

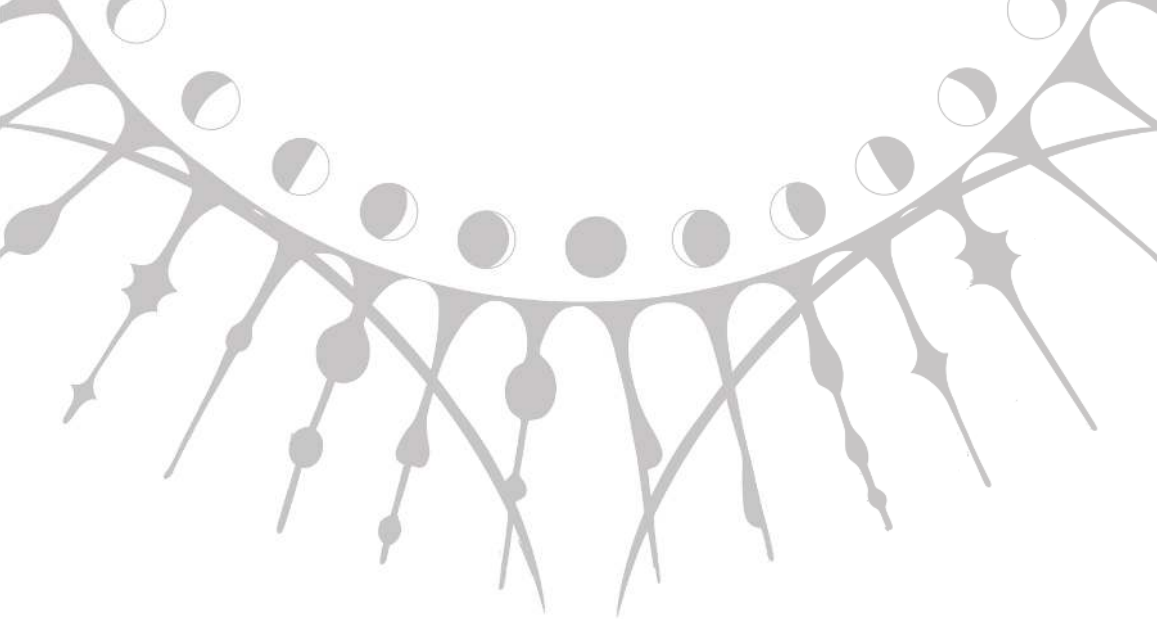


TIME IS POWER.
LOVE IS A REVOLUTION.

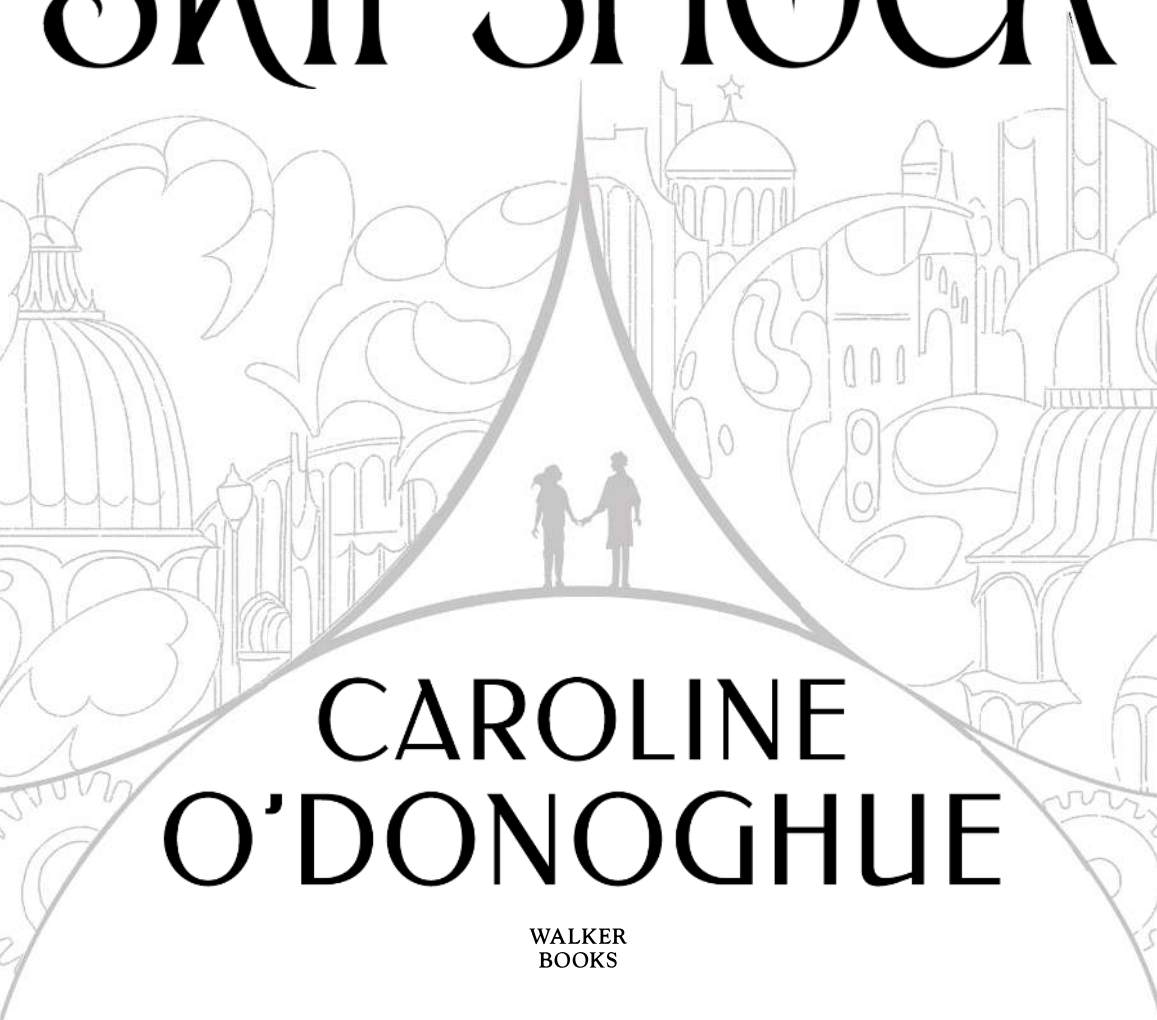
SKIP SHOCK

CAROLINE
O'DONOGHUE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



SKIPSHOCK



CAROLINE
O'DONOGHUE

WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2025 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2025 Caroline O'Donoghue
Cover illustration © 2025 Deb JJ Lee

The right of Caroline O'Donoghue to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd, 36 Cloch Choirneal, Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland. EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

This book has been typeset in Bembo Infant MT Std

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

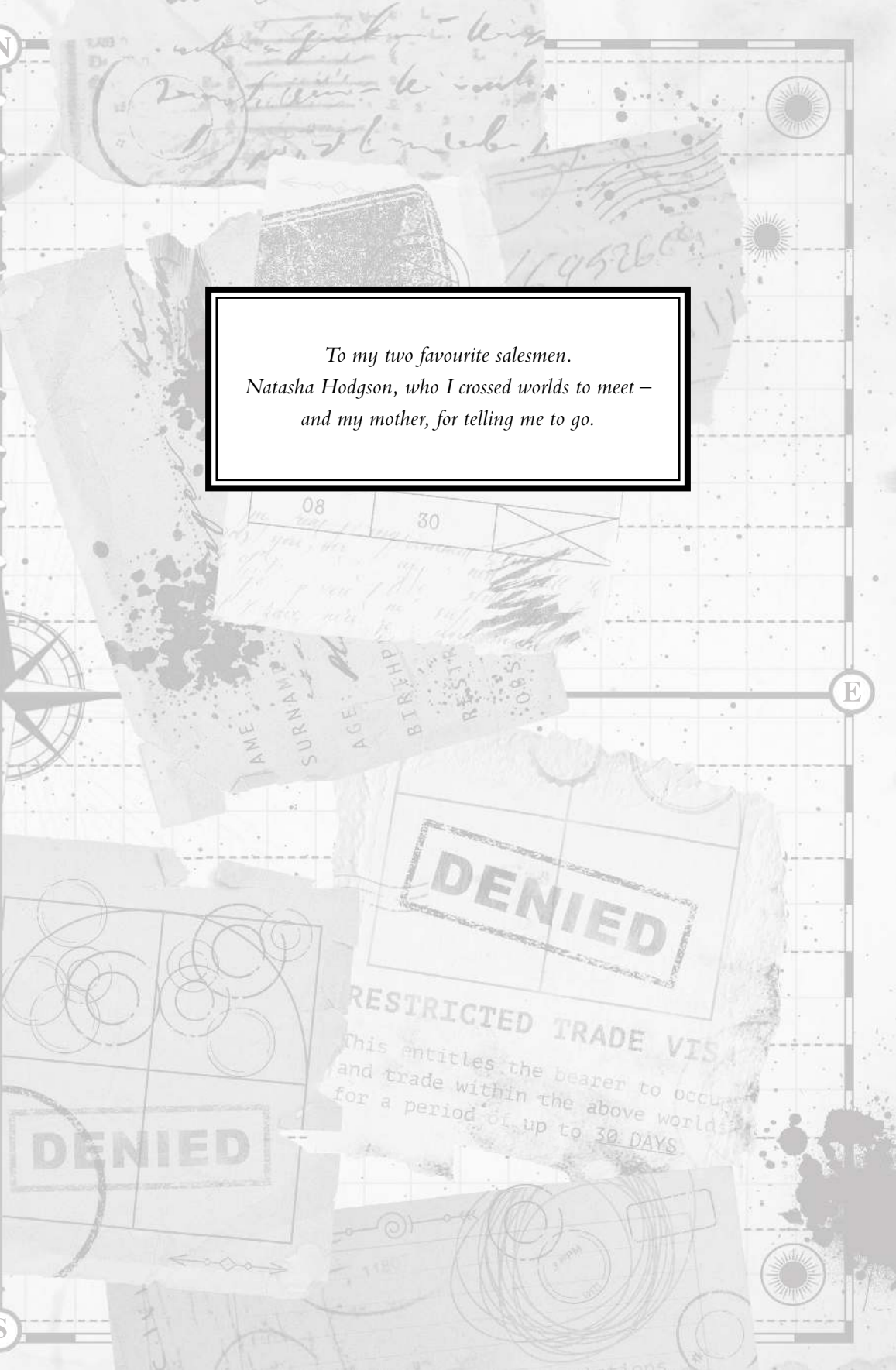
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback: 978-1-5295-0796-6
Export Pbk: 978-1-5295-3132-9

www.walker.co.uk





*To my two favourite salesmen.
Natasha Hodgson, who I crossed worlds to meet –
and my mother, for telling me to go.*

PROLOGUE

MOON

The most common response I get when I tell people what I do for a living is: I couldn't do a job like that. What they mean is they *wouldn't* do a job like this. Every so often a new gruesome story circulates about salesmen, and what travelling between time speeds does to one's physical health.

We are twice as likely to be alcoholics, three times as likely to die by suicide, and infinitely more likely to disappear without anyone caring at all.

But all I ever say is – you're right. You *couldn't* do a job like this. You couldn't haggle in a language that you don't speak. You couldn't fall asleep anywhere, training your body to relish fifteen-minute-long seated naps in the middle of a busy market square. And you couldn't wake up the way we do.

Salesmen wake up like dogs. Snoring one second, barking at a stranger the next.

I wake up on the train. Somewhere between Crader and New Davia I feel the carriage screech against a tunnel, and have the slightly spectral sensation of knowing – even with my eyes closed – that I am being watched. The tangled gari beads are pressed between the seat and the nape of my neck, leaving light indents in my skin.

“Hello,” I say, eyes shuttering open. Everything about the stranger tells me she’s in the wrong place. First of all, she’s a *she*. You rarely get women travellers these days, unless they’ve got a visa to work a special trade, and she looks too young and too out of sorts for that to be the case. Every detail uncovers a new question. Questions like: Why is she wearing summer clothes on a train heading this far west? Why is she wearing a man’s watch that doesn’t fit her wrist? I squint at the glint of light catching the clock’s face. It’s heavy. Expensive. Silver.

“Hello,” she responds anxiously. The longer I look at her, the more her strangeness unfurls like new petals. Frantic green eyes glancing worriedly down at an orange slip, a paper rectangle no bigger than her palm. “You’re in my seat.”

I gesture around the empty train carriage, arms wide with emphasis. Evidencing that there are quite a few seats free, and it’s rather churlish of her to be protective of this one.

“There is no *my* seat,” I reply. “This is the North-west quad – no assigned seating. Who are you?”

She says nothing. Just shows me her orange rectangle, creased in her nervous hand. I take it from her, and read it aloud like I’ve been handed a story written by a small and imaginative child.

“13.05 single,” I read. “Cork Kent to Dublin Heuston.”

She looks at me expectantly. “Am I near?” she asks, the hope draining from her speech. “Am I near Dublin?”

I hand the bright stub back to her. I’ve never heard of where she’s from or where she’s going to. I choose not to share this information. Salesmen are supposed to know about everywhere. The licensing tests are rigorous. They give you a big empty train map to mark with every world station, and it’s a ninety per cent pass rate. They want to make sure you know every world, so there’s less plausible deniability if they catch you in the wrong

one with the wrong visa. Perhaps she's a plant. A test. A mole. Some new plan of Semper's, designed to trial our memories, our sympathies, and our resistance to a pretty face.

Pretty face comes to me unbidden, instinctive, the way "sleep tight" might follow a softly uttered "goodnight". It presents itself to me in a childish way, because even though she's about the same age as me, she reminds me of childhood. The wild hair – red, but nowhere near a natural colour. The big eyes. The willingness to show fear to a stranger.

Fear. It's something I've tried to grow beyond. I'm not an idiot, and I don't think of myself as superhuman. I'm victim to the same thoughts and emotions as anyone else. But I do think that in almost all cases you can subdivide large emotions into smaller ones – fear into anxiety, love into affection, empathy into sympathy – therefore protecting yourself from those who will reliably take advantage. In the way insects will cloak themselves to look like their surroundings, I will respond blandly in the hope that blandness will cover me and that peace will follow.

It is only very traumatized people, Ves once told me, who confuse stasis for peace.

This person, meanwhile. This person is making no secret of her feelings. She's completely animated by fear, and, for a few seconds, I simply stare at her. Her uneasy eyes flitting all around the carriage. Her breath running short. Fingers fidgeting at her hair, then her scalp, then at the cuticles on her other hand.

"Why don't you sit down?" I suggest.

We sit, uneasily, in a moment of mutual study. Now that she's across from me, her eyes level with mine, I can feel her digesting my appearance. To be fair to her, it's a lot to take in. The crescent moon that starts above my left eyebrow and hugs around my cheekbone is far bigger than most salesmen's tattoos,

its largeness in direct proportion to how much they didn't want to give a licence to a Lunati boy. They dug deeply, sharply, and despite their insistence on professionalism and neutrality, with some spite. The scar was violent red in the beginning. Now, six years on, it has smoothed to a papery beige. I watch her, watching me. She forgets her panic for a second because she is wondering how a person could end up with a scar that is so aggressive, yet so precise.

"The answer is yes," I say. Eager, for some reason, to get these private thoughts of hers into the open. "It did hurt, and yes, I was awake. And yes, I gave my permission."

She laughs then, embarrassment briefly overriding terror. "Sorry," she says. "I was staring, wasn't I?"

"Oh, not so much that anyone would notice."

There is a brief trading of apologetic smiles, and then a silence.

Before we continue, I want to say something about that trade and that silence, because it happened so quickly, and no one was there to see it. Among salesmen, there is a practice known as scooping. This means that a salesman "scoops" a bunch of his old inventory into a handkerchief for you at a low price, and while most of it will be useless or cheap or out of date, there will always be something strangely valuable in there. A little gem, or a rare coin, or a kind of glass that you didn't think they made any more. Maybe the salesman didn't realize he was giving it to you. Maybe he holds you in higher esteem than you originally thought.

That's what it was like with her, during that first train journey. A gemstone was briefly uncovered in silence.

She scooped me up, is what I'm saying. Or maybe it was the

other way around. The face and the eyes and all the silly red hair. Not red like fire. Red like rust. Red like metal. Red like a chemical spill.

The moment passes. She remembers that she has no idea where she is, and her breath starts coming short. She lays the palm of her hand across her chest, as though trying to block her own heart from escaping.

“My name is Moon,” I say at last. “And I think you’re in the wrong place.”

WORLD MAP



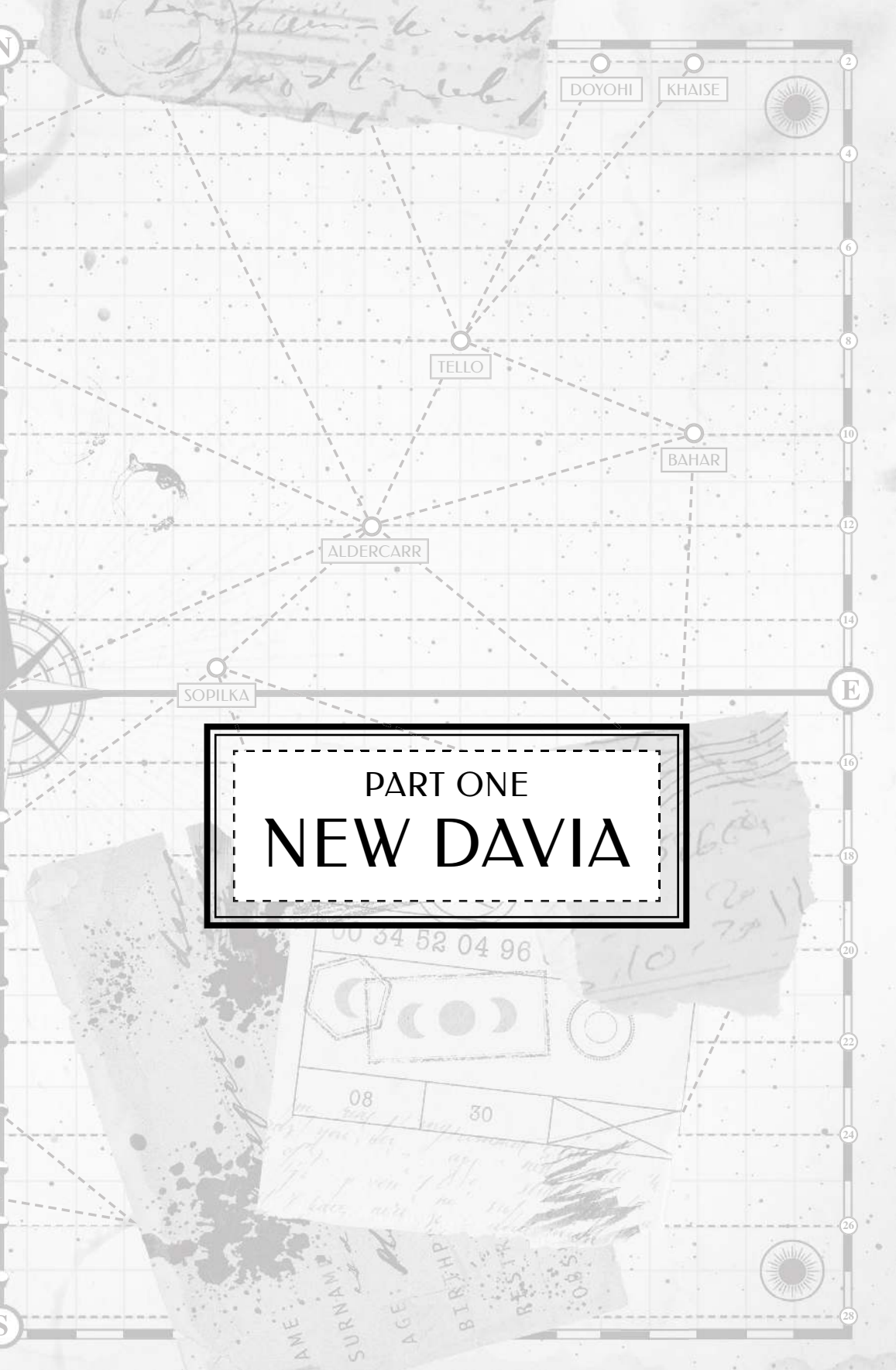
DENIED

RESTRICTED TRADE VIS

This entitles the bearer to occur
and trade within the above worlds
for a period of up to 30 DAYS.

DENIED

Failure to comply with regulations
will result in fines and penalties



DOYOHI

KHAISE

TELLO

BAHAR

ALDERCARR

SOPILKA

PART ONE
NEW DAVIA

00 54 52 04 96

08	30	
----	----	--

NAME: SURNAME: AGE: BIRTH: RESID: 005

MARGO

The school pushed for a therapist.

Donna-Anne agreed to it, not because she believed in therapy, but because she wanted to impress upon Margo how serious the matter had become. She had, after all, sold the watch. And not just any watch. *Richard's* watch.

Donna-Anne said it as though Margo had stolen from her mother directly. As if she had purposefully severed her mother's last remaining tie, and only out of spite. But Donna-Anne had many things, including their house, to remember Richard by. Margo only had the watch. It was, technically speaking, hers to sell.

The therapist suggested that Margo had depression. The therapist implied that it was something that was always cooking inside of Margo, even before the crash. That death had stirred up a nature that was naturally morose. Old school reports were summoned and then reviewed. Much was made of comments over her primary school years.

Margo is content in her own company, read one.

Margo often seems a little lost during group projects, came another.

And – this one felt slightly cruel, on review – *Margo has not left much of an impression on the other girls.*

He suggested that there was a link between this early Margo and the Margo who, aged sixteen, sold her dead father's watch, dyed her hair metallic red, and attempted to run away from home. He thought it was deeper than simply having a dead dad. He said that somewhere down the line, and after more meetings, drugs might be helpful. For the moment, he said, he could recommend breathing exercises.

Donna-Anne took her daughter and left the therapist's office.

There was nothing, Donna said, actually *wrong* with Margo. If anyone was to blame, it was Donna herself for allowing the leash to get too long. She had left her daughter to her own devices and it had led to the blossoming of a criminal. The whole thing had gone beyond her mother's capabilities. It was time for a change. It was time for boarding school.

(They got the watch back, of course. The pawn shop owner, a Cash4Gold that took silver too, had called Donna-Anne after he realized that the third hand only worked when you pushed the timer. The inscription – *Richard Madden III* – made its owner easy to track down. Small towns don't forget plane crashes in a hurry, much less their victims.)

And this is how we find Margo, in the moments before she fell through worlds. A sixteen-year-old failed runaway with a watch and unsuitable clothing. Six days off her next birthday, and on a train from Cork to Dublin.

Thirsty.

So, so thirsty. The summer had arrived late in Ireland, as it almost always does, with hot weather such a rarity that no one knew how to protect against it. She did not bring sunglasses for the immense glare of light through the window. She had not brought her water bottle. Her only snack was a sweating ham sandwich, gluey with heat. She picked at the

bread and got thirstier by the minute.

The train screeched to a halt inside a blackened tunnel. She waited a moment. A voice came over the tannoy, a fuzz of static obscuring the driver's words. Something was broken. He repeated himself, and Margo listened closely. She understood nothing. Then, silence.

When she had boarded in Cork there had been a smattering of other travellers in the carriage with her. But they had all got off in Mallow, and now she was en route to Dublin alone. She became uneasy. It felt like being strapped into a broken roller coaster, wondering whether her terror was normal or simply part of the ticketed experience.

The open windows, which had been the carriage's only air conditioning, let in nothing but dead heat and a dank earthy smell. There was a faint whiff of piss, and she wondered whether people sheltered in these tunnels at night.

As the darkness pushed in on the train and the tannoy continued to express garbled, apologetic sentiments, Margo felt her throat grind with anxiety. There was nothing really scary at all happening, she told herself. She was just dehydrated. This was why she had a headache. This was why she was panicking. There was a shop somewhere on board. There had to be. She needed water. She got out of her seat, keeping her hands on the headrests in case the train suddenly started moving again.

As Margo moved through one empty carriage after another, there was a mounting sense that she was in a problem that Coke Zero could not solve.

Eventually, she came to a shuttered counter that usually sold snacks and drinks. Through the shutters she could see cans winking at her. Margo threaded her fingers mournfully through the gaps, like a mother visiting her son in prison. She looked

down at her silver watch, slung low over her palm, and reasoned that she would sell it all over again for a single can.

She was alone on a broken train. A wild sadness rushed through her, not for the situation itself, but because of how much this moment felt like all the ones that had led to it. She had been a clean and well-running thing for so much of her life. She was an only child, and not the kind who had lots of cousins and neighbours to compensate. Their family was a strange and quiet one. Love was gained through achievement and maintained through behaving pleasantly. She had been a good student and she had some friends, despite what those early school reports had implied.

Then her father died. Her habitual insomnia and moody periods became her permanent companions. She was sleep-starved and in shock. She stopped talking to everyone, stopped going to school, and eventually her friends stopped calling. Life was too hard to put up with for a moment longer, so she decided to run away. She didn't get far. Boarding school was meant to be the compromise. The fresh start.

Yet here she was: stuck, clouded with menace, and alone. No fresh start, and no bad dye job, could change that. She was silly for thinking it could.

The train started moving again. There was a sharp, screeching noise that sounded like metal on metal, and she knew the train was fighting hard against the darkness. Before she even had time to apply this metaphor to herself, the compartment shook and Margo was thrown by the momentum. She steadied herself, one arm clutching furiously at the wall. As the train moved faster and faster, she inched her way to the rubbery airlock between carriage doors.

In the airlock, she started to feel sick. It suddenly felt as though all her internal organs were crowding together and

looking to escape through her neck. Would she vomit? *Here?* On Iarnród Éireann property? Margo closed her eyes and remembered Cork, where everyone got the bus everywhere. She could no longer keep her balance by holding on to the wall, and instead curled into a ball on the floor, her eye sockets resting on both knees.

As the airlock rocked and screeched, Margo wondered if this was what it felt like to die. She pushed the timer on her father's watch, the thin hand that only ticked for sixty seconds and stopped again. She practised the breathing lessons the therapist had taught her. Timing her breaths on ten-second intervals, watching the third hand strike two, then four, then six. Breathing in. Breathing out.

And when she opened her eyes again, the train had changed completely.

Everything was wooden. The industrial plastics had been replaced by dull mahogany. The sticky, piss-soaked air had thinned. It was suddenly cool, like a window was open and letting in a chilly winter. Margo rubbed at her arms in her thin denim jacket, her cheap summer dress soaked with sweat.

She stumbled back to her seat, the carriage still empty. Although not, she suspected, because passengers had changed for Mallow. The itchy seat coverings that her legs had prickled against just moments before were now a deep red velvet, torn in places and showing stuffing. Her legs wobbled as she walked.

But one other thing, she realized, had changed.

She wasn't alone any more.

A figure, a man, was asleep with his head against the window. His suit jacket was draped over him like a blanket, and his shoes – a pair of dark, battered brogues – were on the seat opposite him.

Her seat.

She could sit somewhere else. There was, after all, no one else on board. But to sacrifice 57B at this point was to let go of reality. She needed to talk to someone. Anyone. A grown-up. She watched him, her gaze packed with need, wondering if that alone was enough to wake him up.

His grey eyes opened quickly and fell from her hair to her feet, taking detailed mental notes on each part of her. Margo could do nothing but stare back.

He was not, as it turned out, a grown-up.

What age he was exactly, she couldn't tell. Every element of his appearance both proved and contradicted the idea of maturity. His mess of thick brown hair said *boy*; the grey streaks in it said *man*. His quick, mischievous smile was definitely *boy*; his dark suit was absolutely *man*.

The one thing about him that didn't figure into the algebra of how old he was, was the tattoo that started at his temple and arched around his left eye. The tattoo was the thinnest sliver of a crescent moon.

"Hello," he said at last.

MOON

There isn't very much time for pleasantries, because moments after Margo gives me her name, the Pig arrives.

The Pig's mask is iron and takes up two-thirds of his face, which makes me think he was tattooed right at the start of the ban, when things were a little tougher. His right eye, cheekbone and temple are still pink and fleshy. But his nose is a sculpted snout, his jowls a polished grey. He's making his way slowly down the carriage, refilling the paper roll on his ticket dispenser as he does. He's trying to do two things at once, which they're never very good at.

It is sad and probably wrong to hate the Pigs. After the war, when Semper started recruiting Northern workers for the trains, they debated for a long time just how to make it secure. They had to be absolutely sure the ticket inspectors, janitors and assorted personnel wouldn't use the job as a means to escape to the South. So men – family men, mostly, made destitute by the various collapsed industries affected by the travel ban – queued up to be maimed and plated. Each man's septum deviated by ironwork, grunts peppering their speech where easy breath once drew. We called them pigs because they snorted, and because we hated them. Then Semper made it official. It has

always been in their interest to make travel into a ghoulish thing. They updated their plate designs and turned the pig joke into hard fact.

I look at Margo. “You’re really sure you don’t have a ticket?” She brandishes the orange thing again.

“Not *that*; that’s not a ticket.”

Why am *I* panicking now? This girl is none of my business.

“I was just trying to get to school. My new school.”

The Pig drops his paper refill and it rolls under a seat. He sighs, lowering slowly to his knees to fish for it. They must stand up and sit down carefully: their equilibrium is shot from the plates, their inner ear affected by vertigo.

“Do you have a visa?” I ask her, my voice low.

“A visa? Why the hell would I have a visa for Dublin?”

I run my eyes over her again. The thin clothing, the heavy watch, the strange short hair. The accent, melodic and low, and slightly reminiscent of certain Semper house servants I’ve come across. But richer. Deeper. There are schools in slower worlds that Mid-Axis people used to send their kids to. You can learn so much more in a forty-hour day. Your kid comes back still a kid, but now she’s a lawyer too. I didn’t think you were allowed to do that any more.

“You’re from a place called Dublin?” I ask, keeping one eye on the struggling Pig.

“No, I’m *from* a place called Cork.” She’s indignant about this. “I’m *going* to Dublin. To school.”

Whatever brief moment of connection we experienced before the Pig showed up, it appears to have evaporated now. It’s as if each of us has been paired up to play a game with a stranger who doesn’t know the rules. She can’t get over that I don’t know about these places, these words. She’s frustrated,

fuming in a way that implies she thinks she could win if she was with someone who could actually *play*.

Maybe there are open worlds that I don't know about. Maybe boarding school visas are back on. I don't have kids, so maybe I missed the bulletin. Maybe this girl somehow walked onto the wrong train and just needs help navigating her way onto the right one.

"Well, if you can't come up with a visa and a ticket in the next thirty seconds," I tell her, "you're out in the snow." I say it with a touch too much spite, as if trying to remind her that it's *my* game she's not playing properly, and not the other way around.

The poor girl. She looks like she might keel over in panic. She seems to have no idea why you would need a visa to get the train. And the ticket. She bought it from somewhere, certainly, but not a Semper train. And there *are* no trains except Semper trains. Haven't been for years.

Margo finally notices the Pig thundering towards us, and for a brief second looks relieved by the presence of a much older person in uniform. Then she clocks the ironwork, and her face pales.

Another benefit of the Pigs looking the way they do: nobody taking a Semper train thinks that anyone on board is going to help them.

"Ticket, visa," he says, first to me, but with a metal eye swivelling towards Margo as he speaks. He's clearly finding her hard to figure out too. Those clothes? This weather?

My tattoo gives me permission to travel, but my visa informs him where, exactly, I'm allowed to travel to. I can go North. North-west, North-east, Far North. Certain worlds along the Mid-Axis. But I cannot go South.

"Sales," I say to the Pig. "Semi-precious raw material; heating sources; dry goods."

He punches my ticket, grunts and moves on to Margo.

“Ticket, visa,” he repeats.

She looks to me, willing an answer, an excuse, praying that anyone will speak on her behalf.

There is a short pause. A pause in which I weigh up several options: what this will cost me, what it is worth, and how many problems it’s likely to create down the road.

If she is a lost, rich schoolgirl, then her family will be grateful to me for looking after her. A cash reward. Or, if not a cash reward, a new trade contact, a sponsor for a Southern visa. I need slower worlds on my rota. I am, quite literally, not getting any younger.

If she’s *not* a lost, rich schoolgirl, and she’s ... something else, from somewhere else, then this amounts to something far more. It means some of the sealed worlds are perhaps not as sealed as we once thought. That there are avenues of travel that Semper does not yet know about, or does and is keeping secret. It means someone started on one train and ended up on another, which means there is a rupture somewhere.

And where there is a rupture, there is an opportunity.

For Vesna, and for PACT. But most of all for me, the person who delivers this strange girl into their lap.

Option one is lucrative, easy, and gets me out of sales.

Option two is dangerous, deadly, and could help unmake civilization. A civilization that – as Ves often says, and I’ve agreed with, in a drunk, non-committal sort of way – desperately needs to be unmade. And in that scenario, there *is* no sales, and so I come out on top regardless.

When you become a salesman you quickly discern the difference between The Rules and The Law. Lying about your quantities is breaking the rules; dodging your taxes is breaking

the law. Taking a message from one world to another is breaking the rules; helping an undocumented person cross worlds is breaking the law.

I sometimes break the rules. I never break the law.

Not since becoming a salesman, anyway.

“This is my apprentice,” I say as brightly as I can. I take out my wallet and try not to make eye contact with the baton attached to the Pig’s trousers. “And I can’t seem to find her travel papers.”

Most people, I think you’ll agree, really couldn’t do a job like this.

MARGO

Wherever she had ended up, her bags had not deigned to come with her. She had nothing except the clothes on her back. Even her phone, somehow, had stayed on the Cork train.

When something bad happens to you, it's normal to comb through your own actions for the moment you signed up for your own doom. In Margo's case, she couldn't locate it. Even Dorothy had wished Kansas away. Margo *wanted* to go to Dublin.

The pig man let them get off at New Davia, accepting the bribe Moon offered him. She kept replaying her memory of the pig man's face. He was short and heavyish, like a club bouncer, only most of his face was iron. Like a mask that was welded onto his skin, or perhaps *instead* of skin. And the mask was ... well, piggish. Did he have a nose under that snout? Or *was* his nose the snout?

There was nothing to do but follow Moon. He had taken some kind of risk for her. Financial, definitely, but perhaps some other kind too. Visas were important, wherever she was, and she didn't have one. Could she get one? She vaguely recalled a moment in childhood when her mother had lost her passport shortly before a family holiday. There were forms and visits to several boring offices, but it was handled quickly enough.

She could do that. A visa was just a passport, really, and she had one of those. She didn't know where it was, but it existed, and surely there was a database of these kinds of documents internationally. People were always saying they were being secretly monitored. Well, here was a moment when this could be both useful and true. She would go with Moon, get warm – it was so cold, it was too cold, it was illegal how cold it was – and then he would tell her the way, perhaps even escort her, to the nearest passport office.

The train station was one large room with a shuttered saloon bar. A painted sign read: NEW DAVIA CENTRAL STATION.

Below, in smaller writing: NWQ-6 – RESTRICTED INTERWORLD TRADING ONLY.

She wanted to ask him to decode this for her, but he was already walking fast, crossing the station at an impressive clip. Margo was left with the unsettling task of trying to decode the sign herself. New Davia she had never heard of. But “Interworld” was far more alarming. She squinted at it, wondering if it was simply a brand name. Amazon wasn't, after all, a company based in a rainforest.

Her focus went back to the train they had just disembarked from.

It was a steam train, and old, but the tracks were the interesting thing. The rickety wooden boards were knitted close together on the ground, but as they receded from the station they spread further apart and curved upwards. The tracks climbed higher, reaching towards the sky in a giant curve the way a roller coaster might. The sky was dark and full of snow, so it was impossible to see where the tracks ended. But Margo saw something above the stars. A kind of stitching in the sky, a spot where the air warped and stretched, blurring the edge of

the moon's pale circle. For all the world's strangeness, the moon was still the same old familiar silver dollar, hovering mutely before her.

"Are you coming?" He was already across the station. His movements seemed to imply that if she did not keep pace with him, he would simply leave her there to rot.

She ran across the empty station, bursting onto the New Davia streets. Freezing air danced through her, the snow falling light and steady. Within moments, Margo's dress was plastered to her skin like tissue paper. The chattering, illegal-seeming cold came harder. It was dazzling pain now, the kind of weather that regularly snapped off the noses of people who were still using them to breathe.

Moon was already halfway up the street. The world was so dark, and this strange boy the only visible thing within it. She felt as though she were in a video game, the kind that will only load one step at a time. And like a video game, he always remained several steps ahead of her, just close enough to seem catchable.

"Can you *please* slow down?"

He said something in reply, but it was immediately swallowed by the snow.

"*What?*" she shouted back. "What did you say?"

He did not repeat himself. This struck her as incredibly rude, but as he quite clearly had all the power in this situation, he had the liberty of rudeness too. She began speed-walking after him, her breath haunting the air in big, hot puffs.

Silently, she began to cry. It made no difference. Not to the snow, or in it.

So she walked on. And the further she went, the less hope she had for the international database of passports.

Every few moments, a lamp post would cast a gloomy yellow light on the town. Because it *was* a town, she realized: it had shops and houses, and signs that said BREAD and SLIP and FUEL. It was too dark to make out colour, but she identified shiny slicks where house paint was, and wormy grey spaces where it had been chipped away. It was not a rich place. It was rickety and frozen. Dull. Dim. Windows were lit by candles and the streetlights were powered by gas. For a moment, Margo considered that she was not simply in a new place, but in the past, too. Some kind of desolate Siberian township from the turn of the century. But how?

She thought of time-travelling narratives, butterfly effects, and half-remembered YouTube videos about black holes. She attempted moral questions around the killing of baby Hitler. She tried to remember anything about her ancestors, and the possibilities of preventing her own existence. Then she looked up at Moon, who had finally slowed down just as she was starting to match his pace. The baby Hitler stuff had got her revved up. They briefly bashed into one another in this new negotiation of speed, her feet tripping on the backs of his shoes, her forehead almost flush with the back of his neck. The path was icy and Moon almost fell, gripping the fence just in time.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

“That was you, right?” Suddenly he was full of panic. “You crashed into me?”

Margo looked around, unsure if this was a riddle. “Yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

He kept his hand on the fence a moment, his face empty of emotion. He looked as though he were performing a kind of factory reset on himself. Then he came back, suddenly animated by purpose. He gave her shoulder a strange, reassuring squeeze.

“All right,” he said. “All right. On we go.”

She didn’t quite know what she had just witnessed, only that it was a sort of private dread, and that she should not mention it again.

The moonlight glanced off her father’s watch, still ticking reliably. She had taken the 13.05 train from Cork. According to her wrist, it had only just turned two p.m. They twisted off the wide street and onto a narrow path. Then the lamplight cast its beam on something so improbable that she almost laughed out loud at the sight of it.

Oranges.

Everywhere, oranges. Thick hedges, stiff and dense as mattresses, started to curve inwards off the road, and the streetlights turned to paper lanterns. Oranges hung off all of them. She was certain that oranges were strictly a tree thing, not a hedge thing, but here they were. Bright and smiling and surrounded by glowing white blossom. So joyful-looking that they seemed to be tap-dancing their way towards her.

“Oranges,” she said, because that was all she could think. “*Oranges.*”

He looked at her, bemused. The hedge path had narrowed, pushing their bodies closer together. She gazed up at him. The scar was, obviously, the thing you noticed first. It was the thinnest sliver of the moon, the last wink of the month before the sky became black again. But he looked different outside, and in the dark. He was white, but tinged with something else, something she didn’t have a reference point for. His skin was a faint silver, very almost lilac. It felt like a trick of the eye, a colour you could only see if you kept it slightly out of focus. His hair had something of the same quality. On the train it was an ordinary sort of light brown, longish and wavy. But under

the frosted lamps, strands of his hair refracted light, turning it to silver thread. Not grey and wiry like an old person's hair. But silver, and very fine.

"You're staring at me," he said as she followed him.

"No," she replied, even though she was. "Is your real name Moon?"

"No." He looked at her like she should have known this. He did not volunteer what his real name might be. "Is your real name Margo?"

"Yes."

They walked on. She put aside her theory of time travel and infant fascists. She did not really believe that she was in the past. The skin, the scar. The fence. The factory reset. If a person like him had existed in any lifetime, she would have heard about it. They would have taught him in schools.

The orange bushes peeled away, and they found themselves standing in front of a large house. Four storeys high, cherry-coloured, with a porch that wrapped around the whole building. White painted patterns decorated every side: swirls and flowers, birds and half-set suns.

Even though she was cold and frightened and unsure if she had done the wrong thing by following him, she couldn't help realizing that she was standing before something very beautiful. Not just the house, but the whole scene: the oranges and their friendly smell, the lanterns lighting her way, and a sign that said **SALESMEN WELCOME – BEDS FOR CHEAP** propped up in the window.