

I

The Wimbledon
Wraiths

Chapter 1



“Don’t look now,” Lockwood said. “There’s two of them.”
I snatched a glance behind me and saw that he was right. Not far off, on the other side of the glade, a *second* ghost had risen from the earth. Like the first, it was a pale, man-shaped curtain of mist that hovered above the dark, wet grass. Its head, too, seemed oddly skewed, as if broken at the neck.

I glared at it, not so much terrified as annoyed. For twelve months I’d been working for Lockwood & Co. as a Junior Field Operative, tackling spectral Visitors of every horrific shape and size. Broken necks didn’t bother me the way they used to. “Oh, that’s brilliant,” I said. “Where did *he* spring from?”

There was a rasp of Velcro as Lockwood pulled his rapier clear of his belt. “Doesn’t matter. I’ll keep an eye on him. You keep watching yours.”

I turned back to my position. The original apparition still floated

about ten feet from the edge of the iron chain. It had been with us for almost five minutes now, and was growing in clarity all the time. I could see the bones on the arms and legs, and the connecting knots of gristle. The wispy edges of the shape had solidified into flecks of rotted clothing: a loose white shirt, dark tattered breeches ending at the knee.

Waves of cold radiated from the ghost. Despite the warm summer night, the dew below the dangling toe bones had frozen into glittering shards of frost.

“Makes sense,” Lockwood called over his shoulder. “If you’re going to hang one criminal and bury him near a crossroads, you might as well hang two. We should have anticipated this.”

“Well, how come we *didn’t*, then?” I said.

“Better ask George that one.”

My fingers were slippery with sweat. I adjusted the sword grip in my hand. “George?”

“What?”

“How come we didn’t know there’d be two of them?”

I heard the wet crunch of a spade slicing into mud. A shovelful of soil spattered against my boots. From the depths of the earth a voice spoke grumpily. “I can only follow the historical records, Lucy. They show that one man was executed and buried here. Who this other fellow is, I haven’t a clue. Who else wants to dig?”

“Not me,” Lockwood said. “You’re good at it, George. It suits you. How’s the excavation going?”

“I’m tired, I’m filthy, and I’ve found precisely zip. Aside from that, quite well.”

“No bones?”

“Not even a kneecap.”

“Keep going. The Source must be there. You’re looking for *two* corpses now.”

A Source is an object to which a ghost is tied. Locate that, and you soon have your haunting under control. Trouble is—it isn’t always easy to find.

Muttering under his breath, George bent to his work again. In the low light of the lanterns we’d set up by the bags, he looked like some giant, bespectacled mole. He was chest deep in the hole now, and the pile of earth he’d created almost filled the space inside the iron chains. The big, squared mossy stone, which we were sure marked the burial site, had long ago been upended and cast aside.

“Lockwood,” I said suddenly, “mine’s moving closer.”

“Don’t panic. Just ward it off gently. Simple moves, like we do at home with Floating Joe. It’ll sense the iron and keep well clear.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Oh, yes. Nothing to worry about at all.”

That was easy enough for him to say. But it’s one thing practicing sword moves on a straw dummy named Joe in your office on a sunny afternoon, and quite another warding off a Wraith in the middle of a haunted wood. I flourished my rapier without conviction. The ghost drifted steadily forward.

It had come fully into focus now. Long black hair flapped around the skull. Remnants of one eye showed in the left-hand orbit, but the other was a void. Curls of rotting skin clung to spars of bone on the cheeks, and the lower jaw dangled at a rakish angle

above the collar. The body was rigid, the arms clamped to the sides as if tied there. A pale haze of other-light hung around the apparition; every now and then the figure quivered, as if it still dangled on the gibbet, buffeted by wind and rain.

“It’s getting close to the barrier,” I said.

“So’s mine.”

“It’s *really* horrible.”

“Well, mine’s lost both hands. Beat that.”

Lockwood sounded relaxed, but that was nothing new. Lockwood *always* sounds relaxed. Or almost always: that time we opened Mrs. Barrett’s tomb—he was definitely flustered then, though that was mainly due to the claw marks on his nice new coat. I stole a quick sidelong glance at him now. He was standing with his sword held ready: tall, slim, as nonchalant as ever, watching the slow approach of the second Visitor. The lantern light played on his thin, pale face, catching the elegant outline of his nose, and his flop of ruffled hair. He wore that slight half-smile he reserved for dangerous situations: the kind of smile that suggests complete command. His coat flapped slightly in the night breeze. As usual, just looking at him gave me confidence. I gripped my sword tightly and turned back to watch my ghost.

And found it right there beside the chains. Soundless, swift as thinking, it had darted in as soon as I’d looked away.

I swung the rapier up.

The mouth gaped, the sockets flared with greenish fire. With terrible speed, it flung itself forward. I screamed, jumped back. The ghost collided with the barrier a few inches from my face. A bang, a splash of ectoplasm. Burning flecks rained down on the muddy

grass outside the circle. Now the pale figure was ten feet farther off, quivering and steaming.

“Watch it, Lucy,” George said. “You just stepped on my head.”

Lockwood’s voice was hard and anxious. “What happened? What just happened back there?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “It attacked, but the iron drove it off. Next time, I’ll use a flare.”

“Don’t waste one yet. The sword and chains are more than enough for now. George—give us good news. You must have found something, surely.”

In response, the spade was flung aside. A mud-caked figure struggled from the hole. “It’s no good,” George said. “This is the wrong spot. I’ve been digging for hours. No burial. We’ve made a mistake somehow.”

“No,” I said. “This is *definitely* the place. I heard the voice right here.”

“Sorry, Luce. There’s no one down there.”

“Well, whose fault is that? You’re the one who said there would be!”

George rubbed his glasses on the last clean portion of his T-shirt. He casually surveyed my ghost. “Ooh, yours is a looker,” he said. “What’s she done with her eye?”

“It’s a man,” I snapped. “They wore their hair long back then, as everyone knows. And don’t change the subject! It’s your research that led us here!”

“My research, and your Talent,” George said shortly. “I didn’t hear the voice. Now, why don’t you put a cork in it, and let’s decide what we need to do.”

Okay, maybe I'd been a little ratty, but there's something about rotting corpses leaping at my face that puts me a bit on edge. And I was right, by the way: George *had* promised us a body here. He'd found a record of a murderer and sheep-stealer: one John Mallory, hanged at Wimbledon Goose Fair in 1744. Mallory's execution had been celebrated in a popular chapbook of the time. He had been taken on a wagon to a place near Earlsfield crossroads and strung up on a gibbet, thirty feet high. Afterward, he'd been left "to the attention of the crows and carrion birds" before his tattered remains were buried near the spot. This all tied in nicely with the current haunting, in which the sudden appearance of a Wraith on the Common had slightly tarnished the popularity of the local toddler playground. The ghost had been seen close to a patch of scrubby trees; when we discovered that this wood had once been known as "Mallory's End," we felt we were on the right track. All we had to do now was pinpoint the exact location of the grave.

There had been an oddly unpleasant atmosphere in the wood that night. Its trees, mainly oaks and birches, were crabbed and twisted, their trunks suffocated by skins of gray-green moss. Not one of them seemed quite a normal shape. We'd each used our particular Talents—the psychic senses that are specially tuned to ghostly things. I'd heard strange whisperings, and creaks of timber close enough to make me jump, but neither Lockwood nor George heard anything at all. Lockwood, who has the best Sight, said he glimpsed the silhouette of someone standing far off among the trees. Whenever he turned to look directly, however, the shape was gone.

In the middle of the wood we found a little open space where no trees grew, and here the whispering sound was loud. I traced it

carefully back and forth through the long wet grass until I discovered a mossy stone half buried at the center of the glade. A cold spot hung above the stone, and spiderwebs were strung across it. A clammy sensation of unnatural dread affected all three of us; once or twice I heard a disembodied voice muttering close by.

Everything fit. We guessed the stone marked Mallory's burial spot. So we laid out our iron chains and set to work, fully expecting to complete the case in half an hour.

Two hours later, this was the score: *two* ghosts, no bones. Things hadn't quite gone according to plan.

"We all need to simmer down," Lockwood said, interrupting a short pause in which George and I had been glaring at each other. "We're on the wrong track somehow, and there's no point continuing. We'll pack up and come back another time. The only thing to do now is deal with these Wraiths. What do you think would do it? Flares?"

He moved around to join us, keeping a watchful eye on the second of the two ghosts, which had also drifted near the circle. Like mine, it wore the guise of a decaying corpse, this time sporting a long frock coat and rather jaunty scarlet breeches. Part of its skull appeared to have fallen away, and naked arm bones protruded from frilly sleeves. As Lockwood had said, it had no hands.

"Flares are best," I said. "Salt-bombs won't do it for Type Twos."

"Seems a shame to use up two good magnesium flares when we haven't even found the Source," George said. "You know how pricey they are."

"We could fend them off with our rapiers," Lockwood said.

"That's chancy with two Wraiths."

“We could chuck some iron filings at them.”

“I still say it has to be the flares.”

All this while the handless ghost had been inching closer and closer to the iron chains, half-head tilted querulously, as if listening to our conversation. Now it pressed gently up against the barrier. A fountain of other-light burst skyward; particles of plasm hissed and spat into the soil. We all took a half step farther away.

Not far off, my ghost was also drawing close again. That’s the thing about Wraiths: they’re hungry, they’re malevolent, and they simply don’t give up.

“Go on, then, Luce,” Lockwood sighed. “Flares it is. You do yours, I’ll do mine, and we’ll call it a night.”

I nodded grimly. “Now you’re talking.” There’s always something satisfying about using Greek Fire outdoors. You can blow things up without fear of repercussion. And since Wraiths are such a repulsive type of Visitor (rivaled only by Raw-bones and the Limbless), it’s an extra pleasure to deal with them this way. I pulled a metal canister from my belt and threw it hard on the ground beneath my ghost. The glass seal broke; the blast of iron, salt, and magnesium lit the surface of the trees around us for a single white-hot instant—then the night went black again. The Wraith was gone, replaced by clouds of brightly slumping smoke, like strange flowers dying in the darkness of the glade. Small magnesium fires dwindled here and there across the grass.

“Nice,” Lockwood said. He took his flare from his belt. “So that’s one down, and one to— What is it, George?”

It was only then that I noticed George’s mouth was hanging open in a grotesque and vacuous manner. That in itself isn’t unusual and

wouldn't normally bother me. Also, his eyes were goggling against his spectacles, as if someone were squeezing them from inside; but this too is a familiar expression. What *was* concerning was the way his hand was raised, his pudgy finger pointing so unsteadily at the woods.

Lockwood and I followed the direction of the finger—and saw.

Away in the darkness, among the twisting trunks and branches, a spectral light was drifting. At its center hung a rigid, man-shaped form. Its neck was broken; its head lolled sideways. It moved steadily toward us through the trees.

“Impossible,” I said. “I just blew it up. It can't have re-formed already.”

“Must have,” Lockwood said. “I mean, how many gallows Wraiths can there be?”

George made an incoherent noise. His finger rotated; it pointed at another section of the wood. My heart gave a jolt, my stomach turned. *Another* faint and greenish glow was moving there. And beyond it, almost out of eyesight, another. And farther off . . .

“Five of them,” Lockwood said. “Five more Wraiths.”

“Six,” George said. “There's a little one over there.”

I swallowed. “Where can they be coming from?”

Lockwood's voice remained calm. “We're cut off. What about behind us?”

George's mound of earth was just beside me. I scrambled to the top and spun three hundred sixty nervous degrees.

From where I stood I could see the little pool of lantern light, surrounded by the faithful iron chain. Beyond its silvery links, the remaining ghost still bunted at the barrier like a cat outside an

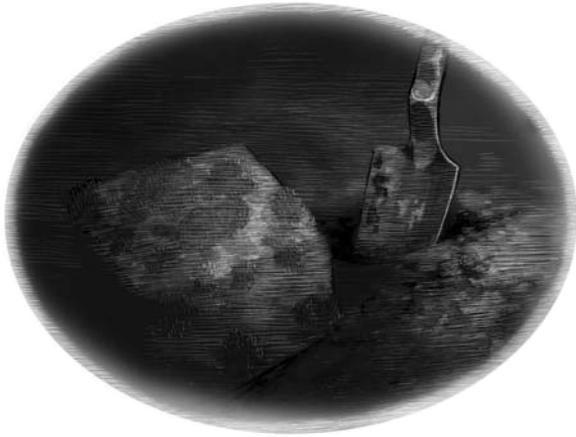
aviary. And all around, the night stretched smooth and black and infinite beneath the stars, and through the softness of the midnight wood a host of silent shapes was moving. Six, nine, a dozen, even more . . . each one a thing of rags and bones and glowing other-light, heading in our direction.

“On every side,” I said. “They’re coming for us on every side. . . .”

There was a short silence.

“Anyone got tea left in their thermos?” George asked. “My mouth’s a little dry.”

Chapter 2



Now, we don't panic in tight situations. That's part of our training. We're psychic investigation agents, and I can tell you it takes more than fifteen Visitors suddenly showing up to make us snap.

Doesn't mean we don't get irritable, though.

"*One man*, George!" I said, sliding down the mound of earth and jumping over the mossy stone. "You said *one man* was buried here! A bloke called Mallory. Care to point him out? Or do you find it hard to spot him in all this crowd?"

George scowled up from where he was checking his belt-clips, adjusting the straps around each canister and flare. "I went by the historical account! You can't blame me."

"I could give it a try."

"No one," Lockwood said, "blames anyone." He had been standing very still, his narrowed eyes flicking around the glade. Making

his decision, he swung into action. “Plan F,” he said. “We follow Plan F, right now.”

I looked at him. “Is that the one where we run away?”

“Not at all. It’s the one where we beat a dignified emergency retreat.”

“You’re thinking of Plan G, Luce,” George grunted. “They’re similar.”

“Listen to me,” Lockwood said. “We can’t stay in the circle all night—besides, it may not hold. There are fewest Visitors to the east; I can only see two there. So that’s the way we head. We sprint to that tall elm, then break through the woods and out across the Common. If we go fast, they should have trouble catching us. George and I still have our flares; if they get close, we use them. Sound good?”

It didn’t sound exactly *great*, but it was sure better than any alternative I could see. I unclipped a salt-bomb from my belt. George readied his flare. We waited for the word.

The handless ghost had wandered to the eastern side of the circle. It had lost a lot of ectoplasm in its attempts to get past the iron and was even more sorry-looking and pathetic than before. What *is* it with Wraiths and their hideous appearance? Why don’t they manifest as the men or women they once were? There are plenty of theories, but as with so much about the ghostly epidemic that besets us, no one knows the answer. That’s why it’s called the Problem.

“Okay,” Lockwood said. He stepped out of the circle.

I threw the salt-bomb at the ghost.

It burst; salt erupted, blazing emerald as it connected with the plasm. The Wraith fractured like a reflection in stirred water.

Streams of pale light arched back, away from the salt, away from the circle, pooling at a distance to become a tattered form again.

We didn't hang around to watch. We were already off and running across the black, uneven ground.

Wet grass slapped against my legs; my rapier jolted in my hand. Pale forms moved among the trees, changing direction to pursue us. The nearest two drifted into the open, snapped necks jerking, heads lolling up toward the stars.

They were fast, but we were faster. We were almost across the glade. The elm tree was straight ahead. Lockwood, having the longest legs, was some distance out in front. I was next, George on my heels. Another few seconds and we'd be into the dark part of the wood, where no ghosts moved.

It was going to be all right.

I tripped. My foot caught, I went down hard. Grass crushed cold against my face, dew splashed against my skin. Something struck my leg, and then George was sprawling over me, landing with a curse, and rolling clear.

I looked up: Lockwood, already at the tree, was turning. Only now did he realize we weren't with him. He gave a cry of warning, began to run toward us.

Cold air moved against me. I glanced to the side: a Wraith stood there.

Give it credit for originality: no skull or hollow sockets here, no stubs of bone. This one wore the shape of the corpse *before* it rotted. The face was whole; the glazed eyes wide and gleaming. The skin had a dull, white luster, like those fish you see piled in market

stalls. The clarity was startling. I could see every last fiber in the rope around the neck, the glints of moisture on the bright, white teeth. . . .

And I was still on my front; I couldn't raise my sword, or reach my belt.

The Visitor bent toward me, reaching out its faint white hand. . . .

Then it was gone. Searing brightness jetted out above me. A rain of salt and ash and burning iron pattered on my clothes and stung my face.

The surge of the flare died back. I began to rise. "Thanks, George—" I said.

"Wasn't me." He pulled me up. "Look."

The wood and glade were filled with moving lights: the narrow beams of white magnesium flashlights, designed to cut through spectral flesh. Bustling forms charged through undergrowth, solid, dark, and noisy. Boots crunched on twigs and leaves, branches snapped as they were shoved aside. Muttered commands were given; sharp replies sounded, alert and keen and watchful. The Wraiths' advance was broken. As if bewildered, they flitted purposelessly in all directions. Salt flared, explosions of Greek Fire burst among the trees. Nets of silhouetted branches blazed briefly, burned bright against my retinas. One after the other, the Wraiths were speedily cut down.

Lockwood had reached us; now, like George and me, he stopped in shock at the sudden interruption. As we watched, figures broke free into the glade and marched over the grass toward us. In the glow of the flashlights and explosions, their rapiers and jackets shone an unreal silver, perfect and pristine.

“Fittes agents,” I said.

“Oh *great*,” George growled. “I think I preferred the Wraiths.”

It was worse than we thought. It wasn’t *any* old bunch of Fittes agents. It was Kipps’s team.

Not that we discovered this immediately, since for the first ten seconds the newcomers insisted on shining their flashlights directly into our faces, so that we were rendered blind. At last they lowered their beams, and by a combination of their feral chuckling and their foul deodorant, we realized who they were.

“Tony Lockwood,” said an amused voice. “With George Cubbins and . . . er . . . is it Julie? Sorry, I can never remember the girl’s name. What on earth are you playing at here?”

Someone switched on a night lantern, which is softer than the mag-lights, and everyone’s face was illuminated. There were three of them standing next to us. Other gray-jacketed agents moved to and fro across the glade, scattering salt and iron. Silvery smoke hung between the trees.

“You do look a sight,” Quill Kipps said.

Have I mentioned Kipps before? He’s a Team Leader for the Fittes Agency’s London Division. Fittes, of course, is the oldest and most prestigious psychic investigation agency in the country. It has more than three hundred operatives working from a massive office on the Strand. Most of its operatives are under sixteen, and some are as young as eight. They’re grouped into teams, each led by an adult supervisor. Quill Kipps is one of these.

Being diplomatic, I’d say Kipps was a slightly built young man

in his early twenties, with close-cut reddish hair and a narrow, freckled face. Being undiplomatic (but more precise), I'd say he's a pint-sized, pug-nosed, carrot-topped inadequate with a chip the size of Big Ben on his weedy shoulder. A sneer on legs. A malevolent buffoon. He's too old to be any good with ghosts, but that doesn't stop him from wearing the blingiest rapier you'll ever see, weighed down to the pommel with cheap plastic jewels.

Anyway, where was I? Kipps. He loathes Lockwood & Co. big-time.

"You *do* look a sight," Kipps said again. "Even scruffier than usual."

I realized then that all three of us had been caught in the blast of the flare. The front of Lockwood's clothes was singed, his face laced with stripes of burnt salt. Black dust fell from my coat and leggings as I moved. My hair was disordered, and there was a faint smell of burning leather coming from my boots. George was sooty too, but otherwise less affected—perhaps because of the thick coating of mud all over him.

Lockwood spoke casually, brushing ash from his shirt cuffs. "Thanks for the help, Kipps," he said. "We were in a tightish spot there. We had it under control, but still"—he took a deep breath—"that flare came in handy."

Kipps grinned. "Don't mention it. We just saw three clueless locals running for their lives. Kat here had to throw first and ask questions later. We never guessed the idiots were you."

The girl beside him said, unsmilingly, "They've completely botched this operation. There's no way I can listen here. Too much psychic noise."

“Well, we’re clearly close to the Source,” Kipps said. “It should be easy to find. Perhaps Lockwood’s team can help *us* now.”

“Doubt it,” the girl said, shrugging.

Kat Godwin, Kipps’s right-hand operative, was a Listener like me, but that was about all we had in common. She was blond, slim, and pouty, which would have given me three good reasons to dislike her even if she’d been a sweet lass who spent her free time tending sick hedgehogs. In fact, she was flintily ambitious and cool-natured and had less capacity for humor than a tortoise. Jokes made her irritable, as if she sensed something was going on around her that she couldn’t understand. She was good-looking, though her jaw was a bit too sharp. If she’d repeatedly fallen over while crossing soft ground, you could have sown a crop of beans in the chin holes she left behind. The back of her hair was cut short, but the front hung angled across her brow in the manner of a horse’s flick. Her gray Fittes jacket, skirt, and leggings always seemed spotless, which made me doubt she’d ever had to climb up inside a chimney to escape a Specter, or battle a Poltergeist in the Bridewell sewers (officially the Worst Job Ever), as I had. Annoyingly, I always seemed to meet her after precisely that kind of incident. Like now.

“What are you hunting tonight?” Lockwood asked. Unlike George and me, both wrapped in sullen silence, he was doing his best to be polite.

“The Source of this cluster-haunting,” Kipps said. He gestured at the trees, where the last Visitor had just evaporated in a burst of emerald light. “It’s quite a major operation.”

Lockwood glanced at the lines of child agents streaming out across the glade. They carried salt guns, hand catapults, and flare

throwers. Apprentices loped along with chain reels strapped to their backs; others dragged portable arc lamps, and tea urns, and wheeled caskets containing silver seals. “So I see. . . .” he said. “Sure you have *quite* enough protection?”

“Unlike you,” Kipps said, “we knew what we were getting into.” He cast his eyes over the meager contents of our belts. “How you thought you’d survive a host of Wraiths with *that* little bit, I don’t know. Yes, Gladys?”

A pigtailed girl, maybe eight years old, had scampered up. She saluted smartly. “Please, Mr. Kipps—we’ve found a possible psychic nexus in the middle of the glade. There’s a pile of earth and a big hole—”

“I’ll have to stop you there,” Lockwood said. “That’s where *we’re* working. In fact, this whole thing is *our* assignment. The mayor of Wimbledon gave us the job two days ago.”

Kipps raised a ginger eyebrow. “Sorry, Tony, he’s given it to us, too. It’s an open commission. Anyone can take it. And whoever finds the Source first gets the money.”

“Well, that’ll be *us*, then,” George said stonily. He’d cleaned his glasses, but the rest of his face was still brown with mud. He looked like some kind of owl.

“If you’ve found it,” Kat Godwin said, “how come you haven’t sealed it? Why are all the ghosts still running around?” This, despite her chin and hairstyle, was a fair point.

“We found the burial spot,” Lockwood said. “We’re just digging for the remains now.”

There was a silence. “Burial spot?” Kipps said.

Lockwood hesitated. “Obviously. Where all these executed criminals were put . . .” He looked at them.

The blond girl laughed. Imagine an upper-class horse neighing contemptuously from a chaise lounge at three passing donkeys, and you’d have her down perfectly.

“You total and absolute bunch of duffers,” Kipps said.

“That’s rich,” Kat Godwin snorted. “That’s priceless.”

“Meaning what?” Lockwood said stiffly.

Kipps wiped his eye with a finger. “Meaning this clearing isn’t the *burial site*, you idiots. This is the *execution ground*. It’s where the gallows stood. Hold on. . .” He turned and called out across the glade. “Hey, Bobby! Over here!”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Kipps, sir!” A tiny figure trotted over from the center of the glade, where he’d been supervising operations. I groaned inwardly. Bobby Vernon was the newest and most annoying of Kipps’s agents. He’d only been with him for a month or two. Vernon was very short and possibly also very young, though there was something oddly middle-aged about him, so that I wouldn’t have been surprised if it turned out he was secretly a fifty-year-old man. Even compared to his leader, who was diminutive, Vernon was small. Standing next to Kipps, his head came up to his shoulders; standing next to Godwin, he came up to her chest. Where he came up to on Lockwood I dread to think; fortunately I never saw them close together. He wore short gray pants from which tiny legs like hairy bamboo canes protruded. His feet were almost nonexistent. His face shone pale and featureless beneath a swirl of gelled-back hair.

Vernon was clever. Like George, he specialized in research.

Tonight he carried a small clipboard with a penlight attached to it, and by its glow surveyed a laminated map of Wimbledon Common.

Kipps said, “Our friends seem a bit confused about the nature of this site, Bobby. I was just telling them about the gallows. Care to fill them in?”

Vernon wore a smirk so self-satisfied, it practically circled his head and hugged itself. “Certainly, sir. I took the trouble to visit Wimbledon Library,” he said, “looking into the history of local crime. There I discovered an account of a man called Mallory, who—”

“Was hanged and buried on the Common,” George snapped. “Exactly. I found that too.”

“Ah, but did you also visit the library in Wimbledon All Saints’ Church?” Vernon said. “I found an interesting local chronicle there. Turns out Mallory’s remains were rediscovered when the road was widened at the crossroads—1824, I think it was. They were removed and reinterred elsewhere. So it’s not his *bones* that his ghost is tied to, but the *place he died*. And the same goes for all the other people executed on this spot. Mallory was just the first, you see. The chronicle listed *dozens* more victims over the years, all strung up on the gallows here.” Vernon tapped his clipboard and simpered at us. “That’s it, really. The records are easy enough to find—if you look in the right place.”

Lockwood and I glanced sidelong at George, who said nothing.

“The gallows itself is, of course, long gone,” Vernon went on. “So what we’re after is probably some kind of post, or prominent stone that marks where the gallows once stood. In all likelihood this is the Source that controls all the ghosts we’ve just seen.”

“Well, Tony?” Kipps demanded. “Any of you seen a stone?”

“There was *one*,” Lockwood said reluctantly. “In the center of the glade.”

Bobby Vernon clicked his tongue. “Ah! Good! Don’t tell me . . . Squared, slanting on one side, with a wide, deep groove, just like so?”

None of us had bothered to study the mossy stone. “Er . . . might have been.”

“Yes! That’s the gallows mark, where the wooden post was driven. It was above that stone that the executed bodies would have swung until they fell apart.” He blinked at us. “Don’t tell me you disturbed it at all?”

“No, no,” Lockwood said. “We left it well alone.”

There was a shout from one of the agents in the center of the hollow. “Found a squared stone! Obvious gallows mark. Looks like someone just dug it up and chucked it over here.”

Lockwood winced. Vernon gave a complacent laugh. “Oh dear. Sounds like you uprooted the prime Source of the cluster, and then ignored it. No wonder so many Visitors began to return. It’s a bit like leaving the tap on when filling the sink . . . soon gets messy! Well, I’ll just go and supervise the sealing of this important relic. Nice talking to you.” He skipped off across the grass. We watched him with dark eyes.

“Talented fellow, that,” Kipps remarked. “Bet you wish you had him.”

Lockwood shook his head. “No, I’d always be tripping over him, or losing him down the back of the sofa. Now, Quill, since we clearly found the Source, and your agents are sealing it, it’s obvious we should share the commission. I propose a sixty/forty split,

in our favor. Shall we both visit the mayor tomorrow to make that suggestion?”

Kipps and Godwin laughed, not very kindly. Kipps patted Lockwood on the shoulder. “Tony, Tony—I’d love to help, but you know perfectly well it’s only the agents who actually *seal* the Source that get the fee. DEPRAC rules, I’m afraid.”

Lockwood stepped back, put his hand to the hilt of his sword. “You’re taking the Source?”

“We are.”

“I can’t allow that.”

“I’m afraid you haven’t any choice.” Kipps gave a whistle; at once, four enormous operatives, each one clearly a close cousin of a mountain ape, stalked out of the darkness, rapiers drawn. They arranged themselves beside him.

Lockwood slowly took his hand away from his belt; George and I, who had been about to draw our weapons, subsided too.

“That’s better,” Quill Kipps said. “Face it, Tony. You’re not really a proper agency at all. Three agents? Scarcely a single flare to call your own? You’re a flea-pit shambles! You can’t even afford a uniform! Anytime you come up against a real organization, you end up a sorry second best. Now, do you think you can find your way back across the Common, or shall I send Gladys here to hold your hand?”

With supreme effort, Lockwood had regained his composure. “Thank you, no escort will be necessary,” he said. “George, Lucy—come on.”

I was already walking, but George, eyes flashing behind the round discs of his spectacles, didn’t move.

“George,” Lockwood repeated.

“Yeah, but this is the Fittes Agency all over,” George muttered. “Just because they’re bigger and more powerful, they think they can strong-arm anyone who stands in their way. Well, I’m sick of it. If it was a level playing field, we’d thrash them.”

“I know we would,” Lockwood said softly, “but it isn’t. Let’s go.”

Kipps chuckled. “Sounds like sour grapes to me, Cubbins. That’s not like you.”

“I’m surprised you can even hear me behind your wall of hired flunkies, Kipps,” George said. “You just keep yourself safe there. Maybe one day we’ll have a fair contest with you. We’ll see who wins out then.” He turned to go.

“Is that a challenge?” Kipps called.

“George,” Lockwood said, “come on.”

“No, no, Tony . . .” Kipps pushed his way past his agents; he was grinning. “I like the sound of this! Cubbins has had a decent idea for once in his life. A contest! You lot against the pick of my team! This might be quite amusing. What do you say, Tony—or does the idea alarm you?”

It hadn’t struck me before, but when Kipps smiled, he rather mirrored Lockwood—a smaller, showier, more aggressive version, a spotted hyena to Lockwood’s wolf. Lockwood wasn’t smiling now. He’d drawn himself up, facing Kipps, and his eyes glittered. “Oh, I *like* the idea well enough,” he said. “George is right. In a fair fight we’d beat you, hands down. There’d have to be no strong-arming, no funny business; just a test of all the agency disciplines—research, the range of Talents, ghost-suppression and removal. But what are the stakes? There’d need to be something riding on it. Something that makes it worth our while.”

Kipps nodded. “True. And there’s nothing you’ve got that I could possibly want.”

“Well, actually, I disagree.” Lockwood smoothed down his coat. “What about this? If we ever get a joint case again, the team that solves it wins the day. The loser then places an ad in the *Times*, publicly admitting defeat and declaring that the other’s team is infinitely superior to his own. How’s that? You’d find that highly amusing, wouldn’t you, Kipps? *If* you won.” He raised an eyebrow at his rival, who hadn’t answered immediately. “Of course, if you’re nervous at all . . .”

“Nervous?” Kipps snorted. “Not likely! It’s a deal. Kat and Julie are witness to it. If our paths cross again, we’ll go head-to-head. Meanwhile, Tony—*do* try to keep your team alive.”

He walked away. Kat Godwin and the others followed him across the glade.

“Er . . . the name’s Lucy,” I said.

No one heard me. They had work to do. In the glow of arc lights, agents under Bobby Vernon’s direction were placing silver chain nets over the mossy stone. Others pulled a dolly over the grass, ready to carry the stone away. Cheers sounded; also clapping and sporadic laughter. It was another triumph for the great Fittes Agency. Another case stolen from under the noses of Lockwood & Co. The three of us stood silently in darkness for a time.

“I had to speak out,” George said. “Sorry. It was either that or punch him, and I’ve got sensitive hands.”

“No need to apologize,” Lockwood said.

“If we can’t beat Kipps’s gang in a fair fight,” I said heartily, “we may as well give up now.”

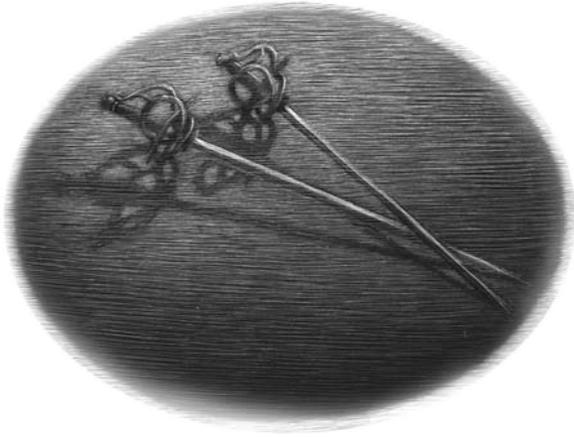
“Right!” George clapped his fist into his palm; bits of mud dropped away from him onto the grass. “We’re the best agents in London, aren’t we?”

“Exactly,” Lockwood said. “None better. Now, Lucy’s shirt is rather burnt, and I think my trousers are disintegrating. How about we go on home?”

II

The Unexpected
Grave

Chapter 3



Next morning, like every morning that fine, hot summer, the sky was blue and clear. The parked cars lining the street were glittering like jewels. I walked to Arif's corner store in a T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops, squinting at the light, listening to the city's busy, breathless hum. The days were long, the nights short; ghosts were at their weakest. It was the time of year when most people tried to ignore the Problem. Not agents, though. We never stop. Look at us go. I bought milk and Swiss rolls for our breakfast, and flip-flopped my slow way home.

Thirty-five Portland Row, shimmering in the sunlight, was its usual unpainted self. As always, the sign on the railing that read

A. J. LOCKWOOD & CO., INVESTIGATORS

AFTER DARK, RING BELL AND WAIT BEYOND THE IRON LINE

was wonky; as always, the bell on its post showed signs of rust; as always, three of the iron tiles halfway up the path were loose thanks to the activity of garden ants, and one was missing completely. I ignored it all, went in, put the rolls on a plate, and made the tea. Then I headed for the basement.

As I descended the spiral stairs, I could hear the shuffling of shoes on a polished floor, and the *whip, whip, whipping* of a blade through air. Soft, crisp impacts told me the sword was finding its target. Lockwood, as was his habit after an unsatisfactory job, was ridding himself of his frustrations.

The rapier room, where we go to practice swordplay, is mostly empty of furniture. There's a rack of old rapiers; a chalk dust stand; a long, low table; and three rickety wooden chairs against one wall. In the center of the room, two life-size straw dummies hang suspended from hooks in the ceiling. Both have crude faces drawn on with ink. One wears a grubby lace bonnet; the other an ancient, stained top hat; and their stuffed cotton torsos are pricked and torn with dozens of little holes. The names of these targets are Lady Esmeralda and Floating Joe.

Today, Esmeralda was receiving the full force of Lockwood's attentions. She was spinning on her chain, and her bonnet was askew. Lockwood circled her at a distance, rapier held ready. He wore sharp fencing slacks and loafers; he'd removed his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves a little way. The dust danced up around his gliding feet as he moved back and forth, rapier swaying, left hand held out behind for balance. He cut patterns in the air, feinted, shimmied to the side, and struck a sudden blow to the dummy's ragged shoulder, sending the tip right through the straw and out

the other side. His face was serene, his hair glistened; his eyes shone with dark intent. I watched him from the door.

“Yes, I’ll have a slice, thanks,” George said. “If you can tear yourself away.”

I crossed over to the table. George was sitting there, reading a comic book. He wore distressingly loose tracksuit bottoms and an accurately named sweatshirt. His hands were white with chalk dust, and his face was flushed. Two bottles of water sat on the table; a rapier was propped beside him.

Lockwood looked up as I passed. “Swiss rolls and tea,” I said.

“Come and join me first!” He indicated a long, torn-open cardboard box lying by the rapier rack. “Italian rapiers, just arrived from Mullet’s. New lighter steel and silver enameling on the point. Feel really good. They’re worth a try.”

I hesitated. “That means leaving the cakes alone with George. . . .”

Lockwood just grinned at me, flicking his blade to and fro so that the air sang.

It was hard to say no to him. It always is. Besides, I wanted to try the new rapier. I drew one from the box and held it loosely across my palms. It was lighter than I’d expected, and balanced differently from my usual French-style *épée*. I gripped the handle, looking at the complex coils of silvery metal surrounding my fingers in a protective mesh.

“The guard has silver filigree on it,” Lockwood said. “Should keep you safe from spurts of ectoplasm. What do you think?”

“Bit fancy,” I said doubtfully. “It’s the kind of thing Kipps would use.”

“Oh, don’t say that. This has class. Give it a try.”

A sword in the hand always makes you feel good. Even before breakfast, even when wearing flip-flops, it gives you a feeling of power. I turned toward Floating Joe and cut a standard ward knot around him, the kind that keeps a Visitor penned in.

“Don’t lean in so much,” Lockwood advised. “You were a bit off balance there. Try holding your arm forward a little more. Like this. . . .” He turned my wrist, and altered my stance by gently adjusting the position of my waist. “See? Is that better?”

“Yes.”

“I think these rapiers will suit you.” He gave Floating Joe a nudge with his shoe so that he swung back and forth, and I had to skip aside to avoid him. “Imagine he’s a hungry Type Two,” Lockwood said. “He wants human contact and is coming at you in a rush. . . . You need to keep the plasm in one place, so it doesn’t break free and threaten fellow agents. Try doing a double ward knot, like this. . . .” His rapier darted around the dummy in a complex blur.

“I’ll never learn that,” I said. “I couldn’t follow it at all.”

Lockwood smiled. “Oh, it’s just a Kuriashi turn. I can take you through the positions sometime.”

“Okay.”

“Tea’s getting cold,” George remarked. “And I’m on the penultimate slice.”

He was lying. The rolls were still there. But it *was* time to eat something. I had a fluttery feeling in my tummy and my legs felt weak. It was probably the late night catching up with me. I ducked between Joe and Esmeralda and went over to the table. Lockwood

did a few more exercises: swift, elegant, and flawless. George and I watched him as we chewed.

“So, what do you think of the rolls?” I said, with my mouth full.

“They’re all right. It’s things like Kuriashi turns that I can’t stomach,” George said. “Nothing but trendy claptrap, invented by the big agencies to make themselves look fancy. In my book, you thwack a Visitor, avoid being ghost-touched, and make it home. That’s all you need to know.”

“You’re still sore about last night,” I said. “Well, I am too.”

“I’ll get over it. It’s my fault for not researching properly. But we shouldn’t have missed that stone. We could have had the case done and dusted before that Fittes rabble showed up.” He shook his head. “Bunch of stuck-up snobs, they are. I used to work there, so I know. They look down on anyone who hasn’t got a posh jacket or neatly ironed trousers. As if appearance is all that counts. . . .” He stuck a hand inside his tracksuit bottoms and had an indignant scratch.

“Oh, most of the Fittes crowd are all right.” Despite his exertions, Lockwood was scarcely out of breath. He dropped his rapier into the rack with a clatter and dusted the chalk from his hands. “They’re just kids like us, risking their lives. It’s the supervisors who cause the trouble. They’re the ones who think themselves untouchable, just because they’ve got cushy jobs at one of the oldest, biggest agencies.”

“Tell me about it,” George said heavily. “They used to drive me mad.”

I nodded. “Kipps is the worst, though. He *really* hates us, doesn’t he?”

“Not us,” Lockwood said. “*Me*. He really hates me.”

“But why? What’s he got against you?”

Lockwood picked up one of the bottles of water and sighed reflectively. “Who knows? Maybe it’s my natural style he envies, maybe my boyish charm. Perhaps it’s my setup here—having my own agency, no one to answer to, with fine companions at my side.” He caught my eye and smiled.

George looked up from his comic. “Or it could be the fact you once stabbed him in the bottom with a sword.”

“Yes, well there is that.” Lockwood took a sip of water.

I looked back and forth between them. “What?” I said. “When did this happen?”

Lockwood flung himself into a chair. “It was before your time, Luce,” he said. “When I was a kid. DEPRAC holds an annual fencing competition for young agents here in London. Down at the Albert Hall. Fittes and Rotwell always dominate it, but my old master, Gravedigger Sykes, thought I was good enough, so I entered too. Drew Kipps in the quarter final. Being a few years older, he was a lot taller than me then, and he was the hot favorite going in. Made all sorts of silly boasts about it, as you can imagine. Anyway, I bamboozled him with a couple of Winchester half-lunges, and the long and short of it was, he ended up tripping over his own feet. I just gave him a quick prod while he was sprawling on all fours, nothing to get upset about. The crowd rather liked it, of course. Oddly, he’s been insanely vindictive toward me ever since.”

“How strange,” I said. “So . . . did you go on to win the competition?”

“No.” Lockwood inspected the bottle. “No . . . I made the final,

as it happens, but I didn't win. Is that the time? We're sluggish today. I should go and wash."

He sprang up, seized two slices of Swiss roll and, before I could say anything more, was out of the room and up the stairs.

George glanced at me. "You know he doesn't like opening up too much," he said.

"Yeah."

"It's just the way he is. I'm surprised he told you as much as he did."

I nodded. George was right. Small anecdotes here and there were all you got from Lockwood; if you questioned him further he shut tight, like a clam. It was infuriating—but intriguing, too. It always gave me a pleasant tug of curiosity. One full year after my arrival at the agency, the unrevealed details of my employer's early life remained an important part of his mystery and fascination.

All things considered, that summer—and leaving the Wimbledon debacle aside—Lockwood & Co. *was* doing okay. Not *super* okay—we hadn't gotten rich or anything. We weren't building swanky mansions for ourselves with ghost-lamps in the grounds and electrically powered streams of water running along the driveway (as Steve Rotwell, head of the giant Rotwell Agency, was said to have done). But we *were* managing a little better than before.

Seven months had passed since the Screaming Staircase affair had brought us so much publicity. Our widely reported success at Combe Carey Hall, one of the most haunted houses in England, had immediately resulted in a spate of prominent new cases. We exorcised a Dark Specter that was laying waste to a remote portion

of Epping Forest; we cleansed a rectory in Upminster that was being troubled by a Shining Boy. And of course, though it nearly cost all of us our lives, our investigation of Mrs. Barrett's tomb led to the company's being short-listed for *True Hauntings'* "Agency of the Month" for the second time. As a result, our appointment book was almost full. Lockwood had even mentioned hiring an office assistant.

For the moment, though, we were still a small outfit, the smallest in London. Anthony Lockwood, George Cubbins, and Lucy Carlyle: just the three of us rubbing along together at 35 Portland Row. Living and working side by side.

George? The last seven months hadn't changed him much. With regard to his general scruffiness, sharp tongue, and fondness for bottom-hugging puffer jackets, this was obviously a matter for regret. But he was still a tireless researcher, capable of unearthing vital facts about each and every haunted location. He was the most careful of us too, the least likely to jump headlong into danger; this quality had kept us all alive more than once. George also retained his habit of taking off his glasses and polishing them on his sweater whenever he was (a) utterly sure of himself, (b) irritated, or (c) bored rigid by my company, which, one way or another, seemed pretty much all the time. But he and I were getting along better now. In fact, we'd only had one full-on, foot-stamping, saucepan-hurling row that month, which was itself some kind of record.

George was very interested in the science and philosophy of Visitors: he wanted to understand their nature, and the reasons for their return. To this end he conducted a series of experiments on our collection of spectral Sources—old bones or other fragments that retained some ghostly charge. This hobby of his was sometimes

a little annoying. I'd lost track of the number of times I'd tripped over electric cables clamped to some relic, or been startled by a severed limb while rummaging in the deep freeze for fish fingers and frozen peas.

But at least George *had* hobbies (comic books and cooking were two of the others). Anthony Lockwood was quite another matter. He had few interests outside his work. On our rare days off, he would lie late in bed, riffling through the newspapers, or re-reading tattered novels from the shelves about the house. At last he'd fling them aside, do some moody rapier practice, then begin preparing for our next assignment. Little else seemed to interest him.

He never discussed old cases. Something propelled him ever onward. At times an almost obsessive quality to his energy could be glimpsed beneath the urbane exterior. But he never gave a clue as to what drove him, and I was forced to develop my own speculations.

Outwardly he was just as energetic and mercurial as ever, passionate and restless, a continual inspiration. He still wore his hair dashingly swept back, still had a fondness for too-tight suits; was just as courteous to me as he'd been the day we met. But he also remained—and I had become increasingly aware of this fact the longer I observed him—ever-so-slightly detached: from the ghosts we discovered, from the clients we took on, perhaps even (though I didn't find this easy to admit) from his colleagues, George and me.

The clearest evidence of this lay in the personal details we each revealed. It had taken me months to summon up the courage, but in the end I'd told them both a good deal about my childhood, my unhappy experiences in my first apprenticeship, and the reasons I'd had for leaving home. George, too, was full of stories—which I

seldom listened to—mostly about his upbringing in north London. It had been unexcitingly normal; his family was well-balanced and no one seemed to have died or disappeared. He'd even once introduced us to his mother, a small, plump, smiley woman who had called Lockwood *ducks*, me *darling*, and given us all a homemade cake. But Lockwood? No. He rarely spoke about himself and certainly *never* about his past or family. After a year of living with him in his childhood home, I still knew nothing about his parents at all.

This was particularly frustrating, because the whole of 35 Portland Row was filled to overflowing with their artifacts and heirlooms, their books and furniture. The walls of the living room and stairwell were covered with strange objects: masks, weapons, and what seemed to be ghost-hunting equipment from faraway cultures. It seemed obvious that Lockwood's parents had been researchers or collectors of some kind, with a special interest in lands beyond Europe. But where they were (or more likely, what had happened to them), Lockwood never said. And there seemed to be no photographs or personal mementos of them anywhere.

At least, not in any of the rooms *I* visited.

Because I thought I knew where the answers to Lockwood's past might be.

There was a certain door on the first-floor landing of the house. Unlike every other door in 35 Portland Row, this one was never opened. When I'd arrived, Lockwood had requested that it remained closed, and George and I had always obeyed him. The door had no lock that I could see and, as I passed it every day, its plain exterior (blank, except for a rough rectangle where some label or sticker had been removed) presented an almost insolent challenge. It dared me

to guess what was behind it, defied me to peek inside. So far, I'd resisted the temptation—more out of prudence than simple nicety. The one or two occasions when I'd even *mentioned* the room to Lockwood had not gone down too well.

And what about me, Lucy Carlyle, still the newest member of the company? How had *I* altered, that first year?

Outwardly, not so much. My hair remained in a multipurpose, ectoplasm-avoiding bob; I wasn't any sleeker or better-looking than before. Height-wise, I hadn't grown any. I was still more eager than skillful when it came to fighting, and too impatient to be an excellent researcher like George.

But things *had* changed for me. My time with Lockwood & Co. had given me a confidence I'd previously been lacking. When I walked down the street with my rapier swinging at my side, and the little kids gawping, and the adults giving me deferential nods, I not only knew I had a special status in society, I honestly believed I'd begun to *earn* it too.

My Talents were fast developing. My skill at inner Listening, which had always been good, was growing ever sharper. I heard the whispers of Type Ones, the fragments of speech emitted by Type Twos; few apparitions were entirely silent to me now. My sense of psychic Touch had also deepened. Holding certain objects gave me strong echoes of the past. More and more, I found I had an intuitive feel for the intentions of each ghost; sometimes I could even predict their actions.

All these were rare enough abilities, but they were overshadowed by something deeper—a mystery that hung over all of us at 35 Portland Row, but particularly over me. Seven months before,

something had happened that had set me apart from Lockwood and George, and all the other agents we competed with. Ever since, my Talent had been the focus of George's experiments, and our major topic of conversation. Lockwood even believed it might be the foundation of our fortunes, and make us the most celebrated agency in London.

First, though, we had to solve one particular problem.

That problem was sitting on George's desk, inside a thick glass jar, beneath a jet-black cloth.

It was dangerous and evil, and had the potential to change my life forever.

It was a skull.