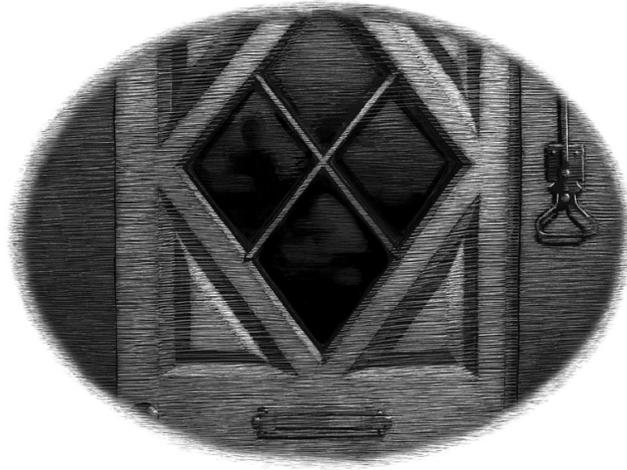


I

The Ghost

Chapter 1



Of the first few hauntings I investigated with Lockwood & Co. I intend to say little, in part to protect the identity of the victims, in part because of the gruesome nature of the incidents, but mainly because, in a variety of ingenious ways, we succeeded in messing them all up. There, I've admitted it! Not a single one of those early cases ended as neatly as we'd have wished. Yes, the Mortlake Horror was driven out, but only as far as Richmond Park, where even now it stalks by night among the silent trees. Yes, both the Gray Specter of Aldgate and the entity known as the Clattering Bones were destroyed, but not before several further (and I now think unnecessary) deaths. And as for the creeping shadow that haunted young Mrs. Andrews, to the imperilment of her sanity and her hemline, wherever she may continue to wander in this world, poor thing, there it follows too. So it was not exactly an unblemished record that we took with us, Lockwood and I, when

we walked up the path to 62 Sheen Road on that misty autumn afternoon and briskly rang the bell.

We stood on the doorstep with our backs to the muffled traffic, and Lockwood's gloved right hand clasped upon the bell pull. Deep in the house, the echoes faded. I gazed at the door, at the small sun blisters on the varnish and the scuffs on the letter box, at the four diamond panes of frosted glass that showed nothing beyond except for darkness. The porch had a forlorn and unused air, its corners choked with the same sodden beech leaves that littered the path and lawn.

"Okay," I said. "Remember our new rules. Don't blab about everything you see. Don't speculate openly about who killed who, how, or when. And, above all, don't impersonate the client. Please. It never goes down well."

"That's an awful lot of don'ts, Lucy," Lockwood said.

"I've plenty more."

"You know I've got an excellent ear for accents. I copy people without thinking."

"Fine, copy them quietly *after* the event. *Not* loudly, *not* in front of them, and *particularly* not when they're a six-foot-six Irish dockworker with a speech impediment, and we're a good half-mile from the public road."

"Yes, he was really quite nimble for his size," Lockwood said. "Still, the chase kept us fit. Sense anything?"

"Not yet. But I'm hardly likely to, out here. You?"

He let go of the bell pull and made some minor adjustment to the collar of his coat. "Oddly enough, I have. There was a death in

the yard sometime in the last few hours. Under that laurel halfway up the path.”

“I assume you’re going to tell me it’s only a smallish glow.” My head was tilted to one side, my eyes half closed; I was listening to the silence of the house.

“Yes, about mouse-sized,” Lockwood admitted. “Suppose it might have been a vole. I expect a cat got it, or something.”

“So . . . possibly not part of our case, then, if it was a mouse?”

“Probably not.”

Beyond the frosted panes, in the interior of the house, I spied a movement: something shifting in the hall’s black depths. “Here we go,” I said. “She’s coming. Remember what I said.”

Lockwood bent his knees and picked up the duffel bag beside his feet. We both moved back a little, preparing pleasant, respectful smiles.

We waited. Nothing happened. The door stayed shut.

There was no one there.

As Lockwood opened his mouth to speak, we heard footsteps behind us on the path.

“I’m so sorry!” The woman emerging from the mists had been walking slowly, but as we turned, she accelerated into a token little trot. “So sorry!” she repeated. “I was delayed. I didn’t think you’d be so prompt.”

She climbed the steps, a short, well-padded individual with a round face expanding into middle age. Her straight, ash-blond hair was pulled back in a no-nonsense manner by clips above her ears. She wore a long black skirt, a crisp white shirt, and an enormous

wool cardigan with sagging pockets at the sides. She carried a thin folder in one hand.

“Mrs. Hope?” I said. “Good evening, madam. My name is Lucy Carlyle, and this is Anthony Lockwood, of Lockwood and Company. We’ve come about your call.”

The woman halted on the topmost step but one, and regarded us with wide, gray eyes in which all the usual emotions figured. Distrust, resentment, uncertainty, and dread: they were all there. They come standard in our profession, so we didn’t take it personally.

Her gaze darted back and forth between us, taking in our neat clothes and carefully brushed hair, the polished rapiers glittering at our belts, the heavy bags we carried. It lingered long on our faces. She made no move to go past us to the door of the house. Her free hand was thrust deep into the pocket of her cardigan, forcing the fabric down.

“Just the two of you?” she said at last.

“Just us,” I said.

“You’re very young.”

Lockwood ignited his smile; its warmth lit up the evening. “That’s the idea, Mrs. Hope. That’s the way it has to be.”

“Actually, I’m *not* Mrs. Hope.” Her own wan smile, summoned in involuntary response to Lockwood’s, flickered across her face and vanished, leaving anxiety behind. “I’m her daughter, Suzie Martin. I’m afraid Mother isn’t coming.”

“But we arranged to meet her,” I said. “She was going to show us around the house.”

“I know.” The woman looked down at her smart black shoes. “I’m afraid she’s no longer willing to set foot here. The circumstances

of Father's death were horrible enough, but recently the nightly . . . *disturbances* have been getting too persistent. Last night was especially bad, and Mother decided she'd had enough. She's staying with me now. We'll have to sell, but obviously we can't do that until the house is made safe. . . ." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Which is why you're here. . . . Excuse me, but shouldn't you have a supervisor? I thought an adult always had to be present in an investigation. Exactly how old *are* you?"

"Old enough and young enough," Lockwood said, smiling. "The perfect age."

"Strictly speaking, madam," I added, "the law states that an adult is only required if the operatives are undergoing training. It's true that some of the bigger agencies *always* use supervisors, but that's their private policy. We're fully qualified and independent, and *we* don't find it necessary."

"In our experience," Lockwood said sweetly, "adults just get in the way. But of course we *do* have our licenses here, if you'd like to see them."

The woman ran a hand across the smooth surface of her neat blond hair. "No, no . . . that won't be necessary. Since Mother clearly wanted you, I'm sure it will be fine. . . ." Her voice was neutral and uncertain. There was a brief silence.

"Thank you, madam." I glanced back toward the quiet, waiting door. "There's just one other thing. Is there someone else at home? When we rang the bell, I thought—"

Her eyes rose rapidly, met mine. "No. That's quite impossible. I have the only key."

"I see. I must've been mistaken."

“Well, I won’t delay you,” Mrs. Martin said. “Mother’s filled out the form you sent her.” She held out the manila folder. “She hopes it will be useful.”

“I’m sure it will.” Lockwood tucked it somewhere inside his coat. “Thank you very much. Well, we’d better get started. Tell your mother we’ll be in touch in the morning.”

The woman handed him a ring of keys. Somewhere on the road a car horn blared, to be answered by another. There was plenty of time until curfew, but night was falling and people were growing antsy. They wanted to get home. Soon there’d be nothing moving in the London streets but trails of mist and twisting moonbeams. Or nothing, at least, that any adult could clearly *see*.

Suzie Martin was conscious of this too. She raised her shoulders, pulled her cardigan tight. “Well, I’d better be going. I suppose I should wish you luck. . . .” She looked away. “So *very* young! How terrible that the world has come to this.”

“Good night, Mrs. Martin,” Lockwood said.

Without reply, she pattered down the steps. In a few seconds she had vanished among the mists and laurels in the direction of the road.

“She’s not happy,” I said. “I think we’ll be off the case tomorrow morning.”

“Better get it solved tonight, then,” Lockwood said. “Ready?”

I patted the hilt of my rapier. “Ready.”

He grinned at me, stepped up to the door and, with a magician’s flourish, turned the key in the lock.

—

When entering a house occupied by a Visitor, it's always best to get in quick. That's one of the first rules you learn. Never hesitate, never linger on the threshold. Why? Because, for those few seconds, it's not too late. You stand there in the doorway with the fresh air on your back and the darkness up ahead, and you'd be an idiot if you didn't want to turn and run. And as soon as you acknowledge *that*, your willpower starts draining away through your boots, and the terror starts building in your chest, and bang, that's it—you're compromised before you begin. Lockwood and I both knew this, so we didn't hang around. We slipped straight through, put down our bags, and shut the door softly behind us. Then we stood quite still with our backs against it, watching and listening, side by side.

The hall of the house lately occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Hope was long and relatively narrow, though the high ceiling made it seem quite large. The floor was tiled in black and white marble squares, set diagonally, and the walls were palely papered. Halfway along, a steep staircase rose into shadows. The hall kinked around this to the left and continued into a void of black. Doorways opened on either side: gaping and choked in darkness.

All of which could have been nicely illuminated if we'd turned on the lights, of course. And there was a switch on the wall, right there. But we didn't attempt to use it. You see, a second rule you learn is this: electricity interferes. It dulls the senses and makes you weak and stupid. It's much better to watch and listen in the dark. It's good to have that fear.

We stood in silence, doing what we do. I listened; Lockwood

watched. It was cold in the house. The air had that musty, slightly sour smell you get in every unloved place.

I leaned in close to Lockwood. “No heating,” I whispered.

“Mm-hm.”

“Something else too, you think?”

“Mm-hm.”

As my eyes grew used to the dark, I saw more details. Beneath the curl of the banister was a little polished table, on which sat a china bowl of potpourri. There were pictures on the wall, mostly faded posters of old-time musicals, and photographs of rolling hills and gentle seas. All pretty innocuous. In fact, it wasn’t at all an ugly hallway; in bright sunlight it might have looked quite pleasant. But not so much now, with the last light from the door panes stretching out like skewed coffins on the floor in front of us; and with our shadows neatly framed inside them; and with the manner of old Mr. Hope’s death in this very place hanging heavy on our minds.

I breathed hard to calm myself and shut out morbid thoughts. Then I closed my eyes against the taunting darkness and *listened*.

Listened . . .

Halls, landings, and staircases are the arteries and airways of any building. It’s here that everything is channeled. You get echoes of things currently going on in all the connecting rooms. Sometimes you also get *other* noises that, strictly speaking, ought not to be there at all. Echoes of the past, echoes of hidden things . . .

This was one such time.

I opened my eyes, picked up my bag, and walked slowly down the hall toward the stairs. Lockwood was already standing by the

little polished table beneath the banister. His face shone dimly in the light from the door. “Heard something?” he said.

“Yep.”

“What?”

“A little knocking sound. Comes and goes. It’s very faint, and I can’t tell where it’s coming from. But it’ll get stronger—it’s scarcely dark yet. What about you?”

He pointed at the bottom of the steps. “You remember what happened to Mr. Hope, of course?”

“Fell down the stairs and broke his neck.”

“Exactly. Well, there’s a tremendous residual death-glow right here, still lingering three months after he died. I should’ve brought my sunglasses, it’s so bright. So what Mrs. Hope told George on the phone stacks up. Her husband tripped and tumbled down and hit the ground hard.” He glanced up the shadowy stairwell. “Long, steep flight . . . Nasty way to go.”

I bent low, squinting at the floor in the half-dark. “Yeah, look how the tiles have cracked. He must’ve fallen with tremendous f—”

Two sharp crashes sounded on the stairs. Air moved violently against my face. Before I could react, something large, soft, and horribly heavy landed precisely where I stood. The impact of it jarred my teeth.

I jumped back, ripping my rapier from my belt. I stood against the wall, weapon raised and shaking, heart clawing at my chest, eyes staring wildly side to side.

Nothing. The stairs were empty. No broken body sprawled lifeless on the floor.

Lockwood leaned casually against the banister. It was too dark to be certain, but I swear he'd raised an eyebrow. He hadn't heard a thing.

"You all right, Lucy?"

I breathed hard. "No. I just got the echo of Mr. Hope's last fall. It was very loud and very real. It was like he'd landed right on top of me. Don't laugh. It's not funny."

"Sorry. Well, *something's* stirring early tonight. It's going to get interesting later. What time is it?"

Having a watch with a luminous dial is my third recommended rule. It's best if it can also withstand sudden drops in temperature and strong ectoplasmic shock. "Not yet five," I said.

"Fine." Lockwood's teeth aren't quite as luminous as my watch, but when he grins, it's close. "Plenty of time for a cup of tea. Then we find ourselves a ghost."

Chapter 2



When you go out hunting wicked spirits, it's the simple things that matter most. The silvered point of your rapier flashing in the dark; the iron filings scattered on the floor; the sealed canisters of best Greek Fire, ready as a last resort . . . But tea bags, brown and fresh and plentiful, and made (for preference) by Pitkin Brothers of Bond Street, are perhaps the simplest and best of all.

Okay, they may not save your life like a sword tip or an iron circle can, and they haven't the protective power of a sudden wall of fire. But they *do* provide something just as vital. They help to keep you sane.

It's never pleasant, sitting in a haunted house, waiting in the dark. The night presses in around you and the silence beats against your ears; and soon, if you're not careful, you start to see or hear

things that are the products of your mind. In short, you need distractions. Each of us at Lockwood's has our preference. I do a bit of drawing, George has his comics, Lockwood reads the gossip magazines. But *all* of us like our tea and cookies, and that night in the Hopes' house was no exception.

We found the kitchen at the far end of the hall, just beyond the stairway. It was a nice enough room, neat and white and modern, and noticeably warmer than the hall. It had no supernatural traces of any kind. All was quiet. The knocking sound I'd heard was inaudible here, and there was no repetition of the nasty bumping on the stairs.

I got the kettle going, while Lockwood lit an oil lamp and set it on the table. By its light we took off our rapiers and work belts and laid them out before us. Our belts have seven separate clips and pouches; we went through these in silence, systematically checking the contents while the kettle wheezed and huffed away. We'd already checked everything back in the office, but we were more than happy to do it again. A girl at Rotwell's had died the previous week after forgetting to restock her magnesium flares.

Outside the window, the sun was gone. Faint clouds choked the blue-black sky, and mists had risen to engulf the garden. Beyond black hedges, lights shone in other houses. They were near, but also distant, cut off from us like ships passing across deep water.

We put the belts back on, and checked the Velcro fasteners around the rapiers. I fixed the tea and brought it to the table. Lockwood found the cookies. We sat together while the oil lamp flickered and shadows danced in the corners of the room.

At last Lockwood pulled the collar of his overcoat high around his neck. “Let’s see what Mrs. Hope has to say for herself,” he said. He stretched out a long, thin hand for the folder lying on the table. Lamplight glimmered darkly in his flop of hair.

As he read, I checked the thermometer clipped to my belt: 59°. Not warm, but roughly what you’d expect from an unheated house this time of year. I took my notebook from another pouch and jotted down the room and temperature. I also recorded details of the aural phenomena I’d experienced in the hall.

Lockwood tossed the folder aside. “Well, that was useful.”

“Really?”

“No. I’m being ironic. Or is it sarcastic? I can never remember.”

“Irony’s cleverer, so you’re probably being sarcastic. What’s she say?”

“Absolutely nothing of any use. She might as well have written it in Greek for all the good it does us. Here’s a summary. The Hopes have lived here for two years. Before that, they were down in Kent somewhere; she gives lots of irrelevant detail about how happy they were. Hardly any curfews, ghost-lamps almost never on, how you could go for a walk late evening and meet only your living neighbors. That sort of thing. Don’t believe a word of it myself; Kent had one of the biggest outbreaks of anywhere outside London, according to George.”

I sipped my tea. “It’s where the Problem *began*, I thought.”

“So they say. Anyhow, then they moved up here. All fine, no troubles in the house. No manifestations of any kind. Husband changed his job, started working from home. That’s six months

ago. Still nothing funny going on. Then he fell downstairs and died.”

“Hold it,” I said. “How did he fall?”

“Tripped, apparently.”

“What I mean is, was he alone?”

“According to Mrs. Hope, he was. She was in bed. Happened during the night. She says her husband was a bit distracted in the weeks before he died. Hadn’t been sleeping well. She thinks he got up to get a drink of water.”

I grunted noncommittally. “Ri-i-ight . . .”

Lockwood flashed me a glance. “You think she pushed him?”

“Not necessarily. But it would provide a motive for the haunting, wouldn’t it? Husbands don’t normally haunt wives, except when there’s reason. Pity she didn’t want to talk with us. I’d have liked to suss her out.”

“Well, you can’t always tell by looking,” Lockwood said. He shrugged his narrow shoulders. “Did I ever tell you about the time I met the notorious Harry Crisp? Sweet-faced man he was, soft-voiced and twinkly-eyed. Good company and very plausible; he actually got me to lend him a ten. Yet it turned out in the end he was the most appalling murderer, who liked nothing better than to—”

I held up a hand. “You *did* tell me that. About a million times.”

“Oh. Well, the point is, Mr. Hope could be coming back for a host of other reasons that aren’t to do with vengeance. Something left undone, for instance: a will he hasn’t told his wife about, or some stash of money hidden under the bed . . .”

“Yeah, maybe. So the disturbances began soon after his death?”

“A week or two later. She was mostly away from the house up until then. Once she’d moved back, she began to be aware of an unwelcome presence.” He tapped the folder. “Anyway, she doesn’t describe it here. She says she gave a full account to our ‘receptionist’ over the phone.”

I grinned. “Receptionist? George won’t like that. Well, I’ve got his notes with me, if you want to hear them.”

“Go on, then.” Lockwood sat back expectantly. “What’s she been seeing?”

George’s notes were in an inside pocket of my jacket. I took them out and unfolded them, smoothing the papers on my knee. I scanned them briefly, cleared my throat. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“A ‘moving shape.’” With great ceremony, I refolded the papers and put them away.

Lockwood blinked in outrage. “A ‘moving shape’? That’s it? No further details? Come on, was it big, small, dark, or bright, or what?”

“It was, and I quote, a ‘moving shape that appeared in the back bedroom and followed me out across the landing.’ Word for word, that’s what she told George.”

Lockwood dunked a forlorn cookie in his tea. “Hardly the finest description of all time. I mean, you wouldn’t want to try to sketch from it, would you?”

“No, but she’s an adult: what do you expect? It’s never going to be any good. The *sensations* she had are more revealing. She said

she felt as if something was looking for her, that it knew she was there but couldn't find her. And the thought of it finding her was more than she could bear."

"Well," Lockwood said, "that's a *little* better. She sensed a *purpose*. Which suggests a Type Two. But whatever the late Mr. Hope's up to, he's not the only one at work in this house tonight. There's *us* as well. So . . . what do you say? Shall we take a look around?"

I drained my mug, set it carefully on the table. "I think that's a very good idea."

For almost an hour we toured the downstairs, briefly turning on our flashlights to check the contents of each room, but otherwise moving in near darkness. We left the oil lantern burning in the kitchen, with candles, matches, and an extra flashlight also on the table. It's a good rule to keep a well-lit place to retreat to if the need arises, and having different forms of light is always advisable, in case the Visitor has the ability to disrupt them.

All was clear in the pantry and dining room at the rear of the house. They had a sad, musty, rather somber air, a sense of lives suspended. Neat piles of newspapers lay curling on the dining room table; in the scullery, a tray of shriveled onions sprouted quietly in the darkness. But Lockwood found no visual traces anywhere, and I heard no noise. The delicate knocking sound I'd detected when we'd first entered seemed to have died away.

As we walked back up the hall, Lockwood gave a little shudder, and I felt the hairs rise on my arms. The air was noticeably colder now. I checked the reading: 48°, this time.

At the front of the building were two squarish rooms, one on either side of the hall. One had a television set, a sofa, two comfy armchairs; here the temperature was warmer, back to the level of the kitchen. We looked and listened anyway, and found nothing. On the opposite side, a formal sitting room contained the usual chairs and cabinets, arranged before large net-swathed windows, and three enormous ferns in terra-cotta pots.

It seemed a little chilly. Fifty-four degrees showed on the luminous dial. Colder than the kitchen. Might mean nothing, might mean a lot. I closed my eyes, composed myself, and prepared to listen.

“Lucy, look!” Lockwood’s voice hissed. “There’s Mr. Hope!”

My heart jolted. I spun around, rapier half-drawn . . . only to find Lockwood stooped and casual, peering at a photo on a side table. He had his flashlight trained on it: the image hung in a little circle of floating gold. “Mrs. Hope’s here as well,” he added.

“You idiot!” I hissed. “I might have run you through.”

He chuckled. “Oh, don’t be so grumpy. Take a look. What do you think?”

It was a gray-haired couple standing in a garden. The woman, Mrs. Hope, was an older, happier version of the daughter we’d met outside: round-faced, neat-clothed, wearing a radiant smile. Her head was level with the chest of the man beside her. He was tall, and balding, with sloped, rounding shoulders, and big, rather cumbersome forearms. He too smiled broadly. They were holding hands.

“Seem cheerful enough there, don’t they?” Lockwood said.

I nodded dubiously. “Got to be a *reason* for a Type Two, though. George says Type Two always means someone’s done something to somebody.”

“Yes, but George has a nasty, gruesome little mind. Which reminds me: we should find the phone and call him. I left a message on the table, but he’ll probably be worrying about us, even so. Let’s finish off the survey first.”

He didn’t find any death-glow in the little sitting room and I couldn’t hear anything; and that was the ground floor done. Which told us what we’d already guessed. What we were looking for was upstairs.

Sure enough, the moment I set foot on the lowest step, the knocking began again. At first it was no louder than it had been before, a tiny, hollow *tap-tap-tapping*, like a fingernail on plaster, or a nail being hammered into wood. But with every step I climbed, the echo increased a little, became a little more insistent in my inner ear. I mentioned this to Lockwood, who was treading like a formless shadow at my back.

“Getting nippier, too,” he said.

He was right. With every step the temperature was dropping, from 48° to 45° to 43° here, midway up the flight. I paused, zipping up my coat with fumbling fingers, while staring upward into the dark. The stairwell was narrow, and there was no light above me at all. The upper regions of the house were a clot of shadows. I had a strong desire to switch my flashlight on but resisted the impulse, which would only have made me blinder still. With one hand on my rapier hilt, I continued slowly up the stairs, with the knocking

growing ever louder and the cold biting at my skin.

Up I went. Louder and louder grew the knocking. Now it was a frantic, scratching, tapping sound. Lower and lower dropped the number on the dial. From 43° to 41° and finally to 39°.

The blackness of the landing was a formless space. On my left, white balusters hung at head height like a row of giant teeth.

I reached the final stair, stepped out onto the landing—
And the knocking noise stopped dead.

I checked the luminous dial again: 39°. Twenty degrees lower than the kitchen. I could sense my breath pluming in the air.

We were very close.

Lockwood brushed past me, flicked his flashlight in a brief reconnaissance. Papered walls, closed doors, dead silence. A piece of embroidery in a heavy frame: faded colors, childish letters, *Home Sweet Home*. Done years ago, when homes *were* sweet and safe, and no one hung iron charms above their children's beds. Before the Problem came.

The landing was L-shaped, comprising a small, square space in which we stood, and a long spur running behind us parallel to the stairs. It had a polished wooden floor. There were five doors leading off: one on our right, one straight ahead, and three at intervals along the spur. All the doors were closed. Lockwood and I stood silently, using our eyes and ears.

“Nothing,” I said at last. “As soon as I got to the top, the knocking noises stopped.”

Lockwood took a while to speak. “No death-glow,” he said. From the heaviness in his voice, I knew that he too felt *malaise*—that strange sluggishness, that dead weight in the muscles that

comes when a Visitor is near. He sighed faintly. “Well, ladies first, Lucy. Pick a door.”

“Not me. I picked a door in that orphanage case, and you know what happened then.”

“That all turned out fine, didn’t it?”

“Only because I ducked. All right, let’s take this one, but *you’re* going in first.” I’d chosen the nearest, the one on the right. It turned out to lead to a recently remodeled bathroom. Modern tiling gleamed eagerly as the flashlight swept by. There was a big white bathtub, a sink and toilet, and also a distant smell of jasmine soap. Neither of us found anything noticeable here, though the temperature was the same as on the landing.

Lockwood tried the next door. It opened into a large back bedroom, which had been converted into possibly the messiest study in London. The flashlight beam showed a heavy wooden desk set beneath a curtained window. The desk was almost invisible under stacks of papers, and further teetering piles were placed, higgledy-piggledy, all across the room. A row of dark bookshelves, chaotically filled, ran down three-quarters of the far side wall. There were cupboards, an old leather chair beside the desk, and a faintly masculine smell about the room. I tasted aftershave, whisky, even tobacco.

It was bitterly cold now. The dial at my belt showed 36°.

I stepped carefully around the paper stacks and pulled apart the curtains, disturbing enough dust to set me coughing. Dim white light from the houses across the garden drifted into the room.

Lockwood was looking at an ancient frayed rug on the wooden

floor, nudging it to and fro with the toe of his shoe. “Old pressure marks,” he said. “Used to be a bed here before Mr. Hope took over. . . .” He shrugged, surveyed the room. “Maybe he’s come back to sort his paperwork.”

“This is it,” I said. “This is where the Source is. Look at the temperature. And don’t you feel heavy, almost numb?”

Lockwood nodded. “Plus, this is where Mrs. Hope saw her legendary ‘moving shape.’”

A door slammed, loudly, somewhere below us in the house. Both of us jumped. “I think you’re right,” Lockwood said. “This is the place. We should rig up a circle here.”

“Filings or chains?”

“Oh, filings. Filings will be fine.”

“Are you sure? It’s not even nine o’clock, and its power’s already strong.”

“Not *that* strong. Besides, whatever Mr. Hope wants, I can’t believe he’s suddenly turned malevolent. Filings will be more than adequate.” He hesitated. “Also . . .”

I looked at him. “Also what?”

“I forgot to bring the chains. Don’t stare at me like that. You do weird things with your eyes.”

“*You forgot to bring the chains?* Lockwood—”

“George took them out to oil them and I didn’t check that he’d put them back. So it’s George’s fault, really. Listen, it doesn’t matter. We don’t need them for a job like this, do we? Get the iron set up while I scan the other rooms. Then we focus here.”

I had a lot more to say, but now wasn’t the time. I took a

deep breath. “Well, don’t get into trouble,” I said. “Last time you went wandering off during a case, you got yourself locked in the bathroom.”

“A ghost shut me in, I keep telling you.”

“So you claim, but there was not a shred of evidence that—”

But he was already gone.

It didn’t take me long to carry out my task. I hauled several stacks of dusty, yellowed paper to the edges of the room to make space in the center of the floor. Then I pulled the rug aside and scattered the filings in a circle, giving it a fairly small radius, so as not to waste the iron. This would be our primary refuge, where we could retreat if necessary, but we might need other circles too, depending on what we found.

I went out onto the landing. “I’m just going down to get more iron.”

Lockwood’s voice echoed from a nearby bedroom. “Fine. Can you put the kettle on?”

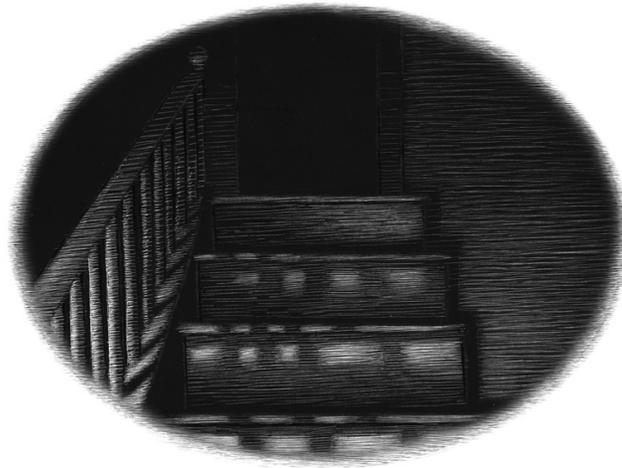
“Yeah.” I crossed to the stairs, glancing at the open bathroom door. When I put my hands on the banister rail, the wood was freezing to the touch. I hesitated at the top, listening hard, then descended toward the grainy illumination of the hall. A few steps down, I thought I heard a rushing noise behind me; but when I turned back, I saw nothing. With my hand on my rapier hilt, I continued to the bottom and walked along the hall to where the kitchen’s warm glow shone through a crack in the door. Dim as it was, the lantern light made me screw my eyes up as I went in. I helped myself to a cheeky biscuit, rinsed out the mugs, and put the kettle on again. Then I picked up the two duffel bags and, with

The Screaming Staircase

some difficulty, pried the hall door open with my foot. I moved back out into the hall, which—thanks to the bright kitchen—seemed even darker than before. There was no sound in the house. I couldn't hear anything of Lockwood; presumably he was still scanning the final bedrooms. I climbed the stairs slowly, from cool, to cold, to colder, holding the heavy bags awkwardly on either side.

I reached the landing and heaved the bags down with a little sigh. When I raised my head to call to Lockwood, I saw a girl standing there.

Chapter 3



I froze; for a tightly packed string of heartbeats, I couldn't stir a muscle. In part, of course, this was due to simple shock, but there was a lot more to it than that. A cold weight pressed like a headstone on my chest; my limbs felt entombed in mud. An icy torpor crept through the roots of my brain. My mind was numbed, the workings of my body dulled; I felt I should never have the strength to move again. A mood stole over me that might have been despair, had I the energy to truly care about it one way or the other. Nothing mattered, least of all me. Silence and stillness and utter paralysis of movement were all I could aspire to, all that I deserved.

In other words, I was experiencing *ghost-lock*, which is the effect Type Twos have when they choose to direct their power on you.

An ordinary person might have stood there helpless and let the Visitor work its will upon her. But I'm an agent, and I'd dealt with this before. So I wrested savage, painful breaths from the frigid air,

shook the mist clear of my brain. I forced myself to live. And my hands moved slowly toward the weapons at my belt.

The girl stood halfway across the floor of the study-bedroom, directly ahead of me. I could see her framed by the open door. She was fairly faint, but I saw she stood barefoot on the rolled-up rug—or, more precisely, *in* it, for her ankles were sunk into the fabric as if she were paddling in the sea. She wore a pretty summer-print dress, knee-length, decorated with large, rather garish orange sunflowers. It was not a modern design. The dress and her limbs and her long fair hair all shone with dim, pale other-light, as if lit by something far away. As for her face . . .

Her face was a solid wedge of darkness. No light reached it at all.

It was hard to tell, but I guessed she'd been eighteen or so. Older than me, but not by too many years. I stood there for a time wondering about this, with my eyes locked on the faceless girl, and my hands inching to my belt.

Then I remembered I was not alone in the house.

“Lockwood,” I called. “Oh, Lockwood . . .” I said it as lightly as I could. Showing signs of fear is best avoided where Visitors are concerned—fear, anger, and other strong emotions. They feed on it too easily; it makes them faster and more aggressive. No answer came, so I cleared my throat and tried again. “Oh, *Lockwood* . . . !” I was using a merry singsong intonation here, as if I were speaking to a little babe or cuddly pet or something. As I might as well have been, in fact, because he didn't bloody respond.

I turned my head and called a little louder. “Oh, Lockwood, *please* come here. . . .”

His voice sounded muffled, back along the landing. “Hold on, Luce. I’ve got something. . . .”

“Jolly good! So have I. . . .”

When I looked back, the girl was closer, almost out onto the landing. The face was still in shadow, but the drifts of other-light that spun about her body shone brighter than before. Her bony wrists were tight against her side, the fingers bent like fishhooks. Her bare legs were very thin.

“What do you want?” I said.

I listened. Words brushed soft as spiders’ touch against my ear. “*I’m cold.*”

Fragments. You seldom get more than fragments. The little voice was a whisper uttered at great distance, but it was also uncomfortably close at hand. It seemed an awful lot closer to me than Lockwood’s reply had been.

“Oh, Lockwood!” I cooed again. “It’s *urgent.* . . .”

Can you believe it? I could detect a hint of annoyance in his answer. “Just wait a sec, Lucy. There’s something interesting here. I’ve picked up a death-glow—a really, *really* faint one. Something nasty happened in this front bedroom too! It’s so hazy I almost missed it, so it must’ve been a long while back. But, you know, I think it was traumatic. . . . Which means—it’s only a theory, I’m just playing with ideas here—there might possibly have been *two* violent deaths in this house. . . . What do you say to that?”

I chuckled hollowly. “I say that it’s a theory I can maybe *help* you with,” I sang, “if you’ll only come out here.”

“The thing is,” he went on, “I don’t see how the first death’s got anything to do with the Hopes. They were only here two years,

weren't they? So perhaps the disturbances we're experiencing aren't—"

"—actually caused by the husband?" I cried. "Yes, well done! They're not!"

A brief pause. *Finally* he was paying attention. "What?"

"*I said it's not the husband, Lockwood! Now, get out here!*"

You might notice I'd slightly abandoned my attempts at keeping it lighthearted. That was because the thing in the study had already picked up on my agitation and was now drifting through the door. The toenails on the thin, pale feet were long and curled.

Both my hands were at my belt. One gripped the rapier hilt; the other had closed on a canister of Greek Fire. You shouldn't really use magnesium flares in a domestic environment, of course, but I wasn't taking chances. My fingertips were icy, but sweaty too; they slipped against the metal.

A movement on my left. From the corner of my eye, I saw Lockwood emerge onto the landing. He, too, stopped dead. "Ah," he said.

I nodded grimly. "Yes, and the next time I call you while in an operative situation, do me a favor and get your butt out here double-quick."

"Sorry. But I see you've got it well in hand. Has she spoken?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She says she's cold."

"Tell her we can fix that for her. No, don't fiddle-faddle with your weapon, that'll only make it worse." The girl had drifted a little closer across the landing; in response, I'd begun to draw my blade.

“Tell her we can fix it,” Lockwood said again. “Tell her we can find whatever she’s lost.”

I did so, in as steady a voice as I could manage. It didn’t have much effect. The shape neither shrank nor changed, nor became vaporous, nor departed, nor did any of the other things the *Fittes Manual* claims they’ll do when you give them hope of release.

“*I’m cold,*” the little voice said; and then again, much louder, “*Lost and cold.*”

“What was that?” Lockwood had sensed the contact, but he couldn’t hear the sound.

“Same words, but I’ve got to tell you, Lockwood, this time it wasn’t much like a girl talking. It sounded really deep and hollow and echoed like a tomb.”

“That’s never good, is it?”

“No. I think we should take it as a sign.” I drew my rapier. Lockwood did likewise. We stood facing the shape in silence. Never attack first. Always wait, draw out its intentions. Watch what it does, where it goes, learn its patterns of behavior. It was so close now that I could make out the texture of the long, fair hair sweeping down around the neck, see individual moles and blemishes on the skin. It always surprised me that the visual echo could be this strong. George called it “the will to exist,” the refusal to lose what once had been. Of course, not all of them appear this way. It all depends on their personality in life, and what precisely happened when that life came to an end.

We waited. “Can you see her face?” I asked. Lockwood’s Sight is better than mine.

“No. It’s veiled. But the rest is *really* bright. I think it’s—”

He stopped; I'd lifted up my hand. This time the voice I heard was the barest tremor in the air. "*I'm cold,*" it whispered. "*Lost and cold. Lost and cold . . . and DEAD!*"

The wisps of light that hung about the girl flared bright and desolate, and for an instant the dark veil was lifted from the face. I screamed. The light went out. A shadow swept toward me, bony arms outstretched. Icy air drove into me, forcing me toward the stairs. I stumbled on the lip and toppled backward, over the edge. Dropping my rapier, I threw out a desperate arm, grasped the corner of the wall. I hung above the void, buffeted by the raging wind, fingertips slipping on the smooth, cold wallpaper. The shape drew close. I was about to fall.

Then Lockwood sprang between us, his blade cutting a complex pattern in the air. The shadow reared up, arm raised across its face. Lockwood cut another pattern, hemming it in on several sides with walls of flashing iron. The shape shrank back. It darted away into the study with Lockwood in pursuit.

The landing was empty. The wind had died. I scrabbled at the wall, pulled myself upright at the top of the stairs and sank to my knees. My hair was over my eyes; one foot dangled over the topmost step.

Slowly, grimly, I reached out for my rapier. There was a dull ache in my shoulder where I'd jarred my arm.

Lockwood was back. He bent close to me, his calm eyes scanning the darkness of the landing. "Did she touch you?"

"No. Where did she go?"

"I'll show you." He helped me up. "You're sure you're all right, Lucy?"

“Of course.” I brushed my hair away, forcing the rapier viciously back into its belt loop. My shoulder twinged a bit, but it was okay. “So,” I said, starting toward the study. “Let’s get on with it.”

“In a sec.” He held out a hand, stalling my movement forward. “You need to relax.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re angry. There’s no need to be. That assault would have caught anyone out. I was surprised too.”

“*You* didn’t drop your rapier.” I pushed his hand away. “Listen, we’re wasting time. When she comes back—”

“She wasn’t directing it at me. It was all at you, trying to pitch you over the stairs. I guess we know how Mr. Hope came to take his tumble now. My point is, you need to calm down, Lucy. She’ll feed off your anger superfast, and grow strong.”

“Yeah, I know.” I didn’t say it gracefully. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and then another, concentrating on doing what the *Manual* recommends: mastering myself, loosening the hold of my emotions. After a few moments, I regained control. I withdrew from my anger and let it drop to the floor like a discarded skin.

I listened again. The house was very silent, but it was the silence of a snowfall, heavy and oppressive. I could feel it watching me.

When I opened my eyes, Lockwood was standing with his hands in his overcoat pockets, waiting quietly in the blackness of the landing. His rapier was back at his belt.

“Well?” he said.

“I’m feeling better.”

“Anger gone?”

“Not a trace left.”

“Okay, because if you don’t feel steady, we’re heading home right now.”

“We’re not heading home,” I said coolly, “and I’ll tell you why. Mrs. Hope’s daughter won’t let us in here again. She thinks we’re too young. If we haven’t cracked the case by tomorrow, she’ll take us off it and put Fittes or Rotwell’s on the job. We need the money, Lockwood. We finish this now.”

He didn’t move. “Most nights,” he said, “I’d agree with you. But the parameters have changed. It’s not some poor old boy bothering his widow; it’s almost certainly the ghost of a murder victim. And you know what *they’re* like. So if your head’s not in the right place, Luce . . .”

Calm and steady as I was, I found his condescension slightly irritating. “Yeah,” I said, “but it’s not really *me* that’s the issue, is it?”

Lockwood frowned. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning the iron chains.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on. That’s hardly the—”

“Those iron chains are standard equipment for every agent, Lockwood. They’re essential for protection when we’re up against a strong Type Two. And *you* forgot to put them in!”

“Only because George insisted on oiling them! At *your* suggestion, if I remember.”

“Oh, so it’s *my* fault now, is it?” I cried. “Most agents would sooner forget their pants than go out without their chains, but you somehow managed it. You were so keen on rushing out here, it’s a wonder we brought anything at all. George even advised us not to go. He wanted to do more research on the house. But no. *You* overruled him.”

“Yes! Which is what I do, on account of being the leader. It’s my responsibility—”

“—to make bad decisions? That’s right, I suppose it is.”

We stood there, arms folded, glowering at each other across the darkened landing of a haunted house. Then, like the sun coming out, Lockwood’s glare softened to a grin.

“So . . .” he said. “How’s your anger management going, Luce?”

I snorted. “I admit I’m annoyed, but now I’m annoyed with *you*. That’s different.”

“I’m not sure it is, but I *do* take your original point about the money.” He clapped his gloved hands together briskly. “All right, you win. George wouldn’t approve, but I think we can risk it. I’ve driven her away for the moment, and that gives us breathing room. If we’re quick, we can settle this in half an hour.”

I stooped and lifted up the duffel bags. “Just lead me to the place.”

The place proved to be on the far side of the study: a blank stretch of wall set between two recessed stretches of the chaotic bookshelf. In the harsh light of our flashlights, we saw it was still covered with ancient bedroom wallpaper, drab and faded and peeling near the molding. Puffy, shapeless roses ran floor to ceiling in slanting lines.

In the middle of the space hung a colored map showing the geology of the British Isles. The base of the wall was concealed by thigh-high piles of geology magazines, one or two of which were weighed down by dusty geological hammers. My keen investigative instinct told me that Mr. Hope might possibly have been a geologist by trade.

I inspected the bookshelves on either side, saw how the wall protruded at that point. “Old chimney breast,” I said. “So she went in there?”

“She was fading before she reached the wall, but yes—I think so. Would make sense if the Source was hidden in the chimney, wouldn’t it?”

I nodded. Yes, it made sense. A natural cavity, big enough for anything at all.

We began shifting the magazines away, carting them in cascading armfuls to the other side of the room. Space was an issue. Lockwood wanted to keep my original circle free and have a good access route to it from the wall where we’d be working, so we dumped most of the magazines by the door and even out onto the landing. Every second armload or so I stopped and listened carefully, but the house remained still.

When we’d cleared a big enough area, I opened the bags and poured out another plastic pot of filings in a curving line across the floor. It formed a rough semicircle that extended outward from the crucial section of the wall. I joined up the two ends with a straight line running along the base of the wall, keeping a yard or so back from it so that the iron wouldn’t be messed up by all the falling plaster. Once I’d finished there was enough room inside the lines for us both to stand *and* have our duffel bags too. It would be pretty safe, though not as secure as if we’d used some chains.

I also checked the original circle in the center of the room. A few filings had gotten scattered by our feet as we’d tramped past, but I brushed them back into position.

Lockwood removed the geological map and propped it by the

desk. Then he went down to the kitchen and returned with a couple of lanterns. The time for watching in the dark was past; action was required now, and for that we needed proper light. He set the lanterns on the floor inside our semicircle and switched them on at low intensity, directing the beams toward the empty wall. The light illuminated it like a little stage.

All this took about a quarter of an hour. At last we stood together inside the iron, pocketknives and crowbars ready, looking at the wall. “Want to hear my theory?” Lockwood said.

“Thrill me.”

“She was killed in the house decades ago—so long back, she at last grew quiet. Then Mr. Hope set up his study in this room, and that triggered her somehow. It stands to reason, therefore, that something of hers must be concealed here, something she cares about, that makes her linger on. Clothes, maybe, or possessions; or a gift she promised another. Or—”

“Or something else,” I said.

“Yes.”

We stood and looked at the wall.

Chapter 4



Ever since Marissa Fittes and Tom Rotwell conducted their celebrated investigations, way back in the first years of the Problem, finding the Source of a haunting has been central to every agent's job. Yes, we do other stuff as well: we help create defenses for worried households, and we advise individuals on their personal protection. We can rig up salt traps in gardens, lay iron strips on thresholds, hang wards above cradles, and stock you with any number of lavender sticks, ghost-lights, and other items for day-to-day security. But the essence of our role, the reason for our being, is always the same: to locate the specific place or object connected to a particular member of the restless dead.

No one really knows how these "Sources" function. Some claim the Visitors are actually contained within them, others that they mark points where the boundary between worlds has been worn thin by violence or extreme emotion. Agents don't have time to

speculate either way. We're too busy trying to avoid being ghost-touched to worry about philosophy.

As Lockwood said, a Source might be many things. The exact location of a crime, perhaps, or an object intimately connected to a sudden death, or maybe a prized possession of the Visitor when alive. Most often, though (73% of the time, according to research conducted by the Rotwell Institute), it's associated with what the *Fittes Manual* calls "personal organic remains." You can guess what *that* means. The point is, you never know until you look.

Which is what we were doing now.

Five minutes in, we'd almost stripped the central slab of wall. The wallpaper was decades old, its glue dry and turned to dust. We could slip our knives under it and cut away great curls with ease. Some practically disintegrated in our hands; others flopped over our arms like giant folds of skin. The plaster of the wall beneath was pinkish-white and mottled, and speckled with orange-brown fragments of paste. It reminded me of Spam.

Lockwood took one of the lanterns and made a closer inspection, running his hand along the uneven surface. He moved the lantern at different heights and angles, watching the play of shadows on the wall.

"There *was* a cavity here at some point," he said. "A big one. Someone's filled it in. See how the plaster's a different color, Luce?"

"I see. Think we can break into it?"

"Shouldn't be too difficult." He hefted his crowbar. "Everything quiet?"

I glanced over my shoulder. Beyond the little circle of lantern light, the rest of the room was invisible. We were an illuminated

island in a sea of blackness. I listened and heard nothing, but there was a steadily mounting pressure in the silence: I could feel it building in my ear. “We’re okay for the moment,” I said. “But it won’t last long.”

“Better get on with it, then.” His bar swung, crunched into the plaster. A shower of pieces cascaded to the floor.

Twenty minutes later the fronts of our clothes were spotted white, the toecaps of our boots smothered by the heap of fragments ranged beneath the wall. The hole we’d made was half my height and wide as a man. There was rough, dark wood behind it, studded with old nails.

“Some kind of boards,” Lockwood said. Sweat gleamed on his forehead; he spoke with forced carelessness. “The front of a box or cupboard or something. Looks like it fills the whole wall space, Lucy.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Mind the filings.” He’d stepped back too far, kicking them out of position. *That* was what we had to focus on. Keep to the rules, keep ourselves safe. If we’d had the chains, it wouldn’t have been so difficult; but filings were treacherous, their line easily broken. I crouched down, got the brush, and with small, methodical movements, began to fix the break. Above me, Lockwood took a deep breath. Then came the soft crack of his crowbar biting into wood.

With the line repaired, I scooped away several handfuls of plaster that threatened to spill over the barrier at the front. This done, I remained there, crouching, the fingertips of one hand pressed firmly on the floorboards. I stayed like that a minute, maybe more.

When I got to my feet, Lockwood had done some damage to one of the planks, but he hadn't broken through. I tapped him on the arm.

"What?" He struck the wall again.

"She's back," I said.

The sounds had been so faint that at first, they had merged into the noise we made; and it was only by the vibrations in the floor that I'd noticed them at all. But even as I spoke, they began to rise in volume: three quick impacts—the last a dreadful soft-hard *thud*—then silence, before the sequence started over. It was an endless loop, identical each time: the sound-memory of Mr. Hope falling down the stairs.

I told Lockwood what I heard.

He nodded brusquely. "Okay. Doesn't change anything. Keep watch, and don't let it unsettle you. That's what she's aiming for. She recognizes you're the weak one."

I blinked. "Sorry? What are you saying?"

"Luce, this isn't the time. I just mean emotionally."

"What? Like *that's* any better."

He took a deep breath. "All I'm saying is . . . is that your kind of Talent is *much* more sensitive than mine, but, ironically, that very sensitivity leaves you more exposed to supernatural influences, which in cases like this might be a problem. Okay?"

I stared at him. "For a minute there, I thought you'd been listening to George."

"Lucy, I have not been listening to George."

We turned away from each other: Lockwood to the wall, me to face the room.

I drew my rapier, waited. The study was dark and still. *Thud, thud . . . THUD* went the echo in my ears.

A cracking sound told me Lockwood had the crowbar wedged between the boards. He was pushing sideways with all his strength. Wood creaked, black nails shifted.

Very slowly, one of our lanterns began to die. It flickered, faltered, became pale and small, as if something was crushing out its life. Even as it did so, the other lantern flared. The balance of light in the room shifted; our shadows swung oddly across the floor.

A gust of cold air blew through the study. I heard papers moving on the desk.

“You’d think she’d *want* us to do this,” Lockwood panted. “You’d think she’d *want* to be found.”

Out on the landing, a door banged.

“Doesn’t seem so,” I said.

Other doors slammed elsewhere in the house, one after the other, seven in a row. I heard the distant sound of breaking glass.

“Boring!” Lockwood snarled. “You’ve done that! Try something else.”

There was a sudden silence.

“How many times,” I said, “have I told you not to taunt them? It never ends well.”

“Well, she was repeating herself. Get a seal ready. We’re almost there.”

I bent down, rummaged in my bag. In the pockets we carry a wide range of products designed to neutralize any given Source. All of them are made of those key metals Visitors can’t abide: silver and iron. Shapes and decorations vary. There are boxes, tubes, nails

and nets, pendants, bands, and chains. Rotwell's and Fittes have theirs specially stamped with their company logos, while Lockwood uses ones that are simple and unadorned. But the crucial thing is to select the right size for your Visitor, the minimum grade necessary to block its passage through.

I chose a chain-net, delicate but potent, made of tightly fused links of silver. It was still carefully folded; when shaken loose it could be draped over objects of considerable size, but for now I could clasp it in my palm. I stood and checked on progress at the wall.

Lockwood had succeeded in forcing out one of the boards a little way. Behind it was a slender wedge of darkness. He heaved and strained, leaning back, grimacing with effort. His boots dug perilously close to our ridge of iron filings.

"It's coming," he said.

"Good." I turned back to face the room.

Where the dead girl stood beside me, just beyond the iron line.

So clear was she, she might have been alive and breathing, gazing out upon a sunlit day. The cold, dim light shone full upon her face. I saw her as she must have been—once, long ago, before it happened. She was prettier than me, round-cheeked, small-nosed, with a full-lipped mouth and large, imploring eyes. She looked like the kind of girl I'd always instinctively disliked—soft and silly, passive when it mattered, and, when it didn't, reliant on her charms to get her way. We stood there, head-to-head, her long hair blond, my dark hair pale with plaster dust; she bare-legged in her little summer dress, me red-nosed and shivering in my skirt, leggings and padded parka. Without the iron line and what it represented, we might have reached out and touched each other's faces. Who knows, perhaps

that's what she wanted? Perhaps that severance drove her rage. Her face was blank and without emotion, but the force of her fury broke against me like a wave.

I raised the folded chain-net in a kind of ironic salute. In answer, bitter air whipped out of the darkness, scouring my face, slapping my hair against my cheeks. It struck hard against the iron barrier, making the filings shift.

"I highly recommend finishing this," I said.

Lockwood gave a gasp of effort. There was a crack as wood grains tore.

All across the study came a sudden rustling: magazines flipping open, books moving, dusty papers lifting off their piles like flocks of rising birds. My coat was pressed against me. Wind howled around the margins of the room. The ghost-girl's hair and dress were motionless. She stood staring through me, like *I* was the one made of memory and air.

Beside my boots, the filings began to drift and scatter.

"Hurry it up," I said.

"Got it! Give me the seal."

I turned as quickly as I dared—the key thing now was not to cross the iron line—and offered him the folded net. Just as I did so, Lockwood gave a final heave upon the crowbar and the board gave way. It cracked across its width, near the bottom of our hole, and ruptured forward, carrying with it two others that were nailed to it by connecting spurs of wood. The crowbar slipped from its recess, and suddenly came free. Lockwood lost his balance; he fell sideways and would have tumbled right out of our circle, had I not lunged across to steady him.

We clung together for a moment, teetering above the filings. “Thanks, Luce,” Lockwood said. “That was almost bad.” He grinned. I nodded in relief.

At which the broken boards fell out toward us, revealing the contents of the wall.

We’d known. Of course we’d known, but it was still a shock. And shocks that make you both jerk backward are never ideal when you’re already off balance, when the two of you are already on the brink. So it was that I didn’t get much of a look inside the cavity before we toppled over together, arms locked, legs tangled, Lockwood above and me below, beyond the protection of the iron.

But I’d seen enough. Enough to have the image seared upon my mind.

She still had her blond hair; that was the same, though so smirched with soot and dust, so choked up with cobwebs, that it was impossible to tell where it finished or began. The rest was harder to recognize: a thing of bones, bared teeth, and shrunken skin, dark and twisted as burnt wood, and still propped snugly in the bed of bricks where it had rested maybe fifty years. The straps of the pretty summer dress hung loose upon the jutting bones. Orange-yellow sunflowers glinted dimly within a shroud of webs.

I hit the floor. The back of my head struck wood, and the dark was seared by light. Then Lockwood’s weight drove down onto me. My breath burst through my mouth.

The brightness faded. My mind cleared, my eyes opened. I was lying on my back, with the silver chain-net still clutched tightly in one hand.

That was the good news. I’d also dropped my rapier again.

Lockwood had already rolled off me and away. I rolled too, knelt back into a crouch, looked frantically for my blade.

What did I see instead? A mess of iron filings, scattered by our fall. Lockwood kneeling, head down, hair flopped forward, struggling to pull his sword clear of his long, heavy overcoat.

And the ghost-girl, floating silently above him.

“Lockwood!” His head jerked up. His coat had gotten twisted tight beneath his knees and was preventing access to his belt. He couldn’t free his sword in time.

The girl dropped low, trailing wreaths of other-light. Long, pale hands stretched out toward his face.

I tore a canister from my belt and hurled it without a thought. It passed straight through the stooping shape and struck the wall behind. The glass lid broke; sheets of magnesium fire licked out and sliced across the girl, who vanished in billowing plumes of mist. Lockwood threw himself sideways, iron sparks flickering in his hair.

Greek Fire’s good stuff, no question. The mix of iron, magnesium, and salt hits your Visitor three ways at once. Red-hot iron and salt cut through its substance, while the searing light of the ignited magnesium causes it intolerable pain. But (and here’s the snag), even though it burns out fast, it has a tendency to set *other* things on fire as well. Which is why the *Fittes Manual* advises against its use indoors, except in controlled conditions.

The present conditions involved a study filled with papers and a very vengeful Specter. Would you call that even the slightest bit “controlled”?

Not really.

Something somewhere wailed with pain and fury. The wind in the study, which had perhaps died back a little, suddenly redoubled. Burning papers, ignited by the first surge from the canister, were plucked aloft, blown directly at my face. I batted them away, watched them whirl off, willed by something unseen. They blew in squalls across the room, landed on books and shelves, on desk and curtains, on curls of wallpaper, on bone-dry files and letters, on dusty cushions on the chair. . . .

Like stars at dusk, hundreds of little fires winked into being, one after the other, high, low, and all around.

Lockwood had risen to his feet, hair and coat both smoking. He flicked his coat aside. A flash of silver: the rapier was in his hand. His eyes were fixed past me on a shadowed corner of the room. Here, in the midst of whirling papers, a shape was starting to reform.

“Lucy!” His voice was hard to make out against the howling wind. “Plan E! We follow Plan E!”

Plan E? What the devil *was* Plan E? Lockwood had so many. And it was hard to think straight with every other stack of magazines going up in flames, and those flames leaping higher, and the way back to the landing suddenly blocked by smoke and flaring light.

“Lockwood!” I cried. “The door—”

“No time! I’ll draw her off! You do the Source!”

Oh yes. *That* was Plan E. Luring the Visitor away from where the crucial action was. And already Lockwood was dancing through the smoke, moving with insolent confidence toward the waiting shape. Burning fragments blew about his head; he ignored them, kept his rapier lowered at his side. He seemed unprotected. The girl made a sudden rush; Lockwood leaped back, rapier swinging up

at the last minute to parry an outstretched spectral hand. Her long blond hair, blending with the smoke, curled around him from either side; he ducked and feinted, slicing the misty tendrils into nothing. His sword was a blur of movement. Safe behind its flashing steel, he steadily retreated, leading the ghost ever farther from the chimney breast and the broken wall.

In other words, giving me my chance. I plunged forward, fighting against the raging wind. Air slammed into me, screaming with a human voice. Sparks spat against my face; the breath was driven from my lungs. Flames rose up on every side, reaching out as I passed by. The wrath of the air redoubled. I was slowed almost to a standstill, but plowed my way onward, step by step.

Beside the chimney the bookshelves had erupted into walls of flame; trails of racing fire ran like mercury along the floor. Ahead of me the plaster surface swam with orange light. The hole itself was a pool of darkness, the object inside it scarcely visible. Behind the veil of webs, I glimpsed its lipless smile.

It's never good to see such things directly. They distract you from the job. I shook the chain-net loose, held it trailing in my hand.

Nearer, nearer . . . step by step. . . . Now I *was* close. Now I could have looked at her, if I'd chosen to, but I kept my eyes averted from her face. I saw the little spiders clustering on the cobwebs, as they always do. I saw her bony neck, the flowery cotton dress gaping. I also saw a sudden glint of gold—something hanging beneath her throat.

A little golden chain.

I reached the hole, stood with the net held ready, amid the roar of the wind and fire. And, just for a moment, I hesitated, staring at the delicate golden necklace that hung there in the dark. It ended

in a pendant of some kind: I could just see it sparkling in the horrid gap between her dress and bony chest. Once, that girl's living hands had put it around her neck, thinking to make herself look lovelier for the day. And still it hung there, decades later, and still it shone, though the flesh beneath was blackened, shrunken and dead.

A rush of pity filled my heart.

"Who *did* this to you?" I said.

"Lucy!" Lockwood's cry rose above the howling wind. I turned my head; saw the ghost-girl come rushing at me through the rising flames. Her face was blank, her eyes bore into mine; her arms were stretched toward me as if in greeting or embrace.

It wasn't the type of embrace *I* fancied. Blindly, I thrust both hands in through the mess of cobwebs, sending the spiders racing. I sought to lower the net—but it had caught on a snag of wood in the mouth of the hole. The girl was almost upon me. I gave a frantic heave; the splinter broke. With a sob, I draped the chain-net over the dry, soft, dusty hair. Iron-and-silver folds dropped down across the head and torso, encasing them as securely as a cage.

At once the girl's momentum stalled; she was frozen in mid-air. A sigh, a moan, a shudder. Her hair fell forward and hid her face. Her other-light grew dim, dim, dimmer. . . . Gone. She winked out of existence as if she had never been.

And, with her, the force that filled the house went too. There was a sudden release of pressure. My ears popped. Wind died. The room was full of burning scraps of paper, drifting slowly to the floor.

Just like that. It's what happens when you successfully neutralize a Source.

I took a deep breath, listened. . . .

Yes. The house was quiet. The girl *had* gone.

Of course, when I say it was quiet, I only mean on a *psychic* level. Fires raged throughout the study. The floor was alight, smoke hid the ceiling. The piles of papers we'd dumped beside the door roared white, and the whole landing was aflame. There was no way out in *that* direction.

On the other side of the room, Lockwood waved urgently, pointing to the window.

I nodded. No time to waste. The house was going up. But first, almost without thinking, I turned back to the hole, reached under the net and (closing my mind to what else I touched there), grasped the little gold necklace—that one uncorrupted reminder of what the living girl had been. When I pulled, the chain came free as easily as if it had been unclasped. I stuffed it all—chain and pendant, webs and dust—into the pocket of my coat. Then, turning, I zigzagged between the fires to the desk below the window.

Lockwood had already vaulted onto it, booting a stack of burning papers to the floor. He tried the window. No go—stiff or locked, it didn't matter which. He kicked it open, splintering the latch. I jumped up beside him. For the first time in hours we breathed in fresh, wet, foggy air.

We knelt there on the windowsill, side by side. Around us, curtains hissed, went up in flames. Out in the garden, our silhouettes crouched in a square of swirling light.

“You all right?” Lockwood said. “Something happen by the hole?”

“No. Nothing. I'm fine.” I smiled wanly at him. “Well, another case solved.”

“Yes. Won’t Mrs. Hope be pleased? True, her house will have burned down, but at least it’s ghost-free.” He looked at me. “So . . .”

“So . . .” I peered over the sill, hunting vainly for the ground. It was too dark and too distant to be seen.

“It’ll be fine,” Lockwood said. “I’m almost sure there are some whopping bushes down there.”

“Good.”

“That and a concrete patio.” He patted my arm. “Come on, Lucy. Turn and drop. It’s not like we have a choice.”

Well, he was right about *that* part. When I glanced back into the room, the flames had spread across the floor. They’d already reached the chimney breast. The hole—and its contents—were being greedily consumed by tongues of fire. I gave a little sigh. “Okay,” I said. “If you say so.”

Lockwood grinned a sooty grin. “In six months, when have I ever let you down?”

I was just opening my mouth to start the list when the ceiling above the desk gave way. Burning spears of wood and chunks of plaster crashed down behind us. Something struck me on the back. It knocked me out and over the windowsill. Lockwood tried to grab me as I fell. He lost his balance; our hands snapped shut on air. We seemed to hang there for a moment, suspended together between heat and cold, between life and death—then we both toppled forward into the night, and there was nothing but rushing darkness all around.