

The Ghost Within

By Charlotte Bloomfield

Copyright © Charlotte Bloomfield 2012

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the author.

All characters and events in this publication are purely fictitious and any

resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover artwork

Copyright © Clivia @ Fotolia 2012

All rights reserved

No part of the cover image or illustrations may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the illustrators.

Written in English (UK)

978-1-909411-24-1

Published by Mauve Square Publishing

2012

Dedicated to

Alex and Hannah

The Ghost Within

Crystal looked around, feeling scared and icy cold. She could see shadows on the grey stone walls that enclosed her. It was dark, but not so dark that she couldn't see him. He stood quite still, tall and stocky, with lots of hair covering most of his face. But not his eyes. She saw them all too clearly, glowing amber red – like fire, she thought. And then she could smell something in the air, it was smoke....

Chapter 1, New School

Crystal felt a jolt. She was awake – the taxi she was travelling in had stopped suddenly.

“Damn thing flew right into my windscreen,” the man in the driver’s seat said.

He let down his window. Crystal did the same and looked at the ground, where a lifeless mass of feathers had been thrown from the car bonnet to the side of the vehicle. The bird’s head was at an unnatural angle, its eyes closed. Then she heard a squawk and looking up saw another dark- feathered bird in the tree, flapping its black wings at her.

“Nasty birds are crows, Miss,” the driver said. “They eat their own you know. That one in the tree is just waiting till we go and he’ll have his dinner.”

Crystal felt sick – she didn’t know if it was what he’d said or if she was sick with nerves at starting a new school. Then she felt cold wet drops hit her face.

“Better get that window up, miss. I don’t want my seats gettin’ wet.” The driver looked at her sternly and turning re-started his engine.

Crystal pressed the window button, and gazed in front of her as the taxi carried on its journey. Through the rain, she could see the building now coming into view and the taxi slowed again as they headed for two tall iron gates, standing open.

“Gonna get a bit bumpy,” the driver said. As they went through the iron gates and across a cattle grid, a sign on the left caught Crystal’s eye.

Welcome to Castle Mount School

Boarding and Day School

BOYS AND GIRLS

11-18 years

“There it is Miss – isn’t she grand?” The driver said.

Crystal looked ahead at the building growing closer and closer as they made their way

down the endless driveway. The school was impressive – it was indeed very grand and extremely old with so many windows, Crystal lost count. The taxi came to a stop in front of the huge entrance where a notice in big letters said *RECEPTION - THIS WAY*. Crystal knew there was no one to welcome her and no one to say goodbye to either, except the grumpy taxi-man. But it had been her choice. Dad had said he'd drive her, but she'd refused, knowing it would be easier on them both if she did this on her own. Yet now the reality of it all was much harder than she'd bargained for.

*

It was half an hour since Crystal had arrived at Castle Mount School and she was alone. Miss Mitchell, one of the teachers and in charge of the girl boarders, had shown her where she'd sleep and left her to unpack. She'd informed Crystal that she'd arrived at a chaotic time. It was the first week back from the Easter holidays, “not ideal for starting a new school, Crystal – in the middle of the school year,” Miss Mitchell had said, brisk but kind. But her Dad's new job couldn't wait until September and it had been impossible for him to take his daughter along.

Standing in the open doorway of the dormitory, Crystal clasped her suitcase in both hands feeling utterly miserable. Her cheeks were flushed and wet, her grey blue eyes sad and watery. Just then a hand landed on her shoulder and she flinched, dropping the handle of her case. Spinning round, as she stepped backwards her leg caught the side of the suitcase and she lost her balance. Falling back, she landed with a thud. In a heap on the cold hard floor, she looked up at the stranger who seemed to loom over her. The young girl had wavy long blond hair and glasses and Crystal judged she was about her own age. The girl had a concerned expression on her face.

“Sorry I scared you,” she exclaimed at once. “Are you ok? Let me help,” she offered, holding out her hand.

Crystal shook her head and scrambled back on her feet.

“I'm fine. You didn't scare me, just took me by surprise.” Crystal said in a firm voice, dusting herself down. The girl still looked concerned, but then she smiled.

“Well, I'm Lucy, I believe you're next to me,” she said in a friendly way, her eyes moving over to the other side of the large room, where two single beds stood next to each

other. Crystal followed Lucy's gaze, then her eyes darted to the oval window directly above the beds. Cold rain splattered against the glass from a dark and angry sky – a depressing sight.

Crystal sighed. It was like seeing how she felt inside. She turned to face Lucy.

“I'm Crystal. It's nice to meet you. How long have you been in this place?” she asked. She looked round the room again and counted three more beds in the room. Four strangers including Lucy to share with. This was going to be tough. As an only child she'd never needed to share a room with someone - or anything else, for that matter.

Lucy laughed. “You make it out to be like a prison or something, Crystal! But it's really not that bad.”

“Oh! Sorry – I'm new to all this. Yesterday I was back home with my Dad, just him and me and now – well, I'm here and he's in Canada.”

Quickly wiping away a tear that trickled from her left eye, she grabbed the suitcase handle again and made her way across to the bed that would be hers for the foreseeable future.

She sat down on the soft mattress as Lucy followed, sitting on her own bed and swinging her legs back and forth as she studied Crystal through her large round glasses.

“You didn't want to come to boarding school, did you?” she asked in a quiet voice.

Crystal shook her head. “I wanted to go with my Dad. I told him I could be his research assistant but he said I was too young. So it was boarding school or my great aunt's house. Let's just say being here is the better option.” Crystal even managed a little smile at this.

Lucy's eyes opened wide and her lips parted. “Why?” she blurted out excitedly. “Is she a witch or something? Please, tell me she is!”

Crystal was surprised at Lucy's excitement and couldn't help another smile.

“No, well, I don't *think* so.”

Lucy's smile dropped. Seeing her disappointment, Crystal continued, “But she does have this room in her creepy old house that's kept locked all the time. Aunt Adelaide always

wears the key on a chain around her neck and only she knows what's in that old room.”

Lucy was on the edge of her bed, gripping the sides. Her eyes were wide as she hung on every word Crystal was saying.

“So, what do you think she keeps in there, then?”

“Dunno, but it wouldn't surprise me if it was....” Crystal stopped suddenly as two more strangers entered the dormitory arm-in-arm. Laughing, they walked past Crystal and Lucy, apparently not even noticing they had a new roommate.

“Who are they?” Crystal whispered.

“Oh, the tall one is Samantha, who everyone calls Sam and the other is Rebecca – they're alright, however, they're always together – not much time for anyone else.”

Crystal looked across at the two girls, then back at Lucy. A boarding school was going to take a lot of getting used to.

Lucy jumped up off her bed. “Come on,” she said smiling, “I'll show you round everywhere - and I'll try and make it fun, I promise.”

Crystal nodded. She was glad she had a new friend and quickly followed Lucy out into the corridors of Castle Mount School.

Chapter 2, Megan

“And this is the Common Room,” Lucy said cheerfully, as they reached the final room of the tour round the school, which was a lot smaller than Crystal had first thought.

The tour only lasted a short time, during which Crystal had learned there were a total of five girl boarders, all the rest were boys. Lucy had told her that up until one year ago, the place was a school just for boys. This explained a lot as the Common Room seemed full of them.

Standing at the door, Crystal stared into the bright, colourful room. There were some armchairs and a huge sofa placed in the centre. Lots of book cases crammed with all sorts of volumes lined the edges of the room; posters and pictures covered the walls and the large wooden coffee table in front of the sofa was littered with comics and magazines. The room was extremely busy with children talking and laughing. Crystal felt even smaller and more lost than she did when she'd first arrived on the school grounds. She wasn't used to so many children in one place. Her old school was in a small village and this was all so different, noisy and very lively.

“Hey Lucy! Who's the new girl?”

Crystal's eyes moved round the room to where the voice came from. A boy with messy brown hair got up from the sofa.

“This is Crystal - and be nice!” Lucy replied to the boy, walking over to him. Crystal followed reluctantly. The noise levels had lowered since the boy's greeting which he'd shouted across the floor. She could feel lots of eyes staring at her and kept her own eyes down as she joined Lucy and the boy.

“Cool name, Crystal, by the way,” he said, grinning.

“Yeah, thanks! My mum had a thing for precious stones.” Crystal replied, thinking back to what her Dad had told her.

“Well, our mum's have a thing about the letter 'L',” he said, his grin growing wider. “I'm Liam! And don't listen to my dear cousin here. I'm always nice.”

“Oh well, it’s *nice* to meet you.” Crystal replied, surprised her new friend hadn’t mentioned she had a cousin who went to the same school.

The boy glared at Lucy, as if he could read Crystal’s mind and knew she hadn’t mentioned him.

“However, unlike my dear cousin here – I don’t board, I choose to go home every night.”

“Stop being so pleased with yourself,” Lucy said, punching him on the arm. “and you shouldn’t be in here anyway, the Common Room is supposed to be for boarders only. Careful you don’t miss the last bus, clever-clogs! Then you’ll have to stay over with me.”

Liam rubbed his upper arm, looking annoyed now. “I’m telling Mum you did that, Lucy! You know I can’t hit you back – you’ll cry. And you know very well my Mum and Dad can’t afford for me to board, they’re already working all the time to pay for me to be here in the first place.”

“Now that’s an exaggeration! You live ten minutes down the road. I live over two hours away. You’re being such an idiot and a show off.” Lucy’s face was quite red with temper.

Crystal thought she better step in before a full blown argument broke out.

“Are you two always like this?” she asked, laughing at the squabbling pair. She found the two were more like brother and sister than cousins.

“Pretty much,” Lucy replied, smiling. “It comes from spending nearly every summer since I can remember at his house.”

But before Liam could reply, the room grew almost silent. Lucy and Liam looked towards the door and Crystal also turned to see what everyone else was looking at.

At the doorway was not some scary, wild creature, or worse, a teacher, but a girl with two long black plaits and pale white skin. Her eyes were dark and small and her lips, drained of any colour, were shut tight together. She was staring right at Crystal, who hugged her arms around her. Even though she was wearing a cardigan, Crystal felt colder, much colder, and she shivered. Then the girl at the door lifted her right arm in front of her and pointed a long drooping hand at Crystal, who found she was rooted to the spot.

People gasped and looked at Crystal. As they did so, the girl turned and walked back out into the corridor, vanishing from sight. The room resumed its normal activity straight away, everyone chattering as if nothing had happened. Watching Lucy and Liam, who both looked at the floor, Crystal put her own arms back down to her sides. Somehow she wasn't cold anymore. It was strange...

"What was that all about?" she asked the pair.

Liam and Lucy looked uncomfortable. Then Liam spoke first. "*That* was Megan – well it used to be."

"It still is." Lucy's voice was sad. "She's just – well, different now."

"Why, what happened to her?" Crystal asked intrigued and a bit scared if she was honest.

In answer, Liam walked across the room to the window beckoning Crystal to follow. Lucy went along as well and all three stared out at the gloomy British weather.

"Now, Crystal. Look up the hill and you'll see what's left of a castle," Liam said, pointing.

"Yeah, I see it." Crystal nodded, thinking how desolate and grey the ruins appeared through the pouring rain.

"It's all that's left after it was burned to the ground during a massive battle. The Baron, who lived in the castle and his army were defeated and legend has it, Baron John and his people were burned alive when the castle was set alight."

"That's awful!" Crystal blurted out.

"Yeah," agreed Lucy, "and now the ghost of Baron John is supposed to haunt the ruins. That's right, isn't it Liam?" Lucy said.

Liam turned to face the girls. "Yeah, that's right. So they say, anyway."

Crystal was bewildered. "But where does Megan fit in to all this?" she asked.

Before Liam could answer, he glanced at his watch. "Damn, I've got to go, I'm gonna miss my bus. See you later." He raced out of the room.

“So – what about Megan, then?” Crystal said, looking at Lucy expectantly.

“Let’s go back to the dorm first,” she said softly. “I’ll explain it all there. Too many eyes and ears in here.”

Chapter 3, Ghosts

Crystal sat next to Lucy on her bed. They were alone in the dormitory.

“Have you seen those ghost reality shows on TV?” Lucy said.

“No, not really,” said Crystal, a bit uncertain, “I’ve heard of them though. My Dad doesn’t believe in ghosts, says it’s a load of rubbish, all made up.”

“I think that as well, but Megan was different, she believed in ghosts all right! Always reading ghost stories and always saying that one day she’d prove that ghosts were real and she was going to get evidence!”

Crystal looked at Lucy, puzzled. “Why do you talk about her as if she’s not here anymore?”

Lucy shuffled her feet. “I don’t mean to talk about her like that, it’s just - well she was my best friend and since that night, she’s not mine or anybody’s friend anymore – she’s not even Megan.”

“What happened?” Crystal was shocked at how sad Lucy sounded.

“Well, it was Christmas just gone. Megan had been given one of those digital camcorders by her parents as a special present. She’d always wanted one, I know. Of course she realized she shouldn’t bring it to school but she did anyway, saying that it was her chance to get the evidence that ghosts exist. All it took was a suggestion by my dear cousin that she go up to the ruins with the camcorder and prove the Baron’s ghost really does haunt them.”

“Oh I see. So - she went, right?”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah. I tried to stop her – it was really late and dark, I should have gone with her. I wish I had.” Lucy had tears in her eyes.

Crystal put her arm around her new friend’s shoulders.

“You can’t blame yourself, Lucy. It was Megan’s own decision and you said you tried to stop her.”

“I know – she told me not to tell and I didn’t but when she hadn’t come back by the

morning, I knew something was terribly wrong. But, I still didn't want her to get into any trouble so I waited till after lunch. And by then I *had* to tell someone. They sent out a search party that afternoon up to the ruins and they found her." Tears were now rolling down Lucy's cheeks.

"She was up there all that time by herself?" Crystal was surprised, wondering what had happened to Megan?

"Yes, all alone. Apparently she'd fallen down a pot hole into what they think is the dungeon or dungeons beneath the ruins. She'd managed to climb back out somehow and they found her lying unconscious next to the hole. She was frozen, covered in mud and they said there was blood under her finger nails, where she had clawed her way out of the ground."

Lucy wiped her tears away with the back of her hand, adding, "They also said it was a miracle she hadn't broken her leg falling or caught pneumonia lying on the wet ground all that time."

"When did she come back to school?" Crystal asked.

"About a week or so later. She'd recovered, they said, there was nothing physically wrong with her." Lucy lowered her voice, even though she and Crystal were still on their own in the dormitory. "But it was awful," continued Lucy, "she'd changed completely – in herself, I mean. She wouldn't speak to anyone – not even me. They just said it was psychological – the shock of the fall and being trapped in the dark. All she needed was some counselling and she'd be fine – but that was three months ago." Lucy shook her head. "And she's not fine at all."

"I don't understand, shouldn't she be in a hospital or something? And what about her Mum and Dad? Surely they must be worried sick?" Crystal was very puzzled.

"Well, her Mum and Dad are on some lecture tour in Australia and from what I overheard in the school office, all they've been told is that Megan had a fall but she's ok and not to worry," replied Lucy. "But it's like she's got a power over the teachers here, they seem to just accept the way she is and she pretty much does what she likes – it's hard to explain."

"You sound almost – well, *afraid* of her."

Lucy nodded. "I am. Everyone is, and I've got to tell you Crystal, that she sleeps in

here with us.” Lucy was looking in the direction of the corner of the room.

Crystal could see a single bed over there, perfectly made and standing by itself at the end of the room.

“That’s hers, then?”

Lucy nodded. Crystal felt a chill go down her spine. Added to everything else being strange, she’d be sharing a room with someone who was obviously weird and not her normal self!

“My aunt’s house doesn’t seem so bad now,” Crystal said with a little smile.

“I’m so glad you’re here anyway, Crystal.” Lucy smiled back. “It’s really nice to have a friend again, just promise me you won’t go ghost-hunting!”

“I promise. Oh, talking of promises, I told my dad I’d call him before I go to sleep. I’ll see you in a bit.” Crystal made for the door as Lucy said,

“Ok, you know where you’re going – the school office?”

Crystal nodded and gave Lucy a little wave. But as she walked through the door she came face to face with Megan, who just stood there barring her way. Crystal shivered. It was obvious Megan wasn’t going to move. So she moved herself around the girl - but just as she passed her, Megan grabbed her arm. Crystal flinched and stared at Megan, who mouthed something at her. No voice came out but she seemed to want to say something as her eyes bored into Crystal’s. However, after a few seconds she let go of Crystal’s arm and walked off into the dormitory, leaving Crystal feeling totally bewildered. Had Megan wanted to speak to her? If so, what could she have wanted? Anyway, why her and not Lucy? She stood there for a few moments - then remembered the time. If she didn’t hurry, she wouldn’t be able to call her Dad.

“Ah – let me see. Crystal, isn’t it?” a large, round woman said from inside the school office as Crystal hovered in the doorway.

“Yes, that’s right – is it ok to ring my father, please?” Crystal asked quietly, moving into the warm room.

“Of course, dear. I’m Mrs Briggs – the School Secretary. Do you want me to ring him or would you like to do it yourself?”

“I can do it, thank you.” Crystal replied with a smile, walking over to the desk in the corner of the small room. Mrs Briggs pushed over the phone.

“I’ll be just through there, if you need me, dear. You’ll have about ten minutes.” She said as she walked to the internal door, leading to a smaller room. Crystal waited until the door was closed then dialled her father’s number.