

A THOMAS USHER NOVEL



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LITTLE
DEAD
THINGS

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For Emily

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have taken certain liberties with the geography of Leeds. Let's just call it artistic licence. The city in this novel is the Leeds of my imagination – part fact, part fiction, wholly extraordinary. I hope keen-eyed readers will forgive me for transforming the place in these subtle ways, and that they enjoy the haunted landscape I've created.

PART ONE

A KNOT, TIGHTENING

"Nothing exists which is not subject
to the conditioning of death."
The Tibetan Book of the Dead

I have never visited their graves. The grief I carry always inside me would be too much to bear, so I choose to remember them in my own way, in my own time. Not a day goes by when they are not in my thoughts. They haunt my every movement, but still I have not seen them: they have not come to me the way that others have, asking that I bear witness to the memory of their passing or simply requesting that I help guide them towards the next part of their journey. But someday, somehow, I hope that they will find their way back to my side.

ONE

Fifteen Years Ago

The Mersey is a broad, black ribbon, the shimmering lights of Birkenhead promising a world of untold stories on the opposite bank – dark stories, probably told by old men in their cups and women whose skin has been bruised by careless husbands too many times to count. I stare through the passenger window, lost in thoughts of nothing in particular – just thinking, as I tend to do, about life in general, my dull job, paying the bills, the things I think I might be missing out on because I married so young and the things I gained by doing so.

The broad shape of a ferry trawls slowly across the darkened waters, seeming to heave upwards on waves that are not quite visible, as if a giant submerged hand is struggling to lift it above the busy surface of the river. Darkness then presses down on the vessel, giving the illusion that it is not sinking gradually beneath the waves. The motion is so lazy and incremental that it looks like a cartoon animation. I wonder why a ferry is crossing so late at night, and what haulage it might be carrying.

The car swerves to avoid an animal that has run into the road – a dog or a cat or perhaps even a roaming river rat – and Rebecca turns to smile at me, the delicate yellowish hue of the streetlamps on the side of the road catching her face and holding it for a moment in a wash of amber. In that instant I know that I have missed out on nothing in life, because all that I will ever need is inside the car with me. Past mistakes and misdemeanours no longer matter; what is important is how I feel right now, sitting in the dark with my wife and daughter.

"Sorry," she says. "Did I disturb you?"

I shake my head, smiling. "No. It's okay. I was just woolgathering." I have never known exactly what that phrase means, but have always enjoyed the way it sounds. Like a snatch of crude poetry lodged in the back of my mind, or part of the verse from a folk song I might have heard as a child.

Allyson sleeps soundly in the back seat; the sudden deviation of the vehicle's path has not broken her slumber. Her breathing is even and her hands are clasped tightly in her lap. I turn around in the passenger seat and watch her, my heart breaking just a little, as it always does whenever I take a moment to realise how much my infant daughter means to me. Her small white face is the face of the world. Her loosely closed eyes are windows through which I might glimpse the truth of my own existence.

"We should be home before midnight. Traffic's light." Rebecca's face is stern; she watches the road intently, on edge because of what has just happened with the animal running out in front of her. She is a skilled driver – better than me – and she resents the thought of anyone thinking otherwise. Her anger and pride is one of the things I love about her.

One of the *many* things I love about her. There are about a million other reasons to go along with it, but that one will do for now.

The strong German beer I have consumed earlier that evening sloshes around inside the pit of my belly, making me feel bloated and uncomfortable. I need to urinate, but I do not want to ask Rebecca to stop the car and interrupt our journey home. I should have gone to the lavatory back at John and Emma's place, before we left. When I think about it, I realise that we should have stayed the night with our friends. The offer of a bed was there but I'd wanted to get home to make an early start in the morning. I am booked in to referee a football match for Ally's school team at 9am and hate the thought of breaking a promise even as small as this one. The scars of adulthood are sometimes caused

by such tiny blades.

~~There was also the fact that things had grown tense as the evening wound down. John's usual gentle mocking demeanour had caved in and given way to something darker and slightly more vicious as he had gone well beyond his usual lager quota. He and Emma are on the verge of splitting up; she has even asked him for a divorce. I suspect that a third party is involved somewhere along the line, but am not quite sure on whose side the weight of infidelity falls. As usual in these situations, there is no one person to blame. Something has come between them, blocking the way they used to feel about each other, and it looks like whatever it is will not budge as much as an inch.~~

"How much did you drink earlier?" Rebecca speaks without taking her eyes off the road.

I wonder, briefly, if she has ever been tempted to sleep with someone else. God knows, I have been attracted to other women during our marriage, but have only once acted upon it. Despite my flaws I consider myself a good man, a loyal husband, and I would rather damage my own body than harm my family. That one time was a terrible mistake I know I will never stop regretting and will spend the rest of my life trying to make up for – a shame I will always carry with me, like a leaden weight around my neck.

"Just a couple." It is not exactly a lie, and even years later I will still ask myself why, in that near-perfect moment of potential connection, I failed to tell the complete truth. If I'd admitted that I was slightly woozy, that the relatively small amount of beer I had consumed was stronger than I expected, then things might have turned out differently. My life might have been better. Then again, this might all be wishful thinking. Some events, I have learned, are just meant to happen. Some things are meant to be taken from us, no matter how hard we try to hold on to them.

Ifs, buts and maybes: the eternal stumbling blocks to happiness.

"I'm tired." Her eyelids are drooping and her mouth twists into a yawn. "Really tired." She is blinking rapidly, which is always a sure sign that she needs a rest.

"Pull over. I'll take it from here." A sense of *déjà vu* hits me then, a strange feeling that I have lived through all of this before – perhaps many times – and the last time it had turned out badly, maybe even fatal. I feel a great desire to take back what I have just said, but the sight of Rebecca's sudden dough-white face and her eyes that are now open too wide to try and combat sleep cause me to hold my tongue instead.

The moment passes. I actually feel it leave, like a physical presence passing over us within the confines of the car and moving on elsewhere, towards other unwitting travellers. Is fate a sentient entity? Did it touch me that night, making itself known to me? I suppose I will never know.

"It's okay. I can make it."

"No. You should rest. It's my fault we left, so it's only fair that I should drive. The beer's out of my system now. I feel wide awake. Honest."

"You sure? I don't like the idea of not knowing how much you drank. Remember, we have a daughter asleep in the back."

Lights blur past the window, but no sounds penetrate the car. I feel like we are in another world, perhaps hurtling through a cosmic void. I have not really lied about my current level of intoxication yet I feel odd. Detached. It is not a feeling of drunkenness, but a sense of the world spinning on its axis, of things moving too fast for anyone to stop and think. Particularly me.

"Here," I say. "Pull over here." I point at the bright service station lights, and before she has the chance to change her mind, Rebecca is pulling into the entrance and stopping the car on the clean concrete forecourt, next to one of the stubby petrol pumps.

"We need fuel, anyway," she says, undoing her seatbelt.

Lights flicker outside; darkness seems to fall in layers, coating the footpaths and the verges and the squat service station buildings.

Ally sleeps on in the back of the car, her state of near exhaustion after that evening's excitement and the hypnotic lull of the motorway conspiring to keep her under. Cold light bathes her face, making her look older than she actually is. Instead of a seven year-old girl, for a brief moment I feel that I am looking at a little old lady snoring on the back seat, her small, claw-like hands making fists in her lap. The bones of her knuckles shine white for a moment as she grasps something in her dreams. I wonder briefly where my daughter has gone, and who has replaced her with this wizened little doppelganger.

The car door opens and Rebecca steps outside into the chill night air, which rushes suddenly into the car, filling it up. My ears pop from the change in pressure, as if we are travelling at high altitude instead of sitting parked by a petrol pump on a lonely motorway refuge.

"This should wake me up, actually. I can drive the rest of the way." She slams the door and walks to the back of the car, twisting off the petrol cap and slotting the nozzle of the pump into the tank. She leans on the side of the car, her attention focused somewhere else, and I watch her without her knowing. I love to catch her unawares like this, when her guard is down and she looks lovelier than ever. Rebecca's beauty is purely an unconscious one: she never realises how attractive she is, and I am always amazed whenever anyone chooses to compliment her appearance.

She smiles, still staring into space, and I wonder exactly what crosses her mind at that particular moment. Is it something to do with me, or Ally? Or is it the memory of a joke we shared earlier in the day? Perhaps it is nothing more than the mental equivalent of breaking wind.

Just another mystery: one that I will never solve. Some secrets are best left alone.

Before long Rebecca replaces the nozzle in its clamp at the side of the pump and walks across the forecourt to the singlestorey building, fishing her purse out of her jeans' back pocket. There are no other cars on the lot; no other customers stop by while we are there. The place is almost silent, and the emptiness seems eerie in a way I cannot pin down.

I get out of the car, walk around the front, past the bonnet, and climb into the driver seat. I watch through the windscreen as Rebecca pays for the petrol, enjoying her sleek profile, and smiling as she walks back towards the car, doing a silly little dance for my entertainment. Then I glance over my shoulder at Ally.

"Come on," says Rebecca, grinning as she opens the driver door and leans in, her perfume and her breath filling the space. "Get the hell out of there and let me take the wheel."

"Don't be daft," I say, grasping the steering wheel. "You take a break. I'll do the rest of the journey. Honestly, I'm completely clear-headed."

Rebecca tenses, as if she is about to say something more, then simply shrugs, slams the door, and strolls around to the passenger side. She climbs in and hands me the keys. As I take them from her, I feel her cold hand against mine, her thin fingers resting in my palm, and for some reason I cannot quite understand but which seems somehow inevitable, the sensation makes me faintly and absurdly nauseous. I can feel the bones beneath her skin.

It is only much later that I will identify that passing emotion as fear.

I head for the motorway slip road, the night sky almost as clear as day but clusters of dark clouds closing in to obscure the view. Rebecca fiddles with the stereo as we descend the slope to join the motorway, and the sound of easy-listening music fills the car. "Whoo!" says Rebecca, pressing back into her seat. "Groovy!"

Laughing, I stifle a sudden yawn. Perhaps I should have let her continue driving after all. I shake my head and work the muscles of my jaw, trying to overcome the sensation of falling.

When Billy Joel begins to sing about an *Innocent Man*, Rebecca closes her eyes and starts to sway her head to the music. Joel is one of her favourites; she has all his albums at home, and never sickened of playing them. I will burn them all exactly a year to the day after that night. Even now, the sound of the singer's voice as he hits a high note is enough to make me weep with loss.

I fight to remain focused on the road ahead, but the unusual lack of traffic and my overactive brain make it difficult to focus. I think now that if there had been more cars on the road it might have been easier to keep my act together. I would have been forced to concentrate.

The music lulls me; my eyes begin to feel heavy and the road ahead blurs and blends to form an endless swirling ocean of grey. The lights far ahead and on either side of the car turn to watery streaks of illumination, and what few other vehicles there are present on the road recede, swallowed up by distance and the burgeoning weight of something soft and heavy that is pulling me down, down, down...

We enter a narrow aisle formed by traffic cones, where the two lanes are forced into a single passage because of some mysterious, unseen roadworks. The cones flash past. My vision flares.

In that moment I fail completely to see the other car speeding towards us along the left-hand lane, its extinguished headlights and radiator grille looming like the eyes and jaws of some giant mythical beast, like a dragon. Perhaps if I'd seen it earlier I could have turned the wheel to avoid the collision, but the dull red Ford Sierra just ploughs on, its dusty (how on earth can I pick out such a minor detail while so much else remains out of reach?) front bumper and number plate growing larger and more terrifying in the windscreen.

Terror bears down on me, coming towards me faster than I could ever have expected.

When at last I truly notice that something is amiss about the way the car is racing towards us on the wrong side of the road, the opportunity for action has long passed and I simply brace myself for impact, throwing one arm out instinctively to protect my wife.

Rebecca has her eyes closed, lost in the simple pleasure of a good song; Billy Joel's bruised voice fading to make way for the next tune. Ally – thank God – still sleeps in silence in the back, so she is completely unaware of what happens next.

But I am aware of it. All of it: every hellish second.

It was raining again. Why does it always rain in situations like this, when you're stuck out on a street that you aren't too familiar with, on a dark night in a rowdy part of town? It's like some kind of immutable law, perhaps akin to the strange household hoodoo that ensures you lose one sock from every pair you put in the washing machine, or whenever you put something down it's no longer there in the same place, when you go to pick it back up.

Some call it Sod's Law, but I just call it life.

A grey blanket of sky hung over the maze of flat grey streets, the horizon line nothing more than a vague, slightly greyer demarcation located somewhere beyond the edge of the city. Clouds and sky were indistinguishable, a vast metal-grey sheet hanging above me, waiting to drop onto my unsuspecting head.

Leeds is a pretty hostile city at the best of times, but on the night in question I felt that hostility rushing at me in waves, pulsing through the heavy air and into my mind like a small mental battering ram. The pubs had chucked out some time ago, but the late bars and nightclubs were still jumping. Bass-heavy music spilled out onto the slick streets, mixing with the vomit and kebab meat that lay in unappealing fleshy patches on the glistening footpaths. Raised voices combined to create a rumbling undercurrent of chatter, but no actual words were audible within the shuddering din.

Cars passed by at a slow pace, their drivers and passengers watching the roadside carnival from behind a protective layer of glass. Most northern cities after nightfall are like zoos, but by that late hour the animals had already been let out of their cages and allowed to roam free for a while. Giggling young women in short skirts and high heels stumbled off kerbs, sweaty men in thin cotton shirts sank to their knees and prayed to some drunken deity, large figures in dark suits watched from neighbouring doorways – uneasy sentinels trained to spot the flame of violence before it even flared beyond a tiny spark.

The girl I was waiting for was standing in the doorway of a pub opposite the Metropole Hotel. She was just twenty-one, wearing a fake fur coat over an expensive Japanese designer dress, and her feet were clad in the latest pair of Jimmy Choos – bought with her father's money, of course. Despite the suggestion of glamour, the girl was more "sauce in the suburbs" than *Sex and the City*. She stood in the recess, leaning against the wall, one knee bent and the corresponding foot resting flat against the dirty brickwork. She was smoking a short handrolled cigarette and warbling along to whatever tune was playing inside the pub, her eyes bright from the ingestion of cheap narcotics and expensive alcohol.

I stepped back into my own dark doorway, wary that she might see me. I'd been following her for a couple of days, ever since her father agreed to my slightly inflated fee proposal.

Baz Singh was a well-known Bradford businessman. He owned three curry restaurants, an off licence and a small strip club in the centre of Bradford which – if the rumours were true – also doubled-up as a brothel. The girl was his daughter, Kareena, and in my considered opinion she was certainly worth watching.

Let me get something straight right from the start. I am not a private eye or some glorified down-at-the-heel shamus; I do not have an official licence to run around investigating things the police are paid good tax money to look into. My days are not dedicated to Chandleresque sleuthing and I certainly don't spout sudden bursts of clipped dialogue while I hunt down Maltese Falcons or tarnished McGuffins. No, I just try to help people out, people who ask and who are willing to pay me for my trouble. Sometimes this works, other times it doesn't. Often it all goes horribly wrong. But it's a damn

sight better – and safer – than what I used to do for a living: better by far than mingling with the dead. My name is Thomas Usher and I am – well – that's part of the problem. I don't really know who I am, not any more. Not since I began to feel the maggot of self-doubt gnawing away at my gut, not since the potentially true nature of my peculiar abilities were revealed to me in a glimpse too brief even to be considered fleeting. Since then I have tried to stick to the right path and avoid all things *unearthly*, for want of a better word. These days I was more likely to be looking for someone's missing teenage daughter or absent spouse than gazing into the heart of the abyss.

But it wasn't always that way.

I used to be gifted but now I feel cursed. At one time I thought my purpose in life was to help the dead find their way through the dark, but these days it seems that I might have been mistaken.

These days I can't even help the living.

Kareena Singh stubbed out her cigarette against the wall and pushed away towards the middle of the footpath, like someone kicking off from the side of a swimming pool. A small burst of sparkle remained in her wake, held in the air for a moment like a tiny swarm of fireflies before being washed away by the rain. The intensity of the rainfall had diminished, leaving behind that fine, wispy rain that seems to get you even wetter than its heavier counterpart. My scalp was soaking and my coat was stuck to my back.

"Come on, Byron." Her voice was pure Bradford: dull, dour, an ugly sound from a pretty mouth.

"Yeah, yeah." The large shaven-headed Caucasian man she was shouting at shook the hand of the even larger bouncer he'd been locked in conversation with and approached Kareena as she opened her arms to take him in a loose embrace. He ignored the gesture and grabbed her slim forearm, guiding her instead out into the centre of the road, where he stood trying to flag down a passing taxi. His hands, as he waved them in front of his face, looked as big as shovels, and just as lethal.

I watched the couple without leaving my hiding place, studying the way they moved, the subtleties of their body language. One of the downsides of my particular type of insight is that I am often unable to read people. The dead are easy to understand if you know the rules – they follow straight lines of logic – but the living rarely think or act in a linear manner, and I am sometimes left feeling confused. I can't manage to fumble through, but whatever insights I have come from darker regions than those inhabited by the sunlit folk I meet on a daily basis.

The truth is, only death could help me read the living.

The muscle-man's name was Byron Spinks. I'd gathered enough information on him to know that he was a low-level criminal involved in everything from house burglary through car crime to prostitution. Kareena was seeing him simply because her father disapproved – that fact was obvious to anyone who took the time to look, even to me. Baz Singh had already arranged his daughter's marriage to a wealthy Indian business partner, but Kareena wasn't playing ball. She liked the freedom Western culture offered her, the right to make her own decisions and see any man she liked. The right to talk before you buy.

And this was where I came in.

Baz Singh had retained my services and asked me to watch his daughter and report on her movements. He was terrified that she was planning to run away with this yobbo Spinks, and that any business capital to be gained from the proposed arranged marriage would go down the drain like so much discarded confetti during a storm.

The couple crouched and climbed into a taxi, so I ran for my car, which was parked at the kerb a few yards away in a No Parking zone where I knew I'd get away with it. I dodged a group of weaving late night revellers and climbed inside, following the taxi as it passed through a series of amber lights and headed out of the city towards the inner ring road. I'd seen enough cop shows on television to know that I should keep at least one vehicle between myself and the car I was trailing, but I was also worried

that my lack of real experience in covert pursuit would ensure that I lost them in the heavy night time traffic. The fact that I hated cars and driving was yet another obstacle to overcome.

I didn't like this kind of work. It wasn't what I was made for. Then again, I wasn't really made for anything – that was the other part of the problem.

During my years as what can only be described as a psychic sleuth I'd honed and utilised many specialised methods. Seeing the dead, being called upon by spirits to help guide them to the next level is a very esoteric field – I had no business rivals and I paid no income tax on my earnings. It was hard work, thankless for the most part. But after the death of my wife and daughter it was the only thing in my life that meant anything. My talent – my ability to see ghosts – was like an anchor, ironically tethering me to the physical world. Without it, I would've taken a hot bath with a cold razor, or dived off the nearest bridge with rocks in my pockets.

But that's another story.

After a few miles the taxi left the ring road at an exit marked for Bestwick, and I cringed at the thought of pursuing these people into what I knew was a rough area. But the taxi continued, passing through the outskirts of the mean-looking estate, and carrying on towards a disused industrial complex called Clara Heights. The place consisted of a wide concrete access road leading to several warehouse units, most of which had been gutted in a serious fire a couple of years ago, and some vacant office space which had miraculously survived the blaze. Prefab huts and squat redbrick buildings were scattered among the blackened shells of the warehouses. I knew the place was dangerous. If red-top news reports were to be believed, the area was used regularly by junkies and sex pests.

"Welcome to the Terror Dome," I muttered, reciting the line from a film, or a book or a song – I'm still not sure which.

The taxi stopped at the kerb and the couple climbed out. By this point Kareena looked slightly worse for the evening's drugs-and-alcohol intake: she was stumbling and her clothes were dishevelled. Spinks looked to me as if she and Spinks had been getting more than cosy on the back seat.

Kareena's black stockings were rolled down to her knees.

According to Singh, his daughter had been seeing Spinks for six weeks – long enough for her to trust him but not long enough to really know him. I had the suspicion that the promise of danger associated with this thug was half the attraction, and that Kareena knew exactly what she was doing and why she was doing it. Pure bloody-mindedness and the desire to hurt her father were the motivating factors in this particular soap opera.

My heart sank. Over the years, I'd seen the bloodied remains of too many women who'd made similar mistakes, the sorry victims of abuse and murder and sexual mutilation, the torn, shredded bodies of those whose only crime had been to make a bad choice on a lonely night. I'd watched them, the murdered women, as they tried and failed to speak to me from somewhere else. They often wept, but they failed to communicate the depth of their pain through the barrier of death.

I closed my eyes and held my breath, summoning the courage to go on, to follow these two people towards the edge of their personal darkness. I think even then I knew what was coming, but I kept on going anyway, stupidly hoping that this would not turn into exactly the kind of situation I'd been running from.

When I opened my eyes the taxi had already pulled away; I could see the twin sparks of its taillights as they diminished to tiny pinpricks in the dark.

I glanced over to where the two passengers were now stumbling over a stretch of rough ground towards the shabby heart of the small industrial estate, holding on tightly to each other in case they fell. Hesitating for only a moment, I left the car and followed them over the rubble-strewn ground. I trod softly, as if I were engaged in some kind of guerrilla warfare. I had no idea who else was around or who they might be meeting here, and the last thing I wanted was to draw attention to my presence.

on the scene.

I recalled Baz Singh's words to me earlier that day: "Just follow her, and if she gets into trouble, intervene as best you can. If she gets hurt, it's her own decision, but I don't want her dead." The man was as heartless as one of the many stone statues that littered his home – artful representations of the Hindu gods he no longer believed in yet paid lip service to in the name of commerce. It seemed to me that he probably wanted his daughter to be hurt so that she might be punished for her transgression, but even he drew the line at allowing her to come to serious harm. My role here was as a glorified babysitter, but the money was good so it was a situation worth sticking with.

Or so I hoped.

Not for the first time, I questioned my own involvement in such matters, and with such unappealing people. In the past I'd always sought out the good, or at least the semi good. Now I worked for anyone who would pay me. Not for the first time, I wished that things could be different. That I hadn't once felt the pull of something dark and hungry and powerful as it moved towards me through the space between stars.

I regretted the people who had died over the years because I might have unknowingly drawn dark forces towards me. And when I saw their faces in my mind, screaming silent accusations at me demanding their right to speak, I felt utterly lost.

The truth was I no longer felt able to connect with the departed. Their demands were too intense, and so much more than I was currently willing to handle. I was stuck in some weird middle ground, hating the living and tired of the dead.

Spinks allowed Kareena to go first and followed her towards the blackened entrance of one of the burned-out warehouses. The timber boards barring the entrance had at some point been stripped away from the door, and the door itself had been kicked in. Darkness swallowed Kareena's small, agile figure. Glancing once over his shoulder, his large pale face leering like a clown's mask in the gloom. Spinks entered the building behind her.

That should have been the moment that I walked away. Should have been. But wasn't.

I paused at the doorway when I reached it, sensing something stirring lazily within. Not the couple I'd followed, nor any associate of theirs. No, this presence was something entirely different; it was something I'd been fighting not to acknowledge since I'd arrived here at the industrial estate. My failure to see the dead was not an actual breakdown of my ability, it was a deliberate act. For thirteen months now I'd fought against the insight that raged within me, blocking them out, ignoring their voiceless pleas, pretending that they did not still come to me in droves, seeking my aid.

But the dead were never restful. They were always there, peering over my shoulder, stepping into my path, and it was difficult to ignore them for long.

The struggle was taking its toll on my physical appearance – I looked thin and haggard and older than my years – and my head hurt constantly. I devoured painkillers by the packet, their effect diminishing with each passing day. A doctor friend who knew almost everything about me, and had done for many years, often suggested I take harder drugs – morphine, even heroin – but that was a route I didn't want to take, despite his promises to carefully administer just enough to fight my demons. No, I had to do this alone – until I was ready to once again allow the dead access to my battered psyche.

I took a breath and ducked into the warehouse. Every inch of skin on my body was cold, as if I'd suddenly fallen into icy waters.

I could hear footsteps up ahead. Kareena giggled and whispered something I couldn't quite make out. Her voice sounded slurred, unsteady, and I began to fear for her. I never carried a weapon when I was working, but right then I wished that I had a gun. Baz Singh had shown me a small pistol that he'd acquired for my use, but I'd told him to lock it back inside his desk drawer and hide the key. The taking of a human life was an alien concept to me. I had communed with the dead for so long and

often that I had no desire to add to their numbers.

The darkness pulsed around me like a sea of organic black matter, clinging to my clothes, entwining with my hair, sticking to my skin. I kept raising a hand to push it away or wipe it off, but could feel nothing of any substance beneath my fingers. It was an illusion, like so many others I'd encountered over the years. The dark was not alive, nor was it sentient – but there was no doubt in my mind that it did contain *something* which thought and probed and hungered. It was looking for the gaps in my armour, the chinks and damaged areas caused by fear.

Fear was something I could ill afford to show, so I kept it down, kept it at bay.

The sound of a woman giggling came to me again, this time from farther away. Its source couldn't have been miles ahead of me, but that would have been impossible because the industrial building I was moving around inside took up not more than a few hundred square yards. I lost all sense of walls and floor and ceiling. The air opened up, as if sucking me into a vast and airless space. It was a struggle to hang on to my sense of reality; things wanted to move and shift, and transform into other less solid objects.

It was a sensation I was more than familiar with.

Footsteps echoed on the concrete floor and I concentrated on their hollow music, focusing on the sound as if it were a lifeline to what I knew to be real and solid and earthly. Phantoms swam in and out of vision, reaching out to me, clutching at the tattered remnants of my resolve, picking away the stitches of my refusal to accept them.

"Leave me. Let me be." But they wouldn't listen. Instead, they intensified their attempts to snag me in the dark, groping for my weak points.

"This way," said a man's voice – one which I assumed must belong to Spinks. Kareena laughed again and then fell abruptly silent. I stood there for what seemed like hours, trying to navigate the at once familiar country I found myself in. The landscape was soft, blurred at the edges, but the topography was similar to those places I'd traversed before, many times. This was the realm of the dead, a land where the common laws of physics did not hold sway. What disturbed me more than the ease with which I'd crossed over was the fact that I'd accepted such an extreme transition so readily. Fear gnawed at my insides, a rat in a soft cage, and again I tried to block it out, ignore it, and carry on in the dark.

After thirteen months of denial, I had finally found my way back home – as good a home as any, the only one I really knew.

It was as if a map appeared before me in the darkness, with a route etched in threads and filaments of light. I knew exactly where to go, and accepted that I was being led – by my weird instincts, and by the dead who walked before me, clearing a path like native guides on an expedition deep into the homeland. I can't be sure how long I was in there, delving into a night like no other, but it felt like ages had passed, the world withering outside, people dying and being born. All clocks had stopped; time meant nothing to me.

I followed a narrow passage and stood at the top of a flight of concrete stairs. Each of the steps was blackened by an old fire, their edges chipped and cracked. The banister had fallen away at some point, so I clutched the bare wall as I descended, unsure of what I would find at their base.

The cramped space at the bottom of the stairs was flooded. My feet rested in several inches of standing water. The darkness receded, and then rushed back in increments, but this time it was normal darkness. My guides had abandoned me, deciding that from here on in I would either know the way or could find it without their help. Water sloshed loudly in the hollow chamber. I reached out in front of me to find some kind of purchase. When my fingers fell upon a ragged door handle, I slowly turned it and pushed. The door opened awkwardly, held back by the standing water, but I leaned my weight against it and stepped into the cold room beyond...

At first I was unable to see anything beyond the rubble and the dark reflections in the restless puddles, but gradually my eyesight grew accustomed to the poor conditions. I'd come at them from behind, somehow managing to take a route that would allow me to remain unseen. There were two of them inside the damp chamber, yet I had the sense that someone else had recently departed the scene. Ghost footsteps rippled the surface of the shallow pools of water nearby, and the tableaux on the raised concrete platform up ahead seemed incomplete, unfinished, as if a vital element was missing from the whole.

Darkness shivered in the corners and in the doorways, receding, moving away from me.

Spinks was down on his knees, his large hands clasped in front of his face; he was hiding behind them, afraid of whatever it was he refused to look at. His head was bowed, his thick neck was red and damp, and his broad back was curved in an attitude of defeat. A high-pitched moaning sound came from him, but for some reason it seemed too feminine to associate with such a big man. It was more like the wailing of a little girl.

I wanted to close my eyes, to erase the sight, but I couldn't. I had to see, had to face it. All of it: even the single piece of the picture.

Kareena Singh swayed before Spinks, suspended from a thick rope which hung around her throat and upper chest like a trailing brown snake. The rope was wrapped once around her neck and its end terminated somewhere up in the rafters, most of which were lost in shadow. Her smooth skin had paled a shade and her eyes bulged from their sockets, fixing me in their bloated gaze. Her tongue was hideous, like a fat grey graveworm, and it protruded between lips as thick and rubbery as uncooked steaks.

There was some kind of metal stand set up before the body, maybe a tripod for a camera, but my attention refused to focus on the contraption. As usual, I had eyes only for the dead. Her body drew my attention, not letting me go. I stared and I stared and I felt her sorrow like the vibration left in the air by a shriek. I was being pulled back towards death – always, always drawn to it, with any choice in the matter I might once have had now snatched away.

Kareena's feet dangled slack and lifeless. One shoe was missing and the other hung treacherously from her dainty toes. I could not take my eyes from those feet. Their gentle motion was hypnotic, and it drew me like nothing I have witnessed before or since. They danced in the air with a grace she surely would have lacked in life – the rhythm was that of the grave, the dance of the dead, but she kept the beat well.

I would be standing there still, entranced by that elegant footwork, if Spinks had not abruptly fallen over onto his side and begun to scream.

THREE

"Jesus, Usher, I thought you were dead." Detective Inspector Donald Tebbit stalked the length of the tiny room like an expectant father. All that was missing was the worry frown and a pocket full of cigars. He paused, ran a hand through his sweaty hair, and then resumed his repetitive exertions. "I mean, you just slipped off the edge of the world for a while."

I smiled, but my mouth wasn't too keen on the expression so I ditched it in favour of a grimace. "I was lying low, taking it easy. I've been advising a few people on certain situations, making some easy money. This is the first big thing I've been involved in for months."

Tebbit stopped moving again. This time I thought it might stick. "I was worried about you." He looked coy. It didn't suit him. "We had a few things we wanted to talk to you about, ourselves. You could've returned my calls, you know... or even answered my emails." He stared at me as if expecting miracles – it was a look I'd grown accustomed to over the years I'd known him, and it always gave me a bad feeling. A very bad feeling.

"I don't do that anymore. These days I'm working for the living, not the dead. Strictly for the living." I didn't even believe it myself, so wasn't surprised when Tebbit shook his head before sitting down opposite me at the scarred table. He spread out his broad fighter's hands on the faded wood and flexed his chunky fingers. The wedding ring glinted once, catching the light, and my stomach lurched.

I stared at him. "I'm not under arrest, am I?"

"Don't be silly, Usher. You are a witness – our only one, in fact – but that doesn't mean we can hold you. You're free to go whenever you like."

"I have no plans for this evening," I countered, finally finding that smile.

Tebbit shook his head again, but this time I knew he was softening, his habitual defences coming down. I'd known the man for over a decade, and helped him on several so-called unsolvable cases, so I felt that he at least owed me a few favours. "So you found them like that? The girl already dead and her bloke praying to the gods of muscle mania."

"Yes. She was hanging from a rope and he was in no fit state to tell me anything about how it happened. How is he now?"

Tebbit sighed, ran a hand across his lined, damp forehead. "Inconsolable." He rubbed at his right temple, grimacing.

"Do you think he did it? Do you think he murdered her?" I knew by his face that he'd already decided what he believed.

Tebbit nodded once, and then shook his head, slowly. Finally he just shrugged his broad shoulders. "I don't know. Probably. Do you?"

Perhaps I should have spoken up and voiced my doubts, but at that point I was operating without any additional information. The facts were that I'd followed them both to a deserted location, where I discovered the girl hanging from her neck and her boyfriend kneeling at her feet, not even trying to cut her down. On the surface of it, this one looked obvious – but I rarely dealt with the surface of things. All my breakthroughs came from somewhere underneath, guided by instincts located far below everything that other people – normal people – try their best to believe in.

"We have him locked up and awaiting trial. This should happen fast – it seems like a simple case of boy-meets-girl-and-kills-her. Sorry if I sound cynical, but I am." He glanced away, trying to hide from me the doubt in his eyes, and the reflection of something I could not help but see and be afraid of.

"She's not the first, is she?"

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