

Christopher Peter  
FALLING  
GIRL  
A GHOST STORY

## **Part Four**

### **Chapter 6: The spirits in the walls**

Sarah knelt quite still, a soft breeze ruffling her pale golden hair; she gazed distantly over their heads as if searching for the right words to begin, and it took her a few moments to find them.

“First of all I think I owe you an apology. Some of you at least.” Here she turned soft brown eyes to Ellie. “I really am sorry Ellie that my behaviour may have been rather ... odd at times. In fact I’m afraid I’ve probably been rather rude, trying to tell you what to do, when of course there’s no particular reason why you should have to listen to me at all. You’ve only just met me after all, and you’re very sensible to be careful about strangers. The truth though is that ... well I really don’t want to frighten you but ...”

Ellie watched an ant weaving its way aimlessly across the rug near her foot.

“You may think I’m mad because of what I’m going to tell you,” Sarah continued, “but I assure you that it’s true. I have already told most of you about something that happened here a long time ago, and I don’t think you all quite believed me, but I cannot help that. I can only tell you what I know, and appeal to you

to listen.” She took a deep breath. “This castle is haunted. It really is. There are ghosts in the walls and towers, the passages and the dark rooms, the secret places away from the warmth and sunshine, where it’s cold and clammy and ... lonely. That’s why you have to stay out here, with me. You’ll be safe then.”

“Are you talking about Margaret Pentrillis and Walter de Vane?” asked Helen.

“Yes, Helen, I am. And Callum here hasn’t yet heard the story, so I must tell him now.”

Sarah then briefly recounted the earlier story of the nobleman’s daughter and her grim suitor. Ellie’s mum would have called it superstitious nonsense, and she would have been inclined to agree, but enough had already happened that day to make her doubt that judgement. Looking around at the others, she could see a range of reactions. Helen and James had of course already heard the story too. Helen did not look anything like as animated as she had done during the first telling – now she sat very quietly and thoughtfully. James was frowning at the sky. Callum’s features were frozen into that familiar sneer, and he was almost quivering as though barely containing something inside.

“Have you seen the ghost?” Ellie asked when Sarah had paused. “Or heard it?”

“There are *two* ghosts, don’t forget. Margaret is ... chilling but also so ... sad, so very sad. Walter – well, the less said about him the better. You do not want to come across him, take my word for it.”

“Where did you see them? Where do they go? Especially this Walter chap?” asked James, looking suspiciously at the walls around them, rather as if he feared some shimmering ghoul might make an appearance on cue.

“Well in many places really,” replied Sarah, “they seem to get everywhere. But don’t worry James – they have never been out

here, outside. They don't come out into the open, into the light. I believe they can only really exist in the dark."

"Is there any place in particular though?" asked Ellie, looking towards the chapel.

Sarah seemed to follow her gaze. "Yes, the chapel is one of the main places actually. I don't like it myself. I think you sensed something in there didn't you? Is that why you ran out of there so quickly?"

Ellie nodded.

"Well there's no need to worry now. You're perfectly safe now, out here." Ellie looked at her, at this small serious mouse of a woman, eyes wide with perfect sincerity. The story teller really did seem to believe her own tale.

"But I say," said James, still frowning, "the thing is, I don't believe in ghosts. I don't mean to be rude, Miss Grant, but I think it's all rot, all that ghost stuff. And anyway ..."

"Ghosts don't hurt people, do they?" interrupted Helen. "They might sort of wail and moan a bit, and flit about" – she illustrated her point by waving her hands around, presumably to show how a ghost might look while busily engaged in its flitting, wailing and/or moaning – "but I've never heard of a ghost actually *hurting* anyone. So maybe we shouldn't be afraid of them really. I mean, I definitely felt or sort of heard something, near the keep, but although it frightened me, it didn't feel – I don't know – evil or malevolent or anything like that. I think that ghosts can't help being scary, but that doesn't mean they actually want to harm. I don't know how they could, what with – well, you know, not actually having bodies."

Sarah's pale face was broken by an icy smile. "That must have been Margaret you encountered, Helen. Perhaps she would do little harm, I don't know. But she is desperate, and frightened. And people are apt to be at their most dangerous when they're frightened. Perhaps ghosts are the same. Should we take the risk?"

And as for Walter – well, you definitely haven't met *him*. If you had, you wouldn't be nearly so optimistic. You would have been terrified out of your wits." She sighed, and stood up. "You just have to trust me about this, all of you. The ghost of Walter de Vane does not just float around aimlessly, it ..." She folded her arms around herself, as though cut through by a cold wind no-one else could feel. "It follows you. It chases you. It will not let you go. It ... it *hunts* you. Do you understand?"

There was a silence. Helen was slowly shaking her head. Callum was still ominously quiet.

Then James stood up too. "Look here, Miss Grant," he began, "I've heard quite enough. Your silly story is scaring these children. What do you mean by – ?"

"Sit down!" Sarah's voice was a sharp, hard crack of a whip. James took a small step back, astonished; then, without protesting further, he sat back down.

"I'm sorry," Sarah continued more quietly, but still firmly enough to suggest that further interruption was not an option, "I'm sorry to raise my voice, and I honestly don't want to scare anyone unnecessarily. But it really is so terribly important that you listen to me and you understand what I'm telling you. You must stay out here with me. Provided that you do that, you will be completely and totally safe. Believe me, I have your best interests at heart."

"But what does it do when ... if it – Walter – catches you ...?" asked Helen.

"I don't know," said Sarah, "because he's never caught me. But as I said, you've got nothing to be afraid of, because you're outside with me. With us."

A dread thought stole into Ellie's mind. "What about my Dad? He's not out here ... he's ..."

"Outside," said Sarah. "He's outside the castle, as James has already said. So he's safe as well. You've no need to worry about him."

“Well, I never ... I didn’t actually see him leave or anything,” said James. “I just ... you know, thought that since we hadn’t come across him ...”

“How do you know he’s outside the castle?” asked Helen, looking steadily at Sarah. Ellie got the feeling she would stand up for herself, even to Sarah Grant if she had to. “We know our father is, but we don’t know about Ellie and Callum’s. I mean I’m sure he’s safe,” she added quickly, her eyes flicking towards them, “but we don’t really know for sure where he is, do we?”

Sarah hesitated momentarily. “I believe he’s outside. In fact I’m sure he is,” she said; but her full attention seemed to have left them and become vaguely focussed on a point somewhere above their heads.

“But how do you know?” persisted Helen.

“What?” Sarah looked back down at them. “Oh. Well I saw him – Ellie’s father. I saw him leave, walk out through the gatehouse.”

But Sarah’s attempted reassurance served only to increase Ellie’s apprehension. Something did not add up here. “But ... why didn’t you say so earlier? I said I was looking for my Dad, and you said you’d help me. Now you say he went outside. Do you know where he is or not?” She was a bit afraid of this woman but she was also really missing Dad.

Sarah turned to her and Ellie felt those deep brown eyes bearing down on her again. “I am not a liar, Ellie. I can’t help what you thought you heard me say. Your father is safe. And you will be safe too if you stay here.”

Ellie started to stand up but her knees felt like they had gone missing. She wanted to get away and to find Dad, right there and then.

“Please sit down,” said Sarah, very softly.

“We can just walk out too then, like Rob, can’t we?” said Callum, suddenly leaping up. “I don’t think the ghoulies are gonna stop us, are they? Got a problem with that, *Miss Grant*?” Ellie smiled and felt strength flood into her legs. You could say what you liked about Callum (and she often did) but he wasn’t one to defer too much to adult authority, and for once she was very glad of it. She moved over to join him.

Sarah made as if to stand up too, her face cold and deadly – and then, much to Ellie’s surprise, she sat back and stretched out her legs luxuriously. “Well. Callum. So nice of you to honour us with your opinion at last. I would guess that you’re normally a little quicker to say what you think, am I right? Now, about your wonderfully original idea of just walking out of here. Do you think that will work?”

“Why not? The doors are open. That’s what everyone else has done, isn’t it? Rob, supposedly. And those other two ...?”

“Yes, the other two!” Ellie exclaimed. Why on earth did she keep forgetting about them? “Sarah, you were going to say something about them? Where are they?”

“Ah yes, well I was just getting to that. Yes, there were two other children here earlier. Their names were Maisie and Phillip. But they’re gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sit down and I’ll tell you.”

Ellie sat down. Callum didn’t.

“Callum, dear,” said Sarah sweetly, “your sister is being very sensible. Please sit down.”

“What are you on about? Why should I?”

“Then I won’t tell you what you want to know.”

All Ellie really wanted was to run out of this castle, but she knew she had to hear more first. Something was very wrong – she kept having that feeling, and now more strongly than ever. She

looked up at her step-brother's belligerent face, a face warming up for battle, and she did something she would usually have gone to any lengths to avoid. She pleaded with him. "Callum, please. Please will you sit down, just for a minute? I'll go with you in a minute, but we need to hear about those children. They might be in trouble. Please."

Callum looked at her. And then, amazingly, he sat down. "Stupid lame place," he muttered. Ellie was relieved, but she knew his cooperation wasn't likely to last for long.

"Thank you." Sarah smiled serenely around at them all. You think you've won, thought Ellie, but you haven't – just get on with it.

"So this – this Maisie and Phillip. Where are they?" said Helen quietly.

Sarah looked serious again, and sighed. "Where indeed? I wish I knew."

James snorted. "Look, begging your pardon Miss Grant, but do you know where they are or not ...?"

"They went off exploring. Or looking for their Uncle, or something. It doesn't matter. They went into the keep, if you must know, before I met you all. I asked them not to. I gave them the same warning I'm giving you. They chose not to listen."

"So where are they?" asked Ellie. "Didn't they just leave the castle?"

"Ellie, I fear they may never leave the castle again. In fact as far as I know they never even came out of the keep."

"So they're still inside?" Ellie shook her head. "But, no, we searched it from top to bottom. They weren't in there."

"That's right, they weren't," said Helen. "Not on the roof either. Why do you think they didn't leave it, Miss Grant?"

"Because I went in there after them. I looked very carefully, and they simply weren't there."

“That scream ...” said Ellie, “Was that Maisie?”

“I didn’t hear a scream. All I know is that Maisie and Phillip went into the keep and they didn’t come out again. I very much fear they came across a ghost, and that was that.”

“But that’s ridiculous,” blurted out James. “They must have come out and you just didn’t see them.”

“The big bad ghost of Walter de *Lame* Vane must have gobbled them up, mustn’t it?” added Callum, following up with the short snigger of contempt that Ellie sometimes thought he must spend hours practising in front of his bedroom mirror. Before Sarah could respond, he sprang up again and glared at all around him, as if to make it absolutely clear that his time of sitting still and listening had come to a decisive end, and that remaining in the present company no longer interested him. “I’m gonna look for Rob again. Coming Ellie?”

“Please sit down,” Sarah said, a little more quickly than before.

“No,” retorted Callum, and turning his back on her he began to saunter away. “You’re out of order you are. Can’t order me about. You don’t scare me with your lame ghost stories.”

Ellie trotted after him, and they headed together back towards the inner bailey. Soon after she heard someone jogging up behind them, and for one uncomfortable moment she thought that Sarah was following them, until she heard Helen’s voice: “Wait, I’m coming with you.”

“Thank you,” said Ellie. She was grateful for Helen’s support – three represented a sizeable rebellion. She glanced back to see James still sitting next to Sarah. “James not coming?”

“No,” said Helen, “He said he’d stay with Miss Grant. I think he wants to keep an eye on her. She seems a bit of an odd fish to me.”

“You can say that again,” said Callum without looking back, “she’s a right weirdo.”

“Do you think he’s all right, staying there with her?” Ellie asked. Rather him than me, she could have added but didn’t.

“Well I think she’s harmless actually,” said Helen, “but she seems very superstitious, and maybe a bit simple. I don’t believe for a moment that cock and bull story about those two children disappearing into thin air in the keep. James is very sensible. He can look after himself. Don’t worry.”

“Well, OK. At least they’re out in the open, where everyone can see them.” Though, as Ellie reflected, there seemed still to be no-one else around, apart possibly from those two mysterious children who might or might not have disappeared.

Ellie, Cal and Helen reached the point where the wall separating the inner and outer baileys met the high curtain wall at the back of the castle, and near there a part of the wall was low enough for them to scramble over. Once over it they were back in the inner bailey, with the Great Hall on their left and the keep away behind it.

Ellie stopped. “Hang on. Maybe we *should* just check outside the castle. I mean, Sarah might be right. Dad might be there. If he couldn’t find us in here, that might be where he’s waiting for us.” But even as she spoke she didn’t quite believe what she was saying.

“No, she’s lying,” said Callum bluntly.

“I think Callum’s right,” said Helen. “Did you notice how she wouldn’t look us in the eye when she was telling us that your father had gone outside? And also about those other children? I wouldn’t be surprised if she were making it up on the spot. Come on, I think we’ve nearly looked everywhere now, between us. If we start here and work our way round the outer walls, then if we don’t find your father by the time we get back round to the gatehouse then I think we can safely say he really has gone outside.”

Ellie nodded. She couldn't quite believe there really was some kind of malevolent spirit on the prowl, but she didn't like the thought of Dad wandering alone down dark corridors in this place, just in case.

"Yeah, and then we can leave this boring old ruin at last," grunted Callum. Ellie sighed – she had admired her step-brother's guts just now, but he remained a grumpy little sod when all was said and done.

They came to a doorway in the curtain wall, near the far corner tower, and paused outside it. "What's the matter – scared of ghosts?" said Callum with a sudden bright grin, and then he was swallowed up by the dark opening. Ellie looked up to see a ragged grey cloud overhead, and at that moment the sunlight faded. They were about to follow Callum when a new thought struck her.

"Helen ... what did James mean when he said he couldn't remember coming into the castle, or how long you'd been in here? He seemed confused."

"Did he say that? I don't know ..."

"Yes, I'm sure he did ..." said Ellie slowly; and she thought about how long she herself had been there, and to her surprise found it hard to remember exactly when she had first arrived. Her mind was full of the sun-drenched castle, and when she tried to reach back to a time before that her memories became a vague, dreamlike jumble. She recalled some elusive impression of a monochrome, drizzly world, of cars and roads, but it was like another realm, another time; it might as well have been a different planet. She thought she saw her strange confusion reflected in Helen's face, as if the same thoughts were going through her new friend's mind too.

"Come on you two!" came a distant echoing voice from the dark doorway. Helen gave a nervous little laugh, smiled at Ellie and walked on through. Ellie followed reluctantly, wondering if the spirits in the walls would be waiting for them.

## Chapter 7: The hole in the sky

As the darkness enveloped them Ellie felt Helen take her hand. They stood blinking for a few moments, and then Ellie saw that the passageway continued for a couple of metres before turning at right angles to the left. A soft grey glow in the air suggested that there was a window around the corner.

As their eyes were still adjusting to the dark, the two girls started off again. Ellie realised she was virtually tiptoeing, which of course was ridiculous – if anything making more noise might help them find Dad more quickly, and anyway it seemed highly doubtful that they could avoid any resident apparition by creeping around quietly, unless it had a hearing problem. But she couldn't help it somehow, and she noticed that Helen was proceeding with similar caution.

Beyond the corner the passageway stretched on for perhaps eight or ten metres more, at the end of which Ellie could just about make out some steps leading upwards. A single narrow window on the right-hand, outer wall provided the only meagre light. As they passed this window, Ellie peeked through and found herself unsurprised by the damp grey scene outside. Maybe it was just the river, she thought, causing a mist or something.

The steps turned out to be the bottom of a circular staircase, and the girls began winding steadily upwards. Ellie could hear footsteps up ahead – Callum's, she hoped. After a few metres they passed a doorway looking out into the vast hollow shell of the north-west corner tower, the opening barred by a wooden gate. They paused only briefly to look down into the space, but there was no-one there. Continuing the ascent, a growing light told them they were near the top.

Then Ellie heard Callum's shocked voice float down from above: "*What the hell ...?*"

She froze for a second. Callum sounded surprised and a little afraid – not something Ellie remembered hearing very often before, or ever in fact. Then she shook herself into action and began to stride up the rest of the staircase two steps at a time until she burst out into broad daylight on the top of the wall. Immediately she saw Callum close by with his back to her, standing very still. “Are you all right?” she called breathlessly.

He turned round to face her, eyes wide. “Look,” he said, gesturing from side to side, “look at the weather. Look at the *sky!*”

Ellie looked, from left to right, then up, and then all the way around in every direction. She barely noticed Helen arrive at her side.

“Wicked isn’t it?” said Callum, breaking into a grin. He looked scared and excited both at the same time.

“What on earth is this?” exclaimed Helen, arms raised as she spun around. “This is incredible!”

It certainly was. The sky all around the castle was dominated by towering grey clouds, and the countryside in every direction was almost completely obscured by curtains of steady rain. In fact hardly anything at all could be seen at ground level outside the castle beyond ghostly tree shapes looming through the sodden gloom. However, there was one exception to the soaking weather, just one place where the clouds did not reign supreme, and that was Pentrillis Castle itself. Directly above them was an absolutely perfect circle of deep blue sky, in the middle of which, like a dazzling queen holding court in her island of tranquillity, was the sun.

The three of them stood watching this scene for some time, craning their necks to take in the astonishing sight. And the longer they stood there the more perplexing it became. Because it soon became clear that even though a breeze, warm but with the faint scent of rain, rippled their hair and clothes, the gigantic clouds all around were not actually moving. Or at least, while the sheer iron

grey cliffs were slowly pulsing and shifting as if a high and distant wind were whipping across their surface, they were not encroaching at all on the oasis of blue sky from any direction, bar a few tiny wisps that swam across the clear expanse like fish in a pond. Come to think of it, Ellie realised, it had been sunny and almost completely cloudless in the castle for as long as she had been in it. So this perfect hole in the bleak clouds had stayed fixed impossibly and wonderfully right above them, summer holding sway within the walls of Pentrillis Castle even while a cold watery tide pressed in all around it like an invading army kept at bay by the mighty fortifications. Except of course the curtain walls were no more than thirty or forty feet high, while the clouds reared thousands of feet above them into the heavens, glowering down on the miniscule ring of stone that inexplicably contrived to resist them.

Ellie lowered her head at last, rubbing her stiff neck. “This is so weird. Why isn’t it raining here? It seems to be wet everywhere else?”

“It’s just a freak of nature I suppose,” Helen replied, sounding doubtful.

“Well I don’t suppose it’ll last,” said Callum, “so we’d better keep moving. It’s cool though. Wait till we tell Rob!” Then he pointed along the top of the wall towards the north-east tower, the one in which Ellie had met Sarah earlier. “Have you already been in there Ellie?”

“Yes,” Ellie replied, “I didn’t come up to the top of the wall though.” Then she remembered that Sarah had called her back, and so she hadn’t seen then how fragile and miraculous the summer of Pentrillis Castle really was. Maybe she hadn’t been meant to see it? But why not?

“Well come on then,” said Callum, starting back towards the steps they had recently come up (as they were obviously the only way back down – there was no way to get from this section of the

ramparts over to the other tower, as the wall-walk was blocked about halfway along by a gap where the remains of another, lower tower now rose no higher than the curtain wall). He smiled a little awkwardly at Helen as he passed her. “Come on, let’s find Rob, hurry up!” they heard him call back as he disappeared down and round the corner of the staircase, back into the darkness.

“Your step-brother’s very nice,” said Helen as they began to follow him.

Ellie looked at the other girl curiously. Helen had spoken quite casually but there was more than a hint of pink on her cheeks. Perhaps the sun had gone to her head, not just her face. “Oh yeah, he’s great. Couldn’t meet a lovelier person.”

“His clothes are a bit rum though,” Helen added with a giggle, “and his hair.”

That was a bit rich coming from the Wizard of Oz girl, thought Ellie. She did like Helen but she continued to find her a bit disconcerting at times; one moment she seemed pretty normal, nice and level-headed, and the next minute she was saying demented things like Callum being “nice”. Helen and Callum seemed to get on very well, but Ellie couldn’t see how that was even possible; Helen was just so polite and well-spoken, while Callum – well, wasn’t.

It was towards the bottom of the staircase, just after they had passed the gated opening which looked out into the bowels of the tower, that Helen, who was slightly in front of Ellie, suddenly stopped and looked back up. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Even as Ellie spoke, looking down on Helen’s half-lit face, she began to feel a familiar prickle on the back of her neck.

“In the tower. I thought I saw something,” said Helen. “It was like ...”

“Dad?” Ellie turned to look up at the opening two steps above and behind her. From where she was standing she could see part of

the shadowy far wall of the empty tower, pockmarked by moss and the odd straggly weed, but not the bottom of it, where perhaps Dad could have been standing. Her heart suddenly beating like a jackhammer, she began to move back up the steps.

“No, wait!” Ellie was stopped in her tracks by the sharp urgency in Helen’s voice. The air around them grew colder and thicker in the long seconds before she spoke again. “It wasn’t down on the ground. It was up in the air. Like it was ... floating.”

“Floating? Was it a bird or something?”

“Y-yes ... I suppose ... I just thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye ...”

“Yes, must have been a bird.” Ellie’s too-loud voice echoed around her. The explanation made sense but she didn’t feel at all confident about it. She really wanted to continue down the staircase as fast as possible, but instead she made herself climb the last step back up to the wooden gate to look out into the tower. It was just a quick check. She would probably just see a pigeon or something ... nothing else ...

She gazed out into the shadowy void. The air hung cold and stagnant like a shroud, with not even the faintest movement and no sound save her own shallow breathing. The dim red sandstone walls, streaked with green lichen, curved around her like a tomb. She shook her head. There was nothing here – time to go ... And then she saw it.

At first she thought it was some random pattern of moss, a suggestive shading of the opposite wall; but as she watched, this patch of masonry darkened further, and now it was ... a human form? No, it couldn’t be ... but she couldn’t look away and the shape was changing and spreading, seeping across the stone. Then a ghastly shadow detached itself from the wall, and it had legs and arms and a head. She could see through it the lines between the great blocks of stone, and one of the square timber beam holes floated in the middle of its torso like a black heart. And Ellie could

not move and she could not scream. She just stood, as the shadow began to slink across the void towards her.

“Ellie? What’s the matter?” Helen’s voice, behind and below her, might as well have been a hundred miles away. The shadow was now drawing close to the middle of the tower, its edges rippling, its form transparent and yet horribly real. Ellie’s eyes were drawn to its face, or rather where its face would have been; it looked like something *should* be there, but ... She blinked. Was that ...?

Then she saw a gleam of white. On the end of something like an arm, a spidery shape was raised towards her. Curving dead fingers, stretching out, closer and closer.

A hand gripped Ellie’s shoulder. She gasped loudly, the sound echoing back from the damp walls, and swung round to see Helen’s scared wide eyes.

Just for a moment Ellie swayed as the staircase spun sickeningly around her; then she snapped to her senses and grabbed Helen’s arm. “Come on! Don’t look!” Together they began to stumble down the steps. Ellie felt something brush her face, and she flailed her arm in the darkness to push the invisible cobweb away. They had just reached the bottom of the staircase when Helen stopped abruptly again and Ellie jolted into the back of her.

“What’s the matter?” Ellie whispered hoarsely. She didn’t dare look back to see whether that *thing* was following them. Then Helen half turned to her, and her eyes were flicking back and forth but not focussing on anything in particular, as though she were listening for something – something that she didn’t really want to hear. “Helen...?” This time Ellie’s voice came out as barely more than a croak through her tightening throat. Her eyes watered with the effort of sucking the treacly air into her lungs.

“You didn’t hear it?” Helen whispered.

Ellie could only shake her head. Every atom in her body was urging her to shout, push past and drag Helen down the passage,

around the corner and out into the daylight. And she would have done, only her feet were gripped tight by the pitiless stone beneath, stuck like a fly in concrete. The darkness enclosed them, leering in at them from all sides, and it wouldn't let go. Beyond Helen she couldn't even see the end of the passage, and Callum was nowhere to be seen. The single window cast only a grey eerie glow, and as she watched the shadows began their flickering dance, swaying around the walls, rolling across the roof. Panic rose inside her like a vile tide.

And then at that moment she felt – no, she *knew* – that there was someone or something behind her on the steps. Almost as quickly she knew one more thing – that whoever was there, whatever was there, could not be a living person. It was a shadow. *The shadow.*

“Can you hear the whisper? Can you hear it?” Helen's voice was thick with fear, and Ellie stared helplessly into her pleading eyes. She wanted to clap her hands over her ears, but she knew it was futile. An icy prickling flickered around her head – no, *in* her head – accompanied by an overwhelming urge to look at the staircase behind her. She fought this perverse impulse with all her strength – she could not, *must* not look there – but with utter despair she felt her head begin to turn, slowly but inexorably. She closed her eyes, wondering if that would stop her seeing.

*There are ghosts in the walls and towers, the passages and the dark rooms ...* Sarah's words replayed in her mind and all at once Ellie felt more desperate and lost and alone than ever before in her life. Then she felt Helen take her hand and squeeze it; no, perhaps not quite alone, not this time.

There was a sound like a light echoing footstep in the passage ahead. Ellie opened her eyes. One of the shadows moved again. An indistinct figure began to form in the dead light in front of the window. They were trapped; there was no way out, ahead or behind them. She opened her mouth, the scream rising in her throat.

“Ellie? Helen? What’s going on?” The muffled voice swam across to them through the near-darkness, as though from a great distance or the other side of a wall; but it was definitely Callum’s, and as she watched Ellie saw the figure resolve into that of her step-brother. She had never been so glad to see him, and all at once a wave of warm relief crashed over her. Then things moved very quickly. Helen pulled her forward, her frozen limbs jerked into action, and they began to run together down the passage as fast as their legs could carry them. Ellie stumbled but just about stayed on her feet. They careered around the corner, Callum ahead of them; and then there was blessed bright sunlight. They kept running for a few metres more, before doubling over and fighting for breath as if they had run a marathon. Ellie could do nothing but drink in the sweet warm air, desperate to expel the darkness from her lungs. At length they stood up straight, one by one; then Helen stepped forward and gave Ellie a hug.

“What the hell happened in there?” asked Callum at last. “I was waiting and you didn’t come out. What took you so long?”

“It was the ghost,” said Helen, “I think we met the ghost. One of them at least.”

Callum shook his head but he looked thoughtful, with no sign of smirk or scowl. “When I went back in it was so dark, and I couldn’t see you. Then when I did, you looked ... well, you both looked well weird. You were just standing there, like – like statues. I thought *you* looked like ghosts.” He shrugged. “I know it sounds lame.”

Helen shivered. “Well I suppose we felt a bit like that. It was certainly very dark in there, and it felt like we couldn’t move. Not until we saw you. Thank you for coming back for us, Callum.”

Callum smiled tightly, pulled a face and studied his shoes. “That’s OK. I could hardly leave you in there could I? Anyway,” he added, looking up, “we’ve still got to find Rob.”

“Do we have to go back inside anywhere?” asked Ellie. The thought of venturing into any more dark towers or passages today did not appeal very much. Love castles though she did, this particular one was proving just too stressful, and she wasn’t sure she could handle another experience like the one they’d just had.

“No. I don’t think Rob’s inside the castle anyway. I think he’s outside,” said Callum, and at that he turned and began to stride past the keep towards the far corner of the inner bailey, where the doorway into the outer bailey stood. “Come on,” he called to the girls over his shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

They trotted to catch up with him. “What makes you sure your father isn’t in the castle?” Helen asked him, verbalising the question that was also in Ellie’s mind. “That isn’t what you were saying before. Wouldn’t he still be in here somewhere looking for you and Ellie?”

“No, don’t think so,” Callum answered, and then stopped. He looked at the girls, opened his mouth, then closed it, and then finally said slowly, “Did you see anyone else in there – in that passage? I mean – did anyone go past you – before I got there?”

“Well apart from the ghost, no – and we didn’t actually *see* that, more like sort of felt and – well, heard it. Or I did anyway. I don’t think Ellie did,” said Helen, looking at Ellie as if for confirmation.

“I didn’t really hear anything, no. But I saw ...”

“What? Did you see something in the tower – when I was behind you?”

“Yes. I think – yes. I don’t know what it was. But I really saw it.” Ellie described the dreadful floating shadow, and while she was talking it was like her voice belonged to someone else, so unreal were the words, even though she knew them to be true. “And there was something ... I don’t know, something not quite right ...”

Callum laughed. “What, apart from it flying through the air and you seeing right through it you mean?”

“I’m not mucking about, Callum. It was real!”

“I’m not saying it wasn’t, am I?”

“Callum, why did you want to know whether anyone else came into the passage before you?” asked Helen.

“Nothing. Don’t worry.” Callum then set off again so briskly that Ellie and Helen had to jog to keep up with him. As they all passed through into the outer bailey, ahead and to their left Ellie could see James still sitting on the picnic rug, but there was no sign of Sarah the story teller. Callum forged straight ahead towards the gatehouse, never slowing his pace, clearly determined to exit the castle as soon as possible.

They had just reached the bottom of the chapel steps when Sarah Grant stepped out from the inner gatehouse doorway ahead of them.

Callum and Helen stopped, and Ellie skidded to a halt beside them. Sarah stood completely still facing them, between them and the way out. She was gazing at them with an expression that Ellie couldn’t quite read. She could see something like anger and pity and fear, all mixed up together on that small pointed face. It was a peculiarly unsettling kind of look.

“I don’t think you know quite what you’re doing,” Sarah said, more quietly than Ellie had been expecting. “I tried to tell you what was going on here, but you wouldn’t listen. Now look!”

She pointed back past them. Ellie looked round, and at first could see nothing amiss. But then she raised her eyes to the sky, and the mountainous white clouds that had been pinned back around the castle just a few minutes earlier were now advancing stealthily, leaning and rolling forward, as if eagerly intent on filling the blue expanse above them. It was as though whatever power had held them at bay for so long was now waning, and the summer of Pentrillis Castle was being rapidly consumed by the autumnal gloom all around it. And looking down, Ellie could see a line of

shadow advancing steadily towards them along the ground, eating up the sunshine.

“It’s coming,” said Sarah.

“It’s only cloud,” said Callum. “So the weather’s turning a bit worse – so what?”

Sarah smiled thinly. “I told you it only came in the darkness. Now the shadows are here. You thought you could get away from it, but you can’t. It’s coming after you.”

“What’s coming? Walter de Vane?” asked Helen, looking over her shoulder towards the galloping shadow.

“Walter, perhaps. What does it matter? The shadows are all around us, you know. They always are. If you stay in the light it’s all right, but you didn’t. And now they’re coming.”

“Don’t be so lame!” Callum snapped loudly and indignantly enough to make Ellie jump. “We don’t care about your moronic ghost stories. We want to find Rob. We think he’s outside.”

“Oh, do you?” Sarah raised an elegant eyebrow. “Well perhaps he is. But just how do you suppose you’ll be able to get out to him, dear Callum?”

“Oh I dunno, I thought I’d just pole-vault over the wall.” Sarah was treated to Callum’s full-on you’re-such-a-lame-idiot glare. Helen giggled nervously. Sarah went even whiter (if that were possible) and opened her mouth to respond, but Callum beat her to it. “What do you think? Through the gatehouse of course.”

“Oh yes. The gatehouse.” Sarah seemed to compose herself, put her head on one side and a finger on one cheek, and cast her eyes to the heavens as if carefully considering the idea. Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she continued. “What a good idea. Just one problem though. Do you think it might be dark in there?” Ellie stared at her – it was such an odd reaction, and even through this jarring bravado Ellie thought she could sense that this woman was scared, perhaps even desperate.

“So what?” retorted Callum; but his voice had suddenly lost both volume and confidence.

“But ... it’s behind us isn’t it?” said Ellie. “It was back there.”

Sarah shook her head. “I don’t think ghosts have to run to get in front of people, do they?”

At that moment the world around them turned a sombre grey, like someone in the sky had turned the sun right down with a dimmer switch, as the line of shadow cast by the advancing cloud passed over them. Ellie felt the last of the summer warmth drain from her body with disheartening suddenness. She looked longingly past Sarah towards the gatehouse passage. They were so near, and yet it felt now as though an insurmountable barrier had somehow been placed between them and freedom. Not just this petite yet strangely formidable woman but, even worse, whatever might be lying in wait for them in the darkness beyond.

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” exclaimed Helen suddenly. “I don’t wish to be rude, Miss Grant, but we don’t know who you are and we don’t have to listen to what you say. My friends here want to find their father, and I’d like to find my mother too, and that is what we are going to do, so if you don’t mind, please, we must be going on now, ghost or no ghost.”

If Sarah was taken aback it was for only the briefest second. “Now listen to me, young lady,” she said in a voice quavering with barely concealed anger, her hand lifted to point at Helen, “you are not leaving this castle, you cannot leave this castle, and your juvenile attitude is not going to help you one little bit now. Your only hope is me. Do you understand? *Me*. You have no clue what is going on here, and I do. You all walk off like silly little children when I tell you not to, but even now, if you come back with me over there,” she pointed back towards the picnic rug in the midst of the now greyish lawn, “if you come back with me, and stay with me, things may – they *will* turn out all right.”

It occurred to Ellie again that Sarah herself was really quite scared of this ghost, or ghosts, and that was another disquieting thought. It was one thing children being scared of the dark, but adults weren't supposed to be as well were they?

While Sarah was still speaking, James had begun to stride over from the picnic rug towards them, and now he called out: "I say. I say, what's going on here?" When he arrived beside them his cheeks were flushed and he stood bristling with agitation.

Sarah turned to him. "I was just explaining, James, that we must all stick together. You can see what's happened to the weather. It's extremely important that we all stay together now."

"Well I say, Miss Grant, there's really no need to point the finger like that, is there?" said James, shaking his head. "Really no call for that at all. I'm sorry Miss Grant, but this is my sister." Ellie realised now why James was upset. It must be quite cool, she thought, having a big brother standing up for you sometimes.

Sarah froze momentarily; and then her face melted and her voice turned to treacle. "Oh, I'm so sorry James – and Helen. I'm really just so concerned for you all. Please forgive me if that makes me rather short at times. Come on, let's go back over to the rug and talk about it. Come on. Please let's be friends again." She motioned over to the middle of the grass and began to step away from the gatehouse.

James and Helen began to follow her, but Ellie and Callum hung back and exchanged a glance. Something that Sarah had been saying was really bothering Ellie, and now she realised what it was. "I don't understand – Sarah? Why should anything *we* do be affecting the weather? Why should the clouds be coming over now?"

"I told you," said Sarah, "there are spirits here that dwell in the darkness. The sunshine keeps them away. Come on now, please."

“But why should the sunshine come back just because we go with you?” said Callum. “Do you control the weather or something?”

Then a peculiar smile crept onto Sarah’s face. “Come along now, Callum. You know there’s a ghost really, don’t you? I think you might have seen something more than the others. In fact I’m quite certain you have. And you know very well exactly what will follow you if you go into that gatehouse. Better to stay outside with everyone else, wouldn’t you say? Because it *will* follow you Callum, make no mistake.”

Sarah’s words meant nothing to Ellie – but they certainly had an impact on her step-brother. All colour drained from his face and he seemed almost to deflate in front of Ellie’s eyes; and then, to her utter dismay, he began to trail off meekly with the others, head bowed. Where had that attitude gone? Had Sarah bewitched even him now?

Sarah turned her attention back to Ellie. “Come on now Ellie. Everyone else has seen sense, and I know you’re far too sensible to do anything silly.”

Ellie still didn’t move. She felt agonisingly torn, caught between two opposing impulses – to go with the others, away from the darkness, from the shadows (perhaps *that* shadow) and hopefully back to the lost sunshine; or to run from the castle to find Dad.

Dad. It had to be Dad. But as she looked at the implacably black opening of the gatehouse she didn’t know where she would find the courage.

A rising breeze swept across them, and above them the sky had taken on a greenish, thundery tinge. Sarah looked up, then back down to Ellie with her face now darker like the sky; and when she spoke again it was with that sickening blend of lightness and menace, sweet and bitter.

“Well, well, you really are quite the Daddy’s girl aren’t you? But you know, of course, that this is all for the best. You are going to come with me – with us – because you cannot possibly face the shadows. Not alone.”

Then Ellie’s mind returned to that day two years earlier, when she had sat in the kitchen at home, feeling small and hopeless, with her Mum standing over her and telling her that she didn’t understand, that it was all for the best, that she was going to have to stop being such a Daddy’s girl. And she remembered too the tears and the helplessness and the anger that had overwhelmed her in the following days and weeks; and then, unbelievably, the guilt – the dreadful feeling that she hadn’t argued or fought hard enough, hadn’t done enough, and that in some way she had failed to stand up for her Dad and for the family that she had always known. But it wasn’t fair – what chance did she have? What could she have done?

Well she could do something now. She wasn’t going to let this Sarah Grant stop her from doing what she wanted and needed to do. So she was frightened and felt utterly alone – well that might be so, but at that moment she knew it could not and must not stop her.

And so Ellie turned and sprinted to the gatehouse. She thought she heard someone shout behind her, just before she plunged into the darkness. Trying not to think about what else might be with her in that place, she kept her eyes on the ground and ran for her life.

## **End of Part 4**

**Next instalment:  
The ghost / Dad**

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