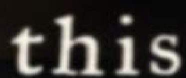

this House is Haunted

Author of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*

JOHN BOYNE

About the Book

‘I blame Charles Dickens for the death of my father…’

Eliza Caine arrives in Norfolk to take up her position as governess at Gaudlin Hall on a dark and chilling night. As she makes her way across the station platform, a pair of invisible hands push her from behind into the path of an approaching train. She is only saved by the vigilance of a passing doctor.

When she finally arrives, shaken, at the hall she is greeted by the two children in her care, Isabella and Eustace. There are no parents, no adults at all, and no one to represent her mysterious employer. The children offer no explanation. Later that night in her room, a second terrifying experience further reinforces the sense that something is very wrong.

From the moment she rises the following morning, her every step seems dogged by a malign presence which lives within Gaudlin’s walls. Eliza realises that if she and the children are to survive its violent attentions, she must first uncover the hall’s long-buried secrets and confront the demons of its past…

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About the Author
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This House Is Haunted

John Boyne

For Sinéad

Chapter One

London, 1867

I BLAME CHARLES Dickens for the death of my father.

In tracing the moment where my life transformed from serenity to horror, twisting the natural into the unspeakable, I find myself seated in the parlour of our small terraced home near Hyde Park, observing the frayed edges of the hearth rug and wondering whether it might be time to invest in a new one or try to repair it myself. Simple, domestic thoughts. It was raining that morning, an indecisive but unremitting shower, and as I turned away from the window to catch my reflection in the looking glass above the fireplace, I grew disheartened by my appearance. It was true that I had never been attractive but my skin appeared paler than usual, my dark hair wiry and unkempt. There was a certain hunched aspect to my shoulders as I sat, my elbows propped upon the table, a teacup positioned between my hands, and I tried to relax in an attempt to correct my posture. I did something foolish then – I smiled at myself – hoping that a manifestation of contentment would improve the rendering, and was startled when I noticed a second face, much smaller than my own, staring back at me from the lower corner of the mirror.

I gasped, a hand to my breast, then laughed at my folly, for the image I observed was nothing more than the reflection of a portrait of my late mother that was pinned to the wall behind my chair. The mirror was capturing both our likenesses side by side and I did not benefit from the comparison, for Mother was a very beautiful woman, with wide, bright eyes where mine were narrow and pallid, a

feminine jawline where mine tended towards harsh masculinity, and a slender build where my own had always felt outsized and absurd.

The portrait was a familiar one, of course. It had been hanging on that wall for so long that perhaps I never really noticed it any more, in the way that one often ignores familiar things, like seat cushions or loved ones. However, that morning her expression somehow captured my attention and I found myself lamenting her loss anew, despite the fact that she had passed from this world to the next more than a decade before, when I was little more than a child. And I wondered then about the afterlife, about where her spirit might have settled after death and whether or not she had been watching over me all these years, taking pleasure in my small triumphs and grieving for my numerous mistakes.

The morning fog was beginning to descend on the street outside and a persistent wind was forcing its way down the chimney, tracking a path along the loose stonework within and diminishing only slightly as it entered the room, forcing me to wrap my shawl more closely around my shoulders. I shivered and longed to return to the warmth of my bed.

I was pulled out of my reverie, however, by a cry of delight from Father, who was sitting across from me, his herrings and eggs half-eaten, scanning the pages of the *Illustrated London News*. The issue had been lying unread since the previous Saturday on a small table in that same room in which we sat, and I had intended on discarding it that morning, but some impulse had made Father decide to glance through its pages over breakfast. I looked up in surprise – it sounded as if something had passed his throat the wrong way – but his face was flushed with excitement and he folded the paper in two, tapping it several times with his fingers as he passed it across to me.

‘Look, my dear,’ he said. ‘The most wonderful thing!’

I took the newspaper and glanced at the page he had indicated. The article seemed to have something to do with a great conference that was scheduled to take place in London before Christmas in order to discuss affairs related to the North American continent. I read through a few paragraphs but quickly became lost in the political language, which seemed designed both to provoke and intrigue the reader simultaneously, before looking back at Father in confusion. He had never before shown any interest in American matters. Indeed, he had professed his belief on more than one occasion that those who lived on the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean were nothing more than barbarous, antagonistic scoundrels who should never have been permitted independence, an act of disloyalty to the Crown for which the name of Portland should for ever after be damned.

'Well, what of it?' I asked. 'You don't plan on attending as a protester, surely? The museum would take a very dim view of your engaging in political matters, I think.'

'What?' he asked, confused by my response, before shaking his head quickly. 'No, no,' he said. 'Not the article about those villains. Leave them well alone, they have made their beds and they may lie in them and be damned for all I care. No, look to the left. The advertisement at the side of the page.'

I picked up the paper again and realized immediately what he was referring to. It was announced that Charles Dickens, the world-famous novelist, would read from his work the following evening, Friday, in a Knightsbridge speakers' hall, a venue no more than a half-hour's walk from where we lived. Those who wished to attend were advised to come early, as it was well known that Mr Dickens always attracted a substantial and enthusiastic audience.

'We must go, Eliza!' cried Father, beaming in delight and taking a mouthful of herring to celebrate.

Outside, a slate fell from the roof, unsettled by the wind, and crashed in the yard. I could hear movement in the eaves.

I bit my lip and read the advertisement again. Father had been suffering from a persistent cough that had weighed heavily on his chest for more than a week, and it was showing no sign of improvement. He had attended a doctor two days before and been prescribed a bottle of some green, glutinous liquid which I had to force him to take but which did not, in my view, appear to be doing much good. If anything, he seemed to be growing worse.

'Do you think it's wise?' I asked. 'Your illness has not quite passed yet and the weather is so inclement. You would be sensible to remain indoors in front of the fireplace for another few days, don't you agree?'

'Nonsense, my dear,' he said, shaking his head, looking dismayed that I might deny him this great treat. 'I'm almost entirely recovered, I assure you. By tomorrow night I shall be myself again.'

As if to belie that statement he immediately let forth a deep and sustained cough that forced him to turn away from me, his face growing red, his eyes streaming with tears. I ran to the kitchen and poured a glass of water, set it before him and he took a deep draught, finally smiling at me with an expression that suggested mischief. 'It's just working its way out of my system,' he said. 'I assure you that I'm improving by the hour.'

I glanced out the window. Had it been springtime, had the sun been shining through the branches of the blossoming trees, I might have felt more persuaded by his argument. But it was not springtime, it was autumn. And it seemed imprudent to me that he would risk further ill health for the sake of hearing Mr Dickens speak in public when the novelist's words could be more honestly located between the covers of his novels.

‘Let’s see how you feel tomorrow,’ I said, an attempt at conciliation, for surely no decision needed to be reached just yet.

‘No, let us decide now and be done with it,’ he insisted, setting the water aside and reaching for his pipe. He tapped the remains of last night’s fug into his saucer before refilling it with the particular brand of tobacco that he had favoured since he was a young man. A familiar scent of cinnamon and chestnuts drifted through the air towards me; Father’s tobacco held a strong infusion of the spice and whenever I detected it elsewhere it always recalled the warmth and the comfort of home. ‘The museum has permitted me to remain away from my post until the end of the week. I shall stay indoors all day today and tomorrow and then in the evening we shall don our greatcoats and go together to hear Mr Dickens speak. I would not miss it for the world.’

I sighed and nodded, knowing that for all he relied upon my advice, this was one decision upon which he was determined to have his way.

‘Capital!’ he cried, striking a match and allowing it to burn for a few seconds to disperse the sulphur before holding it to the chamber and sucking on the bit so contentedly that I could not help but smile at how much pleasure it afforded him. The darkness of the room, coupled with the mixed light from candles, fire and pipe, made his skin seem ghostly thin and my smile diminished slightly to recognize how much he was ageing. When had our roles altered so much, I wondered, that I, the daughter, should have to grant permission for an outing to him, the parent?

Chapter Two

FATHER HAD ALWAYS been an impassioned reader. He maintained a carefully selected library in his ground-floor study, a room to which he would retire when he wanted to be alone with his thoughts and memories. One wall housed a series of volumes dedicated to his particular study, entomology, a subject that had fascinated him since childhood. As a boy, he told me, he rather horrified his parents by keeping dozens of samples of living insects in a glass box in the corner of his bedroom. In the opposite corner he kept a second display case, exhibiting their corpses *post mortem*. The natural progression of the insects from one side of the room to the other was a source of great satisfaction to him. He did not want to see them die, of course, preferring to study their habits and interactions while they were still alive, but he was industrious in keeping a series of journals relating to their behaviour during development, maturity and decomposition. Naturally the maids protested at having to clean the room – one even resigned in protest at being asked – and his mama refused to enter it. (His family had money back then, hence the presence of domestics. An older brother, dead many years by now, had squandered the inheritance and so we had enjoyed few such extravagances.)

Gathered next to the volumes describing the life cycles of queen termites, the intestinal tracts of longhorn beetles and the mating habits of strepsiptera, was a series of dossiers that gathered his correspondence over the years with Mr William Kirby, his particular mentor, who had offered him his first paid employment in 1832, when Father had just

acquired his majority, as an assistant at a new museum in Norwich. Subsequent to this, Mr Kirby had taken Father with him to London to help with the establishment of the Entomological Society, a role which would in time lead to his becoming curator of insects at the British Museum, a position he loved. I shared no such passion. Insects rather repelled me.

Mr Kirby had died some sixteen years earlier but Father still enjoyed re-reading their letters and notes, taking pleasure in following the progress of acquisition which had led the society, and ultimately the museum, to be in possession of such a fine collection.

All of these, 'the insect books' as I facetiously referred to them, were shelved carefully, with a curious order that only Father truly understood, on the wall next to his desk. Gathered together on the opposite wall, however, next to a window and a reading chair where the light was much better, was a much smaller collection of books, all novels, and the most dominant author on those shelves was of course Mr Dickens, who had no peer in Father's mind.

'If only he would write a novel about a cicada or a grasshopper instead of an orphan,' I remarked once. 'Why, you would be in heaven then, I think.'

'My dear, you are forgetting *The Cricket on the Hearth*,' replied Father, whose knowledge of the novelist's work was second to none. 'Not to mention that little family of spiders who set up home in Miss Havisham's uneaten wedding cake. Or Bitzer's lashes in *Hard Times*. How does he describe them? *Like the antennae of busy insects*, if memory serves. No, insects appear regularly throughout Dickens' work. It is only a matter of time before he devotes a more substantial volume to them. He is a true entomologist, I believe.'

Having read most of these novels myself, I am not so certain that this is true, but it was not for the insects that Father read Dickens, it was for the stories. Indeed, the first time I remember Father smiling again after Mother's

passing, in the wake of my return from my aunts' home in Cornwall, was when he was re-reading *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, whose protagonist could always reduce him to tears of laughter.

'Eliza, you must read this,' he said to me in my fourteenth year, thrusting a copy of *Bleak House* into my hands. 'It is a work of extraordinary merit and much more attuned to the times than those penny fancies you favour.' I opened the volume with a heavy heart which would grow heavier still as I tried to discern the meaning and intent of the lawsuit of Jarndyce *vs.* Jarndyce, but of course he was quite right, for once I had battled through those opening chapters the story opened itself up to me and I became deeply sympathetic to the experiences of Esther Summerson, not to mention utterly captivated by the romance pursued between her and Dr Woodcourt, an honest man who loves her despite her unfortunate physical appearance. (In this, I could relate quite well to Esther, although she had of course lost her looks to the smallpox while I had never found mine in the first place.)

Prior to his bout of ill health, Father had always been a vigorous man. Regardless of the weather, he walked to and from the museum every morning and evening, discounting the omnibus that would have taken him almost directly from our front door to the museum entrance. When, for a brief few years, we had the care of a mongrel dog named Bull's Eye, a far kinder and more temperate creature than Bill Sikes' mistreated companion, he would take further exercise twice daily, taking the dog into Hyde Park for a constitutional, throwing a stick for him in Kensington Gardens or allowing him to run free along the banks of the Serpentine where, on one occasion, he claimed to have spotted the Princess Helena seated by the waterside weeping. (Why? I do not know. He approached her, enquiring after her health, but she waved him away.) He was never late to bed and slept soundly through the night.

He ate carefully, did not drink to excess, and was neither too thin nor too fat. There was no reason to believe that he would not live to a good age. And yet he did not.

Perhaps I should have been more forceful in attempting to dissuade him from attending Mr Dickens' talk but in my heart I knew that, although he liked to give the impression that he deferred to me on domestic matters, there was nothing I could say that would prevent him from making the journey across the park to Knightsbridge. Despite his ardour as a reader, he had never yet had the pleasure of hearing the great author speak in public and it was well known that the performances the novelist gave on stage were the equal, if not the superior, of anything which might have been found in the playing houses of Drury Lane or Shaftesbury Avenue. And so I said nothing, I submitted to his authority, and agreed that we might go.

'Don't fuss, Eliza,' he said as we left the house that Friday evening when I suggested that, at the very least, he should wear a second muffler for it was shockingly cold out and, although the rain had held off all day, the skies were turning to grey. But Father did not like being mollycoddled and chose to ignore my advice.

We made our way, arm in arm, towards Lancaster Gate, passing the Italian Gardens on our left as we bisected Hyde Park through the central path. Emerging some twenty minutes later from the Queen's Gate, I thought I saw a familiar face appearing through the fog and, when I narrowed my eyes to make out the visage, I gasped, for was this not the same countenance that I had seen in the mirror the previous morning, the reflection of my own late mother? I pulled Father closer to me, stopping on the street in disbelief, and he turned to look at me in surprise just as the lady in question appeared from the miasma and nodded a greeting in my direction. It was not Mother of course – how could it have been? – but a lady who might have been her

sister, or a cousin, for the resemblance around the eyes and brow was uncanny.

The rain began almost immediately then, falling heavily, great drops tumbling on our heads and coats as people ran for shelter. I shivered; a ghost walked over my grave. A large oak tree a little further along the pavement offered shelter and I pointed towards it but Father shook his head, tapping his index finger against his pocket-watch.

'We'll be there in five minutes if we hurry,' he said, marching along the street faster now. 'We might miss it entirely if we seek refuge.'

I cursed myself for having forgotten my umbrella, which I had left by the front door during the business about the muffler, and so we ran through the forming puddles towards our destination unprotected and when we arrived, we were soaked through. I shivered in the vestibule, peeling my sodden gloves from my hands, and longed to be back in front of the fireplace in our comfortable home. Beside me, Father began a fit of coughing that seemed to build from the very depths of his soul and I despised those other entrants who glanced at him contemptuously as they passed. It took a few minutes for him to recover and I was for hailing a hansom cab to take us home again but he would hear none of this and marched ahead of me into the hall, and what, in the circumstances, could I do but follow?

Inside, perhaps a thousand people were gathered together, equally damp and uncomfortable, a stench of wet wool and perspiration pervading the atmosphere. I looked around, hoping to find a quieter part of the room for us to sit, but almost every chair was taken by now and we had no choice but to choose two empty seats in the centre of a row, surrounded by shivering, sneezing audience members. Fortunately we did not need to wait long, for within a few minutes Mr Dickens himself appeared to tumultuous applause and we stood to receive him, cheering loudly to his evident delight, for he stretched his arms wide as if to take

us all into his embrace, acknowledging the wild reception as if it was entirely his due.

He showed no sign of wanting the ovation to subside and it was perhaps five minutes more before he finally moved to the front of the stage, waving his hands to indicate that we might suspend our admiration for a few moments, and permitted us to take our seats once again. He wore a sallow expression and his hair and beard were rather dishevelled but his suit and waistcoat were of such a rich fabric that I felt a curious urge to feel the texture beneath my fingers. I wondered about his life. Was it true that he moved as easily in the back alleys of London's East End as he did in the privileged corridors of Balmoral Castle, where the Queen in her mourning had reputedly invited him to perform? Was he as comfortable in the company of thieves, pickpockets and prostitutes as he was in the society of bishops, cabinet ministers and leaders of industry? In my innocence, I could not imagine what it would be to be such a worldly man, famous on two sides of the ocean, beloved by all.

He stared out at us now with a hint of a smile on his face.

'There are ladies present tonight,' he began, his voice echoing across the chamber. 'Naturally I am delighted by this but also distressed for I hope that none of you are of the sensitive disposition that is peculiar to your sex. For, my dear readers, my friends, my *literati*, I do not propose to entertain you this evening with some of the more preposterous utterances of that delightful creature Sam Weller. Nor do I plan on uplifting your spirits through the bravery of my beloved boy Master Copperfield. Neither shall I seek to stir your emotions through a retelling of the last days of that unfortunate angel Little Nell Trent, may God have mercy on her soul.' He hesitated, allowing our anticipation to build, and we watched him, already captivated by his presence. 'Instead,' he continued after a long pause, his voice growing deep and mellifluous now, the words emerging slowly, 'I intend to read a ghost story that I

have only recently completed, one which is scheduled to appear in the Christmas number of *All the Year Round*. It is a most terrifying tale, ladies and gentlemen, designed to stir the blood and unsettle the senses. It speaks of the paranormal, of the undead, of those pitiful creatures who wander the afterlife in search of eternal reconciliation. It contains a character who is neither alive nor deceased, neither sentient nor spirit. I wrote it to chill the blood of my readers and despatch ghouls into the beating heart of their dreams.'

As he said this a cry went up from halfway down the hall and I turned my head, as did most of those in attendance, to see a young woman of about my own age, twenty-one, throwing her hands in the air and running down the aisle in fright. I sighed and secretly despised her for disgracing her sex.

'Should any other ladies wish to leave,' said Mr Dickens, who appeared to be delighted by this interruption, 'might I urge you to do so now? I would not like to interrupt the flow of the story and the time has come for me to begin.'

At these words, a small boy appeared from the side of the stage, approached the novelist and offered a low bow, before thrusting a sheaf of pages into Mr Dickens' hand. The boy ran off, the writer glanced at what he held, looked about him with a wild expression on his face and began to read.

'Halloa! Below there!' he shouted in such an extraordinary and unexpected roar that I could not help but jump in my seat. A lady behind me uttered an oath and a gentleman on the aisle dropped his spectacles. Apparently enjoying the reaction that his cry had caused, Mr Dickens paused for a few moments before continuing, whereupon I quickly found myself entranced by his tale. A single spotlight illuminated his pale face and his tone fluctuated between characters, describing fear, confusion and distress with only a slight change of modulation to his tone. His sense of timing was impeccable as he said one thing that made us laugh, then

another that made us feel unsettled and then a third that made us leap in fright. He portrayed the two characters at the centre of the story – a signalman who worked by a railway tunnel and a visitor to that place – with such gusto that one almost believed that there were two actors on stage performing either role. The tale itself was, as he had suggested in his introduction, a disconcerting one, centring on the signalman's belief that a spectre was informing him of calamities to come. The ghost had appeared once and a terrible crash had ensued; he had appeared a second time and a lady had died in the railway carriage as it passed. It had appeared a third time more recently, gesticulating wildly, urging the signalman to get out of the way, but as yet no misfortune had occurred and the nervous fellow was distressed at the thought of what horror might lie ahead. I considered Mr Dickens rather devilish in the manner in which he took pleasure in stirring the emotions of his audience. When he knew that we were scared, he would incite us further, building on the threat and menace he had laid out for us and then, when we were certain that a terrible thing was about to happen, he would let us down, peace would be restored and we who had been holding our collective breaths in anticipation of some fresh terror were free to exhale and sigh and feel that all was well in the world once again, which was when he took us by surprise with a single sentence, making us scream when we thought we could relax, terrifying us into the depths of our very souls and allowing himself a brief smile at how easily he could manipulate our emotions.

As he read, I began to fear that I might not sleep that night, so certain was I that I was surrounded by the spirits of those who had left their corporeal form behind but had not yet been admitted through the gates of heaven and so were left to trawl through the world, crying aloud, desperate to be heard, causing disarray and torment wherever they went,

uncertain when they would be released to the peace of the afterlife and the quiet promise of eternal rest.

When Mr Dickens finished speaking, he bowed his head and there was silence from the audience for perhaps ten seconds before we burst as one into applause, leaping to our feet, crying out for more. I turned to look at Father who, rather than appearing as thrilled as I had anticipated, wore a pale expression, a sheen of perspiration gleaming on his face, as he inhaled and exhaled in laboured gasps, staring at the floor beneath him, his fists clenched in a mixture of determination to recover his breath and a fear that he might never do so.

In his hands, he clutched a handkerchief stained with blood.

Departing the theatre into the wet and cold night, I was still trembling from the dramatics of the reading and felt certain that I was surrounded by apparitions and spirits, but Father seemed to have recovered himself and declared that it was quite the most enjoyable evening he had spent in many years.

'He's every bit as good an actor as he is a writer,' he pronounced as we made our way back across the park, reversing our earlier walk, the rain starting yet again as we marched along, the fog making it almost impossible for us to see more than a few steps ahead of ourselves.

'I believe he often takes part in dramatics,' I said. 'At his own home and the homes of his friends.'

'Yes, I've read that,' agreed Father. 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to be invited to—'

Another coughing fit overtook him and he struggled for air as he bent over, assuming an undignified position on the street.

'Father,' I said, putting my arm around his shoulders as I attempted to right him. 'We must get you home. The sooner

you are out of those wet clothes and lying in a hot bath the better it will be.'

He nodded and struggled on, coughing and sneezing as we leaned on each other for support. To my relief the rain came to an abrupt halt as we rounded Bayswater Road for Brook Street, but with every step I took I could feel my feet growing more and more soaked through my shoes and dreaded to think of how wet Father's must be. Finally we were home and he forced himself into the metal bathtub for a half-hour before changing into his nightshirt and gown and joining me in the parlour.

'I shall never forget tonight, Eliza,' he remarked when we were seated side by side by the fire, sipping on hot tea and eating buttered toast, the room filled again by the scent of cinnamon and chestnuts from his pipe. 'He was a capital fellow.'

'I found him truly terrifying,' I replied. 'I enjoy his books almost as much as you, of course, but I wish he had read from one of his dramatic novels. I don't care for ghost stories.'

'You're frightened by them?'

'Unsettled,' I said, shaking my head. 'I think any story which concerns itself with the afterlife and with forces that the human mind cannot truly understand risks disquiet for the reader. Although I don't think I've ever experienced fear in the way that others do. I don't understand what it is to be truly frightened, just how it feels to be disconcerted or uncomfortable. The signalman in the story, for example. He was terrified at the horror he knew was sure to come his way. And that woman in the audience who ran screaming from the hall. I can't imagine what it must feel like to be that scared.'

'Don't you believe in ghosts, Eliza?' he asked and I turned to look at him, surprised by the question. It was dark in the room and he was illuminated only by the glow of the reddened coals that made his eyes appear darker than

usual and his skin glow with the colour of the sporadic flames.

'I don't know,' I said, uncertain how I truly felt about the question. 'Why, do you?'

'I believe that woman was an imbecile,' declared Father. 'That's what I believe. Mr Dickens had barely even begun to speak when she took fright. She should have been excluded from the start if she was of such a sensitive disposition.'

'The truth is I've always preferred his more realistic tales,' I continued, looking away. 'The novels that explore the lives of orphans, his tales of triumph over adversity. Masters Copperfield, Twist and Nickleby will always hold a greater place in my affections than Mr Scrooge or Mr Marley.'

'*Marley was dead, to begin with*,' stated Father in a deep voice, imitating the writer so well that I shuddered. '*There is no doubt whatever about that*.'

'Don't,' I said, laughing despite myself. 'Please.'

I fell asleep quite soon after going to bed but it was a fitful and unhappy sleep. My dreams were supplanted by nightmares. I encountered spirits where I should have undertaken adventures. My landscape was dark graveyards and irregular vistas rather than Alpine peaks or Venetian canals. But nevertheless I slept through the night and when I woke, feeling groggy and out of sorts, the morning light was already coming through my curtains. I looked at my wall clock; it was almost ten past seven and I cursed myself, knowing that I would certainly be late for work and still had Father's breakfast to prepare. However, when I entered his room a few minutes later to see whether his condition had improved in the night, I could see immediately that he was far more ill than I had previously realized. The rain of the evening before had taken hold of him and the chill seemed to have entered into his very bones. He was deathly pale, his skin damp and clammy, and I took great fright, dressing immediately and running to the end of our mews where Dr Connolly, a friend and physician of long standing, lived. He

came back with me and did everything in his power, I have no doubt of that, but he told me there was nothing we could do but wait for the fever to break, or hope that it would, and I spent the rest of the day by Father’s bedside, praying to a god who did not often trouble my thoughts, and by early evening, when the sun had descended again to be replaced by our perpetual and tormenting London fog, I felt Father’s grasp of my hand grow weaker until he slipped away from me entirely, gathered quietly to his reward, leaving me an orphan like those characters I had spoken of the night before, if one can truly be called an orphan at twenty-one years of age.

Chapter Three

FATHER'S FUNERAL TOOK place the following Monday morning in St James's Church in Paddington and I took some comfort in the fact that half a dozen of his co-workers from the British Museum, along with three of my own colleagues from St Elizabeth's School where I had employment as a teacher of small girls, attended to offer their sympathies. We had no living relatives and so there were very few mourners, among them the widow who lived next door to us but who had always seemed loath to acknowledge me in the street, a polite but shy young student whom Father had been mentoring in his insect studies, our part-time domestic girl, Jessie, and Mr Billington, the tobacconist on Connaught Street who had been providing Father with his cinnamon-infused tobacco for as long as I could recall and whose presence made me feel rather emotional and grateful.

Mr Heston, Father's immediate superior in the Department of Entomology, held my right hand in both of his, crushing it slightly, and told me how much he had respected Father's intellect, while one Miss Sharpton, an educated woman whose employment had initially caused Father some disquiet, informed me that she would miss his lively wit and excellent humour, a remark that rather astonished me but which I nevertheless found consoling. (Was there a side to Father that I did not know? A man who told jokes, charmed young ladies, was filled with *bonhomie*? It was possible, I supposed, but still something of a surprise.) I rather admired Miss Sharpton and wished that I could have had an opportunity to know her better; I was aware that she had attended the Sorbonne, where she was awarded a degree,

although naturally the English universities did not recognize it, and apparently her own family had cut her off on account of it. Father told me once that he had asked her whether she was looking forward to the day when she would get married and thus not have to work any more; her reply – that she would rather drink ink – had scandalized him but intrigued me.

Outside the church, my own employer, Mrs Farnsworth, who had taught me as a girl and then hired me as a teacher, informed me that I must take the rest of the week to grieve but that hard work could be an extraordinary restorative and she looked forward to welcoming me back to school the following Monday. She was not being heartless; she had lost a husband the year before, and a son the year preceding that. Grief was a condition that she understood.

Mercifully, the rain stayed off while we laid Father to rest but the fog fell so deeply around us that I could barely make out the coffin as it descended into the ground and, perhaps a blessing, I missed that moment when one is aware of laying eyes on the casket for the final time. It seemed to be simply swallowed up by the mist, and only when the vicar came over to shake my hand and wish me well did I realize that the burial had come to an end and that there was nothing left for me to do but go home.

I chose not to do so immediately, however, and instead walked around the graveyard for a time, peering through the haze at the names and dates etched into the tombstones. Some seemed quite natural – men and women who had lived into their sixtieth or, in some cases, their seventieth years. Others felt aberrant, children taken while they were still in their infancy, young mothers buried with their stillborn babies in their arms. I came across the grave of an Arthur Covan, an erstwhile colleague of mine, and shuddered to remember our one-time friendship and his subsequent disgrace. We had developed a connection for a brief period, Arthur and I, one that I had hoped would

blossom into something more, and the memory of those feelings, combined with the knowledge of the damage that troubled young man had caused, only served to upset me further.

Realizing that this was not perhaps a sensible place for me to linger, I looked around for the gate but found myself quite lost. The fog grew thicker around me until I could no longer read the words on the headstones, and to my right – extraordinary thing! – I was certain I heard a couple laughing. I turned, wondering who would behave in such a fashion here, but could see no one. Uneasy, I reached a hand out before me and could make nothing out beyond my gloved fingertip. ‘Hello,’ I said, raising my voice only a little, uncertain whether I truly wanted a response, but answer came there none. I reached a wall where I hoped for a gate, then turned and almost fell over a group of ancient headstones piled together in a corner, and now my heart began to beat faster in anxiety. I told myself to be calm, to breathe, then find the way out, but as I turned round I let out a cry when I was confronted by a young girl, no more than seven years of age, standing in the centre on the path, wearing no coat despite the weather.

‘My brother drowned,’ she told me and I opened my mouth to reply but could find no words. ‘He was told not to go towards the river, but he did. He was disobedient. And he drowned. Mama is sitting by his grave.’

‘Where?’ I asked, and she stretched a hand out, pointing behind me. I spun round but could see no lady through the vapour. I looked back only to discover the girl turning on her heels and breaking into a run, disappearing into the mist. Panic rose inside me; it might have developed into an hysteria had I not forced myself to walk quickly along the paths until finally, to my great relief, I was returned to the street, where I almost collided with an overweight man I was quite certain was our local Member of Parliament.

Walking home, I passed the Goat and Garter, a public house I had of course never entered, and was astonished to observe Miss Sharpton seated by the window, drinking a small porter and engrossed in a textbook while she made notes in a jotter. Behind her I could see the expressions on the men’s faces – naturally, they were appalled and assumed that she was some sort of deviant – but I suspected that their opinions would have caused her not a moment’s concern. How I longed to enter that establishment and take my place beside her! Tell me, Miss Sharpton, I might have said, what shall I do with my life now? How can I improve my position and prospects? Help me, please, for I am alone in the world and have neither friend nor benefactor. Tell me what I should do next.

Other people had friends. Of course they did; it was the natural way of things. There are those who are comfortable in the company of others, with the sharing of intimacies and common secrets. I have never been such a person. I was a studious girl who loved to be at home with Father. And I was not pretty. In school, the other girls formed alliances which always excluded me. They called me names; I will not repeat them here. They made fun of my unshapely body, my pale skin, my untamed hair. I do not know why I was born this way. Father was a handsome man, after all, and Mother a great beauty. But somehow their progeny was not blessed with similar good looks.

I would have given anything for a friend at that moment, a friend like Miss Sharpton, who might have persuaded me not to make the rash decision which would nearly destroy me. Which still might.

I looked through the window of the Goat and Garter and willed her to glance up and spot me, to wave her arms and insist that I join her, and when she failed to do so I turned with a heavy heart and continued for home, where I sat in my chair by the fireplace for the rest of the afternoon and, for the first time since Father’s death, wept.