

Christopher Peter
FALLING
GIRL
A GHOST STORY

Part Three

Chapter 4: The keep

After the bright sunshine it took a few moments for the room to form out of the darkness around them. There were single arrow slits in the left- and right-hand walls, another in the back wall straight ahead, and in the back right-hand corner was a spiral staircase. A dank odour oozed into Ellie's nostrils.

Ellie moved over to the staircase, which led both upwards and downwards. "Hello?" she called tentatively – then again, louder. There was no reply. She began to tread gingerly down the narrow steps to the basement room – many people would call it a dungeon, but Ellie guessed it had most likely been a cellar used for storage. It was even darker down there, with just one small opening high in one wall from which a shaft of light pierced the dusty air. The room was empty. Ellie shivered, feeling the cold humid atmosphere begin to bleed into her very bones. She started to edge back up the steps; and then flinched as she bumped into James who had come down silently behind her.

“Sorry old girl,” whispered James. Ellie gave a hollow little laugh and slid hastily past him. Helen was waiting back in the first room.

Ellie continued up the steps as they wound tightly towards the upper storeys of the keep. It occurred to her that although she had been up countless such staircases in so many castles, this was different – she was no longer just wandering around on her own; now she was actually looking for someone, or something. It felt strange to have a purpose for once, somehow exhilarating and also more than a little bit scary.

The second and third floors yielded no more sign of life than had the two lower ones. Ellie stopped on the third and topmost storey to admire a rather magnificent carved stone fireplace. This room could have been one of the principal chambers of the lord of the castle. The windows were larger here too, and the greater light they let in gave the room a slightly cheerier feel than the dark rooms beneath.

“Hang on ... this must have been Walter de Vane’s chamber when he stayed here – if that really happened,” she murmured to herself.

“Pardon?” James was right behind her (again).

“Come on, you remember ... the story that Sarah told us. Well weird wasn’t it? Probably not true.”

Then she heard a sound from behind her. She turned to see Helen step down from the staircase that led from there up to the roof of the keep. Her face was ghostly white.

“Oh lor, not again,” said James. “Another spook, sis?”

“Oh do stop it, you beast,” said Helen. “I’m all right. I just ... I didn’t like it up there.”

“Are those two kids up there?” asked Ellie, though she already felt uncomfortably sure the keep was deserted.

“No. No-one’s there.” Helen paused. “It wasn’t nice. I felt sort of dizzy as soon as I got there, and I don’t normally mind heights. And the weather’s turned bad all of a sudden. It was grey and windy and horrid, and all wet like it’d been raining. There must have been a shower while we’ve been in here.”

Ellie glanced doubtfully back at the large window, through which yellow sunlight still poured. James snorted and began to stride towards the staircase. “What *are* you talking about?” he said to his sister. “Let me have a look.”

“No, don’t,” said Helen quickly.

James stopped and looked at her. “Why ever not?”

Helen hesitated and glanced warily towards the steps. “I just think – that scream we heard earlier – well ... I think it came from up there. From the top.”

Ellie tried to ignore the cold butterflies boxing in her stomach. “What makes you say that?”

Helen shook her head. “I don’t really know. I just think it did. I thought it when I was up there, on the roof. Please let’s not go up there again, any of us. Those children definitely aren’t up there. Can we just go down now?”

Ellie mentally abandoned the idea of going up there to view the whole castle. She tried to tell herself it was to keep Helen happy, but deep down she knew perfectly well that was just an excuse. And she hated herself for it. Damn Sarah Grant and her stupid ghost stories ... messing with her head ... and with Helen’s too it seemed.

Then the sound of footsteps came echoing up the staircase from below. Ellie froze; so did James and Helen. No-one said a word. The footsteps were coming closer. Ellie didn’t want to look at the staircase but she couldn’t look away either. For the first time she noticed a ghoulish dust-encrusted old cobweb sagging down from the roof above the doorway, twitching fitfully in a draught

blowing down the staircase. The footsteps grew still louder. Any second now they would see who or what was making them.

A dark figure rose up in the doorway – and it was Callum. Ellie took a second or two to register his arrival – for some reason her step-brother was the last person she had expected to see. If he had made his entrance on roller skates, through dry ice and clad in a spangled leotard, she could not have been much more taken aback.

“There you are. Where’ve you been? Trust you to run off round your stupid castle, and now I can’t find Rob.” Callum’s whiny voice was like a splash of ice cold water, a shocking jolt back to the reality of Ellie’s so-called family life.

“I didn’t run off actually,” Ellie snapped back. “What do you care anyway – why aren’t you on your phone to your pathetic mates as usual?” No sooner had these words escaped her lips than Ellie became horribly aware of how much of a sulky, immature little girl she must have sounded. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Helen and James looking at her, but Ellie pretended to find something interesting about the wall above her step-brother’s head. She wished that she was somewhere else. Or Callum was. Or both of them. Why did he *always* do this to her?

Her thoughts jumped back to that tragic day when she first met this blight on her life, about eighteen months earlier (though it felt like longer). It had been over Sunday lunch at Susan’s house. Although Ellie didn’t immediately realise it, this occasion was obviously meant to be a dry run for the new, reconstituted family, one hammered together from some of the bits and pieces left over from the disintegration of two others. Not that that was how Dad had described the situation to her at the time, of course – oh no, they were just having lunch with ‘a new friend’. No hint at all that he was going to marry his new buddy eight months later (Ellie was still amazed that the two of them were so willing to rush back into marriage – what happened to ‘once bitten, twice shy’?). Oh, and

Susan had a son. He was ‘a good lad’, and Ellie was going to like him.

Susan was OK actually, and had appeared genuinely interested in Ellie’s big news, that she had just landed a place in the secondary school she really wanted to go to. Then, once Ellie and the two lovebirds were sat up at the table and the veg was being passed round, Callum finally appeared, sloping moodily through the door, grunting in the direction of the guests. He managed to stay just sufficiently the right side of downright obnoxious to avoid being ejected from the room by his mother and thus missing out on the roast, but there was never any doubt that he was completely unimpressed with his prospective new relatives. All in all it was totally excruciating. The longer the meal went on, the more you could see in Susan’s eyes how desperately embarrassed she was, and how she must have wished that Callum would start making some kind of effort, just this once. Ellie had felt sorry for her.

It was over the dessert (homemade trifle – delicious – the woman could cook at least), that to Ellie’s horror Susan had begun to talk to Callum about Ellie’s news – how well she’d done, how great her new school was, and wasn’t it exciting? Ellie could still remember Callum turning his scornful eyes on her – pretty much the first time he had even looked in her direction – and she could never forget the coldness of his eyes, the sneer of utter contempt, the shake of the head. He had said nothing but his feelings were made loud and clear; he might just as well have jumped on the table and shouted in her face: “How lame are you? Pathetic. You’re just *pathetic*.”

Ellie was dragged back to the present by James, ever polite (to strangers even if not always his own sister), breaking the awkward silence. “Hello there,” he said, stepping over to Callum, hand outstretched, “I’m James. And you are ...?”

“Callum,” muttered Callum, looking down at James’s proffered hand with a puzzled frown, as though shaking hands was

a completely unknown concept. Probably James may as well have hopped over and offered a foot.

“He’s my step-brother,” said Ellie apologetically. At least she could make clear that they weren’t actually related, not properly anyway.

“And my name’s Helen. I’m James’s sister,” said Helen, likewise holding out her hand, “Delighted to meet you. Ellie’s told us all about you.” Ellie had never heard a white lie told with such grace and charm. In truth she would have been more likely to confess to her new friends some kind of embarrassing fungal disease than to admit the existence of her step-brother.

Certainly Callum seemed disturbed by the idea that his step-sister had been talking about him. “Has she?” he said warily.

“No,” said Ellie flatly.

“You look like that girl from *The Wizard of Oz*,” said Callum to Helen. Ellie’s irritation at the sheer randomness of this comment was swiftly overtaken by the odd realisation that, in fact, Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* was exactly who Helen reminded her of too.

Fortunately, Helen did not seem upset by the observation – quite the opposite in fact. “Oh really?” she said, her smile widening with delight, “Gosh, how sweet of you to say so! You see, James, Callum noticed. He’s a gentleman, not like you.”

Ellie idly noticed Callum blush slightly, but another random thought popped up at that point (apart from the fact that Helen seemed a bit odd to be dressing up as a character from *The Wizard of Oz*): “Hang on. Didn’t Dorothy have red shoes? Yours are green.” She remembered this from the last time she had watched the film, on an especially horrific Christmas afternoon a couple of years before – she had concentrated extra hard on the TV, taking refuge in the land of Oz to block out the tired snidey bickering of her parents.

Helen's smile faded. "Oh really?" Ellie felt bad for being so picky.

"Gosh, have you seen *The Wizard of Oz* at the cinema then?" asked James. "Well you must have done to have known that. That Dorothy's shoes were red I mean. You are lucky. We've never seen it at the cinema."

"No, I haven't," Ellie replied. "It's a very old film isn't it? I've only seen it on TV."

"TV? You mean on your television set?" James sounded surprised. "But hang on ... how could you tell from that, when it's just black and white?"

"Are you in the dark ages or something? No-one has a black and white TV anymore," said Callum incredulously.

"Dark ages?" James bristled. "I'll have you know ours was the first house in our street to have a television set. We had one even before the Coronation."

"And what else are we supposed to have?" added Helen. "Television sets are always black and white."

James laughed suddenly. "Maybe Callum's got a colour one. Eh, Callum? Good one old chap! Pull the other one, it's got bells on!"

"Well of course we've got a colour TV!" said Callum. "Don't be stupid."

"Yes, we both have," added Ellie, finding herself in the highly unusual position of actually agreeing with her step-brother.

"And why are you dressed like a man anyway?" said James rather abruptly to Ellie.

"And why are you dressed like a little schoolboy?" Ellie retaliated. She wasn't about to take sartorial criticism from someone who seemed to think that shorts with knee-high socks was a good look.

"James!" hissed Helen. "You're so *rude!*"

“But you said ... the boots ...”

“*James!*”

The conversation had taken a distinctly surreal turn. Helen and James didn't look like they were joking, or mad; in fact, they were looking at Ellie and Callum as if *they* had said something totally ludicrous.

In her short life Ellie had got quite practiced at pushing aside things that she didn't want to think about any more and turning her mind to something completely different – usually they were more hurtful things, but it turned out she could ignore weird stuff like this as well if she had to. That was what she decided to do now. There was something more important to attend to, and Callum's presence had the effect of focussing her attention on it.

“You said you've lost Dad,” she said. “We ought to find him. He might be worried.”

“All right,” said Callum, “come on.” He slouched back towards the staircase, mumbling as he went. “I'd text him if I had a signal. Bet his phone's switched off as usual though. So lame!” As she started to follow him down the steps, Ellie risked a glance upwards towards where Helen had been a few minutes earlier. A muted, washed out light filtered down the steps from above, and a cold draught blew down the scent of rain. Of course it couldn't be rain. Ellie began to descend a bit more quickly.

“I say, how about if James and I keep a look out for your father while we look for our mother?” said Helen on the way down. “If we find him we'll all meet up back at the picnic blanket.”

“Thanks, good idea,” said Ellie. They might have been a bit peculiar in some ways, but these two seemed OK really.

The four of them emerged blinking into the sunshine outside the keep moments later. It felt seriously hot now, like walking out into a huge stone oven. There was still no sign of anyone else around. “Bye for now,” said Helen, and she and James headed off towards one of the large corner towers.

“Right, where did you see Dad last?” Ellie asked Callum. “He might still be waiting there.”

But Callum didn't seem to hear her right away. He was squinting back up at the keep, with – it seemed to her – a sort of surprised, questioning look. Then he turned back to her and his face immediately reassumed its habitual scowl. “What? Oh ... yeah, the gatehouse. One second he was there and then he wasn't. What was that stupid whispering about, anyway?”

“What whispering? What are you going on about now?”

“In the gatehouse. I know it was you. I'm not stupid.”

“No Callum, of course you're not. What was I supposed to have whispered?”

“You know. *Don't go* or some rubbish. Sarcastic as usual. I heard you. Skulking in the shadows, trying to freak me out. So lame!”

Ellie stared at him. So he had heard it too. Then she looked at the walls and towers around them. The old stone was drenched in sunlight, but that only made the windows and doorways seem blacker than ever, eyes of deepest midnight, watching and waiting. At that moment Ellie wanted more than anything else to find Dad as quickly as possible and to leave this place, to escape those eyes and the whispers in the dark.

Chapter 5: The postern gate

Ellie may have been nervous but she was not about to let Callum know that, and so she just shrugged. “You're hearing things, Callum. First sign of madness, as Mum would say. Come on, let's get back to the gatehouse then.”

With that she turned and marched off, glancing back to see Callum slouching after her. As they came upon the large area of grass where Ellie had earlier sat with Helen and James, she saw

Sarah looking once again back towards the inner bailey; and pausing to follow her gaze, Ellie thought she seemed to be looking directly up at the keep. Did Sarah really believe the story she had told about it?

When Ellie and Callum arrived back at the gatehouse, she peered back down the passage and could barely see the open doorway, dim and grey, at the other end. Anyway she couldn't see Dad in there, and she felt certain he wouldn't have left the castle without them. Reluctantly she then looked up at the chapel door. "Did you go in there?" she asked Callum.

Callum seemed to hesitate before answering – his eyes too were on the doorway at the top of the steps. "Yes," he said, much more quietly than usual. Had he sensed something in there too? Ellie doubted he would admit it if he had, certainly not to her.

"Let's meet back here in ten minutes, OK? We're more likely to find him sooner if we split up." Her step-brother pulled a face, grunted and shrugged. Taking that as being as positive a response as she was likely to get, Ellie began to continue on past the gatehouse passage and towards the right-hand curtain wall of the outer bailey. She didn't know where Callum would go now and she didn't much care. Eerie though this place might be, she still felt slightly more inclined to risk meeting an apparition or two than to spend any more time than absolutely necessary with Mr Obnoxious. She looked back only once, to see him heading back towards the inner bailey.

And yet, as Callum disappeared into the distance, Ellie suddenly felt very alone. She realised how much she was starting to miss her Dad. Where had he got to? This castle wasn't that big, surely, that both she and Callum could have kept missing him all this time? She did seem to have been here quite a while now. Her mind began to replay the things she had experienced in this place today: the strange shadows in the chapel, that whisper, the slightly odd Sarah Grant, Helen getting scared at the top of the keep, that

scream, that demented story ... she hoped Dad was OK. She swallowed hard and shook her head to clear foreboding thoughts away. Don't be stupid, she told herself, of course he was OK. He was Dad. She just had to find him, that was all – and quickly would be good.

As she commenced her search, however, Ellie began to find herself insistently soothed by the sweet heavy air of that sun-soaked afternoon. She drank it in until it seeped through her whole body, warm and gooey right down to her toes. It didn't seem possible to be too stressed on a day like this. She loved exploring castles after all, and surely she would find Dad soon enough. Maybe she just needed to chill out a bit.

One tower of the gatehouse – the other side of the passage from the chapel – also served as a corner tower of the castle, and that did not take long to check as it was a roofless, floorless shell. A low doorway gave access at ground level, and looking up Ellie could see only a hollow space topped with a circle of blue sky fringed with a few tufts of grass and weeds. The bottom few steps of a spiral staircase rose up in an alcove just to her left, but petered out after a couple of metres – stairs to nowhere. Most people would have been thoroughly underwhelmed by this tower, looking as it did so tall and impressive from outside, but inside merely an empty husk with no stairs to climb or rooms to explore beyond the grimy bird dropping-stained pit at the bottom.

Ellie however had seen enough such places to know what to look for and be able to imagine something of their former glory. At intervals on the wall going up all around were the rows of square holes that showed where timber beams would once have supported the floors, and the outline of a large fireplace was situated dizzily high up on the wall in front of her. By noting such clues she could see that this tower originally had three further floors above the ground level where she now stood, and the size of the fireplace suggested that on that floor at least had been a chamber

designed for a person of some importance, rather like the similar (but square) top floor room in the keep.

But anyway, there was no Dad there, so Ellie left the tower and began to head away from the gatehouse alongside the curtain wall towards the back of the castle. There was another, smaller tower about half-way along it, again empty inside and open to the sky. A little further along, some low walls, no more than a metre high, extended out a little way onto the grass, the remains of some domestic buildings presumably. It was here, just before the large tower in the far corner, that Ellie came across another doorway, this time in the curtain wall. Through this was a narrow flight of steps leading steeply downwards; these she followed, and then found herself outside the curtain wall on a grassy bank above the river that skirted two sides of the castle. This must be a postern gate, she decided, which would have afforded quick access to and from the river; but being such a small narrow entrance would have been easily defended and therefore did not greatly compromise the castle's strength. Ellie looked left and right along the river bank but again, no Dad. Then she shivered and looked up. The sky was leaden grey; a spot of cold rain stung her cheek and a biting breeze blew hair across her face. She sighed. Typical; the blue skies were just too good to last for long in that lousy summer.

Something moved in the corner of her eye. She shot a sharp glance to her left, along the high curtain wall; then behind her to the narrow black doorway that led back up into the castle. It must have been a bird or something. God, she was jumpy today. She shivered again, this time so violently her teeth chattered. It felt stupidly cold all of a sudden.

With that Ellie hurried back up the postern gate steps into the castle, walked a few paces into the outer bailey; then stopped and looked up again. The sky above her was deep, clear blue; and turning, she could see not even the merest hint of cloud above the curtain wall. That was totally bizarre – it was as if the castle's outer wall marked a sharp divide between two completely different sorts

of weather. She remembered what Helen had said about the bad weather on top of the keep. There must be a few odd showers about, but it was more than a bit strange. She thought about going back through the postern gate to look outside again, but then reminded herself that she should really hurry up and find Dad.

The next tower to explore was in the far corner. This one had rather more to it than the previous two, and the doorway led into an enclosed ground floor chamber with wooden floorboards overhead. Ellie started towards the staircase at the other side of the room; then stopped as she heard footsteps on the floor above. "Dad?" she called. No answer. She climbed unsteadily up the steps, calling again; but when she reached the first floor room there was no-one there. The spiral staircase went no further upwards, but on the other side of this room there was an exit to a short passageway, at the far end of which she could see more steps leading straight up. Entering this passage, she paused to look out through a window that faced out over the river, and her heart sank to see a fine rain falling – that must really spell the end of the sunshine now.

At the top of the next, straight flight of steps was an open doorway which she guessed must lead out onto the top of the curtain wall. "Dad?" she called again; but the only answer was a chilly draught blowing down from the daylight above her.

Ellie was halfway up when she stumbled in the gloom, stubbed her toe on the hard stone and gasped as sharp pain shot up her foot. Clumsy idiot! She was standing clutching the rope handrail, head bowed, worried about how badly she had hurt herself, when a shadow passed over her. There was now a figure framed in the doorway. She squinted, unable to make out who it was; then all at once her mind was filled with the chapel and that watching presence. She tried to speak but the words were strangled tight in her throat, and though her lips moved no sound came. Her eyes struggled to focus on the figure above her; a shape that seemed almost to shift and pulse in the cold light.

Dad? Please be Dad ...

“Ellie?”

The voice was not Dad’s but a woman’s. “Are you all right? Have you hurt yourself?” The figure began to move down towards her; and as soon as it did, Ellie realised it was Sarah Grant.

“Yes I’m fine thanks. Just stubbed my toe,” Ellie replied with a weak smile, hoping it wasn’t too obvious to Sarah how unenthusiastic she was about seeing her again. And it was quite annoying how Sarah always had to pop up when Ellie wasn’t at her best – falling off steps, out of breath, doubled over with pain, that sort of thing. “I was looking for my Dad? Have you seen him up there?”

“No, there’s no-one on the wall, and it’s a dead end. The only way out is back down through this tower. Let’s go down and I’ll help you find your father.” Sarah’s smile seemed genuinely benevolent, like when they had first met. Was Ellie getting the nice mouse this time?

Sarah put her hand on Ellie’s arm as she passed her on the steps. “Come on. Maybe we should look at your foot outside too.” The pain was already draining away from Ellie’s foot to leave a dull throbbing.

“OK. Thanks.” Ellie looked back up towards the doorway to the wall walk and had an idea. “Maybe if we went up there we might be able to see him. I mean, we could see a lot of the castle from there.” She moved to continue up the steps.

“No.” Sarah’s voice was quiet but it had an edge which stopped Ellie in her tracks. “That’s not a good idea. I’ve just been up there and I couldn’t see anyone. You can’t see the whole castle from there anyway. I think the sooner we go back down the sooner we’ll find your father. Come on. Please.” During this speech Sarah’s tone became not only gentler but also, Ellie thought, slightly pleading, even a little desperate. In any case Ellie was left in little doubt that Sarah didn’t want her to go up to the wall walk,

and she had no idea why. However, she quickly concluded it wasn't worth arguing over, so she shrugged and followed Sarah down the steps. Bit weird again – but fine, Ellie would go outside with her – for now.

As they were crossing the ground floor room Sarah spoke again, without looking at Ellie. “There is something else I want to talk to you about, actually. There's something I think you deserve to know. For your own good.” She sounded hesitant, as if choosing her words carefully.

“What's that?” A memory flickered in Ellie's mind, of another time an adult had told her something she ‘deserved to know’, apparently for her ‘own good’. That had been her mother, and what Ellie heard next had turned her life upside down. Looking back now, she found it hard to understand why Mum's words that day had come as quite such a shock. It wasn't just the rows – after all, her parents' arguments had been part of the backdrop to Ellie's life for as long as she could remember, though they had certainly grown in both venom and frequency. No, it was more that indefinable chill, the harshness and indifference that had set in between the two of them; that, in hindsight, should have told her that something precious was suffocating, dying, little by little. Until it finally came, that black Friday when she was bombarded with words that may as well have been in Serbo-Croat for all the sense they made to her then (*... we've grown apart ... we're different people now ... it's not anyone's fault ... it's for the best ...*). The day her world gave way beneath her feet.

As they left the tower the vibrant sunshine embraced them once more, and it suddenly hit Ellie that the weather had performed yet another u-turn. “Have you noticed anything odd about the weather today?” she asked Sarah. “I mean, one minute it's all warm and sunny, and the next it's cold and wet. It was raining when I looked outside just now.” But even while she was talking, Ellie began to feel strangely vague, her words not quite real. *Had* it really been raining outside? Yes of course it had ... hadn't it? The

unyieldingly clear sky overhead seemed to gently mock her words, telling her the sunshine would last forever. Forever? The cloying warmth was seeping inside her brain; she put up a hand to her forehead, blinking stupidly. Was the sun getting to her? But after all, what was she stressing about? Everything was fine, wasn't it?

Sarah was smiling at her. "Please don't worry Ellie. It was probably just a little shower, outside. It's gone now. And how's your foot?"

"But ..." Ellie tried to fight the fuzz in her head. Her foot? It felt fine – no pain at all. "It's just ... I've looked outside twice and it was raining outside the castle but not inside ... and then Helen said that on top of the keep ..."

"Hello, who's this?" Sarah interrupted.

A small knot of people was coming towards them across the grass. One of them waved. Ellie shaded her eyes and saw that it was James, Helen and Callum.

She turned back to Sarah, whose smile was now as broad and sunny as the sky. "What did you want to tell me?" Ellie asked. The sharp dread she had felt just a few moments before had melted in the sunshine, but she was still curious, and the nagging doubt about the weather wouldn't quite go away.

"Oh, that. Well, I really ought to tell you all together. You should all know. It's about time." Then Sarah waved to the others and gestured towards the middle of the grass. The five of them converged on the picnic rug and the abandoned hamper next to it. Ellie felt her spirits rise with the approach of friends, and just for the moment she forgot about Dad and the phantom rain.

"Hello," she called, "where have you been?"

"Just exploring," sang back Helen, who was half-walking, half-skipping towards her. She looked like she was having fun. "What about you? Did you find your father? We haven't found mother yet, but we did find your brother for you!"

Ellie eyed Callum unwillingly. He was slouched, hands in pockets as usual, but she saw that even he was smiling, or at least the corners of his mouth were twisted upwards in a vaguely positive sort of way, though it had to be said his face looked a little uncomfortable accommodating such an expression. Certainly she couldn't remember him smiling often before, the occasional smirk being the nearest he usually got.

"Yes, we've brought back Callum," went on Helen blithely. "You wouldn't want to lose him as well, would you?"

"No, that would be a total tragedy. I doubt I'd be able to go on living," Ellie muttered; and then stopped, surprised and embarrassed again by how thick with bitterness her words had been. Oh great, she thought, not again. But – it was just that they all looked so ridiculously *comfortable* together. Did Helen and James really like him? Why couldn't they see him for what he was? They didn't know him, not like she did.

Then Ellie noticed Sarah looking intently at her, wide brown eyes clouded with questions. "I do wish you and Callum could ..." she started to say.

Ellie swiftly cut her off. That was not a conversation she wanted to have, and certainly not in front of everyone and with some woman she had only just met. She couldn't think of anything more pointless. "James, er ... you haven't seen my Dad then?"

"No, we haven't seen anyone else apart from Callum here. I think your father must have gone outside. That's where *our* father is actually. He likes to paint a bit, you know. He'll probably spend simply ages on his picture. He hates being disturbed when he's painting." Then James stared at the ground with a puzzled look. "Actually we do seem to have been here an awfully long time. I can't actually remember when we came in. Helen, can you ..."

Helen didn't seem to notice. "Did you see Father on the way in?" she asked Callum. "You can't miss him. He set up his easel right in front of the gatehouse. He's got a bright red shirt on today

and he's wearing a simply *huge* wide brimmed hat. He likes to look awfully Bohemian when he's painting."

"No ... I don't remember," Callum replied, frowning (a much easier thing for his face to cope with, Ellie thought).

"Yes, the Warden chap made him move from where he tried to set up first – said he was blocking the bridge," added James.

"Honestly, you must have had your head in the clouds to have missed him," said Helen.

"What do you mean, the Warden *chap*? The Warden's a woman. We saw her in the ticket office," said Callum.

Helen giggled. "The Warden had a moustache, you dolt. Have you ever seen a woman with a moustache?"

"Well he's never met Auntie Mary," said James.

"James! Don't be so rude about Auntie Mary!" exclaimed Helen, her face caught halfway between shock and guilty amusement.

Then Callum burst out laughing. It was unexpectedly quite a nice laugh, thought Ellie, one that she had never heard before. He had a good line in disdainful sniggering, and often whispered and snorted in a conspiratorial and slightly sinister way with his mates, but she had never known him break his generally humourless demeanour with anyone else until now.

"Hello again, Miss Grant," said James (obviously deciding now was a good time to change the subject), "very nice to see you again."

"Well hello again James. And Helen. I hope you're enjoying your time here?" Sarah now looked younger and happier than ever, thought Ellie, almost glowing; not so much a mouse as the cat that got the cream. "Well, this is very pleasant. We're all together now. How wonderful. Oh, and – Callum, isn't it? I don't think I've had the pleasure?"

Ellie trod on something, looked down and saw the Frisbee she had lain on earlier. Suddenly keen to divert attention from Sarah's gushing I'm-everyone's-best-friend act, Ellie brandished the orange disc at James. "Is this your Frisbee? Fancy a game?"

"What's that? What's a *Frisbee*?" Helen's face was a picture of bafflement.

James was looking the same way. "Yes, I can't say I've heard of that game either. Jolly strange name. How do you play it?"

"Um ... a Frisbee. You know ..."

James took it from Ellie and turned it over in his hands. "Some kind of plastic is it? I don't think I've ever seen one of these before. Looks a bit like a plate."

"You've never seen a Frisbee before?"

"Well I've never seen one either," said Helen, reaching out to touch the awfully strange object. "What do you do with it?"

"Well you throw it through the air to each other, and you catch it." Ellie couldn't quite believe that she was explaining what a Frisbee was and how you played with it. She thought back to the TV conversation in the keep earlier – was this another Wizard of Oz moment? They were so old fashioned, these two, almost like they'd stepped out of a museum.

"I say, that sounds fun," said James, "sort of like a flying saucer is it? Yes, I see now, like in those films. Can we try it?"

Callum snorted. "They've been around for ever. I've got one – *everyone* has. I don't know how you've never seen one. That's just lame." The old sneer was back on his face, and he pulled out his phone, no doubt to text his mates about the stupid lame people who had never even heard of Frisbees.

"What's that?" asked Helen, returning to Callum's side and peering at the phone.

Callum was too engrossed with his pride and joy to answer straight away. “Still no signal. Stupid castle,” he muttered crossly. “What?”

“What’s that thing you’ve got there?”

Callum regarded her warily. “You don’t mean you’ve never seen a phone either? Are you having a laugh?”

“A phone? But where’s the wire? A phone’s got to be plugged in,” said James. “No wonder it doesn’t work, you dolt!”

“Don’t be rude, James,” said Helen. “If he wants to play with his toy phone then let him.”

“Toy phone!” squeaked Callum.

Ellie felt another wave of unreality wash over her. She decided on a swift change of subject. “But – James or Helen, if this isn’t your Frisbee ...” She looked at Sarah. “Miss G – er, Sarah, do you know who this belongs to? Is it yours?”

“No, Ellie, it isn’t mine.” Sarah smiled serenely, but Ellie had the uncomfortable impression that she had deliberately ignored the first question.

“I know! Perhaps it belongs to one of those other children...” said Helen, and then stopped. She had the dazed, mildly uncomprehending air of someone struggling to recover some vague distant wisp of a memory. Ellie recalled their earlier conversation about the two mysterious figures – the ones she, too, thought she had seen, and near the picnic rug too. So maybe they *were* real?

“I don’t know what you mean, Helen,” said Sarah brightly. “What other children?”

“Helen and James thought they’ve seen two others here – and I ...” began Ellie, but Sarah cut her short.

“Please, I really do have something very important to say now. And it may answer all your questions. Let’s all sit down and I’ll tell you.” There was something in Sarah’s voice that precluded any further argument; and so without another word they all

obediently sat down on the picnic rug to hear what the story teller had to say next.

End of Part 3

**Next instalment:
The spirits in the walls / The hole in the sky**

Previous instalments available on www.christopher-peter.com