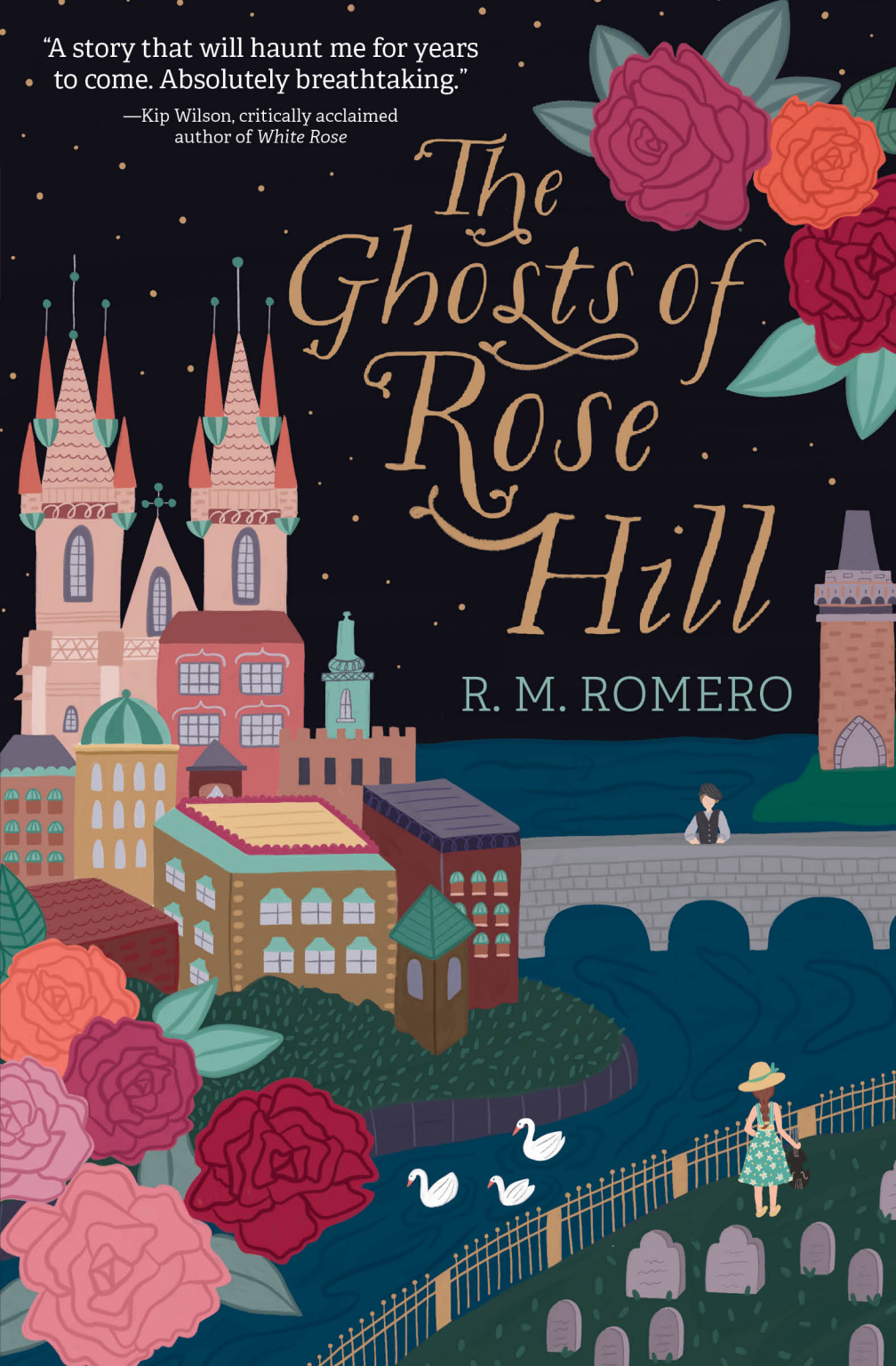


"A story that will haunt me for years
to come. Absolutely breathtaking."

—Kip Wilson, critically acclaimed
author of *White Rose*

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

R. M. ROMERO



The
Ghosts of
Rose
Hill



For Jacob and Miriam,
who led me out of the woods
—R. M. R.



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R. M. ROMERO

*The
Ghosts of
Rose
Hill*



PEACHTREE
Teen



“She made herself stronger by fighting
with the wind.”

—Frances Hodgson Burnett

my only sisters are the friends
I won't see
until September.

And Martina and Sarah
haven't reached out
since we left the beach
and they started their own adventure
together.

Without me.



Chapter Five

The sun pulls me from my bed

my second morning in Prague.
I follow the light
into Aunt Žofie's garden,
where hundreds of roses bloom.
They come in shades
of cotton-candy pink
and vivid red,
like kisses.

I climb the hill
behind the cottage,

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

a prayer
drifting
through my head.

*(We praise You,
Eternal God,
Sovereign
of the universe,
who creates fragrant flowers
and herbs.)*

By the time I reach the top of the hill

(Rose Hill)

the backs of my legs
burn like the sunrise
splashed across the sky.

From here, I can see:
the blue walls of Rose Cottage,
a dark snake of concrete road,
the black towers of Prague Castle,
the arch of Charles Bridge
spanning the Vltava River,
which flows all the way to Austria.

I fling my arms out,
trying to gather the city
in my hands.

Behind me is a grove of trees.

The alders and ash
devour
the pink light of dawn;
the wind
makes them laugh and shiver.

I venture into the little wood.
Any secret I bury
between these trees
would never find its way out.

In the gloom of the forest,
an old stone rises
from the ground.
A lion is carved on its rough face,
his mouth open
in a silent roar.
Ropes of ivy and moss
crawl
up his sides,
the green cloak of a once
and future king.

What are you?
Who put you all the way up here?
I ask the great cat.

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

The lion must know
what my history books forgot,
but time
has swallowed his voice.
He doesn't answer;
he can't.

The greenery

ensnaring the stone is an invader;
it conquered Rose Hill
long before I was born.
But I want to see the lion
in all his glory.

I struggle,
trying
to pull the vines away.
As I move, my ankle
bumps
against something solid.

It's another stone,
this one made of white marble.
I shift
lost October leaves from its base,
exposing letters
I've been learning
since I was a child.

Yud.

Ayin.

Aleph.

Hebrew.

I whisper:

You were Jewish.

Like Mom.

Like me.

There aren't many Jews left in Prague;

the Shoah

(the greatest shipwreck
of our People)

stole them away,
leaving their books,
their songs,
their stories behind.

But the Jews of Prague
are all around me here.
Their dust grows up
through the earth;
their hands reach for me.

This is a *cemetery*,
I realize.

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

And I don't think anyone remembers
it's here.

Anyone
 except
 for
 me.

I feel eyes moving over me

as I trace
the letters on the headstone—
the *matzevah*.
I stumble back,
asking the alders:
Hello? Ahoj?

The woods
refuse to speak.
But I'm not alone.

There is a boy
standing between the trees.
His eyes are the blue of the sea
I left behind.
He's taller than me
and slim as a birch rod
with soft dark curls
I want to wrap my fingers around.
We must be the same age.

My voice is more certain now.
My name is Ilana.
Do you live nearby?
Do you know my aunt Žofie?

The boy pulls back
like the tide.
Now I wish
I hadn't shouted.
I take a step forward,
but the boy is gone
in a flicker of my lashes,
leaving the shadows
settling like crows
in the space
where he stood.

I saw a boy,
on top of Rose Hill,
I tell Aunt Žofie
when I return to the cottage.
My heart has crawled up my throat;
I'm so excited
I can barely breathe around it.

Did he have blue eyes?
My aunt
holds a chipped teacup

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

between two fingers,
like it, too, is one of her many
paintbrushes.

(I can tell her mind is only
half
with me.
The rest of her is a permanent resident
of Fairyland,
where the borders are closed
to nearly everyone.)

When I nod, Aunt Žofie says:
I've seen him too.
He used to live near here, I think.
Although he hasn't lived anywhere
for a long time.
I'm surprised he let you see him at all.
Having a ghost
is like having a cat.
They wander where they like
and won't come
when you call.

A ghost?

The word sparks
on my tongue.
That makes sense—

*there's a Jewish cemetery
at the top of Rose Hill.
Did you know that?*

There's a story
printed
in Aunt Žofie's gaze,
but it's in a language
I haven't learned to read.

(Yet.)

*I knew the stones there
held some meaning.
But I've always preferred
not to climb the hill myself.
I don't care for ghosts.*

Could I clean the cemetery a little?

*Trim back the trees,
make the matzevot visible again?
I hold my breath,
expecting to be exiled
from the graveyard
as I was exiled from Miami.*

Aunt Žofie sets her cup down.
*I'm not Jewish—you are.
That gives you a connection
to the cemetery*

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

*that I'll never have.
You should do
whatever you think is right.
But wear gloves
and be careful, Ilana.
Keep your head down
as you work.
Don't talk to the ghost boy
again.*

*I can't help but ask:
Why not?*

*Aunt Žofie
squeezes my hand.
I appreciate Prague's magic.
I paint it
each and every day.
But not all magic is safe,
and there are things here
far worse
than ghosts.
By speaking to the dead,
you might draw them to you.*

*Let the boy on the hill go;
let him move on.
You don't belong in his world*

*and he has stopped belonging
in ours.*

The boy and his death

don't unsettle me,
regardless of what Aunt Žofie says.

Most of the stories
Mom and Dad tell me
are ghost stories.

So why wouldn't I want
to talk to the dead?

If I were in Miami, I'd know

what to do
for the boy on Rose Hill.

I'd know
whether he'd want me
to find ten men
and say Kaddish.

I'd know
if I should offer a prayer
to the Orishas—
Yemoya,
Oko,

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

Osanyin,
 (who live
 in the water
 and the soil)
on his behalf.

I'd know
if I should feed him
bread and sugar,
as if his soul
were a hummingbird,
swift and bright.

But I don't know anything
about the boy in Prague,
except the color of his eyes.

Tomorrow morning
when the world is cool and misty,
I'll climb the hill
and tend to the *matzevot*.
The dead boy's name
must be engraved on one of them.

I want to know it;
then it can be a blessing.
Then I can remember him
the right way.



Chapter Six

Aunt Žofie needs art supplies;

I need gardening gloves
to fight
the cemetery's stinging nettles.
We leave Rose Cottage
and walk toward the city center
in search of both.

My aunt tells me about Prague
as we cross Charles Bridge,
watched by the statues of saints
(black with coal dust and age)
neither of us
put our faith in.

*Prague's always confusing itself.
It doesn't know
what's part of its true history
and what is a story
people tell about it.*

*It can't remember
if it was built by travelers
or a woman named Libuše*

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

who could see the future,
if Rabbi Loew was a scholar
or a magician
who made a soldier
out of clay
to protect
the Jewish people here.

It doesn't know
if the birch groves are silent
or if they're full of vila—
enchanted women
whose beauty
haunts
the minds of foresters.

Prague believes in magic.
Prague believes in itself.

(I wish
I could be more like Prague.)

Dad never tells stories like Aunt Žofie's
when he mentions Prague.
Every word that leaves his mouth
about the city
is newsprint gray.

When I was younger, he said:
*The communist government
demanded
we all believe
the same things,
cultivate
the same dreams.
If we defied them,
they stole our voices
and what little freedom
we had.*

*I wanted a future
I couldn't have in Prague.
I wanted more than breadlines
and secrets.
So I ran,
trying to make myself
into a ghost, unseen and unheard,
as I walked to freedom
through Austria.
Then I came here, to America.
A refugee.*

I nodded along
with this sad tale.
If I closed my eyes,
I thought I could feel

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

the echo of Dad's journey
out of Prague
in my own bones.

Maybe
my father is still running from Prague.
Maybe
my mother is still fleeing Havana.
Maybe
my entire family is still trying to escape history.

(But if that's true,
what am I doing here,
drowning in it?)

The buildings that block out

the morning sun
in the city center
are older than any in America.

Bullet holes are visible
on the doorways,
old wounds
in need of healing.
Bottles of absinthe glow,
green as Rose Hill's forest,
in dusty shop windows.
Posters in gleeful electric colors

promise dance clubs
full of beautiful boys,
glittering girls,
music guaranteed
to set a person's soul alight.

Martina and Sarah finally write back
after I send them photos
of all the forbidden things
at my fingertips.
For the first time,
they're jealous of *me*.

But I don't want to chase
the green fairy
or lose myself
in the arms of a stranger
after dark.

There's only one thing
I want now.
And no one
(not even Prague itself)
can give me a lifetime of music.

The earthy smell of Turkish coffee
welcomes us inside a café
hidden away

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

between the houses and museums
where the centuries
blur together.

The walls are whipped-cream white;
the tiles lemon custard yellow.
Even our chairs are licorice red,
weeping
cotton-candy wisps of stuffing.

All the other patrons
sketch, write poetry,
tap out rhythms
on the edges of tables
as they sip their coffee.
Prague is old,
but her streets are dancing.

Aunt Žofie says:
*This city's become popular
with Westerners
who weren't allowed here
before the old government
changed hands
with the new.
They think they can become
the next Picasso
if they let Prague into their hearts.*

Even if the artists fail,
I still envy them;
I haven't created
anything
in what feels like forever.

I am just a tangled mess of notes
that don't make up a song
and barely
make up a girl.

No one looks up

when Aunt Žofie orders us coffee,
her voice thunderclap loud.
They're too lost
in the worlds they're making
to pay attention
to what's happening
in this one.

*My brother told me
you want to be a musician, says Aunt Žofie.
He also told me
it wasn't practical—
as if being practical
ever matters
when it comes to art.*

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

I shrug.
He's right.
I can't make money
playing the violin.
It won't give me
stability in life.

You've seen Rose Cottage—
it's a simple place, Aunt Žofie replies.
But I earn enough
with my paintings
to keep coffee in my cup
and a roof
over my head.
And when I need to see the sky
open like a book,
I take the train out of the city.
What more do I need?

Aunt Žofie soon leaves her coffee
(and me)
behind
to greet another artist,
his fingers smudged with paint.

I'm relieved.
Now I don't have to disappoint her
with the truth:

I can't defy my parents,
I can't be like her.

I do what I'm told.

Outside,

a little girl is staring into the café,
pressing her pale hands
against the window.

Her dress
is the color of strawberries,
her dark eyes are filled with wishes
for sour cherry jam
and squares of milk chocolate—
everything
just out of her reach.

I wave, but the girl
only scowls at me.

The rose
 (the petals
 the pale yellow of old
 forgotten lace)
tucked behind her ear
flutters
each time she moves.

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

It looks
as if it's sprouted
from her very skin.

I close my eyes
against the sight of her
and the impossibility of her flower.
Today
has been strange enough
already.

When Aunt Žofie returns,
the strawberry girl is gone,
taking the wonders
 (caught like pebbles)
in the soles of her shoes
with her.



Chapter Seven

My aunt and I go from shop to shop,
the sun striking my back
like a fist.
We follow her list of items,
a trail of bread crumbs
that will

(eventually)

take us home.

Aunt Žofie purchases:
tubes of paint,
new brushes,
reels of canvas so large
they could cover Prague's streets.
I buy:
leather gloves,
thick socks,
a sun hat—
protection
against the forest
trying to overtake the cemetery.

Every shop we visit is hidden away,
the rooms so cold
December itself
would feel at home in them.
I wasn't built for places like this;
July blazes in my blood.
I ask to wait outside
before I freeze.

I dance to keep warm,
so that my skin remembers
summer hasn't ended yet.

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

I still have time to change
my future—
whatever it may be.

I don't wander the streets

in my aunt's absence,
but my gaze does,
traveling
up, up, up
over the rooftops
before coming to rest
on the house across the way.

The building looks like a rotten tooth,
black and chipped.
A hundred years of dust
have turned the windows silver.
Anything
could be hidden
beneath that glaze.

A man in a butter-yellow suit
perches like a falcon
on the front steps.
His tie bounces
in time with the music
he summons
from the black violin

propped beneath his chin.
The instrument's silver strings
steal the sunlight.

The man smiles
as he plays.
His front teeth are crooked,
fence posts bent in the wind.
The notes of his song
slide
through the gap
between them.

He looks happier
than anyone
I've seen in Prague so far.

The music

drags me
across the cobblestones,
demanding
I go forward.

In Miami,
there are riptides
that will pull you under the water,
leaving you
beneath the waves

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

with no mermaids to raise you up
from the depths.

This feels
like a riptide,
drawing me out
from the shore.

But where
is it
taking
me?

Up close,
the man with the violin
is younger than Aunt Žofie
or any of the adults in my life.
But he is still more grown-up
than I am.

His black hair is faded,
like someone's memory
of a night sky.
But there are no stars
in this man's eyes.
One is hazel;
the other is white
as a cup of milk.

The stranger asks:

Mohu vám pomoci?

Can I help you?

His German accent

wraps around

each Czech

and English word

like a wool scarf.

“Un bel dì, vedremo” from *Madame Butterfly*, I say.

That’s what you were playing,

wasn’t it?

The man’s face lights up,

bright as the summer sun.

You’re a musician then!

Wonderful!

My name is Rudolf Wassermann.

And you are ...?

I fumble for a name

that isn’t mine

(never give your real name

to a stranger;

they could be

the wrong sort of angel

and gobble it up)

The Ghosts of Rose Hill

but I can never be anyone else
except me.
I'm Ilana.

Wassermann laughs,
bouncing
up
on his toes.
It's wonderful to meet you, Ilana!
Do you play the violin?
You must!

I step away from Wassermann.
But the cobblestones
catch at my heels,
trying to shove me back to him.
I used to.
But not anymore.
I left my violin somewhere else.

Wassermann taps his chin
in time
with the music
that must be buzzing
in his veins.
Well then,
someone will just have to find you
a new violin.

*A person should never be
without their music
for too long.*

He spreads his hands,
white as the pages of a book
I haven't read yet.
I follow the gesture down
and see the truth,
an absence
written on the cobblestones
too firmly for me to deny.

Wassermann
has no shadow.

I look up,
but he is already gone,
just like the boy
on Rose Hill.



Chapter Eight

I rise with the sun
the following morning, unable
to sleep any longer.