I think it was only at the very end of the Lavender Lodge job, when we were fighting for our lives in that unholy guesthouse, that I glimpsed Lockwood & Co. working together perfectly for the first time. It was just the briefest flash, but every detail remains etched into my memory: those moments of sweet precision when we truly acted as a team.

Yes, every detail. Anthony Lockwood, coat aflame, arms flapping madly as he staggered backward toward the open window. George Cubbins, dangling from the ladder one-handed, like an oversized, windblown pear. And me—Lucy Carlyle—bruised, bloody, and covered in cobwebs, sprinting, jumping, rolling desperately to avoid the ghostly coils. . . .

Sure, I know none of that sounds so great. And to be fair, we could have done without George’s squeaking. But this was the thing
about Lockwood & Co.: we made the most of unpromising situa-
tions and turned them to our advantage.

Want to know how? I’ll show you.

Six hours earlier. There we were, on the doorstep, ringing the bell. It
was a dreary, storm-soaked November afternoon, with the shadows
deepening and the rooftops of old Whitechapel showing sharp and
black against the clouds. Rain spotted our coats and glistened on the
blades of our rapiers. The clocks had just struck four.

“Everyone ready?” Lockwood asked. “Remember, we ask them
some questions, we keep careful psychic watch. If we get any clues
to the murder room or the location of the bodies, we don’t let on.
We just say good-bye politely, and head off to fetch the police.”

“That’s fine,” I said. George, busily adjusting his work belt,
nodded.

“It’s a useless plan!” The hoarse whisper came from somewhere
close behind my ear. “I say stab them first, ask questions later! That’s
your only sensible option.”

I nudged my backpack with an elbow. “Shut up.”

“I thought you wanted my advice!”

“Your job is to keep a lookout, not distract us with stupid theo-
ries. Now, hush.”

We waited on the step. The Lavender Lodge boardinghouse was
a narrow, terraced building of three floors. Like most of this part of
London’s East End, it had a weary, ground-down air. Soot crusted
the stucco exterior, thin curtains dangled at the windows. No lights
showed in the upper stories, but the hall light was on, and there
was a yellowed **vacancies** sign propped behind the panel of cracked glass in the center of the door.

Lockwood squinted through the glass, shielding his eyes with his gloved hand. “Well, **somebody**’s at home,” he said. “I can see two people standing at the far end of the hall.”

He pressed the buzzer again. It was an ugly sound, a razor to the ear. He rapped the knocker, too. No one came.

“Hope they put their skates on,” George said. “I don’t want to worry you or anything, but there’s something white creeping toward us up the street.”

He was right. Far off in the dusk, a pale form could just be seen. It drifted slowly above the sidewalk in the shadows of the houses, coming in our direction.

Lockwood shrugged; he didn’t even bother looking. “Oh, it’s probably just a shirt flapping on someone’s line. It’s still early. Won’t be anything nasty yet.”

George and I glanced at each other. It was that time of year when the days were scarcely lighter than the nights, and the dead began walking during the darkest afternoons. On the way over from the Tube, in fact, we’d seen a Shade on Whitechapel High Road, a faint twist of darkness standing brokenly in the gutter, being spun and buffeted by the tailwinds of the last cars hurrying home. So nasty things were out already—as Lockwood well knew.

“Since when has a flapping shirt had a head and spindly legs attached?” George asked. He removed his glasses, rubbed them dry, and returned them to his nose. “Lucy, you tell him. He never listens to me.”
“Yes, come on, Lockwood,” I said. “We can’t just stand here all night. If we’re not careful, we’ll get picked off by that ghost.”

Lockwood smiled. “We won’t. Our friends in the hall have to answer us. Not to do so would be an admission of guilt. Any second now they’ll come to the door, and we’ll be invited inside. Trust me. There’s no need to worry.”

And the point about Lockwood was that you believed him, even when he said far-fetched stuff like that. Right then he was waiting quite casually on the step, one hand resting on his sword hilt, as crisply dressed as ever in his long coat and slim dark suit. His dark hair flopped forward over his brow. The light from the hallway shone on his lean, pale face, and sparkled in his dark eyes as he grinned across at me. He was a picture of poise and unconcern. It’s how I want to remember him, the way he was that night: with horrors up ahead and horrors at our back, and Lockwood standing in between them, calm and unafraid.

George and I weren’t quite so stylish in comparison, but we looked all business nonetheless. Dark clothes, dark boots; George had even tucked his shirt in. All three of us carried backpacks and heavy leather duffel bags—old, worn, and spotted with ectoplasm burns.

An onlooker, recognizing us as psychic investigation agents, would have assumed that the bags were filled with the equipment of our trade: salt-bombs, lavender, iron filings, silver Seals and chains. This was in fact quite true, but I also carried a skull in a jar, so we weren’t entirely predictable.

We waited. The wind blew in dirty gusts between the houses. Iron spirit-wards swung on ropes high above us, clicking and clattering
like witches’ teeth. The white shape flitted stealthily toward us down the street. I zipped up my parka, and edged closer to the wall.

“Yep, it’s a Phantasm approaching,” the voice from my backpack said, in whispers only I could hear. “It’s seen you, and it’s hungry. Personally, I reckon it’s got its eye on George.”

“Lockwood,” I began. “We really have to move.”

But Lockwood was already stepping back from the door. “No need,” he said. “What did I tell you? Here they are.”

Shadows rose behind the glass. Chains rattled, the door swung wide.

A man and a woman stood there.

They were probably murderers, but we didn’t want to startle them. We put on our best smiles.

The Lavender Lodge guesthouse had come to our attention two weeks earlier. The local police in Whitechapel had been investigating the cases of several people—some salesmen, but mostly laborers working on the nearby London docks—who’d gone missing in the area. It had been noticed a number of these men had been staying at an obscure boardinghouse—Lavender Lodge, on Cannon Lane, Whitechapel—shortly before they disappeared. The police had visited; they’d spoken to the proprietors, a Mr. and Mrs. Evans, and even searched the premises. They’d found nothing.

But they were adults. They couldn’t see into the past. They couldn’t detect the psychic residue of crimes that might have been committed there. For that, they needed an agency to help out. It so happened that Lockwood & Co. had been doing a lot of work
in the East End, our success with the so-called Shrieking Ghost of Spitalfields having made us popular in the district. We agreed to pay Mr. and Mrs. Evans a little call.

And here we were.

Given the suspicions about them, I’d half expected the owners of Lavender Lodge to look pretty sinister, but that wasn’t the case at all. If they resembled anything, it was a pair of elderly owls roosting on a branch. They were short, roundish, and gray-haired, with soft, blank, sleepy faces blinking at us behind large spectacles. Their clothes were heavy and somehow old-fashioned. They pressed close to each other, filling the doorway. Beyond them I could see a grimy, tasseled ceiling light, and dingy wallpaper. The rest was hidden.

“Mr. and Mrs. Evans?” Lockwood gave a slight bow. “Hello. Anthony Lockwood, of Lockwood and Co. I rang you earlier. These are my associates, Lucy Carlyle and George Cubbins.”

They gazed at us. For a moment, as if we were conscious that the fate of five people had reached a tipping point, no one spoke.

“What’s it regarding, please?” I don’t know how old the man was—when I see someone older than thirty, time sort of concertinas for me—but he was definitely closer to coffin than crib. He had wisps of hair oiled back across his scalp, and nets of wrinkles stapled around his eyes. He blinked at us, all absentminded and benign.

“As I said on the phone, we wanted to talk with you about one of your past residents, a Mr. Benton,” Lockwood said. “Part of an official Missing Persons inquiry. Perhaps we could come in?”

“It’ll be dark soon,” the woman said.

“Oh, it won’t take long.” Lockwood used his best smile. I
contributed a reassuring grin. George was too busy staring at the white shape drifting up the street to do anything other than look nervous.

Mr. Evans nodded; he stepped slowly back and to the side. “Yes, of course, but best to do it quickly,” he said. “It’s late. Not long before they’ll be coming out.”

He was far too old to see the Phantasm, now crossing the road toward us. We didn’t like to mention it either. We just smiled and nodded, and (as swiftly as we decently could without pushing) followed Mrs. Evans into the house. Mr. Evans let us go past, then shut the door softly, blocking out the night, the ghost, and the rain.

They took us down a long hallway into the public lounge, where a fire flickered in a tiled grate. The decor was the usual: cream woodchip wallpaper, worn brown carpet, ranks of decorated plates, and prints in ugly golden frames. A few armchairs were scattered about, angular and comfortless, and there was a radio, a liquor cabinet, and a small TV. A big wooden hutch on the back wall carried cups, glasses, sauce bottles, and other breakfast things; and two sets of folding chairs and plastic-topped tables confirmed that this single room was where guests ate as well as socialized.

Right now we were the only ones there.

We put our bags down. George wiped the rain off his glasses again; Lockwood ran a hand through damp hair. Mr. and Mrs. Evans stood facing us in the center of the room. Close up, their owl-like qualities had intensified. They were stoop-necked, round-shouldered, he in a shapeless cardigan, she in a dark woolen dress.
They remained standing close together: elderly, but not, I thought, under all their heavy clothes, particularly frail.

They did not offer us seats; clearly they hoped for a short conversation.

“Benson, you said his name was?” Mr. Evans asked.

“Benton.”

“He stayed here recently,” I said. “Three weeks ago. You confirmed that on the phone. He’s one of several missing people who—”

“Yes, yes. We’ve talked to the police about him. But I can show you the guest book, if you like.” Humming gently, the old man went to the hutch. His wife remained motionless, watching us. He returned with the book, opened it, and handed it to Lockwood. “You can see his name there.”

“Thank you.” While Lockwood made a show of studying the pages, I did the real work. I listened to the house. It was quiet, psychically speaking. I detected nothing. Okay, there was a muffled voice coming from my backpack on the floor, but that didn’t count.

“Now’s your chance!” it whispered. “Kill them both, and it’s job done!”

I gave the pack a subtle kick with the heel of my boot, and the voice fell silent.

“Can you remember much about Mr. Benton?” In the firelight, George’s doughy face and sandy hair gleamed palely; the swell of his stomach pressed tight against his sweater. He hitched up his belt, subtly checking the gauge on his thermometer. “Or any of your missing residents, for that matter? Chat with them much at all?”

“No really,” the old man said. “What about you, Nora?”

Mrs. Evans had nicotine-yellow hair—thin up top, and fixed in
position like a helmet. Like her husband’s, her skin was wrinkled, though her lines radiated from the corners of her mouth, as if you might draw her lips tight like the top of a string bag. “No,” she said. “But it’s not surprising. Few of our guests stay long.”

“We cater to the trade,” Mr. Evans added. “Salesmen, you know. Always moving on.”

There was a silence. The room was heavy with the scent of lavender, which keeps unwanted Visitors away. Fresh bunches sat in silver tankards on the mantelpiece and windows. There were other defenses, too: ornamental house-guards, made of twisted iron and shaped like flowers, animals, and birds.

It was a safe room, almost ostentatiously so.

“Anyone staying here now?” I asked.

“Not at present.”

“How many guest rooms do you have?”

“Six. Four on the second floor, two at the top.”

“And which of them do you sleep in?”

“What a lot of questions,” Mr. Evans said, “from such a very young lady. I am of the generation that remembers when children were children. Not psychic investigation agents with swords and an over-inquisitive manner. We sleep on the ground floor, in a room behind the kitchen. Now—I think we have told the police all this. I am not entirely sure why you are here.”

“We’ll be going soon,” Lockwood said. “If we could just have a look at the room Mr. Benton stayed in, we’ll be on our way.”

How still they were suddenly, like gravestones rising in the center of the lounge. Over by the hutch, George ran his finger down the side of the ketchup bottle. It had a thin layer of dust upon it.
“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” Mr. Evans said. “The room is made up for new guests. We don’t want it disturbed. All trace of Mr. Benton—and the other residents—will be long gone. Now . . . I must ask you to leave.”

He moved toward Lockwood. Despite the carpet slippers, the cardigan on the rounded shoulders, there was decisiveness in the action, an impression of suddenly flexing strength.

Lockwood had many pockets in his coat. Some contained weapons and lock-picking wires; one, to my certain knowledge, had an emergency store of tea bags. From another he took a small plastic card. “This is a warrant,” he said. “It empowers Lockwood and Co., as DEPRAC-appointed investigation agents, to search any premises that may be implicated in a serious crime or haunting. If you wish to check, call Scotland Yard. Inspector Montagu Barnes would be happy to talk to you.”

“Crime?” The old man shrank back, biting his lip. “Haunting?”

Lockwood’s smile was wolf-like. “As I said, we just wish to take a look upstairs.”

“There’s nothing supernatural here,” Mrs. Evans said, scowling. “Look around. See the defenses.”

Her husband patted her arm. “It’s all right, Nora. They’re agents. It’s our duty to help them. Mr. Benton, if I recall, stayed in Room Two, on the top floor. Straight up the stairs, two flights and you’re there. You won’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” Lockwood picked up his duffel bag.

“Why not leave your things?” Mr. Evans suggested. “The stairs are narrow, and it’s a long way up.”
We just looked at him. George and I shrugged our bags onto our backs.

“Well, take your time up there,” Mr. Evans said.

There was no light on upstairs. From the semidarkness of the stairwell, filing after the others, I looked back through the door at the little couple. Mr. and Mrs. Evans stood in the middle of the lounge, pressed side by side, ruby-red and flickering in the firelight. They were watching us as we climbed, their heads tilted at identical angles, their spectacles four circles of reflected flame.

“What do you think?” George whispered from above.

Lockwood had paused and was inspecting a heavy fire door halfway up the flight. It was bolted open, flush against the wall. “I don't know how, but they're guilty. Guilty as sin.”

George nodded. “Did you see the ketchup? No one's had breakfast here in a long time.”

“They must know it’s all over for them,” I said as we went on. “If something bad happened to their guests up here, we’re going to sense it. They know what Talents we have. What do they expect us to do when we find out?”

Lockwood’s reply was interrupted by a stealthy tread on the stair behind. Looking back, we caught a glimpse of Mr. Evans’s gleaming face, his hair disarranged, eyes wild and staring. He reached for the fire door, began swinging it shut . . .

In a flash Lockwood’s rapier was in his hand. He sprang back down, coat flying—

The fire door slammed, slicing off the light from downstairs. The rapier cracked against wood.
As we stood in the dark, we heard bolts being forced into place. Then we heard our captor laughing through the door.

“Mr. Evans,” Lockwood said, “open this now.”

The old man’s voice was muffled, but distinct. “You should’ve left when you had the chance! Look around all you like. Make yourselves at home! The ghost will have found you by midnight. I’ll sweep up what’s left in the morning.”

After that it was just the *clump, clump, clump* of carpet slippers fading downstairs.

“Brilliant,” said the voice from my backpack. “Outwitted by a senior citizen. Outstanding. What a team.”

I didn’t tell it to shut up this time. It kind of had a point.
Hold it. I suppose I should stop before things start getting messy, and tell you exactly who I am. My name is Lucy Carlyle. I make my living destroying the risen spirits of the restless dead. I can throw a salt-bomb fifty yards from a standing start, and hold off three Specters with a broken rapier (as I did one time in Berkeley Square). I’m good with crowbars, magnesium flares, and candles. I walk alone into haunted rooms. I see ghosts, when I choose to look for them, and hear their voices, too. I’m just under five feet six inches tall, have hair the color of a walnut coffin, and wear size seven ectoplasm-proof boots.

There. Now we’re properly introduced.

So I stood with Lockwood and George on the second-floor landing of the boardinghouse. All of a sudden it was very cold. All of a sudden I could hear things.
“Don’t suppose there’s any point trying to break down the door,” George said.

“No point at all. . . .” Lockwood’s voice had that far-off, absent quality it gets when he’s using his Sight. Sight, Listening, and Touch: they’re the main kinds of psychic Talent. Lockwood has the sharpest eyes of us, and I’m the best at Listening and Touch. George is an all-rounder. He’s mediocre at all three.

I had my finger on the light switch on the wall beside me, but I didn’t flick it on. Darkness stokes the psychic senses. Fear keeps your Talent keen.

We listened. We looked.

“I don’t see anything yet,” Lockwood said finally. “Lucy?”

“I’m getting voices. Whispered voices.” It sounded like a crowd of people, all speaking over one another with the utmost urgency, yet so faint it was impossible to understand a thing.

“What does your friend in the jar say?”

“It’s not my friend.” I prodded the backpack. “Skull?”

“There’s ghosts up here. Lots of them. So . . . now do you accept that you should’ve stabbed the old codger when you had the chance? If you’d listened to me, you wouldn’t be in this mess, would you?”

“We’re not in a mess!” I snapped. “And, by the way, we can’t just stab a suspect! I keep telling you this! We didn’t even know they were guilty then!”

Lockwood cleared his throat meaningfully. Sometimes I forgot that the others couldn’t hear the ghost’s half of the conversation.

“Sorry,” I said. “He’s just being annoying, as usual. Says there’s lots of ghosts.”

The luminous display on George’s thermometer flashed briefly
in the dark. “Temp update,” he said. “It’s dropped eight degrees since the foot of the stairs.”

“Yes. That fire door acts as a barrier.” The pencil beam of Lockwood’s flashlight speared downward and picked out the ridged gray surface of the door. “Look, it’s got iron bands on it. That keeps our nice little old couple safe in their living quarters on the ground floor. But anyone who rents a room up here falls victim to something lurking in the dark. . . .”

He turned the flashlight beam wide and circled it slowly around us. We were standing just below a shabby landing—neat enough, but cheaply furnished with purple curtains and an old cream carpet. Several numbered plywood doors gleamed dully in the shadows. A few dog-eared magazines lay in a pile on an ugly bureau, near where a further flight of stairs led to the top floor. It was supernaturally cold, and there was ghost-fog stirring. Faint wreaths of pale green mist were rising from the carpet and winding slowly around our ankles. The flashlight began to flicker, as if its (fresh) battery were failing and would soon wink out altogether. A feeling of unquantifiable dread deepened in us. I shivered. Something wicked was very close.

Lockwood adjusted his gloves. His face glowed in the flashlight beam, his dark eyes shone. As always, peril suited him. “All right,” he said softly. “Listen to me. We keep calm, we take care of whatever’s up here, then we find a way to tackle Evans. George, rig up an iron circle here. Lucy, see what else the skull has to say. I’ll check out the nearest room.”

With that he lifted his rapier, pushed open a door, and disappeared inside, long coat swirling behind him.
We got to work. George took out a lantern and set it on low; by its light, he busied himself with the iron chains, creating a decent circle in the center of the carpet. I opened my backpack and—with some difficulty—took out a large, faintly luminous glass jar. Its top was secured by a complex plastic seal and, inside it, floating in green liquid, was a leering face. And I don’t mean nicely leering. This was more the kind you get behind bars in a high-security prison. It was the face of a ghost—a Phantasm or Specter—tied to the skull that rested in the jar. It was godless and disreputable and had no known name.

I glared at it. “Are you going to be sensible now?”

The toothless lips grinned awfully. “I’m always sensible! What do you want to know?”

“What are we dealing with up here?”

“A cluster of spirits. They’re restless and unhappy and . . . Hold on, I’m getting something else—” The face contorted suddenly. “Ooh, that’s bad. That’s real bad. If I were you, Lucy, I’d find a window and jump out. So what if you break both legs in several places? It’s better than staying in here.”

“Why? What have you found?”

“Another entity. Can’t tell what it is yet. But it’s strong and hungry, and . . .” The bulging eyes looked sidelong at me. “No, sorry, there’s a limit to what I can sense, imprisoned in this cruel jar. Now, if you let me out, on the other hand . . .”

I snorted. “That’s not going to happen, as well you know.”

“But I’m an invaluable member of the team!”

“Says who? You spend most of the time cheering when we nearly die.”
The rubbery lips screwed tight in outrage. “I hardly ever do that now! Things have changed between us. You know that’s true!”

Well, it was sort of right. Things had changed between us and the skull. When it had first begun talking to me, some months before, we’d viewed it with suspicion, irritation, and distaste. However, as the weeks passed and we’d gotten to know it properly, we’d learned to really despise it, too.

George had long ago stolen the ghost-jar from a rival agency, but it was only when I’d accidently twisted a lever in the lid that I realized that the spirit trapped there could actually speak to me. At first it was simply hostile; gradually, however, perhaps out of boredom or a desire for companionship, it had begun offering help in supernatural matters. Sometimes this was useful, but the ghost was untrustworthy. It had no morals worth speaking of, and more vices than you would think possible for a disembodied head floating in a jar. Its evil nature affected me more than the others, for I was the one who actually talked to it, who had to put up with the gleeful voice echoing in my mind.

I tapped the glass, making the face squint in surprise. “Concentrate on this powerful spirit. I want you to locate its Source—find where it’s hidden.” With that, I stood up. George had finished the circle around me. A moment later Lockwood emerged onto the landing and joined us both inside the chains.

He was as calm and composed as ever. “Well, that was horrible.”

“What was?”

“The decor in that bedroom. Lilac, green, and what I can only describe as a kind of bilious off-yellow. None of the colors went at all.”
“So there’s no ghost there?”

“Ah, there is, as it happens. I’ve fixed it in position with salt and iron, so it’s safe enough for now. Go and look, if you like. I’ll replenish supplies here.”

George and I took our flashlights but didn’t switch them on. We didn’t need to. We were in a paltry little bedroom. It had a single bed, a narrow dresser, and a tiny window, black and studded with rain. All this was illuminated by a horizontal orb of other-light that hung above the bed, merging into the pillows and bedsheets. In its center reclined the ghost of a man in striped pajamas. He lay on his back, as if asleep, his limbs hovering slightly above the sheets. He had a small mustache and rumpled hair. His eyes were closed; his toothless mouth sagged against a stubble-dusted chin.

Cold air streamed from the apparition. Twin circles of salt and iron-filings, emptied by Lockwood from the canisters on his belt, encircled the bed. Whenever the pulsing aura drew too close, the particles of salt ignited, spitting out green fire.

“Whatever they charge for a room in this place,” George said, “it’s way too much.”

We withdrew to the landing.

Lockwood had refilled his canisters and was reattaching them to his belt. “See him, did you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Think that’s one of the missing men?”

“Definitely. The question is, what killed him?”

“The skull says there’s a powerful spirit here. Says it’s a bad one.”

“That’ll be on the prowl at midnight. Well, we can’t wait till then. Let’s see if we can hunt it down.”

We checked the next bedroom, and the bathroom next to that.
Both were clear. But when I opened the fourth door, I found two ghosts within. One man lay on the single bed, much as the Visitor had in the other room, only curled on his side, with one arm bent beneath his head. He was older, thickset, with sandy hair cut very short, and dark blue pajamas. His eyes were open, staring into nothing. Close by—so close that their auras of other-light nearly touched—stood another man. He wore pajama bottoms and a white T-shirt. He looked as if he had just gotten out of bed, clothes rumpled, straggle-bearded, long black hair all tangled. I could see the carpet showing through his feet. He gazed up at the ceiling as if in mortal fear.

“There are two death-glow,” Lockwood said. “One’s much brighter than the other. Different dates, different incidents. Something killed both these men while they were sleeping.”

“I’m just glad neither of them slept naked,” George said. “Particularly that hairy one. Let’s pen them in. They look passive, but you never know. Got your iron, Lucy?”

I didn’t answer him. Spectral cold was beating upon me, and with it came echoes of emotion: of loneliness and fright and sorrow, as experienced by the lost men in these rooms. I opened myself up to it. Out of the past I heard the sound of breathing—the steady breathing of a person heavily asleep. Then came a slithering—a soft, wet flapping noise, like a landed eel.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something on the ceiling.
It beckoned to me, pale and boneless.
I jerked my head around, but there was nothing there.
““You all right, Lucy?” Lockwood and George were at my side. Over by the bed, the ghost of the bearded man stared upward. He
was looking at the same spot on the ceiling where my eyes had rested a moment before.

“I saw something. Up there. Like a hand reaching down. Only it wasn’t a hand.”

“Well, what do you think it was?”

I gave a shiver of disgust. “I don’t know.”

We penned in the two ghosts and checked the final bedroom on the floor. It had no dead occupants, which made a nice change. Then we considered the final flight of stairs. Greasy filaments of ghost-fog were pouring down it, cascading like water in a weir, and the beams of our flashlights seemed to warp and twist as they probed the darkness.

“Yup, that’s where the action is,” Lockwood said. “Come on.”

We gathered what remained of our stuff. From the depths of the ghost-jar, the grotesque face watched us keenly. “You’re not going to leave me behind, are you? I’m hoping for a ringside seat when you perish horribly.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “Have you located the Source of all this?”

“Somewhere above. But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

I slung the jar unceremoniously into my backpack and hurried after the others. They were halfway up the stairs.

“Didn’t much like the way Evans said he’d come back to sweep us up in the morning,” George whispered as we neared the final landing. “It sort of implied there wouldn’t be much of us remaining. But I suppose he’s exaggerating.”

Lockwood shook his head. “Not necessarily. Some spirits suck so much energy out of their victims, the bodies go all dry and papery, like empty shells. That might explain why the police couldn’t find
any remains. Evans has probably burned them on that fire downstairs. Or folded them up and put them in a box under his bed. Or hung them neatly in a wardrobe, like a collection of unusual, slightly pimply suits. I’m not making it up. That’s happened.”

“Thanks, Lockwood,” George said, after a pause. “That makes me feel so much better.”

“But what do they get out of it?” I asked. “Mr. and Mrs. Evans, I mean?”

“I suppose they help themselves to the victims’ money and belongings. Who knows? They’re obviously quite mad. . . .”

Lockwood raised his arm; we halted on the topmost steps. The landing was similar to the one below. It had three doors, all of which were closed. The temperature had dropped again. Ghost-fog flowed across the carpet like boiling milk. The whispering of dead men rattled in my ears. We were close to the heart of the haunting.

All of us moved slowly, as if great weights bore down on us. We looked carefully, but saw no apparitions.

“Skull,” I said, “what do you see?”

A bored voice came from my backpack. “I see great peril,” it intoned. “Great peril very near. You mean to say you can’t? Honestly, you’re rubbish. You wouldn’t notice a Wraith if it strolled up and dropped its pelvis in your lap.”

I shook the backpack. “You dirty old pile of bones! Where is this peril?”

“Not a clue. Far too much psychic interference. Sorry.”

I reported this. Lockwood sighed. “All we can do is pick a door,” he said. “Well, I guess there’s one for each of us.”

“I’ll go for this one.” George advanced confidently to the door.
on the left. He flung it open with a dramatic flourish. “What a pity,” he said. “Nothing.”

“That was so obviously a broom closet,” I said. “Look, the door’s a different shape and hasn’t got a number or anything. Really, you should choose again.”

George shook his head. “Not a chance. Your go.”

I chose the door on the right. It had a sticker with the number 1 on it. Holding my rapier in front of me, I pushed it open. It was a small bedroom with a sink and mirror. Standing in front of these, faintly luminous, was a skinny, bare-chested man. His chin was white with shaving foam; he held a cutthroat razor in his hand. As the door opened, he turned and looked at me with sightless eyes. Sudden fear poured through me. Fumbling at my belt, I located my supplies of salt and iron filings and emptied them out across the floor. They created a barrier the spirit could not cross. It hung back, circling from side to side like a caged beast, staring at me the while.

I wiped my ice-cold brow. “Well,” I said, “mine’s done.”

Lockwood made a slight adjustment to his collar. He regarded the final door. “So . . . my turn, is it, now?”

“Yep,” I said. “That’s Room Two, by the way, the one Evans mentioned.”

“Right. . . . So there’ll probably be a ghost or two inside. . . .” Lockwood didn’t look the happiest I’d ever seen him. He hefted his rapier in his hand, rolled his shoulders, and took a deep breath. Then he gave us his sudden radiant grin, the one that made everything seem okay. “Well,” he said, “after all, how dreadful can it actually be?”

He pushed open the door.
The good news was there weren’t a couple of ghosts inside. No. The bad news was we couldn’t count how many. It was packed with them: they filled the room, that host of pajamaed gentlemen. Some were bright, others much fainter. They were gaunt, unshaven, hollow-cheeked, and empty-eyed. Some looked as if they’d just been awakened from deep sleep. Others had died in the act of dressing. They overlapped each other in that mean and dowdy space, crammed between the dresser and towel rack, between bed and washbasin. Some looked at the ceiling; others drifted haltingly, staring toward the open door.

They were all victims—but that didn’t make them safe. I could taste their resentment at their fate, the force of their blank hostility. Cold air lapped at us: the edges of Lockwood’s coat fluttered; my hair brushed against my face.

“Careful!” George cried. “They’re aware of us! Get a barrier down before—”

Before they moved, George was going to say. But it was too late. Some ghosts are drawn to living things—perhaps they sense our warmth and want it for themselves. These men had died lonely deaths, and the urge for warmth was strong in them. Like a tide, the host of luminous figures surged forward: in an instant they were through the door and out onto the landing. Lockwood dropped the canister of iron that he was about to pour, and swung up his rapier. My sword was out too: we wove them in complex patterns, trying to create a solid defensive wall. Some spirits fell back; others moved deftly left and right, out of rapier range.

I grabbed at Lockwood’s arm. “They’ll surround us! Downstairs! Quick!”
He shook his head. “No, there’s nothing down there! And if they follow us, we’re trapped. We’ve got to find the cause of all this. We’ve got to keep going up.”

“But we’re at the top of the house!”

“Are we? What about that?”

He pointed. I looked, saw a narrow wooden attic hatch, high up in the ceiling.

“George,” Lockwood said calmly. “Pass me the ladder, please.”

“What ladder?” George was busy throwing a salt-bomb; it ricocheted off the wall, peppering the Shades with particles of bright-green fire.

“Pass me the ladder, George.”

George waved his hands above his head in panic. “Where from? Down my trousers?”

“There’s one in that closet you opened, you twit! Quick!”

“Oh, yes. I remember.” George leaped for the little door.

Ghosts pressed in on us. Their whispering had become a roaring. At my side I saw the outline of a man in a vest and jogging pants. He shimmered toward me; I slashed the rapier diagonally, slicing him in two. The two halves tumbled, flowed together, re-formed. Beyond, Lockwood had brought lengths of chain from his bag; he was dragging them into a rough circle in the middle of the landing.

In a moment, George was back; he had the ladder, the kind that expanded on telescopic legs. He jumped into the center of the circle, next to Lockwood and me. Without words, he extended the ladder up toward the ceiling, balancing its end against the rim of the attic opening, just below the hatch.

All around us, the landing had filled with eerie light. Figures
flowed toward us, white arms reaching. Ectoplasm fizzed against the barrier of chains.

Up the ladder we went, first Lockwood, then George, then me. Lockwood reached the hatch. He shoved it hard. A band of blackness opened, expanding slowly like the edges of a paper fan. A smattering of dust fell down.

Was it me, or had the assembled ghosts below us suddenly grown quiet? Their whispering stilled. They watched us with blank eyes.

Lockwood pushed again. With a single crash, the hatch fell back on its hinge. Now there was a hole, a black slot gaping like a mouth. Chill air poured down from it.

This was where it stemmed from, the horror of the house. This was where we’d find the cause. We didn’t hesitate. We scrambled up and, one after the other, were swallowed by the dark.
It was **cold**, that was the first thing.

It was also pitch-black. A hazy column of other-light drifted up through the attic hatch from the ghosts below and lit our three pale faces; otherwise we could see nothing.

And there was something with us, close and all around. We felt the pressure of its presence, hovering over us in the dark. The force of it made it hard to breathe, hard to move; it was like we were suddenly crouching in deep water, with the awful weight of it crushing down . . .

Lockwood was the first to fight back. I heard rustling as he reached into his bag and drew out his lantern. He flicked the switch and turned the dial; a soft warm radiance swelled from it and showed us where we were.

An attic: a cavernous space, broad at its base, and rising into darkness beneath the eaves of a steeply pitched roof. There were old brick
gables at either end, one with chimneys built in, and one pierced by a single tall but narrow window. Great crossbeams spanned the shadows high above us, supporting the weight of the roof.

A few broken tea chests lay in one corner. Otherwise the room was empty. There was nothing there.

Or almost nothing. Cobwebs hung like hammocks between the rafters, thick and gray and heavy, like ceiling drapes in an Arabian bazaar. Where the rooflines hit the floor, they were piled in drifts, plugging the corners, softening the edges of the abandoned room. Threads of webbing dangled from the crossbeams, twitching in the little air currents our activities had stirred.

Some of the webs glittered with frost. Our breath made bitter clouds.

We got stiffly to our feet. There’s a well-known fact about spiders, a curious thing. They’re attracted to places of psychic disturbance; to longstanding Sources, where invisible, unknowable powers have loitered and grown strong. An unnatural congregation of spiders is a sure sign of a potent and ancient haunting, and their cobwebs are a dead giveaway. To be fair, I hadn’t seen any in the guest rooms of Lavender Lodge, but then, Mrs. Evans was probably pretty handy with her duster.

It was a different matter in the attic, though.

We gathered what remained of our equipment. In our haste to climb the ladder George had left his bags below, and between us we’d used up our chains and most of the salt and iron. Luckily, Lockwood still had his bag containing our vital silver Seals, and we each had our magnesium flares tucked safely in our belts. Oh, and we still had the ghost-jar too, for what it was worth. I dumped
it beside the open attic hatch. The face had grown faint, the plasm dark and cold.

“You oughtn’t to be up here. . . .” it whispered. “Even I’m nervous, and I’m already dead.”

I used my rapier to cut away a few dangling cobwebs near my face. “Like we’ve got a choice. You see anything, let me know.”

Lockwood went over to the window, which was almost as tall as he was. He rubbed a circle in the filthy glass, brushing off a thin crusting of ice. “We’re overlooking the street,” he said. “I can see ghost-lamps far below. Okay. The Source must be here somewhere. We can all feel it. Go cautiously, and let’s get this done.”

The search began. We moved like climbers laboring at altitude: it was slow, painful, painstaking. All around us the dreadful psychic weight bore down.

There were recent handprints by the hatch, perhaps where the police had made their cursory inspection. Otherwise, no one had been in the attic for years. In places, the floor had been roughly boarded, and Lockwood pointed out the thick layers of dust lying over everything. We noticed certain swirls and curling patterns traced faintly into that dust, as if it had been stirred by curious motions of the air, but no footprints at all.

George poked in the corners with his rapier, winding cobwebs around his blade.

I stood in the middle, listening.

Beyond the freezing rafters, beyond the cobwebs, the wind howled around the roof. Rain lashed against tiles; I could hear it running down the pitch and drumming onto the window. The fabric of the building trembled.
Inside, however, it was quiet. I could no longer hear the whispering of the ghosts in the rooms below.
No sounds, no apparitions, not even any ghost-fog.
Just vicious cold.
We gathered at last in the center of the attic. I was grimy, tense, and shivering; Lockwood, pale and irritable. George was trying to get a mass of sticky cobwebs off his rapier, rubbing the blade against the edge of his boot.
“What do you think?” Lockwood said. “I’ve no idea where it can be. Any thoughts?”
George raised a hand. “Yes. I’m hungry. We should eat.”
I blinked at him. “How can you possibly think about eating now?”
“Very easily. Mortal fear gives me an appetite.”
Lockwood grinned. “Then it’s a pity you haven’t any sandwiches. You left them in your bag, back down with the ghosts.”
“I know. I was thinking of sharing Lucy’s.”
This made me roll my eyes. Mid-roll, my eyes stopped dead.
“Lucy?” Lockwood was always first to notice when anything was wrong.
I took a moment before replying. “Is it me,” I said slowly, “or is there something lying on that beam?”
It was the crossbeam almost directly overhead. Cobwebs hung down from it, merging with the shadows of the eaves. Above was a funny patch of darkness that might have been part of the beam, or part of an object resting directly on it. You couldn’t really see it from below, except for something poking out on one side that might have been hair.
We regarded it in silence.

“Ladder, George,” Lockwood said.

George went to get the ladder, pulling it upward through the hatch. “Those guys are still down there,” he reported. “Just standing around the chains. Looks like they’re waiting for something.”

We set the ladder against the beam.

“You want my advice?” In its jar, the ghost had stirred. “The worst thing you can do is go up and look. Just chuck a magnesium flare and run away.”

I reported this to Lockwood. He shook his head. “If it’s the Source,” he said, “we have to seal it. One of us has to climb up. How about you, George? Seeing as how you went for the broom closet just now.”

George’s face generally expresses as much emotion as a bowl of custard. It didn’t display overwhelming delight now.

“Unless you want me to?” Lockwood said.

“No, no . . . that’s fine. Hand me a net, then.”

At the heart of every haunting is a Source—an object or place to which that particular ghostly phenomenon is tethered. If you snuff this out—for instance, by covering it with a Seal, such as a silver chain net—you seal up the supernatural power. So George took his net, ready-folded in its plastic case, and started up the ladder. Lockwood and I waited below.

The ladder jerked and trembled as George climbed.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” the skull in the ghost-jar said.

George climbed out of the lantern light, drew close to the shaded beam. I took my sword from my belt. Lockwood hefted his in his hand. We met each other’s eyes.
“Yes, if anything’s going to happen,” Lockwood murmured, “I’d say it’s likely to happen just about—”

Shimmering white tentacles erupted from the beam. They were glassy and featureless, with stubby tips. They uncoiled with ferocious speed—some aiming high for George; some striking low at Lockwood and me.

“Just about now, really,” Lockwood said.

Down swung the tentacles. We scattered, Lockwood diving toward the window, me toward the hatch. High above, George jerked away, dropping the chain net, losing his balance. The ladder toppled back. It wedged against the angle of the roof behind, knocking George’s feet clear, leaving him dangling by two hands from the topmost rung.

A tendril flopped against the floorboards next to me, merged with them, went through. It was made of ectoplasmic matter. Unless you wanted to die, you had to prevent it touching your bare skin. I gave a frantic jump sideways, tripped, and dropped my sword.

Worse than dropped it—it vanished through the open hatch to fall among the ghosts below.

High above, things weren’t much better. Letting go of the ladder with one hand, George tore a magnesium flare from his belt and lobbed it at the coils. It missed them completely, erupted against the roof in a brilliant explosion, and sent a cascade of white-hot burning salt and iron down on Lockwood, setting his clothes aflame.

That’s how it went with us, sometimes. One thing just led to another.

“Oh, good start!” In the ghost-jar, the face had visibly perked up; it grinned cheerily at me as I bounded past, dodging the lunges
from the nearest tentacle. “So you’re setting each other on fire, now? That’s a new one! What will you think of next?”

Above me more tendrils of ghostly matter were emerging from the crossbeam and the rafters of the roof. Their nub-like heads protruded like baby ferns, blind and bone-white, before whipping outward across the breadth of the attic space. On the other side of the room, Lockwood had dropped his rapier. He staggered backward toward the window, the front of his clothes feathered with darting silver flames, his head craned back to avoid the heat.

“Water!” he called. “Anyone got some water?”

“Me!” I ducked under a glowing tentacle and reached inside my bag. Even as I found my plastic bottle, I was shouting a request of my own: “And I need a sword!”

There was a rush of air through the attic, unnatural in its strength. Behind Lockwood, the window slammed open with a crash of breaking glass. Rain gusted through, bringing with it the howling of the storm. Lockwood was only two steps, maybe three, from the dreadful drop to the street below.

“Water, Lucy!”

“George! Your sword!”

George heard. He understood. He gave a frantic wriggle in mid-air and just about avoided the blind thrust of another coil. His rapier was at his belt, glittering as he swung. He reached down, ripped the sword clear.

I jumped over a slashing frond of plasm, spun around with the water bottle, and hurled it across to Lockwood.

George threw his rapier to me.

Watch this now. Sword and bottle, sailing through the air, twin
trajectories, twin journeys, arcing beautifully through the mass of swirling tendrils toward Lockwood and me. Lockwood held out his hand. I held out mine.

Remember I said there was that moment of sweet precision, when we jelled perfectly as a team?

Yeah, well, this wasn’t it.

The rapier shot past, missing me by miles. It skidded halfway across the floor.

The bottle struck Lockwood right in the center of his forehead, knocking him out the window.

There was a moment’s pause.

“Is he dead?” the skull’s voice said. “Yay! Oh. No, he’s hanging on to the shutters. Shame. Still, this is definitely the funniest thing I’ve ever seen. You three really are incompetence on a stick.”

Frantically dancing clear of the nearest tentacles, I tried to get a view of Lockwood. To my relief, the skull was right. Lockwood was hanging out over the drop, his body a rigid diagonal, clinging to the broken shutters. The wind howled around him, tugging his hair across his long, lean face, seeking to pluck him away into the November night. Happily, it was also buffeting his burning coat. The silver flames were dwindling. They began to die.

Which was what we were all in danger of doing. Any second now.

George’s sword was only yards away, but it might as well have been in Edinburgh. Ghostly coils swirled around it like anemones waving in a shallow sea.

“You can get it!” George called. “Do a cool somersault over them or something!”
“You do one! This is your fault! Why can’t you ever throw things accurately?”

“Coming from you! You chucked that bottle like a girl!”

“I am a girl. And I put Lockwood’s fire out for him, didn’t I?”

Well, that was sort of true. Over at the window, our leader was hauling himself back inside. His face was green, his coat gently smoking. He had a neat red circle on his forehead where the bottle had struck. He wasn’t exactly tossing thanks my way.

A particularly long and silver tentacle had homed in on me; it was steadily pushing me back toward the hatch, among cobwebs large as laundry.

“Faster, Lucy!” That was the skull in the jar. “It’s right behind you!”

“How about a little help here?” I gasped as a tendril brushed my arm. I could feel the stinging cold right through the fabric of the coat.

“Me?” The hollow eyes in the face became hoops of surprise. “A ‘dirty old pile of bones,’ as you call me? What could I do?”

“Some advice! Evil wisdom! Anything!”

“It’s a Changer—you need something strong. Not a flare—you’ll just set fire to something. Probably yourself. Use silver to drive it back. Then you can get the sword.”

“I don’t have any silver.” We had plenty of silver Seals in the bag, but that was near Lockwood, on the other side of the room.

“What about that stupid necklace you always wear? What’s that made of?”

Oh. Of course. The one Lockwood had given me that summer.
It was silver. Silver burns ghostly substances. All ghosts hate it, even powerful Changers that manifest as ectoplasmic coils. Not the strongest weapon I’d ever used, but it just might do.

Squatting back against the angled roof, I put my hands behind my neck and undid the clasp. When I brought my fingers around, cobwebs hung from them in greasy clumps. I held the necklace tight, and whirled it around and around my fist. The end made contact with the nearest tendril. Plasm burned; the tentacle snapped upward and away. Other coils flinched back, sensing the silver’s nearness. For the first time, I cleared a safe space around me. I stood up, supporting myself against the rafter behind.

As my fingers touched the wood, I was hit by a sudden wave of emotion. Not my emotion—this feeling came from all about me. It seeped out of the fabric of the attic, out of the wood and slates, and the nails that held them there. It seeped out of the flailing coils of the ghost itself. It was a vile sensation—a sickly, shifting mix of loneliness and resentment, speared with cold, hard rage. The strength of it beat against my temples as I looked across the room.

A terrible thing had happened here, a terrible injustice. And from that act of violence came the energy that drove the vengeful spirit. I imagined its silent coils slipping through the floor toward the poor lodgers sleeping in the rooms below. . . .

“Lucy!” My mind cleared. It was Lockwood. He had stepped away from the window. He’d picked up his sword. One-handed, he slashed a complicated pattern through the air, shearing through the nearest tentacles. They burst like bubbles, scattering iridescent pearls of plasm. Even with his coat all charred and crispy, even with
that red circle on his forehead, he had reasserted himself. His face was pale in the spectral light as he smiled across the attic at me. “Lucy,” he called, “we need to finish this.”

“It’s angry!” I gasped, ducking under a grasping coil. “I got a connection with the ghost! It’s angry about something!”

“You don’t say?” High above, George raised his knees to avoid the thrashing tentacles. “Your sensitivity is amazing, Luce. How I wish I had your Talent.”

“Yes, that isn’t the most surprising insight you’ve ever given us.” Lockwood bent over his bag. “I’ll get a Seal. Meanwhile, you might just want to rescue George . . .”

“Anytime you like,” George said. “No hurry.” His position was looking precarious. He still dangled by one hand, and the fingers of that hand were slipping fast.

Spinning my necklace, I leaped between the coils, feeling them dart aside. I snatched up the rapier as I passed by, skidded under the ladder, and wrenched it bodily forward, dragging its length below George just as his grip gave way.

He fell—and landed on the middle rungs like a scruffy sack of coal. The ladder bowed; I heard it crack. Well, that was better than him breaking his neck. He’d have made such an annoying ghost.

A moment later he’d skittered down the ladder like a fireman down a pole. I tossed him his rapier.

“What’s up there?”

“Dead person. Angry dead person. That’s all you need to know.” Pausing only to adjust his spectacles, he leaped past to attack the coils.

Across the room, Lockwood had brought something out of the
The Hollow Boy

bag. “Lucy—I’m going to throw it! Climb up and get ready to catch!” He drew back his hand, then darted aside as a swiping tentacle narrowly missed his face. A flick of the rapier; the coil was gone. “Here it is!” he called. “It’s coming now.”

Lockwood, of course, could throw. I was already moving up the ladder. A small square object came spiraling straight up and over the central beam; down it came, landing right in my hand. Not even a fumble. Close by, George was slashing with his rapier, watching my back, carving coils asunder. I reached the top of the ladder, where it touched the beam.

And the Source was there.

After so many years, it lay with surprising neatness on its secret perch. The cobwebs that fused it to the wood had smoothed out the contours of the bones and buried them under a soft gray shroud. You could see the remains of old-style clothes—a tweed suit, two brown shoes tilted at an angle—and the bone ridges around the dust-filled sockets of the eyes. Strands of dark matter—was it hair or matted cobwebs?—ran like water over the lip of the beam. How had it happened? Had he purposefully climbed up there, or been tucked away (more likely) by a murderer’s careful hand? Now was not the time to worry either way. The dead man’s fury pounded in my mind; below me, in the weaving lantern light, Lockwood and George did battle with the coils.

In those days the Sunrise Corporation provided silver chain nets in plastic boxes, for ease of use. I cracked the lid open, took out the folded net. I let it slip outward until it had fully unfurled between my fingers, thin and loose like an uncooked pastry case, like a shimmering skin of stars.
Silver snuffs out Sources. I flicked it up and over the beam, over the bones and cobwebs, as calmly and casually as a chambermaid making a bed.

The net sank down; the fury winked out of my mind. All at once there was a hole there, an echoing silence. The coils froze; a second later they had faded from the attic like mist from a mountaintop: one moment there, the next gone.

How big the attic seemed without the Changer in it. We stopped dead, right where we were: me sinking down against the ladder, Lockwood and George leaning against the rafters, weary, silent, rapiers gently smoking.

Smoke twisted from one side of Lockwood’s overcoat. His nose had a residue of silver ash on it. My jacket had burned where the plasm touched it. My hair was a nest of cobwebs. George had contrived to tear the seat of his trousers on a nail or something.

We were a total mess. We’d been up all night. We smelled of ectoplasm, salt, and fear. We looked at one another, and grinned.

Then we began laughing.

Down by the hatch, in its green glass prison, the ghostly face looked on in sour disapproval. “Oh, you’re pleased with that fiasco, are you? Typical! I’m ashamed even to be faintly associated with Lockwood & Co. You three really are hopeless.”

But that was just it. We weren’t hopeless. We were good. We were the best.

And we never fully realized it until it was too late.
II

Whitechapel Nights
Chapter 4

BED & BREAKFAST—AND MURDER!

Horrific secrets of Whitechapel Guesthouse

Bodies found in pit beneath garden shed

Authorities in East London acted yesterday to seal off Lavender Lodge, a guesthouse in Cannon Lane, Whitechapel, after the discovery of human remains on the property. The owners, Mr. Herbert Evans (72) and his wife, Nora (70), have been arrested and charged with murder and robbery, and with failure to disclose a dangerous haunting. A powerful Visitor, located in the attic of the house, has been destroyed.

It is believed that over the last ten years many lodgers may have died of ghost-touch while staying at the Lodge. Mr. and Mrs. Evans then disposed of the corpses in a fruit cellar hidden in the back garden. Police have recovered a large number
of watches, jewelry, and other personal effects that were taken from the victims.

The decisive investigation was carried out by the Lockwood & Co. agency, led by Mr. Anthony Lockwood. “Records show that a previous owner of Lavender Lodge vanished in mysterious circumstances more than thirty years ago,” he says. “We think that the mummified body in the attic belonged to him. It was his angry spirit that stalked the house, killing guests as they slept. Mr. and Mrs. Evans took advantage of this for their own personal gain.”

After subduing the ghost, the agents were forced to break a window and climb down a drainpipe to escape the Lodge, before finally confronting the geriatric duo in their kitchen. “Old Evans proved quite handy with a carving knife,” Mr. Lockwood says, “and his wife came at us with a skewer. So we knocked them on the heads with a broom. It was a ticklish moment, but we’re happy to have survived unscathed.”

“And that’s it,” Lockwood said disgustedly. He lowered the newspaper and sat back into his armchair. “That’s all the Times gives us for our trouble. There’s more about the scuffle in the kitchen than there is about the Changer. Doesn’t exactly focus on the important stuff, does it?”

“It’s the ‘unscathed’ bit that I object to,” George said. “That old cow gave me a right old whack. See this horrible red blob?”

I glanced up at him. “I thought your nose always looked like that.”

“No, here, on my forehead. This bruise.”
Lockwood gave an unsympathetic grunt. “Yes, dreadful. What really bothers me is that we only made page seven. No one’s going to notice that. The massive Chelsea outbreak is dominating the news again. All our stuff’s getting lost.”

It was late morning, two days after the Lavender Lodge affair, and we were stretched out in the library of our house in Portland Row, trying to relax. Outside the window a gale was blowing. Portland Row seemed formed of liquid. Trees flexed; rain pattered on the panes. Inside, it was warm; we had the heating on full-blast.

George was slumped on the sofa beside a giant pile of crumpled ironing, sweat pants akimbo, reading a comic. “It is a shame they don’t talk more about the actual case,” he said. “The way the Changer created its own little cluster of other ghosts was fascinating. It’s how the Problem spreads, some say—strong Visitors causing violent deaths, which lead to secondary hauntings. I would have loved to study it in more detail.”

That was how George always was, once the panic of a case died down. He was curious about it: he wanted to understand why and how it happened. Me, it was the emotional impact of each adventure that I couldn’t quite shake off.

“I just felt sorry for all those poor ghost-touched men,” I said. I was sitting cross-legged on the floor below the sofa. Officially, I was sorting the mail; unofficially, I’d been having a gentle doze, having been up till three on a Lurker case the night before. “I could feel their sadness,” I went on. “And even that Changer . . . yes, it was terrifying, but it was unhappy, too. I could feel its pain. And if I’d had more time to try to connect with it properly—”

“It would have killed you stone dead.” From the depths of his
chair Lockwood gave me a look. “Your Talent’s amazing, Luce, but the only ghost you should communicate with is the skull, because it’s locked up in its jar. . . . And to be honest, I’m not even sure that’s safe.”

“Oh, the skull’s okay,” I said. “It helped me with my Lurker case last night. Gave me a fix on the Source, so I could dig it up. We were quite close to Chelsea, where we were. What about you two? Either of you hear the sirens?”

Lockwood nodded. “Another three people killed. DEPRAC is completely clueless, as usual. They were evacuating a couple of streets, I think.”

“Way more than that,” George said. “The outbreak stretches a good square mile along the King’s Road. More ghosts every night, in greater concentration than ever before, and no one knows why.” He adjusted his glasses. “It’s weird. Until recently, Chelsea was pretty quiet, everything peaceful—then, all at once, things go into haunting overdrive. It’s like an infection spreading. But here’s what I want to know—how do you actually fire ghosts up? How do you infect the dead?”

There was no answer to this, and I didn’t try to provide one. Lockwood just groaned; he’d been chasing a Specter through Hackney marshes until the early hours and was in no mood for George’s ponderings. “All I care about,” he said, “is how Chelsea’s hogging our publicity. You do know that Kipps’s team is working on it? He’s on page one today, giving some stupid quote or other. Page one! That’s where we should be! We need to take part in something big like that. I should speak to Barnes, maybe, see if he wants us to help out. Trouble is, we’re already so overworked. . . .”
Yes, we were. . . . It was November, as I’ve mentioned, at the beginning of what would become known as the “Black Winter,” the deadliest period yet in the history of the Problem. The epidemic of hauntings that had beset the nation for more than fifty years had reached new levels of intensity, and the terrifying outbreak in the district of Chelsea was just the tip of the iceberg. All psychic investigation agencies were stretched to the breaking point. Lockwood & Co. was no exception. “Overworked” didn’t really cover it.

We lived, the three of us, in a four-story property in Portland Row, London, which was the headquarters of our agency. Lockwood himself owned the house. It had once belonged to his parents, and their collection of oriental wards and ghost-chasers still lined the walls of many rooms. Lockwood had converted the basement into an office, with desks, iron stores, and a rapier practice room. At the rear, a reinforced glass door led out into the garden, complete with a little lawn and apple trees, where we’d sometimes lounge in summer. On the upper floors were bedrooms; the ground floor contained the kitchen, the library, and the living room, where Lockwood interviewed our clients. It was here that we spent most time.

For several months, though, time had been in extremely short supply. This was partly due to our own success. In July our investigation at Kensal Green Cemetery had ended with the so-called “Battle in the Graveyard,” featuring a fight between agents and a group of violent black-marketeers. Along with our encounter with the horrific Rat-Ghost of Hampstead, it had aroused a lot of interest in the press, and this interest continued during the trial of the chief marketeer, a man named Julius Winkman. Lockwood, George, and I had all
testified against him; by the time Winkman was sent down for a stiff stretch in Wandsworth Prison, it was the middle of September, and our period of free publicity had lasted nearly two months. During this time, our phone had seldom stopped ringing.

It was true that most wealthy clients preferred to stick with the large agencies, which had swankier equipment and bigger reputations. Most of our business came from poorer districts like Whitechapel, where clients didn’t pay so well. But jobs were jobs, and Lockwood didn’t like to turn any of them down. This meant that free evenings were few and far between.

“Anything going on tonight, George?” Lockwood said suddenly. He’d thrown a weary arm over his face, and I’d assumed he was asleep. “Please say no.”

George said nothing, just raised three fingers.

“Three?” Lockwood uttered a long and hollow groan. “What are they?”

“Woman in a veil on Nelson Street, Whitechapel; a haunted apartment in a housing project, and a Shade spotted behind some public restrooms. The usual glamorous stuff.”

“We’ll have to split up again,” Lockwood said. “Dibs on the veiled woman.”

George grunted. “Dibs on the Shade.”

“What?” My head jerked up. The dibs rule was second only to the biscuit rule in terms of importance. It always held firm. “So I get the housing project? Brilliant. I bet the elevators will be out, and everything.”

“You’re fit enough to manage a few stairs, Luce,” Lockwood murmured.
“What if it’s twenty-one floors? What if there’s a Raw-bones at the top, and I’m too out of breath to deal with it? Wait, what if the elevator is working, but the ghost’s hidden inside? You remember what happened to that girl from the Sebright Agency when she got stuck in that haunted elevator at Canary Wharf? They only found her shoes!”

“Stop burbling,” Lockwood said. “You’re tired. We all are. You know it’ll be fine.”

We all subsided again. I leaned my head back against the sofa cushions. Rivulets of water laced the library window like veins of blood.

Okay, not really like veins of blood. I was tired . . . like Lockwood said.

Lockwood . . . Through half-closed eyes, I watched him now, trapping him tight between my lashes. I looked at his long legs, loosely crossed over the side of the chair; at the bare feet, at the slim contours of his body half-concealed beneath the rumpled shirt. His face was mostly covered by his arm, but you could see the line of his jaw and the expressive lips, relaxed and slightly parted. His dark hair spilled softly over the white sleeve.

How did he manage to look like that after five hours’ sleep, lying curled and crumpled in the chair? Being half-dressed never did me any favors; with George, it practically came with a health warning. Yet Lockwood managed to carry it off perfectly. It was pleasantly warm in the room. My eyelashes squeezed a little tighter. I put my hand to my silver necklace, turning it slowly between my fingers. . . .

“We need a new agent,” Lockwood said.
I opened my eyes wide. Behind me, I heard George put his comic down. “What?”

“We need another operative. Another working agent to back us up. Don’t we? We shouldn’t have to keep separating all the time.”

“We worked together at Lavender Lodge,” I said.

“That was a one-off.” Lockwood moved his arm, and pushed the hair out of his face. “Hardly ever happens now. Anyway, look around. We’re not really coping, are we?”

George yawned. “What makes you say that?” He gave an almighty stretch and knocked over the pile of ironing, which collapsed on my head. Like a giant amoeba undulating purposefully across a petri dish, a pair of George’s briefs flopped slowly past my nose.

“Case in point,” Lockwood said as I shook myself free. “One of you should have sorted all that. But you haven’t had time.”

“Or you could always iron them, of course,” George said.

“Me? I’m even busier than you.”

This was the way it always went now. We were working so hard at night, we had no energy for doing stuff during the day. So we no longer got around to inessential things, such as keeping the place tidy or sorting the laundry. All of 35 Portland Row was suffering. The kitchen looked like a salt-bomb had gone off in it. Even the skull in the jar, no stranger to vile surroundings, had made indignant comments about the environment we lived in.

“If we had another agent,” Lockwood said, “we could properly take turns. One of us could rest at home each night and do odd jobs during the day. I’ve been considering this for a while. It’s the only answer, I think.”

George and I were silent. The idea of a new colleague didn’t
much appeal to me. In fact, it gave me a twisty sort of feeling in my belly. Overstretched as we definitely were, I liked the way we operated. As we had at Lavender Lodge, we backed each other up when necessary, and we got things done.

“Are you sure?” I said at last. “Where would they sleep?”

“Not on the floor,” George said. “They’d probably get some disease.”

“Well, they’re not sharing the attic with me.”

“They wouldn’t have to sleep here, you idiots,” Lockwood growled. “Since when has living under the same roof been a requirement for the job? They could turn up for work in the morning, like ninety-nine percent of other people do.”

“Maybe it’s not a full agent that we need,” I suggested. “Maybe we just need an assistant. Someone to tidy up after us. In all the important stuff, surely, we’re doing fine.”

“I agree with Lucy.” George returned to his comic. “We’ve got a good setup here. We shouldn’t mess it up.”

“Well, I’ll think about it,” Lockwood said.

The truth was, of course, that Lockwood was far too busy to think about it at all, and so nothing was ever likely to happen. Which suited me just fine. I’d been at the company eighteen months so far. Yes, we were overworked; yes, we lived in partial squalor. Yes, we risked our lives almost every night. Yet I was very happy.

Why? Three reasons: my colleagues, my new self-knowledge, and because of an opened door.

Of all the agencies in London, Lockwood & Co. was unique. Not just because it was the smallest (total number of agents: three),
but because it was owned and run by someone who was himself young. Other agencies employed hundreds of child operatives—they had to, of course, because only children could detect ghosts—but these companies were firmly controlled by adults who never got closer to a haunted house than shouting distance across the street. Lockwood, however, was a leader who fought ghosts himself—his skills with the rapier were second to none—and I knew I was lucky to work at his side. Lucky in a lot of ways. Not only was he independent, but he was an inspiring companion, managing to be both coolly unflappable and recklessly audacious at the same time. And his air of mystery only added to his allure.

Lockwood seldom spoke of his emotions, desires, or the influences that drove him, and in the first year of living at Portland Row, I had learned almost nothing about his past. His absent parents were an enigma, even though their possessions hung on every wall. How he’d come to own the house, with enough money to start his own agency, I likewise didn’t have a clue. To begin with, this didn’t much matter. Secrets followed Lockwood about like the flapping of his coat, and it was nice to be close enough to feel them brush against me, too.

So Lockwood’s proximity made me happy. George, it had to be said, had been more of an acquired taste, being scruffy, acerbic, and renowned around London for his casual approach to the application of soap. But he was also intellectually honest, had boundless curiosity, and was a brilliant researcher whose insights kept us all alive. Plus—and this is the crucial point—he was ferociously loyal to his friends, who happened to be Lockwood and me.
And it was precisely because we were friends, because we trusted one another, that we were each free to explore the things closest to our hearts. George could happily research the causes of the Problem. Lockwood could steadily build the reputation of the firm. Me? Before arriving at Portland Row, I’d been ignorant—even uneasy—about my ability to hear the voices of the dead and (sometimes) communicate with them. But Lockwood & Co. gave me the opportunity to explore my psychic Talents at my own pace, and uncover what I could do. After the pleasure I got from my companions, this new self-perception was the second reason why I was so content that grim November morning as the rain poured down outside.

And the third? Well, for some months I’d been growing frustrated by Lockwood’s ultimate remoteness. All three of us certainly benefited from our shared experiences and mutual trust, but as time went by the mysteries that surrounded him had begun to weigh heavily on me. This had been symbolized by his refusal to tell us anything about a particular room on the first floor of the house, a room we had never been allowed to enter. I’d had a lot of theories about this strange, shut door, but it was clear to me it had something to do with his past—and probably with the fate of his missing parents. The secret of the room had steadily become an invisible block between us, keeping us apart, and I’d despaired of ever understanding it—or ever understanding him.

Until one summer’s day, when Lockwood had unexpectedly relented. Without preamble he’d taken George and me up to the landing, opened the forbidden door, and shown us a little of the truth.
And do you know what? It turned out I’d been wrong.
It wasn’t his parents’ room at all.
It was his sister’s.
His sister, Jessica Lockwood, who had died there six years before.