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THE
HOUSE
OF
HIDDEN
WONDERS

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For my cousin Sarah

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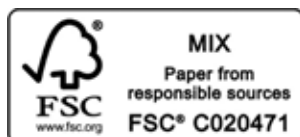
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~PROLOGUE~



The ghost and her demon move in silence, hidden by shadows, cloaked in night. Down the long columns of darkness they drift: unseen, unheard. The rain does not touch them, neither does the chill wind. Despite the hour, the streets are busy, but no one notices them. No one calls after them or points them out. They are as invisible as the silver moon once hidden behind a storm cloud.

The ghost keeps moving. This place is not dark enough for her, nor the one after, nor even the next or the next. She has no home, nowhere to rest. She wanders, seeking; a restless spirit. There is no place where she belongs.

Somewhere behind her a great clock strikes twelve, its bell clanging into the gloom. It is midnight. The witching hour. The time when spirits rise. Her demon chatters, then quiets. A crack appears in the darkness beside her:

a passageway to the underworld. The ghost and her demon float in, and on, on, on.

Way down deep they go, then deeper still, into the midnight dark.

CHAPTER 1



“Run!” Zinnie shouted over her shoulder.

“He’ll never catch us!” Nell shouted back, as she dithered after Zinnie. “He ain’t got a chance!”

“Stop messing about, Nell!” Zinnie ordered her little sister. “Just *run*! Sadie, you too!”

She could hear their footsteps thundering behind her as they fled through the twilight. High above their heads the castle loomed, the yellow sandstone of its slabs turning black in the setting sun. She jinked a sharp left and there ahead were the steps of Castle Wynd. Zinnie glanced behind her. Sadie still looked fresh but Nell was puffing hard, beads of sweat gleaming on her forehead. Zinnie frowned. It wasn’t like Nell to be slow – usually, her feet were as quick as her tongue. Further behind she could see the lawman gaining on them.

We won't make it, Zinnie thought, trying to catch her breath. *Not like this.*

She paused, letting Sadie and Nell pass her. As they did, Zinnie hooked the silver watch out of her pocket and slipped it into the fold of Nell's grubby pinafore.

"Keep going," she told them. "Don't look back. Split up in the market and hide. Don't go straight home – he might follow."

"What about you?" Sadie cried.

"I'll be right behind you – go!"

Sadie grabbed Nell's hand and pulled her up the steps, taking them two at a time. Zinnie followed, but slowly, making sure the constable had her in his sights. When he came puffing on to the steps, she faked a stumble, as if she'd slipped and fallen. She tugged her cap down lower over her eyes, stayed down for a beat, two, waiting until he was almost level with her...

"You, boy," the policeman called weakly, wheezing his way up the steps, his cheeks red with the effort of the chase. "Stop in the name of the law. I—"

Zinnie kicked out with her foot, catching his ankle just hard enough that he buckled to his knees with an '*oof!*' Then she was away, streaking up the worn stone steps, dodging in and out of the shadows and around curious onlookers until she'd reached the top.

"You!" the copper cried, still trying to regain his footing. "I'll get you yet, you little scoundrel! I'll—"

Zinnie made a show of turning left, but once she knew she was hidden among the knots of people that still crowded the thoroughfare she dashed right, down Castlehill towards the High Street. The sun had dropped below the horizon now, but there was still a faint glow in the air, even with the heavy blur of rain clouds gathering overhead. The late stalls were out, selling the leftover scraps that only the desperate would buy. This was Old Edinburgh. There were a lot of desperate people here.

“Zinnie!”

Sadie was peeking out from the shadows of St Giles. Zinnie looked around but there was no sign of the policeman. He’d not find them now, not in this crowd.

“Are you all right?” Sadie asked, as Zinnie reached her.

“Fine,” Zinnie said. “Where’s Nell?”

Sadie shook her head. “Don’t know. She’ll hide somewhere for a bit. You did say...”

Zinnie nodded. “All right. She’s got the watch, though. If I take it to him now, we might be able to afford some supper.”

Just the thought of food made her stomach rumble. There hadn’t been enough bread for them all to eat that morning, so Zinnie had given Nell her own share. Now though, hunger gnawed at Zinnie’s empty insides like a sharp-toothed rat.

“Come on,” said Sadie. “He’s long given up. Let’s go home.”

They'd only got as far as the entrance of Writers' Court when they spotted Nell further down the whip-thin street. She had her back against the wall, staring up at the man looming over her.

"That's Bartholomew Talbot!" Sadie hissed.

Despite herself, Zinnie's heart turned over. *Bartholomew Talbot*. A terrible, cruel man. She usually tried to stay as far away from him as possible. But she couldn't let him hurt Nell.

"Talbot," Zinnie said, running up to step between him and Nell. "What do you want?"

"What's it to you?"

"You don't mess with my sisters. You should know that by now."

Talbot's face twisted into a sneer as his gaze flicked between Nell and Zinnie. "Sister?" he said. "I don't think so."

Zinnie lifted her chin so she could look him in the eye. She slipped her fingers into her pocket and pulled out her knife, flicking it open without looking away. "Let her *go*."

Talbot narrowed his eyes. "I think you've got a death wish, girly, threatening me with that little trinket. I was just asking your *sister* a polite question, is all. About that wee glint of silver I can see in her pocket there. Got a notion it ain't hers, see."

"It's not," Zinnie agreed. "But it isn't yours, either, and I'm about to make sure it gets back to its rightful owner."

Bet that's not something you'd do, is it? In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if it were you that nicked it from the gent who's missing it in the first place."

Talbot smiled again, but his eyes were as cruel as ever. "You'd best be careful, my wee lambs. Watch yourselves, all right?"

He turned and jerked his head. One by one, four big men slid out of the shadows to flank him. Talbot gave Nell a rot-toothed grin. Then he and his cronies were gone, barging their way through the bustle on the Royal Mile.

"Oh!" said Nell, throwing her arms round Zinnie's waist and almost knocking her over. "I'll never be as brave as you, Zinnie! I'll never be able to stand up to Talbot like you do!"

Zinnie snapped her knife closed and put it back in her pocket before hugging Nell.

"I'd rather you never saw him again," she said. "But if you do, there's no shame in running away, pippin. I'd rather you do that than ever face the likes of Bartholomew Talbot alone. You see him coming, you run. All right?"

"All right," said Nell, and then began to cough.

"Nell?" Sadie asked with a frown.

"It's just the running, that's all."

Sadie pressed a hand to Nell's forehead. "You're hot."

Nell huffed. "Course I am! You pulled me up those steps so quickly I thought I was flying!"

Zinnie retrieved the watch from Nell's pocket. "Take her home," she told Sadie. "I'll get rid of this and be back with

something for us all to eat before you know it.”

Sadie nodded and took Nell’s hand. Zinnie watched them go, then turned down the Mile, making for the curving turn of Cockburn Street and the elegant squares of the New Town beyond.

CHAPTER 2



“Miss Zinnie!” exclaimed Arthur Conan Doyle, standing in the centre of his study with the silver watch she’d just given him dangling from his hand like a pendulum.

“Just Zinnie is fine,” Zinnie told him.

“It would be impolite for me to be so familiar,” the young man declared. “Now tell me – *how*? From where did you retrieve it?”

Zinnie shrugged. She was hardly going to tell him that they’d had to steal it from the window of a pawnbroker’s shop. “It doesn’t matter.”

Conan Doyle shook his head. “Well, thank you. This will mean a great deal to the friend from whom it was stolen. He thought never to see it again. I confess, I feared that this time I must surely have given you a task that would confound even your skills. I am glad to have been mistaken.”

Every now and then, Arthur Conan Doyle asked Zinnie to find something for him, usually something that had been lost or stolen. The watch had been his latest request – although he'd actually referred to it as 'the Pursuit of the Purloined Pocket Watch'.

"And now," he said, "let me find you and those sisters of yours something for your trouble."

Conan Doyle turned away to his desk, which gave Zinnie a chance to look round the room. She'd never been inside his house on Picardy Place before, much less into his study. Usually, he came to find her on the Mile, or talked to her briefly out in the hallway. But it seemed that by returning the purloined pocket watch Zinnie had proven something to Conan Doyle. That she was trustworthy perhaps. Zinnie didn't really care as long as he kept finding work for her to do.

The study looked out over the street via a large bow window. There was a desk and a fireplace, a chair, tables and ... books. Books everywhere, on shelves and in stacks on the tables, the chairs, even on the floor. Several were open on the desk, along with a folded newspaper, a notebook and an ink pen, as if he'd just been sitting there, taking notes.

Conan Doyle opened one of the desk drawers, pulling out a little leather money pouch and upending it into his palm. From the pile of coins he took a half-crown and held it out to her. It was the most money Zinnie had seen in a long time and she took it quickly, clenching it in her fist

as if it might vanish. Forget just supper – this would keep them fed for days without even having to beg. Zinnie was careful not to show Conan Doyle just how much the money meant to her, though. She had no intention of being sent to the poorhouse and she'd move heaven and earth to make sure Sadie and Nell didn't end up in an orphanage. She had no good memories of her own time there and some were so bad that they still haunted the worst of her dreams.

“Obliged,” she said with a nod, slipping the coin into her pocket. “Got any more jobs for us?”

Conan Doyle flashed her a smile. “Well, now – perhaps I do. Do you happen to have heard of anyone with an unhealthy interest in the human ear?”

Zinnie blinked. “Sorry?”

Conan Doyle sank into his desk chair. “You know that I am a medical student at the Royal Infirmary, yes?”

Zinnie nodded.

“Something's been happening to some of the cadavers delivered for use in our learning,” he said. “In the past ten days, two of them have arrived without their ears.”

Zinnie shifted from one foot to the other. “Haven't you never had a corpse with bits missing before?”

“Well – yes, of course. Sometimes we get ones with a limb cut off, or some other injury. But to have two that have both lost their ears – severed cleanly, as if with a knife or some other precision instrument – that seems strange, does it not? Even to you?”

Zinnie wasn't sure what he meant by the 'even' in that question and narrowed her eyes.

Conan Doyle raised both hands in silent apology. "All I mean is that it seems obvious to me that something is amiss. Don't you agree?"

Zinnie shrugged again. "Don't seem like a very usual occurrence, no."

Conan Doyle nodded. "Yet the chief physician of the Royal Infirmary has dismissed it as a prank, perhaps by my fellow students. Why he feels they would bother with such a charade, I don't know. I've been trying to work out what might have been important enough about those men's ears that would warrant their removal."

Zinnie thought for a moment. "A punishment maybe?"

Conan Doyle grimaced. "I don't think so. As far as I can make out, the ears were removed *post mortem* – after death, not before. Not much of a punishment, eh?"

"Maybe they had something on them or in them? A tattoo? Earrings?"

"Hmm. Perhaps, but it is impossible to tell." He peered at her from his desk, as if a little surprised. "Good questions, though, Miss Zinnie. What else have you got?"

"I've got to get back..." She trailed off as Conan Doyle tipped out another half-crown into his hand and held it up.

"I'll pay for your time," he said. "I should be glad of another perspective and, forgive me for saying so, but perhaps one from the underbelly of this great city is

exactly what I have been missing when it comes to ‘the Mystery of the Severed Ears’. I intend to take any theories to the police, of course, especially if it seems there is risk of more, but it would be sensible to have something solid to suggest to them before I do.”

Zinnie took the coin and added it to the one already in her pocket, pleased by the chink and jingle they made. A whole crown! That could feed the girls well for a week, and might even get them a night or two in a hostel on Grassmarket as well.

“What sort of men were they?” Zinnie asked. “The ones missing their ears, I mean.”

Conan Doyle shook his head. “Their names are lost. They each had tattoos, however. I had it in mind that they could be sailors but, if that’s the case, they could have come from anywhere, and their ship – or ships – have probably already left Leith.”

“How did they die?”

“The police have concluded the deaths were accidental and are planning no further investigation. They had both suffered knocks to the head. The inspector I spoke to offered the opinion that the men were probably drunk at the time and suffered some form of misadventure.” Conan Doyle shrugged. “It is possible, I suppose, but it seems an inadequate explanation to me, especially given the fact that they arrived in the morgue without their ears.”

“I suppose,” Zinnie said slowly, “that *when* they had

their ears cut off is significant. If it was when they died, it probably means they were murdered by whoever took their ears. If it was afterwards, maybe not.”

Conan Doyle snapped his fingers. “Yes! Exactly, Miss Zinnie, exactly! I was really hoping the constabulary would investigate properly but, between you and me, I have more faith in the detective powers of a day-old trout. The police have written it off. It seems as if only I am interested in this little problem.”

“Not sure what anyone can do without knowing who the men are,” Zinnie pointed out. “Got to have somewhere to start.”

“Then perhaps that’s what you can help me with?”

Zinnie thought for a moment or two. Even if they had been dock workers or sailors, Leith wasn’t her patch and getting anyone down there to talk to her would be difficult. There must be some other way.

“What about the tattoos?” she said. “Were any of them shared between the men?”

“I think so, actually, but I can’t tell for sure – some had been burned off.”

“Burned off?” Zinnie repeated. “What do you mean?”

Conan Doyle indicated his own chest with a swipe of his forefinger. “They both had old marks across their chests, which suggested to me that they were trying to remove the tattoos by means of scorching. They were roughly in the same place and of the same shape, though. It would make

sense that the tattoos which had once been there matched.”

Zinnie frowned. “Have the bodies been done away with yet?”

“No. They’re still in the mortuary, awaiting dissection. Perhaps tomorrow I should go and examine them again. I could produce some sketches for you to look at.”

“Good idea,” Zinnie said, turning to the door with the coins jangling in her pocket. “Might give us something to go on, at least.”

“Wait!” Conan Doyle snapped his fingers. “By God, why didn’t I think of it before? Lady Sarah’s seance!”

Zinnie blinked. “What?”

“It’s tomorrow night, at Montague House on Queen Street,” Conan Doyle said. “I can gather items of each man’s clothing from the mortuary and ask the medium to summon their spirits. We can get the answers directly from the dead men themselves!”

“Really?” Zinnie said doubtfully. “And what do you mean ‘we’?” She didn’t believe in an afterlife. As far as she was concerned, there was enough trouble to deal with in this world without worrying about the next one. Yet Conan Doyle’s enthusiasm seemed genuine.

“I’ll need you there, Miss Zinnie, listening to whatever they say. I think the answer lies on your side of Edinburgh rather than mine. You may find significance in something I do not.”

“I can’t go to a seance on Queen Street!” Zinnie almost

laughed. "Your Lady Sarah would kick me out as soon as look at me!"

"She won't. When I tell her I need you there, she'll go along with it. Lady Sarah Montague is game for anything, the more daring the better. Six months ago, she was fording rivers in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. A child from Old Town Edinburgh isn't going to scare her off." He raised his eyebrows. "You can be a maid for the evening."

Zinnie looked down at herself. She was dressed in the only clothes she owned – a threadbare pair of rough brown trousers with a grubby shirt over the top. "Will I have to wear a skirt?"

Conan Doyle grinned. "Afraid so. A clean cap too, to hide that short hair of yours. But don't worry about all that. Subterfuge will suit you, I know it already. Be at thirty-three Queen Street at six o'clock tomorrow and Lady Sarah will arrange the rest. I'll make sure of it."

Zinnie still wasn't keen. Her doubt must have shown on her face.

"I'll pay you, of course," Conan Doyle said.

"All right," said Zinnie. "Six o'clock it is."



Sharon Gosling is an award-winning writer who lives in Cumbria. Her first middle-grade book, *The Diamond Thief*, won the Redbridge Children's Book Award in 2014. Her young-adult horror title, *Fir*, was shortlisted for Lancashire Book of the Year 2017. *The Golden Butterfly* was nominated for the 2020 CILIP Carnegie Medal. She also writes books and articles about television and film, and has written, produced and directed audio dramas.

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