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a genius'**
Rick Riordan

THE HOLLOW BOY
JONATHAN STROUD

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Praise for Lockwood & Co.

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About the Book

Phantoms in your attic? Spectres by your bed? Never fear - Lockwood & Co. are here!

A terrible new outbreak of ghosts is causing chaos across London. With the authorities baffled, psychic investigators Lockwood, Lucy and George see a fresh chance for fame and glory.

But countless horrors await them: bloody footprints on a spiral staircase, murderous ambushes in the night - and, waiting at the centre of the outbreak, the most fearful apparition of all.

Lockwood
& Co.

THE HOLLOW BOY



JONATHAN STROUD

RHCP DIGITAL

For Rosie and Francesca, with love



I

Lavender Lodge



1



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 back towards 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 situations 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 goodbye 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 rucksack with an elbow. 'Shut up.'

'I thought you wanted my advice!'

'Your job is to keep lookout, not distract us with stupid theories. Now, hush.'

We waited on the step. The Lavender Lodge boarding house was a narrow terrace building of three floors. Like most of this part of London's East End, it had a weary, ground-down air. Soot crusted the pebbledash render, thin curtains dangled at the windows. No lights showed in the upper storeys, but the hall light was on and there was a yellowed VACANCIES sign propped behind the panel of cracked glass in the centre 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 towards us up the street.’

He was right. Far off in the dusk, a pale form could just be seen. It drifted slowly above the pavement 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 one another. 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 took off 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 the business even so. Dark clothes, dark boots; George had even tucked his shirt in. All three of us carried rucksacks 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 towards 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 rucksack 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 labourers working in the nearby London docks -

who'd gone missing in the area. It had been noticed that some of these men had been staying at an obscure boarding house - 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, of course. 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 grey-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 tasselled 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 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 absent-minded 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 enquiry. 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 towards 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 drinks cabinet and a small TV. A big wooden dresser 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 centre 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 woollen 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 dresser. 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. OK, there was a muffled voice coming from my rucksack 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 beneath 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?'

'Not 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 defences 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 bedrooms do you have?'

'Six. Four on the first 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 centre of the lounge. Over by the dresser, 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 towards 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, ring 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 say, we just wish to take a look upstairs.'

'There's nothing supernatural here,' Mrs Evans said, scowling. 'Look around. See the defences.'

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 semi-darkness 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 rucksack. ‘*Outwitted by an old-age pensioner. Outstanding. What a team.*’

I didn’t tell it to shut up this time. It kind of had a point.



2



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 Spectres 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 foot six inches tall, have hair the colour of a walnut coffin, and wear size six ectoplasm-proof boots.

There. Now we're properly introduced.

So I stood with Lockwood and George on the first-floor landing of the boarding house. 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 other 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 rucksack. ‘Skull?’

‘There’s ghosts up here. Lots of them. So . . . now do you accept 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 the others couldn’t hear the ghost’s half of the conversation.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘It’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 five degrees since the foot of the stairs.’

‘Yes. That fire door acts as a barrier.’ The pencil-beam of Lockwood’s torch speared downwards, and picked out the ridged grey 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 torch beam wide and circled it slowly around us. We were standing just below a poky 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 second 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 torch 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 torchlight, his dark eyes shone. As always, peril suited him. ‘All right,’ he said softly. ‘Listen to me. We keep calm, we sort 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 centre of the carpet. I opened my rucksack 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 Spectre – 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 got 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 accidentally 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 colours 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 torches, but didn't switch them on. We didn't need to. We were in a mean little bedroom. It had a single bed, a narrow wardrobe, 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 bed linen. In its centre reclined the ghost of a man in striped pyjamas. He lay on his back, as if asleep, his limbs hovering slightly above the sheets. He had a small moustache and ruffled 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 like 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 pyjamas. His eyes were open, staring into nothing. Close by - so close that their auras of other-light nearly touched - stood another man. He wore pyjama bottoms and a white T-shirt. He looked as if he had just got out of bed, clothes rumpled, straggle-bearded, long black hair a-tangle. 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 round, 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 upwards. 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 first 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 over a weir, and the beams of our torches 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 rucksack, 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 rucksack. '*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 rucksack. '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 on the door to the left. He flung it open with a dramatic flourish. 'What a pity,' he said. 'Nothing.'

‘That was *so* obviously a broom cupboard,’ I said. ‘Look, it’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 picked 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. ‘That’s 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 OK. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘after all, how dreadful can it actually be?’

He pushed open the door.

The good news was that there weren’t a couple of ghosts inside. No. The bad news was that we couldn’t count how many. It was *packed* with them: they filled the room, that host of pyjamaed gentlemen. Some were bright, others much fainter. They were gaunt, unshaven, hollow-cheeked and empty-eyed. Some looked as if they’d just been awoken from deep sleep. Others had died in the act of dressing.

They overlapped each other in that mean and dowdy space, crammed between the wardrobe and towel rail, between bedstead and washbasin. Some looked at the ceiling; others drifted haltingly, staring towards 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 forwards; in an instant they were through the door and out on 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 loft 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 cupboard 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 bottoms. He shimmered towards 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 out of 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 centre of the circle, next to Lockwood and me. Without words he extended the ladder up towards the ceiling, balancing its end against the rim of the loft opening, just below the hatch.

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

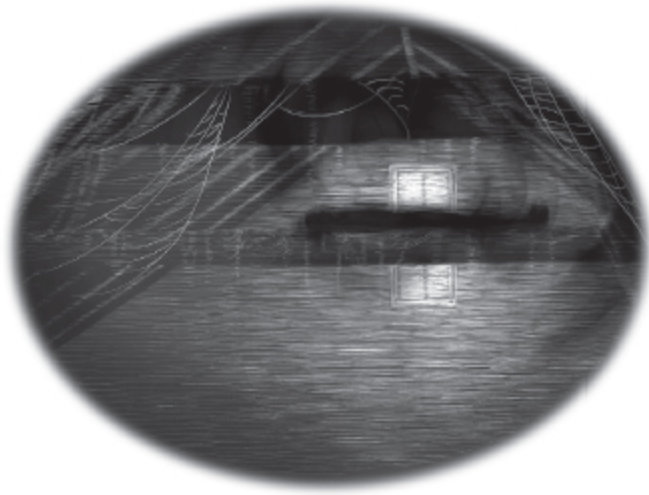
Up the ladder we went, first Lockwood, then George, then me. Lockwood reached the hatch. He shoved it hard. A band of blackness opened, expanding slowly like the edges of a paper fan. A smattering of dust fell down.

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.



3



It was *cold* – that was the first thing.

It was also pitch-black. A hazy column of other-light drifted up through the loft 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 chimney-stacks built in, and one pierced by a single tall,