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FALLING

GIRL

A GHOST STORY

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Prologue: No-one there

The torrential rain thundered onto the wooden planks, unleashing miniature bombs of water that bounced up around the Warden's feet. His trousers clung to his legs with tight clammy fingers, and lines of cold water coursed down his back and dripped off the end of his long nose.

And yet he hardly noticed any of this; instead he stared at the massive castle doors straight ahead, senseless to all else. He wanted desperately to look away, anywhere else, but he had simply lost the power to do so. So he just stood like a statue amidst the raging storm, as though something had sucked every drop of life right out of him; mute and helpless, doomed to wait, to hear again the sound he dreaded.

Then he flinched as it came – a loud, hollow thumping on the other side of the doors – once, twice, three times. His stricken mind scrambled to understand what could be making that sound, but really he knew that only one thing could be: a person on the inside, banging their fist on the solid timber.

The only problem was, he knew there was no-one there.

A few minutes earlier – though it seemed like an age away – at closing time, the Warden had crossed the wooden bridge from the ticket office to lock the castle doors as he had done countless times before. Dark clouds were pressing down on the green fields behind him and the air was heavy with the scent of oncoming rain, so he was in a hurry to lock up and get back to the shelter of the hut as soon as he could. He knew there could be no-one in the castle, as he had counted them in and counted them out as was his habit, and the last person had passed by the hut on their way back to the car park fifteen minutes earlier. Sometimes, being a cautious man, if he was in any doubt he would go into the outer bailey and call out three times very loudly, “Anyone there? Closing up!”, just to make

absolutely sure there was no-one left inside before he locked up for the night; and in fact he had taken that very precaution tonight.

True, it was possible that someone could sneak in to the castle without passing the ticket office by climbing over the not-very-high fence that ringed the dry moat, and then gaining access through the postern gate towards the back of the castle. However, the Warden reasoned that anyone who got in that way would then just exit by the same route, and so the locking of the great gatehouse doors would not trap them inside overnight.

So that evening he had passed back through the gatehouse passage in the gathering gloom, pulled shut the large double doors behind him, and then locked them with the heavy brass key. The latch gave an echoing click, and he glanced nervously up at the slate-grey clouds now rearing over the castle. All around him the world had become still and almost oppressively quiet; nothing moved, the breeze had died and even the birds had fallen silent. He gave a sudden involuntary shiver, and began to hurry back across the bridge just as the first plump rain drops began to fall.

He had not gone six paces when he heard three loud, booming thumps on the wooden doors behind him. He tutted to himself as he turned and pulled out the key again. Damn – someone still inside. Why couldn't people pay more attention? He was going to get wet after all thanks to this joker!

But when he pushed the doors open and peered into the shadowy passage beyond, he could see no-one. "Hello?" he called impatiently into the musty air. "Come on, let's be having you. Come out now. I've got to lock up, it's closing time. Didn't you hear me call?" There was no reply; all he could hear was the soft pitter-patter of the rain behind him. He sighed. Kids, maybe? Got in through the postern gate, having a laugh? There was a small guard room off the left side of the passage, but a quick check inside found it empty. He made sure that the door to the store room on the other side of the passage was locked – yes it was, so they couldn't have

gone in there. He then went to the far end and glanced quickly around the outer bailey, but again there was no-one to be seen. Well, if they were kids then they had been very quick and very quiet in getting back out of the gatehouse.

“OK, well I don’t know where you are, but I’m locking up now and going home. If you need to get out, there’s the postern gate over there,” he called out, waving in that direction, “but you probably already know that. Goodnight!” The Warden tried to project control and self-assurance, but the heavy dusk seemed to stifle his voice; and dead silence was the only response from the dark corners and blank windows around him. He shrugged and strode back into the gatehouse, more quickly than usual. He told himself it was to beat the rain.

As he passed back through the inner gatehouse doorway he paused, noticing the black wrought iron gates pushed back flat against the passage walls there, and he had an idea. He had never locked these gates before, and actually did not really understand why they were there at all. Perhaps a previous Warden had been paranoid about the contents of the store room. For his own part he couldn’t see why anyone would take too much trouble to steal a rusting old lawnmower, a few dusty garden tools and some scant cobweb-festooned remnants of building materials; and anyway the store room door was itself locked.

Now, however, he could see the point of the gates for that night at least. If he locked them, then whoever was in the castle could not sneak back into the gatehouse and try the same trick of banging on the outer doors. He found the right key on the bunch he held, and smiled to himself as he locked the gates. Warden one, smart alec kids nil. He glanced in the guard room once more on the way out – yes, still empty – and just to be absolutely sure he even checked the store room before locking it up again. Finally, having assured himself that no-one could possibly get in to the gatehouse passage again, he re-locked the outer doors. He had half a mind to nip round the side of the castle and wait by the postern gate to nab

whoever tried to slope out, but the steadily increasing rain persuaded him otherwise. Let them get soaked – served them right; he would just sit tight in his nice dry hut.

This time he got eight or nine paces before he heard the banging again – now even louder and faster, as if more urgent. He wheeled round and stared at the doors. What the—? He hesitated for just a second before racing back. He didn't know who was doing this, but he'd get them this time! A disquieting thought flashed across his mind, but he quickly smothered it – he was not an especially superstitious man, and being Warden of a lonely old castle would hardly be a suitable job for anyone who was.

He swung back the doors and burst into the passage looking around wildly – left, right, behind, even up. “Come on, where are you?” he bellowed, and the hard walls threw his voice back at him. He checked the guard room yet again, the store room door, then the iron gates at the end; still locked, just as he had left them. He stopped there, panting at the sudden exertion, and glared pointlessly through the bars of the gate into the darkening outer bailey.

As he retreated down the passage, his eye was caught by a tiny blur of movement. An ash-grey cobweb was twitching spasmodically on the wall. At first he thought it was stirred by an unfelt breeze until, moving closer, he perceived a small speckled moth held fast in the clinging trap, wings fluttering madly. Then he saw the spider, grey like the old wall on which it lived, scuttling towards its prey. The moth beat its wings ever more frantically, but the spider was nearly there, closing in with cold efficiency. The Warden was not a sentimental sort of person but right then he felt a twinge of pity for that insect. It was caught and there could be no escape, no matter how desperately it tried.

Something made him turn sharply. His eyes frantically scanned the swimming gloom. “What ... ?” he whispered. His mind was a storm of thoughts, none of which he dared entertain. Then he

shook himself. He must not be a fool. He had no idea what was going on here, but it was time he just locked up and went home. That was all he needed to do.

The hairs on his head prickled and he realised he was sweating. He broke into a trot but the passage seemed to stretch out before him. He had no idea how long it took him to reach the wooden doors. Then, just as he touched the cold timber, he heard it.

Or thought it, or sensed it. He never really knew. But it was there, like a slither of ice penetrating his skull.

Don't go

He froze, hand on the door. His heart pounded in his ears. He began to shake. No. No, he had heard nothing. It must be –

I don't want to be alone

He couldn't move. He wanted to run, to shout, but his throat felt like it was carved from the same dry timber as the doors in front of him.

Please

He thought he felt something brush against his back. That was it. He fairly leapt through the doorway, whirled round, and with eyes cast down and half closed, lest he see something that might drive him insane, he yanked the doors shut. He tried to lock them but the key slipped from his clammy grasp and fell to the ground. He jerked down, grabbed the key and then, with shaking hands, finally locked the doors. Then he staggered back, his breath shredded into painful, shuddering gasps.

He had to wait only a few seconds to hear again that violent hammering, the impossible fist thumping onto the other side of the doors. There he stayed for he knew not how long, heedless to the rain drenching him to the skin. He heard the sounds at least two, maybe three more times. He could not tear himself away, but he dared not open the doors again. Was he losing his mind?

Eventually a sharp whip-crack of thunder roused him from his stupor, and he turned and ran across the bridge. All thoughts of sheltering in the hut had gone now – anyway, he was already soaked – and so he just turned out the light, locked the door, and then resumed his rapid retreat to the car park. He jogged heavily along the path around the front of the castle, feet splashing in the rapidly growing puddles, all the while averting his eyes from the dark brooding fortress to his right.

His wife was already waiting for him in the car. She was amazed to see him so wet, bedraggled and fighting for breath, and tried to coax some explanation out of him on the way home, but he was tense and fidgety and would say very little. In fact she never did find out exactly what happened that night, as he would never speak of it.

The very next day he resigned as Warden and never saw Pentrillis Castle again. He thought himself a fool, for the job had suited him well, but he knew he could never again face locking up at the end of the day. Of course he had been tired, he told himself, needed a holiday, wasn't quite himself. But whatever had happened that autumn day, he feared for his sanity if he ever dared to return.

And so he didn't; but for months afterwards, frequently at first and then just occasionally, he found himself in his dreams in the dead of night back in the gatehouse, paralysed, feeling the darkness enfold him, and the impossible whisper slice in to his mind.

Please ...

Chapter 1: Shifting shadows

By the time her Dad's grimy people carrier swung into Pentrillis Castle car park, Ellie Black was ready to jump out whether it was still moving or not. It wasn't just that her step-brother was being every bit as nauseating as usual; to make matters even worse, her Dad's mood had lurched into near-homicidal rage following an overdose of bickering children, infuriating road works and a satnav that somehow managed to get them lost in an impenetrable maze of country lanes. Finally a signpost to the castle had been spotted hiding in an overgrown hedge, and so mercifully the nightmare journey had drawn to a close. Dad braked just a bit too sharply and the car slid to a halt in a flurry of grit, but he got no further than opening his mouth before his daughter had flung open the door and escaped to the cool air of the summer's afternoon.

Well, summer it might be, but apparently no-one had thought to tell the weather. The psychotically jolly TV weather girl had trilled that the day would be breezy, cloudy and "mostly" dry. "Mostly", it seemed, did not include Pentrillis Castle car park, as a dour drizzle had already soaked the broken tarmac and surrounding bushes, making them glisten dully in the subdued light. The sun was making itself scarce as usual, skulking behind stubborn grey cloud as had been its habit through most of that July. For once though Ellie didn't care too much, so relieved was she to be outside. She gulped lungfuls of air, desperate to expel the claustrophobic gloom of the car.

"Ellie, put on your coat. Your mum'll kill me," Dad called from behind her.

"OK," she sighed, opening up the back of the car to fetch her blue raincoat. She glanced at her black fingertips. Ugh. Didn't he ever wash this car?

"Get mine too," Callum grunted expressionlessly from the back seat.

“Yes sir. Right away sir. Would you like me to put it on for you too sir?” She knew her sarcasm would be lost on him – Callum’s skull was about a mile thick and very little got through it – but it was the kind of thing that kept her sane. Well almost sane.

“Shuddup,” Callum muttered, turning back to his phone (little else ever held his attention for long). “Rob, tell her, she’s being rude again.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” shot back Ellie. “You’ve got a first class *degree* in rudeness.”

From the driver’s seat came a long, juddering sigh. “OK, Callum, put that thing away now. We’re here. Let’s go.” Robert Black climbed heavily out of the car, then reflexively patted the top pocket of his shirt. His expression darkened further. Ellie pulled a face; much as she had hated him smoking, she had to admit that her Dad had been noticeably tetchier during the three weeks since his latest last ever cigarette.

From within the car came the peculiar whiny grunt that was one of her big step-brother’s most charming trademarks. “Stupid boring castle. Why did we have to come here anyway?”

Ellie felt her hackles rise again, but she bit her lip. There was no point in reminding him that today it had been his turn to choose where they went for lunch and hers of where to go afterwards. She had sat in that greasy fast food so-called “restaurant” and watched Callum attack with grim enthusiasm a pile of fried chicken of doubtful origin, while she had nibbled dejectedly on as little as possible, despite which she now had the faint sickly feeling of oily junk sitting heavily in her stomach. It would serve him right if he was dead before he was forty, his arteries congealed to a dead stop. She didn’t know anyone with a worse diet.

Dad didn’t seem in the mood to argue either. “Come on. Out you get. You’re not staying in there.”

As far as Ellie was concerned Callum could stay in the car if he wanted. She didn’t really want him trailing sullenly after her

around the castle. But Dad had promised Susan (as usual) that he wouldn't let her darling son sit alone texting his reptilian mates the whole time, but would instead ensure that he went for a nice healthy stroll or something. And of course, bond with Ellie. Apparently Susan hadn't yet realised, in spite of all the blindingly obvious evidence, that Callum was interested in bonding with his phone and absolutely nothing and no-one else, not least his pointless little step-sister.

Susan had appeared on the scene with bewildering speed after Dad's divorce from Ellie's mother. Susan was a divorcee herself, and with the package – unfortunately – came Callum. The only saving grace was that, since Mum had got custody of Ellie, she didn't actually have to live with her repugnant step-brother. (Dad of course did, which earned him a certain amount of sympathy in his daughter's eyes.) But what really crushed Ellie was when she was forced to share days like today with Callum. It wasn't fair. It wasn't enough that she had to keep seeing this – this *thing*, or that he lived with her Dad. Oh no – on the few precious occasions when she had quality time with Dad, this revolting little imbecile was invariably there too, spreading his gloom and spite like an oily stain over the day. In fact the more she thought about it, the angrier she felt.

So Ellie tried not to think about it. She began to move away – time to escape. With any luck Callum would find a quiet corner to sneakily resume his telecommunications while Dad would pretend not to notice. She could see only one other car, which was good; she didn't feel like having hordes of people around, especially not the gaggles of screeching little kids who too often infested castles on summer Saturdays.

Then she looked back as Callum swore sharply. He had dropped his precious phone as he was shuffling out the car. As Dad turned to wearily admonish him for his bad language, Ellie gazed at her step-brother much as you might find yourself unable to tear your eyes away from a road accident. It was so hard to believe that

he was nearly two years older than her. At thirteen, Callum Stubbs cut a short, slouching figure, with spiky greasy hair and an acne-besieged face which wore a largely fixed expression of sneering incredulity, as if he were permanently amazed at just how stupid, boring and/or unfair almost everything in the world was.

“What are you looking at?” Callum virtually spat as soon as he noticed her derisive eyes on him.

“Oh, nothing. Just admiring you good looks and sparkling personality. What do you think? Imbecile.”

“Ellie!” The sharpness of Dad’s interjection jolted her. “Please don’t talk like that. It’s really – it’s just not helpful, OK?”

Not helpful? A lump rose in Ellie’s throat. “What do you mean? Why do you always take *his* side? It’s not fair...!”

“Oh don’t be daft, I don’t take anyone’s side ...”

“You do! He can be as crap as he likes to me and you and Susan, but as soon as I say something back ...”

“Ellie, you know that’s not true ...”

“It is! He’s always giving me grief! But you just make allowances for him, don’t you? Just because you can’t handle him! You won’t stand up to him – or Susan!” Hot tears prickled Ellie’s eyes, but for a moment she felt oddly detached, watching as the rage buried deep inside her flared up, suddenly unstoppable.

“Ellie, that’s enough!” Dad was practically shouting now. Ellie would not look at Callum but she caught sight of his smirking face in the corner of her eye.

That was it – stuff the both of them! “Fine. See you later then.” At that Ellie spun around and began to stride off towards a track marked “To the Castle”. She heard Dad call out her name but his voice spoke of resignation more than rage; it suggested he knew it was best to let her go. Even now part of her wanted him to call her back, to run after her; but another part would have hated it. She was afraid that she would cry if he did that and – no, not in front of

Callum, no way. As it was she was thankful that neither of them could see the treacherous tear running down her cheek, nor know that her heart had gone ballistic inside her ribcage.

She breathed deeply as she walked and tried to think of nothing except the castle ahead. The track took her through a small wood, with branches of bright green leaves swaying and sighing above her head, and gradually the tight knot in her stomach began to loosen. Then she felt a flash of excitement as she caught first sight of dark old stone through the greenery ahead. Moments later she emerged from under the trees and paused to take in the view.

Pentrillis Castle lay before her, an impressively rugged fortress that seemed almost to have arisen from the rocky outcrop on which it stood. It was ringed by a smooth green dry moat, and at each corner were large circular towers, between which high curtain walls were topped by pitted, uneven battlements. The walls were a brooding dark grey in the light of that overcast afternoon, but then as she watched the sun abruptly forgot its shyness for a moment and slipped out from behind the clouds, and in response a deep rusty red blush passed over the old sandstone masonry. Poking slightly above the curtain wall was the top of a square keep, obviously built at a different time in different stone to the outer walls and towers, a contrasting ash grey like a jagged old tooth.

Most of Ellie's friends dismissed castles as old, dusty, boring beyond mention – no bright lights or fast food, no instant thrills. But for her, this timeless fortress held the promise of adventure, mystery and discovery. She loved exploring these rambling old buildings with their warren of cool dark passages, inviting doorways and dizzyingly steep winding staircases. Exciting, and just a little bit scary as well. She wasn't quite sure whether she believed in ghosts, but she was certain of one thing. When you entered the still, stony world of a medieval castle, leaving the insistently loud buzz of twenty-first century life fading away behind you, you could never really know what stories, what shadows might survive in the deep, dark, hidden places. The thing

it was easy to forget about castles was that once upon a time, for long decades and centuries, these now abandoned places were full of people; and wherever people lived and worked there would be laughter, weeping, longing and tragedy. All that experience, all that emotion might easily leave its imprint even on such a cold hard canvas.

Ellie shivered with a delicious anticipation as she began to follow the track around the side of the castle towards the entrance – until she stopped as she noticed someone on top of the grey keep. The figure wouldn't normally have caught her eye but there was something different about it. As she stood shading her eyes from the unexpected sunshine, she realised what it was. It looked like this person was straddling the guard rail around the top of the keep, with one leg over it. That was obviously a very dangerous thing to do – they might fall over the edge. Ellie squinted to look more closely but the top of the keep was a glaring grey-white in the bright sunlight, and the figure was blurred and indistinct. She blinked and rubbed her eyes – and all at once the figure wasn't there anymore. She scanned the top of the tower but whoever had been there was now out of sight. Had she been seeing things? Her eyes were playing tricks on her perhaps, dazzled by the sunlight – they weren't used to much of that in this lousy summer. Then she remembered that Dad and the unmentionable step-brother would soon catch up with her if she didn't get a move on, and so on she went.

As Ellie rounded the right-hand tower the front of the castle came in to view, revealing a commanding twin-towered gatehouse. From that a wooden bridge – perhaps in place of an older stone structure that no longer existed – spanned the width of the deep dry moat. At the near end of the bridge was a green wooden hut, presumably the ticket office and gift shop. She got out her purse – these days she liked to pay the entrance fee with her own pocket money.

A bell chimed as she opened the ticket office door and walked in. Behind the counter stood someone who she took to be the castle Warden, an oldish lady, in her early sixties perhaps, small and neat with a short blonde perm. She looked up and smiled as Ellie entered. “Hello love.”

“Hi. One child please. And a guidebook?”

The lady smiled again as she handed Ellie her ticket, guidebook and change. “I must say it’s good to have a visitor at last, it’s been so quiet today. You’re the first one in fact. Unnaturally quiet I’d call it. Must be the weather I suppose. Not all on your own are you?”

“Um ... no, my Dad and step-brother are behind me. They’ll be here in a minute.” She gave a rueful smile. “Probably arguing.”

The lady chuckled. “Well you’d better hurry up and go in before they catch up then hadn’t you? Do you like castles?”

“Oh yes.”

“Yes they’re such fun aren’t they? And this is a very good one. The outer walls are complete and unbreached, which isn’t actually true of most medieval castles, so the gatehouse really is the only way in and out, apart from a little postern gate. There’s quite a lot to see inside too.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice, adopting a slightly conspiratorial air. “There really is a lot to see, love. Keep your eyes peeled. The guidebook doesn’t mention *everything*”.

“Thanks,” said Ellie as she smiled and left, glancing only quickly back up the track to catch a glimpse of Dad and Callum walking towards her. She saw Dad wave and the bent figure of her step-brother walking slightly behind, absorbed by his rotten phone. What a flipping surprise. She hurriedly turned the other way, pointedly not returning Dad’s wave, and began to walk across the bridge. She found herself half wanting to wait for Dad and – what, apologise? But he had been so unfair – and yet she knew she shouldn’t have said that he couldn’t handle Callum. Even if it was

true. Well it was no good hanging around anyway, with Callum there, so she screwed up her face and kept walking.

She was halfway across the bridge before she wondered why the guidebook apparently didn't mention everything, according to the Warden. Oh well, she'd see soon enough. The Warden didn't need to treat her like a little kid. As she approached the imposing castle entrance she noticed a large window with a pointed arch halfway up the left-hand gatehouse tower; it was of unusual size for the outside wall of a medieval castle and was the only window she'd noticed that had glass. It also looked rather like a church window, and she guessed that it might be a chapel.

She loved this bit, entering the castle, and so briefly the thought of her ridiculous family began to recede to the back of her mind. This was the start of an adventure of exploration, with all the anticipation of what lay ahead. As she passed under the high brooding arch, she looked back one last time at the outside world. Dad and Callum were just entering the ticket office hut. Predictably the sun had retreated back behind the clouds after its cameo appearance and the world had reverted to muted monotone. What with one thing and another, she wasn't exactly sorry to leave that world behind.

She walked down a wide passage. On the right-hand side was a locked wooden door. On the left was an open archway, beyond which was a small square room lit by a single arrow slit, and she paused only briefly there. Upon returning to the gatehouse passage and glancing back outside toward the Warden's hut, she was unpleasantly surprised to see Callum trotting across the bridge towards her. This was about as fast as she had ever seen him move – normally he seemed hell-bent on moving as slowly as possible, especially when other people clearly wished otherwise. Now however he appeared almost eager to see either the castle or Ellie. But of course either was about as likely as the Pope parachuting into the moat; the newly-returned drizzle was a far more likely explanation of his unnatural speed.

“Rob said you’ve got to wait,” Cal called out in a kind of panting whine.

“No he didn’t. He wouldn’t say that. Where is he?”

“Buying the tickets, what do you *think*?” he sneered, eyes rolling theatrically as he stopped in front of her. “Lame brain!”

“Well, I guess you want to come round the castle with me, don’t you? I can see you can’t wait to spend quality time with your step-sister.”

Callum’s eyes widened in mock horror. “You must be joking! Castles are *so* lame. Almost as lame as you.” He smirked. “Rob says we can go to the football next week. Can’t wait.”

“No he didn’t.”

“How do you know? Why not anyway? It’s not fair, always going to boring old ruins like this. We *never* go to a match. Why can’t *I* get to choose sometimes?”

“Because football’s too expensive. And anyway, it’s *my* access day with Dad. It’s only right it should be my choice. I don’t ask you to come with us do I?”

“I don’t want to come with you. I’ve got far better things to do. Susan makes me. Silly cow.”

“That’s your mum you’re talking about, you idiot.”

“What’s it got to do with you? She’s not your mum is she? And anyway, you were well out of order with your Dad back there, so you can’t talk. He’s *really* pissed off with you.”

“Oh yes, I’m sure he is. He’s ...” Ellie’s voice dried up – her head was filled with Dad again and the recent row. Callum had hit a sore spot – and judging by the exultant sneer on his face, he knew it. “Oh, just get lost!” And with that, before he could reply she turned and marched further on into the gatehouse, determined this time to leave him behind – forever would be wonderful, but just for now would have to do.

She might have known that darling Callum wouldn't take her parting shot lying down, and sure enough she heard him call out something charming after her like, "No, *you* get lost, you sad ..."

It was then that Ellie heard something else, something very quiet, as if Callum had started his last sentence with a shout and ended it with a whisper. She stopped and turned around – and when she did so, she was surprised to see that she was further down the passage than she thought. In fact Callum, framed in the grey archway of the front entrance, looked a bizarrely long way off. She rubbed her eyes, but that made his slight distant figure look more blurred, not less.

Don't go

"What?" She looked around – nothing. Oh great – now she was hearing things. The domestic aggro must be getting to her even more than she thought. It was messing her head up. "Get lost," she muttered again, this time directed at Callum, Dad and all of the empty air around her. She resumed her hurried progress into the castle before her mind could play any more tricks on her. The next moment, as she emerged from the other end of the passage and into the outer bailey, a blinding light flashed into her eyes and she had to put up her hand to shade her face.

She stood for a few moments, blinking her watering eyes. The sun, piercingly bright, hung in a deep blue sky with just one tiny wisp of a cloud in view. The weather had certainly changed dramatically for the better. She looked back in to the gatehouse passage, but with her eyes now adjusted to the vibrant sunlight she could perceive only a deep inky blackness there, with (thank goodness) no sign or sound of Callum.

Ellie began to survey the scene before her to get her bearings. On her right and straight ahead were the curtain walls of the outer bailey, and away over to the left was a tumbling range of walls and buildings – a quick consultation of her guidebook confirmed that this was the inner bailey, as she would have guessed – and the top

of the square grey keep could be seen rising above the ruined masonry.

Behind her, to the right of the entrance passage as she looked at it now, a flight of stone steps led three or four metres up alongside the gatehouse tower wall, and at the top was a doorway. She decided to begin her exploration by climbing these rough steps; then at the top she paused and turned round as a random thought struck her. In the middle of the expanse of grass in the outer bailey there were three people sitting on a red picnic blanket; and, in the direction of the keep, she noticed two more figures down in the inner bailey. She thought back to the car park – only one other car there, which she had assumed was the Warden's. That had led her to think the castle would be pretty much deserted, but it wasn't. Where had these people all come from? The castle was quite a distance from the nearest town or any main road and was the kind of place that people had to drive to. Not only that, but hadn't the Warden said something about there being no other visitors today?

Ellie mentally shrugged, turned and passed into the cool shimmering darkness that lay beyond the doorway at the top of the steps. Immediately she saw the same large, church-like window she had first noticed from the gatehouse bridge outside – yes, this must be the chapel. Slowly the rest of the room began to take shape around her. The sandstone walls looked smoother here and the ceiling above was vaulted, while the floor beneath her feet was of dully shining paved slabs. Directly in front of the window at the far end was a large plain stone block, presumably some kind of altar. The light coming through the window was dim and grey – the glass must have been as dirty as Dad's car – but the sunlight from the doorway behind her cast a hazy golden glow around the centre of the chapel. She breathed in the familiar castle smell, musty and dusty, of old stone bowed down by the weight of centuries.

She moved further into the room, and as she did so noticed a lighter coloured oblong shape about halfway along the right-hand wall. Approaching it she saw a stone plaque with some indistinct

carved lettering. She bent her head forward and squinted hard, the words swam into focus and she read:

John XIV: I – III

It looked like a Bible verse reference; the numbers were Roman numerals, but she couldn't quite remember her Roman history lessons well enough to decipher them all.

Ellie began to move away, over towards the altar. Until something made her turn back and look at the plaque; and for some reason it suddenly appeared much clearer, the lettering so distinct that she could read it easily now from several metres away. In fact the words and numbers, which she could have sworn were so spindly and faint, now seemed almost to jump off the wall, as if projected onto the stone surface rather than etched into it. She blinked – was that writing getting ... bigger? And what did it say now ...?

John 14: 1 – 3

But surely, they had been Roman numerals just now? Hadn't they?

She felt the hairs on her arms stand on end. She hadn't realised how cold it was in the chapel. Shivering, she looked back towards the door; the light coming through was now muted, with a greyish tinge as if the sun outside had gone behind a cloud.

Ellie never normally felt afraid in castles, but there had been another time the year before when she had been exploring a desolate, sprawling ruin on the windswept Northumbrian coast. She had been standing alone beneath the skeletal shell of a jagged tower, surrounded by a deep oppressive silence broken only by the mournful cries of sea birds as they wheeled aimlessly above and around the black mossy tops of the high walls in front of her. At that moment she had found herself engulfed by a feeling that she

could only describe as a kind of lonely despair – and more than that, a sense that she *shouldn't be there*, that there were things that wanted to be left alone. She had left that castle quickly, looking back only once at the jumbled stone walls and towers that lined the barren horizon, all the time telling herself she was just being stupid but never slowing her pace nonetheless. But that had been such a stark, forlorn kind of place and there had been no-one else around, and Dad had stayed back in the car park that time. She had been utterly alone. Pentrillis Castle was not a wild place like that, and she knew that just outside the chapel door were other people including, probably by now, her Dad and step-brother.

But now, here ... there might not be anything that didn't want her there ... but there was something. Had the shadows around the edge of the chapel grown *darker*, as if her eyes, instead of growing more used to the gloom, were finding it more and more difficult to penetrate? She became intensely aware of her own breathing – quick, ragged.

What was that? She gasped and closed her eyes, daring to look no more, but if anything that made things worse. She became certain that the shadows were stirring in the dead air all around her. Swallowing, she tasted the acid bitterness of sick in the back of her throat.

And then – even in that crushing silence, on the very edge of her hearing, she thought she heard the smallest impression of a whisper.

I'm lonely

Something snapped. Ellie tore towards the doorway, throwing herself blindly at the light. The next moment was all yellow-white glare, and for one split second she felt the glorious rush of freedom of an animal escaping from a trap – until she put down a foot only to feel empty air beneath it. In a flash of horror she knew that she had stumbled over the unguarded edge of the steps. Her stomach

lurched as she tried to pull back but it was too late. Her balance was gone and she was falling.

End of Part 1

**Next instalment:
The story teller / Whispers in the dark**