



**URBAN
EXPLORATION
&
THE CURSE OF
CHILLINGHAM
CASTLE**

Pete Rossi

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Smashwords Edition

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Thank you for your support.

This book is dedicated to my mate Derek, who provided help and advice which has made this book a hell of a lot better than it was going to be.

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[Curse of Chillingham Castle](#)

Chillingham Castle is one of the most haunted places in England, with a long and bloody past. Over from America on their first European holiday, tourists Mark and Susie take a detour to the atmospheric castle. It was a decision that they would later regret. Life for them will never be quite the same again.

Urban Exploration

It was a lively late Saturday evening, ticking slowly on toward Sunday morning. I had been in the pub with my mate Doug for a few hours. We met at University and had stayed firm friends in the three years since we graduated. We were seated in the corner - close enough to the bar to be easily able to get over to order our next round, but close enough to the exit in case it all kicked off again. Which it invariably did in this place.

"Nice to get out for an evening," Doug said to me.

"Yeah," I replied. "Even if it's just to this dump."

We came here because of the location rather than the atmosphere. During the day it could be quite pleasant, but on a Saturday night the place came alive, usually for all the wrong reasons. It was crowded. A blonde in high heels tottered past, giving me a grin as she tried not to drop the three full pints she was holding on to. I reckoned within the hour the place would be crawling with police. Again.

"That's what you need, mate," Doug said, indicating toward the girl.

"Someone like that to come home to."

"I've got someone," I replied, grimacing. "Bev."

"Ah, the lovely Bev," Doug said. "What do you see in her?"

"Bev's not bad," I said, swallowing another mouthful of lager. "Okay, she doesn't look quite as good as she did, she can't cook, won't clean the house, sits around all day doing nothing and getting fat." I paused, then grinned.

"Maybe you're right!"

"Me and Jim are off out tomorrow. We're going to explore York View Hospital. You could come with us."

"Can't. Got to go to Bev's mums."

"Come on! Let her go by herself. It will be a great day out. Like we used to have. Before you met Bev. We were wild then."

I glanced up as two girls in very short skirts skipped past. One gave me a wink and licked her lips. Maybe I could do with someone like that. I watched her legs as she walked away, knowing I was watching her.

"What do you mean by explore?" I asked Doug.

"Right. That's settled then. See you at six, bright and early. Bring your camera."

At five forty five the next morning I woke up. Bev was snoring as I silently got out of the bed. Quite easily actually, as she had the duvet mostly on her side as normal. Really didn't want to wake her. Haven't been up at this time on a Sunday morning for years. I peered through the bedroom curtains, careful not to let too much light in. All was quiet outside. I wondered what I was letting myself in for. Still, it had to be better than going round to Bev's mum's. Anything was better than that. Seeing Bev's mum made me think of what Bev would be like in twenty years, and that was not a pleasant thought. Bev had been asleep when I arrived back a few hours earlier so I hadn't

actually told her that I'm not going with her today. Bet that will be the start of yet another argument.

I made a quick bathroom visit, forcing myself to miss out on a shower in case it woke Bev, and grabbed a snack from the kitchen. I rearranged the fridge magnets to say "GONE OUT." Seconds later, I saw lights on the road as Doug arrived with Jim in his battered blue Citroen. I locked up the house and walked down the driveway to the car. The lawn could do with mowing again. That was another of the jobs I had to do round the house.

"Morning mate," said Jim as I got in the back seat.

"Hi Jim, Doug."

With a squeal of tyres Doug pulled away. I rubbed my eyes. Still tired. "What we doing anyway?"

"Told you last night," Doug replied. "Going to explore the old York sanatorium."

"What we're doing, mate," Jim said, "is called urban exploration."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Look, there are abandoned derelict buildings all over the country. Factories that went out of business years ago, old holiday camps that have been closed since the seventies, schools left abandoned going to seed, mental asylums from the 1900s."

"Yeah, so."

"It's huge, man. We go and explore these places before they get knocked down. We take photos and post reports on the Internet. It's the next big thing. And it's great fun."

It'll be better than going to Bev's mum's anyway, I thought. What wouldn't. "And how do we get in? They'll be boarded up, locked down surely."

"Nah," said Jim, shaking his head. "No one cares about them any more. They're just left to rot. And even if they are patrolled by security guards, we can give them the slip."

Security guards. This didn't seem to be turning out like I thought it would.

Jim could see I looked worried, although at that time, I couldn't have said whether it was the upcoming exploration or Doug's driving that was concerning me the most. If there were any police about, I was pretty sure they would be interested in Doug's car control, or lack of.

"Don't sweat, man," Jim said. "We explore these places. We don't smash them up, we don't graffiti everywhere, don't break in if we can't get easy access. If we can't get in easily, we go somewhere else."

I still didn't look convinced. "Was like this on my first time too," Doug piped up, cutting a corner.

Jim continued. "Okay, we have to be careful, but it'll be cool."

"Have to be careful?" I echoed.

"Yeah. Old buildings can be dangerous. Ceilings will have come down, floors might give way under you, rooms will have been burnt out by the local chavs, there's always the worry of asbestos. Needles, all sorts. And you don't want to break your leg or something and get stuck. We can't exactly call for an ambulance."

This was sounding worse by the minute. "Guys, don't know if I'm up for this," I said.

"We're more than halfway there. Not turning around now." Doug banged the steering wheel before accelerating around another corner.

Doug's driving was not the best, and it had only been a few hours since we were downing pints one after another, so I let him concentrate on his driving the rest of the way. The roads were deserted, but that didn't stop him from nearly sideswiping a Renault after a particularly sharp bend.

I settled in for the rest of the journey.

Half an hour later, we arrived. Jim directed Doug down a side road until a barbed wire fence stopped our progress. "Park behind that tree," Jim said. "Got to keep the car out of view." There were signs on the fence which featured stark warnings in huge red letters of prosecution for trespassers. They included pictures of salivating Dobermans.

"Been here once before," Jim said. "If we walk by the fence a bit there's a cut through. Local chavs made it. Don't want our virgin explorer ripping his coat before we even get in. We walked slowly along by the fence, keeping a look out for security. "Don't worry. Won't be any dogs. They just put them on the signs to try and scare you off." Nearly worked, I thought.

"It's huge this place. It's been closed for fifty years, but there's loads still inside. We could easily spend the whole day here, and still have lots we haven't seen."

"Do you know much about this place?"

"Did a search on the net. It's pretty wrecked inside."

Crunching up the gravel driveway, it wasn't long before I got my first look at the place. From a hundred yards away, I could see it was four stories high. The stonework was blackened from over a century's dirt. From fifty yards away, I could make out turrets and gargoyles on the imposing structure. Almost all of the windows were broken, tattered curtains flapping through some of the smashed panes.

From ten yards away, we were close enough for the building to block the warm morning sunlight. The structure loomed above us. It seemed to be leaning over us, as though it wanted to take us in. "Welcome to Hell" was scrawled over the entrance. Surprisingly, it was spelt correctly. The original door was long gone though. A dirty sheet of thick metal, covered in names and offensive messages was up in its place. Underfoot, glass crunched. We would have to find another way in.

There was a smell of burning in the air. I got the feeling that the local fire brigade knew this place well.

We snapped off a few pictures. So sad to see a fantastic Victorian building sitting like this. Wouldn't be surprised if they tore the whole place down or turned it into luxury flats. Still, that would be better than it burning which looked like what would be its fate.

We walked past the door and peered in through one of the smashed window panes. Couldn't see much inside though. If we can't get in any other way we could try and get in here, but the local chavs must have a better route than this. Jim signalled to keep us moving. We carried on and walked round to the back of the main building. A greenhouse used to be here, but nothing would be growing in this place again. There seemed to be about six inches of glass underfoot, with thick weeds sprouting up all over the place. Needles as well. We had our boots on, so had a reasonable chance of getting through

without impaling our feet on the sharp glass shards that were sticking up everywhere.

Extreme caution was needed. To slip and fall in a place like this would not be good. Another vital supply - apart from our lunch - wish I had thought to bring more than just a snack - is the first aid kit Jim had. I say kit, but what I really mean is a few plasters, a box of Paracetamol and a flask of whisky. There's no way a regular ambulance would be able to get here, and I know the police would take a pretty dim view of why we were here. Mind you, the place is so wrecked that there's little more we could do to cause more damage short of incinerating it.

We carefully made our way through the greenhouse, glass crunching under each foot fall.

"Great fun this," Doug said.

At least somebody was enjoying themselves. I was still feeling distinctly uncomfortable. Never liked the idea of getting a six inch shard of glass through my foot, or getting my leg opened up by a hungry dog. "Could have told me it would be like this," I complained. "Would have dressed better."

"Stop complaining. You'll be alright," said Jim.

"Yeah. Enjoy yourself," Doug concurred.

At the other end of the greenhouse was a door hanging on its hinges. We went through and arrived into a huge room.

"This is the Great Hall," Jim told me. "Enough room in here to hold all the staff and patients."

Again, the whole place was pretty trashed. In its day, the room would have been magnificent. Carvings on the ceiling, a marble floor, oak wood panelling, a stage where some of the less disturbed victims would put on shows. I would say patients, but don't think that's appropriate. All of it pretty much gone. Burnt away, blackened and covered in obscene graffiti and more crude and improbable drawings of body parts. I could imagine how it must have been in its heyday. These chavs have a lot to answer for.

"Is it all like this?" I asked.

"Pretty much," said Doug. "State of this country. Leave something for six months, and it'll be wrecked, burnt or stolen."

I sniffed. The smell of smoke was in the air still. It did look as though the locals had a weekly sport of trying to burn the whole place down, but for some reason had never succeeded. Not through lack of effort though. There were obvious seats of fire on the stage and in some of the corners of the room. A burnt pushchair was sat in the middle of the floor with remains of a plastic doll melted down the side. Jim snapped off some more pictures for the website.

"It's sad. Shame to see a place like this treated this way."

"Same as anywhere, now," Doug replied. "Used to be just in the major cities that places like this got trashed, but it's everywhere now. Fancy braving the stairs?"

Up or down? Up won. The stairs didn't look too bad to be honest. Back when this place was made, things were built to last. Up we went, taking care as we walked through the rubbish. Old Coke cans, a dirty pink teddy bear, patient records strewn all over the place. More needles. Looking up, I could

see the sky through the holes in the floors above us. A pigeon flew in our direction, and I jumped out of its way, startled.

"Dirty things," Jim said. "Don't let them get near you. Got diseases and all sorts."

"Could say the same thing about most of the girls I see you with," countered Doug, laughing.

We walked through a room that contained the remains of old metal beds. A hideous wheelchair with manacles on the armrests and a ripped seat with no stuffing left in stood in the middle of the room. "Just imagine being here in that thing," I said. "Glad I didn't live a hundred years ago."

"No way I would have survived years ago," Jim said. "Imagine life without net porn."

There was an old newspaper, gently fluttering in the breeze from the smashed windows. November 1904, it said. There were still bottles with drugs long crumbled to dust, a tattered nightgown on the ground. Dozens of empty cans were strewn about the floor. "Must have been a party in here, sometime," I said.

"Heard there's something happens every Halloween. Place is supposed to be haunted, and the locals come down to scare themselves shitless and get pissed every year." Doug looked out the window. "No sign of anyone today though. Got the place to ourselves."

Leaving the room, we continued on. We walked through the deserted wrecked rooms and came out in to a big space. It looked like a children's ward - but surely they didn't have children in this place did they?

"Know what you're thinking," Jim said. "Place creeped me out the first time I saw it. Surprising what a peeling mural of Daffy Duck on the wall and blackened toys can do to you. Yeah, they did have children here. Not normal children though."

He sniffed. "Did a bit of research. There was a little kid in the 1890's that set fire to his house. Killed his parents and three brothers and sisters. Didn't survive in this place long though. He was in here for a few weeks, and couldn't take it. Teased and taunted every day, he was. Jumped out that window there." He indicated right. "Supposed to still be able to hear him crying at night. True story. Saw it on the net."

"If it's on the net, must be true," I replied.

We walked back along the corridor and came to some open doors. I was about to step through when Jim caught my shoulder and pulled me back. "Got to keep alert, man," he said. I looked down. We were standing at the top of an empty lift shaft. Looking up I could see the sky, blue and clear. Looking down, I could see all the way to the bottom. Tangled wreckage was all I saw down there. Must have been about a thirty foot drop, with no sign of the lift car anywhere.

"Know where to take you next. The morgue," Doug said.

Heading down, we took another set of stairs at the back of the building. Whereas the main staircase was once both open and opulent, this way down was anything but. It was a tight metal spiral staircase which clanged loudly as we trudged down. Some of the fixings of the metal struts were breaking away from the stone walls. I breathed a sign of relief as I made it off the bottom step, but that feeling of relief didn't last long as we entered the morgue.

We were below ground level now. The morgue was cluttered with decaying, rusted furniture. A huge furnace stood in one corner. I couldn't help the shiver that went down my spine, and I could see that Doug didn't like it in here either. Jim was having a great time though.

"Just imagine being in there," he said. "Burned alive. They did that you know!"

Jim nodded to Doug. Must have been a secret signal. They took me completely by surprise, Jim going for my legs and Doug manhandling me over until I was on the floor. They tried to get me toward the furnace. "Get him in there," Doug laughed. "See how you like it!"

I struck out with my right hand in an attempt to throw them off. It hit Doug, who increased the pressure on my neck. "Guys," I groaned. It came out as an indistinct moan, not loud enough for either of them to hear.

My left leg became free for a second, and I kicked out. Missing both Doug and Jim, it connected with the leg of a table. My foot snapped the brittle metal. One half of the leg pinged off to our right. Unbalanced, the table tipped forwards and showered us with its contents. A scalpel, covered with dry blood, embedded itself in the floor inches from my face. A glass bottle, filthy knives, their blades dirty and black, and glass apparatus I couldn't even identify landed on us, and around us.

Jim let go. "Stop, Doug," he cried. "Enough. We can't risk any injuries in this place."

Getting to my feet and rubbing my neck I shouted, "Guys. You bastards. What the hell did you do that for?"

"Initiation. First trip out with a virgin explorer, we always do something like that."

"Not appreciated, guys," I snapped back.

"Gives you a sense of the terror of this place though, doesn't it."

It certainly did. No way would I want to be stuck injured in this place, left alone. Food for thought.

"No hard feelings, mate." Jim stuck out his hand, expecting a shake. Didn't get one.

This place was seriously creepy. To think of the dead bodies that have been taken down here, the experiments that probably went on, and the furnace where the bodies were burnt creeped me out, made me nervous. I don't think I would be able to stand it in here at night, whether I was alone or not.

We continued the explore, walking through the basement level. "Prepare To Die" was scrawled on one wall, next to red swastikas. A rat skittered past. Straight ahead was the boiler room. I don't know why, but boilers scare me. Ever since I read *The Shining*. The boiler itself was absolutely huge. About the size of a double decker bus. Dented out of shape, rusty, but the dials on the front still looked intact and it might still work.

To the left of the boiler room was another small area where the patient records must have been kept. They were scattered all over the place. I picked a few up and scanned through them. If the chavs had some sense, bringing a load of these up to the Great Hall would improve the chance the fires they set doing what they want them to. Still, if I ever want to start a fire here, I know exactly where to come.

Hours later, we were heading back down the driveway. It had certainly been a day to remember, and had piqued my interest. "Been to any other places?" I asked Jim.

"A few, yeah. An old Pontins Holiday camp in Jersey when I was over there last year. Cracking place that. A boys village somewhere in Wales, complete with church and swimming pool. That's trashed even more than here."

"So you liked it after all, then," Doug questioned me.

"It was good, yeah. Have to admit that I'm a bit relieved to get out."

"Sometimes these old places seem to have an atmosphere. Don't know why. Maybe because they used to be so busy and are now lying alone, abandoned. Can feel sorry for them."

"Mainly because there were no security guards around," I replied, running my hand through my hair. "Happy to get out without breaking any bones. The needles and glass put me off a bit though. Ever had any trouble?"

"Once or twice," Jim admitted. "Last time I was up in Scotland, I was in one of the railway stations up there, big building, and I got caught."

"Railway station?"

"Yeah, I'd heard that there was a hidden underground street below it dating from when the station was built, in the nineteenth century. Supposed to be a door to it from one of the underground platforms there. Couldn't find it though, so I went up instead and had a look through old hotel that was built on top. Several floors were abandoned and the homeless and drug addicts were living in them. I was quite glad when the Transport Police followed me up and got me out."

"Any ideas where you might go next? Might tag along if that's okay. As long as you don't plan on assaulting me again."

"Nah, we just do that once. I've got a few more locations planned. My old school is about to be demolished, and I'd like a look there before it is."

"Sounds good, count me in."

We got back to the car. It was getting quite late. Overall, it hadn't been a bad day out. I could see myself getting into this sort of thing.

Doug dropped me back home in the early evening. I unlocked the front door and went in. Wasn't expecting a warm welcome. Didn't get one. That wasn't surprising. Bev had rearranged the fridge magnet letters telling me exactly what she thought of my unplanned trip. Didn't realise we had three F's.

I walked in to the lounge, and sat there lounging in front of the TV as usual was Bev.

"Where you been?" she said without looking up from Hollyoaks, as she stuffed a huge handful of crisps into her mouth.

"Out," I said.

"You were supposed to come out with me today. To see my mum."

"Something came up," I replied. "Something important."

"Bollocks. You've been out all day with Doug."

That was all the conversation there was for a while. That was quite good actually. One way not to argue. Less chance of me wanting to put my fist through her face. That feeling was becoming much more common these days.

I went out into the kitchen and put together a quick sandwich. I ate it out there while I planned every last detail of my next exploration trip. Bev was going to come with me on this one, whether she liked it or not.

"I'll make it up to you," I said, going back into the living room. Another party size bag full of crisps, Cheese & Onion this time, had appeared on Bev's lap. Must be a secret stash of them somewhere. Perhaps they multiply themselves.

A grunt was all the reply I got, but I wasn't giving up that easily. "Look, I'll take you somewhere you've never been before, and when we come back, we'll pop in the Toby Carvery and you can pile your plate high as you like." Still not convincing her. God, she could be so stubborn sometimes.

"You don't have to make it up with just me, you know. Need to make it up with my mum as well. She could see how upset I was that you didn't come out with me today."

I was fast losing my temper, but I kept it under control. An end was in sight.

One week later, I woke up bright and early, just after eight. Today was going to be a great day, I could just tell. "Morning, darling," I said as Bev stirred.

"You sound happy today." She yawned and looked at the clock. "Why did you wake me up so early? You know I'm not a morning person, especially on a Sunday."

I've got a treat for you, remember. A nice trip out."

One hour later, we were flying through the country in my black Astra. Bev had some Monster Munch. Car would need hovering again. No other vehicles were in sight, and it looked as though it was going to be a scorcher.

We arrived safely at York View Sanatorium, or as close as we were going to get by car anyway. The area was deserted once again. There had obviously been some recent activity as the main gates to the hospital were wide open this time, their hinges broken. Padlocks lying on the ground. Which was probably just as well, because I don't think Bev would have managed to fit through the gap in the fence. That would have been a laugh and a half to watch.

"What have you brought me to?" she asked as the hospital came into view.

"It's great inside," I said. "You can feel the history in that place."

"Screw the history."

"Come on," I said, as we passed a bent traffic cone. "We'll stay a few hours and then we'll grab that meal I promised."

"Look," Bev said stopping. "I'm not going in there." She turned around and headed back towards the car.

I had to persuade her to go in. Absolutely had to. I went for the only tactic I thought might work. "If you don't come in with me, I won't treat you to that meal I promised."

"That's not fair," Bev came back at me with.

"Course it is," I told her, looking her straight in the eye. I've found that helps enormously in these sorts of situations, and there have been quite a few. "I said I'd take you out after we've been here."

"No. You never told me we were coming here. You just said you'd take me somewhere I haven't been before. I thought you meant somewhere good, where I can shop or eat or something."

"Look, honey," I said to her. Being nice to her during arguments is another trick I've learnt. "The sooner we go in, the sooner we'll be finished, and then we'll go out for dinner. I'll pay. It will be my treat. But you have to do this first."

"And we can have a starter, a main course and dessert as well?"

"Yes, okay. All three. I promise."

"And whatever I want to drink. No limits."

"You drive a hard bargain."

Bev turned back around. "I'll go in then, if I absolutely have to, just to shut you up."

If it was possible, the place looked even more trashed than last week. A pile of shopping trolleys had appeared, apparently welded to each other in some bizarre experiment. The local Tesco would be needing plenty more soon. Police tape fluttered between the trees. The metal covering the hospital entrance had been twisted and bent out of shape, so we could sneak in without having to head round the back to the greenhouse. That must have taken some force. I couldn't believe just how much this place had degraded so quickly. Wouldn't last till the end of the year at this rate.

We entered and explored the ground level for about twenty minutes before heading upstairs.

"It's so sad," Bev said as she passed a half eaten pink teddy bear. We walked in to the room with the wrecked beds and the manacled wheelchair. I glanced over at Bev, and glanced back at the wheelchair.

"Look at that thing," she said, indicating towards the wheelchair. "The patients must have been handcuffed in it. Poor bastards."

"Sit in it," I said.

Instead, she pushed me over to it and made me sit in it. "Not very comfortable," I said and got up. "Your turn."

Bev sat down. I flipped over the hand restraints and started pushing the chair. "Give you a feeling what it was like." The wheelchair moved slowly. Oh, so slowly. Why hadn't I checked that out when I was here with Doug and Jim? How could I push her when the chair would hardly move? How could I get it to the lift shaft? How could I push it over the edge and let it drop down?

I pushed. I strained, and I pushed. I pushed some more. As hard as I could. Still kept on pushing and pushing. Ten whole seconds of maximum effort and how far had the chair moved? Six inches.

Bev looked at me. "Were you going to do what I think you were going to do?" she asked. "I've seen the warning signs, you know. I can tell you don't love me any more. Hell, I can tell you don't even like me any more. And sitting

in that chair, right then, I knew what you wanted to do to me. Exactly what you wanted. And it ain't gonna happen."

"I wasn't going to do anything," I stammered, flipping up the hand restraints.

"Do you think I was born yesterday?" she said. "I saw you put a can of petrol in the boot of the car this morning. I saw the way you looked at the wheelchair when you came in this room. I didn't quite believe it. Not you. You wouldn't do something like that. Haven't got the balls. Then you started to try and get that wheelchair moving. And then I did know for sure. You would."

She got up, turned round, hit me in the face with the most technically perfect right hook. I didn't even see it coming.

I don't really know exactly what happened next. One punch and she must have knocked me out. She must have thrown me back into the wheelchair, fastened me down even though I was going nowhere, and took off the handbrake. She then must have wheeled me out of the room, the wheelchair moving easily with no brake on. She must have pushed me close to the lift shaft, because that was where I found myself.

I was gradually coming to. When I finally opened my eyes, I realised my situation. I couldn't move. I could hardly think. Everything was going wrong. Everything.

"Honey, what are you doing?" I asked her.

"Don't speak to me in that tone of voice," she snapped back. "What do you think I'm doing? Exactly what you were going to do to me. Next time, I'd advise not screwing up your 'plan' and leaving it in the kitchen bin. How frigging stupid was that."

Bev slapped me on the face. Three times. Hard. Left marks. "The last year with you has been a total nightmare," she said. "You think you're better than me? Well, you're not. Never have been. You're the one in trouble now. Big trouble."

She pushed the chair forward another six inches. It was right on the edge of the drop. I was struggling, but she was staying well back. Didn't dare move too much in case I managed to tip myself forwards and did the work for her. Bev kicked the back of the chair as hard as she could. It wobbled and moved forward another few inches. She kicked again. It teetered on the edge and then it fell. Then there was blackness.

I don't know how long I was out, but it can't have been long. My head hurt, my neck hurt, my right arm was twisted and bent, stuck under the wheelchair. It just looked wrong. Bent where it shouldn't be. It was broken for sure. The manacles on the wheelchair holding my wrists had broken so my arms were free, but I couldn't move at all. My legs were manacled. Pain in my neck. Pain in my back. Trapped in the mangled wheelchair. Nowhere to go, even if I could move. I shouted, but there was no answer. My left leg was cut badly and bleeding. Cuts and scrapes all over me.

I dug my fingernails in to the palms of my hands, drawing blood so I could concentrate on that pain rather than my shattered arm. My shattered ulna bone pierced through my skin near my wrist, the white bone sticking out obscenely. I screamed and swore in agony.

It wasn't too dark at the bottom of the shaft. I couldn't look up from the position I was in, but if I could have, I would have seen Bev peering down at me. I moaned, and then I shouted. "Help, Bev, I need you." Gritted my teeth with the pain. If I could have looked up, I would have seen her head duck back. Moments later, I would have seen her come back with what I later found out was a bedpan. I would have seen her look down, aim, and then drop the bedpan. I never saw any of this, so my surprise was complete when it smashed into the floor inches from my face. "Darling," I shouted. "Don't. Please."

I would have seen her vanish again, for longer this time, then throw a flurry of objects down at me. Glass jars which smashed, a scalpel that embedded itself in a wooden beam, beer cans that spilt out the last few dregs of liquid on me, then the full can of petrol from the boot of the car. That burst on impact, petrol splashing on me, stinging my skin. I was knocked out for the second time by something else Bev threw down. For much longer this time.

When I came to, there was no sign of Bev. No matter how much I shouted and screamed and swore. Nothing. The pain in my arm was unbearable. I jumped when my exposed arm bone touched a metal object as I struggled. A huge lump was forming on my head from being struck by something that Bev had launched down at me. Still no sign of her. Neck was still hurting. Back was still hurting. My arm felt as though it was on fire.

I started banging and shouting again. There was nothing else I could do. Eventually, I could hear voices.

I struggled to move myself so I could see upwards, pain shooting through my body once more. With a supreme effort I managed to turn over. I felt white hot pain for a few seconds and then threw up. I looked up and saw a face appear about ten foot above me. Then another. Salvation. At last. A torch was shone down at me, blinding me for a few seconds. "I'm injured," I shouted. "Help me. Please."

"Caught you at last, firebug," one man shouted down. They could smell fuel from the petrol can. Were they security guards? Surely not!

"He's got petrol down there," one shouted.

The other guard called for backup using his walkie-talkie. "Ring the police, Rob, got the bastard this time." Looking back down at me, he said, "You don't know how much trouble you're in son. We had a tip off that there was somebody in here looking to start a fire. We have called the police," he added unnecessarily, "and they won't take long to get here."

"Just stay there," said the other guard.

I wasn't going anywhere.

Hours later, I was in a hospital bed, handcuffed to it, with two policemen by my side. They had had to operate on my arm. My neck was in a brace. My leg was bandaged. The cut in it had gone down to the bone. I still felt groggy from the anaesthetic.

"We are charging you with attempted arson," one said to me, a stern looking gentleman with a permanent scowl on his face. "You were caught red handed by the security guards at the Sanatorium. They have been keeping a

round the clock watch for the arsonist repeatedly attacking their building. And now they have you."

"I wasn't trying to set the place alight," I said, slurring slightly. "I'd just come with my girlfriend on a day out to show her around the place."

"There was no one else there."

"But there had been. Do you think I trapped myself in a wheelchair, threw myself down an open lift shaft, knocked myself unconscious, smashed my arm and poured petrol all over myself?"

"Right now, sir, I don't care about any of that. Not at all. Criminals like you are never very intelligent. You were found in a very compromising position. It's an open and shut case."

"Do I get a phone call?" I asked.

"Of course, sir. When we take you to the station. Who do you want to phone?"

Who could I phone? Bev? She was probably the one who phoned in the anonymous tip off. Doug or Jim? All they would do is prove that I've been there before, knew about the lift shaft, and the fires that regularly happened there. Who then? Who?

"I would suggest your lawyer," the other policeman said. "Five to ten years is the usual sentence for this sort of crime."

The day wasn't going quite as well as I had planned.

Author's Note:

This story is fictional, all characters and places do not exist in real life. Any similarity to people or places you now must just be a coincidence. Honestly.

Urban Exploration is becoming more and more popular however. If you think you may be interested, have a look at <http://www.28dayslater.co.uk> for some great places to visit.

The Curse of Chillingham Castle

My name is Mark Benson. I'm married to a beautiful woman, Susie. We're in our early thirties and from Florida, and we were over for our first holiday in Europe. In England, in fact. It was a summer day, I won't say it was a *warm* summer day, because England doesn't appear to do warm summer days.

Let me tell you about the visit we had to Chillingham Castle. It was a day that will not be forgotten in a hurry.

We started off in London, spent a few days there and then headed north to York. After a few more days, most involving a smattering of rain, we were heading up the motorway towards Edinburgh in Scotland. Part of the way there, passing through Northumberland, we saw a sign. "Come and see the most Haunted Castle in England" it said. This is where our story starts. Now I'm not normally one for ghosts or stuff like that, but Susie, or Suze as I sometimes call her, is. We had been driving for a while and did fancy a break for lunch, so we turned off the main road in the direction the sign pointed us.

Being American, we're used to wide roads, and English ones are not. It's bad enough driving on the wrong side, roundabouts really confuse me as well, but when you've only got one lane in each direction, it just makes it even worse. And this is on the main motorway, the A1.

After a few minutes of nervous driving, crossing my fingers we wouldn't meet a bus coming in the opposite direction (we didn't), we reached a brown tourist sign that pointed us down an even narrower road. Nothing would be able to pass us on this one. We drove through an open gate with small towers on both sides in to the castle grounds, and were directed to a clearing in the woods to park our car. At the least, that was free unlike many of the places we've been to.

We walked towards the castle, down a tree lined avenue, signposted as the 'Devil's Walk'.

"You know," said Suze. "I recognise this place. It's been on TV."

"You and your ghosts," I replied.

"No really, it was on TV. Think it was on Scariest Places on Earth, you know, the one that Linda Blair hosts. It's supposed to be really spooky." She tried unsuccessfully to swat a wasp away that seemed to be following us.

"That's all made up," I replied, nevertheless failing to stop a shiver going down my spine.

"I remember this walk from the show", she continued. "It was the middle of the night, pitch black, but for lit braziers. The family that were going to spend the night in the castle were walking down this road, terrified before they even got to the castle."

We came out of the shady avenue, back in to welcome sunlight. The castle, we later found out, is still lived in, unlike many other castles in England. We passed by cannons on the lawn, and a huge dirty brown door that looked as though it hadn't been opened in decades.

The castle building itself was very impressive. Three floors high, with towers at each corner. A weather vane shaped like a bat on the roof. With its rough stone exterior, the place looked oppressive even on a summer's afternoon. It looked like it had history, and as we were to soon find out, it

certainly did. One half of the rusty, ancient stained metal front door stood open.

Climbing the steps, we moved toward the door, then through it. I knocked on it as I went past, succeeding in creating a satisfying bang and bruising my knuckle at the same time. Inside, it felt as though we had moved back centuries in time instead of only a few metres. Only the pay kiosk spoiled the atmosphere.

To the left, there was a small room leading to one of the dungeons, called the Oubliette. You can look directly down and see the small prison cell below, the only way in or out being the trapdoor in the roof I was looking through. At night it would be pitch black. I took a photograph looking down, remembering to switch on the flash. For a few hundredths of a second, as the dungeon was lit up, I could see bones at the bottom. Chicken bones, I hope, but you never know. A sign says that they are reputed to be the bones of the last victim of the castle, supposedly a young girl who was thrown down there and left for three days and starved to death.

We emerged into a central courtyard, surrounded on all four sides by the cold, tall stone walls of the castle. No sunlight beat down on us in here. We grabbed a bite to eat from the café and then started exploring.

Just over the other side of the courtyard was one of the staples of a medieval castle, the torture chamber. Inside, it was a dingy room, dark even in the height of summer, packed with evil looking metal devices. An old lady, a guide, was stood in the corner. She was just finishing telling a family about the contents of the chamber, so Suze angled over to talk to her. I followed.

"It's a bit spooky in here with all this stuff," Suze said to the guide.

"It is indeed," the lady answered. "I never like being in here, but all of the guides here at Chillingham have to know everything about all of the different rooms in the castle and their history. Would you like me to tell you about what used to go on in here?"

"Go on," Suze said, glancing around. "There's some pretty evil looking stuff."

"I don't know how much you know about the history of medieval England, but it was a very violent place indeed."

Looking around at some of the devices, I could well believe that.

"Are these things real?" I asked her.

"Of course they are," she replied back, nodding. "Much of it dates all the way back to the most famous torturer in Chillingham's black past, a man called John Sage. During the thirteenth century, if you had come in here, not that you would have wanted to, you would have seen maybe fifty or sixty prisoners. Mainly Scottish. You can see," she said pointing towards a metal cage hanging from the ceiling, "one of the most famous devices from this time."

I looked over to where she was pointing. A tiny metal cage, looking hardly big enough to keep a parrot in. Definitely not big enough to swing a cat in.

"People were locked into this tiny metal cage, and a fire would be lit below. Sage would use bellows until the fire was well alight, roaring away, hot

as he could make it. The prisoner would be naked, slowly cooking. Look, you can see the manacles on the wall where people used to be hung, upside down, and left, starving to death."

"Sounds like a thoroughly nice chap," I joked.

"Don't joke," she admonished me. "See over there, a bed of nails. Sage lived to cause pain and death. He boiled people alive. He gouged their eyes out. This barrel," she said looking left and indicating, "is covered with spikes on the inside. He would roll his victim around until the flesh literally fell from their bodies in chunks. They were begging him to kill them, and he was only too happy to oblige."

"That's awful," Suze said, her face pale. "And all of these are real."

"Every one of them. No reproductions here. Yes, Chillingham has a long and bloody past."

"What's the worst?" I asked the guide, checking out a cute brunette in a short black skirt as she came into the room with a skinny boyfriend.

"Oh, there's no doubt about that," she replied. "Has to be the rat trap."

"The rat trap?" Suze asked. "Do I *really* want to know about this?"

Thoughts of what it may be going through her mind.

"Well, what Sage did was first get a live rat. There were always plenty around here, gnawing away on the dead and almost dead bodies. He would catch the rat, that took some skill, and put it into a barrel. The inside of the barrel was strong, reinforced, but for a small section. He would string up his victim and attach the barrel to their stomach. The only way out for the rat, desperate to escape, was for it to break through the barrel, the soft part, straight into the stomach of the prisoner, and eat its way out, through the barrel, through the prisoner."

"That's just, I, er, I can't find the words," Susie said. "Wish we hadn't just had lunch."

"If you want, you can touch the devices, such as the rack we have over here." Looking at the rack, if you asked me to describe it in one word, I would say 'evil'. If you asked me to describe it in two words, I would say 'really evil'.

"No thanks," we replied in unison.

"There's more," she said. "Would you like to hear how Sage met his end. As you might expect, it was brutal."

"Go on then, I'm all ears."

"Picture the scene. It's the thirteenth century, twenty or so prisoners are in here dying, wounded. A quiet day. Sage had a girlfriend, Elizabeth Charlton she was called, and they were here in this very room. As I told you, John was a violent man in everything he did. He had got in to the habit of tying Elizabeth to the rack over there when he was making love to her, that very rack, and half strangling her. One night, he went too far and couldn't stop himself. He had his hands around her throat, gripping on tightly as he did his stuff with her. She died on the rack. It took him over ten minutes to notice."

"Dear God. That's just disgusting," Suze said. "I hope he was punished."

"Life was cheap in those days, but you'll be glad to hear he was. See, Elizabeth's father was one of the Border Reivers who were active at this time. They were basically gangs from the borders who would raid both the English and Scottish unless you paid them not to do so. They mainly attacked the English though. The Reivers contacted King Edward, who was on the throne of England at that time, and they demanded that Sage be put to death. Sage

used to be a soldier for Edward before being injured and turning into the executioner here, you see. They threatened to team up with the Scots and attack and destroy Chillingham Castle before moving further south, rampaging through the countryside. They demanded that Sage free all of his Scottish prisoners. Edward did indeed order Sage to do this, but Sage didn't do it straight away. Oh no! Instead he went on a rampage of his own, killing every Scot around and outside of the castle grounds that he could find. He rounded up men, women and children alike and took them to the central courtyard, just behind you there. Most of the Scots ended up in a huge bonfire. It burnt for days."

I looked back, seeing a family with two young children dressed as knights running around the courtyard. The brunette was still in the chamber, bending over, examining a metal suit in the shape of a body that prisoners used to be locked in. She was giving me a nice look at her firm, tight backside without realising she was doing so. Suze spotted what I was looking at and gave me a dig in the ribs.

"It's hard to imagine, I know, but there's more," the old lady continued. "He had a special fate for the younger children. They were too much of an opportunity for him to simply burn. He led them up to the Edward I room, high in the castle and imprisoned them there. You can go in to this room later. When you're up there, look down, you'll see there is a fantastic view into the central courtyard. The children were locked in there, able to see their mothers, fathers, older brothers and sisters burn. They could see the sheer terror on their faces. They could hear their screams. They could smell their burning flesh. It must have driven them mad."

"Sage was not finished with them yet though. Once the carnage outside was over, he marched up to the room with his axe. He did not stop for one hour until every child was dead. Dismembered. He didn't want them to grow up and return for revenge. He needn't have worried about that. He hacked them all to pieces. Every one of them. Some of them were babies, as young as one. By the way, don't have children yourself do you?"

Suze gasped. "No, we don't. And this is all true? It's just hideous."

"Oh, absolutely true. Every word. And as you would expect, the axe is still up there today. It is displayed just outside the Edward I room. Have a look on your way up. There's still more though. Sage still wasn't finished. The day he was supposed to release his prisoners came. There were over one hundred captives. Poor souls. So as not to disobey his King, Sage did indeed release the prisoners from the torture chamber. But they didn't get far. The path leading out of the castle is called The Devil's Walk. You walked up it on your way here. Never has a name been more appropriate. The prisoners left the torture chamber, some of them seeing the sun for the first time in weeks, and walked or crawled down the Devil's Walk. Not a single one of them, man, woman or child made it all the way down the path. They were slaughtered, their bodies left to rot where they were hacked down. Every now and then, even to this day, bones are still seen creeping up through the surface."

I shuddered. Surely this can't be true. The brunette's boyfriend looked over and saw my wandering eyes. Scowled at me.

"Sage was eventually hung in public along the Devil's Walk, in front of a large crowd. As was common at public hangings at the time, the gathered crowd cut off souvenirs, keepsakes from Sage's body, his toes, fingers and

nose and so on, all while he was still alive apparently. It is not known how long Sage survived after the mutilation occurred, but it can't have been long enough in my opinion. His body was dismembered and buried at the crossroads where you drove into the castle grounds. The villagers believed that this would stop his ghost knowing the way to heaven. He had precious little chance of getting there, let me tell you."

A fitting end, I thought.

Back outside in the courtyard, with families eating their lunches, laughing and giggling, it was almost impossible to imagine what must have gone on here over seven hundred years ago. We wandered through the castle. Through the pantry, the banquet hall, living rooms and bedrooms. Saw the priest holes, hidden staircases, medieval swords, suits of armour.

In many of the rooms, you can reach out and pick up the antiques. Most of them anyway. You can sit on the ancient furniture. You can hold solid metal cannon balls that were fired centuries before. They're a lot heavier than you expect, but I guess they had to be to get through ten foot thick castle walls. It's not like most places where you are kept behind ropes, forbidden to do anything, even to take photographs. No, photography was encouraged here, and I was building myself a nice little collection.

Entering the chapel, there was another attendant, another old lady. Suze walked over to her, said hello, and asked her if there were any ghost stories. I was surprised it had taken her this long to ask someone.

"Where do you want to start?" the old lady said. "The castle was built in the twelfth century. There is so much history here. We have more ghosts than I can remember. You Americans love your history and your ghosts."

For the next fifteen minutes or so, we both listened as we were told one story after another.

We were told about the voices in the chapel we were in. When it's quiet, visitors often report hearing men talking. Any attempt to try and find where the voices come from results in them stopping. I was half expecting the old lady to surreptitiously click a button and start off a recording to try and scare us. I think it's all rubbish. There's no such thing as ghosts. It would take quite something to convince me there is.

She told us about the Blue Boy and the Pink Room. At exactly the stroke of midnight - what other time would you expect - the haunting cries of a young boy in pain can be heard. The cries come from inside a wall. In this place, as I said, they are up to ten feet thick. As the cries subside, a blue flash comes from the wall and a young child can be seen walking toward you. Apparently, you can stay the night in this room as it's now a holiday apartment. Years ago, as the room was being renovated she told us the construction workers found a man and a boy dead, incarcerated inside the wall. Apparently, the child had broken all of his nails and worn down the bones in his fingers trying to tear his way out through the wall, trying to escape. The workers left and refused to return. In the open air, the corpses that had been so well preserved in the wall deteriorated significantly. A further insult to the dead. They were given a Christian burial, but apparently this has failed to stop the sightings.

Even the Pantry in this place has a ghost. She is old and frail and known as The White Lady. Earlier in the century, a servant slept in the room to guard the silver that used to be stored there, and he saw the woman who he assumed was a guest. She vanished in front of him. Yet another ghost, this one called Lady Mary, searches for her missing husband. This ghost wanders the corridors of the castle, never finding her husband - he ran away with Mary's own sister, leaving her alone and pregnant. She was left in the castle, with only her baby girl as a companion, heartbroken. Visitors to Chillingham often report feeling a chill as the ghost of Lady Mary supposedly walks by. They feel weak, start swaying, their eyes go bloodshot. This sometimes happens to me as well, although only after eight or nine pints.

Apparently, even the grounds of the castle are haunted. Under the lake lie the remains of thousands of Scots killed during the war with the English. The water itself is rumoured to be cursed, and if you put your hand into the water the souls of the dead will pull you under. Quite frankly, I thought this was getting more ridiculous by the minute.

As you can tell, by now, I was quite bored with these far fetched fantasies. I wandered off and looked around, just going anywhere, picking up and touching the odd object here and there. I picked up a small bone and put it in my pocket. Suze wandered off to look inside the castle again while I relaxed in the garden. Half an hour later she came back. "Time to go," I said. "We want to be in Edinburgh by five, and we've still got quite a drive on these tracks they call roads over here."

"And, I saw you checking out that girl's ass in the torture chamber, you know." Suze scowled at me. "Don't let me catch you doing that again."

We drove out of the castle and back to the A1 again. We had only travelled for a few minutes before we came up to a traffic jam. We could not see where the head of the queue was - the single carriageway road was full of cars, and there were no vehicles coming toward us either which didn't seem good. Two children in the back of the car in front of us started making rude gestures at us. I made some rude gestures back at them until Suze stopped me.

So we sat there, unable to move for about fifteen minutes. And then for another fifteen. And another.

"Did you enjoy it in there?" I asked Suze.

"In the castle? I thought it was good. All that history. Don't have that where we come from. Although all that torture stuff was a bit scary. I don't think I'd be able to spend a night there. What did you think of it?"

"It was okay," I replied. "Got a bit bored after a while."

"I know. Saw you walk off. Still, that Sage bloke. Might have nightmares tonight about some of that."

"Don't worry. I'll keep you nice and warm."

After another ten minutes, the queue started moving, slowly. A policeman - at least I think it was a policeman - directed us on to a side road. Used to six lane highways back home, the single track road was barely wide enough for our car. God help anyone who came towards us wanting to pass. There were no cars in front, and looking in the mirror, no cars behind us

either. Had the other cars stuck around us been diverted somewhere else? Never mind. We were moving.

We continued along the road and slowed as we neared a level crossing. I changed back down a gear and started slowing as the barriers started to come down. The warning lights were flashing with the barriers now fully closed. I increased pressure on the brake pedal. Nothing happened. I started to pump the pedal, and finally the brakes kicked in and started to slow the car down. The front bumper ended up resting against the red and white barrier, so I backed up a few inches. Good job that barrier was there.

"The brakes just didn't work well," I said to Suze, puzzled.

"No drama. We stopped."

"Gonna ring the hire company and give them hell though. Why is every hire car we ever get a wreck?"

Seconds later the train arrived. There was an almighty roar, and it thundered past, from left to right, going over a hundred miles an hour, grey and blue flashing in front of our eyes. Then it was gone, out of sight over the horizon in a flash.

"Suze, do you want to take over?"

She slid over in to the drivers' seat. "You alright?" she asked.

"Yeah, thought we were going to be in trouble for a few seconds there. How about we stop and have a drink in the next place we come to."

"Fine by me. That could have been nasty."

After ten minutes or so, we came to a little fishing village called Seahouses. The harbour was crowded with old fishing boats taking visitors out to sea. I spotted what I wanted, a traditional English pub called The Bamburgh Castle and pulled in to a nearby car park. Hopefully this would be somewhere that would serve drinks cold. Never seen the attraction of warm beer myself.

We walked back over to the pub, holding hands and went in. We got drinks and sat down in a corner. There was a magnificent view over the sea. We could see the brightly coloured boats were ferrying passengers out to some little islands in the distance. A lighthouse on one of the islands flashed. I later found out these were a bird sanctuary run by The National Trust which has one of the largest puffin colonies in England. The sea looked choppy. Too rough for Suze to go over without throwing up.

We sat there in silence and had several drinks. The barman, John, was friendly, and the waitress, Elizabeth was kept on her toes all afternoon.

Eventually, Suze looked at me and said, "Don't think we're going to get to Edinburgh today. Will have to book in overnight somewhere.. I can't face much more driving now and you've had enough drinks to last for a week."

I wandered over to the bar. "Have you got any rooms free?" I asked the barman.

"You're in luck. We've got a couple left. Want one?"

"Yes please."

"Do you want to see it first before you pay?"

"No, it'll be fine I'm sure."

I paid for our night's stay and walked back over to Suze. "We're in here," I told her.

"Do you want to get the luggage out of the car now?" I asked her.

"It'll wait," she replied. "Let's have a look around."

We wandered outside and took a stroll through the village. We walked along the harbour, past the brightly coloured little huts selling the boat trips, past families with laughing children eating fish and chips, seagulls swooping down to try and take some. We could see a magnificent castle in the distance. A friendly local, he was called John as well, told us all about the history of the castle which the pub we had been in was named after. He told us about Holy Island as well, which was located only a few miles north, and the Viking Raids in the seventh century when they came and pillaged and murdered on the island.

"I fancy going there," Suze said. "It's not too far so I'll drive."

Back in the car we slowly drove out of the village. The road took us around the coast right by the sea. Minutes later we passed by Bamburgh Castle which was located on a high rock right in the centre of the picturesque little village. This castle too is intact, and even bigger than Chillingham. It dominates the village. There was a cricket match going on in the village green, located in the shadow of the castle. Suze waved to two laughing children as they crossed the road in front of us with ice creams. I started to brighten up again. It felt good to be moving.

"Bet that place has got even more ghosts," I said.

"Had enough ghosts for one day."

Barely ten minutes later we were back on the A1. Free flowing traffic again, thankfully. After another ten minutes, we came to a garage on the right swiftly followed by a sign pointing right showing the way to Holy Island, and were once again back on another narrow road. Suze negotiated the bends skilfully. More skilfully than I can anyway. The road twisted left and right. Coming around a corner, we saw another level crossing in front of us. "Not again," Suze said, annoyed.

"Just put your foot down and drive," I said. She did. We flew over the crossing at about 40mph and nearly bounced straight off the road the other side of it and in to a hedge.

"Made it. Safe and sound. Just." She looked over at me and grinned. We passed a Bird of Prey centre, then rounded one final corner and came to a large warning sign. "Danger. Holy Island Causeway. Floods at high tide. Consult tide tables!" it said. So we did.

We pulled over in to a little car park on the left side of the road and checked out the tables. There was a picture of a land rover shown half covered by the sea with the words 'This Could Be You'.

"Think we're okay," I said glancing at the list. "It's the fifteenth, right?"

We hopped back in to the car and drove on. A few hundred yards ahead, we could see the road rose slightly and narrowed so only one car would fit through. Water was lapping all of the way up to the road. "Must only be a few inches deep," Suze said.

We drove on. The front tyres reached the water. I opened the window and peered at the front of the car. Looked as though we were going to be okay. The water was indeed only an inch or two deep. Feeling more confident,

I closed the window, told Suze we were okay, and she put her foot down. Big mistake.

The road must have dipped. Within seconds the water was up to bonnet level. By the time we had come to a stop, the water level had reached the windscreen. Freezing water came rushing in, through cracks between the doors and the air vents and submerged the inside of the car. Freezing cold water. It quickly covered us up to our waists. Suze yelled. She hit the steering wheel with her fists. Least it wasn't me she hit. The engine stopped and wouldn't start again."

"What have you gone and made me do now, you daft bastard," Suze said to me. "You told me it was okay."

"You're the one that drove us in here."

"Only because you told me it was okay. You're really starting to annoy me today. Did you say today was the fifteenth or the fifth?" Suze asked me.

"Fifteenth," I replied.

"That'll be why then, brainbox. It's the fifth. We're stuck. No room to turn around. Not enough room to do anything but go backwards or forwards. If the engine was running, which it isn't. I'm really pissed off with you now."

"Come on. We need to stop arguing. Have to get out. Can't stay in here," I said. "It's freezing. Look, there's a hut over there." A tiny white hut stood on long legs with steps leading up. It looked like a garden shed.

I struggled to open the car door with the water pressing it, but managed it eventually, swearing rather a lot in the process. "Wish you wouldn't use words like *that* particular one," Suze admonished me. "I know we're in a situation here, but it's no excuse to use words like that."

"I'm thinking of the money," I said. No way are we getting our deposit back for this car now."

We slowly made our way through the deep water up to the hut. Looks like we're not the only ones to have been caught out like this. We struggled up the steps, our clothes completely soaked. Everything was wet. Every bit of clothing, all the way down to and including underwear, completely saturated. Hadn't been soaked like this since my stag night. And our spare clothes? In the car of course, in the boot, probably just as wet. If only we had taken the time to dump our luggage in our room before we set out.

The hut was empty inside. It was indeed a garden shed, stood on long legs to keep it out of the way of even the highest tides. We sat there for a few minutes shivering. Suze stared at me. I know what looks like that from her mean.

Minutes later we heard an engine. I stood up and looked through the filthy windows, the names Johnnie and Liz were scratched in to the glass. "There's a boat coming. A lifeboat."

"Oh god, this is going to be expensive as well as embarrassing," Suze remarked.

That evening, we were back in Seahouses. We had no transport, and the ride back in the lifeboat had not been very pleasant. Suze had spent most of the time throwing up over the side, and the rest glowering at me. I think she got pretty close to pushing me in at one point, and only the thought that I

would get rescued straight away again by one of the lifeboat men stopped her. The lifeboat crew themselves were friendly enough though. Apparently this is a regular thing for them. And we were not expected to pay anything. Another three were called John.

In the hotel, Suze knocked on the door to my room. As soon as we had got back to the hotel, she demanded a separate room to stay in for the night. That's how bad it's got. The atmosphere between us was not good, to say the least.

"I think we're being followed," she said.

"Followed?"

"Yes, by that John Sage bloke."

"Come on," I snapped back. "He's been dead for centuries."

"Well why do we keep meeting people called John, or Elizabeth then?"

"Honey, they're just common names. There's nothing going on." Suze was starting to really let this bother her. "Do you really think a ghost is following us?"

"It sounds silly, I know," she said back. "But there is something strange going on."

I needed to take her mind off it. "Fancy a meal," I said. "I'm bored here. I want to spend time with you in the same room."

"Okay," she said. "This *isn't* me making up with you yet though. We *will* be staying in separate rooms tonight."

I could work on that. Maybe if the waitress was called Elizabeth, she wouldn't take too much convincing. "What do you fancy?" I asked her.

"Something traditional? Something English? Something that we can't get back at home?"

"Fish and chips? In the restaurant hotel?"

Suze glowered. "No way. You are taking me somewhere special, and expensive. But I'm going to read the menu. I can read you see. I know what the date is." I wasn't going to hear the last of that for quite a while. I could tell.

We left the hotel, no longer holding hands. Our clothes hadn't fared too badly, most of our luggage had been rescued from the car by one of the lifeboat men. Therefore, we were only slightly damp, but there was a chill in the evening air now. We walked up Main Street, past an ice cream parlour where families with huge cornets sat outside, past a closed National Trust shop, and a gallery that had a dramatic picture of a summer sunset over Bamburgh Castle.

We came to a restaurant. Candles flickered in the window, and couples sat round some of the tables inside. "This will do," Suze said. "Hopefully expensive. You're paying." I opened the door for Suze to go in first, which she did.

We were led over to a quiet corner table by a smart waiter, thankfully not called John – he was called Gianni – and ordered a bottle of wine. Suze's wish on the prices looked as though it was going to come true. We made small talk for a while, and then ordered from the menu. Our starters arrived and were magnificent. The main course arrived, and this too was spectacular.

After this, Suze spoke. "I need to have a talk to you about your behaviour," Suze said to me.

"My behaviour?"

"Yes," she explained, "I saw you checking out that girl in the castle."

"I was only looking."

"You were staring at her bottom. For about a minute. Her boyfriend noticed. And just then, I caught you looking at that girl over there." She indicated right. "You were looking at her chest. It was so obvious. I'm sure everybody in here saw. You may as well just go over there and ask her for a quick feel of her tits."

"Look, Suze, come on."

"It would serve you right if her boyfriend came over here and thumped you."

Right on queue, although I don't think he heard Suze's words, the man did get up and come over. Six foot five, strong, mean eyes, muscles. Jack Reacher type of bloke.

"You," he thundered. "You were looking at my Lizzie in a way I don't approve of. If I catch you even glancing in my direction again, you will be leaving here on a stretcher." He jabbed his finger out as he spoke. All said loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear. I couldn't meet his gaze. After a few uncomfortable seconds, he stormed back to his table.

"I told you, I told you," said Suze. "Don't expect me to help if he does come back over. I've told you countless times before not to look at women like that. We don't like it. I'm so ashamed of you. How could this day get any worse?"

Dessert arrived. It did not live up to expectations. I was about half way through the expensive slice of chocolate fudge cake I'd ordered, which tasted very nice indeed, when I felt something in my mouth. I spat out my current mouthful, making a right mess on the white table cloth. Suze gasped. She looked ready to walk out on me. I called the waiter over. "What's this?" I asked him pointing to the mess. "Can you see that?"

"What is it?" Suze asked.

"It appears to be the back half of a mouse. Look, that's a bit of its tail."

Walking back to the hotel, to our separate rooms, Suze asked me something.

"Did you take anything from the castle?" she said.

"Take anything?" I parroted. "Don't think so."

"I've been thinking you see, about the curse, about all these John's and Elizabeth's that are following us."

"You said curse."

"Yeah, the curse at Chillingham."

"What curse?"

"Didn't you see? The Spanish witch. Are you absolutely completely totally utterly one hundred million percent sure that you didn't take anything at all from the castle," she said, giving me one of her infamous looks. "At all."

"I really don't think so," I said.

"Look at this," she said, finding a picture on her phone and showing it to me. It showed a stern looking woman with black hair. "That's the Spanish witch."

"Spanish witch?" I echoed back.

"Yes. If you take anything, and I mean *anything* from that castle, you are cursed. There were letters from families from all over the world who have taken something and suffered bad luck until they returned it." She tapped the phone screen to make it move the next picture. "Read that. One of the letters. You'll have to zoom in." She handed me the phone.

I read the letter.

1985, The Hunters

Dear Sir,

I am returning a china trinket I took while at your castle. I am not normally a thief, but while visiting, I picked it up and put it inside my bag. I don't know why I took it. I know only that I need to return it to you. Since then, the most unfortunate luck has followed myself and my family.

Our house burnt down. The only surviving item was the china trinket. My sister suffered a miscarriage. My son both broke of his legs in a hit and run accident.

I return this trinket to you in the hope that the curse will be lifted.

The Hunter family from Ohio.

"Where did you see this?" I asked.

"Just opposite the Oubliette is an antique wardrobe. Above it was that picture of the witch. The wardrobe is covered in letters from visitors. Like that one you just read. They all have one thing in common. During their visit, they each took something - be it a door knob, wooden toy, trinket or whatever - and were cursed. They and their family have experienced illness, tragedy, bad luck. This has only stopped when they returned what they had taken."

"You don't believe any of that rubbish do you, surely," I said to Suze. "Come on, it's the twenty first century."

"Let me ask you once again," she said. "Did you take anything?"

"I really don't think so," I said, playing the day back in my mind. It wasn't too clear, but you can blame that on the pints I had been knocking back since. My encounter with Lizzie's boyfriend in the restaurant hadn't exactly helped either.

"Well that's okay then," said Suze. "I just had a feeling. That's all. With all the bad luck. And all the John's."

A few minutes later I spoke. "Hang on," I said. "Been playing the day back in my mind. I think, maybe, I did possibly take something. A little bone, or something like that, when that lady was telling the ghost stories, I think."

She called me a particularly nasty name. "Marcus, we have to take it back." When she uses my proper name, I know I'm in trouble.

"Come on, you don't believe in curses surely. It's just bad luck"

"What, the car brakes failing, getting half drowned on that causeway, having a mouse served for dessert, John's and Elizabeth's everywhere, all bad luck? No way."

I fished in my pocket to reach for the bone. But it wasn't there. Wouldn't be would it. Would be in the trousers I was wearing earlier in the day. The wet ones.

"If we must," I grumbled. "It'll be back at the hotel."

"Yes, we must," Suze answered back. "Get it. We'll take it back right now. The hotel will burn down tonight, or something if we don't."

Suze followed me up to my room and stood there in the doorway with a stern look on her face, arms crossed over her breasts. I looked through my trouser pockets, first in the ones I had been wearing earlier in the day, and then through the rest of them. I searched shirt pockets, inside rolled up socks, everywhere I could think of. Even places there was no chance it could be. No bone.

"Come on. Losing patience with you. Quickly."

After five more minutes of searching I gave up. The room looked as though a tornado had been through it. I knew for a fact I had the bone earlier on when I was getting drunk, but couldn't remember it after that. "The pub," I said. "I'll look there." I rushed out, Suze following. The pub was a blank, the harbour also, and the restaurant had closed by the time we got back there.

"I think," I said, as Suze, looking at me with an extremely pissed off expression, "that I might have lost it. I think, maybe when we were trying to get out of the car, that I might have just lost it in the sea. In the scramble to get out."

"Oh, you idiot," she said. I'm paraphrasing here because she used words along those lines, but quite a bit stronger. "Go out and find it. Now."

"Go out and find it? It's in the sea. It's lost. It's gone forever. It's not coming back."

"Oh, you are so dead," Suze snapped back. "We need to search the car. Might still be in there."

"The car," I reminded her, "is still on that causeway blocking it. They said they couldn't get it moved till it was low tide."

"I am so *annoyed* with you." Paraphrasing again. The word annoyed and the ones she had used before it were emphasised heavily. "You won't be getting sex for a month, at the least, and that thing you used to like me to do, I won't be doing *that* again. Maybe Lizzie will do it for you."

"Here's a taxi," Suze snapped, sticking her hand out as one passed. It pulled over and we got in.

"Where to, mate," the driver asked. At least I *think* that's what he said. His accent was very hard to understand.

"Holy Island causeway. Our car got a *bit wet*," Suze said. Said in a way that emphasised the whole thing was my fault.

"Oh, you're in trouble I see," said the driver to me, chuckling. "We'll be there in twenty minutes." True to his word, we were.

The tide was going out, so the taxi could drive right up to our sodden hire car. Inside was waterlogged and slimy. The slime smelt particularly strongly. Slime that had to be painstakingly search through - by myself alone, I may add - in search of a tiny bone, no more than an inch across. Even if it was in the car, I would have my work cut out finding it in the sludge.

Suze sat motionless in the taxi, the meter increasing, prices ticking over far too quickly. The money I thought I had saved from the mouse debacle was going to end up with the taxi driver instead.

Covered in filth, I eventually gave back up and walked back to the taxi. The driver promptly refused to let me get back in, reversing a hundred yards

to prove his point. An extra fifty English pounds resulted in him allowing me back in.

"So, you found nothing," said Suze.

"What now?"

"I don't know."

"If I may interject," said the taxi driver, interjecting anyway, "I say you should go back to Chillingham, and as that car is clearly going nowhere, I would be delighted to help you get there." Delighted to get even more money out of us, I thought.

"And how is that going to help?" I asked him. "You want us to talk to the Spanish Witch."

"No, obviously not."

The tears finally arrived. Suze started crying, and then started swearing at me, using words I'd never heard her say, including some I didn't think she would have even known. Some I didn't even know.

The taxi arrived back at Chillingham around 9pm. The driver insisted on full payment, with the charge going well into three figures before he would unlock the doors and let us out of the cab. I'm sure they charge one price for locals, and then double it for the tourists. I told him to wait, but as he had our money, I didn't expect to see him when we finished in the castle. Not with the day we're having. Maybe there is something to this curse after all.

It was starting to get dark and the castle had long closed up for the day. No amount of banging on the entrance door seemed to do any good. I thought the castle was supposed to be lived in, but obviously not. Maybe the living quarters were a long way from the entrance. Maybe not. After waiting a few more minutes, still no luck, we turned around to go back to the taxi. But it was gone. As predicted. There we were, outside a deserted haunted castle, with darkness fast approaching in the middle of nowhere in only the clothes we stood up in. And they were dirty and salty from their unexpected sea bath.

"Didn't you ask him to stay?" Suze asked.

"Yes, but when he insisted on us paying, I'll admit I wasn't optimistic on the chances of him still being here."

Suze swore. She called the taxi driver a few names. Then she called me a few names. Then a few more.

"Come on, Mr Muscles, get banging on that door again." What she thought was going to happen if we got an answer at the door, I don't know.

I turned back around, and tapped Suze on the shoulder. Standing in the door was a man. He was short, old and timeworn. I didn't recognise him from our earlier trip. "Can I help you?" he said.

"We, er, we," Suze started.

"I've, we've, er, we've come to, er" I added helpfully.

"Ah, one of those," the old gentleman said. "We get a lot of you. Taken something from the castle, did you?"

"Well, yes," Suze replied, nodding. "He did, not me."

Thanks for that, I thought.

"Cat got your tongue, young man. Give it here and you can be on your way."

"Er, well," I stammered. "I can't. I've lost it."

"Lost it?" echoed the old man, looking alarmed. "Lost it! You can't have lost it. That's not good. That shouldn't happen."

"It's a long story, see", I tried to explain.

"Out with it then."

I noticed Suze was doing her best to sneak behind me, trying to stay out of the way of his gaze.

"I took a little bit of bone. We left to go to Edinburgh, but then there was a crash and the road was blocked, and we nearly ended up stuck on a level crossing. And then we got stuck in the sea, trapped in our car. And then I was served a mouse for supper. And my wife thinks John Sage is following her. And now the taxi has gone."

"My," he said, grinning. I didn't like that grin one bit. Made his teeth look much too big. "You certainly have got the old lady witch after you! Sage as well! But you say, a bone it was that you took, and you've lost it. Now, that's never happened before. That's bad. I don't know what's going to happen." He walked back through the castle door. "Aren't you coming?" he shouted from inside.

God, no, I thought. "Coming," was what I said.

"Come on. Can't stay out there all night. I'll have to have a think about what to do."

Reluctantly - very reluctantly - we followed him in. He had walked over to the wardrobe with the witch portrait and trinkets, and was absent minded reading one of the letters about returned artefacts. Eventually he turned back around.

"Look at the picture," he said.

I did. My mouth dropped open. I heard Suze say some more very choice words quietly, but not quietly enough.

The witch had vanished from the picture. Gone completely.

"She's not in the picture any more," said the old gentleman. "Goodness me, that's never happened before. I don't quite know what to do." He paused and thought long and hard. "Maybe there will have to be some sort of sacrifice, or a ritual or something. I don't like this one bit. Come, I've got some whisky we could have."

You don't like it, I thought. *You* don't like it. What about us? She's after us, not you.

"Come in to the Grey Room and we'll have a think and see what we can do with this situation we're in."

Three days later, Matt Simpson and his family arrived at Chillingham Castle, fresh from Connecticut.

"What a fantastic castle this is", Matt said to his cute wife Debs as they walked up the drive. "Come on Maggie, Jake," he shouted to his kids, "you don't want to get lost in a place like this."

They walked in and paid their entrance fee.

"Look at this, Matt. There's a curse on this place," Debs said to me.

"What a cool picture," young Jake said.

"It's a witch," his dad answered. "If you steal anything from the castle, you're cursed."

"There's a letter daddy, can you read it out to me."

"Sure thing, little buddy." He began.

2011, The Benson's.

To the Spanish Witch,

I have paid the ultimate price. I know it is wrong to steal from you, and I am heartily sorry.

I did not believe in the curse, but I do now.

I was visiting the castle with my beautiful wife Susie, and I took a little bone. I wanted to return it, but I couldn't. Me and my wife had the most terrible luck. We were nearly hit by a train, drowned in the sea, chased by a long dead executioner and given a mouse for supper in a space of a few hours.

I lost the bone that I took. I had no way to return it to lift the curse.

I could not live with the curse, so I had to give the Spanish Witch something to appease her.

I hope the sacrifice is worth it.

Mark Benson.

"Wow, cool dad, wish we had castles like this back at home."

Jake ran over to the other side of the room and looked down a trapdoor.

"Wow, there are bones down here. What does this notice say?"

His dad walked over and read the legend. "This is the Oubliette. It holds the bones of the last two people ever to die in Chillingham Castle."

"Cool!"

Matt looked down. Took a photograph. Nonsense, he thought. Half those bones look practically new to me.

Author's Note:

Chillingham Castle exists and is located in the north of Northumberland in the top left hand corner of England. It has featured on Scariest Places on Earth as mentioned in the story, and also on Most Haunted and Ghost Hunters International. It is a fantastic day out. Many parts of the story you have read are true, with only a little bit of artistic licence thrown in. John Sage, the executioner, did indeed work and die here and his actions and the manner of his death are also true. Allegedly. If you do visit Chillingham, you will hear the ghost stories, such as the one featuring the Blue Boy, again, all supposed to be true.

And most of all, you will see the picture of the Spanish Witch on the antique wardrobe, and you will be able to read the letters from people who have taken items from the castle and later returned them. As far as I know, there should still be only one set of bones in the Oubliette. That is, unless somebody else has taken something recently and misplaced it.

Finally, I will say that I'm sure that the modern day owners of Chillingham would never consider throwing a person down into the Oubliette

and leaving them there, not unless it was something really expensive you've taken.

See <http://www/chillingham-castle.com> for more details.

Thanks for reading. Hope you enjoyed the stories! I'll be back soon with some more.

Pete.