

CHAPTER ONE

It was late in the evening and I was soaring majestically through the air, whizzing around like an acrobatic bumblebee. Somewhere below I could hear a crowd of people chanting my name as I tumbled into a particularly impressive mid-air pirouette. Madame Pym, ringleader and trapeze-artist extraordinaire, swung back and forth in front of me, her short legs hooked over the trapeze and her arms held out waiting to pull me to safety. Reaching forward, I stretched out as far as I could, ready to grab on to Pym and to hear the humongous roar of applause fill my ears. Instead, I felt my fingertips brush Pym's before they slipped away, leaving me grabbing at nothing but thin air. Then I was falling. Down.

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It was as if the world went into slow motion. The sound of the crowd disappeared and all I could hear was the thundering beat of my heart. With a sickening lurch of my stomach I saw the ground rising up to meet me. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound came out. Instead there was Pym's voice, full of fear and pain, shouting one word over and over again.

“POPPY!”

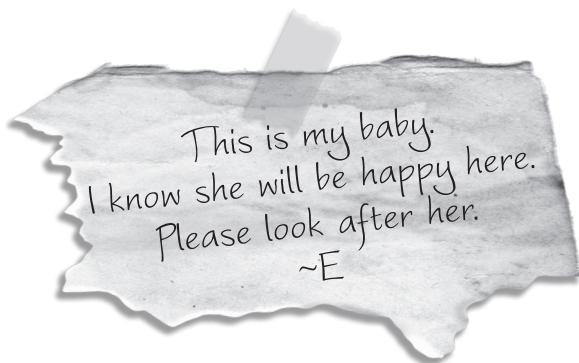
With a gasp I sat up in bed. My heart was hammering but as my eyes adjusted to the darkness I made out the reassuring shapes of my dorm room, and heard the gentle breathing of my two sleeping room-mates. I fumbled around on my nightstand and grabbed my torch, then I shuffled down under my bed covers and sat up so that I was inside my own little tent before turning on the light. I'd had the same dream a few times now, and sometimes the only thing that gets rid of those dark pesky nightmare feelings is a big shining light bulb.

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Wasn't that a good beginning? I like it when a book starts right in the action with something scary like that. Don't worry though, there's lots of exciting non-dream stuff coming right up, and if you think about it, it wouldn't have been much good if that dream bit had been real. I mean, this would have been a very short book indeed – what with me being a total Poppy pancake. My favourite books are the Detective Dougie Valentine books by H.T. Maddox, and they're about this kid-detective, Dougie Valentine, and his dog, Snoops, and those books always start with him hanging off the side of a mountain staring helplessly into the evil face of the world's most dangerous criminal. Or something like that. They're so exciting, and I want my book to be exciting as well.

I have actually already written one very exciting book about my own adventures but my best friend, Ingrid – one of the snoring shapes next to me in the dorm – says that in a second book you still have to introduce everyone at the beginning in case someone hasn't read the first book. (But if you haven't read the first book you really definitely should. It got five out of five stars in my book group. I suppose I *should* say that my book group is just

me and The Magnificent Marvin, but still, you have to admit a top score like that is pretty impressive. We're quite picky, you know.) Anyway, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Poppy Pym and I'm eleven. When I was a baby a magician called The Magnificent Marvin pulled me out of his magic hat. I know how it sounds, but it's true! The only clue about where I had come from was a note pinned to my blankets that read:



Well, whoever E is, they were right. I *have* been happy, because The Magnificent Marvin was a part of Madame Pym's Spectacular Travelling Circus, and I have lived there with my family of funny and eccentric performers ever since. There's Madame

Pym herself, of course, who also has psychic abilities (she has one good eye that seems to notice everything and one bad eye that screws up a bit and can see into the future. Pym says that's one eye for looking out and one for looking in), and The Magnificent Marvin, but a circus wouldn't be any good without a few more entertainers – and Madame Pym's circus is the best in the world. Marvin's wife Doris is his assistant, but she's also a tightrope walker and inventor, then there's Luigi the lion tamer and his lion, Buttercup; Tina and Tawna the horse-riding gymnasts, BoBo the happy clown and Chuckles the sad clown, Sharp-Eye Sheila the knife thrower, Boris Von Jurgen the strongman and last of all, Fanella the Italian snake-charmer and fire-eater, and her long orange snake, Otis. Still snuggled under my sheets I shone my torch on a photo of us all that had been taken a few weeks ago, after we recovered a priceless ruby scarab, and that took pride of place on my bedside table. I'll stick in a copy here so that if you haven't read about them before you can get to know everyone a bit better.



Now, you might be wondering why I was waking up in a dorm room if I grew up in a circus. (I knew you'd spot that, you beady-eyed brainiac.) What happened was that I recently started going to a swanky boarding school called Saint Smithen's. When I first arrived school felt huge and scary – I mean, it's a pretty big change, going from worrying about getting up in time to feed the lion, to getting up in time to attend a maths lesson – but Saint Smithen's had started to feel like home. Well, almost.

I shivered under my blankets, remembering my dream. It felt so real every time I had it. In the beginning I was always so happy to be back home at the circus, but by the end I was relieved to wake up and find myself at home at Saint Smithen's. (It's a funny word, "home", isn't it, when you've got more than one of them?) The dream was always the same – I would be performing high up on the trapeze and everything would be going brilliantly, the crowd would be going wild. Then, in the middle of the trick, I'd reach for Pym, miss and then fall to my certain death. (I don't like to think about that bit too much.) I wasn't sure why I kept having the dream, but in all of my favourite books it seemed like mysterious dreams usually came before big

adventures. Well, maybe some of Pym's psychic powers were rubbing off on me, because as I turned off the torch and squished my eyes tight shut, trying to get back to sleep, I had the tingling feeling that a fresh mystery might be just around the corner.

And guess what? I was right.

(And I'll warn you right now ... it's a pretty spooky story. So maybe read it with the lights on.)



CHAPTER TWO

I must have drifted off to sleep for another couple of hours but I still woke up ages before my alarm clock was set to go off, when the first fingers of sunlight were just tugging at the edges of the curtains. I knew that I needed to banish the last of those scared feelings that seem to stick to you after a bad dream, and I had a great plan for how to do it. Trying to be as super stealthy as possible I pulled some green wellies on, and yanked a yellow coat over the top of my purple stripy pyjamas before making a break for it, down the stairs and into the chilly early morning air. As I scrunched along over the gravel path and between the towering ancient oak trees that stretched out in front of the school, the sun

was just coming up, burning the sky like a beautiful flaming bowl of orange jelly. I wriggled my nose and took a deep breath of autumn air that smelled of crunchy leaves and bonfires and conker fights. With a quick look around to make sure there was no one else about, I turned a neat line of perfect cartwheels over the slightly dewy grass. Then I pushed myself forward into a series of flips, springing up higher and higher, the world spinning and righting itself around me like I was looking at it through a wonky kaleidoscope. I jumped in the air, tumbling and twirling, backwards and forwards until I was out of breath. Collapsing into a pillow of scrunchy orange leaves, I lay panting and pink cheeked, feeling my blood whirring around my body and my fingers and toes tingling. *That's better*, I thought. *Nothing like a bit of circus practice to make me feel like ME again.*

Once I had got my breath back I realized I would need to get a shuffle on if I didn't want to miss breakfast. Racing back along the path so fast that I was just a green, yellow and purple blur, I pushed through the entrance to the girls' dormitory and through a jumble of girls, tennis racquets, hockey sticks, musical instruments and football boots. I wound my way through the labyrinth of

corridors until I came back to the door for our room, with its gleaming brass sign that reads GOLDFINCHES 3 in elegant letters. (The school is split into four houses: Goldfinches, Sparrows, Robins and Wrens. It's part of an old tradition and you can see all four house birds on the school crest. Apparently old Saint Smithen was a big fan of birds, but you'd have to ask Ingrid for the whole story on that one.) I share my room with Ingrid and Letty. They're brilliant. Ingrid is the cleverest person I know and the best pal you could ask for. Letty is a year older than us and she's like a human tornado – always on the move. She's in a LOT of different clubs and that means she's always off doing loads of different activities. Here's a picture of us in front of Saint Smithen's. That small boy pulling the funny face is Kip Kapur. He's my other best friend, and you shouldn't let his smallness fool you. He's got the biggest voice you ever heard. (And a big appetite to match.)



I pushed the door to my room open to find that Ingrid was already up, dressed and occupying her usual position: sitting neatly on her bed with a humongous book right in front of her short-sighted eyes. The title on the front of this one was *Ulysses*. It sounded like a book about someone sneezing to me, but it was *very* long so it was probably about some other stuff as well.

“Boo!” I said, not even that loudly. Ingrid leapt in the air and the book fell from her hands with a mighty, and slightly dusty, thump.

“Poppy!” she squeaked, “where have you been?”

“I went to do a bit of circus practice. Restless legs, you know,” I said, tugging off my wellies and changing into my uniform as speedily as I could.

“Letty’s already left for French club, but I wanted to wait for you before breakfast,” Ingrid said. “Although, I didn’t mind much because I *was* enjoying my book.” She looked wistfully towards the fat book lying on the floor and her giant eyes gleamed behind her spectacles. “I don’t suppose there’s time for me to just finish this chapter. . .” Her hands stretched towards it, like a thirsty person reaching for water.

I grabbed Ingrid’s arm with a groan. “You must be

joking, Ing! I'm FAMISHED." I rubbed my stomach which was growling like a disgruntled lion cub. "I haven't had a BITE to eat since my double-chocolate fudge rainbow-sprinkle sundae. And that was well over twelve hours ago! They're practically starving us at this school! Let's go and get some breakfast."

We made our way outside, falling in with the steady stream of girls heading to the dining room.

"I had a letter from my mum and dad at the stamp collectors' fair," sighed Ingrid, pulling out a thin white envelope. "Their mint condition Penny Black is the star attraction. Plus apparently everyone keeps acting like they are celebrities because their new book *Stamps for Scamps: It's Never Too Early to Start Stamp Collecting* just came out."

(I suppose not every book can be as interesting as mine.)

"That's . . . er . . . nice," I said. I would never really understand Ingrid's parents' obsession with stamps, but then neither did Ingrid.

"Have you seen Kip yet this morning?" she asked, changing the subject.

"No," I said, shaking my head, "I came straight here, but he's hardly likely to miss his breakfast, is he?" We both squawked with laughter at that idea

because it was so ridiculous, and we were proved right as we entered the main building and headed for the dining hall. We could hear his foghorn voice blasting over all the other muffled chatter.

“. . . and I said, no, it’s a PEANUT,” Kip yelled at his startled-looking audience, laughing noisily at his own story. “Poppy! Ingrid! Over here!” he cried, waving both arms wildly in our direction as if otherwise we would have no idea he was around.

“Hey, Kip!” I said, punching him on the arm in a friendly way.

“I thought you guys were going to miss breakfast,” Kip said, suddenly serious. “I got some extra bacon sandwiches just in case you were late but then I accidentally ate them all while I was busy telling this great story.” His eyes looked down to the three empty cereal bar wrappers fluttering in front of him. “Oh, er, and these cereal bars too, I guess.” He looked genuinely puzzled as if he had no memory of scoffing them.

“Well, at least you took the wrappers off this time,” Ingrid said placidly. After all we were used to Kip hoovering up everything in sight, especially if he was telling a particularly involved story.

We were all chatting away when a voice

interrupted that sent shivers weaselling down my spine.

“Oh look, it’s the freaks’ table.” I looked into the icy blue eyes of my number one arch nemesis, Annabelle Forthington-Smythe. Growing up in the circus might have meant I didn’t have loads of friends, but it also meant that I had never before experienced having a number one arch nemesis either. Unfortunately that all changed when I met Annabelle. I couldn’t understand what I had done that had made Annabelle Forthington-Smythe hate me on sight, but whatever it was we had since become mortal enemies. (Plus, she’d been horrible to Ingrid since they were in primary school together and that was more than enough to make her a baddy in my book.)

Kip was staring at Annabelle, his mouth slightly open and full of his neighbour’s cereal bar. Ingrid was trying hard not to look bothered but a telltale pink flush was spreading across her pale cheeks.

“I guess I am a freak,” I said thoughtfully. “After all, I can do this.” I reached behind Ingrid’s ear and pulled out a chocolate coin. Ingrid giggled and I passed her the chocolate. Then I reached behind Kip’s ear and pulled out another coin. Needless to

say Kip gobbled that so fast that I'm not completely sure he bothered to remove the gold foil.

There was a cheer and cries of "me next, me next" rang out around the table.

"Oh no," I said with a grin. "Annabelle next."

Annabelle's lips tightened as I leant towards her before she could protest. Putting my hand up to her ear, I pulled out a realistic-looking rubber spider, its thick, furry legs quivering. Annabelle shrieked as I dropped it on to her arm, and she nearly dropped her tray in fright.

"What's the matter, Annabelle, scared of a little toy?" I asked, scooping up the spider and wagging it around for my appreciative audience. There were more cheers, and I stood up to take a bow.

"You'll pay for that, Poppy Pym," Annabelle spat, her eyes flashing. Then, with a toss of her blonde ponytail, she swept off to a table in the corner with a gaggle of her friends.

"That was brilliant!" exclaimed Kip, holding out his hand, which I slapped in a happy high five.

"Yes. . ." said Ingrid with a small frown. "Although I'm not sure it's such a good idea to make her so mad."

"She's always cross like that," I said with a shrug,

but deep down I knew Ingrid was right and that winding up Annabelle wasn't the best of plans. You never knew what she was going to do, but it was usually something dastardly and befitting of a real meanie .

“Wish I could think of something really good to say to her when she's being nasty like that,” Kip mumbled through a mouthful of chocolate coin crumbs.

“I'm surprised you can't,” I said. “Usually me and Ingrid can barely get a word in edgeways around you.” I gave him a friendly jab in the ribs.

“It's because he has to choose between talking and eating,” Ingrid said sweetly.

“OY!” Kip exclaimed, swallowing his last mouthful. “I don't know what you two are on about, I'm not that. . . RILEY! RILEY! OVER HERE! RILEY! IT'S ME, KIP! RILEYYYYYYYYYY!” Kip was blasting across the room to a red-headed boy carrying a clipboard who made his way over, a grin splitting his freckled face.

“All right, Kip!” He held out his right hand and the two boys did a sort of complicated handshake. “Hi, Poppy. Hi, Ingrid.” He turned his smile on us. “Are you all excited about the party?”

“What party?” I asked.

“Haven’t you heard?” His eyebrows shot up. “We’re having a Halloween party during Parents’ Weekend. Costumes and everything.”

“YES!” exclaimed Kip. “I’m going to go as something REALLY scary like, like. . .”

“A vegetable?” asked Riley, nudging Kip in the ribs with his elbow. The two of them continued joking, but my attention had turned to Parents’ Weekend. It was pretty simple really, a weekend where the students’ parents were invited to visit the school, have a look around and do some fun activities. I suppose it was less simple, though, if you didn’t exactly have parents. At least not two nice neat ones with names like “Mum” or “Dad”. My thoughts were interrupted by Riley, moving on to a new subject.

“Anyway,” he said, waving the clipboard in the air, “the party isn’t what I came to ask you about, I’m here to see if you want to sign up for the coach to Brimwell tomorrow? It’s the first years’ turn, but spaces are limited.”

All three of us jumped to our feet. You see, Brimwell is the town closest to Saint Smithen’s (the school sits all big and fancy on top of a steep hill called “Beggar’s Hill”, and Brimwell is nestled snugly at the bottom). At night you can see

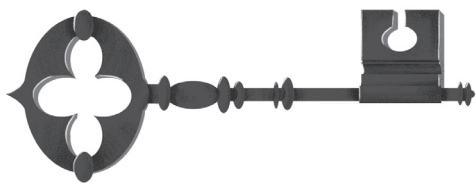
the twinkling lights of the town glittering like a precious jewel from the dormitory windows. Most importantly, you can use a trip into town to spend your pocket money and to eat giant slices of gooey chocolate cake at Miss Marigold's Tea Shop. Each year group takes it in turns to go, so I hadn't had a chance to go yet and I was VERY excited to sample this legendary cake for myself.

"Oooh, yes!" Ingrid's glasses practically fogged up with excitement. "We can go to the book shop."

"Forget the book shop," Kip said, his face lit up, his mind obviously working in the same direction as my own. "We can go to the CAKE SHOP."

"Sign us up!" I cried.

We scrawled our names at the bottom of the list and Riley moved on to the next table. I sat back with a happy sigh, pesky thoughts of Parents' Weekend replaced by much happier thoughts of baked goods. Little did I know that that trip to Brimwell would lead to something EVEN MORE important than a slice of chocolate cake.



CHAPTER THREE

The next morning found a group of excited first years, neatly lined up outside the main building. We were waiting under the fiery autumn leaves of the oak trees that lined the drive, next to an old stone sundial that was decorated with engravings of acorns and oak leaves. I ran my finger over the engravings and worked out that the shadows said ten o'clock exactly. Glancing around impatiently to see if I could spy the minibus I noticed that a lot of the other girls who were waiting were wearing purple badges with the letters QFF written on them in glittering gold. I turned to Jacinta, a girl from my class, who was standing in line next to me, and asked her what the badges were. She clutched

her own badge and giggled squeakily. “QFF?” she replied. “It stands for ‘Quest Friends Forever’. We’re Lucas Quest’s fan club.”

I must have looked confused because she said the name again. Louder this time, and more slowly. “Looooooooocas Queeeeesst.”

“Who?” I asked.

“You really don’t know?” It was her turn to look confused. “Lucas Quest? He’s an actor? He was in the film *Love Vampire: Vampires in Love*? And there’s going to be a SEQUEL, *Love Vampire 2: Vampires More in Love than Ever!*” Her voice was getting higher and higher as I didn’t show any signs of suddenly understanding what she was talking about.

“Nope.” I shook my head. “Sorry,” I added because she looked so upset.

“I guess maybe he’s not exactly world famous yet,” Jacinta sighed. “But he WILL be soon, and we’ll have been his fans from the very beginning. Soon QFF won’t just be at Saint Smithen’s . . . we’ll have members everywhere!” She pulled a photograph out of her pocket and put it in my hand. It had been torn out of a magazine and showed a boy with tanned skin and dark curly hair flopping into dark eyes. His smile showed off a set of very straight,

very white teeth, and the caption underneath read “Brimwell’s resident love vampire reveals his love of puppies.” I didn’t really understand what Jacinta was so worked up about but one look at her love-struck face and I knew I had to say something nice.

“I like his, er, ears,” I said.

“You can have this if you want.” Jacinta pressed the picture into my hand like it was a really precious gift. “I have sixteen more copies from the *Brimwell Bugle* in my room. Maybe you would like to join the fan club?”

“Er. Maybe,” I muttered, looking at the boy in the picture. (I’ll stick it in here for you to see if you can work out what all the fuss is about.)

“He’s fourteen,” she murmured as if I hadn’t spoken, her eyes glazing over dreamily. “And he’s sooooo handsome. He actually goes to Saint Smithen’s, you know, and his brother Andrew is a fifth year here as well. Last term he was off school because he was FILMING. Isn’t that so amazingly amazing? If only I had started school a year earlier I might have already MET him. We might be IN LOVE!” Jacinta’s cheeks flushed and she raised a trembling hand to her face. “He’s back now but he isn’t coming back to school until next week because he’s still being taught by a tutor.” Her eyes took



on a moony look again. “But he’s actually FROM Brimwell.” She waved her arm in the direction of Brimwell and her eyes opened really wide as she stared down at the town, as if hoping to be able to spot him from all the way up here. “And now he’s in town rehearsing for a play. Maybe we’ll actually see him. IN THE FLESH.” She quivered and looked a bit faint. “We’re going to try and find out where he’s rehearsing and see if we can get his autograph. He’ll have to come out some time.”

I tried to look like I was excited as well and Jacinta turned back to her friends.

“Have you heard of this Loo Cast person?” I whispered to Ingrid, who was standing the other side of me with her head buried in her book.

“It’s Lucas,” she said, not looking up. “I think he was in some rubbish films about werewolves for about five minutes.”

“It’s vampires,” I said. “Or love. I’m not quite sure.”

“It’s funny, the way people get.” Ingrid shook her head. “From what I hear he’s hardly even in the films – I think he plays the main vampire’s little brother or something – but people at this school act like he’s such a big deal. Why don’t you ask Annabelle,

if you're so interested?" She snorted (a most un-Ingrid sound). "After all, she's the head of his fan club."

And sure enough, there was Annabelle at the front of the queue boasting the biggest badge of them all. Well, that was all I needed to know – if Annabelle was a fan then I didn't need to hear anything more about this Lucas Quest character. Anyway, at that moment the coach arrived on the scene and two teachers got out, causing a collective but muffled groan from Kip, Ingrid and me.

First of all there was Mr Grant who taught botany, which is the science of plants. He is tall and handsome with a fierce-looking scar down the side of his face. Rumour has it that he got the scar while wrestling a crocodile on one of his many exploring adventures. As usual he was wearing loose khaki trousers and a dark green shirt, as well as a pretty excellent wide-brimmed brown hat. He looked exactly like an explorer from a story. But Mr Grant wasn't the reason for our dismay. That particular honour belonged to the lady standing next to him. Small and neat, with pale blonde hair and cool green eyes, Miss Susan the chemistry teacher was not exactly my favourite person, and I wasn't exactly hers. She had actually thawed out

a bit since that one time I accidentally accused her of being a jewel thief (it's a long story), but she still didn't seem especially happy to see us. In fact her eyes lingered on me for a moment and her cold stare sent an icy shiver through me, like a hasty gulp of milkshake.

"Right, children," Miss Susan said crisply, "as you get on the coach, please make sure that either Mr Grant or I have marked your name off on the register. We will meet you back at the bus stop at two o'clock precisely. Lateness will not be tolerated." She looked sharply in my direction as she said this, which I thought was a bit unfair. I was hardly ever late. My idea of time was just slightly more ... *relaxed* than other people's. "Please remember," she continued, "that you are representatives of the school and that how you conduct yourselves reflects on the reputation of this fine institution. TRY to behave accordingly." Miss Susan's eyes seemed to bore into mine again.

"And have a good time!" grinned Mr Grant.

Miss Susan went a bit pink. "Yes, well, that as well," she said, and began marking names off the register in her hand as students bustled on to the coach.

When I got to the front of the line Miss Susan

looked at me with a frown.

“Poppy,” she said, giving me a curt nod.

“Hello, Miss Susan,” I muttered.

“How are you?” she asked stiffly.

I think my mouth must have dropped open. Was Miss Susan trying to . . . *chat*? “Er. I’m good,” I stammered.

She nodded and her cool gaze met mine.

“I like your necklace,” I said, trying to think of something friendly to say. Plus it really *was* a nice necklace, a light silver chain threaded with tiny pearls and a silver charm in the shape of a heart.

Miss Susan’s hand went to the necklace and she thrust it back under the neckline of her shirt. Something shut up in her eyes like a telescope folding in on itself. “Poppy. I trrrrust you and your friends will manage to stay out of trouble for the next few short hours. I’ve got my eye on you, so none of your usual escapades.” Her voice went a little bit frilly like it sometimes does when she’s being extra bossy.

Anger welled up inside me, but at the same time I was almost relieved. No need to worry, folks; Miss Susan was back to her frosty self and it was business as usual. I was about to tell Miss Susan

what I thought about her accusations, quite loudly, when Ingrid nudged me in the back and up the steps on to the coach.

When I was in my seat I turned to face her and Kip who had plonked down behind me. Before I could say anything Kip thrust his face in front of mine.

“Gosh, Poppy, your face is so red! You look like a strawberry lollipop.”

“Didn’t you hear what she said?” I gasped. “I mean, we practically saved the whole school from a madwoman and Miss Susan acts like *we’re* the criminals.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Ingrid shrugged, her nose already back in her book. “You know what she’s like – why would you expect any different? Anyway, we’re not going to get in any trouble so it doesn’t matter, does it?”

I knew Ingrid was right but it didn’t stop dark feelings towards Miss Susan simmering inside me like angry soup. However, I was swiftly distracted by the squeal of the coach starting up, and the rumble of us rolling down the gravel drive. We were off! Looking down at the town lying below, all thoughts of Miss Susan were replaced with thoughts of cake.

After all, a girl has to have her priorities.