

*Jimmy*

It was a Thursday, halfway through the summer term. My sister Donna and I were on our way to school, and we had just been joined by Donna's best friend Emerald. We were discussing *Ghost in Residence*, a television programme we had seen the evening before, in which various celebrities spent the night in a haunted building.

"I'd love to see a real ghost!" Donna said.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Alex?" Emerald asked. I've known Emerald forever, and she already knew the answer to that question, but she loves to tease me.

"Course not," I said. "Nobody's ever managed to prove scientifically that ghosts exist. When they do, I'll believe in them."

"Huh!" Donna said. "Say what you like; I bet if you saw a real ghost, you'd be just as scared as anybody else."

We were still arguing about the existence of ghosts as we turned the final corner on the road to school. Suddenly, a long, sleek old-fashioned car purred past us and pulled up outside the entrance to the school. As we stood and stared, a kid with ginger hair got out of the car. He was wearing a Lea Green uniform. I couldn't see his face, but something about him was familiar. He gave a brief wave to the driver, who was wearing a peaked chauffeur's cap, before disappearing through the school gates. As the car drove off down the road, we all stared, open-mouthed.

"What's going on?" Donna asked. It was a good question. Most of the kids who go to Lea Green come from the nearby estate, and they walk or cycle to school. In Holcombe Bay, people who can afford cars like that don't send their kids to Lea Green.

Emerald giggled. "A vintage car and your own chauffeur! Perhaps he's a prince in disguise..."

"Oh, ha ha," I said. "And I suppose you're Cinderella. Come on, let's go and find out what's going on."

By the entrance gates we met up with Ryan, who was staring in the direction where the car had disappeared. He shook his head in disbelief. "That was a Rolls Royce Silver Dawn! I wonder if Dad knows who it belongs to." Ryan's dad works at the Used Car Mart, so Ryan knows loads about old cars. If he thought it was a Silver Dawn, he was probably right.

Just then the deputy head appeared and started rounding up latecomers, so we hurried inside – our first lesson was with Mr Owen, who's a stickler for timekeeping. In the rush to reach our classroom before he did, I forgot all about the boy in the chauffeur-driven car.

It was a warm day, and the classroom was stuffy. Biology isn't really my thing, and after half an hour or so of listening to Mr Owen's sing-song Welsh accent as he explained the intricacies of a plant's reproductive system, I nearly dozed off. When the bell rang for break, it was a relief to get out of the classroom and into the fresh air. As I walked into the schoolyard with Donna and Emerald, I noticed the boy with red hair who we'd seen earlier. He was standing on his own, looking a bit lost.

Now that we could see his face clearly, I realised I knew him. I turned to Donna. "Isn't that Jimmy Devlin?"

She nodded. "I remember him. He disappeared suddenly halfway through Year 6 and never came back."

"Didn't his dad run the old bakery in the High Street?" Emerald asked. "The one that's all boarded up now? So how come he's now arriving at school in a chauffeur-driven Rolls?"

Donna grinned. "Let's find out, shall we? Come on!" She strode over to where the boy was standing. "Hi, Jimmy! Remember us?"

Jimmy looked up. It took a minute for him to recognise us, then he smiled. "Course I do. Miss Bowman used to call you *the terrible twins*."

Donna made a face. "And everyone called you Spock because of your big ears! So what have you been doing since you left Fairview Juniors?"

Jimmy glanced sideways at a group of kids hovering nearby, and jerked his head towards a less crowded part of the yard. He lowered his voice. "Let's go over there, and I'll tell you all about it." Intrigued, we followed him.

Once we'd left all the other kids behind, Donna spoke. "Come on, then. Tell us why you left Fairview so suddenly, and where you've been since."

Jimmy pulled a face. "I've been at Holcombe Academy."

We all stared at him, gobsmacked. Holcombe Academy is the private school on the other side of town. After a disastrous football match between Lea Green and Holcombe Academy, when several of the players on both sides ended up in A&E, we now do our best to steer clear of the Academy kids.

I was puzzled. "How come your parents could afford to send you there?"

Jimmy grinned. "They won the lottery!"

We all gasped. "You're kidding!" I said.

Jimmy shook his head. "I know. At first I didn't believe it either. It's true, though. It was a huge amount – enough for Mum and Dad to buy a big house, and for Dad to give up working as a baker. Then they decided that I should go to a private school."

"So why are you at Lea Green now?" I asked.

"I didn't like it there, so I got myself excluded."

I was just about to ask how he managed that, when Emerald butted in. "So where are you living now?"

"At the Priory. It's a big old house on the edge of town."

The name rang a bell. "Didn't they shoot a film there last year? It was on the local news."

"Yeah. Vintage Films used the house and grounds as a setting for *The Poisoned Chalice*. There were actors and camera crews swarming all over the place for a few weeks. It was great. I learned a lot about film-making, and my brother Harry got a part as an extra. Liddy hated it, though. She was always complaining about all the work it made for her."

"Who's Liddy?" Donna asked.

"Mrs Liddell. She's the housekeeper. Then there's Parsons – he's the chauffeur and handyman, and the butler, Furze."

"I didn't think butlers existed anymore," Donna said.

Jimmy nodded. "I used to think that too. Furze worked for the previous owner, so he sort of came with the house. So did Liddy and Parsons. By the time we moved in, Dad had bought the Rolls, because he's always wanted to own a vintage car, and he needed someone to take care of it.

I thought how weird it was that we now knew a family with servants, but Emerald was more interested in Jimmy's home. "I'd love to live in an old house like that instead of a horrible concrete tower block!" Her eyes opened wide suddenly as she asked in a hushed voice, "Is it haunted?"

Jimmy's grin faded, and he looked a bit uneasy. "Funny you should ask that. Some really strange things have been happening lately that nobody can explain."

"What kind of things?" Donna asked, glancing at me. I could tell what she was thinking. We both enjoyed solving mysteries, which was why we had started Eye Spy

Investigations earlier in the year. Since then, we'd been on the lookout for a new mystery to investigate.

"Well, it started just before supper a couple of days ago," Jimmy explained. "Liddy was carrying a tray of food from the kitchen to the dining room, and when she passed the door to the cellar, she heard noises coming from behind the door."

"What sort of noises?"

"Thuds. Bangs. And..." he paused a moment before continuing, "...a child crying."

Donna frowned. "Spooky! Was the door to the cellar locked at the time?"

Jimmy nodded. "It's permanently locked because it's where Dad keeps his collection of vintage wines. They're really valuable. He only lets Furze have the key if he wants him to fetch a bottle of wine."

"Did anyone go and check out the cellar?"

"Yes. Dad did, but by the time he'd put on the light and gone down the steps, everything was quiet again. Then Liddy got upset, because Dad accused her of imagining all the noises. They had a bit of an argument, and Mum told her to take the rest of the evening off."

I wasn't sure I believed the housekeeper's story. I wondered if she had been secretly helping herself to some of the vintage wine. Then Jimmy continued, "But that's not all. The next evening, halfway through supper, all the lights in the dining room suddenly went out. And you know what the *really* odd thing was? They came on again by themselves after five minutes."

"That could have just been a power cut," I suggested.

Jimmy shrugged. "All I know is, it's all a bit weird. And the worst thing is that Dad thinks it's just me, playing tricks on everyone, and I can't prove it's not."

"Why does he think that?" Emerald asked.

"Because Harry and I used to play practical jokes on people all the time. We were always getting into trouble for it. This time, it's not me, but I don't know how to prove that to Dad."

Donna put her hand on Jimmy's arm. "Why don't you let us help you find out what's going on at the Priory? When it comes to solving mysteries, we're experts!"

That was a bit of an exaggeration. We'd only had one case so far, after all. But then, of course, we had to tell Jimmy all about Eye Spy Investigations, and how we had set about solving the case of the missing lap dog. He was impressed, you could tell.

I thought the chance to go on a real ghost hunt was too good to miss. "Tell you what, Jimmy," I said. "See if you can persuade your mum and dad to let us sleep over at the weekend. That will give us the chance to snoop around a bit after dark and see what we can find out."

"Yes, and tonight Alex and I will do some research on ghost-hunting and try and come up with a plan of action," Donna added.

We exchanged mobile numbers so that we could keep in touch. By the time break was over, Eye Spy Investigations had its second case, and Jimmy was looking a lot more cheerful.