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Opening extract from

The Magnificent Lizzie Brown and the Devil's Hound

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CHAPTER 1

'Two hundred and seventeen,' said Lizzie Brown, sighing loudly.

The cow she had just counted looked up at her through the pouring rain and chewed thoughtfully. The bright gold paint on the side of Lizzie's circus wagon declared her to be 'THE MAGNIFICENT LIZZIE BROWN, Mystic Wonder of our Age!' and 'Unmasker of the Notorious London Phantom!' Rain hammered it now as if the heavens were trying to wash away all traces of her former glory.

Right now, Lizzie felt about as magnificent as a soggy sock. Circus life was so intense and

exciting when the shows were on that you somehow forgot all the travelling you had to do. It was like falling from a brightly coloured trapeze into a tub of cold, grey porridge.

Nora and Erin, the Incredible Sullivan Twins, were taking it in turns to hold the reins. Their red hair stood out brightly next to Lizzie's own chestnut-brown locks. The horses pulling the wagon were a temperamental new pair, who would be performing with the twins, so the girls were doing their own driving for a change. They softly sang Irish folk songs together to the rhythm of the jolting caravan. Lizzie didn't know the tunes, so she'd decided to count cows.

'What in the world are you doing that for?' Erin asked.

'It passes the time,' said Lizzie with a shrug.

And what a lot of time there was to pass. Fitzy's Travelling Circus had been plodding its way through mile after mile of North London countryside for hours now. Lizzie was sick and tired of quaint stone bridges, sullen young men on haycarts and groups outside village pubs staring at the circus as it went past. *Good manners don't cost anything*, her ma had always said.

A shout came from the head of the convoy:

'Kensal Green up ahead!'

Thank goodness, Lizzie thought. *That's our pitch. We can stop soon.*

Although this was the first time the circus had returned to London since Lizzie had joined a month ago, it didn't feel like coming home. Most likely it never would.

London held too many ghosts for Lizzie. Memories of her father's fists, of hunger and begging on the streets, came back to her. Her pa had nearly broken her arms more than once. Sooner or later, in one of his dreadful drunken rages, he'd have broken her neck. That was the way stories like Lizzie's ended in the London slums. Fitzy had saved her from all that, and she'd never forget her debt to him.

The circus had brought her happiness like she'd never known, filling her heart as well as her belly. Compared to the horrors of violence and slow starvation, this endless rain was a small price to pay, especially as she had friends like Nora and Erin to huddle up to. The long journeys might be dull sometimes, but she'd never go back to the life she'd had before.

She'd run away from Rat's Castle, the slum where she'd grown up, only to find a new home among

the colourful strangers of Fitzy's Travelling Circus. Fitzy had taken her on as a fortune-teller's assistant, only to discover that he had a *genuine* fortune-teller on his hands.

When her strange powers had first shown themselves, Lizzie had been more surprised than anyone. All that supernatural mystic-shmystic nonsense turning out to be true? It didn't sit right with her, but she couldn't deny it.

All her life she'd had vivid dreams that often came true, but she'd always dismissed it as coincidence. Ironically, it was while the old fortune-teller, Madame Aurora, had been teaching her how to *fake* a reading that her powers had come to the fore. Nowadays, she could see people's futures just by looking into their palms.

Her gift was her living now that she worked at Fitzy's. People paid well for a reading from the Magnificent Lizzie Brown. The sign on her trailer was no idle boast, either. She really had revealed the true identity of the fearsome Phantom, the masked burglar who had terrorized London. It had been the first – and so far only – victory for Lizzie and her crew of crime-fighting circus friends, the Penny Gaff Gang.

'Easy, Victoria!' Nora said, as one of the beautiful black horses pulling their trailer whinnied and tossed her head. 'It's only a cow.'

'What's Kensal Green like, Lizzie?' Erin asked.

'Never been,' Lizzie said. 'Heard there's not much there, though. Railway, canal, a few streets of houses.'

'So long as there's punters to put on a show for, that's what matters,' Nora said.

Lizzie peered ahead, to where dim shapes were coming into view through the misty rainfall. 'Are we at the site yet?'

'We must be!' Erin said.

There was a row of trees just off the road, and as they drew closer Lizzie saw it was the fringe of an enormous park. White stone buildings showed through the trees. The rain brought out the sad, sweet smell of cypresses.

Nora whistled. 'That's a belter of a pitch. Look at all the lawns! Smooth and flat as a billiard table, so they are.'

'Must be a park for proper toffs,' agreed Erin. 'Fitzy knows what he's about. You two beauties will be paid for in no time, won't you now?' She was talking to Albert and Victoria, the two night-black stunners who were pulling the caravan. Lizzie had never seen more

beautiful horses in her life. Fitzy hadn't been able to resist them and had bought them on credit, risking a huge amount of money.

'Come on, Fitzy,' Erin said, frowning. 'Why aren't we heading off the road?'

'Because that ain't our site,' Lizzie said.

'Sure it's not? And how would you know?'

'Because,' Lizzie said with grim satisfaction, 'it ain't the sort of place for a circus to set up. It ain't even a park.'

'So what in the world is it if it's not a park, I'd like to know?'

Before Lizzie could answer, a set of gates came into view. With a silver sound of jingling harnesses and a clop of hooves on stone, a strange procession emerged from the rain and began to pass through the park gates. A gentleman wearing black and carrying an ebony cane walked in front, with a slow measured tread and downcast eyes.

Two gigantic black horses followed, decked out in livery that was as black as their coats. Tall feathery plumes rose from their heads like jets of ink. They were pulling a long, flat carriage that was overflowing with white lilies, startlingly bright against all the black.

In amongst the soaking flowers lay a long, dark casket. Erin and Nora instantly crossed themselves, superstitiously warding off evil in the presence of a dead person. Lizzie might once have smiled at that, but not nowadays.

'It's not a park, it's a cemetery!' Erin exclaimed.

'Kensal Green Cemetery,' said Lizzie, feeling uneasy and proud at the same time. 'Them white buildings are tombs. Goes on for flippin' miles.'

'I've heard about it,' Nora said with a shudder.

'Everybody has,' Erin added. 'The stories they tell… Oh, I hope we're not setting up anywhere near. Me skin's crawling just looking at it.'

The funeral procession went on and on. A host of mourners, women in veils and gentlemen in top hats, passed by with their heads bowed. Many of the women were weeping, swabbing at their eyes with black silk handkerchiefs. The circus people at the front removed their hats respectfully as they passed.

Angry glares were the response. The mourners didn't want to see jolly circus caravans going past. Lizzie heard some of them grumbling: 'Couldn't they have taken a different road?' and, 'How could they? A *circus*? The vulgarity of it!' One woman fainted dramatically and

had to be revived with smelling salts. Lizzie felt awkward and shifted uncomfortably.

'There's no call for that,' Nora said. 'Sure it wasn't our fault that we were on the road at the same time as them.'

'Toffs,' Erin snorted, as if that explained everything. 'Think how much that funeral there must have cost! Everything tricked out in black, silks and satins if you please, all for some poor soul who can't even see it!'

Lizzie felt a stab of pain right under her ribs. When her mother had died, there had been no money for a funeral. There hadn't even been a coffin. The man had come and stitched Ma up into the long white sheet. Her father had yelled at her to stop snivelling, but she'd cried anyway. Then her mother had been bundled onto a cart, driven through the streets and lowered with ropes into a hole in the ground. There were other white bundles down there, strewn with earth, and other families crying.

That was all her mother got. A pauper's grave, without even a gravestone to mark it.

The year before, her brother John had died from phosphorus poisoning. Matchstick factory workers often went that way. Lizzie had saved up a few farthings

for some flowers, but her father found it and spent it on drink. John was buried the same way. Another muddy pit, and a few mumbled words from a vicar who had no idea who any of them were.

Lizzie had tried to find the graves since then, but it was hopeless. There were no grand marble monuments for the dead of the London slums. They were just thrown away like so much rubbish.

Her caravan was passing the funeral procession now. Lizzie looked straight ahead. *I won't give you lot the satisfaction of rolling your eyes at me*, she thought. *You don't know what I've been through in my life.*

Victoria whinnied and shook her head. She clattered sideways for a moment, as if a horsefly had bitten her.

'Easy, girl!' Nora said, alarmed. Many of the mourners turned to stare as she struggled to calm the mare.

The casket passed through the cemetery gates. At that exact moment, Victoria reared up. Her hooves waved in the air. Someone in the crowd gave a cry of fear.

Gasps rang out as Erin leaped from her seat onto Victoria's smooth back. Hanging on with her legs, she stroked the long mane and whispered into Victoria's

ears until the horse seemed calmer.

Lizzie stole a quick glance into the cemetery and saw the casket making its way up a slope towards an open grave, where a crowd was waiting.

'Wouldn't look if I were you, Lizzie,' Nora said.

'Why not? It's only a load of toffs.'

Nora lowered her voice. 'There's something in Kensal Green Cemetery you don't want coming after you. Victoria's got wind of it.'

Lizzie laughed. 'Get away.'

'Didn't you see how spooked she was?'

'She just got worried by the big crowd, didn't she, Erin?'

Still on the horse's back, Erin didn't reply.

Nora shivered and whispered, 'They say that cemetery's haunted.'

'"They" say that about *every* cemetery,' Lizzie said scornfully.

'Not like this one. Have you not heard the rhyme?

Hide your face, my darling girl,
and run, oh run for home,
For round the stones of Kensal Green,
the Devil's Hound does roam.'

'Devil's Hound, my foot!' Lizzie scoffed. Her friends could be so superstitious sometimes. 'It was the crowd that spooked her. That's all.'

'D'you think?' Nora said. 'Well, we'd best hope Victoria doesn't panic at her next sight of a crowd. We can't have her acting up like that on opening night.'

That was a frightening thought. The new horses were a big investment and Fitzy was counting on them to take part. He'd even had new posters printed, featuring the twins balancing on Albert' and Victoria's backs. They *had* to be ready to perform.

Up ahead, the convoy was moving off the road and into a green field.

'We're here!' Lizzie said. 'About time. My bottom's gone numb.'

In only a few moments, the atmosphere changed from weary boredom to frantic hard work as Fitzy's Circus set about pitching its show tent. The rain was still coming down in torrents, threatening to turn the field into a muddy swamp. First the canvas and poles had to be unpacked, then the rigging and the stakes along with

the mallets to drive them in. Meanwhile, enclosures had to be set up for the animals, who all needed to be fed and watered after their journey.

Like scenes from a mad poet's dream, camels trotted past behind bearded ladies, a boy with claw-like hands and feet tucked nails into his mouth and a hammer under his arm, a woman as fat as a hot air balloon passed wicker travelling baskets to her short, smiling husband, and acrobats stood on one another's shoulders to lift tent poles into position.

It looked like chaos, but Fitzy had it all under control. Lizzie loved to watch him at work, striding from place to place with his cane under his arm. If any job needed an extra pair of hands, he'd roll up his sleeves and help, never mind the mud and wet.

'Hari!' Lizzie called, running up to help the lean Indian boy lead one of the elephants out. 'Easy, Akula. It's me!' The elephant nuzzled her fondly under the arm, making her giggle.

Once Akula was safely set up with fresh hay and a meal, Lizzie went to see where else she could be useful. Her own fortune-telling tent didn't have to be put up until later.

The Boisset family, acrobats and high-wire walkers,

were pulling up a support pole. Lizzie ran over to give them a hand. Dru Boisset was tall for his age, and everyone agreed he was turning into a handsome young man. 'You 'ave muscles,' he said approvingly.

'Do I?' Lizzie was a little mortified at that.

The French boy laughed. 'For a girl, I mean.'

'Try bending an iron bar next,' grunted Mario the strong man, giving her a wink.

One of the clowns, JoJo, was unloading crates stuffed with juggling clubs, costumes and props. Lizzie always looked forward to helping him, since he loved to try out new routines with her. 'Chuck 'em over here!' she joked. 'I'll catch them!'

JoJo stared. There were dark bags under his eyes. 'Are you going to give us a hand or not?'

Startled, Lizzie ran to take the other end of the crate. 'I was just joking.'

Jojo sighed and rubbed his sweating forehead. 'I know. Sorry, love. I'm not myself today.'

'What's the matter?'

He blinked helplessly, as if there was something he badly needed to say, but didn't dare to. 'I'm feeling a bit poorly,' he admitted.

'You go and lie down. I'll unload the rest of this stuff.'

'You sure?'

'Of course! Go and get some rest.' She patted JoJo on the back.

But the moment she touched him, her skin prickled all over. In her mind's eye, she saw a shadow. Long, ragged arms stretched out to grasp JoJo. It wore a hood and robe, but there was nothing beneath but bare bones. *Death.* Next second, it was gone.

Lizzie gasped and pulled away.

From somewhere in the distance – possibly from Kensal Green Cemetery itself – came a long mournful howl. Lizzie's blood chilled as the sound went right through her.

It was the baying of a hound…