

A CHRISTMAS-TIME GHOST STORY

# THE GHOST LOCKET



ALLISON RUSHBY

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First published in Great Britain 2022 by Walker Books Ltd  
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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Illustrations © 2022 Rovina Cai

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This book has been typeset in Centaur, Antigua and Atmosphere  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:  
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-0599-3

[www.walker.co.uk](http://www.walker.co.uk)







# Prologue

## SPITALFIELDS, LONDON

I am eight. I'm standing outside a tall terrace house that has fancy green shutters and a solid black front door. I don't want to go inside the house. Something about it doesn't feel right. I have that feeling. That funny feeling that I get in my stomach sometimes.

"Freya?" I look up.

"Mmm-hmm?" She turns on the pavement, busy digging for her phone in her bag.

"Have I been to this house before?"

She stops digging. "Why do you ask that?"

"Um, I don't know." I do know. I already know not to talk to Freya about the feeling I'm having. "It just . . . it feels like I've been here before. Like I remember it."



“Well, yes. You have been here before. A long time ago. Several times, in fact.”

“Okay.” If I’ve been here before, it should be all right. It’s just that I think there might be something that lives inside the house ... I used to call them shadows, but now I’m older I know they’re not. They’re people. People who used to be alive. People who are stuck between this world and what comes next. I call them spirits now. When I notice one, I just do this thing where I pretend I haven’t seen it at all. The spirit will usually go away then.

“Coming?” Freya is at the door, framed by the ivy that climbs up either side. A glass-and-iron pendant light hangs heavy overhead.

I nod. I want to see Elsie and I know she’s inside. Elsie is Freya’s great aunt and she’s one of my favourite people in the world. Elsie comes to visit us every year in Singapore, but this year we’ve come to her instead.

Freya grabs the iron knocker and knocks twice. It takes a few moments before the door creaks open.

“There you are!” Elsie beams as she opens the door wide. She is all silvery hair and rosy cheeks.

I hesitate in the doorway. Something feels ... wrong. Like I’m not welcome inside.

“Come on, Lolli, where’s my hug?” Elsie says.

Of course I’m welcome inside. I dash past Freya into the hallway and am enveloped by Elsie’s soft folds.

“Come here, you,” she says over the top of me, pulling in Freya as well.

Still a bit unsure, I peek around Elsie’s skirt.

What a strange place. It’s almost like I’ve stepped into the past. The entrance hall is gloomy, the walls layered thick with years of creamy paint. The only light comes from some old glass lamps on the wall with candles in them. The flames flicker and dance. All the things I can see – a heavy bench seat, a little hall table, the bumpy, uneven floor – look ancient and worn. A set of dark wooden stairs looms. The good news is, I can’t see any spirits. As Elsie draws back, I relax.

“Now, I’ve prepared some fun for this afternoon. I’ve found an old waffle iron and I’ve whipped up some batter. I thought we could make some waffles over the open fire, Lolli. Would you like that?”

I nod, barely hearing her question. The thing is, the moment I relaxed, a different feeling had come creeping in. Before it had been a bad feeling that I’d had. But this ... if it’s a spirit, it’s a friendly one. I’m surprised. Sometimes they seem confused, or worried,

or look lonely, but I don't think I've met a friendly one before.

While the grown-ups talk, I continue to look around. A clock I can't see *tick-tocks* and the house *creaks* and *groans*, as if it's talking to me.

Maybe it is?

Freya has told me Elsie's house is famous. I know not to call it a museum, because it isn't. It's an art installation. I don't really understand what that means, but when Freya explains it, she says the house isn't about artefacts, red ropes and reading labels. Apparently it's about emotions and drama. That still doesn't make complete sense to me, so I try to think of it like a ride where you experience the past. It's not expensive for the public to get in here, but it can take ages to get a ticket. Especially at Christmastime, because Christmas at the House in Spitalfields is special. Every Christmas the house is crammed full of festive decorations, holly and ivy. It's made all cosy and inviting and visitors are plied with mulled wine and mince pies by the hearth.

"Come on, Lolli. Let's go down to the kitchen and make some waffles the old-fashioned way," Freya says.

There's a mirror behind her reflecting a room and in it I see a flash of something. "Who's in there?" I ask Elsie, turning to point at the room itself.

"In the dining room? No one. It's just us. The house is closed today."

"There is. I think I saw someone. In the mirror." I regret the words the moment they come out of my mouth, because I know what I just saw.

"You saw someone in the mirror?" Elsie says quickly. "Who? A girl?"

"I ..." I start, but then stop as a feeling overtakes my body. Whatever I saw, whatever I felt that was kind and good just moments ago has gone. It has been chased away by something else. The something I felt a tingle of before when I was standing outside. Something angry. Something dark and hateful that is pressing down heavily from above, building and growing and doubling like an incoming deep, dark storm cloud. Now I've let it in, it grabs me with two hands. It sucks all the air from my lungs. Presses tight around my head. I know I'm not going to have the strength to push it away. It's too late. I'm too late. It warned me and I didn't listen. Now I can't move my feet. I'm stuck here.

I'm at its mercy.  
And it's coming.  
Coming.  
Barrelling down the stairs like a wave.  
Coming to take me.  
To drown me.  
*Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock*, the clock says, not caring.  
*Creak-crack*, the stairs groan as the thing hurtles  
downwards.

I put my hand out, scrambling for something to hold on to. I grab at the wall, but it's no good; my fingernails only slide down the layers of paint.

“Freya!” I panic. “Freya!”

I try the wall again, scratching, grasping. I have to hold on. It's pulling me under.

Just as I think there's no hope, the wall seems to shift. My fingers catch on something, taking hold as a shape forms, thrusting outwards. Something warm. Something ... doughy. And then I see what that shape is.

A nose. Two eyes. A gaping hole of a mouth.

“Leave,” the face says, the lips shifting. “Leave this place, girl.”

I do the only thing my frozen body can do.

I scream.

I scream and I scream and I scream.

It's Elsie who saves me. She grabs me. Grabs me tight. So tight.

"Get away from her," I hear her hiss. "Get away from her, you nasty old bat."

She picks me up, presses me to her and runs, my body jolting as we go. I keep screaming. Because it is everywhere. All around me. The house is full of it. This being that has swallowed me alive. Elsie keeps running. Along the hall. Down some stairs. And I keep screaming. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to stop.

"Lolli!" I hear Freya's voice in the distance. "What's wrong? What is it? Are you sick? Where does it hurt?"

Elsie keeps running.

Until we stop.

It feels like a hundred years before the pressure starts to release.

"It's all right," a voice soothes. "It's all right. It's all right ..."

I dare to open an eyelid.

We're sitting. I'm on Elsie's lap. There is light. Warmth. Nice smells – toast, tea, cinnamon, spicy

ginger, sweet marzipan. A fire crackles. Now the tight feeling around my head is not the work of a spirit, but of Elsie's soft hand, cradling me to her.

The person, the face, the spirit is gone.

Elsie bends her head down to me. Her eyes meet mine and she whispers. "Listen to me now. Listen carefully. You are always safe by the hearth, Lolli. Always. Remember that."