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The Haunting of Jessop Rise

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Danny Weston

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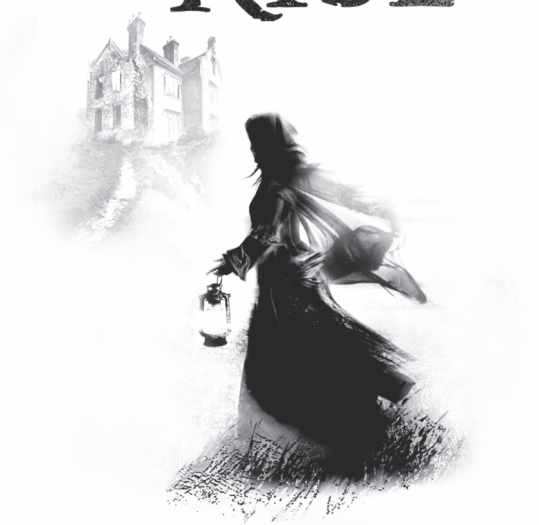
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THE HAUNTING OF JESSOP RISE



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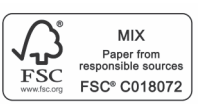
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PART ONE

October 1853

CHAPTER ONE
The Long Walk

William crested the hill and paused for a moment to look down into the bay. It was a blustery night and the ocean moved restlessly beneath a full moon, rushing back and forth onto a wide shingle beach. Even at this height, he could hear the rhythmic swishing of water on stone far below him. Off to his left, set back from the sea and arranged on a distant hilltop, was a circle of tall standing stones, stark in the moonlight, their grey shapes casting long shadows on the ground. Away to his right, he had his first clear view of what must be Jessop Rise. It was perched high on the cliff edge, a big, crumbling ruin of a place, stark against tumbled moonlit clouds, and it seemed to be positioned here so the occupants could gaze out across the sea for mile after mile. To a boy who had only ever seen the ocean at a distance, it was a powerful moment.

William adjusted the bundle on his back, which contained everything he had in the world, and considered the fact that he had been walking solidly for the best part of four days. His ankles were rubbed raw by his heavy boots, and the soles of his feet were blistered and aching. He'd spent every night of his travels sleeping in barns and outbuildings, sneaking into them after dark and leaving well before the sun was up. The only food he'd had over this time were the berries and roots he'd foraged along the way and the occasional meagre offerings from people he'd met as he travelled, kindly souls who despite being poor themselves had taken pity on this young boy, out on his own.

He didn't know Wales at all, even though it was the land of his birth. But coming back here was certainly preferable to staying on at the workhouse in Northwich, surviving on the awful food and dealing with the endless bullying of the older boys. He told himself that however unfamiliar his uncle's house was, it had to be an improvement on what he had endured over the past few months.

William started along the clifftop track, the powerful wind gusting in off the sea threatening to blow him off his feet at any moment. As he walked, he thought of Mrs Selby's face when she'd called him into her study, five days ago.

She was the person charged with the day-to-day running of the workhouse, a heavy-set, scowling fright of a woman, with a face that looked as though she were being forced to swallow something that tasted bad. She'd glared at him as he stood in front of her desk, his cap in his hands, his head bowed.

'Well, boy,' she said, 'it would appear that all your prayers have been answered.'

He stared at her, mystified. 'My… prayers?' he echoed.

She lifted a sheet of writing paper from the desk and waved it at him. 'I have a letter here from a Mr Seth Jessop…'

'Who?' William couldn't help himself. It was his own surname, sure enough, but the Christian name meant nothing to him.

Mrs Selby grimaced. 'Your uncle,' she elaborated.

He continued to stare at her in bemusement.

'Your dead father's brother?' she added, saying it slowly as though speaking to an idiot. 'Oh, come along, boy, you must know of him. He lives in North Wales, does he not?'

William shrugged. 'I think I do remember my father mentioning that he had a brother,' he murmured. 'He told me he had fallen out with his family years ago; he had very little to do with them.'

'Yes, well, he must have a forgiving nature, your uncle. At any rate, he's offered to give you a home.' She looked positively outraged at this news. 'He wants to take you off my hands, just as the two of us were beginning to get acquainted.' She glanced slyly at the willow cane hanging on the wall above her desk, a cane that William had already learned she was more than happy to use on any boy who incurred her wrath – something that was surprisingly easy to do. You only needed to be a little bit slow in following one of her orders. 'Well, don't just stand there gaping like a stranded fish,' she told him. 'Aren't you pleased? Aren't you delighted?'

William nodded, but he was still utterly mystified. 'Excuse me, Mrs Selby, but how…how did my uncle even *know* about me?'

'The authorities must have written to him, I suppose. Informed him of your father's untimely death and reminded him that, as your next of kin, he had a moral duty to offer you some sort of help. I imagine they expected nothing more than a few guineas in financial assistance, but he's actually offered to give you a home in one of the finest houses in North Wales.' She laughed at the sheer improbability of it and pushed the letter across the desk to him. 'Here, read it

for yourself,' she suggested. She thought for a moment. 'You *can* read, I take it?'

'Yes, Mrs Selby. I…I was going to school before my father…' He found he couldn't continue down that line. It made him think about the accident and of his father, lying pale and drawn in a hospital bed, gasping for breath as death placed its cold hands upon him, so he busied himself looking at the letter. It was short and to the point.

Jessop Rise
Porthmadog
North Wales

Dear Mrs Selby

I was deeply saddened to hear of my brother's recent demise and of my nephew's resulting predicament. As somebody who has himself suffered at the hands of tragedy, I can fully appreciate the boy's plight and I cannot in all decency allow him to remain a ward of the state.

Luckily I am in a position to offer the boy a roof over his head and three square meals a day. Please tell him to come to my home at his earliest convenience and I shall find something useful for him to do.

Yours sincerely

Seth Jessop Esquire

The message was so brief that William found himself turning the paper over to see if there was anything else written on the back of it, but that was all. He placed it back on Mrs Selby's desk and looked at her.

'Wales?' he said.

She gave him an impatient look. 'What about it?' she snapped.

'I know nothing of it.'

'But your late father was a Welshman, was he not?'

'Yes, ma'am, but . . . we came to Northwich when I was just a baby.'

Mrs Selby shrugged. 'I cannot do much about that, can I? Think of this as an opportunity to reacquaint yourself with your homeland.'

'Yes, ma'am. Excuse me, ma'am, how… how will I even *get* there?'

'That,' said Mrs Selby, 'is entirely up to you, boy. But you will leave these premises at first light tomorrow, so we can offer your bunk to somebody less privileged than you. We won't be short of applicants, of that you can be sure.'

So at first light the following day, he'd done as she suggested. He had no idea how far it was or how long it would take him to reach his destination. As it turned out it was a journey of over eighty miles, and the workhouse had given him nothing for the trip but the clothes he stood up in, an old blanket, a crust of dry bread and a tattered map that Mrs Selby had found for him. William was glad that he had it as he made his way steadily south-west, through Kelsall, Chester, Ruthin and a whole collection of towns that he couldn't even pronounce, until finally he reached the very end of the country, beneath the spot where the long arm of North Wales pointed out into the sea. The armpit, William decided, looking at the map.

And now here he was, in a place where the land ended abruptly, falling away to the moonlit sea far below him. He turned and followed an ancient track towards the old house. The path rose and fell, the dirt worn smooth by the passage

of generations of feet. It switched this way and that, dropping steeply into unexpected declivities and then rearing up again so that William was sometimes obliged to balance on slippery rocks, uncomfortably aware of how close he was to the sheer drop at his left. One slip and that would be the end of him, he realised, so he stepped with great care. Gradually he grew closer and closer to Jessop Rise. Every muscle in his body protested at this last trudge, but he steeled himself and kept on going, telling himself that food and drink would surely be waiting for him when he finally reached his destination.

He was perhaps no more than half a mile from the house when he came to a place where a high rocky outcrop edged the track to his right and he became aware of a figure, sitting on the rocks a short distance ahead. As he drew closer he saw that it was a woman, her slight frame cloaked and hooded against the rough winds that flapped and shook the folds of the loose grey garment. A small lantern at her side bathed her body in a weak yellow light, but somehow failed to illuminate her face, which was lost in the shadow of her hood. William decided that she was gazing towards Jessop Rise, as though watching it intently. She made no sign of being aware of his presence; she just sat and stared in the

direction of the house. As he came alongside her, he felt compelled to stop and speak. In such a desolate place, it would have seemed rude not to say something.

'Good evening, ma'am,' he said, trying to push aside the exhaustion that made even talking an effort. He pointed towards the house. 'Would that be Jessop Rise?' he asked.

She made no effort to reply, just kept gazing fixedly at it.

He wondered if perhaps she had failed to hear him, so he tried again, raising his voice to shout over the blustering wind. 'Excuse me, ma'am. Am I . . . am I heading along the right path to . . .?'

His voice trailed away as her head turned in his direction. He still had no impression of a face contained within the hood, just a dark hollow that seemed as deep as a pit. The sight of it seemed to momentarily still his blood in his veins. He swallowed hard, aware that the woman's eyes must be studying him with the same intensity with which they had watched the house. He felt compelled to say something more.

'It . . . it is my . . . my uncle's house. Seth Jessop. He has invited me to . . .'

But then the head turned away and went back to studying the distant building, as though the woman had dismissed him.

'Well,' he said, and he was aware of a tremor in his voice as he spoke. 'I'll b-bid you goodnight then.'

He resumed walking quickly onwards and had taken perhaps three steps when he distinctly heard a hoarse voice behind him: 'Good night, boy,' followed by a breathy laugh.

Fear rippled through him, and despite his tiredness he quickened his pace, almost tripping and falling on an outcrop of stone, but he managed to steady himself. When he had walked another twenty paces or so, he paused to glance back and felt another thrill of apprehension when he saw that the stone outcrop was now completely empty. He looked this way and that, trying to work out where she could have gone, and it occurred to him that she might have left her perch in order to follow him. The thought of that lent him wings. He kept on going and did not slow his pace again until he reached the gateway of the house.