

CHAPTER 2

Mount Dusk Academy

Mr. Mutton drove George and Maggie to school the next day on his way to work. Mr. Mutton had gotten a job as a local carpenter almost as soon as he had arrived and was very excited himself. It was his first day, too.

"See ya, kids!" He boomed. "Wish me luck and good luck to you both."

"Good luck, Dad," George replied, "and...be careful with your tools."

George and Maggie clambered out of the car and faced their new school. The sloping lawns at the front were a lush green surrounded by rocky, rugged terrain. The school itself was huge. George had been picturing a tiny little stone cottage, but Mount Dusk Academy was certainly no cottage. It rose in graceful towers on both sides of the building and the front gates were ridiculously tall and made of brass. It was an old castle! The windows were tall and elegant and the roof peaked to a sharp point in the middle.

George and Maggie walked up to the front gates and, once they had entered, they stopped and looked at the beautiful garden in front of them. Vibrant pinks, yellows, blues, purples and reds hit their eyes as they studied the huge mass of flowers.

Garden seats had been placed in the flower beds and they were brass too. The overall effect was stunning. Maggie's face, which had been tense and sulky in the car, now lit up in delight as she ran to the winding paths through the flowers. George sat on a bench to watch his sister. He did not want to leave her to walk into the school by herself because he thought she might just have a heart attack from nerves. As he sat on the garden seat George tried to master his own nerves.

Come on George, he chided himself, *pull yourself together*. But his heart still seemed to be doing a crazy dance in his chest with his stomach as a partner.

"Come on, Maggie, you can look at the flowers at lunch time; we're going to be late."

Maggie gave George a fleeting look of annoyance but joined his side again and they finished the walk to the front door of the school.

The reception area for the school was decorated richly. The walls were painted in beautiful shimmering gold and the two lounges to their right, in front of the service window, were covered in rich purple velvet and looked very inviting. The ground was covered in tiles with little pictures of ancient looking fairies and George wondered why on earth they had kept such a big, extravagant building for only fifteen children.

George led the way to the service window where a bothered looking old woman sat shuffling papers while muttering to herself.

"I have half a mind..."

"Excuse me," George said politely. "I'm George Mutton and this is my sister Maggie. Today is our first day of school and we're not sure where to go."

The old reception lady, who was wearing a name tag which read *Mildred*, stared at George with her sharp, beady eyes.

"You go to class, that's where you go."

George felt a slight flush cross his face.

"Well..." George started uncertainly, "do you know where our classes are?"

The old woman glared at him for a second and then heaved a great sigh and hoisted herself out of her chair. She shuffled out of sight and then reappeared next to the service window, made from a door that blended perfectly with the wall.

"Well come on," Mildred snapped, rolling her eyes. "I didn't just nearly break my back for your entertainment; follow me."

George and Maggie hurried over to the old woman and walked silently in her wake. They passed about a dozen empty classrooms before Mildred stopped outside of a somewhat occupied one. It had only five pupils in it.

"This will be the girl's classroom," Mildred said, snapping her eyes to Maggie.

Maggie started at being addressed as such and hurried into the room with a small, scared glance at George. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. Mildred started walking again and George followed silently. Every now and then Mildred would cluck her tongue irritably and look back at him.

"This is your classroom here, boy. You're bordering on late for your first day, did you know? I'd smarten up by tomorrow, if I were you."

And with that, Mildred started to slowly shuffle back the way she came.

George entered his new classroom with his heart pumping wildly. He was more nervous than he had ever been in his life and wondered briefly how he would feel if no one liked him. The door swung open and George saw five kids, around the same age as he was, turn their heads to look at him.

There were three boys and two girls. One of the girls wore her long black hair in pigtails and, even on first appearance, seemed snobby. The other girl, obviously that pigtailed girl's friend, had shocking red hair and gave an annoyingly high-pitched giggle when she saw George and immediately started talking in whispers to her friend. Two of the boys nodded at George and beckoned him over to them. The boys were both blond and tall. They were trying to get the girls' attention by throwing paper at them.

"Hi, I'm Matty," the taller one said, extending his hand.

George shook it, mumbling his own name in reply, suddenly very conscious of his spiky hair and short height.

"And I'm Billy."

George shook the other boy's hand too, and turned to introduce himself to the third boy in the room, who had black hair and very pale skin. Billy grabbed him and turned him back around.

"You don't wanna do that," he said, with a contemptuous look at the black-haired boy.

"Why?" George asked, looking again at the boy, trying to find something that could be bad about him.

"He's a freak," Matty said, with a laugh. "He's a loser. It'd be really stupid of you to talk to him; you'd become an instant loser too."

George looked at the two boys laughing cruelly, then looked again at the black-haired boy. George could see him blushing. He had obviously heard Matty and Billy's comments about him and George felt a huge pang of pity, but an even bigger wave of anger. He turned to the two blond boys.

"You know what? He looks like he at least has some brains, which is more than I could say about either of you."

And then George swiftly turned from the two stunned-looking boys and walked over to the other boy, to sit next to him.

The black-haired boy stared at George in shock for a few seconds. "What are you doing? Those boys will torture you if you sit near me; I'm like a disease."

George laughed. "Look, mate, I don't care how much they hate me. Must be better than having them as friends."

The black-haired boy let out a small laugh and extended his hand. "Charlie Redwin."

George shook his hand and told Charlie his name. George was just about to ask Charlie what their teacher was like when she walked into the classroom. George's new teacher had long, wavy blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, a nice smile and pleasant rosy cheeks.

"Wow! She's pretty," George whispered to Charlie.

"Yeah, and she's really nice, too."

"It seems that we have a new member of our class," the pretty teacher said smiling kindly at George. "George, I am Miss Roland. Perhaps you could stand up and introduce yourself to all of us. Give us a bit of information on yourself."

George swallowed thickly and stood up on shaky legs; he had not been expecting this.

"Ummm...hey," he mumbled lamely, feeling a hot red flush rise in his cheeks. "The name's George Mutton. I had to move here because my mum's about to have twins and...that's it."

George sat down hurriedly, completely aware that he sounded like an idiot. Matty and Billy sniggered, shaking their heads menacingly at George, while the girls let off another round of ear-piercing giggles.

"That's lovely, George," Miss Roland said, seemingly oblivious to the terrible embarrassment George was suffering. "And now for some math..."



George's second day had a much better feel about it, now that he at least had a friend to depend on. Charlie and George had struck up a friendship instantly. Charlie was a quiet boy who frequently stuttered and spoke with his eyes lowered to the floor, while George was the complete opposite; they seemed to be two halves to a whole and were both grateful for each other's company.

"Good morning, class," Miss Roland said in a sing-song voice as she swept into the classroom.

"Good Morning, Miss Roland," the class chanted back—except for the girl with the black hair.

The teacher stopped in front of the girl with a hurt look on her face.

"Miss Redwin? Don't you wish me a good morning?" Miss Roland stared at the girl with black hair as she glared up at her.

"Redwin?" George whispered to Charlie. "Are you related to her?"

Charlie looked at George incredulously.

"Of course I am; she's my twin sister Yvonne. Couldn't you see the resemblance? Wow, you really don't pay much attention, do you, mate?"

George looked back at Charlie's sister and now realized that, yes, she was a confident, snooty, female version of Charlie.

Miss Roland had walked away from Yvonne and sat down at her desk.

"If anyone does not reply to my 'good morning' from now on, they will be put into detention for being rude," she said, giving Yvonne a pointed look. "Is that quite understood?"

"Yes, Miss Roland," the class chanted back, including Yvonne.

"Now, class, please extract your copies of *The Mysterious Mount Dusk* from your bags and read chapter five in silence while I talk to Miss Redwin outside for a minute."

Yvonne huffily got out of her seat and stormed outside. Miss Roland followed her and closed the classroom door behind them. As if they were reading each other's minds, Charlie and George instantly jumped out of their seats and ran to the door, ears pressed eagerly at the large, old-fashioned key hole.

"That was quite unacceptable, Yvonne," they heard Miss Roland saying. "I will not be humiliated by my students in my classroom. If it happens again, I will call your Uncle Hubert."

The two boys heard Yvonne give a mean little giggle.

"Oh yes, Uncle Hubert. I do believe that your mother knew my uncle, Miss Roland. Uncle Hubert was just telling me last night of our family's connection to yours."

There was silence for a few moments and then they heard Miss Roland reply with her voice shaking.

“Yvonne, I am well aware of both our families’ history but the...conflict happened a long time ago, before you or I were even born, and I expect you to leave your personal opinions of me and my family out of my classroom, do you understand? Does Charlie know about your family history?”

Yvonne laughed again.

“That little do-gooder? Ha! Uncle Hubert tried to get Charlie involved but he lacks certain noble family traits that are essential to hearing the full story.”

George felt Charlie tense up next to him.

“He does not even care that our parents perished to uphold the family name. No, Charlie has not heard what I was told last night. Don’t worry, Miss, he still respects you.”

Charlie and George looked at each other. It was obvious to George from the look on Charlie’s face that he too was very confused, without a clue about what his twin sister had apparently heard the night before.

“Miss Redwin, you will behave from now on. It is...very sad to me...that you have taken this attitude, and I can see that I will not be able to make you understand the other side of the story. I simply ask that you treat me with at least a bit of respect at school. Now, sit down and read with the rest of your class.”

Charlie and George scrambled back to their seats just in time. Yvonne stalked back to her chair, sat down and violently flicked the pages of her book until she found the right one. Miss Roland quietly sat down at her desk, her face tense and sad.

“You have to find out what your sister knows. Sounds like it’d be something interesting,” George whispered to his new friend.

“I’ll try,” Charlie whispered back uncertainly. “But I know how good my family is at keeping secrets.”