

CHAPTER ONE

The Start of Everything

‘Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!’ yelled Arnie, as he ran full pelt, arms outstretched like aeroplane wings, down the longest and widest corridor in Shabbington Hall. As he reached maximum speed, he let himself go and slid, jerking and twisting along the polished floor, his legs splaying dangerously further apart, until shuddering violently, he crumpled to the ground with a deadening thwump.

For a second he lay there listening fearfully, heart pounding, expecting to be caught before scrambling back the way he had come. Ahead of him, past the crumpled suits of armour and dusty display cases, the passage opened out into a square hall. From here rose a zigzagging staircase above which a huge crystal chandelier hovered regally. Hearing a gaggle of voices, he sprinted on and straight into the path of a woman.

‘Arnie Jenks! In a rush to be somewhere?’ she demanded, as he swerved to avoid colliding with her.

‘Sorry Miss McGarry,’ he panted, pulling up sharply, clocking his shoes that lay in a corner one on top of the other.

‘You know the rules governing this place. No running! If Lord Martlesham had seen you he would have no qualms about sending you straight back to school.’ She glared at his woolly socks.

‘He didn’t though, did he?’ said Arnie, looking around nervously to make doubly sure.

‘No – I think I saw him leave – just your good luck. But *I’m* not best pleased,’ she said firmly.

Arnie grinned and fingered his shock of unruly brown hair. 'I wasn't running *really* Miss. More like "sliding". Got a bit carried away. Sorry.'

'Well, despite what it may look like, this particular stately home doesn't need an over-enthusiastic twelve-year-old roughing it up any further – "time" has done enough of that,' she emphasised, flicking her eyes up to a bunch of thick cobwebs that hung across the corner of a grubby water-stained ceiling.

'Yes Miss,' he said apologetically.

'Mmmm...' she demurred, before deciding his punishment. 'If you want to make amends then you can hand these out.'

She thrust a wad of plastic-coated cards towards Arnie, which he began reading as another boy sidled up awkwardly, slightly out of breath.

'Where have *you* been Connor?' Miss McGarry asked, 'Not running about too I hope?'

'Oh, no Miss,' he said twitching, adjusting his glasses and trousers at the same time. 'Just finding my notebook, there's too much here for me to remember!'

Miss McGarry narrowed her beady eyes towards Arnie.

'I'll use my memory!' he said perkily.

'Yes, well...' she said a little unsure, 'I'll be expecting originality and accuracy in your account of our visit here. No cribbing from the Internet later!'

'Wouldn't dream of it Miss,' Arnie smiled sincerely.

His teacher frowned.

Arnie attempted to act serious by returning his gaze intently to the cards he was clutching.

Miss McGarry then turned towards a younger woman at the far side of the hall who was struggling to count twenty or so

bobbing heads, as the children around her kept switching places, causing her to start again from the beginning.

‘Miss Pink! I think we should get going. We have a lot to see.’

Miss McGarry caught Arnie rubbing his hands together.

‘You should be wearing a jumper under that blazer,’ she remarked, checking out his uniform.

‘It’s ok,’ he said brightly, ‘the cold doesn’t bother me much.’

‘It will here,’ she said, brushing away some tiny icicles from the inside of a window.

Arnie shrugged away the suggestion as Connor began making peculiar grunting sounds, his face buried deep into his satchel.

‘Here we are!’ he squeaked, producing an awfully long pencil. ‘Ready for anything that might be thrown at us!’

‘Now then everyone,’ Miss McGarry wailed, gazing over the chattering pupils, ‘come and take one of these guides.’ The children eventually formed a line and Arnie dutifully handed out the cards.

‘Good. We’ll begin along here,’ she decided, pointing back down the long corridor and towards a door on the right.

‘What’s through there?’ queried Arnie, as he crammed on his scuffed shoes.

‘Where the servants once worked I think,’ said Connor, turning his map the right way up and studying the floor plan. Miss McGarry approached the opening and beckoned everyone to follow, pushing on like an explorer into the lonely half-light, feeling the way forward with her hand.

Arnie hung back until he was alone before reaching for the iPod in his pocket. As he touched it, a hellish screech from above made him jump. Spinning round, he peered upwards and spied through a skylight the shape of a bird descending. It landed with

a scraping of claws, like blades upon steel, casting a sinister shadow down into the hall. Arnie darted away in the direction of the others.

Turning into a corridor he caught sight of the school group heading further into the gloom. Recognising the last figure struggling to keep pace with the others, he crept up behind him very stealthily.

‘Gotcha!’ he hissed.

‘Stop it Arnie!’ Connor said, whirling round in a flurry. ‘You know I hate being scared!’

‘Only joking!’ Arnie teased.

‘Well it isn’t funny!’

‘Sorry,’ Arnie said. ‘I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about...
down here in the dark...’

‘Hope not.’ Connor swallowed deeply as they joined the line of children who shuffled and fidgeted, trailing behind Miss McGarry like one very long caterpillar. Moments later, they reached a set of stone steps and gripping the iron handrail tightly, one by one they descended into the depths of the house.

After the tour of the ground floor and basement rooms was over, everyone broke for lunch before assembling once more in the hall.

‘Now pay attention everyone,’ piped up Miss McGarry, ‘your task for this afternoon. I want you to select a character or a room of your choice that would make for an interesting story using the history around you as a basis. Notes are fine – we can work them up next week. I suggest splitting into pairs. Is that clear?’

‘I thought we were all done,’ said Arnie, yawning. ‘It’s supposed to be a day out!’

‘But not a day off,’ reminded Miss McGarry sarcastically from

over her shoulder as she moved away to deal with a pupil whose nose had started to bleed.

‘Ok,’ said Arnie reluctantly. ‘But I...’

‘What’s up?’ said Connor cutting in.

‘I can’t see much here that would set the world alight.’

‘We could write up the Martlesham family tree? That would fill up a few pages.’

‘That’s a bit dull though, isn’t it?’ said Arnie flatly. ‘Just names and *dates!*’

‘What do you want to do then?’

Arnie’s eyes lit up. ‘To discover a *secret!*’

‘Well how?’ said Connor clueless. ‘We can’t expect to dig up a chest full of coins or stumble over a forgotten skeleton hanging in a dungeon...’

‘We could try – there must be something to find that nobody knows anything about.’

‘Why?’ said Connor simply. ‘Think of the people who have spent their time looking. And if *they* haven’t found anything by now, what chance have we got?’

‘It’s quite possible though,’ said Arnie, rubbing his chin, ‘this house is humongous! Who knows what’s stashed about?’

‘Couldn’t we just do the family tree?’ said Connor wearily. ‘It’s the sort of thing we’re expected to do in places like these.’

‘Exactly!’ said Arnie, as his eyes drifted over to the edge of the stairs. ‘So – let’s not.’

Connor heaved a sigh and dragging his feet like a lifeless puppet, followed Arnie to where they both stood staring at a portrait hanging on a nearby wall. It was of a woman in a dark green dress seated next to a small open window.

‘Wow! What scary eyes she’s got!’ whispered Arnie, tilting his

head from one side of the frame to the other. ‘See how they follow you around as you move?’

‘Freaky!’ said Connor, clutching his pencil tightly.

Arnie stiffened.

‘What?’ stammered Connor.

‘The painting must be...*inhabited!*’

‘How do you mean?’ Connor said nervously, as Arnie leaned in close to the face.

‘Is it me or did her lips twitch just then?’

‘Don’t say that,’ said Connor worriedly.

Arnie rubbed his finger over a little metal strip fixed along the bottom of the portrait. It bore an inscription:

“Lady Dervela Martlesbam 1562-1628.”

‘It’s ok Con – she’s dead for sure,’ he said soothingly. Connor dared one more glance.

Arnie shifted along and raised his hand. ‘Hey, this is cool!’

Connor scuttled up and peered closer.

‘Look!’ said Arnie, pointing to a series of sketches. They showed an anonymous figure in a cloak climbing through an open panel in a wall. Once safely hidden in the tiny space behind, he was lowered by ropes through a vertical gap between the brickwork into the sewers below from where he was led to safety.

‘A priest hole!’ said Arnie breathlessly. ‘Could it still be here somewhere do you think?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Connor, pausing to consider carefully. ‘Can’t see one on the plan.’

‘Really? You’ve looked?’

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'Someone has to keep track of things,' he said, squinting hard at the faint print. After a moment he shook his head, satisfied.

'Doesn't mean it's not there,' disagreed Arnie, 'just that no one's managed to find it!'

'Yeah, but...'

'So it's only a question of where we start looking!' plotted Arnie as he turned to face Connor with a wicked grin.