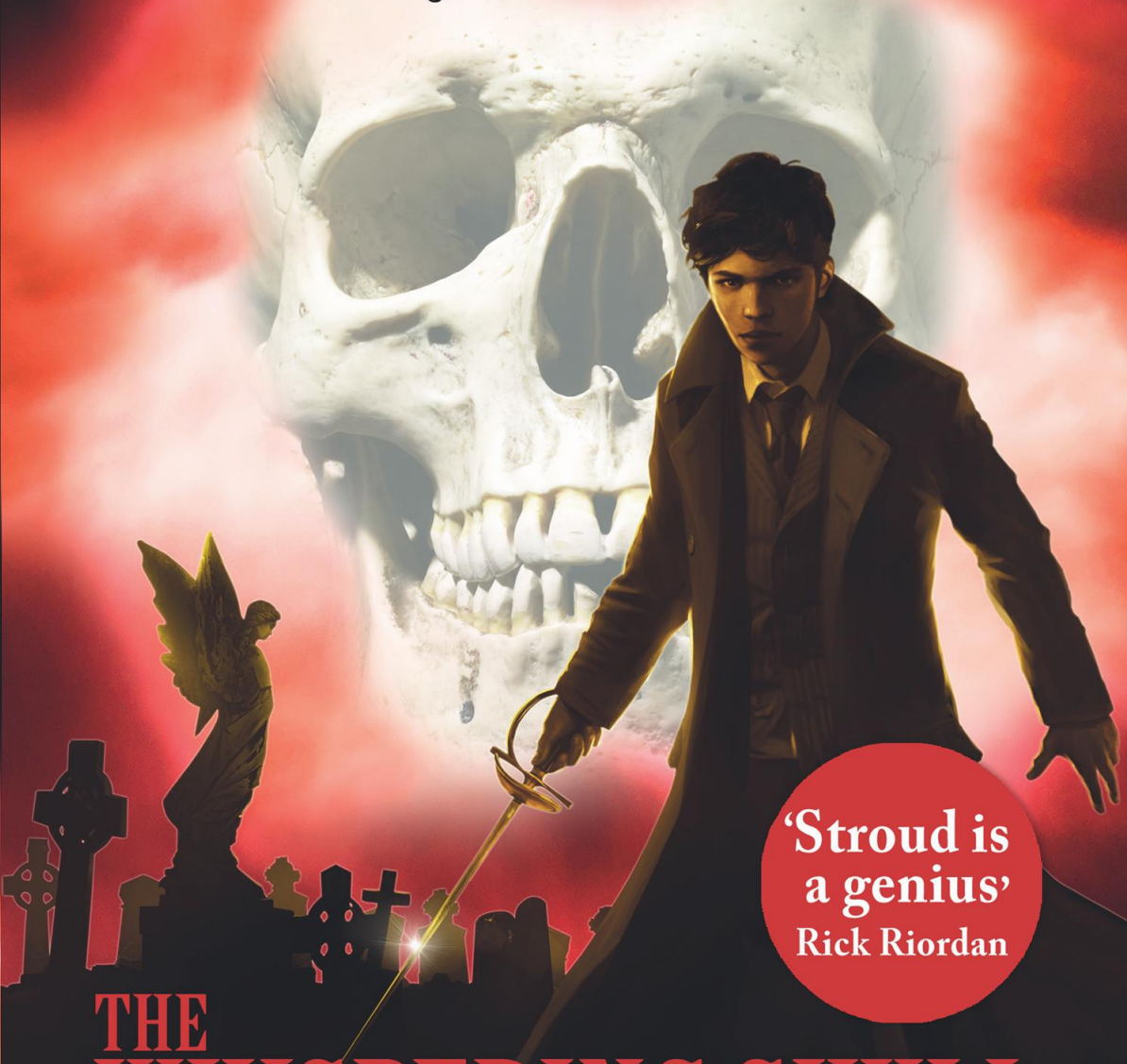


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THE
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THE WHISPERING SKULL



JONATHAN STROUD

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LOCKWOOD & CO.: THE WHISPERING SKULL
A DOUBLEDAY BOOK
Hardback 978 0 857 53265 7
Trade paperback 978 0 857 53266 4

Published in Great Britain by Doubleday,
an imprint of Random House Children's Publishers UK
A Random House Group Company

This edition published 2014

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Typeset in 12/18pt Caslon by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.

RANDOM HOUSE CHILDREN'S PUBLISHERS UK
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA

www.randomhousechildrens.co.uk
www.totallyrandombooks.co.uk
www.randomhouse.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited
can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

THE RANDOM HOUSE GROUP Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

For Laura and Georgia



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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 cross-roads, you might as well hang two. We should have anticipated this.’

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

‘Better ask George that one.’

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

‘What?’

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

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

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

‘I’m tired, I’m filthy and I’ve found precisely zip. 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 Raw-bones 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.’