

Text copyright © 2012 Christopher Peter
All Rights Reserved
www.christopher-peter.com

Christopher Peter

FALLING GIRL

A GHOST STORY

Part Two

Chapter 2: The story teller

For an instant Ellie hung over the drop, pitching forwards. Then she felt a hand grab her arm and pull her back. She stood there at the top of the steps, stunned, and gave a little sob. There was a pain in her side, probably a muscle she had pulled as she had tried to jerk back to stop herself falling. Blinking against the sunlight, she looked up into big, concerned brown eyes of a young woman.

“Are you OK?” asked the woman.

“Yes … yes, thank you,” Ellie half whispered. “I’m sorry.”

The woman smiled brightly. “Sorry? What for? You came out of there rather too quickly I think. I do wish they’d put a guard rail here. You could have had a nasty fall.”

“I know.” Ellie’s relief was rapidly being overtaken by embarrassment, both for getting spooked like a silly little kid and for blundering clumsily over the edge. She felt her cheeks begin to flush. “I … er … I tripped.”

“I could see that. Come and have something to drink – do you good after that shock. My name’s Miss Grant by the way – but you

can call me Sarah. How do you do.” She held out a slim white hand.

Ellie took the hand shyly. “My name’s Ellie. Thank you for catching me.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m just glad I happened to be in the right place at the right time. Anyway, come and meet some friends of mine. Are you here with anyone else?”

“Yes, my Dad’s here too.” Callum wasn’t worth mentioning. Ellie couldn’t see either of them for the moment anyway. She began to follow Sarah Grant down the steps, looking over the edge on the left. It wasn’t a big drop but a blind fall onto the rough stone paving directly below would have had nasty consequences. She shuddered and tried not to think about it.

Once out on the grass Sarah headed over to the picnic rug, around which four other figures were now sitting or standing. Ellie trotted alongside and had a proper look at her companion. Fair in hair and complexion and with those wide brown eyes, Sarah Grant was strikingly pretty. Slim and petite, she had an almost waif-like air about her, as if a stiff breeze might blow her away. Her hair was tied back with a ribbon that matched the dark red polka dots on her long white dress and the cardigan draped casually around her shoulders. She was elegant in a slightly old-fashioned kind of way; and there was something else, like an aura of confidence and authority that belied her slight frame. “Are you a teacher?” Ellie asked without really thinking.

Sarah laughed. “Yes, how did you guess? Look, here are my new friends. Meet James and Helen.”

On the picnic rug sat a young boy and girl among some scattered plates and remains of food. As Ellie approached the boy jumped to his feet, and she saw that he was older than she had first imagined, tall with a mop of fair hair. He was strangely attired in grey shorts and socks, a white shirt and a green tank-top. It was a curious combination of clothing, making him look both younger

and older at the same time, a sort of cross between a nursery school kid and a middle aged man. What his clothes did not make him look like was a teenager, even though Ellie guessed he was probably about fifteen or sixteen.

“Good afternoon, I’m James. Jolly nice to meet you. How do you do?” said the boy in a kind of rich, plumby accent as he gave a funny little bow and extended his hand to her.

“Hello. I’m Ellie.” Slightly bemused, she shook his hand. The boy seemed nice enough – in fact he was quite good looking, despite his dubious Just William style fashion sense – but he spoke like he had stepped out from the pages of one of her Mum’s old Enid Blyton books that Ellie used to read. No-one still talked like that, surely? Well, apparently at least one person did.

“And this is my sister, Helen,” James added, gesturing to the girl who was now also standing.

“How do you do? Delighted to meet you,” said Helen, smiling and holding out her hand in the same polite way as her brother. Make that two people who still talk like the Famous Five, thought Ellie. You could tell they were related – she had the same emerald green eyes and jolly gymkhana accent. Her light blue dress went almost down to her bright green shoes, and her long brown hair was tied in two ponytails hanging down over her shoulders, making her look, like her brother, younger than she probably was. She reminded Ellie of someone but she couldn’t quite put her finger on whom.

Ellie responded again in her rather less fulsome way, and then paused awkwardly. She still felt a bit shaken, as well as self-conscious about what had just happened outside the chapel; and she thought these two must have seen it. If they had, then goodness knows what they must think of her.

“Are you going to offer Ellie any of that rather fabulous chocolate cake?” said Sarah, raising her eyebrows at her two young companions.

"Yes of course!" said Helen. "Where are my manners? Please join us. Have some cake! It's quite gorgeous. Mother made it."

"Thank you," said Ellie, and sat down on the edge of the warm rug. The chocolate cake did look good, and there wasn't much left of it.

Sarah knelt down beside her. "James and Helen are here with their parents. Where are they – still exploring I suppose?"

James' smile faded and he suddenly looked serious. "Well ... Father stayed outside actually. But Mother ... she's around here somewhere, but she's been gone ages." He frowned at his watch. "That's rather odd I must say, I think my watch must have stopped ... it seems like we've been here for simply hours now."

"She hasn't been gone *that* long," said Helen. "She's probably just gone up in the keep or somewhere like that." She giggled suddenly. "I do find it funny how you worry about Mother so. Still tied to her apron strings, I sometimes think!"

"Oh, don't talk such rot Helen!" James retorted sharply. But although he wore a slight frown as he regarded his sister, it struck Ellie as being more of a caring, big brotherly sort of look. An obvious kind of warmth suffused it. It was undeniably very different from the bone-freezing stares Ellie got from her own step-brother. On that thought she looked over her shoulder towards the gatehouse but there was still no sign of Callum or Dad. Where the heck had they got to? When she turned back she caught Sarah gazing right at her, those brown eyes curiously sad all of a sudden. It made Ellie feel a little uncomfortable, and she was relieved when Helen passed her a slice of cake.

"Thanks." Ellie took the cake. "It's very kind of you." She took a bite. It was lush – moist, rich and very chocolaty. The two girls munched in contented silence while Ellie looked around at the bright green grass and the old stone walls bathed in dreamy sunshine. It really was a gorgeous day now. Then she suddenly

remembered something she had seen a couple of minutes earlier.
“Where are the others?”

“Others?” asked Sarah.

“Well … there were other people here just now – two others? I mean …” Ellie frowned. She had seen *four* people here around the picnic rug as her and Sarah had walked over … hadn’t she? But they weren’t there now. Had they left without her noticing?

Then she noticed James peering keenly at her, his eyes narrowed with something like suspicion. “I say … what did they look like, these two others?”

“Um … I don’t really know …”

Sarah laughed. “Ellie, I think the sun must be going to your head. Only Helen and James were here. Now, what about the story?”

“Oh yes, the story! We really must hear the rest.” Helen leaned forward and tugged at her brother’s sleeve; James looked doubtful, but after a glance towards the gatehouse he sat back down in silence.

“The story? What story?” asked Ellie.

“Miss Grant’s a *story teller*. And she’s started to tell us a story. It’s awfully good. And she was just about to tell us about the *ghost!*”

“The ghost?” Ellie’s eyes flicked involuntarily back towards the chapel.

“Yes, Ellie.” Sarah laughed again. “Helen’s getting rather ahead of herself though. I hadn’t said anything about a ghost.” She paused, looking around at each of them with a slightly playful look on her face. “Not yet anyway.”

“Do you work for English Heritage then?” asked Ellie.

“English Heritage? No … not exactly. But I certainly do work here – and it’s my job to tell stories. Do you want to hear this one?”

“Yes please.” Ellie had heard of story tellers in castles before, especially during the school holidays, but she hadn’t realised there’d be one there today.

“Well ...” Sarah pulled her feet under her and sat still for a few moments, looking down at her clasped hands. Curled up there on the rug, she suddenly reminded Ellie of a cute little white mouse she had owned once. “Once, a very long time ago – in the late fourteenth century in fact – this castle was owned by a wealthy lord called Hugh Pentrillis. It was then at the height of its splendour. Hugh’s father had completed the last major phase of building here, including new outer walls – called curtain walls – corner towers and the great gatehouse you came in through.”

Ellie nodded. “Yes, that makes sense. They look about thirteenth century. The keep’s older though, isn’t it? It’s square so it looks more Norman – like early twelfth century, or late eleventh maybe?”

Sarah raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Why, Ellie, you do know your castles, don’t you? Well done!” There was genuine admiration in her voice. It caught Ellie momentarily off guard, so used was she to hearing sarcasm instead of praise; then she blushed, realising she’d probably sounded like a smart-alec. “You’re absolutely right,” Sarah continued, appearing not to notice Ellie’s discomfort. “The keep was part of the original castle built by Henry Pentrillis around 1220.”

“Anyway, where was I ...? Oh yes. Well, Hugh Pentrillis was a wealthy and content man. He owned a lot of land around here, and he lived in a castle that was considered to be the most impressive in the county. As you might know, this part of the country has had a turbulent history, but there was peace at this time, so there was little to disturb the genteel existence of his family. Hugh was married and he had four children. Of his two daughters, one died as an infant – a sadly common occurrence in

those days – but the other, whose name was Margaret, grew into a beautiful young woman.”

“Well, when I say that she was a young woman, I mean really very young. In fact, at the time of this story she would not have been too much older than you girls – around fifteen or sixteen years old perhaps. This was a time when girls tended to be married at a very young age, or at least an age that we would think very young in these modern times. People did not live as long in those days. Life was shorter, and girls married and started families earlier.”

“Anyway, I digress. Margaret Pentrillis was, in fact, so beautiful that her fame spread far and wide. She had many admirers. Her father would no doubt have liked her to make a good match and so increase the family’s wealth and status still further, but he also loved his daughter dearly and desired above all her happiness. That was not a common attitude in those days. Marriage was not necessarily about love – in fact, love was often not considered important at all, as we would understand it. It was more about what was best for the family, and the kingdom was full of ambitious noblemen busily engaged in forging the most advantageous alliances via their offspring ...”

“Oh for goodness sake, we’ve had all this once already!” If Helen thought she had uttered these petulant words under her breath quietly enough that no-one else would notice, she was sadly mistaken. Sarah stopped, and for the first time her smooth forehead wrinkled into a frown.

James’s reaction was more extreme. “Helen! Why – I cannot believe how rude you can be at times!” His face had reddened. “Apologise to Miss Grant at once!”

Helen looked first startled, then a little tearful. “S – so sorry, Miss Grant. Please forgive me, I didn’t mean to be rude ...”

Ellie couldn’t help feeling sorry for her. She glanced nervously at Sarah, wondering if the school-teacher in her was about to come out in full force to administer an ear-bashing to the

errant child; but, instead, the woman's face broke back into its habitual smile. "That's quite all right, Helen, you just need to learn to be a little patient. I know that Ellie here is interested in the history. I really am about to get to the interesting part, I promise."

If Sarah Grant appeared satisfied with Helen's apology, then judging by the face he pulled James did not. He lapsed into a vaguely sullen silence, gazing straight ahead at no-one in particular. Ellie wondered what had happened to the impeccably-mannered young gentleman of a few minutes earlier.

Sarah resumed. "I have already said that Hugh Pentrillis lived a content and peaceful life, but actually there was one exception to that. Have you heard of Newton Castle – it's about ten miles west of here?"

"I have," said Ellie. "I went there once. There's not much left." That was something of an understatement, as that castle consisted of little more than a grassy mound surrounded by nettle-choked ditches, with barely any surviving masonry to be seen. It occurred to Ellie that if Callum found a decent castle like Pentrillis boring, then Newton Castle might cause him genuine suffering. She made a mental note to request an access day visit to there as soon as possible.

"No, that's correct, very little now," said Sarah. "But in the fourteenth century it was reasonably impressive, and at that time it was owned by one Robert de Vane. Now the de Vane family had a somewhat dark reputation, and Robert himself was no exception. In fact he was popularly known as ..."

"Black Bob!" interjected Helen with some relish.

"Quite so. History does not record him to have been, shall we say, a very nice man. And the very worst thing he did was to send his son here to Pentrillis Castle, possibly with the desire for him to secure the lovely Margaret's hand in marriage. Now, the young Walter de Vane was no great catch. He was a pale and sickly young man. His father beat him as a child, and possibly as a young adult

too, so we should not stand too harshly in judgement of him. Nevertheless, Walter was by all accounts fussy, spiteful and self-pitying. Margaret may well have felt some sympathy for him, but it seems inconceivable that she should desire him for a husband.”

“Why did Hugh agree for Walter to come here, then?” asked Ellie.

“Well, Hugh was a good and fair man, and following a history of bad blood between his family and the de Vanes, he may just have wanted to make the conciliatory gesture of welcoming the heir of the de Vane estate at Pentrillis. I am perfectly sure that he had no intention of his daughter marrying into the de Vanes. Poor man, he surely could never have imagined the tragedy that his kind act would bring upon his family, not even in his darkest nightmares.”

Helen was leaning forward now, chin on hands, eyes wide with anticipation. Meanwhile the general concept of family tragedy prompted Ellie to look at the gatehouse and around in search of her own relatives, but still they were nowhere to be seen. Where *were* they?

“Walter de Vane was to stay here for three days and nights. The first two of those passed without incident. He was a most disagreeable guest. He muttered about the food and wine, complained about his room, and on one occasion sent Margaret’s pet dog yelping away with a swift kick when the unfortunate creature ventured to sniff his leg. All this his hosts bore with patient grace. During this time, he showed barely any interest in Margaret; and although she attended to him during meal times, he spoke infrequently to her. All of which made what happened on the third and final night all the more shocking.”

Sarah paused, no doubt for dramatic effect. Ellie found herself wondering how the story teller knew all these details; it might, she decided, be what her Dad would call a “shaggy dog story”, sexed-up for the tourists. Still, it was entertaining enough.

Sarah rose up on to her knees, spread out her arms and assumed a louder, slower and more significant kind of voice. “That last night, after supper, Walter invited Margaret up to his apartment in the top floor of the keep. Of course her father accompanied her – it would have been unthinkable for an unmarried girl of her reputation to have gone there alone. It was a stormy night and the wind howled restlessly around the old tower. A servant brought wine and, rather typically, Walter made a great show of choking on it, pronouncing it to be off and demanding that more be brought. Hugh, both embarrassed and exasperated, followed the servant out of the room to try the wine for himself. Of course there was nothing wrong with it, and he returned to the room immediately – only to find that Walter and Margaret were not there. He was halfway up the steps leading up onto the battlements before he heard a terrified scream. His daughter’s scream.”

“What happened?” asked Ellie.

“When Hugh reached the roof, he could see little through a sudden squall that drove rain like iron rods sideways though the air. He caught a glimpse of two figures in front of him, apparently struggling. Then they were gone, and there was another scream that died away to nothing.”

“You – you mean ... they ...?”

“The shattered bodies of Margaret and Walter were found at the base of the keep. No-one knows why they fell, or even what they were doing on the battlements in the first place. The Pentrillis version of events was that Walter must have somehow persuaded Margaret to go up there with him and then tried to force himself on her, and in the ensuing struggle they both stumbled over the parapets and fell. The de Vanes maintained that it was a tragic accident, caused partly by the storm, and that Margaret must have been at fault in leading Walter up there. Certainly Robert de Vane bore a grudge against Pentrillis for the rest of his life, claiming that his son had not been treated and protected as he should have been.

As for Hugh, he died a broken man within a year. He blamed himself, I am afraid, for leaving his daughter unprotected, even for just a moment.”

Sarah looked straight at Helen. “It was not many years later when the rumours of the haunting began.”

“W – what ...?”

“And even to this day, the story is told. Of a presence, that of a frightened woman who roams the corridors of this castle, lost and inconsolable. Looking for her father perhaps, and never finding him. Utterly desolate.”

Ellie looked at Sarah wonderingly. Well, what a story this had turned out to be. Was there a punch line? The story teller lowered her voice and began to cast watchful eyes around her at the old walls as if something within them might be listening.

“But she is not only searching. She is also running away. She is terrified, and she has very good reason to be. Because you see, there is another presence here: the dark, malevolent, grasping spirit of Walter de Vane. In the very darkest places you may find him, if you are very unlucky – or he may find you. Stay away from the dark, is my advice to you. It would be no laughing matter to fall into his dead hands. You may never move again.”

Helen looked like Walter de Vane may already have reached out one of those ghostly hands to smite her, so statue still did she sit, wide eyes locked on Sarah’s. Ellie thought about summoning up the courage to say something – after all, Sarah had quite clearly scared the girl and didn’t seem about to leave off – when it was James who broke the spell.

Throughout the story James had been giving every impression of wanting to be somewhere else, and when Sarah reached the climax he gave a little snort and looked over his shoulder as if willing his elusive mother to appear out of thin air and save him from this mad woman.

This was not lost on Helen, who glared at her brother “Now who’s being rude?” she exclaimed suddenly. “Miss Grant’s trying to tell her story and you just look *bored!* Stop looking for Mother – she knows where we are doesn’t she?”

James didn’t look flushed this time; instead his face was chalk-white as he struggled rather uncertainly to his feet. “Well I didn’t really like that story – begging your pardon, Miss Grant, but...”

“Don’t worry, James, it’s only a story,” Ellie felt moved to say. He looked even more spooked than his sister. “There aren’t really any ghosts. It’s just a legend. Isn’t it, Sarah?”

Sarah just looked at her, a slight smile on her lips.

“It might be true, though,” said Helen, talking rapidly in her excitement. “I mean, who knows? That poor young woman dying so horribly like that, and that awful man. I do sort of wonder if it might be true after all, don’t you think James?”

“Well ... no ... I”

“No, it’s just a story isn’t it? No-one has ever seen the ghosts have they?” Ellie asked Sarah again, starting to feel slightly irritated at the story teller’s failure to reassure James when he so obviously needed it.

“Well, now that *is* a good question Ellie. What do you think?” Sarah laughed again. She laughed a lot, but now it was jarring, out of place.

“What do you mean? I think it’s just a story, like I said.”

“And why on earth would I tell a story if it wasn’t true?”

“Well ... because you’re a story teller.”

“Yes, we all know that. But that fails to answer my question, does it not? Why, as a story teller, would I waste my time spinning some silly yarn, when I could tell you one of the fascinating true stories from the long and rich history of this castle?”

Sarah Grant's smile was still there, but it was a bright, penetrating gaze that now bore down on Ellie. This, now, was the school-teacher, an altogether scarier mouse; and Ellie had the unmistakable feeling that she had said the wrong thing, was answering back or being cheeky or something, even though she couldn't quite work out how. Suddenly she felt very small. She looked around at the other two but there was little support to be had. Helen was gawping rather comically at Sarah, apparently hanging on every word the woman said. James, pale and distracted, seemed quite deliberately to be looking the other way.

"W-well ... I'm sure most of the story is true – I mean, Hugh and Margaret Pentrillis and all that. But ... um ..."

"What, Ellie?" Sarah said quietly, delicate eyebrows raised.
"What part of my story was not truthful in your eyes?"

"Well – you know. The last bit. The bit about the ghosts." To her great annoyance Ellie could feel her cheeks prickling.

"Oh. So that was a lie was it?"

"A *lie*? No ... no ... just ... look, you don't *really* believe in ghosts do you?" Ellie was almost pleading now.

"I do, as a matter of fact. Some people think they're far too clever and sophisticated to believe in such things of course. Ghosts have been seen, Ellie. There have been witnesses. In fact I have seen, and heard and felt, them myself. They're real, Ellie. As real as the ground beneath you, as the air around you, as the sky above."

All this time, Sarah Grant's brown eyes – now hard as coal – never left Ellie's, and her voice never strayed from its calm, unyielding path. Madness had never sounded so irresistible. Ellie, throat dry, found she had no further response.

"I'm going to look for Mother again," announced James. "I think she might be over there." He pointed towards the gatehouse. His voice was loud, but Ellie noticed his raised arm was quivering.

Helen gave a huge, exaggerated sigh. “Oh James, stop being such a *bore*. Why can’t we just stay here? Did Miss Grant’s story scare you?”

“Oh, Helen! As if I would believe any of that rot! Grow up, will you? Why do you have to be such a silly, selfish little girl the whole time?” Small rosy patches flared on James’s white cheeks.

Helen sprang to her feet. “And why do *you* have to be such a stuck-up prig all the time? You’re always on your high horse. It’s just not fair! Even when we met Miss Grant you were scolding me, and *she* told you to leave me alone!”

“Please – Helen, James … please calm down.” Mean Miss Grant had flipped back to mousy Sarah. She didn’t seem to like these arguments. But what had it got to do with her?

Helen rolled her eyes. “Oh, *all right* James. I suppose we should find Mother now. Would you like to come, Ellie?”

Ellie hesitated. Confused and slightly humiliated by the weird slapping down she had just received from Sarah Grant, she wasn’t quite sure what to do next. “Well … I’d better wait for Dad. He gets worried if I get too far ahead.” Strange that he and Callum still hadn’t appeared. They must surely be inside the castle by now and she just hadn’t noticed them come in. Whatever, she wanted to see Dad and get away from Sarah. She didn’t feel like taking any more grief from this story teller.

So Ellie was about to get up when Sarah beat her to it. “I’ll come too, James, if you don’t mind. I could do with stretching my legs. No more new listeners for my story yet anyway.” She looked back down at Ellie. “You look tired, Ellie. Why don’t you stay here and read your guidebook for a few minutes? Your father will be along soon I’m sure, and he’s bound to see you straight away if you stay in the open right here.”

Ellie found herself in no mood to argue. As long as Sarah left her alone, that would be cool with her. She watched the three of them walk off together towards the gatehouse, and thought again

how oddly the two kids were dressed. Sure, old clothes came back into fashion sometimes, but she couldn't imagine James's fogey boy scout look being remotely trendy ever again. Maybe it was just that he wasn't very bothered how he looked, like a lot of boys.

Helen's fashion sense didn't look quite such a lost cause, but it was still bizarrely juvenile. Ellie remembered Dad once wearing a somewhat dubious patterned zip-up cardigan, a well-meaning but disastrous gift from an elderly relative, and Mum making fun of it. She looked down at the grass and felt a little lump in her throat. Mum and Dad. Then she shook her head to dislodge the thought; there was no point in getting herself down again.

She yawned. The sunshine was searingly bright, forcing her to half-close her eyes, and she realised how drowsy she felt. Sarah was right. Ellie hadn't slept well last night, again, and she must look it too. A little lie down wouldn't hurt. The castle was still waiting to be explored of course, but that could wait just a bit longer, until Dad was there at least. She started to lay back down on the rug; then felt something hard and cold under one shoulder. Reaching behind her she pulled out an orange Frisbee – must have belonged to James or Helen she supposed. Never mind, they'd be back. She yawned again, lay down and closed her eyes.

The gentlest of breezes caressed her face. Sighing, she felt her body slowly relax. A bird was singing in the distance and from somewhere far up in the sky came the faint droning of an aeroplane, almost beyond hearing. She must get out of the sun in a minute, or she'd start to burn ... she'd get up in a minute ... yes, just a minute ...

And then, time was lost as Ellie's thoughts jumbled and tumbled slowly into unconsciousness.

Until she was somewhere else.

I'm standing in the air. I am high up. The wind is in my face, and the smell of rain is all around me. I'm stepping over to the edge, and I am looking down, down to the ground far below. I feel

dizzy, and put my hand against the rough stone. Just one more step. What would it be like? There is pain behind me, and in front ... what? There has been no escape for me, and yet ... what if? The wind gathers and gusts, howling around me. The world spins. I move my foot, and it skids on wet stone. My other hand flails in the air, looking for support and finding none. I'm pitching forward. Sickeningly, I'm falling. My elbow cracks against something hard and I cry with pain. I close my eyes.

I can't stop falling!

NO !

Ellie's eyes snapped open as a piercing scream cut through her sleep like a knife.

Chapter 3: Whispers in the dark

Ellie scrambled onto her knees. For a few moments she was not fully certain whether she was awake or asleep. There was a sudden sharp breeze; she shivered, looked up and saw a grey cloud across the sun.

The scream had been a female's. Helen? Ellie thought it might have come from the inner bailey. She climbed to her feet, trying to blink the fuzziness from her head. There was no-one else in sight. She felt her eyes drawn towards the chapel; the arched doorway at the top of the steps was all black shadow, solid and impenetrable. She looked quickly away and began to walk briskly towards the gateway to the inner bailey; then she broke into a run, even though she was not at all sure where she was going or what she would find when she got there. Her bleary thoughts held the vague notion that Helen might be hurt.

As she rounded the corner into the inner bailey gateway, she almost ran straight into Sarah. "Oh! Sorry," said Ellie, panting. "Where's Helen? Did you hear that scream?"

There was a grave, almost stern expression on Sarah's face; pale before, it was now ashen white. Ellie took a step back and felt her heart beat even faster. "What's ... what's the matter?" she stammered. "Is Helen OK? What's happened?" Something about Sarah's manner frightened her.

Sarah regarded her absently, frowning slightly. "Oh, yes, Helen's perfectly all right. Don't worry." She looked slightly away to one side and added, almost to herself, "They will keep going off, you see. I wish they wouldn't."

Ellie looked past her to the inner bailey beyond. "Where are they?"

Sarah sighed. "It doesn't matter, does it?" She sounded weary now and slightly tetchy. "There's no point in trying to find them. Let's go and find your family. Come along." She strode past Ellie through the gateway back into the outer bailey. Ellie felt caught. She wanted to see the others and find out what had made Helen scream (if it had been her), but Sarah seemed insistent that she should go back with her. It felt like Helen and James had done something to offend Sarah, rather like Ellie had earlier.

Sarah turned back after a few metres when Ellie didn't follow. "Well, come along," she said, the note of irritation very clear in her voice now. "Be a good girl now. Your father will be worried about you, won't he?"

Now you really do sound like a teacher, thought Ellie. She was starting to feel a bit put out by this woman's tone, speaking to her like she was a little girl – and this after the earlier telling-off after that ridiculously overblown ghost story. Who was she to dish out orders? Even if she was a teacher – and Ellie realised she didn't even know that for a fact. Still, this woman was more than a little intimidating in this mood; definitely more Miss Grant and less Sarah.

"No ... no, I want – I should go and find Helen ..." mumbled Ellie, feeling those stony brown eyes bear down on her once again.

“Won’t your brother be worried too?”

“My *step*-brother. No, he won’t. Have you seen him?” (Had Ellie even told her about Callum?)

“That’s a shame,” said Sarah, eyes softening. “Why is that, do you think? Why won’t you come back and see him?”

Ellie felt herself redden. What were these questions about? Had Sarah overheard the spiteful exchange in the gatehouse passage? More to the point, why couldn’t she mind her own business?

“I’m not going with you. I don’t even know you,” said Ellie finally, with what was supposed to be defiant confidence but came out more as croaky apology.

Sarah glared at her, and for a few nervous seconds Ellie feared she was about to get another lecture. This mouse had claws, and it looked more than ready to use them if provoked. Then, to Ellie’s surprise, a faintly smirking smile spread across the woman’s face. “Well, all right then,” she said in an oddly forced, jolly sort of voice. “Please yourself. If I see your father I’ll just tell him you refused to come back to see him. I’m sure he’ll be delighted with you. Goodbye.” And with that she spun around and strode off.

Ellie stood, catching her breath, half relieved and half indignant. Sarah Grant was evidently not as benign as she had first appeared, and talking about Callum like that had touched a raw nerve. Ellie hoped she wouldn’t come across this woman again.

Anyway ... that scream – time to find out what was going on. The sun came out again as Ellie stopped a short way inside the inner bailey and looked around. She realised then that she didn’t have her guidebook; she must have left it on the picnic rug. She briefly considered nipping back to fetch it, but being reluctant to encounter Miss Psycho Story Teller again, decided she could do without it for now – better to retrieve it later, preferably with Dad in tow.

She was in a smaller area than the large outer bailey, with mostly low ruined buildings ranged around a rectangle of grass. To Ellie's right a high arched doorway led into a long wide room open to the sky, with a large blank window high in the far wall; she guessed from its size that this building was probably the Great Hall. In front of her was the square grey keep, with a short flight of steps leading up to the entrance. On the left was the high outer curtain wall, and in the corner one of the great circular towers.

Ellie was just deciding where to go next when she heard a boy's voice from somewhere ahead. At first she thought it was coming from the keep, but then a figure emerged from a gap in a low wall to the right of it. It was James.

"Hello!" he called over, and began to trot towards her. "Ah, Ellie! I say, what luck! Another girl – that's what Helen needs. She's really had quite a turn."

"Yes, I did hear someone scream. Is she OK?"

"Oh yes, she's really quite all right, thank you," replied James cheerfully. "She thought she saw a ghost or something, the silly thing. Imagining things as usual. We were in a very dark passage you see. Would you mind terribly coming over to talk to her? She's in a bit of a strop with me I must say. I only said she should stop being a big silly."

"OK," said Ellie slowly, her mind battling to translate the Enid Blyton-ese as she accompanied James over the grass towards the low ruined building he had just come from. As they approached the gap in the wall, Helen flounced out in front of them. Her cheeks were flushed, and dangerous eyes flashed at her brother. "What do you mean, running off like that?" she half-screeched at him. "I'm upset and you run off! I did hear something I tell you! And then that awful scream! You're just horrid!"

Her eyes flicked over to Ellie and immediately softened. "Oh, Ellie! I'm sorry," she said rather more calmly, "my brother is a frightful idiot sometimes you see."

Only sometimes? Ellie thought, but she said, “What happened? What did you hear?”

“Well it was really very odd.” Helen sat down on a nearby wall; James stood nearby with hands in pockets. “We were exploring back there,” she continued, gesturing behind her to the section of curtain wall that ran behind the keep, “and we were in a really dark passage. There was only one narrow little window at one end, so you could see hardly anything. I was quite afraid of scuffing my new shoes.”

“And how awful that would have been! Never would have heard the end of it!” said James from what he presumably hoped to be a reasonably safe distance.

“Don’t listen to him, the pig!” said Helen. “Where was I? Well, we were walking along this passage – stumbling really – feeling the walls as we went along. They were quite damp and mossy.” She wrinkled her nose. “A bit horrid and smelly really. I was in front. And then I looked around and I couldn’t see James.”

“I was right there you know,” said James, “just behind you. You must be blind as a bat.”

“Don’t be so rude!” Helen looked embarrassed as she smiled at Ellie. “You must excuse my brother. He really can be terribly ignorant at times.”

“Well, that’s a bit rich coming from you,” said James. “At least I’m not scared of the dark. Not to mention all that God nonsense you keep filling your head with.”

“You have to keep going on and on about that don’t you?” shot back Helen. “If something doesn’t quite fit in with your narrow view of the world you just dismiss it!”

“So you were talking about what happened in the passage?” Ellie interjected hastily, as Helen was looking poised to spring up and give her brother a slap.

Helen sighed. “Pardon? Oh yes. Sorry. Well I couldn’t see James – I think he must have wandered off or stayed back to look at something – and then I suddenly felt ...” Her voice tailed off and she visibly shuddered.

The sun beat down and the faint buzzing of an insect was the only sound in the still air as Helen sat quietly, small and pale, gazing down at her hands. Her mind must be still in that dark narrow place, thought Ellie.

Helen’s voice was now barely a whisper and Ellie had to strain to hear her. “It sounds so silly but ... the darkness seemed to sort of *press in* on me somehow, and I ... I felt like I couldn’t move and I was so cold.” She shivered again at the memory. “And then I heard a sort of a voice. A whisper really.”

“Well I didn’t hear anything,” said James.

“Well actually I’m not sure I really *heard* it exactly. It was more like ... like ... a thought or a feeling. Or an impression. I sort of *sensed* the words.”

James sighed loudly but said nothing this time. “What did you hear – or sense? What were the words?” Ellie asked quietly. This sounded uncomfortably like her own experience in the chapel.

“It said something like, ‘don’t go, I’m lonely’. It said it two or three times, I think. The voice sounded quite sad.” Helen looked up with wide eyes. “But it was still scary. And after that story that Miss Grant told us ...”

“Did it sound like a man or a woman? Or a child?” Ellie asked.

Helen hesitated. “Good question. That’s a funny thing, I’m not completely certain ... but as I said, I don’t think it was an actual voice.”

“And I was calling her and she didn’t seem to hear me,” said James. “And then – and even I heard this – there was that scream from outside. I say,” – he looked more closely at Ellie, concern

written on his face – “it wasn’t you was it, old thing? Rather remiss of me not to ask earlier. Did you scream?”

“Well, no,” said Ellie in surprise, “I thought the scream was from Helen.”

“Well she did give a sort of strangled yelp,” said James, shaking his head, “and then she suddenly ran into me, grabbed me and started gabbling about ghosts and suchlike.”

“I did not give a ‘strangled yelp’,” said Helen stiffly, “and I didn’t gabble anything about ghosts. But I do admit, I jumped about a yard in the air when I heard that scream. It gave me such a turn, after what I’d just heard – well, felt.” She stood up and stretched. “I do feel a bit better now. It’s nice out here. I don’t want to go back in that passage though.”

Ellie sat pondering what she had just heard. She had done a lot of wandering around castle ruins in her time without encountering anything ghostly. But today she had had that moment in the chapel, and now Helen had felt or heard something apparently similar in another part of the castle. And then there was that scream. Ellie doubted it had been Sarah Grant – she didn’t seem the screaming type somehow, and anyway she had said nothing about it just now. So, there must be someone else in the castle, someone Ellie hadn’t yet come across.

“Perhaps it was that other girl?” said Helen.

“What other girl?” asked Ellie.

“Err … I don’t know,” was Helen’s unexpected answer. Her eyes met her brother’s and a look of acute confusion passed between them. James scratched his head, and Ellie remembered his rather odd response to her earlier question about the two other people at the picnic rug she thought she had seen from a distance.

“What do you mean? What other girl?” Ellie began to feel uneasy. Warm and bright the weather might be, but there was a chill in the pit of her stomach. She realised she had a growing, gnawing sense that something was wrong.

“Well … the thing is …” started Helen slowly.

“No – no I really don’t think so. There wasn’t anyone else, Helen. We didn’t see those two,” cut in James.

“So you did see them too, then?” said Helen, glowering again at her brother. “You told me I was imagining things!”

“Please, what are you talking about?” said Ellie. “Are there others here?”

Helen turned back to Ellie, hesitated as if debating whether to continue, and then evidently decided she should. “Yes. There are two other people that we’ve seen in the castle – a boy and a girl – about our age I think. We’ve sort of seen them two or three times, but …”

“So? Who are they?”

“We don’t know. We haven’t actually spoken to them, you see. And the thing is …”

“Oh, come on sis, there must be some rational …”

“Oh James, please don’t! You know quite well you saw them too! And you saw them disappear!”

“Disappear?” Ellie was starting to feel slightly sick, and she still didn’t know quite why.

James grunted and turned half away, hands thrust back in pockets. Helen sighed. “I’m sorry, Ellie, you must think I’m talking in riddles. But the last time we saw them – just before we met Miss Grant – they went into a tower just before we did. We followed them in and – well they weren’t there.”

“Weren’t there?”

“No. There was no sign of them at all. And there was no other way out. They had just disappeared into thin air. And the previous time, I’m sure I saw them – well, it sounds awfully silly I know – I saw them sort of disappear again … I mean one moment they were there and the next they were – well, gone.”

Ellie knew what she wanted to ask next, but was just wondering how to say ‘do you think they were ghosts?’ without sounding like a nutcase, when James sparked back into life. “Oh, this is just ridiculous!” he exclaimed hotly. “Stuff and nonsense! Yes, I did see them – I admit that – or I thought I did. There probably are some other people gadding about here somewhere. This castle is open to the general public you know! But this – this sun, you know, this – this *heat*. It can play tricks on the mind. And I’m fairly certain that ...”

Then his words dried up, as he noticed what Ellie already had – that Helen was no longer listening but was looking past and between them with wide and frightened eyes. Ellie did not want to turn around, but she did – and saw nothing but the keep; nothing and no-one else.

“What’s the matter now, sis?”

“I saw them again,” said Helen quietly. “Those two children. They came round the corner and walked into the keep.”

The grey tower stood impassively, quiet as the grave; and its open doorway seemed almost to beckon them in.

James cleared his throat. “Are you quite sure? You might have imagined ...”

“Well then!” Helen’s fire flared up once more. “Why don’t we have a look inside? If I’ve imagined it, there’ll be no-one there, will there? And if they were two *real* people, we’ll find them inside. So let’s go and see, shall we?”

“Well, steady on old girl, I don’t necessarily think ...”

“I agree with Helen. Let’s go and look,” said Ellie, possibly to hide her sudden urge to run like hell in the opposite direction.

James looked pained; then he gave a totally unconvincing little laugh. “Well, all right then. Let’s go shall we? No time to lose! Chop chop!” He strode past Ellie a little too quickly and proceeded to bound up the steps to the keep’s entrance. Ellie

paused for a moment in the shadow of the ash-grey tower brooding over them, and she couldn't help recalling Sarah's story about Margaret Pentrillis falling with an awful scream from the top. Of course that was just a silly story. Of course ...

At the top of the steps, Ellie stopped and looked back towards the outer bailey, remembering that she still hadn't seen Dad or Callum since entering the castle. Dad might be really stressed by now, especially if he'd heard that scream too; maybe she ought to go back now and find him. But no ... this keep wasn't too big and should only take two or three minutes to quickly explore; and once at the top she would have a fine view of the whole castle, and if she saw Dad from up there she would call and wave to him.

She caught sight of Sarah through a gap in the Great Hall wall, standing in the outer bailey, looking back over towards them. Without thinking Ellie raised her hand to wave – immediately feeling a bit stupid for doing so – and Sarah waved back. Then Ellie turned and walked with the others into the cool gloom of the keep, trying not to think too hard about who – or what – they might find inside.

End of Part 2

**Next instalment:
The keep / The postern gate**

Previous instalments available on www.christopher-peter.com