



# THE ODDS

LINDSAY PUCKETT



Scholastic Press / New York

Copyright © 2023 by Lindsay Puckett

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

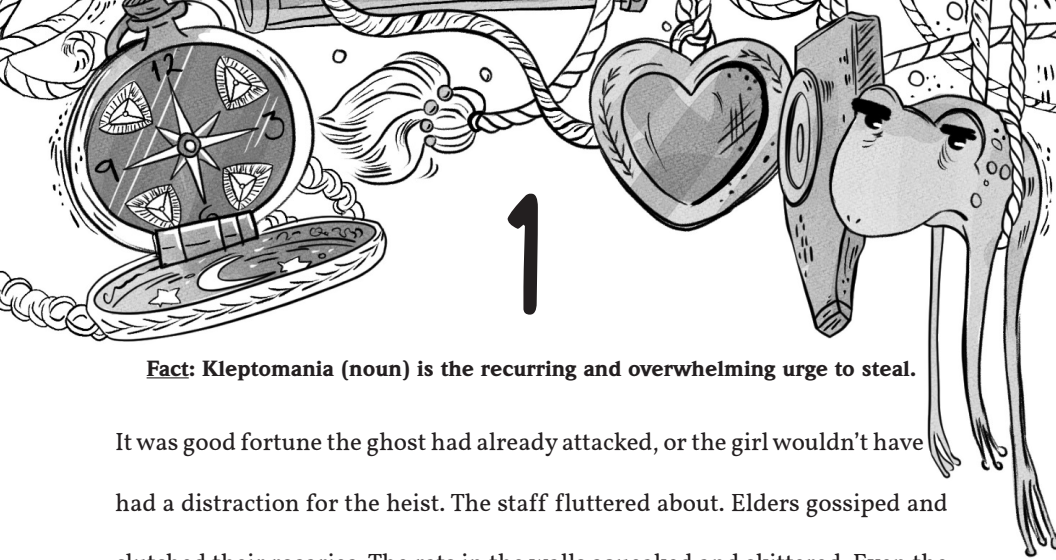
ISBN 978-1-338-80381-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in Italy 183

First edition, September 2023

Book design by Stephanie Yang



**Fact:** Kleptomania (noun) is the recurring and overwhelming urge to steal.

It was good fortune the ghost had already attacked, or the girl wouldn't have had a distraction for the heist. The staff fluttered about. Elders gossiped and clutched their rosaries. The rats in the walls squeaked and skittered. Even the manor itself was so worked up by all the excitement that it flapped its shutters as if caught in a windstorm.

Of course, this all left *his* office unattended.

The girl seemed to glide down the dimly lit hall. She knew exactly where to place each foot so as not to make a noise. For example, one would only step on the second-to-left wooden panel if they wanted to alert the whole manor of their secret wanderings with a *squeeeeeek*.

No. Not tonight.

Her calculated creeping crept to a crawl at the door of room nine, Mr. Haneef's suite. Grandpa—or Dada, as it was in his homeland—number forty-two.

Ghost attack number: Four

It was reported to the Never Odds as a coma since they couldn't understand things like magic and souls and ghosts. Most with Oddities didn't think those

without them were worth the time—the girl included—but appearances must be kept up, and something had to be documented.

The child rested a hand on the brass doorknob as a buttery, flaky taste swelled on her tongue. A memory stretched its fingers across time, back to samosas and Eid and *Before*.

*“Like this, meri gudiya,” he had said, his soft brown hands molding over hers to shape the pastry into a perfect cocoon for the spiced goodies inside. “Fold it like it holds a secret.”*

*The girl giggled, flour dappling her cheeks. “That’s your job.”*

*Her dada winked. “Oddity is as Oddity does.”*

Whatever secrets he kept were now buried within him.

She had never seen a ghost, but she liked facts, and the fact was something had left her dada Haneef stiff as a board, eyes leaking black smoke, just like Abuelo Humberto, Pawpaw Henry, and Grandfather Charles before him.

Sadness threatened to rise, but the girl pushed it down, locking it in the coffin of her mind. She had more pressing matters at hand. Her eleventh birthday, as a matter of fact, in three days’ time.

**Fact: On average, people have one thousand one hundred and sixty-four nightmares between birthdays.**

**Fact: Loud singing, cheering, and whooping noises common around birthday celebrations were once thought to scare away bad spirits.**

**Fact: Begonia Hollowmoor’s eleventh birthday would be the worst day of her life.**

The pipes in the walls groaned, something the manor did whenever it felt as if it wasn't getting enough attention.

"Hush," Begonia hissed, nudging the baseboard with her boot. "You'll give me away."

A hanging mirror performed a dramatic spin against its nail as the floorboards huffed.

"Don't roll your eyes at me. If you want to be part of this mission, you better *stick to the plan.*"

A tarnished suit of armor saluted as she passed, the manor's way of saying, "*Sir, yes, sir!*"

"Good," Begonia said, throwing a leg over the banister. "Now move out!"

The staircase molded into the exact shape needed for optimum sneakacy, slithering down into the belly of the manor. She pushed off, and her hair whipped behind her as she slid to the main floor.

She patted the banister. "Good boy."

The curtains hummed in delight. Or perhaps some creepy-crawly was munching the fabric.

As she snuck through the foyer, the towering grandfather clock hiccupped a loud *bong!* Begonia froze, still as a corpse, her teeth on edge. Only her heart moved, an angry rhythm tromboning against her ribs.

You see, my Advantageous Adventurer, everyone has a nemesis. If you don't, then perhaps you are too young, or too nice, or *you* are someone's

nemesis and don't know that you have made such a dangerous enemy and that they are lurking behind you waiting for an opportune moment to blow a poison dart between your shoulder blades before you release a final scream for help.

Just a thought.

Begonia did have a nemesis. In fact, she had compiled a growing list of them. They were as follows, Villainous Violation rating included (scale rating 1-10, 1 being overstarched pinafores and 10 being Ms. Majorie):

### **1. THE NEVER-ODD CHILDREN IN THE VILLAGE**

**Crime:** Being loud and sticky. (Always sticky? Why?) Making fun of my height, or lack thereof, and calling me "the cripple from the creep house."

**Villainous Violation Rating: 6**

### **2. MS. MAJORIE**

**Crime:** Existing.

**Villainous Violation Rating: 10**

### **3. THE FOYER'S GRANDFATHER CLOCK**

**Crime:** Ticking, chiming, and overall incessant timekeeping.

**Villainous Violation Rating: Off the scale. DOOM IMPENDING.**

The rug rolled under Begonia's feet, gently urging her on.

"Thanks," she muttered, and scurried down the main hall.

As planned, the manor clicked open the lock, and the door to the office swung inward.

Before we continue, it's important for you to understand how badly our hero—or villain, depending on who you ask—wanted the object in this office. No, *needed*. The need set a fire in her belly, tingles in her fingertips, and only the slightest tinge of guilt on her tongue.

Not enough to *not* steal it, mind you; this story is about a terrible little girl, after all. A thief.

But she would want you to know the guilt was there, Dear Reader, no matter how small.

Begonia crept inside the office. Something that smelled like gun smoke clung to the room the way mud clings to a toadstool. Every nook and cranny was filled with books, empty teacups, spare sets of dentures, and strange metal contraptions that either whistled, clacked, or sang in squeaky falsettos.

Begonia usually loved the manor's quirks—this kooky, disorganized office, the back steps that just pretended to be steps, doors that opened only on a waning moon, windows that lied about the weather. But today, each whizz of the machines sent lightning through her fingers and thunder through her heart.

She scoped out the room with a criminal eye.

Hiding places / shadowy corners: Four

Quick exits: Two

Satisfied, she slunk over to the desk.

A cracked picture frame glinted on its surface. Inside, the two of them lounged atop a picnic blanket at her favorite springtime spot—the double-heart-shaped beach by the bog.

Her stomach squirmed.

She looked the same as ever—pale white face, wispy white hair, dingy white smock. Scrawny. Insubstantial. Dandelion child, Nana Babette once called her, because if a big wind came, she looked as if she'd blow away with the wispy petals. The only thing grounding her was the tarnished silver locket around her neck. The locket she had been abandoned with as a baby. The locket she never took off.

If she looked the same as always, then the opposite must be said for David.

His neat chestnut hair fell in waves just above his neck, which grew out instead of up from all the hours spent hunched in his workshop. He had kind eyes, lanky arms, and no matter the occasion, always dressed in browns. Sprawled out over the picnic blanket, he looked warm and lazy and happy.

This was before the nursing home ran out of money. Before David's eyes stopped twinkling.

Before "the ghost."

Guilt bloomed up Begonia's throat like poisonous mushrooms. With quick



fingers, she flipped the picture facedown so he could not watch, and slid open the desk drawer.

It was exactly where she knew it would be, nestled between stray paper clips, broken quills, and envelopes that screamed in bold red ink **OVERDUE**.

The pocket watch.

It wasn't really stealing. David had mentioned he might sell it for some extra funds, and she absolutely could not let him do that to his most prized possession. This wasn't so much a heist as a rescue mission.

She reached for the watch's chain.

"There you are."

She jumped, slamming the drawer shut.

David stood in the doorway, one of his goofy work-in-progress inventions strapped over his brow. It could have been a headlamp the way it was fixed around the skull, but with bug-eyed goggles and golden cogs that whirred around the ears like moth wings.

It looked like utter junk, but that's how David's Oddity worked. He was an inventor. Or really, an *un*-inventor. He had the specific knack of breaking things in just the right way to create something extraordinary.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Begonia said, voice too high.

Normally David would have noticed something was off, but as it was, he seemed distracted. Begonia's eyes narrowed, suspicion laying eggs in her gut.

The least shabby suit in David's collection hung loosely from his frame. His hands, usually dirty from tinkering with tools all day, were scrubbed clean of grease. His hair was oiled.

"You look . . . nice," Begonia said.

Oblivious, he straightened his coat. "What? Ah, yes. Thank you. Listen, Bug—I wanted to talk to you about something. Something very important."

David sat on one of the scratched brown leather chairs, patting the seat next to him. Begonia's heart hadn't stopped its thumping. She gulped down a deep, calming breath and threw one last longing glance at the drawer before joining him, swinging her feet off the edge in an attempt to act normal.

"About what?"

"There is a particular—ah—event coming up soon that I thought we should talk about."

Grave-worms reared their vicious heads, gnawing at her middle.

"My birthday," she said.

You might think it's odd for a child to dread their birthday. You may assume it's unusual for a child to have fifty-eight grandparents. You might even consider it bizarre for that child to enjoy stealing from them all, despite her love for them.

There can be no doubt she was a peculiar girl, but the oddest thing about Begonia Hollowmoor was that she wasn't odd *enough*.

Her birthday had everything to do with that.

“It’s going to be the worst day of my life,” Begonia moaned.

David put a hand on her shoulder, but Begonia couldn’t feel it. It might as well have gone straight through her. He blinked down at her with a gentle expression, only slightly terrifying through his bug-eyed spectacles. “Everything is going to work out. You,” he said, poking her chest with each word, “are magical. You. Are. Odd.”

Begonia pasted on a smile. Her eyes strayed to the pocket watch drawer.

The unspoken truth was that if she *did* have an Oddity, she could use it to help fund the nursing home, like Grandpa Clive, who sold honey from his head-hive at the farmers market, or Nana Babette, who had a fortune-telling tent at the annual renaissance faire.

Well, that, and she wouldn’t get torn from her home, have her memory wiped, and be forced to live with the putrid Never Odds at a city orphanage, but we’ll get to that later.

“Mr. Klein.”

A woman stood in the doorway. Nay, not a woman. A Nemesis. A blight. A long shadow cast over the whole of Swamp Root Manor.

Ms. Majorie.

Begonia thought of all the residents of the manor as family, but as the nursing home’s head caregiver, smile squanderer, laugh liquidator, and overall thief of joy, Begonia saw Ms. Majorie more like the feral cat that lived under your porch and hissed when you went to get the mail.

She also had an unfortunate Oddity that allowed her to twist her head nearly all the way around. Two hundred and seventy-degree vision. This used to put Begonia at a terrible disadvantage, regardless of how much of an accomplished thief she was. But lately, instead of her usual glare or snide comments or tattling, Ms. Majorie had taken to ignoring her altogether. As she stomped into the room, her eyes slid over Begonia like she wasn't even there.

Begonia did not enjoy looking at Ms. Majorie either; therefore, I will not waste my time describing her to you, my Precocious Pickpocket. Just picture the most horrible person possible.

"Sorry to disturb," Ms. Majorie said, "but Mr. Schmoob and Mrs. Pingleton are here to see you."

David sighed, looking older than usual. "Send them up."

Ms. Majorie nodded and left.

Suspicion curled Begonia's eyebrows into question marks. "Why is Mr. Schmoob here?"

"Well," David said, pulling at his collar. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Go wait in the hall and then we'll chat after, all right?"

Begonia did not like the smile he gave her, all weak and wobbly. It made tension cloud along her forehead, and these were the nimbus-cloud kind. The ones that brought storms.

David touched her shoulder. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah, just a little pressure.”

His face did that strange double-emotion thing it had been doing recently, as if caught between one of his screws (sadness) and one of his hammers (discomfort). It prickled her nerves to no end. She had always been able to handle her pain on her own, thank you very much. She didn’t need whatever sympathetic display this was.

“Why don’t you lie down for a bit,” he said. “You don’t want another episode.”

Begonia rubbed her temple, letting her annoyance dissolve from her body. Schmoob was the problem now. He had been coming around a lot lately, always with talks of refinancing, consolidation, and other fancy banker words Begonia didn’t understand. All she knew was each time he left, a new gray hair curled along David’s temple.

Her eye gave a nasty throb. From under her curtain of bangs, she snuck another glance at the drawer. Even out of sight, the ticking clock pulsed in time with her head, with the ache of her heartbeat.

Despite the pain, she tried to treasure the dull beat now, knowing it would cease to pump at all if she lost her home. Or if she was taken from it.

As always in times of stress, three pieces of trivia swam up through the murk of her mind.

- 1. On Mercury, a single day is two years long.**
- 2. One hundred and eighty-four families relocate per year because they believe their house is haunted.**
- 3. Nothing—pain, a ghost, or least of all, Mr. Schmoob—was taking her home from her.**

And that, Dear Reader, was a *fact*.