

Lockwood & Co.

Hauntings are our business . . .



**'Stroud is
a genius'**
Rick Riordan

**THE
WHISPERING SKULL**
JONATHAN STROUD

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About the Book

Ghosts and ghouls beware! London's smallest, shabbiest and most talented psychic detection agency is back.

Life is never exactly peaceful for Lockwood & Co. Lucy and George are trying to solve the mystery of the talking skull trapped in their ghost jar, while Lockwood is desperate for an exciting new case.

Things seem to be looking up when the team is called to Kensal Green Cemetery to investigate the grave of a sinister Victorian doctor. Strange apparitions have been seen there, and the site must be made safe. As usual, Lockwood is confident; as usual, everything goes wrong - a terrible phantom is unleashed, and a dangerous object is stolen from the coffin.

Lockwood & Co must recover the relic before its power is unleashed, but it's a race against time. Their obnoxious rivals from the Fittes agency are also on the hunt. And if that's not bad enough, the skull in the ghost-jar is stirring again ...

The author of the blockbuster BARTIMAEUS sequence delivers another humorous and chilling instalment in the critically acclaimed LOCKWOOD & CO. series.

Lockwood
& Co.

THE WHISPERING SKULL



JONATHAN STROUD

RHCP DIGITAL

For Laura and Georgia



I

The Wimbledon Wraiths



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. 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 rotten 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 splattered 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. Apart 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, 'my one'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 practising 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 forwards.

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 near 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. 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 reserves 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 forwards. 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 further back, quivering and steaming.

'Watch it, Lucy,' George said. 'You just trod 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.'

For answer, the spade was flung aside. A mud-slaked 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.’

OK, maybe I’d been a little ratty, but there’s something about rotting corpses leaping at my face that gets 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 tumbrel to a place near Earlsfield crossroads, and strung up on a gibbet, thirty feet high. Afterwards 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 grey-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 had 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 centre of the glade. A cold spot hung above the stone, and spiders' webs 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 fitted. 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 carrying on. 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 round 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 the 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 flares.'

All this while the handless ghost had been inching nearer and nearer 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 skywards; particles of plasm hissed and spat into the soil. We all took a half-step further 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 (though Rawbones and the Limbless push them close), 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, 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 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 not unknown. What *was* concerning was the way his hand was raised, his podgy 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 centre hung a rigid, man-shaped form. Its neck was broken; its head lolled sideways. It moved steadily towards 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 eyeshot, another. And further 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?’

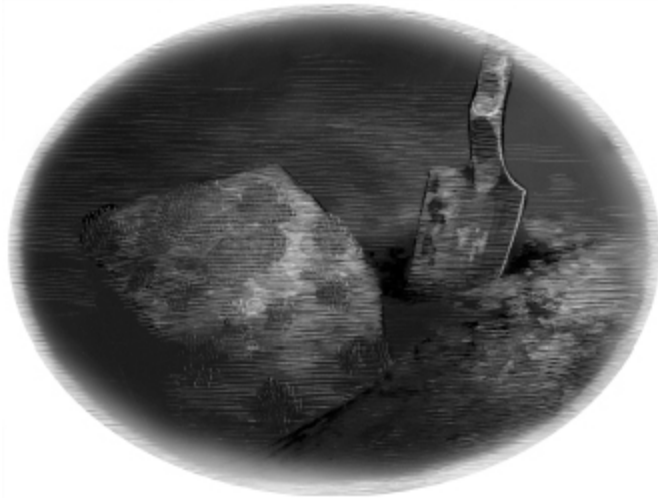
George’s mound of earth was just beside me. I scrambled to the top and spun three hundred and sixty nervous degrees.

From where I stood I could see the little pool of lantern-light, bounded 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.'



2



Now, we don't panic in tight situations. That's part of our training. We're psychical 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 tetchy, 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 good go.'

'No one,' Lockwood said, 'blames anyone.' He had been standing very still, 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’ll 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’.

‘OK,’ 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 about 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 towards 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 towards 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 lustre, like those fish you see piled in the Covent Garden market stalls. The clarity was startling. I could see every last fibre 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 towards 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 the glade were filled with moving lights, the narrow beams of white magnesium torches, 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 towards us. In the glow of the torches 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 torches directly into our faces, so 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 it was.

'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-torches, and everyone's face was illuminated. There were three of them standing next to us. Other grey-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 psychical 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 wearing the blingiest rapier you'll ever see, weighed down to the pommel with cheap paste 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 burned 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 off 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 blonde, 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 poorly hedgehogs. In fact she was flintily ambitious and cool-natured, and had less capacity for humour than a terrapin. Jokes made her irritable, as if she sensed something 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 sewn 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 grey Fittes jacket, skirt and leggings were always spotless, which made me doubt she'd ever had to climb up inside a chimney to escape a Spectre, 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've *quite* enough protection?'

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

A pig-tailed 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 all the ghosts still running around?' This, despite her chin and hairstyle, was a fair point.

'We've 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 blonde girl laughed. Imagine an upper-class horse neighing contemptuously from a sun-bed 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 centre 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 he'd secretly turned out to have been 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 grey trousers from which tiny legs like hairy bamboo canes protruded. His feet were almost non-existent. His face shone pale and featureless beneath a swirl of Brylcreemed 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 map of Wimbledon Common, encased in a weatherproof sleeve.

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 hung 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 centre 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 centre of the hollow. ‘Found a squared stone! Obvious gallows mark. Looks like someone’s 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 favour. 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 ranged 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 fleapit shambles! You can’t even afford a uniform! Any time you come up against a real organization, you’ll 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 a 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 advert 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 trolley over the grass, ready to carry it 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.

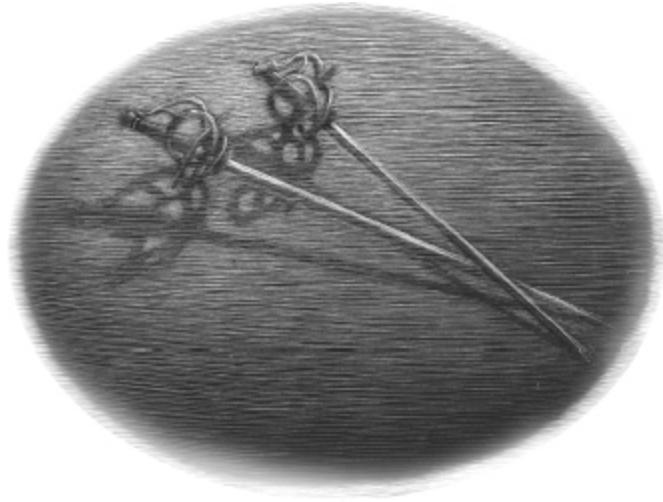
'If we can't beat Kipps's gang in a fair fight,' I said heartily, 'we may as well give up now.'

'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 front's rather burned, and I think my trousers are disintegrating. How about we get off home?'

II

The Unexpected Grave



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 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 railings 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