

Prologue

Langlands House is haunted, but not by the ghost you think.

It's the ghost of a girl who died here during the War, that's what they say.

The house is difficult to get to – in the middle of a private estate and surrounded by forest. But if anyone does make their way up the winding track under the dark canopy of trees, they eventually find themselves on a gravel area in front of a big grey stone building topped with slate-roofed turrets. Langlands.

Although rare, this does actually happen. People travelling across country by foot stray from the usual routes and stumble across the house. Once, a census taker came to knock in vain. And occasionally, people come especially to look for the ghost.

Any of these people may find themselves standing on the gravel staring up at those grey walls, streaked with patches of damp and lichen, and the windows which are always darkly reflective, like jet, because there is never any light behind them. They may glimpse her at one of those windows, looking down, or perhaps gazing back at them from a patch of deep shadow under the trees that ring the house.

Sometimes they doubt their own eyes. They stare and stare, and sometimes she goes away. She drifts away from the window or vanishes into the darkness under the trees. Other times, she gazes back at them, not going anywhere. That always frightens them off. They back away, or they just turn right round and make a run for it, skidding on the gravel, stumbling on the ruts in the tracks. I've seen this happen.

A rational person would say, how can this be, considering that there are no such things as ghosts? And they would also say: how did you see this happen?

The answer to both of these questions is: it's me they see. I'm the one they run away from, round-eyed, sometimes screaming. The Langlands ghost is me.

Chapter One

In an instant my eyes were open, staring into the dark. My heart was thudding at the deep rumbling that swelled until it seemed to fill the sky above the house. There was one brilliant flash that traced the outline of everything in my room for a split second: the iron bedstead, the wash stand, the bookcase. Then a terrible splintering crash which reverberated through the entire house. It was so loud that I thought the entire roof must be coming down on my head.

I threw back the covers and slid out of bed, the wooden floorboards cold under my feet. From somewhere within the ancient house I heard a series of minor shocks, as though something were crumbling and falling in. I imagined a widening breach, cracks running through the aged structure, a sudden and final collapse. I ran for the door.

The moment I wrenched it open I knew my mistake. Langlands House had neither gas nor electricity; the passage outside was pitch dark, lacking even the moonlight that seeped into the bedroom between the shabby velvet curtains. The candle, unlit, was by my bed; instinctively I felt for the matchbox I always carried in my pocket, but of course I was clad only in a nightdress.

No time to go back for it. I was thinking about the one other person in Langlands House – the person who was also in danger if the building came down.

“Grandmother,” I shouted.

Light bloomed at the other end of the passage as my grandmother came out of her bedroom, carrying a brass oil lamp with the flame protected by a glass chimney. She too wore a long nightdress, but she had sensibly thrown a warmer robe over hers. Her white hair hung over one shoulder in a loose plait, giving her a strangely ethereal look.

“Are you all right?” I wanted to drag her downstairs that instant, to find safety, although I could hardly think where that would be – under the stairs, outside in the grounds?

Grandmother was remarkably composed. “Perfectly all right,” she said calmly. She looked at me carefully, with no sign of urgency in her manner.

“We should go downstairs,” I said urgently. “We’re being bombed.”

“I very much doubt it,” she said drily.

Now it was my turn to gape at her. “But did you hear it? It sounded like something fell on the house,”

“Yes,” she said. “But listen. Do you hear anything else?”

She raised her hand, and in spite of myself, I did listen.

Nothing. No further reverberating crashes; no droning of engines overhead. A window rattled in its frame from a sudden gust of wind. That was all.

“But what was that crash?”

Grandmother said, “We had better go and see what it was. But you must put a robe on first.”

I was amazed that she could be so sensible at such a time. But my teeth were beginning to chatter. I went back to the bedroom and wrapped myself in my dressing-gown before we went to investigate.

The subsiding, shifting noises I had heard had stopped. Instead, there was a curious rushing sound that I could not at first identify; it made me think first of the sound of a distant river flowing, and then of loud whispering.

The first two rooms we looked into were seemingly undamaged. We looked into the third, on the east side of the house, and even Grandmother was shocked; a soft sound escaped from her, as though she

had been winded by a blow. There was a hole in the ceiling, and through it we could see the night sky. In fact, we could *feel* the night on our upturned faces, because the wind was coming in, and it was carrying drops of rain with it. You could see the whole structure of the roof in a brutal cross section, the ragged-edged plaster and the shattered beams and beyond that the broken edges of tiles.

Apart from the rain and the wind's doleful howling, which was producing the rushing noise I had heard, there was no sound from outside that I could detect. Nor was there any light except that of the moon, half hidden behind the scudding clouds. If this was an attack, it was over.

In the middle of the worn Persian carpet was a mess of plaster – whole chunks and pale dust – and broken stones. I approached it with caution, looking for pieces of the bomb that must surely have done this. At first, I saw nothing, but as I circled the heap of rubble, the light from Grandmother's lamp picked out the dull gleam of metal.

“Look at this.”

I craned over, straining my eyes in the low light. Grandmother came closer to look for herself, but after a moment she shook her head.

“That's not part of a bomb, child. It's the weathervane. The storm has brought one of the chimneys down. That was what we heard.”

I didn't think a person of seventeen could possibly be considered a *child*. But I let it pass because I was digesting what she had just said.

The storm.

Was it possible that the tremendous crash that had ripped me out of sleep was simply a chimney coming down in the wind and rain?

I glanced up to check that no more debris was about to fall from the ceiling, and then I put out a hand and brushed plaster dust off the metal object. Sure enough, it was the weathervane from the topmost chimney, bent and twisted beyond repair.

I suppose I should have been relieved. For the War to have reached somewhere as remote as Langlands would have meant something very serious indeed. That the skies above the house were lit up with nothing more sinister than lightning was a *good* thing. We were safe. Langlands was safe. So why was I disappointed?