BEN MILLER



ONCE UPON A LEGEND

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CHAPTER ONE

'Did you hear ANY of what I just said?'

Marcus was in the headmaster's office, again, seated between his mum and dad, a bored expression on his face.

'Well?' said Mr Strickland impatiently, glaring at Marcus through his little round glasses. 'I'm waiting.'

'Marcus,' said his mum, putting a hand on Marcus's arm, 'the headmaster is asking whether

there might be a reason you keep misbehaving. Something you'd . . . you'd like to tell us? Something you're upset about, perhaps?'

Marcus scowled. 'I'm *fine*,' he said.

'You see?' said the headmaster, throwing up his hands in exasperation. 'This is the whole problem, right here. The boy must know he's in serious trouble, but look at him! He just sits there, not a care in the world, like he's waiting for a film to start. Demerits, detentions – it's all just water off a duck's back. I'm sorry, but I think we've reached the end of the road.'

'What are you saying?' asked Marcus's mum, sitting bolt upright in her chair.

'I am recommending to the governors that Marcus is suspended.'

'*Suspended?*' she echoed. 'But . . . but . . .'

'Oh come *on*!' said Marcus's dad with a snort.

'Is that really necessary? All he did was move the "shallow end" sign. It was a joke – wasn't it, Marcus? Just a bit of harmless fun.'

'Not for Mr Figgis, it wasn't. He lost two front teeth demonstrating a racing dive.'

Marcus's dad stifled a laugh, and his mum shot him a stern look.

'I'm sorry –' the headmaster frowned, straightening his glasses – 'do you find that amusing?'

'Nope,' replied Marcus's dad innocently, struggling to keep a straight face. 'Nothing funny about that!' He gave his son a little nudge in the ribs and shot him a knowing wink.

'I would remind you,' continued Mr Strickland, reaching for Marcus's file, 'that this is not Marcus's first incident. This term alone, your son has been caught . . .' He opened the front cover,

licked his finger and located the appropriate page. 'Putting laxatives in the school custard, shaving the school goat, spray-painting obscene images on the staffroom door, and – let me see, oh yes – substituting potassium for sodium in one of Mrs Brightwell's chemistry demonstrations, thereby causing a SERIOUS explosion.'

As if closing the subject, Mr Strickland shut the file and glared through his thick-framed glasses across the desk once more.

'Trust me,' said Marcus's dad, chuckling, 'when I was at school, I did a lot worse.'

'This is no laughing matter,' snipped Mr Strickland. 'Mrs Brightwell's eyebrows may never grow back.'

'Graham, please,' said Marcus's mum, leaning across the desk and looking pleadingly into the headmaster's eyes. 'Something like this . . . it

could really affect Marcus's future. Just give him one more chance.'

But Mr Strickland was unmoved. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Watts,' he replied curtly. 'I've made my decision.'

'Fourteen years I've taught here . . .' began Marcus's mum.

'I don't see that that's releva—'

'Fourteen years!' Marcus's mum said again, louder this time. 'The last three of which, I've been acting Head of History, with twice the work and no extra pay. As well as running the bring-and-buy sale at the school fair *and* the Year Six orienteering course. Marcus isn't a bad kid – you *know* that. He's just going through a rough time. You're sorry, aren't you, Marcus? And you promise you won't do it again, don't you?'

She reached desperately across the table and

grabbed Mr Strickland's hand. 'I know he needs punishing, Graham – but he needs help too. Maybe there's somewhere we can send him over half-term? A week with a tutor, or camp, or . . .'

Mr Strickland looked up suddenly, as if an idea had occurred to him.

Marcus's mum paused, watching him carefully.

'Hmm,' said Mr Strickland.

'Hmm?' she repeated, hopefully.

Removing the handkerchief from his top suit pocket, Mr Strickland gave both lenses of his glasses a long and thoughtful clean. Then, repositioning them back on his nose, he said, 'Well, there is *one* place.'

'Oh thank you, Graham!' said Marcus's mum, pushing back her chair and rushing round the other side of the desk to give the headmaster a hug. 'We'll try anything . . . thank you. You won't regret this, I promise.'

Mr Strickland blushed and shooed her away. 'Now, now, I'm not making any promises. We'll have to call and see if they have room. It's a rather . . . unconventional place. Their methods are . . . unusual, to say the least.'

'What's it called?' asked Marcus's mum.

But Mr Strickland didn't answer. Instead, he reached for the corner of his desk, lifted an old-fashioned telephone from its cradle and dialled.

'Mrs Pettifer, I'd like to place a call, please. To the admissions team . . .' He glanced at Marcus. 'At Merlin's.'



CHAPTER TWO

'*Merlin's?*' whispered Marcus's mum with a frown as they waited for the headmaster to get off the phone. 'Don't you think that's a funny name for a school?'

Marcus and his dad shrugged in unison.

'You have?' said Mr Strickland self-importantly. 'That's wonderful news . . . Tomorrow should be fine. I'll confirm. Much obliged. Well then,' he said, carefully replacing the receiver. 'Success.

Merlin's have agreed to take Marcus for the week of half-term, see what magic they can work with him.'

'I don't recognize the name,' said Marcus's mum, a note of anxiety in her voice. 'Is it local?'

The headmaster shook his head. 'Wiltshire. Not far from Stonehenge.'

Marcus's mum chewed her lip. 'But that's miles away! How are we supposed to get him there every morning?'

'You wouldn't have to. It's residential.'

'You mean it's a *boarding school*?' She frowned again, and looked at his dad. 'Do you think a boarding school is a good idea right now?'

'Oh, I think he can handle it – can't you, champ?' said his dad, cuffing Marcus on the shoulder, who grinned.

'There's a lot going on at home at the

moment, Scott,' his mum said, widening her eyes meaningfully. 'What Marcus needs right now is stability. Not to be shipped off to some uptight boarding school in the countryside.'

'Wait, *boarding school*? Would we have to pay?' asked his dad. 'Boarding schools are expensive, aren't they?'

'It's a charity,' said Mr Strickland icily, 'so, no, it's not expensive. It's free. And to answer your question, Abigail, Merlin's is about as far from "uptight" as it's possible to get. The correct term, I believe, is *progressive*. The man who runs it, Mr Tom Sheen, gave a talk last year to the Association of Headteachers. He claims results with even the most . . . *difficult* of cases,' he finished, shooting Marcus a frosty glare.

'Well, if you're sure, Graham?' said Marcus's mum nervously.

'Honestly, I don't hold out much hope. But if you're looking for an alternative to suspension, it's all I can offer. Now, unless there's anything else . . . ?'

And for the first time that week, that term, and perhaps even that year, Mr Strickland smiled.



'What a stiff!' exclaimed Marcus's dad, chucking an arm round Marcus as they stepped out into the musty autumn air. 'I bet he squeaks when he walks.'

Marcus beamed up at his dad, and they both laughed.

'Chip off the old block.' He ruffled Marcus's hair. 'I tell you, the things me and my mates used to get up to at school, you wouldn't believe it! Hasn't held me back. Number four industrial refrigerator

salesman in the entire country, barring London and the Greater London area. And I've got the wheels to prove it.'

They had reached the car park, where – as if to prove a point – the sun was glinting on the silver exhaust pipe of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

'Old Strickland, what does he know? Has he ever upsold a two-door fridge to a *five*-door? I don't think so,' sneered his dad, extracting his helmet from beneath the cushioned seat. 'Could he maintain customer relationships through the simple power of a pie and a pint? Answer: no. People would be clawing for the exits.'

Marcus's mum narrowed her eyes. 'I've only just managed to prevent him getting suspended, Scott! Can you please not encourage him . . .'

'All I'm saying,' protested his dad, fastening his helmet strap, 'is life is not all about school!'

'But it helps if you get the chance to finish!'

'Sure, sure.' His dad sounded bored now as he swung one leg over the bike. 'Gotta learn to play the system, kid. Make it work for you. And next time –' he winked – 'don't get caught!' He flicked a switch on the handlebar, and the motorbike's engine gave a throaty roar.

'Wait!' Marcus's voice had come out louder than he had meant it to – much louder – and as both parents turned to look at him, the boy felt his face flush red. His dad turned the engine off.

'You're not going?' said Marcus. 'Just, I thought we were going for dinner?'

'Sorry, kid. Got to dash. Work is crazy at the moment. This week I'm in Nuneaton, Milton Keynes . . . Carlisle on Wednesday. Pure madness.'

'Right,' said Marcus, kicking at the ground.

'Now behave at this place, won't you?' His dad

placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I don't want to be back here next week, listening to old Strickland do the same song and dance, eh?'

Marcus nodded and forced a smile.

'Good man,' said his dad, giving him a mock punch on the chin. 'See you, Abi!'

The second his dad pulled away, Marcus's face crumpled, the smile fading as he watched him disappear around the corner.

'You okay, love?' asked his mum quietly as they walked back to the car.

Marcus rearranged his face into a scowl, crossing his arms tightly across his chest, as if he was trying to keep himself from breaking apart. 'I'm fine,' he said, climbing in and slamming the car door behind him.