Nightspark

A Ghostcloud novel

By Michael Mann



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To Sarah, Chris, Meg & Leia.

I'll never thank you enough.


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BATTERSEA POWER STATION
SLUMS

CHAPTER 1
HIDE AND SEEK

Click. Swish. Tap. Click.

She was coming his way. There had to be somewhere to hide in this place. He looked down the corridor. There were tall arched windows and whitewashed walls, cold stone floors and thick oak doors. Surely one of them would be unlocked.

Click. Swish. Tap. Click.

The sounds grew closer. She'd see him soon. Reaching the first of the doors, he pressed his ear to the keyhole: nothing. It was as good a door as any. He grasped the iron-ring handle and paused. What if she heard him?

On the breeze came a floral, sharp-sweet smell, and through the shutters, he glimpsed fields of red.

Click. Swish. Tap. Click.

The breeze swelled, a shutter slammed, and he took his chance. He opened the door and dived in, hoping the wind would mask the

noise. But the room was not a room at all – it was a cupboard, piled high with moth-eaten blankets. In the corner, crouched down, was someone familiar.

'Ravi?' Luke asked, his heart beating faster.

Ravi put his finger to his lips, then pointed at the door.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

She was outside already? Somehow, she'd known which door he'd gone through. He heard the ring-handle squeak and slid the bolt shut just in time. The door rattled but didn't open. An amber eye flickered at the keyhole. Luke caught the scent of tobacco.

She'd be angry now. He could hear her breathing. Luke searched the closet frantically for an exit or something and that was when he saw them. Peering out from the blankets were children: he recognised some from Battersea. Wide-eyed, breath held, they faced the door. What were they all doing here?

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

The door rattled again. Then came a strange squeaking noise. Something moved in the keyhole . . . but it wasn't a key. It was a black-painted fingernail. It poked right through, towards Luke's chest, and he leapt back, landing on the floor beside Ravi. The nail paused, as though thinking, then it did something strange: it grew,

at an angle, up the side of the door, snaking, searching, till it reached the bolt. It curled tight around it.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Luke grabbed Ravi's hand. The blankets tumbled and covered them in darkness. Through the stifling fabric, he heard the bolt slide open.

'Luke?' said a voice. But the voice was not Tabatha's. It was kind, muffled and warmly familiar. 'I've been knocking for ages. Are you under the blanket?'

The blanket was ripped from above and suddenly everything was far too bright.

His sister stood over him, frowning. 'Here.' She thrust a steaming cup into his hand. 'You look like you need it.'

CHAPTER 2
HOME

Luke sat up in bed and took the cup from his sister. He sipped and the malty aroma washed over him. He felt a little more human.

'Nightmares again?' she asked.

Not nightmares, but nightmare. He'd had the same one several nights running. Tabatha chasing, then Ravi, then both of them trapped. Every time, he woke up shaking.

It was surprising he'd dreamt at all, come to think of it. He'd been out all night with Alma – scouting for ghouls in a pre-Hallowmas 'clean-up', trailing spidery shapes through the Walthamstow Marshes. There were so many these days, he'd barely caught an hour of sleep. It seemed that this had still been enough for a nightmare.

He shrugged; he wouldn't dwell on it. That would let Tabatha win. And a dream was just a dream, no matter how often you dreamt it. Or, at least, he hoped so.

He took another sip. It was a liquid hug, washing the taste of

sleep from his mouth. 'Why is this never as good when I make it?'

'Nana's some kind of kitchen witch. Everything she makes tastes better.' Lizzy sat down on his bed and looked round. 'This room needs a refresh.'

She had a point. A whole summer had passed since he'd escaped from Battersea, yet he'd changed nothing: the piles of board games in tatty boxes, the moth-eared football and old fishing rod, the shelves upon shelves of detective comics. It was practically a museum to his ten-year-old self. But then, he'd liked being ten. Things were simpler back then.

'You know, I don't mind it. It brings back good memories.'

She leant down and picked up a pair of old trainers. 'Even these?' She threw them expertly into the bin in the corner. 'They don't even fit. Come on, Luke. A photo, a hobby, a book, or something – you must have picked up some new interests down there?'

'Shovelling?' he said. 'That's one I'd rather forget.'

There was another interest, of course, that he had to keep secret – the world of ghostclouds and all that came with it . . . flying through the night sky, changing his shape, making it rain and hopefully, soon, lightning too. As a 'half-ghost', he had the gift of

crossing over, of slipping out of his body and into the realm of the ghosts. Alma said it was because his heart had stopped at birth, and because of what he'd been through at Battersea but, whatever the reason, he was glad for it now.

Well, mostly. He'd happily lose the nightmares.

'Lizzy, do you think dreams mean anything?' He saw her expression. 'You know, like fate, signs, that kind of thing.'

She gave her lopsided smile. 'I'd forgotten how serious you could be.' She studied his face. 'If I'm honest, I don't. We're just tiny specks on a planet, beside an average star. But that's just me.' She stood and walked to the door. 'Anyway, drink up, it's banana fritters, they're best when they're hot.'

The door closed. Luke savoured his Horlicks in the quiet of his room. After two years of gruel, it was the little things that mattered.

Scratching sounded from the window. He stood up and slid it open; Stealth stuck his head through. Luke rubbed his cat's fur between the ears. 'I wish I looked as sleek as you in the morning.'

Stealth blinked, then leapt down to lick up some Horlicks that had spilt on the floor. Luke washed his face, put on the shirt he'd ironed, and tucked Ravi's old watch under his left cuff. He hated

dressing up. The collar felt even scratchier than his old sackcloth in Battersea. But today was important. He had to make an effort.

He straightened his sleeves and opened the kitchen door. The breakfast table groaned under his grandma's efforts: orange juice and sliced mangos, banana fritters and fried eggs, cereal, toast, eggs and cold beans. Nana Chatterjee was determined to feed him up after his stint underground. She plonked another hot drink on the counter before him.

'I've just had one, Nana.'

She gave him 'the look'. 'You'll drink it, young man. There's still nothing on you.'

He took it and sat next to Lizzy, who picked at a fritter while reading bits from the paper.

'You seen the Mayor's Hallowmas calendar? It's to raise money for the Battersea kids. There's a prize for the best Terence outfit on All Hallows' Eve and they're burning a Tabatha doll on Bonfire Night instead of Guy Fawkes.'

'Hmm,' said their dad, barrelling in. 'That's a little morbid. But I suppose if it's for charity . . .' He adjusted his tie. 'That Mayor's a good man. On the side of the people.'

Luke stirred his tea uneasily. It had been months since the

ghosts had torn the roof off of Battersea Power Station, freeing Luke and a thousand other shovellers. But the person behind it all – Tabatha Margate, the station owner – had disappeared entirely. Her right-hand man, Terence, had vanished too, along with dozens of the children, including Luke's best friend, Ravi.

Tabatha was now public enemy number one. The Mayor had 'wanted' posters hung from every street corner. He'd made public announcements and offered rewards. He'd even appointed a dozen detectives, including Luke's dad. And now this ridiculous bonfire. But Luke knew the truth: the Mayor had been working with her all along. Something told him it was better to keep this quiet.

'Dad, any luck with the Tabatha case?'

His dad turned and squeezed Luke's shoulders. 'Sorry, son, these things take time. We'll get her, though. London wasn't built in a day, you kn—' A burst of coughing cut him short.

Luke reached for a napkin, Lizzy for the water. The coughing came less often than when he'd left prison, but often enough. At the last visit, the doctor's face had been hard to read, unlike his bills.

Luke couldn't help but feel it was partly his fault. If his

dad hadn't fought so hard for him, Tabatha wouldn't have thrown him in prison and he'd never have got sick in the first place.

His dad caught his breath and chose his words carefully. 'You're young, and you've got your whole life ahead of you. Focus on the future, not the past.'

Luke knew his dad was right, but he couldn't forget. He *wouldn't* forget – at least, not until Ravi was safely home.

His dad smiled. 'Anyway, I bet you thought I'd forgotten. Here's your gift.'

Luke's mind went blank. 'Gift?'

'You earnt it,' said his sister. 'Two years off school and you still somehow passed the Detectives Guild exam.'

He'd only scraped a pass, but he'd wanted to be a detective for as long as he could remember, to be just like his dad. For his fifth birthday, he'd even asked for a detective hat. But he'd never expected a gift today. It had been enough just to sit the exam in the first place, unlike Ravi and the other kids, who'd never get the chance.

He felt a rush of anger, a strange urge to smash the gift on the floor. It was all so unfair. He wouldn't even be here if Ravi hadn't protected him, listened to him, taken him under his wing – if he hadn't shown him the ropes when he'd first got to

Battersea. Ravi, who'd had dreams of his own – of running a shop, of seeing his sister, of his parents' boat in the north bank water market. Ravi had wanted Luke to be his business partner, to meet his family, but when he'd needed him most, Luke had failed to protect him.

And now Ravi was gone. Sold to Europe through the Old Channel Tunnel. All because he'd worked hard and earnt his golden ticket, which was supposed to have won them their freedom. Golden handcuffs, more like.

The ghosts and the detectives all said they were searching, but until they had a location, they held little hope. Europe, as everyone kept reminding him, was enemy territory and a very big place.

'You OK, Luke?' his sister asked. They were staring at the wrapped gift squished in his tense-knuckled hands.

'Sorry,' he said. 'It's nothing.' He reached to tear at the wrapping.

'Hold on,' said his nana. 'You have to guess; you're a detective now.'

'Only an apprentice, Nana. But OK, I'll try.'

He observed the present. The wrapping was cheap, but folded precisely, stuck with smudgeless Sellotape that had been cut with

scissors. There was only one person that neat in his family.

'Lizzy wrapped it.' She grinned and nodded, but Luke was already hunting for more clues. He weighed the item in his hands, shook it and squeezed. It was firm but gave slightly. Leather, it had to be. A book, perhaps. A detective notepad? No, a box.

But a box this small . . . It wasn't, they hadn't . . .

He didn't wait to guess, he just tore off the paper.

It was a leather box – he'd been right – and inside it lay a gleaming, silver-rimmed watch. It had a dark brown strap, textured and soft. A pattern of moons ran round its edge. It looked used, but well-loved. In good condition. He heard its little cogged heart ticking boldly away.

But Luke's own heart sank. He had a watch already: Ravi's watch.

'To be a detective, you have to the look the part,' said his dad, smiling.

'This was your mum's.' His nana's eyes softened. 'She loved the sky, just like you.'

His mum's? He didn't know what to think. They'd never said she loved the sky. He felt a surge of something – sad but sweet. He missed her more these days now he was out of the station. He turned

it in his hands and saw words on the back, engraved like a motto: *Make a difference*. *Every second counts*.

Luke sighed. He loved it, and he hated it, and they'd never understand.

He forced a smile. 'Thanks, guys. Best present ever.' He took Ravi's watch off, pocketed it and put the new one on. Then he squeezed each of them in oversized hugs.

His dad patted his shoulder. 'Now, go change the world. Make every second count.'

There was a knock at the door. Jess's head peeked through. The paddle in her hand dripped water on the floorboards.

'Power cuts again. There are river jams all the way to Mile End. We'd better go now or we'll both be late.'

Luke nodded, grabbed a fritter and ran out on deck before scaling the ladder to Jess's dinghy. As his hand ran over the last rung, he stopped. There were scratch marks. He placed his fingers in the grooves. They fit. *A human hand*. And the cuts were deep . . .

His neck prickled. Someone was watching. He spun around.

It was only his dad from the boat. Luke took his fingers from the marks and shook off his doubts. He was imagining it, that's all.

'Remember,' his dad called, 'be patient, be thorough, but most

of all, be polite. Guildmasters can be tricky, but they're the ones who decide if you pass.'

But Luke wasn't worried. The one good thing about having been a Battersea shoveller was that his new boss couldn't be any worse than his last.