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Opening extract from

Elspeth Hart and the School for Show-Offs

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Another Horrible Tuesday

It was three o'clock on a Tuesday, and Miss Crabb was picking her nose. She was digging her long pointy finger right inside her nostril and pulling out the most awful strings of green snot.

Elspeth Hart was staring at her in horror. She didn't want to watch, but she couldn't help it.



"Gah! What are you staring at, you little rat-face?" shouted Miss Crabb, when she realized Elspeth was watching. "Can't a body pick her own nostrils in peace? Gerroff down to the cellars and sweep up the mouse droppings! I might need them as an ingredient in the stew I'm making. Get to it!"

Elspeth hurried off. She had only lived with Miss Crabb for a year, but she already knew not to cross her. Miss Crabb was

Elspeth's aunt. She had a nasty temper and a never-ending list of disgusting chores she could make Elspeth do.

Elspeth and Miss Crabb didn't live in a house like most people. They lived in a boarding school. Miss Crabb was the Chief Cook at the school and she lived in a very small attic right at the top of the building. So when Elspeth moved in, there wasn't much space for her. She had to sleep in a wardrobe.

Yes, dear reader – a wardrobe! It doesn't seem very fair to me, either. That was bad enough, but the school itself was even worse. It was a drama school called the Pandora Pants School for Show-offs and it was a dreadful place. You could only study there if you were really, really good at showing-off, or your parents were very rich.

Hundreds and hundreds of film stars, TV stars, people in adverts – they had all been to the Pandora Pants School for Show-offs once upon a time. And some of the students were nastier than a mouthful of mouldy cabbage.

The Pandora Pants School for Show-offs was not a place you would want to visit. Ever. Unless you, dear reader, are a show-off. Are you?

I thought not. And nor was Elspeth Hart.

Elspeth Hart was a bit shorter than you are, and a bit shyer than you are. She had green eyes and fuzzy dark hair that was hard to control. She had lived a normal life until she was ten, when her parents disappeared in a flood and were never seen again. That was when she had come to live with Miss Crabb.

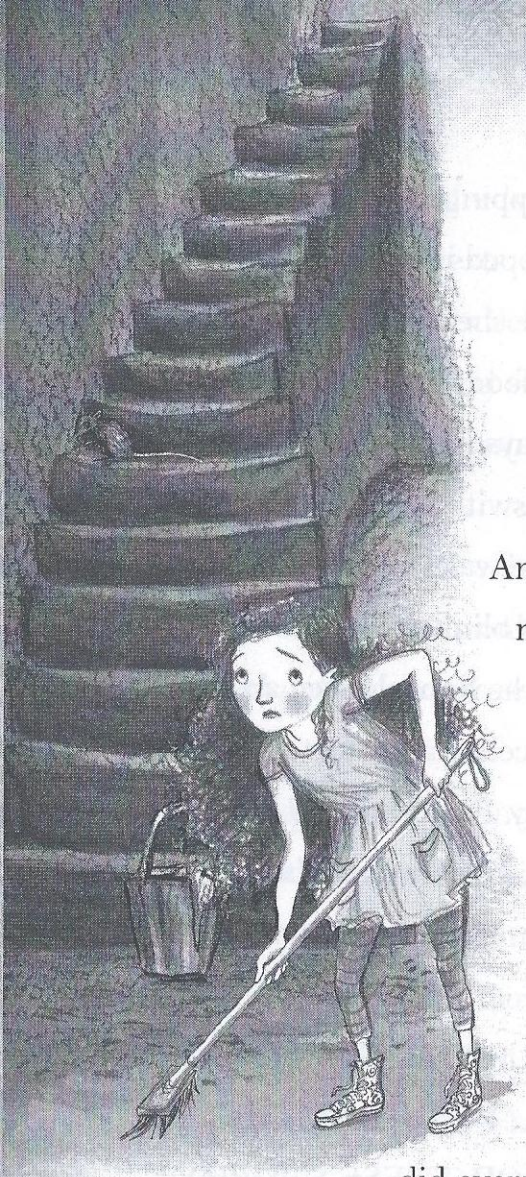
"More mouse droppings," Elspeth muttered, as she stepped into the dark cellar. "I can't believe she gets away with putting them in the food. Evil old woman."

She moved sideways in the dark, feeling around for the light switch, and bashed her knee hard against the wall. Tears came to her eyes, but Elspeth blinked them away.

She switched on the light, looked around the stinky, dripping cellar and started sweeping very slowly. Elspeth could hear Miss Crabb upstairs, crashing and banging around the kitchen in a rage, and she was in no hurry to go back.

"STUPID LITTLE VARMINTS!" Miss Crabb was shouting. "I CAN'T BELIEVE I HAVE TO COOK FOR THESE STUPID LITTLE VARMINTS!"

There was the sound of smashing glass.



Miss Crabb hated the children at the Pandora Pants School for Show-offs. She hated Elspeth, too. And if Miss Crabb met you, dear reader, I am afraid that she would hate you, no matter how friendly you are. Children were Miss Crabb's sworn enemies, and she did everything she could to make poor Elspeth's life a misery.

When Elspeth came to live with her,

Miss Crabb instantly put her to work in the filthiest, stickiest, darkest corner of the kitchen and gave her all sorts of other horrible jobs around the school. Elspeth never complained. As you know, she was quite a bit shyer than you are, and besides, she had been brought up to be very polite. So poor Elspeth had to scrub pots and shoo away cockroaches and watch Miss Crabb make the most disgusting school dinners in the world.

If you've ever tried to keep your head down in a horrible situation, dear reader, you can imagine how poor Elspeth felt. But what Elspeth didn't know, as she swept up hundreds of mouse droppings in a creepy dark cellar, was that things were about to change.

