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Opening extract from

Shiverton Hall

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Chapter One

Arthur Bannister was ignoring his mother. Or rather, he was ignoring her voice, which travelled into his bedroom from the hallway below at exactly the same pitch and volume as a train whistle. He scrabbled frantically around his room, desperately trying to pack, knowing that any minute now, his mother would burst into the room and discover just how appallingly behind schedule he was.

Arthur had been reading while he was supposed to be packing. Now, in a panic, he started grabbing a collection of increasingly random and useless items. He had so far selected his new football boots (a fourteenth birthday present), his underwear, a handful of mismatched socks, a scuba mask and a hideous tie with smiley pigs on it. As he heard the ominous sound of his mother angrily ascending the stairs, he flung open his wardrobe pulling

things out of it indiscriminately: shirts, Christmas jumpers, a homemade planet costume he'd worn in a school play, aged ten.

The door opened with a bang to reveal May Bannister, red-faced and wearing a violently pink suit and matching hat.

'Arthur!' she cried, taking in the apocalyptic mess of his room. 'What on *earth* are you doing?'

'Packing,' Arthur replied, quickly hiding an empty crisp packet in his bag.

'You're not packed yet?' May squeaked. 'We've been waiting for you downstairs. We were supposed to leave twenty minutes ago!'

'I know!'

'It's a four hour drive as it is. If we hit the traffic too then –'

'I *know*!'

'You need to make a good impression, Arthur,' she said, suddenly fretful. 'You won't get another opportunity like this after –'

'OK, Mum, I get it,' Arthur interrupted.

Arthur's mother sighed – it was impossible to stay angry with him. She hated telling him off; one wounded look from her handsome son and she had flashbacks of him as a little boy, patching up his cuts and bruises and pushing him on the swings. She shook the concern out of her eyebrows and smiled.

'Come on, then,' she said, nudging him aside and removing some of the more insane items from his bag. 'I'll help you. It would be a good idea to pack your uniform, for starters!'

Arthur began to take in his mother's outfit. 'Mum,' he said casually, pretending to fold some jumpers, 'what is that on your head?'

She put her hand up to the enormous pink confection. 'It's my new hat. Jean made it. Smart, no?'

'Mum.' Arthur tried to keep his cringing to a minimum. 'Don't you think it might be a bit much?'

'What do you mean?'

'We're just going to my new school – we're not exactly having lunch with the Queen.'

His mother looked crestfallen and Arthur immediately felt horrible.

'I just want to make a good impression, that's all,' she mumbled, blushing.

Arthur put his arm around her. 'I know, Mum. And I appreciate it, I do. The hat's fine, but it's hard enough going to a school where I don't know a single person. I just don't want to make a scene, you know?'

May smiled. 'I understand, petal. No hat.'

'And no "petal".'

In no time at all May had slotted the last neatly folded shirt into the suitcase with a satisfied clap of her hands. 'Right,' she said as she swept out of the room, 'you have

five minutes to get into your uniform. If you don't come down then your brother can have your scholarship.'

Rob, Arthur's half-brother, sat yawning at the kitchen table. Even though only eleven, he was almost identical to Arthur, with the same scarecrow blond hair and hazel eyes. Both boys had taken after their mother, with barely a hint of their different fathers. The only marked contrast was that Rob was a foot shorter than Arthur and wore a pair of enormous glasses that stood out from his face like bug's eyes. Rob was not nearly as innocent as his appearance implied – nothing gave him more satisfaction than winding up his brother. From the moment he was old enough to crawl, he was slipping spiders between Arthur's bedsheets and filling his shoes with golden syrup. But today any jokes had been forbidden by May, on pain of gruesome and painful death, so Rob had to be satisfied with the memory of some of his finer moments, snickering to himself as he recalled the prank a few years earlier that had resulted in Arthur turning up to school with one of his mother's bras hooked on to the back of his blazer.

Rob looked up as May came into the kitchen, minus her hat. 'Mum!' he cried. 'What happened to the hat? It looked amazing!'

He knew full well how mortified his brother would be if May turned up to the prestigious Shiverton Hall School looking like she was on her way to a Vegas

wedding, and wanted to encourage this as much as possible.

May, unaware of Rob's real intentions, giggled and ruffled her son's hair fondly. 'Thank you, Robbie,' she replied, 'but I think your brother wanted something a bit more low key for his first day.'

'Don't listen to him,' Rob pressed on, grinning. 'Why don't you bring it in the car just in case?'

'No, petal. But I'll tell you what, why don't I wear the hat to your football match this weekend? That'll show all the other mums up!'

Before Rob had the opportunity to prevent his idea backfiring terribly, Arthur entered the kitchen, awkwardly wearing his uncomfortably woolly new uniform: a rather unusual pair of humbug-striped black-and-white trousers and a grey blazer with the school crest embroidered over the breast pocket.

'Arthur!' May said dramatically, tears welling up in her eyes. 'You look so smart.'

Rob pretended to well up himself, clasping his hands to his chest. 'Arthur, you look so . . . lame.'

Rob ducked as Arthur's hand swiped the back of his head.

'Stop it, boys,' their mother snapped. 'It's going to be a long journey and the last thing I need is you two going at it like rats in a bag.'

'Does he have to come?' Arthur moaned.

'Yeah, do I have to?' Rob echoed.

'Enough. Car. Now,' their mother growled.

The boys, admitting defeat, trudged towards the car, pinching each other when she wasn't looking.

The scenery rushed past the car window, and gradually the orange light and concrete of London slid away into the green of the countryside. It was raining and nearly dark. Arthur tried to push down the squirming in his stomach; he hadn't even touched the sandwich his mum had packed for him. Rob had spent the past four hours kicking the back of his seat. If there was one perk to attending a boarding school in the middle of nowhere, he thought, it was getting away from Rob.

'Robert Bannister,' May said through gritted teeth, 'if you don't stop tormenting your brother I swear I will stop this car and leave you here. The wolves can have you.'

Rob looked dubiously at the empty fields and the black forest that stood on the horizon. He was pretty sure that there weren't any wolves in England, but he definitely didn't want to find out first-hand.

'How much further is it?' Arthur asked, anxiously fiddling with his seat belt.

'I think,' May said, peering ahead of her, 'we're almost there.'

Arthur swallowed.

They took a turning off the main road through a patchy wood, filled with twisted, pale trees that looked as though they had died centuries before. They continued on for a few miles, and the wood thickened, until every shard of evening light had been pressed out by the thatch of branches. The car's headlights bounced off the withered trunks, their shadows giving the illusion of faces trapped beneath the bark. Even Rob, who wasn't easily spooked, was relieved when the trees thinned into a clearing.

Up ahead, Arthur could just make out a huge, stone gateway.

'That must be it!' May said.

They slowed as they reached the gate – two stone columns, each with its own crumbling angel perched on top. The angels held up a rusty, wrought-iron arch that read, in curling, serpentine letters: *SHIVERTON HALL*. Carved into the columns was the Shiverton coat of arms, the same one as on Arthur's blazer, with its peculiar collection of symbols: a ship, axes, skulls and a pair of iron shackles. The gate was open, not that it would have mattered if it hadn't been; it was so old and corroded that a small push would almost certainly have sent the whole thing tumbling to the ground.

'Creepy,' Rob whispered as they drove through the gate and up the drive.

Out of the grey sky and the grey, flat land, the outline

of an imposing, grey building could just be seen, a few lights studded in its stern face. Shiverton Hall. A Gothic, turreted behemoth, all ridges and spines and gargoyles.

Arthur stared at it and gulped; it didn't look anything like the jolly, welcoming place in the school prospectus.

May glanced over at her son, who was looking as though he might throw up. 'Very grand, isn't it?' she said brightly.

Arthur didn't dare answer. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go back to London, to their poky flat and his messy bedroom. Was it too late to change his mind? They could just turn around – surely he could find a school in London that would take him? But then Arthur remembered his last day at St John's. The cold water, and what had happened afterwards. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force the memory back into the dark crevice of his mind.

When he opened his eyes again, Shiverton Hall didn't look half so bad – after all, it was only a pile of stones.

They followed a queue of cars round to the side entrance of the school, a huge, cobbled courtyard filled with expensive estate cars. The Bannisters stepped out of their beat-up wreck self-consciously. Everywhere parents and pupils hastily carried leather trunks and tuck boxes out of the rain and into the school.

Arthur looked down at his old, battered suitcase and tried to muster up a smile.

May smoothed down her fuchsia skirt. 'I think I'm more nervous than you are,' she whispered, gripping Arthur's hand.

'I doubt it,' he muttered, quickly removing his mother's fingers before anyone saw.