

Crow Boy

Philip Caveney

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*To the team at Mary King's Close –
many thanks for the special tour and the useful
insights into everyday life in the 17th century.*

Praise for Philip Caveney

THE SEBASTIAN DARKE ADVENTURES

“Unputdownable! The comedy in the book makes it very enjoyable and you will keep turning page after page.”

CBBC Newsround

“It all adds up to an amusing and action-packed tale of loyalty, unexpected love and trouble around every bend.”

Publisher's Weekly

“...zips along with plenty of jokes, outrageous moments of melodrama and odd spots of violence of the type that never really seems to hurt. A sequel is promised soon; readers who enjoy this book, and there should be many, can start looking forward to it now.”

Nicolas Tucker, Times Educational Supplement.

THE ALEC DEVLIN ADVENTURES

“A fast-paced action adventure that literally brings the archaeology and history of a lost civilisation to life.”

Writeaway

“Philip Caveney is an author who knows what appeals to young boys and in *Maze of Death* he certainly delivers.”

Book Zone For Boys

“This story will appeal to adventure and fantasy fans from Intermediate age upwards.”

Story Time Books

ONE

Tom stood in the pouring rain with the other kids from his class and waited for the coach. It was April, but felt cold enough for December. His classmates, boys and girls alike, were bundled up in heavy coats and parkas; they'd known what to expect. Tom had only his maroon blazer, which was already wet through.

It was hard not to feel sorry for himself. He hated Edinburgh, he hated his new school and he hated his classmates. And, what was worse, they hated him.

Oh, he could see that under different circumstances, Edinburgh would be a really cool place to visit. But he was here against his will. Only a week ago, he'd been in Manchester, hanging out with his friends, going to the movies, playing computer games, all the usual stuff. Any excuse not to spend too much time at home. He'd known for a long time that something was wrong between his parents; he'd suffered their long, deep silences, the sudden arguments that blew up out of nowhere but he'd chosen to stay out of it, telling himself that they were adults; they were supposed to know what they were doing . . .

And then, one Friday, he strolled out of school, looking forward to the weekend, and his Mum was waiting for him, sitting in the passenger seat of a car he'd never seen before, a sleek black Alfa Romeo. There was this guy at the

wheel of the car, a thickset man with a scrubby beard and receding hair. Mum wound down the window and said, 'Hi, Tom, get in.'

So he climbed into the back seat, bewildered, and Mum gestured at the driver and said, 'This is Hamish,' like it was supposed to mean something. Then Hamish gunned the engine and they set off.

'Where we going?' Tom asked apprehensively.

'Scotland,' she said, breezily, like she'd just announced they were nipping down the shops. 'Edinburgh. We're going to have a bit of a holiday.'

'For the weekend, you mean?'

'Umm . . . maybe a bit longer.'

'But . . . it's the middle of term,' he reminded her.

'Don't worry about that. I think you're entitled to a few days off every now and then.'

But of course, it was more than that. On the long . . . the very long journey North, Mum gradually revealed more and more about what was going on. She and Dad hadn't been getting on for a long time now. They'd drifted apart. She'd met Hamish through work, three months back. He was a rep, a kind of travelling salesman for a company that made shower fittings. He was based in Edinburgh, a really cool city. She kept saying that last bit as though trying to convince Tom that what they were doing was a good idea. Or maybe she was just trying to convince herself.

Anyway, she went on, she and Hamish were just made for each other; they were on the same wavelength. They had so many interests in common. Hamish liked dancing and Dad would never do anything like that, he'd always

been so reserved. Mum and Hamish liked the same music, the same films, the same holiday destinations . . .

Tom sat in the back seat and felt an awful sinking feeling deep inside, as he realised what she was really telling him. They were leaving Dad. They were leaving Manchester. He knew that he should be shouting about this, telling them to stop the car and let him out, but he was in shock and he could only sit there and listen while his mother prattled on. Hamish had this really fabulous house in a 'sought-after' part of Edinburgh, she told him. He was a widower, his wife had died a couple of years ago and, when he'd met Mum, something had just clicked between them; something incredible, something magical.

'It was like, I don't know, fate or something?' said Mum. She sounded like some love-struck teenager, not like a married woman of thirty-eight. 'We just looked at each other across the room and it was like it was all meant to be, you know what I mean? I thought to myself, Mary, you only get the one chance at happiness and you need to do something about this now, or spend the rest of your life regretting it.'

Through all this, Hamish just sat at the wheel, staring at the road ahead, his eyes narrowed down to slits against the sunlight, an unpleasant smirk on his potato-like face. Occasionally, he lifted one hand from the steering wheel and placed it on Mum's hand and Tom noticed a crude tattoo on his bare arm which read *Scotland Forever*. He didn't look anything like Dad, Tom thought. He looked like an oik, a loser. But Mum just kept on about how wonderful he was, how good he was with kids (he'd raised

two of his own; they were grown now, and both of them had responsible jobs), he was a football fan and he'd run a couple of marathons for charity.

Tom finally pulled himself together enough to throw in a couple of objections. What about Mum's job at the catalogue company? What about school?

'Oh, I can walk into another job any time. You know I've always hated working for the catalogue, and as for school, there's a really good comprehensive just a stone's throw from Hamish's house in Fairmilehead, both of his kids went there, we can get you in, no problem! Edinburgh's a fantastic place, it has a castle, seaside, a mountain . . . oh, and the festival every summer! All that stand-up comedy, you'll love that! And listen, you can tell this was meant to be because the school has the same maroon blazers you wear at St Thomas's; all I'll need to do is sew on a new badge!'

'What about my friends?' he pleaded, but she hadn't faltered.

'You'll soon make new ones,' she told him. 'An easy-going lad like you, it'll only take you a few days . . .'

But of course the reality had been so different. From the moment he'd walked into his first class and Mr McKenzie, his form teacher, had introduced him as 'the new arrival,' he'd been a marked man. The other kids spent all their time whispering about him, the 'The Manky,' a blow-in, laughing every time he opened his mouth and spoke in his flat Mancunian accent, imitating him when he was almost, but not quite, out of earshot. He felt like telling them that he hadn't asked to be here, that he hadn't had any say in

the matter, but what difference would that have made? He wasn't welcome, simple as that.

And neither did he feel welcome at home. Hamish's 'cool' house had turned out to be a large semi on an anonymous side street of Fairmilehead. It had probably been nice enough once but, after three years of Hamish living there alone, it was looking decidedly scruffy. Whenever Tom was there with Mum and Hamish, he felt as though he was in the way, that they wanted to be alone, so he spent most of his time in his bedroom, the one that had previously belonged to Hamish's eldest son. With its Hibernian F.C. wallpaper and yellowing posters of grinning footballers, it looked as though nobody had been in there for years.

'We'll soon get this decorated more to your taste,' Hamish assured him when he and Mum had first taken him to look at the room. And then he reached out a big hand and tousled Tom's hair. 'I expect you're a United fan, eh?'

Tom had no interest in football whatsoever, and he certainly didn't like Hamish touching him, but he said nothing, just shrugged his shoulders.

'We'll get you a computer,' Mum had added and Hamish had given her an odd look, a kind of a pursed-lip scowl, as if to say 'we'll have to see about that.' When they'd left him to 'make himself at home,' Tom had lain down on the bed and curled himself up into a foetal position, feeling that he wanted to cry, but not allowing himself the comfort of it.

And now, here he was, three weeks later, and he was going on a school trip to something or somewhere called Mary King's Close. When he'd brought the letter home from

school, Mum had been keen for Tom to go but Hamish had said that he'd been to it, it was a con, just a trudge along some dirty old streets and not worth the money the school was asking. Mum still hadn't managed to 'walk into' that new job she'd mentioned and Hamish seemed to be watching the pennies. Mum had argued that Tom needed to get out a bit, it would help him make friends, and Hamish said that visiting some old ruin wasn't going to help the kid do that, he needed to stand up for himself a bit more. Right then and there, the couple who were 'so right for each other' had proceeded to have their first row. Tom thought about telling them that he didn't care whether he went or not, but they seemed to have forgotten he was there so he slunk off to his room and left them to it.

Mum must have prevailed though, because the money had been paid and now here was the coach, lurching out of the pouring rain like a giant caterpillar. It came to a halt with a loud hiss of air brakes. Then everyone was piling aboard, pushing and shoving to be first. Tom waited till everyone else was on and then he climbed the steps and trudged along the aisle until he found a seat to himself, as far away as possible from the most vocal of his tormentors, a kid called Stuart Gillies; a big overweight thug of a lad with spiky blonde hair, who took great delight in referring to Tom as 'The Manky.' Gillies was big enough and hard enough to have a small following of admirers who would do just about anything to be in his gang. If slagging off Tom was the price of admission, they were more than willing to join in.

As Tom slid into his seat, he heard Gillies' voice

announcing that, 'The Manky looks like a drowned rat this morning.' This caused some laughter and then another voice, a girl called Jenny, added that it was a pity the Manky's Ma couldn't afford to buy him a coat. 'Oh, they don't wear coats in Manchester,' Gillies assured her. 'Too cool for that.' He adopted a poor Mancunian accent. 'They all think they're Liam bleedin' Gallagher!'

Tom tried to ignore him and stared fixedly out of the window at the rain-lashed street. A tramp in a frayed overcoat was pushing a supermarket trolley piled with his tattered belongings along the pavement, a few wet strands of grey hair plastered to his head. Somehow, he was managing to smoke a roll up, the thin stream of smoke rising between the daggers of rain. Some of the kids at the back of the coach started banging on the window and shouting to him. He looked up and flicked a casual V in their direction with two nicotine-stained fingers.

Mr McKenzie pulled his gangling figure aboard and stood at the front of the coach, doing a quick headcount. He was wearing a camel-coloured duffel coat which somehow made him look like an extra from a movie about World War Two. Then he made an announcement.

'I'd just like to remind everyone that you're representing your school today and we'd like you to act with the necessary decorum.'

This was met with a barrage of groans, laughs and jeers, but he soldiered gamely on.

'Also, don't forget that this is an educational trip, not a holiday. You will each be asked to submit an essay about the Plague of 1645, so I would advise you all to listen

attentively to everything you hear today.’

Another long groan. Mr McKenzie gestured to the driver and took a seat at the front of the coach. It pulled away with another hiss of hydraulics and started along the street. Rain streaked diagonally across the window. Tom tried to concentrate his attention on the view but couldn’t quite manage to shut out the voices coming from the back of the coach.

‘I heard the Manky’s mother did a runner on her old man,’ said a voice.

‘Aye,’ agreed Gillies. ‘Left him high and dry in Mankyland. Fancied a bit of local talent instead.’

‘She’s shacked up with Hamish McPherson,’ said Jenny. ‘I heard my Ma telling her friend.’

‘Hamish McPherson. Jesus! She likes to live dangerously. Hamish McPherson with the . . .’ The voice lowered to a whisper towards the end of the sentence so Tom couldn’t hear what was said, but the derisive laughter at the end suggested that it had been fairly crude.

‘Keep it down at the back!’ shouted Mr McKenzie and the laughter faded. ‘Stuart, don’t let me have to tell you again.’

Tom sighed. He wondered what his friends were doing now. In Manchester, he’d have been joining in with the laughter and some other kid would have been the butt of the joke, some spod that everybody made fun of. Here, he was the outsider and it wasn’t a nice place to be.

He reached into his pocket and took out his mobile, keeping it well out of sight because school rules didn’t allow pupils to have them. It was Pay As You Go, and he

was currently out of credit. Mum, sensing perhaps that he would be phoning his dad, had refused point blank to fund the habit, and he'd had to resort to using his dinner money but that only went so far.

The phone had been his lifeline over the past few weeks: he'd texted all his mates back in Manchester, telling them of his woes and, at first, they'd replied to him, expressing their concerns and making vague plans to come up there and rescue him. But, as time went on, they texted less often and now seemed to have given up on him completely. But he'd been texting his dad too and Dad had been texting him back, several times a day and had even phoned him a couple of times.

Dad claimed to have had no inkling about Mum's affair; the first he had known of it was when he got back from work and found the house empty and a letter on the mantelpiece. He had now put the matter in the hands of his solicitors (whatever that meant) and they were trying to find a way that Dad and Tom could be allowed to spend some time together – but the distances involved meant it could take quite a while to do that. In the meantime, Tom was to 'keep his chin up' and work hard at his new school, try to fit in as best he could. The last text Tom had received was an odd one and made him think that his Dad must have been drinking when he wrote it.

Tom. Please remember I will always love you. Dad.

As far as Tom could remember, it was the first time his dad had ever said those words to him.

He sighed and, determined to take his mind off his troubles, he loaded up *Timeslyp* on his phone, a game he'd been playing a lot lately. In it, the hero, John Kane, a lean, craggy man dressed in a wide-brimmed hat and a long leather coat, spent all his time running along endless corridors, dodging attacks from cloaked and masked assassins. They came out of the most unexpected places, leaping through paintings on the wall, oozing up from the bare floorboards beneath Kane's feet, dropping through the ceiling onto his back. He escaped them by performing a series of athletic leaps and somersaults to avoid the razor-sharp sickles they carried. Every so often, Kane would reach a doorway, a portal into another level and, whenever he burst through one of them, he would find himself in an alternate reality, where everything was slightly different and where the rules learned on the previous level no longer applied. It was weirdly addictive. Tom was currently on level six but couldn't quite seem to reach the next doorway. Every time he got close to it, he would be felled by a couple of assassins who jumped out of the shadows, hell-bent on his destruction.

He was so engrossed in the game that it was a complete surprise when the coach, with a great hissing of air brakes, pulled to a halt on the High Street and Mr McKenzie announced that it was time to get off. Tom abandoned the game, noting as he did so that the phone's battery was half gone.

'Great,' he muttered. He shoved the phone into his damp blazer pocket and waited for the other kids to leave the coach before tagging reluctantly along behind them.

Two

The tour started in the gift shop. The class stood around looking at a collection of pencils, fridge magnets, posters and assorted bits of multi-coloured plastic. Tom found himself by a pile of pewter keyrings depicting the tiny figure of a man in a long cloak and a flat-topped hat, carrying a long cane in one hand. He picked one up and took a closer look. Inexplicably, the figure seemed to have the head of a bird, with a long hooked beak and big, goggly eyes.

‘Manky’s just found a model of his dad,’ sneered Gillies, moving past and deliberately jostling Tom with his shoulder. Then he flapped his bent arms up and down and made a clucking sound. Tom dropped the keyring back with the others and stood there, fuming silently, wondering why he felt so unable to stand up to Gillies and the other kids. They were just bullies, after all, and Tom would have had no problem telling them to get lost back in Manchester, but here he felt somehow powerless. So much was wrong with his life right now that he didn’t feel able to make the smallest change to anything. But, he thought, how satisfying it would be to turn around and punch Gillies on the nose.

A door set into the wall opened and a young woman came out, dressed in olden-day clothing: a green dress

with a white apron and a tightly-fitting cloth cap that drooped down on one side of her head. 'It's Wee Willie Winky!' sniggered Gillies and Mr Mckenzie moved closer to shoot a warning look at him. The woman had obviously heard it all before. She waited calmly until the murmur of conversation had died down and then she performed a curtsy to the waiting children.

'Good morning,' she said. 'My name is Agnes Chambers; I'm a maid and I'll be taking you down to Mary King's Close. Please be very careful on the steps; we don't want any accidents, do we? Now, if you'd like to follow me?'

She turned and led the way through the open door and the class fell into line behind her. Once again, Tom waited till last, well aware how easy it would be for somebody to 'accidentally' barge into him on the steep stone steps that led down into the gloom. The group descended in silence, some of the girls clutching at each other nervously until they found themselves standing at the top of a long run of stone floor, which angled steeply downwards. On either side of them, rough plastered walls, sparsely lit by strategically placed lights, rose up sheer to a dark ceiling high above their heads. Lines hung with ratty looking washing were strung across the gap. 'Agnes' came to a halt and turned to look at the class. She waited for them to gather in front of her.

'You're probably wondering what this place is,' she said. 'What we're looking at here are the streets of the old city, underneath the Royal Mile, just as they would have looked in the 1600's. Well . . . almost. If we'd been down here in the year 1645, we'd have been ankle-deep in raw sewage.'

Tom felt Gillies' elbow jam into his ribs.

'Just like home, eh Manky?' he whispered and there were muted sniggers. Mr McKenzie shushed them to silence and Agnes continued.

'Everywhere, you would have heard the words '*Gardez Loo!*' which was the signal that somebody was about to empty a chamber pot out of a doorway or an upstairs window. You certainly didn't want to be in the way when *that* happened.'

'See,' smirked Gillies, 'What did I tell you? Just like Manchester.'

'The sewage ran downhill from here until it reached the loch, so you can imagine what that must have smelled like.'

'Why don't you tell everyone, Manky?' hissed Gillies. More sniggers.

'In 1753, The Royal Exchange decided to take down the top three floors of Mary King's Close and use the lower ones as foundations for the new City Chambers. So all this was hidden from the public view, locked away until the year 2003, when it was decided to reopen the Close as a tourist attraction. Now, we're going to walk down the hill and look at some of the homes of people who lived here in the 1600's.'

She turned and led them on down the slope.

'Some tourist attraction,' Tom heard Gillies mutter. 'Place looks like it needs a good clean.'

'Yeah, it stinks down here,' agreed one of his cronies. 'Dead borin.'

But Tom didn't agree. He thought the Close was really atmospheric. In this strange, shadowy world beneath the

city, it was all too easy to imagine what it must have been like to live in those times. He pictured the narrow streets filled with the bustle of human life – carts and carriages rattling over the cobbles, salesmen and women shouting out their wares as they wandered through the crowd, ragged children chasing after the carriages to beg for coins.

Now Agnes paused in front of an open doorway and a serious look came to her face. ‘We’re about to enter the house of one of the Close’s residents, John Craig,’ she said. ‘It’s the year 1645, and the bubonic plague has come to the city. When we go into the room, be careful you don’t bump in to anybody.’

She led the way in and the group followed. When it came to Tom’s turn, he saw that the room was in almost total darkness, save for the light of a lantern beside a roughly made wooden bed. There was a child lying in the bed, his face and bare chest unnaturally pale – and kneeling beside him was a strange and nightmarish figure, similar to the keyring that Tom had looked at earlier. Instead of a hat, he wore a tightly fitting leather helmet, but the face was the same, a great curved beak like a bird of prey and what looked like huge round eyes. It took a few moments to register that the figures were nothing more than waxworks, but it was still an unsettling image.

There was an uncomfortable silence before Jenny said, ‘Who’s the Crow Man?’

Everybody laughed at this, but Agnes took it all in her stride.

‘I’ve heard him called some interesting names,’ she said, ‘but that one’s a first for me.’ She moved closer to the

figure. ‘This sinister-looking gentleman is Doctor George Rae, Edinburgh’s most famous plague doctor, and he’s here to treat young Thomas Craig who has contracted bubonic plague, as you can see by the telltale buboes on his body.’ She indicated a bright red swelling under the child’s left armpit. ‘Dr Rae is Edinburgh’s second plague doctor. The first, Dr John Paulitious, died in 1645, after just a short time in the job.’

‘What did he die of?’ asked one boy and his friend gave him a scornful look.

‘Work it out,’ he said.

Agnes nodded. ‘Absolutely,’ she said. ‘Plague doctoring was a very dangerous profession, but quite lucrative. To take Doctor Paulitious’s place, Doctor Rae was promised the incredible salary of one hundred and ten pounds a month. His employers were happy to offer him that because they didn’t think he’d live to collect the money, but they were wrong. In the end he had to virtually sue the Town Council for his back pay.’

‘But why’s he all done up like a big bird?’ asked another girl.

Agnes smiled. ‘Back in the seventeenth century, people believed that the plague was spread by something called ‘miasma’ – infected air. The mask that the doctor wore had a beak that was literally stuffed with herbs and flowers, which he thought would act as some kind of filter. He wore goggles to protect his eyes and, of course, his helmet and cloak were made of thick leather.’ She studied the class for a moment. ‘I wonder if any of you can tell me how the plague was actually spread,’ she said.

Before he could stop himself, Tom's hand went up. 'Fleas,' he said.

There was raucous laughter at this, but Agnes soon silenced them with a stern look.

'I don't know why you're laughing,' she told them. 'He's quite right.' She smiled at Tom. 'What else can you tell me?'

'Well . . .' Tom was aware of Gillies and his mates looking daggers at him, as though The Manky wasn't allowed to know anything about *their* history, but he ignored them and went on. 'The fleas fed on infected rats and then, when the rats died, the fleas moved on to people.'

'Have you been here before?' Agnes asked him, suspiciously.

He shook his head. 'I went to this other place,' he muttered. 'Eyam, in Derbyshire?' He'd been there on a school trip earlier that year. His class had done a project on it and, unlike most projects he'd been involved with, it had been really interesting. They'd got the plague there in the 1660's (he couldn't remember the actual date). The fleas came in on rolls of cloth that a tailor had ordered and near enough the whole village had ended up infected. The villagers were incredibly brave about it and opted to shut themselves off from the rest of the world, forbidding anyone to leave, so they wouldn't spread the sickness. 'I think over two hundred people died there,' he added, 'which was like two-thirds of the village.'

The moment he'd finished talking, Tom regretted it. Gillies was looking at him now with a 'just you wait' expression on his ugly face.

But Agnes smiled. 'That's brilliant,' she said. 'Thanks for

sharing that with us.' She looked around at the children. 'You see, it wasn't just Edinburgh that suffered from the plague; there were outbreaks all over the world. Perhaps the most famous was the Great Plague of London in 1666. I'm sure some of you must have heard of that?' Nobody so much as grunted, so she continued. 'But, going back to our 'Crow Man' here . . .' She flashed a mischievous look at Jenny. 'Although the herbs and flowers in that beak didn't help him one iota, something else about his costume almost certainly saved him from infection. I wonder, would anybody like to hazard a guess about what that might be?'

There was a long, baffled silence, before Tom felt compelled to speak again. 'The leather cloak,' he said. 'The fleas wouldn't have been able to bite through it.'

'Correct!' said Agnes. 'You're certainly on the ball, today.' She looked around at the others. 'Now, if there are no more questions, we'll move on.' She headed for the door and the children shuffled after her. Tom hung back, as ever, but noticed that Gillies was doing the same. The heavysset boy ambled closer until he was standing right beside Tom. He smelled of a mixture of stale sweat and cheese and onion crisps.

'Think you're smart, don't you, Manky?' he murmured.

'Smarter than you, at any rate,' said Tom. His success with the questions must have made him reckless.

'Yeah, you enjoy it while you can. You and me are gonna have a little talk straight after this. We'll see how clever you are, then.'

'Come on, boys, stop hanging around,' said Mr

McKenzie, who was probably already regretting offering to shepherd this outing.

The two boys moved obediently towards the door and Mr McKenzie followed them out. They caught up with the rest of the group just as they came to a halt in front of another doorway.

‘The room we are about to go into is in some ways our most famous one,’ Agnes told the children. ‘Lots of people know the story of it even though they have never visited Mary King’s Close. We call it, ‘Little Annie’s Room,’ and, before we go in there, I’m going to tell you the story.’ She paused for a moment to make sure she had everyone’s attention. ‘In the nineteen-nineties, this room was visited by a famous Japanese psychic. She claimed it was the saddest room she had ever visited and that when she stepped inside it, she felt a wee hand pulling at her sleeve . . .’

She paused for effect and some of the more impressionable girls grabbed each other nervously.

‘The psychic turned around and saw the ghost of a little girl standing behind her. She was crying. She said her name was Annie and that she was looking for a lost doll. Then she vanished. Well, the psychic was so moved by this experience she went straight out and bought a wee Barbie doll, which she placed in the room in an attempt to cheer Annie up. As I told you, that was some time ago and, over the years in between, visitors to Mary King’s Close have added to Annie’s collection. Let’s go in and have a look, shall we?’

She led the way into the room. Back at the end of the queue, Tom could hear gasps of surprise coming from

ahead and, when he finally made it into the room to peer over the rows of heads in front of him, he saw that one corner was piled high with literally hundreds of dolls, teddy bears and cuddly toys of every shape and size.

Agnes continued to talk, but Tom's attention was distracted as somebody moved past the open doorway behind him. He turned his head to look and felt a chill tingling along the length of his spine; he saw that a young girl, perhaps ten or twelve years old, was walking by. She was carrying a straw basket of what looked like vegetables and she was dressed in seventeenth-century clothing: a tattered brown dress and a white cap like Agnes wore, from beneath which a tangle of blonde hair spilled. As she walked by she turned her head to look at Tom and he felt another sense of shock, because she had the most intense blue eyes he had ever seen. But she only looked at him for an instant before turning her head and walking on.

Tom told himself that she was just part of the tour, a young girl dressed as Annie, put there to throw a scare into the visitors to her room, but that didn't seem to make any sense. If that was the case, wouldn't she be positioned somewhere in the room itself, ready to pop out and shout 'Boo!?' As far as Tom could tell, he was the only one who had so much as noticed her. And, if she was just an actress, how had they got that flickery, shimmery quality to her? Some kind of special effect? A projection, something like that?

Against his better judgement, he stepped back from the rest of the group and leaned out to have a look around the edge of the doorway. There was the girl gliding silently

along the corridor, seemingly intent on going somewhere. Tom wasn't sure why but he felt impelled to follow. The others were listening to what Agnes was saying and they didn't even notice as he slipped out of the room and went after the girl.

She's not a ghost, he told himself as he walked. There's a logical explanation for this.

But he couldn't for the life of him imagine what that might be and he couldn't seem to stop himself from following her just the same.

'Excuse me?' he said and she glanced back at him for a moment, a look of surprise on her face, but then she turned away and increased her pace, as though anxious to get away from him. 'Hey, it's all right, I won't hurt you,' said Tom. 'Hang on a minute!'

There was another doorway up ahead of her, a low opening with a stone lintel across the top of it but it was roped off with a length of thick cord, and prominent signs in bright red letters at either side made it clear that it wasn't a sensible place to go.

**DANGER. NO PUBLIC ACCESS BEYOND THIS POINT.
KEEP OUT.**

Tom had expected the girl to turn away from it, but no, she went straight through the doorway without slowing her pace and, here was the weird thing, she hadn't even bothered to duck under the length of cord that barred the way, but seemed to go through it without disturbing it.

In the heat of the moment, all Tom could think was

that the girl was going into a dangerous place.

'Hey, you!' he shouted. 'Can't you read?'

He quickened his pace in an attempt to catch up with her, but she continued walking into the darkness of the room beyond and, almost without thinking, he jumped over the rope and followed her. As he ducked under the lintel he felt a strange, giddy feeling ripple through him and then found himself walking through almost total darkness, his feet clunking on wooden floorboards. He saw the girl up at the far end of the room, standing in front of an ancient stone fireplace. In the gloom she seemed to flicker and shimmer like a silent movie. Tom took a cautious step forward.

'You really shouldn't be in here,' he told her. 'I don't think it's safe.'

She glanced at him again, her expression one of suspicion, and then she turned her face away from him.

'Look, honestly,' he said, 'I really think it's best if we go outside and I—'

He broke off in alarm as he felt something sag beneath his feet; there was a slow creaking noise, the sound of ancient timbers protesting at his weight. He stayed very still. The girl was looking at him again now, an expression of concern on her face. She turned to face him and he saw with a stab of shock that the front of her dress was stained red with blood.

'OK,' he said. 'I think we'd better—'

And then suddenly, shockingly, everything was falling away beneath him in a slow, grinding roar. He made a desperate attempt to turn back towards the entrance but

his feet were no longer standing on anything solid and the next thing he knew, he was falling, falling in the midst of splintered wood and clouds of dust and he seemed to fall for a very long time before he hit the ground.