraffe around the city centre without being bullied or mocked. You couldn't do that so easily back home. It was just not so common, not even in Halloween, which pseudo-nationalists called a 'gringo festivity' and the religious traditionalists called a celebration of the Devil, but never mind that because, in England, it was a different story. Walking behind Stephen, the explorer, I recalled the many hen parties and stag-dos I'd seen since I'd arrived. Women dressed as angels and devils and bunnies, and guys dressed as prison runaways, and bunnies as well. There were also the people who didn't even need an excuse to dress up, like that group I saw one night dressed as Spartans, parading half naked in the cold. Passers-by got involved with those guys, but they were partying around asking people to help them put nipple pasties on. They got the kind of attention they were asking for. The explorer and his giraffe, however, were getting no annoyance. Walkers-by did notice them and occasionally snapped a furtive photo, but they didn't give out any abuse.

Two people did make a fuss when Stephen passed them. They were a young couple doing some shopping at a Tesco Express. The man rushed out of the store to hail the explorer. He was dressed in similar Safari fashion, but his hat had a wide, round brim and he wore shorts instead of trousers – and I never joined the boy scouts because I thought their uniforms were ridiculous. He was carrying a wicker picnic basket, a useful thing too. His partner shoved their shopping inside it when she joined them on the street, but she kept the tube of Pringles she was eating. She was at another level. She wore proper Victorian attire, a black pleated skirt and a bright blue overdress. Her hair was pulled back under a veiled bowler hat that made her look like a dream. She could have been wearing a bustle, but I couldn't be sure. One of her gloves had come off and she used her naked hand to plunge into the tube of crisps.

I tried to act normal while they spoke, lingering purposeless some twelve feet behind them. I checked the schedule of bus 36 at the stop. Then I studied the bikes and accessories at the window of Bonnie's Bikes. I didn't want them to notice me – such a creep with a confused expression and a dented lamp on his shoulder.

They went on together up Parliament Street. I had never wandered around that part of the city. We stumbled upon fewer and fewer people as we moved away from the centre. The place was not designed to attract visitors. Instead of high-street businesses, there was a car wash and a few garages. The street had six lanes, and the buildings all shared a modern industrial theme. Unlike the hundred-and-fifty-year-old structures near the centre, these were dull and gave the impression of being owned by a corporation. So much grey concrete made the heart sink. That was a side of the city I didn't know. One I didn't care for.

The view soon changed for the better. We arrived at a cluster of old red-brick buildings with the *right* kind of industrial look. These were late nineteenth-century and had a charm of their own. I hadn't noticed that so many of these had their date carved on the front, 1888, 1884, 1861. I told myself I would make an effort to spot these more often. Stephen and his friends went into one of these buildings, which I later found out used to be a silk mill over a hundred years ago. It looked more like a castle than a factory, including towers and battlements, and dozens of arched windows. The eccentric trio went in through the back, past a great arched gate. A green plastic sign sticking out indicated it was a car park.

I stopped in my tracks when they went out of sight, as if a spell had lifted from me. Zoe popped into mind, and I started to ponder the way back. I would have gone back right then, but when I turned around, one of those quaint Hackney cabs was coming up the hill. As the car drove by, I noticed the passengers were in costumes too,

and I could have sworn I saw the same woman with dark hair that I had seen at Atkinson's. The same girl I had only seen in parts. I could almost hear the electric crackling of the memory.

'Wait!' I shouted.

The car stopped not far ahead, by the back gate of the mill.

'Wait, wait, wait. Is that you?' I gasped as I ran towards it.

Three ladies dressed in period gowns stepped down and into the building, but none of them was the dark-haired lady with the lilac dress. I checked the inside of the cab. No one else was there, except the driver, who told me something I couldn't understand. I couldn't be bothered.

'Lori,' I sighed, and I thought I heard a whisper, *inside*.

My eyes went towards the gate, and the rest of my body followed.

Chapter Seven

If it hadn't been for the green plastic sign, I would have never connected that place with something as dull and ordinary as a car park. I couldn't see the barren black pavement or the painted spaces. It was cobblestone, laid in curving lines and spirals, flattened, chipped, polished to a shine over the years by a multitude of wheels and feet.

The sight made me think about home, by contrast. The old public library of San Jose was knocked down to build a car park. They were about to declare the building national heritage, but the bastards completely levelled it before the paperwork was finished. My aunt reminded me of that every time we went by it. The last time, I was driving her, or more accurately, we were stuck in a traffic jam in front of where the library used to be. The street had just two lanes, and a truck was parked ahead of us, unloading merchandise, so we were waiting for someone to let us sneak into the other lane. I asked aunt Olga to roll down her window and wave at the other drivers to let us through. She wouldn't stop talking about the old library even while she was at it.

'They tore it down in a day,' she said. 'I came to have a last look when I heard it was going down and almost missed it.'

'*Tia*, please. Stick your hand out and ask for a space,' I interrupted. She waved her hand out the window as she kept telling me about how she used to work in a bar-restaurant not far from there. Soon enough, another driver let me cut in front of him.

'They were halfway done when I got here,' she continued, taking a last look at the car park. 'They had it down to the foundations by the end of the afternoon.'

'I think part of a wall is still standing,' I said. I didn't mean to be ironic, but that was probably the way I sounded. What was left of the wall was a dilapidated, waist-high pile of masonry.

‘A mockery,’ said aunt Olga. She didn’t raise her voice, but her articulation, that odd tension in her mouth, was plain fury. It shocked me because she never showed me anger, and at the same time, it moved me to know some old building could mean so much to her.

‘*Diay*, that’s the way it is,’ I told her patting her arm. ‘Progress.’

Bullshit. I was giving my aunt that same resigned, acquiescent attitude I always criticised about my people. It helped comforting her at the moment, but that was all that way of thinking ever achieved, comfort. And nothing ever happened. An early-twentieth century building gave way to an asphaltic lot with a tollbooth. That was progress. It was the kind of progress that made me reluctant to remember home.

But things were backwards in Audbridge, it was the car park that disappeared, not the old mill. Past the gate, it looked nearly as it did a hundred-and-fifty years ago, only there was more. Something called *Steampunk* was going on, and the view was fantastic.

A fairy with mechanical wings dashed from the corner of my eye. She fluttered towards a pink-haired girl in a period mourning dress and a fellow who was an amalgam of alchemist and blacksmith under a Derby hat. They were busy at their jewellery stall but put their pliers away to greet the fairy. There were many more stalls, two rows of them, one on each side of a long alley where three ladies paraded with their parasols, white, gold, and green. They matched the ribbons on their dresses. There were men in waistcoats and aviator helmets, their more elegant counterparts in jackets and top hats. There was a Mrs Lovett with her Todd and a chimney sweeper, pulling at her skirt; silver chains and silver buckles, helmets full of rivets, and silk cravats. I saw a Medusa, not with snakes, but an octopus on her head. People selling; people buying. It was a market.

Walking in was easy. It felt like falling, not ‘falling’ like a drunk who tripped and met the floor with a bang, but like a leaf fell from a tree. I fell in spirals, floating up and down among the exhibition stands, drawn by the gravitational pull of hundreds of thousands of tiny bronze beats and charms in one stall, wafted away a moment later towards a glasswork demonstration. I fell with my eyes open, with ears strained and hands reaching.

People were gathering around a senior gentleman who was complaining vociferously about not being able to ride his Penny-farthing on the cobbles without breaking his spine. In his seventies, he had probably shrunk over the years but still wasn’t much shorter than me. The seat of his bicycle was just below head level. In all honesty, the thought of him riding it was fearsome. Someone shouted that he should have gone for a Boneshaker instead of a Penny-farthing. The rebuke came from another senior gentleman sitting on his own Boneshaker, which had wooden wheels with iron rims and the pedals in the front wheel. It hardly appeared a comfortable ride. The owner posed for photographs and chatted to people on the history of cycling. I left shortly after. I figured he wasn’t going to ride his bike either.

I found the explorer with the giraffe almost at the end of the line of stalls. He and another man were securing the sculpture onto a pedestal, and curious people were already taking photos of it. I came closer, trying not to look too purposeful and hung around the next stall, looking at goggles.

Steampunks loved goggles. They loved them in every shape and finish, from large slick ones that resembled skiing gear, to bulky ones that imitated welding eyewear, to small round ones like swimming goggles. Looking at them bunched together on the rack reminded me of the street vendors back home, either at promenades

or manoeuvring among cars in traffic jams, their Styrofoam displays completely stuffed with as many unbranded sunglasses as they could possibly fit.

The next stand had leatherwork on sale, but nothing in their range seemed cheap. Craftmanship was evident in all their wares, from simple bracelets to large, elaborate pouches and utility belts. I had a closer look and grabbed a sort of bandolier, which instead of ammunition held glass vials in its loops. That was when the man who had been helping the explorer came over to greet me. He must have been in his fifties. He had long white hair, which he brushed back with his hand as he said something to me. I didn't understand what he was saying. I was too busy looking at Stephen step back from the giraffe and dust off his hands. His body language was so exaggerated that I didn't need to hear him say 'I'm done here' to get the message.

I got embarrassed and scared. I didn't want him to know I'd followed him there.

I stepped back and tried to leave, but the moment I turned, she was behind me. It was the black-haired woman, so close I could almost touch her. Like with the words in my book, I couldn't figure out whether she had appeared out of thin air or if I hadn't noticed her standing there the whole time.

'Lori?' I asked.

Her lips pulled up in a gentle smile, and a small dimple formed on her cheek.

'Excuse me, mate. Are you alright?' said the man with the long white hair. And with his words the woman in front of me disappeared, leaving me wondering whether she had actually been there.

'That's some proper metalwork you have there,' said the man. He was wearing a brown apron on top of an orange shirt. 'You didn't buy that here in the market, did you?'

He meant my lamp, which I stilled carried as a baby, sleeping against my chest. I said I'd just bought it somewhere else. Who knows if he understood what I said. My eyes were all over the place, trying to catch another glimpse of the woman.

'I got it in this place Atkinson's. Downtown.' I showed him the dent on the shade and told him the story of how I got it.

His crystalline blue eyes inspected the lamp covetously. 'You can hammer off that dent in a minute,' he said. 'Here, let me show you.'

I handed him the lamp and immediately questioned myself for giving it to him. Within seconds he had removed the lightbulb and detached the shade from the rest of the lamp. He was wearing a leather tool belt, from which he took a small hammer. He was about to start working on the dent when someone interrupted.

'Rob! What are you doing, you nutbar?!'

It was Stephen. He'd taken off his pith helmet and was drying his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief.

'What am I – What I'm doing is helping a friend in need! I've offered...' Rob paused, expecting me to say my name. I didn't follow at the moment, so he continued, 'I've offered *my friend* here to repair his lamp. You see?' He showed it to Stephen. 'Dented.'

'And you trust him?' Stephen asked me.

I said yes.

'May it rest in peace,' said Stephen solemnly. 'So I'm guessing you will postpone working on the giraffe?'

'What's the point of having just one project,' replied Rob, pulling out another bigger hammer out of his toolbelt, 'when you can have three or four at the same time?'

‘Or five.’ Stephen turned to me. ‘He’s crazy about hammers, this one. He wants to shape everything with a hammer.’

‘You *can* shape anything with a hammer!’ said Rob. He started tapping on the metal with his small pin hammer, to my peace of mind.

Stephen scoffed.

‘You know what, Steve? I bet you a pint not only can I fix this lampshade with just a hammer, but I can also mod it.’

‘I’ll take that wager!’ replied Stephen, ‘provided our friend here approves of it.’

Their eyes darted to me. I apologised and confessed I wasn’t following.

The two of them properly introduced themselves, and this time, I did give them my name. They explained Rob wanted to ‘mod’, to modify, my lamp in a Steampunk way. They led me to their little exhibition area where they had a few Steampunk creations on a table and, of course, the aluminium giraffe which was going to be modified, someday hopefully. The sculptures shared a similar industrial theme with gauges, gears and nuts and bolts here and there. They had been transformed in such a way you could still call it the original thing, a lamp, a telephone, a typewriter, but at the same time they looked like a whole new thing. It was clever, beautiful art. So I said I would love it if they steampunked my lamp.

‘We’ve got a wager!’ celebrated Rob, and they shook on it.

Rob got on with the task and Steve stayed chatting with me. Not long had past when a woman dressed as a sort of pirate approached us.

‘Oi, Steve! *Nothing* is about to begin.’

‘Now?’ asked Steve. ‘What time is it?’ He checked his pocket watch hurriedly. ‘Have they given the signal yet?’

The woman nodded and started to leave, but she gestured Steve to hurry as she walked away. My new friend told me he had to be somewhere to see something *not* happening. I was pretty certain his emphasis on the ‘not’ implied something else, but I was seldom a hundred percent sure of anything said in a British accent, mind you, only when they were joking, or mocking, or being sarcastic, angry, or dead serious, sassy, cheeky or ironic, or talking to a pet. In those early days in England, I walked around understanding maybe about half of what people said. My confusion must have been clearly noticeable to Steve, but he made no attempt to explain. Instead, he asked me to hold on and went rummaging under the table. Then he started drawing out stuff, a leather messenger bag, a folded camp stool, and a suitcase.

‘Here, put this on,’ said Steve donning a newsboy cap on my head. It was clearly too small, but before I could say anything, he pushed the suitcase across the table and asked if I would mind carrying it for him.

It was an oddly large suitcase, made of dark rugged leather with large golden letters that read: Bram Stevenson’s Unrivalled Creations.

‘Come on. We are late,’ said Steve as he strode off.

When I grabbed the suitcase, something metallic rattled inside. The noise continued as I skipped across the market to catch up with Steve. I chased the white pith helmet as he headed towards the main building and found him at the door, where he stood talking to a gentleman. That man was wearing a long black coat with velvet lapels and looked like Edgar Allan Poe, minus the moustache. He stopped me when I came closer.

‘Excuse me,’ he said. ‘Do you work here?’

Steve stepped in and told the man I was with him. ‘Don’t you see the cap?’ he said. ‘He’s in it too.’

No-moustache Poe apologised, saying he hadn't recognised me in my twenty-first-century clothes. Again, I didn't know whether he was joking or not.

Steve asked me if I was ready. 'Ready for what?' I asked, but he didn't answer. He led the way into a large, unfurnished hall with tall columns on each side and large windows on the upper floor. Undistinguishable voices bounced off the walls and merged into an amorphous racket. The place was crowded. It was like the standing section at a concert, except every single person was dressed in a Steampunk costume. Outside in the parking lot, other casual passers-by had made it easy to mingle with the steampunks, but here I was noticeably underdressed. I tugged down my newsboy cap, as if I could hide under the tiny thing. I was overreacting, really, in anticipation to all those puzzled looks I thought I was going to get. In reality, my lack of proper clothes was making me invisible. Or maybe my clothes didn't matter at all. No one could be bothered to acknowledge me. Everyone seemed expectant, like people do on New Year's Eve a minute before midnight.

'Are you ready?' asked Steve again.

'Ready for what?!'

A bell rang as if answering my question. It was a single stroke above the murmur of the crowd, loud enough to make a lady nearby shriek with excitement. Silence followed, but like that moment of doubt at the theatre between the end of a performance and the applause, it was shortly broken by a loud, excited buzz. Steve smiled at me, raising his eyebrows. Then I watched him transform into Bram Stevenson, the peddler.

'Bugs!' he shouted. 'I've got bugs and I know you want them!'

He set the camp stool on the spot and took his suitcase from me. It rattled as if it was filled with bottlecaps. He placed it on the stool and opened it. Inside there were at

least a dozen compartments, honeycomb patterned and filled to the rim with little figurines. Steve kept chanting about his bugs while I admired them in the suitcase. They were copper and brass and some had a silvery shine.

A lady and her friend stopped by. They asked how much the beetles were as they tried them on. They were brooches.

Around, other traders chanted and shouted. They rhymed and jested to lure the customers. I let Steve finish his sale and asked him what was going on.

He shushed me and whispered to my ear, 'It's the illicit market, you see.' I asked him why he was whispering, and he said we had to watch out for the coppers.

I told him I didn't understand.

'The rozzers, the bobbies! Cops, boy, the cops,' he spat.

A couple overheard him and acted alarmed, but Steve reassured them that the authorities had not showed up yet. Then he raised his voice again to advertise his bugs. 'Go on,' he said back to me. 'See if you find something you like.'

So I went.

Here and there peddlers were shouting their wares. Some had laid tablecloths on the floor to display their merchandises, sepia photographs, test tubes filled with tiny cogs turned into pendants, rings made out of watch parts and wire. The young couple I'd seen earlier was there, pulling knitted octopus dolls out of their wicker basket.

I thought I saw the woman with the dark hair among the crowd behind them, but she was gone by the time I reached the spot. I could've sworn I saw her again standing next to some guy selling prints of engine designs. Her dress was not lilac as I first thought; it was white, and like the Steampunk outfits of the ladies in the market, it seemed to belong in the nineteenth century. Hers, however, was pure, delightful

Victoriana, beyond pretend, and much like her hair, her manners and gait. Completely unspoiled.

She kept coming in and out of sight, much like I'd seen her before, vanishing, fragmented, the trace of an image, a coy smile come and gone. Someone always stood between us. The last time, it was a fat man in a long coat. He opened his coat in front of her and two other unsuspecting ladies. From behind it looked as if he was flashing them. I grabbed his arm much upset, but when he turned, I could see the lining of his coat was packed with the pins and badges he was selling. 'Everybody needs...' 3-D badges? I think he said 3-D badges. I rejected them bitterly. The woman was gone again. It was the last time I saw her, and I couldn't even tell if she had noticed me.

Two strokes of the bell marked the end of the party. The excitement that ruled the room became a general feeling of relaxed satisfaction. People smiled and joked as they rearranged their accessories. Some bragged with their friends, as they all slowly began to leave. Two constables broke in at a certain point; they weren't real police. I had seen them earlier drinking tea outside. It was all part of the act. They couldn't find anything 'illicit' going on. The market had come and gone.

I glanced round and felt disappointed. Not only had I crashed this Victorian party dressed from top to bottom in high-street autumn fashion. I hadn't bought a single thing.

I found Rob back at his stall chatting with Steve and a lady with wavy hair in a costume that reminded me of a medieval carnival.

'There he is, my loyal henchman!' shouted Steve when he saw me. 'Come here, you fellow rascal. Tell me, did you enjoy our little venture?'

I said I had and added that I would have liked it more if I had been better dressed for the occasion. I gave Steve his cap back and mentioned it was way too small for me.

The woman with them asked Steve for the hat. She had a round face, huge firm cheeks like a baby's.

Rob introduced her as Madame Victoria. She was working in the festival as a psychic medium and performed a number of spiritual services, including palm reading, tarot card readings, spiritual cleansing, even contacting dead loved ones.

She examined the cap carefully and asked me if I was serious about wanting better clothes. I said I was, and she excused herself abruptly and dashed away in short, fast steps, leaving the three of us quite surprised.

Rob told us he was done with the lamp, but before he showed it to us, he tossed me what I thought was a copper coin. Only it wasn't. It was an unengraved copper disc, clean except for a thin mark slithering across the middle like a scar.

'That's what's left of the dent,' clarified Rob. 'I thought you'd like to see it.' He told me there were ways to make the mark disappear, but since the challenge was to fix the shade with a hammer, he'd decided to simply punch the bit off. 'Then I made a design of it,' he said, pulling up the lamp from beneath the counter.

He had punched a line of holes around the shade and covered them with a copper sliding band. The band had a flange through which the light could come through. Rob called it a slotted peephole. To me it looked like those miner helmets with a light.

'And you did that with a hammer?' asked Steve with disbelief.

'I did! Fixed the dent with a hammer. Steampunked it with a hammer.' Rob wavered. 'I might have used a few other tools to make it neater. But I didn't *have* to!'

Rob's confession ignited a discussion about the terms of the wager, which inevitably had them revisit past quarrels and subtle ruses against each other. They were arguing about something that had happened in Lincoln in 2006 when Madame Victoria re-joined the group.

'Are you two arguing over cider again?' she asked.

'Not *over* it this time, my dear, just about who's paying for it.' Rob pointed at Steve as he spoke.

Victoria brought with her a black-felted top hat. She handed it to me and asked me to try it on.

'Wonderful. It fits you perfectly,' she said. 'It had your name written all over it. Well, not quite literally. See the inside.'

The inside of the hat was a yellowing white silk and had the manufacturer's stamp printed in black and gold letters.

'It's an Austin Reed of Regent Street,' said Victoria as I read the words. 'Very elegant, a proper antique, circa 1930.'

I said it was wonderful. Great condition for something so old. The way she talked about it suggested she was going to try and sell it to me, but she offered me a trade instead. She said she had been looking for a desk lamp for her readings and had absolutely fallen in love with mine.

'It fits me perfectly. The hat fits you perfectly. Some things happen for a reason.'

One reason. She kind of made sense, and coming from her, maybe because of the way she spoke, her seductive elongation of the sounds, the pauses and loops of her phrasing, it sounded like something mystical.

Madame Victoria said one of Rob's sculptures such as my lamp could sell for up to a-hundred pounds, which exceeded the best price she could ask for the hat, so she offered a spiritual reading to round up the price. With that she got me interested.

Steve offered his expert opinion to value the hat for me. I learnt then that he owned an antique shop just outside the city centre. He examined the hat and gave the deal a thumbs-up. So I, without further deliberation, took it.

'Terrific!' said Madame Victoria. She reached into her purse and handed me her card. 'Hope to see you soon.'

'That's a nice item,' said Steve, pointing at the hat. 'It's the sort of item you may want to dress up but not modify. Put a pair of goggles or a plume there, but don't go on punching holes into it!'

I told him I wouldn't and took the chance to ask a question that I've had on the tip of my tongue for a while. 'What exactly is Steampunk?'

Steve, Rob and Victoria gasped and giggled. I could have sworn the people on the next stall laughed too.

'How much time have you got?' asked Rob.

My smile disappeared. I had no time at all.

I'd forgotten I had a date.

Chapter Eight

Zoe and I had arranged to meet at a Brazilian restaurant on the other side of town from the Steampunk market. I texted her that I was going to be late as I hurried down the street. She replied saying it was fine, but I kept picturing her sitting at our table, bored and disappointed, scribbling some rhyme on her notepad, about a girl being stood up and finding out she was better off by herself. I saw her paying her bill and leaving, just as I was beginning to cramp.

I clashed loudly against the front door when I finally got to the restaurant. I bounced back feeling like an idiot, then tried again, this time pulling instead of pushing. My heart was thumping in my ears as I walked in, and I had a cramp that felt like a knife between my ribs. It was a busy night. Silverware clinked to accompany laughter and conversation. The tables were full of couples smiling, enjoying their dinner and conversations. It was that kind of restaurant. Zoe had picked it. I didn't know we were there yet.

Zoe was sitting at the bar, halfway down her gin and tonic. I probably apologised twenty-seven times before she could say a word. Her mouth was open the entire time I spoke, her lips either slightly parted in a sexy silent "u" or pulled back in a smile. She asked if I wanted a beer, then ordered it for me while I was busy catching my breath.

Her hair was combed to the side. It was the first time I'd seen it that way. Anyone watching us sitting there would have agreed she was completely out of my league, a gorgeous young lady who was killing her black dress and smelled like freshly cut roses and lilies. Her date, on the other hand, an embarrassed, clueless guy, out of place, haircut overdue, who had made a fool of himself coming through the door. I

could feel my own body heat and cool drops of sweat running down my back. I gulped half my beer when the bartender handed it to me.

‘Calm down and start over,’ said Zoe. She pointed at the hat in my hand. ‘You can start with that.’

I put the hat on and told her I’d got it at the Steampunk market. She smiled and said I looked adorable, silly but adorable. I tried to put it on her, but she wouldn’t wear it. She kept laughing when I told her I had traded it for a lamp I had damaged and bought earlier and carried the whole afternoon as a baby in my arms. Her gin and tonic went down the wrong way when I told her the woman I had bartered with was a psychic and had also thrown a palm reading into the bargain. I laughed along a little bit.

‘It does sound a bit ridiculous,’ I said, ‘But I think I’ll give her a call later in the week. Set up an appointment.’

‘It should be fun,’ replied Zoe, raising her eyebrows with incredulity. She asked me about the Steampunk market, and I tried my best to recount the fairies and imperial adventurers, the gents and ladies, and mad scientists, and gothic beauties I had seen. I told her about Steve and the illicit market. I stopped talking when she seemed to be losing interest. I didn’t tell her about the woman in the white dress.

‘To each his own, right?’

I said I didn’t follow, and Zoe explained she had nothing against people who liked dressing up and roleplaying. Some folks enjoyed escapism to the fullest. She just wasn’t one of them. She didn’t say anything bad about the hat, but her constant glances at the top of my head made it clear she didn’t want me wearing it. I took it off and toyed with it in my hand.

‘Oh no, don’t tell me you are going to start showing up at work in fancy-dress?’ she mocked, but her tone was way too condescending. I wasn’t expecting that. If I had

known Zoe better than, I would have recognised the symptoms of her hungry crankiness right away. It was impossible to win an argument with Zoe in that state.

I dropped the hat on the counter and sipped my beer.

‘Come on, Sam! I’m teasing. I just don’t get why some people are still in love with that idea of the Empire and, you know, all that hegemonic... British power... celebration.’

The irony was that she was drinking something called Bombay Sapphire, which was so called because of some association with the popularity of gin during the British Raj in India. The bottle had a lovely picture of Queen Victoria on its label. I didn’t know any of that back then, so I said nothing. And I was lucky I didn’t know because our argument wasn’t really about Steampunk or British colonialism or fashion choices.

‘Just don’t keep me waiting for something like that, okay?’

Stab to the heart.

I grabbed her hand and said I wouldn’t again.

Our table was ready.

We didn’t talk about Steampunk again until dessert. Zoe brought it up, not I. She would always feel guilty after the episode of hungry crankiness had passed. Surely, she was feeling sorry already.

‘It sounds like something I should see with my own eyes, that Steampunk thingy,’ she said between the inevitable moans that came with a spoonful of her chocolate mousse. ‘We could check it out together if you like. How long are they having it?’

I drew a blank.

‘I mean, is it a one-day event, or spread over a few days?’

No idea. I hadn't even considered it could be a temporary event. Of course, it was temporary. It took place in a car park, under stalls. Zoe looked it up on her mobile and confirmed it was a one-day thing.

'I know the place,' she said, looking at her phone. 'Quast Mill. It used to be a silk mill. They had a vegan festival there last year. Rachel asked me to go with her. She never got around to becoming vegan, though!'

She showed me the photo of it on her phone.

'Yes, that's the place,' I said with disappointment.

Zoe said she was sorry she'd missed it but we could catch it the next time it was in town. It sounded as if she was talking about a circus.

I found some time the following afternoon to check the place out. I walked up the hill to the mill and found it closed. I moved towards the gate and pressed my cheeks against the iron bars, trying to peek inside. I couldn't see much, so I went around the perimeter, found nothing, and came back to the same place to peek again. There wasn't much to see. It was the same building of the day before, same structure, same brick, *1861 anno domini* was still carved on the side, but the place looked abandoned, never more like a ruin, and far from what I'd seen only hours before, weathered as if the years had caught up with it overnight. The thought of jumping the gate crossed my mind. A glimpse inside would have been nice, but there was CCTV and I didn't want to risk it. I was terrified of being caught on tape doing anything that could serve as an excuse for deportation. Next time might be different.

After dinner, Zoe and I went to the *Raglan Road*, the Irish pub we went to on that first day I ran into her. I asked the barkeeper for two pints of Jaipur and experienced a sort of proud satisfaction as I watched him pull the right beer. I pronounced the name

slightly different from him, but it was a major improvement over pointing at the tap and asking for a 'pint of that'.

I brought the beer to our table and we toasted to being there, over a month after meeting again and still getting to know each other.

'You know what was great about that day we got together again?' I asked. 'As soon as I meet someone here, they want to know where I come from.' The sentence came out harsher than I'd planned, and Zoe seemed to take it with equal seriousness. 'You didn't ask me that.'

You had met before. In your country.

'Of course, we had met before,' I added. 'But still...'

She didn't get the chance. The thought interrupted me and I forgot what I was saying.

'Is that such a bad thing?' asked Zoe. 'Does it bother you that they ask?'

I said it didn't, but that sort of chat always led home, and I didn't want to talk about home. Zoe pointed out I still called it home, but I told her I still called my aunt's house home and no one I knew lived there anymore. The place brought me bad memories. Still I called it home.

Zoe nodded.

'But still, you've never made me feel foreign.' That's what I had forgotten before.

'It could be the accent, the reason why people ask me, or the features of my face, or the colour of my skin. Or the entire combination. My theory is that I don't match their records. Not many of us cross the sea to this side of the world. They can't place me and that makes them curious. That's what I tell myself.'

'What happens when you tell them?'

I snickered. ‘They start talking about Brazilian football and Colombian coffee, and about that trip a friend of theirs took to Peru fifteen years ago to see Machu Picchu, and the bloodcurdling experience of drinking coca tea. That’s what people do, bounce the conversation to something they know.’

‘I would have guessed they start talking about themselves instead,’ said Zoe. ‘That’s many people’s favourite topic. Many people I know.’

‘Are you trying to tell me to shut up?’ I joked, trying to embarrass her. She did choke a little on her beer, so I didn’t try it again. ‘You’re right,’ I continued. ‘Those are the nice people, the ones that bother trying.’

On the second round of drinks, Zoe asked me the question. ‘So why did you come here, to England?’

‘Well first, I knew the language. Second, I didn’t want to go to the States. There are too many Latinos there. They would remind me too much of home.’

Zoe asked me if I was running away from my own people, and I said I wasn’t running away from anything. I was not scared. I was tired, tired of my life there, of myself, of gradually becoming nothing.

‘I’m twenty-seven,’ I said, ‘And I feel I have never really pursued anything. I’ve had no true goals. I left because I was stuck. Worse, I left because I was conscious of it. When...’ I hesitated. ‘When my aunt passed. I thought I could chance a change.’

‘I get it,’ said Zoe. ‘And I’m sorry about your aunt.’

‘Thanks. I think she would have liked to see me leave. She knew how much I admired faraway England. She knew I wasn’t happy in Costa Rica, even though I tried to hide it from her.

‘What’s was wrong with Costa Rica?’

‘Nothing ever changes there.’

‘Not much changes here!’ Zoe leaned on her elbow and said, ‘We had a royal wedding last April.’

I gave her a nod as I sat back on my chair, but after a quick glance out the window, I was shaking my head. The building across the street was covered in scaffolding.

‘Here.’ I gestured Zoe to come closer and check out the mesh of aluminium tubes, boards, and the yellow foam sleeves with the zip ties that made the poles look like urban bamboo. ‘Every other week there’s a new building scaffolded.’

‘Yeah?’

‘So if you are doing it on purpose, keeping time from passing is not easy. Damn, it’s the hardest thing. You gotta work everyday to keep facades like those from ruin.’ I pointed at the building across the street. ‘You guys are forcing the building, the country even, to stay where you want it.’

Zoe was frowning, attentive. She made me feel solid when she looked at me like that. Present. Relevant even.

‘Things never change back at home because people don’t think it’s worth the effort. No one wants to risk their own peace and mediocre quiet. Muggers are caught by the police and released almost right after because no one files a complaint. Teachers go on one strike after another only to take a day off – and to hell with their kids schooling. It’s a damn oligarchical democracy there, where public funds are squandered all the time...’ I drank. ‘And no one. No one fixes a leak on the ceiling as long as they can simply place a bucket underneath when it rains.’

I gave the scaffold outside another look.

‘Here and there. Time is stuck in both places. The difference is that over here you tame it. There it just happens.’

‘Action and inaction,’ said Zoe, ‘Same result.’

‘No, not the same at all. It fucks up everything if you just let time pass through.’

Zoe’s eyes went back across the street. ‘So you thought you needed a fresh start?’

‘Yes. I was too comfortable. I get restless being too comfortable.’

There was silence while I wetted my mouth with some beer. Zoe was letting me get it all out.

‘It’s funny,’ I said.

‘What is?’

I told Zoe I had left home so I didn’t have to think about it, but now I understood that to avoid speaking about home I should’ve stayed there. ‘I always end up talking about the places I’ve been.’

‘Most people will ask you about that if you give them the chance. You’re too exotic,’ she said. Her fingers were playing with my hair. I thought she was going to kiss me.

‘You are exotic to me.’

She laughed. ‘Never thought of *us* as exotic.’

I leaned forward, but she flinched.

‘So you said your flat was near here?’ asked Zoe.

I said it was within walking distance.

Zoe seemed to consider something as she played with her nearly empty glass.

‘How’s that book collection you said you wanted to build?’

‘A couple more and I’ll have to start looking for a bigger place!’

She kept her eyes down on that last ounce in her glass.

Alright you. Set off. She is not going to ask you.

‘Come on,’ I said and downed the two fingers of beer I had left. ‘Let me show you.’

Zoe actually darted to the bookshelf when we entered my flat, though you pretty much were there the minute you walked in. Like always, the light bulbs took a while to warm up. The emptiness of the place seemed sadder in the dim yellowness. Lucky for me, my books were enough to distract Zoe. *Great Expectations* she had read in her first year of college. She told me about her discussions with her classmates as she picked it off from the shelf. The memory lit up her face.

Northanger Abbey, The Country of the Blind and Other Stories. She ran her eyes over the titles. ‘These are all Victorian,’ she said intrigued.

‘Or Neo-Victorian,’ I added. ‘There’s something about the aesthetic. The excitement of the times. I dunno, the grimness.’

She kept perusing until something else caught her eye.

‘What’s this?’ she asked, picking up a tattered book from the corner. The only one whose title had rubbed off of the spine.

Fool. I should have hidden my copy of *Frankenstein*.

You are embarrassed?

I didn’t want to look crazy. I didn’t want to ruin my moment with Zoe. I tried to take the book from her, but she didn’t let go.

You and I are like the monster who walks alone in the ice. You needn’t be ashamed of being different.

I thought I felt Zoe pull the book towards her, but it wasn't her. When I glanced down, I saw three hands on the cover. Three! There was my hand. There was Zoe's hand, and next to hers was someone else's. Another woman's hand, pulling the book away from me.

We are Other. Together.

They tugged and I tugged back.

Only you and I.

It all happened in a second. I reviewed it in my head many times afterwards: the small and delicate fingers clinging tightly to the book, white lace around the wrist. It scared me of course, but it was gone faster than I could react.

Zoe kissed me then. She'd say I kissed her, if she was telling the story. She'd say I launched into her and pulled her close, that it was my mouth that found hers. That was the way she told it to everyone, and it became the truth because I never contradicted her. I couldn't tell them that our first kiss was bound to the third hand on the book. I couldn't just say that I looked up from it, expecting to see a ghost, but instead I met her lips – Zoe's lips.

I couldn't tell her, could I?

Chapter Nine

Everything would've worked out fine if Lori had stayed within the book, if she and Zoe had remained separate in different realms.

I had no idea Zoe existed before I laid eyes on her. It was her hair, her smile, her figure that drew me to her as she entered my life. But Lori – Lori was nothing but sentences in a book when we met. Her material presence was bound to the page, thin, weightless as a pen stroke. Our conversations were always out of context, literally, absent setting, disembodied.

Only Lori knew how much I missed my aunt. I probably confessed to her because I thought she wasn't really there. That time, we were on page 139, in the part where the Monster is learning to read, and she simply posed the question: *You must regret her absence very much?*

My handwriting stared at me from the paper, but I heard her voice, full-bodied. Firm, but sweet, so damn charmingly sweet.

I wrote down I missed my Aunt's cooking. I missed how much she knew about third-grade maths. I listed the occasions her advice had saved me money, or time, or my teeth from being knocked out, whatever came to mind. She gave me dancing lessons once before a high school party and took that most embarrassing secret of mine to the grave. I put down a few examples of the many ways she showed me the purest love I'd ever known. Completely unconditional. Undeserved.

A sob happened then. It could have been hers, but I'm fairly sure it was mine. I closed the book and that was it. We continued on a different page the next time we talked.

Around Christmas, Zoe asked me the same question. She was driving, and it was pouring outside. Her arms stretched out in her cable-knit jumper as she grabbed the steering wheel.

‘Do you miss her, your aunt?’ she asked, with a furtive glance at me.

I told her I’d lost aunt Olga over a year before her death. The strokes had left only a part of her with me. They had taken the best of her from me. She didn’t smile anymore. She didn’t talk. Her kindness and sense of humour had become complete and inescapable stoicism.

‘I still loved her, of course. But when I talked to her, as I combed her hair or changed her clothes or whatever, she was not there anymore. And once I realised I was only talking to the memory of someone I knew, the joy of it faded. I was cheating myself into believing that the memories were as present as her body, but they were never going to talk back.’

Zoe reached out and rested her hand on my lap. ‘I bet she could still hear you,’ she said. ‘Some part of her could still sense that you cared for her. Even if she couldn’t say anything back.’

I nodded at Zoe, though I disagreed. My aunt couldn’t hear me, not near the end. But that didn’t matter. Zoe meant good and I wasn’t going to argue. The sound of the rain on the windshield was soothing.

‘It’s not like I wanted to get rid of her. Not even at the end,’ I tried to explain. ‘That woman raised me. She taught me to be a man – probably a better man than I ended up being. But she was gone quite a while before her body gave up. I had had my time for pining.’

What I said to Zoe was true. What I said to Lori was also true. I had learnt to cope with loss in my own way. I’d learned to discard the most immediate experiences.

Sweep and erase the misery every twenty-four hours. Let kinder memories occupy the mind.

Lori screwed me up when she showed me her own death. Falling for Lori meant mourning her. I wasn't ready for that.

I woke up at 6:00 am the day Lori died. It was 21 December, and a sliver of light was coming through the curtains. Zoe had spent the night and was now leaving for work. She had an early shift at the Inn. Mine didn't start until 11:00, so I was still in bed, half asleep, when she came by and gave me a good morning / goodbye kiss on the cheek. It took me a second to react, and when I tried to kiss her back, she was already gone. The thud of the door closing woke me up for good. I got up and hurried to the window to catch one last glimpse of her walking away, but when I opened the curtains there was something else outside.

Parked right outside my flat, just in front of the neighbour's Vauxhall, was a carriage, a real, old fashioned, horse-drawn carriage.

I'd never seen one of those before. If anything, it looked like a hearse. The black cabin was longer than it was tall and had large oval windows, narrowing at the ends like eyes. The black fringed drapery behind the glass was opened, and I could see through the hearse to the other side of the street. It was empty. There was no coachman either, not that I could see. The Friesian horses were black too, solemn and massive. Black plumes on their heads shivered as they shifted on the spot and pawed on the pavement, steam rising from their bodies, their breaths.

The frame of the cabin was lustrous like a piano, expensive looking. The red phantom of Zoe's coat flashed by, reflected on the lacquered wood. She passed the

carriage without paying any attention to it. I thought it was strange, but then again, it was Zoe. She was not impressed very easily. But I was.

I was sure I would never see anything quite like that back home, but I concluded that things like that carriage were too common in England to be impressive. A ‘traditional’ funeral was always an option in England. I learnt what plumed Friesian horses were by reading an ad online, the same with rosettes, and liveried coachmen, and grooms. It was a thing for some people to be delivered to the grave in style. Or maybe the carriage was one of those rentals for weddings. I’d seen something like it on the telly. Some people liked black for their wedding. Or maybe the carriage was part of a marketing number. I heard once that Sainsbury’s was using carriages for home deliveries to celebrate their one-hundred-something anniversary.

I detached my forehead from the window to go put on some pants. I must have been away from it less than a minute, but when I looked out again, the carriage was gone.

I tried to carry on with my day casually, but I was kidding myself. When the bread popped up from the toaster, I was still wondering about that hearse. I would have loved to see it closer. I peeked outside again when I came out of the shower. It was foolish to think I would see it again, but it was one of those unavoidable things. By the time I left the house, some blue hatchback was parked on the spot. I didn’t pay much attention to it as I walked by.

I was late for work and made the ten-minute walk from my flat down to the bottom of Castle Road in six minutes. A wasted effort because I lost all the time I’d gained, waiting for the light to change at the intersection with Maiden Way. I pushed the button at the crossing twice before a biker joined me and pushed it a third time. The wheels of

his bike reminded me of the carriage, that oversized look, sticking out of the frame. I tried not to stare too much. When people caught me watching them, they acted like they thought I was going to mug them.

The light finally turned green, and I stepped forward. Then I realised there was a car speeding towards me. I barely had time to recoil before it rushed past. It didn't even slow down.

Only it wasn't a car but a carriage, a wooden carriage pulled by a horse. Or was it two horses? The driver yelled at me and I yelled something back at him, which not even I could understand. I couldn't think of the right words in English fast enough and ended up just shouting half-words. I turned around to the biker with a 'Can you believe that guy?' on the tip of my tongue, but the biker was gone.

It wasn't that he'd pedalled away. He'd disappeared. The streetlight wasn't there anymore, nor its pole, nor the zebra crossing. The pavement was gone too, along with everything else. Suddenly I didn't know where I was. The world became distant and out of focus. It was like looking through foggy glasses. I couldn't see two feet away. I groped around but there was nothing within reach. I was having an episode of some kind, gone into some sort of blindness. I could see light and colours, but shapes were all distorted. Everything around me had become a blur.

I kept groping until someone yelled behind me. I stopped and glanced back but there was no one. I could see nothing that made sense. I realised I was standing in the middle of the street when I saw another one of those carriages coming my way. The horses were pure muscle in action, their hooves up in the air then down with violence. They were all I could see, the only tangible thing in the blur: one second a tiny dark shape in the distance, the next, a bulk speeding towards me, machine and beast in one, harness and sinew, muscle and rivet. The sounds of hooves and wheels merged into

continuous thunder. They were charging at me and I didn't move. I stood mesmerised like an idiot.

I reacted an inch short of death and leaped to the side. There was no thinking involved in the action. One moment I was watching the carriage approach and the next I was lying on the ground with a sore shoulder, watching it go by.

I continued my escape on all fours, afraid to stand up and walk. I was on the other side of the road. I could tell because Audbridge City Council appeared in front of me. I was right where I was supposed to be if I had crossed Maiden Way, where I'd been a minute before, waiting for the traffic light to change.

I made my way to the building and placed my hand on one of the pillars. It was cast stone, firm, immovable. I anchored myself to it. I put my arms around the pillar and concentrated on breathing, trying to hold the sickness back. There was an odd smell, the scent of nothingness, the complete absence of the sense. It felt as if I was permanently about to sneeze.

I hugged the pillar until I began to feel stable. Slowly people started coming in and going out of focus, walking in front of me. They appeared from the corner of my eye, materialised out of the blur like the horses, but they did so without violence, going in different directions, minding their own business. Soon the street was populated. A man showed his pocket watch to another. A boy trudged by, carrying a wooden box of spuds that was clearly too heavy for him. They acted so normal; it made everything stranger. I rubbed my eyes and squinted to see a little farther. A peddler was selling bottles of something, hair tonic, according to his sign. A handful of men were listening to him. There was noise and conversation, some laughs even. Thank God, I was not alone anymore. 'Hey,' I cried faintly, my voice weak and broken. A bit farther ahead, a group of refined ladies paraded towards the tram stop. They seemed to glide in their long skirts.

The city was slowly coming into focus. I was on Market Avenue. The street broadened up here to accommodate the tram tracks. Wooden carts and stalls crowded the walkway in the middle, adjoining the stop. There were so many people now, children whining and mothers yelling at them, couples, business people. Everything was odd. No one was wearing oversized knitted jumpers, or those short skirts with braces, or high-waisted jeans. Where were all the fashion items that made the present look like twenty or thirty years ago? The people I was watching had taken the retro vibe too far. The women wore antiquated, long dresses. The men's clothes were plainer, more modest. No one had their flashy Adidas sportswear on. The hipsters had disappeared from the street, the punks too, and the skateboarders, and the rockers. No one was wearing a headscarf. No turbans. No Burkas.

I gave a shout to a young man walking by, 'Hey, mate. Hi. Excuse me.' He went right by me and acted as if he couldn't hear me. He must have heard me. Surely, he must have. I tried letting go of the pillar, but I couldn't. I lost my grasp of things as soon as my fingers stopped touching the surface, and I felt sick again. I needed to find out where I was, *when* I was. Moments later a woman approached, and I tried shouting again, but she didn't pay attention to me either. The next three or four people were deaf too.

I had to move. I began to experiment, removing my hands from the building in short intervals, looking for a place to go. I scanned around and noticed other buildings. Like the City Council, they remained solid in the middle of all that blurriness. I had to reach one of them.

It took me a while to gather my courage and plunge into the blur. It was darker by then. The light had shaded from white to blue and made me think it was colder, though I couldn't truly feel the temperature, no wind, no sunshine. I started walking and

my vision worsened again. I kept prowling, placing my feet with care, making sure I wasn't walking onto any road or rail line, but then it occurred to me that I was going too slow. Every second out there, I was putting my life at risk. My pace quickened. If I was going to crash into something, then so be it. Behind me, the City Council building remained immovable, its contours well defined. White and solemn, it struck me how much like a mausoleum it seemed. I couldn't let it become mine.

I groped my way in the bluish darkness. I had the impression of things moving around me. They kept dashing out of the corner of my eye and disappearing before I could get a good glance. I carried on towards one of the buildings until I saw a shadow ahead, a small smudge in the distance, slowly growing feet and arms as I went closer. He was a small lad, wandering. He must have been half my height, but I believed he could save me. I called out to him, but he said nothing back. I followed him and shouted, again and again, until he stopped. I went closer, all too close. He was all shadow, black and treacherous. I could feel him looking at me, though there were no eyes. I panicked. I surrendered to the fear and dropped to the muddy ground.

When I looked up again, the shadow was gone. Only it wasn't really gone. It had transgressed its shape and now covered all around me. I was still on the mud when I got a sudden whiff of manure, strong as it got, sickening. It was the first thing I smelled in too long and it was shit. I tried to crawl away, but my body had turned too heavy. My shoulders hit the ground.

I'd lain in the darkness for too long, forlorn and helpless, when a light shone on me, a warming light that masked the smell of horse shit with something sweet like vanilla.

'Lori,' I whispered.

She was a few meters away.

‘Lori,’ I said, louder this time. Her back towards me, she seemed to be walking away but without really moving. In the dark blur, she was a beacon. Her form remained solid as the rest of Audbridge sublimated. I despaired and called ‘wait!’ But she wouldn’t look back.

I did what seemed impossible a moment before and stood up. I went to her, but now she started moving away. I hurried as much as I could, putting one foot in front of the other, but the distance between us remained the same.

In that place of darkness and vagueness, she was solid colour. Her dress was all white, yet it seemed more colourful than everything else I’d seen on the street. Her hair was black, blacker than the shadows around me but it shone, even in that darkness. Only after seeing her, I realised all the colour everything else lacked.

‘Lori,’ I cried. ‘Lori, please wait.’

I needed to hear her speak, to touch the lace of her dress, to confirm that she was really there, more real than I had ever seen her. I thought of her face as I staggered forwards but couldn’t remember it clearly. I simply couldn’t make up the wholeness of her features. And in its terrible absence, there was only one other face that I could picture. One face that could match the beauty and kindness of her light. That was when I got Zoe involved. I placed her body in the other woman’s dress, coloured her hair black, and the clearer I pictured her, the closer I drew to her.

I reached for her hand and touched the tip of her fingers. But when she turned around, I recoiled. My expectations betrayed me. Her face wasn’t Zoe’s. The nose was slightly thinner. The eyes were rounder, with a certain sadness in her gaze. And for all that I loved Zoe’s features, I couldn’t, I simply couldn’t help thinking I had never seen a face more perfect to my taste.

‘Help me,’ she cried, extending her hand. It was the same voice I’d heard reading the marginalia in my book, but full of frightened urgency. And just as she pleaded for my help, I had the same sensation I had felt when I thought my life was at risk.

I pulled away, wriggled back like a coward.

‘Stop it,’ I said. ‘Bring me back.’

‘Please, it’s coming,’ she replied.

‘Bring me back,’ I shouted. ‘Leave me alone!’

A bell tolled. There was something else in the blur. Horses. I’d seen them before. They materialised with furious speed. I watched from the side, contorted like a shrimp, as they nearly trampled her. She managed to jump to the side. I shouted to get out of the way. She wasn’t safe; she was on the tracks, and it was coming. The tram was coming. She didn’t see it, didn’t hear it. The bells, the neighs, the screams.

It was too late. I witnessed the accident and I felt it at the same time. I was in both places at once, watching her from a distance and also in front of the machine as it struck her. I was spinning in the air. Cries echoed.

I hit the ground, and everything was quiet.

Just like that, she was gone. And I was back.

The smell of burnt rubber mixed with fried chicken nuggets was so strong I could taste it in my mouth. I was sitting on one of the benches at the tram stop on Market Avenue. The stop was an island platform with trams coming from North and South. I looked around and saw one of the trams leaving behind me. Audbridge wasn’t blurry anymore. There were no shadows, no horses or carriages. Just me in the city, alone.

Nearby, a middle-age man smoked a cigarette while he spoke on his mobile. 'Hey,' I yelled. He flinched and stared straight at me. He saw me walking to him and told his caller to hold on.

'Yeah?'

His breath reeked of cigarette, but he was actually talking to me. He really was. I couldn't think of anything to say.

'Bugger off, mate,' he grumbled and returned to his conversation.

I went back to the tram stop. To my right, the display showed the tram's live departures. The dotted yellow letters said the service to Wudberry was due and the next one was in 7 minutes. It was 10:55. Fifteen minutes. I'd lost just about fifteen minutes, but in the vision, it had felt like hours. I got dizzy.

I sat at the stop for a while. There was no point in moving too quickly now. I was already late for work. Rachel was going to kill me. Zoe was going to kill me.

The tram arrived a moment later, so green and grey and plastic. When the automatic doors opened, a senior woman climbed down. She moved carefully with the help of a cane. I could have offered her a hand, but I didn't move a muscle from my seat. I just sat and watched her hobble. The image of her, falling, came to mind. It wasn't that I meant her any harm. I just wondered whether I would be fast enough to catch her if she fell. When I played the scenario in my head, I wasn't.

Whatever Lori was, I couldn't deal with it alone.

Chapter Ten

Was it a paranormal haunting or mental illness? Either problem sounded expensive to fix. After what happened with the tram and the carriages, I was sure I needed to talk to a professional. I had two options, a psychic or a psychiatrist. I could say that I contacted Madame Victoria, the psychic medium from the Steampunk market, because she owed me a reading. Talking to her wouldn't cost me a penny. But the truth was that being haunted seemed better than going mad.

I had the medium's card in my wallet. I took a long look at it before I decided to call. The name on the card was Victoria Ridley. That was a good sign, I thought, a sign of existing outside the circles of Steampunk. I needed someone serious. I went online and checked her out. As far as psychic mediums go, she seemed legit.

I went to see Victoria the day after my episode with the carriages and the tram. She was at another fair, a spiritual-medium fair held at the community centre. It reminded me of the science fairs in high school, where each student got a square meter at the school's gym to try to make the best of it, decorating with posters and other visual aids. At the community centre, each medium had their own table, a little one-on-one station. They ran side by side around the perimeter of the hall. Each medium had their own instruments, or attention grabbers, their own display of crystals, or a set of saint figurines. No one had a crystal ball, but they all had a different tablecloth. I walked quickly past the other mediums, trying to avoid eye contact, any awkward choose-me-and-I'll-give-you-a-good-run-for-your-money look. Victoria was near the back of the hall. They had cubicles there, set as nice little booths.

Victoria saw me coming in the distance and started waving happily. She was a sweet one, Vicky, a kind spirit. I nearly didn't recognise her. Different makeup,

different hair. She wasn't wearing a Steampunk outfit, of course. Though I recognised one of Steve's beetle brooches on her lapel.

I sat down across from her at her booth. She had my lamp, or rather the lamp I'd traded with her, on the table. It looked nice on her gold and blue tablecloth. Next to it, there was a deck of tarot cards, and a bowl of mint chocolates.

We had barely said hello when I declared the insufferable fact, 'Vicky, I'm haunted.'

'Okay, right to business,' she said. 'I would normally start with some basic questions, then a tarot reading. But you seem to have something specific in mind?'

'I want—I want to get rid of her.' I doubted I wanted her out of my life, even as I said it.

Victoria chuckled. 'Okay. *Her*, you said?'

I told her about the writing, the marginalia in my book, and what had happened to me the day before. I tried to explain the blur the best I could, but I found it difficult to explain something I hadn't truly seen, something that existed where I was not looking and disappeared when I laid eyes on it. The blur was something that changed the world from the corner of my eye.

When I was done, Victoria leaned slowly back on her chair but sprang right back in one quick movement. 'But it was *our* world?'

'It was a version of it. The past of it. Many things were the same. Many buildings were exactly the same.'

'And you say you had no control whatsoever?'

'I had power over myself. I could kind of move around, make decisions, but that's it.'

‘*Kind of?* What was it like?’ Victoria was a little more excited about my vision than I expected – or would have liked.

‘It’s like walking underwater. The body is heavy but weightless at the same time. The medium slows down every movement but makes it easy to drift, to jump from one place to another, one time to another.’

Victoria took a moment to think. She hummed to herself as she did so.

‘And the woman who got hit by the tram is the same woman you’ve seen before.’

I agreed. ‘Lori.’

‘Lori. And we’re sure she’s the one writing as well?’

‘She *has* to be.’ The words came out sharp. ‘Doesn’t she?’

Victoria clicked her tongue, thinking. ‘Possibly.’

‘Has she told you anything since that episode? Explained it somehow.’

I told Victoria Lori hadn’t spoken to me since. ‘The last thing I said to her was to leave me alone. Is it possible that she did?’

‘Unlikely. They usually have a reason for coming on so strongly.’

Victoria proposed an exercise. She handed me a notepad and a pen. We were going to try something called automatic writing.

‘What you do,’ said Victoria, ‘is grab a pen and a piece of paper and write, trying not to think about what you are writing. The trick is to relax yourself and let your hand do the work.’ Victoria said it would help me convene with the spiritual being that was distressing me. That or unearth the inner conflict that was affecting me.

‘So you think it could be all in my head?’

‘Sometimes external energies affect us in unexpected ways. Sometimes it’s our own energy that is off-balance. You are going through some massive changes at this time in your life. A slight unbalance can be expected.’

‘Does that mean I’m crazy?’

‘No, Sam. I can’t tell you if you’re crazy.’

I sighed and sunk in my chair.

‘Now, automatic writing is a clairvoyance ability. It may not work the first time.’ Right as she said that her eyes went down to the table and widened with surprise. ‘Woah, look at that! You are already doing it.’

I glanced down and saw three spirals on the piece of paper. ‘Nah, I do that all the time when I’m nervous. It’s a habit.’

‘Is it an old habit, or is it something you started doing recently?’

I wasn’t sure which of those would have been better, but I couldn’t blame Lori for that. I said I’d done it for years.

‘Hmm, interesting,’ said Victoria. ‘Automatic writing allows information to flow from the spirits. It’s a form of channelling.’

‘So a ghost comes and possesses my hand? It possesses me?’

Victoria snorted. ‘Automatic writing is not a possession. The medium shuts his consciousness and becomes able to listen to the spirit. It’s a transcript of what *she* says, not a first-hand account.’

I was unconvinced.

‘Here!’ Victoria tossed me a chocolate from her bowl. I reached out and caught it.

‘Did you see what I did? I moved your hand and you didn’t even think about it, did you? It knew where to find the chocolate by itself.’

‘That’s different. That’s muscular memory.’

‘Well, it works a bit like that. Practical knowledge connects us to them.’

I pouted.

‘Are you going to eat that?’

I gave the chocolate back. They were her favourites, she said, as she chewed it.

We went on with it. Vicky was very professional. She said I needed to get into a shallow trance, and I don’t know how she did it, but she helped me relax with a few instructions. Her tone was soothing and her words comforting. I had no idea how much time had passed when she said:

‘Okay, Sam, we’ve been talking for ten minutes now. Let’s see what you’ve got.’

‘We’ve been talking?’ I asked.

‘Sure, you and I. We’ve been chatting the whole time. Don’t worry if it’s hard to remember. It’s a common thing. And look!’ She showed me her own piece of writing. ‘I’ve been doing it too.’

Both of us had written about a page. She asked me to swap papers and started reading mine. A second later, she stopped and rummaged through one of the bags behind her chair. She found a black marker which she started using to cross out some of what I’d written.

I finished reading her paragraph. There were lots of short sharp sentences, many about having chicken korma for dinner, but I found nothing at all meaningful to me. Then she showed me what I’d scribbled. The lines were crooked and slanting, and the words ran into each other and overlapped a few times. Victoria had stroked through much of the ‘noise,’ the non-sense between meaningful sentences. She asked me to read the redacted document aloud.

‘You will think this is a hoax... a charade... that it is impossible that I ... be writing this if I’m dead. But... I am. I truly am... and still I’m writing to you.’

The words felt strange coming out of my mouth.

‘Vicky, is this a joke?’ It had to be. I was both disappointed and annoyed.

‘Quite something, right?’

She acted excited and I started to believe she wasn’t tricking me.

‘You swear you are not pulling my leg?’

‘Sam, look at your hand!’

I glanced down. Victoria’s marker was in my hand. I had written on the back of my other hand: ‘I need you, Samuel. I do.’

I tossed the marker away. ‘What the fuck is that, Vic!’ I started swearing like a madman as I tried to rub the ink off with my thumb, some words came out in Spanish. Victoria had to take me outside to calm down. She showed me out through a glass door into a garden. The fresh air and quietness helped me, but Victoria seemed quite stricken. We stood out there for a while until the silence was broken by the crinkling of one of her mint chocolates being unwrapped. She put it whole in her mouth.

‘This could get dangerous, Sam. We can’t do this here. There are too many people, too many voices. I can’t exactly figure out what we’re dealing with.’

I made the point that Lori actually sounded polite in what she’d written.

‘It’s not just what she wrote. It’s your reaction.’

‘Come on, Vic. I’m desperate here. I’m – I’m scared.’

‘Yes, Sam, but others don’t know you’re scared – neither the living nor the dead.’ She leaned forwards and lowered her voice. ‘You frightened some people in there. That’s bad for business.’

‘It’s just a misunderstanding. I’ll keep it down from now on.’

‘It just doesn’t work like that.’ She checked inside. ‘Come on.’

We returned to her station in silence.

‘You have to be in a good mood to try to contact the spirits. Bad moods attract negative entities.’

She offered me a chocolate. She said it would help me feel better. I put one in my mouth and had to spit it right out.

‘That’s awful,’ I told her. ‘They’ve gone bad.’

She took another one out of the wrapper and bit on it. She also had to spit it out.

‘Oh, come on!’ She snapped. ‘Don’t mess with the medium’s chocolate.’

‘Was it her?’ I asked, and Vicky nodded.

She breathed heavily and kept going, ‘You shouldn’t have... Oh, you naughty... You shouldn’t have...’

It took her a minute to calm herself.

‘What I’m thinking,’ she continued, ‘is that spirits usually don’t like to be tested like this. They want people to “trust” them. Then again, some spirits may deny us information just *because*. Mess with our sweets, just to annoy us.’ She said that last part, looking up in the air, as if talking straight to Lori. ‘They were people once. They can be stubborn and unreasonable.’

She reached behind her chair for her purse.

‘No one’s ever done that to me before,’ she said with indignation as she searched inside her purse. A Twix came out. She unwrapped it and sniffed it. Then she took a bite. ‘It’s good,’ she said nodding. She offered to share but I said I was okay.

‘This is probably more than I can handle,’ she said. ‘We need time to talk to her and find out what she wants. We also need a better, quieter location.’

Victoria told me she was going on the road the next day, first to Birmingham, then up to Manchester. So she wanted me to contact her friend Catherine. Apparently, as a medium, she was on a whole other level. Victoria assured me that if anyone could help me, it would be her. Vicky wrote down her address on the back of my automatic writing and handed it to me.

‘Visit her tomorrow. She’ll sort you out. I’m sure.’

It was 16:50 when I left the fair. I had lost track of time again, and now I had to make a call to work I didn’t want to make. So instead, I made another call and messed up royally.

‘Sam?’

‘Hey, Zoe. Listen, I’m on my way to the Inn, but I’m stuck in traffic a bit outside of town. I know I’m already late. Yes, I know. I know she is, but this is important. I’ll explain—I’ll explain myself in person. Yes, I’m sending Rachel a text, but if you talk to her, she’ll take it a lot better. I know. Thank you, babe. I’ll make it up to you. Promise.’

I hung up, thinking I had aced it. What a screw up.

I didn’t go into the staff room at the Inn. I put on my pinny as I hurried through the back door and threw my bag in a corner. The pot wash had become a warm, misty cloud, and the stink of dirty dishes and damp was beginning to build. The machine was on, but they’d forgotten to turn on the extractor. I went straight for the ‘on’ switch and peeked between the racks of pots and the piled dishes. I was expecting to see Marco or perhaps a furious Rachel. Instead, I saw my saviour angel in a cloud of steam.

‘Zoe?’

She was wiping a plate, her belly flat against the stainless-steel sink. She glanced at me, chin up, peeping through her damp hair on her face.

‘I thought your shift ended an hour ago,’ I said as I went around the racks.

‘Well.’

It had. I thought, *you moron*.

‘Man! I’m so sorry, Zoe. I’ll make it up to you. I promise.’

She pulled the sprayer down and pressed the trigger all the way right above some gravy saucers, which had the same effect of putting a spoon under a jet of water – only much worse. She got soaked in a second and tossed the sprayer on the sink. The hose stretched down and immediately bounced back up. She grabbed it and flung it again with a little groan. And again, it bounced up. Zoe seldom swore, but she definitely knew how.

‘Hey, hey, hey. It’s alright,’ I said.

‘It’s not alright, Sam. Where were you today?’

One of the waiters brought in a load of dishes. He gave me a stinky look.

‘Can we talk at home?’

‘What?’

‘It’s hard for me. I don’t want to do it here. Go home and I’ll meet you there right after I’m done here.’

She started taking off her rubber gloves. I was going to give her a hand when she saw what I’d written on it with Victoria’s marker.

‘What’s that?’

I tried to recoil and cover my hand, repeating, ‘nothing, nothing’ like a five-year-old. The whole thing was a fiasco.

‘What the hell, Sam. Are you seeing someone else?’

‘What? Of course not.’

She took off one of her gloves and threw it at the sink. ‘You’re obviously hiding something.’

‘Calm down, Zoe. Calm down.’

I took a deep breath and said, ‘I was talking to a medium today, okay?’

‘What?’ she asked puzzled.

‘I spent the afternoon talking to a psychic medium. Her name is Victoria. She’s helping me with... I—I think I’m being haunted by a woman’s ghost.’

She held her composure for a moment. Then she broke into laughter, loud, tired, and desperate.

‘You’re exhausted,’ I whispered. ‘We’ll talk about it later when you’ve had some rest. I promise.’

‘So you see dead people?’ she mocked.

I went into my pocket and showed her the automatic writing Lori had written earlier. Zoe stared at me in the eye, those pleading brown eyes of mine. Not a bit of deceit in them. She snatched the paper from my hand and scanned it.

Few things were more lovely than watching Zoe read. Even that. Even at that moment.

‘You must think I’m stupid,’ she said.

‘What? Why?’ I asked. I was not at my best, thinking of replies.

‘You wrote this.’

‘No, I didn’t. I swear! I mean—’

‘Sam, I recognize your handwriting.’ Zoe was going to hand me back the piece of paper when she saw the other side.

‘What’s this?’ she asked, reading the address Victoria had noted down. ‘Who’s Catherine?’

Damn it. ‘She’s another one, another medium.’

There was indignation in Zoe’s stare. ‘Another one? Why do you need two?’ She looked down at the paper and up at me again. ‘And how did you come to meet all these women?’

‘I haven’t met *her* actually, and it – it just happens they are women. I didn’t choose any of them.’

There would be other moments when Zoe was absolutely justified to be mad, but not then at the pot wash. There would be other messages. There was a record of them in my copy of *Frankenstein*. *Our* book, Lori’s and mine. It contained the short telegrams that set us off. The conversations that followed, our shameful chat transcript. Zoe could be mad about those.

‘How much does she charge a session, a consultation, whatever?’

‘I haven’t spent a penny yet. It’s all been free.’

She folded the paper slowly with finesse and offered it back. ‘Nothing is free, Sam.’

I couldn’t avoid checking the writing again. I knew every word and how they looked on the page, but I felt it calling me, wanting me to inspect it one more time. My eyes swept the loops of the characters, the crossing of the Ts, the thickness of the lines. I was still trying to find proof it wasn’t my handwriting.

‘Okay, I did write this,’ I concluded, putting the paper back in my pocket. ‘But it wasn’t intentionally. I have no control over these things.’

More dirty dishes arrived. Zoe fetched the rack and gestured at me to get started. I began by washing my hand, trying to get the marker’s ink off.

‘Spirits are acting through you, then? Moving your hand?’ Zoe pantomimed writing in the air and squinted at the invisible letters floating between us.

‘Of course it sounds foolish when you say it like that.’

‘Maybe you should grow a goatee. Get a turban with a gem in the middle and a plume. Get a cape too, the whole attire. There’s a fancy-dress shop on Queen’s Street.’

‘You’re thinking of a genie.’

‘Wait!’ said Zoe, holding up her index finger. ‘Is this a Steampunk thing?’

I told her where I’d met Victoria, strategically omitting the ‘Madam’ title, and told her that was pretty much all it had to do with Steampunk.

‘Perfect. I’m beginning to *love* that crowd.’

I knew Zoe well enough to stay quiet. Nothing I said would change her mind when she was in ‘defence mode’. I kept it shut and washed dishes.

‘Zoe?’ I broke after I’d cleared out a few cups.

‘Yeah?’

‘I don’t think you’re stupid.’

‘You better not.’ She crossed her arms and pouted.

A minute later a new batch of dirty dishes was brought in, and Zoe started putting on her rubber gloves back on. ‘Come on now. You’ll never catch up at this pace.’

She checked my hand. ‘You wiped that thing off your hand?’

I showed her it was gone.

Chapter Eleven

A blonde woman opened the door at Catherine's house. She must have been in her forties. Her face was weathered, and the blue of her eyes was the lightest shade I'd ever seen.

I said hello and asked for Catherine.

'Is she expecting you?' asked the woman, speaking with what sounded to me like a Polish accent.

I said she probably wasn't. 'I would've called but I've only got her address.' I showed her the wrinkled paper.

She asked my name and then simply said, 'Wait,' before closing the door.

Catherine's was a Georgian brick house, with large rectangular windows and a blue door. It had a large front garden and a brick fencing wall. A slippery stone walkway went from the iron front gate to the door of the house, splitting the garden in halves. Catherine was clearly not into gardening. The grass needed mowing and weeding, and the whole space was crowded with unkempt bushes and some tall, leafy plants that needed pruning. They could've been sunflower plants, but there were no flowers, so I couldn't tell.

The blonde woman opened the door a minute later and asked me to come in. The front door led into a long narrow hall with a few doors on the left and one on the right, just before the staircase to the first floor. I was ushered into the first door on the left.

The room had style. It reminded me of the antique shops I had been to only by mistake, the really posh ones where immediately after setting one foot inside I knew I wasn't going to be buying a thing, where the antiques seemed new and cost thousands.

Catherine's parlour was the ideal those shops tried to achieve, the Eden of antiques. From the Persian rug, to the portraits hanging and their ornate frames, to the burgundy wallpaper and the furniture, everything in the room appeared to be a hundred years old at least. Not that anything looked dull or worn-out or even dated because, together, everything seemed to fit into the same scene from the past. I got the feeling I was the one out of time.

The hostess was no exception to this general rule of the parlour. So close she was to being another antique that I missed her at a first glance of the room. She was looking out the window when I walked in. One hand was on her cane, and the other had a firm grasp on the heavy, velvety curtain.

'Samuel, is it?' She said, without turning. Her voice was raspy and deeper than I expected.

'Yes, hi. I'm a friend of Victoria. She sent me here.'

'I'm aware. I've been in contact with her.'

She was a slim elderly woman with abundant white curls held up in a bun. She was maybe a foot shorter than me. The years bore heavy on her shoulders, made her slouch, but she still maintained a certain elegance in her posture. She wore a white silky dress with a black lace shawl.

'Thank you, Anna,' said the old woman to the blonde. 'Could you bring us some tea?'

'Yes, ma'am. Would you like me to help you to your chair first?'

'Just the tea, please,' replied Catherine. Then shifting towards me, 'I'm sure this young man can lend me his arm?'

I hurried across the room and offered her my arm.

Catherine had a lean face. Her eyes were small but wide open, and her eyebrows arched broadly, giving a certain tension to her expression as if she was permanently about to jeer.

‘It’s been a while since I walked on the arm of a handsome gentleman.’

I laughed and helped her to her chair. It was a tall wingback chair. She sat on it with poise and finesse as if it were a throne.

‘I love your house. You must really like antiques.’

‘Thank you, my love, but when you are as old as me, you can hardly call them antiques.’ She sniggered. ‘In fact, that’s a word better left unsaid around here.’

I nodded. She asked me to sit down on the small ottoman next to her, which I did.

There was something else to the room, invisible like a scent. The smell of dead flowers before they wither, strong, moist and almost indistinctly putrid.

‘Victoria told me what happened. But I would like to hear it from you.’

I told her everything about the book, about the writing and the vision.

‘Have you ever been diagnosed with schizophrenia?’

I hadn’t.

‘Any personality disorders? Narcolepsy?’

I said no.

‘And you’ve never been contacted by any other spirit? You’ve never had any mediumship training, messed around with a Ouija board?’

No, no, no. My answers never changed.

‘I just need to know what is wrong with me. I need this to stop.’

Anna knocked on the door. She walked in carrying a platter with the tea and some garibaldi biscuits. Catherine motioned Anna to approach and whispered something in her ear, and she nodded and left.

‘There is nothing wrong with you, as far as these visitations go. Have some tea.’

I had a sip. It was good tea. It immediately helped me calm down.

‘Tell me something about yourself.’

Strange. ‘Like what?’

‘A part of your past.’

I hesitated.

‘I need to get to know you before I can work on you. The more I know the easier it’ll be to help you. You’re not American?’

‘I am,’ I cleared my throat. ‘Not from the US, though.’

Catherine seemed confused.

‘I’m originally from Costa Rica. That’s Central America. *Latin America*.’

‘Alright.’

‘I’m a single child... I arrived here in September. On the fifteenth. That’s our Independence Day.’

‘Come again,’ said Catherine, ‘it’s your...?’ She leaned forward to hear better.

‘Independence Day.’ I tried to speak up. ‘It’s the same date for most of Central America. We didn’t have a war for it, or anything like that. Someone signed a declaration of independence in Mexico and we were sort of a package deal.

Independence was passed on to us.’

‘And you wish they had fought a war.’

‘No, not at all,’ I corrected Catherine. ‘That’s not me. It’s not the way I was raised.’

‘Well then, who are you?’

‘I dunno.’

‘How were you raised?’

‘To get things passed on to me. I guess.’ I chuckled nervously.

Catherine sighed. ‘You bore me, love. You need to tell me something juicy.’

‘Juicy,’ I repeated, puzzled.

‘Good memories have substance. They have deep roots and are terribly different to what actually happened.’

I thought for a moment.

‘There’s a tradition back in my country called “the lanterns parade.” At night, on the fourteenth, the same day I left, people usually gather on the streets with lanterns to commemorate something called “the passing of the torch.” It’s a relay run, kind of like in the Olympics. It symbolises the news of independence arriving in the country. I left the country right before it started.’

‘Hmm-hm. That’s an improvement. But I need you to make more of an effort. Try again.’

‘I don’t understand what any of this has to do with my problem. Victoria said we needed to find out what she wants from me. Can we start with that?’

‘This has everything to do with your problem. If you can’t do this, I can’t help you. We won’t even try.’

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

‘I want you to look forward towards that wall.’ Catherine pointed to the wall opposite me where the fireplace was. ‘Pick a point and keep your eyes on it.’

There was a fire screen before the fireplace. The wooden frame was ornate, and the central panel, the screen itself, was a tapestry of a couple embracing in a courtyard.

‘That’s beautiful,’ I said, pointing. I didn’t have the word for it then.

‘The fire screen? Oh, the needlepoint? I made it myself. It was a dream I had many, many years ago.’

The woman on it was arched back, knees bent as if she was fainting and the man was catching her. I told Catherine it was a fine piece of art.

‘It always rains during the lanterns parade. Every single year. It’s rainy season then.’

Catherine laboriously lifted herself from her chair. My reflex was to help her.

‘No, no,’ she said. ‘Eyes to the front.’

‘It is tradition to make your own lantern, usually out of paper and cardboard. Though the most common type is a paper accordion design they sell in the shops. It’s striped red, white, and blue, like the national flag.’

I tried to continue, but I could see Catherine gesturing from the corner of my eye. I lost all concentration. I turned to her and said, ‘I really don’t understand what you are doing.’

Catherine shrugged. She seemed disappointed. ‘Would you feel more comfortable if I told you I’m training your peripheral vision?’

‘Oh, right... why exactly?’

She sighed. ‘Preparation, love. It’s preparation.’

‘Well, I have excellent peripheral vision,’ I said proudly.

‘Alright,’ she said, her pitch high, full of disbelief. ‘Have you noticed my handmaid?’

‘Handmaid?’

Catherine leaned to the side to see behind me. I glanced too, and there was Anna. She was standing in the corner, stiff, with her arms to the sides like a human post. She scared me pale.

Catherine thanked Anna, and she took her leave.

‘If we are to discover what this ghost wants,’ said Catherine, ‘We’ll need to give her a chance to speak.’

I agreed.

‘I’ll be putting you in a trance. So, I first need you to try and relax, okay? You think you can do that?’

I had a sip of my tea again and nodded.

‘Once more,’ demanded Catherine. ‘Really, throw yourself into the memory this time. Look inwards and paint me the picture.’

I gawked forward, and soon the needlepoint started going out of focus. I let it go.

I told her about that one time at school. I must have been around eight, barely half the height of the adults around me. There was water in my shoe. It squished if I stepped too hard. I could feel it cold. The sidewalk was wet too. There were puddles everywhere, glistening with the yellow streetlights and the swarm of candle lanterns that hovered around. Children were wandering about with them hanging on the Costa Rican equivalent of a shepherd’s crook – some ended in a hook; others were just a stick with a nail on the tip.

Some kid’s lantern was a three-storey house. Jesus! I’d never even seen a real three-storey house. Her father had to help her carry it. The broomstick it was on didn’t seem to hold, and they ended up carrying it like a birthday cake.

Mine was simple. A house too. Single storey. The typical design of a colonial adobe house. My aunt helped, but I mostly made it myself. If you looked through the red cellophane of one of the windows, you could see the mascot from the cereal box I used to make the walls. It was a toucan. That was sort of Costa Rican.

‘Where are you?’ said Catherine.

‘On the street.’

‘Is my voice reaching you on the street in Costa Rica, in the past? Samuel, tell me where you are.’

I snapped back and turned to Catherine. ‘I’m here. I’m in Audbridge at your place.’

‘Good,’ she replied. ‘You must always be aware of your own presence. You are not a ghost.’

‘Of course,’ I said, somewhat impatient.

Catherine sighed. ‘The difference won’t always be so clear.’ She stepped back slowly and plopped down on a chair at a small round table on the side. ‘Some spirits will try to convince you they are equals to the living. But there are fundamental differences we mustn’t forget.’

‘Yes, fundamental differences,’ I said, yawning. I felt drowsy and very calm for some reason.

‘The spirits are not what they seem. As long as I have you under a trance, they will appear as solid as you and I, but you must remember their bodies are gone. Buried.’

‘They are dead. I’m not.’ I yawned again. ‘Let’s do it.’

‘You are already under.’

‘Am I?’ My voice sounded distanced.

‘You seem to have a talent for it. Your willingness helps.’

It sounded like something I should be taking seriously, but I scarcely managed to care about it. ‘I *am* willing. Just don’t try to make me do anything strange.’

‘No need to worry. This is only your first time, and you’ll probably forget you are in a trance as soon as I stop talking about it.’ There was a calmness in her voice, but there was also power, control. If I closed my eyes, I could clearly picture a much younger woman talking.

‘Could you stand up, Samuel?’ requested my hostess.

I did so.

‘Now walk to the fireplace. On the mantle you’ll find a red pouch.’

I’d barely noticed the fireplace. Beautiful to look at. The tiles were dark green with a loopy yellow pattern, and the mantel and frame were a fine reddish wood. There must have been twenty pictures on it. Small, old photos in black and white, more like grayscale in golden frames.

‘It’s a small velvet pouch,’ repeated Catherine.

I found it and headed back. It was filled with little somethings that clicked and clacked inside. The sound made me think of poker chips.

‘So, this is part of the training?’

‘This?’ she asked. ‘Oh no, love, this is just for me. My help is not unconditional.’

She poured the contents of the bag on the table. Dozens of tiles rattled out onto the lacquered surface.

‘Do you play Dominoes?’

Chapter Twelve

Catherine said I would forget I was in a trance as soon as she stopped talking about it. That didn't happen so fast. But perhaps because I was making an effort to remember, I didn't notice when darkness filled the room. I swallowed hard. The impenetrable absence of light reminded me of that other vision in Market Square, when Lori had had to help me up from the mud.

I did see the exact moment light returned. A white sunbeam cut the blackness at an angle. The light made the air come alive with dust particles floating confused in twirling currents, downwards and upwards, against gravity and the stream of light pouring down on a drafting table. That table and the window from where the beam came appeared at the same time. Both solid, in a perfect tangent to accommodate the ray of morning sun, its beginning and its end. Next to materialise was the man bent over the table like a worm, face half-lit, hanging from the darkness as if from a noose, a stranger whose face meant nothing yet.

He was sitting in the corner where the light from the window could reach. Nothing else was visible in the blackness. I went to him in the shadows, my fingers against the rough edge of some wooden counter, guiding me on a straight line. He kept his eyes on the paper. He frowned at the drawing and his lips moved slightly as if he was having a conversation with it. He was too absorbed by his work to notice me. I stood next to him, watching him draw on a paper sheet framed between two T-squares. He erased and redrew, swapped pencils twice, and tried half a dozen instruments to get the angle he wanted. I watched over his shoulder for a while but couldn't make sense of the schematics he was working on. I laid my hand on his arm and let my fingers run

along the outline of his shoulders as I crossed behind him. He didn't feel that either. Skinny lad, his shirt was too large for him.

The rest of the diagram was spread out over the entire table, but his drawing instruments were on top, and only parts of it were visible. What I could see beneath two wooden set squares reminded me of a carburettor. Another part was partially covered by a case of compasses. It looked like an astrolabe. These parts were intricate devices in themselves but seemed designed to fit together into a single, more complex machine. I understood nothing of their function, so my attention quickly drifted to their beauty or at least to the beauty of his drawing, the neatness of the lines and perfect contours, the immense amount of work palpable in the level of detail. He was a proper draughtsman. There was a charm to watching him in action, painstakingly drafting over that tiny section of the paper.

'You need more light,' I whispered.

It was a strange sound – my voice. It seemed to come from a distance as if I was listening to a crunchy old recording of it, but that barely recognisable echo of my voice wasn't nearly as unnerving as the realisation that, up until then, I hadn't heard a thing in that place. I had been completely deaf. My senses were numb, like on that first vision of the past of Audbridge. I could've panicked again. I could have surrendered to the smothering sensation of being cut off from the world, crushed by the realisation that I was in a place where I didn't belong. I could have lost it, but this time, I didn't. I didn't because I knew I was having a vision. Awareness was the key. Since I realised the absence of sound, I could commit myself to hear. I began to perceive the graphite against the paper, and the harsh fabric of the draftsman's sleeves grazing the side of his shirt, the bench creaking as he shifted his weight. I managed to hear his voice repeating, 'I need more light.'

The man stood up and reached for a handle on the wall, cranked a mechanism, and a system of blinds in the ceiling began to open. I stepped back to watch it work. A shaft stretched three or four meters up to the ceiling to turn a set of gears at the top, which in turn opened the panels on the ceiling. The white sunlight dropped in a beautiful striped pattern. My hand shot forward, open wide to catch one of the rays, as if light was something you could grasp. Its weight, its texture, those were things I never noticed before.

The room welcomed the clarity. It revealed a workshop. A narrow spiral staircase led to an 'L' shaped inner balcony with flowery iron railings. The feature gave the impression that at one time the room possessed a level of refinement that it now lacked. The walls were unpainted, filled with shelves from top to bottom. There, the man had laid his tools, callipers and wrenches in different shapes and sizes, gauges with dials, tongs hanging from the sides and coils of wire. There were boxes piled in corners and glass jars everywhere. He had a lathe and a drill press cast in iron and a black stove that matched. Two large tables occupied the centre of the workshop, one on each side of an enormous machine that I could not identify but looked as if someone had fused all the brass instruments of an orchestra into a single monster of a device. I turned to see the draftsman get back to his drawing table and his fine delicate instruments, too neat and ordered to match the rudimentary appearance of the rest of the room.

He went back to his project and I had just about started peeping around when we were interrupted. There was someone at the door. The knocking was forceful and monotonous like a military march, to which the glass jars clinked and the metal bits rattled on the wooden shelves. He hurried to comb his hair back and tucked his shirt before he opened the door. And in strode another man, an older fellow yet more robust

than the draftsman, who looked bony and juvenile in comparison. His boots dropped heavy on the floorboards along with that cacophonous tapping of his walking stick.

‘The deed is done,’ said the older man, his chin up high, his look stern. ‘Smith has finally given up his warehouse. I tell you, seldom have I encountered a more miserably obstinate character. And to think he calls himself a businessman.’

He spoke with passion, but I couldn’t determine whether it was joy or anger he wanted to express. He gave no indication of seeing me.

‘That is good news, Mr Quast. I’m glad to hear your plan is finally on its way.’

‘Our plan, my boy.’ He came closer to the draftsman and laid his hand on his shoulder. ‘Our plan.’ Quast patted his shoulder. ‘You must see the warehouse. It already has the canal flowing in. All we have to do is expand the pool and we shall have all the water we need.’

‘Expand the pool? Mr Quast, perhaps we should start on a smaller scale?’

‘What? You want us working in a bathtub now? Nonsense!’ shouted Quast, hammering his walking stick against the floor. ‘We are in a race, my boy, and the competition is ahead of us. Haven’t you seen Diesel’s new patent? This one is better.’

The younger man nodded in agreement.

‘I’m afraid his new engine will become something of relevance,’ continued Quast. ‘Benz has got a new one too. The Americans...’

‘They are not working with spirits.’

‘It’s never been about the spirits! Never mind where you get the power from, my lad. It’s all about how we use it. It’s about making it efficient, profitable. It’s about seizing the market at the right moment, money flow, investors.’

‘I don’t care for money.’

Quast's eyes darted with anger towards his partner, but his hostility dissipated before he replied. 'And you think that's all I care about.' He sounded more disappointed than anything else.

The young man denied the accusation and apologised.

Quast fumbled in his jacket pocket for a pair of spectacles as he approached the drawing table. He didn't put them on but used them as a magnifying glass to inspect the schematics. He leaned close enough as if to smell the ink on the paper.

'You are encrypting these with a different code,' he said. 'I don't recognise it.'

'I'm testing a new heliocentric method,' replied the draftsman.

'Helio—' Quast seemed baffled.

The younger man cleared his voice. 'I'm taking every precaution. This is important work.'

'That's an understatement,' said Quast. 'This will be our patrimony, but remember, a partnership like ours is built on mutual trust.'

Quast dragged a tattered wooden chair from a corner and sat. 'Sit down, boy. Let me tell you a story.'

The draftsman did so and his older partner began:

'One day when I still lived in Manchester, it must have been during the sixties, for Martha was still with us, some loud noise awoke me before dawn. Still half asleep, I heard what could have been a child crying. I left the bed to check what was happening, trod furtively around my own chamber, seeking to stumble upon that sound once more. Then there it was again, the sharp lament of a child, clearly identifiable, but it was coming from inside the wall.'

Quast raised his arm in a straight angle and touched the wall of the workshop with his cane.

'I laid my ear on the wall and listened. The cries were not a feat of my imagination; there was a child inside my wall. I went downstairs and found Mrs Robins, my maid, holding a gas lamp inside the sitting room's fireplace. The fire was not lit, and instead of a flaming log, I saw the bottom half of a man squatting at the hearth. Mrs Robins jumped when she saw me and attempted to explain what was happening before I could ask. An older man came out of the fireplace and was introduced as the dustman on his regular visit to clean the soot. He was barely able to look me in the eye when he greeted me. Mrs Robins seemed equally embarrassed, yet her reaction was the opposite of the dustman, jabbering nonstop, explaining herself and the man, who had come with a new apprentice. The boy, about seven, had climbed up the chimney and was now stuck a couple of yards in. I crawled inside the fireplace with the lamp and saw him with my own eyes. Locked in foetal position, the boy helplessly tried to hold his sobs. He was barefoot and I could reach his blackened toes with the tips of my fingers. His name was Emmett and I told him to stay calm and that I was going to help him.'

At this point, Quast stood up from his chair and began to pace around the room as he spoke.

'The master sweep suggested tying a rope to the boy's leg. It would, said the man, gain us enough leverage to pull him out. I, of course, refused such barbarism and after exhausting various kinder methods to free Emmett, I concluded there was no other way out but through a hole in the wall. I requested a mallet and chisel and with careful toil managed to bore a hole big enough to get the child out. I pulled him free with my own hands. We were both trembling, covered in soot and dirt. I could still feel the hammer reverberating in my hands. Imagine how little Emmett must have felt! I held him in my arms and sat with him by the window. Do you know what he said when I pulled him out?'

The draftsman shook his head.

'I'm sorry, sir. I slipped.'

The younger man seemed taken aback.

'Emmett smelled of brimstone and sulphur, even after Mrs Robins had cleaned him. He said he had been born working, and that when the midwife pulled him out of his mother, he was clutching a half-finished matchbox in his hand. When asked, he couldn't even remember when he'd learnt to make them. He asked me if I read the paper and if by chance I had any of yesterday's papers around. I asked him why and he said he could bring them back to the shop and the keeper would then rent it for three pence, out of which he would see a farthing. I asked him how much they could make renting the same day's paper and he said twice as much. As you might remember, I have been a subscriber of The Manchester Guardian for years, even back then when I met little Emmett. So I told him I read my paper early every morning and that by ten o'clock he could be sure I had no use for newspapers lying around in the house, so he could have it. You should have seen his face, that honest smile of a child.'

Quast gave a short chuckle and dropped back down on his chair. His gaze lost in memory.

'From that morning on, Emmett came by the house and collected my used newspaper daily. I spoke to him from time to time when I saw him, but regardless of that, the papers always went away. It became routine. Then, Martha fell ill and I forgot about nearly everything else, including him. A couple of years later I read in The Guardian that a boy named George Brewster had also become trapped inside a flue at Fulbourn hospital, but unlike Emmet, the accident had cost him his life. Upon reading this news, I called Mrs Robins to inquire if the papers were still being picked up. She said the boy had stopped coming over a year before. Later I learnt that Emmett had

become a chimney sweeper of his own, going in and out of smokestacks in the city. He was a clever boy; he never jammed himself in a flue again. Instead he lived long enough to die of cancer, Sweep's Cancer.'

Quast stood up, giving his back to his partner but facing me. A ray of sunshine fell onto his face. He frowned at it but let the light rest on his face. I couldn't tell if he was holding a laugh or a sob, but he let neither show.

'For the past fifty years men have been clearing the path for technology based on burning. They are nearly done,' Quast turned back to the draftsman. 'But I shall tell you I have no intention of living in a future where children have to earn their board by cleaning the soot off of house appliances or putting their tiny arms into the narrow exhausts of vehicles to sweep them.'

Quast moved towards the other man. 'Do you understand why we have an obligation to do this? We have the key to a world free of smoke and soot. I watched Martha die of lung disease and could do nothing. I saw the horrors of baby sweepers in my own house and I did nothing.'

'You helped Emmett,' interrupted the draftsman.

'I helped one child,' shouted Quast. 'One in thousands, and he died nonetheless... I barely had the guts to watch from a distance as better men intervened. I've been a coward, but I can't go on like that. I will put all fires out. We will put them out all at once.'

Quast sat down again. 'So no,' he said. 'Money is not all I care about.'

For a while, there was no sound other than the wooden vertebrae of Quast's chair cracking.

'I finished designing the main arc horns,' said the younger man, talking to his shoes. 'They should be enough to control the flashover peaks.'

'My dear boy, that's fantastic! Any problem with the bushing? The flux?'

They spoke of technical terms which I couldn't understand, steering the conversation around different parts of the device they were creating, until they landed on something they called 'the Nautilus'. Quast requested to see it, and the draftsman showed him the scrolls of paper with the design.

'I don't get it. These are encoded.'

The younger man smiled and started moving things round the room. 'I built my first orrery when I was sixteen,' he said as he cleaned up space. 'I did it without a scholarly purpose. I built it because I wanted to look at it.' He wheeled out a bulk under a blanket. 'This one I just finished.'

He uncovered an oversized orrery. It was a five-feet tall conical tower of gears laid flat one on top of the other. Brass arms stretched out sideways to support rods of different lengths, and on them the maker had fitted glass spheres for the planets.

'Heliocentric!' exclaimed Quast. 'I get it now.'

'Heliocentric,' confirmed the draftsman as he winded the mechanism.

Turned on, the centre sphere at the top of the device cast a light on the surrounding spheres and projected their tenuous shadows on the wall.

Quast praised the orrery for its beauty but still said he didn't understand how the decoding worked.

One by one the younger man removed the spheres and replaced them with small slides of his schematics. Moving the arms to align the slides in a kind of eclipse arrangement, the projections became something completely new. Lines superimposed, erased and bent each other, angles mirrored, new designs formed.

The draftsman turned the crank on the wall to close the blinds in the ceiling again. The faint light of his machine became brighter, the projection clearer.

'What you mustn't forget, Mr Quast, is that we are not building a four-dimensional object. That's impossible. We are recreating its shadow.'

The last thing I saw was the draftsman reaching for the curtain of the window. The darkness was never truly gone from the room. The shadows had writhed away from light, but they had recoiled into corners and lie flat under ledges like cockroaches. The draftsman brought them all back with one forceful tug of the curtain.

Chapter Thirteen

I must have been a horrible sight when I woke up from that first trance at Catherine's. My aunt used to have one of those baby dolls with the hard-plastic head and the eyes that open when they are sat up and close when laid down. As a child, it would always creep me out to see those mechanical lids open, the doll's glassy green irises fixed forward, staring at nothing. I must have looked a bit like that when I awoke, except my stare wasn't blank; it was full of dread. I couldn't breathe. I sat up, tongue rigid. Whatever air I managed to force in went through a slither of trachea and made a sound that went back in time, back to what I imagine were the noises of the first men, half human, half animal. It was the ghost of my voice, going inwards instead of out, the vocal cords acting backwards to produce a bellow.

Catherine patted my back and told me to relax.

'I was dying!' said I between coughs.

'Were you, really?' said Catherine, pouring me some water. The glass and pitcher clinked repeatedly in her trembling hands. She filled about half the glass and handed it to me. 'We were playing a nice game of Dominoes. Then you said you wanted to lie down. A moment later you're gasping and saying you are dying.'

My shoes were off, and I had my feet up on Catherine's chesterfield. I sat up straight, with both feet on the floor, and sipped my water.

'Dominoes?' I whispered. I glanced over the table. Catherine's set of Dominoes described a game abandoned halfway. Before she mentioned it, I couldn't remember, but once she had, my head was filled with the sound of the bones being spilled on the table and shuffled. I could see myself putting bone and bone together. I remembered their cool, smooth surface in my hand.

‘Oh darling, don’t you worry,’ said Catherine. ‘I know it’s hard to process, but that’s how it normally goes. Your mind enters a trance, but a bit of you stays put. Someone has to watch over your body, after all.’

Catherine slowly made her way back to the table. Her body swung and creaked like an old ship at high seas.

‘As you get better at disconnecting both parts, you’ll find yourself traveling farther away from your body and staying more aware of the present at the same time. I call it disassociating.’

‘Is it like a split personality thing?’ I asked.

‘It’s something else. The part that stays is still yourself. A bit apathetic, less responsive, lethargic even, like it is early in the morning before you’ve had your coffee, but it’s still you. I wouldn’t ask you for life advice but you’re still good enough to play Dominoes with.’

Catherine looked at the tiles on the table and sighed. ‘Now this hand is ruined,’ she grumbled. ‘I’ve seen all of your bones.’ She ploughed the dominoes to the centre of the table and began turning them face down. ‘Care for one more?’

I sat opposite her. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that she was telling the truth, the more real the memory of playing games with her became. As we shuffled the bones and picked seven of them to start the hand, I felt I had been doing that the whole afternoon.

‘You are worried about the workshop,’ said Catherine as she readied her bones.

‘What—what workshop?’ I asked, playing dumb.

‘Well, the young man’s. With the mechanical skylight and all the instruments. You wouldn’t stop talking about it a minute ago.’

Then I remembered telling her about it, sitting exactly where I was, talking and mimicking the man as he operated his machines. A chill shook my back. Not being able to remember was horribly disconcerting but having Catherine always one step ahead made it worse, made it eerie, as if her words were stitching memories onto the fabric of my brain.

‘Would I remember if you hadn’t told me?’

Catherine chuckled. ‘The present or the past?’ she asked, starting the hand with the double six.

‘You don’t remember the present,’ I replied puzzled. ‘You—you live it.’

‘And you can’t live the past, you’d say?’

I played a six/three, without answering her question. I didn’t know how. ‘I remember being at the workshop. A moment ago, I was sure I was there. Now I don’t know. It’s like it’s pulling away from me, more dreamlike the more I think about it.’

‘Only a little part of yourself is telling you it was a dream. Don’t listen to it. It’s a misconception that you have to leave one place to get to another.’

The bones kept dropping on the table, and slowly a domino snake slithered into shape.

‘You were talking about these two men. They were discussing a project of theirs.’

‘Yes, the schematics... but it doesn’t make any sense. I have no idea who those people were, and I didn’t see the woman with the black hair.’

I put my dominoes down and pushed my chair back. ‘I’d never lost track of where I was before.’

I stood up behind my chair. Catherine had done something to shoot me away to a place unknown.

‘You did this to me?’ It was the only explanation. ‘You did this to me.’

‘I’m just giving you the help you asked for.’

‘I did not ask to see that past,’ I said frustrated. ‘Those men, you put them in my head, didn’t you?’

‘I think you shouldn’t make accusations so easily, young man. In that manner, least of all.’

The shame made me flush. I apologised and stared at my feet.

‘Danger,’ I said in a more moderate voice. ‘Victoria mentioned things could get dangerous.’ I paced to the door and back. That horrible sensation of darkness all around haunted me. ‘Are these ghosts, demons? Are they something else?’

‘I wouldn’t let a demon into my house. Trust me, they have tried.’

A chill ran through my back. I sat back down.

‘No, love, these are dead people we are dealing with.’

‘Alright,’ I said, not truly comforted. ‘Can they hurt me? People around me?’

‘Spirits are just like regular people. Some are good, some are bad. Most are neither, and all of them can do you wrong if you provoke them.’

I was about to ask Catherine to clarify when she carried on, ‘Some spirits are like leeches. Those are dangerous. They’ll feed on your energy, your warmth. It’s not like they would die if they didn’t feed. But it helps them keep their essence, say, undiluted. It’s quite chaotic after death.’

‘Could they kill you?’

‘Kill you? No, not that way. But some ghosts, if they stick around for too long, if they convince the living to see them all the time, they can drive us mad. Those are the real dangerous kind.’

She paused. For my benefit, I think.

‘To be clear, love, I am speaking about long-term, “career” ghosts here, not your average dad, or auntie who just died.’

I shifted on my seat.

‘Oh, I’m sorry. I meant that figuratively. Is it a dad or an auntie you lost?... Wait, don’t say a word.’ She studied my eyes and spoke slowly without looking away. ‘No, she’s not the one causing you trouble. Rest assured your aunt is out of reach for us now.’

‘There’s a reach?’

Catherine looked at me with a certain coolness, her eyebrows arched like always. I could tell she enjoyed discussing the topic.

‘The spirits of the recently deceased are in transition. They’re easily confused, and it usually takes them a couple of days to leave this world. They may take a bit of your energy with them, but you wouldn’t even notice. No danger.’

Catherine leaned forward and touched my arm.

‘It is only when a spirit remains Earth-bound for an extended period of time that they become... difficult.’

Catherine asked me for some water. I poured her a glassful and she drank it all in one go.

‘This Lori of yours, the woman with dark hair. She was with you. You couldn’t see her because you hadn’t been so close to her before. You’d never been so close to anybody.’

I sat back down, striving to digest what Catherine was telling me.

‘You were watching through her eyes,’ she continued. ‘Stowing away into her memory.’

It seemed possible. In the middle of all the madness I was experiencing, it sounded like an explanation I could believe.

‘I don’t like that,’ I whined. ‘I don’t like any of it.’ But the truth was that I felt better. Maybe I was beginning to understand what was happening to me. I sat up straight and examined my dominoes, played the double four.

Catherine smiled and glimpsed at the two tiles she had left. ‘Oh, you got me,’ she said, reluctantly drawing from the boneyard until she found another four.

We kept playing for a few minutes. It seemed we both wanted to win that hand.

‘What else can you tell me about the men? You called one of them Quast. Did you hear the other one’s name, any other name at all?’

I told Catherine I hadn’t.

In Dominoes, at the end of a hand you got points for every pip of your opponent’s bones. The more they had, the higher you scored. After I’d made my move, Catherine and I were down to one bone each, with one left in the boneyard. I was one move away from winning, but it was her turn, which meant she still had a chance too. But even if she managed to take the game from me, the bone I had left was the double blank. She wasn’t going to get a score from me. I felt so proud of my strategy, I couldn’t avoid smirking.

‘What can you tell me about this scientific project of theirs?’ asked Catherine.

‘They didn’t say much I could understand. They were projecting some sort of blueprints on the wall. Some sort of electricity machine.’

Catherine snorted. ‘Is that all you can tell me, they’re working on an electrical machine?’ She sounded upset. ‘Nothing about its purpose? Its operation?’

I shrugged. ‘Energy? Wait... a cleaner source of energy?’

‘Are you asking or telling?’

‘Dunno.’

She sighed.

‘They said they were working with spirits too. What does that mean?’

‘It means they were crossing a boundary they shouldn’t have,’ said Catherine. ‘I can’t explain much until *you* find out more.’

She drew the last bone from the yard and held it up next to her other one. Then she examined the other pieces laid on the table. The domino snake had a two at the end of its tail and a blank for a head.

‘You do remember that a double-blank adds fourteen points to the final score?’ she asked. ‘It counts as a double-seven.’

I glanced down at my tile and then back at her.

‘Oh no. Don’t look at me like that.’

‘Like what?’ I said bitterly.

‘Like I didn’t tell you that rule at the beginning.’ It was her turn to smirk. I saw a tiny bit of my aunt Olga in her at that moment, around the wrinkles of her mouth. Though in reality, Catherine was nothing like my aunt.

‘You chose to forget it,’ she said.

Fuck. Once again, the memory took shape as soon as the words came out of her mouth. She had told me.

She matched the blank end with a blank/one. That left me no move. It sounds like the stupidest thing to get mad about, an old lady beating me at Dominoes, but in that moment, I wanted to slam my fist against the table and curse.

I quietly counted to ten in my head before I broke the silence with a ‘pass.’ The word tasted bitter in my mouth.

She then ended the hand with a blank/two.

‘How did you know I’m holding the double blank?’ I asked. ‘Did you cast some sort of magic on me?’

‘Magic? I don’t do *magic*. I’m a spiritual medium.’

‘Did the spirits tell you I had the double blank, then?’

Catherine gave a low growl as she laboriously stood from her chair. ‘You may come back when you feel more cooperative. For now, I think we’re done.’

‘But I haven’t got all the answers I wanted.’

Catherine didn’t reply. She collected the dominoes into their velvet pouch. Then she glimpsed at the score-sheet on her little notebook. ‘Sixty-five to forty,’ she said, without a pinch of excitement. ‘We’ll have to finish the game some other day.’

‘Mm-hmm,’ I agreed, looking under the table for my shoes, but I had no intention of ever touching another domino.

She walked me to the door of the parlour. At the threshold I reached for my wallet, but Catherine stopped me before I could even ask how much I owed her.

‘You asked me how I knew what bone you had in your hand.’

I nodded.

‘It’s easy if you pay attention to the other pieces on the table and remember. Remember other people’s moves. Your eyes are just an organ, a mechanism to carry light into your brain. You don’t need them all the time to see.’

I nodded again, though I couldn’t grasp what she wanted to say exactly. Catherine called Anna and asked her to open the door for me.

‘As for the woman,’ said Catherine just before I walked out, ‘Talk to her. She was human at some point. In her head she probably still is. Talk to her, like you would to any person, and find out who she is.’

I thanked Catherine and started to leave, but before I crossed the threshold, I went back and asked her if I could come back some other day. If I needed to.

She smiled and said, 'Of course. If you need. Whenever you need.'

Catherine played medium between Lori and me eleven times during the winter.

Once and again I lay on her chesterfield and sank into the past. She watched me slip in and out of Lori's world. Catherine saw everything between us. She saw all of us, naked, skinless, disembodied. Perhaps that's why she did it. It was enough for me to believe Catherine was helping me out of the kindness of her heart, but I could tell she enjoyed working with us too. The company injected life into her system, and above all, I must say, she enjoyed our little drama.

She could bear witness, to my shame, of how I fell for Lori.

Part III

Chapter Fourteen

‘Excuse me, hello?’ The way the Chilean girl elongated that final syllable made me suspect she had been trying to get my attention for a while before she brought me back to the present.

She showed me her ticket and asked me whether this was the right platform to get the train to Audbridge Central. She looked up concerned at the board of departures. The next train approaching was heading to Manchester.

I checked her ticket and told her they were fine, just a bit too early. ‘Your train won’t show on the board until after the next one.’

She tilted her head and stared straight into my eyes, brown as hers. I thought she’d recognised my accent, but she thanked me and turned to scold her companion in Spanish. ‘You see! We’re fine here. Just too early.’ She cared little about keeping her privacy. Perhaps she felt protected behind the language.

They were heading up to Hull and had to change at Audbridge Central.

Hull. It sounded as good a place as anywhere else, and I knew nothing about it.

Return. Open return. Single. That was an easy choice – all I had in mind was leaving. But then the ticket machine started mocking me, showing me all the railcard options I didn’t qualify for. Senior. Under 25. Family. *Two-together*. How about an N/A card, or ‘does not register card’? A DNR card, it did sound like an English thing.

Zoe and I could have gotten one of those discount cards together. Before she disappeared, we were almost inseparable. She would have disagreed. But she just wouldn’t understand that the time I spent with Lori didn’t count as ours did.

The next train to arrive on Platform One was our connection to Audbridge Central. The old model sluggishly squealed to a full stop and the Chilean couple laboriously carried their luggage across the gap and up the step. I must have been the last passenger on the platform. The anticipation tickled the inner layer of my stomach as I grabbed the handle on the side of the door and pulled myself on board.

I drifted inconspicuously along the aisle as the other passengers arranged their bags on the racks. I sat by myself, three seats behind the *Latinos* and witnessed the guy's futile attempts to fit their carry-on in the space overhead.

I looked out the window to the vacant station. That funny feeling in my stomach hadn't disappeared. I breathed in slowly, deeply, and remembered the last time I'd travelled by train. Early March. I was heading out to the countryside with Zoe – and Lori.

That one time, we were cat-sitting for a friend of Zoe who had a house in the countryside outside Audbridge. I never met the friend, and I never learnt her name, but her cat was called Joey. It was a tan-and-cream Siamese, who stared at me, looking either half-asleep or obnoxiously nonchalant while I stroked the back of his head and took off grumpily when I stopped.

Joey saw Lori too, at least the one morning. I got up early to take a piss and when I came out, there was Joey, waiting for me outside the toilet door. I picked him up and went downstairs. Lori was standing between the windows in the living room. The morning light cast trapezoid shapes around her. Only half of her body was visible in the penumbra. The rest was lost in the blinding whiteness of the world outside. She stood

motionless like one of those mechanical dolls in a cuckoo clock before the hour strikes. Joey's eyes darted towards her when she bid me good morning. He raised his head, spine arching and twisting to the limit of feline agility. I turned so he could see her better, and apparently, he did. The cat stared at her with those blue eyes of his, wide open, as I'd never seen them. No one else had seen her before. It felt weird. It felt like a violation. After all, Lori had been just mine until then, all and only mine. And this apathetic, blue-eyed Siamese was taking some of that exclusiveness away from me. Joey ruined everything. He reminded me that Lori was someone I shared.

An urge to prove my dignity spoke for me. 'I'm hers, you know. I'm Zoe's.'

'Yes,' replied Lori, softly, taking an equally soft step forwards. The light ate away more of her figure as she approached.

'Just wanted to make that clear,' I said. 'I'm taken too.' I came closer as well and stupid Joey freaked. He clawed his way up my shoulder and was out of sight in three long leaps. The escape left a small cut on my chest. Cats, man.

Lori backtracked, regained her figure in the shadows against the wall. She gestured to the opposite corner of the living room. 'May I?' she asked.

Zoe's friend had a piano in the corner. It was her grandmother's, I'd heard. I nodded to Lori, as if it was mine.

It was an old upright piano, dented and scuffed in several places, but the marks of time had not yet ruined its quality; the walnut wood with its polished dark-brown finish accentuated the floral carvings. It was probably far more valuable than I could register at that moment, but since I had never seen a piano in someone's living room, it became my standard of how most middle-class suburban houses looked, and for a while after, I believed centenary pianos were common in British living rooms. It broke my heart when someone told me they weren't. Either way, that one piano was a lovely

thing to look at, more so with Lori sitting at it. She cracked her fingers and let them glide over the yellowing keys as if they were her lover's back, the kind of touch that would still give goosebumps a week later. I watched her quietly, in anticipation of her fingers raining down on the keys. I thought of a light drizzle, a sweet, soft melody, but when her fingers finally fell, they fell with weight, with severity and preciseness, and produced a beautiful sombre tune.

I sat on the couch and listened, until Lori stopped abruptly.

'Well,' she said. 'Aren't you joining me?'

I sat on the bench next to her.

She smiled and said, 'We start with a C minor.'

My finger trembled, pushing down the key, and the note shivered out awkwardly. I'd never been so close to Lori. She smelled of sweet wood. I once had a guitar with that scent, slightly like vanilla.

A moment later we were playing. I didn't notice when we started. I wasn't thinking about it, but simply let things happen. The melody went up and down, from brightness sinking into darkness and back up again. My fingers at times light, at others heavy, they went where hers had just been, where they couldn't reach, where they needed to be. Lori's fingers answered with reciprocity. We fed on each other's harmonies, consumed each other. I inhaled her music and exhaled ours, once and again and again and again, both of us carried by the melody until the last note was spent.

I sat, silent, absorbing the scent of music left in the air.

Vanilla lingering still.

A loud whoop bolted from behind me. Zoe's voice. I jumped off the bench and hit my knee against the wood. When I looked around, Lori was gone.

‘I had no idea I was dating such a proficient musician,’ said Zoe. She was wearing her tartan pyjama bottoms and that cosy jumper of hers with the Little Mermaid.

I told her I was sorry I had woken her up, that I got carried away and lost sense of how loud I was playing.

She said she had no problem waking up to such beautiful music. Then she came and sat on the stool.

‘Do it again,’ she pleaded, pulling me down beside her.

‘I don’t think I can.’

‘Come on, Sam! I want to see you playing. It sounded fantastic.’

‘I’ve actually never played before today.’

Zoe nudged me and laughed. ‘Right, you prodigy.’ She started testing a few keys before she could find the notes she was looking for. ‘Wait, wait, I’ve almost got this,’ she insisted and began playing the introduction of a tune, cyclical, steady, sweet. She started singing, ‘I heard...’

She was a such beauty right then, that instant more than ever. My eyes welled and Zoe hugged me. We kissed. Then our clothes came off.

I couldn’t blame Lori for losing Zoe. It wouldn’t be fair. Even if I wanted to convince myself that she was an evil succubus who split us up, it wouldn’t make sense. Without her, I wouldn’t have boarded the right tram to find Zoe. By myself, I wouldn’t have been able to charm her into having a drink together. Lori had brought us together. It was Zoe who figured that out during the ride back to Audbridge after cat-sitting Joey.

Both of us were facing the window, looking at the countryside rush by. Zoe was leaning back against my chest. She was getting much better at showing affection in

public. I rested my cheek gently on her head and surrendered to the sedative power of the spring-morning fragrance of her shampoo. Outside, winter was almost gone, and the flocks had reclaimed the fields for grazing. I spent the first half hour of the trip snapping photographs in my mind of cloudbanks of sheep drifting on the grass and of the dark silhouettes of horses standing rigid among the silver patches of flooded land. They were images I'd never seen before. If aunt Olga had been there, she would have insisted on getting snaps of everything, on pulling the old Canon PowerShot out of its Velcro pouch and taking flash pictures that would mostly show her own reflection and the muck on the window. But she was not there, and that silver PowerShot had been sold, and my cheek was warm against Zoe's head. What my eyes managed to capture would have to do.

A memory came to mind, one of yellow flowers. Then I made my first mistake of the afternoon, asking Zoe when the rapeseed bloomed.

'Mid-to-late spring,' she answered. 'Around May, I guess.'

'Oh, shame. I'd like to see it.'

I thought the conversation would end there, but Zoe seemed to remember something. She reached for her bag and fetched her little notebook. This time she wasn't writing anything on it. She read it attentively, searching for something specific.

I asked her if she was alright. My second mistake.

She said she was fine, but then she sat up to face me.

'Remember that day we met on the tram?' she asked, holding my arm. 'You said I was like a field of rapeseed kissed by the sun.' She sat facing the window again. 'You said I was a view.'

‘Yes,’ I replied, elongating the word as if trying to remember, but the truth was that the memory of the day came to me immediately, and with it, I remembered its undoubtable connection to Lori.

Zoe seemed a bit weighed down. When I asked if she was sure she was alright, she nodded but then said, ‘It’s just that I’m realising it was a chat-up line.’

I asked her what she meant.

‘You made it up. You don’t actually remember watching a field of rapeseed, do you?’ She turned around. ‘I mean, you arrived here in September, yeah?’

I agreed.

‘So when did you see a rapeseed field before?’

I didn’t know how to reply.

Zoe pondered.

‘You also said you liked reading.’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Yes, well, the only time I’ve seen you with a book was at the Inn, before we even started dating.’

I tried to remember.

‘You brought that tattered book and pretended to read it to get me interested.’

She meant my copy of *Frankenstein*. Lori’s copy of *Frankenstein*.

‘Sam! That’s how you got me into your flat our first night. Did you get all those books in your flat to lure me in?’

She made me feel dirty.

‘I swear I used to read. I still love it. It’s just that that last book put me off reading a little bit.’

Sometimes I lied for Lori. Zoe wasn’t buying it.

‘I do remember the flowers.’ I truly did. I pretty much knew the memory belonged to Lori, but I remembered it.

‘Just say you lied, Sam. You played your cards well.’

‘But I didn’t.’

‘I would actually feel sort of flattered.’ She shifted on her seat. ‘Just don’t lie to me. The last thing you want to do is keep lying.’

I watched her get more and more upset, terrifyingly steadily.

‘Alright, alright,’ I said. ‘I probably made it up. It must have come to mind from a documentary or something.’

Sometimes Zoe made me lie too.

‘Maybe I read it somewhere,’ I added for my disgrace. ‘I also read poetry.’ That must have been my last fatal mistake of the afternoon, the cheeky punchline that left Zoe silent for the rest of the trip back home.

I didn’t lose Zoe for those slips of the tongue – though they did put ideas in her head. I lost her because I wasn’t there for her when she needed me. I lost her because I failed at not being an arse.

Chapter Fifteen

I could have easily blamed Lori for losing Zoe. But even if I wanted to convince myself that she had something to do with Zoe's leaving, anything Lori could have done to her must have happened through me.

By mid-spring Zoe and I were practically living together. We were watching the telly in her living room, just after lunch, when the bell rang. Zoe had been sitting on pins and needles the entire morning, and this seemed to be the climax of the excitement. She darted to the front door and held it half shut as she eagerly talked to the courier guy on the other side.

She came back, carrying a large brown box behind her back.

'I have a surprise for you,' she said.

'Do you, really?'

Zoe handed me the box and clapped as she pleaded that I opened it.

'What is it?' I asked, weighing it. It was extraordinarily light for the size of the box. I could've believed it was sealed empty. I opened it and removed the bubble wrap around...

'What on Earth is this?' I said perplexed. My first thought was of an ornament made out of deer antlers. I pulled it out carefully. It was like looking at an octopus from below. Six red and green tentacles, or horns, curved out of a black face. It was a mask – some sort of demon. There were cut-outs for the eyes and either a toothed beak or a snout in the centre. The whole thing was painted with yellow polka-dots.

'It's a Boricua mask,' said Zoe, 'like from your story.'

She meant an anecdote I'd told her about this indigenous people in Costa Rica.

'Oh, you mean *Boruca*!' I told Zoe. '*Boricua* is... that's from Puerto Rico.'

Zoe's smile disappeared. She snatched the mask from my hand and examined the invoice.

'It's a whole other country,' I said, slightly offended.

'I know it's a whole other country, Sam. Don't mock me.'

Her mistake upset me. This was Zoe. If she couldn't tell the difference, nobody would. Of course, I regretted being so harsh a second later when she started to cry.

'Hey, hey, hey, it's okay, Zoe. I'm sorry. I totally ruined it.'

'I feel so stupid,' she said, forcefully wiping the tears from her cheeks.

'Don't! Boricua, Boruca. I wouldn't have come that close. I'm surprise you remembered.' I'd told her the story over a month before.

She sat down and hit the arm of the couch with her fist. 'I wanted it to be a surprise. I blew it.'

'Babe, I love it. I love masks!' I tried it on. 'How does it look?'

'You look hideous.'

'I bet you can tell I'm smiling underneath.'

Zoe chuckled and snorted.

I took the mask off and kissed her. 'Thank you. Really.'

Zoe sighed and wiped her eyes. 'There's a masquerade next month, on the 25th. It's a charity event. It's important, the mayor will be there. They asked me to sing.'

I told Zoe that was wonderful news, then looked down at the mask. 'We'll have to cut around the mouth,' I said. 'I'll want to kiss you at some point that night.'

On the 25th, I knocked on Catherine's door all dressed up in costume. What I called costume was a suit and a tie, a bargain from *Next*. I could have passed for a firm

executive. In reality, the only thing out of the ordinary was the Boricua mask I was carrying.

I'd tried to cancel our session for that day, but Catherine had made it clear that we couldn't slack. We still didn't know exactly what Lori wanted, and Catherine believed she could become frustrated and volatile over time. I did convince Catherine to see me early in the afternoon, though. That way we would have plenty of time before Zoe's masquerade. I also made her promise to bring me back before it was late.

'I'm not certain why Puerto Ricans dress up as demons,' I said to Catherine. I was lying down on her chesterfield with the mask in my hands. It might have something to do with rebelling against the Spanish. I know that's why the Boruca do it.'

'What was this anecdote you told Zoe?' asked Catherine. She was sitting on her porter's chair, dignified as always, both hands resting on the handle of her cane.

I sat up and placed the mask on a table nearby. There was little I kept from Catherine by that point. Not only had she made it clear that my stories were the currency she would take as payment for her services, but every memory I shared with her brought me a bit closer to Lori.

'The Boruca are these indigenous people from the South of Costa Rica, from a place called *Curré*. It's a rural town with houses scattered here and there among the banana plantations.'

Catherine reached out for her cup of tea and held it close to its matching porcelain saucer.

'They gather every year to put on this drama that lasts three days.'

'Drama, you say?'

‘They call it a game. The Boruca put on the masks and take the role of *diablitos*, or “little devils”, who have a series of confrontations against a Bull – that’s someone else in a bulky costume representing the Spanish conquerors. The devils crowd around the Bull and tease it, and the Bull rams them to the ground, if he can. They carve their masks out of balsa wood and hand paint them.’

Catherine put down her cup and grabbed the Puerto Rican mask Zoe had given me.

‘They’re nothing like that, really,’ I said. ‘You won’t find horns like those in Boruca masks. They’re usually quite beautiful, colourful angry faces, tongue sticking out, overemphasised frowns, animal traits, sometimes.’

‘And this offends you?’ She showed me the mask.

‘It doesn’t *offend* me. It’s just that...’

‘Yes?’

‘It isn’t the mask I’d like to wear.’

‘Hmm. Lie down again,’ said Catherine. ‘Show us these masks.’

The burning sun beamed through the plantain trees and the cloud of dirt all around someone’s back yard. I could taste the dry earth in the air. I could feel it sticking to the sweat of my arms, on my face. I felt it going through my nostrils and down my throat.

The sound of struggle was as invasive, as if every dirt particle carried a yelp, a whimper, a groan, all together with the blowing of conch shells and drums. It was the devils raising the cloud of sound and dirt from the ground. They hustled and skipped, fell and got back up. The Bull knocked one of them to the ground and a few others ran to his aid. One taunted the Bull while two others pulled at the burlap costume of the fallen devil.

The *chicha* was also the colour of dirt. That is what they called the traditional alcoholic beverage, locally made out of corn.

A young fellow passed on a bowl of *chicha* to me. ‘Drink, brother. Drink,’ said he. I brought the bowl to my lips and he gently held it up, making sure I downed it whole. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back as the bowl emptied. My aunt used to say I should be grateful to my grandfather for my Spanish passport, but in that moment, as I swallowed the *chicha*. I felt like shit.

That was the last I saw of the Boruca that day at Catherine’s. The day in *Curré* turned black. It wasn’t that day became night. It was that darkness of the mind, that thick, cold darkness that I had seen in visions before.

‘Lori,’ I muttered instinctively. She was the light that made moments like these pass. ‘Lori, please!’

‘Open your eyes,’ she said, in a whisper that seemed to come from nowhere, except within.

‘Open your eyes and follow me.’

I hadn’t noticed they were closed.

When I opened my eyes again, I was somewhere else. It was night, and a cold drizzle felt like hail against my face. My hand went up to protect my face and I nearly fell. I was running. Lori was running ahead, clutching up the skirt of her dress as she sped along the towpath of Audbridge’s canal. I recognised the place immediately. That part of town still looked very close to how it did a hundred years ago, especially at night. The brick and stone structures stood the same. Even the streetlights kept the traditional style. The gas-lamp heads were hexagonal with bevelled glass panes. With

their warm, tenuous light, it was hard to tell whether the place belonged to Lori's world or mine.

I had no idea when we'd started running. I was trying to catch up with Lori, and she kept glancing back at me as if she meant to stop and wait but couldn't. She too was chasing someone. From what I could see in the dark, he was a man in a grey mackintosh. He must have been half a block ahead, but we were getting closer. The coat made him look either too tall or too skinny. I couldn't decide which as I was running. There was something else strange about him. He seemed to keep a slow, leisurely pace, but we were having a hard time catching up with him. Lori and I were sprinting, but we weren't drawing near as quickly as we should.

The man went on scanning the buildings to his right. I glimpsed them too when I ran out of breath and had to break my pace. Hands on my knees, I looked at the structures some twenty feet away behind black bushes. The buildings were collapsing into each other as if they were merging, as if the lines of brick were just shapes in a drawing with no real density, or volume.

I started running again, and my thighs were instantly burning. I was cramping, hungry, aching. I could hear my body complain. I thought I was going to have to let Lori and the man get away when he stopped. She did the same, and the distance between us disappeared so fast that I almost crashed into both of them, as if I had been a mere foot or two behind them when they halted.

The man in the mackintosh turned to me. Lori mirrored the movement precisely but a fraction of a second after, an unnerving delay effect. Her eyes were wide and on me, but her mind wasn't where her gaze was. 'Ezra,' she called. I couldn't tell if she was talking to me or him.

The name echoed in my head. It was the first time I'd heard it.

Lori's gaze focused back on me. 'This is the place,' she said, her arm projecting to the aside, pointing towards the brick building across the bushes. 'Seek Ezra.'

Suddenly Lori was standing even closer. She reached to touch my face, first gently, but more forcefully in the end. Her eyes were full of worry. 'Be watchful!' she cried and dropped me to the floor. It didn't feel like she'd pushed me. It was as if I couldn't support my own weight. I fell flat on the spot, like a puppet whose strings got cut. When I sat up, she was gone. Ezra was gone too.

I was out of the trance, but I wasn't at Catherine's anymore. I was sitting on cold, wet floorboards at the point where the towpath turned into a bridge. The puddles of rainwater, the darkness, they matched my vision. I must have walked out of the house in the trance. Catherine had let me.

I arduously stood up. The drizzle had stopped, but the backs of my trousers were damp and cold. I looked both ways of the towpath. The stony surface glistened in the yellow light of the lampposts. There wasn't a sign of anyone as far as I could see.

The bridge where I was didn't go across the canal but ran above an inlet some three meters wide. It was sort of a perpendicular gutter. I leaned against the rail of the bridge to see the two-meter drop to the bed of the inlet. It must have fallen out of use long before, and now there was an actual bed in there – just a mattress and some blankets, but someone had definitely nested down there.

I stayed in the darkness for a while, looking but not looking at things around me. The name Ezra kept me thinking. Not only that. But the way Lori had said it, her tone, her arching eyebrows. She loved him. And she was afraid for him.

'What kind of an asshole name is Ezra, anyway!' I yelled at the darkness. The words came out effortlessly. I started making my way back the towpath and distinguished something lying on the ground a few meters ahead. That familiar

sensation of being punched in the stomach returned as I recognised my mask, Zoe's mask lying on the damp floor. 'Shit!' I rushed to pick it up. Then I kept running. 'No, no, no, no, no.' I was late again.

Chapter Sixteen

The Fine Line was built as a music hall in 1877. The stage was straight ahead, at the end of the hall as you walked in, five feet above the ground floor. It was empty. I could almost hear Zoe thanking the crowd and wishing everyone a good rest of the evening. I glanced up to the mezzanine and, beyond that, at the spectacular glazed vaulted roof. The word around was that in a good night you could see the stars. I couldn't vouch for that. The night was dark and starless when I walked in.

I made my way across the sea of masks and found Zoe's table upstairs. I began apologising before I even reached it. Still I wasn't sure how much of my remorse could be seen through the mask. I hugged her tight, but she wasn't as effusive. My mask knocked on hers. She was wearing a Venetian style mask in black and gold with black lustrous feathers on one side.

Zoe was sitting with two other women. They were wearing matching masks, black and silver with rhinestones. I greeted them and we were introduced. Bea was tall with blond curls. She was a born-and-raised Audbridge girl. Priya was her opposite, a tiny woman with straight black hair. I had met her before at another bar called *The Raven's Nest* when I mistakenly thought she was flirting with me. The memory flashed as soon as I saw her, and I felt embarrassed again. I remembered the custom and asked if I could get anyone a drink as soon as I could, but everyone's glasses were nearly full. I was going to ask Zoe for a moment when Priya said to Bea, 'Sam, here, is from Puerto Rica.'

'Costa Rica,' I corrected. The irony of my Puerto Rican mask made me laugh.

'Uuuu Costa Rica,' said Bea as if we were talking about the sexy movie star she fancied. People did that sometimes; they heard the name and pictured themselves

sunbathing at the beach. Bea's wine must have turned into a *piña colada* in her hand just for a moment. 'So, what's it like in Costa Rica this time of the year?' she asked.

I told her the usual. Temperature wise? Nineteen to twenty-eight Celsius, most of the year was like that. I explained they had only two seasons over there: rainy and dry, which was a bit less rainy. But people often called them winter and summer.

'Hmm, so you get the solstices but not the equinoxes,' said Bea.

I chuckled, trying to be nice. Though I couldn't tell whether it was a joke or if she really thought we didn't have equinoxes over there.

Bea drank her wine and said, 'I don't get it. Why come here if you could be where you can actually get some sunshine?'

'Win something, lose something,' said Zoe.

I said I actually liked the weather in England. They laughed and I said I meant it; that hot days were okay for holidays, but I always preferred the cold. It was still a new, fascinating experience.

Intentionally or not, Bea had started a secret game: sip your drink and ask a question. Priya jumped in next as if she had a record of the rules from some night in college.

'Have you met any other people from Central America living in Audbridge?'

I told her I hadn't, omitting that one conversation I'd had with a Colombian. I didn't say I wasn't really looking for them. Instead, I even used the word 'unfortunately'. I was still trying to be nice to Zoe's friends, but then it crossed my mind that my answers were relevant only as cues for making the next question. It became obvious it was a game, a bar game like darts, and I was the target.

'Why did you come to Audbridge and not London?'

'How long did it take to get here?'

‘We are not suffocating you with too many questions, are we?’

‘Guys, leave him alone,’ said Zoe, but she was laughing with them. That annoyed me more than her friend’s questions.

I excused myself and went to the toilet. I took my time, tried to appreciate the building. The cast-iron pillars had stood solid over the years, housing first a music venue, then a comedy theatre, a warehouse, a counselling office, and a curry restaurant before finally becoming a free house. You could read lots about the history of the place while standing in front of the urinal.

I bought a pint on the way back to the table. Screw etiquette.

Callum was sitting on my chair when I got back. He was another of Zoe’s college mates. More smile than face, he was one of those guys who took really good care of their looks. Neat haircut, fancy clothes. His mask covered only the left side of his face, *Phantom-of-the-Opera* style. He said he was showing his less handsome half, for the rest of the men’s benefit. He was telling one of his stories about himself when I returned to the table – the first of a few I heard that evening. Callum paused to shake my hand. Apparently, he hadn’t changed a bit since college and still had the habit of arriving late wherever he went. He had just landed back from some exotic trip to Malaysia, or Burma, or Singapore. He jumped from one place to the other as he talked, which made it difficult to keep track of where he was when he gave his Crocs away to a poor person on the street or when he had the spiciest soup he’d ever had, or from where he’d flown back to the UK.

‘I, for one, find traveling immensely gratifying,’ said Priya. It sounded like something she’d quoted from her book.

‘Tell that to Zoe!’ said Bea. ‘One quick holiday to some exotic country and she gets admirers flying in from around the world just to see her again.’

‘Bea!’ exclaimed Zoe.

Priya raised her hand and said. ‘I confess I’m officially envious.’

‘You are embarrassing me, and Sam.’ She was right.

‘Besides,’ said Zoe, ‘he didn’t fly in just to see me.’

‘Of course he did,’ said Callum. ‘Why else would he come to Audbridge?’

‘I love it here,’ I said. ‘It’s a beautiful place.’

Callum scoffed, and Priya did her best to hold a patronising laugh.

‘Come on, buddy,’ he said. ‘You are not going to tell me you came here for the view.’

The word *view* brought back the fight I’d had with Zoe over the rapeseed field. I glanced at her, and the horrible idea of calling her a view again crossed my mind. When I looked back at Callum, I didn’t know how to respond.

‘Exactly,’ he said, and that could have been the end of it. But he insisted. ‘I’m going to put you on the spot, buddy. Tell us what put Audbridge on the map for you.’

I thought I could tell him I wanted to go to a place I didn’t know much about. I could have told him I wanted to board a plane and get to a country where they didn’t speak my language; that I wanted to board train after train, to get off just to board again, and again until I could be sure I’d reached a place that had no connection to me. I thought about telling him that. But who the hell was he to tell him anything?

I shrugged.

‘I’m sure this town has plenty to offer,’ said Priya.

‘Aside from Zoe, of course,’ said Bea with a laugh that Priya copied.

I didn’t laugh along. I told him I had discovered I liked Steampunk. ‘Or maybe, I discovered a name for what I already liked. I’ve always been fond of mechanisms, and old analogue devices, and things that look Victorian.’

‘Oh, you’re talking about the guys that dress up in top hats and, what is it?... goggles and gas masks,’ said Priya.

‘Yes, well, dressing-up is quite an important part of it.’

‘Sam’s acquired a few items himself,’ said Zoe.

‘Have you?’ snapped Callum. ‘I think the last time I wore a fancy-dress, I dressed up as Begbie.’

‘The guy in *Trainspotting*?’ asked Bea.

Callum nodded. ‘Sexier, though.’

They went on joking, and I kept talking, in my head. I was telling them Steampunk was not just about clothes but that it was also about fabrication and upcycling and, just hanging out being nice to people.

Callum took me by surprise when he nudged me and asked, ‘So has this beautiful lady joined you in your Steampunk adventures?’

‘Lori’s been awesome about it,’ I said, looking at the shapes of the dry foam stuck on my glass. ‘Zoe!’ I corrected. ‘Zoe’s been simply great about it. She hasn’t been to one of those events yet. She said she will, though.’

Callum kept smiling as he had all night. Priya and Bea nodded and sipped their drinks. A second later, everyone was distracted, talking about something else. They may have not even noticed I said the wrong name, but Zoe had. She didn’t have to ask me to join her outside. It was clearly the place to be.

At *The Fine Line*, the stage was straight at the end of the hall. The windows on the front doors were narrow, but still I could see it standing outside on the street.

Zoe removed her mask and asked, ‘Who is she, Sam?’ Her arms were crossed. She was sleeveless, and the cool air from outside was giving her goosebumps.

I took off my mask slowly, making time for thinking.

‘Tonight is not the first time you’ve said her name. Who’s Lori?’ Zoe’s frown disappeared when she asked me again. An impenetrable expression replaced it. She wasn’t simply hurt. She looked sharp, as if she thought the question would gain her the upper hand in our argument, as if she already knew who Lori was and she just wanted to test what I would say, to use it against me. To hurt me like I had hurt her.

The world froze at the question. The wind held her hair to the side. The intermittent white LEDs on the window next door sparkled off her eyes one last definitive time, and the noise of the crowd inside the pub died along with the pop-rock they had on. The drunk shouting at the chippy a few doors down, the couple smoking next to us, the cars and buses in the distance, they all went quiet. The entire city joined me in this longest, most embarrassing moment of silence.

Zoe had found the one question I would hesitate to answer, the one question that would keep me silent long enough for her to lose her trust. Was that what she wanted?

‘Say something, Sam. Just say something!’

‘Lori is not a woman.’

Zoe was taken aback. ‘Is he a man? Is that what this is, the big secret?’

‘No, she’s not a man. She’s...’ I had no language to describe her.

‘You have to speak to me. Every time you don’t tell me something, I assume the worst.’

And what is that? I almost asked. I wanted her to tell me, to accuse me of cheating. *That*, I could’ve denied instantly. Whatever was happening between Lori and me couldn’t be called cheating. I had convinced myself to exploit that loophole.

‘She’s something else,’ I sighed. ‘I tried to tell you about her once. In the beginning. You didn’t listen.’

'I didn't listen!'

We were catching some attention on the street. There weren't many people around, and most avoided direct eye contact, but one or two glances were enough to make me uncomfortable.

'Come on, Zoe. You're making a scene.'

'I don't care if I'm making a scene!' She paced a few meters up the street and back.

'Can we just go?' I asked. 'Can't we just go home?'

'Who the hell do you think you are, Sam?' She was calmer now.

'I'm nobody. Can't you see that? I have no stories. I'm no one.'

'I don't get why you have to say things like that.'

'Yeah, well I don't get why you can't be a little more supportive.'

'But I do support you, Sam. I've always tried to be there for you, but it's been seven months, man, and I still can't get a grasp of you.'

I told her she knew me better than anyone else, and she told me that wasn't enough, that I wasn't even trying to tell her what was really in my head.

I scoffed.

'That's your problem,' she said. 'You enjoy it. You enjoy keeping your distance, being outside of things.'

Maybe she was right, and she didn't know me after all. Distance was the last thing I wanted.

'Does she call you Samuel or Sa-mu-el?'

I must have seen Zoe trying to pronounce my name in Spanish a dozen times. She still looked cute doing it. I tried not to smile.

‘She’s never said my name. She only wrote it once.’ I let out the most pathetic laugh.

What? she mouthed. Then she looked up and grunted. ‘Is this some kind of a joke to you?’

My laughter grew louder. I was nervous, didn’t know what to say.

‘I give up,’ said Zoe. She didn’t even sound mad anymore. She walked back to the bar’s door and said, ‘You said you wanted to go, Sam. Go. I’m giving up; I think—I think we are done.’

A group of masked people was heading into the bar. The last one held the door open for Zoe. ‘Coming in?’ he asked. She said yes. I saw that door close many times behind Zoe, and every time I remembered, it felt like a hole in my chest.

I watched Zoe through the window. She disappeared in the crowd almost instantly, and just like that, I lost her. I didn’t realise it fully that night. I just stood there, watching the empty stage, and said nothing.

I probably would have gone in again. I would have put on the mask and walked straight in. But just as I was ready to, something stopped me. It was a voice I couldn’t hear. I felt it instead. Lori. I tried to listen above the conversation of the two guys smoking across the street and the muffled noises of the crowd inside the bar. I listened for Lori’s voice above the police siren fading away in the distance, and the sound of traffic, and the chatter on the street. I heard her whisper my name, a whisper that was louder than anything I’d heard that night, and the name was in English. I felt angry.

I started searching for her. I needed to see her. I strode long, and I strode fast. My feet led me downhill again towards the canal. I didn’t notice where I was until Lori’s voice came to me again, and I stopped.

‘Is this a joke to you?’ I asked aloud. ‘You are married!’ I yelled. You can’t love me if you still love him, I said to myself.

‘Oi!’ yelled some guy from across the street. He was a husky man, wearing a red Arsenal hat and a green parka. He approached me and asked if I was alright.

‘What’s that?’ He asked, about the mask in my hand.

It was nothing. I told him. He was close now. ‘Looks like something,’ he said. He warned me that I shouldn’t be walking around there all by myself. ‘Come on, mate. You know what this is,’ he said next. ‘Just give me all of your money, yeah.’

I attempted to run but it was too late. He blocked my escape, and some other guy came from behind. I didn’t see him well at all. He smacked me near the ear. Then they pushed me against the wall and knocked me over. Punches came and went. I couldn’t get back on my feet. All I could do was to put my arms up and try to cover my face. At that moment, down on the hard pavement, my brain turned primeval. Thought was reduced, and there was only the pain and the squeaky noises of the nylon jacket of the guy doing the hitting, the groans and whimpers.

I must have lost consciousness.

Chapter Seventeen

A heavy hand landed on my shoulder. Only it wasn't really my shoulder; it was Ezra's. The hand was Quast's, and I was watching them from the side. I was both close and distant, in and out, with them in the past but apart.

'Walk with me, my boy,' said Quast. His voice was deep as one would expect from a man that robust. The words rumbled as if he was murmuring into my ear, instead of Ezra's.

They were both wearing hats and coats. I recognised Ezra's grey mackintosh from before. We went downhill, though I was so drained that it felt like trudging uphill. We were strolling down an alley between tall industrial buildings. The night was gone but we were still walking in the shadows. The clouds were bright and white above, but light was scarce at the bottom of that manmade ravine. The rain had just stopped. Some of it was still dripping from the black pipes that held to the brick walls like vines. It had been a heavy shower, and water still ran in a stream down the street.

Ahead, a group of homeless people covered from the running water. They were sombrely leaning against the wall as if in line for execution. Someone saw us coming, and the whole gang grew restless. That scared me. The group was large, made of people in obvious poverty, and Ezra and Quast were dressed in a style that exuded richness.

My mugger's red hat dashed from one corner of my eye to the other. The memory of the pain seeped into my vision, his knuckles on my ribs. I instinctively covered my face and curled down.

Glistening wet asphalt. I was back just outside my flat, twenty-first-century Audbridge as normal as always. The street was empty, showered in yellow light from the lampposts. I glanced around the usual cars parked on the side of the road, my neighbours' windows closed, tellies flashing like lightning behind drawn blinds. At first, I had no idea how I had arrived there, but by the time I got inside and closed the door behind me, I had a clear notion that I had walked home while I'd been with Ezra and Quast. Disassociation, Catherine had called it.

I must have had a concussion because my vision blurred again.

'On your feet, you lot! Here comes the boss,' yelled a man from within the group of homeless people ahead. He had long hair bound at the back and thick sideburns. He did not belong with the poor. He was only slightly better groomed, but he looked better fed. His clothes were not new, but they fitted him well and weren't ragged. He was Quast's foreman, I learnt later, a loud man who spat when he spoke. The crowd obeyed his commands. All except a small boy who sprang out from behind the first line of men and ran directly to Quast.

'Please, sir, choose me. I'm good for it.'

'Good for what?' asked Quast.

'Good for anything, sir!' replied the boy. He was a little wee one. 'My mum is over there. She's good too.'

Quast lifted the boy's chin and examined his unwashed face. 'I seem to remember you. Do you come every day?'

'Most days. Whenever I can, sir.'

'When was the last time I let you in?'

'Oh, long ago, Mister. I can barely remember what's like inside.'

Quast chuckled. 'You mustn't lie,' he said.

The boy looked surprised first, then embarrassed at being caught in a lie. He apologised to his senior. Quast reached into his pocket as he leaned down towards the boy. A coin changed hands almost imperceptibly. 'Don't let the others know I gave you this,' whispered Quast. 'It is a job I pay you for in advance.' He patted the boy on the head. 'I can't use you or your mother today,' he said aloud. 'Not today, but remember to keep coming back.'

The child acted disappointed but grateful. He hid the coin inside his mouth and rushed back to the group where his mother waited.

Quast told Ezra to stay and wait for him, and we both watched him stride towards the group. Quast's building had a large rounded entrance with a heavy double-door gate. The foreman had managed to marshal the indigents at both sides of it. Quast walked the length of the crowd and studied people's faces. They stood quietly as he went by, except for the mother of the little boy, who greeted him when he passed them. She thanked Quast and took her leave without complaint.

The woman and her child came our way, and Ezra stopped her to ask what was going on.

'The boss picks someone different everyday,' she said. 'If you're lucky, he lets you in. We can only try and wait for a chance.'

She had one hand on her son's shoulder and held her shawl across her chest with the other one.

'Why wait? Why come here so far from the city centre? There must be other jobs.'

'A day of work here is worth three anywhere else, my Lord. It's worth the walk. It's worth the try.'

Ezra glanced at Quast, who was going through the inspection of the potential workers, and then back at the woman. 'And you come here everyday?'

'The boss likes it that we keep trying. He never picks first timers. You have to prove you want it.'

The boy mumbled something no one understood. His mother told him to spit the coin out. 'It's good money. I don't want you to swallow it,' she said.

He spat it onto her hand and repeated, 'But he never picks you twice in a row.'

Ezra nodded. Then he gave the woman some change. 'Here, ma'am, pay your landlord.'

'But we have no landlord!' snapped the child.

Ezra blinked in surprise. 'Where do you sleep then?'

'We have a corner. It's only damp.'

'You sleep on the street?' asked Ezra.

'Yes, my lord,' said the woman. 'With my sister and her husband too.'

Quast's voice resounded in the distance. The woman took that as her cue to excuse herself. She told Ezra she needed to get a head start over the others, thanked him again, and left, hurrying up the hill with her son.

In the opposite direction Quast was speaking to the rest of the homeless.

'I need twelve today,' he said and went up and down picking three men, four women and five children from the group. He told the rest to come back the next day, that there would be more work, like every day.

The first drops of another shower were falling as the foreman took the twelve inside the building. The rest of the crowd dispersed quickly, perhaps because of the looming rain, but most likely because they were all in competition for the next job. Some of them came our way. Faces like those, I had seldom seen before, so full of

disappointment yet with a spark of resolution in their eyes. Those were the eyes of fighters, of survivors, people who wouldn't just sit on their bums and beg. They were the kind that would come back the next day and keep coming every day until they got their turn into Quast's warehouse, or found a better option. It seemed there was no better option.

Quast gestured for Ezra to follow him inside.

Past the gate, a long, roofed gateway led to what appeared to be a small court. The foreman led the new workers there. We stopped by a door halfway to the court. While Quast unlocked it, I listened to the foreman briefing the new workers gathered in the rain. He talked about tiers, but I couldn't grasp what he was saying.

The door led to a spiral staircase. It was made from cast-iron and shook as we climbed it. Quast's heavy footfall was echoed by Ezra's, but I noticed my steps gave no sound against the metal. I stamped harder and had no sensation in my feet. Then I saw I wasn't wearing shoes and realised I was standing on my kitchen's worn Formica floor.

The lights were off, and the sliver of moonlight coming from outside was tinting my flat with hues of blue. My eyes were already used to the darkness. I must have been there for a while. I should've been creeped out, but I wasn't. I was relieved, actually, to know where I was, to be back home, back to safety. My head hurt too much to be creeped out. I tried washing my face at the sink. It hurt to touch it, so I simply let the water run down my face. It crossed my mind to call Zoe, but then I realised the guys who mugged me had taken my phone. I still had my wallet but all the cash was gone. It crossed my mind to head down to Zoe's, but I didn't want her to see me all swollen up. She would've worried. Besides, she probably wasn't expecting to hear from me until the next day, if ever.

Ice, I had to put some ice on my bruises. I knew I didn't have any but still looked in the fridge. I'd seen in the movies that a bag of frozen peas worked fine. I didn't have that either, but there was a bag of chicken nuggets in the bottom drawer. Just as good.

I turned around to get a towel and gasped alarmed when I saw someone in the shadows. 'Who's there?' I shouted, and she stepped closer to the freezer's light and the smell of stiff chow mein and spilled ketchup.

'Jesus!' I cried. 'Lori? How long have you been there?'

I startled her back into the darkness. A part of me wanted her to stay there out of sight, to run back to that Ezra of hers and let me sulk alone, but even as I thought of that, the other half of my brain kept reminding me how much I loved her face.

'Wait!' I said and asked her to come back.

Lori stood at the threshold of the kitchen. She said she was concerned about me and wanted to apologise.

Calmed now, I told her I was alright, just a bit sore. I wrapped the bag of nuggets in a kitchen towel and held it against the side of my head. Lori kept standing at the threshold. She looked worried and embarrassed. I told her I wasn't mad anymore, that it hadn't been her fault, that I should have known better than to walk around alone so late, in an unknown place, calling attention to myself, breaking my stride when someone approached me. I had broken all the rules of the survivor. I'd practically begged the muggers for it.

The bag of nuggets smelled bad, so I tossed it back in the freezer. As I did so, it dawned on me that Lori had guided me back home when I fell unconscious. I didn't thank her. I didn't feel I needed to. Instead, I extended my hand and said. 'Come on. Let's try again. But I'm staying here in the flat.'

She smiled and took my hand.

I returned to Quast and Ezra at what I suspected was Quast's office. The room wasn't too fancy, but it was comfortable. The fireplace was simple, unadorned and had a couple of thick logs burning. The furniture was all wood and leather. Quast's desk and chair were beautiful but commonplace. Mahogany, they probably seemed more beautiful to me than they did to them. The weather had worsened. I knew that because the room had three tall windows overlooking the canal. Raindrops hurried down the glass leaving long thinning trails. Outside, they hit the canal in their millions and gave the surface goosebumps. The opposite wall of the office was covered with wooden shutters, which I initially took for regular wood panelling until Quast opened them. He looked excited – in his own stern way. Behind the shutters, there was a set of glazed doors. These faced the main floor inside the building.

'Take a look,' said Quast, raising his voice above the muffled clanking from the other side.

Ezra and I approached the glass slowly, gradually getting a larger picture and a clearer sound of what Quast had created. The new hires we'd seen earlier were but a fraction of Quast's labour force. We were looking down at a large open-floor warehouse, with rows and rows of working stations. There were people working at augers and presses, and hammering, cutting sheets of blackened metal, riveting pieces together. I took a second glance at Quast's office and realised it was indeed quite fancy compared to the room below. The walls were brick and the floor unfinished wood. It was busy and unwelcoming.

'What are you doing here?' asked Ezra, perplexed.

Quast leaned forwards and pointed. 'Those women are winding copper wire. Those children are greasing parts, those are dusting, those others... I can't tell from here.'

'Yes,' countered Ezra annoyed. 'But what are you really doing here? This is not the project.'

'Oh, but it is. What you see is only a part of it.'

Ezra gazed pensively at the workers. Most, but not all of them were wearing white aprons and caps, practically a uniform. 'Are you running a poorhouse?' asked Ezra. 'Is that it, you are being subsidised by the government?'

'The government?' broke Quast. 'It shocks me how a mind as perceptive as yours can conjure such non-sense.'

Ezra sulked for a moment, then asked: 'Why are you doing this? Why paupers, why children?'

'If I don't employ them, somebody else will,' replied Quast. 'At least this way I can keep an eye on them. I pay them adult rates, keep their quotas low, same as their hours.'

Quast slid the doors open and led us to a small wooden balcony, then down a staircase straight to the factory floor. The place was noisy with metal banging on metal, and sawing, and foremen yelling instructions, and mumbling voices. I noticed most of the workers at the stations were adults, but children went around the floor sweeping and scrubbing. Every so often a child wheeled a trolley among the stations. The finished parts went into it and the child wheeled it out who-knows-where. There were several children at that task. Each collected specific parts and went out through different doors. The workers noticed our presence, and the boss received several head bows, but the work never stopped.

'Children can't be children in this day and age,' said Quast to Ezra. 'Not even under my eye. We must do our best with the means we have.'

Quast picked up the pace towards a door at the far end of the warehouse. He took a gas lamp from a shelf nearby and unlocked the door. A short entryway led to what used to be the outside of the building. Quast had closed the alley between two buildings and created a waterway leading straight into the canal. It was a manmade cave, roofed and walled with a narrow bridge connecting one building to the next.

Quast lit the way and stopped in the middle of the bridge. 'Earlier, you saw me give money to that boy outside.' His voice was grave above the echoing water. 'That was me, setting a bad example. I apologise for that. You must understand, Ezra... A fair return for honest work, that's the elemental principle. People must feel they have earned their wages, even when you know the toil to be a mere illusion.'

'Illusion?' asked Ezra.

'Dear boy, you crossed the entire factory floor and you didn't notice?'

As Ezra pondered in silence, Quast's mouth wrinkled into a smile.

'They do and then undo', said Quast. 'It's not obvious, of course. A man polishes a screw. Two tables away a woman fits it into a barrel that someone else has handed her. A child takes it to another room and greases it. Another one brings it back to another man in a third room who dismantles it, and the process goes on and on until the same screw returns to the first man, or whoever is doing that man's task that day.'

Ezra's face lit up, and Quast's hand landed heavily on his shoulder. 'A single rotary screw compressor can employ an entire family,' said the older man, smiling. Then he took Ezra into the next room, saying that there was more to the business he had to show him.

I lingered on the bridge after they carried on. I watched the black water flow, so easily, so constant, down the slope and out through a grate. I looked closely at the crescent-shaped grille and realised I had seen that before, only I had seen it from the outside of the building. I had been there with Ezra and Lori, the point where the waterway joined with the canal.

The light grew poorer as Quast walked away with the lamp. I rested my chest on the railing and lowered my head. My eyes were on the surface, on gallon after gallon rushing by. Then I got the sense I was slopping down towards the current, slowly, the way gravity pulled molten glass. I was standing on the bridge but still so close to the current that it splashed on my face. The water sizzled against my skin. A cloud of steam broke when my head plunged down. I sublimated and felt unbounded.

Floating away in a cloud of steam was delightful, but then I suffered its equivalent opposite, dropping solid onto my bed. Scientists would call it ‘deposition’ when gas turned into solid without going liquid first. I didn’t know much about how it worked, but I was certain about one thing: deposition fucking hurt.

I woke up, aching, a few more times that night. Every time, I tried to connect with Lori, but it didn’t work. To see more of Quast’s building, I would have to go there myself.

Chapter Eighteen

The Marsh was a good twenty-minute walk down the hill from the city centre. The name was said to have originated in the sixteen-hundreds, when it was all flooded meadows on the banks of the river Leen. In time, the river was diverted; the canal was built; the meadows drained, and by the late nineteenth century, everybody said they called it The Marsh because when it rained too much all the city's street water and litter flowed down there and flooded the houses of the poor. That was just what they said. It didn't really happen – that often, anyway.

I walked down the same narrow street where Quast had led Ezra. My ribs hurt if I moved too fast, so I tried not to hurry. The morning sunlight was drawing angular shapes on the building tops, but like in my vision, shards of shadow were rising from below. The brick walls were too tall to let the sunbeams touch the bottom. The whole block seemed abandoned, Quast's building in particular. The windows at street level were boarded up, and the ones above were just too high to see anything inside. I went straight to the gate. It was the same one I had seen before, only the red paint had faded and blended with the dark tan of the wood. I ran my fingers on the wrought iron fittings, still solid but rough to the touch. Some grime stuck to my fingers, which I immediately tried to wipe on the wood. I knocked a few times but there was no answer. I wasn't expecting one, to be honest. There was a lock, but no doorknob I could turn. I instinctively gave the door a little nudge, but there was no way it was opening.

I kept going downhill and took the towpath to the right. I had chased Lori the same way the night before, but in the daylight, without Lori, it was a different place altogether. The years had caught up with it overnight. Dry, prickly bushes separated the buildings from the path. The natural barrier was several metres wide and flanked the

buildings like barbwire. The odd plastic bag or sweet wrapper decorated the spiky twigs.

I made my way to the little bridge where I'd fallen the night before. The grate on the wall of the building was probably twenty metres away. The pattern of the grid was the same. It had to be the outlet I'd seen from inside. There had to be a way in through it. The bridge was a couple of feet higher than I remembered. Still, I was resolved to get down there.

I was going over the railing when a man's voice jumped out at me. 'Hold on, chief! What are you doing?'

He didn't shout at me, but the words came out as a clear warning. I froze with one leg on each side of the railing. There was a man down on the inlet, tucked in a corner looking up at me.

'Where do you think you're going, lad?'

He must have been in his fifties, but I probably remember him older than he was. His face was quite bony, with a greying moustache and stubble. He was wearing a fiddler cap, which confuses my memory of him with the image of an old sailor. I can see him wearing a reefer jacket with the collar up as well, but *that* I'm surely making up.

I put both feet back on the bridge. 'Nowhere,' I said. 'Actually, I need to take a closer look at that building.' I pointed. 'I need to check that grate over there.'

'What, the drainage?' asked the man, scratching the back of his neck. 'Well, you can't jump in here. Can't you see I'm having me coffee?'

He was sitting down on an old, stained mattress, holding a cup in both hands. I felt ashamed and disrespectful. It did seem like I was barging in during breakfast. I sat down on the edge of the bridge and apologised for that and for startling him.

Then the strangest thing happened. He recognised my shoes and asked me if I'd been there the night before. It turned out that he had been sitting in that same place the previous night, during my whole scene on the bridge. He chuckled when I asked him what exactly he'd seen, but I told him I was being serious and he said he'd watched me standing by myself on the bridge. I asked him if he'd heard me say anything, but he'd only heard me mumbling.

'Then you collapsed,' he said. 'I thought you fainted or something, but you got right up and walked away.'

'And you were standing right there?'

'I was sitting right here on my spot.' He tapped the stained mattress and the springs inside rattled. 'I was going to help you, but I don't know. You can't be too careful these days. Lots of crazies out everywhere, and ah... No offence but you have an accent.' He looked down and bit his nails. 'Oh! Wait, wait, wait. You were talking about some guy named Ezra. I used to know an Ezra. A bastard, that one.'

I made up some story about talking to Ezra on the phone. I don't think the old sailor believed me, but then I changed the subject to how I got mugged later that night. I showed him the bruises on my ribs and the cut on my lip. That worked in my favour.

He gave me a long 'fucking hell, man' and told me I had to take better care of myself and that the best way of not getting mugged was simply not being there. 'Take me for example. I could've given you a hand last night when you fell, but...' he tapped his temple with his finger. 'Better keep it quiet. You never know these days.' The second-best option for protection was numbers, he said. Being around people, friends, buddies.

I thanked him for the advice, and we continued making small talk until I found a way into the question, 'You don't have other friends down there that I can't see, do you?'

His eyes narrowed. 'No one right now.' He snorted and I thought I had pissed him off, which was the last thing I wanted, but luckily, he didn't seem to find me too annoying. 'Oh, I do get visitors here, mind you, but it works fine for me to go unnoticed most of the time.'

He sipped the last of his coffee. 'So,' he said. 'After you had jumped down here and probably broken me stuff and made a mess, how where you planning to get back up on that bridge?'

I blanked, and he laughed. Then he told me to go back and look close by for the path through the bushes. I did what he told me and found a kind of tunnel through the prickly bushes, which led down to the paved floor of the inlet. The sailor was waiting for me on the other side. He was squatting down, leisurely weeding the stony floor with his fingers. When he stood, I could see how tall he was, much taller than me, and thin, very thin, a combination that made his features strikingly long.

Closer to the building, the bed of the channel sloped up in such a smooth curve that you could barely notice where floor became wall, the kind of thing skateboarders loved. Up close, the grate was much larger than it looked from the bridge, about a head above mine in diameter, and the bars were about an inch thick. When I saw the rusty crust on them, I thought I could break them. I found a rock and started banging on the metal. The foolish effort made a racket but had no effect on the bars, and worse, it spurred the pain on my side and shoulder.

I looked behind me and saw the sailor leaning back on the slope, watching me nonchalantly, the way a cat loiters.

‘So why d’you wanna break in?’

I could see he was more comfortable around me. His speech fell into a relaxed and very particular rhythm, something odd, halfway between the jeering attitude of a dirty joke and mimicking baby-talk.

I told him somebody had showed me an old picture from inside the building and I wanted to see what it was like now. Then I started hammering again. I jammed my thumb on the second try.

The sailor seemed indifferent to my shouts and curses. ‘Nah, for real,’ he said. ‘Someone dared you or... is it a wager? How much did you wager?’

He was now lying head down on the slope. Blood was rushing to his head, and the veins on his neck and brow were swelling up. I couldn’t take him seriously. I turned around without answering and tried bending the bars, levering with my good hand and my feet. When that didn’t work, I kicked the grate in anger.

‘This is really important to you, innit?’ he asked.

‘Yes!... Yes, it is important to me.’

His eyes were fixed on me. ‘If you tell me, I may be able to help you.’

‘I doubt it.’ I tried to ignore him, but I could feel him gawking. There was no real danger in telling him. ‘You really wanna know? A ghost told me to.’

The way he straightened up reminded me of meercats when they stand to look out. ‘What do you know about ghosts?’ he asked.

‘I’ve seen one or two.’

He came closer and whispered, ‘There are ghosts in this place.’ He shushed me. ‘They hear when you talk about them.’

He told me I wasn't getting in through that grate but that there were other ways. He gestured towards a pile of rubble tucked in a corner nearby. I didn't get what he meant, so he raised his hand to his moustache and pointed with his little finger.

'What? Something under there?'

The sailor nodded, holding back a giggle. He ran back to his place underneath the bridge when I started moving the rubble away. It crossed my mind that he was playing a joke on me, that at any moment I would find a stinky animal carcass buried or get a spray of sewer water from a busted pipe. But I kept on with the job anyway, and to my good fortune, there was indeed something else hidden under the rubble. It was a smaller grate, not bigger than a regular manhole cover.

The sailor skipped back and brought me a tatty nylon jacket, which I thanked him for but avoided touching as much as possible. He had put on a similar one, in plaid. It was clearly oversized and kept sliding off his shoulders. He peeked into the culvert and went on to squat next to it.

'Well? Open it!' he said, referring to the grate as if it was a Christmas present.

I was about to start levering when I got that funny feeling again. 'Wait. Why don't *you* open it?' Being mugged the night before may have left me paranoid, but I still think the question was justified.

'I don't need to go in. You do. If you want in, you have to do it yourself.'

I lost my nerve and stepped back.

'Where are you going, chief?'

I didn't answer. I was too busy asking myself why I was following this huge rough sleeper I had just met into the sewer of some abandoned building. I turned around and strode back out.

I stopped at the threshold of the path through the bushes. Or rather, I was paralysed with indecision. I heard a voice telling me all the things I should have been doing. I still had to find a new phone. I had to buy some pain killers. I couldn't even remember if I had work that day. I had to talk to Zoe. Then I looked back at the building, and the voice going through that list died out. Would I come back if I left now? I really didn't know.

I picked up a stick from the ground and swung it around a couple of times. It was dry but solid enough to defend myself. I was ready to smack anyone in the head if they tried something funny.

The trouble was that the sailor wasn't where I left him. I thought he'd gone away, but then I noticed something odd on the grate of the culvert. Fingers! It was the sailor inside the sewer and hanging from the grate.

'You're back,' he said. The tunnel sloped down and I could only see the top of his body. Everything else beneath his shoulders was pure darkness. 'What's the stick for?' he asked.

I told him there could be rats down there. He didn't seem to care about my excuse and simply replied, 'You coming?' and let himself go, sliding into the darkness.

I painfully wriggled down the dirty, wet pipe, feeling every single one of my bruises, and landed on slippery brick. The initial whiff took me by surprise, though it wasn't worse than the stench of a blocked sink drain. The real problem was the darkness. I tried standing up and hit my head on a damp stony ceiling. Then I reached into the blackness and touched a wall on the side, but it wasn't just brick I felt. The wall was covered with a thick layer of something slimy. I gagged and wiped my fingers on my clothes, but they were also covered in some muck. Then I regretted not taking the jacket

the sailor had offered. I stooped rigid in the darkness for a horribly long moment, chin buried in my chest, in contemplation of the stupid decision I'd made going down there. I shouted for the sailor but there was no answer. Nothing, until he giggled.

‘Where in the hell are you? I asked.

He lit an oil lamp. The rasping sound and the burst of fire in the dark scared the hell out of me. The sailor was close enough to blind me with the light. I could have killed him, but I was also glad to see him and to see light.

‘What on Earth is that?’

‘It’s a Davy lamp. Here.’ He gave it to me and lit up another one. ‘They are all over the place.’

We were inside a long tunnel. You had to crouch a little, but it was fine for walking. The brick was black and only a small section of the walls, the exact bit I'd touched, was covered with tan and orange slime. My fingers left an impression. Ahead, the sailor marched past a bend in the tunnel. It was impossible to see where he was heading, but I could see his light moving away. Standing there by myself, I could think of nothing better than to follow him.

We reached a cavernous sewer chamber. It was three times bigger than my entire flat. There was a large round pool in the middle with wide curving gutters spreading from it. Altogether, its spiral shape reminded me of those satellite pictures of hurricanes. The ceiling was tall and vaulted, with a skylight in the middle. I imagined that at some point the light dropped on the water of the pool directly below, but now the glass was dirty, and whatever light came through the brownish filter spread only tenuously around the rest of the chamber.

A dodgy ladder dropped about three storeys from the side of the skylight to the bottom of the chamber. The sailor pointed up to a trapdoor at the top of it. He said that

was our way and began climbing. A wiser man would have followed him immediately, but I was feeling an urge to explore the place a bit more. A number of gutters joined in the centre pool from all directions, making it difficult to tell from which the water came in or drained away. I went closer to the centre and shone some light onto the milky olive current only to realise that there was no actual current. The water wasn't flowing anywhere. Then I began hearing something. Metal scrapping. Perhaps also the wavering ding of a bucket. I leaned towards the water and the sound became clearer.

At the top of the ladder, the sailor pushed the door open and climbed out. The day light from the upper floor ripped through the blackness. It was enough for me to make out shapes in the shadows. I thought I saw a figure standing in one of the tunnelled gutters. I pointed my lamp towards it, but there was nothing to see. I moved the light away and there he was again. It was a man. Water up to his knees, he plodded on, cleaning the gutter with a shovel. I redirected the light again, and one more time he vanished when I shone it directly at him. I turned the lamp away and saw not one but two men. The other man approached from behind the first one, scrubbing with a wire broom in the manner of a rake.

I spoke to them, but they didn't reply. The scrapping and splashing were now loud and clear, and I was getting anxious. I shouted at them, but they made no response. I tried to shout at the sailor, but I don't think my voice came out loud enough. The men kept coming, relentless, unnervingly slow. Their silhouettes were blacker than any other shadow. They carried lamps like mine, but there was no light shining from them. I lost my nerve and dashed up the ladder. I didn't look back but I could feel them hot on my heels. The decrepit steps rattled and wobbled as if every piece of it was loose. The bolts fixing it had begun to give and I could feel the entire structure leaning towards the side.

I couldn't stop rushing. I felt if I didn't reach the top fast, I wouldn't reach it at all. I pushed up with all my strength and went flying through the threshold.

I pushed myself across the floor and kicked the trapdoor closed. Whatever strength I had left went into crawling back to the opposite wall.

The white light in the room was blinding, but I could see there were two men in the room with me. I recognised their voices before I could get their faces in focus. They were Ezra and Quast.

I was at their feet, bruised, filthy, and panting, yet they gave no indication of noticing me. I raised my hand to them. I held my palm up for as long as I could – for as long as I could bear the heartache of knowing they wouldn't stoop to reach for it; for as long as I could stand the agony of hoping they would. I held it. Held it. They didn't see.

My eyes shut as if by their own will. My hand turned heavy and dropped. In my head, it kept falling and falling. But eventually someone caught it. I wasn't truly expecting that. I tuned in again and saw the sailor sitting by my side.

'You okay, chief?' he asked.

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'Have you been there all along?'

He looked around in confusion. 'You mean here?' he asked. Then he stood up and closed the trapdoor I could have sworn I closed before. He pulled me up and said, 'Listen. I don't enjoy this particular place very much. I'd be much more comfortable upstairs.'

What I'd thought was a room wasn't one at all. It was an empty circular shaft with stairs winding up along the walls. It went up at least five storeys, all the way to another skylight. From where we were standing, the sky was a featureless bright disk.

Directly below, in the middle of the floor was a round well. It wasn't truly a well but the brick casing of the skylight I'd seen down from the sewer. It had a metal grille covering the glass.

'You ready?' asked my friend.

I told him to keep going, that I needed a minute but that I would see him at the top. Yes, I'd be alright, I said. Yes, I was sure.

The sailor didn't look so much like one anymore. The magic was in his fiddler hat and he wasn't wearing it any longer. I asked him about it and he said it had flown off. He started climbing up but I stopped him not far from the bottom.

'Hey!' I yelled. 'What's your name?'

He said it to me. He said it, and I heard it, and I cared for it. And before the day was gone, I forgot it.

Going back to where I left off with Quast and Ezra was easier than I thought it would be. I closed my eyes and felt it happen. I could almost see the two men materialising through my eyelids, a cloud of warmth going through mitosis, splitting, taking solid shape, then clothed, talking and thinking. I opened my eyes and there they were. The change in the room was subtle. The bottom of the shaft had been cleaner back then. There was a smell missing from the modern version, something that the stink of the drains couldn't fully mask, like the rusty scent of iron in blood.

Quast closed the entrance to the sewers. The same door I thought the sailor had closed and that I thought I'd closed before him. Now Quast was taking his turn in the loop. Ezra thanked him for that while he tapped his shoes at the boot scrapper.

'Cleaning sewers is a job that never ends,' said Ezra. 'Fits right into your plans.'

'I'm glad you are getting the idea.'

Ezra nodded. 'But you knew that already, didn't you, Mr Quast? That's not why you took me down there.'

'No, not just that. I value your opinion. I wanted to hear what you have to say.'

'Well, I understand the point of shovelling grit from catch tanks, the overflows, but some galvanised piping could reduce much of the maintenance cost. It would be an efficient solution.'

'A solution to what, exactly?' asked Quast. 'What problem do you see?'

'I don't think there is a need to employ so many men down there. That's all. I understand the idea of keeping people working for a salary, but there are many more pointless jobs they could be doing up there. They could even do real jobs!'

'Don't mock what you don't understand.' replied Quast. *'I can't give those men jobs upstairs with the rest. I picked them from the true gutters of this country. I removed them from houses of vice and filth, from dens of rogues and criminals.'*

'So you're punishing them.'

'All men are accountable for their own actions, but I run no dungeons.' Quast stepped on the grille above the skylight. *'Despite all the bars and gates,' he joked.*

I peeked through the thick glass. From upstairs you could barely see the gas lamps of workers moving in the dark, twinkling like fireflies, but from downstairs Quast's great shadow must have eclipsed most of the sunshine. Everyone must have glanced up.

'Maybe some of those men have been denied enough chances in life. Others may have squandered their opportunities. One way or another, they all have turned spiteful. The alcohol has made them rude and awkward. I can't trust them around the nice men and women upstairs, nor with the children, never with the children. I have taken in ex-

bone grubbers and toshers, good people who used to roam the sewers of the city looking for score. Now they are working upstairs with the rest, but they are allowed there because they behave.'

He jumped off from the well. 'Which reminds me, shall we continue?'

They started up the stairs, and I went along but with difficulty. The floor was sticky, and my feet turned very heavy.

'Worry not, Ezra. Those men are free to go any time they wish, yet most of them pray to stay at the end of their contracts,' said Quast.

'Like so many others, I've heard,' replied Ezra.

'Like those who can tell a good thing when they see it.'

'Why not give them permanent work?'

'I cannot give permanent positions to all who come to me.' Quast stopped and searched for words, his walking stick drawing circles in the air. 'I would rather do some good to many, than too much good to a few.'

The floor wasn't sticky anymore. It was slippery. Upon my second slip, I checked my soles and noticed the blood, the dark thick fluid dripping from my shoes. What the hell was going on? I was leaving bloody footprints, and the two men climbing ahead were too. Then I noticed the tracks were not becoming fainter; instead, each new step left behind even more blood than the previous. It all worsened quickly once I'd noticed something was happening. Ezra and Quast kept going, unaware. I tried to catch up, tiptoeing at first, but I tripped. I landed forwards on the steps and left a massive bloody print on the surface. Now my clothes were soaking in blood too. The footprints became puddles, and the puddles began overflowing, cascading down the stairs. A pool was building at the bottom. I begged the men in front of me to hurry but they wouldn't listen. Then I heard somebody scream from above. It wasn't a scream of horror. Not

one of pain. It was a scream of regret, of vertigo, the cry of the stomach trying to leave the body through the mouth. The voice shifted quickly as it came closer and passed me on its way down. Something had dropped. Someone. The sailor.

I snapped back into the present in that moment. I broke down on the steps against the wall. The blood was gone, but the stench stayed. I smelled it on my fingers. I smelled it on my clothes. That was when I threw up, right on the step. I moved up two steps and sat for a while. I only started up again when the smell of sick got too strong. On the way to the top of the shaft, I found hundreds of small slots in the wall, ventilation perhaps, too small for me to fit through. The darkness was eerie on the other side.

The sky was darker when I reached the top.

The stairs led me into a chamber. With only so much light coming from the skylight, I couldn't tell the dimensions of the room, but it was large enough for the walls to hide behind the darkness. I had the impression that the room was round, probably because standing there, the shaft was just a circular hole cut on the floorboards. The tubular railing of the staircase continued along the edge of the shaft. Someone was sitting on it on the other side of the room. He was facing away from me, his back towards the hole.

I cleared my throat. The sick had left a burn.

'Hello?' I called as I slowly walked around. He didn't answer, but I continued to move forwards until I saw the side of his face. The sailor. The reek of the vomit, the blood, and the drains came back all together in one monstrous tide. His cap was back on, and he seemed very much alive.

We stared at each other in silence. I struggled thinking of the right words to say, and in the end, what came out was, 'I said I'd see you at the top.'

'You never saw me,' he said.

Then he let himself go. Backwards. With a glug.

Chapter Nineteen

The room didn't use to look like that. It wasn't just a hole in the middle of the floor. The machine used to sit there, suspended above the big drop. A wheel with thick black spokes sat on a self-aligning bearing. A merry-go-round mounted right on the edge of the shaft, it wobbled like a top losing momentum but never stopped rotating. Ezra's device was in the centre, the golden shell. The Nautilus.

But now the space was empty. There were no windows in the room, except for the skylight in the middle of the ceiling. It was a glass dome, but its truss structure was angled like a spiderweb. I lay on the wooden floor as near the edge of the shaft as my nerve permitted. I stared at the changing colours of the sky and let days pass.

Logically, I couldn't have stayed inside that building for so long. I didn't eat. I didn't sleep or go to the toilet. Someone outside would have been looking for me, surely. Still, I saw day and night pass. In my mind, I stood up and walked the building complex Quast had created. I saw people coming and going in different outfits, different companies. Faces changed, grew stubbles and were shaven. There were good-hair days and the bad. Days, I remembered.

It got worse because those *days* were in disorder. It was not simply that I remembered them wrong. It was that the sequence in which I saw them made no sense. That meant some days were dull, like catching the beginning of a movie you've only seen the ending of or like nodding in agreement when you didn't understand what someone said. Some other times I just got to see climaxes, the kind of moment that would freeze you on the spot, even when you can't grasp half of what's happening. Any

way I recounted those days would be a sort of lie, so I simply lined them up the way they made sense to me.

After visiting a few rooms, I figured I needn't worry about when I was but about where. Thinking chronologically wasn't going to get me anywhere. I needed to understand things spatially. Easier said than done. From the inside, the architecture of the place made it difficult to locate myself. From what I could hear, Quast had arranged his building complex with the Nautilus as a model, not precisely the sea creature, but the machine Ezra had created with a similar shape. That meant, to my understanding, that he had segmented the structure into chambers, emulating the spiral shell of a nautilus. The largest rooms were in the perimeter of the complex, and they got progressively smaller towards the centre. I used this key to try and map the place in my head and figure out where I was in my memories.

By far the largest of the chambers was the warehouse with all the workstations Quast had showed us from his office. It was easy to settle on that one as the first chamber of the nautilus. The second biggest was a sort of loading/unloading warehouse. It had gates with access to the canal, so I could be sure that chamber was in the exterior of the complex. The gates were just at the point where the course of the canal swerved north, creating a nice little bay which flowed into the room. This made me also realise that these first two rooms side by side were the entire width of the complex, a good one-hundred meters long. Aside from those two chambers I had little certainty of the order of the rooms. I couldn't rely completely on size to map them all. Many were of similar dimensions, and sometimes I simply had no chance of sizing them properly. Also, most of the rooms had the same design, with excessively high ceilings and windows near the top, which made it impossible to look outside and map the place.

The only way to grasp the arrangement of the project was getting inside Quast's mind. The way I kept track of where I was in my visions was by paying attention to who was allowed in the room. The outer chambers had the highest numbers of 'paupers'. That first large warehouse, for instance, had around eighty of them with only a few foremen to lead them. But as the rooms turned smaller and the work became more complex, less and less paupers were present, with more 'contracted' workers in their stead.

Those higher-tier employees required less supervision and showed training and technical mastery, much like the foremen in the bigger rooms. They weren't so different from the paupers. It was easy to see a foreman in the shoes of a cleaner, or a cleaner in a technician's, and so on. I couldn't, from where I watched them, detect great differences in their behaviour, their speech, or manners. Often, I heard those who had just been recruited from the streets laugh at the same joke a foreman had told his peers minutes before, and the same happened the other way around. They talked about God in similar ways and had the same discussions about Notts County playing Aston Villa, and pie, and ale.

There were, however, noticeable differences between the two types of workers in the way they looked. The contracted ones had a better, healthier semblance, which was the logical outcome of a steady diet, which was the logical outcome of a more regular income, I deduced. They also seemed to have money to pay for the wash, or even buy new clothes that fitted them well and were in good condition. The garments of the poor were usually too big or too small, mended, torn, stained, or dirty, and generally the smell of old, bitter sweat was worse.

The ratio of contracted to casual workers changed room to room. At times the numbers were quite even, like in the boiler room, where there was a variety of jobs to

be done, tending to the furnaces, the mechanical equipment, the technical monitoring of the machines. But as a general rule, I found out, untrained workers stayed in the first chambers, for the most part. The way Quast explained it was that people he picked from the street gained further access to the facilities with time, and only if they met his criteria. He compared it to a sea tide. Waves of workers came and went constantly. Those who didn't cause any trouble, who were loyal and kept coming back after their terms were over, would be invited in again and little by little gain deeper access into the complex. Some would be just good enough to get their job back; others would move up. They would receive longer contracts, more benefits, but still they would have to surrender their posts to the next wave when their time was done. That was the system he had designed.

That became my method for locating myself. The fewer poor were in the room, the further inside the complex I was, and the more recent the memory was. I understood that because the people Quast picked up from the street weren't the only ones being tested. Ezra too was being gradually introduced to Quast's plan, and I with him. I didn't realise that until Ezra did himself.

He took great offense then. Quast had convinced him the project was both theirs, and now he was learning there was much his senior partner had kept from him. I was watching when Ezra unloaded his frustration. He told Quast he was keeping life unstable and impoverished for those people, that his commitment to being just to everyone was noble, but his scheme was flawed. Because his sole focus was making life merely bearable, he was achieving less than that. The benefits were not outweighing the consequences, as he had promised.

'All lives lead to death,' said Quast, serious, sober. 'My intention is not making it comfortable for a few. It is making it sufferable for most.'

'It is not right. It is not worth it,' replied Ezra. 'Not at the cost of the afterlife.'

'For what is a body without the spirit?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?' asked Quast, rushing to Ezra. It was a fearful sight to see a man as broad as him move so fast, so forcefully and focused. He clasped Ezra's arms, his heavy hands pressing hard enough to leave a mark. Ezra struggled, first with the shock and then with his partner's grip.

'Is this nothing?' asked Quast, the tips of his fingers had turned white with the pressure. 'Do you feel nothing?'

He let go of Ezra and stepped back. 'Not nothing. A beating mass, flesh, exposed nerves and emotion, skin that sweats and bleeds. The body is not simply a threshold, my boy. Terrible news chill the bones as much as a winter breeze. Anger, joy, and sadness are all the same as cold, heat, and pain. We cannot be insensible to them.'

Quast took a deep breath and combed his hair back.

'No imaginary afterlife is worth a minute of my time on Earth. Or their suffering.'

In the time I was there, I saw Ezra and Quast fall out two other times. They both had something to do with the Nautilus.

One of those arguments happened when Quast was showing us the generator room. It was a long room, narrow compared to the first chambers but just as tall. A handful of technicians were monitoring the machinery. Oil can in one hand and a rag in the other, they went back and forward, oiling some parts and wiping excess of others. It must have been an early memory because Ezra still had that look of wonder on his face. He was delighted as he stumbled upon the many great technological surprises that

Quast's building contained. The room was overtaken by three dormant but still impressive machines. Three-phase dynamos, I heard Ezra say, not that I knew what that meant. They had a large round face and a frame curving outward at the bottom, which made them look like giant mantel clocks. Ezra said he had never seen them so big. They reached up two thirds of the room's height. You had to step back more than a few meters to see the whole body of one of them, but in spite of their hugeness, they had that special quality of smaller, sleeker machines, like the beauty of antique typewriters or those Singer sewing machines with the black polished finish.

'This one we call Martha,' said Quast, laying his hand on one of the black beauties.

'Martha... Martha?' asked Ezra, frowning. He gazed at the second generator incredulously as if he already knew what Quast had named it and hated it.

'That is Lori,' said Quast, almost kindly, as if he was offering a gift.

Ezra let out a snort, some sort of animal sound. It was as if he'd meant to say something but closed his mouth before it came out.

Quast seemed to pretend he didn't hear it and pointed his walking stick at the opposite corner. 'The third one in the back is not yet functioning. We are exp—'

'You shouldn't,' broke Ezra. 'You should have left Lori out of this.'

'Hold on,' replied Quast. 'There is no reason for being so defensive. I named her Lori to honour your dear, late Mrs. These ladies will change the world. Their names will be part of history, their memories shared by all countries.'

'But I never wanted any of that. You know it,' said Ezra. 'When I see these machines, the way you have scaled it all up, it makes me shiver. This is not the end I was pursuing. This is not the dream I had.'

'It is a grander dream,' replied Quast. 'A more complex project. Perhaps even overwhelming. None of us could have envisioned how big it would become when we started. I'm afraid now it has a life of its own. It has built on its own momentum.'

'And yours.'

'You point fingers as if we were in the wrong, as if I was in the wrong. But put yourself in my place and ask: why would I, who has the means to see it done, attempt to scale it down? We gain nothing from fear of where the future might take us.'

'And where, you reckon, will the future take us?'

'This future? Farther than you and I can conceive. Electrified cities, transport, homes, in the near time, who knows after. If you could see what I see, you wouldn't think this scale is too much.'

He gestured at Ezra to follow him up a steep metal staircase. It led onto an overhead platform, which besides offering a panoramic view of the machinery, served as an intermediate storey where a few more workers occupied themselves with the knobs and switches of the control panels.

Quast leaned on the railing of the platform and contemplated the generators. 'We will be looking at forty-thousand volts. Each. Of course at the moment, with the power we can muster from the steam turbines, we can have only one of them working at a time. We will run all of them once the Nautilus is operational.'

'How much death will it demand to power something this size?' asked Ezra, his gaze lost in the floor below.

'We are almost ready to start the trials. We will find out then.' Quast tapped the metallic floor with his walking stick. 'There are a few more chambers you should see before I show you to the Nautilus.'

'Show me to the Nautilus? Mr Quast, the Nautilus is in my workshop.'

'Yes, well. We moved it.'

'You moved it?' The question made Ezra sound both alarmed and disoriented like someone who's been woken up in the middle of the night. 'You mean you moved it from my workshop?'

'We needed it here. You hadn't set foot in there for days.'

'Excuse me but what do you know about where I go or don't go! Have you— have I been followed?'

'I always keep an eye on my interests.'

'The Nautilus is mine. You can't just take it.'

'You mustn't worry. It is safe.'

'It was safe where it was. In my workshop.'

'Which is in my building, as well. Now I've moved the device to another of my buildings, where you can work just as well. If you think about it, the only change is that now you will be working at the site where everything will take place.'

'You shouldn't have just taken it.'

'You never paid heed when I asked for it. Listen, Ezra, my boy. You must trust me on this. We had to move it. Time is of the essence.'

Quast gave a signal to his employees, and they began to fiddle with the controls. One of them stood up and went to a panel nearby, which had about six large power switches. He grabbed the wooden handles with both hands to flick them on. They sparkled as he flipped them up. On the floor below, the men opened and closed valves as different parts of the machine began to hiss. The intricate design of the dynamo gained life with the staccato clanking of rods and pistons, hissing escape valves, and gears turning. A swirling hum filled the room. A howl and a roar together, Martha sang and wailed.

And we all watched in awe.

Chapter Twenty

Memento mori, remember death. The phrase was carved in wrinkles all over Ezra's face on the day of his final confrontation with Quast. It now bore a similarity with the yellowed skulls in those catacombs beneath cities. He had adopted the graveyard look, the sunken eyes and pale saggy skin. He could have passed as the subject of post-mortem photography, posing to give the impression of what he was in life. Never fully managing. It was the contrast with his previous appearance that made his unwholesomeness so shocking. I saw two faces of him, years apart but also back to back.

The argument began with a young version of Ezra walking into the hospice. That was what they called the next-to-the-last chamber, or chambers. It was similar to a ward. That shaft through which I'd gained access to the building, the place where I lost my friend the sailor, that was only the inside of the central tower in Quast's complex. The chambers were built between the shaft and the outer wall, and those slot windows I'd seen earlier climbing up the shaft looked straight into the hospice. There were several levels which went around the inner shaft, like a roll of Life Savers, only instead of rings of fruit candy, they were storeys for accommodating the moribund poor.

What I saw first that day was Ezra walking into one of those levels. I was following him, his shoes gently tapping on the wooden floor. Candles kept the room dimly lit, but Ezra's silhouette was dark against the brightness coming through one of those small slot windows. The light fell on a bed directly below and bounced off the white linens. It was a plain single bed, different from what they sell today, smaller, narrower. It had that institutional look with the tubular metal frame and generic bedding. From my point of view, the rest of the room was empty. I had no interest in

looking anywhere else. The bed's black frame squeaked when Ezra sat on it. The sound attuned my hearing, and I caught a faint hum coming from that slot in the wall, loud at first but instantly fading in the background, like the central hitting kicking on in the next room. Ezra sat quietly, facing up towards the light for a while, then looking down at his knees. His hands came up to rub his eyes. He took a deep breath and asked, 'Tell me it's not your plan to euthanise them.'

The answer didn't come immediately. First came the steps, heavy, sombre steps. Then the harsh tap of his walking stick on the floorboards, and as soon as I distinguished that, Quast came into view.

'I'll just give them a place to lie in their last hours. This is a research facility, not a hospital. I don't facilitate death. Nor try to stop it.'

'You are just a harvester, is that it?'

'Oh, the reaper is a terrible image,' said Quast, shaking his head. 'I rather think of it in terms of foraging or picking. I simply collect what is of no use to anyone else.'

Ezra rose from the bed. 'Your cynicism knows no boundaries. I wonder what Ms Abishaw will think of this place.'

'Again with that woman. She is no longer a part of our operation. It is about time you stop thinking about her.'

Ezra seemed to struggle with the statement. He asked what Quast meant.

'I mean she is out.'

'Surely you don't mean out?' asked Ezra. 'She is the medium. How can she not be part of the plan, of its execution?'

Quast smiled. 'Why, this entire building is our way around working with her. Good riddance.'

Ezra seemed lost. Annoyed but confused for the most part.

'Let me walk you through it,' continued Quast. 'She has tried to turn you against me. You told me she warned you against me because I had "spirit children" hanging around me.'

Ezra said he remembered, but that it was too harsh to say she was trying to turn him against Quast.

Quast ignored the comment and explained: 'Those children didn't get attached to me because I did them any harm. They stuck because I made their last days better. They were six affected children I extracted from that chimney sweeping business. I understood that the moment you brought it up. I took those boys in and cared for them as if they were my own. Until the inevitable happened.'

Ezra shifted uncomfortably. 'I am very sorry for what happened to you, Mr Quast. But what does that have to do with this place?'

'You should be able to tie the loose ends. I am replicating the process with these people. If we can guarantee the energy springs from this site, there is no need for a medium to "summon the spirits." This way we only have to usher them into the Nautilus.'

'What you are doing is dangerous,' muttered Ezra, dropping back down on the bed. 'Abishaw has a way with this spirit matter that you and I will never understand.'

'Please, my boy. Can't you see the entire psychic business is a sham. Those people profit from adding a social dimension to a phenomenon of nature. You and I know souls have no intelligence, no feelings. They are energy. Not "moodier" than any engine.'

There was silence for a moment.

'How did she know they were children?' asked Ezra. 'If it was all a sham, if she had no vision or power, how would Ms Abishaw know they were children lingering around you?'

'I don't know. She must have heard it somewhere!' replied Quast annoyed. 'None of it was a secret. The whole thing was in the papers. Why is it so difficult for you to see pass her wiles? Why do you entertain yourself trying to make sense of her charlatanry?'

Ezra stood up and walked away, and as he did, I became aware of the room I had neglected to see up until then. The space I'd initially thought empty was filled with beds, exact copies of the first one, down to the way the covers were folded. There was other furniture as well, which came in two varieties: a modest nightstand with a drawer, and a plain wooden chair. Around the room the pattern repeated: nightstand, bed, side chair; nightstand, bed, chair; over and over, as far as the curve of the chamber allowed me to see.

Ezra laid hands on the metal frame of one of the other beds nearby. 'Because of him,' he said. Then pointing at the other beds, 'And because of him, and him, and her. Because this is bigger than you and me. You've said it yourself so many times.' A short, wet laugh came through his lips. It was a saddening sound. 'Haven't you...'

'What?'

'Haven't you considered telling them? We don't know the kind of suffering this could mean to them.'

It was Quast's turn to chuckle. 'Should I explain to them the maths or the applied engineering?'

'That is not what I'm saying. If you—'

'I know what you are trying to say,' interrupted Quast. 'What you want is to spook them away. To play upon their superstitions.'

'The human soul is not a matter of superstition.'

'But what about the horned devil who tries to snatch it and put it to work?'

Quast's walking stick hit the floor loudly. 'Here's an idea,' he continued, 'why don't you tell them once they are dead? I'd approve of you telling them anything you want then.'

'I beg you, sir, don't mock me.'

The seriousness in Ezra's face made Quast's smile disappear.

'You may not tell them a thing, Mr Granger. I fear you might actually scare them away. Out of a dignified deathbed, away from the comfort of having a roof above their heads, food on the table. May they find better lives begging on the street, right? Or breaking stones for a bowl of gruel at the workhouse.'

'Then I—then I will have to find another sponsor.' Ezra sounded as someone who was trying to convince himself of what he was saying. He let Quast take his time to answer.

The silence was awkward.

'It would break my heart to see you go, Ezra, my dear boy. Specially so close to a breakthrough. But I cannot stop you if you feel you must.'

Quast started to leave but halted after a few steps. 'Before you do something you might regret, consider the project cannot and will not stop because you are gone. I will finish the Nautilus. And forget about looking for other sponsorship. Even without you, I will have the machine working long before you manage any progress around the legal restrictions, if you manage at all.'

Quast marched to the door and stopped once more at the threshold. He lingered there for a moment but left without another word.

Ezra and I stayed in the hospice for hours, or minutes, or perhaps years. I couldn't tell, but in that time, I figured out the chaos that was a ghost's memory. The trick to handle it was being aware that time was no longer fluid. It became a type of stop-motion. What I had before me, those memories, was a series of still shots, each giving me a slightly different angle of things. It was up to me to animate them.

So it must have been my fault that Ezra's young and driven face turned into that yellowing sack of bones in an instant. Everything that happened after Quast left the hospice was a bit more difficult to follow. The order of things became slippery, and events slid onto one another, swapped places. Things that happened months apart presented themselves simultaneously, fought over the senses, over attention. Earthquakes happened when tectonic plates overlapped like that.

I could have drifted away from Ezra's side. I could have easily become lost in the past, but there was a voice that helped me travel straight from Ezra's first time in the hospice to the last. It was the sweet, trembling voice of an older woman.

'Has there ever been such a gracious man?' she began.

Ezra stayed silent, which at that moment bothered me more than not being able to see who had made the question.

'Has there ever been a better man?' she asked again.

The voice was coming from somewhere around the bed, but there was no one else around. Ezra sat still on one of the chairs. He looked down, head resting on his right palm, his fingers seeking the roots of his hair. He wouldn't answer.

'A godsend, he is. An angel.'

Who? I thought I asked, but I had no certainty the word came out. Even if I did speak aloud, no one seemed to hear it.

I caught movement in the corner of my eye. Something shifted on the bed next to Ezra, but there was nothing when I glanced across. The first time.

The second time, I saw something moving under the covers. It began as a small lump, but the longer I looked the larger it became, going up and down in short intervals, in and out like breathing, but always getting bigger. It spread across the bed and began to take shape, a pair of legs here, and arms there, feet, and all the rest. It was a person underneath.

Whoever they were, they were lying face up, completely still now. The covers seemed heavy, falling tightly on the figure almost as if they had been tucked in. The way their hands rested on the chest reminded me of museum mummies, only there was no crystal case between us. Could I touch it? I went closer. My hand went forwards.

The woollen blanket was coarse between my fingers. I pinched it carefully as to avoid touching any more than I needed. Still I had a feel of the bony structure underneath, a forehead. I had hardly started unveiling the body when a large shadow crept closer from the side. I jumped back, stifling a cry. It'd been the shadow of Ezra, who was now leaning towards the figure on the bed. He tucked the blanket back again and rested a tender hand on the body's head.

At that moment, I had my first glimpse of Ezra's new appearance. It was something else. His cheeks had become more prominent. His eyes sunken. He had lost so much weight. He had lost so much life.

'Have you come to see her go?' I heard him say, but I instantly doubted myself. His mouth didn't move as he spoke. Ezra looked as if he was wearing a mask of himself,

his features slightly off, somewhat aged. I kept expecting him to take it off, to go back to being the same healthy fellow I knew.

'If you came to see her go, you are too late,' continued Ezra.

'I have come to see you. To ask you for a private word.'

It was Quast's voice. He was back but nowhere to be seen. As with the old woman before, I could trace the direction from where the words came, but he was not there to say them.

What I did see were the changes around the hospice. A yellowish colour had engulfed it. The walls and the furniture were worn and stained. That and the smell of sweaty bodies and incense burnt the night before made the atmosphere heavy. The beds were now occupied, every single one, so were the chairs, and the new benches they had brought in, and the other pieces of furniture improvised out of wooden boxes and hanging rags. I couldn't tell the class of the people in the chamber right away. They were all wearing similar outfits, plain dresses and shirts, which were aged but still decent. Their clothes fit well and were neither torn nor mended. Their hair was trimmed, their faces washed, but still they looked poor. There was little difference between the people lying on the beds and those tending to them, or waiting for them to die, whatever they were doing. They talked collectively in a low, unintelligible murmur. I guessed they were of low status because I'd heard the hospice had been designed for the poor. The room was full but not fully crowded. It wasn't a workhouse dormitory; it wasn't a slum, nor the loading bay of a slave ship. It wasn't pretty, but it was ordered and functional.

In spite of their similarities, there was a clear common difference among those lying on the beds and the people around. The beds were for dying, and anyone on them was closer to the other side than to this one. The deathbeds marked the morbid spatial

arrangement of the room. The mourners – for that was what they seemed – restricted themselves to the perimeter of the beds. There were beds with up to three people around them, some had two, but most had none. The bed on which Ezra gazed down at the woman, had no one else besides him.

She was around seventy. I told myself hers was the voice I'd heard before and almost surely hers was the body under the covers. Now she was just a corpse, an old lady with wavy, grey locks. She had left the world with a frown.

'I do know her name,' said Quast, and the words were like a conjuring spell, for the man materialised to my side, fresh and unmoved as if he had been there all along.

'Of course you know her name,' said Ezra, softly but upset. 'You study all of these people before you bring them here.'

Quast seemed to notice Ezra's temper but avoided confrontation. 'She used to read The Water Babies to her peers – children and adults, the same. I encouraged her reading.'

'So few of them can,' said Ezra.

'I believe she was a governess in a former time. Before she went insane. She used to carry a volume of the magazine around all the time.'

Ezra reached down and picked up a reddish hardcover from below the bed. He waved it at Quast, and he took it. The cover was faded and tattered. There were signs of a gold inscription on the spine, but it was too far gone to read. It was a thick book and it nearly came apart when Quast opened it. He glimpsed at the index and smiled. 'It's only the first three chapters in this volume. That is why she kept reading those over and over again.'

'I brought her a copy of the full novel once,' said Ezra. 'She wouldn't take it.'

I saw her at that moment. On the same bed but alive. She wasn't younger or wholesome, simply not dead. She frailly held herself up on her elbows, her long grey hair combed to the side. Her face was wearied, her skin pale enough to let the bluish tint of her veins through. Alive, she did not look too different from her corpse, not happier or much healthier. The biggest difference life made for her was that she inspired pity. She took deep breaths between words as she complained about the dreadful character of old mister Grimes. I saw her like that for a few seconds. Then she let herself go and dropped back to her dead body.

The book closed with a dull clap. Quast could have shut it on my face, and it wouldn't have brought me back faster. He tried to hand the book back to Ezra, but he said Quast should take it. He refused and left it on the bed.

'The ending is nonsense, anyway,' stated Quast.

'Not more nonsense than the beginning.'

Quast repeated he wanted to talk in private and walked Ezra away from the beds towards the exit.

'They are dying faster,' whispered Ezra. 'You brought her into the hospice – what, a week ago? Your screening process is improving.'

Quast shifted and the floorboards squeaked.

'I have seen the way you do it,' continued Ezra. 'You are only letting through those near death.' He laughed, shaking his head. 'These people think you care about them, but all your talking, all your questions... they're all about learning who is closer to dying.'

Quast grunted. He was about to speak when Ezra broke in, 'Do not fret. I will not try to dissuade them.'

'Perhaps, you have no need for that,' said Quast. 'I know you have found a way to delay our progress.'

'I do not follow.'

'The deaths are not registering upstairs. The Nautilus works. It is feeding the system properly, but it's not catching the new releases.'

Ezra took two steps back. 'Maybe it's reached capacity.'

Quast approached him closer than before in a single stride. 'Do not play me for a fool, lad. You have found a way to sabotage the channelling.'

'Don't you mean the collection? They die; you collect. That is the way you put it once.'

'You gave me your word you wouldn't turn them against me if I let you stay.'

'And I have kept true to what was promised. You said tell them when they are dead. Well, I am telling them when they are dead. I advise them to stay away from the Nautilus.'

Quast slammed his walking stick against the floor so hard that even the dying on the beds glimpsed at him.

'You play a dangerous game,' said Quast.

'Do you believe me now?' asked Ezra. 'It's all worth it if you believe me now.'

'Believe?'

'It is not just energy, Mr Quast. There's a consciousness attached to the spirit.'

'Our work is scientific, not mystic blabbering. We work with science, not belief.'

Ezra glanced at the dead woman a few feet away. Then his head went back to stare at the ceiling. 'There's where you are wrong. Our business has always been a matter of belief.' He held Quast's gaze for an instant and said, 'and I don't believe in you anymore.'

Ezra went back to the woman on the bed. He picked up the book and flipped the pages. He kept searching for something while Quast spoke:

'You have no reason to stay any longer. You will cease to work for me immediately and leave this complex at once. As of right now you are no longer allowed a part in this project. Not until I find out how you are doing whatever it is you are doing.'

Ezra found the page he was looking for and ripped it out. He gently placed the book under the woman's hands and pushed her hair away from her forehead. Then, he pulled the blanket to cover her face. He went through the whole sequence decisively as if it was routine, as if he knew exactly what he was doing.

Quast watched him march back to him.

'I expected that,' muttered Ezra. He looked at the piece of paper one more time. The printed font was small and in two columns. I could not read any of it. But I managed to see that hand-written note on the margin as he handed it to Quast. He cannot be swayed.

Quast's eyes went from the paper to the woman lying beneath the sheets. I saw it from her point of view, through the white cotton fabric: Quast looking at us, confused, distracted; Ezra behind him, his eyes full of conviction and some madness, taking the chance to fly up the stairs.

I lost perception. Everything went black and I could only hear Ezra panting. I was running out of breath too. I could tell I was running with him, though I cannot explain how. When my sight came back, we were in a different room. A room fully lit but with no windows. Ezra was barricading a door with a cabinet. A moment later there was

Quast, yelling from the other side, landing blow after blow, trying to bring down the door.

It took me just a moment to recognise we were in the last chamber of the complex. A few feet away towards the centre of the room, rested the Nautilus. The domed skylight above it, the industrial merry-go-round spinning around it.

The trick to making sense of Lori's memories was keeping in mind that time did not flow by its own means. The task was finding what memory followed another. What I saw of Ezra were pages on a flipbook. Still frames I kept trying to animate. They didn't fully make sense, but I certainly saw his eyes fixed on the sky the way only a corpse's could. He never made it out alive.

Chapter Twenty-One

It was night when I climbed down the wall out of Quast's building.

Some places were easier to leave than others. Leaving home was easy, leaving the continent. With my aunt gone, I didn't feel I was leaving anything behind. All I needed was ahead. Life was an easy ride when you thought about it as only going forward.

Leaving Lori's world was never easy. I was always forced out before I was done with it. It was Lori that ditched me. People were always leaving me wherever I went.

I headed straight to Zoe's flat. I stood outside the door for a few minutes before I knocked. I had my key, but it didn't feel right to barge in. There was no answer, so I eventually decided to use it anyway. Zoe wasn't in there. She'd left the bedside lamp on again. I turned it off and went to the kitchen, closed the cabinets she always left open. I decided to wait for her. I showered and changed clothes, trying to get the awful sewer stink off, and Zoe still hadn't arrived. I spent the night there, mostly waiting awake, tapping my foot on the floor, watching Adélie penguins in love on the telly. I went to bed but couldn't sleep. My back was killing me. Zoe and Lori were too present in my head, and unfortunately, so was Ezra.

When I did catch some sleep, I dreamed I told Zoe all about the ghosts and Quast's building, the machine and the ripping. Then I started thinking about my own ghost. I pictured the moment of my death in one of those beds in Quast's building.

No one was there to see me take my last breath. No one covered my head with a sheet. After a while, two engineers in grey lab coats came and checked me out. They were a horror movie cliché, wearing head mirrors and thick black gloves. They ran

some kind of Geiger counter up and down my dead body, a few times, but the device made no sound.

‘Non-measurable,’ said one of the engineers.

‘Nothing?’ asked the other one.

‘Completely empty. Some folks just have nothing in the tank. They die and that’s it.’ He dusted off his palms and drew a flat line in the air, giving a long, shrill whistle.

If Zoe had come home, I would have told her everything. I would have told her I was afraid of becoming nothing. But Zoe wasn’t there when I woke up. She wasn’t there when I looked around. Then I realised that up until that moment my fears had been really petty.

Zoe becoming nothing when I was not watching, that was a truly terrifying thought.

I left her flat in the morning. I opened the kitchen cabinets again before walking out so that she wouldn’t know I’d been there. Maybe I did it to remind myself of her, or maybe trying a last-minute conjuration. I had no power for that.

I wandered around town, but I couldn’t find her anywhere. The longer I looked the more anxious I became. I stopped at the first shop with phones on display and got a new one. The problem was that I didn’t know her number. She had punched it in my old phone, and I don’t think I ever even glanced at it. So I headed to *The Grey Lady*.

I never was Mr Popularity at work. Usually we wouldn’t have anything to talk about, aside from the weather. I never knew a thing about *Coronation Street* or a show called *Strictly*, or the one where celebrities dance, or the one with ‘celebrities’ on an island. But, boy, that day was something else. Everybody was giving me the cold

shoulder. Even Pauline, the girl with the fake lashes. She usually smiled so much she looked like she was walking around with her eyes closed.

Marco was working the washer. He'd never been friendly to me, but that morning he looked ready to beat me up, so I didn't even get close. I poured myself a bitter cup of coffee and sat quietly by the counter. Then I caught a flash of red hair. 'Rachel?'

Rachel said something on the way to her office which I didn't get. I chased after her and found her sitting behind her desk, frantically clicking the bottom of her mouse. It was too much effort and I knew she was just pretending to be busy.

'I gave your shift to Marco,' she said, without lifting her eyes from her monitor. 'No one had any idea if you were coming.'

I sighed and scratched my head, trying to appear concerned. I told her she did what she had to do and asked if she had seen Zoe around. Rachel wouldn't look at me, but she said Zoe had asked her for a few days off.

'Is she okay? Do you know where she is?'

Rachel rolled her eyes at me and back to the computer screen. 'She's alright. I talked to her this morning.' Rachel was punishing her keyboard, harshly nailing down each key as she typed. She stopped suddenly and said, 'I don't know where she is. And frankly I don't think I would tell you if I did. You pulled a really ugly one, Samuel. D'you know she had to go back to her friends and explain why you left.' Rachel gave a sort of grunt. She could be scary sometimes. 'You may want to give her some space.'

It took me a while to convince Rachel I was truly sorry and that I wanted to make it up to Zoe. I asked her for Zoe's phone number and had to explain the mugging again and how I had lost my phone. Then she finally looked at me, properly, bruises and cuts and all.

‘Gosh, you do look like shit.’ She reached into a drawer and fetched me some ibuprofen. Then she wrote Zoe’s number on a poppy post-it. ‘You probably had it coming,’ she said, as she handed it to me.

I probably did.

I wandered the city, trying to contact Zoe. She wasn’t answering her phone, so I had to keep searching on foot. I bounced off from place to place, finding nothing but memories. Every spot I knew in Audbridge – every cafe and bar, every shop, and office, and tram stop – I’d been there first either with Lori or with Zoe. I’d always had at least one or the other. Now they both were gone, and I was failing miserably at reaching any of them. So I went looking for the one person I knew exactly where to find.

Catherine’s handmaid opened the door. It was a new one, a brunette. She was the third handmaid I’d seen at Catherine’s. Like the previous two, she was European, but I couldn’t tell exactly from where. She had an angular face. Her nose was long and narrow, and her eyebrows were very thin and straight, drawing a perfect capital T. She didn’t look much like her predecessor, except she also looked anaemic and tired as if she hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in a while. Caring for Catherine had to be a tough job. I told her who I was and that Catherine knew me. Still I heard her turn the lock twice when she went to ask her if she’d take my visit. After a while, I ended up sitting on the doorstep. Looking at the bare branches of the dry shrubs, I made a mental note to come by and give Catherine a hand with the gardening, as soon as I had the time. The garden was dying; it wasn’t already dead. I knew I could help.

There must have been a playground nearby. I could hear the kids playing, their pitchy shouts echoing around the neighbourhood. Some upset mum, shouting

‘Gustavo!’ *The kid must be climbing too high in the jungle gym, I thought. Or perhaps he’s been caught eating worms.*

The handmaid opened the door again. ‘She’s in the parlour,’ she said.

Catherine was sitting in her wingback chair, with its back towards the door. I must have walked in very quietly because she seemed very surprised when I came around. She let out one of those high-pitched ‘ooh’ sounds only ladies of a certain age can make. ‘Well, you’re not wasting any time. Come closer.’ She squeezed my face with both hands and examined it. It hurt. ‘How are you feeling today?’

‘I just need to talk to someone.’

‘And you come to me?’ She acted suspicious.

‘I need to talk about ghosts.’

‘You don’t say.’ She smiled with a certain pride and invited me to sit down. She called Anna and asked her to bring some tea. I said I didn’t need any tea, but she didn’t seem to care.

‘What is troubling you, love?’

‘You said some ghosts are more dangerous than others. You said there were some who stayed behind for too long.’

She nodded slowly.

‘How can I tell the difference?’ I asked.

‘The way they act mostly. When you’ve seen as many as I have, it only takes a minute to figure them out.’

‘Where do you see them?’

Her eyes went towards the window and back. ‘The world is full of people you can’t see, not unless you make an effort to notice them, and sometimes...’ She

straightened up. ‘Sometimes you need a little help too. Someone who can tell you where to look.’

Catherine grabbed her cane and reached out to me with her other hand. ‘Here, help me get up,’ she said.

We shuffled together to the window and looked through the sheer curtain towards the front of the house.

‘What do you see?’ she asked.

The unkempt plants and dry bushes in the front garden made it look smaller than it actually was. I studied the pathway, her front gate, the brick wall.

‘Your front garden? I dunno. What?’

‘Do you see the man with the hat?’

She creeped me out when she said that, but there was no one when I checked again. I leaned further, till my forehead was touching the window. The glass was cool through the fabric of the curtain. Nothing.

‘Focus on the hinge of the gate. The bottom hinge.’

I nodded.

‘You see something like a dark stub on top of it? That’s the tip of his shoe. Follow that up and you’ll see him leaning on the gate.’

I did as she instructed and saw the damn shoe. I hurriedly moved the sheer curtain away and stared again. The glass began to mist, but I saw the man she was talking about.

‘He’s been there since the beginning of the week. I’ll have to do something about him at some point.’ Catherine didn’t seem upset at all. She said it as if she was talking about mowing the lawn or sweeping the drive.

‘He’s not dangerous,’ said Catherine. ‘He’s just confused.’

Anna came back with tea and biscuits. Catherine thanked her. ‘We’ll be here a while,’ she told her as we walked back to her chair. ‘Have a tea break yourself. Eat. You’re looking a little pale today.’

Catherine waited for her to leave, leaned close to me, and whispered, ‘I’m replacing her today. A new girl is coming this afternoon. Anna doesn’t know, so don’t say a word!’

Her lucky day, I thought as I shook my head.

Catherine poured the tea so pleasantly I thought she would start humming. ‘Try the Viennese whirls,’ she insisted.

Viennese whirls. The sound of delicacy set me off.

‘How do you do it?’ I complained. ‘How can you care so little about anyone?’

The wrinkles on Catherine’s forehead reshaped into a frown. ‘I resent your tone, Samuel. Give it up.’

I sank down on a chair. ‘How can you act so casual after our last time? How come you don’t even ask me about my bruises?’

‘I don’t ask people about their bruises. I haven’t since the seventies.’ She paused. ‘And I don’t understand what you mean by last time.’

‘You let me walk out of here in a trance. You said you’d look after me!’

She looked puzzled for a moment; then she chuckled. ‘Oh, Lori. My dearest, Lori. What are you doing to this poor lad?’

‘What?’

‘I didn’t let you walk away. You tricked me – you both did. Whatever Lori showed you that night, she didn’t want me to find out. You two made me believe the trance was over.’

She laughed again. ‘Care to tell me what it was?’

I considered.

‘Have you been spending a lot of time with her lately. Are the visions getting longer?’

I nodded.

Like always, Catherine held her cup in one hand and the saucer in the other. I didn’t bother picking up mine.

‘And then you pull out, or is it she that pushes you away?’

‘I think neither of us have control over how long it lasts. It’s like the vision runs out of fuel or something.’

‘How does that feel?’ She calmly sipped her tea.

‘Like I have no damn control over anything.’ All of a sudden, the afternoon had turned into a therapy session.

‘Watch your language,’ said Catherine drily. ‘But how does it *feel*?’

‘How does it feel?’ I repeated. I was gasping for air in my mind. ‘You really wanna know?’ I was drowning. ‘It feels like dying. Being forced out of Lori’s memories always feels like dying.’

Catherine sat back and thought for a moment.

‘If leaving her world is like dying,’ she began, ‘Then coming back to the twenty-first century must feel like some sort of resurrection, right?’

I couldn’t buy into that. Resurrection? I wasn’t left with any feeling of spiritual wealth after I awoke from one of Lori’s memories, no greater sense of worth, no awakening of pious devotion. No sense of ascension. Better to leave resurrection to Jesus or Lazarus, the kind of people who knew how to come back and make a miracle of it. If they raised me back from the dead, the first thing I’d do would be retching out all the dirt I swallowed.

‘It sure doesn’t feel like resurrecting.’

‘It would be fine if you want to focus on the dying instead,’ said Catherine.

‘There’s power in dying. If you do it right.’

‘If anything, it’s like I’m collecting deaths. One after another, they stack into a pile somewhere. I fear some day I’m gonna run into them all together.’

‘Are you concerned for your safety? Death, your real, definite death? Is that what’s making you anxious?’

‘No, I don’t think Lori would harm me.’ Zoe’s face jumped into my head, then faded into nothing. ‘But maybe I should keep her away from others.’ I took a bite at a whirl. ‘It’s just...’ I chewed. ‘It wouldn’t be so bad if I saw more of Lori at least. Lately I haven’t seen her much.’

‘Meaning?’ She placed her teacup and saucer on the table and leaned closer to me.

‘She’s been trying to show me something related to those two men, Quast and Ezra’

‘Ezra?’

I piqued her interest.

‘Her husband. I know his name now... Lately, it’s all been about them. We never spend any time together anymore. The worst part is... that I’m beginning to feel attached to these men.’

Catherine’s hands came together in a single clap. It happened slowly and without sound. ‘Of course.’

‘Sorry, am I missing something?’ I asked.

‘Sometimes is hard to appreciate the most evident things.’ Her face lit up. What was wrong with this lady? ‘You are seeing what she is seeing. You’re there with her. In

her. Even her sympathies are passing onto you. Tell me, is it love you feel for any of these men?’

‘Of course not,’ I replied.

‘You should be proud of achieving this sort of connection. It is your most intimate time together, but here you are blocking your feelings and complaining about it.’

‘That doesn’t make sense. In these visions it’s like we’re not there.’

‘Let me ask you this. Have you really seen anything from before her death?’

I couldn’t answer.

‘You haven’t seen a single event from before her death because spirits can’t look back beyond that point.’

Suddenly I got a bitter taste in my mouth. It came along with the smell of burnt wood.

‘The spirits know they existed before they died. There are traces. They recognise some people, and the smart ones, like Lori, learn details of their former lives from what they see and hear. But it drives them mad that they can’t remember.’

She was making sense, but my gut told me I wasn’t going to like where she was heading. The bitterness in my mouth got worse.

‘That’s why for them there is no real progression of time. Have you felt that, has she passed that onto you?’

I nodded. I was beginning to feel sick. I needed to excuse myself, but I also wanted to hear what Catherine had to say.

‘We usually think of time as an arrow. We move forwards, look back often, but always keep moving forward. To Lori there’s no arrow. There’s neither back nor forward. It all goes sideways. She sees all times at once but there is no progression.’

‘No progression?’

‘*Our* concept of it. She has no perception of going forwards. Everything that will come to pass has passed already, and the present is what you and Lori live and remember at once. There’s no past or future because she sees them simultaneously.’

Get out.

I had to get out. I was afraid. I was in danger.

‘Resist, Samuel,’ said Catherine. ‘She’s always listening. You must resist her impulses.’

I sprang up. Catherine tried to grab my arm, but I managed to dodge her.

‘She only loves one, and he’s not you.’ I was flying out the door when she shouted. ‘Don’t choose blindness.’

I walked. I walked fast, and I walked away. Catherine was right; Lori had spurred me to leave. I could tell. But now it was all me, doing the walking. I wasn’t searching for anyone anymore, just yielding to my own urge to keep going. I went farther than I’d ever been from wherever I could call home. I needed distance to think.

That’s how I ended up at *Manton-on-Leen*. The rail tracks split the station in two. Both were deserted sides. Platform One was right past the small lobby. There was no operator, and the only other traveller walked into the toilet almost as soon as I came in. I carried on pacing to the edge of the platform and stopped. I was gazing down at the rails when I distinguished the scent of wood in the air.

Lori was standing a few feet away, also at the edge of the platform, beautiful as the sun rising. Her long dress was white with tiny red flowers, or kisses, or splattered

blood stains. The skirt waved softly in the wind, and the sunshine behind her went through the fabric, and through her ever so slightly.

Her beauty made me angry.

‘I thought you were gone,’ I shouted. ‘Reunited with Ezra or something.’

She didn’t move. Her feet were anchored on the platform. I strode towards her, my steps falling heavily, shoulders swinging forcefully, jaw clenched tightly. All of my theatrics put into play, but she remained.

‘I saw him die, you know. I saw Ezra dead. Eyes fixed up on the ceiling like a fish on a hook.’

Lori looked away and then back at me, her eyes sparkling with tears, not a single one poured. They just welled up, and with that tiniest of gestures, I was undone. My fists relaxed, my bite unclenched, and my eyes welled up like hers.

‘You have to speak to me,’ I said. ‘You need to tell me why he is so important. I need to know why I’ve began to care about him.’

She held my hand and passed on to me so much sorrow and self-pity that I gasped. ‘We need to find him,’ she whispered.

Lori hadn’t answered my question. An idea dawned, compelling me to ask, ‘Do you remember how you and Ezra met?’

She couldn’t reply. How foolish of me, how insensible! She didn’t know. Lori had no idea who she was before.

I let my head drop back and glanced at the clouds above Audbridge. The magnitude of Lori’s tragedy was becoming apparent. My doubt was her doubt, only she’d suffered it through ages. She loved a man she’d met in a life gone. Death had always been between them.

‘I wasn’t really there,’ I said, ‘but what I’ve deduced is that it was your father who introduced you.’

Lori’s pupils widen. What’d been transparent in the daylight became black as her memory of life. I told her that, in the later part of his life, Mr Ashbridge had grown fond of the natural sciences, with a devoted passion for the relatively under-discussed field of ornithology. He had secured himself specimens endemic to territories as remote as Sierra Leone, Burma, and Nova Scotia, though he’d never journeyed that far in person. Around the time Lori turned twenty, Mr Ashbridge decided to compile his own illustrated guidebook based on his collection of over two-hundred specimens. That was when he brought in Ezra. His father was an acquaintance of Mr Ashbridge, and talk of the young man’s skills as a draughtsman had reached him. When Ezra received the letter from Mr Ashbridge, asking him to participate in the project, he was inclined towards rejecting the proposition. In fact, the day he met Lori, he was visiting Mr Ashbridge to explain that his actual specialty was mechanical drawing and design and that he had very little professional interest in illustrating a bird catalogue. But miracles did happen because, on learning that Ashbridge’s beautiful daughter was his assistant curator and would be closely involved in the project too, a sudden, fervent curiosity for ornithology awoke in the young man. By the end of the year, the project yielded two volumes with one-hundred-and-fifteen lithograph plates, a very happy ornithologist, a young lady head over heels in love with the illustrator, and a draughtsman who was ready to propose.

That was how I told Lori it’d happened. I didn’t use the name Ashbridge then.

‘You must help me find him,’ said Lori. ‘Sam, I need you.’

I took a deep breath and had a look around the station. ‘Shall we take a seat?’

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lori led me to one of the benches along the platform. I transitioned so fast into her world that I never felt the cold metal of the seat. I sat down on an antique wooden settee.

'Can you see me now?' asked Lori, sitting next to me on the settee. *The tiny red spots on her dress still hadn't come into focus.*

I nodded, frowning. The candlelight was dim and made it difficult to see. We were in the entrance hall of a large house.

'Miss Abishaw will be down shortly,' she said. 'Wait for the knock on the door.'

I located the front door along with another two doors. I squinted trying to see more of the hall, and I thought I recognised the cream and brown wallpaper. Nothing was immediately manifest when Lori showed me somewhere new. The walls were crowded with pictures I still couldn't see properly. There was something familiar about the place, though I'd never been that far back in time and Miss Abishaw was still someone I knew only by reputation.

The staircase to the first floor was on our right, and sitting on the first step, was another guest, a sailor in a naval uniform.

'I see someone else,' I told Lori.

'Who?'

'On the stairs. I think he's a sailor,' I whispered.

'Good,' said Lori, with a certain coldness. She didn't even give him a glance.

'Anyone else?'

My eyes went around the hall once more and caught something taking shape – someone. Paper-thin against the light at first. Then opaque. Solid.

'A tall, bearded man. Just across from us.'

Lori approved and smiled, that smile that made my heart race. 'They have both come uninvited.' She spoke loudly but had no reaction from the men. 'Anyone else? How about that third one who has just walked in?' She gestured at the front door.

My eyes went towards the door. If it ever opened, I didn't see it. I couldn't see anyone new either. The entrance hall was already feeling crowded with the four of us. The settee Lori and I were sharing just about fitted the two of us. It had tall arms which gave the sensation of sitting in a box, a wooden box that creaked every time I shifted.

'He has just walked in,' said Lori. 'A young man in his twenties.' She gently pushed my chin with her index finger. 'There, by the painting. You see him? He's wearing a white shirt and a grey waistcoat and cravat.'

The painting was an oval portrait of some lady in a black gown, but there was no one there. I squinted and rubbed my eyes. It had become a habit of mine, my routine method for adapting my sight to Lori's candle-lit world. Then I saw him fade in, like a photo that's being developed. One second I was looking at the portrait hanging on the wall, and the next he was there in front of it.

'I've got him now.'

'Good,' said Lori, somewhat proudly. 'All you have to do is focus and allow yourself to see.'

I nodded without removing my gaze from the young man. To me, he looked younger than twenty and was in much better shape than the two men who had arrived before him. I felt forced to face away when he glanced in my direction.

'Do you think the others can see me?' I whispered.

'I doubt it,' replied Lori. 'You're only my guest. You belong here even less than I do.'

I suddenly felt really small. 'Can they see you?'

'Some of them can, sometimes. Sometimes they stare too much, actually. It's very improper... unsettling, really. But that's as much contact as we get. We never speak.'

'Why not?'

'It doesn't work out.'

'Works for us.'

She shifted towards me. 'Look at me.'

She was frowning a little, a beautiful combination of concentration and sadness.

'Do you see my lips moving?'

I didn't. I hadn't noticed that before.

'Yet my voice is in your head. We are special, you and I.'

'We are special,' I repeated.

'But you mustn't forget what I am.'

I nodded and kept quiet for a while. 'How come they just show up uninvited at your summoning?'

'Oh, these things are hardly ever private,' said Lori. 'I don't know of a way to stop others from coming. I can't blame them either. We all want to be heard. I know I called them uninvited earlier, but in reality we are all welcome at Miss Abishaw's.' She leaned closer and whispered, 'I have shown up uninvited once or twice too.'

At that moment, none of the three men were looking at us. The youngest one, in the grey waistcoat and cravat, was standing catatonic in the corner by the door. It must have been his first time. On the stairs, the sailor had adopted a more comfortable pose. He was leaning back with his elbows on the steps, his legs spread open. He looked quiet and peaceful, as if he were asleep. His cap was pulled forwards on top of his brow. Like

the rest of his uniform, it was dark blue, but it also had some gold lettering. It was hard to make the words in the dim yellow light, but I'm almost sure it read HMS Victoria. The third man was anything but peaceful. He kept pacing around in the back of the hall, curling and pulling at his beard. He seemed to be talking to himself. Maybe he was singing; I couldn't make out which because there was no sound in his voice.

'I'm pretty sure your lips used to move before,' I told Lori.

'I have little command of how you remember me,' she replied, and it only confused me more because I did see her mouth move then.

She was about to say something else when a cacophony of knocks interrupted her. First it was the door, someone calling from outside. Then it was hurried footsteps cascading down the stairs.

'Miss Abishaw,' said Lori. All of us sprang right up and watched her rush down.

'Pa-pa-pa-pa, out of the way,' shouted the lady, and the sailor barely had time to move away before she trampled him.

She was a short, twiggy woman. Her hair was black and curly, held up in a bun, but two or three of her curls bounced loose around her neck as she moved.

The young man in the waistcoat opened his mouth as if to speak to her, but before he could make a sound, Miss Abishaw held her hand up and said, 'Quiet lad. Not yet. Not yet.' She didn't look directly at him, but her firm hand and tone were enough to shut his mouth – and everyone else's.

Miss Abishaw went straight to a cheval mirror standing near the door. We watched her in complete silence as she set straight the black lace shawl she was wearing on top of a burgundy dress, her figure stylised by a corset and a bustle. She fixed her hair, and then pinched her cheeks to make them flush. All the while, she kept glancing around the hall reflected in the mirror, pausing briefly upon each of us there.

There was a second rapping on the door. 'Just a moment,' replied Miss Abishaw, who then turned to us and commanded in a lower voice, 'You may not approach my guests.' Her eyes scanned the hall. 'You will keep your hands to yourselves and cause no trouble.' There was power in her voice.

She hurried to the door and let in the two men on the other side.

'Ezra?' I whispered to Lori. 'Quast?'

She didn't answer. Just straightened her posture and smiled to receive the men.

They both took off their hats to greet Miss Abishaw. Quast's silver hair was combed back. He was of an impressive size. Stripped of his fancy tailored clothes, he would have looked like he belonged on a fighting pit. His roughness made Ezra seem delicate, even fragile.

'My dear Mr Granger, how wonderful to see you back so shortly! I see you brought Mr Quast,' said Miss Abishaw.

Quast entered the house with all too much pomp and stood giving us his massive back as he greeted the hostess.

'Arse!' The word slipped, without giving me time to consider what an obvious comment it was. With everything he had done, everything he was going to do to Lori, he was easy to hate.

Lori straightened the skirt of her dress with sharp tugs. The fabric sounded harsh against her hands, and while she did that, I thought I also saw her lose her self-restraint and attack Quast. I saw her hitting the side of his arm with her palm as she tried to snatch his walking stick. A gentle breeze against an immutable rock, he never noticed her. I also saw Lori back on the settee, hiding her face, crying. It all happened at once and I wondered how many times Lori had been there before she brought me.

Quast removed his coat and hung it with his hat by the door, revealing the embroidered gold waistcoat and pristine white shirt he was wearing underneath. He was carrying his walking stick, which he kept with him. It wasn't that he needed it for walking. His gait was solid, and so was his body, seemingly cast in marble, and like the stone, Quast gave the impression of being heavy and classy, a hideously expensive look.

'Let's get rid of him,' I said. 'Let us jump onto him and choke him to death.'

Lori half smiled and a tiny wrinkle formed in the corner of her mouth. 'If only we could.'

I held my hands up, ready to smother the bastard in my head, but I couldn't even picture it.

'I know. I know,' I said. 'We are here to watch.'

After helping Ezra with his coat, Miss Abishaw led the two men into the parlour. The rest of us followed close behind.

The simplicity of the room was unnerving. I'd seen twenty-first-century rooms that looked way more Victorian than Miss Abishaw's parlour. It gave the impression people had just moved in and hadn't finished filling up the space. There was a round table in the centre, with six chairs, but aside from that, there were few other pieces of furniture. A wall lamp at each end of the room kept it half-lit.

Quast paraded around the centre table, inspecting the room. He held up his walking stick by the shaft, flourishing its golden knob.

'Not much to look at, is there?' he said with a grin, leaning towards Miss Abishaw.

He was right, but he was so obnoxious about it that it was hard to agree with him. The parlour was not a place to entertain. Heavy purple curtains covered the

windows, and the walls were bare, no pictures, no flowers, no ornamented Victorian décor.

'You see, Mr Quast,' said Miss Abishaw, 'I can't have things just lying around in this room. Oh dear, no. You don't want things tossed and thrown around. This is a place for business. I assure you this is quite an adequate venue for a séance.'

'And a séance is our business, Miss Abishaw,' he replied bowing. 'Mr Granger here holds you in very high esteem. I'm sure you know your trade.'

'Oh, isn't Mr Granger sweet.' She gestured playfully to Ezra.

Miss Abishaw invited the two gentlemen to sit at the centre table. Ezra was last to sit, after holding Miss Abishaw's chair for her. The rest of us spread around the room and remained standing. I was going to take a chair at the table as well, but Lori warned me against it.

'I was expecting an even gloomier room, to be perfectly honest,' commented Quast. 'This doesn't look haunted at all.'

'It doesn't need to be haunted,' said Miss Abishaw. 'We are contacting old friends tonight; I believe.' She raised her eyebrows at Ezra.

'Yes, yes, my wife. My late wife, Lori.'

My stomach churned when I heard him say that. I turned to Lori, but she was no longer by my side. She was on her way to the table.

She glided across the room towards Ezra and graced his arm when she passed behind him. One fluid movement after another, she seemed to dance, unaffected by gravity. It was an odd moment; she had never looked more like a ghost.

If she could get back to him so easily, what did she need me for?

Miss Abishaw placed four candles of different colours on the table. The light became warmer once she was done lighting them. She announced the beginning of the

séance, and the other spirits followed Lori's example and gathered around the table. I too felt compelled to come a bit closer to see what was going on. Lori and Ezra were right across from me. They looked as if they were posing for a portrait. I could hardly stop staring at Ezra. He looked a bit manlier with Lori standing by his side. Everything looked better with Lori nearby.

Miss Abishaw asked the two gentlemen to join hands and close their eyes. Then she started talking about projecting her inner light.

'I am surrounded by white light.' She spoke softly with a rhythm, slightly sexily, to be honest. 'It's a warm, soothing white light that spreads all over my body.'

I couldn't see a thing.

'Now, you are going to let out your own light. Picture it springing from your pores. It's your own soul that is creating it, and this product of your soul spreads all over your body. Feel it warm in your chest.'

I still couldn't see the white light, but the expressions of both men did become softer, calmer.

'The white light covers me from the top of my head to my feet. It shields me from all evil, and now I'm going to share it with Mr Granger. I pass it on to you to make a stronger shield.'

Miss Abishaw asked Ezra to pass on the white light to Quast, and he then projected it back to the medium. So they were all supposedly entwined in some sort of protective light pretzel.

'Now we are ready to begin,' said Miss Abishaw.

I crossed myself. I wasn't sure why. It was kind of a reflex.

Miss Abishaw and the two men kept their hands together while she addressed Lori and the other guests. 'Mr Granger, Mr Quast, and myself would like to welcome

those who have passed to this friendly gathering. Let this table and these sitters be your link with the earthly realm, but I must warn you, he who means harm is not welcome.'

The four spirits loved being spoken to directly. It showed in their faces, even in Lori's. The young man in the cravat bounced up and down where he stood. He seemed so excited he might pee his pants at any moment.

'We've gathered here to try and contact Lori,' said Miss Abishaw loudly. 'Lori Granger.'

My stomach churned again at the sound of her name and his together.

'Lori Ashbridge, actually,' corrected Ezra. 'We never got to the point of her taking my name.'

I didn't know that. It sounded like good news, but I needed to mull it over. Later.

'If only there was a Lori Ashbridge present?' asked Miss Abishaw to the room.

The other spirits weren't happy with the attention Lori was getting. The young man with the cravat began biting his nails. The bearded man too looked agitated, scratching his chin then crossing his arms then scratching again. It bothered me that neither of them could hold still, but it was the third spirit that had me really concerned. The sailor had kept his temper all this time. He'd done it so well that he started to look sinister in his silence, his head low, his eyes hidden under his blue cap. His hands were clenched into fists.

Miss Abishaw reached for one of the candles on the table. 'If you are here, Lori, could you blow out the red candle I am pointing at?'

Before Lori could even attempt to move, the younger man dashed forwards and extinguished the flame between his fingers.

The men were amazed. 'She's here!' said Ezra.

'Unfortunately, that is not her,' retorted Miss Abishaw. At least she was being honest.

The medium took a moment to explain that there were others in the room who wanted to be heard. 'These apparitions,' she said, 'are a common occurrence in séances. Nothing to worry about.' She looked straight at the jumpy young man. 'We welcome only friendly presences into this safe space. You may stay but only if you behave. At the moment, I want to speak with Mrs Granger—Ashbridge. If only there was a Miss Ashbridge here.'

Lori wasted no time and leaned forwards to blow out the remaining three candles. The flicker of the dousing flames excited Quast and Ezra, but before they jumped to any conclusion, they stared expectantly at Miss Abishaw. The news that this time it was actually Lori elated them.

'Tell him I've missed him,' began Lori. 'Tell him I miss him all the time, even when I can see him. Tell him I miss him right now that he is in front of me.'

'She misses you, Mr Granger,' said Miss Abishaw apathetically.

'I miss her too,' replied Ezra, then he looked randomly away. 'I miss you too, Lori. Everyday.'

'Every day a little more,' whispered Lori.

Miss, miss, miss, they repeated the word so much that I thought I missed them too. It sickened me.

'Mr Quast is accompanying me tonight. He wanted to say hello.' Ezra gestured for him to speak, which the older man did reluctantly.

'Hello, Lori. How wonderful it is to hear from you – about you.' He cleared his throat and gazed around the room, awkwardly searching for something he couldn't find. 'When Ezra mentioned these sittings, I had to make sure I'd attend one myself.'

'Tell him I know he's here to make sure Ezra is not wasting his money on a charlatan,' said Lori, and Miss Abishaw passed on the message, in her own words and adding a marked emphasis on the word 'charlatan.'

Communication was slow and difficult between the living and the dead. Though Miss Abishaw proved her interpretation skills, not everything Lori said went through. Aside from the natural difficulty of speaking with the dead, the medium was forced to deal with the other presences in the room who grew more restless by the minute. I couldn't hear their voices, but I could see them moving around the sitters and mouthing words. And there was a strange hum, distant but right in my ear.

Fewer and fewer of Lori's messages were going through. Miss Abishaw apologised, explaining that a number of other spirits had arrived since they started. I couldn't see them, but she said they were nagging her for attention.

'There's a particularly loud young lady,' said Miss Abishaw, 'a feisty little blonde, who is looking for her husband.' The medium paused to listen. 'She is very insistent. Perhaps you know her?' As far as I could see, Lori was the only woman in the séance, aside from the medium herself. So either Miss Abishaw was lying, or I was failing at this. She listened some more. 'Mar-Margot?'

'Margaret!' called Quast. The interruption surprised us all, seemingly even Quast himself. He cleared his throat and asked in a more composed tone, 'Is her name Margaret?'

'Actually, she—' Miss Abishaw stopped in mid-sentence. She stared blankly ahead and then nodded. 'Actually, she's shouting that she is here.'

The medium leaned towards Ezra and whispered, 'Who's Margaret?'

'His late wife,' said Ezra.

Quast's walking stick fell from his lap, and he dived hurriedly under the table to pick it up. 'I lost her long ago,' he said when he was back up.

'She's here,' confirmed Miss Abishaw. 'Margaret is with us tonight.'

I tried to tell myself she was lying to impress Quast, but why would she bother? No, she wasn't faking it. I had been too focused on the conversation. There was that hum. I had forgotten about it, discarded it as background noise, but as I started to pay attention again, it got louder and louder. An eerie feeling stirred within me – there could be more people in the room than I was aware of.

I looked over my shoulder and got the chills.

Others had arrived without me noticing. Aside from the three spirits that started the séance, there must have been about eight more now in the room. Men and women. They acted as if they couldn't see me. Still, the thought of them creeping all around me before I noticed made me shrink inside my shirt.

'Margaret says she's glad she has finally found you.'

I could see her now, the blonde girl talking to Miss Abishaw from across the room. She looked too young for Quast. She kept pushing forwards, trying to get past the wall the others had built around the table. There must have been at least fifteen people in there.

'She loves the flowers that you leave for her,' said Miss Abishaw, making an effort to reproduce the message.

'Flowers?' Quast seemed puzzled.

'The purple lilies you bring her to her grave.'

It was only because Quast's scowl caught my eye that I noticed what was going on behind him. The bearded man, the one who had been there since the beginning, was also jostling his way through the crowd, but he was going the wrong way. He was going

against the flow, forcing his way towards the young blonde. Miss Abishaw was unaware of him. She too was completely immersed in the blonde.

I saw it then. They didn't care about Quast or Abishaw. They only wanted each other. The bearded man was reaching out for her, and she was reaching out for him. She was the wrong Margaret.

'She has missed you every single day,' cried Miss Abishaw. 'She searches for you every single day.'

'No, she's the wrong Margaret,' I whisper. 'She's the wrong Margaret,' I yelled, but Miss Abishaw didn't listen. I wanted to tell Lori but I'd lost sight of her. There were too many people in the room.

'She is asking for her boy,' said Miss Abishaw. 'How's her baby boy?'

Quast's walking stick banged against the floor. 'Baby?' he shouted. 'I'm sorry Mr Granger, but she has crossed the line. We are done here.' He said something else, but it was all growls to me.

Tempers rose in the room. The hum became a racket of thumps and bangs and shrills, and I couldn't find Lori. Quast stood up bitterly, calling the medium a fraud while Ezra tried to calm him down. Miss Abishaw was trying to cope with both, the living and the dead, but there was too much yelling.

I called for Lori. Ezra did too, but she was not answering, at least not to me.

Then the sailor, that silent sinister figure from HMS Victoria, burst into madness. I could see his eyes beneath his cap now. I could have sworn they were on fire. He slammed his palms against the table and knocked over one of the chairs. I lost sight of the bearded man and his Margaret. So many dead had arrived that I couldn't count them.

On my right, Miss Abishaw began saying a prayer I couldn't understand. Her words were overcome by the other voices in the room. The spirits were not mute anymore. They mumbled indistinctively, gave out loud noises from the throat. With the deafening sound, I started losing sight of them, as if one sense had turned off the other. One of the wall lamps went out, and the shadows became darker.

I was feeling very heavy and had to sit down. I tried leaning on the table, but as soon as I rested my head on the wood, it started rattling. The legs hit the floorboards with anger. Ezra and Quast stepped back, speechless with their eyes wide open. The candles rolled off the table as it began to spin. It started slowly but gained momentum with each turn. Quast attempted to hold it. His fingers squeaked against the wood. He must have been the strongest man among us, but he couldn't keep the table from spinning. Ezra joined him trying to hold it, but the spinning force overpowered both men. The wooden legs rasped on the floor and gave a horrible background clatter to Miss Abishaw's prayer. We watched the table spin until Miss Abishaw finished mumbling and nailed both hands on it. The action killed the movement in such an unnatural way I could barely believe my eyes.

Then there was silence. The hostess replaced one of the candles in the centre of the table and lit it. This time the small flame made a difference in the brightness of the room. Eyes wide open, the two men were still but breathing rapidly – we all were. My hands were shaking.

Miss Abishaw took a deep breath and invited her clients to rejoin her at the table, but Quast would not sit down again.

'Everything is good now,' said Miss Abishaw in a melodious tone, 'No need to worry too much. These things do happen, from time to time.'

Quast was about to break into yelling again. But he swallowed his anger enough to say, 'We must leave at once, Mr Granger.' He nodded to the hostess and left the parlour in three long strides. His walking stick didn't touch the floor once. Miss Abishaw tried to bless him, but he was out of the house before she could finish a sentence. Ezra stayed for the blessing and told her he was sorry for how the night ended, that he was still very thankful, and that Quast had no children and was sensitive about the topic.

'But he does have children, in a way. You must be careful with that one, Mr Granger. Dead children pull at his hems.'

Ezra seemed thrown aback by the warning, but he nodded politely.

'I'm sorry you didn't have the chance to say goodbye,' said Miss Abishaw, reaching with her hand to touch Ezra's face, but she pulled back when the man flinched.

'It's alright, Miss Abishaw. I have a feeling that Lori is leaving with me.'

Perhaps she was because, as the door closed behind him, I could feel myself going too. I was vanishing back into my body, tuning in with my own senses and the multi-flavoured scent of the twenty-first century.

I was still floating, oblivious, inside my body when a plastic wrapper crinkled. A woman in a light blue hijab was digging into her Cajun-chicken sandwich next to me. I closed my eyes, reluctant to transition, and in that darkness behind my lids, recalled the loss of Zoe. Heavy. Her absence weighed me down, forcing my eyes to open. I was back.

The 10:10 service to Sheffield was about to arrive.

Part IV

Chapter Twenty-Three

I came back to my senses on the train. Our carriage shook with the loud whoosh of a train rushing in the opposite direction. A minute later, the driver gave the announcement we were approaching Audbridge Central. Outside, the thick tree line receded and red-brick buildings came into view. Then the rail lines slithered and multiplied. Running side by side, there were so many of them that they merged in the distance.

I remained seated while other passengers hurried to queue at the door of the carriage, we must have been delayed. I'd lost sight of the Chilean couple then, but when I was on the platform, I caught a glimpse of them hurrying up the stairs with their bags. I could still hear them – her voice, really, echoing off the metallic structure of the station. Audbridge Central was a cathedral of industry, one immense metal ribcage. Walking in still made me feel like I'd been swallowed – no, smaller, *inhaled* like a dust particle, inconsequential and gaping at this giant from inside. I was sent back a century, without the need of Lori. The iron work told the years of the building. The rivets spoke of hammering and toiling.

My train to Hull was departing from the other side of the station. I took the stairs to the bridge and called Zoe on the way. No answer. I stopped halfway across the bridge. Her number was all there was on my contact list. It depressed me. My chat log with Zoe was not a chat at all but a miserable list of outgoing messages. All unanswered. She was ghosting me. The irony. She had ended it with me and I hadn't realised.

I peeked over the wall of the bridge at the rail tracks below, head resting on my forearms, leaning on the edge of the wall. I didn't move for a while. I felt absolutely no need.

Time did not flow. There was no progression. The world was dead, for everything that would come to pass has passed already, and the present was what we lived and remembered at once.

I would've probably made a better ghost than a human being. I would've probably been better off as one.

I gripped the top of the wall and pushed up and forwards onto my hands.

It wouldn't be that bad to forget life.

My feet lifted off the floor, and the blood went to my head. I closed my eyes and felt the breeze.

I would haunt Zoe and she wouldn't have a chance. She wouldn't have a chance to refuse me.

When I opened them again the tracks seemed so much farther than before.

'I need to find Zoe,' I said and dropped back on the bridge.

Right then the awfully loud recording from the lift announced: 'Doors opening.' I thought I was back into some sort of dream when I saw Catherine slowly plodding her way out of the lift. Her pace was hypnotic, cane first, then two short steps; cane, step, step, fragile yet unwavering. I couldn't avoid feeling pity for her. Out of all that she could remind me of, I could only think of her having tea and Viennese whirls.

'Don't jump!' she joked. I think she was joking.

She looked older in the open daylight. I went to her and offered my arm. She grabbed it and we started across the bridge.

'What are you doing here? How did you find me?'

She raised her eyes from the floor for a moment to tell me she'd come to see me go. 'Where is it you are going exactly?'

'I've forgotten,' I replied, just as the name popped into my head. 'Hull.'

She seemed surprised. 'I suppose, you must have a good reason for traveling all the way to Hull. Been there before?'

'Never. That's why I'm heading there. I know absolutely nothing about it.'

'And no one knows you.'

I snorted.

'Listen. I know earlier you felt you had to bolt away from my house. But it's my duty to try to make you see things straight. Lori has probably been trying to turn you against me.'

We paused so that Catherine could take a breather.

'Samuel, you should not trust her blindly. I know it's difficult, but you must strive to separate your feelings from hers.'

I chuckled. 'I know. I know. I know. The moment you walked out of the elevator, I understood. It's not you I want to get away from.'

We got to the other end of the bridge, and I called the lift.

'Why seek after her then? Why do you put up with her?'

I glanced down at Catherine. Her white curls held up with copper pins.

'Because I understand how she feels. Because she's alone and vulnerable and such a faint image of her real self that she has to – She. Has. To – look into the past to keep it together.'

Catherine listened attentively. She was going to speak when I let the words spill out.

‘Because with her I am at home and away from it at once. I can feel the sun and my toes sinking in the wet sand. The foam of waves tickling my ankles. I can feel the void in my stomach from playing on the swings at the park. I touch her, and the mist of the rain forest, and my work desk, and my childhood’s *Hot Wheels*, all at the same time. I can feel my fingers plunge into her hair.’

The lift came and we went in. It jolted before it started going down. When the doors opened again Catherine asked, ‘How about the mosquito bites?’

The question threw me off-balance.

‘Your skin sticky with dried coke all the way back from some school trip because that bully of yours poured a whole can on you? Or when you were in that church retreat and all the kids got tons of letters from their families, sending their blessings and telling them how good they were, and you didn’t get one because your aunt couldn’t hand it in on time. How about your aunt’s head in your hands when you found her. So heavy.’

‘I’d never held anything dead before,’ I said, eyes fixed on the past.

‘Does Lori remind you of the pain as well?’

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes. ‘I never told you those things.’

‘You talk in your sleep.’ Catherine winked at me.

We carried on to one of the benches on the platform. She dragged me down with her when she sat down. The Chilean couple had made it and were standing farther along the platform.

‘I remember,’ I said. ‘I remember telling you now.’

‘Good,’ said Catherine, straightening her posture. ‘She’s not in control, you know. You are. Just like she is in control of *her* memories. Whether you find logic in

the order she shows them to you is completely up to you.’ She had both hands on her cane.

‘Only I can see her. How can I neglect her, knowing I’m her only option?’

Catherine smiled. ‘I think she got lucky this time, with you.’

‘This time?’ I asked. ‘Why do you speak as if you knew her?’

‘You’d be surprised how many people I’ve seen through my door. Most of them I forget as soon as they leave, but Lori is... persistent. She’s not easy to forget.’

‘How long have you known her?’

She looked down and chuckled. ‘Let’s just say I always thought Mr Granger looked better on my arm than hers.’ She grabbed my arm. ‘Kind of like you do.’

I instinctively laughed, but then the significance of what she’d said dawned on me. ‘You can’t be her.’

Impossible, but somehow believable too. It was the intonation of the sentence, the pronunciation of ‘Mr Granger’ that sounded so familiar.

‘I can’t be who?’ she sniggered.

I took a long look at her. ‘Abishaw?’

As soon as I said the name, both faces matched perfectly.

‘Catherine Abishaw?’

‘Miss Catherine Abishaw, please,’ she replied, raising her chin.

I stood up, trying to process, and strode to the edge of the platform and back to my seat. I opened my mouth a couple of times, but the words didn’t come out.

‘You spend hours talking to ghosts in places invisible to others,’ said Catherine.

‘Why is this so hard to believe?’

A train arrived in the opposite platform. It wasn’t until it left that I managed to ask, ‘Why are you helping me now?’

‘I must confess a young lady convinced me you were worth getting involved with. She reminded me it’s never too late to atone.’

I got up again and stretched. I squatted down in front of Catherine; then lost my balance and ended up sitting on the floor.

‘You could have told me the truth before. Lori and Ezra and Quast. You knew who they were. You knew all about them.’

‘I didn’t know *all* about them. I still don’t.’ She grabbed my hand. ‘I’m only trying to help... to help you and myself, and the others as well. We are all in this game together.’ She dragged the brass tip of her cane up and down on the floor. It was an antique, another one which she might have bought new. ‘I’ve played my part since the beginning and can’t leave the game until it’s finished. I’m sorry you were dragged into this, but there’s a chance you might end it for all of us. And give us rest.’

The 15:15 service to Leeds came and went. I didn’t speak until the platform was clear again.

‘The last thing you said back in your place. That she only loves the other guy. Was it true?’

‘Whatever I tell you now won’t change the way you feel. That’s a question you should be asking yourself.’

The train to Hull was announced. The woman on the speakers apologised for the twelve-minute delay.

‘Take your train. See where it leads you. If you decide to come back, there is a place I’d like you to go.’

She began fiddling with the handle of her cane. I couldn’t figure out what she was doing until she showed it to me.

‘Could you be a dear and pull the pin out?’

The handle was dark wood carved in the shape of a slouching raven. I examined what appeared to be part of the bird's foot but was actually a tiny peg, half pulled out. I only noticed it because Catherine had begun drawing it out.

With the pin out, Catherine instructed me how to unscrew the base, and the whole raven top came off.

'There were times I used this as a flask,' she said with a smile. 'It's been dry for years now.' She drew a piece of paper from the secret compartment. 'Here. This is the address,' she said handing me the paper. 'Put it in your pocket and forget about it for a while.'

I put the paper in my pocket and patted it.

She grabbed my face, squeezing my cheeks in between her thumb and index. 'Don't forget to check the attic, okay? The attic.'

I nodded and mumbled I understood. Then we walked back to the lift, where she pressed the button.

'Will you be okay by yourself?' I asked.

'Don't worry about me, love. New Anna is waiting for me on the other side.'

She waved over across the rail tracks. A girl wearing a light blue hijab waved back from the other side of the station and started heading up the stairs.

'Let's see if this one can outlast me,' said Catherine, stepping inside the lift. She pressed the button. 'Stay awake around rail tracks,' was the last I heard from her before the doors closed.

I tried to sleep on the train, but it was a diesel and the empty overhead racks rattled every time they restarted the engine at a stop. So instead, I kept my eyes open towards the window, only at times truly looking at the scenery outside. The rest of the time I just

stared at my reflection on the glass. I kept thinking of the dead I'd seen in my visions. They were solid. They were dead, but they were concrete. I was neither. There I was on the window, see-through, floating above the speeding greenery of the English countryside, or flying by the grey buildings of... wherever.

At one of the stops, Zoe boarded the train, or rather a transparent version of Zoe. I saw her reflected on the window as well, ghostly as me for the first time. I went back to the memory of the day I met her in Costa Rica. My eyes unavoidably fixed to the window watching her reflection, her eyes closed tight, fending with the sun as she tried to sleep. Of course, this blonde woman sitting across from me wasn't the real Zoe. She didn't even look much like Zoe. It was embarrassing when she caught me looking at her, and even though I tried not to bother her, I succumbed to a cheeky second glimpse. Our gazes crossed again, making us both uncomfortable.

I got up and went to the back of the carriage. I stood by the door and peeped through the window. My eyes widened when the trees along the tracks yielded space to the view. It was late spring, and the rapeseed was blooming. Perhaps I had been looking at it for a while along the ride, without really paying attention to it. I leaned closer to the window until my forehead bumped on it. That was the first time I laid eyes on a rapeseed field. I could tell Zoe I finally saw one in the flesh.

The train arrived at the next stop within minutes. I didn't even have to think about getting off the train. My feet did it automatically when the door opened. The Chilean couple saw me through the window, and the girl waved, mouthing something at me. I could've sworn it was *hasta luego*. They knew after all.

The view from the train did not compare to the beauty of the field from the side of the road. The street was at a higher level. Sitting on the slope at the side, I still had a good

panoramic view of miles and miles of rapeseed. Every so often a line of trees marked the edge of a farmer's land, but the next field was also yellow, and the next, and the next, up the hills and beyond. The way the wind caught the rapeseed reminded me of my first time in Lori's world. It was the blurry unstable surfaces. The gusts created ripples on the floral bed. The shadows of clouds drifted and clashed, and far in the distance, a solitary tree towered solid above the yellow waves.

The sun would take forever to go down in this part of the world. Back home dusk would last only a few minutes. The sky would burst into flames for a moment, and then it was gone. In England, the sun paced itself. Died old and pale, surrounded by golden clouds. Half an hour went by before I could see the light was falling short of the farthest fields. The change caught me by surprise. The bright yellow mantle turning greenish, mustard, if that can be called a colour. I stood up, watching the twilight approach, and noticed a power pylon. It was a dark metallic giant in the middle of the field – like that tree I'd seen. Somehow I had missed it before. It wrecked that perfect image of the field of flowers; it cut short my moment of peace.

I strolled along the low line of bushes that made the fence and found a spot where I could negotiate an entrance. I needed to tread on the field while there was still light.

I went in angry. It was the stupid pylon that ruined it for me, but as I went through the field, the feeling dissipated. The rapeseed plants were just below waist-height. I could graze the flowers as I drifted by. I crouched too. Trespassing had to be illegal, but what was I to do? The worst that could happen was that an angry farmer came out, shotgun in hand. I acted out the scene. 'No, please Mr Farmer' – that was his name, not his occupation – 'Please, Mr Farmer, don't shoot.' Then bang! I dropped on

the ground. The soil was dry and hard. Still, I lay there perfectly quiet. Buried among the flowers. The stems towering above me, waving at the pink clouds.

The rapeseed plant was something else from below. The flowers grew only on the tip. In that moment, lying on that field, I realised there was a hell lot of green beneath the golden tip. Nothing was as it seemed from a distance.

‘Remember what I told you about how you and Ezra met?’ My voice was followed only by the sound of the wind and the leaves of the rapeseed. ‘Lori?’

She was there. I’d felt her presence since I started walking across the field. I repeated the sentence.

‘Yes?’ replied Lori. I couldn’t see her, but her words were clear.

‘I told you your father had hired Ezra to illustrate a book of his, a book of birds. You were curating your father’s collection, fell in love with the draughtsman.’ It played like a movie in my head.

I sensed Lori agreeing.

‘What I didn’t tell you back then is that when Ezra asked your father for your hand you were watching from across the courtyard. It was raining that day. We remember because you were under the back-door canopy. It was pitched, so the water cascaded between you and them, blocking the view of your father’s office in intervals. Still you could see them both through the window, candlelight flickering as they spoke. It was not going well. You could tell by their expressions.

Thunder broke, and you went out in the rain, in fear the unthinkable could happen. Mr Ashbridge did not give his consent. He would not give his daughter’s hand in marriage to a man like Ezra, a man of moderate resources, a man without an appropriate name. The Ashbridges didn’t have the habit of worrying too much about the

incomes of their acquaintances, but they couldn't act blind to the circumstances of their daughter's marriage.

The mud from the puddles was splashing on your dress. The rain was cold on your back.

Ezra saw you through the window and rushed out of your father's office. He dragged you back inside, away from the rain. "I promise you, Lori my love. We won't be parted," he said, drying you with a cloth.

Unfortunately, it was too late. You got pneumonia, and Ezra was forced away from your side. You saw the worst of it on the second day, your head cold and sweaty, resting on the lap of Death. You could barely open your eyes when your father sat at your side, but you mustered all your energy to say, "I shall die before you break us apart."

Mr Ashbridge was not a bad man. He cared for you dearly. So he let Ezra come to you. He watched the young man hold your hand, and tend to your fever, and sleep by your bed.

Pneumonia often kills on the third day, someone told your father, and upon the news that you weren't rallying, he became desperate. He went and knelt before your bed. He made you promise you'd recover if he gave his consent. And in the end, you both came through.'

I sat up back in the field, my sightline just above the rapeseed. The bright yellowness of the field had disappeared with the sun. I breathed deep the dusty scent of the field. Only then did I notice how quiet the darkness was. All I could hear was the electricity humming in the powerlines nearby. I'd never heard that. I wondered if that was the reason there were no crickets around, no insects at all. Far on the road, headlights beamed as a car rushed by.

‘That was my gift for you. A memory I hope you like.’ I got up on my feet and turned to the side. Lori was not visible, but to me I was looking straight into her eyes.

‘This, right here, right now, is mine.’

And with that I started walking back.

I didn’t get to Hull. There was business to attend to in Audbridge.

Chapter Twenty-Four

23 Hounds Gate was a ghostly place. The red-brick building was in a corner, and from across the street, it seemed to have three floors. The ground floor was split in half by a gateway. On one side, there was a bicycle shop, which according to the large letters above the front windows also sold toys, crafts, and DIY supplies. The other half of the ground floor was a Thomas Cook branch. What used to be the main entrance to the building was right between these two shops. Customers entering through the narrow archway could go right to the travel agency or left to the department store, but if they followed the stuffy hallway to the end, they would find the set of stairs to the first floor and the tattered blue-and-yellow sign that read: *The Emporium*.

The Emporium was an antiques shop. I had no idea where I was going when I pulled Ms Abishaw's note from my pocket. It came as a surprise, both good and bad at once because I enjoyed looking around antique shops, but I suspected Ms Abishaw wanted me to find an object, and a place like that, with thousands of them, would make the task much harder. I couldn't tell exactly the moment I entered *The Emporium*. The overflowing merchandise spilled out of the shop. I realised that, going up to the first floor. The complete randomness of the pictures hanging along the stairs was an indication that they were for sale rather than decorative, unless someone could actually have a liking for displaying stock photos of Big Ben and Tower Bridge superposed, school class photos, and empty frames. Every other step had a different stuffed animal, mostly bears, or a bronze statuette, or a cast-iron iron. I turned around halfway up and noticed the white banner hanging opposite the staircase. It had a huge red poppy in the centre, and the black silhouette of a band of soldiers, all Brodie helmets on, trudging on top of the phrase 'Lest we forget' at the bottom.

A girl with bold, oversized glasses greeted me upstairs. I said hello and had a look around. The entire floor was open-plan, but much of the merchandise was furniture; overfilling cabinets, wardrobes, dressers, they were arranged to form a number of mock living rooms. Dining sets and clusters of coffee tables often took the centre. Around them, chairs, stools, bookshelves and more tables were teeming with all sorts of memorabilia and whatnot. Gas lamps, pans, skillets, mining sieves, hung like copper garlands from the wood beams. Fishing boots draped in one corner, watering cans in another. The shop was packed with objects, but it wasn't messy. The room was well lit and didn't have that smell that sometimes haunted antique shops, of mothballs and damp.

Ms Abishaw had insisted that I should check the attic when she gave me the address, so I paced around the floor shortly before discreetly making my way to the top level. That second floor of the shop was dedicated to paintings and framed artsy photographs. It was considerably smaller and didn't have an open plan like the floor below. There were two rooms with goods and a third room that was closed to the public. I inspected the ceilings trying to find a loft or some indication that there had been one, but I couldn't find anything. If there was another room above, the access had to be through that closed door.

I neared it stealthily and tried the knob. It wouldn't turn, so I backed up to a display of photographs close by to avoid suspicion. What bothered me a minute later was that there was a chance the door just needed a bit of a stronger push. I was going for my second try when I noticed the CCTV camera set directly above the doorframe. It deterred me for a moment, but I was a man on a mission. The knob didn't turn the second time I tried it either. I monitored the stairs. No one was coming. I peeped through the keyhole, but there wasn't enough light on the other side to see anything.

I was about to give up when I heard someone rushing up the stairs. I jumped to the nearest display and pretended to be interested in the old photograph of a footballer.

‘Hello, sir. Everything alright?’ asked a man. He was calm, despite being slightly short of breath. His tone made it evident he was there to impose some authority.

I glanced sideways at this large man and thought he was armed with a golf club. ‘Yeah, yeah,’ my Latin accent was through the roof. ‘I’m alright, thanks.’

‘Were you looking for anything in particular?’ he asked.

He had undoubtedly seen me through the camera. My heart started pounding and my body was boiling. I reluctantly turned towards him and was about to tell him some lie when I saw who it was.

‘Steve?’

It wasn’t some large man. It was only Steve, the Steampunk, aka Bram Stevenson. You didn’t stumble upon handlebar moustaches like his very often. His faced showed both surprise and relief that it was me. What I thought was a golf club turned out to be a walking stick. We shook hands enthusiastically.

‘I almost didn’t recognise you without a—’ I was going to say costume. ‘I almost didn’t recognise you in twenty-first century clothes. How are you?’

‘Not too bad,’ he said. It turned out that *The Emporium* was Steve’s shop.

‘Melissa over there was getting suspicious of you!’ He gestured at the girl with glasses who had greeted me earlier. She had followed Steve up and was waiting at the top of the stairs. She was wearing eighties-fashion overalls and a *Back to the Future* top underneath.

‘I had to come up and check you weren’t planning on causing any trouble, you miscreant!’ He shook his walking stick at me.

I laughed nervously. ‘Were you going to hit me with that?’

It was his turn for a nervous laugh. ‘No, no, no. I just had it in my hand when Mel gave me the heads up. I’m just trying to break it in. My knee’s been giving me trouble.’ He put it down and leaned onto it. ‘But seriously, what brings you to my shop? Are you looking for something specific?’

I said I had found the place by chance and that I was just looking around. Steve insisted he would show me the place. We went back downstairs, where Melissa took her place back behind the counter.

‘I have a little bit of everything,’ said Steve. He had a quick glance around and seemed to remember something. He put his stick with a bunch of umbrellas in a rack and climbed on a stool. It wobbled as he reached above one of the cabinets. ‘Check this out!’

He brought down what I thought was a violin case, but there was no violin inside. It was a prosthetic arm. A wooden hand mounted on a leather saddle and a metal frame jointed at the elbow with clasps.

‘Late eighteen-hundreds,’ bragged, Steve. ‘1896-98, most likely.’

I honestly marvelled, looking at it, though it wasn’t something particularly beautiful. ‘In case someone had an accident with a machine in one of the factories?’ I guessed.

‘Yes, if they were the owner of the factory, probably. These beauties were really expensive. Way above blue-collar salary.’

‘Where do you find stuff like this?’

‘Believe it or not, this one came with the store when I bought it.’ Steve read my expression and anticipated my next question. ‘This shop has been here for eighty-five years. We’ve got a few items that haven’t left this room in that long. Maybe longer.’

I told him I was impressed.

Steve was called. He excused himself and said he had to take care of business, but I was welcomed to stay as long as I wished. I thanked him, immediately thinking of that attic – if that was what it was. Steve hadn't mentioned the locked door on the second floor, and I couldn't just ask him. He had definitely seen me trying to force it open, and I wouldn't be able to play innocent if I brought it up myself.

Mel was waiting for Steve at the cashier. She was with a woman who had found Steve's walking stick on the rack and was very eager to buy it. Steve was emphatic that the cane was not for sale, but he couldn't avoid 'selling it'. The way he described it was enticing, the way he waved it and exhibited it, hypnotising. This was a stylish presentation cane. Victorian, circa 1850. The streaky character of the dark ebony of the shaft complemented the handle beautifully. Steve graced the spectacular eighteen karat gold knob and asked Mel for a magnifying glass, which he used to show us the hallmarks in the collar. The superb craftsmanship of the handle was evident in the precision of leaves motif chased in baroque style. He explained a cane like that wasn't made for walking. A gentleman would have carried it as a symbol of his social standing.

'It's dented,' said the lady, dryly.

Steve sighed. 'A small mark that adds character. Sorry Ma'am. This one is not for sale.'

He tapped the floorboards with the stick, and the sound struck me like lightning.

I had been too concentrated on Steve's presentation to recognise what was in his hands. Only when he hit the floor with it did the memory stir, the certainty that I knew *that* was Quast's walking stick.

I completely zoned out of Steve's discussion with the lady and wondered how that cane went from my dreams to Steve's hands.

‘Mel, could you hold this for a moment?’ he said, offering it to her.

I stepped forwards and raised both hands. ‘Do you mind if I see it?’

Steve hesitated, undoubtedly surprised, but he let the stick roll into my palms.

I thought there would be sparks flying when the wood touched my skin. I thought the exquisite ebony shaft would burst into flames and I would hear the voices of ghosts, and holy instruction would come with a flash of light.

But none of that happened. I held the stick up as if it was sacred. I regarded it, waited, but there were no voices. No apparitions around me. But that stick had to be what Ms Abishaw sent me to find. It couldn’t be a coincidence. I examined it from top to bottom. The cane was most definitely Quast’s, but it wasn’t giving me anything.

Then I noticed a tiny circle engraved in the knob. Only it wasn’t engraved. I had seen something like that before. I toyed with it a little and discovered the head of a pin.

‘Oh, Steve,’ I called. He was still talking to the lady. They were, actually haggling for the cane. ‘Excuse me, Steve. You need to see this.’

When I got his attention, I pulled the pin out and revealed the hidden compartment within. Everybody was mesmerised. I gave Steve the handle and gently tapped the hollow shaft onto my hand. A rolled piece of paper slid out. It was a page from a book. The print was very small, in two columns, with a handwritten note on the side that read, *He cannot be swayed.*

At five o’clock the store was closing for the day. Steve had asked me to stay. I was sitting on the floor with a box of comic books I’d found when Melissa waved good-bye to me from the entrance. The comics were spread around me in a semicircle. Thor, Chewbacca, and Batman, laid in front of me, frowning, their mouths open. Did they know something I didn’t? Pretending to read them gave me time to think about the cane

and the piece of paper inside. The more I thought about it the more questions I had. Why would Quast keep the note Ezra had given him? How did it end up here and at what point did Abishaw become aware of it? I couldn't grasp the significance of any of it. Neither the cane nor the paper had given me any clue as to what to do next or how to help Lori.

Steve came by and I put *Thor* away. He brought two bottles of beer and handed me one.

'I have a mini-fridge by the cashier. Sometimes I like to chill around after the shop is closed.' He raised his beer. 'Here's to the hero of the day.'

I toasted with him. And he sat in one of the chairs around.

'I wonder how you knew about it. Tell me the truth. Are you secretly a walking stick expert?'

I laughed. 'No, not at all. I knew someone who had a similar one. Well, not as nice.'

'Christ, and to think I almost sold it to that lady. She was offering £500.'

'Tempting. How much did it cost you?'

Steve said it'd been one of those things he had found in the store. He sipped his beer. 'It was in a box along with a bunch of rubbish. I didn't have the time to examine it properly until a few days ago. I picked it up because I needed a walking stick for our next Steampunk event. I thought it might help with my busted knee.'

I acted surprised. Perhaps the cane was not what I came to find. 'It really makes me wonder what other treasures you have just lying around.'

He joked about chances being very slim that there was anything left undiscovered, 'Then again. You never know.'

I drank a big gulp of beer.

‘You know what, mate? I could bet you a pint that I can find something in your shop that you don’t even know about.’

‘You really want to bet against me?’

‘Couldn’t think of a better way to waste my time,’ I jested.

‘Then I’ll take that wager!’ We were about to shake hands when he said. ‘Hold on, hold on. I need to ask you something first.’

‘Yeah?’

He cleared his voice and coughed. ‘What were you doing, upstairs, trying to open the staff-only door?’

‘This is embarrassing,’ I said with a foolish smile on my face that quickly vanished when Steve leaned forwards, elbows on his knees.

‘Better get it out quick then.’ He looked aged. The odd absence of expression on his face made me nervous.

‘I needed to see if there was an attic.’ I just let it out. ‘My psychic told me I would find answers in the attic. She didn’t say which attic so I’m kind of desperately looking for them everywhere I go.’

He stared blankly at me. Swallowed what was left of his beer and burst into laughter. ‘Oh, man. I had no idea! Wait, is this psychic Vicky?’ He laughed some more.

I told him it wasn’t her. ‘I’m so sorry. I hope I didn’t damage the door. I’m a bit desperate these days. I lost my job recently.’

Steve stopped giggling and apologised.

‘Well I’m glad I didn’t have to get tough on you. My knee is killing me today.’

He made me smile.

‘You know what, I can’t take that bet of ours anymore.’ He paused. His eyes moved as if he was doing maths in his head. ‘I’ll raise you. Find me something I can be surprised about and I’ll hire you.’

I asked him if he was serious, and he promised he wasn’t joking. He would give me a job.

It moved me. I hesitated but eventually said, ‘One condition, though, I wanna start with that room on the second floor.’

He chuckled. ‘Okay, chief. But I warn you, it is no attic. It’s just storage.’

We shook on it. I downed what was left of my beer and stood up.

‘What, now?’ asked Steve.

‘Yes, now. Come on. I’ll probably have to work tomorrow!’

‘Oh right.’ He stood up, cursing his knee. ‘But you better call that boss of yours and tell him you are going to be late tomorrow!’

Steve went in first. He switched on the lights and held the door for me.

The room wasn’t welcoming. The exposed brick was a feature that I usually liked, but there, it just felt cold and in desperate need of a revamp. The ceiling was twice as high as in the other rooms. The floorboards creaked with every step we took, and the windows were grungy; the light that came in was... sad. Boxes were piled here and there, some had ‘Christmas decorations’ written on the side, or ‘charity’, or ‘books’. Two of every three weren’t labelled. There were clothes racks and stands, mannequins, many of which were missing limbs or were actually just a torso.

‘What is this place?’

‘I told you it’s just storage. You won’t find anything exciting here.’

For a moment, I feared he was right, but then I stopped looking at the merchandise and started paying attention to the room itself.

‘Déjà vu.’ The phrase was at the tip of my tongue and came out by accident.

‘Pardon?’ asked Steve.

‘Oh, it’s nothing.’ I had been there before, in Lori’s memory.

‘There is,’ said Steve, reaching for a handle on the wall. ‘There is one really nice feature about this room.’ He began turning the crank, and I knew what was going to happen. The memory played in my head as I watched Steve, he and Ezra standing on the same spot, winding the same mechanism. The gears on the top started turning, and the panels on the ceiling opened. I had seen it all happen already, the first time I was in that workshop.

There used to be two storeys, an inner balcony with an iron railing. All that was gone. The spiral staircase as well. Many of the old shelves had disappeared, but I could see the holes in the walls and sometimes the fixtures where they had been. The few shelves that remained were empty of Ezra’s stuff. I wondered how much of it had been sold away, his tools now in someone else’s garage; his gauges, reused; his coils of wire, recycled; his fine instruments, that beautiful lathe of his. Gone.

‘Well?’ asked Steve. ‘You seem flabbergasted.’

There was some light left in the dark purple sky.

‘Yes,’ I said, plainly. I went to the corner, the boards squeaking under my feet.

‘There used to be a stove over here.’

‘That is actually very perceptive.’

I walked to the middle of the room. Creak. Creak. Crack. ‘And there was something big here. Occupying the whole centre of the room. A machine.’

Steve didn’t know what I was talking about.

I took my time going through some of the stuff accumulated over the years. A part of me was hoping I would find Ezra's orrery. I began moving boxes around. Some were carton, some wooden. A few of them fell apart in my hands. The orrery was not there. It was too big, too precious to still be there.

Steve showed me some interest in the beginning, but by the time I sat on the floor and started rummaging inside the first boxes, he was certainly becoming impatient. I could hear him pacing behind me, or more exactly, I could hear the floor. The creaking got worse by the minute. I tried not to glimpse at him. I didn't want to make eye contact. Any moment, he would get too bored or too annoyed and ask me to leave. I had to hurry. My anxiety kept building up. I had a shortness of breath, worse, the sensation that the little air I could inhale was stuffy and tasted of dust, and the damn floor wouldn't stop creaking. Simple steps couldn't have been making that much noise. Steve had to be doing it on purpose. I turned to him and said, 'Steve, could you stop that?'

Only that when I turned around, he wasn't there. And the room was silent.

'Steve?' I shouted.

'I'll be up in a minute.' It was a muffled shout. 'Just getting another beer, mate.' I got the chills. He was downstairs.

I stood up and listened to the silence. I thought I'd gone mad, but then I took a step and made the wood creak. The awful sound was a relief.

I stepped back and realised that I'd been sitting on what seemed to be the only spot in the room where the floorboards didn't squeak.

'Found anything?' asked Steve, walking into the room. He'd brought me a beer, but I didn't reach for it when he offered it.

My attention was on that particular spot on the floor. The gaps of the planking were hiding a larger panel. I followed the edges and found a small thumbhole. Away came the panel, and there it was, a hidden compartment beneath the floor. It must have been about twenty inches long.

‘What the hell?’ said Steve. He pushed me away to see better. ‘Jeez.’ He reached inside and picked something up from within. A membrane of spiderwebs hugged whatever he grabbed. ‘Jesus Christ, lad.’ It was a book. A thick tome. Steve put it on a table under the light. ‘Jesus Christ.’ He wiped some of the thick layer of dust from the cover. Much of the golden ink had rubbed off, but the title was legible, engraved on the leather. *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*.

‘Jesus bloody Christ. Are you seeing this, mate?’ cried Steve.

I was trying to see it properly, but he wouldn’t let me. He slowly turned to the title page. ‘Halifax: Milner & Sowerby, 1865!’ He started jumping around like a crazy person. I took the chance to go for the book.

Touching it gave me an odd sensation. It wasn’t too different from the other times when touching a particular item invoked flashes of Lori. But it wasn’t quite the same either. There were no visions. I didn’t travel anywhere else. I was anchored there in the present with Steve.

‘Jesus bloody Christ, lad.’ He said it over and over. It must have been like finding a golden nugget for him.

He would have loved to keep it. But once I had scanned a few pages, I was certain that book was what I had come to find. He tried to stop me from escaping. Poor old Steve. I promised myself that I would make it up to him as soon as I could. Not just for taking the book. But for taking it from him. And for the wasted beer, and for his busted knee, which I was sure was killing him after he fell.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I couldn't take another look at the book until I was sitting on the tram. I'd run seven blocks from Steve's shop, and my hands were shaky and muggy. It didn't matter. I wasn't careful. I had in my hand the most valuable book I would probably ever hold and I didn't care for it. I didn't even read the printed text. My only interest was on the marginalia. The book I was holding, the artefact from another century that had been buried away for god-knows how many decades, was filled with the same notes as my copy. I couldn't be sure they were exactly the same words, or that they were in the exact same place, but they were at least close. I found the message that changed me. *I died my first week in Audbridge*. The words jumped out as I flipped the pages. *I didn't see the tram coming*, the sentence was reproduced just as I'd read it in my book. Then the terrible realisation dawned on me. This copy was older. The yellowing black ink of the marginalia told its age. That book in my hands was the original, and I had been recreating it in mine, at least in part. The next note read: *Help me, please... Ezra*. That stung.

I didn't even close the front door when I got to my flat. I went for the copy under my bed. I kneeled before the bed and put both books side by side. I thought I could check page by page, observing the places where the notes had been made. I realised that idea was nonsense when I saw the first annotated page of my book. They were completely different editions, with different makers, published over a hundred years apart. They were *never* going to match. I closed both copies and stood back. 'Now what?' I said to them lying on my bed. I had stolen that book and arguably assaulted a man in the process. The last I'd heard of Steve, as I flew down the stairs of his shop, were his

shouts promising the police would catch me. I went to close my flat's door and stood on the frame looking at the street outside. The neighbourhood seemed sluggish under the yellow glimmer of the lamp posts. The neighbour's cat padded by on the other side of the street. There were no police sirens, just yet.

I went back to the books, looking for clues. At around two in the morning, I could barely keep my head up, but I'd finally understood something, that the marginalia in both books came from Lori. Though different hands had put the words down, the composition was all hers. Ezra and I were truly connected in that sense. He and I had been used in the same way. She had spoken through both of us. I leaned close to Ezra's text, my nose perhaps an inch away from the musty paper. His handwriting contained both him and Lori, just like the notes in my copy were Lori and me. I fell asleep thinking about it.

The next morning, I lingered across the street from Ms Abishaw's for a while before I was ready to walk in. The house was quiet. It stood just as tall and sombre, but it wasn't nearly as intimidating as the first time I'd seen it. I wasn't standing outside because I was afraid to go in. I was trying to see if the man with the hat was still around. He wasn't.

I crossed the garden – the bushes and the naked stalks seemed even drier, grimmer. I knew it was going to take a while after I knocked on the door, so I sat down on the step right away. I was carrying the books in a tote bag. I rested it on my lap and tapped it out of tempo. The man with the hat was there when I glanced at the gate again.

I sneered. 'Morning,' I said.

The man nodded, grimly.

'It wouldn't kill you to smile a little, mate,' I said. 'Try it, really.'

The door opened behind me as I was finishing my sentence.

‘Who are you talking to?’ I thought it had been the new Anna, the girl with the headscarf, but when I turned around, I saw the last person I expected to see at Abishaw’s front door but the only one I’d be glad to see anywhere.

‘Zoe?’

I jumped to my feet saying, ‘Please don’t be dead.’ My arms went around her waist and hugged her. She was there, real, in the flesh. I squeezed the skin under her shirt, feeling her body under the fabric.

‘You’re here,’ I said in her ear. My voiced trembled. Her hair smelled of apple harvest. ‘I am sorry. I am so sorry.’

I looked into those gorgeous grey eyes and saw the struggle, her impulse to resist her love for me. ‘We are not okay yet,’ she said. Her hands lashed around me too and squeezed. ‘But I’m glad to see you are alright.’

Inside, the doors to all of the rooms were open, letting the natural morning light into Ms Abishaw’s hall.

‘What are you doing here?’ I said closing the door behind me.

‘We were just talking about you,’ replied Zoe. She gestured at Abishaw standing at the threshold of the parlour.

‘You know each other?’ I asked Zoe. But it was Ms Abishaw who replied, ‘Did you really expect a smart young lady like her wouldn’t see through your excuses?’

Zoe smiled at her.

‘She came to meet me two or three days after your first visit.’

‘You’ve known each other all this time?’ I didn’t know who I was asking. My eyes jumped from Ms Abishaw to Zoe and back again. ‘How? Why?’

Abishaw sniggered. ‘Anna,’ she called, ‘Could you please bring us some proper hot tea?’ She didn’t wait for a reply and went into the parlour.

The woman I’d seen at the station peeped through a door in the back and told Abishaw she’d put on the kettle.

Zoe and I followed the hostess into the room.

‘Remember when I found Catherine’s address?’ asked Zoe.

‘Yes?’

‘Well.’

‘You followed me?’ A smirk happened. ‘You stalked me?’

‘Of course not,’ said Zoe. ‘I called at her door and arranged a meeting.’

‘You stalker,’ I teased. ‘You came to harass the other woman! Were you gonna kick her ass?’ I was joking.

It was too soon for jokes.

‘I should have kicked yours,’ replied Zoe after an awkward pause.

Abishaw cleared her throat from her porter’s chair. She gestured us to sit down on her Chesterfield, and we did. ‘As much as I enjoy being mistaken for the other woman, I had to tell this lady the truth.’

I didn’t think she was joking, but Zoe gave a laugh and carried on, ‘I didn’t see Catherine again until... the day after our fight at the bar.’

‘She wanted Lori out of the picture,’ said Ms Abishaw.

‘And she is out!’ I said. ‘I mean. I still need to help her – help them. But I’m not doing it because I’m interested in her.’

Anna came in with the tea. We drank it while I told Zoe everything, everything I’d been hiding about Lori and Ezra, and Quast, and my visits to Abishaw. I told her all I could remember and apologised for keeping her in the dark and for being an arse. I

told her the god-honest truth, that at one point I thought I loved Lori. And I thought I needed her. ‘I don’t anymore,’ I said. ‘I see better.’

Zoe wasn’t mad. She wasn’t happy, but she wasn’t mad. She said Abishaw had informed her of what I’d been doing. She told Zoe about our sessions. That lady was playing a dangerous game, but in the end, it seemed to work.

‘Wonderful,’ said Ms Abishaw. ‘I’m glad to see the two of you together for once. Now we have urgent business to discuss.’ She gestured at my tote bag. ‘Is that what I think it is?’

‘What do you think it is?’ I asked back. I was honestly curious whether Ms Abishaw knew, but the question may have sounded as another joke. I didn’t get a response.

I handed Abishaw both books, but she only showed interest in Ezra’s copy. ‘Finally,’ she whispered. ‘Was it in the attic?’

‘There wasn’t an attic. I found it in a hidden compartment under the floorboards of— of Ezra’s workshop. I think it belonged to him.’

‘Of course it belonged to him. That is the key,’ replied Abishaw. She raised her gaze from the book and asked, ‘Tell me something. Could that compartment look like an attic, from the point of view of the book?’

I put myself in that secret compartment, detached of a human body, waiting, like the book, to be picked up. ‘I guess.’ I replied. ‘Why is that the key?’

‘Lori used this book to communicate with Ezra when he was alive. This is what will bring them together again.’

I didn’t quite follow Ms Abishaw’s logic, and for the look on her face, neither did Zoe.

‘Zoe, love, let me explain. I once held a séance. It was many, many years ago. This was before I knew how to shut my door properly so that no pesky spirits could barge in. So before I could do anything about it, there were dozens of voices asking me for favours, spirits wanting me to pass on messages, to find people for them, blah, blah, blah.’ She gave me a quick glance. ‘Poor things, I love to help them, but they can be a bother.’ Then her eyes went back to Zoe. ‘That night, at that sitting, I made the mistake of listening to the wrong voice. I connected with the spirit of a woman who was trying to find her lover. The complication was that they were both dead, you see. She died shortly before him and never realised he passed. And the man couldn’t recognise his woman in death.’

Zoe sighed.

‘They were both present at the sitting,’ continued Abishaw, ‘But they couldn’t perceive each other. Except possibly through me.’

‘Possibly?’ asked Zoe. ‘Did you not help them?’

‘I couldn’t pick them in the multitude,’ said Abishaw, frustrated. She gently tapped the arm of her chair. ‘I have held many séances in my life, but that was the only time I’ve let that happen.’ She leaned back in her chair. ‘Samuel has seen it.’

I nodded.

Zoe reached for my hand, but she let it go almost as soon as our skins touched. ‘That’s an awful story.’

‘With this,’ said Ms Abishaw, holding the book up to us. ‘We’ll make sure the same doesn’t happen to Lori and Ezra.’

It took me a moment to digest what she had said. ‘So all we need to do now is recreate that séance? Summon Lori. Summon Ezra and—’

‘He can’t,’ interrupted Zoe, her eyes fixed forward as if she was coming to terms with some thought. ‘He can’t be summoned.’

‘He can’t?’ I asked.

‘Ezra can’t come to us because he is trapped,’ explained Zoe. ‘He is trapped in the machine.’

‘He is trapped in the Nautilus,’ said Abishaw.

The invocation of the machine sent a shiver down my spine. ‘What? How do you know that?’

‘I told her,’ said Abishaw. ‘I’ve always known.’

I took a deep breath and said, ‘I’ve been inside Quast’s building. There is nothing there. All of the equipment is gone.’

Zoe grinned.

‘Zoe, love, could you show him the flyer?’ asked Ms Abishaw.

I watched Zoe walk away and just for a moment forgot about the whole ghost situation, all about the machine, and the séance. Just for a moment I simply watched her walk.

She came back with a flyer. It was printed in glossy paper and had a woman posing glamorously on the front. She was springing out of a bunch of gears, and shafts and other mechanical imagery and wore kind of a gold plated armour. She was a bit of a slightly sensual combination of C-3PO and Sauron, a Science Fiction Joan of Arc with large round shades on.

We are Steampunk, read the bold copper letters of the title. *Audbridge Steampunk Festival. 27-29 of May.*

I recognised the event. Steve had mentioned it. I threw a puzzled glance at Zoe.

‘Turn it around,’ she said.

On the other side of the flyer was a picture of the venue, the Museum of Industry of Audbridge. The building was superposed on pictures of random machinery. Zoe pointed at the top right corner. The golden shell.

‘The Nautilus?’ I asked.

‘It’s a permanent exhibit in the Museum of Industry,’ replied Zoe. ‘Sam, Ezra is in there.’

I suggested we went there immediately, but it turned out we couldn’t. The Nautilus was an important piece of Audbridge industrial history and access to it was restricted.

‘But it will be accessible to staff members and performers at the event,’ said Ms Abishaw.

I asked her if she was any of those things. Ms Abishaw seemed annoyed by the question, but her answer was no. However, she did know someone who was.

‘I will make sure,’ said Abishaw, ‘that you two take her place.’

Chapter Twenty-Six

Madame Victoria, aka Victoria Ridley, aka Vicky, had a slot in the festival's Saturday programme. *An Evening of Mediumship with Madame Victoria*, read the official post on the festival website. She was to appear on stage at eight in the evening and demonstrate her psychic-medium abilities to a ticketed crowd. That was the slot we were after.

We had separate training sessions with Abishaw. She insisted on it. Her plan sounded somewhat twisted when she explained it to me. It piled up with the guilt I was feeling for what I'd done to Steve. Now I was going to go after another nice person. I had the impression we all felt a little guilty. Zoe and I never talked about it. We were still at a weird place and I didn't want to appear pushy about what she knew or didn't know. So I brought it up with Ms Abishaw.

Abishaw fixed her sombre gaze on me and said, 'I've known that woman since she was seventeen. She is the closest thing I have to a next of kin.'

I felt pity for the old woman, and she probably sensed that because she immediately complained, 'It's alright. I'll make it up to her. I've already decided to bequeath her this house. That's more than a fair compensation for this petty gig, I believe.'

'Very fair,' I admitted, sweeping my eyes around the decorative mouldings and posh wallpaper. I said nothing about the fact that inheritance from a woman who seemingly couldn't die sounded like an empty promise.

'This man, Steve,' said Abishaw. 'Will he be trouble?'

I had considered it. 'He will most likely be at the museum. But I'm planning on wearing a costume. I'll make myself something special.'

'It better makes you invisible.'

It was about nine in the evening on the day of the hoax when I received the call from Victoria. She was with Abishaw and things were not looking good. The doctor had visited earlier, and he had told Vicky there was medically nothing else he could do for Catherine. At that point, he'd said, it was a matter of making Catherine as comfortable as possible. Victoria broke into tears right at that moment. I hated that part.

'He said Catherine may not last the night,' moaned Vicky.

'I'm terribly sorry, Vic. Thanks for letting me know. Are you at the hospital?'

Abishaw had told me to ask that.

'We're at her house. The doctor just left. She's asking for you. Do you think you can make it?'

'Sure,' I replied. 'I'm sure I can make it.'

I felt like shit when I hung up.

I turned to Zoe. We were having Chinese at a nearby restaurant, and she had a mouth full of Chow Mein. 'Did you know she was going to hire someone to play the doctor?'

Zoe shook her head.

'Well, she did and it worked.' I asked the waiter for the bill and said to Zoe, 'Ready to con a beautiful person?'

Abishaw's house was less unnerving at night. The darkness fitted it better than daylight. The dry twigs and stalks in the garden could pass for skeleton hands raising from the undulating grass. It was almost expected of a graveyard scene. I couldn't stay and see it properly. I had to keep up with Zoe, and she flew like an arrow towards the door. Anna opened and let us in. Her name was not Anna. I asked. It was Shelly. She looked

surprisingly well, in comparison to her predecessors. I never saw any of the other handmaids without puffy eyes and a tired expression. She was outlasting them too, as far as I knew. I told her that, and she seemed happy. Playing the dying-woman, Ms Abishaw must have been less trouble than usual. That was saying something.

We were told to go upstairs. I'd never been there. The smell of herbal smoke got stronger as we climbed up the steps. Victoria was waiting for us at the top of the staircase. She was wearing a regular top and jeans, but from the neck up she was something else. She'd put on her performance makeup. Doll-face makeup, with long, thick eyelashes and lots of blush. Her hair. Her hair was at another level. At first sight, against the light, I thought she was wearing dreadlocks, but they were socks, old knee-high socks. She had wrapped them around her hair to get rag curls. Apparently, that technique had been around for generations, and that was the way to go about getting a good Steampunk hairstyle.

Victoria awkwardly let me hug her. I introduced her to Zoe and told her she knew Catherine as well.

'How are you holding up?' I asked. 'You okay?'

She said she was alright and was about to show me into the room when I said, 'You look like you're half ready to go somewhere.'

Zoe pinched me. I would have acted out the pain if she'd just pretended, but she pinched me hard. I let out a very real whine.

'It's okay,' said Victoria, touching her hair. 'It's for Catherine. Years ago, when I was just getting into this, I used to come to her all the time for help with my hair and makeup. I don't know if you are aware the Steampunk Festival started today?'

Of course I was, I said.

‘Catherine wanted to help me get ready for it. I told her I wasn’t planning on attending, but this turned out to be a nice way to pass the time.’

She was breaking my heart.

The bedroom looked as if it hadn’t changed in a hundred years. The bed was carved ebony and had a canopy. Quartz, Amethyst, and Aquamarine were arranged along with other crystals on a five-tier what-not. It looked like a small shrine in a corner of the room. Abishaw’s large cheval mirror was tucked in another corner. I recognised it from my vision of the séance. It matched the rest of the Victoriana in the room.

Abishaw was the best liar I knew.

She was lying down on her bed. A few pillows raised her head enough for her to see forward but she was flat on her back. Her mouth was slightly open, lips folding inwards. Apparently, she had decided to lose her teeth overnight. I didn’t know she wore a denture; I almost said that aloud. She’d let her hair down. It impressed me how much that aged her. It was far longer than I thought. It went down to her chest in snowy white locks. She looked thinner with her hair down and untidy, a bit worn out.

We went through the conversation as planned. The three of us pretended she was dying. Zoe and I paid our respects, laughed at her jokes, kept her comfortable. It wasn’t a bad way to go, specially without pain.

Abishaw pretended to fall asleep a few times. That way she gave us time to sow the idea in Victoria’s head.

‘I didn’t know you two were so close,’ said Victoria.

‘We’ve been meeting regularly since last December,’ I said. ‘Catherine’s helped me through some bad times.’

‘She’s helped *us*,’ corrected Zoe. ‘She has taught Sam to cope with his gift.’ She ran her finger through my hair. ‘A few months ago, he was so afraid of it he wouldn’t even hint it to me. I thought Catherine was his lover before I met her.’

Victoria smiled.

‘Mediumship is a power I’ll never have, but I enjoy assisting Sam. Catherine said he could make a living of it. We may just try that.’

Zoe glanced at me when she said that last bit. Her command of the conversation, her fingernail softly scratching my skin, sending shivers down my neck, I wondered how much of what she was saying was actually true. If it was all acting, she was fooling me.

The second time Abishaw pretended to sleep. I showed Victoria what I could do.

I went outside and practiced talking to the man on the gate. No big story from him. He’d taken his own life, over financial debt in the thirties. He was still worried about it. I told him it didn’t matter because he was dead. It took some convincing, but I did as Abishaw told me, talked to him, and in the end, he went away. It felt good when he vanished. I knew Abishaw had prepared the whole thing in advance, but I really felt I’d sent him home. The girls were looking at me from the bedroom window. I gave them a thumbs up from the gate, and they cheered for me. I was going to remember that.

During another of Abishaw’s naps, it must have been around one in the morning, Victoria told us about her show at the festival. She said she hadn’t cancelled just because Catherine had made her promise she wouldn’t, but Vicky assured us that there was no way Catherine was convincing her to leave her side.

‘She thinks the day we give up our spaces in events like this, the charlatans and entertainers will rise up and seize them,’ said Victoria.

I put my hand on Abishaw’s forehead. It was clammy and cold. Her skin was not simply pale. It seemed to have decayed since the last time I’d seen her. There were brownish spots here and there and the blue of her veins ran down her temples and neck.

‘What was the show?’ I asked. ‘Picking up voices from the crowd?’

‘Yes,’ said Victoria, ‘Nothing extraordinary. The audiences in this kind of events are usually quite synergetic and... appreciative.’

The old lady had done her job. Victoria only needed a little nudge.

‘I could do that.’

‘You could?’ Victoria straightened up, just as her voice got pitchy at the end of the question.

‘Yeah, I could replace you for the night.’

‘Do you really mean that?’ She sounded excited. ‘Are you sure?’

I sighed. ‘It sounds scary, but I think I can manage.’

Zoe laid a hand on my shoulder.

‘I—I was actually going to ask you,’ said Victoria. ‘It would make things much easier for me. Catherine suggested it to me before, but I couldn’t find a way to ask.’

When Abishaw decided to wake up, Victoria told her the news. She gave her approval, and that was it. The hoax was done. When the sun came out Victoria called the organisers. They were friends of hers and understood what she was going through and how important it was for her not to cancel the number.

We kept on with the farce for the rest of the day. It got easier. Eventually, it didn’t feel like a lie. It didn’t feel malicious. We slept in turns, keeping an eye on the patient. When I woke from mine, Victoria was doing Zoe’s hair. She had small braided

sections fixed with safety pins and five huge rag dreadlocks hanging around her head. I made a joke about pink plastic rollers that fetched me no laughs from any of them.

Abishaw hadn't died by lunchtime. We agreed that I would go home and change, and Zoe would borrow something from the others and meet me at the museum.

We had to go through a final scene before I left. A farewell.

Abishaw blessed us, in English and in Latin – it sounded like Latin. When she finished, she reached for Zoe. 'Now come down and give me a hug.'

Zoe did.

'You take care... of each other,' she started talking to the two of us. 'In life! When death catches you, don't you even think about sticking around.'

Zoe choked; it sounded like a chuckle and a sniff combined. She was crying. For real, I think.

Ms Abishaw told me she was proud of me and that I would do alright.

'I would like to rest now.' She winked at me. I was going to remember that too.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

A turquoise scarf floated up in the air for a moment before it dropped back down to the hand of a belly dancer. Her hips shimmied like the high-pitched Zurna trembled. The melody fell on top of the speedy rhythm of the darbuka and the qanun. It took me to places I'd never been, Istanbul, Beirut. The track was playing through large speakers. It was just a recording, but as disappointing as that was, it was only the backdrop to the real live music, the tinkling of the coins jiggling below the dancers' waists. Six women played their belts with their expert hips. I'd never seen a Steampunk belly dancer before. To my eye, there wasn't much of a difference, except the costumes were a combination of Turkish folklore and Old-West-saloon. Their skirts were colourful, slightly above the knee, and their high-heeled boots were surprisingly silent on the slates of the floor.

We were in the museum's front yard, just in front of the main doors.

The Museum of Industry reminded me of a cathedral, an industrial cathedral – if those two could be put together. The nave, the main hall, was at least one-hundred meters long and cross shaped, with a side wing on each side of the hall at the rear end. The museum had its own particular graveyard. A hundred years ago, the building was the terminus of Audbridge railway. Some of the tracks were still being maintained, and on busy days like today, antique steam locomotives resurrected to plod once more over the polished rails.

The belly dancers' next number was an upbeat version of Jack Buchanan's 'Everything Stops for Tea'. That was more like the Steampunk I knew. But I couldn't stay to listen. I needed to find the organisers, and I didn't want to stay too long out in the open. Steve could be around anywhere. I reached into my haversack for the main

piece of my disguise. I'd made myself a Boruca mask, a barely passable papier-mâché imitation, really, but it essentially looked the part. I went for a growling devil in turquoise and violet with heavy eyelids and long white tusks.

I put on my devil mask and crossed myself. I was going to need all the help I could get.

The front doors led straight into the long hall. The vaulted glass ceiling was roughly four storeys tall, judging by the balconies stretching out of the upper galleries on the sides. They'd set up the market alongside the permanent exhibits, large objects that were too heavy to be moved, like the steam and diesel engines from the old mills. Instead of the usual two rows of stalls with an alley in the middle, several rows ran along the entire length of the building. They did say attendees would 'revel among our industrial past' in their flyer.

I made my way to the West wing, near the back, where my stage and the Nautilus were supposed to be. At the moment, *tea duelling* was taking place there. I knew that because there was a crowd standing around the stage, and people were talking about it.

The crowd was a complication. I had no idea how to find my contact, Michael, in that multitude. It was not easy to tell the staff from the general public. In the nearest stall, a woman was selling postcards and prints. I asked her for Michael.

'Huh? It's a cool mask, buddy, but I can't understand you.'

I risked taking it off to repeat my question. She was distracted, pamphleteering for some political cause, and barely had the time to say, 'The baron's busy.' She pointed at a large crowd gathering. 'It's the tea duelling finals.' She handed me a ballot. 'Here, don't forget to vote. Milk last! Spread the word, brother.' The piece of paper had a cartoon teapot and a simple question: Does milk come first or last into your cuppa?

Below there were two boxes, milk first and milk last. I was about to tell her I was Costa Rican, that I drank black coffee, but I didn't have the heart. 'Will do, thanks,' I said and made my way back towards the stage with my mask back on.

Tea duelling was a Steampunk thing. 'It is based on the obsession we have with tea,' said the announcer. He was talking on a microphone from the small round stage, about three feet above the floor. In the centre, there was a tall round table with a white lace tablecloth. The two duellists sat at the table across from each other. Each was served a cup of tea, and they picked their 'weapon of choice' from a plate of biscuits. They were instructed to grab the biscuit between their first finger and thumb, presenting at least three quarters of it ready for dunking. 'At the command of the referee – that's Michael over here,' said the announcer gesturing to the tall, bald man on his right. 'At the command of the referee, the duellists will submerge their biscuits in their teas.' Then the ref would count to five; the duellists would 'withdraw' and begin the duel. The last person to put their whole biscuit in their mouths would be declared the winner. Splats, splashes, and splodges disqualified you. 'It is a cutthroat sport and a matter of honour between genteel people.'

They were having a few rounds like these before a National Champion could be named. I stayed around for the first one. I had to wait for Michael anyway, so I took the chance to inspect the area. The Nautilus should've been around somewhere. There were two industrial drill prototypes, a scale power loom, a linotype machine and several magazines for it. They all had little red plaques explaining what they were, but there wasn't one for Ezra's device. A Ms Carriger won the first duel, and the next two duellists stepped onto the platform.

I froze with fear. I had forgotten about Steve. I expected him to be there, but not right on the stage, a duellist. He glanced straight at me but didn't seem to recognise me

with my mask on. I discreetly sneaked away, nevertheless. I couldn't risk Steve ruining everything. I clutched the book in my bag, just to know it was alright and hurried towards the stalls.

I jumped from rack to rack, at first just trying to look busy, but then I started searching for something that covered up more of me, something that might work on stage, and so I stumbled upon a duster coat. It was black leather and it had a hood. Some of the colour had rubbed away in places. The leather had turned rusted iron and weighed as much. It was perfect. I wanted to feel heavy. I wanted gravity to pull me down hard.

Zoe was not around yet. A steel-drum band was playing Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*, which always made me a bit anxious, and Zoe still wasn't there. I listened to the whole piece while I waited. 'She'll be here.'

The announcer of the tea duelling shouted into his microphone that they had a winner. The crowd cheered and a moment later started to dissipate.

Michael had sunken eyes and a vein that seemed about to burst on his temple. He was wearing a black military jacket with golden buttons. I had to introduce myself twice. I had to remove my mask so that he understood I was Madame Victoria's replacement.

'Yes, Vicky's spot. It's a shame about her... relative.' We made some small talk about how she and Ms Abishaw were holding on.

'Right.' Michael grabbed a worn notebook and a pen and flipped the pages. 'So her performance was taking place at eight. *An Evening of Mediumship with Madame Victoria* – I don't suppose you have a stage name?' he asked.

'Pardon?'

He clicked his pen, ready to write. ‘I need your stage name. How would you like me to introduce you?’

I looked around slightly desperate for inspiration. It wasn’t easy to concentrate with so many people moving around, so much stuff, brass tubes, and trinkets, and hats with feathers, and military outfits, and spiky goth boots. I closed my eyes and tried to listen above the voices of the crowd. There was the beat of steel drums in the distance. ‘Ravel,’ I told Michael. ‘Mauricio Ravel... the Occultist.’

‘Alrighty,’ he said and noted it down. He was wearing a silver ring on every finger. The gemstones were too large and too many. If they were real, they would cost a fortune. ‘Alright, *Señor Mauricio Ravel*’ – he said that with a Valencian accent – ‘You’ll be on this same stage.’

I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. The performance was imminent and the Nautilus was nowhere in sight. Michael called one of the helpers and asked him to start setting up the stage for my act. Then he went on talking to me about safety regulations or something related to that. I stopped listening to him when some of the staff began clearing the stage. They took the table away, and underneath it, inconspicuous like a piece of trash, was Ezra’s device.

Michael must have noticed me watching it.

‘Oh yeah, about that piece.’ We moved closer to the stage. ‘I suppose you have heard about our immersive-experience initiative.’

I nodded, speechless.

‘This piece right here has to stay on the stage. It’s actually – I don’t know if you can see it...’ He bent down, gesturing for me to do the same, so he could show me below the floor of the stage. ‘We built the platform for the stage around this machine. It’s part of the terms we worked out with the Museum.’ I saw a large piece of

machinery underneath. It was painted black and had some tubing and valves coming out of it. Whatever it was, it wasn't part of Ezra's original design. 'Will you be moving much during the act?'

'Some.' I pointed up to the stage. 'Can I check it out?'

We both got up onto the stage. The golden shell of the Nautilus was at waist level. I crouched down before it and pressed my fingers against the polished surface, gently as if feeling a child's temperature. The metal was cool to the skin, and my fingers left a steamy impression that disappeared almost instantly.

'You'll have to make your way around it. We can't really move it, no.' He laid both hands on the machine and tried to shake it. 'It's only the tip of the iceberg. The thing is nailed solid to the base.'

After giving me a few more instructions, Michael left and I thought, *this is it*. That had to be my chance. No need to wait to free Ezra.

I kneeled down in front of the shell and realised what an idiot I'd been. I had no idea how to open the device. I saw my stupid face reflected on the brass as it dawned on me. The outer shell was made of plates seemingly welded together. There was a panel with a couple of jacks on the side. I had no idea what those were for. The panel itself could be removed, possibly, but it was sealed with large bolts. My hands were sweaty. My whole body was sweating. I took off my haversack and the duster coat and attempted to lift the machine from the ground. It was impossible. I tried not to think of the words 'panic attack', but I was getting there, and Zoe was not around. How could I have not prepared for this? How utterly stupid had I been? People were beginning to notice me. I couldn't see Steve but the risk was high. I needed some air. I needed to get out.

The courtyard behind the main building was practically empty. There were no stalls, or food trucks, or live shows back here. I crossed the courtyard and sat on the parapet wall at the farthest point from the building and let my feet hang from the edge. The canal bordered the property there, before swerving North. There was no towpath. The stone wall dropped about fifteen feet before meeting the water. It reminded me of a castle's moat.

Lori arrived. She stood next to me silently.

I wouldn't turn my head to see her. We were not fine. We were getting through this and I still loved her in a way, but we were not fine.

'Have you come to say good-bye?' I asked, eyes on the water. 'You must be thrilled. Today is the big day. You know, right? You know what we're doing.'

She wasn't speaking.

'I heard something weird about you the other day. That you can't really tell time for what it is. That it's all the same to you, past, future, whatever.'

She came forward and leaned on the wall, looking at the surface of the canal. I swung my feet above the water. My reflection was a dark wavering silhouette. Lori had no reflection at all. I'd never noticed that before.

'So you know how it ends?' I asked. 'If the past is mixed with the present and the future. Then you know what we do next?'

She sighed.

'If you know something, you should tell me. I'm groping like a blind man here.'

'If I had to answer right now, I couldn't tell you. But there's a part of me that is looking at this moment from outside. For that Lori, this right here, our present, is the future. I can't see what will happen tonight, but there must be another Lori who knows how it ends. She's seen it.'

‘That doesn’t help me.’

‘I know.’ She leaned over the edge of the wall, letting her arms hang towards the water. She was like a sock hung out to dry. ‘I am exhausted.’ Now she was the one talking to the water. ‘You know I need to see him.’

And we saw him right then. His hair unkempt. He was in his workshop, getting grease on his white shirt.

‘What became of him,’ clarified Lori.

‘I know.’

We saw Ezra again, meeting Abishaw for the first time. They shook hands and Abishaw glanced at us over his shoulder. We were invisible but I was pretty sure she looked at both of us, with condescension.

‘Every day I see him like this is one more day he doesn’t see me.’

‘I know,’ I repeated. Lori couldn’t remember a single thing Ezra said to her alive. He had never regarded her. He had never admired her.

We saw Zoe. She and I were in bed, facing each other. We did nothing except look at each other. I was trying to memorise her face, but I just couldn’t manage it. I kept trying to understand the angles of her eyebrows, the shape of her lips, and why they were so perfect to me.

Lori whispered, ‘Thank you.’ And it saddened me.

‘If you fall into the canal, I won’t jump after you.’ I recognised Zoe’s voice immediately. ‘Not in these clothes.’

‘I won’t,’ I replied and turned back towards the courtyard.

Her dress was white with tiny gold stripes, and her hair was held back with white ribbons. I stared. I didn't care. I stared at her skin, at her figure. If she couldn't be memorised, my only option was to stare.

'Sam?'

'You look beautiful.'

She gave me a smile. 'Hold on,' she said and cleared her throat. Then she began to sing...

'In my life

There are so many questions and answers

That somehow seem wrong.'

She came back out of character with a giant grin. 'So what do you think? Spot on, yeah?'

I was so in love with her right then that if I'd opened my mouth I would've cried.

'I'm Cosette!' she said. 'Cosette, from *Les Misérables*?'

'Oh I get it,' I smiled back. 'Though I don't think you were supposed to dress up as some character in particular.'

'I think you are missing the point of dressing up.'

Lori whispered in my ear, and I repeated, 'You are the condensation of auroral light in womanly form.'

Zoe looked flattered and slightly puzzled. Then just puzzled... and annoyed.

'She's here?' she asked.

I pointed at Lori, sourly acknowledging I'd screwed up.

'Good. She must be ready.' She grabbed my belt and pulled me close. 'Shall we?'

‘Yes, ma’am.’

I told Zoe what I saw of the Nautilus. She was cool about it and gave me the impression she and Abishaw had already worked something out.

‘I’m here,’ said Zoe. Then annoyedly, ‘She’s here. We’re all together in this.’ She reached out and said, ‘We all know our parts. You trust me, right?’

I took her hand and we headed back in.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The museum had turned a little spooky shortly before I went on stage. It was a strange, fleeting hour, a moment within a moment, when the twilight filtered through the glass ceiling but no one had yet turned on the lights of the building. Incomplete obscurity, that's what it was. The great hall was nearly empty. Its massiveness accentuated the vacant space. The market sales had stopped. The traders had packed away, and a crew of builders were pulling the stalls apart. They were not careful with the metal pipes. The ratchet was massive. Michael assured me earlier they'd be done by eight. But I saw them struggling with one of the stalls. A few of the men took turns trying to pull it apart, but it was stuck. I walked closer and took a better look. There was a lad holding it together. They couldn't see him but he was the reason they couldn't take it apart. He was having a laugh. Made me smile, but still I felt responsible for telling him he'd had enough and to please let the men finish. The joiners thought it strange, but when the spirit let go of the frame everyone was content, creeped out, but content. Even me.

When I turned around, Zoe was waiting for me at the threshold of the left-wing gallery. She'd brought us a tall candelabrum from Ms Abishaw's. It must have been a hundred years old. I was supposed to light it up and bring it with me when I stepped onto the stage.

'Got the book?' asked Zoe.

I nodded and tapped my bag.

She kissed me softly on the cheek for good luck. She turned and started walking away.

'Zoe?'

'Yes?' She froze.

‘When all of this is over, would you like to get one of those Two-Together travel cards? You and me?’

Zoe smiled and said yes, and it meant the world to me.

I waited in the balcony above the stage for my signal to start. I wasn’t supposed to be seen, so just in case, I lay face down on the floor and peeked between the uprights of the marble balustrade. There was barely any light left coming through the windows now. We had arranged for candles to be lit, and their flickering light was instilling life in the shadows of the machines. They danced with the extravagant silhouettes of the attendants. The shadows of pistons and shafts overlapped those of hats and epaulets, procreated, reshaped. The seats were arranged like ripples around the stage. Lori waited on the platform with Ezra’s machine. She recognised it and was both afraid and protective of it. Steve was sitting in the audience, but it would be okay if he saw me without my mask at the performance. I didn’t expect him to try to stop me then.

Michael was now wearing an admiral’s hat that matched the black and gold of his jacket. He introduced Mauricio Ravel. ‘Ladies and gents, I give you, the Occultist.’

The announcement triggered a stomach cramp, but I forgot it as soon as I got up. There was a moment of silence while I lit the first two candles of the candelabrum. Below me, heads were turning left and right, scanning for me.

‘I’m not here to try and convince you to believe in anything.’ My voice was loud and bounced off the walls. ‘Believing is up to you.’

The audience heard me alright but couldn’t see me. There was doubt and whispering among them. A lady stood up, looking for me, and the feathers in her hat wobbled as she shook her head.

‘I’m here to show you science and the inexplicable are not so incompatible as you have been made to believe.’

I finished lighting the remaining two candles of the candelabrum, grabbed the book, and started down the stairs.

‘Science is our own way of ridding ourselves of the inexplicable. You know what’s another way of getting rid of the inexplicable? Just ask them what they are, or even better, *who* they are.’

‘There he is!’ yelled the lady with the feathered hat, and there was some murmuring from the audience. I got upstage. The candelabrum and the book went next to the Nautilus, and Lori stood behind me.

‘The spirits know their stuff. You can ask them the great questions, about life and death, the soul, and the universe. One may give you the answer you are looking for.’

I briefly crossed stares with Steve and failed to recognise his expression. Anger and surprise smashed together.

‘I’ve – I’ve been in conversation today with a few spirits, and I’ve asked all of them the same question, the great question, the one that pretty much can define our way of life.’

Zoe was in the back, next to a door. I didn’t know what she was doing.

‘And there seems to be an agreement among spirits. Would you like to know their answer?’

The audience was engaged.

‘Milk. Comes. Last.’

The joke fetched me some laughs. There were some boos as well. The pamphleteer from earlier gave me a loud ‘whoo’ from a corner.

‘Now that we are on the topic of British customs. You are all familiar with the legend of King Arthur, I suppose? Picking up the sword from the stone, etc, etc.’

They agreed and joked among themselves.

‘I wonder if we could attempt to recreate that here today. If I could have a couple of volunteers from the audience?’ Some hands shot up. ‘Thank you, I just need two strong volunteers.’ A few hands came back down. People jested, and I picked my two volunteers: a man and a woman. Then I asked Michael to join us too. They all came on stage, and I challenged them to remove the Nautilus from the rest of the base structure. There was a fairly evident difference between the polished golden shell of Ezra’s device and the black wrought-iron apparatus it was on. One at a time, the volunteers tried and failed. I thanked them again and sent them back to their seats. It was my turn. I glimpsed at Lori and hoped Zoe was ready.

‘If I pull this out, you better name me king of England, alright?’

There were fewer laughs.

‘Right.’ I grabbed the golden shell with both hands. Lori did the same and together we started to pull. We pulled but nothing happened.

I threw a desperate glance at Zoe in the back. She nodded and peeked behind the door she was standing by. She was talking to someone. Abishaw, I told myself. She had come to save the day.

But it was not her. It was a dark, tall figure, none other than Mr Quast.

I saw him before Lori did, and witnessed the absolute terror on her face at the man’s presence. She was less human for a moment, a little bit like a fish, hurriedly swimming away from a threat. She got behind me so fast that I could barely follow the movement with my eyes. She grabbed me by the waist and pulled me back.

‘It’s resisting,’ I told the spectators, and I noticed that the audience had grown. It was just like in Ms Abishaw’s séance. Other spirits had joined. They were standing all around.

And here came Quast. He frowned, stoic, focused.

I was tempted to flee, as Lori wanted. But Zoe was walking with Quast, overlapping with him at times. I concentrated on her eyes. I trusted her. I trusted her. So I fought Lori and grabbed the golden shell again.

Lori had both arms and legs around me. That was how it felt. She pulled and pulled, choking me. I clutched the Nautilus with both hands and barely managed to keep my ground.

Quast stopped in front of us and went down on one knee. His hand slipped into the iron base holding the Nautilus. It went through the black plate all the way up to his elbow. It jimmied and twisted. Then he was pushing his whole arm through, all the way to his shoulder.

Something was happening, a vibration on the stage. The floor creaked and clinked. The machine began to move.

Around me, the spirits became restless. They made music with the machines in the room, chic-chac-chic-chac-chic-chac. The loom was set in motion. From my point of view, it was all a bit silly. They spun wheels and pulled levers, slammed and stomped like children throwing a tantrum. But the audience couldn’t see any of that. They flinched and whined and held their partners.

‘Come on, guys. Give me a hand. Pull!’ I was talking to the spirits, but the people in the audience got confused and started gesturing as if they were sending me energies or something. Zoe was the reason behind it. She was extending her hands at me and encouraging people to join in.

I was about to yield to Lori's pull when there was a loud clank, and the Nautilus detached from the base with a slimy train of wires and cables. I fell back with it on my hands, and the audience gasped.

There I was, sitting on the floor with the Nautilus in my arms, nursing it like a baby. I turned it upside down and pulled the train of cables out. The whole piece came off with a pop, exposing a round inlet in the bottom. It looked like the throttle of a car.

Zoe fetched the book and knelt across from me. I carefully passed the device on to her. It was heavy but she could handle it. She held it upside down, inlet up towards the ceiling, while I opened the book.

'Ready?' I asked. Zoe nodded. I asked Lori to join.

I undid the top of the inlet and we braced ourselves.

Silence. The ghosts quieted down. The machines stopped. The audience was mute.

I held my breath for one, two, three seconds, waiting for the explosive end, but this was no Beethoven's Ninth. I'd thought light would spring out as if from a geyser, shake the floor, but all that failed to happen. An anticlimactic vapor started coming out. It floated down the stage like fake fog and ate away the flames of the candles. We were left with the feeble light of the night.

Until a timid little pearl of bluish light slowly pushed itself out of the Nautilus. It was a pocket-size sunrise. The bright orb rested momentarily on the rim of the inlet before it sprang up into the air. Away it went, a sparkling dandelion seed caught in the wind.

More came. There was a burst, alright. They shot out five, ten at a time. There must have been hundreds of them. It was like one of those helium balloon releases. They went up flying in the air. They were tiny, though, tiny lights, like fireflies.

‘They were trapped before they could even take human form, before they remembered they had one,’ I told Zoe.

The audience was gawking. There was no joking or jesting. Even the ghosts looked astonished. They didn’t know how to react. Some of them faded away. Some let go of human shape and burst into light dust. Lori was scared but I told her it was okay. It would all be over soon.

Quast was standing a few feet away, staring down at us. His face looked strange. There was a faint smile on it. He seemed peaceful. He stretched his back and extended his arms to the sides. He stretched so much that he broke into a dozen tiny lights. They swooped up and down and scattered with the rest of the lights.

I stood up and held the book up. ‘Come on, man. Don’t let me down. Come on, Ezra.’

One of the lights drifted by. It fluttered around a couple of times before landing on the book. ‘I’ve got you,’ I told myself. ‘Lori, I’ve got him!’

I told Lori to cup her hands. She brought them up together, and I passed the book through them. The pages flapped as they went through, and the little pearl of light stayed on her palms.

She smiled at me one last time, and our bond broke. It felt like glass shattering between us.

A swirl of lights took her away. I chose one of the orbs that could be her and followed it with my eyes around the room and up towards the vaulted ceiling.

I will miss you, Lori.

She vanished like they all did.

Zoe hugged me in the dark.

The overhead lights came on. It'd been a while and people must have gotten uncomfortable. I got up and placed the empty shell of Ezra's machine back on its seat before the fluorescent lights of the museum flickered to full brightness. I heard it clank in place.

The audience was still in silence, expectant.

To my surprise, someone began to clap. It was a slow, clumsy clap, but others joined in, and before I could react, people were cheering and applauding. I glanced at Zoe, still on the floor of the stage. She shrugged and started clapping as well.

The book was on the floor next to her. An idea stroke me and I picked it up. 'Please everyone,' I shouted above the clapping. 'Join me in a big thank-you to Mr Bram Stevenson. He made it possible for me to be here and lent me this beautiful antique tome.' I pointed the book at Steve and gestured for him to come and take it. He seemed slightly annoyed, maybe embarrassed on his way to me, but then someone shouted, 'Master duellist!' and his face softened. He took a bow and showed off the badge on his lapel that credited him as Tea-Duelling Champion. I joined in the applause once the book was off my hands. It was liberating to see it with Steve.

The night ended with Michael joining us on stage. He officially closed the festival's activities for the night and reminded the audience of tomorrow's events. There was another round of applause and people began to disperse. Not Steve, though. He was walking to me. At least he was not limping. It was a good sign. I was about to climb down to talk to him when Michael grabbed my arm.

'I don't know what actually happened here,' he threatened, 'But I hope you didn't damage anything while you were doing it!'

He called two other men, museum staff apparently. They stepped on stage and began examining the apparatus. I smiled and invited them to inspect all of the machines.

‘Not just this one,’ I teased, ‘all of them in the room. I put on a show, gentlemen.

Things are not always what they seem.’

Thank goodness, they failed miserably at removing the Nautilus from the rest of the machine. ‘You can’t move that,’ I told them. ‘Someone told me it’s only the tip of the iceberg.’

Michael snorted. They discussed among themselves and kept searching for damage. I peeked down at Steve and caught Zoe talking to him.

‘Excuse me gentlemen. I need to speak to my partner. Surely, you can keep an eye on me from here. I won’t flee.’

Michael agreed. His demeanour had changed. They must have begun to realise there was no damage to the equipment and that there was no way I actually did what they thought they saw.

I approached Steve slowly but confidently and addressed him by his Steampunk name. ‘Mr Stevenson. It’s good to see you reunited with your precious volume.’ My Steampunk parlance was still a work in progress.

‘Cut it out, Sam,’ he replied.

Zoe stepped in, ‘I was telling Steve how very sorry we are for the misunderstanding. That you never truly intended to keep the book to yourself.’

‘I didn’t, Steve. I swear.’ I also apologised for my behaviour.

‘I was just reminding Steve,’ continued Zoe, ‘that if it hadn’t been for you, that book would never have been found.’

Steve grunted. ‘You’re very lucky this charming lady is on your side.’

Zoe and I exchanged relieved glances.

‘But you can forget about that job I offered.’

‘Excuse me,’ interrupted a woman. She and her partner approached us from the side. They were in their fifties, dressed as posh aristocrats.

‘It was a wonderful performance,’ complimented the woman, ‘I was sitting next to the loom over there. I nearly fainted when it started moving by itself.’

I thanked her kindly.

‘It truly makes one wonder how you did it,’ said the man.

‘Later,’ I replied, ‘when you’ve had some time to think, you’ll be asking yourself whether the machines really moved or I just made you believe they did.’

It appeared I’d taken them aback.

‘You have a true antique right there,’ said the man to Steve. ‘May I see it?’

‘Why, yes,’ Steve replied, disconcerted. ‘*Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*. Halifax: Milner & Sowerby, 186—’

‘65,’ I added. ‘1865.’

‘Goodness me!’ said the man. ‘And these annotations. Interesting. I don’t suppose you’d be interested in selling it?’

The question brought a smile to Steve’s face. ‘A fellow antiquarian, are you?’ he said, laying a hand on the man’s shoulder. ‘Everything is for sale, for the right price of course.’

They left together.

The last Steampunk attendants slowly made their way out of the venue. Cider and gin were mentioned. Zoe and I were held for about twenty-five minutes before the staff of the museum gave us the green light. We talked about my Boruca mask while we waited. She wasn’t confused about it anymore. I thought about giving it to her, but that one was mine. I told Zoe we could make her own, and she seemed excited about it.

Walking out through the darkened museum corridor crept Zoe out.

‘Really?’ I asked with sarcasm. ‘After all you’ve seen tonight?’

She buried her elbow between my ribs.

In the half-light, the exhibits looked more medieval than Victorian and cast menacing shadows. I was tempted for half a second to light the candelabrum again, but it was an impractical idea. When Zoe took out her phone to use the torch, she noticed two missed calls from Vicky.

‘You better call her,’ I said and checked my phone while she rang. Victoria had called me a few times as well.

‘Hi, Vic,’ started Zoe. She bit her lip. ‘What?’ she asked alarmed. She stopped in her tracks. It was the first of a series of nervous, incredulous questions. Abishaw had passed away. It was not something I overheard. I felt it right that moment. A chuckle slipped. It was something I knew. The sadness didn’t hit me immediately, but instead I felt abashed, outsmarted. I’d known for a while. The feeling reminded me of our games of Dominoes.

Vicky was telling Zoe over the phone. She played us. All of us, that lady. Zoe grabbed my coat hard, trying to keep her balance.

‘Catherine.’ Zoe’s voice trembled as she ended the call.

‘She’s gone. I know.’

Zoe gawked at me silently for a moment, her pupils slowly contracting as she remembered. ‘She told you.’ Zoe glanced at her phone again. ‘She told *me* she was really going tonight. We made peace with it.’ Zoe massaged her temples. ‘I didn’t remember until now.’

We stood in the darkness until the shock had passed. She wept a little, and I did too.

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘I don’t know how Vicky is taking it.’

We found Victoria sitting on her knees in the garden, twigs and dry leaves tangled in her hair.

‘She’s gone,’ said Victoria as I came by.

‘I know,’ I said, kneeling next to her.

‘No, Sam. I mean she’s really gone. I left the room for a moment and—and when I came back, she wasn’t on the bed. She wasn’t even in the room. I searched the entire house but she was nowhere to be found. Then I thought I heard her outside.’ She had another look around. ‘But no.’

Zoe and I helped Victoria up on her feet.

‘You are not going to find her in the garden.’ I said.

‘She’d never leave the house, Sam. She said it would kill her if she left the house. She was old.’

‘I know.’

‘You don’t know,’ replied Victoria. ‘She was too old.’

‘I know how old she was, Vic. Believe me.’

Vicky looked me in the eye. She tilted her head as if seeking in them the answer to a question she hadn’t asked yet. In time, she said, ‘She’s gone.’

It took days to convince Vicky that Catherine had really crossed over. She insisted that we attempted to contact her, and we did, but as I expected, she never replied.

Catherine’s Will and Testament requested that Victoria moved in immediately. I went by the day she did. We’d agreed I could come and fix the garden. It was something I wanted to do, for Catherine. I must have been working on it for a couple of hours when Victoria asked me into the reading room.

‘She’s left something for you too,’ she said, waving a document in her hand. It was Catherine’s testament, she said and pushed across the table a couple of leather-bound books tied up loosely with a green cord.

‘*Persuasion*,’ I read from the cover.

‘A more suitable novel from 1818, in two volumes,’ read Victoria from Catherine’s testament, ‘I would love for you to gift one to Zoe, and never separate them.’

The kind gesture made me smile. I grabbed the books and held them against my chest. ‘Thank you,’ I said to Victoria. ‘I really appreciate this.’

I looked around the old reading room; there was something different I couldn’t quite distinguish. Perhaps what I could perceive was not the absence of one owner, but the presence of another. The dead flower perfume had disappeared completely when we opened the windows, and in came the smell of a reviving garden and rain about to fall. I glanced at the fireplace and saw something on the mantle. A red velvet pouch.

The Dominoes rattled inside as I picked up the pouch.

‘Hey, Vic. Would you mind if I take these?’ I asked, showing her the small bag. ‘Catherine really enjoyed our games.’

We never finished our last game. And I thought I’d better be ready. You never know when someone is coming back.

THE END

Critical Companion

**Spectral Encounters: The Latin American Immigrant and other
Ghosts of England**

Part I

Hauntology of the Ghost and the Spectre

This thesis employs the ghost to articulate the unacknowledged presence of the Latin American immigrant in England. My research draws from the Derridean concept of *hauntology* and related critical propositions to determine the possible challenges the ghost can pose to the dichotomies of presence and absence, as well as past and present. In turn, I situate these challenges within the encounters of the Latin American immigrant with different cultural subjects in England. These ‘ghostly encounters,’ as I treat them in my novel, show the effort of the Latin American protagonist to find a space within British society as he becomes accustomed to the complex relation of contemporary England and its past. The figure of the ghost is a transient manifestation of the past irrupting into the present and takes two forms in the novel: the ‘sensuous presence’ of Lori (along with her spectral entourage) and the haunting of Victoriana (in the shapes of material culture and Steampunk performances and art). The interaction of my protagonist with these ghosts aims at capturing the ghostly experience that settling in England can be for the Latin American, and these encounters with the ghost are representational of the encounter of both cultural subjects.

My creative interests for this novel are in direct relation to my analysis of two fundamental aspects of the ghostly encounter: presence and time. I take advantage of the challenges the ghost poses to our basic understanding of these two concepts in order to structure my ideas of the condition of the Latin American immigrant. First, I work with the ontological description of the ghost as a combination of both absence and presence to express the practices that render the Latin American as an Other in England. I achieve this by adopting the hauntological perspective from which the relationship

between the ghost and the living is described as something between *us* and *them*. I establish a connection between this proposition and the idea that the Latin American suffers from *ghosting*. Not to be confused with ignoring a person in social media parlance, my term *ghosting* is a particular form of Othering in England. My novel and the accompanying critical commentary examine the dynamics of cohabitation between the British and the Latin American in England, from the point of view of the latter, to interrogate whether *ghosting* is inherent to the relationship. *Ghosting* is the result of the lack of acknowledgement of the Latin American immigrant in England. Haunting the idea of ‘Othering’ from postcolonial studies, my proposition of the term *ghosting* refers to the practices that render an individual invisible and liminal. While Othering signals a labelling of the individual as something *else*, something *different*, *ghosting* is a consequence of the lack of a proper label for the Latin American. The second aspect of my investigation is the temporal challenge of the ghost, its symbolic capacity as a past that returns. I am creatively drawn towards the idea that for a ghost to haunt the present, it needs recourse to a past. I map this idea onto the context of the Latin American in England, arguing that, without a shared colonial past with England, this immigrant is a ghost that does not haunt. Unacknowledged, the Latin American is spectralised, and at the same time he is also set apart from other ghosts that haunt England.

My novel, *Penumbra*, is a series of ghostly encounters which pace the development of the main character. The above-mentioned challenges to presence and time are the pillars of the world of my novel, but what propels the plot forward is the protagonist’s awareness of his own particular ghostliness. Within a few weeks of being in the United Kingdom (UK), the character becomes conscious of his own spectrality in the eyes of the British. This awareness motivates Samuel to take an interest in the symbolic ghosts which haunt England from the past, as well as for the actual ghost of

the novel, Lori, whom he initially shuns. Henceforth, spectrality becomes the character's means to search for a space in a social system which is both immediate and remote at once. The singular position of the protagonist is that, though he recognises British colonial history has no space for him, he can fit more easily in the present by engaging with ghosts representative of that colonial past. The Latin American is a ghost that does not haunt but who is willing to participate in other hauntings that already exist. This claim elaborates the notion of adaptability, a path that many Latin Americans take in their integration to British society, as will be discussed further in the third section of this thesis. My discussion of this willingness to become involved in other hauntings, presupposes that the novel is not only about the Latin American migrant as a spectre in the eye of the English, but also about the migrant's encounter with the ghosts already established in the land. The English Steampunk community is introduced at this point to foreground the role of the ghost in contemporary England. Supported by hauntological arguments, I introduce the challenges that the interventions of the past pose to the solidity of the present, particularly relating them to the idea of a 'postimperial melancholia,'¹ a type of collective mourning for a past. The character experiences these different hauntings as another ghost, but his unique type of spectrality, disconnected from Britain's past, sets him apart from the rest. The conflict emerging from this search for integration and the failure to creatively progress by solely reformulating the past is the essence of the narrative.

Hauntology

It would be pertinent to touch upon some key postulates of hauntology, from which I develop the dynamics of spectral time and presence in *Penumbra*. The term

¹ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 90.

hauntology was coined by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, in which he theorises the ghost from two angles, in relation to *presence* and to *time*. ‘To haunt does not mean to be present,’ claims Derrida, ‘and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology’.² With this, Derrida begins to establish a co-dependency between what is present and what is absent. The spectre ‘embodies’ this combination, and Hauntology emerges as a strategy to understand it. According to Katy Shaw, ‘because ontology is incapable of representing the state of specters (both living and dead), hauntology develops as a way of articulating both the presence and absence that define the spectral’.³ Derrida constructs hauntology as a means to express what is non-present, and he expresses it as a direct and specific challenge to ontology: ‘Ontology opposes [hauntology] only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration’.⁴ I find great creative potential in this fabrication of Derrida. Hauntology is where ontology cannot reach. It allows me to give creatures of the imagination, such as ghosts, an alternative status comparable to the ontology of humans. One way I attempt to translate this opposition into the novel is by emphasising the opposition of light and darkness, particularly palpable throughout Chapter Twelve (p. 118), when the main character explores a memory of the ghost, Lori. The transition of the protagonist from an ontological to a hauntological perspective, that is, the fading of his physical form and of his narrative voice in the scene, is complemented by the dynamics of light and darkness presented in the chapter (see p. 127). Colin Davis states that, ‘Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the *priority* of being

² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 202.

³ Katy Shaw, *Hauntology, the Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 6.

⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 201-02.

and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive'.⁵ The key word here is 'priority', which suggests a displacement rather than a complete replacement of ontology. However, some critics continue employing the word 'replacement'. Tom Lewis, for example, states that 'Derrida goes on to assert the need to replace "ontology" with its near homonym [...] "hauntology"',⁶ but Hauntology cannot erase ontology. It only defies its absolute prominence, its priority, in critical theory. The perspective of hauntology offers me creative possibilities for addressing the spectralised presence of the Latin American in the UK. *Penumbra* is the result of my interest as an author in explaining the absent-presence of this immigrant subject in England by means of Derrida's proposition that the being cannot be understood as fully present, only in relation to what is no longer there and in anticipation of what will come.

The second main aspect of the ghost that hauntology explores is time. In this regard, hauntology functions in two directions from the present, towards the past and the future. It draws power from two distinct ghosts, one arising from the compulsion to repeat the past and the other from what is still to come, what has not happened but still has an effect in the present because of our anticipation of it. Mark Fisher explains:

We can distinguish two directions in hauntology. The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat,' a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is

⁵ Colin Davis, 'État Présent: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms', *French Studies*, 3, 59 (2005), 373-79 <<https://academic.oup.com/fs/article-abstract/59/3/373/638853>> [accessed 12 June 2017] (p. 373). (My italics).

⁶ Tom Lewis, 'The Politics of "Hauntology" in Derrida's Specters of Marx', in *Ghostly Demarcations, A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marxs*, ed. by Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 134-67 (p. 140).

already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).⁷

In consideration of Fisher's proposition, Shaw understands hauntology as capable of 'dissolving the separation between now and then'.⁸ She suggests spectres, 'function to draw attention to the limitations [the boundaries] of time, and the ever-present role of the past in both the structure of haunting and the future of society.'⁹ Also working from a sociological position, Avery Gordon, a major influence for post-millennial hauntologists, explains the ghost in relation to the future. Her interest is in the ways the ghost arrives from the past to influence the present and motivate future action, which matches my protagonist's desire to engage with the past to secure a future for himself in British society, but Gordon points at a less subject-specific outcome when she states that, '[Haunting] always registers the harm inflicted of the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done'.¹⁰ This position contrasts other authors' such as Fredric Jameson and Fisher, who see hauntings as a nostalgic effect in operation. Jameson connects ontology with the 'sense of tangible certainty and solidity', while hauntology 'serves to underscore the very uncertainties of the spectral itself, which promises nothing in return; on which you cannot build; which cannot even be counted on to materialize when you want it to'.¹¹ This implies that our capacity to imagine futures is limited by our present and its reflection of the past. Jameson sustains that, 'the

⁷ Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 1, 66 (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012), 16-24 (p.19).

⁸ Shaw, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters, Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. xvi.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', in *Ghostly Demarcations, A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, ed. by Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 26-67 (pp. 38-39).

living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us'.¹² Aligning himself with Jameson, Fisher argues that, 'what haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate'.¹³ My writing takes into consideration both of these temporal directions of hauntology, visualising a future for the Latin American in England, along the lines of Gordon's argument, while also underlining the limitations of not sharing a colonial past with Britain at the time the Latin American tries to engage with its present. Samuel is haunted, both by his past in Costa Rica and his future in England.

Another aspect of hauntology that is relevant for this study is that most hauntologists emphatically separate their critical views from any belief in the paranormal. As Jameson claims, embracing Derrida's concept of hauntology does not involve a conviction in the existence of actual ghosts.¹⁴ Neither does it imply thinking according to religious or mystical beliefs of what happens after death. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren argue that:

To believe or not to believe in ghosts no longer involves a determination about the empirical (im)possibility of the supernatural, but indicates contrasting validated attitudes [...] towards the uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy that characterize language and Being because of their inevitable entanglement with alterity and difference.¹⁵

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹³ Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', pp. 16-24 (p. 16).

¹⁴ Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. by Michael Sprinker, pp. 26-67 (p. 39).

¹⁵ María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, 'Conceptualizing Spectralities', in *The Spectralities Reader*, ed. Blanco and Peeren, pp. 1-27 (p. 9).

This emphasis on indeterminacy, uncertainty, and heterogeneity is certainly part of my association of the ghost and the unacknowledged Latin American immigrant, but I also propose a metaphor in which the sensory qualities of the ghost are still paramount.

Other hauntologists such as Martha and Bruce Lincoln find the exclusion of ‘ghosts qua ghosts’¹⁶ as a limitation of modern hauntology: ‘Initiatives in the new hauntology [...] typically base themselves on a scant and idiosyncratic evidentiary foundation, developing the trope of haunting without considering how ghosts are theorized by those who take them as something other than metaphor’.¹⁷ In a specific critique of Gordon, Lincoln and Lincoln denounce that ‘she never considers individuals or social groups who experience haunting as something consistent with, and rooted in, their cosmology, ontology, and psychology (the latter term used in the etymologically precise sense: “theory of the soul”)’.¹⁸ Lincoln and Lincoln introduce some authors who understand and work with the ghost beyond its metaphorical function. They cite Grace M Cho (2008), Heonik Kwon (2006; 2008), and Mai Lan Gustafsson (2009), in whose accounts, ‘Ghostly subjects appear as fully extant and active animate beings that confront the living in direct, non-mediated, and even menacing fashion’.¹⁹ To account for figurative and nonfigurative hauntings, Lincoln and Lincoln propose a typology that distinguishes a primary type of haunting, in which the afflicted ‘recognize the reality and autonomy of metaphysical entities,’ from the secondary haunting which ‘recognizes its “entities” in the sedimented textual residues of horrific historic events or, alternatively, as tropes for collective intrapsychic states and experiences’.²⁰ Lincoln and

¹⁶ Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln, ‘Toward a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chúc’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57 (2015), 191-220, (p. 195).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 197-98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Lincoln suggest that hauntology has failed to take into account individuals and, at times larger ethnographic groups, to whom ghosts are part of their cultural reality. The desire to distance hauntology from any belief in the paranormal, as well as the impulse to assure the reader of such a departure, has contributed to the exorcism of the spectre from hauntology and its replacement with an emphasis on *haunting*. One of the objectives of this thesis is to foreground the sensory presence of the ghost in the theory of hauntology.

The Modalities

I map the Latin American immigrant as a ghost among ghosts. To clarify his position in England, I place him in contrast to other ghosts which are more compatible with the English because they have a history with the country, namely apparitions of Victoriana, and paranormal spectres, such as Lori. I will explain this in terms of modalities of the ghost, and distinguish two particular modalities. One is its sensory presence; this ‘physical’ modality designates the ghost as almost a being, almost embodied, presenting its own particular challenges to materiality as ‘the visibility of a body which is not present in the flesh and blood’.²¹ I call this the sensuous modality of the spectre. It involves the experience of the ghost through the senses, and I mainly focus on sight. Whether we see the spectre, fail to see it, or have the synesthetic sense of ‘feeling’ its invisibility, making us ‘feel ourselves watched’ in a Derridean sense,²² the encounter with this modality of the ghost always has to do with sensory stimuli. In my novel, the apparitions of Lori, vanishing, transparent, invisible, illustrate this modality (see pp. 139, 168, and 248). This spectre contrasts with the revenant ghost in

²¹ Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Ecographies of Television, Filmed Interviews*, trans. by Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p. 115.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

the second modality. This second symbolic modality refers specifically to the manifestation of the past in the present day. Instead of being straightforwardly descriptive of the ‘ghostly object’, this modality refers to an abstraction which the subject fabricates around an object that is not ghostly by itself but becomes ghostly by action of the subject, through subjective understanding. A pith helmet, for example, is not inherently ghostly, at least not until we associate it with British colonisation. This idea is made into a passage of my novel when Samuel is introduced to Steampunk (see p. 58). This second modality of the ghost is reliant on subjective cognition. It involves knowing a particular past to recognise its return in the ghosted object. I introduce this necessity of a particular knowledge as a factor of the invisibility of Latin Americans in relation to their lack of a connection with the colonial past of Britain. The Latin American immigrant is caught between these two modalities, since he is made invisible by the incapability of the hegemonic British subject to associate him with a familiar past. The two modalities I propose here cannot be simply rendered as ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ ghosts. This thesis demonstrates that both can function at a figurative level to connect the Latin American and the spectre; and it does so as it engages with the literalisation of the metaphor as a creative practice. This is palpable in the scenes where the protagonist plays the actual ghost in the memories of Lori. Sam frequently walks in and out of the invisible ‘ghostly’ Victorian setting. The narration moves along with the protagonist’s conscience to this second realm, but Samuel’s body remains present in the real contemporary England. During these episodic disappearances from the ‘first world’, Samuel’s interactions become ‘flavourless’ and ‘colourless’ (see p. 129), but this is only a temporary change. It is his situational invisibility literalised. The Latin American comes between the modalities of the ghost. He negotiates his ghostliness as something caught between these two.

Synonymic Distinction

I have identified the two main modalities in which the ghost is critically productive, as sensuous presence and as a symbol. To these I assign respectively the terms 'spectre' and 'ghost'. The two terms are often used arbitrarily outside academic circles, and in my novel, I use 'spirit', 'phantom', 'apparition' and other synonyms with artistic freedom. However, the different denominations often point in specific theoretical directions. I bring them into this critical section as synonyms but also inevitably alluding to the established scholarly notions of both a sensuous presence and a symbol of a returning past. What I am proposing in this critical companion is a 'synonymic distinction', which is a conscious authorial use of the terms as synonyms but simultaneously referring to an epistemological difference between them. In other words, 'spectre' and 'ghost' indicate different approaches to the same concept. This distinction goes hand in hand with my understanding of the Latin American as liminal ghost, who as I mentioned earlier, is in-between the two modalities I propose. These modalities are not distinct types of ghosts. They both refer to the same figure. Acknowledging the distinctive connotations of these synonyms asserts the parallelism and synchronicity of the sensory and symbolic aspects of the ghostly within this thesis. What I am suggesting is that to understand the position of the spectralised Latin American immigrant, it is necessary to recognise in him the traces of the spectre and the ghost.

This emphasis on terminology is not an attempt to discard the work done by other authors to differentiate 'ghost' from 'spectre'. It builds on a division already

drawn within much of the post-Derridean literature on the ghost and hauntology. On the one hand, the ‘spectre’ is often connected with a spectacle, with something visible. This connection is regularly introduced etymologically²³ and followed by a theoretical explanation of it in reference to ‘the visibility of a body which is not present in the flesh and blood’.²⁴ On the other hand, ‘the ghost’ in Derridean terms is *un revenant*, that which comes back, indicating the use of the word as symbol of the past and the effect of that past in the present. Nevertheless, the separation of ghost and spectre is not always clear. In his native French, the term Derrida uses for his *revenant* and *arrivant* is *fantôme*,²⁵ which translates both as ‘ghost’ and ‘phantom’. According to Blanco and Peeren ‘phantom’ has its own connotation as ‘the synonym of the ghost most intimately associated with the illusionary’.²⁶ In addition, Derrida also used ‘spectre’ to designate someone who is gone and comes back, for example, in image through a recording.²⁷ With this statement about a two-dimensional image, Derrida invites the spectre, ‘the invisible visible’,²⁸ to usurp the space of the other term, of the ghost. This mutability of Derrida’s terminology makes it necessary to delineate the meanings of spectre and ghost more clearly. By defining the spectre as different from the ghost, with a consistent separation of the sensory qualities of the spectre from the symbolic connotation of the ghost, I attempt to refocus my hauntological approach on the ghost instead of its haunting.

²³ For example, Derrida and Stiegler, *Ecographies of Television* (p. 115); Blanco and Peeren, ‘Conceptualizing Spectralities’, in *The Spectralities Reader*, ed. Blanco and Peeren, pp. 1-27 (p. 2).

²⁴ Derrida and Stiegler, *Ecographies of Television*, p. 115.

²⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, and Derrida and Stiegler, *Ecographies of Television*.

²⁶ Blanco and Peeren, ‘Conceptualizing Spectralities’, in *The Spectralities Reader*, ed. Blanco and Peeren, pp. 1-27 (p. 8).

²⁷ Derrida and Stiegler, *Ecographies of Television*, pp. 120, 127.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Hauntological Subordination

The contemporary approach to hauntology is characterised by a tendency to prioritise the concept of haunting above that of the spectre and the ghost. This can be traced back to Derrida's coining of the term as a pun on 'ontology'. In the original French, the silent letter 'h' renders the words homonyms. With this letter, absent in speech but present in written form, Derrida illustrates his concept with its own signifier. This is reason enough to justify his choice of words. However, the choice of the verb 'to haunt' as the root of the term suggests the dissipation of the ghost's 'being' into its function 'to haunt'. Hauntology ponders the ghost, or what haunts, only as a starting point, but its true determination is studying the haunted subject. More specifically, the spectre has taken a merely functional role in contemporary hauntology at the service of the prevalent notion of haunting, and the symbol that the word 'ghost' stands for, the symbolic modality, has become absorbed by the idea of haunting. Hauntology is a subject-centred discourse, concerned with how the ghost makes us feel and what it means to and about us, in the broadest sense of the word 'us' as 'the haunted'. But my study specifically positions the Latin American as the ghost, as an Other to the subject spectralising it. In this sense, my study is not only about haunting. It is also about 'those who haunt'. Hence, my creative writing foregrounds the ghost, both metaphorically with the character of Samuel and with the literalisation of his ghostliness as he enters the realm of Lori and other spectres. In *Penumbra*, I connect the invisibility of the Latin American to that of the spectre as a 'sensuous presence' in order to support my argument that a ghost can exist without necessarily haunting a subject. My association of the Latin American with the ghost foregrounds the dynamic relation between spectre and ghost, between the sensuous presence and its symbolic dimension. Samuel is spectralised, but his lack of a colonial past in relation to England differentiates him

from other ghosts he encounters, particularly those from the nineteenth century. Aware of this difference, the protagonist actively seeks for ways to haunt, to participate in the hauntings he perceives, and thus attain recognition in Britain.

The Disappearance of the Spectre

Foregrounding the spectre to match the attention given to its haunting is an authorial priority of mine. Hauntologists have discussed the presence of the ghost as a critical tool and debated a differentiation between such a ghost and the actual paranormal manifestation, and I draw creative power from this debate. Derrida and Walter Benjamin polarise the academic writing about the ghost: Derrida freely making a point of the need to refer to the figure of the ghost and Benjamin abstaining from mentioning it. The influence of Benjamin is evident in postmillennial hauntological studies. But unlike Derrida, who builds his argument around the ghost, Benjamin abstains from directly summoning the spectral into his theory. While contemporary hauntological studies deriving from Derrida's theory tend to rely more on the symbolic presence of the ghost than on its sensuous presence, the influence of Benjamin is a more transparent reason for the disappearance of the spectre. In such studies, the ghostly presence is replaced as a research focus by a subjective perception of the past alive in the present. Lincoln and Lincoln criticise contemporary hauntologists for largely basing their arguments on Benjamin's postulates, which evoke the ghost figuratively. Consequently, 'these authors' citations of Benjamin [...] draw rhetorical power from their literalization of a figure whose presence in the theses is only implicit'.²⁹ To interpret Benjamin's arguments 'as an interest in spectral phenomena extends [his]

²⁹ Lincoln and Lincoln, p. 193.

language in the direction of metaphor and expands his argument toward metaphysics'.³⁰ If there is such an extension, however, these contemporary hauntologists remain consistent with Benjamin's line of thought, as far as they understand the ghost as a representation of a past that is still significant in the present. Lincoln and Lincoln single out Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* as one of the most influential hauntological works in which, 'expanding on Benjamin, she redefines the experience of being "haunted" as a call to fight on behalf of the dead against those who sought to erase them'.³¹ Beyond that, Gordon erases the spectre as a sensuous presence. For her, discussing hauntings is the reason why ghosts raise a sociological interest. Ghost are, in fact, not agents bringing a haunting about; they are rather what any haunting throws up.³² It is the haunting itself that generates ghosts and not the other way around: 'Haunting raises specters'.³³ What Gordon proposes is a ghost that is completely absorbed by its haunting:

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just a sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure.³⁴

This prioritising of the haunting signals a tendency to undermine the work the sensory spectre can perform. I emphasise the legitimacy of thinking of the spectre as independent from its haunting, because my argument is that the Latin American is

³⁰ Ibid., p. 193.

³¹ Ibid., p. 195.

³² Gordon, p. 7.

³³ Ibid., p. xvi.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

spectralised but does not haunt precisely because he is not acknowledged as a social figure in England.

The creative section of this thesis is a ghost story, namely one that engages with the ghost in a comprehensive sense, purposely ‘mundane’ and ‘intellectual’, encompassing symbolic and sensuous spectral presence. I draw on Derridean principles of hauntology for my composition, but what enables this attempt to fully exploit the ghost in its symbolic and sensuous modalities is its metaphoric counterpart: the Latin American. The invisibility of its visibility, its liminality, and its challenge to the solidity of the present are all reflected in this encounter of the Latin American immigrant with England. Wendy Brown points out that, ‘the specter as the “becoming body” challenges ontology as fixity, and challenges as well the distinction between material dimension and concept [...] the specter bypasses materiality and its putative opposite’.³⁵ To creatively and critically approach Derridean hauntology implies looking beyond the broad dichotomies of life and death, presence and absence, and focusing on the transgressive characteristics of the ghost, which does not fully take part in these dichotomies. I do not assign the Latin American strictly to one modality or the other. They are not fixed but situational, and this immigrant is both spectre and ghost in England.

Conclusion

This first section has situated my argument within the theory of hauntology. I have presented the principles and nomenclature of theory that contribute to explain my statement that, unacknowledged, the Latin American is spectralised in England. I

³⁵ Wendy Brown, ‘Specters and Angels at the End of History’, in *Vocations of Political Theory*, ed. by Jason A. Frank and John Tambornino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 25-58 (p. 34).

introduced the challenges the ghost poses to our understanding of time and presence, which are elemental structural and thematic components of the novel. Starting from its challenge to the concept of ontology, a hauntological perspective allowed me to express the inconspicuous presence of the Latin American in the UK in terms of the ghostly in my novel. I designed my main character to vacillate between ontological and hauntological statuses and convey my authorial interest for the absent-presence of this immigrant subject in England. Moreover, the novel was written in accordance with the hauntological perspective of time, which is that the ghost signifies the permanent role of the past in the present and future of society. In his interactions with other ghosts along the novel, my protagonist learns that compulsion to repeat the past indicates that the present is not self-sufficient. Earlier in this chapter, I defined a ‘synonymic distinction’ between the spectre and the ghost. I introduced two different modalities of the ghost. First, the sensuous modality, I associated with the term ‘spectre’ as the visibility of the invisible. With the second symbolic modality I referred to the ghost as the past that returns to affect the present. These modalities are the basis for my discussion of the spectralised presence of the Latin American immigrant. My proposition that the Latin American exists as a ghost who does not haunt involves challenging the prioritisation of ‘the haunting’ in the theory of hauntology. I proposed that neither ‘ghost’ nor ‘spectre’ should be limited to the service of this third concept of haunting. Haunting implies a relation, conditioning the relevance of the ghost to a subject, reducing it to a functional stepping stone to discuss the more impactful concept of haunting, but in my critical and creative practice the ghost, in its two modalities, has remained the focus.

Part II

The Ghost and the Latin American Immigrant

This second part discusses the spectralisation of the Latin American in his condition as an immigrant in England. I focus on the challenges of hauntology to the concept of presence in order to articulate the liminality of the immigrant figure. In this part of the critical section, I utilise the premises of hauntology as epistemological tools, but in my reading of the Latin American in England, I also adopt a postcolonial perspective. This combination allows me to denote this subject's invisible condition within spaces as varied as critical theory, creative writing, and contemporary British society. My suggestion is that the ghost is an alternative to triangulate the inconspicuousness of the Latin American within these three areas. The conceptualisation of 'ghosting' has resulted as part of the creative process of composing a novel about this immigrant in the context of postcolonial Britain. It is a means to express the condition of the Latin American immigrant in a critical argument and a piece of fiction.

The focus of this creative and critical project is the migrant individual adjusting to life in England, rather than Latin America as an ethnic group. Though I explore certain aspects of the collective history of the nations and the ethnic groups composing Latin America, the argument is localised on Samuel and the country of Costa Rica. I identify the factors for the ghostliness of this Latin American immigrant as an individual, which are, in turn, the substance of my novel. My project seeks to answer microsociological questions on a personal scale. Given that creative writing is my research methodology, I have created a fictional impression of the Latin American individual to propel the study forward. A Costa Rican, Samuel, is the protagonist of my novel and is the vehicle for my critical argument. The different points of this section

aim at elaborating the reasons for narrating the cultural inconspicuousness of Latin Americans in today's England as a ghost story.

Ghosting

My proposition of the term *ghosting* refers to the practices that render the Latin American invisible and liminal. The postcolonial term 'Othering' signals a labelling of the individual as something *else*, something *different*, which is presented as inferior, intellectually and morally. My term *ghosting* builds on that term and takes difference in a specific direction. Particular to the encounter of the Latin American with the British subject, *ghosting* is a consequence of the lack of awareness of the latter, who notices the difference of the Latin American but cannot identify them because he does not have a label for them. Unacknowledged, the Latin American is spectralised, and at the same time he is set apart from other ghosts that haunt England, emerging from its past. In the novel, this happens to Samuel when he registers for institutions that ask for his personal data, when he literally has to identify himself as 'Other' (see p. 38). It happens in social contexts when he meets new people (see pp. 49 and 154) and it also happens in his sojourns to Lori's past (see p. 224-225).

Having previously noted the differences between the spectre and the ghost, I can lean specifically on the bodily aspects of the spectre to explain *ghosting*. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida defines the spectre as a *non-sensuous sensuous*, distinguished by 'a supernatural and paradoxical phenomenality, the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible, or an invisibility of a visible X'.³⁶ I must note that in his later text, 'Spectrographies,' Derrida changes the order of his phrase: '[The spectre] is of the

³⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 6.

visible, but of the invisible visible'.³⁷ The order of the words 'visible' and 'invisible' does make a difference, for Derrida speaks about the sensation of detecting a presence that is not there (perceivable), what should be expressed as the sensorial perception, or the visibility, of the invisible. Moreover, I invert these terms when I apply them to the Latin American immigrant. That is the case of the *invisible visible*, of a modified visibility, signifying the visibility of a body that *is* present in the flesh and blood, but is present as the materialisation of the unknown, as a body which is present but has no recognition other than his physicality. In my fiction, the spectrality of the Latin American is imposed by the gaze of the British. This gaze does not challenge the ontological status of the Latin American, but it destabilises his self-image (see pp. 119, 160). The Latin American becomes, from his own point of view, the unknown. This understanding appears in the novel in multiple occasions when Samuel disregards his own national heritage and personal history (see pp. 63-64, 119). The protagonist does not reach the point of accepting himself as a ghost, in spite of momentarily considering he might feel and do better as one (see pp. 240-241). The conflict that propels the story originates from this subjective ghostliness and the protagonist's struggle to cope with *ghosting*, and I illustrate the power of the subject's gaze to erase the Other with the interactions between Samuel and other literal ghosts: throughout the novel he is advised that, to perceive spirits, he needs to 'see better', which he only achieves near the climax of the story.

The Haunting of Othering

My term ghosting directly alludes to the concept of Othering from postcolonial theory. I combine aspects of hauntology and othering to describe the specific situation

³⁷ Derrida and Stiegler, *Ecographies of Television*, p. 115.

of my subject. Drawing from G W F Hegel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Edward Said, who work the term *Other*, Gayatri Spivak is first to use the concept of Othering systematically in ‘The Rani of Sirmur’, to discuss British colonial power in India.³⁸ When Spivak coined the term, she distinguished three dimensions of Othering. ‘[The first] dimension is about power, making the subordinate aware of who holds the power, and hence about the powerful producing the other as subordinate’.³⁹ The second dimension ‘is about constructing the other as pathological and morally inferior’.⁴⁰ Lastly ‘[the third] dimension of othering implies that knowledge and technology is the property of the powerful empirical self, not the colonial other’.⁴¹ Othering involves practices which not only identify and expose the difference, but discursively manipulate it to exert dominance. Influenced by Spivak, Ruth Lister defines othering as a ‘process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between “us” and “them” – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained.’⁴² This process distorts the self-image of the supposed Other, imposing foreign aspects on their identity, and it does so at the same time it acts upon the One, asking them either to claim or maintain their place above. This discursive power is evident in some attempts to define Othering critically, which present it as having the power to create, to evoke ontological typologies. Michael Schwalbe speaks of Othering as, ‘the *defining into existence* of a group of people who are identifiable, from the standpoint of a group with the capacity to dominate, as inferior’.⁴³ This

³⁸ Sune Qvotrup Jensen, ‘Othering, Identity Formation and Agency’, *Quantitative Studies*, 2 (2011), 63-78, in *Directory of Open Access Journals* <<https://doaj.org/article/0e28481534ec492f96c68ea3df0cf5a7>> [accessed 11 Julio 2017] (p. 64).

³⁹ Jensen, pp. 63-78 (p. 64).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴² Ruth Lister, *Poverty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 101.

⁴³ Michael Schwalbe, ‘The Elements of Inequality’, *Contemporary Sociology*, 26 (2000), 775-81, in *JSTOR* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2654084>> [accessed 12 January 2018] (p. 777). (My italics).

definition is echoed by Sune Qvotrup Jensen, who considers Othering as, ‘discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make up a numerical majority, *define subordinate groups into existence* in a reductionist way which ascribe[s] problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups’.⁴⁴ In *Penumbra*, I refer to this power to ‘define into existence’ in a few scenes with the intention of rendering them as mere instances of realisation of the Other, not acts of creation. A few times in my novel, ghosts appear as if from nowhere, but the narration is clear that these ghosts have been there since before the protagonist notices them. In this first person narration, Samuel literally brings them into existence only when they become apparent to him (see pp. 234, 215, and 292). The Other is created by difference. John Riker describes the ‘problem with difference’ as a three-phase othering process. In an initial phase, ‘an essential difference is noticed’, which can be sexual, racial, ethnical, etc. In a second stage, ‘a normative judgment is made as to which side of the difference is superior’. Finally, the side of the difference with more power establishes ‘structures of privilege and discrimination’.⁴⁵ Riker explains that, ‘The reason for the immediate leap to judgmentalism is that the experience of difference causes anxiety to arise, for we are in the presence of the unknown (insofar as what appears is not the same as us) and, hence, the unpredictable’.⁴⁶ Othering problematises difference by reifying, objectifying, and/or presenting individuals as a threat. “‘The others’” are reduced to stereotypical characters and are ultimately dehumanized [...] Such processes imply reduction and essentialization in the sense that those who are othered are reduced

⁴⁴ Jensen, pp. 63-78 (p. 65). (My italics).

⁴⁵ John H. Riker, ‘Self Psychology and the Problem of the Other’, *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*, 7 (2012), 165-79, in *Taylor & Francis* <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15551024.2012.656349>> [accessed 14 October 2017] (p. 166).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-68.

to a few negative characteristics.⁴⁷ The term Othering applies here more accurately than the seemingly absolute Other, particularly because: ‘The notion of “Othering” conveys how this is not an inherent state but an ongoing process’.⁴⁸ The argument of this thesis is that the Latin American is not inherently ghostly in his condition as an immigrant. Instead, he is *ghosted* by the lack of a common past with the British, and he is also spectralised, made inconspicuous, in the eye of the natives. In my novel, the invisibility of the ghost becomes his own.

Postcolonial Invisibility

From a postcolonial angle, the same reasons that relate Europe and the West Asian nations, particularly for Edward Said, function to explain why the encounter with a Latin American immigrant is more difficult to process for the British than meeting others from Britain’s former colonies. In his definition of *Orientalism*, Said contrasts the relation of America and Europe with what he calls ‘the Orient’:

Unlike the Americans, the French and the British – less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss – have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling *Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jensen, pp. 63-78 (p. 65).

⁴⁸ Lister, p. 101. (Italics in original).

⁴⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 1.

Along with cultural contestation, the author discusses proximity and colonial history as factors of the relation and the Orientalist gaze of the European. These three factors sustain the connection between England and West Asian nations, but from a different angle, they are significant reasons for the Latin American not figuring majorly in the consciousness of the English subjects. The small numbers of Latin Americans present in the United Kingdom, the geographical distance and the lack of a common colonial history contribute to the invisibility of the group. My thesis aims to draw attention to the fact that disregarding the Latin American in the theory that introduced the concept of Other, and subsequently Othering, only worsens the invisibility of the Latin American subject in England. As long as the Latin American subject remains unacknowledged in and outside critical theory, it will continue to be treated differently from effectively recognised 'home' former colonies, even if indirectly by omission. As mentioned above, Othering renders subordinate groups as problematic or inferior, often by means of reductionism. This is a type of violence against the collective and individual identity of migrants from former colonies. The lack of acknowledgement the Latin American experiences in England is, similarly, a kind of violence.

Cultural historian Robert Young begins his *Colonial Desire* with an illustration of the East-West paradigmatic divide. He invites readers to imagine themselves standing just outside the Old Royal Observatory in Greenwich, where 'the smooth gold band in the ground marks the Prime Meridian, or Longitude Zero [...] Stand to the left-hand side of the brass strip and you are in the Western hemisphere. But move a yard to your right, and you enter the East: whoever you are, you have been translated from a European into an Oriental'.⁵⁰ Young carries on making a point about the heterogeneity

⁵⁰ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.1.

of London, but my interest for introducing this passage is the writer's language, his equalisation of Europe and the West. The implication is that the American continent is too far west, so far indeed, that it does not figure in the relation he outlines with the East. There is of course, an evident connection between the British Empire and North America and the Caribbean, and these territories are included in the traditional postcolonial bipartite argument between Britain and its former colonies. My research introduces a third party into the discussion. Bringing Latin America, and more specifically Costa Rica, into this relationship is complex, first and primarily, because the Costa Rican colonial history involves an empire other than the British, the Spanish. In my novel, this mismatch between England and the Costa Rican narrator, between former colonizer and colonised, is a factor of his inconspicuousness and has a constant spectralising effect on the immigrant.

Searching for references to Latin Americans on the pages of Britain's postcolonial theory bears a similarity with hunting for ghosts. Its historical absence during the country's imperial period results in its theoretical absence. The figure of the Latin American is bound to a different colonial past by different European colonizers, Spain and Portugal. This is an individual who has learnt the repercussions of his own colonial past, who never belonged in colonial Britain. This historical absence contrasts with the presence of the Latin American within the contemporary context of the country. The Latin American subject lacks a colonial past but lives a postcolonial present in Britain. He occupies a space beneath the shadow of what Paul Gilroy calls 'postimperial melancholia,'⁵¹ that is, as an alien in the postcolonial territory of an empire that is no longer there. Paul Williams explains that Gilroy's term describes the state of mourning after the Second World War, resulting from the realisation that the

⁵¹ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 90.

dismantling British empire could no longer match global superpowers such as the United States and Russia: ‘Britain had its international eminence wrenched away, and as the term “melancholia” indicates, it has still not come to terms with its collapse in status’.⁵² In my novel, the Costa Rican protagonist experiences this melancholia at first hand, particularly accentuated in his incursion into Steampunk.

The Numbers

A factor contributing to the invisibility of Latin Americans in England, which I associate with distance, is their moderate countable presence in the land. Brian Linneker and Cathy McIlwaine agree that ‘it is not possible to accurately determine the number of Latin Americans in London from official data sources’,⁵³ which is the same case for the rest of the English territory. The latest 2011 census estimated the UK Latin American population in 2008 was 186,500, but this number has margins of error that cannot be accurately calculated.⁵⁴ ‘These figures’, writes Mas Giralt, ‘need to be approached with caution as “Latin American” has not been recognised as an ethnic minority category in the Census (and many other official surveys in the UK)’.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, in December 2014, the Office for National Statistics published its *2011*

⁵² Paul Williams, *Paul Gilroy* ([n.p.]: Taylor and Francis, 2012), *ProQuest Ebook Central* <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=1114718>> [accessed 22 July 2017] (p. 61).

⁵³ Brian Linneker, with Cathy McIlwaine, ‘Estimating the Latin American Population of London from Official Data Sources’ (London: Queen Mary, University of London; Latin American Women's Rights Service; Trust for London, 2011) <www.geog.qmul.ac.uk/media/.../latinamerican/LACommunityPopulationestimates.pdf> [accessed 19 September 2017] (p. 3).

⁵⁴ Cathy McIlwaine, with Juan Camilo Cock, and Brian Linneker, 2011. ‘No longer invisible: The Latin American Community in London’ (London: Queen Mary, University of London; Latin American Women's Rights Service; Trust for London, 2011) <<https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/documents/108/No-Longer-Invisible-report.pdf>> [accessed 19 September 2017] (p. 29).

⁵⁵ Rosa Mas Giralt, ‘Sociocultural Invisibility and Belonging: Latin American Migrants in the North of England’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 15 (2015), 3-10 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2015.03.002>> [accessed 10 October 2017] (p. 4).

Census: Small Population Tables for England and Wales for ‘All usual residents with ethnic group Latin, Central South American’,⁵⁶ a specific section for small groups offering more exact figures. It revealed 272 Latin Americans with residence in Nottingham which has a population of 305,680⁵⁷ (that figure translates to 0.088% of the total population or one Latin American every 1137 people), 501 in Birmingham out of a total population of 1,073,045⁵⁸ (or 0.046%), and 2200 out of 219,346⁵⁹ in the City of London, Westminster (1%). These figures support the thesis that Latin Americans are too few to stand out at a national level. Costa Ricans, as a standalone group, do not figure. Mas Giralt claims that ‘the small numerical size of specific national groups has also undermined collective expressions of belonging which rely on particular national or other imaginaries’.⁶⁰ The comparatively small numbers of Latin Americans in contemporary UK matter at the time of creating an impact on the rest of the population, and these limited figures indicate that the majority of the British population is yet to get acquainted with the Latin American component of their localities.

What is Latin America?

Defining Latin America is a complex task. The region is rich with peoples, ethnicities, and religions. This richness, this panethnicity can become a factor contributing to the invisibility of this population in Britain. The name, Latin America,

⁵⁶ ‘2011 Census: Small Population Tables for England and Wales’, in *Office for National Statistics* <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/small_population> [accessed 9 December 2017].

⁵⁷ ‘National Identity by Measures: Nottingham’, in *Office for National Statistics* <<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/KS202EW/view/1946157131?cols=measures>> [accessed 9 December 2017].

⁵⁸ ‘National Identity by Measures: Birmingham’, in *Office for National Statistics* <<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/KS202EW/view/1946157186?cols=measures>> [accessed 9 December 2017].

⁵⁹ ‘National Identity by Measures: Westminster’, in *Office for National Statistics* <<http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/KS202EW/view/1946157259?cols=measures>> [accessed 9 December 2017].

⁶⁰ Mas Giralt, ‘Sociocultural Invisibility’, pp. 3-10 (p. 8).

has a colonial origin. The Latin American territories were once part of European empires, but today the ghost of those empires is still present in the way Latin Americans identify themselves, as once part of something now gone. I would like to retake Said's identification of the Orient as 'the source of [European] civilizations and languages'⁶¹ and from it, reflect on the significance of European languages in the conceptualisation of Latin America. McIlwaine et al. define Latin Americans as 'Spanish or Portuguese first language speakers from the Central and South American geographical regions'.⁶² She also includes Spanish-speaking Cubans and Dominicans, and Mexicans (though she refrains from listing Mexico as part of North America). The definition of McIlwaine et al. excludes 'non-Spanish and non-Portuguese speaking countries in the region such as Guyana, Surinam, French Guiana, Haiti, Jamaica and the other Caribbean islands'.⁶³ Other studies, however, suggest this system of selection and exclusion may not completely reflect the Latin American perspective of themselves. In her study Mas Giralt, found that Latin Americans' understandings of the term 'were varied and included perceptions that it was an identity externally imposed by the Western gaze, that it discriminated against indigenous and African American peoples or that, contrarily, it made reference exclusively to these groups'.⁶⁴ Despite these apparent breaches of meaning and the problems of inclusiveness they cause, the term continues in use. A probable cause for this continuity is that the denomination *Latin American* is more widely acknowledged than the individual groups that compound it. Data suggest that migrant populations tend to use it 'strategically to be recognised politically in receiving societies'.⁶⁵ The negative side of this is that, while the term Latin America

⁶¹ Said, p. 1.

⁶² McIlwaine, with Cock, and Linneker, p. 12.

⁶³ Ibid., p.11.

⁶⁴ Mas Giralt, 'Sociocultural Invisibility', pp. 3-10 (p. 10).

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

conveys common traits of a large heterogeneous group, it also masks more specific identity traits. Still this acknowledgement compensates for the overgeneralisations that the general idea of a multiplicity implies. Strategic acknowledgement is preferred to anonymity. In my novel, for example, Samuel opts to describe himself as Latin American rather than Central American after having to explain that to new acquaintances that he is not from Central *United States*. He takes refuge in a better-known term to facilitate his interactions with others (see pp. 43 and 112). This means the character has to lay down his most comfortable label of identity for another which gives him a higher chance of acknowledgement, however general it might be.

The Discovery of Latin America

My novel, *Penumbra*, is not concerned with the lack of significant contestation between England and a country such as Costa Rica. In a broader sense, a case could be made about Latin America being involved in arguments with England, such as the case of the sovereignty dispute over of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands in 1982, or the remote conflict between the United Kingdom and Spain over Mosquito Coast, Central America, in 1786. But the realities of these American places are as foreign to the Costa Rican as they are to the English, and such particular aspects of their colonial history appear unrelatable. Instead of working with ‘contestation’ in that broad sense, my project has focused on the individual, on producing a fictional Latin American migrant who represents the effects of postcolonial theory in modern times. What I strive to capture in my novel in regard to the colonial history of Costa Rica and its postcolonial study is the discursive impact of news and public changes in the last decade of the twentieth century. These familiarised the millennial generation with invisibility, by showing them their historical narratives had been subjected to European recognition.

The sense of invisibility that characterises Samuel's experience of England is not something completely new. Some of it is brought by Sam when he arrives in the country. It has a historical aspect which has its root in the late fifteenth century, with the Spanish conquest, or the 'discovery of America'. What Samuel learns in his youth is that, before Europe turned eyes on America, the uncharted land existed in an invisible embryonic state, so would suggest a modernist-Eurocentric narrative of the history of America. The existence of the land, its riches, and its peoples was predicated on its recognition by the European powers. It was the Europeans who invented, the name Costa Rica, or 'rich coast' in English. It was the Europeans too who called the continent a 'discovery' and who incidentally conceptualised it as such. Reflected in the microsociological focus of my novel, this familiarity of the main character with invisibility facilitates his awareness of his own *ghosting* when he arrives in England.

The fictional subject of my study, Samuel, is modelled upon the millions of Central Americans raised during the 1990s, who experienced at first hand the repercussions of what Walter Mignolo calls 'a shift in the geography of knowledge'.⁶⁶ Mignolo discusses the option of decoloniality and proposes considering the term 'invention' instead of 'discovery' of America. The thesis of the invention of America may be traced back to Edmundo O'Gorman's *The Invention of America*,⁶⁷ first published in Spanish in 1958; however, I situate the period of effective change brought about by this thesis in the last decade of that century. By the 1990s the theoretical discussions on the subject had become more palpable in the cultural mainstream of a country such as Costa Rica. In 1994, Costa Rican law number 7426 repealed and replaced law number 4169 from 1968, changing the name of the national holiday

⁶⁶ Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Singapore: Blackwell, 2008), p. 2.

⁶⁷ Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1961).

observed every 12 October from *Día del Descubrimiento y de la Raza*,⁶⁸ or ‘Day of the Discovery and of the Race’ (my translation), to *Día de las Culturas* or ‘Day of Cultures’.⁶⁹ Although the reasons behind this legislative change point at the possible racist undertones of ‘the Race’, the removal of ‘the discovery’ exposed the complexity of the term and its implications to the population of the country. It widely exposed a part of their history which was told from a foreign perspective. The awareness of invisibility then transcended academic circles and became a topic of public discussion, and it meant that postcolonial criticism was not the only way to raise consciousness on postcolonial interests.

Samuel is affected by the narratives of discovery he learnt as a child and then was encouraged to reformulate at the end of the twentieth century. The narratives telling of this ‘discovery’ of America were discussed and taught formally and informally, spreading a limited view of the colonial period. Mignolo points out that the main issue that decoloniality contends is one of perspective:

From the sixteenth-century Spanish missionary Bartolome de Las Casas to G. W. F. Hegel in the nineteenth century, and from Karl Marx to the twentieth-century British historian A. J. Toynbee, all we can read (or see in maps) about the place of the Americas in the world order is historically located from a European perspective that passes as universal.⁷⁰

These narratives, which taught Americans their own place and history, were passed on through the years as universal truths. In schools, students discussed Christopher

⁶⁸ ‘Ley 7426’, in *CONAVI* (2001) <www.conavi.go.cr/.../Ley+No.+7426.+Dia+de+las+Culturas..pdf?> [accessed 10 October 2017].

⁶⁹ ‘Ley 4169’, in *Sistema Costarricense de Información Jurídica* (1994) <http://www.pgrweb.go.cr/scij/Busqueda/Normativa/Normas/nrm_texto_completo.aspx?param1=NRTC&nValor1=1&nValor2=36649&nValor3=38639&strTipM=TC> [accessed 10 October 2017].

⁷⁰ Mignolo, p. xii.

Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci as heroic seamen who discovered and brought civilisation to the New World. A popular children's poem, 'Tres Carabelas' ('Three Caravels', my translation), celebrates the arrival of Columbus in America and calls 12 October 'la fecha gloriosa | que otra tierra vio',⁷¹ '*glorious* date | when he saw another land' (my italics and translation). The poem also recognises the joy of the Spanish crown:

Los reyes de España
contentos están
por la otra tierra
que han de conquistar.⁷²

Which I translate as:

The sovereigns of Spain
joyful they are
because of the other land
they are about to conquer.

Children of the 90s such as Samuel adopted this European perspective but then were presented with a different truth, that Americans had little to do with the way their own history had been told until then. 'Indeed,' Mignolo writes, 'both people and continents outside of Europe were overly present as "objects," but they were absent as subjects and, in a way, out of history. They were, in other words, subjects whose perspectives did not count'.⁷³ The Latin Americans that inspired my protagonist were still learning these 'truths' inherited and unchallenged for centuries, but these narratives were still

⁷¹ Juan Barrera Garduño, 'Tres Carabelas', in *Asamblea Escolar* (2011)
<<http://www.asambleaescolar.com/2011/09/poema-al-descubrimiento-de-america-para.html>>
[accessed 29 December 2017] (lines 11-12).

⁷² Ibid. (lines 13-16).

⁷³ Mignolo, p. xii.

being taught nationwide at the same moment they were being questioned. Christopher Baker discusses the emergence of what Bhabha calls the ‘unhomely’ moment for protagonists of post-colonial literature, ‘when identities that have been imposed by oppressing ideologies are transformed either through pain or subversion. What these protagonists had once called “home” in both the physical and cultural sense is made strange by changes in political and identity consciousness, a process that Bhabha calls the “postcolonial condition”’.⁷⁴ Samuel’s invisibility is both culturally inherited and formally learnt. This ‘postcolonial condition’, the circumstances of the character’s immediate personal past, has seen him reformulate what he once understood as his cultural past. The protagonist of my novel has perceived flashes of the invisibility of Latin America from an early age, but when he arrives in England, that distant ‘theoretical invisibility’ becomes something he experiences in the flesh. Having ideas about his native region’s own invisibility facilitates awareness of his own inconspicuousness in the new land.

Adaptability

Some Latin Americans have learnt to make the best of their spectrality. They believe that a visible presence is not necessarily favourable in certain localities; instead, it could actually be detrimental when minorities become visible for the wrong reasons, such as being connected to antisocial behaviour or crime. To some Latin Americans, “visibility” as a distinctive cultural or ethnic group was perceived as potentially dangerous as it could lead to processes of negative stereotyping of Latin Americans or Latinos, as has taken place in the US or Spain’.⁷⁵ Like other large migrant groups, the

⁷⁴ Christopher Richard Baker, *The Hybrid Church in the City: Third Space Thinking* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 20.

⁷⁵ Mas Giralt, ‘Sociocultural Invisibility’, pp. 3-10 (p. 6).

arrival of Latin American immigrants has previously been considered a problem for the host nation. The antecedent makes members of the community anticipate being viewed as potentially troublesome, so they opt for remaining unacknowledged to keep themselves from prejudice (see p. 53). Moreover, a portion of the Latin American population in the UK see their invisibility as a proof of their integration to British society. Mas Giralt concludes that for many, ‘the “invisibility” of Latin Americans was perceived as positive and as a signifier of the “successful incorporation” and greater cultural closeness (e.g. Christian background) of migrants from this region to British mainstream society’.⁷⁶ This is the early strategy of my protagonist to try and fit in England. Samuel initially tries to overcome feeling inconspicuous by being quiet and accepting sameness, trying to imitate the locals. The character attempts to adapt to the new culture, by adopting it as his own. Mas Giralt argues that in many cases, ‘strategies of adaptation were not simply actions to fit in but implied emotional compromises. That is, sentiments of personal or familial need, achievement or fulfilment provided the basis for a compromise between letting go of past values and acquiring new ones’.⁷⁷ In *Penumbra*, Samuel’s emotional compromises do not seem to pay off. The protagonist experiences regret for ‘betraying’ his Costa Rican heritage when he fails to act as British as Zoe or even Lori, whether because he realises he can imitate the British but not entirely be one or because he adopts the wrong kind of Britishness (his association with Lori and the steampunks brings him into conflict with Zoe). These feelings of guilt and loneliness lead the character to his lowest point in the narrative, beginning in Chapter Twenty-One (see p. 210).

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp.5-6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 3-10 (p. 6).

Conclusion

In this second section, I took advantage of my creative methodology to align my presentation of the condition of the Latin American immigrant in England with the background of my protagonist. I used Samuel's fictional history as a conducting thread to examine the relation between the Latin American and England, before and after arriving in the country. The section interrogated the connection the character had maintained with Europe from his childhood and the ways that past affects his present upon his arrival in England. In this context, I described the factors that were the most influential during my creative process: his exposure to *ghosting*, the isolating reality of the Latin American immigrant, and his adaptability to the new cultural surrounding.

I proposed the term *ghosting* to refer to the practices that spectralise the Latin American, that render him invisible and liminal. Basing my concept on the postcolonial ideas of 'Othering', I attempted to characterise the particular Othering practices that affect the Latin American immigrant as he encounters British subjects who lack an awareness of his past. Ghosting happens, I proposed, when the hegemonic subject notices the difference of the Latin American but cannot identify the individual with a familiar type of Other. Ghosting exposes the invisibility of the visible; that is, the visibility that is limited by the lack of familiarity of the subject. These interactions with a subject that spectralises my protagonist cannot challenge his ontological status, but they destabilise his self-image. The Latin American becomes, from his own point of view, the materialisation of the unknown. This was literalised in Samuel's visions of Lori's world. I placed the reductionism involved in Othering practices parallel to the lack of acknowledgement that Latin Americans such as Samuel experience in order to expose both as equally violent acts against the collective and individual identity of the Othered. I analysed conceivable reasons why British awareness of the Latin America is

limited, in comparison to the knowledge of other foreign regions which have common history with England.

This second part of the critical section was structured to expose the factors that bind the past of my protagonist to invisibility. It referred to the background of my character before he arrives in the UK. Samuel is haunted by the narratives of discovery he learns as a child but which are reformulated at the end of the twentieth century, the changing attitudes towards the former Spanish conquest of America and its cultural legacy of subjectivation, what Mignolo calls a ‘shift in the geography of knowledge’.⁷⁸ Upon arrival in England, this history of invisibility facilitates the protagonist’s awareness of his own spectralisation and incites a chain of reactions against it, beginning with mimicry (see, for example, the superficial impression of substantiation high-street clothes give him, p. 63 and 51). This early response to difference is consistent with the tendency of adaptation of the Latin American immigrant. This adaptation, however, is not satisfactory for the character, who must seek other means to cope with his ghostliness. In the following part of this critical essay, I discuss the search of the character for a space in the social sphere, which requires him to be willing to participate in current hauntings of England.

⁷⁸ Mignolo, p. 2.

Part III

Ghosts of Britain

While the spectre, defined by its sensuous appearance, poses direct challenges to the dichotomy of presence and absence; the ghost, in its symbolic modality, designates its relation to time, to the past, present and future of haunting. As argued previously, the lack of acknowledgment of the Latin American in England is the reason for his spectrality. In *Penumbra*, the protagonist adopts his ghostliness as a means to find spaces for himself in the social fabric of the nation. Steampunk is introduced here to juxtapose spectrality with its heavy materiality (see p. 281). In his first encounter with Steampunk, Samuel meets the character of Steve, ironically dressed as a colonial explorer, whom the protagonist initially confuses for another ghost (see p. 58). It is this physical substance of the spectre incarnated by Steve that motivates Samuel to follow him and later become involved with his Steampunk community. Aware of his own spectrality, Samuel is drawn to the apparent tactile solidity of Steampunk material culture: steampunks' apparel and the venues where they gather. He is dressed by Steve (see p. 69) and Victoria (see p. 74) in key moments of integration and adaptation. This interest in Steampunk meddles with the character's search for a space for himself in contemporary England. He attempts to give bodily substance to his spectrality by dressing up in Steampunk fashion, metaphorically investing himself in a rendition of symbols of Victorian England. This external mimicry represents his involvement with the ghosts of England.

Steampunk collects ghosts of Britain's past. It is a manifestation of English melancholia. My analysis of Steampunk proves it a complex hauntological practice which involves a number of agents, representations of the past, and attitudes towards

such representations. Steampunk can be understood as a cultural movement, a literary genre, an aesthetic, and as a community. Though I discuss the main tropes of Steampunk in general, my objective is to fictionalise with transparency the reality of the Steampunk community in England today. With this realistic portrayal of their fanciful practices, I demonstrate the hauntological principles that affect the social context of my protagonist, and in turn, complicate his spectral experience of the country. My protagonist engages with a contemporary Steampunk community in his strive to fit within the present of the country. From Samuel's perspective, the steampunks represent a safe, comfortable social group, which functions as a surrogate ethnic group and as his means for understanding and experiencing 'Englishness'.

Steampunk

The term *Steampunk* was coined in a letter K W Jeter wrote to the science fiction magazine *Locus* in 1987, describing a group of authors (James Blaylock, Tim Powers, and Jeter himself) who merged history and fantasy in their work. As Jeter originally explained it in his letter, steam-punks were authors of 'Victorian fantasies' written in a 'gonzo-historical manner'.⁷⁹ Miller and Taddeo call these, 'nineteenth-century-inspired technofantasies—darkly atmospheric novels of a time that never was'.⁸⁰ These fantasies are inspired by the literature of Jules Verne and H G Wells and retain similar formal and thematic characteristics, which in turn became traits of the genre. They combine elements of the past into their visions of the future: they often include clockwork technologies, steam power, and Victorian settings and fashions.

⁷⁹ J. W. Jeter, 'Locus Letters', *Locus*, April 1987, p. 57.

⁸⁰ Cynthia J. Miller and Julie Anne Taddeo, 'Introduction', *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*, ed. Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller (Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), pp. xv-xxvi (p. xv).

Some of the most well-known works are Jeter's *Infernal Devices* (1987), William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990), Allan Moore and Kevin O'Neil's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999), China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), and Gail Carriger's *Soulless* (2009). The social scene of Steampunk has developed parallel to this literary genre, gathering aficionados of re-enactment, DIY, cosplay, Neo-Victorianism, and Goth, among others, into large organised festivals, including shows, markets, and performances, as well as smaller social gatherings.

My creative writing represents Steampunk in a non-literary sense. It is not a Steampunk novel, but a novel concerning Steampunk, a narrative of the community. My characters do not inhabit a literal retro-futuristic world where steam technology abounds, where they captain airships for a living. Instead, I am presenting a narrative of that narrative. These characters belong in our modern world. They could be bankers, teachers, or students. They buy groceries at Tesco, watch the BBC news, and board trams. Nevertheless, mine is indeed a *speculative novel*. It contains elements of fantasy, and it is possible to connect it to the Steampunk genre particularly because of the sections in which the psychospiritual connection between Lori and Samuel allows him to visit the past in her memories. Various themes and tropes of literary Steampunk are part of these 'visits to the past'. The creation of Ezra's *Nautilus*, the device he invents to contain the human ghost, is identifiable with Steampunk; the same can be said about the business Quast launches to use the spirits of the dead as a source of power. Regardless of these tropes, the primary reason for referring to Steampunk in this thesis is investigating its potential to generate spaces outside literature that facilitate the engagement with England's past, the nineteenth century in particular. In other words, Steampunk opens spaces for the ghost in its symbolic modality by taking advantage of

the material and immaterial legacy of the Victorian Era and disrupting the present with flashes of the past. Steampunk is locked in a period, and all its forms of cultural expression extrapolate various ghosts of England. This emblematic past matches the cultural and aesthetic ideals my protagonist has of Britain before he arrives in the country. He understands it as an alternative means to experience that past and play a role in it. Samuel becomes attached to this community and seeks Steampunk out as another ghost, more or less believable than the others he encounters.

Locked in Time

Discussing the past in terms of the ghostly reveals ourselves as locked in time. Wendy Brown suggests that, ‘A characterization of the past as haunting the present and as conjurable in the present challenges not simply linear but progressive history’.⁸¹ In *Penumbra*, I engage with this challenge to the conception of time, directly stating the inability of ghosts to perceive it linearly (see pp. 219-220 and 284). When Lori introduces Samuel to her memories, he immediately notices a disturbance in the order these passages from the past are presented to him (see p. 188 and 209). It becomes the task of the protagonist to set them in order. I associate this motif of the novel with Mark Fisher’s claim that, ‘The kind of nostalgia that is now so pervasive may be best characterised not as a longing for the past so much as an inability to make new memories’.⁸² Fisher analyses Fredric Jameson’s description of ‘one of the impasses of postmodern culture as the inability “to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current

⁸¹ Brown, ‘Specters and Angels’, in *Vocations of Political Theory*, ed. by Frank and Tambornino, pp. 25-58 (p. 37).

⁸² Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014), p. 113.

experience.” The past keeps coming back because the present cannot be remembered’.⁸³ The constant revival of the past exposes the limits of our capacity to express the present by its own means. The result is an aesthetic blurring of the two and a blending. I attempt to capture this ‘blur’ of the present and past in Chapter Nine, during Samuel’s probably most unsettling confrontations with the past (see p. 86). As quoted previously, Jameson’s argument is that spectrality reveals that ‘the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be’.⁸⁴ The dependence of the present on the past is symptomatic of its lack of solidity. In his explanation of Derrida’s terminology, Jameson connects ontology with the ‘sense of tangible certainty and solidity’ while hauntology ‘serves to underscore the very uncertainties of the spectral itself, which promises nothing in return; on which you cannot build; which cannot even be counted on to materialize when you want it to’.⁸⁵ If haunting is all about returning and the impossibility of creation, instead of a “spectral turn” in contemporary criticism’,⁸⁶ sparked by Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, we should be speaking about a ‘spectral return’. This nihilistic view is a dangerous one, resulting from the intervention of the past but also worsening its effects. Oversaturation with the past can be culturally stultifying, argues Shaw, leaning on Nietzsche to claim that, “oversaturation of an age with history” can lead to that period having a “dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism”.⁸⁷ Along most of my novel, Samuel gradually distances himself from the present, represented by

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 113-14.

⁸⁴ Jameson, ‘Marx’s Purloined Letter’, in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. by Michael Sprinker, pp. 26-67 (p. 39).

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

⁸⁶ Roger Luckhurst, ‘from The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the “Spectral Turn”’, in *The Spectralities Reader, Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 75-88.

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, ‘On the uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’ quoted in Shaw, p. 14.

Zoe, in favour of the past (Lori) to the point of endangering his life (see pp. 162 and 178). Ghosted by his absence in the memory of the British, he finds an alternative inlet through the hauntological past returning. He attempts to find that space in British society, engaging with as many ghosts as he can find.

One of the challenges of writing *Penumbra* is representing the consciousness of a ghost, which is one locked in time. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida poses a number of questions, which contribute to my conceptualisation of time for the ghost in the novel: ‘What is the time and what is the history of a specter? Is there a present of the specter? Are its comings and goings ordered according to the linear succession of a before and an after, between a present-past, a present-present, and a present-future, between a “real time” and a “deferred time”?’⁸⁸ These questions express the general concerns hauntology addresses. Katy Shaw explains that,

The paradox of the specter is then perhaps best understood in terms of time, of a repetitious compulsion to return. The distortion of linear time that is required for manifestation means that ‘there may be no proper time’ for specters; they instead function to draw attention to the limitations of time, and the ever-present role of the past in both the structure of haunting and the future of society.⁸⁹

The complexity of narrating the way the ghost operates in time rises from trying to explain it according to our linear understanding of it. Time itself is a spectral concept. We believe time exists though we have no sensory perception of it. Laura Janda observes that, ‘If time exists at all, it exists purely as an epiphenomenon of effects on ourselves and the things around us’.⁹⁰ We observe it indirectly in the aging of the world

⁸⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 48.

⁸⁹ Shaw, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Laura A. Janda, ‘The conceptualization of event and their relationship to time in Russian’, quoted in Shaw, p. 3.

around us, often most palpably in its unstoppable decay. To us time is linear. We age; we grow; and time moves forward. But in *Penumbra*, I build the notion of ‘parallel time’. For these literary ghosts, there is no sequence to events. Their point of view is affected by their hauntology (as a particular twist to ontology). From our perspective, as the living, the ghost is the one left behind, the dead, part underground, part locked in memory. But from the point of view of the ghost itself, from Lori’s, it is never past. The future does not exist either. To her all times are present because she has no perception of the passing of time. My proposition is that ghosts experience all times at the same time. This is the panoptic vision of the ghost; in the world of the novel, it is a direct challenge to Fisher’s statement that ‘the present cannot be remembered’,⁹¹ but outside of it, it is an illustration of his idea.

I situate my novel in the midst of what Mark Fisher conceptualises as a ‘hauntological confluence’ taking place during the first decade of the twenty-first century and defined by ‘its confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future’.⁹² This cultural-artistic reaction to never reaching the futures imagined in the twentieth century is the context of my novel. Samuel leaves Costa Rica in an attempt to flee from that cultural impasse, but he finds it again in England (see pp. 64, 82-83, 92, and 253). What haunts the twenty-first century is the loss of the futures imagined in the previous century, vastly prodigious, uber-technological, marvellously different from the present in which they were conceived. To Fisher, ‘the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination’.⁹³ Our conceptions of ‘new’ futures submit to our remembrances of the past. Steampunk, for example, aims at recreating a *futuristic past* in the present. In *Penumbra*, it represents the way the

⁹¹ Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life*, p. 114.

⁹² Fisher, ‘What is Hauntology?’, pp. 16-24 (p. 16).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

dependence of the present on the past, symptomatic of its lack of solidity, turns the future into a pseudo-fantastic performance. Brown suggests this type of haunting continues today:

On a daily basis we live the paradox that this most fast-paced epoch in human history harbors a future that is both radically uncertain and profoundly out of the grasp of the inhabitants of the present. Moving this fast without any sense of control or predictability, both past and future have become sites of bewilderment and anxiety. In consequence, we inheritors of a radically disenchanted universe feel our impotence more strenuously than humans may ever have felt it before, even as we occupy a global order more saturated by human power than ever before. Power without purpose, power without lines of determination, power without end in every sense of the word.⁹⁴

The disillusionment and gloom with which Brown presents this paradox of acceleration towards a destination unknown indicates a lack of a sense of progression, of gradual building up and sequentiality. Without the notion of approaching a goal, we can only sense movement as the world ages and decays around us. This takes us back again to the argument that time is a spectral concept. It is the most nihilistic side of hauntology. It is melancholic.

British Melancholia

To map Fisher's argument about lost futures within the specific social context of England, I will focus on the idea of melancholia. Like Fisher, Shaw identifies the first decade of this century as a 're-living' of the previous decades, lacking original

⁹⁴ Brown, 'Specters and Angels', in *Vocations of Political Theory*, ed. by Frank and Tambornino, pp. 25-58 (pp. 25-26).

creativity.⁹⁵ She locates her argument in England: ‘Haunted by the sense that it could not articulate the present, contemporary English culture became marked by a sense of failed mourning, a refusal to give up a past that it had not yet resolved’.⁹⁶ Repetition is symptomatic of melancholia as well as of the inability to express the present. This association is better understood as part of what Paul Gilroy calls ‘postimperial melancholia,’ an ailment that has afflicted the country since the end of World War II. To Gilroy, ‘the life of the nation has been dominated by an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige’.⁹⁷ Comparing what the loss of Hitler meant for Nazi Germany to that of the empire for Britain, Gilroy explains that, ‘melancholic reactions are prompted by “the loss of a fantasy of omnipotence” and suggest that the racial and national fantasies that imperial and colonial power required were, like those of the Aryan master race, predominantly narcissistic’.⁹⁸ The past is revered above the disillusioning present, and the nebulous future. What melancholic reactions reveal is the desire to match the greatness of the past mixed with an almost certainty that we can’t. I revisit this proposition in the novel with the overpowering and unjustifiable manner in which Lori appeals to Samuel. The ghost, who has only her memories to offer, seduces my protagonist into prioritising her and her problems above his own issues with contemporary England and of course his relationship with Zoe. Along with the central relationship of Samuel with Lori, the novel is also indicative of other common melancholic reactions, Steampunk most noticeably.

⁹⁵ Shaw, p. 14.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹⁷ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 90.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Steampunk Pastiche

English Steampunk is one of these manifestations of an obsession with mourning the past and the lost futures it once promised that I am weaving into my novel. Steampunk in England is better understood as a form of ‘postimperial melancholia’ which strives to rework a historical foundation into their very own performative present. Steampunk could be seen as taken literally from the opening passage of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*:

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.⁹⁹

Of course, Marx is discussing *real* revolutions, but as Marx himself says: every significant world-historic fact appears twice, ‘the first time as tragedy, the second as farce’.¹⁰⁰ Steampunk is, in such sense, the farce that emerges from tragedy, a manipulation of the past purposely made entertaining, even comical. Marx refers to the weightiness of the past, the idea of reinvention, and conjuring of the ghosts to borrow from them; all of these are essential components of Steampunk. They are, in fact, literalised by steampunks. In *Penumbra*, like often happens with real-life steampunks, characters change their names and adopt a Steampunk persona. Steve, for example,

⁹⁹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 3rd edn (London: The Electronic Book Company, 2001), *ProQuest Ebook Central* <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=3008499>> [accessed 2 March 2017] (pp. 7-8.).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

appears in the text also as Bram Stevenson; Victoria Ridley is also Madame Victoria, and even Samuel takes the name of Mauricio Ravel. The language, names and appositives, costumes and accessories of steampunks are derived primarily from the nineteenth century. A costume of a steam-powered cyborg, for example, which combines bulky DIY armour, mock hydraulics, and LEDs is a literalisation of what Brown calls 'the past's heavy yet indeterminate appearance in present and future'.¹⁰¹ This is the kind of pastiche in which steampunks invest themselves, and these are some of the ghosts to which my protagonist learns to adapt.

Steampunks are most recognised for appropriating the iconic garb of the nineteenth century and adapting it into their own. The costumes steampunks wear is the outer layer of their subculture, the identifiable, visual representation of it. My protagonist copies this external trait since his first introduction to the community. Samuel returns to Zoe from the Steampunk market, wearing a hat (see p. 77). This seemingly innocuous act signifies an initiation into a larger hauntological performance. Steampunks allow themselves to overcome the restrictions of a completely realistic representation of the past, and by doing so, trade the accurate enactment of the past for the construction of their own system of reference. 'Steampunk does more than simply invoke a distant past,' Bowser and Croxall state, 'it creates a new paradigm in which technologies, aesthetics, and ideas mark different times simultaneously, instead of signposting different historical periods'.¹⁰² The tendency towards pastiche indicates that Steampunk is not a recreation of Victorian England; it is a reimagined version of it. The common optimistic attitudes of steampunks and the cheerful tone in which they reflect

¹⁰¹ Brown, 'Specters and Angels', in *Vocations of Political Theory*, ed. by Frank and Tambornino, pp. 25-58 (p. 36).

¹⁰² Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall, 'Introduction: Industrial Evolution', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 3 (2010), pp. 1-45 (p. 3).

on their own affinity with the past are clearly in opposition to Fisher's and Brown's. Where these two authors see a paralysing melancholia, steampunks see the genre 'rebel against the system it portrays', such as Victorian London, says Jess Nevins, 'critiquing its treatment of the underclass, its validation of the privileged at the cost of everyone else, its lack of mercy, its cutthroat capitalism'.¹⁰³ Authors, such as Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller, qualify Steampunk as subversive rather than nostalgic, as 'another lens through which to examine the racial, class, and gender politics of both the past and present'.¹⁰⁴ Steampunks aim to achieve what Shaw calls 'spectral effect', when 'Specters disturb the present with the possibility of alternative pasts and futures. In doing so, they also defy time and space, and challenge the fixity of the temporal'.¹⁰⁵ Ideas of the Industrial Revolution and Empire, for example, are expressed through modern fabrications. Steampunks make that evident in their practices and collective image, exalting the most pleasing and exciting aspects of the past. This Steampunk pastiche of ghosts is immediately attractive to Samuel. It reflects the fantasy of a Victorian past that he constructed even before he arrives in England and gives him a sense of belonging.

The combination of fantasy and history that characterises Steampunk becomes problematic when it comes to assigning meaning to their symbols. Steampunks' characteristic style of dress tries to exteriorise their subcultural identity; it is their symbols put into practice, but most of those symbols also identify England with its imperial past. The British Steampunk community is just one among the many around the world, and it is possible to find small variations in the adaptations of these other

¹⁰³ Jess Nevins, 'Introduction: The 19th-Century Roots of Steampunk', in *Steampunk*, ed. by Ann and Jeff Vandermeer (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2008), pp. 3-11 (p. 10).

¹⁰⁴ Miller and Taddeo, 'Introduction', *Steaming into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*, ed. Taddeo and Miller, pp. xv-xxvi (p. xviii).

¹⁰⁵ Shaw, p. 7.

groups outside the UK, but what makes the British community unique is their closeness of Steampunk with their mainstream national tradition. Victorian London is the original model for Steampunk, captured in quintessential novels of the genre such as Jeter's *Infernal Devices* and *Morlock Night*, or *The Difference Engine* by Gibson and Sterling. When my protagonist becomes involved with the steampunks, he finds access to common English legacies including drinking tea, cider, and ale. He gets the opportunity to talk to characters extracted from literature, parodies of archetypal figures such as aristocrats, the English gentleman, and the lady, the chimney sweeper, and the 'copper'. These references are made through costumes and performances. Margaret Stetz claims that 'unlike fashion in historical fiction [...] the clothing in steampunk narratives is self-consciously inauthentic'.¹⁰⁶ This inauthenticity, this element of pastiche, is a key element that separates Steampunk from re-enactment and political groups. However, it may not be excuse enough for some detractors who accuse steampunks of romanticising Britain's colonial and imperial past, and even worse, celebrating the injustices of the era, the most common claim is that their code of dress, perhaps unknowingly, replicates ideas of the empire. Kristin Stimpson states that, 'Steampunk attracts people because of its beautiful aesthetic, but the beautification and aestheticization of the Victorian era have consequences for today. Steampunk style does not seem to grapple with today's racial and class tensions, but rather ignores or reproduces them'.¹⁰⁷ Selectively remembering the greatness of Britain's past can indeed create a false national sense of tranquillity and moral superiority in today's society, in turn offering what Gilroy calls

¹⁰⁶ Margaret D. Stetz, 'Steampunking New York City in Kate and Leopold', in *Neo-Victorian Cities: Reassessing Urban Politics and Poetics*, ed. by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, 4 (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), pp. 283-306 (p. 294).

¹⁰⁷ Kristin Stimpson, 'Victorians, Machines, and Exotic Others: Steampunk and the Aesthetic of Empire', in *Clockwork Rhetoric*, ed. by Barry Brummett ([n.p.]: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), pp. 19-37 (p. 34).

the ‘pleasures and distractions that defer a reckoning with contemporary multiculturalism and postpone the inevitable issue of imperial reparation’.¹⁰⁸ To place this into the context of the novel, I must clarify that I investigate Steampunk as a popular cultural movement, not just an academic current, and though the meaning of its particular symbols can be questioned academically, it is unrealistic to expect the steampunk public to take collective responsibility for the intentional or unintentional reproduction of imperial motifs in each individual customisation. This is not simply a matter of awareness; it also involves memory, once again, because there is no single way of understanding and remembering that past. The character of Steve, for example, owns his own antique shop full of Victoriana, and he plays a substantial role, personifying the compulsion to keep the past tactile and at hand. Brown states that, ‘haunting takes place between history and memory; it is simultaneously an achievement of memory and a failure of memory with regard to some significant historical effect’.¹⁰⁹ My work with Steampunk and memory is not meant to suggest that a shared selective memory justifies the proliferation of imperial ideas.

Steampunk seeks to rework not every aspect of the Victorian era but the most commonly popularised in works of fantasy literature from the nineteenth century. In my novel, the combination that Steampunk makes of fantasy and reality complicates my immigrant protagonist’s positioning within a social system in which he is already spectralised. Brown explains that, ‘Living with ghosts, permitting and even exploiting their operation as a deconstructive device, means living with the permanent disruption of the usual opposites that render our world coherent between the material and the ideal,

¹⁰⁸ Paul Gilroy, ‘Why Harry’s Disoriented about Empire’, *Guardian*, 18 January 2005, (para. 8 of 14).

¹⁰⁹ Brown, ‘Specters and Angels’, in *Vocations of Political Theory*, ed. by Frank and Tambornino, pp. 25-58 (p. 38).

the past and the present, the real and the fictive, the true and the false'.¹¹⁰ The climactic scene of the novel at the Steampunk Festival literally connects the past of the novel with the present in front of a crowd (see p. 289). It confronts literal ghost with the metaphorical, as well as spectre with ghost, yet none of the attendees of the event realise the difference (see p. 292). The scene is laid out to unite the steampunk audience with the staff of the museum, the machinery of another era, ghosts of the past and spectres of the present, all of these together and compacted in a moment of confusion. Roger Whitson contests the idea that Steampunk is evidently nostalgic for a lost past, but fails to offer a more convincing alternative. Whitson states that, 'If Steampunk is a form of nostalgia at all, it is what *The Affinity Bridge* author George Mann calls a "nostalgia for what never was": not a fake fantasy of the past, but an alternative to a history that is too often seen as immutable'.¹¹¹ But a 'fake fantasy' and an 'alternative history' are both fictions. Quoting Mann, a fiction author, Whitson appropriately recalls the literary beginnings of Steampunk. What becomes apparent is that Steampunk relies on fantasy to function, both in and outside literature. Steampunk is still a literary movement, even now that its *fantasies* are extrapolated into reality. In *Penumbra*, the challenge Samuel faces is distinguishing reality from fantasy, the Victorian from pastiche. As a dramatic element of my novel, Steampunk makes this differentiation more difficult for Samuel and complicates the character's relation with the present. As a thematic element, it illustrates his engagement with hauntological aspects of modern England.

Steampunk Spaces

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.32.

¹¹¹ Roger Whitson, *Steampunk and Nineteenth-Century Digital Humanities: Literary Retrofuturisms, Media Archaeologies, Alternate Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 4.

Steampunks take advantage of historical location to fabricate spectral spaces. When Samuel enters these spaces, he realises steampunks engage with physical space in the same way he does. Steampunks tend to gather in public events. Though there are no real limitations as to where one of these gatherings can take place, the British Steampunk community tends to favour locations that are evocative of the Victorian era for their largest events, such as mills, prisons, train and even pumping stations. These include the old Promenade Railway Station, known as The Platform, during Morecambe's Splendid Day Out, Lincoln Castle's Victorian Prison during the Asylum Steampunk Festival, the Pavilion on Whitby's Steampunk Weekend, and Papplewick Pumping Station on various celebrations. The architectural design and décor of centenary buildings contribute to the sense of immersion Steampunks seek for their events; however, these places offer something beyond mere aesthetic complementation. They physically link the different eras of England. They are both historical and contemporary: playing different functions over the years, structurally stable and inhabitable, commonly with minimal modifications. The temporal spectrality of Steampunk only makes evident the amalgamation of past and present that exists permanently in such Victorian buildings. These nineteenth century locations represent what Steampunk is, a blend of past and present. Steampunks take advantage of the connection to the past that a two-hundred-year-old building offers and take it one step further by adding elements of fantasy to it. In the scene recounting the protagonist's first Steampunk event at Quast Mill (see p. 63), his initial reaction to the Steampunk market suggests that the present is not present anymore, not as it normally is. The car park disappears when the location is rid of that function. The physicality of the place is unchanged during the event, but a new space is created by the performance that occupies it. The years turned the mill, a place of industry, into an events venue, its

courtyard into a car park. Steampunk repurposes it once more, trying to return it to its original temporality, but Steampunk events do not aim at recreating the past exactly as it was. They seek creative engagement with it. This space, this *present past*, is a modern version of a bygone time that is neither period in its totality. It is spectral by definition.

Shame, Guilt, and Paralysis

The ghost challenges our confidence in the solidity of the present as well as the unity of the past and the veracity of narratives of the past. Steampunk strives to create new spectres, new images of the past, and in the process finds itself, summoning the ghosts of that past. As previously defined, the ghost brings back the past *to* and *for* us, but those moments of realisation and confrontation with haunting are not necessarily a complication to progress. They can also be the way to move forward. They are, what Gilroy calls, the ‘additional shocks’ that compound the trauma accepting the loss of empire. Gilroy explains that, ‘Among them are the painful obligations to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history and to transform paralysing guilt into a more productive shame that would be conducive to the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness’.¹¹² Steampunk can offer such moments of confrontation that can stir the English from that paralysing guilt, as long as it pays as much attention to the grim details of the past as to the most cheerful, steamy and flamboyant. My novel aims at producing those small shocks. A call to awareness, specifically designed to amend the spectrality of the Latin American immigrant. Gilroy claims that ‘once the history of empire became a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside’,¹¹³ but the public and loud reclaiming of Victorian symbols by Steampunks has the potential to externalise the causes of postimperial melancholia. As Brown explains, ‘To be haunted often entails being touched or suffused by something that one cannot quite recall, to feel the importance of something

¹¹² Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 99.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

that one has laid aside or tried to forget'.¹¹⁴ Here, in repressed memory, lies the unsettling feeling of the haunting. The materiality of Steampunk, regardless of being purposely inaccurate or farcical, brings back the complexities of the past, notably the British imperial past. It substantiates the invisible spectre by reviving the symbols of the past.

Conclusion

In this third part of the critical companion, I established a connection between Steampunk and hauntology. Steampunk was defined as ghostly in two senses. It is spectral since it feeds on the image of the ghost and attempts to build on it, but it also invokes the ghost in its symbolic modality. I argued that Steampunk is a literalisation of the returning past and also a fabrication of that past. In *Penumbra*, I've written a protagonist who is attracted to this filtered version of the past because it provides him with an alternative to the space denied by his spectrality, which rises from his lack of a shared history with Britain.

Melancholic reactions, I claimed, reveal our desire to match the greatness of the past mixed with the firm belief that we can't. That my protagonist becomes infatuated with the ghost of Lori is a result of the admiration he has for the past and the notion of England he creates even before he arrives in the country. This relation is clearly the main interference with his relation to the present. Steampunk works alongside the protagonist relation with the ghost of Lori as another melancholic reaction. I mapped the disillusionment authors such as Brown and Fisher have associated with the loss of a sense of progression towards an imagined future within the context of England by

¹¹⁴ Brown, 'Specters and Angels', in *Vocations of Political Theory*, ed. by Frank and Tambornino, pp. 25-58 (p. 38).

introducing Gilroy's concept of 'postimperial melancholia', which problematises our compulsion to repeat the past as a symptom of the inability to face the loss of Empire. In *Penumbra*, I endeavoured to exploit the potential of Steampunk to generate spaces outside literature that facilitate the engagement with England's past, the nineteenth century in particular. Steampunk performance realises the ghost in its symbolic modality, taking advantage of the material and immaterial legacies of the Victorian era to disrupt the present with flashes of the past. Nevertheless, substantiation of the symbolic modality of the ghost, as steampunks do, involves expressing their own particular relation to national symbols. English Steampunk is a form of postimperial melancholia which reworks the ghosts of Britain into their very own performances. Steampunk is the farce that emerges from tragedy expressed through pastiche. My protagonist, Samuel, has to learn to cope with the combination of fantasy and reality that is presented to him on a daily basis. His vacillation takes him to different places, leads him to attempt fitting in different positions within the system he is just beginning to know.

Part IV

Writing the Ghost

In previous chapters of this critical companion to the novel, I have argued that the Latin American and Steampunk are both better understood as combinations of the spectre and the ghost. Their hauntological status is defined by both modalities: the ghost's sensuous absent-presence and its symbolic return of the past. This final chapter, discusses the aspects of presence and time in the literary creation of the ghost, specifically the interconnection that emerges between the modalities when the ghost is represented. Placing my work alongside other ghost stories, I examine the implications of authorial decisions involved in the composition of a modern ghost story, the specific narrative techniques and allusions to the thematic anxieties, and national context. I illustrate how the combination of physical and metaphysical characteristics portray both modalities of the ghost in my novel. I primarily compare *Penumbra* to two contemporary works of fiction: Jenn Ashworth's *Fell* and Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs*. The main reason for comparing these two works is that their authors offer a modern take on the ancient ghost story tradition and rely on the humanity of the ghost to give substance to their texts, which is also what I attempt to do writing my novel. None of our ghosts goes 'Boo'—though they could, if sarcasm strikes. The ghost is an amalgam of the earthly and the supernatural, and my fiction seeks to exploit this basic characteristic. The human traits intensify the strangeness of the supernatural elements, and it is the human likeness of the spectre that renders their hopelessness, their powerlessness, their timelessness so bizarre and relatable at once, uncanny. It is my belief that writing a ghost story that revolves around the life of a Latin American will contribute to making this population more visible.

Presence and National Context

Penumbra is a ghost story about a Latin American immigrant in England. The writing reflects my concerns about the Latin American experience of England at the same time it captures my interest in the spectrality of Britain. Both the ghost and the Latin American are fundamental elements of the conceit I have created. Andrew Smith argues that '[Ghost] tales should be seen within their national contexts'.¹¹⁵ This is a productive proposition to apply to my novel, for it interrogates the extent to which the Latin American, despite having residence in England, is truly part of the 'nation'. Smith's claim points at the multicultural aspect of the production of my novel, which has been written in England by a Latin American. On the one hand, the sensuous modality of the spectres in my novel reflect the anxieties of the Latin American living in England about being invisible, voiceless, and liminal. On the other hand, *Penumbra* also embraces the idea of the ghost as a symbol of the past interacting with the British and with the migrant. Lori's main role is attuning the spectralised Latin American to an alternative reality where he becomes a real spectre that walks among others. While the existence of 'actual' paranormal ghosts is a matter of belief, Latin Americans are undoubtedly present in England. The irony is that they are less visible than ghosts. The long history of the ghost story in the United Kingdom, its mainstream popularity, and its exposure result in audiences knowing what to expect from ghosts and their representations in literature, but Latin Americans have a briefer history with these nations and are less frequently represented in the medium. I strive to promote the Latin American subject without letting the novel become an essay on the topic. 'Storytelling',

¹¹⁵ Andrew Smith, 'Hauntings', in *Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 147- 153 (p.152).

writes Himesh Patel, ‘is the most powerful way to promote our understanding of the world in which we live and the vessel to tell these stories is our media.’¹¹⁶ The circumstances of the Latin American blend in with my interests in the ghost and the traits of the genre. Gothic literature has a long history of making the paranormal visible. For centuries, Gothic stories have familiarised us with the occult, the dark, the unknown, and the return of the past. It is characteristic of the genre to represent societal concerns in the shape of monsters. In this tradition, ghosts are often represented as unwanted visitors because they are drawn from the fears and anxieties of the societies that see them created, but my primary objective is not to terrify the reader with my novel. The function of ghosts in my novel is making the presence of the Latin American Other explicit, conversely by working with its spectrality. I follow in line with novels such as McGregor’s *Even the Dogs* which draws public attention towards vulnerable sectors of society and participates in what Jean-Michel Ganteau, calls ‘a politics of literature’ by being ‘instrumental in a new distribution of visibilities’.¹¹⁷ The underlying idea of *Penumbra* is that the Other is terrifying only as long as its true self remains unknown, alien. The Latin American Other emerges, then, less as a projection of anxiety than as a sentient being suffering from them, and among these, my writing foregrounds my protagonist’s search for a space within the past that returns.

Penumbra is written with the idea that ghosts mourn their losses. With my ghosts I communicate what the Latin American protagonist has lost in his migrant

¹¹⁶ Himesh Patel, ‘Window of Opportunity’, *The Good Immigrant*, ed. by Nikesh Shukla (London: Unbound, 2017), pp. 57-67 (p. 67).

¹¹⁷ Jean-Michel Ganteau, ‘The Powers of Exposure: Risk and Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction’, *Textual Practice*, 31,3 (2017), 443-55 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1294891>> [accessed 2 August 2018] (p. 454).

condition. These losses are not about the world departed or material possessions, but the parts of the self that are left behind. The hardships resulting from the ghost's absence are representative of the effects of ghosting on the migrant subject. The spectre is a pseudo-human presence. It only retains traces of its mortal self, enough to inspire a sense of limited humanity and mourning for the loss of its voice and materiality. These make the ghost an ideal conceit for the Latin American. The tradition of ghost writing has seen the traces of humanity in this figure expressed in a number of ways. One of these is letting their mannerisms from their previous life carry on beyond death, even when these have no substantial consequence. Such technique is palpable in Charlotte Riddell's ghost of Mr Elmsdale who wets his fingers to count banknotes.¹¹⁸ In my novel, that Lori cracks her fingers before playing the piano is a similar gesture that gives the impression she actually has certain materiality (see p. 141). Moreover, taking advantage of sensorial imagery in relation to the spectre can turn mundane subjects and situations into significant illustrations of struggle to cope with loss and powerlessness. That is the case of the ghosts of Netty and Jack in Ashworth's *Fell*, who, bored and having to wait for their daughter to finish bathing, 'hold [their] breaths' and 'run [their] fingers along the walls and the shiny soap-flecked surfaces of the tiles'.¹¹⁹ In another passage, Jack and Netty lament the loss of their voices: 'We hold our hands to our faces and no matter how loudly we shout we can't feel the warmth of our breath against our palms'.¹²⁰ They keep trying until a sense of worthlessness overcomes them.¹²¹ In my novel, the character of Samuel is naturally written in a slightly different way to the actual ghosts. In Derridean words, his is a case of the *invisible-visible*, of the invisibility

¹¹⁸ J.H. Riddell, *The Uninhabited House* ([n.p.]: The Project Gutenberg, 2003), p. 28. *The Project Gutenberg Ebook*.

¹¹⁹ Jenn Ashworth, *Fell* (London: Sceptre Books, 2016), p. 116.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

of a body that is present in flesh and blood. Though his physical body remains present, he frequently fades out of conversations (see pp. 49 and 158). Even his narrative voice is overtaken by Lori's when they share her memories (see p. 119). Her emotions and ideas outshine his (see p. 220). The liminality of the spectre, being both absent and present, makes it a useful figure to denote issues sourcing from a particular lack: invisibility, voicelessness, the lack of company, socialisation, hope, all of which I associate with the Latin America immigrant.

Disembodied Perspective

The absent-presence of the spectre can also affect the narrative perspective. My novel not only incorporates the invisibility of the visible as a thematic element. It is narrated from the point of view of the spectralised subject, which allows me to overcome some of the bounds between the narrative voice and an implied body. Ashworth explains that,

Fiction is the nearest thing we have to telepathy because it evokes inwardness, or in other words, what goes on inside the meat and bone of our physical selves. So many of the rules about what we can and can't do with first and third person point of view in narrative prose are really about what we can do with our bodies. But what if I decided to disembody my narrators and allow them to do what couldn't be done in real life?¹²²

In *Fell*, Ashworth's protagonists fly above the streets.¹²³ They bear silent witness to everything that happens in the present and past. They are omniscient but unable to

¹²² Jenn Ashworth, 'Making the Rules: Physics and *Fell*', *This Itch of Writing: The Blog* (2016) <<https://emmadarwin.typepad.com/thisitchofwriting/2016/07/guest-post-by-jenn-ashworth-making-the-rules-physics-and-fell.html>> [accessed 3 August 2018] (para. 6 of 12).

¹²³ Ashworth, *Fell*, p. 150.

communicate freely with other characters. In *Penumbra*, the sense of eavesdropping is constant. Samuel is constantly witnessing events in which he does not partake or even has any impact, both in his and in Lori's world. Furthermore, a passage in which the bodily substance of the protagonist notoriously changes with his point of view is at the end of Chapter Seventeen. In his vision of the past, the narrator slopes down as molten glass as he looks down over the railing of the bridge; he sublimates into a cloud of steam and drops solid on his bed (see p. 172). The imagery illustrates his transition back to reality. Similarly, in Ashworth's *Fell*, the ghostliness of the narrative voice filters through the imagery to attune the language to the emotional tones of the scenes. For example, in a display of empathy towards their daughter, the spectral narrators relate her despondency to the limboid state from where they were awoken: 'It's like she's trying to find her own no-time, dark-time, her own silence – it's like she's trying to go to the place we were in before she came back to the house and jangled us back to the trees'.¹²⁴ At this moment in the plot, Annette is at her lowest, when even the dead pity her. The specificity of Ashworth's language invites us to empathise with Annette's sadness as well, by means of the ghosts' invocation of a metaphysical experience. In Ashworth's novel, as in mine, the perspective of the ghost reaches beyond human possibilities, without completely becoming something else, some unrelatable other.

Ghost stories tend to depend on their characters not being completely amorphous. The literary portrayal of the absent-presence of the spectre involves retaining a connection to its anthropomorphic physicality and the bodily language of the living. This includes the most basic reactions, such as involuntary reflexes. In Hilary

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

Mantel's *Beyond Black*, the ghost Morris reacts rudely and defensively when he has an incident with Collette:

[Morris] was on the floor, half sitting and half lying, slumped against the wall: his stumpy legs were spread out, and his fingers playing with his fly buttons. When Colette stepped back she trampled straight over him. As usual she didn't notice. But Morris did. 'Fucking stuck-up cow,' he said, as Colette went out.¹²⁵

To Colette, there is nothing to stumble upon, but the ghost retains the primitive and basic instinct to protect his body. It brings his ghostliness to a human level. There is of course, no real need for the character to protect anything. Mantel further exploits this motif in a similar instance. We see Alison purposely step over him and 'ground her heel into his face'¹²⁶ without causing the spectre any real harm, but full of intent to hurt his affective side. Another instance of this bodily conscience of the ghost is that of Catherine Linton, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, who shivers in the cold as she requests Lockwood to let her inside the house.¹²⁷ In these texts, the supernatural characters are not visible to everyone around them, but they are described as having a defined physicality much similar to any other human; Catherine is almost confused with a living person. I attempt a similar effect with the character of 'the Sailor' in Chapter Eighteen, who drinks tea, weeds his garden and changes clothes before it is revealed he is a ghost (see pp. 174-187). Details in relation to the practicalities of possessing a physical body contribute to the believability of ghost characters and facilitates the empathy of the reader.

¹²⁵ Hilary Mantel, *Beyond Black* (London: Fourth State, 2005), p. 5.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹²⁷ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 25.

It is not impossible, though, to hide the spectral body. Authors can be less literal in their representations of physical bodies of spectres and imply idea of a body in the text. The presence of the spectre, its visible invisibility, is constructed not only by what is shown of it but also with what is kept undescribed. As Neal Alexander states, the narrative voice in *Even the Dogs* 'is clearly homodiegetic but difficult to locate or identify with any precision'.¹²⁸ The ghost narrators get inside the van transporting Robert's body: '[They] all climb in beside him. There isn't enough room, but it seems like the right place to be'.¹²⁹ A small detail such as this reveals they are aware of each other's bodies. The 'we' pronoun hides their actual number, but a simple comment such as 'there isn't enough room' suggests they can make up a crowd, or at least have the impression of crowding a space. McGregor does not let the spectral bodies materialise, but he suggests their invisible physicality. In my novel, the hidden bodies of ghosts appear in large numbers on occasion. They crowd places and give a sense of invasion, of ambush even, materialising abruptly from apparently nowhere, like in the séance in Chapter Twenty-Two of my novel (see p. 223), as well as in the final performance of Samuel at the museum (see p. 292-291). At other times, only parts of the body appear, such as the spectral hand that grasps Samuel's copy of *Frankenstein* (see p. 85). The hand falls on top of the book in a mundane, normal way, where anyone's hand could. It is meant indeed to pass momentarily as Zoe's hand, but upon Samuel's realisation that it is not, the hand disappears. Lori's flashing hand communicates her presence, allowing me to maintain her whole, definite image out of sight. In *Penumbra*, ghosts are kept out of sight, in the shadows (see pp.168 and 181), covered, or they may appear as mere voices (see pp. 40, 161 and 248). I combine these techniques in different passages of the

¹²⁸ Neal Alexander, 'Profoundly Ordinary: Jon McGregor and Everyday Life', *Contemporary Literature*, 54,4 (2013), 720-51 < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43297933> > [accessed 3 August 2018] (p. 740).

¹²⁹ Jon McGregor, *Even the Dogs* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 15.

novel, hiding the body of ghosts as a creative alternative to suggesting a full-bodied materiality.

Merging Presences and Times

The spectral as a literary resource functions to defy the apparent solidity of time and presence. In *Penumbra*, I have doubled my illustrations of the intervention of the past in the present by using two methods. While my references to Victoriana and Steampunk represent the return of the nineteenth century to the twenty-first in a factual manner, I have also opted for merging the past and the present together in a literal way, having my protagonist's conscience travel back. Ashworth and McGregor have taken similar approaches with the same objective of having time collapse. That in mine and other ghost stories the past and the present appear to merge indicates, as Jameson argues, that the present is not 'self-sufficient'.¹³⁰ And along with this present time, the self-sufficiency of the individual ghost can also collapse. The possibility of 'I' straightforwardly becoming 'we' is a characteristic of spectral liminality; literary description can accommodate more than one consciousness, one body, or one voice in the same 'absent' space. In my novel, Samuel is seduced into the past repeatedly, and every time he visits one of Lori's memories the bond between their consciousness tightens. By the end of the novel, the main character shares Lori's feelings for Ezra. The device I employ to show the past to the protagonist is similar to Ashworth's in *Fell*, in which the narrators observe the past as separate bodily experiences. The novel is

¹³⁰ Jameson, 'Marx's Purloined Letter', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. by Michael Sprinker, pp. 26-67 (p. 38-39).

narrated jointly in the first-person plural by the ghosts of Jack and Netty. They split the narrative in two main timeframes. In the present, the narrators' daughter, Annette, arrives in their dilapidated house and awakens them from their ethereal slumber. The second story takes place in 1963 when Annette is a child and both her parents are alive. In the present, the narrators refer to themselves using the plural 'we' and are involved with the action, but when they recount the past, Ashworth allows them to step back and narrate the plot as omniscient witnesses. Jack and Netty become individuals, separate from the narrative voice:

[Annette] kicks through the old letters, looking up at the damp patches on the ceiling and the strings of cobwebs around the light fitting. [...] And we see ourselves too, the way we were before. Jack stringing Christmas lights around a plastic tree and digging in the garden and painting the dinning-room walls, doing battle against the damp. Netty with her dustpan and brush in the hallway, putting lipstick on in the hall mirror, kissing Jack in the kitchen.¹³¹

Though the narrative voice and the individuals it describes are technically the same people, identification is belated. With this imposed distance between 'we' and 'Jack and Netty', the presence of the couple is doubled, and with it, there is also a doubling of time. The 'we' form brings the present into the past. Or more precisely—because, as readers, we always stay with the narrators—the past is brought to the present as a living memory. The scene changes around us in an instant, flooded by the past. Similarly, in my novel, the attention of the protagonist is frequently drawn from the present to the past. If not literally overtaken by Lori's memories, the present is threatened in a hauntological sense by the inability to express the present without looking at the past. The compulsion to repeat the past permeates the world. This is shown in some of the

¹³¹ Ashworth, *Fell*, p. 4.

characters' sense of fashion, the reappearances of Victoriana, and the incursions of Steampunk, which are fleeting but regular along the plot, and often leave Samuel perplexed and wanting more. He becomes involved with the hauntological obsession with a returning past, specifically a British past, ultimately embodied by Lori.

Temporal Transitions

A permanent challenge of writing a ghost story is expressing the ways in which the ghost operates in time. The transitions between the past and the present happen fast in Ashworth's *Fell*. On occasion, both times collide, leaving even the narrators puzzled. This collapse of time happens, for example, when the ghosts, gazing at their daughter in the present, are surprised by the intrusion of a vision of Timothy, their lodger from the past:

When she's done she stands at the gate, the cold rust of the metal snug against her palms, and just stares at the place. And, strange though it is, even to us, we see Timothy Richardson arrive and he stands in the garden too, on a day too bright and too hot for him to wear his good raincoat but he does.¹³²

The past then appears uncontrollably and is always disrupting. From a hauntological perspective, this illustrates the lack of solidity of time. The boundaries of past and present are also blurred in *Even the Dogs*. When the ghosts recount the police investigation of the scene of Robert's death, they catch glimpses of Robert while he was alive, going about his daily business along with his partner, Yvonne:

A phone rings, and the policeman standing by the door pulls it from his pocket, gesturing to the others before ducking out of the room to speak, out through the ruined hallway and the battered front door, and as the door closes behind him *we*

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

*see Robert, and Yvonne, working back to back as they take down the old wallpaper.*¹³³

The thematic element of time affects the formal qualities of the writing. The text collapses as time does too, illustrated by the conjunction joining the statements of past and present. These unexpected changes continue happening during the police investigation of the place: ‘The older policeman says something from the front doorway, and they follow his directions into the kitchen *as Robert comes back from the street with a pile of steaming chips doused in vinegar*’.¹³⁴ This ‘stream of consciousness’ technique situates the novel inside the narrators collective mind, the ghost mind, which is free to move in ways a physical human body would prevent. This means that McGregor’s ghosts are able to transition not just between past and present, but also between two events in the narrative present too. These ghosts can witness two events happening at different locations in the present. This happens when they ride a van with the body of Robert, and switch between the driver’s conversation to Danny, who is elsewhere:

Is this your first one, he’s asking, and the policeman says Yes, just about first proper one like this, and the two men laugh and say You’ll soon get used to it, chap, it’s a busy time of the year. We follow Danny down the bottom of the hill, trailing his blankets.¹³⁵

In passages like this, the technique suggests ubiquity. Of course, if the narrative present of *Even the Dogs* is actually another past, the suggestion is that the narrators are on a time loop, that they are always recounting the past. This reflective narration would bring the text closer to Ashworth’s. The ghosts in *Fell* are able to see at least two places

¹³³ McGregor, p. 9. (My italics).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10. (My italics).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

in the past at the same time, as it happens when they see Tim running away from the house and child Annette inside the house: ‘We are torn’,¹³⁶ say the ghosts, watching the separate events simultaneously. Both texts correspond with the perception of time as a spectral construction. They explore different ways to overcome the linear structure of writing, in a similar way I do in my novel with the proposition of parallel time.

Ashworth and McGregor design timeframes in accordance to the ghostliness of their narrative voices. These are similar to mine, but my novel differs in the key element that my narrator is not literally a ghost. Samuel is spectralised by his immigrant condition but he is still ontologically human, with limited understanding of what time means for ghosts. In *Fell*, the ghosts have to become accustomed to seeing the present and the past at the same time. Early in the novel, when a collection of memories parades in front of their eyes, they decide they have no need for sorting the past according to dates. One after another these memories bring them a piece of what used to be their lives, when they happen exactly has no relevance: ‘When was this?’ the narrators ask themselves, ‘No matter – it’s all happening now. As if we were never away’.¹³⁷ The narrators of *Even the Dogs* have a similar scope of the past. For example, the ghosts become acquainted with Robert’s partner, Yvonne, only when they see it in his past: ‘We never met Yvonne but we see her now. We see things differently now’.¹³⁸ I attempt a similar engagement with the past in my novel, but the crucial difference is that my narrator is not an actual ghost and can barely cope with the chaotic images of the past that Lori presents to him. In Chapter Twelve, when the protagonist first sees Ezra and Quast, he has no idea who they are. While McGregor’s ghosts are able to identify Yvonne by name right away, Samuel lacks the power, or rather the knowledge, to do

¹³⁶ Ashworth, *Fell*, p. 215.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹³⁸ McGregor, p. 9.

the same. The difference is that my narration is indirectly ghostly. Samuel does not know who the men are because Lori hasn't introduced them. For the practicality of reading the novel, I worked around the ambiguity by introducing most of the characters in a flashback in the opening chapter, but Samuel's chronological lack of knowledge and confusion replicates the idea that Lori had to learn who she was by picking up the information after her death. In an effort to make Samuel empathise with her, Lori shows him her memories in the same way she has revisited over and over again to construct her own identity. McGregor's ghosts seem to undergo a similar process of revision and realisation: 'There are things we didn't know before, and we know them now. How but. These things coming to us slowly, surely, rising to the surface like bruises and scars'.¹³⁹ But they express a clearer sense of control, again possibly because they are in a time loop. Juxtaposing the perspectives of the passing of time in these two novels adds a new dimension to Janda's argument that time exists 'purely as an epiphenomenon of effects on ourselves and the things around us',¹⁴⁰ and it foregrounds the ontological differences of the terms of my conceit. My Latin American protagonist has the potential to relate to the present and take action towards and unknown future, while the ghost characters are locked in a loop where the future is part of the past.

Conclusion

In this fourth part of the critical section, I applied my proposition that the spectre and the ghost are different modalities of the same figure to my study of selected literature of ghosts. I claimed that these modalities can operate simultaneously and converge from different angles of a literary text. Comparing my work to other novels,

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁴⁰ Laura A. Janda, 'The conceptualization of event and their relationship to time in Russian', quoted in Shaw, p. 3.

Jenn Ashworth's *Fell* and Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs*, primarily, I demonstrated authorial preoccupation with the dynamics between the ghost's sensory absent-presence and its symbolic connection to a past that returns. The analysed texts evinced deliberate combination of sensory and metaphysical aspects of the ghost. Alongside the techniques of other authors, I explained my methods for expressing what Derrida calls the 'visibility of the invisible'.¹⁴¹ My interest in the liminality of the spectre revolves around its usefulness to denote particular lacks: invisibility, voicelessness, social isolation, among others, which I also connect to the situation of the Latin American immigrant. My objective was to engage with the ghost as a vehicle to familiarise the British with the losses and lacks of the immigrant Other.

I complemented my argument of the sensory presence of the spectre by examining its relation to time. My novel offers a hauntological perspective of our present, of the past that returns, and a panoramic view of what Fisher calls a 'cultural impasse'.¹⁴² I expose with detail Lori's memories after her death but completely elide the recollections of her former life. This makes her a more spectral, indistinct character, and that in turn attracts Samuel. He falls for the ghost of Lori, not the woman she was. In this critical reflection, I compared this technique of mine with the concepts of other novelists of ghostly timeframes to underline the impact of the spectral absent-presence at the point of engaging with the return of the past. Lastly, I underlined the relevance that my novel has a mortal narrator, not a ghost who is used to non-linear time. During most of my novel, Samuel continues searching for a space in the past of Britain, a space with Lori, when he should strive to localise his struggle in the present with Zoe. The novel traces the character's process of realisation of this difference. This is the way I

¹⁴¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 6.

¹⁴² Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', pp. 16-24 (p. 16).

postulated the impact of the return of the past and its hindering of the acknowledgement of the Latin American immigrant.

Conclusion

Penumbra is a ghost story about a Latin American immigrant in England, Samuel. I began this project to investigate whether the unacknowledged presence of the Latin American immigrant in England could be stated in terms of the ghost. My objective was to employ that popular tradition of the ghost to introduce the Latin American resident of England to the British. *Penumbra* is the result of my interest as an author in explaining the invisibility of this immigrant subject in England by means of Jacques Derrida's Hauntology, whose main principle is that the being can be understood only in relation to what is no longer there and in anticipation of what will come. My proposition is that, unacknowledged, the Latin American is spectralised in England. What this means is that the immigrant is assigned the sensory qualities of the spectre and, thus, ghosted. He is turned invisible in the eye of the British. To explain the causes of this spectralisation I referred to the vague historical relation between England and Latin America, Costa Rica, particularly, and concluded that this immigrant is seen as the materialisation of the unknown, as a body that has no other recognition than that of his physical presence. I have distinguished two modalities of the ghost. These indicate the practical ways in which the ghost is productive as a literary figure. That I assigned the terms *spectre* and *ghost* respectively to the sensuous and symbolic modalities is not an effort to define different independent beings; instead, it is meant to bring to mind the same figure from different angles simultaneously. I addressed this topic in a microsociological scale, which allowed me to focus on the factors of ghosting of a fictional, but realistic, character. Borrowing from postcolonial theory, I decided to reposition the lens through which Edward Said observed the factors that relate Europe to its former West-Asian colonies to determine the factors of the ghosting of the Latin American immigrant. I

identified the low numbers of Latin Americans present in England, the distance between the countries, the panethnicity of the region, and the lack of a common history as causes for invisibility of this migrant subject. To these I aggregated the discursive impact of what Mignolo designates as a 'shift in the geography of knowledge',¹⁴³ the changes in the last decade of the twentieth century which had granted my protagonist some awareness of his invisibility in relation to Europe. Upon arrival in England, this history of invisibility facilitates the protagonist's realisation of his own spectralisation and incites a chain of reactions against it, such as mimicry and various attempts to adapt.

A piece of fiction about the ghost is a hauntological artistic expression, as far as it invites a figure of the past to impinge in the present, bind it to its absent-presence and challenge its self-sufficiency. In my creative piece, traveling to England signifies journeying into the past. Initially, the memories that Lori offers my character are in fact more compatible with the expectations of the protagonist before arriving in the country than what he perceives as a modern and diverse cultural landscape once he arrives. This leads him to seek ways into the past. My novel frames two levels in which Samuel intrudes in a ghostly world, baring witness to the story of Lori and exploring the hauntological reality of modern England. That in *Penumbra* Samuel irrupts in the ghostly world of Lori may be seen as an alteration to the standard motif of the ghost intruding in our present, but I have noted Ashworth's *Fell* and McGregor's *Even the Dogs* as examples where the narrators bear witness to events in the past from the present as well. A more original achievement of *Penumbra* is that the past Samuel attempts to infiltrate, represented by the ghosts, catches up with the present of the narrative, as part of the linear plot. That is the climactic scene containing the return of

¹⁴³ Mignolo, p. 2.

Quast and the final reunion of Lori and Ezra. The protagonist has no impact in the past when he re-lives it in memory. His actions produce effective change only once the story of Samuel catches up with the present of the ghosts. Quast, Lory, and Ezra have all waited for that final séance/Steampunk performance in which he sets them free. It is Samuel who closes that book, who ends that story, and it is only after he has done so that he is capable of focusing on his present and beginning a new story for himself, with Zoe.

The novel ends with the idea that Samuel is ready to stop searching for a space in the past of Britain and start shaping one in the present with Zoe.

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