



CHAPTER ONE THE FROZEN HOUSE

“It’s hideous,” said Ruby Pilgrim, staring at herself in the mirror. “Absolutely hideous. I look about eight! And you look even worse.”

Alex didn’t reply. Secretly he rather liked his new uniform. White shirt, grey shorts and blazer, red

jersey and socks, striped tie. At his current school the uniform was a red sweatshirt and a T-shirt. At the big noisy school most of his friends were going to in September you wore a blue sweatshirt in winter, and a shirt and tie in summer. Alex didn't consider sweatshirts a proper uniform at all. This one looked *smart*.

“Seven maybe!” said Ruby in disgust. “Six!”

Things were, he had to admit, worse for Ruby. She was wearing what Aunt Joanna called a gymslip, but Alex and Ruby would have called a pinafore dress, the sort of thing only very little girls would ever have worn at their primary school. The striped tie and blazer were all right, but the whole thing looked most unRubyish. Ruby was

thirteen, and currently went to the secondary school with the blue sweatshirt. There she wore her tie as short as she could get away with, stuck badges all over the lapels of her coat and had pulled all the thread out of the school crest on her chest. There she looked like a teenager. Here she looked like something out of Enid Blyton.

“Everyone else will look the same,” Alex said.

Ruby glared. “It's all right for you!” she said. “You'd have had to move schools anyway!”

It was true. Alex would be leaving primary school forever in September, and everything would change. The old, comfortable routine of glue sticks and topic books and school trays would be replaced with terrifying prospects like



algebra and rugby and getting your head flushed down the toilets. He hadn't been looking forward to it *at all*.

But this new school...

Their parents had taken them on a tour. Ruby had been scowling and furious, but Alex was secretly thrilled. It had its own theatre. Its own swimming pool. Canoes and rowing boats that pupils took out on the river in PE. A beautiful old-fashioned library, with ladders on wheels. School trips to France to go skiing. ("Not that Mum and Dad could afford to send us on *those!*" said Ruby.)

"Only Aunt Joanna could think giving us money for *school* was a good idea," said Ruby. "St Caedmon's must cost thousands and *thousands* of

pounds. Just think what we could have done with that! We could go on a round-the-world cruise! We could buy our own yacht!"

"You don't even like boats!" said Alex. "And I don't think she's paying for *all* of it. Mum and Dad are helping."

He knew Aunt Joanna was trying to be kind. Last summer he and Ruby had stepped inside a magic time-travelling mirror and found themselves in 1912. There they'd helped save a Saxon treasure from some thieves and hidden it in a secret compartment in the sitting-room wall, where it had stayed until they'd triumphantly revealed it to Aunt Joanna. Aunt Joanna had sold the Newberry Cup at Christmas, and now she'd

told their parents that she wanted them to have some of the money, as a thank-you. Only instead of just putting it in their bank accounts and letting them spend it on what they wanted, the money was to go towards this new, expensive school.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go and show Aunt Joanna the uniforms and get it over with.”

Ruby pushed herself off the bed and went downstairs. Alex followed.

The big eighteenth-century mirror that had started all this hung in the hallway below the staircase. Alex glanced at it reflexively as he passed. Most of the time it just showed Aunt Joanna’s hallway, with the front door and the tiled floor, and the little table with the guest book, and

leaflets about local attractions. But sometimes...

“Ruby!”

Sometimes it didn’t.

Sometimes it showed other reflections, long-ago hallways in long-ago Applecott Houses. And at those times you could step into it and be taken ... well, who knew?

Somewhen else.

This time it showed a dark hallway, papered with dingy green paper, and what looked like a painting of a knight on a horse. A little girl was sitting on the floor laying out a train set. She looked about five or six, with fair hair and bright-blue eyes. Although she was inside she was wearing a brown coat, a pink woolly hat and scarf, and boots.

“All *right*,” said Ruby. She looked at the reflection. “When do you think it is?”

Alex shrugged. It was hard to tell. Twentieth century definitely. Later than 1912, when the girls they’d met had worn petticoats and bodices and all sorts. But longer ago than the photographs of his parents’ childhoods.

“Hey,” Ruby said. “Do you think we should yell for Aunt Joanna? If she saw this, she’d *have* to believe us.”

Alex felt a surge of panic. “No!” he said far too quickly. He was sure the mirror didn’t want Aunt Joanna to know its secrets. “What if it closed? What if it never opened again? What if this is our *one chance*?”

“All right!” said Ruby. “It was just an idea.” She caught hold of his sleeve. “Ready?” He nodded.

Ready.

And they stepped into the mirror.

The familiar sucking sensation. The familiar lurch in the pit of Alex’s stomach. And the violence at the other end as they landed in a heap on the floor of the hallway at Applecott House. And – so sudden it felt like a physical attack – the cold.

It was freezing – literally, Alex realised, as he sat up and saw his breath coming out in icy clouds. Even in his new school jersey and blazer, it was desperately cold; midwinter, snowy-day-without-a-coat-on cold. The tiled hall floor against his

hands and knees was almost colder than he could bear. He looked around, wondering if the door and windows were open or something, but, no, they were shut. It *was* snowing, though; through the windows he could see the thick white flakes falling through dusky twilight.



“Central heating!” moaned Ruby behind him. “Even the *Romans* had central heating! Please tell me they have some!”

But all Aunt Joanna’s radiators had gone. Alex looked around him cautiously. The floor was patterned with the same black-and-white chessboard tiles it had had in 1912, but now they looked old and cracked and worn. There were several new pictures, and two stiff hard-backed chairs that hadn’t been there before. The wallpaper was different, and so was the stair carpet, although it looked so tatty that it had obviously been there a long time. The whole hall looked worn and shabby and rather dingy. The front door was just the same as in 1912, though, with the same

coloured glass in the fanlight. The hall table was the same, and the picture of the little girl with the cat, and, just as in the 1912 house, there was the faint background scent of tobacco. And, of course, the mirror was still there, in exactly the same place it had always hung in Aunt Joanna's hall.

The little girl sat surrounded by pieces of train set, her mouth open in amazement. Her cheeks were white with cold, Alex saw, and her hands were an awful blueish colour. There were raw red sores all over her fingers, like swollen scarlet blisters.

“Hello,” said Alex. He gave her a little wave.

“Right,” said Ruby. She dusted herself down. “Ruby Pilgrim. Alex Pilgrim. Time travellers from

the twenty-first century, here to right wrongs and sort out stuff that needs sorting out and generally be awesome. You're probably related to us. What year is it, and what needs doing? And is it always this *cold*?”

The little girl gave them a sudden, completely unexpected smile, and shook her head. “It's the coldest winter in three hundred years,” she said proudly. “It's 1947. Silly! Fancy not knowing that! Have you come to help Colin find where the highwayman hid his treasure? How super!”

“I dunno,” said Ruby. “Probably. Have you lost some highwayman's treasure?”

“No!” The little girl giggled. “It's Mrs Eddington's necklace Colin wants to find. It's—”

But she was interrupted by a noise behind her. It was the door to the living room opening to reveal two elderly women. One was pleasant-looking, with white hair and a pink scarf tied on to her head instead of a hat. Like the little girl, her nose was blue with cold and she was wearing her coat inside the house. Despite the cold, she gave the girl a quick smile and raised her eyebrows at Alex and Ruby.

“Hello! Where did you two spring from? I didn’t miss the bell, did I? I must be going deaf in my old age. Oh!” Her face changed. “Oh, of course! You must be our evacuees from the hills! It’ll be rather nice to have evacuees here again, won’t it, Sheila? Quite like old times! Mrs Blackstaff *did*

say she might billet some on us. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Um,” said Alex. “Yes?” The mirror was surprisingly good at providing them with a conveniently plausible-ish explanation for being wherever it was they’d landed this time. Maybe it was part of its magic? It was one advantage to hideously old-fashioned school uniforms at least. When you actually ended up somewhere hideously old-fashioned, you didn’t stand out.

The other woman shook her head and pursed her lips. She looked older than the first lady. She was smaller and more wrinkled somehow, and her shoulders were hunched. She scowled at the children as though she thought the first lady was

stupid for agreeing to house them.

As soon as she saw her, Sheila scrambled to her feet.

“Mrs Eddington!” she cried.

The cheerful-looking woman said, “Now, Sheila—”

But Sheila ignored her. “Mrs Eddington!” she said. “Daddy’s coming home any day now – he is, isn’t he, Granny?”

“Well, yes,” said the cheerful woman, who must be Granny. “But, dear—”

“Mrs Eddington, *please* say you’ll forgive him – *please*. If you don’t—”

“Sheila!” said Granny.

Mrs Eddington’s scowl grew deeper.

“But, Granny!” Sheila cried. “You always say we have to forgive people – like when I took Colin’s magnifying glass and dropped it in the river by mistake; you said he had to forgive *me!*”

“Sheila, that’s enough!”

Mrs Eddington held up her hand. She advanced on Sheila, her face hard and stony. “Your father,” she said slowly, “is a liar and a thief. He is lucky I didn’t report him to the constables, and if he comes begging at my door, I will certainly do so! Do you understand me?”

Sheila looked as though she were going to cry.

“He is not!” she said shrilly. “He isn’t any of those things! And we’re going to prove it!”