1

A secret's worth depends on the people from whom it must be kept. My first thought on waking was to tell my best friend about the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. Tomás Aguilar was a classmate who devoted his free time and his talent to the invention of wonderfully ingenious but bizarre contraptions such as the aerostatic dart or the dynamo spinning top. I pictured us both, equipped with torches and compasses, uncovering the mysteries of those bibliographic catacombs. Who better than Tomás to share my secret? Then, remembering my promise, I decided that circumstances advised me to adopt what in detective novels is termed a different 'modus operandi'. At noon I approached my father to quiz him about the book and about Julián Carax – both of which must be famous, I assumed. My plan was to get my hands on the complete works and read them all by the end of the week. To my surprise, I discovered that my father, a natural-born librarian and a walking lexicon of publishers' catalogues and oddities, had never heard of *The Shadow of the Wind* or Julián Carax. Intrigued, he examined the printing history on the back of the title page for clues.

'It says here that this copy is part of an edition of two thousand five hundred printed in Barcelona by Cabestany Editores, in June 1936.'

'Do you know the publishing house?'

'It closed down years ago. But, wait, this is not the original. The first edition came out in November of 1935, but was printed in Paris. . . . Published by Galiano & Neuval. Doesn't ring a bell.'

'So is this a translation?'

'It doesn't say so. From what I can see, the text must be the original one.'

'A book in Spanish, first published in France?'

'It's not that unusual, not in times like these,' my father put in. 'Perhaps Barceló can help us. . . .'

Gustavo Barceló was an old colleague of my father's who now owned a cavernous establishment on Calle Fernando with a commanding position in the city's secondhand-book trade. Perpetually affixed to

his mouth was an unlit pipe that impregnated his person with the aroma of a Persian market. He liked to describe himself as the last romantic, and he was not above claiming that a remote line in his ancestry led directly to Lord Byron himself. As if to prove this connection, Barceló fashioned his wardrobe in the style of a nineteenth-century dandy. His casual attire consisted of a cravat, white patent leather shoes, and a plain glass monocle that, according to malicious gossip, he did not remove even in the intimacy of the lavatory. Flights of fancy aside, the most significant relative in his lineage was his begetter, an industrialist who had become fabulously wealthy by questionable means at the end of the nineteenth century. According to my father, Gustavo Barceló was, technically speaking, loaded, and his palatial bookshop was more of a passion than a business. He loved books unreservedly, and – although he denied this categorically – if someone stepped into his bookshop and fell in love with a tome he could not afford, Barceló would lower its price, or even give it away, if he felt that the buyer was a serious reader and not an accidental browser. Barceló also boasted an elephantine memory allied to a pedantry that matched his demeanour and the sonority of his voice. If anyone knew about odd books, it was he. That afternoon, after closing the shop, my father suggested that we stroll along to the Els Quatre Gats, a café on Calle Montsió, where Barceló and his bibliophile knights of the round table gathered to discuss the finer points of decadent poets, dead languages, and neglected, moth-ridden masterpieces.

Els Quatre Gats was just a five-minute walk from our house and one of my favourite haunts. My parents had met there in 1932, and I attributed my one-way ticket into this world in part to the old café's charms. Stone dragons guarded a lamplit façade. Inside, voices seemed to echo with shadows of other times. Accountants, dreamers, and would-be geniuses shared tables with the spectres of Pablo Picasso, Isaac Albéniz, Federico García Lorca, and Salvador Dalí. There any poor devil could pass for a historical figure for the price of a small coffee.

'Sempere, old man,' proclaimed Barceló when he saw my father come in. 'Hail the prodigal son. To what do we owe the honour?'

'You owe the honour to my son, Daniel, Don Gustavo. He's just made a discovery.'

'Well, then, pray come and sit down with us, for we must celebrate this ephemeral event,' he announced.

'Ephemeral?' I whispered to my father.

'Barceló can only express himself in frilly words,' my father whispered back. 'Don't say anything, or he'll get carried away.'

The lesser members of the coterie made room for us in their circle, and Barceló, who enjoyed flaunting his generosity in public, insisted on treating us.

'How old is the lad?' inquired Barceló, inspecting me out of the corner of his eye.

'Almost eleven,' I announced.

Barceló flashed a sly smile.

'In other words, ten. Don't add on any years, you rascal. Life will see to that without your help.'

A few of his chums grumbled in assent. Barceló signalled to a waiter of such remarkable decreptitude that he looked as if he should be declared a national landmark.

'A cognac for my friend Sempere, from the good bottle, and a cinnamon milkshake for the young one – he's a growing boy. And bring us some bits of ham, but spare us the delicacies you brought us earlier, eh? If we fancy rubber, we'll call for Pirelli tyres.'

The waiter nodded and left, dragging his feet.

'I hate to bring up the subject,' Barceló said, 'but how can there be jobs? In this country nobody ever retires, not even after they're dead. Just look at El Cid. I tell you, we're a hopeless case.'

He sucked on his cold pipe, eyes already scanning the book in my hands. Despite his pretentious façade and his verbosity, Barceló could smell good prey the way a wolf scents blood.

'Let me see,' he said, feigning disinterest. 'What have we here?'

I glanced at my father. He nodded approvingly. Without further ado, I handed Barceló the book. The bookseller greeted it with expert hands. His pianist's fingers quickly explored its texture, consistency, and condition. He located the page with the publication and printer's notices and studied it with Holmesian flair. The rest of us watched in silence, as if awaiting a miracle, or permission to breathe again.

'Carax. Interesting,' he murmured in an inscrutable tone.

I held out my hand to recover the book. Barceló arched his eyebrows but gave it back with an icy smile.

'Where did you find it, young man?'

'It's a secret,' I answered, knowing that my father would be smiling to himself. Barceló frowned and looked at my father. 'Sempere, my dearest old friend, because it's you and because of the high esteem I hold you in and in honour of the long and profound friendship that unites us like brothers, let's call it at forty duros, end of story.'

'You'll have to discuss that with my son,' my father pointed out. 'The book is his.'

Barceló granted me a wolfish smile. 'What do you say, laddie? Forty duros isn't bad for a first sale. . . . Sempere, this boy of yours will make a name for himself in the business.'

The choir cheered his remark. Barceló gave me a triumphant look and pulled out his leather wallet. He ceremoniously counted out two hundred pesetas, which in those days was quite a fortune, and handed them to me. But I just shook my head. Barceló scowled.

'Dear boy, greed is most certainly an ugly, not to say mortal, sin. Be sensible. Call me crazy, but I'll raise that to sixty duros, and you can open a retirement fund. At your age you must start thinking of the future.'

I shook my head again. Barceló shot a poisonous look at my father through his monocle.

'Don't look at me,' said my father. 'I'm only here as an escort.'

Barceló sighed and peered at me closely.

'Let's see, junior. *What* is it you want?'

'What I want is to know who Julián Carax is and where I can find other books he's written.'

Barceló chuckled and pocketed his wallet, reconsidering his adversary.

'Goodness, a scholar. Sempere, what do you feed the boy on?'

The bookseller leaned towards me confidentially, and for a second I thought he betrayed a look of respect that had not been there a few moments earlier.

'We'll make a deal,' he said. 'Tomorrow, Sunday, in the afternoon, drop by the Ateneo library and ask for me. Bring your precious find with you so that I can examine it properly, and I'll tell you what I know about Julián Carax. Quid pro quo.'

'Quid pro what?'

'Latin, young man. There's no such thing as a dead language, only dormant minds. Paraphrasing, it means that you can't get something for nothing, but since I like you, I'm going to do you a favour.'

The man's oratory could kill flies in midair, but I suspected that if I wanted to find out anything about Julián Carax, I'd be well advised to stay on good terms with him. I proffered my most saintly smile in delight at his Latin outpourings.

'Remember, tomorrow, in the Ateneo,' pronounced the bookseller. 'But bring the book, or there's no deal.'

'Fine.'

Our conversation slowly merged into the murmuring of the other members of the coffee set. The discussion turned to some documents found in the basement of El Escorial that hinted at the possibility that Don Miguel de Cervantes had in fact been the nom de plume of a large, hairy lady of letters from Toledo. Barceló seemed distracted, not tempted to claim a share in the debate. He remained quiet, observing me from his fake monocle with a masked smile. Or perhaps he was only looking at the book I held in my hands.

2

That Sunday, clouds spilled down from the sky and swamped the streets with a hot mist that made the thermometers on the walls perspire. Halfway through the afternoon, the temperature was already grazing the nineties as I set off towards Calle Canuda for my appointment with Barceló, carrying the book under my arm and with beads of sweat on my forehead. The Ateneo was – and remains – one of the many places in Barcelona where the nineteenth century has not yet been served its eviction notice. A grand stone staircase led up from a palatial courtyard to a ghostly network of passageways and reading rooms. There, inventions such as the telephone, the wristwatch, and haste, seemed futuristic anachronisms. The porter, or perhaps it was a statue in uniform, barely noticed my arrival. I glided up to the first floor, blessing the blades of a fan that swirled above the sleepy readers melting like ice cubes over their books.

Don Gustavo's profile was outlined against the windows of a gallery that overlooked the building's interior garden. Despite the almost tropical atmosphere, he sported his customary foppish attire, his monocle shining in the dark like a coin at the bottom of a well. Next to him was a figure swathed in a white alpaca dress who looked to me like an angel.

When Barceló heard the echo of my footsteps, he half closed his eyes and signalled for me to come nearer. 'Daniel, isn't it?' asked the bookseller. 'Did you bring the book?'

I nodded on both counts and accepted the chair Barceló offered me next to him and his mysterious companion. For a while the bookseller only smiled placidly, taking no notice of my presence. I soon abandoned

all hope of being introduced to the lady in white, whoever she might be. Barceló behaved as if she wasn't there and neither of us could see her. I cast a sidelong glance at her, afraid of meeting her eyes, which stared vacantly into the distance. The skin on her face and arms was pale, almost translucent. Her features were sharp, sketched with firm strokes and framed by a black head of hair that shone like damp stone. I guessed she must be, at most, twenty, but there was something about her manner that made me think she could be ageless. She seemed trapped in that state of perpetual youth reserved for mannequins in shop windows. I was trying to catch any sign of a pulse under her swan's neck when I realized that Barceló was staring at me.

'So are you going to tell me where you found the book?' he asked.

'I would, but I promised my father I would keep the secret,' I explained.

'I see. Sempere and his mysteries,' said Barceló. 'I think I can guess where. You've hit the jackpot, son. That's what I call finding a needle in a field of lilies. May I have a look?'

I handed him the book, and Barceló took it with infinite care. 'You've read it, I suppose.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I envy you. I've always thought that the best time to read Carax is when one still has a young heart and a blank soul. Did you know that this was the last novel he wrote?'

I shook my head.

'Do you know how many copies like this one there are on the market, Daniel?'

'Thousands, I suppose.'

'None,' Barceló specified. 'Only yours. The rest were burned.'

'Burned?'

For an answer Barceló only smiled enigmatically while he leafed through the book, stroking the paper as if it were a rare silk. The lady in white turned slowly. Her lips formed a timid and trembling smile. Her eyes groped the void, pupils white as marble. I gulped. She was blind.

'You don't know my niece, Clara, do you?' asked Barceló.

I could only shake my head, unable to take my eyes off the woman with the china doll's complexion and white eyes, the saddest eyes I had ever seen.

'Actually, the expert on Julián Carax is Clara, which is why I brought her along,' said Barceló. 'In fact I think I'll retire to another room, if you don't mind, to examine this tome while you get to know each other. Is that all right?'

I looked at him aghast. The scoundrel gave me a little pat on the back and left with my book under his arm.

'You've impressed him, you know,' said the voice behind me.

I turned to discover the faint smile of the bookseller's niece. Her voice was pure crystal, transparent and so fragile I feared that her words would break if I interrupted them.

'My uncle said he offered you a good sum of money for the Carax, but you refused it,' Clara added. 'You have earned his respect.'

'All evidence to the contrary,' I sighed.

I noticed that when she smiled, Clara leaned her head slightly to one side and her fingers played with a ring that looked like a wreath of sapphires.

'How old are you?' she asked.

'Almost eleven,' I replied. 'How old are you, Miss Clara?'

Clara laughed at my cheeky innocence.

'Almost twice your age, but even so, there's no need to call me Miss Clara.'

'You seem younger, miss,' I remarked, hoping that this would prove a good way out of my indiscretion.

'I'll trust you, then, because I don't know what I look like,' she answered. 'But if I seem younger to you, all the more reason to drop the "miss".'

'Whatever you say, Miss Clara.'

I observed her hands spread like wings on her lap, the suggestion of her fragile waist under the alpaca folds, the shape of her shoulders, the extreme paleness of her neck, the line of her lips, which I would have given my soul to stroke with the tip of my fingers. Never before had I had a chance to examine a woman so closely and with such precision, yet without the danger of meeting her eyes.

'What are you looking at?' asked Clara, not without a pinch of malice.

'Your uncle says you're an expert on Julián Carax, miss,' I improvised. My mouth felt dry.

'My uncle would say anything if that bought him a few minutes alone with a book that fascinates him,' explained Clara. 'But you must be wondering how someone who is blind can be a book expert.'

'The thought had not crossed my mind.'

'For someone who is almost eleven, you're not a bad liar. Be careful, or you'll end up like my uncle.'

Fearful of making yet another faux pas, I decided to remain silent. I just sat gawking at her, imbibing her presence.

'Here, come, get closer,' Clara said.

'Pardon me?'

'Come closer, don't be afraid. I won't bite you.'

I left my chair and went over to where she was sitting. The bookseller's niece raised her right hand, trying to find me. Without quite knowing what to do, I, too, stretched out my hand towards her. She took it in her left hand and, without saying anything, offered me her right hand. Instinctively I understood what she was asking me to do, and guided her to my face. Her touch was both firm and delicate. Her fingers ran over my cheeks and cheekbones. I stood there motionless, hardly daring to breathe, while Clara read my features with her hands. While she did, she smiled to herself, and I noticed a slight movement of her lips, like a voiceless murmuring. I felt the brush of her hands on my forehead, on my hair and eyelids. She paused on my lips, following their shape with her forefinger and ring finger. Her fingers smelled of cinnamon. I swallowed, feeling my pulse race, and gave silent thanks that there were no eyewitnesses to my blushing, which could have set a cigar alight even a foot away.

3

That afternoon of mist and drizzle, Clara Barceló stole my heart, my breath, and my sleep. In the haunted shade of the Ateneo, her hands wrote a curse on my skin that was to hound me for years. While I stared, enraptured, she explained how she, too, had stumbled on the work of Julián Carax by chance in a village in Provence. Her father, a prominent lawyer linked to the Catalan president's cabinet, had had the foresight to send his wife and daughter to the other side of the border at the start of the Civil War. Some considered his fear exaggerated, and maintained that nothing could possibly happen in Barcelona. In Spain, both the cradle and pinnacle of Christian civilization, barbarism was for anarchists – those people who rode bicycles and wore darned socks – and surely they wouldn't get very far. But Clara's father believed that nations never see themselves clearly in the mirror, much less when war preys on their minds. He had a good understanding of history and knew that the future could be read much more clearly in the streets,

factories, and barracks than in the morning press. For months he wrote a letter to his wife and daughter once a week. At first he did it from his office on Calle Diputación, but later his letters had no return address. In the end he wrote secretly, from a cell in Montjuïc Castle, into which no one saw him go and from which, like countless others, he would never come out.

Clara's mother read the letters aloud, barely able to hold back her tears and skipping paragraphs that her daughter sensed without needing to hear them. Later, as her mother slept, Clara would convince her cousin Claudette to reread her father's letters from start to finish. That is how Clara read, with borrowed eyes. Nobody ever saw her shed a tear, not even when the letters from the lawyer stopped coming, not even when news of the war made them all fear the worst.

'My father knew from the start what was going to happen,' Clara explained. 'He stayed close to his friends because he felt it was his duty. What killed him was his loyalty to people who, when their time came, betrayed him. Never trust anyone, Daniel, especially the people you admire. Those are the ones who will make you suffer the worst blows.'

Clara spoke these words with a hardness that seemed grown out of years of secret brooding. I gladly lost myself in her porcelain gaze and listened to her talk about things that, at the time, I could not possibly understand. She described people, scenes, and objects she had never seen yet rendered them with the detail and precision of a Flemish master. Her words evoked textures and echoes, the colour of voices, the rhythm of footsteps. She explained how, during her years of exile in France, she and her cousin Claudette had shared a private tutor. He was a man in his fifties, a bit of a tippler, who affected literary airs and boasted he could recite Virgil's *Aeneid* in Latin without an accent. The girls had nicknamed him 'Monsieur Roquefort' by virtue of the peculiar aroma he exuded, despite the baths of eau de cologne in which he marinated his Rabelaisian anatomy. Notwithstanding his peculiarities (notably his firm and militant conviction that blood sausages and other pork delicacies provided a miracle cure for bad circulation and gout), Monsieur Roquefort was a man of refined taste. Since his youth he had travelled to Paris once a month to spice up his cultural savoir faire with the latest literary novelties, visit museums, and, rumour had it, allow himself a night out in the arms of a nymphet he had christened 'Madame Bovary', even though her name was Hortense and she limited her reading to twenty-franc notes. In the

course of these educational escapades, Monsieur Roquefort frequently visited a secondhand bookstall positioned outside Notre Dame. It was there, by chance, one afternoon in 1929, that he came across a novel by an unknown author, someone called Julián Carax. Always open to the *nouveau*, Monsieur Roquefort bought the book on a whim. The title seemed suggestive, and he was in the habit of reading something light on his train journey home. The novel was called *The Red House*, and on the back cover there was a blurred picture of the author, perhaps a photograph or a charcoal sketch. According to the biographical notes, Monsieur Julián Carax was twenty-seven, born with the century in Barcelona and currently living in Paris; he wrote in French and worked at night as a professional pianist in a hostess bar. The blurb, written in the pompous, mouldy style of the age, proclaimed that this was a first work of dazzling courage, the mark of a protean and trailblazing talent, and a milestone for the entire future of European letters. In spite of such solemn claims, the synopsis that followed suggested that the story contained some vaguely sinister elements slowly marinated in saucy melodrama, which, to the eyes of Monsieur Roquefort, was always a plus: after the classics what he most enjoyed were tales of crime, boudoir intrigue, and questionable conduct.

The Red House tells the story of a mysterious, tormented individual who breaks into toyshops and museums to steal dolls and puppets. Once they are in his power, he pulls out their eyes and takes them back to his lugubrious abode, a ghostly old conservatory lingering on the misty banks of the Seine. One fateful night he breaks into a sumptuous mansion on Avenue Foch determined to plunder the private collection of dolls belonging to a tycoon who, predictably, had grown insanely rich through devious means during the industrial revolution. As he is about to leave with his loot, our *voleur* is surprised by the tycoon's daughter, a young lady of Parisian high society named Giselle, exquisitely well read and highly refined but cursed with a morbid nature and naturally doomed to fall madly in love with the intruder. As the meandering saga continues through tumultuous incidents in dimly lit settings, the heroine begins to unravel the mystery that drives the enigmatic protagonist (whose name, of course, is never revealed) to blind the dolls, and as she does so, she discovers a horrible secret about her own father and his collection of china figures. At last the tale sinks into a tragic, darkly perfumed gothic denouement.

Monsieur Roquefort had literary pretensions himself and was the

owner of a vast collecton of letters of rejection signed by every self-respecting Parisian publisher in response to the books of verse and prose he sent them so relentlessly. Thus he was able to identify the novel's publishing house as a second-rate firm, known, if anything, for its books on cookery, sewing, and other handicrafts. The owner of the bookstall told him that when the novel appeared it had merited but two scant reviews from provincial dailies, strategically placed next to the obituary notices. The critics had had a field day writing Carax off in a few lines, advising him not to leave his employment as a pianist, as it was obvious that he was not going to hit the right note in literature. Monsieur Roquefort, whose heart and pocket softened when faced with lost causes, had decided to invest half a franc on the book by the unknown Carax and at the same time took away an exquisite edition of the great master, Gustave Flaubert, whose unrecognized successor he considered himself to be.

The train to Lyons was packed, and Monsieur Roquefort was obliged to share his second-class compartment with a couple of nuns who had given him disapproving looks from the moment they left the Gare d'Austerlitz, mumbling under their breath. Faced with such scrutiny, the teacher decided to extract the novel from his briefcase and barricade himself behind its pages. Much to his surprise, hundreds of miles later, he discovered he had quite forgotten about the sisters, the rocking of the train, and the dark landscape sliding past the windows like a nightmare scene from the Lumière brothers. He read all night, unaware of the nuns' snoring or of the stations that flashed by in the fog. At daybreak, as he turned the last page, Monsieur Roquefort realized he had tears in his eyes and a heart that was poisoned with envy and amazement.

That Monday, Monsieur Roquefort called the publisher in Paris to request information on Julián Carax. After much insistence a telephonist with an asthmatic voice and a virulent disposition replied that Carax had no known address and that, anyhow, he no longer had dealings with the firm. She added that, since its publication, *The Red House* had sold exactly seventy-seven copies, most of which had presumably been acquired by young ladies of easy virtue and other regulars of the club where the author churned out nocturnes and polanaises for a few coins. The remaining copies had been returned and pulped for printing missals, fines, and lottery tickets.

The mysterious author's wretched luck won Monsieur Roquefort's

sympathy, and during the following ten years, on each of his visits to Paris, he would scour the secondhand bookshops in search of other works by Julián Carax. He never found a single one. Almost nobody had heard of Carax, and those for whom the name rang a bell knew very little. Some swore he had brought out other books, always with small publishers, and with ridiculous print runs. Those books, if they really existed, were impossible to find. One bookseller claimed he had once had a book by Julián Carax in his hands. It was called *The Cathedral Thief*, but this was a long time ago, and besides, he wasn't quite sure. At the end of 1935, news reached Monsieur Roquefort that a new novel by Julián Carax, *The Shadow of the Wind*, had been published by a small firm in Paris. He wrote to the publisher asking whether he could buy a few copies but never got an answer. The following year, in the spring of 1936, his old friend at the bookstall by the Seine asked him whether he was still interested in Carax. Monsieur Roquefort assured him that he never gave up. It was now a question of stubbornness: if the world was determined to bury Carax, he wasn't going to go along with it. His friend then explained that some weeks earlier a rumour about Carax had been doing the rounds. It seemed that at last his fortunes had improved. He was going to marry a lady of good social standing and, after a few years' silence, had published a novel that, for the first time, had earned him a good review in none less than *Le Monde*. But just when it seemed that the winds were about to change, the bookseller went on, Carax had been involved in a duel in Père Lachaise cemetery. The circumstances surrounding this event were unclear. All the bookseller knew was that the duel had taken place at dawn on the day Carax was due to be married, and that the bridegroom had never made it to the church.

There was an opinion to match every taste: some maintained he had died in the duel and his body had been left abandoned in an unmarked grave; others, more optimistic, preferred to believe that Carax was tangled up in some shady affair that had forced him to abandon his fiancée at the altar, flee from Paris, and return to Barcelona. The nameless grave could never be found, and shortly afterwards a new version of the story begin to circulate: Julián Carax, who had been plagued by misfortune, had died in his native city in the most dire straits. The girls in the brothel where he played the piano had organized a collection to pay for a decent burial, but when the money order reached Barcelona, the body had already been buried in a common grave, along with beggars and people with no name who had

turned up floating in the harbour waters or died of cold at the entrance to the subway.

If only because he liked to oppose general views, Monsieur Roquefort did not forget Carax. Eleven years after his discovery of *The Red House*, he decided to lend the novel to his two pupils, hoping, perhaps, that the strange book might encourage them to acquire the reading habit. Clara and Claudette were by then teenagers with hormones coursing through their veins, obsessed by the world winking at them from beyond the windows of the study. Despite the tutor's best efforts, the girls had until then proved immune to the charms of the classics, Aesop's fables, or the immortal verse of Dante Alighieri. Fearing that his contract might be terminated if Clara's mother discovered that he was miseducating two illiterate, featherbrained young women, Monsieur Roquefort presented them with Carax's novel dressed up as a love story, which was, at least, half true.

4

'Never before had I felt trapped, so seduced and caught up in a story,' Clara explained, 'the way I did with that book. Until then, reading was just a duty, a sort of fine one had to pay teachers and tutors without quite knowing why. I had never known the pleasure of reading, of exploring the recesses of the soul, of letting myself be carried away by imagination, beauty, and the mystery of fiction and language. For me all those things were born with that novel. Have you ever kissed a girl, Daniel?'

My brain seized up; my mouth turned to sawdust.

'Well, you're still very young. But it's that same feeling, that first-time spark that you never forget. This is a world of shadows, Daniel, and magic is a rare asset. That book taught me that by reading, I could live more intensely. It could give me back the sight I had lost. For that reason alone, a book that didn't matter to anyone, changed my life.'

By then I was hopelessly dumbstruck, at the mercy of this creature whose words and charms I had neither means nor desire to resist. I wished that she would never stop speaking, that her voice would wrap