THE WICKFORD DOOM

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CHRIS PRIESTLEY

With illustrations by
VLADIMIR STANKOVIC

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For Anne & Tim



The air-raid siren sounded just as Harry and his mother sat down to dinner. They would just have to eat the food cold when they got back from the shelter. It wouldn't be the first time – or the last.

They had an Anderson shelter in the back garden. Harry had helped his father to build it. It was only a few yards from the back door but they walked as fast as they could, heads down, hand in hand. Harry's mother seemed to hold her breath until they arrived.

They sat silent, as always. Harry's mother held his hand so hard it hurt – but Harry never complained. They listened to the muffled thud of bombs and guns and comforted themselves with the thought that they sounded far off tonight.

Then the all-clear sounded and they could go back inside. Harry saw their neighbours doing the same, but no one spoke. The family had moved here just before Harry's father got his call-up to the army and they had never got to know anyone very well.

At first, when Harry's father was away, it felt as if Harry's mum was waiting for him to come home all the time. Waiting for him to come back so they could live proper lives again.

When they learned that he would never come home, Harry knew she felt it was wrong to live at all. She felt like it was wrong to live like normal people – like they were pretending

that their lives had not been ruined for ever by the letter that came to say his father had been killed in action.

That night, Harry woke in the small hours. It was so dark that there seemed little difference between his eyes being open or shut, but at last he began to make things out in the gloom. He heard something, too.

It was the sound of sobbing. Harry crept out of bed and along the hall. A lamp was on in the sitting room.

Harry stood in the door and saw his mother sitting in the armchair. Her head was bent, and she had a hanky in one hand and a photograph in a frame in the other.

Harry could only see the back of the photograph but he knew what it was. It was a

photo of his father in uniform in the desert, a smile on his face.

Harry's mother looked up and saw him standing there.

"Oh, Harry," she said. "I'm sorry ..."

Harry walked into the room and they hugged and his mother cried some more. Harry cried too, for all that he tried not to, because his father had told him to be brave and look after his mother when he wasn't there.

But it was hard.



The next day was Saturday and after breakfast Alan and Eric knocked at the door to see if Harry wanted to play football.

Harry was not close friends with Alan or Eric, but sometimes he needed to get out. Time seemed to have come to a stop inside the house and it felt so good to play and not think, to run free like an animal.

The boys kicked the ball around in the street until a group of younger children turned up and there were enough of them to

play something like a proper game. Harry's team lost 5–3 after the usual fierce flash of arguments about handballs and fouls and goals or no goals.

Then the young ones ran off to play hide and seek in a bomb site while Harry, Alan and Eric sat on the kerb to get their breath back.

They chatted about the air raid the night before and Alan said that it had been pretty bad. His father was an ARP warden, and he'd told Alan that the wall of a burning warehouse had collapsed on two firemen, and killed them both.

Harry's heart was always heavy after football. While the game lasted, it was like an oasis in the dull, bomb-cratered desert they lived in now. A place where he could forget the world, forget the war. But bit by bit, it always seeped back in.

When he walked in the door at home, Harry found his mother sitting at the table with a stern-looking man in a dark suit.

"Harry," his mother said. "This is Mr Williams."

Mr Williams got to his feet and held out his hand for Harry to shake. "Pleased to meet you, Harry," he said.

"Hello, sir."

"Mr Williams is a lawyer," Harry's mother said. "He has some exciting news."

Harry had no real idea what a lawyer did apart from stand up in court with a wig on. But he had the distinct feeling that whatever this man did, it wasn't fun. He didn't look like someone who was about to tell them anything exciting.

"Harry," Mr Williams said. "I am the lawyer for your father's family in Suffolk."

"But Dad hated his family," Harry said.

"Harry!" his mother cried.

Mr Williams's thin face cracked into a half-smile.

"That may be," he said, "but despite that, your father's cousin remembered your father in his will."

Harry's eyes grew wide. "They were rich, weren't they?" he said.

"They were," Mr Williams said. "Very rich at one time and still rather well-off."

"Are we going to be rich?" Harry asked. "Are we rich, Mum?"

"Shhh," his mother said. "Let Mr Williams speak."

"Your father's cousin left your father a piece of property in Suffolk," the lawyer went on. "A house and some land at a place called Wickford. Part of what had been a rather large estate."

"Goodness!" Harry's mother said. "Wickford Hall?"

She and Harry looked up at a small dark painting above the fire. It showed a gloomy manor house – a house Harry's father had always said they should live in, if only they hadn't been cheated out of it by some relative or other.

"Imagine, Harry!" Harry's mother said, and she pointed to the painting.

Harry saw the lawyer open his mouth as if he was going to say something, but then he changed his mind and smiled a forced smile instead.

"I'm afraid I am not free at the moment to give any more details about the will," Mr Williams said. "My orders were to ask you to travel to Suffolk where … well, I will explain then."

Harry's mother turned to him, beaming. "Suffolk, Harry?" she said. "How do you like the sound of that? Get away from these bombs for a while."

"We will, of course, be happy to pay your expenses," the lawyer said.

"Gosh," Harry's mother said. "A free trip to the seaside, Harry. Or …"

She turned to the lawyer.

"Wickford Hall is on the coast, isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh yes," he said. "Very much so."

Again the lawyer looked as if he was going to say more, but instead he folded his fingers together and said that he had to be going.

"I'm going to Suffolk myself this afternoon," he said. "I have taken the liberty of arranging train tickets for you and your son for tomorrow, if that suits."

"I dare say we'll manage to make the journey, won't we, Harry?" Harry's mother said. "You might have to miss a couple of days at school."

Mr Williams shook Harry's mother by the hand and nodded to Harry. He put on his hat, picked up his briefcase and umbrella, then took his leave.

Harry peered out of the window as Mr Williams walked off up the street. When he got to the corner he turned and looked back at their house for a moment. Then he shook his head and walked on.

Harry had a strong feeling that there was more to this business than the lawyer was letting on, but he didn't have the heart to say anything to his mother. Besides, it was only a hunch – what would he have said?

But the niggling doubt wouldn't go away. It seemed like such good news. What could possibly be wrong? Maybe Harry had just forgotten how to enjoy life.

For the 100th time, Harry wished his father was there. He wished he could talk to him and ask him what he thought. In fact, he just wished that his father could take care of everything and leave Harry to be a boy again.

Harry felt sure his father would have had doubts about the lawyer too. But he wasn't there. He was never coming back and that was that.



It had been a long time since Harry had been on a train and his worries began to fade as he looked out of the window at the rolling countryside. It all looked so normal here, away from the city. It was almost possible to pretend the war was over.

There were trees and fields and church spires, just as they had always been. There was a farmer in his tractor, followed by gulls as he dug up the earth. Harry knew that the war had infected every part of the country, but here it didn't look so sick, so broken.

Mr Williams, the lawyer, was there to meet them at the station at Talmington. He had on the same dark suit and stiff white collar and tie.

He smiled in his cold way and asked them about their journey, and again Harry had the sudden feeling that something was not quite right. Harry's doubts must have shown on his face, because the lawyer frowned and his manner changed.

"I think I should say that I have acted as your father's cousin's will said I must," he said. The platform had cleared and the train had moved on.

Harry thought Mr Williams sounded a bit defensive. As if they had accused him of something. Or they would do.

"I'm sure you have –" Harry's mother began.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mrs Pointer," Mr Williams said, "but I must explain. I

followed the will to the letter. That is my duty as a lawyer. I hope you will forgive me."

"Forgive you?" Harry's mother said. "What is there to forgive?"

The lawyer's smile had now vanished.

"The last step laid out in the will," he said, "is that I must take you to view the property. Without any further explanation."

"I see," Harry's mother said. "This is all very mysterious."

"I have a car," Mr Williams said. "If you'd like to follow me, I'll take you there now. It's only a short drive."

It was only the second time in Harry's life that he had ever ridden in a car – and never in such a nice one – but he did his best to look as if he did it every day. He looked out of the window and marvelled at the amount

of sky he could see and the trees and flowers everywhere. It was so different to London that it might just as well have been the Amazon jungle or the Sahara desert.

After about five minutes they headed down a narrow lane that took them between fields with tall hedges and leafy trees on either side. Then they turned again at a metal signpost that said 'Arlham 1 mile'.

As they came over a hill, Harry got his first glimpse of the sea in the distance and he couldn't stop himself giving a little cry of excitement. His mother grinned.

"The sea!" she said. "How lovely."

In truth, it did not look very lovely today. The sky was grey and the sea even more so. Harry looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the lawyer's eyes looking back at him. As soon as their eyes met, Mr Williams looked back to the road. They headed downhill until they

reached a village with an old church and a cluster of buildings around a green and a pond.

"This is Arlham," Mr Williams said, as they drove through the village and out onto a road that ran between bare thorn hedges. Now they were heading for the coast.

After a while they turned at a stone gate and drove up a long gravel track. Harry's mother turned and looked at him, her eyes shining. Harry pressed his face against the glass, trying to see what was ahead.

They came to a stop near a little cottage and when they got out of the car they saw that the track ahead came to a sudden end.

There was a barrier in front of the car that looked like it had been put there by the army. But beyond that, Harry could see that the track fell off the edge of the cliff as if it was the end of the world.

"I don't understand," Mrs Pointer said, as Harry walked to the end of the track and looked past the barrier and over the cliff to the beach below.

"Not too close, young man," Mr Williams called. "The cliffs are very unstable."

"Come away, Harry!" his mother said. "Where are we?" she asked the lawyer. "I thought you were taking us to Wickford Hall."

Mr Williams stared at his shoes for a moment and took a deep breath.

"This is ... very ... difficult," he said. "Wickford Hall fell over that cliff 40 years ago. Every stone of it is under the sea."

Harry and his mother stared off at the cliff and then back at Mr Williams. The lawyer licked his lips as though his mouth had gone dry.

"What on earth do you mean?" Harry's mother said.

"I'm afraid that this was a rather nasty joke meant for your husband," the lawyer said. "I was bound by the will to bring him here without any explanation. And since your husband has passed away, I'm afraid –"

"My husband did not 'pass away', as you put it," Harry's mother said. "My husband was killed in the service of this country. He was a good man. Too good for this cruel game. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"And I am," Mr Williams said with a sigh. "But I am a lawyer and I must obey my client's wishes, however unpleasant."

Harry's mother shook her head, unable to speak. Harry scowled. Then the sound of tyres on the track made them all turn to see a black car arrive. It parked on the grass and the driver got out and walked towards them.