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JONATHAN STROUD

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—RICK RIORDAN



The Whispering Skull

Lockwood & Co.

BOOK TWO

The Whispering Skull JONATHAN STROUD



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For Laura and Georgia

I
The Wimbledon
Wraiths

Chapter 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. For 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 rotted 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 crossroads, 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. Aside 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, "mine'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 practicing 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 forward.

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 close to 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 now. 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 reserved 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 forward. 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 farther off, quivering and steaming.

“Watch it, Lucy,” George said. “You just stepped 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."

In response, the spade was flung aside. A mud-caked 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."

Okay, maybe I'd been a little ratty, but there's something about rotting corpses leaping at my face that puts 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 wagon to a place near Earlsfield crossroads and strung up on a gibbet, thirty feet high. Afterward, 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 gray-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 was 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 center of the glade. A cold spot hung above the stone, and spiderwebs 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 fit. 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 continuing. 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 around 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 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 the flares."

All this while the handless ghost had been inching closer and closer 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 skyward; particles of plasm hissed and spat into the soil. We all took a half step farther 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 (rivalled only by Raw-bones and the Limbless), 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, like 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 was 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 a familiar expression. What *was* concerning was the way his hand was raised, his pudgy 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 center hung a rigid, man-shaped form. Its neck was broken; its head lolled sideways. It moved steadily toward 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 farther 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 sixty nervous degrees.

From where I stood I could see the little pool of lantern light, surrounded 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

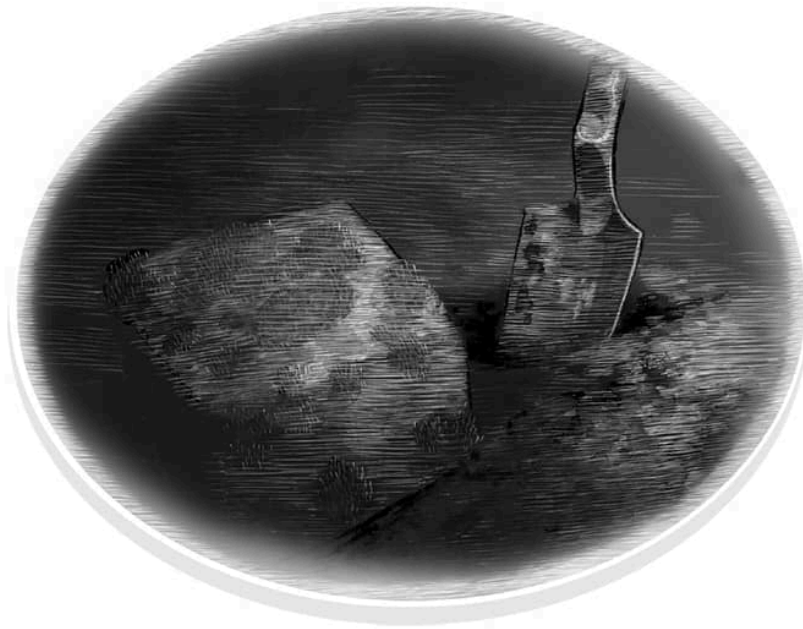
stretched smooth and black and infinite beneath the stars, and through the softness of the midnight wood a host of silent shapes was moving. Six, nine, a dozen, even more...each one a thing of rags and bones and glowing other-light, heading in our direction.

“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.”

Chapter 2



Now, we don't panic in tight situations. That's part of our training. We're psychic investigation agents, and I can tell you it takes more than fifteen Visitors suddenly showing up to make us snap.

Doesn't mean we don't get irritable, though.

"*One man*, George!" I said, sliding down the mound of earth and jumping over the mossy stone. "You said *one man* was buried here! A bloke called Mallory. Care to point him out? Or do you find it hard to spot him in all this crowd?"

George scowled up from where he was checking his belt-clips, adjusting the straps around each canister and flare. "I went by the historical account! You can't blame me."

"I could give it a try."

"No one," Lockwood said, "blames anyone." He had been standing very still, his narrowed eyes flicking around the glade. Making his decision, he

swung into action. “Plan F,” he said. “We follow Plan F, right now.”

I looked at him. “Is that the one where we run away?”

“Not at all. It’s the one where we beat a dignified emergency retreat.”

“You’re thinking of Plan G, Luce,” George grunted. “They’re similar.”

“Listen to me,” Lockwood said. “We can’t stay in the circle all night—besides, it may not hold. There are fewest Visitors to the east; I can only see two there. So that’s the way we head. We sprint to that tall elm, then break through the woods and out across the Common. If we go fast, they should have trouble catching us. George and I still have our flares; if they get close, we use them. Sound good?”

It didn’t sound exactly *great*, but it was sure better than any alternative I could see. I unclipped a salt-bomb from my belt. George readied his flare. We waited for the word.

The handless ghost had wandered to the eastern side of the circle. It had lost a lot of ectoplasm in its attempts to get past the iron and was even more sorry-looking and pathetic than before. What is it with Wraiths and their hideous appearance? Why don’t they manifest as the men or women they once were? There are plenty of theories, but as with so much about the ghostly epidemic that besets us, no one knows the answer. That’s why it’s called the Problem.

“Okay,” Lockwood said. He stepped out of the circle.

I threw the salt-bomb at the ghost.

It burst; salt erupted, blazing emerald as it connected with the plasm. The Wraith fractured like a reflection in stirred water. Streams of pale light arched back, away from the salt, away from the circle, pooling at a distance to become a tattered form again.

We didn’t hang around to watch. We were already off and running across the black, uneven ground.

Wet grass slapped against my legs; my rapier jolted in my hand. Pale forms moved among the trees, changing direction to pursue us. The nearest two drifted into the open, snapped necks jerking, heads lolling up toward the stars.

They were fast, but we were faster. We were almost across the glade. The elm tree was straight ahead. Lockwood, having the longest legs, was some distance out in front. I was next, George on my heels. Another few seconds and we’d be into the dark part of the wood, where no ghosts moved.

It was going to be all right.

I tripped. My foot caught, I went down hard. Grass crushed cold against my face, dew splashed against my skin. Something struck my leg, and then George was sprawling over me, landing with a curse, and rolling clear.

I looked up: Lockwood, already at the tree, was turning. Only now did he realize we weren't with him. He gave a cry of warning, began to run toward us.

Cold air moved against me. I glanced to the side: a Wraith stood there.

Give it credit for originality: no skull or hollow sockets here, no stubs of bone. This one wore the shape of the corpse *before* it rotted. The face was whole; the glazed eyes wide and gleaming. The skin had a dull, white luster, like those fish you see piled in market stalls. The clarity was startling. I could see every last fiber in the rope around the neck, the glints of moisture on the bright, white teeth....

And I was still on my front; I couldn't raise my sword, or reach my belt.

The Visitor bent toward me, reaching out its faint white hand....

Then it was gone. Searing brightness jetted out above me. A rain of salt and ash and burning iron pattered on my clothes and stung my face.

The surge of the flare died back. I began to rise. "Thanks, George—" I said.

"Wasn't me." He pulled me up. "Look."

The wood and glade were filled with moving lights: the narrow beams of white magnesium flashlights, designed to cut through spectral flesh. Bustling forms charged through undergrowth, solid, dark, and noisy. Boots crunched on twigs and leaves, branches snapped as they were shoved aside. Muttered commands were given; sharp replies sounded, alert and keen and watchful. The Wraiths' advance was broken. As if bewildered, they flitted purposelessly in all directions. Salt flared, explosions of Greek Fire burst among the trees. Nets of silhouetted branches blazed briefly, burned bright against my retinas. One after the other, the Wraiths were speedily cut down.

Lockwood had reached us; now, like George and me, he stopped in shock at the sudden interruption. As we watched, figures broke free into the glade and marched over the grass toward us. In the glow of the flashlights and explosions, their rapiers and jackets shone an unreal silver, perfect and pristine.

"Fittes agents," I said.

"Oh *great*," George growled. "I think I preferred the Wraiths."

It was worse than we thought. It wasn't *any* old bunch of Fittes agents. It was Kipps's team.

Not that we discovered this immediately, since for the first ten seconds the newcomers insisted on shining their flashlights directly into our faces, so that we were rendered blind. At last they lowered their beams, and by a

combination of their feral chuckling and their foul deodorant, we realized who they were.

“Tony Lockwood,” said an amused voice. “With George Cubbins and... er...is it Julie? Sorry, I can never remember the girl’s name. What on earth are you playing at here?”

Someone switched on a night lantern, which is softer than the mag-lights, and everyone’s face was illuminated. There were three of them standing next to us. Other gray-jacketed agents moved to and fro across the glade, scattering salt and iron. Silvery smoke hung between the trees.

“You do look a sight,” Quill Kipps said.

Have I mentioned Kipps before? He’s a Team Leader for the Fittes Agency’s London Division. Fittes, of course, is the oldest and most prestigious psychic investigation agency in the country. It has more than three hundred operatives working from a massive office on the Strand. Most of its operatives are under sixteen, and some are as young as eight. They’re grouped into teams, each led by an adult supervisor. Quill Kipps is one of these.

Being diplomatic, I’d say Kipps was a slightly built young man in his early twenties, with close-cut reddish hair and a narrow, freckled face. Being undiplomatic (but more precise), I’d say he’s a pint-sized, pug-nosed, carrot-topped inadequate with a chip the size of Big Ben on his weedy shoulder. A sneer on legs. A malevolent buffoon. He’s too old to be any good with ghosts, but that doesn’t stop him from wearing the blingiest rapier you’ll ever see, weighed down to the pommel with cheap plastic jewels.

Anyway, where was I? Kipps. He loathes Lockwood & Co. big-time.

“You *do* look a sight,” Kipps said again. “Even scruffier than usual.”

I realized then that all three of us had been caught in the blast of the flare. The front of Lockwood’s clothes was singed, his face laced with stripes of burnt salt. Black dust fell from my coat and leggings as I moved. My hair was disordered, and there was a faint smell of burning leather coming from my boots. George was sooty too, but otherwise less affected—perhaps because of the thick coating of mud all over him.

Lockwood spoke casually, brushing ash from his shirt cuffs. “Thanks for the help, Kipps,” he said. “We were in a tightish spot there. We had it under control, but still”—he took a deep breath—“that flare came in handy.”

Kipps grinned. “Don’t mention it. We just saw three clueless locals running for their lives. Kat here had to throw first and ask questions later. We never guessed the idiots were you.”

The girl beside him said, unsmilingly, “They’ve completely botched this operation. There’s no way I can listen here. Too much psychic noise.”