

Christopher Peter  
FALLING  
GIRL  
A GHOST STORY

## **Part Six**

### **Chapter 10: The prisoner**

For some reason Ellie's legs felt like she had just run a marathon, but she dragged them into life and began to head a little stiffly over the grass towards her step-brother and the woman she now knew to have been dead for several decades, a thought so bizarre that it almost wasn't scary. Almost.

As she drew closer Ellie realised she had no idea what she was going to say or how she and Callum were going to get out of the castle. Could they just run into the gatehouse and yank open the front doors the way Ellie had done earlier? Would Sarah try to stop them? Ellie couldn't believe she wouldn't – but would she actually be able to physically stop them, being a ghost? She did seem solid enough after all.

Sarah looked up as she approached, and smiled. "Hello Ellie. It's so good to see you again. I did wonder whether you'd come back." Her voice was honey-sweet, her face radiant. Ellie thought, why do you look so happy? She had not expected any kind of warm welcome on her return – she had run away after all, but now it was almost as if nothing had happened.

Callum on the other hand was hardly a picture of euphoria. He sat hunched up, knees drawn up to his chin, and his face reminded her of – what did Dad sometimes say? – a bulldog chewing a wasp. But as he glanced up at his step-sister he did appear to brighten a little, and the bottom of his face even managed to twist itself into something resembling a smile. It was as much or more than Ellie could expect and much better than she normally got, so she felt quite encouraged. Perhaps they might leave together after all.

“Please sit down,” said Sarah. “I think we’ve got quite a lot to talk about, don’t you?”

Ellie hesitated, before Callum spoke in a muffled grunt. “Come on, sit down. We’ve got something to tell you, and you might not believe it, but I don’t care, it’s true.”

Ellie sank down onto her knees on the very edge of the rug, which was the best compromise she could think of – she did not want to actually put her backside on the ground. She feared she might have to run at any moment. Her heart was hammering madly in her ears.

“Oh, I think you already know by now, don’t you Ellie?” said Sarah. She was looking over Callum’s head towards the keep with that faraway look back in her eyes.

Callum frowned at Ellie, but he sounded hopeful. “Do you? Do you know about her?”

“Yes,” said Ellie, “she’s a ghost.” Well, she thought, there’s something I don’t say every day.

Sarah laughed softly. “A ghost,” she said, almost to herself. “A ghost. Well, well. Who would have thought I would end up being a ghost? I don’t feel like one. I don’t think I look like one. But they tell me I am, and I know that after what happened ...” She tailed off, her eyes still on the keep.

“You fell off there, didn’t you?” said Ellie. She felt more sad than afraid at that moment, looking at this fragile young woman

with her sad, lost eyes. But Sarah gave no reply, or any indication that she had even heard the question.

“How did you find out?” Ellie asked Callum.

“It was when you and Helen were in that passage, when I’d already gone outside. I turned round and I saw her – Sarah – go in. And there was just something about her .... I dunno. And then when you two ran out you said you’d had a scare but you hadn’t seen anyone else. That’s when I began to think ... but I didn’t say anything – you’d have thought I was mental or something. And then she told me, after you’d gone. But how come you know?”

“The Warden told me. She showed me an old newspaper. Sarah Grant was a school-teacher, and she fell off the keep a long time ago – 1946.”

Sarah was looking at them again now, an unreadable smile on her lips. “Excuse me, am I still here? Please talk to me, not about me. I may be dead – technically at least – but I’m clearly not departed.”

“So what happened? I mean ... do you want to tell us?” asked Ellie uncertainly. Asking someone how they died felt like a very delicate and personal question somehow – not to mention unusual.

Sarah’s smile faded and she said nothing for a while. She sighed and looked around her and up at the sky, which was pockmarked with fluffy white and grey clouds, the sun poking around the edge of one of them. It wasn’t quite the deep blue heat wave of earlier in the day, but it was still a lot better than the weather outside the sandstone walls (or rather, Ellie reminded herself, in another time).

“Just look at all this,” Sarah said at last. “Isn’t it stunning? I first came here as a child, and I remember that day so well. I was with Martin – my brother – and it was a beautiful, perfect summer’s day. Father stayed outside, and Martin and I played in here for ages. I always loved castles, and I loved this one in particular. We came back here many times, even as adults, until ...”

“Until what?”

“Until he died.”

“I’m sorry.” It was all Ellie could think to say.

“Yes. My little brother. Dead at twenty-eight. He survived the war, but fell ill almost as soon as he returned. Survived the war only to be struck down by cancer. Not even thirty years old. Can you believe that? And so after that I came here alone.”

“What about the rest of your family?” asked Ellie.

“What about them?” Sarah’s laugh was bitter and sardonic now. “My father? He was long gone by then, I didn’t know where to and I didn’t much care. My mother had left him, and I don’t blame her. She died years before Martin. I didn’t have any other brothers or sisters. There was no-one else. I had the odd boyfriend but they were all hopeless.”

“What about friends?”

“Friends? Oh yes, I had *friends*. People to go out with, to pass time and gossip with. People who asked how you were but you always wondered how much they really wanted to know, and how they would cope if you ever actually told them the truth. And after Martin died, that was the worst part. I could just sense that no-one knew quite what to say to me, and to be honest I didn’t have a clue what to say to them either. I didn’t feel like most of them ever really *knew* me, or could even begin to comprehend the big black hole that had opened up right in the middle of me.”

A drop of water fell on Ellie’s head, making her flinch. She looked up to see a small hard grey cloud directly overhead.

“I did have one really good friend,” Sarah went on. “Frances. But she married and moved away, and that was that really. Her new husband was the most important thing in her life. She wrote sometimes but ...”

Perhaps it was just a trick of the light, in the sunshine dimmed and scattered by the miniature rain cloud above – but the

keep looked closer now, an ash-white beacon looming towards them over broken red walls.

“And I found myself coming back here, again and again. And I didn’t really want anyone else to be here with me. I wanted to be alone I suppose. I felt peaceful here. It felt safe. And I could remember Martin as I knew him when he was well, and we were both happy.”

Sarah gazed down at the grass and lapsed back into silence.

Ellie wanted to ask how Sarah had come to fall from the keep, but she couldn’t find the words; and then Sarah looked up and answered that very question. “I suppose you think I committed suicide don’t you? Well I didn’t. I thought about it all right. One day, I just ... I don’t know, I felt so low. It was raining, and windy, a horrible day. I went up to the top of the keep, and everything felt so black. All I did was climb over the guard rail. I was just going to stand there and look over the edge and wonder what it would be like to die. Just a few seconds of terror and the pain would be gone forever, or so I thought. Then I was going to climb back over, I really was. But the stone was slippery with the rain, and ...”

Her blank face turned once more to the ground. Ellie’s mind felt numb; it was impossible to take this in.

“Is it lonely?” asked Ellie at last.

“What do you think?” murmured Sarah, still looking down.

Ellie felt another drop of rain.

“Is that why you’ve brought us here? Us, and the others?” said Callum with a sudden, jarring bitterness that made Ellie look at him sharply. “Because you’re lonely? And you think if you don’t let us leave, you don’t have to be lonely anymore?”

Sarah looked up, and then her face broke into an odd smile. “Well. Clever boy. Still it didn’t take too much working out did it? Goodness me, I am *so* transparent aren’t I? – motivationally if not physically!” Then abruptly she leapt to her feet and stretched her

arms high into the air. “Well that’s quite enough moping for one day. Do you want to know where the rest of my prisoners are?” Yet again, a sudden change seemed to have come over her. Ellie found her utterly disorientating, swinging as she did from one mood to another with dizzying speed. You never knew what to expect from her from one moment to the next.

“I expect they’re hiding from you. If they’ve got any sense anyway,” muttered Callum sullenly. He looked a lot less frightened now and his usual surly persona was starting to re-assert itself.

“Oh yes, of course, I forgot, how silly of me!” said Sarah. “Callum here tried to spill the beans, you see.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ellie.

“I told them. About her. That’s she’s a ghost,” said Callum.

“Not sure they believed you though, did they?” said Sarah. “What was it that James said? ‘Don’t talk such rot! You’ll scare Helen!’ It didn’t go very well did it?”

“They didn’t hang about long after that though did they?” shot back Callum, squinting defiantly up at Sarah. “They all decided to go off looking for someone or other again. No-one seemed to want to stay with you. They all think there’s something strange about you. And James – I think he knows really. He wouldn’t even *look* at you.”

“Oh well, so be it,” said Sarah, waving a hand dismissively. “They know about the ghosts now – especially Walter de Vane. They’ll be scared of *them*, not me. You can be sure they won’t go far.”

Callum uncoiled himself and sprang up, his slight frame almost quivering for the fight. Ellie couldn’t help smiling to herself. She doubted whether Sarah knew what she was letting herself in for – supernatural or not, she was going to find it very hard work carrying on an argument with someone who could start a fight in an empty room. Callum had turned belligerence into an art

form, and as far as he was concerned he was rarely – no, make that *never* – wrong.

“No, I’m telling you, they believed me, I could tell,” Callum almost snarled. “And anyway, what do you mean, that lame story about Margaret whatsername and Walter de *Lame*? *You’re* the ghost. Just you! And whatever happened to you, you’ve *no* right to keep us here. But it’s just typical isn’t it? Another bloody adult telling me what to do, pretending it’s for my good when all the time it’s all about *you!*”

“Oh, just listen to the expert!” said Sarah, hands on hips. “So you’ve been here five minutes, and little sissy here has read a newspaper article about me, and suddenly you’re an expert on me and this place! Well, you are an adolescent after all, aren’t you? So I suppose you’re expected to be an ignorant little know-it-all. Well, little boy, you’re wrong! If you think I’m the only supernatural thing in this place, you are *very* much mistaken. And once your friends realise that, they will be back here quicker than you can say *boo!* And they’ll never leave me again, because they’ll realise I’m the least scary thing around here!”

Callum opened his mouth but it seemed to have seized up momentarily with sheer indignation. Ellie knew this wouldn’t last for long. Sarah resumed before he could reply, more quietly this time.

“And why didn’t you go off with them, anyway? Why did you stay alone with me, if you thought I was the only ghost here? Weren’t you scared?”

Callum stared at her, then glanced over at Ellie, then down. “Well I couldn’t could I?” he mumbled.

“Why not?”

“Because of her.” He jerked an elbow ungraciously in Ellie’s direction.

“What do you mean?” said Sarah. “She wasn’t with us. Anyway, you could have left the castle with her.”

Callum continued studying the grass at his feet. Perhaps Sarah Grant did have ghoulish powers over teenagers after all, Ellie wondered – she seemed to have stunned this one into silence mid-rant, which was no mean feat.

“I couldn’t go with you. I was too scared. I’m sorry,” he said very quietly, almost stuttering, his eyes briefly meeting Ellie’s but then darting away to the ground, the sky, the walls, anywhere else. “And I didn’t want to leave the others behind ... Helen and ... you know. And I knew you’d come back to find me because – well, you’re like that. And I thought if I stayed out here with Sarah then that’s where you’d come.”

Ellie had never heard him talk like this before. It sounded so ... well, real, honest, even (whisper it) *normal*. Not only that, but buried somewhere in the middle of it was something vaguely approximating to a hint of a compliment about her, his step-sister. Callum had never, ever come within a million miles of saying anything vaguely nice about Ellie ever before – not counting the sarcastic put-downs, usually something about goody two-shoes. Forget the freakish micro-climate, the solid ghost and the time travel, thought Ellie – this was real magic.

In the ensuing awkward silence, she noticed that Sarah was gazing at them, and there was no self-conscious smirk now, but instead a smile that seemed more real, and rather sad. There were lines around her eyes; she looked tired, and somehow older.

Callum broke the silence. “I think we should find James and Helen now,” he mumbled to Ellie, still not quite looking at her.

“Yeah, I guess so. Where did they go?”

“They went over to the inner bailey,” said Callum. “I think they were going to stay out in the open though.”

“OK. Let’s go then.” Ellie and Callum took a few paces, and then Ellie paused and looked back at Sarah, uncertain of what to say. “Um ... do you want to come with us?”

Callum shot his step-sister a look which said, roughly translated, “Are you totally off your head?” Sarah stirred as if from a trance, and said, “Er, no, no, you go on. We don’t want to frighten James with the Ghostly Miss Grant, do we? I’ll see you soon.” She was looking towards the chapel now.

“OK. See you later.” Even as Ellie moved with her step-brother away from Sarah, she felt a ripple of unease. What if the others were no longer here, disappeared like those other two kids? Or what if they had left the castle, or somehow just gone back to their own time? She didn’t at all relish the thought that it might just be Callum and her, all alone with Sarah Grant. When they came to try to escape the castle, Ellie really wanted all the kids to make the attempt at the same time. Sticking together had to be their best hope.

However, her fears were soon allayed: as they rounded the corner into the inner bailey, she was thankful to see Helen and James sitting on a low wall near the keep. Helen jumped up and ran over to Ellie, almost knocking her over as she flung her arms around her neck.

“Ellie! Oh Ellie, thank *goodness* you’re all right! After you ran into the gatehouse like that, we didn’t know if you’d got out or not.”

James was at his sister’s side, grinning broadly. “I say, Ellie, jolly good to see you again. I must say you were awfully brave, making your dash for freedom like that. You took off like a hare with a pack of hounds at your heels, and old Miss Grant couldn’t do a thing about it. Very impressive.”

Ellie blushed, a little taken aback at this returning hero’s welcome. “I ... w-well, it was nothing. I just thought, I had to get out, I had to find Dad.”

“And did you?” asked Helen, eyes wide and imploring. “Did you get out? Out of the dark?”

“Yes. For a while anyway. I saw the Warden again, and she told me something – something you should know ...”

“Oh, thank goodness!” said Helen “I, we were so afraid that you’d got – well, lost in there. You know – the ghosts that Miss Grant was talking about ...”

“Oh lor, sis, not the spooks again.” James rolled his eyes.

“Oh, do shut *up!*” Helen rounded on her brother. “I’m trying to say that ... look ...” She turned back to Ellie, obviously on the verge of tears. “I’m ... we’re sorry Ellie, that we didn’t come with you. We ... we let you go in there on your own, and that was just beastly, we should have ...”

“No, no, don’t worry, please,” said Ellie quickly, now understanding why Helen was so upset. “I got out really easily – well, quite easily. I didn’t see anything in there. I did hear the whispering again, but that was all. I didn’t expect anyone to come with me, honestly. I just needed to find Dad. I was scared and I needed to find him ...”

James touched Ellie’s shoulder awkwardly. “Ellie, that’s very kind of you, but really it wasn’t quite cricket for us to ... you know, let you go on your own like that. We should have stuck together really. I don’t know why ... of course, I don’t really believe in all this ghost nonsense, but well ...” He mumbled into silence, no longer quite able to catch her eye.

Helen sniffed, and smiled at Callum. “And are you all right Callum? I thought you were awfully brave to stay out there with Miss Grant waiting for your sister to come back. You said she would didn’t you?” Callum shrugged but his mouth betrayed him with a surprisingly sappy grin.

James leaned closer to Ellie and lowered his voice. “I say, have you been with Miss Grant then? She’s an odd fish isn’t she? A bit creepy if you ask me. Callum here had a rum old tale to tell about her. I was almost inclined to believe it I must admit. Would make some sense in a funny sort of way.”

Ellie however was only half listening. As glad as she was to see Helen and James again, the way they were dressed had struck her even more forcefully than before. Their clothes were so in-your-face – especially James in his little schoolboy get-up – that she was finding it quite distracting. Which was strange in a way, as this time she had been expecting it. They really did look like refugees from another time. She wanted to ask them but was stuck on how to broach the subject. How exactly did you ask someone what year they're from with a straight face? So she asked instead where they'd been since they'd last met.

“Nowhere in particular. Just knocking around really,” replied Helen. “I say, you've been into the chapel haven't you? Did you see that plaque on the wall? A bit odd. It looked quite new.”

“Yeah, I saw it. Just a Bible verse wasn't? I don't know what it meant though.”

“Well I looked it up,” said Helen, pulling a small blue book out of her handbag. “And it's really quite interesting ...”

“What's that book?” asked Callum

“It's my Bible.”

“What? You carry a *Bible* around with you?” Callum pulled a face.

“Yes, of course. I read it a lot.”

“Yes, sis is rather religious. Not like me, I'm an atheist myself you know,” said James.

“I am *not* religious,” said Helen. “How many times do I have to tell you? My faith means a lot to me but I'm not some sort of nun.”

“You read the Bible and you go to church,” said James flatly. “That's being religious in my book.”

“That's not quite the same thing! What I mean is ...”

Ellie decided it was time to interrupt again. “So – do you think Sarah’s trying to keep us here, then? You don’t believe in her story about the ghosts in the walls?”

“It’s just like I said,” said Callum, “she’s a bitter and twisted old ghost, and she wants us here just because she’s lonely.”

“Oh no, not that again,” said James with obvious exasperation. “Not that absurd Miss-Grant-is-a-ghost story. She’s as solid as you and me. Anyone can see that.”

“Are you calling me a liar then? Or are you saying I’m mental?” snapped Callum, flushing this time for reasons unconnected with Helen. At that point Ellie knew it was time to bring the others up to date with the revelation about Sarah Grant in the newspaper from 1946. And so, looking over their heads to avoid their faces, taking a deep breath, and hoping fervently they didn’t conclude she was a complete and total nutcase, she did.

“I had guessed as much. I believed you, Callum,” said Helen when Ellie had finished.

James shook his head. “No. It’s all a bit odd, I grant you, but there must be some rational explanation.”

“No, I think it’s true,” said Helen. “I thought there was something not quite right about her. It all makes perfect sense when you really think about it, James. Please try to *think* about it.”

James just plunged his hands into his shorts pockets and stared fiercely at the nearest wall.

“And I don’t think that’s quite all is it? What about us?” said Helen, looking at Ellie in a meaningful sort of way.

“No ... it’s not all,” said Ellie slowly. “I think – the six of us – we ...”

“Hang on – *six* of us?” said James.

“Six? Did I say that? I meant ...”

“Hang on! The other two – Maisie and ...”

“Phillip!” Helen exclaimed. “Maisie and Phillip! Those other two children we saw – the ones that Sarah was talking about. What happened to them? We never did find out.”

“Yeah.” Ellie scratched her head dumbly. It felt like a window had been opened deep inside her brain, letting in air and light. She kept forgetting about the other two, forgetting that they had even existed. But they had ... hadn’t they?

“It’s as though this is all there is,” said James, waving his arms at the walls around them. “I can’t even remember much about outside. Anything that’s not here, now ...”

“You’re right there, mate,” said Callum. “But what’s happened to them – the other two? *She* said they were still in the keep didn’t she? But we know that’s just crap. So what did she do with them?”

“Who’s *she* – the cat’s mother?” It was another voice there amongst them. James gave a loud gasp. Ellie took a step back, not immediately realising why. Then she saw a shape in the shadow of a large ruined window frame above them. The shape jumped and landed soundlessly on the low wall that James and Helen had been sitting on a few minutes earlier; and the shape was Sarah Grant.

“Oh come on! What’s the matter with you lot?” said Sarah. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“I say, beg-begging your pardon Miss Grant, but what on earth are you playing at?” said James. “You gave us – Helen here, quite a turn by jumping around like a ... a ... I don’t know what. That was really rather mean. You know – um – she’s a bit scared of you.”

“Scared of me? Little old me?” said Sarah, eyes wide in mock innocence. “Yes, I bet *she* is, isn’t she James? Anyway, you don’t need to be scared of me. It’s the ghosts in the walls you should be scared of. Haven’t you been listening?”

Ellie noticed Callum perk up, no doubt winding himself up for renewed aggro; but she decided enough was enough. After all it

was a bit pathetic to let her step-brother fight all the battles. So, before she could dwell too much on what she was doing, she stepped forward and, trying to imbue her voice with more courage than she felt, she addressed this strange, solid, volatile ghost.

“Sarah, I’m sorry but this has to stop. You must let us go now. You can’t keep us here. I’m sorry about what happened to you – really, really sorry – but it’s not right to keep us here. Please, please let us go.”

Sarah – still standing on the low wall, dominating from above – fixed that piercing gaze on Ellie, the one that could freeze her on the spot. Ellie thought she could see a succession of emotions chase across Sarah’s face – surprise, annoyance, uncertainty, fear – and then finally the face ossified into the familiar hard countenance, the smirking mask.

“Oh I see. That’s told me then, hasn’t it?” said Sarah quietly. Then she lifted her arm in an extravagant gesture towards the gate to the outer bailey. “Well then young lady – all of you – off you go. You know where the gatehouse is. But – do tell me – do you really think you can just walk out of here? Just like that?”

“Ellie already got out once, didn’t she? Couldn’t stop her then, could you?” said Callum.

Sarah’s mouth twitched. “Of course. Actually she was more determined than I expected, I will admit that. But I will not make that mistake again. Do you really imagine for just one second that I couldn’t have stopped her if I really wanted to? Anyway, I wasn’t terribly unhappy for this ungrateful little girl to leave. I still had the rest of you after all. But do you really think I would let *all* of you go?”

Ellie said nothing but she remembered the dark whispering, the heavy reluctant doors and the fierce rain storm outside. It seemed to her that Sarah had not been all that happy for her to leave the castle, whatever she now said.

“But surely, Miss Grant, you can’t just keep us here,” said James.

“Can’t I? I think I can. You’ve surely seen by now what I can do. The weather is how I want it, how it was when I first came here. And you all came from different times – or hadn’t you realised that yet? James and Helen, you came here in 1954. And Ellie and Callum, you walked into here in ... when was it ...?”

Callum laughed. “You don’t know? Can’t read minds then?”

“And what about Maisie and Phillip?” said Ellie. “When did they come from ...?”

“... and where are they now?” finished Callum.

“Oh, them. I’m surprised you remember. Does it really matter? If you must know, they came here in 1973 – having a real shouting match they were – I couldn’t help but hear them. And see they were alone – no parents watching them. The point is, all of you came here in different years, different decades, quarrelling and bickering like brothers and sisters do. And I *noticed* you. And then I took you, without you even realising it.”

James looked totally stunned; Helen rather less so, and Ellie could see that this unbelievable story was starting to make sense for her, as it did for Ellie herself earlier. As for Callum, he just shrugged and grimaced. “Whatever. Do you want us to be impressed?”

Sarah stared at him. Clearly, everyone being impressed was exactly what she had expected. “Well well, little Callum,” she said, “you are quite the hero aren’t you? Just don’t forget who holds all the aces here. One clue: it isn’t you.”

“Where are this Phillip and Maisie? Why won’t you tell us?” barked back Callum.

“Well, if you must know ... I wasn’t going to tell you. I didn’t want to scare you. Suffice to say they did not cooperate. Please don’t make the same mistake.”

Helen's voice was wavering but surprisingly fierce. "What on earth do you mean, Miss Grant? Please tell us where they are. Please tell us now. If you've hurt them ..."

"What? What if I have hurt them, Helen? Pray do tell."

"Then you're a monster, Miss Grant. And we are leaving." And with that, Helen spun around and began to march away. Callum hesitated, then began to follow her. James did the same.

"Oh, all right. Stop!" Sarah called after them. "I haven't harmed them. They're safe, they really are."

"But where are they then? Why are they sort of here – but not?" asked Ellie.

"It was Phillip," said Sarah. "Phillip! He was scared of his own shadow. My story seemed to frighten him half out of his wits."

"Wasn't it meant to?"

Sarah ignored Ellie. "He became rather upset, and Maisie insisted on taking him outside. So they went into the gatehouse ..."

"I bet you tried to stop them. I bet you whispered."

"Perhaps I did," Sarah said quietly. "They shouldn't have gone."

"So why did we see them again?"

"They came back out of the gatehouse, looking for their aunt. I let go of them, in the end – after James and Helen came, and then you. I had new friends then. They're back in their old time now. I did sort of pull them back a couple of times ... perhaps that's when you saw them."

Ellie had a vivid mental picture of a cat crouched over two mice, batting them around with a listless paw. She shuddered.

"So you let *them* go," said James, who had reappeared with the others at Ellie's side. "So why not us?"

"Yes, James. I must be going soft in my old age. But please don't imagine that I'll let you all go too. Because I won't."

“You lied to us!” said Callum. “That stupid lame story about those kids vanishing in the keep. We can’t trust you can we?”

Sarah shrugged. “I’m sorry, but you can trust me on one thing. All of you. You cannot leave. You know, I would far rather you all stayed here as my friends, but if you have to be my prisoners, so be it. You’ll learn. In time you’ll be happy here, and you won’t even remember the outside any more, or your lives before. You will forget everything else. You’re safer here with me, in the light. You’ll understand.”

“But ...” Ellie’s mind was racing. “You can’t ... what about when it gets dark?”

“It won’t. It’s always sunny here, Ellie. *Always.*”

“No,” said Helen. “It always gets dark. And we aren’t the prisoners here.”

“No? And what makes you say that?”

“There’s only one prisoner in this castle,” said Helen, “and that’s you, Miss Grant. You’re the prisoner of Pentrillis Castle.”

## **Chapter 11: The supernatural storm**

Ellie didn’t really get what Helen had just said, but it certainly seemed to have an effect on Sarah Grant. The story teller was somehow diminished, perched there on the wall like the little mouse she had once reminded Ellie of.

There was a faint, throbbing sound drifting through the air. Everyone looked up. Gradually Ellie realised what it was: a car’s engine, very far away. It was a call from a distant yet familiar land, and it stirred within her a piercing need to return to it. She knew it was time to go now, darkness or not.

Callum obviously thought the same, as he then grabbed Ellie’s arm. “Come on,” he said, “let’s get out of here.” And at that,

everyone except Sarah began to jog out of the inner bailey and towards the gatehouse. They had not got very far when – horrifyingly, but unsurprisingly by now – Sarah was standing in front of them, at the foot of the chapel steps. Of course she could do that, could go anywhere whenever she wanted to; and there was probably little point in her pretending to be a normal person now that everyone knew what she was. She would always be one step ahead now.

But surely this can't really be happening, thought Ellie. It was so sunny. Things like this couldn't happen when it was sunny – could they?

Sarah was very still, looking right through them as they skirted past her and on to the gatehouse. Ellie tried not to look at the ghost, dreading a sudden lunge or cry, but nothing happened. But she couldn't help thinking that the passageway ahead was darker than ever. It was the blackest thing she had ever seen, a blank and merciless hole that seemed to suck in the very light and crush it. And if even light couldn't survive in there, how could any living thing dare to enter?

James stopped dead. "I ... no. No. Isn't there another way? I mean ... we don't know what's in there ..."

"What?" said Callum. "Big brave Jimbo's bricking it now is he? I thought you didn't believe in ghosts?"

"You're right to be scared, James," came Sarah's voice from behind them. "You know perfectly well there is something in there. The darkness will trap you like flies in a web. Ask Ellie – she's been in there, clinging to her Daddy, but she had to let go of him before I'd let her out. Oh, and Callum – do you imagine your bravado fools me for a moment? You all know the truth."

Helen spun round, eyes flashing. "You're horrid, you are, Miss Grant. Scaring me and my brother like this. I used to feel sorry for you. I liked you. But now I don't."

An ear-splitting metallic clang ripped through the air. Ellie flinched, and then saw with horror that the black iron gates at the near end of the gatehouse passage had slammed shut. Sarah wasn't playing games now.

“The postern gate!” shouted Ellie. “Run for it!”

They all began to sprint over the grass, past the picnic rug, towards the small doorway in the curtain wall through which Ellie had ventured earlier. But even as they ran, a horrible doubt seized her. Could they really get out this way? She looked up to see a colossal black cloud looming over the curtain wall, leaning and pressing towards them, threatening almost to push the wall over – and she knew, deep in her bones, that something terrible waited for them ahead. Even so she kept running, not knowing what else to do, not daring to look over her shoulder in case she saw Sarah Grant flitting after them. But of course – how thick was she? Sarah didn't need to run ...

A few fat spots of rain splashed down on their heads just as they arrived panting at the doorway leading down to the postern gate. The opening was as unyieldingly black as the gatehouse passageway and James stopped again, only for Callum to seize his arm and drag him forward into the darkness. Ellie couldn't help glancing back towards the gatehouse, and saw Sarah still standing where they had left her. Then Helen grabbed her hand and they dashed through the doorway after the boys.

They were in a narrow, pitch black world, filled with their freakishly loud breathing bouncing off the stone around them. Mingled with this was another sound, like the roar of rushing water, echoing up from ahead. Ellie reached out to feel her way along the walls, trotting gingerly but as quickly as she could down the uneven steps. Then, just as the darkness began to lighten into a murky grey, she crashed into someone's back, though it was so dark she couldn't tell who it was at first. She peered round them, down towards what should have been the daylight outside, but

there was little to be seen. It looked like day had become night, and the roaring was now much louder.

“Good lord”, she heard James exclaim.

“What’s the matter? What’s wrong?” asked Ellie.

“Come and look Ellie,” shouted Callum above the din; and so she edged past Helen until she could see outside. The sight that greeted her was unbelievable.

At first she could see only a dark, blue-grey, shifting fog, framed by the outer doorway; and then, as her eyes began to adjust, she realised it was not fog at all but rather thick sheets of rain, virtually a wall of water. She felt a faint spray against her face, even though she was standing two or three metres inside the doorway. It was raining as she had never seen it before – torrential didn’t even begin to describe it; the rainstorm she had experienced during her earlier escape was a mere patch of drizzle in comparison.

James and Callum stood, faces in ghostly profile against the watery light, wet hair plastered to their foreheads, eyes blinking against the spray, mouths open in astonishment. “Wicked!” called Callum, but there was fear written on his face.

“We could do with an umbrella, methinks,” shouted back James.

“Are you having a laugh? That wouldn’t last two seconds in this. We need crash helmets more like.”

“Or diving clobber. We’d jolly well end up in the river. In fact, it’s pretty much *all* river now.”

James was right. The rain was pounding into the banks of the moat with such appalling violence, its fingers gouging out channels and craters in the earth, that any grass still clinging on was being rapidly overwhelmed by bubbling whirlpools and gurgling streams of dark brown muddy water. As Ellie watched the very earth seemed alive, writhing, tortured by the punishment hurled down

from the heavens. And through the curtain of teeming water Ellie thought she could just make out the restlessly churning river beyond, swollen with the indescribable downpour, climbing steadily up the bank towards them.

James and Callum looked at each other, then back at the girls. At that moment they must all have known the same thing: there was no escape this way. Anyone stupid enough to venture outside into that supernatural storm would instantly be pummelled, retching and flailing down the treacherous bank, the very air sucked from their lungs, finally to be snatched by the pitiless strength of the river – and then they would be gone.

In fact, even remaining there in the lower passageway they were in danger judging by the ominous slick of black water creeping up the slope towards their feet. And so they all trudged back up the way they had come, emerging one by one into the mocking sunshine of the outer bailey.

There they stood in dejected silence, the boys glistening from their proximity to the wall of water that Sarah Grant had surely conjured up across their path to freedom. For a while Ellie did not venture a look across to the gatehouse, partly from fear but more from the resigned certainty of what she would see there: Sarah, no doubt smirking victoriously, awaiting their chastened return. She began to wonder then, in that paralysis of despair, whether there would ever be any escape from the ghost. What chance did they have against that power? Were they already ensnared in Sarah's world, beyond all hope? Ellie closed her eyes, feeling hot tears pressing against her eyelids. *Dad ...*

“It’s not fair!” Callum shook his head. “She’s got no right to do this. Why us, anyway? What’s she got against *us*?”

“What do you mean, why us?” said James. “It’s just because we came here isn’t it?”

“Actually, that’s a good point Callum,” said Helen. “Why us indeed? There must have been simply hundreds of children who’ve visited this castle since 1946 ...”

“... and maybe thousands by our time,” added Ellie, suddenly realising the significance of what they were saying. “And yet there’s just four of us – or six if you count the others – um, whatever they were called. Six, out of all the children that must have come into this castle over the years. So what’s so special about us?”

“That’s amazing,” said Helen, “I hadn’t thought of that, until now. This might be really important. Let’s think, quickly. *Why us?*”

“Well, we’re all brothers and sisters aren’t we?” said Callum. Ellie caught his eye and then looked away quickly. Brother and sister? Yeah, right ...

“And we all came in without adults, or not at the same time as them, didn’t we?” added Helen.

“Or got separated from them, like we did from Rob,” said Callum.

James stabbed the ground with one foot absent-mindedly. “There must be more to it than that, though. None of that sounds terribly unusual.”

They stood pondering until the silence was broken by Helen’s infectious giggle. “Perhaps we’re just the most charming children to visit the castle for half a century, and Miss Grant just can’t resist us, we’re so lovely!”

“Oh for goodness sake, Helen, this is hardly the time for frivolity!” huffed James. “We’re in real trouble here, as you well know. A little maturity wouldn’t go amiss.”

Helen’s hands flew to her hips. “What’s the matter with you? Why are you always on your high horse? It’s too bad, James!”

Ellie frowned. “Wait a minute, Helen – um ... what did Sarah say about the other two – Maisie and Phillip, that’s it?”

Helen turned to her, blinking. “What do you mean, Ellie? What did she say?”

“Well ... Sarah said she heard them having an argument – that’s why she noticed them. So ... just before you first met Sarah ... were you two arguing by any chance?”

James shrugged. “Well – come to think of it, we may have been bickering a bit, yes. Nothing especially out of the ordinary though. We had just come out of one of the towers. Helen said something about how dark it had been in there, and I think I made some innocent comment or other and she just flared up ...”

“You made a horrid comment about my Bible, you mean!” Helen interjected. “Something about, I couldn’t possibly be scared of the dark when I had the ‘so-called Good Book’ with me – very sarcastic of you, as usual. And then Miss Grant was sort of there, and I was a bit embarrassed ...” She broke into a smile. “Yes, that’s it! I think you’ve found the last piece of the jigsaw, Ellie. So I take it you and Callum were also quarrelling just before *you* met Miss Grant?”

Which was nothing remotely unusual for them, thought Ellie, but she just nodded.

“Well, I don’t know,” said James. “I can’t quite believe we’re the only six brothers and sisters ever to have argued inside the castle. And just why is it important anyway?”

“Well it’s all I can think of,” said Ellie. “Just think – maybe it has to be just one brother and one sister, alone with no other adults in sight, no other family members either, and they have to be arguing at just the moment Sarah finds them. Maybe all those things don’t actually happen at exactly the same time very often.”

“Yes ... and I suppose it’s possible it did happen other times too, but they got away – like, er, Maisie and that other chap did,” said James. “But lucky us, we’re up to our necks in it now – caught good and proper.”

“Well that’s it then,” said Helen, reaching into her handbag and pulling out her Bible. “I think it’s high time we had a serious talk with Sarah Grant. I don’t think we can gain our freedom until the prisoner does.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ellie.

“I mean, she needs to be confronted with reality,” replied Helen; and with that she took Ellie’s hand again and began to walk, slowly but steadily, towards the gatehouse. “Come on.”

“What’s she playing at now?” said Callum. “Why are we going *towards* the flipping ghost?”

“Don’t ask me,” said James. “That’s girls for you. After a while you just learn to shut up and go along with it. I think ...” He tailed off as they approached Sarah. She was still standing exactly where they had left her minutes earlier, apparently just waiting for them. Helen and Ellie stopped a few metres away from her, the boys just behind them, and Helen opened her Bible to a bookmarked page. What on earth is she planning to do, thought Ellie – perform an exorcism or something?

While Sarah’s presence there by the gatehouse was no great shock, what did surprise Ellie was that this was not the smug, superior, high-and-mighty Miss Grant exulting in the triumph of her power. Instead her face looked fragile, as if barely containing a well of tears; almost like she had lost rather than won.

“That was a sick thing you did there,” said Ellie. “You could have killed us all with that storm.”

“Only if you were stupid enough to go outside,” countered Sarah; but her faltering voice had but the merest trace of defiance.

“I thought you liked us,” said Helen, “but if we don’t want to stay with you then you don’t mind hurting us, or even putting our lives in danger. Why is that?”

“Because you cannot leave,” said Sarah softly. “You just can’t.”

“Just because you’re a prisoner here, you can’t make us prisoners too. Not for ever,” said Helen.

Sarah seemed to be looking through them, to a point beyond or somewhere else entirely. Ellie, whilst finding it practically impossible to take her eyes off the ghost, did manage to throw an admiring sideways glance at Helen. She was braver than she looked. Where had the Wizard of Oz girl found the guts to do this?

Helen continued: “You must realise that sooner or later we’ll get out, or die trying. We won’t stay here. We can’t. We have to eat, drink ...”

“That doesn’t matter here,” said Sarah. “Time stands still here, you’ll see.”

“But we have our own lives and families outside. And you ... don’t you want to escape from here?”

“Escape?” Sarah’s voice rose slightly with a hint of her former passion. “Escape to what, exactly? What’s so wonderful about outside? There’s pain and loss out there. There’s suffering and heartbreak. I should know, I’ve been there too. You call me a prisoner, but do you really think I want to go back *outside*? You must be joking. This is my world now, and this is all I want. It’s safe here. The sun always shines, and right here is where I was always most happy, probably the only place where I ever knew true happiness.”

“I know you don’t want to go outside, back into our world – and you can’t anyway,” said Helen. “Your life there has ended. But that doesn’t mean you should stay here, does it? What is there here, for you? What are you holding on to? Not your brother – he’s not here. So you’re lonely – and so you wanted us, brothers and sisters from outside, playing and laughing in the castle like you used to with your brother. But you can’t keep us and force us to be your friends. You can keep us prisoners, or try to, but is that what you really want? Unhappy, resentful prisoners, always trying to escape from you, and growing to hate you?”

“No,” Sarah mouthed but no sound emerged, and she bowed her head. As Ellie watched, her form appeared less distinct, her very body to ripple like a flag in the wind. She became not transparent exactly but somehow less real, less *there*.

Then Sarah looked up, and her face was like that of a waxwork dummy, hard and dead. “Well thank you Helen. Thank you for telling me that I’m utterly alone and that I won’t ever see Martin again. And that you all think I’m a dreadful person and you don’t want anything to do with me. So no-one wants me, and you intend to leave me all alone again – in my prison as you call it. Thank you very much.”

Helen swallowed. “I – I didn’t say that no-one wants you. And you don’t have to stay here. In fact you’re not *supposed* to stay here. You’re not meant to be lonely and this is not where you should be. That Bible passage on the chapel wall – do you know what it means? And do you realise who it’s speaking to, if they would listen?”

Sarah grimaced. “Don’t tell me.” But Helen looked down at her Bible and read out the passage.

“John chapter fourteen, verses one to three: ‘Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.’”

Sarah stared at Helen. “You speak to me about God? Is this the same God that let Martin have cancer, and stood by while he died in unspeakable pain at the age of twenty-eight? And watched while I shrivelled up with my pain and loss? Do you think that this God really loves me?”

“Yes, I do,” said Helen quietly. “I don’t know why your brother died like that. I don’t know why God let it happen. It

doesn't make any more sense to me than it does to you. But I just know ... I just know he loves us. Nothing makes sense otherwise..."

Ellie decided to give voice to a thought that she couldn't quite shake off. "Um ... I think there's something else, isn't there Sarah? Did you – did you quarrel with Martin, before he died?"

Sarah's eyes flicked over to her. "What do you mean, quarrel?"

"Well ... we all think that you picked on us, out of all the kids that came here since – you know – because we were all brothers and sisters who were alone and arguing when you found us. That must mean something, mustn't it?"

Sarah hesitated, and then spoke slowly and deliberately while gazing at the stony horizon. "The last time I saw Martin was three days before he died. He seemed rather better that day. The doctor thought he still had a few more weeks left. I was about to go away for a few days with a friend, and where we were going, there was this boyfriend of mine ... Geoff ... Martin didn't much care for him. He was right of course. Geoff was no good, like the others, but like a fool I went anyway. And that day, Martin and I argued. Nothing especially dramatic, but my last words to him were cold and casual. I never said – I never said I loved ..." She looked down. "It's so terribly important, you see. You can never know how long you've got left with someone. I can't stand by and watch while hurtful words are spoken. Martin and I were happy here. I thought – I thought you could be too – all of us, all together. Do you understand?"

Ellie nodded, though she was still trying to get her head around all this. Could this really be the reason for Sarah's interest in them?

"I used to call myself a Christian," Sarah went on. "Before ... well before many things happened, mainly Martin's death. And I've always known about what you said, Helen. The funny thing is, that Bible passage in John's gospel – that was always one of my

favourites. I had it underlined in my Bible. It always made me feel so peaceful, so reassured. But that seems like such a long time ago...

“Perhaps the spirit I’ve been running away from here really is the spirit of God, come to seek me out. And I know the answer has been in the chapel all along. But there’s ... so much darkness. I can’t go in there. I can’t take the risk. Do you understand?” Sarah shook her head, then added, almost to herself, “Why does there have to be the darkness before the light?”

At that moment there came again the sound of the car engine from outside the castle – it was louder now, and unmistakable – followed by the honk of a car’s horn. Then Ellie heard James shout from somewhere above – “Hey!” – and she glanced up to see him on top of the curtain wall next to the gatehouse. Stupidly she looked behind her but obviously he was no longer there. “He said he was going up to see what was happening outside,” said Callum.

“There’s a man outside!” James called down. “He’s on the bridge, with a car!”

Ellie thought quickly, and called back, “What colour’s the car?”

“It’s red. Big red car. Odd looking thing ...”

*Dad.* It must be him. She remembered the track from the car park – but surely visitors weren’t supposed to take their cars along there? What on earth was he doing?

“He’s saying something about knocking the gatehouse doors down with the car! Says he’ll get in whatever it takes!” shouted James. “He’s calling your name, Ellie!”

Ellie’s stomach went ice cold. Those were very big, heavy, solid doors. Dad was obviously desperate to get in and find her, but he could seriously hurt himself pulling a stunt like that. “Please,” she said quickly to Sarah, “my Dad’s going to try to drive in. Please, you have to let us out now. He could be killed!”

Right on cue the engine revved furiously. Sarah, brow furrowed, looked from Ellie, to Helen, to the gatehouse, and back again. “It looks like your father is coming to rescue you. Lucky you,” she said.

“Someone wants to rescue you, too,” said Helen. “You know what you have to do, don’t you?”

“Do I?”

“Yes. The chapel ...”

“Or perhaps not. You do realise that even if Ellie’s father does break through those doors, he will only come into our time if I allow it?”

So that was it. Dad could crash through those doors and not find Ellie – but still get badly hurt, or even ... Ellie felt her eyes well up and half turned away, angry at her tears and her helplessness.

Then Callum was right beside her. “You have to let him in! He wants to find us. You *have* to!”

“And why is that, Callum?” Sarah’s voice was hard as iron – but was she trembling, just a little?

“Because ...”

The roar of the car engine outside grew ever louder.

“Because – because if he drives into here at any other time, someone could get hurt,” said Ellie. “What if the castle is full of people that day? What if there are – are children in the gatehouse passage?”

“That’s right,” said Callum. “Can you stop that happening? Are you *that* powerful?”

“Well I ... I can push him away from this time, but I can’t control what day he ends up in, no.” Sarah shrugged. “But that is not my responsibility. If the idiot man insists on blundering into here like a ...”

“But that’s so *lame!*” Callum clenched his fists. “You can stop it! And the only way is to let him in *here* and *now!*”

“But what about *me?*” Sarah seemed on the verge of tears, but her eyes were wild. Even a mouse is dangerous when cornered, thought Ellie – never mind one this powerful. “What happens to me then? Do I just stay a prisoner, on my own? Have you thought about that? Have you? Or don’t you even care?”

“The chapel ...” Helen began.

“What about it, Helen? What are you asking me to do? I won’t let go! I won’t!”

“*Please* Sarah!” sobbed Ellie. “*Please* open the doors and let him in!”

Then the engine screamed, there was a tortured screeching of tyres, and Ellie could do nothing but stare at the gatehouse as time stood still.

## **End of Part 6**

### **Next instalment: The rescuer**

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