

Christopher Peter
FALLING
GIRL
A GHOST STORY

Part Five

Chapter 8: The ghost

Ellie's footfalls echoed around her in the claustrophobic darkness. It dawned on her that the lack of light ahead must mean that the front doors of the gatehouse were shut. Why would that be? She resisted the awful thought that they might be locked and just kept running.

Where was the door? She must be nearly there, surely? Her knees ached as her feet pounded against the unyieldingly hard flagstones, and an icy chill began to seep up from the cold stone, making her legs feel heavy as lead.

Then it came: that dreaded cold tingling sensation, icy fingers closing around her heart. She felt panic rise again, and this time she could not stop the despairing thoughts darting through her mind – what if the door *was* locked? What if she was trapped in there? What if something was right there with her?

It was becoming harder to move, and she felt herself begin to slow down as surely as if a dozen invisible hands had sprung from the darkness to claim her. Her lungs were on fire as she struggled

for breath in the dusty dead air; beads of sweat ran down her face. Please, she thought, please just let me go

Then, gloriously, a dull light spread along the ground just ahead and a moment later Ellie's hand touched rough timber. She groped for a door handle, unsuccessfully for a few agonisingly slow seconds, and then found a hard ring of metal which she grabbed, twisted and pulled with all her might. At first nothing happened, and so she clutched the ring with both hands and threw her whole weight backwards. "Come *on!*" she gasped, her fingers starting to feel numb, so hard was she gripping the cold metal – until finally with a metallic creak the heavy door began to inch reluctantly open.

But she was no longer alone in the dark. The presence from the other passageway ... now it was there, behind her again. She couldn't see, but she knew. She dragged at the door, one foot skidding briefly on the smooth stone as she fought to gain her freedom.

Please ...

"No!" she shouted. She clung frantically to the thought of her Dad and how she had to reach him. The next second the door was open just wide enough for her to squeeze through. Without hesitation she threw herself forward and wriggled through the wooden jaws.

Ellie burst into a maelstrom of water. Rain hammered down, pelting her mercilessly, soaking her to the skin almost before she realised what was happening. The roar of the downpour was a deafening shock after the cloying silence of the gatehouse. She tried to blink the water from her eyes but she could see very little and caught only fleeting impressions of the world around her, most of them wet – the large and growing puddles in the supposed-to-be-dry moat either side of the bridge, the slate grey sky above, and ahead a yellow glow from the ticket office hut. She didn't look back at the castle – she just ran.

By the time Ellie reached the ticket office her head was spinning and she could hardly breathe, and she knew little of the following minutes. She did remember wrenching open the door, half-staggering into a bright light that hurt her eyes; the exclamation of surprise from the Warden within. At length she found herself sitting on a chair in the tiny back room of the hut, a large towel (already used to ruffle her wet hair) draped around her shoulders, a mug of hot chocolate in her quivering hands. Her feet were bare, her waterlogged socks draped over the radiator; her arms and fingers ached from the effort of pulling open the castle door. She became aware of the unrelenting rain drumming on the roof.

The Warden sat down in the chair opposite Ellie. This was the same grey haired lady who had sold Ellie the ticket and guidebook earlier in the day. Ellie saw the same bright blue eyes, now full of concern as they beheld the shivering, bedraggled girl in front of her. Ellie was glad to be there; it felt safe – and normal, or at least as normal as anything she had known for what seemed like a very long time.

“How are you, love?” asked the Warden gently. Then she held out her hand. “I should introduce myself. My name’s June – June Hall. I work here – I’m the Warden – well you probably realise that.” She had a northern accent – she sounded just like a distant aunt from Lancashire that Ellie had met once.

“My name’s Ellie. Have you seen my Dad?” Nothing else really mattered.

“Yes I have, love. You’ve no need to worry about that. He’s perfectly all right.”

Ellie felt like crying, so overwhelming was the relief. “Where is he?”

“Well he was here in fact, until not long ago. He was waiting for you and your step-brother – Callum isn’t it? But then he left. I think he’s gone back to his car.”

Ellie nodded, amazingly happy that her Dad was OK, but also slightly puzzled. “Why was he waiting here for us? Why didn’t he come into the castle to find us? I mean, do you know? Did he say?”

“Well, he did. But he said he couldn’t find you anywhere in there. I told him I hadn’t seen you or Callum come out, so you must still be inside.”

Ellie took a sip of the steaming hot chocolate. It was delicious and she felt the warmth from the sweet liquid beginning to spread down through her body. She still hadn’t quite stopped shaking though. “Why were the gatehouse doors closed? It’s not closing time yet is it?”

June frowned. “What do you mean? They’re always open until it’s time to lock up for the night.”

“They were closed just now.”

“Well I don’t know why that was I’m sure. The wind could have blown them shut I suppose – but I wouldn’t have thought so. They’re so big and heavy.”

“And actually I don’t understand why Dad couldn’t find us. We were looking for him in there for ages – me, Callum and the others?”

“Others?” June raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, there are some others in there. Mostly about my age. And Miss Grant – Sarah – the story teller?”

“Sarah Grant. I see.” June sighed and looked out of the window, where streaks of rain were running down the outside of the pane.

“You know her don’t you?”

“Oh ... well, yes. A little.” June stood up and moved over to a brown filing cabinet, opened a drawer and flicked briefly through the files before pulling out what looked like a newspaper. Then she sat down again opposite Ellie with the paper on her lap, and looked

down at the floor for a moment with fixed concentration, as if willing the scuffed green carpet to give up some mysterious secret.

Eventually the Warden spoke again. "Who else was in the castle, Ellie?"

"Well, apart from Sarah, there were two other children. About my age, or a bit older. You must have seen them go in."

"You'd think so wouldn't you love? Or maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

"What were they like, these other children?"

"What were they like? Oh ... OK. Nice. Helen and James, they were called."

"Was there anything odd about them at all?"

"Odd? No. They were all right. They helped me look for Dad." But even as Ellie spoke she remembered that there had indeed been some strange things about Helen and James. And then she found that, curiously, her memories of them were already fading and fragmenting; she was having trouble even remembering their faces. She frowned and tried to think harder, but the scattered bits and pieces of them dodged and floated around in her mind, most of them just out of reach.

"Were there any adults with them?" asked June. "Their Mum or Dad for instance?"

"No ... well, they were around somewhere but I never saw them ... actually they said their Dad was outside here I think, on the bridge, painting the castle?"

"Was he now? I see."

"And they were looking for their Mum but ..."

"Couldn't find her I expect? Just like you couldn't find your Dad. Coincidence maybe?" June smiled. "I'm sorry love. You must think I'm talking in riddles. But you see, I think I know what's been going on here. Part of it at least. Some strange things happened in that castle today, I'll bet?"

Ellie nodded. “Yes. How – how did you know?”

“I’ve worked here for a while now, and let’s just say I’ve seen a thing or two. Did Sarah Grant tell you about the ghost?”

“Yes. Both of them.”

“Both? Well now, I’ve always believed there was only one, but perhaps I’m wrong. Anyway, did you encounter this ghost – or ghosts?”

“Yes. It was horrible.” Ellie clutched her mug tighter and glanced involuntarily towards the door, half expecting that awful shadow to materialise in the room with them.

June leant forward and put her hand on Ellie’s arm. “Don’t worry love. You’re OK here. That ghost belongs to the castle, and it won’t leave it. It never has. But please, tell me a bit more about it. Did you actually see or hear it?”

Ellie swallowed. It felt colder in the room now, and she had a sudden dread of closing her eyes lest the darkness seize her mind once more; so she fixed her eyes on the warm brown circle of hot chocolate in front of her. “Yes I did see it. And Helen and I both heard ... or actually it was more what we *felt*. It was like a cold thing. Like the shadows moved, and ... we sort of heard, not with our ears but inside our heads ... a whispering ...” She looked up and smiled shyly. “Sorry. It sounds totally lame doesn’t it? But honestly, it was real.”

“No, love, I understand. I believe you. But tell me, this whispering – did you make out any words?”

“Well ... I wasn’t really sure. I thought I heard ... like, *please*.”

“And ... anything else?”

“Well ... Helen heard something else as well. It was – I think – *please, I’m lonely*.”

“I see.” June sat back in her chair, and nodded. “Yes. That makes sense, yes. Now ... Ellie, you said you *saw* the ghost too?”

Somewhat reluctantly, Ellie described the floating shadow in the tower. It seemed a bit more real when she talked about it, and she didn't want it to be real.

"Mmmm." June rubbed her chin. "Sounds proper scary to me. I think that would've given anyone a turn. Any thoughts about it?"

"Um ... well, I suppose it was floating in mid-air because it was walking where the floor would have been – where the wooden floors used to be in the tower ..."

"Yes ... like those stories about ghostly Roman soldiers who walk below the level of the road, so you can't see their feet, because in their time the road was lower than it is now ..."

"Yes. And so ..." Ellie stopped as something clicked into place – the thing that had been bothering her earlier about the shadow. "The thing is though ... I could see one of those square holes in the wall – you know, where the floor timbers would have been – right in the middle of it ..."

"And?"

"Well ... it wasn't in the right place – does that make sense? It wouldn't have been at the right *height*. The hole should have been under its feet, if it was walking on the floor. I mean, it probably doesn't matter ..."

"Oh but I think it might do. Yes. What you're saying, I think Ellie, is that this ghost might not have been, shall we say, authentically medieval?"

"What do you mean?"

June looked at Ellie but her thoughts were obviously elsewhere. Her eyes were bright and keen, almost excited but in a calm way. She looked a bit like Ellie's mum when she was making good progress with one of her big jigsaw puzzles.

“Now, back to these other children – your friends in the castle,” June continued after a pause, “*Was* there anything at all about them that you found just a bit odd – or unexpected perhaps?”

Ellie thought back again, screwing up her face with the effort of remembering; and then she recalled some surreal conversations – like apparent bafflement concerning colour TV and Frisbees, and a bizarre comment about Callum’s phone being a toy. And their clothes ... like they were from another time – or on their way to a fancy dress party.

Ellie described all this to June, and then added, “But did you notice their clothes? You must have seen them when they bought tickets? Them, and their parents?”

“No, love, I haven’t seen them at all,” said June softly. “They never bought tickets from me today. They didn’t come by here, not any of them.”

Ellie looked carefully at the Warden. She didn’t look like she was pulling her leg. Her eyes were almost sad now, and her slight smile spoke of kindness more than anything. It was as if she was giving some difficult news as gently as possible. It was actually a little unnerving.

“And what about the other two?” asked Ellie.

“Other two? Don’t tell me there were more?”

“Yes ... no ... um ...” Were there really two others? Ellie couldn’t be sure, but as she sat with head bowed and faced screwed up in concentration she managed to claw back some more dying remnants of her memory. “Yes ... I can’t remember their names but I thought I saw them, and Helen and James thought they had too, and then Sarah said they were there but then they ... er ... went into the keep – and didn’t come out.” Her head was almost hurting with the sheer effort of retrieving this information.

“Sarah said that did she?”

“Yes. But we’d been in the keep and hadn’t seen anyone.”

“I see. So – you didn’t actually *meet* these other two, not as such?”

“No. I mean – I only kind of saw them. They were kind of there but not ...” Ellie shook her head, suddenly realising what she was saying. It was madness, all of it.

“Now that’s interesting too. Well, whether they were there or not, I didn’t see anyone else come or go today. It’s only been you and Callum and your Dad. No-one else has been here at all. It’s been so very quiet.”

“But ...” Ellie wanted to argue but then she remembered the almost empty car park, and how she had wondered how all those other people had arrived at the castle that day. She started to feel a bit dizzy, and put down the mug – still half full of now lukewarm hot chocolate – on the table beside her.

June cleared her throat and looked down at the newspaper spread across her lap; and then she spoke slowly and deliberately. “I’ve got to show you something now, Ellie, and I hope it isn’t too much of a shock. But I can’t really explain any more until I do.”

At that, she leant forward again and passed the newspaper across to Ellie, and pointed to a part of the page it was opened at. Ellie didn’t really want to look, but she did. As she gazed at the yellowing newsprint in front of her, the bulky black words in the headline swam into focus.

WOMAN DIES IN TRAGIC CASTLE FALL

Just above was the date – 15th August 1946. Ellie began to read further:

The body of a woman was found yesterday at the bottom of the keep at Pentrillis Castle...

... the woman has been identified as local school-teacher ...

As Ellie read the name a cold shock rose up from her stomach like she was going to be violently sick. Her disbelieving eyes flicked over to the grainy photograph next to the text, and

looking up at her from the smeary dots of ink, from all those years ago, was the face of Sarah Grant.

So now Ellie knew who the ghost of Pentrillis Castle really was.

And Callum was still in there with her.

Chapter 9: Dad

Ellie kept reading but her numbed mind took in very little.

... Sarah Grant, 32, was a teacher at Disbury Grammar School ...

... there were no witnesses to the fall ... police are keeping an open mind about whether this was a suicide or a tragic accident ...

Ellie looked up from the newspaper, gazed helplessly at June and then started to cry; this was too much. June crouched down to put her arm round her, and gave her a tissue. For a minute or so Ellie was unable to speak or do anything else.

“I’m sorry, love. I’m sorry this has upset you,” said June gently. “I really wish I could have just let you go back to your Dad and not have you find out any of this. But it’s just that Callum’s still in there isn’t he? We have to get him out don’t we? And those other children too.”

“I don’t understand,” said Ellie, sniffing, when she had regained some of her composure. “Sarah was the story teller. She said she was from English Heritage.”

“Did she now? I’m afraid she might not have been completely truthful about that.”

“Well ... actually, no, she didn’t exactly say that ...”

“No, love. English Heritage don’t usually employ ghosts, as far as I know. Mind you, I don’t know why not, come to think of it.

They'd be cheap I should think – they probably wouldn't have to pay them much – or anything really."

Ellie giggled suddenly, feeling light-headed. This was just so mad. "And they wouldn't have to feed them would they? Unless they gave them ghoulish ..."

June held up her hand. "Now don't start with the ghost jokes, young lady. We could go on all day like that, but where would it get us, eh?"

Ellie sat up straight. "But the thing is – she didn't *seem* like a ghost – apart from in the tower anyway, if that really was her. She was so ..."

"Real? Solid? Normal looking?"

"Yes, exactly."

"I don't know much about ghosts. In fact I've never been really sure whether I believed in them or not. Well not until I came here anyway. But I suppose they can appear in lots of different ways. When you saw Sarah Grant in there in broad daylight, you had no reason to question what you were seeing. Your mind expected to see someone normal and solid, and so you did. The human brain is a very clever thing but it can be easily fooled sometimes."

"But – hang on – when I nearly fell off the chapel steps, she actually pulled me back. I'm sure she did. How could a ghost do that?"

"Really? Well I can't explain that. Maybe Sarah has some kind of power over her surroundings, within the walls of the castle at least."

Then a new and even more shocking thought struck Ellie. "And ... the others? Helen and James – do you think ... are they – are they ghosts too ...?"

June shook her head. "That I don't know. I don't think so. Or at least I've got no reason to think they are. Not even those other

two you kind of half saw. I've never heard of them before today, or seen them, before you described them. Whereas Sarah Grant – I know about her, and I've heard her whispering before myself, and I'm pretty sure I've seen her at least once. Gave me quite a turn I can tell you. But I reckoned she couldn't do me much harm, and I feel sorry for her more than anything. And I also realised that she doesn't ever seem to leave that castle, and when I'm out here she's never bothered me at all."

"Were you here when she – when she died – did you see her then?"

June laughed and then gave a theatrical frown. "Excuse me young lady, I may be getting on a bit but I'm not *that* old you know. Didn't you see the date on that newspaper? 1946. That's a long time ago. I've only been Warden here for two years. No, Sarah Grant died long before I got here. In fact before I was even born, I'll have you know."

"Do you think it was an accident – her fall?"

"I really don't know, but it's always seemed to me that there's something very mournful about her. I'm afraid I think she may have jumped."

"So that's why she haunts the castle?" Ellie remembered then how she had seen Sarah gazing towards the keep. The place where her life had ended. "She must have been so sad."

"I expect so, yes." June sighed again and looked out of the window. It seemed a bit brighter outside now and there was no longer the sound of rain on the roof.

"She must be lonely," murmured Ellie.

"Yes, love. She probably is."

"And ... you know she said she was a story teller? There was this story she told us – about a girl called Margaret Pentrillis, daughter of Hugh Pentrillis, and someone else – Walter de Vane –

and how they fell off the keep. It was in the fourteenth century I think. Sarah said *they* were haunting the castle.”

“Ah, yes, now that is interesting too. Hence your reference to ghosts in the plural earlier, I suppose. Well now, Hugh Pentrillis I know about. He was indeed the lord of the castle around that time, and was responsible for much of the castle that you now see.”

“I think it was that Hugh’s son she was talking about.”

“Ah yes, his son was Hugh too, but I don’t think history has much to say about *him*. I don’t recall that he had a daughter called Margaret – the family tree is in the guidebook, which I know off by heart by the way, but that only mentions his sons who carried on the family name. As for de Vane ...”

“So you don’t think the story is actually true?”

“Well, I do know about the de Vanes. The de Vanes of Newton Castle. Rather notorious in these parts during the Middle Ages – had a couple of run-ins with the Pentrillises to be sure. But *Walter* de Vane I haven’t heard of – but then I’m not an expert in the history of that family, or that castle ... well, young lady, as I said I know a great deal of the history of this place, and I’ve never heard of any story about a Margaret Pentrillis or a Walter de Vane, falling off the keep or doing anything else.”

“I knew it,” said Ellie, reaching for the now-cold hot chocolate mug. “It was all rubbish. I just *knew* ...”

“Well, hold your horses young lady. I just said I hadn’t heard of it. It’s conceivable that Sarah Grant knows something about the history of this Castle that I don’t.”

“But not likely?”

June smiled a little smugly. “No, not likely. There might be some fanciful legend of course, but if there was any even halfway reasonable historical evidence to support it, it would be in the guidebook. A story *that* good would certainly be included in the official history if they could get away with it. No, I’m very much

afraid that Sarah was almost certainly making the whole thing up. She has quite an imagination, I'll give her that."

"But why would she do that? Just to scare us?"

"I don't know, love. Quite possibly."

"But ..." Ellie bit her lip and put down her mug again. Something else didn't add up. "Sarah herself ... she looked scared. I mean, really scared, a few times. She spoke of something chasing people ..."

"Really?"

"Yes. I think ... I think she thought that something was after *her* ... something she didn't want to face. Something in the darkness."

"Well then. That is a rather disturbing thought. What on earth can a *ghost* be scared of?"

Those words of Sarah's flashed into Ellie's mind. *It follows you. It chases you. It will not let you go. It hunts you ...*

A bell rang across the silence. Ellie stiffened – it was the chime that told them the outer door had been opened. She and June exchanged a glance; and then without a word the Warden got up and headed out into the ticket office. Ellie followed reluctantly, caught between curiosity and dread; but when she saw the new arrival the relief was explosive.

"Dad!" she cried, and ran across the room and flung her arms round him, and he held her. She shed a few more tears then. This was turning out to be a wet day in more ways than one.

"Ellie, thank God I've found you," said Dad into her hair. He sounded tired and strained. Ellie stepped back and looked up at him. His eyes looked moist too. Then she glanced back at June, who was smiling broadly.

"Where have you been Ellie?" asked Dad, and suddenly he grinned. "You look like a drowned rat. And I see you've managed to find some chocolate as usual," he added, wiping a finger across

her top lip. Ellie grinned back. Good old Dad – his sense of humour was never too far away, no matter how bad things got.

“I’ve been in the castle of course,” said Ellie, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation, “and I’ve been looking for *you*. Where the heck did you get to?”

“Well I’ve been in the castle as well, looking for *you*. But I couldn’t find you or Callum anywhere. In fact the place seemed utterly deserted. Eerily quiet in fact.”

Ellie shook her head. “But didn’t you see any of the other kids in there? There were four of them – well two at least. On the picnic rug, maybe?” She didn’t mention Sarah, without really knowing why.

“What picnic rug?” Dad scratched his head. “Funny weather for a picnic anyway. Bit wet for that.”

“Wet? But the weather was gorgeous inside the castle – warm and sunny.”

Dad frowned at his daughter. “I’m not following you Ellie. The weather’s not been warm and sunny anywhere around here. Unless you’re suggesting that there’s some kind of micro climate thing going on inside Pentrillis Castle. There was no sign of it when I was in there anyway.”

Ellie opened her mouth before realising she had no idea what more to say. It sounded like Dad had walked into a completely different castle from the one she had been in. Instead she turned back to the Warden, hoping fervently that she might be able to help them understand what on earth was going on. Ghosts were one thing, but this was even madder if anything.

“June – do you know why Dad and I couldn’t find each other?”

June shrugged. “Yes. No. Maybe. Look ... I do have a theory, but you might just think I’m barmy.”

Ellie thought she might believe just about anything by now. “Please tell us.”

“And more to the point, where is Callum?” asked Dad quietly.

“Oh yes, I’m sure you’ll find him,” June replied. “In fact I’m certain of it. He’ll be fine.” She looked and sounded confident, but Ellie wondered how she could be so sure.

“Good,” said Dad. “He’s a surly little sod, but his mother will kill me if I don’t bring him home.” Despite his jokey tone he looked tense and ... old. Ellie didn’t remember ever thinking that about him before.

“Well, the thing is ...” began June, as she fiddled with a souvenir pencil from the display rack next to her. “The both of you obviously went through the same door into the same castle. You were both in the same *place*, but I don’t think ... you were in the same *time*.”

Ellie and her Dad stood in silence for a moment, digesting what the Warden had just said. “Do you mean to tell me,” said Dad slowly, “that Ellie or I – or both of us – somehow travelled through time when we walked into the castle? And we ended up in different times?”

“And that’s why we couldn’t find each other?” added Ellie. The explanation made perfect sense in a completely demented kind of way. And then, like a light bulb flicking on inside her head, something else became clear too. “What about everyone else in there – Helen, and the others? Maybe they travelled in time too? I mean, not knowing about colour TV, and the other things. Could they have come from another time as well, do you think?”

June smiled. “Yes, Ellie, I do believe you may be right. But they didn’t come from *too* long ago by the sounds of it? I mean, we’re talking decades rather than centuries I would think?”

Ellie thought. “Yes. There was the Frisbee – that must have belonged to one of those other children – and James and Helen said

they had a black and white TV. But their clothes were very old fashioned. And they mentioned the coronation – the Queen’s coronation that must be?”

“Which was in 1953,” said June. “So it sounds like James and Helen might be from the 1950s, and perhaps the other two from somewhat later. That really is fascinating. I wonder how it could have happened. And more to the point, why? Why are these children from different times meeting each other in Pentrillis Castle?”

Ellie caught her Dad’s eye, and got the definite sense that he wasn’t sure whether to blow his top or burst out laughing. He probably didn’t know himself. He was studying June very carefully, as if trying to work out whether she was mischievous or mad or both.

“I think Ellie travelled in time,” said June. “Whether back or forward I don’t know. I don’t think you did though, Mr Black. Or if you did, you went to a day with exactly the same weather as today.”

Dad smiled grimly. “Yes, that would be just my luck. Look, I don’t want to be rude, but I don’t have time to stand around here talking about time travel. I’m sure you understand – we just have to go back in there to find Callum as soon as possible. Because if we can’t, I’m calling the police.”

“Yes of course. And actually, if you go back in with Ellie, I think that you’ll get back to the right time to find him.” June flashed a sunny smile, though she would have to be thick not to realise he didn’t believe her. Ellie glanced warily back to her Dad – he was usually a courteous man, gentle and measured in his response to most things that life threw at him, but on the rare occasions he really did lose his temper it was something to behold. Now, with his step-son missing and this lady spouting crackpot theories about time travelling children, there was a distinct danger this might be one of those occasions. Ellie herself had seen (and

heard) enough already that day to make her ready to believe the Warden; but her Dad was far more likely to view June's musings as inappropriately flippant at best. It was just a good job she hadn't mentioned the ghost as well ...

To Ellie's relief Dad obviously decided that it wasn't worth debating the point any longer. "OK. Well, fine, whatever. Let's go Ellie. No time to lose." He turned back to the door, but then Ellie thought of another question.

"Why do you think I'll go back to the right time?" she asked June. "Because of Sarah Grant?"

Robert looked back. "Sarah Grant? Who's she?"

Ellie hesitated. Great – her and her big mouth. How on earth to explain to Dad that not only was Callum possibly stranded in another time, but that he was also in the company of a dead school-teacher? She sensed that Dad had already heard quite enough weird stuff for the time being – and even if he did believe her it would probably give him even more grey hairs; and so she decided to be economical with the truth for the time being at least. "Um ... she's someone we met inside the castle – a teacher. She's, er, nice. I think she'll be looking after Callum and the others."

"A teacher? Well that's something at least. So it's not just kids stuck in this time warp then."

Ellie shot a pleading glance at June, but the Warden just nodded slightly as if to reassure that she wasn't about to spill the beans about the ghostly reality of Sarah Grant. Dad was striding out the door, now obviously with just one thing on his mind. Ellie started to follow him, before remembering she had nothing on her feet. She nipped back to the other room, and grimaced as she pulled on her damp socks and shoes; then she ran to catch up with Dad.

June followed her out. "Well I hope you find Callum soon. As I said, I'm sure you will, very quickly."

"Do you really think we'll be able to get in OK?" asked Ellie. "I mean together, you know..."

“You mean both into the same time?” said June. “Well I suggest you keep holding hands as you walk in. I think you will arrive in the right place, and I suppose if you’re holding on to him then your Dad must do so too, mustn’t he?”

“Are you coming with us?” asked Ellie hopefully, ignoring the low growling mutter of “Won’t she ever stop going on about that rubbish?” from her Dad.

“No, love, I don’t think so. I really ought to man my post, so to speak, in the ticket office. Apart from anything else, it’s still possible Callum might come out while you’re still in there, and if he does I’ll keep him here till you come back. And anyway, you don’t need me. You two can find him without my help. You see if I’m not right. I’ll be right here waiting for you when you come back.”

Ellie wished she felt so confident. She took her Dad’s hand – something she rarely did these days – took a deep breath and faced towards the castle. Dark red-grey, it rose in ephemeral splendour out of a mist tinged gold by a watery sun breaking through the clouds. It looked breathtakingly beautiful at that moment, but Ellie could not forget the shadows that dwelt behind those walls. “Wait a bit, please Dad.”

That dread, icy chill had returned to the pit of her stomach and she realised how desperately she wanted to go anywhere else instead of back in to that castle. If only her and Dad could just turn and walk in the opposite direction, away into that comfortingly normal world behind them; but they couldn’t. Dad said he had to find Callum, and he couldn’t possibly do anything else, could he? Of course, if it was up to her ...

Callum Stubbs. Horrible, poisonous waste of oxygen! What had she done to deserve him? What had Dad done? She had watched the exhibition of her step-brother over the last year with steadily growing exasperation and contempt. Once, Dad had treated her to a cringe-worthy little pep talk about the little creep. *He’s at*

an awkward age ... hormones ... taken his parents' divorce very badly ... his Dad's not around now ... he doesn't know how to express himself ... he's confused ... hurt inside. And Ellie had thought – oh, give me a break! *He's hurt inside? He's confused? He's had a hard time? What about her?* Hadn't she gone through all that crap too? And yet funnily enough she wasn't driven to treat everyone around her like something she'd just wiped off the bottom of her shoe. Was she supposed to forgive him – poor diddums Callum? Well, stuff him!

Even as this bitterness seethed within her, Ellie found herself walking towards the gatehouse with Dad. The thick mist embraced them in its cold and clammy arms, and they were halfway across the bridge before they could clearly see the lower half of the gatehouse and the fact that the doors stood open.

They stopped just in front of the yawning entrance. Ahead they could see an archway of light at the other end of the gatehouse passage. Ellie looked over her shoulder and was unsurprised to see that the Warden's hut was now completely obscured by the mist that had closed in after them. All that remained of the world they were leaving behind was about ten metres of damp planks fading gradually into bright white foggy oblivion.

Well – so far so good – it looked like they were going to get in at least. Whether they got out again though ...

Ellie glanced sideways at Dad, who was looking straight ahead, his face set like granite. He could be as much of a pushover as any daughter could wish for, but when he looked like this she knew better than to argue with him. So, despite the resentment towards Callum burning deep within her, and although her desire to turn and run back across the bridge was almost unbearable, she said nothing. She just squeezed Dad's hand, and together they advanced into the gatehouse.

They kept walking ... and absolutely nothing happened. The archway of light ahead was so dazzlingly bright that she could not

look directly at it, and she knew the sun must be shining once more inside the castle. Well when Dad saw that he might start to believe. Ellie suddenly felt like she was walking on air. She and her Dad were entering the castle together, and she was convinced it was into the right time, and they were going to find Callum and the others. They might find Sarah Grant as well, but Ellie didn't feel afraid of her just then – not with Dad by her side.

But no sooner had Ellie allowed herself these comforting thoughts, then with horrific suddenness it all changed. The light ahead vanished abruptly like a candle snuffed out, and at the same instant they heard a jolting, booming crash as the front doors swung shut behind them. Ellie grabbed her Dad's arm as they were plunged into complete and utter darkness.

All she could hear at first were their quick panting breaths, their echoes filling the formless void around them. Then Dad leaned over to Ellie and whispered, "Don't worry Ellie. Someone's playing games with us, that's all, and it's going to stop."

He began to call out, his voice ringing loudly in the dark. "Whoever it is out there, let me tell you something. We're coming to find my step-son and take him home. You can't stop us. Unless you let us through, I'll call the police. Do you understand? I don't know who you are or what you're playing at but it stops right here, right now. Understand?"

There was no response. He tried a couple more times but with no more success. After that he lapsed into silence, and Ellie wished he would speak again because while he was talking the darkness seemed just a little less frightening, but as soon as he stopped the deep, black shadows surged forward and smothered them once more. She began to think he must be afraid.

"Dad, are you OK?" she whispered.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine" he whispered back. She felt him grip her hand more tightly. "It's funny how completely pitch black it is. I'd expect a little bit of light even with the doors closed. I can't even

see them. In fact it's quite disorientating ...” He pulled her over to the side, towards the left-hand side of the passage. “I'm reaching out for the wall, so we can feel our way along to the end.”

It was a good idea – Ellie felt disinclined to edge any further forwards without knowing what they were going to be walking into, or even if they were still going in the right direction.

Then Dad said, “OK I've found the wall,” but he had hardly done so when the whispering began. Ellie closed her eyes and pressed her lips tight together but she knew it was no use; she was powerless to stop the icy voice from slicing into her mind.

No, not him

Ellie felt her Dad stiffen and grip her hand even tighter.

Not him. Just you.

“No,” Ellie half whispered, half sobbed.

Just you. I won't let him in. You know I won't.

“No,” Ellie said more loudly, “no he's coming in with me ... please.”

I won't let you take him in. You'll both stay here. In the darkness.

“No, you can't. No.”

“Ellie, what's going on here? Do you know?” whispered Dad, his voice quicker now, bewildered.

“It's Sarah Grant, Dad. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. She's a ghost. It's her that's trying to stop us.”

Ellie wished she could see Dad's face. Perhaps he might believe her, now that this was happening?

“But you don't believe that, do you?” he said finally.

“Yes. I've met her. So many strange things have happened today, Dad, not just the weather. And then the Warden showed me a newspaper that had a picture of Sarah, saying she died in 1946. I know it sounds mental, Dad, but it's true.”

“No, Ellie. Someone’s playing tricks on us. I don’t know how they’re doing it, but you know what? It doesn’t matter. I’m not playing anyone’s stupid games. We just have to find Callum and get out of here. Come on. We’ll stick together and we’ll be absolutely fine. I promise.”

“But can’t you hear the whispering?”

Dad made a sound as if to reply, but said nothing. Then he pulled her forward and they resumed their progress, half stumbling and half shuffling in grim resolve through the darkness. The whispering came again once more and Ellie tried to block it out as best she could. She began to think that Sarah had made a mistake by extinguishing the light so completely, if the intention was to separate them, for the darkness only made Ellie all the more desperate not to let go of Dad even for an instant, in case she never found him again.

Finally she felt her hand brush against metal. At first this gave her a shock, until she remembered the black wrought iron gates that had been pushed back against the walls at the inner end of the passage. So Sarah Grant must have closed them— and that could mean they really were trapped.

Of course they should have been able to see daylight through the gates, but peering through Ellie could make out nothing but inky blackness; the interior of Pentrillis Castle was shrouded in the darkest of midnights.

Ellie heard her Dad start to wrestle with the gates, working his way along them, no doubt looking for a handle or any other way of opening them, but never letting go of her. This went on for a couple of minutes, until finally he stopped and sighed deeply.

“Right,” said Dad, “time to call the police I think. Don’t know quite what I’m going to tell them but there you go.” He was bathed briefly in the faint glow of his phone before he put it to his ear. Long seconds passed; then his frowning face was again illuminated as he peered at the handset. “I don’t believe it. No

signal. Bloody typical.” Ellie felt sick. The reality that they were up against the supernatural will of Sarah Grant was starting to really hit home now. What could they possibly do against that?

Then Dad held her and kissed the top of her head. They stood like that for a while, as the terrible realisation of what Ellie would have to do next began to grow in her mind. No, she couldn’t ... but she must. Finally she pulled back and, still holding his hand, looked up at him, though his face was once more invisible in the total darkness.

“Do I have to go and get Callum on my own, Dad?” she whispered.

She heard him swallow hard. “No, not on your own. Never alone Ellie.”

“Do you love him, Dad?”

He paused. “I don’t know Ellie. Is that a terrible thing to say? I try and I try. I’ve always tried and I’ll keep trying. But you know what? I love his mother, and I would never be able to look her in the face again if I didn’t do everything I possibly could to bring him home.”

Ellie nodded. She knew what she wanted to ask him next, and actually she did already know the answer but right then, in that black place she needed to hear him say it. In the end she didn’t need to ask – it was as though Dad could read her mind.

“And you? Do you want to know how I feel about you, Ellie?” he said quietly. “I remember the day you were born. I was with your Mum in the hospital when you came out into the world, and I remember when I first saw you. When I held you in my arms, it didn’t seem real. The midwife told me I should feel free to cry, that many other new fathers did. I didn’t, and maybe she wondered why. So did I, if I’m honest. I was just overwhelmed I guess. It just hadn’t sunk in that I was actually holding my daughter in my arms.”

“But then,” he continued, “I went to the Gents’, and when I was washing my hands I looked in the mirror, and you know what? I had this great big goofy grin on my face. I probably had it for some time and never realised. Well, I had just been up all through the night so if truth be told I wasn’t completely sure what was going on generally. But that grin told me how I was really feeling, and it reassured me in a funny sort of way that things were going to be all right.”

“You see, Ellie, before you came along I was never one of those people who doted over babies and children. I never felt especially paternal, and I didn’t want to cuddle every baby I saw. My opinion of children was that they were basically inconvenient, and likely to cost a huge amount of time, effort and money. I guess I wanted a family – well, no, I definitely did – but the whole thing just seemed kind of – I don’t know – academic. I kind of assumed I would love my children but I had no idea what that would really feel like.”

“And then you came along. The love I felt for you hit me like a thunderbolt. For the first time I understood what parental love really was, how powerful, how deep. When I held you in my arms you converted me, Ellie. You showed me I could love in a way I never thought possible.”

Ellie held his hand tighter than ever but could say nothing.

Dad laughed suddenly. “Of course, I’ve since discovered that children are indeed inconvenient and expensive. But worth it. Just.”

Ellie punched his arm with her free hand. “Thanks a lot.”

Now it was time. She didn’t feel remotely brave, still didn’t want to go on into the castle, still less without Dad; but now she felt that she could. There was a kind of warmth inside of her, and a quiet resolve. She would go in, she would find Callum, and she would come out again. Whatever power there was in this castle, there were some things that were even stronger.

She stepped back quickly and pulled her hand out of Dad's. She heard him cry, "No, Ellie!", but, heartbreakingly, his voice already sounded a long way off.

She could not recollect afterwards quite how it came about, but she was standing with her eyes closed against a searing light, and there was a breeze and the smell of grass, and she knew she was outside. From far behind her she heard the closing of a heavy door, an echo from another time. When she was able to open her eyes, she found herself just outside the inner entrance of the gatehouse, looking ahead over the grass of the outer bailey. She looked back into the passage, hoping against hope that her Dad would be still standing there; but even through the blur of her tears she could see that he wasn't.

Then Ellie took a deep shuddering breath and faced ahead. There was the picnic rug, just as before, and sitting on it were Callum and Sarah.

Well, she thought, here goes.

End of Part 5

Next instalment: The prisoner / The supernatural storm

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