

THE GHOULS OF HOWLEAIR

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THE GHOULS OF HOWLFAR

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WALKER
BOOKS

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This is dedicated to
My beautiful Jayne
And to my superb family
And to Peter Camichel
And to Ab, as promised

Oh, and to all you
unstoppable bookworms



The (Possibly) Mysterious Excelsior Guesthouse

THE GHOST-TOUR GUIDES HAD GIVEN UP after another day without customers, and the awnings were coming down outside the Tourist Office on Zaleska Street, and gently, cheep by cheep, the summer starlings sang the sun to sleep. The Ethelhael Valley, shadow-dappled, grew drowsy, and the strange town it cradled blinked with lamplight. Here and there a stray car yawned homeward along a street. A heavy gate snored shut. Soon the children of Howlfair, the naughty and the good, were grumbling their nightly ways to bed – all except Molly Thompson, who was climbing the extra flight of stairs to the attic of the Excelsior Guesthouse to catch a vampire bat.

The moon stared through the stairs window as the small, serious local historian came into view. First the froth of her badly-behaved brown curls. Then her face, tense with anticipation. With the long slender nose,

the little round mouth underneath it, the left eyebrow inquisitively cocked, her face resembled a question mark. Which is appropriate, really, because Molly Thompson was full of questions. Questions like: *Is my Aunt Carol an undead fiend who drinks the blood of the living?*

And: *Is she secretly living in my attic?*

The moonlight made her squint. She halted. There was definitely something moving in the attic of her family's guesthouse. She could hear it scratching around.

Molly was certain she knew what it was. She'd seen it circling above the garden last week.

A fishing net in one hand, she took another steep step up the staircase. Her foot wobbled. She grimaced as the stair voiced a musical croak beneath her foot.

"Molly!"

There were copper pipes snaking at floor level along the stark white walls of the Excelsior Guesthouse – down the corridors, up the stairs, and along the skirting boards in certain rooms such as the lounge and dining room and the lobby – and from these pipes, every few feet, there sprouted an open valve. Through these pipes, Molly's mother could hear what was going on all throughout the building. It was through one of the valves that Mum's voice now hissed, and like a gorgon's glare it turned Molly to

stone. Her camera swung from her neck on its strap.

"Molly! Where are you? You'd better be getting ready for bed!"

No, Mum, she might have said into the open valve. I'm just investigating the possibility that Aunt Carol is a shape-shifting vampire who haunts the attic in the form of a winged mammal.

But she didn't say anything of the sort. Instead she blurted, without thinking:

"Yes, Mum! G'night, Mum!"

Then she winced at her blunder – for now, of course, she had given herself away.

The vampire would have heard her.

The familial fiend in the attic would know that she was halfway up the towering, narrow flight of stairs.

The scratching noises stopped, and with a tingle of terror Molly realised that Aunt Carol was waiting for her.

The Excelsior Guesthouse, impossibly ancient and dizzyingly tall, had always reminded Molly of a haunted galleon, with its low-ceilinged white corridors braced with timber beams, the portholes set in the doors of the cabin-like rooms, the front gable like a ship's prow. The burnt-orange exterior with tar-blackened timbers over which knots of ivy hung like rigging. The square windows just big enough to

fire a cannon through. But Molly had never before experienced the odd phenomenon of which so many guests had complained: the sensation of the house pitching and swaying as though lurching into a storm on high seas. She felt it now. Or was it just fear making her stomach flop like a freshly netted fish?

Molly Thompson steadied herself, reached inside her hair, rummaged around in the curls, and found a stray bobble. Then, from her pocket, she pulled a small flimsy notepad with *MYSTERIES* written on the front. Her hands, she noticed, were trembling. The notepad fell open to reveal pages covered with scribbings: recorded bat sightings with times and dates; doodles of ghosts. Underlined red-penned questions about Aunt Carol, about the mysterious symbols on the Howlfair flag, about mad Mr Wetherill who owned the gift shop that sold stakes and silver bullets. Questions about Dad.

Molly folded the notepad over the mouth of the open valve and secured it with the bobble. Then, carefully, she climbed the remaining steps and took hold of the handle of the attic door, her net raised.

She'd always known in her bones that the Excelsior Guesthouse had a sinister secret. And now – at last! – she was going to come face-to-face with it.

She took a breath and shoved the door open.



Flight of Gabriel

STRAIGHT AWAY SHE SAW THAT ONE OF THE two attic windows was open.

The curtains were flapping.

Then she spied the fat shadowy shape squatting on the Persian rug with poison in its eyes.

The sight of those eyes made Molly reach for the cross around her neck. But the chain had got entangled with her camera strap, and somehow she whapped herself in the nose with the camera. Like lightning a camera flash blasted the chamber and revealed to Molly that the vampire bat on the floor had a tail and no wings. In fact, it wasn't a vampire bat at all! O, ye gods, it was a vampire *cat*! No, wait – it was just her pet cat, Gabriel, who, blinded by the flash, gave a startled meow and ran straight towards the open window...

“Gabriell!”

Molly tripped over her fishing net and fell headlong

onto the rug, sprawling. The rug ripped; her mother's beloved grandfather clock, which encroached upon the far end of the rug, wobbled. And now it seemed that her cat had indeed become a bat, for in his mad panic he sailed through the window frame as Molly watched in horror from the floor. The grandfather clock keeled sideways and fell onto a glass table with a crash like the end of the world, but Molly didn't even notice; on hands and knees she scrambled to the window through which Gabriel had flown.

Grabbing the frame, she hauled herself up to see the cat looking back at her from the other side of the window's lip – Gabriel was clinging to the frame by his front claws.

"Gabriel, give me your paw!"

The cat raised a paw – then plummeted.

"No!"

Down the side of the Excelsior Guesthouse her beloved sidekick, her companion through a thousand adventures, dropped!

Gabriel landed (it must have been painful) on the flagpole that jutted out from above Mrs Helastroom's room. The flagpole was already bowing under the weight of three oversized rooks who'd been using it as a perch. The cat's descent bent it further. Gabriel and the rooks exchanged awkward looks. Then all

at once the rooks took flight, causing the flagpole to whip upwards and catapult Gabriel wailing into the air. Molly heard the *meow* volleying above the roof as Gabriel soared over her head. Whimpering, she sprinted to the other side of the attic, dodging the fallen clock and the smashed table. Hoisting open the opposite window with a mighty grunt, she thrust her fishing net out—

Meeaaaaooooowww!

—and then into her fishing net the flying cat plopped. With a sob of relief Molly hauled him back into the attic and tipped him onto the floor.

“Gabriel, how could you have been so crazy?” she wailed. “How did you even get in here? That *definitely* cost you another one of your lives!”

The cat escaped her as she tried to scoop him into her arms, and he ran for the door, slipping between the legs of the shadow-figure standing there.

It was Molly’s mother.



The People Versus Molly Thompson

ONLY NOW DID MOLLY REALLY NOTICE THE wreckage in the room. The Persian rug: sundered. The grandfather clock like a felled tree. The shattered glass-top table.

"Molly!" Mum screeched. "Snakes alive, what have you done to my attic?"

Molly cowered. She looked around. "The attic?" she coughed, small-voiced. "Oh, I thought I was in the..."

"Don't treat me like a fool, Molly Thompson! I forbade you from coming in here! I forbade you!"

Mum waded into the attic, a gangly creature with hip-length rose-gold hair who looked like someone else's mother entirely. Her moonlit face was all horror. She stepped on a stray shard of glass and cried out as though a zombie had bitten her.

"Sorry, Mum!" said Molly while Mum hopped around clutching her stockinged foot. "I just - I heard

Gabriel in here, and I, um, wanted to play fishing with him, and..."

"Are you sure it wasn't a *vampire bat* you heard?" Mum snapped, whirling round to confront her.

"A vampire?" Molly coughed. "How do you...?"

Mum held up the notepad that Molly had affixed to the listening-pipe. It was open at a page showing a picture of a vampire bat dripping blood. Underneath the doodle was written, in big red letters: *Is Aunt Carol a bat in our attic??*

"Uh-oh," said Molly under her breath.

"I can't believe my own daughter thinks such things about her family!" Mum pulled flabbergasted faces as she flipped through the notepad's pages. "Why would you think my sister is a vampire bat who lives in our attic?"

"Because she's always really pale, Mum! And she's never at home during the day, and I keep seeing a bat flying over the garden, and I keep hearing scratching in the attic, and..."

"Enough!" cried Mum. "Molly, there's only one mystery in this house – the mystery of why you're so convinced that this house is full of mysteries! Why is it, Molly? Why are you so sure that I'm trying to keep secrets from you?"

Molly coughed. She glanced over at the cupboard on

the other side of the attic, the one with chains wrapped around it and a padlock in the shape of a skull. Then she looked at the small door – no more than elf height – on the far wall of the attic, with the sign saying *KEEP OUT*. She eyed the cryptic fandangles on the shelves: odd ivory figurines; locked jewellery boxes; a key attached to a necklace hung with dozens of tiny sharp fangs. She squinted at Gabriel, who was curling like fog around Mum's ankles, and who knew a secret way to get into the attic even when the door was shut.

"Um, just a hunch..."

"Well I have a hunch that you'll be doing your ridiculous investigating somewhere else. This guest-house is our livelihood, Molly. It's all we have, and I can't let you demolish it."

"But I've investigated everything in Howlfair!"

"You've investigated a million local ghost stories that nobody believes in – and you've never found a single ghost. All you ever find is the skeletons in people's cupboards."

"Not just ghost stories, Mum. I've investigated the history of the town and all the families too. I found out that Reginald Pinkside murdered his wife and his two daughters in 1937. I found out that Mrs Henderson was really Mr Farley's daughter ..."

"Yes, that caused quite a stir," tutted Mum.

“... and I learned about the plague pit under the new housing development! And I finally translated the motto on the Howlfair flag! And also I learned what Mayor de Ville was doing visiting that woman who grows those prize-winning carrots, and... Mum, why are you looking at me like that?”

Mum stood shaking her head.

“What is it, Mum?”

Mum hesitated. “I wasn’t going to tell you.”

Molly frowned. “Tell me what?”

“There’s been a local petition.”

“A *petition*?”

“Some people came to me with a list of signatures. They want me to put a stop to your investigations.”

“Who?” Molly staggered as though punched in the gut. “How many people? *Why*?”

“Molly, pretty much every grown-up in Howlfair lives in fear of your next scandal. Almost half the town signed the petition.”

“But I’m not *causing* scandals, Mum – I’m just trying to find out the truth!” Molly fought the urge to cry. “What did you tell these people?”

“I told them to stop being silly.” Mum knelt down and with a wince picked up a broken ornament. “Since then business has gone downhill. We hardly have any new bookings for after the end of the month.

People are finding ways to sabotage us.” She looked up, eyes narrow. “I stuck up for you, Molly. And now I’ve found out that you’ve been disobeying me.”

Molly hung her head.

“No more investigations,” said Mum coldly. “I want your library books returned tomorrow. And I’ll be confiscating your library card until further notice.”

Molly gasped. “What for?”

“So you can’t spend every waking hour leafing through old almanacs and prying into the history of every family in Howlfair!” Mum gave an awful sigh. “Just get to bed, Molly. I bet you’ve woken up every guest in the house.”

“Doubt it,” muttered Molly, staring at her feet. “They’re all about a hundred years old.”

“What did you say?”

Molly looked up. “Can I sleep in a normal room tonight?”

“We’ve been through this,” Mum said. “Mrs Fullsway is an important guest, and when she stays, she likes to sleep in your bedroom; and the only other free rooms are the *themed* rooms, with lots of very valuable antiques, and I can’t trust you not to break anything while you’re pacing around solving mysteries in your head. So I need you to sleep in ... the *spare* room.”

“Why does Hectoria like my room so much? She’s

got a huge house of her own down the road!”

“Because it overlooks the graveyard where her husband is buried.”

“But Mum, that’s so weird! Why would anyone want to look at someone’s grave?”

“Not everyone thinks like you,” snapped Mum. “Now please, Molly – go to bed and leave me to clear up your devastation in peace.”

Molly muttered apologies as she headed past Mum, out of the attic, Gabriel following. She tiptoed down the stairs while Mum knelt despondently amidst the debris, and paused for a second by the stairs window. She glanced out at hill-hemmed Howlfair – a town with more scary legends than any other town on earth, a town that tourists (for some reason) hardly ever came to, no matter how hard the Tourist Board worked to attract them. A town positively crammed with creepy old mysteries that the townsfolk thought were very amusing and very quaint, but which almost nobody other than Molly seemed the slightest bit interested in actually solving.

She didn’t spot the stark skeletal face glaring out from a hedge on the other side of her street. And Molly turned away too soon to see the skull-faced creature crawl out of the hedge and begin creeping through the shadows towards the Excelsior Guesthouse.