The Corny Scaredy-Cat Paranormal Investigation Squad

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For Emmy – the coolest girl in town



CHAPTER ONE

Everyone looked up from their maths test when the new girl appeared. She peeked out through a gap in her waterfall-long red hair, standing in the doorway next to Miss Dellarosa, looking out bravely at her new classmates like a warrior confronting a horde of orcs. She looked like trouble, I remember thinking. She looked like she could be the best friend you could ever have, who'd defend you to the death, or your worst enemy who'd never give up until she beat you.

"Class," said Miss Dellarosa, "you may put down your pencils and greet your new classmate – *Suh* … *Say-oh* … ah … *Say-oh-ear-see*?"

"Actually," the girl spoke, in a voice that, for some reason, reminded me of gold being poured from a vat – I'd never heard the sound of gold being poured from

a vat, to be honest, but it made me feel like I had, and not only that, but it made me feel that I'd heard her speak before, somewhere, once, long ago – "it's pronounced *Ser-sha*. But it's spelt completely crazy."

Miss Dellarosa giggled but seemed to view it as a personal failing that, after so many years teaching young kids how to read, she hadn't been able to sound it out. The girl, meanwhile, took the marker out of our teacher's hand – without asking, mind you – strode up to the whiteboard, and wrote upon it, squeakily, in a beautiful, flowery script:

Saoirse

"*Ser-sha*," we all started muttering, one by one, as if we were being taught a new vocabulary word. "*Ser-sha*."

"Well, Saoirse, welcome to the village of Nate's End, welcome to Cornwall, and welcome to our year six class. You may take a seat over there, next to Alastair."

Alastair – that's me! She was going to sit next to me?

"But, ah, would you mind?"

Saoirse had started to come towards me but turned back around. "Yes?"

"The whiteboard marker?"

"Oh yes – of course." She handed back the marker and sat down next to me, right in the spot Barry used to sit in. Barry had been my best friend, you see. We were always together, like peas in a pod. More than peas in a pod – like mushy peas, without the pod. There wasn't any pod; just forget about the pod. But then his mum got a new job, and of course that's far more important than my friendship with Barry, so



they moved away. And after Barry left, well, I didn't have a best friend. I just had an empty seat next to me, to remind me of all the good times with Barry. Which would never come again.

That's why I felt a little insulted to see this strange, tall, dragon-haired girl sitting in Barry's seat. She looked over at me now, and at once I noticed some eerie, ancient glow in her eyes, as if something from the distant past was reaching out to me through them. She looked at me as if there were something special about me, too, although there wasn't. Well, that is, at least I didn't think so at the time. Back then.

Before everything happened.

"Eyes front, lad," she whispered. "Teacher's talking."

"People call it 'space weather'," Miss Dellarosa was saying. "Solar flares are like big flashy gas sprays on the sun. Large solar flares can affect communications on Earth. Believe it or not, scientists say that a really huge solar flare could even take down the whole internet!"

Saoirse yawned. As the morning went on, she looked more and more bored, fanning herself with a worksheet, drumming her fingernails on the desk, tapping some sort of river dance softly on the floor,

and generally looking like there was nothing of worth Miss Dellarosa could teach her. I liked Miss Dellarosa. I knew plenty of evil teachers in the school – well, Mister Bungthorpe, the other year six teacher, anyway – and compared to him, Miss Dellarosa was the Easter Bunny. Right as I was thinking that Miss Dellarosa asked,

"Alastair! Are you paying attention?"

"Yes, Miss," I answered.

"Then what was I saying?"

What had she been saying? I tried to remember something she'd said. "Well – you were saying how knights in the Middle Ages weren't nearly as glamorous as in films or storybooks."

"I said that half an hour ago. Maybe if you spent a little more time listening, and a little less time staring at Saoirse, you'd realise we're doing maths now."

"Yes Miss."

With a dark cloud over my head, I stared at the desk. Miss Dellarosa was talking about algebra or something, while Saoirse's giggles floated towards me through the air like sarcastic butterflies who had nothing better to do than mock a poor, miserable eleven-year-old boy.

CHAPTER TWO

I could try to invent a bunch of excuses, but I might as well come right out and say it: I didn't have any friends. Remember my best friend Barry? The one I thought would be my best friend forever, but he moved away? Everything was brilliant back then; it was a kind of golden age in my life, you might say. We used to do everything together: we'd run around playing superheroes, saving the school from evil lollipop ladies who shot lasers out of their sign-thingees. Or we'd spend endless hours on the computer until our eyes were so wasted that we'd turn from the screen and could no longer see reality, just a bunch of sad, fuzzy shapes everywhere. Or we'd just sit on these two short stone pillars at the town's border and wait for something new to come to town – a lorry, a tourist, or even a lost hedgehog

whose Google Maps had stopped working. All right, as I write this now, I admit it might not sound like I'd led the most exciting, adventurous life you could possibly hope to have. But at least, with Barry, I had someone around to be bored with. Not only that, but Barry just so happened to be about twice the height of a normal year five student. Maybe not exactly, but I'm rounding up. So having him around, always by my side, was really the only thing that kept the year six bully Johnny Smorgasbord from making my life hell. Which, once Barry moved away halfway through year five, Johnny did.

Basically, since Barry moved away, I kind of kept to myself. Other kids tended to think I wasn't much fun anyway. They'd say I was too bossy, or a tattletale, or a teacher's pet. And I suppose they were right. I didn't know why I was that way. I just was.

The truth is, nobody liked me. I knew they didn't. The same look, the exact same look, hissed out of every pair of eyes after I'd said or done something which didn't meet with their approval. I felt sometimes that they weren't separate people at all, but multiple masks of an angry monster sent up by some old, underground god to judge my every thought. It was

a test I was not built to pass. I could only not fail by becoming somebody else; by forgetting who it was I'd always been.

But I was just me, Alastair Petipace. Which didn't seem to be very much at all.

So I sat at a table outside, alone, eating my lunch. It was summer. I watched the other kids run around in the sun, playing games, or chat under heavy, leafy trees. I was dying to know what they were talking about. It was probably nothing important. Probably football, or TV shows, or computer games. But if I'd gone up to them and tried to join in, I knew what they'd do: just sigh, look at me with an annoyed face, and change the topic. Or even make some excuse to turn around and go inside.

You see, ever since we'd met in nursery, it had been Barry and me against the world. Now, it was the world against me.

This was what I was thinking when Saoirse came over with her tray and a book and sat down at my table.

"You shouldn't sit here," I told her, because I like to be honest.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not popular. If you sit next to me, the others will think you're annoying like me, and they won't want to be your friend. Seriously. I'm telling you now, for your own good. Get out while you can, and you still have a chance."

She shrugged. "I don't want to be popular. Who cares?" And she took a bite of her lunch.

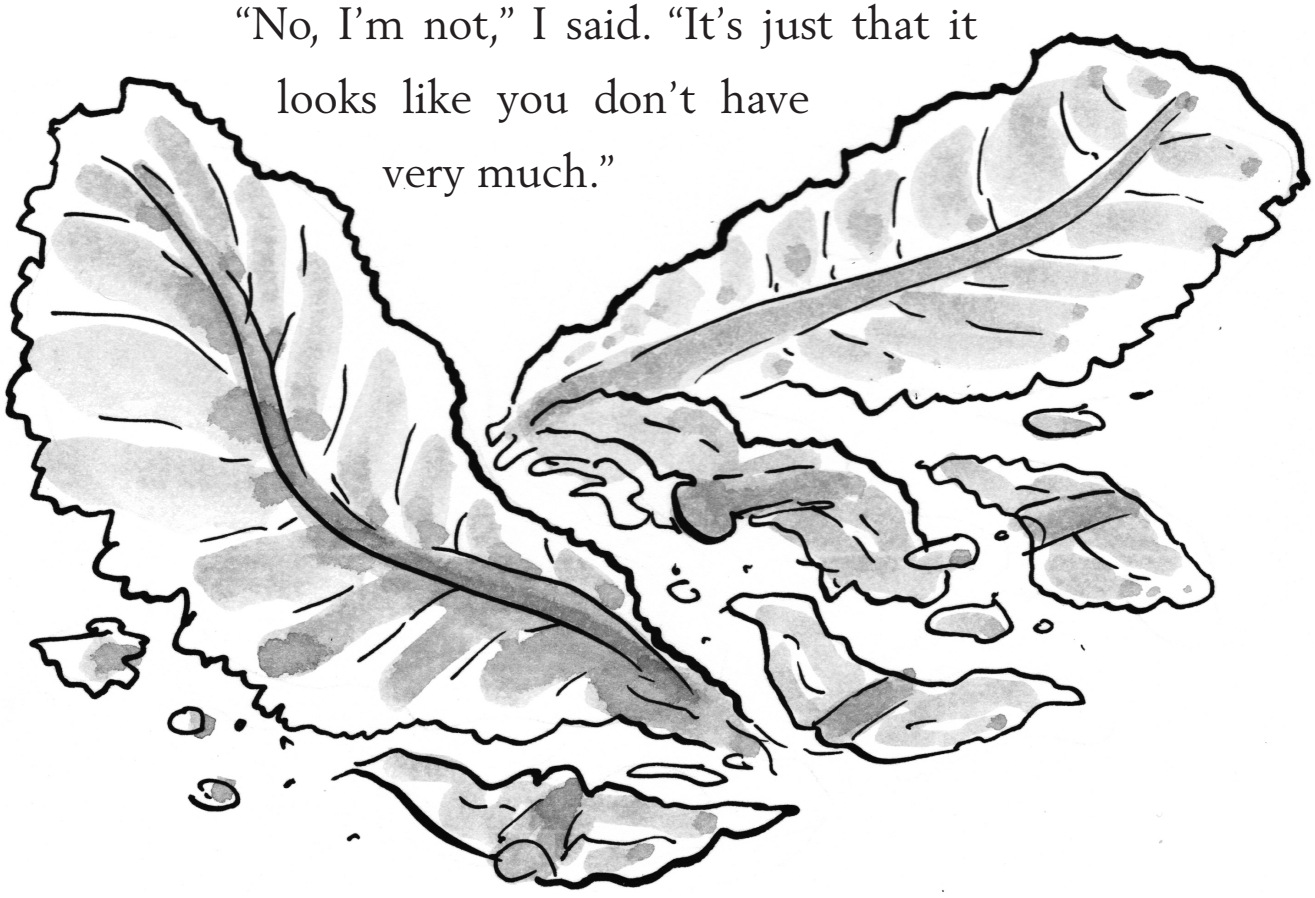
I couldn't believe it. Who'd ever said a thing like that before? I'll tell you: no one.

I looked at her lunch. There were just a few leaves of lettuce and a small apple.

"Where's your lunch?" I asked her.

"Right here," she said. "Are you visually impaired? I'm sorry."

"No, I'm not," I said. "It's just that it looks like you don't have very much."



"Well, they don't have very much to offer at this school, I can see. I'm allergic to most things, and I don't eat animal products, and certain food colour combinations make me dizzy. So that's that."

She looked up from the piece of lettuce she was cutting into tiny slices with a plastic knife and I saw those creepy eyes again, so I looked away.

"So what's your thing?" she asked me.

"My 'thing'?"

"Yeah."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, 'What do you mean'?"

"I don't know what a thing is."

"What are you into? You know – football. Roblox. TikTok."

"No, no, no."

"Dancing. Drama."

"No. No."

"Music."

"No."

"Peppa Pig?"

"No!"

"Well, what then?"

"I …" I was ashamed to admit it. I'd never thought

about it exactly like this before, but, now that I did, it was true – "I … don't really *have* a thing."

"What do you mean?"

"I guess I've never really found something to … get excited about. To care about, so much, like those things."

"Oh. I'm … I'm really sorry." She looked at me as if I were a horse who had broken its leg and would never run again.

"Well, what's yours?"

"My thing? Well, *In the Night Garden* …"

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. "The little kids' show?"

"Uh-huh." She'd cut her lettuce leaf into what I'd assumed was one last piece, and now cut that last piece into pencil-tip-thin sections. "I dress up as Upsy Daisy, and get together with other fans at conventions, where we bid for memorabilia, get autographs from the actors and recreate our favourite episodes. I particularly like the storylines that revolve around Igglepiggle losing his blanket."

"Seriously?"

"No. I was joking." She'd said it all with such a straight face, and even now, she didn't smile. "Really,

I play guitar and flute, watch old black-and-white movies and, most of all, *this*."

She thumped the book she'd laid on the table. I finally looked at the cover: *Unexplained Mysteries (Which You'll Never Understand)*.

"What kind of mysteries?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Someday," she said, "when you're an old man, looking back on your life, you're going to remember the day you asked me that. And the answer. And how everything in your life started to change."

