



RIVERS OF SHADOW



LEO HUNT

THE AUTHOR OF THIRTEEN DAYS OF MIDNIGHT



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CANDLEWICK PRESS

(visitors)

One of the things I learned last year was that life doesn't give you a friendly warning when everything changes. There's no five-minute call before the ice breaks under your feet. The first time you realize everything's about to change will be when it's already happening.

My secret life starts again one Monday morning in second-period math. I'm not even pretending to pay attention, looking up at the ceiling, imagining that the brown water stains above me are the map of some uncharted islands. It's spring; exams are breathing down the back of our necks, and the teachers won't let us forget it. The sun, making a rare guest appearance in North East England, is shining through a gap in the clouds. The room is too warm. On the desk in front of me: textbook, worksheet, a pencil capped with a bacon-pink eraser. My shadow is hard-edged and vividly present. The girl on my left-hand

side has her head propped on one hand. She hasn't moved for a good five minutes. It's not a room where anyone's expecting something exciting to happen.

Mr. Hallow, our math teacher, has one of those pale, awkwardly proportioned faces that look like you're viewing them through the bottom of a dirty bottle. He's drawn a triangle in green pen on the whiteboard, and he wants someone to find its angles. Since I made the mistake of meeting his gaze while I was thinking about how weird his head looks, he chooses me.

"Luke Manchett. Could you find the way out of this dilemma?"

"Sure," I say.

I stand, my chair's rubber-tipped legs making a high squeal on the floor tiles. The only one of my classmates looking at me is Kirk, and when he catches my eye, he quickly looks down at the floor. I'm treated as an embarrassment, an inconvenience that everyone's determined to pretend isn't here. It wasn't always like this, hard as it may be for anyone to believe. I started school last year in a great position, ready to play a winning hand. I was on the rugby team, best mates with Mark Ellsmith and Kirk Danknott, went drinking in the park with the Dunbarrow High A-list. I even had a shot with Holiday Simmon, though I doubt she'd be willing to admit that now.

All that changed last October. I'm a freak now, and

everyone knows it. I'm a freak with a freak girlfriend, and I have a freak mum and a dead freak dad and a freak dog and I live in the Freak House at number one Freak Street. Kirk and me used to be close as anything, friends for years, and now he won't even look me in the eye.

It does hurt, but after what happened last Halloween, I can't totally blame him. I am a freak. I'm not like Kirk, not like Holiday or anyone else, and I never will be again.

Mr. Hallow holds out the green felt-tip as I approach, appraising me gravely, like I'm a young squire hoping to be knighted. I take the pen, clammy and warm from his touch, and stand in front of the whiteboard. I haven't listened to a word he's said all lesson, but fortunately this doesn't look like an especially tricky problem. The classroom is bright, sunlight pouring in through the back windows, and the whiteboard is slightly reflective. I can see a dull mirror image of myself, the class behind me visible as slumped silhouettes. Half of them are asleep, or close to it.

I touch the pen to the board.

"Mr. Hallow?" comes a voice.

"Where have you been?" he asks, irritated.

I turn and see Holiday Simmon, Queen of Dunbarrow High School, standing in the doorway. Holiday being late for class is rare enough, let alone missing a lesson and a half. She advances into the room and stops just in front of Hallow's desk, followed by a strange girl.

"This is a visiting student," Holiday tells Mr. Hallow. "I'm supposed to guide her around this month."

Nobody's paying attention to me now, so I decide I'll hold off on uncovering the mysteries of Hallow's triangle. The boys are all definitely awake now, and they're looking at the new arrivals like caged dogs anticipating their meat ration. Holiday is, by anyone's standards, a beautiful girl. She's tall and blond, always expertly groomed, with the easy confidence that comes from knowing you'll never be second best. She even somehow manages to make our shapeless gray school sweaters look stylish. Taking all of this into consideration, Holiday still seems commonplace compared to the girl who came into class with her.

The visitor is more striking than beautiful, but she's able to hold everyone's attention as she stands beside Hallow. She's petite, barely up to Holiday's shoulder, with a delicate-looking face and slim, tanned arms. She's not in uniform; instead she wears a white sundress and white Converse All Stars, needing only a visor and a racket to look completely at home on a tennis court. An optimistic outfit for an English spring. Her hair is daringly short and more white than blond, the kind of white you'd normally associate with ninety-year-old women. A silver ring glints in her nose. Her grin targets everyone in the room simultaneously, and her teeth are even and bright.

"Hello, everyone!" the new girl says, like she can't

imagine being anywhere more exciting than Room 3G on a Monday morning. "My name's Ashley Smith, but you can call me Ash. I'm sixteen years old, I'm from California, and I am so excited to meet you all!"

"What is this about?" Mr. Hallow asks.

"Sir, this is Ashley," Holiday explains again. "She's an exchange student. She's living here in Dunbarrow with my family, and I'm her guide at school, too."

"Exchange program?" Hallow splutters. "Miss Simon, there is no exchange program. What are you talking about?"

"I'm here as part of the William Goodman Foundation's American-European Cultural and Educational Enrichment Program," the visitor, Ash, tells him cheerfully. She has that thing where your voice makes every statement sound like a question. "It's for teenagers with challenging backgrounds, to help us get perspective and aid us on our personal journeys? And it's really super-great on college applications. I come from Marin County in California, and I was really lucky to be able to come and visit here for a month, to live in your beautiful and historical town!"

The idea that someone would be willing to give up life in California, even for a month, in order to travel here, Dunbarrow, North East England—and not only that, but that they'd be excited about it—seems to baffle Mr. Hallow so much, he can't form an objection.

“We’ve got a note from the Head,” Holiday adds. “She said to bring Ash here because she’ll be taking all my classes with me.”

It makes sense that Holiday would have exclusive early access to this glamorous stranger. Ashley Smith just doesn’t fit in this room, this math class. It’s like seeing a zebra galloping in a supermarket parking lot.

“This is extremely irregular.” Hallow sniffs. “An exchange student, arriving near the middle of spring term, with exams just around the corner . . . I suppose if the Head agreed with this, I can’t . . . Who is the lucky student we sent to Marin?”

“Mark Ellsmith,” Ash says. “I never actually met him—he left a few days ago. But we talked online. I told him some good spots.”

Despite the fact that Mark used to be one of my really good friends, I don’t think we’ve spoken since Halloween. He’s Holiday’s boyfriend now, still captain of the rugby team, with the body of a Greek statue that got a spray tan. He’ll get on just fine in California, I’m sure.

“Well, I see. Good for Mr. Ellsmith,” Mr. Hallow says. “Girls, I really think you’ve taken up enough of our lesson already. And Holiday, I do wish you’d told me about this earlier if you knew you were going to miss some of my class. Speak to me at the end.”

“Of course, sir,” Holiday says.

"Anyway, I'm sure Mr. Manchett is dying to get on with the problem I gave him. Aren't you, Mr. Manchett?"

I'm not sure if Hallow thinks calling us Miss and Mr. is funny or what. Nobody ever laughs. I'd say he's got at least a decade to go before he retires, so whatever keeps you sane, I suppose.

"Can't wait," I say.

Holiday brushes past me without saying a word, without looking at me—I've come to expect it, her acting like we never laughed together or flirted, like she never invited me up to her room—but Ash looks me in the eye, smiling. Her eyes are a strange gray, I see as she passes.

"Nice to meet you, Luke," Ash says cheerily, and follows Holiday to some empty seats right in the middle of the room. They settle themselves down, a beam of sunlight striking them, making Holiday's hair glow like amber and Ash's white head shine in a way that seems lunar, unearthly.

"Mr. Manchett, if we could move this along?" Hallow says again.

"Sorry," I say, turning back to the board. I try to focus on math, collect my thoughts, but something strikes me as odd: How does Ash know my name? She called me Luke. Mr. Hallow only used my last name. She didn't hear anyone call me Luke.

Maybe Holiday already told her about me. She gave

Ash a first-day briefing on who not to sit next to at lunch. That's probably it.

I look at the green triangle scrawled on a white background, and that's when it hits me. There's a sudden roaring in my ears, blood rushing to my head, bursts of color and light in my eyes like the spots you see after you've looked at the sun. Behind it all, I can hear a high ringing sound, like someone struck a glass bell.

I've seen this triangle before. I've seen every triangle before; I've seen them all. Last Halloween, I saw every combination of three lines. In the Book of Eight I saw every shape we have words for and some that we don't. They're all inside me, coiled up inside my mind, waiting for a chance to come spilling out like vomit. They were in the Book, and they're in me now as well. The shapes and sigils flow over everything. I've seen the Book and I saw other things, too. A gray silent shore. My mother standing over me holding a knife. I've seen eyes as black as tar, and I've seen eyes that burned like the heart of the sun. I've met a man with unlined palms, and I saw my dead father walking in mist. I've met a baby without face or name. I met the dead and I spoke with them, too, and I saw where we all go in the end, the darkness behind a pale-green door.

The ringing noise fades, and I find I'm lying down. Someone's put a soft object, a school sweater, I think,

under my neck and head. I'm looking at the ceiling of the classroom and about a dozen frightened faces. Mr. Hallow is leaning right over me, snapping his fingers.

"His eyes just moved," someone says.

"Luke—"

"I never seen nothing like that!"

". . . messed up . . ."

"Luke," Mr. Hallow says loudly. "Luke Manchett. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," I say.

Everyone's looking at me like I grew an extra head or something. I can't see Holiday or the new girl anywhere.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Can you tell me where we are?" Hallow asks.

"Math," I say. "School. What happened?"

"You had some kind of . . . attack," he says.

"What exactly did I do?" I ask.

Mr. Hallow swallows. His eyes flick to one side, seemingly without him realizing he's done it. I turn my head slowly. When I see what happened to the whiteboard, my heart skips a beat.

The original math problem is still there, somewhere. It's almost impossible to see underneath everything else that's been drawn on the board: magic circles, sigils, spiky incantations in a language I don't recognize. There's a design like an eight-pointed star, and a symbol I last saw

tattooed on the palm of a ghost's white hand. There are layers upon layers of letters and symbols, all drawn with scary precision. I close my eyes, but when I open them, the writing is still there.

This will be all over school. This might even make the news.

"You were talking, as well," Mr. Hallow says. "But we couldn't understand what you were saying."

"How long—"

"Ten minutes," he replies.

I don't reply. I sit up, and bright spots flash in front of my eyes again. I feel like I might faint but don't.

I thought this was over. I've had dreams, sure. I've had dreams nearly every night since Halloween, since I shook hands with the Devil and sent my dad on to wherever he went to. Sometimes my dreams are just pages of the Book of Eight, and sometimes I wake and find I'm at my desk writing words I can't understand. But it's never been like this before. Never in daylight.

"What . . . what's going to happen?" I ask.

"I don't know," Mr. Hallow says. "I don't know."

It seems clear to everyone that I shouldn't go to my next class, so they sit me down in the nurse's office while someone calls Mum. The office is small, with pink walls, and

smells of antiseptic. There's nobody else here. The nurse checked my eyes with a handheld light, asked if I felt sick, then gave me a glass of water and went somewhere else. I'm not a medical expert, but it seems like a pretty low standard of care.

My name is Luke Manchett, and I'm still sixteen years old. Until last year, I thought I was pretty normal. That was before my dad died, and I discovered he was actually a necromancer, a dark magician with eight ghosts that he kept as his servants. With Dad gone, the ghosts—his Host—belonged to me instead.

They were a weird bunch, with titles instead of proper names, like the Judge, the Vassal, the Heretic. One of them, a ghost called the Shepherd, wanted revenge on Dad for enslaving him, and since Dad was already gone, he came after me instead. With the help of my now-girlfriend, Elza, and my dog, Ham, I managed to fight the Host off. See, Dad also left me his copy of the Book of Eight, a book of magic that I'm not even sure is really a book at all. It seems to work more like a doorway into a place your mind was never meant to go.

I read the Book of Eight and it gave me a ritual to summon the Devil, who broke my Host and sent them back into the world of the dead. I met my Dad's ghost that night as well, on the border between life and death, and the Devil said I could either send Dad to Hell or set him

free. I let Dad go, but in return, the Devil told me that I was in his debt. What that means, I'm still not sure. I think it's fair to say it was one of the more eventful nights of my life.

Someone is opening the door to the nurse's office. I sit up straighter, doing my best to look alert and healthy. Unless there's someone at the hospital with a working knowledge of necromancy and the Book of Eight, sending me off for testing isn't going to help. I really just want to go home.

The face that peers around the door is pale and freckled, with perfectly arched eyebrows, dark-green eyes, a thundercloud of black hair looming over it. Elza Moss slips into the room, letting the door slam shut behind her, and rushes over to me.

"Luke, what happened?"

I reach out to her, and she hugs me so tight, I can barely breathe.

"Elza —"

"Luke! Don't just hug me! Tell me what happened!"

"I don't know."

"Are you all right?" she asks.

"I feel normal now, yeah. Does everyone know?"

Elza doesn't reply. She sits down beside me, slips her hand into mine.

"They actually . . ." Elza swallows. "It's best you hear

this from me. Someone was actually filming it. You're already online."

"What?"

"I don't know who did it. But *Boy Gets Possessed at School* is already on several thousand views. I think you're going to reach a mass audience."

"That's . . . just great. Perfect."

We have only a few more months left at Dunbarrow High before our exams, but I have a feeling they're going to be long ones.

"You just have to ignore it," Elza says. She rests her head against me. "They don't understand what we've gone through. They're just . . . they couldn't have done what we did. Ignore them."

"Yeah," I say. I don't want to say it out loud, but Elza never really had any friends to start with. For me, being an outcast has been a painful transition. It hurts that we have to eat lunch on our own, walk home from school every day alone. It hurts to have to take an alternate route to avoid walking through the park on the weekends so I don't run into Kirk and his mates, who've told me in no uncertain terms that I'm not welcome there. Elza seems to have this nearly invulnerable armor and has become immune to sneers and laughter, but no matter what, I can't seem to help myself from noticing how people here look at us. Things are great with Elza, and I'm not sorry for

a second that I met her—it was probably the only good thing to come out of that mess last Halloween—but your only friends shouldn't be your girlfriend and a deerhound.

I think morning break must be over now. I can hear people moving in the halls, kids shouting, rushing past. Everyone thinking about normal things, living their normal lives. Me and Elza are shut in this quiet room, alone.

The fluorescent lights flicker.

"Seriously," Elza says again, "what happened? People said you were writing something. What was it? Something from the Book of Eight?"

"I was supposed to solve this geometry problem. Hallow gave me the pen, and then I got this rush. . . . I was back inside the Book again, felt the way I did in your room that time after I came up out of it. I didn't know I was writing, but I could see the symbols, feel them. I felt like I could say those words if I wanted to. . . . It's hard to explain."

"But the Book is gone. You threw it away. Right?"

This isn't exactly true.

"I've had flashbacks sometimes," I tell her instead. "Whatever I read in the Book, it's still inside me. It's not going anywhere. But what happened today is new."

"You never told me anything about flashbacks," Elza says sharply.

"It's just been dreams. Nothing to worry about."

"You know you can tell me this stuff, right? You can tell me. I'm your . . . You ought to tell me. This is important."

"I'm telling you now, Elza. This is me telling you."

"OK," she says. "Whatever. Sure. So why now? Why today?"

"I don't know."

"No ghosts that you saw? You didn't hear from . . . you know?"

"Who? My dad?"

"Berkley."

My dad's lawyer. The Devil. When I first met him, he—it—had taken the form of a man, Mr. Berkley.

"No," I say. "Thankfully. Nothing since . . ."

I'm about to say *since he came to my house, spoke to Mum*, but I never actually told Elza about that. She doesn't know I've still got the Book of Eight, that it's buried in the corner of the field next to my house. After what happened on Halloween, after we'd won, we were so happy to be alive that I never found the right time to mention it. As the months went by, I just felt like I wanted to put it behind me.

"Well, good," she says. "The less we hear from him, the better. So nothing at all? Normal Monday morning."

"There was this girl."

"What girl?"

"She came in with Holiday. Exchange student."

"Oh," Elza says. "Where from?"

"California. She's called Ash. Five foot nothing, bleached white hair. You haven't heard about this?"

"Nobody tells me anything around here," Elza says.

"So what did she say?"

"Just said hi and sat down."

"Well, that hardly sounds very sinister."

"I suppose not."

"But you're OK?" Elza asks again, squeezing my hand. I kiss her.

"I'm fine," I say. "It was probably nothing."

"Yeah," Elza says. "I just wish . . . I wish you'd never read that Book, Luke. I wish I'd never—"

"If I hadn't, we'd probably both be dead. We did what we had to."

We sit together until the noise from the corridor outside fades, and there's not even the sound of stragglers hurrying in from the far yard.

In the end, I get sent home. Mum comes straight from work to pick me up. I'm actually feeling fine and could probably manage the walk back to Wormwood Drive without help, but I want a day off from school, so I don't stress this point too much. Mum has a really disconcerting

habit of looking you in the eye if you're having a conversation with her while she's driving.

"I think it's because of the meat you eat," she says as she pulls out of the school parking lot, barely glancing at the road.

"What makes you say that?" I ask.

"Hormones," Mum says darkly.

Mum's name is Persephone Cusp (back to her maiden name now that Dad's gone, although I'm stuck with Manchett), and she's been making some changes in her life. Back in October, Mum was in a bad way and had been for a long time. She was ill and would spend weeks in bed with headaches, ice pressed to her forehead, curtains drawn. After Halloween, that changed. The doctors, who never seemed to really know what was causing her cluster headaches anyway, call it "an unprecedented recovery." Personally, I suspect Mum's wellness is connected to one of Dad's ghosts—my own brother—who I sent over into Deadside along with the rest of his Host, but it's not really the sort of thing you can bring up at the hospital.

"They take these poor animals," she's saying to me, "and they pump them—are you listening?—they pump them with hormones. It makes them grow faster, get fatter. And the hormones, when you eat meat, they go into you."

"I need protein for lifting."

One thing I've missed since Halloween: nobody to

spot me, and nobody to celebrate my gains. Elza has made it clear she'd rather pierce her eardrums with a pin than listen to me talk about "moving bits of metal around," and while Mum is less hostile to exercise as a concept, she just fundamentally doesn't get it.

"You can get protein from beans and lentils," Mum says.

"I don't want to eat beans. They're no substitute for bacon."

"Well, I don't know. You can be vegetarian and still eat protein, Luke. And you won't be supporting the ghastly industrial farming complex."

"Yeah, I'll look into it."

Mum's weirdness is long-standing and deep-rooted. She's thin, with straw-colored hair, and a desire to wear ponchos that borders on the disturbing. When she first met Dad, she was permanently barefoot and living in a van.

We drive past the town square. I can see the usual pensioners, ambling around, all dressed in some variant of beige. A mobile-phone salesman having a cigarette outside his shop. A woman with a toddler on an elastic leash. A dead man with bloodstains on his uniform.

I still have second sight; it didn't vanish along with my Host. Elza says that she thinks once your brain gets used to seeing the world that way—the true way—it's nearly impossible to go back to how you were before. So I

can see dead people. It's honestly stopped bothering me. They usually just walk around, sit down, stare at nothing. Some of them are a bit gruesome-looking (there's this one ghost in Brackford who me and Elza call Half Head, for reasons that become obvious as soon as you see her), but they're really not frightening. It's better not to let on that you can see them, because they're usually crazy, or boring, or both. One of the weirder side effects of second sight is that a lot of shows on TV and movies actually have ghosts wandering around during some of the scenes. There's a discussion thread on the Second Sight Support website Elza posts on devoted to sightings. I watched a football game the other week, and there was a man in what I think was a Civil War uniform standing beside one goalkeeper the whole game, trying to talk to him. It was really distracting.

"Look," I say to Mum, "I don't think it had anything to do with being a carnivore."

"Yes, of course, love," she says. "Are you feeling OK now?"

"I'm all right. Sort of light-headed. There's a car coming."

"I'll see if you can go to the doctor this afternoon," Mum says, glancing back at the road just long enough to swerve out of the way.

"What exactly did they say happened?" I ask.

"They said you had a seizure," Mum says. "Has that ever happened before?"

"No," I say. "And I don't think I need to go see anyone. I'm just stressed. Exams."

Normally, invoking exam stress is a good way to get Mum to forgive me for things, like leaving cereal bowls in my room until the remains dry harder than cement, or forgetting to close the kitchen door before I let Ham back in from the field—which once led to an unfortunate incident where he came in fresh from rolling in cow pies and jumped on her lap while she was wearing cream-colored pants—but it doesn't seem to be cutting it this time. Mum gives me a sustained and serious look, apparently with full faith that nobody else will want to use either of the lanes on this road in the near future.

"This is really serious, love. You didn't see any flashing lights? Dark spots?"

"I'm not getting your headaches, Mum."

"I hope not," she says. "I've just . . . I was always worried that I would give them to you, somehow."

"Cluster headaches aren't hereditary," I say.

"You're seeing a doctor," Mum says. "Today, if we can manage it."

"We're coming to the intersection," I say.

"I know," she says, and brakes with just inches to spare.

I wonder if there is something really wrong with me, but our doctor isn't going to find anything unusual. I'll end up getting diagnosed with epilepsy or something else and given pills that will do nothing to solve the problem. I know why I had that blackout: I read the Book of Eight, and I saw stuff in there that normal people were never meant to see. And it's still inside my head, festering away in my subconscious, ready to erupt at the slightest provocation. How to deal with that, cure it, I have no idea.

"I suppose," Mum says, almost to herself, as we make our way along Wormwood Drive, "it might be nothing to do with the meat anyway. It could be because your school's using those fluorescent lights."

I decide some questions are better left unasked.

Our place is nothing too fancy: front and back garden, short gravel drive. A few trees, some grass, flowers, the usual garden stuff. Inside we've got more fairly normal stuff: carpets, walls, furniture of varying sizes, a large dog. As soon as Mum opens the door, he leaps past her and tries to knock me down. In a friendly way, of course.

"Get down!" I shout. "Ham! No! I'm a sick man!"

Ham yelps with delight and practically somersaults in the driveway. In Ham's world, me coming home from school a few hours early is like Christmas and his birthday rolled into one. Ham likes eating, sleeping, running in small bursts, being petted, and having his ears rubbed. He

doesn't like the dark, shots, loud noises, vacuums, cats, foxes, fireworks, and people blowing air into his ears while he's asleep (which, of course, I would never do). He's lean and gray, with long, smoky hair and big eyes with pupils the color of marmalade. We've been partners in crime since I was small, just after Dad left.

"Why don't you lie down, love?" Mum asks. I don't need telling twice. I sit down on the sofa and put rugby on. Ham comes and hunkers down in front of me and I rest my feet, still in gray school socks, on the gray fur of his back. He's warm, and I can feel his heartbeat pulsing up through my toes and into my legs.

Mum gets an emergency appointment with our doctor, and I get a more in-depth version of what happened in the nurse's office this morning: light shone in my eyes, lots of questions. He asks if this has ever happened before; I say no. In the end, we get an appointment with some specialists at the hospital next Monday to get a brain scan, and Mum takes me home.

I lie down and watch more TV and try not to think about everything that happened today: Ash and Holiday, Mr. Hallow, Elza, the shapes that I saw in my mind's eye when I looked at the triangle on the board. I just want to relax and ignore that small abrasive voice in my head that tells me something's wrong, that things are about to change again, that whatever happened this morning is

just the start. Ham shifts in his sleep. Despite her earlier objections, Mum makes me a decent pizza, with salami on it.

I lie in bed but I can't sleep. The sky outside my window is dark and clear, glittering with stars. When I think back to those weeks before Halloween, when my whole life changed, what I remember is gray: overcast skies, the gray clouds heavy with rain, the gray mists that swirled around me and Dad and the Devil on whatever shore we walked upon.

I keep thinking about the Californian girl, Ash. There was something weird about her. The last time I felt this so strongly was when I met my dad's solicitor, Mr. Berkley, and he turned out to be someone who was very dangerous indeed. I didn't listen to my intuition then, and it went badly for me. I don't want to make that mistake twice. There's something about that girl. She doesn't fit in at Dunbarrow at all. Why would you go on an exchange to this place? Why would the school agree to it this close to our exams?

I get out of bed and search for "Ashley Smith" online. There's about a hundred thousand results, none of which gets me anywhere. She certainly isn't one of the better-known Ashley Smiths. I scroll through the related pictures

for a while, looking for a glimpse of her distinctive face and short white hair, but I don't find anything.

I sit for a moment, my laptop's fan purring in the dark, my room lit only by the faint creepy light of the screen, and then I search "William Goodman Foundation."

This time the results lead me somewhere. The foundation has a web page, a bland PR-sanitized white void plastered with stock images and clean blue logos. The foundation is "a nonprofit organization devoted to improving the lives of young people worldwide." This claim is accompanied with stock photographs of young people laughing in some kind of coffee bar somewhere. Ash is nowhere to be seen. It doesn't say, anywhere, what the foundation specifically does, or who runs it, or how I might contact the foundation about their activity in Dunbarrow. The website is, essentially, a friendly locked door.

I turn off my laptop and head down to the kitchen. It's about one in the morning. Ham's lying in his crate next to the washing machine. He doesn't get up, but he thumps his tail eagerly as I approach. I kneel down and rub his warm belly.

"All right, boy?" I whisper.

Ham grumbles and rolls onto his back. I sit there, petting him, and think some more. Maybe Elza is right; maybe Ash is just an exchange student, a cheerful Californian

transplant. My attack could've come at any moment, and might have been brought on by the whiteboard's geometry alone. Maybe seeing the green pen caused it? The Book of Eight was green, after all. It's totally possible. Magic, from what little I've learned, seems to depend on the movement of the planets and stars. Perhaps they were in a bad configuration, and Ash just happened to walk in with Holiday? Correlation isn't causation.

No.

There's something wrong. She knew my name, but I don't know how. I couldn't find her online, and the foundation that arranged her trip could be run by anyone. For all I know, this is Berkley again; he (or it) seems to like cloaking his activities in the semblance of human process. He enjoys dressing up as a man, wearing a man's face, pretending to do a man's business. From what I've seen of him, it would be exactly like the Devil to set up a charity called the Goodman Foundation. I imagine he'd get a big laugh out of that.

I decide to take Ham out and stand under the stars, get some night air. If this really is Berkley again, there's no way I can avoid what's coming. He's not someone you can hide from. If he wants something from me, it can't be anything good. I'll just have to be ready and do my best.

Ham hears the jingle as I unwind his leash, and he gets up, grunting, and thrusts his head into my legs. I

put on my raincoat and a woolly hat and softly open the door, leading Ham out into the back garden. There's a fair amount of moonlight, illuminating the stone wall, the garden shed, our apple trees. There's a crisp, fresh smell in the air. Almost April.

We walk out through the back gate and into the grass field behind our yard, which is occasionally used for grazing sheep. There are tall trees at the far end of the field, coming into leaf after the winter, their long branches dark against the orange city glow on the horizon. Beyond this field are more fields, then trees and wild moorland that stretches on for miles. Somewhere off in the distance, I hear the cry of an owl. Ham, a coward of infamous proportions, whimpers a little, but I pull him onward and he calms down.

After a few minutes' stroll we reach the far side of the field, the spot where I buried the Book of Eight. The flat stone is still there where I left it, almost five months later. The site is undisturbed. Although I could hardly claim the Book was the greatest source of my problems, it was the first magical thing I ever saw, and it seems to have had the longest-lasting effect on me. I buried it about a foot deep, in a toolbox, along with my dad's sigil—a strange black ring that was the focus of his magical power—and his other eight rings. That's where they still are, sleeping down there under the stones and mud and grass.

I don't quite know why I came out here. I think I wanted to check on the Book, to make sure it had stayed buried. Maybe I thought the plants here would've turned black, or the hedge would be growing leaves shaped like pentagrams. There's nothing out of the ordinary. It's just a field, just a flat stone from our wall.

The owl cries again, louder this time, a haunting, hollow noise. It sends a prickle of fear down my neck. I suddenly feel exposed, out here in the darkness. I'm glad I wasn't born a field mouse.

Ham, far from mouse-size, is pressed up close to me. He's whimpering and whining, quaking against my thigh like a vibrating phone you're ignoring.

"It's an owl, boy," I say. "It's a bird as big as your head. You're fine."

He whines louder. As I look down at him, I realize I can see my breath in the air. There's a chill around us, a cold that's reaching down into my guts, my marrow. I've felt cold like this before.

I turn slowly, feeling like I'm in a dream, and see a girl standing between us and the house. My heart is thumping, a hard-core rave rhythm, big whooshing bass reverberating up into my chest and skull. Ham snarls, baring his teeth. I can't make the girl out properly; she's about halfway down the field, but she's definitely looking at us. She's wearing what looks like a short dress,

way too skimpy for a clear night like this. She is definitely a ghost.

Like I said, the dead are usually harmless. The town ghosts keep to themselves, don't usually pay you any attention. Some of them are confused, try and talk to you, asking about buses that stopped running back in 1956 or jabbering about the inheritance that wasn't divided the way they wanted it to be. That's annoying, but I can deal with it.

This girl is probably one of them. The ghosts who stick around on earth, in Liveside, aren't the sharpest knives in the drawer. Mostly they don't realize they've died, or are too afraid to go onward into Deadside. I feel a bit bad for them, but they're not scary.

There's something about this girl that I don't like, though.

"Toughen up," I hiss at Ham. "You're a necromancer's familiar, remember? You eat ghosts for breakfast. Literally. Let's get back to the house." Elza put hazel charms in the bushes to keep my house spirit-free, but their effect doesn't reach this far out into the field. Even if this ghost does want trouble, we just have to get past her, into the yard.

We make our way toward her. I don't see any point in trying to be stealthy; she's clearly seen us. My feet rustle

in the grass. The owl calls out again and again in the trees behind us, a mournful siren. The closer we get to the girl, the colder the air becomes. My breath balloons in white clouds.

She's closer now, still a dim shape, but I can make her out more clearly. She's small, almost child-size. What I thought was a dress is actually a hospital gown, pale green, stopping just above her knees. Her hair is long and unruly, spilling down over her shoulders. It looks like it hasn't been washed in a long time. She's gazing up at the stars now, her body turned away from me. We stop about a room's length from her, enough distance to give me time to react if she's not so friendly. To be honest, I'm not sure what I'll do. Elza used to have a wyrdstone, a stone with a hole through it that warded off spirits, but it broke when she used it against my dad's demon, and we haven't found another one yet.

"Hello?" I say, projecting my voice through the cold air toward her. "Can I help you?"

The girl turns to look at me with curious eyes, and my heart nearly stops.

The ghost has Ash's face. She has the same nose, same eyes, same pursed lips. She has Ash's figure, too, I realize: they're exactly the same height. Only her hair is different, darker and longer and tangled around her face like a

lion's mane. As she turns to face us fully, I see that her left arm is missing. The hospital gown hangs limp from her left shoulder, sleeve empty.

"Ash?" I whisper. "Ashley Smith?"

The ghost smiles and says something I can't understand. She's speaking another language, singsong, jaunty. It's not French or Spanish or any of the languages they teach at school. She holds her hand out to me. Ham growls.

"I can't understand you. . . . Do you speak English?"

More nonsense. The one-armed girl smiles again, points up at the stars.

"Are you . . . Ash? Do you know Ash?"

She says something else, more animated. I look up to where she's pointing. There's nothing in particular there. Just blackness, and some small points of light.

"Yes . . ." I say uncertainly. "The stars are nice tonight." I don't understand what's happening. Is this Ash, somehow? Why is she talking like this? What language is that?

She walks toward me, single hand outstretched. I'm not so sure I want to touch her. She doesn't seem exactly threatening, and most ghosts are perfectly harmless, as I said. But last year I met a few that weren't.

I take another step backward, Ham scrambling to keep my body between him and the one-armed girl. She steps forward, almost skipping, holding her hand out like she wants to dance with us. I'm smiling, keeping my body

language friendly and open, trying to move back and sideways so we can get ourselves past her and into the protective influence of the hazel charms. I don't exactly know what I'm afraid of, what I think she'll do. I was safe from my own Host, for the most part—their binding prevented them from harming me directly—but there's no protection here.

She's asking me a question, coming at us a little faster. We're weaving around in the moonlit grass, neither of us quite running, and I feel for a moment like I'm playing tag back in lower school, that thrill of dodging and diving—

Ham suddenly yowls and bucks and tears his leash free of my grasp. I'm turning to see what happened, and then it feels like a supersonic train made of ice hits me in the back, and I'm flung to the ground. It's a hard blow, and I want to stay lying down in case something's broken, but years of rugby have gotten me used to getting up after a hit. Whatever got me came up behind us while I was keeping my eye on the one-armed ghost.

Ham's already running; I can hear him yelping, heading for the house. Surprise, surprise. I heave myself up, whirling around, my ribs squealing with pain inside my chest. I'm gasping, trying to get a breath, raising my fists up as if that'll help me.

A second ghost is standing between me and the one-armed girl, her body held erect, radiating authority.

This spirit is a woman, dark-skinned, with a sheer flow of black hair and a long white robe. Her feet are bare, and her big toes are decorated with golden rings. She's tall and proud, with a face like an obsidian statue, and her eyes are black as tar pits, like bottomless holes bored in her face. I've only seen one other spirit with eyes like that, and he was my father's Shepherd, a ghost who was very old and very powerful. To complete this intimidating picture, the ghost has a spear stuck through her chest, with dark blood clotted around the wound. The point juts several feet out of her back. No prizes for guessing how she died.

I'm unsteady on my feet. My breath is coming shallow, and it burns like I'm taking little gasps of magma rather than air. I've got nothing: no spells, no Host, no sigil. My dad's things, my only source of magic power, the only way I could defend myself, are buried in a box half a field away. The one-armed girl stands behind the tall ghost, looking upset. She's saying something in her nonsense language to the dark-skinned woman, who doesn't take her black eyes from me. The woman shakes her head in dismissal.

I hear the owl crying again in the far trees.

"I don't want to hurt you," I say to them. "I have . . . I have a great Host. I am a powerful necromancer. I don't want to hurt you."

"You cannot harm us," the woman says. Her voice is

smooth and low, implacable, with the strong tinge of an accent I can't place.

"I am Luke Manchett," I say, edging away from her. "I am the son of Horatio Manchett. I am a powerful necromancer. I demand to know your business in my town."

"Remove yourself, sorcerer," the woman says. "Return to your abode."

She stands completely still, but I can tell we're moments away from her doing something unpleasant to me. Knocking me to the ground was just a way to get my attention. My attempt to intimidate her has utterly failed. The spear jutting from her chest seems almost accusatory, mocking me, as if to say, *You think anything you could do to me would be as bad as this?*

The one-armed ghost is saying something again, plaintive, gesturing up at the sky. With an unmistakable look of irritation, the black-eyed woman turns her head and responds in the same singsong language.

I take the opportunity to run, adrenaline taking over, crossing half the field in what seems like no time at all. I vault over the garden wall and collapse onto the grass, gasping, holding my chest as my muscles burn and burn. Ham is lurking in the shadows by the kitchen window, his leash dangling from his collar. He doesn't even come over to see if I'm all right.

Forget about the William Goodman Foundation. If

I needed any more proof that Ashley Smith from Marin County is up to something, I just got it. As for the woman with the spear in her chest . . . if she wasn't a bound spirit, part of someone's Host, I don't know what she was. Being bound to a living person makes spirits more powerful. Normal ghosts don't punch you hard enough to lift you off your feet. Normal ghosts can barely rattle a window frame. I feel like I got hit by a car.

I get to my feet and look over the garden wall. Far away, at the opposite side of the field, I can see the woman, her white robe easily picked out in the moonlight. The smaller figure, the girl, follows her closely. I think they're holding hands. I lean there on the wall, watching for any sign they might know about the Book or be looking for it, but they walk right through the hedge without a glance at the spot where I buried it. I stand out in the garden for a long time, a bruise flowering on my chest. When I'm sure the spirits aren't coming back, I get a spade from the garden shed and head back out into the field again.

Eight Rivers of Shadow

Leo Hunt

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