



THE
RECKLESS
AFTERLIFE
OF
HARRIET
STOKER

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WALKER
BOOKS

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For my friends, who have never once tried to murder me.

It started with the grandmother.

Or did it? I get the order of things confused sometimes. There were a lot of deaths at one point, but they happened at the end. At the beginning, there was only one death. The girl with the camera.

I had known she would be coming for nearly four hundred years, but I still wasn't ready when she finally arrived.

The first time I saw her was when the Cavaliers and the Roundheads were marching into battle. The girl was doing yoga on the fire escape.

I think it was just after Felix...

But, no. That comes later. Let's go back.

Chapter 1

HARRIET

Twenty minutes before her death, Harriet Stoker stared up at the hazard signs peppering the entrance of Mulcture Hall. The signs were very informative, stating in huge black letters: *DANGER – DERELICT BUILDING! THIS BUILDING HAS BEEN FOUND TO CONTAIN ASBESTOS; UNSTABLE STRUCTURE – UNAUTHORIZED PEOPLE FOUND ON THIS SITE WILL BE PROSECUTED* and *DANGER OF ELECTROCUTION!* Harriet was impressed. Confident of her life choices, she began to climb the chain-link fence.

Harriet thought that even when newly built, Mulcture Hall must have looked like a place where architecture came to die. The colourful graffiti covering the pebbledash walls didn't detract from the overwhelming greyness of the old halls of residence.

She picked her way carefully through nettles to the entrance. It was nearly dusk, so she used her phone to shine a light through a crack between the plywood boards covering a window.

When a face lunged at her from the other side, Harriet

skidded back on her heels. She laughed. It was her own reflection.

She inserted a crowbar into the gap. The board came loose in a cloud of cobwebs and sawdust, and the glass of the window smashed with the first tap of her crowbar. With her hands wrapped in her woollen scarf to protect against the broken shards, Harriet climbed through.

Her stomach was squirming in excitement. She'd been imagining this moment for weeks, wondering what might be inside the building when she was supposed to be paying attention to lectures or helping her gran with housework.

There were endless legends about Mulcture Hall, passing from final-year students to freshers in a decades-old gossip chain. It was rumoured to be a local drug dealer's base of operations, *and* the entrance to a secret underground government facility. It was also apparently haunted by the ghosts of students and workers who had died here back in 1994. Supposedly, the halls hadn't been demolished yet because the Biology Department was running some kind of long-term experiment on fungal growth. Harriet wasn't sure she believed any of the myths.

The building smelt worse than she thought it would – a foul mix of damp and urine. The stairwell was filled with beer cans and ashes left by other trespassers. Wrinkling her nose, she took a picture with her expensive camera, which she'd borrowed from the uni's photography department. Her lecturers would probably think the mess was artistic.

Climbing the concrete steps, she peered up over the

banister at the remains of the roof several storeys above. Then she turned and looked at the first floor. There were doors falling off their hinges along either side of a narrow corridor. The nearest had been propped open, but someone had kicked in the lower half.

She slid through the narrow gap between the door and the frame, trying not to get dirt on her clothes. Harriet always chose her outfits very carefully. Today, she was going incognito, so she was wearing a charcoal-grey shirt tucked into khaki trousers.

A thin mattress was rotting on the floor of the small student bedroom beyond. Rubbish had collected in gaps between floorboards – a mix of bottles and crisp packets and the springs of an armchair. The walls were black with moisture.

Harriet took pictures of the intricate cracks in a greenish mirror; an enamel sink turned orange by the steady drip of the tap; neon graffiti distorted by peeling paint like a long-lost cave painting.

It was even better than she'd imagined. For her last photography project, Harriet had submitted half a dozen pictures of the ducks by the campus lake. Her feedback had said that even the most technically proficient pictures were unsuccessful if there was no emotional resonance. She'd only got sixty per cent for it. While Harriet didn't mind being called emotionless, she did want a good grade. Anyway, that wouldn't be an issue this time – the building was unbelievably atmospheric.

She climbed the next two floors, peeping around open

doors into other wrecked and ransacked bedrooms. The building had the sad, historical gloom of a bombsite, she thought, rolling phrases for her report through her mind.

In a tiny kitchenette on the fourth floor, there was an ash-tray on the counter, still full of a squatter's half-burnt curls of Rizla cigarette paper. Next to it lay a yellowing newspaper. She peeled open its mummified pages, catching sight of the words *Diana* and *Blair* before the paper collapsed into fragments.

FELIX

Felix heard the music first, drifting faint and muted from headphones as someone walked past. It took a huge effort for him to summon up the energy to open his eyes. When he managed it, there was nothing left of the intruder but a line of footprints in the dust.

Someone was here. *A human*. They must be playing music on a Walkman.

It had been so long since he'd last seen someone come inside the building. He'd imagined this moment for ever, but now that it was happening, all he felt was – tired. He was *exhausted*.

Felix should probably investigate the stranger. But the stairs alone seemed to be an insurmountable obstacle. Whoever it was would probably find their own way out. There was nothing in Mulcture Hall any more, not for a human.

Felix closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

HARRIET

Harriet adjusted the focus of her camera to capture a fern growing out of the top-floor banister, its fronds curling towards the light from beyond the collapsed roof. She caught a glimpse of darting movement in the periphery of her vision and spun around. Glass crunched under her feet, as her heart tripped over itself.

There was nothing but her own shadow, cast across the stairwell in the last remnants of twilight. She needed to calm down. The building was making her skittish. She was alone here. She was safe.

Harriet's phone rang, distracting her from the shadows. She pushed back her headphones to answer.

"How do you get iPlayer up again?" her gran asked, instead of a greeting.

Harriet patiently guided her grandmother through the process of selecting *Autumnwatch* on BBC iPlayer – a nightly occurrence.

She should tell her gran where she was. She had been the one to suggest Harriet come to Mulcture Hall to take photos for her project, after all. They'd walked past it when they'd toured the University of Warwick campus on an open day the year before. But her gran definitely hadn't meant that Harriet should come here alone, at night. She would be worried about her safety.

When she heard the theme music of *Autumnwatch* playing,

she said, “I’ve gotta go, Gran – I’m finishing my photography coursework. I’ll see you later.”

But her gran had already hung up. She hated it when Harriet talked through her favourite programme.

Norma had raised her ever since she was ten, after her parents had died. When she’d been accepted into university, Harriet had originally paid for a room in halls on campus, wanting to live away from home for the first time. But a few weeks before classes had started, her grandmother had tripped fetching the post in the morning and broken her ankle.

Harriet had cancelled the rent payment so that she could live at home and look after her. It was only a thirty-minute commute to the university, and the campus library was open all night, so she always had somewhere to go after the bars had closed. She never opened any of the books, but the WiFi connection was very strong, which was all she ever needed anyway. At least there, she didn’t need to go to bed at 9 p.m. so that she didn’t keep her gran awake.

Harriet usually filmed make-up tutorials in the stacks, recording herself contouring her cheekbones against a background of law books. It was less embarrassing to do it at night, when the only people who saw her were exhausted PhD students running on caffeine. She could handle talking to them. It was the students her own age who made her nervous.

It was starting to rain through the broken roof, in cold, heavy drops that ran straight down the nape of her neck. Shivering, she suddenly missed her overly warm room at home. She could

picture her gran sitting under a blanket on the sofa, with the electric fire roaring and the cat stretched out on the hearth.

Twisting to watch the flight path of a plane as it passed overhead, her foot caught on something. Harriet tripped over the edge of the stairwell, with nothing below her but five storeys of open air and the concrete floor of the foyer. She dropped her phone, throwing her hands out to grab on to something.

Her heart thundered. Her camera fell first, unhooking from around her neck and crashing to the ground into a thousand shards. Then Harriet followed.

It happened too fast for her to scream anywhere except inside her own mind. Her head bounced off a jutting steel beam, spraying blood as she twisted over once, twice before she landed with an audible crack of bones on the floor.

A pool of blood dripped from the split in her skull, gathering on the lurid green moss. Everything went black.

There it is. The death that started it all. It's interesting, seeing it from this angle. I've only ever seen it from the past before. It would have been easy to stop it happening. Just a little bit of pressure here and there – a nudge to take her down the stairs instead of walking up them. And nothing would have happened the way it did.

Father was always doing things like that when he was here. And later, when he...

Sorry, sorry, you don't know about that yet, do you? I suppose I should go in chronological order. Everything just makes more sense if you look at it backwards.

For now, let's go back to where Harriet Stoker is lying in her own blood. She's undeniably, irrevocably, dead. Below her, a fern is being slowly crushed. Above her, the shadows are gathering to watch.

FELIX

Felix flung open his eyes, gasping. A golden burst of energy spread through him, shocking him awake. He jumped up, shuddering like he'd just had a shot of caffeine.

What had...?

The intruder. The one with the music. Something must have happened to them. He hadn't felt fresh energy like this in decades. He hadn't expected to ever feel it again.

Felix ran through into Kasper's bedroom. To his relief, he was awake too. Felix couldn't imagine anything worse than being the only one to wake up.

"What year is it?" Kasper asked, opening one eye to squint at Felix. He was shirtless, stretching his arm over his head. The muscles all along his torso lengthened and contracted. There was a shock of blond hair in his armpit.

Felix exhaled. "Last I remember was 2009. You?"

"2011 – a cat died in here. You were sleeping."

Felix was disappointed he'd missed a cat ghost – and then felt promptly sick at the rush of emotion. His feelings kept changing so fast, and he wasn't used to it. He'd spent so long suspended in sleep, feeling nothing. When he was low on energy, he barely even dreamed.

The world was a lot to process again after all that time. Had the fresh air blowing through the window always smelt so rich? Had Kasper always smiled so widely? Felix almost couldn't bear to look at him.

Rima flew in through the open window, glowing with energy too. “Someone new has arrived!” she yelled. “Get dressed, get dressed!”

“What year is it?” Felix asked her. It couldn’t have been that long since the cat. He had a brief memory of snow, fluttering in through his window. Winter had been and gone while they slept. Maybe it was already 2012.

“I have absolutely no idea! Have you seen Leah? Where has that girl got to? Let’s go! I need to find Cody!” She twirled, jumping into the air and running through the door.

Kasper looked at Felix, raising an eyebrow. “Business as usual with Rima, then.”

“I think we could be here for an eternity and she wouldn’t change,” Felix said. He took a deep breath, trying to control the deep wave of love that rolled over him. He’d missed them all – Kasper and Rima, Leah and Claudia. After so long starved of them, listening to their voices was like drinking rich cream.

While Kasper pulled on his shirt, Felix turned to examine himself in the mirror by the bedroom door. The glass had a crack down the centre. That hadn’t been there the last time he had been awake. Then, the vines on the windows had only been tendrils, creeping up the bottom of the glass pane. Now they covered the room in green foliage, flooding over the carpet.

Perhaps it had been longer than he’d thought. They could have been dreaming for decades, sleeping through the days as

empty shells of their old selves. It was hard to tell when he still looked the same. He'd always be eighteen, just like the day he'd died.

Felix folded his crinkled collar back into place, then took off his glasses, rubbing them clean with the hem of his plaid shirt. He wasn't entirely sure how they managed to get so many smudges, considering he was incorporeal. It was one of the eternal mysteries of ghosts – and glasses.

Kasper nudged up against Felix's back and rested his chin on Felix's shoulder as he rearranged his hair in the mirror. He licked a thumb and smoothed his eyebrows flat. "Ready, loser?"

Felix folded his hands over his cuffs. It was starting, then. The peace between them never lasted long. "If you're done primping."

He let himself look at Kasper, feeling that deep ache in the centre of his chest. Had he really had these kinds of emotions constantly, before he fell asleep? Surely not. He wouldn't have been able to stand it.

Kasper walked through the door. "Let's go see who brought us back from the brink, then."

HARRIET

When Harriet woke up, the headphones around her neck were still blasting Janelle Monáe. She lay still for a moment, replaying the darkening sky, the sudden loss of balance as she tripped

over something unseen, the flash of brightness as she fell, and then nothing.

She could hear voices. She was surrounded by people, talking quickly. Arguing.

She must be in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. The voices were paramedics discussing her injuries. It was likely she was seriously hurt. She might have broken her leg, or worse. She couldn't feel anything, which had to be a bad sign.

She tuned in to their conversation, trying very hard not to panic.

“...can't just leave her lying—”

“You would say that! You always think that—”

“Oh, because what you think is so much more—”

“Would you two just shut the hell up. It's not—”

“Are we actually fighting about this right now? She's not even cold yet!”

There were so many voices she couldn't keep track of them; they were all talking over each other. She opened her eyes. For a moment, everything was blurry. She blinked, and her vision cleared. She was staring at a mouldy breeze-block wall. The voices around her went silent.

“H-heyyy...” someone said.

Harriet flicked her gaze around until she found the speaker – a short girl wearing a hijab and a nervous expression. There were three people huddled around her, none of whom were paramedics – in fact, they looked like students. They must have heard her fall and come to investigate. She relaxed.

Maybe she wasn't badly hurt, after all.

Clearing her throat around a lump of something dusty and thick, she asked, "What happened to me?"

They exchanged nervous glances with one another. A black boy in a neat plaid shirt said, "Are you – are you OK? You had an accident."

Harriet rubbed her eyes. She knew she probably *wasn't* fine. She ought to be in serious pain right now. But she didn't have a single ache or pain. "I was ... falling."

"You remember?" The boy adjusted his tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses. There was a smudge on one of the lenses.

Another boy spoke. This one was white and much more muscular, with a rugby player's shoulders and rakish blond hair. "Why *wouldn't* she remember?"

"Well, I don't remember when I di—" the other boy began, until his friend cleared her throat warningly. He cut himself off. "Di-di-ha. Uh – well, no, not as such..." He trailed off into silence.

While Harriet watched this display, feeling a little perplexed, the rugby player stared at him in disgust. "Chill out, Felix. Jeez."

"You're the one who needs to chill out!" Felix retorted.

Harriet didn't have time for this. She struggled to her feet, feeling just a bit off balance rather than injured. She must have hit her head, because her bun had been knocked to the side, but there wasn't the tender spot of a bruise.

"You fell from the top floor," the girl said to Harriet,

squaring her shoulders and looking determined. She was wearing a pyjama top that said *HERE FOR THE DRAMA!* in pink glitter cursive writing.

“But how did I survive? I would have died.” Harriet folded over into a lazy forward bend, testing herself for injuries. She wasn’t hurt. At all.

The girl looked embarrassed. “Yeah. Yeah, you would have.”

“So ... did something catch me?” Harriet stretched her back, running through a few other yoga poses as she tried to decide whether it was possible that she was in so much pain she couldn’t feel any of it.

The blond boy grimaced. “You died. You’re dead. Sorry, mate.”

“I’m...?” She must have misheard him. There was a lot going on – it was to be expected.

“You’re dead; we’re all dead,” he said.

Clearly, they were members of a Role-Playing Society or something. What other kind of students hung out in an old abandoned building during their spare time?

“Right. OK. Well, I’m just going to leave, so you can all get back to ... whatever—”

“You can just take a look at your body if you don’t believe us,” Felix said, gesturing behind Harriet and then quickly rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s a bit gory.”

Harriet sighed. She supposed she could play along, if it would get rid of them more quickly. She turned around. When she swallowed, the dusty lump was back in her throat.

Lying on the floor in a puddle of congealing blood was her body.

Harriet fought a surreal sense of dissociation. The world rolled around her as she tried to resolve what she was seeing with everything she knew to be true about the universe.

She was here. She was there.

She was dead.

Chapter 2

HARRIET

“Where are you going?” the girl called, as Harriet pushed her way towards the exit. Harriet didn’t stop. There might still be time to fix this. Clearly concussion was causing her to hallucinate her own dead body. But if she could just get to a doctor, it would be fine. She was going to be fine.

She tamped down her panic. This would all be treated, and the worst outcome of her whole misadventure would be that she would have to submit her photography coursework a day late. There was nothing for her to worry about. So why did she feel like her life was over?

She forced the feeling away, climbing out of the window. She had lost her phone in the fall, but someone on campus would call an ambulance for her.

“Wait!” the girl shouted, as Harriet breathed in the clean, fresh air. She already felt better now that she was out of that musty wreck.

Three steps away from the property fence, she stopped in her tracks. She ached all over. Swaying on the spot, she tried to push away the pain vibrating through her bones.

The further she moved, the worse she felt. The feeling was an ocean, pulling her in. She was suddenly convinced that it would kill her to take even another step forwards. She wanted to lie down and become part of the world. It would be so peaceful to give up control and just become a mass of atoms, free to move as they pleased.

Harriet closed her eyes, unable to stop the concept from overwhelming her. She could feel her particles sliding free of each other, peeling away and drifting off into the atmosphere.

“HEY! HEY, GIRL!”

The yelling came from somewhere very far away. She ignored it. She just needed to let herself become part of the air and ground and sky.

RIMA

She was leaving! The girl had only just died, and she was already going to make herself disintegrate. Rima hadn't even had a chance to find out her name. It was such a waste too – the new girl seemed so young and pretty. Though her university experience was probably very different to Rima's. She looked like she got invited to all of the best parties. Rima had only ever been invited to a private Usenet server.

“We have to do something! Felix, come on!” Kasper hissed. His eyes were wide with panic, his hand tight on Felix's forearm as the three of them leant out of the window to watch Harriet's

progress. Decades-worth of energy was falling away into the wind, precious golden strands disappearing into nothing.

“What do you want *me* to do?” Felix asked, the words turned up high at the end.

“I don’t know – something more than gawp at her!”

Rima rolled her eyes. She nudged them out of the way and hoisted herself over the windowsill.

“You can’t!” Kasper said.

“I thought you wanted me to do something?” she said and twisted into a form that was easier to control. If she flew, she could get to Harriet without losing as much energy.

HARRIET

A hand grabbed her shoulder, pinching into the muscle and shaking hard. Harriet opened her eyes.

“What?” she asked, swooning slightly, struggling to remember how words and speech and vocal cords worked.

“Stop! Wake up!” a voice said. “You’ve got to come with me. Now, or you’re gone.”

A hand tugged her backwards, and the movement made Harriet stumble. As she walked, she remembered that she had limbs, and muscles, and as she focused, they made a human body and she could move again.

At the entrance to the hall, she remembered what being Harriet Stoker felt like and recovered her shape completely. It

was only then that she recognized the girl standing beside her, who was looking at Harriet as if she was searching her face for some sign of life.

The blond boy helped her down from the sill as she climbed back inside.

“What *was* that?” Harriet asked. It had felt impossible and horrifying and *incredible*, like Harriet was so much more than just one person. She had felt connected to everything; every atom and particle on the entire planet.

“You were disintegrating,” the girl said. “You can’t leave. You’ll be gone for ever if you do.”

“Dis—? *Gone*?” Her brain was fuzzy and tired, but it felt surreal and primitive to have a brain at all, running a consciousness using neurons and muscles. “*Who are you*? What is happening to me?”

“We’re ghosts,” Felix said. “We’re all ghosts. And now, so are you.”

Starting from the beginning – or, rather, this beginning at least, which I think is probably the one that will be the most useful – there are signs of it all. You can see it in her behaviour. It’s just like his.

When Rima first realized that she was a ghost, she closed off completely. She said later that she wasn’t angry or panicked or sad, but guilty, like she’d wasted what little time she’d had. She could have done so much more, if she’d known that those eighteen years were going to be all that she’d get. She didn’t cry or shout or try to leave the building. She just sat down and wished and wished that things were different.

It’s always fascinating, watching someone when they think they’re alone. They sink inside their own heads and perform intricate little rituals that make sense only to them, that they’d never even dream of showing another person.

It says a lot about Harriet that she didn’t pause to grieve like Rima. She started looking for a solution to the problem instead. If only she wasn’t so good at finding them.

HARRIET

“I’m a ghost. I’m dead. I’m ... *dead*.” Harriet held up her hand and looked at it, trying to work out how it could possibly be the hand of a ghost. It looked just like anyone else’s hand, but somehow it wasn’t made of flesh and bone any more. Experimentally, she tried to pick up a lump of brick from the floor. Her hand passed straight through it.

It was impossible. How could she be dead and feel so alive at the same time?

She was only eighteen. She couldn’t be stuck here for ever, with no way to return to her old life. She’d had so many plans for her degree and career ... her *life*. She’d only just started gaining followers on her YouTube channel. She’d been diligently posting make-up tutorials every other Monday. The hard work had finally started to pay off, and now all that effort had been wasted.

“I barely did anything with my life,” Harriet said. “I’ve never even left the country. Oh God, I only had sex *once*. I wasted so much time in freshers’ week!”

The blond boy stepped forward and patted her consolingly on the shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he said. “We’re here for you. I’m Kasper, and this is Rima and Felix.”

“What do I even do now?” she said, ignoring him. “Who are you all? Are you the welcoming committee or something? Please say you aren’t *angels*.”

He shook his head. “We died here, too. A long time ago,

now. You don't have to go through this alone. There's loads of us here."

"Loads. Of ghosts?"

He grinned and pointed upwards with both forefingers to where dozens of figures were standing motionlessly on the floors above, peering over the balcony at her.

"No. Freaking. Way." Harriet squeezed her eyes tightly shut. When she opened them again, the people were still there. They were all staring intently at her. None of them were moving. None of them were speaking.

It was too much. Harriet turned back to her body.

"Is there a way we can close my eyes?" she asked. It hit her all over again how awful it looked, a lifeless corpse lying there in a pool of blood and cracked bone. "I keep making eye contact with myself, and that is *not* something I ever imagined doing."

"There's no way to move your body," Rima said, as another girl appeared. This one was carrying a baby and looked very young and very tired. All the ghosts here seemed to be teenagers, around the same age as she was.

Had this new girl been a student parent when she was alive? In some of the halls there were special rooms with kitchens and en-suite bathrooms for parents.

"Leah!" Rima and Felix said together, looking delighted.

"Where have you been?" Rima asked. "I've missed you *so* much."

"I was sleeping, like the rest of you." Leah let Rima hug her,

and then said to Harriet, not unkindly, “Congratulations, new kid. Welcome to the afterlife.”

Trying to hide the dart of pain that rippled through her at the words, Harriet made lazy jazz hands at her. “Thanks! I’m hyped that I never have to pay off my student loans now.”

Leah shrugged at that.

“I’m Leah. This is Claudia.” She peeled a curl of blanket away from her baby’s face. The girl’s blue eyes slid over to focus on Harriet.

Leah was standing right under a drip of water, which kept falling through her left shoulder in a way that made Harriet feel dizzy. It was like watching an optical illusion. Her body looked completely solid right up until the moment the water droplets touched her and then her shoulder went kind of ... fuzzy. That – combined with her deathly pale skin, cream linen dress and slightly lanky hair – was the most obvious indication that she was dead. The rest of them looked alive, if you didn’t pay close attention.

“Do *you* know how to leave the building?” she asked Leah. “They’re saying I can’t get out, but I have to go home.”

Her gran couldn’t drive with her broken ankle. She would be trapped at home if Harriet wasn’t there to take her around. She wouldn’t even be able to go food shopping until Harriet got back. And they were nearly out of milk.

“You might as well quit now. You can’t leave the place where you died,” Leah said. “Trust me, I’ve tried. Our souls are connected to the land or building or something.”

“But I have to go home. My gran is all on her own. She’ll worry about me if I don’t turn up.”

“Even if you went home, your gran wouldn’t be able to see you anyway,” Kasper said.

“You can’t know that for *sure*,” Harriet said. “My gran could be a psychic or something. Are those even real? I hope they are.”

She was very aware that she was pretending to be upbeat and calm about this whole thing. If she stopped smiling, she would break down, and that wasn’t something she could do in front of strangers. She’d always been taught never to show anyone a sign of weakness, because someone would try to use it against her.

“You can’t go home. Forget about it, kid,” Leah said, a little more harshly.

Harriet picked at her nails, miffed. “Why do you keep calling me ‘kid’? You’re, like, seventeen.”

“What part of ‘ghosts’ don’t you understand? We’ve all been here for years. Long before you were even born. You are a kid to me.”

“How did you die?”

Leah sighed heavily and looked down at her baby. Apparently, Harriet had just made a severe breach of etiquette.

“Oh, dude, you’ll never get how Leah died out of her,” Rima replied. “She and Claudia had already been here for ages when we all died. Even I don’t know how she got here, and we’ve been best friends for dozens of years.”

“We’re not best friends,” Leah muttered.

“Sure. Tell that to your half of our *Best Friends Forever* necklace.” Rima tapped a pink locket hanging around her own neck.

“I *told you* – I’m not wearing that thing,” Leah said, glaring at the jewellery.

Harriet ignored their bickering. Her brain was too full to find room to care about whatever kind of fight was going on there. If it wasn’t about her death or her gran, she wasn’t interested.

“Anyway, never mind how Leah died,” Rima said. “It was probably something like carbon monoxide or gas that did the rest of us in, though. We think.”

Harriet blinked. “What, like a gas leak?”

“Yep.” She popped the “p”, acting remarkably cheerful about it. “Everyone in the building died on the same night in our sleep, so a pipe must have come loose or something. That’s our best guess, anyway. We have no way of knowing for sure.”

Harriet had heard that some students had died in Mulpture Hall, but she’d thought it was just another one of the uni myths, exaggerated for optimum scandal. Knowing it was true suddenly put a new perspective on the destroyed rooms, rotting mattresses and collapsing furniture. People her age had lived and died right here. And the current students just saw the building as a spooky story.

“I’m sorry, that’s awful,” Harriet said, though it was hard to feel sorry for someone as lively as this girl.

“I know, right? We’d only just got a modem here too,” Rima said, pouting. She was playing with the folds of her hijab, adjusting the material so that it fell more neatly over her shoulders. “Such wasted potential.”

“*Modem*,” Harriet repeated in bemusement. “Should I know what that is?”

“What?!” Felix said, and then clamped his mouth shut, looking embarrassed.

“Please don’t start talking about computers again,” Kasper told him, and draped an arm over Felix’s shoulder to slouch lazily against him.

“Does everyone become a ghost when they die? Like, everyone ever?” Harriet asked, changing the subject to something she was more interested in. She tried to be casual, like the answer didn’t matter desperately.

Harriet’s parents were dead. Were they ghosts, too? Maybe they had been watching from the afterlife for the past eight years, unable to speak to her. They’d died at her gran’s house – were they there, right now?

“Most people become ghosts,” Rima said. “But some don’t stick around for long.”

“‘Stick around’? Where do they go?”

Rima shrugged. “We don’t know what happens to ghosts who disintegrate. It’s one of life’s unanswered questions. Tell us about you, anyway. What’s your name?” She patted Harriet’s arm gently.

“Harriet Stoker.” She looked down at the hand on her arm.

It would be rude to ask her to remove it. These people all seemed to be very relaxed around each other – they touched each other constantly, lolling around like a litter of puppies. There was something unnerving about it.

Harriet couldn't remember ever touching any of her friends, except for maybe an awkward hug on the last day of term.

“Great! Nice to meet you, Harriet,” Rima said, looking genuinely thrilled. “You should stay with me! I'm in Room 2B.”

“Thanks,” Harriet said, taken aback by the offer. She hadn't even thought about where she was going to stay. Did ghosts sleep? Would she need somewhere to live? There was so much she hadn't considered. “I really just want to get home, though. My gran...” She trailed off.

Rima worried her lip between her teeth. “Well, maybe someone will come looking for you and they can tell your gran what happened. Did anyone know you were coming here?”

Harriet shook her head. “I was trespassing. I didn't tell anyone.”

Rima's shoulders slumped. “That's a bummer.”

“I was on the phone with Gran before I died, though,” Harriet said. Excited now, she realized what that meant. “Could I use it to call someone?”

“We're ghosts,” said Leah. “We can't touch stuff.”

“It's voice-activated,” Harriet said. It might work. It was worth a try.

Rima smiled kindly at her. “Where is it, in your pocket?”

“I think I dropped it on the top floor,” Harriet said.

“I’ll help you find it!” Kasper said, standing up straight and releasing Felix. He suggested, “The others can stay here and keep an eye on the corp— Er, I mean—”

His eyes went wide with panic. Rima mouthed at him, “*Harriet.*”

“*Harriet,*” he corrected. His Adam’s apple dipped as he swallowed. “They’ll watch your body, *Harriet.* Sorry.”

“Great. So glad that someone else is on corpse-watch,” *Harriet* said. She desperately didn’t want to think about her body just yet, but the idea of someone keeping watch over it was reassuring. “Er, what’s your name again?”

“Kasper Jedynak,” the blond boy said, preening slightly. “4B.” He scrubbed his hand through his hair, which was surprisingly fluffy.

“Casper? Like the friendly ghost?”

A much-beleaguered look crossed his face. “Bad coincidence. Don’t bother with the jokes, I’ve heard them all before.”

“Though he is very friendly!” Rima piped up.

Kasper sighed.

He was kind of cute, actually – in a dim-looking way.

“I’m Felix Anekwe, in 4A.” The other boy held out a hand to her.

“You’re neighbours?” She tried to remember whether she’d looked inside any of the rooms on the fourth floor when she’d been taking photographs. It was hard to imagine that the wrecked rooms were still homes for these people.

“Unfortunately.” Kasper scrubbed a hand roughly over Felix’s

scalp, who put up a token resistance but didn't wriggle free.

"Boys!" Rima said, in resigned impatience. "Harriet's waiting for you to take her up to the top floor, Kasper."

He released Felix, looking sheepish. "Right. Come on, Harriet," Kasper said with dignity, squaring his (already very square) jaw.

"Don't get lost, Kasper," Felix drawled. "Just keep going upwards, OK?"

"Talk to the hand, Felix."

"*Talk to the hand?*" Harriet repeated under her breath, bemused.

FELIX

Felix watched Harriet and Kasper walk away. Kasper's hand was casually resting on Harriet's lower back for some reason. He tried to ignore the ghost of Kasper's touch prickling on his own skin.

When Harriet turned, Felix saw for the first time that there was a fist-sized dent in the back of her skull, hidden under her hair. It was the only visible sign of how she had died.

When the two of them had disappeared, the rest of them all started talking at once.

"What was *that?*" Felix asked, as Rima said, "Kasper was *flirting* with her!" and Leah mumbled, "I did not miss this at *all.*"

Felix sighed through his nose. “I cannot *believe*—”

“I *know*.” Rima shook her head. “A suicide attempt, within the first five minutes! Unbelievable!”

Guiding Harriet through her death was a bit of a shock to the system. Felix had forgotten how much there was to learn about the afterlife when you were newly dead. Everything must seem utterly confusing. Felix had been so busy obsessing over his own issues that he could barely remember what he’d done in the years after his death. Harriet was lucky she had them to help her out.

A fly was buzzing tentatively around the congealing blood near Harriet’s right ear. Felix leant closer, thinking: *Go away*. The fly zoomed off to investigate a McDonald’s wrapper instead. Felix settled back, satisfied.

“How long do you think the energy will last?” he asked. “Before we, you know ... go to sleep again.”

Leah, who was the most experienced among them, shrugged. “Could be anywhere from a few months to a year. It depends how much energy escaped and how much she kept for herself. She seems quite strong to me, so probably only a few months.”

Felix swallowed. That didn’t seem nearly enough time to do all the things he wanted to do. He felt revitalized, born again. No matter how much he prepared, he was never ready to return to that dull, dreamless hibernation.

“Well,” he said, lifting up the corners of his mouth in an attempt at a smile. “I suppose we’ll have to make the most of it

while we can.”

Just then, a small fox spirit appeared from the shadows and trotted up to them.

“Cody!” Rima gasped. The fox leapt into her arms, wriggling furiously and twisting upside down to reveal a pure white belly. “I’ve missed you so much,” Rima said, burying her face in her ginger fur. The fox let out a short, squeaky sort of yowl.

“I can’t believe she’s still here. I thought she’d have disintegrated by now.” Felix stretched out his hand, grinning. The fox tapped it with a black-tipped paw.

“She’s a tough old thing, aren’t you?” Rima kissed Cody’s nose.

Before they had all gone into hibernation mode, Rima had been training up the dead fox as a pet. The process had involved a lot of snarling and baring of teeth from both Rima and Cody, but in the end, she’d even got the fox doing tricks.

Cody jumped to the ground, stretching out her front legs, back curving into a bow. She let out another hoarse yowl, then swiftly jumped across the room to chase a mouse into the wall.

Felix stared up the stairs, after Kasper and Harriet. He wondered what they were talking about, and if his hand was still on her back. But most of all, he wondered how he could stop himself from caring.

Chapter 3

KASPER

Kasper led Harriet up the stairs, weaving between the ghosts who were still watching her. They all closed their eyes as she passed, like they were breathing her in. A girl from the second floor – who used to do student radio when she was alive, and sometimes still put on shows for them all – even darted over to touch Harriet’s arm.

Kasper couldn’t blame them. Harriet was glowing golden bright, even though she’d lost some energy while she was outside. Kasper had been so scared when she’d left Mulcture Hall. He wished desperately that he was as brave as Rima, who had gone after her without any hesitation at all. If only he could have played the role of rescuer to Harriet’s damsel in distress.

“What do they want? It’s like they think I’m a snack or something,” Harriet said, brushing her hair flat nervously. It was woven up in some fancy twist. Her make-up was very fancy too. Had she been planning to go out to a party that night, if she had survived? There were probably loads of boys waiting for her to turn up right at that very moment.

“You’re a novelty,” he replied. “Besides, your fall was kind of brutal. No one else has *ever* had such a good death, I don’t

think. Well, I suppose Leah might have, but she's never told us how she died, so that doesn't count."

Having a good death was a gruesome badge of honour. Kasper always wished his own was more exciting.

He summoned up all his courage and added, "Plus ... you're well fit. That makes you even more interesting."

Kasper waited with bated breath for her reply, nerves fluttering in his stomach. It had been a long time since he'd said anything like that to a girl.

"Less fit now that I'm a rotting corpse," Harriet muttered, and ran one hand over the back of her head again. There was a dip there, where her skull had caved in. Kasper and the others had been lucky – they had no wounds.

"Oh, I dunno about that," he said breezily. "You've raised the bar for rotting corpses everywhere."

"Thanks, um—" She paused, clearly trying to remember his name.

"Kasper," he said. He didn't mind. She'd gone through a lot, very quickly.

She smiled at him, her eyes lighting up so beautifully that it completely changed her face. "Thanks for coming with me to get my phone."

"No problem. There is something you can do in exchange, though." He let a small smile pull up the side of his mouth in a way that he used to practise in front of the mirror during pre-drinks, back when he was alive and could go to clubs and flirt with all the girls he wanted.

“What do you want?” Her voice was wary.

He bit back a grin. “Well ... you don’t happen to know how the Sky Blues are doing in the league tables this season, do you?”

Harriet grinned. Something inside him lightened. He had been hoping for this.

HARRIET

As they walked up to the top floor, Harriet made awkward small talk with this boy, Kasper. He had apparently been a rower, not a rugby player; he had been studying Art History; and he’d been seventh in line for a peerage when he had died.

When they reached the fifth floor, it was full of ghosts too. The ones up here seemed different somehow. They weren’t watching Harriet curiously, but just sat around, staring blankly into space. Some were slumped against walls or curled up on the ground. They were faint, too – dimly lit compared to the brighter ghosts she’d seen so far, who could almost pass for living people.

“What’s wrong with them?” Harriet asked.

“They’re still Shells,” Kasper said, sounding surprised to see them too.

“Shells?” Harriet moved closer to one, but he didn’t react – not even when she touched his arm. There was no sign of life on any of their faces.

“Ghosts with low energy are called Shells. They’re like empty husks of ghosts, nearly gone.”

“What?”

Kasper shook his head. “Energy doesn’t last for ever. When we first die, we’re fresh and bright, like you. But after decades, you just sort of use it all up. You stop being able to move around, and eventually your energy runs out completely and you disintegrate. Until today, we were all like this too.”

Harriet stared at him. “So what changed?”

He gestured at her. “You arrived. Your death released energy that spread through the building. We absorbed it, and it was enough to wake us up again. We were all Shells until the moment you died. We’ve been Shells before, but we’ve always found more energy from somewhere or other before we disintegrated. This time, we came really close to it, I think.” A worried look crossed his face.

“Wow.” Harriet was a bit miffed. Kasper had taken some of her energy? Surely that should have gone to her. It was Harriet’s death, after all. “So why didn’t the Shells up here wake up when I died?”

“Hmm. Well, you probably died when you hit the ground floor, right? The energy would have radiated through the building, so the ghosts on the lower floors got the most. By the time it reached this far, it was too weak for the tiny bit of fresh energy to make any difference to the ghosts here. So they stayed like this.”

No wonder the ghosts in the building were all watching Harriet. They were waiting for more energy. Well, she wasn’t going to give it to them. If losing energy meant turning into

a Shell, then she was going to keep as much as she could for herself. When she got out of here, she needed to have enough energy to spend years watching over her gran with the ghosts of her parents.

The night they died was a horrible, panicked blur of fear and misery in Harriet's memory. Her parents had eaten contaminated meat that had given them food poisoning. At first they'd just been sick, but after a few hours neither of them could breathe properly. Harriet had called an ambulance while her gran panicked and dithered, but her mum and dad had both died before the paramedics arrived.

Her whole life had been taken away from her in one moment. They'd been about to move to America for Harriet's mum's new job; they'd sold their house and were only supposed to be staying with her gran until their visas came through. Before the documents ever arrived, they were both gone. Everything Harriet had loved was lost, just like that – her family, her home, her life. Harriet was left with nothing except her grandmother.

The ache in her heart for her parents had never disappeared. Their deaths had been a terrible mistake. But now, more time with them was tantalizingly out of reach. Just.

Harriet and Kasper crossed the hallway, stopping once or twice to let a vacuous shell of a ghost drift past, blown wherever the wind took them. Finally, they reached the place where Harriet had tripped and fallen.

Peering over the edge of the floor, Harriet could see

rust-coloured splatters of blood staining a steel beam that jutted out from the floor below. She must have hit her head on the way down.

Harriet realized she was rubbing at the hole in the back of her head and forced her hand down by her side. The quicker they found her phone and got away from here, the better.

“How big’s your pager?” Kasper asked, crouching down and searching the floor for any sign of it.

“Pager? What is this, *Seinfeld*? It’s a mobile.”

Kasper looked confused, so Harriet said, exasperated, “A *mobile phone*?”

“A car phone? One of those big bricks?” He looked embarrassed. “Sorry. I was never really that bothered about technology when I was alive.”

“No, it’s like —” she gestured the size of a small rectangle. “It’s silver.” It blew her mind that he didn’t know what an iPhone was. She kept forgetting that although the other ghosts looked like they were eighteen, too, they were a lot older. There was a whole vacuum between their life experiences.

She started searching too. There were bright yellow hazard signs leaning up against the wall, warning that there was a dangerous, unstable edge. Why hadn’t she noticed them before? No wonder she’d had an accident, if they were hidden out of sight like that.

Harriet caught sight of a flash of metal hidden behind a fern. “Oh, there it is!”

When she attempted to pick it up, her hand went straight

through the phone. Of course. Disappointed, she said, “Well, I should be able to make a call using voice control.”

“How does it work?” Kasper asked. His eyes were bright with excitement. At least someone was happy. “Where are the buttons?”

“You just touch the screen,” Harriet said, already dreading having to give a tutorial in twenty-first-century technology.

“How does touching it do anything?” He leant in for a closer look, his hair brushing against hers.

Harriet had no idea how it worked, but she wasn’t going to admit to that.

“We don’t have time for me to explain. Computer stuff is very complicated. *Unlock*,” she said to the phone, before he could ask any more questions.

Something in her chest loosened when the phone registered her voice. She could call her gran before she started worrying. The battery was still on ninety per cent, too.

Kasper gasped. “There’s writing on the screen!”

A search result was still open in her browser. She had been looking up information about the building just before she’d entered, but hadn’t paid much attention at the time. Now, she paused and read the first link.

SEARCH RESULTS FOR 'MULCTURE HALL'

22 OF THE WEIRDEST UNEXPLAINED MYSTERIES

17. The 23 students who died overnight in a UK university dorm.

Back in 1994, twenty-three students died during a single night at Mulcture Hall, on the University of Warwick campus outside Coventry. The alarm was raised early one morning when a student from another hall found their friend dead in their bed. Police arrived at the scene and discovered that every student who had been in the building that night had died some time after midnight.

It was initially declared that the deaths were due to a gas leak within the building, and a press release was issued by the university to that effect, including promises to run immediate health-and-safety checks on all of the halls of residence on the campus.

However, the mystery deepened when autopsies found none of the signs usually associated with carbon monoxide poisoning or oxygen starvation due to a gas leak. To this day, the case remains open with the West Midlands Police, who declared the deaths suspicious after a long investigation.

The case has been discussed online ever since, and possible explanations have varied from a simple blood-sampling error at the post-mortem, to wilder theories such as alien abduction. However, it seems unlikely the true explanation will ever be found.

The deceased were mainly first-year students aged eighteen or nineteen, as well as four international post-graduate students in their mid-twenties.

Harriet frowned. That was weird. What could have killed them all, then? Had the police seriously never found anything in all this time?

Before Kasper could read it and get distracted, she said, “Call ‘Home.’”

When the phone started ringing, Harriet found that for some reason she couldn’t breathe. Finally, the line clicked on.

“Hello?”

Harriet exhaled in a gust and said, “Gran. Hey.”

She spoke over her. *“Have you been studying in the library all night again? You should come home, it’s not good for you.”*

“I’ve had an accident, Gran,” she said, a lump in her throat. Her gran always assumed the best of her. As if she’d ever been really studying, all those nights she’d stayed out late. She’d been messing around with mascara and eyeshadow in the empty stacks of the library’s Economics section.

“Hello?” her gran repeated. *“Harriet? I can’t hear you. I’m going to call you back. I think the line’s bad.”*

“I’m here, Gran!”

Her gran hung up. Harriet looked at Kasper, who was watching her with a soft, gentle frown. There was a tickling suspicion making itself known in the back of her brain.

The phone rang again.

“Harriet, hello?” Her gran’s voice sent ice-cold shards running through Harriet.

“Hey, Gran. I’m here, Gran. I’m so – I love you. I love you so much.”

“I think you pocket-dialled me. Come home, will you? I need you to turn the heating on. I can’t reach with my ankle.” With that, she hung up again.

Harriet really, really wished that she was the kind of person who cried. Her mum and dad felt further away than ever. “She doesn’t even know that I’m missing. If I had to die, why couldn’t it be where my parents are?”

Kasper didn’t reply. She wanted to shake him – and shake all those ghosts downstairs who’d been watching her every move. This was *her life*. Not a TV show.

Furious, she abandoned the phone and marched down the stairs. The Shells let out a collective, mournful sigh as she left. Kasper didn’t follow.

There was nowhere Harriet could go without being watched by curious eyes. All the students seemed to be enjoying their reawakening, shouting and calling out to each other. A couple of them were even playing hide-and-seek on the stairs, jumping through the walls and dangling from the floor into the rooms below.

She barged past them. When she reached the third floor, she found a scrawny boy with white-guy dreadlocks resting his ear against the wall and listening carefully.

He bared his teeth at Harriet when she passed. “Back off. Get your own rat! This one’s mine.”

Startled, she glanced back at him. “I, er, I don’t—”

“You’re not coming in at the last minute and taking my spirit. Piss off.”

Harriet opened her mouth to reply, but she had no idea what he was talking about, and didn’t really care to find out.

On the second floor, she closed her eyes and walked

through the door to the fire escape which zigzagged down the side of the building.

Sitting on the narrow metal staircase, she wrapped her arms around her knees. The sun had risen, turning the sky a pale blue. She'd been here all night. In the car park below, the spaces on either side of her car were filling up as people arrived for lectures. If she looked closely, she would probably see someone she recognized, on their way to their early morning Digital Photomedia class.

She hadn't managed to make many friends in her first few weeks of uni. Everyone in her lectures had started joking and messing around right on day one, but she could never find a good entry point into any conversations. Not that they were talking about anything interesting, anyway.

She used to sit on her own before the professor arrived, researching new cameras and lenses online, or planning new videos to film. Photography was what she was there to do, after all. Making friends could wait until later, when she'd achieved everything she wanted to achieve.

Lights glimmered on the horizon. Somewhere in the city, Harriet's grandmother was wobbling across the kitchen in her ankle cast to make tea and porridge, carefully bending down to feed the cat, and probably calling BT to check whether her landline was connecting properly. She would settle down with her knitting, and it would be hours before she realized that Harriet's call wasn't just a phone malfunction.

Disappointment boiled in her stomach, morphing into

something dense and painful until she wasn't sure whether she was sad or angry. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. This wasn't who she was. She was going to graduate with a first-class Photography degree, and then move to New York or Paris and get a job as a photographer for *Vogue*. She was supposed to be happy and successful and beautiful, with a string of glamorous model lovers and a penthouse apartment.

She wasn't meant to die in a crumbling, undignified block of student housing, or abandon her grandmother just when she needed her most. This kind of thing wasn't supposed to happen. Not to people like *her*.

I know, it's painful to watch. She's so desperate to get home.

Everything always comes back to family in the end. To the ones you love, or the ones you hate – the people who are closest to you. To get revenge or get away or get back to them. Blood is blood is blood. This is going to be important later, so pay attention.