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Jack Meggitt-Phillips

MALLORY VAYLE AND MAGGOTY SKULL IN THE CASTLE OF HORRORS



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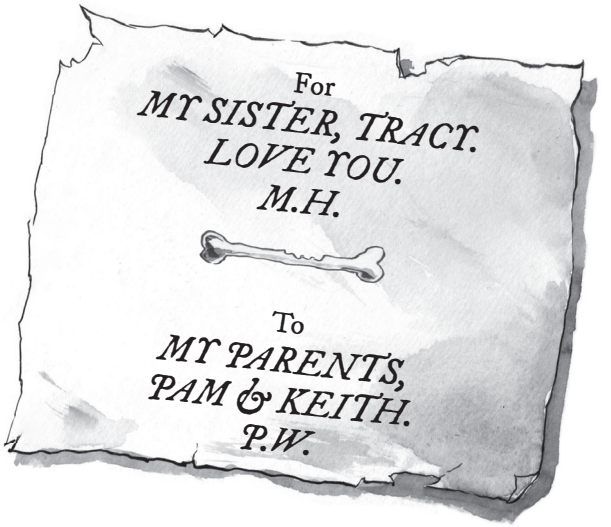
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CHAPTER 1

Gas lights sputtered atop lamp posts as a storm chased a swaying carriage *click-clack-clattering* over cobbles. The gale puffed them out, leaving a trail of darkness that followed the racing carriage through the city. Hard rain battered its roof and the driver, who huddled into a cloak. Underneath his hat, he stared ahead through the waterfall that fell from the brim. There was no need to crack his whip. Horseshoes sparked on the cobbles as the horses strained their muscles, eager to get back to a warm stable where they could put their hooves up with a nice hot mug of hay.

As the coach trundled on to Gibbett Bridge the driver reined them in with a hurried "Whoa there, m'lovelies".

The coach skidded to a stop just before crashing into a traffic jam.

Almost jolted out of her seat inside, Mallory Vayle pulled back the curtain covering the carriage window. Because she was a necromancer – her blood bubbling with the magic of Death … *himself* – part of her wanted to be prowling the shadows on a night like this. If she was being honest, it was quite a large part. This was, after all, perfect weather for dabbling in darkness. The kind of night where a necromancer such as herself should be screeching wickedly at the centre of a whirlwind while the gale whipped her hair and lightning crackled from her fingertips. Because she wasn't *just* a necromancer but also a sensible young girl who preferred books about ponies to catching a dreadful cold running about in wet clothes, she told herself firmly that there would be no dabbling, dark or otherwise. Instead, she peered through the rain, wondering why the carriage had stopped.

She gulped.

Mallory's face paled. Just three months ago, in this exact spot, another carriage had crashed through the stonework and into the river below. Her parents had

been inside. After the funeral, Mallory had been adopted by a strange aunt and taken to live in an even stranger ruin of a castle. There, she had discovered the secrets of her own deathly magical powers – or some of them at least – and made friends with a talking skull only she could hear, although 'talking' wasn't really the right word. "Endlessly jibber-jabbering" was a better way to describe him. She glanced down at the bewigged skull in her lap, who was singing to himself…

"*Oooooh, maggots ate his eyeballs, maggots ate him bare. Maggots ate his face off and also ate his hair*. Get down. Join in if you know the words. *Maggoty, yeah, Maggoty. He's the bing bong bestest skull you ever saw. Maggoty, yeah, Maaaaaaaggoty. He's got the nicest wig that ever wigged and a strong and manly jaw. Hoo ha.* Aaaaand applause. Umm, Boo. Mallory. Maggoty said *applause*. Why aren't you clapping?"

With a small sigh, Mallory returned her gaze to the spot where her parents had died. It felt like a lifetime ago.

"You could have dressed up a bit, Mallory," said the strange aunt from the seat opposite.

"Mmm," said Mallory, without turning her head. As usual, she was wearing a plain black dress and, as usual,

her hair was scraped back into a tight bun. It was neat and kept it out of her eyes.

"Pff. No one will be looking at *you*," yipped the skull in her lap. "All eyes will be on Maggoty wearing his brand-new wig. *Squee*. Will there be a red carpet, Boo?"

"I don't know," Mallory murmured, still staring out of the window.

"Hmm. If there *is* a red carpet, Maggoty is going to sashay past the dreary, not-red-carpet people with his nose in the air."

"You don't *have* a nose," Mallory muttered. Gibbett Bridge had been repaired since her parents had lost their lives there, she noticed. She wished she could say the same for her heart. The ache, she had thought, would fade with the days, weeks and months. Instead, it had grown bigger since the ghosts of her ma and da had passed on into the place beyond death. Mallory squeezed her eyes closed for a second. It was supposed to be impossible, but she was close … *so* close … to being able to talk to them again. She could feel it in her necromancer's bones.

"Yes, well, thank you sooo much, Mallory Pointer-Outer-of-Painful-Facts, for pointing out the painful fact that Maggoty's nose was eaten by maggots," sniffed

the skull. "How very, *very* kind of you to remind Maggoty of what was, frankly, a difficult moment."

"But you were just *singing* about it," said the small part of her brain that was listening to Maggoty.

"Singing about it helps Maggoty come to terms – emotionally – with maggots feasting on his face."

Mallory's eyes remained fixed on the patch where clean new stones showed against the grime-stained barrier that had been built to stop things falling off the bridge. It had not been able to stop four terrified horses and a carriage.

She was so *close*.

"Isn't it *marvellous*, though?" shouted her aunt, leaning forward and patting Mallory's knee. "I honestly think it's the best thing that has ever happened."

Her forehead wrinkling, Mallory turned to face her aunt on the opposite seat, blinking as she untangled her thoughts. Surely her aunt wasn't talking about her parents dying? "Err … *what's* the best thing that's ever happened?" she asked.

This evening Aunt Lilith was wearing her best finery: a fur coat that looked like it had been made from an elderly gorilla who had found the sweet release of death after years of suffering from patchy baldness, chronic dandruff

and dry, unmanageable fur. On her head she wore a black turban with a stuffed raven attached to the front. Its wonky glass eyes gave it the expression of a bird struggling with an especially challenging poo. Mallory's aunt jangled and glinted with cheap jewellery. She looked very much like an extremely spooky psychic, and very much was not.



Dipping a gloved hand into her bag, Aunt Lilith pulled out three tickets, waving them in her niece's face. "These, of course, you goose," she trilled. "Oh, it's all so *thrilling*. I'm absolutely *giddy*. Free tickets to see the one, the *only* Majika deVinckel. Mysteriously left on our doorstep by an unseen hand." Aunt Lilith squawked again. "An unseen *hand*, Mallory. The *drama*. Aren't you excited?"

Mallory shrugged.

"I simply *cannot* understand you sometimes, poppet," sniffed her aunt. "Majika deVinckel! She's almost the most famous magician of our times, and she only does a few shows a year! Which is funny when you think about it. She could be much *more* famous if she worked a bit harder. Pff. The point is, Mallory, that it's im*possible* to buy tickets and we have *three*." Aunt Lilith glanced at the skull in her niece's lap. "Although *two* would have been enough," she muttered.

"Maggoty heard that," yeeped the skull. "She's sassing Maggoty, Boo. *Bold*. Give the old bag a good hard shove out of the door and into the oh-so-convenient river below."

"No," sighed Mallory, a gust of rain rattling the window next to her.



"To remind you, Maggoty recently gave up the once-in-a-deathtime chance of breaking his curse in a *stunning* display of heart-melting, sob-sob friendship. For *you*. Well, for the Eleganza mostly. But a little bit for you. Now would be a *faaabulous* time to show Maggoty how much you appreciate his sacrifice – *shoop shang-a-lang* – and nothing says 'I appreciate your sacrifice' more than pushing sassy aunts into the river."

"No," she repeated, though what the skull said was true. Maggoty had indeed told Death … *himself* … that he wanted to stay with Mallory rather than be released from the curse that had trapped his spirit in his skull. If she had known how much he was going to go on and on and on about it, she might have insisted Death break the curse whether Maggoty wanted it broken or not.

"Gaw, Boo. You won't slap her around the face and shoulders with her own lungs, won't blow her up with gunpowder, and now you refuse Maggoty's *utterly* reasonable request to push the bothersome old bumhat off a bridge. Is there anything – anything at all – you *will* do to make Maggoty happy?"

"I *did* buy you a *very* expensive wig," Mallory



murmured, rolling her eyes and patting Maggoty's beautifully styled light-blue wig that glinted with gems. The feathers sticking up from the back tickled her nose.

"*Don't touch the Eleganza*," he screeched.

With another sigh, Mallory tore her eyes from the dark window and tilted the skull up so she could look down into the green lights that glowed in Maggoty's eye sockets. "I paid for it," she murmured. "So, technically, it's *my* wig."

Maggoty was quiet for a moment. Slowly, carefully, he said, "Never. Ever. *Ever* say such a thing again."

Mallory squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. In the months since the awful night when her ma and da had crashed over the side of Gibbett Bridge, this is what her life had become: skulls, shadows, dark magic, Nightmares and wigs. Wigs, wigs, wigs. *Always* wigs. All her life, she had just wanted to be normal. Instead, she was getting further and further from normal with every passing night. Further, too, from her cosy life with her mother and father. She was making real progress with the whole accepting-she-wasn't-like-other-people thing. Maggoty had been a big help, because however different she felt, she could always tell herself that at least she wasn't as



full-on woo-woo delulu as a flouncing, self-obsessed skull with a wig fixation. But there was still a part of her that longed for the old days of ignoring the strange powers she had been born with and just putting her feet in her dad's lap so he could tickle her ankles while she read a book.

Grabbing a leather strap, she steadied herself as the traffic cleared and the coach lurched forward, rolling off Gibbett Bridge and on to the city high street. Lifting her head, she forced herself to give her aunt a smile. "Sorry I'm not more excited about the show, but it's just someone pulling bunnies out of hats. It's not *real* magic."

"But, darling, it's Majika *deVinckel*," gasped her aunt, putting a hand to her chest in shock.

Mallory shrugged. Lately, her mind had been elsewhere, and a lot of odd things happened at Carrion Castle. She hadn't much thought about the mysterious tickets that had turned up on the doorstep. "She might be *good* at pulling bunnies out of hats," she said. "But it's still just pulling bunnies out of hats."

"Well," sniffed her aunt crossly. "I don't know. You curse the shadow of one ancient, wicked necromancer and vanquish one tiddly little Nightmare; give Death …



himself … back his finger and you think you know everything there is to know about magic. Harrumph. Pay attention tonight, Mallory. Majika deVinckel could teach you a thing or two, I'm sure. You don't get to be almost-the-most-famous magician in the world without having a few tricks up your sleeve."

Mallory snorted. "The only things she has up her sleeve are strings of colourful hankies and bunches of fake flowers."

She rocked in her seat again as the carriage driver stopped his horses and hammered on the roof with the handle of his whip. Once again, Mallory peered out of the window. A crowd of people huddled in the rain outside the city's theatre, beneath blazing lights that lit up the words: MAJIKA deVINCKEL: ONE NIGHT ONLY!

"Drat. Look at the queue," groaned Aunt Lilith, pushing open the carriage door. "It's pouring with rain. We'll be soaked. Oh…"

Clutching Maggoty to her chest, Mallory scrambled out behind her aunt. "Oh," she said.

Two men in the sort of fancy gold and crimson uniforms staff in theatres were forced to wear rushed



towards the carriage. Popping open umbrellas, they stood to attention either side of the door, shielding Mallory and her aunt.

"Oooooh," squealed Maggoty. "There *is* a red carpet. For *me*! *Look*, Boogaloo. Small, unimportant people are *staring*. Maggoty Skull has *arrived*, sprinkling glitter into their miserable, dull lives. *Huzzah*. One banana, two banana, three banana, *four*."





Maggoty was right. People were staring. And taking photographs too. Mallory lifted a hand to shield her eyes, half blinded by flashes of light.

"Easy, Maggoty," yelped the skull. "This is IT. Your moment. Keep it cool. Keep it stunning."

Another flash popped.

"*Bam*. That's the cover of next month's *Total Wigs* magazine, right there."

Putting her head down, Mallory hurried along the red carpet. "*Maggoty*," she whispered urgently. "Don't you think all this is a little bit … *odd*?"

"Not *now*, Boo," the skull gurgled. Louder, and even though no one in the crowd could hear him,



he continued, "Yes, yes, Maggoty Skull is here, dull, ordinary people. No autographs. Lift Maggoty higher, Boo. Let the photograph people get a good shot of the Eleganza."

Mallory's nose wrinkled as she lifted Maggoty. Because she was, basically, quite shy, and because there was already more than enough gossip about Mallory Vayle, the Skull Girl, she made sure her own face was hidden from the cameras.

Flash. Pop.

"*Yes,*" squealed the skull. "Gawjuss. Serving Maggoty Skull red-carpet realness."

"The mysterious tickets," Mallory muttered, trying again as she turned Maggoty this way and that in front of the cameras. "The red carpet. For *us*. Don't *you* think it's odd?"

"Do you think Maggoty should stop and chat with the ordinary people for a few seconds?" the skull replied. "Show them that underneath the celebrity glamour Maggoty is just like them, though – obviously – way, *waaaay* more attractive and special."

"But…" Mallory's voice was drowned out by a growl of thunder.







"No, you're right, Boo. Who are we kidding? Maggoty? Just like the ordinary people? Pff. They *wish*."

Ahead, grand doors opened, freeing a blast of warm air from inside the theatre. Still, Mallory shivered. The theatre didn't *seem* the sort of place where ghastly peril lurked, but that was the thing about unseen peril. It was unseen. Suddenly, she wanted to be at home, behind the thick, protective walls of Carrion Castle. She felt safe in the castle. The castle loved her. *Well,* she corrected herself. *Technically* it loved Aunt Lilith, but it liked her too. Probably. She sighed, watching her aunt sweep through the doors. Taking a breath, she stepped past more bowing staff in outrageous uniforms and followed.

"Nooooo, go back. Go *back*, Boo. Maggoty hasn't finished working the red carpet."



"And this is the Rrrrroyal Box," said the theatre manager, rolling the words off his tongue with pride. "Ta – as they say – DA." He threw open doors to a private balcony overlooking the stage below, with velvet chairs that looked deeply comfy. Waiters scurried in, carrying drinks and trays of nibbly things.

Mallory set Maggoty on the edge of the balcony and

looked around. A curtain covered the stage, but the royal box would easily have the best view in the house when it went up. Below, the cheaper-but-still-very-expensive seats were filling quickly. It all looked perfectly normal. *Too* normal. Once again, a sense of peril poked Mallory with grisly fingers. Why would anyone give them free tickets to this show? The note that had arrived with them had not been signed, but the curly writing had been clear: they were for Mallory, her aunt and Maggoty. It even used his name – Maggoty Skull – though most people thought Mallory was just an oddball who carried an old skull around. Hardly anyone knew he even *had* a name, though it wasn't exactly a secret. Just a detail that usually got lost in the swirl of gossip.

"Do you *have* to put the skull there, Mallory?" Aunt Lilith sniffed, swigging from a tall glass of pale bubbly drink. "People are *staring*."

Mallory glanced down. Her aunt was right. Many people in the audience were looking up at the extravagantly wigged skull perched on the balcony of the royal box. A few were pointing and whispering. She reached out to move Maggoty.

"Don't even *think* about it," growled the skull.

Rolling her eyes, Mallory left him where he was and turned back to her aunt. "Don't you think this is all a bit … well, strange?" she said. "I mean, why would anyone go to the trouble of doing all this for *us*?"

Aunt Lilith threw herself into a chair. "Oh, Mallory. Darling. Darling, sweetie-pie, lambkin, darling. We've been doing a *lot* of psychic readings. This must be a gift from a satisfied customer we helped speak to a dead relative."

Mallory bit her tongue at the word 'we'. She – Mallory – had helped people talk to their dead relatives. Her aunt had made tea and taken their money. Sometimes she waggled her fingers and said, "Woo." It seemed mean to remind her, though, and her aunt did have a point. Mallory *had* been making more of an effort to earn money from her dark powers – mostly to make sure her aunt didn't accidentally summon something awful from the dark places again. Perhaps she *was* being too suspicious, she decided. Perhaps this really was just a gift from a grateful but shy customer.

Quietly, Mallory snorted. *Yeah, right*, she told herself.

She opened her mouth to argue, and was interrupted by her aunt. "Mallory. Poppet. We're at a *theatre*.





Nothing *creepy* is going to happen. Sit down, dear. The show is about to begin."

Above, the lights of chandeliers dimmed. A murmur rippled through the audience and then fell silent as the theatre went dark. Mallory sighed and sat, giving it five minutes before something weird happened.



It began with a piano, tinkling out a few notes.

The curtain rose.

A single spotlight shot through the dark theatre, twinkling on a glittered crescent moon slowly falling from high above the stage. Leaning back in its curve, one leg dangling, was a woman. She was dressed like a circus ringmaster, in a red coat with tails, and tight, creamy-white riding trousers with high polished-leather boots. The brim of a crumpled-looking sparkly top hat was pulled down over her eyes. Her hair – so blonde it looked almost silver in the spotlight – was pulled into a tight bun at the back of her neck, covered in a net that sparkled with diamonds.

He's going to say something about my hair, Mallory thought to herself. *In three, two…*

"One," she said aloud.



"And *that's* how you do a bun," said Maggoty.

Mallory rolled her eyes.

"Are you watching and learning, Boo? If you absolutely *must* wear your hair in the most pointless of all hairstyles, make a feature of it. Make it *pop*."

"Thank you, Maggoty, I will—"

"In other news, *meh*," the skull interrupted. "Why is everyone looking at *her* now and not at Maggoty? Why is everyone clapping? All she's done is sit there. Hello. *Hello*. Maggoty is up here, people."

As the audience applauded, the glittering moon came to a stop high above the stage. Majika deVinckel lifted her top hat by the brim, nodding a thanks. Twisting the hat upside down, she held it out in front of her. From a breast pocket of her coat, she pulled a magic wand and tapped it three times on the hat.

Mallory couldn't help herself. Nudging her aunt, she whispered, "Told you. Bunnies."

"Shh, Mallory. I'm sure Majika deVinckel wouldn't perform such a boring tri— Oh."

Reaching into the hat, Majika pulled out a white rabbit by the ears.

"Mmm-hmm," said Mallory, feeling smug.



"*Borrr*-ring," yelled Maggoty.

The audience applauded again, but without so much enthusiasm. Any children's party magician could pull a rabbit from a hat.

Majika deVinckel took no notice at all. Holding the miffed-looking bunny up before her, she turned her head. Mallory felt the stage magician's eyes meet her own. She held her breath as their gazes locked. There was … there was something about the magician she couldn't quite put her finger on. Something unexpected. Something deeply, *deeply* odd.

There was no time to think about it. Majika glanced back at the rabbit and then at Mallory again, as if she knew exactly what Mallory was thinking. She smiled. Then Majika deVinckel gave Mallory a long, slow, exaggerated wink. She took a deep breath and blew on the rabbit.

Which puffed into a fluttering cloud of butterflies that flapped around the theatre in an explosion of tiny white wings.

A gasp went through the audience.

This time the clapping was a lot louder. One or two people got to their feet, cheering.

Aunt Lilith jangled as she applauded. "I *told* you,

Mallory. Didn't I say? Oh yes, Majika deVinckel has a few tricks up her sleeve."

Mallory wasn't listening. A butterfly was dancing in the air before her eyes. She gazed at it, her face growing paler as its wings stopped beating.

Without thinking, she stretched out a hand to catch the dying butterfly as it spiralled downwards, landing softly in her palm. Mallory leaned over it.

Her eyes widened.

The butterfly was not a butterfly. It was a perfectly folded, butterfly-shaped piece of paper. Her jaw falling open, Mallory unfolded it and read…

I know what you want, Mallory.
I can help. See you after the show.

Kisses,
Majika

Mallory lifted her eyes. Majika deVinckel swung her leg lazily on the hanging moon and replaced her hat, blowing Mallory a kiss.

The tickets, the best seats in the house, the drinks and nibbles… Mallory gulped. Majika deVinckel had arranged all of it. And there *was* something strange about her. Somehow … some *impossible* how … the stage magician could use *real* magic. She could feel the gentle fizz of it. At the same time like and nothing like her own necromancy. This was a completely different kind of magic.

More importantly, she had been right. It had taken less than five minutes for something weird to happen.

