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Opening extract from
**The Mystery of
Wickworth Manor**

Written by
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Published by
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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THE

mystery

OF

WICKWORTH

MANOR

ELEN CALDECOTT

PROLOGUE

CJTE/003 Dog's Tooth Pendant, 18th C.

Maggie went to the healer's hut late late at night. The salt of the sea was close, but the sweetness of the sugar canes was closer. Both made the sweat on her skin feel sticky.

She knocked gently. The dune grasses whispered a warning; a golden plover whistled in alarm.

The door opened.

'Yes, daughter?'

'My boy leaves on the tide,' she said. 'I want a charm for him. I want him to be free. Can you help me?'

The man in the doorway grinned. His smile was more gaps than teeth, though the necklace he wore was more teeth than gaps. 'What about the preacher you been talking with? He'd say you be dancing with the devil.'



Maggie stepped into the open doorway. 'I want my son to come back a free man in this world, not in the next.'



CHAPTER 1



Paige Owens slapped a tarot card down on the back seat of the bus. She whistled.

‘What?’ Sal asked, her dark eyes worried. ‘What is it?’

Jo leaned over the seat, eager for a better look.

‘Ze Tower,’ Paige said in her best Dracula accent. ‘Most mysterious.’

The card showed a tall, white building. Tongues of flame shot from its windows and a bolt of lightning slashed the dark sky above it.

‘Is that bad?’ Sal asked.

‘Zis means change, havoc,’ Paige answered. ‘Like an earthquake shaking up your world. Nothing will ever be ze same again.’ She grinned. ‘You know, like on the telly when they come and redo your whole house in an hour.’



Jo laughed, but Sal still looked unhappy. ‘Well, the cards have got that right. Nothing’s the same now.’

‘It’s good,’ Jo said. ‘Change is good. Isn’t it, Paige?’

Paige didn’t answer. She looked outside. The bus had pulled off the main road and was crunching its way up a gravel drive. Willow trees dripped on either side and black yews stood guard, blocking the sunlight. Then the bus came to a stop. Paige tidied up her cards and put them back in their box. ‘OK. Paparazzi faces on – we’re here.’

Out of one window, Paige could see Wickworth Manor Activity Centre. It was an old house with huge columns across the front, like the bank in *Mary Poppins*. Its windows were as black and shiny as businessmen’s shoes. On the other side of the bus, she could see an oval lake. The water twinkled gold with sunshine.

‘Maybe there’ll be four-poster beds,’ Sal said. Her fear hadn’t quite gone, but Paige could see that she was doing her best to ignore it.

‘Yes, or maybe we’ll be sleeping in the attics with the rats,’ Jo suggested.

Paige gave her a small punch on the arm. ‘Don’t frighten Sal.’

‘Sorry, Sal. If there are rats, I’ll guard you from them.’

Theirs wasn’t the only bus. Three more buses spilled children from other schools. Their time in Year 6 was



nearly over. In September, all the children here would start their new secondary school together. The idea was they would spend this week getting to know each other so the first few days at secondary school were less scary. Paige grinned. She wasn't scared of secondary school. She wasn't scared of anything. Well, maybe snakes. And spiders. And rats. And perhaps heights. Well, definitely heights. But nothing else. And definitely not secondary school.

She looked at the crowd. Boys and girls shouted, or jumped up and down the steps, or clambered on the stone banisters. It was all colour and movement, like beads bouncing from a broken necklace.

Miss Brown stood up. 'Before you all descend to join in the bedlam, I want to remind you that you are here representing Friar's Street Primary. So no nonsense. Yes, I'm looking at you girls.' She raised a steely eyebrow in Paige's direction. 'Stay to one side, stay together. And anyone who gets run over by a bus will have me to answer to.'

Paige raised an eyebrow right back. If there was a sarcasm Olympics, Miss Brown would take gold, silver and bronze – but she was all right, really.

It was hard to hold a paparazzi face in the blistering heat, but Paige, Sal and Jo did their best, smiling and waving at everyone and giggling the whole time.



‘Listen *carefully*,’ Miss Brown said. ‘When I read out your name, take your bag up to the room you’ve been allocated. Leave your luggage there, then come back downstairs to the hall. Follow the signs.’

Miss Brown yelled out her list. Paige, Sal and Joanne were together in a room called Bluebell right at the top of the house.

‘Yay! We’re sharing.’ Sal sounded relieved.

‘Result,’ Jo said.

Just before they passed through the front door, Paige looked back at the drive. A silver car, long and sleek, rolled up. It was silent in the middle of the hubbub. It was the kind of silence that reminded Paige of getting a bubble of water in her ear after swimming, sort of wrong and uncomfortable. She swallowed quickly. A boy got out of the car. He wore dark trousers and a blue shirt. His skin was deep brown and his hair was trimmed short. He looked towards Paige and even at this distance she could tell he was frowning. A shiver ran right the way up her spine to the back of her head. Someone walking over her grave.



CHAPTER 2



Curtis Okafor closed the door of his mother's hire car and rested his hand on the roof. The air felt humid and sticky after the chill of the air conditioning inside.

His mother switched off the ignition. 'Do you want me to come in with you?'

Curtis looked towards the house. Wickworth Manor was Georgian, neoclassical; its elegant Doric columns were mottled green with age. It was impossible to see the facade properly because of the buses and the throng of people in the way. He noticed a blonde girl in a blue tracksuit looking at him from the top of the steps. What was she staring at? He turned away, towards the lake and shielded his eyes against the glare of reflected sunlight.

The lake was lozenge-shaped. There was a chapel perched on the bank on the far side. On the nearside a phalanx of canoes were moored against a jetty. No



doubt he would be forced into one of those at some point this week.

‘Curtis?’ his mother asked again. ‘Shall I come inside with you?’

He turned back to the car. ‘No, thank you. I can manage. No one else has their parents here.’

She nodded once and then popped the boot open. Curtis lifted out his suitcase and went to his mother’s side of the car.

They looked at each other.

‘I’ll be back to collect you in seven days,’ she said. ‘Ring us if you need anything. Ring anyway, just to tell us how you’re settling in.’ She paused and gripped the wheel. ‘Give it a chance, OK?’

Curtis nodded. His mouth was dry.

Mum was looking towards him, but not at him. ‘Curtis –’

‘Yes?’

‘We love you,’ she said as carefully as if she were handling explosives.

He nodded in reply, then clicked up the handle of his suitcase and turned towards the house without another word. He heard the soft purr of the car’s engine, then the crunch as she pulled away; he paused, but didn’t look back. He ignored the ache in his chest and walked into Wickworth Manor.



The hallway of the house was busy: teachers with clipboards rattled out instructions to their groups; pupils grabbed cases and bags, jostling and pushing up the staircase like commuters on a rush hour tube train. Curtis stood still. He knew he should smile, maybe say hello, but his mouth was set in a hard line and every muscle in his face seemed to be set tight. No one jostled him, but no one looked at him either.

Within a few minutes, the hallway emptied. All the pupils had been marshalled up to their rooms and all the noise migrated up into the body of the house. He was on his own.

Suddenly, he felt foolish. Why hadn't he asked someone where to go? Why hadn't he just taken a deep breath and forced himself to talk to someone? He pressed his hand to his chest; the ache was still there. Everyone had just assumed he was with someone else, but he wasn't, he was on his own. He wasn't at Northdene School any more. He pushed the thought away. He wasn't going to stand here feeling sorry for himself.

He grabbed his suitcase and marched up the sweeping staircase; the dorms must be up there. A grandfather clock ticked loudly; behind a closed door someone shouted. He walked on, following the stairs up and up and up. The staircase narrowed at each landing, but sounds came from behind every door. He just needed

somewhere quiet; a room with no one in it where he could collect his thoughts. Finally he found himself at the top of the house. The ceiling sloped towards the eaves, sunlight poured in through dormer windows and dust motes danced in the warmth.

A door slammed open and a blonde girl tumbled out. 'Oh,' she said, stopping abruptly. 'It's you.'

Curtis frowned. 'Do I know you?'

'I'm Paige. Do you know your aura is red and swirly? That's not good, you know.'

'My aura?' Curtis asked.

'I'm psychic. Well, training to be.'

'There's no such thing.'

'Fine, Curtis Okafor, suit yourself.'

Curtis's eyes opened wide. How did she know his name? She *couldn't* be psychic. The idea was ridiculous.

'Ha! Your face! Don't worry, your name's written on your suitcase label.' The girl grinned. 'We're meant to be in the hall. You coming?'

Curtis opened his mouth, but no words came out.

She shrugged. 'Doing a goldfish impression? Fine. You're a bit weird, you know that?' She stepped past him and headed for the stairs. Was she giggling?

The psychic thought *he* was weird.

This place was *nothing* like Northdene.



And yet, there was something about the way the light fell across the old floorboards; something about the smell of warm plaster walls and food cooking floors below that made this part of the house feel safe.

Curtis followed the corridor to the end, right to the last door. If this room was empty, he was staying here.

He turned the handle and stepped inside.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Heavy curtains were pulled across the window. Slowly, the dark shapes and shadows turned into objects: a bank of filing cabinets, spilling paper; chairs stacked haphazardly, their legs sticking out like broken twigs; a cupboard with a door missing and, against one wall, an old bed. It wasn't a bedroom, it was a room where people dumped the things they didn't need any more. Curtis smiled, without humour.

This would suit him fine.

He could stay here and hide and not have to speak to anyone or explain anything to strangers. He could stay here and eat the biscuits in his suitcase and drink rainwater. He could sleep for seven days and when Mum came to collect him he would tell her what a brilliant time he'd had and they could drive home again in silence.

Curtis kicked off his shoes and fell back on to the bed.



It made a horrible crunching sound.

Curtis pressed his fingertips to his eyelids. Had he really just broken an antique bed? He was pretty certain that he had.

He opened his eyes and rolled off. He'd better take a look at the damage.

Underneath the bed it was dark and cluttered with yet more junk: hatboxes, old shoes, even a broken doll. A plank of wood lolled down from the frame, its edge jagged with splinters. That must be what he'd heard snap.

Curtis reached under the bed gingerly and pressed up against the plank. It waggled like a broken bone. He stretched as far as he could; his shoulder ached with the effort. He tried to ease the wood back into place, but it wouldn't realign. Something was jamming it. With his fingers outstretched he could just about touch whatever it was in the way of the plank.

It felt rough – maybe some kind of fabric? It had a square edge, covered in heavy cloth; it felt like an elbow in a sling. He grabbed the edge and tugged. It came loose. A few sharp yanks pulled it away from the bed frame. He sat back on his heels and pulled it clear of the bed.

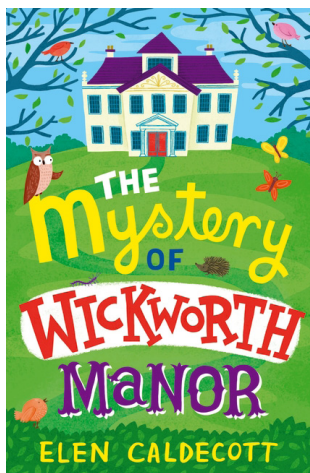
He unwrapped the cloth. And gasped.

It was a painting, about half a metre high and a bit less wide. He stood up and pulled the curtain a little



until a puddle of light fell on to the canvas. A pair of eyes stared at him from inside the gilt frame. The eyes were dark and ferocious. They belonged to a boy with cropped hair and dark skin. He was wearing a bright red coat – some kind of servant’s uniform, maybe? Though the boy didn’t really look old enough to have a job; he looked about twelve or thirteen. The red coat had bright gold buttons, each one decorated with a map of the world, like tiny, gleaming globes. But it was the eyes that held Curtis’s attention. Angry eyes, lost eyes, frightened eyes. Eyes that seemed to be looking at him as much as he was looking at them.

OUT 5TH JULY



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