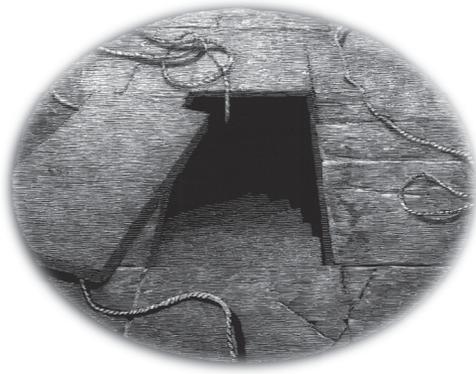




I

The Tomb



1



Want to hear a ghost story? That's good. I know a few.

How about the one of the sightless blue face pressed against the cellar window? Or the apparition of the blind man holding a cane made of children's bones? What about the evil swan that followed me home through the lonely, rain-washed park, or the giant disembodied mouth seen opening in the centre of a concrete floor? What of the milk jug that poured blood; or the empty bath from which choking gurgles sounded after dark? What of the orphan's spinning bed, or the skeleton in the chimney; or the vile spectral pig, all bristles and yellow tusks, glimpsed snuffling through the dirty glass of a shower-room door?

Take your pick. I experienced them all. They represent a typical month's work for Lockwood & Co. during that long and desperate summer. Most of them were written up in our casebook by George on the mornings after the events concerned, in between sips of scalding tea. He did this in his boxer shorts, incidentally, sitting cross-legged on the floor of our living room. It was a sight that was frankly more disturbing than all the hauntings combined.

Our *Black Casebook* has since been copied and filed away in the National Archives in the new Anthony Lockwood Gallery. The good news about *that* is you don't have to negotiate the crushed crisps in the pages of the original if you want to know the details of each job. The bad news? Not every case is in there. There's one that was simply too terrible to be written down at all.

You know how it ended. Everyone does. The city was already full of it on that last cruel morning, with the rubble of Fittes House still steaming around the bodies of the lost. But the beginning? No. That's not yet public knowledge. For the hidden story of murder, conspiracy, betrayal – yes, *and* ghosts – you need the account of one who survived it. For that, you have to come to me.

My name is Lucy Joan Carlyle. I talk with the living and the dead, and it sometimes gets so's I can't tell the difference any more.

*

Here it is, then: the beginning of the end. Here's me, two months ago. I'm dressed in a black jacket, skirt and leggings, with heavy-duty boots suitable for staving in coffin lids and scrambling out of graves. My rapier's at my belt, a holster of flares and salt bombs is slung across my chest. There's a spectral handprint on my jacket. My bob's cropped shorter than before, though this doesn't disguise where a few strands of hair have recently turned white. Otherwise I look the same as ever. Kitted out for psychic investigation. Doing what I do.

In the outside world, the stars were out. The day's warmth was folded up and done. It was shortly after midnight – the time when spirits wandered and all sensible folk were tucked up safe in bed.

Me? Not so much. I was shuffling around a mausoleum with my bottom in the air.

In my defence it has to be said that I wasn't the only one doing this. Elsewhere in the small stone-clad chamber my colleagues Lockwood, George and Holly were also on hands and knees. We had our heads low, our noses near the flagstones. We swept our candles close to walls and floor. Occasionally we stopped to press fingertips into suspicious nooks and crannies; otherwise we worked in silence. We were looking for the entrance to a grave.

‘Do you lot *have* to bend over like that?’ a voice asked. ‘It’s making my eyes water.’

A thin, red-haired young man was sitting above us on a granite block in the centre of the room. Like the rest of our raiding party he was all in black – in his case, whopping big boots, skinny jeans and a roll-neck top. *Unlike* the rest of us, he had an enormous pair of bulbous goggles clamped across his face, giving him the look of a startled grasshopper. His name was Quill Kipps. He was readying our tomb-cracking equipment, laying out crowbars and coils of rope on the surface of the stone. He was also keeping watch, blinking at the shadows. His goggles allowed him to spot ghosts, if any were around.

‘See anything, Quill?’ That was Lockwood, dark hair hanging over his face. He picked with his penknife at a gap between the flagstones.

Kipps lit an oil lamp, tilting the shutters so that the light stayed low. ‘With you in that position, I’ve seen *plenty*. Particularly when Cubbins hoves into view. It’s like watching a beluga swimming by.’

‘I meant ghosts.’

‘No ghosts yet. Apart from our tame one.’ He tapped a large glass jar perched alongside him on the block. Green light flared evilly within, and a spectral face of unusual

hideousness materialized, moving closer through a vortex of ectoplasm.

'Tame?' A disembodied voice that only I could hear spoke in indignation. *'Tame?! Let me out of here and I'll show that scrawny idiot how tame I am!'*

I sat back on my heels, brushing my fringe out of my eyes. 'Best not call the skull tame, Kipps,' I said. 'It doesn't like it.'

The face in the jar bared serrated teeth. *'Too right I don't. Lucy, tell that boggle-eyed fool that if I was out of this prison I'd suck the flesh off his bones and dance a hornpipe with his empty skin. You just tell him that.'*

'Is it offended?' Kipps asked me. 'I can see that horrid mouth moving.'

'Tell him!'

I hesitated. 'Don't worry,' I said. 'It's fine, really. It's cool with it.'

'What? No I'm not! And what's he doing tapping my glass like I'm some kind of goldfish? I swear, when I get free of this, I'm going to catch Kipps and pull off his—'

'Lockwood,' I said, tuning out the ghost, 'are you sure there's a trapdoor in here? We haven't got much time.'

Anthony Lockwood straightened; he was kneeling in the centre of the floor, one hand holding his penknife, the

other running distractedly through his hair. As usual, our leader was impeccably dressed. He wore a dark jersey instead of his long coat, and soft-soled pumps instead of his normal shoes; these were his only concessions to the demands of breaking and entering a national monument.

‘You’re right, Luce.’ Lockwood’s pale, thin face was as relaxed as ever, but his brow had an elegant kink in it that told me he *was* concerned. ‘It’s been ages, and there’s still no sniff of it. What do you reckon, George?’

With a scuffling George Cubbins levered himself up into view from behind the granite block. His black T-shirt was dirty, his glasses askew, his pale hair spiked and matted with sweat. For the last hour he’d been doing the exact same thing as the rest of us, but somehow he’d contrived to get completely covered in a layer of dust, mouse droppings and cobwebs that no one else had even seen. Such was George’s way. ‘All the accounts of the burial mention a trapdoor,’ he said. ‘We’re just not looking hard enough. Particularly Kipps, who isn’t looking at all.’

‘Hey, I’m doing my job,’ Kipps said. ‘The question is, have you done *yours*? We’re risking our skins tonight because *you* said there was a way in.’

George unwound a cobweb from his glasses. ‘Of course there is. They lowered her coffin through the floor into the crypt. A silver coffin. Nothing but the best for *her*.’

It was noticeable that George didn't care to mention the name of the person whose tomb this was. Noticeable too that even the *thought* of that silver coffin gave me a hollow prickling in my gut. I got the same feeling whenever I glanced at the shelf at the far end of the chamber – and looked at what was sitting there.

It was an iron bust of a woman in late middle age. She had an imperious and austere expression, with hair swept back above a high forehead. The nose was sharp and aquiline, the mouth thin, the eyes astute. It was not a pleasant face exactly, but strong and hard and watchful, and we knew it very well indeed. It was the same face as the one on our postage stamps and on the cover of our agency manual; a face that had shadowed us from early childhood and entered all our dreams.

Many remarkable things had been said about Marissa Fittes, the first and greatest psychic investigator of us all. How, together with her partner, Tom Rotwell, she had devised most of the ghost-hunting techniques that operatives like us still used. How she had improvised her first rapier from a snapped-off iron railing; how she'd conversed with ghosts as easily as if they were flesh and blood. How she'd created the first psychical detection agency; and how, when she died, half of London came to watch as her coffin was carried from Westminster Abbey to the

Strand, the streets strewn with lavender flowers, and all the agents in the city marching along behind. How the bells in every church had rung as she was interred beneath her mausoleum, which was still maintained by the Fittes Agency as a special shrine.

Remarkable things . . .

The final one was that we didn't believe she was buried there at all.

The Fittes Mausoleum, in which we stood, lay at the east end of the Strand in central London. It was a compact, high-ceilinged chamber, roughly oval in shape, built of stone and swathed in shadow. Apart from the big sarcophagus-sized block of granite in the centre of the room (which had the single word FITTES carved into the top), the place was empty. There were no windows, and the iron doors that led to the street were closed and tight.

Somewhere beyond those doors stood two sentries. They were only kids, but they had pistols and might have used them had they heard us, so we had to go carefully. On the upside, the place was clean and dry and smelled of fresh lavender, and there weren't any obvious body parts lying underfoot, which instantly made it preferable to most of the other places we'd been that week.

But equally, there didn't seem to be anywhere for a trapdoor to hide.

Our lanterns flickered. Blackness hung over our heads like a witch's cloak.

'Well, all we can do is keep calm, keep quiet and keep looking,' Lockwood said. 'Unless anyone's got a better suggestion.'

'I've got one.' Holly Munro had been zealously combing the floor at the far end of the room. Now she got to her feet and joined us, light and silent as a cat. Like the rest of us, she was in stealth mode: she had her long dark hair clipped back in a ponytail, and wore a zip-up top, skirt and leggings. I could go on about how well the all-black get-up suited her, but why bother? With Holly, that was a given. If she'd gone around wearing nothing but a dustbin suspended from her shoulders by a pair of spotty braces, she'd have somehow made it look svelte.

'I think we need a fresh perspective,' she said. 'Lucy, can't the skull help at all?'

I shrugged. 'I'll try, Hol. But you know what mood it's in.'

Over in the jar, the translucent face was still talking animatedly. I could just see the old brown skull clamped to the base of the glass beneath it.

I let myself tune back in to what it was saying.

'... and eat them. Then I'll freeze his toenails off. That'll fix him.'

‘Oh, you’re not *still* going on about Kipps!’ I said. ‘I thought you’d finished ages ago.’

The face in the jar blinked at me. ‘*Weren’t you even listening?*’

‘No.’

‘*Typical. I went into all kinds of grim, inventive detail just for you.*’

‘Save it. We can’t find the entrance. Can you help us out?’

‘*Why should I? You won’t believe anything I say.*’

‘That’s not true. It’s because we *do* sort of believe you that we’re standing here right now.’

The skull snorted rudely. ‘*If you took my word in any conventional sense, you’d be sitting at home with your feet up, rotting your innards with tea and chocolate biscuits. But no. You have to “double-check” my story.*’

‘Are you surprised? You say that Marissa Fittes isn’t dead, but is actually alive and well and pretending to be her supposed grand-daughter, Penelope Fittes. The same Penelope Fittes who is head of the Fittes Agency and probably the most powerful person in London. That’s quite a claim to make. You’ll forgive us if we need to check it out for ourselves.’

The face rolled its eyes. ‘*Piffle. Know what this is an example of? Skullism.*’

‘What nonsense are you spouting now?’

'You've heard of racism. You've heard of sexism. Well, this is skullism, pure and simple. You're judging me by my outward appearance. You doubt my word solely because I'm a skull lurking in a jar of slime-green plasm. Admit it!'

I took a deep breath. This was a skull known far and wide for its outrageous whoppers and virtuoso fibbing. To say it sometimes stretched the truth would be like saying George sometimes stretched the seat of his trousers when tying his shoelaces. On the flipside, the ghost *had* saved my life more than once and – on certain important matters – hadn't always lied. 'That's an interesting point,' I said, 'and I look forward to discussing it with you later. In the meantime, help me out. We're looking for the entrance to a crypt. Do you see a ring or handle?'

'No.'

'Do you see a lever?'

'Nope.'

'Do you see a pulley, winch or any other mechanism for opening a hidden trapdoor?'

'No. Of course not. You're getting desperate now.'

I sighed. 'OK. I get the message. So there's no door here.'

'Oh, of course there's a door,' the ghost said. *'Why didn't you ask me? It's obvious enough from up here.'*

I relayed this to the others. Holly and Lockwood acted as one. They vaulted up onto the block beside Kipps. Lockwood grabbed one of the lanterns and held it out in front of him. He and Holly both rotated, scanning the floor, faces locked in concentration. The light washed slowly over the flagstones like water, spilling up against the base of the walls.

'This is pitiful,' the skull said. *'I saw it straight off, and I don't have an eyeball to call my own. Well, I'm sorry, but you're not getting any more clues from—'*

'There!' Holly grasped Lockwood's arm. He held the lantern steady. 'There!' she said. 'See that little flagstone set *inside* the bigger one? The big one *is* the trapdoor. Pull up the small stone and we'll find the ring or handle hidden underneath!'

George and I ran over, bent close to where she pointed. As soon as she said it, I knew that she was right.

'Brilliant, Holly,' Lockwood said. 'That *must* be it. Tools ready, everyone.'

It was at times like this that Lockwood & Co. was at its fluent best. Knives were brought out, and the cement around the smaller stone cut free. We levered it up with crowbars; Lockwood pulled it aside. Sure enough, a hinged bronze ring lay beneath, set into the larger stone. While George, Holly and I loosened the edges of this stone, Lockwood and Kipps tied ropes around the ring,

testing and double-testing the knots, making sure they could take the strain. Lockwood was everywhere at once, softly giving orders, helping with every task. Energy crackled off him, spurring us all on.

'Isn't anyone going to thank me?' The skull watched disgustedly from its jar. *'Thought not. Good job I'm not in the business of holding my breath.'*

Within minutes we were in position. Lockwood and Kipps stood by the first rope; they would lift the stone. On the opposite side, the second rope hung slack. George and I held this – it was our job to support the flagstone once it was lifted, and help lower it quietly back onto the floor. In the centre, by the ring, Holly knelt, ready with the crowbars.

The room was still. Up on the wall our lantern light quivered on the iron head of Marissa Fittes. It was as if she was watching us, her eyes glittering with malevolent life.

At moments of maximum tension Lockwood always made it his business to be the calmest of all. He smiled at us. 'Everyone ready?' he asked. 'Right – let's go.'

He and Kipps pulled. At once, smoothly and without noise, the flagstone moved. It lifted up as if on oiled hinges, and a waft of chill air rose from the crack beneath.

Holly pushed the crowbars under it in case the others faltered, but there was no need. With surprising swiftness,

Lockwood and Kipps pulled the flagstone upright. Now it was George and I who had to support its weight. Our rope went taut; we took the strain.

The hinged slab wasn't nearly as heavy as I'd have guessed – perhaps it was some special hollow stone. Slowly we began to lower it on the other side.

'Set it down gently!' Lockwood hissed. 'No noise!'

We eased the flagstone down. It met the ground with a sound like a mouse sighing.

Now we had a square hole in the centre of the floor.

When Holly shone her torch into it, we could see a flight of stone steps leading steeply into blackness. Beyond the steps the light was swallowed utterly.

A damp, dark, earthy smell rose invisibly around us.

'Deep hole,' Kipps whispered.

'Anyone see anything?'

'No.'

There was a brief silence. Now that we had gained access to the crypt, the enormity of what we were about to do fell over us. It was like the darkness hanging above our heads had suddenly, silently, shifted lower. Marissa's face watched us from the wall.

We all stood there quietly, using our Senses. None of us got anything. Our belt thermometers showed a steady

twelve degrees, and we detected no supernatural chill, no miasma, malaise or creeping fear. There was no immediate likelihood of an apparition.

‘Good,’ Lockwood said. ‘Collect your things. We’ll proceed as planned. I’ll go first. Then George, followed by Holly and Luce, with Quill at the back. We’ll turn our torches off, but carry candles. I’ll have my rapier; the rest of you keep your weapons ready too. Not that we’ll need them.’ He gave us his best grin. ‘We don’t believe she’s there.’

But a nameless dread had stolen up on us. In part it was the power of the iron face, and of the name inscribed in stone. And it was also the feel of the dank air rising from the hole. It coiled around us, entwining us with unease. We gathered our things slowly. George passed among us, flicking his lighter, igniting our candles. We lined up, hefting rapiers, clearing throats, readying our belts.

Kipps vocalized his thoughts. ‘Are we *sure* we want to do this?’

‘We’ve got this far,’ Lockwood said. ‘Of course we do.’

I nodded. ‘We can’t bottle out now.’

Kipps looked at me. ‘You’re right, Lucy. Maybe I’m being overly cautious. I mean, it’s not as if our tip came from an evil talking skull that probably wishes us all dead, is it?’

Everyone glanced over at the open rucksack I was carrying. I'd just put the jar inside. The ghost's face had disappeared now; only the skull was showing. Even *I* had to admit that its death-black sockets and leering toothy grin weren't entirely reassuring.

'I know you set great store by that skull,' Kipps went on. 'I know it's your best mate and all the rest of it, but what if it's wrong? What if it's simply mistaken?' He glanced up at the wall. His voice dropped to a whisper. '*She* might be waiting for us down there.'

Another moment and the mood would have shifted irrevocably. Lockwood stepped between us. He spoke with crisp decision. 'No one needs to worry. George, remind them.'

'Sure.' George adjusted his spectacles. 'Remember, all the stories say that Marissa Fittes gave orders for her body to be placed in a special coffin. We're talking iron inlays and silver casing. So, if the skull's wrong and her body *is* there, her spirit won't be able to bother us,' he said. 'It'll be safely constrained.'

'And when we open the coffin?' Kipps asked.

'Oh, that'll only be for a second, and we'll have our defences in place by then.'

'The point is,' Lockwood said, 'no ghost is going to attack us on the way down. Right, George?'

‘Right.’

‘Good. Very well, then.’ Lockwood turned to the stair.

‘Obviously there might be a few traps,’ George said.

Lockwood paused with his foot hovering above the top step. ‘Traps?’

‘Not saying there are. Just that there *might* be some.’ George pushed his glasses up his nose and gave an encouraging flourish with one hand. ‘Anyway, Lockwood – the stairs await! Off you go.’

Lockwood did a sort of reverse swivel. Now he was facing George. ‘Hold it,’ he said. ‘What traps are these?’

‘Yes. I’m quite interested in this too,’ Holly said.

We all were. We gathered around George, who did something with his shoulders that was probably meant to be a casual shrug. ‘Oh, it’s just silly rumours,’ he said. ‘Frankly I’m surprised you’re interested. Some say Marissa didn’t want grave-robbers interfering with her tomb, so she took precautions.’ He paused. ‘Some say these precautions might be . . . supernatural ones.’

‘*Now* you tell us,’ Holly said.

‘When was *this* little fact going to be mentioned?’ I demanded. ‘When a Spectre put its fingers around my neck?’

George made an impatient gesture. ‘It’s probably nonsense. Besides, it would have been a distraction earlier. It’s my job to distinguish between solid fact and rumour.’

‘No, that’s *my* job,’ Lockwood said. ‘Your job is to tell me everything so *I* can make the judgement.’

There was a heavy pause. ‘Do you lot *always* argue like this?’ Kipps asked.

Lockwood gave a bland smile. ‘Usually. I sometimes think incessant bickering is the oil that lubricates our efficient machine.’

George looked up. ‘You reckon?’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, are you going to pick me up on *that* as well?’

‘I thought you *liked* some bickering! You just said—’

‘I don’t like anything *that* much! Now, can everyone please shut up?’ Lockwood gazed around at us. His dark eyes locked on ours, holding our attention, steadying our collective purpose. ‘Traps or no traps,’ he said, ‘we can handle this. We have two hours to check the tomb, close it up and be ready to go when the sentries change again. Do we *want* to learn the truth about Penelope Fittes and Marissa? Of course we do! We’ve worked wonders to get here, and we won’t panic now. If we’re right, there won’t be anything to worry about. If we’re wrong, we deal with it, as we always do.’ He smiled. ‘But we won’t be wrong. We’re on the verge of something big here. It’s going to be good!’

THE EMPTY GRAVE

Kipps adjusted his goggles dolefully. 'Since when has anything good happened in a crypt? It's going to be ropy by definition.'

But Lockwood was already heading down the stairs. Beyond him, light flickered on the iron face. Its thin lips seemed to smile as we descended into the dark.