

Chapter One

The corridor of St. Piddle-on-the-Puddle Comprehensive was not merely a hallway. Oh no.

That would be far too organized. It was, in fact, a COMPLETE AND UTTER DISASTER ZONE.

It was the sort of place that didn't just have a smell; it had an aroma. A pungent, nose-curling cocktail of overcooked school cabbage (which had been boiling since the mid-nineties), very old gym shoes that had developed their own sentient life forms, and the faint, lingering scent of damp despair.

Navigating the corridor required the skills of an Olympic gymnast or a particularly agile mountain goat.

* Desks were piled high in precarious towers, like a game of Jenga played by a giant with a very shaky hand.

* Drafting tables leaned at drunken angles, looking as though they had spent the night partying with the protractors.

* The Vending Machine, which, in its entire twenty-year history, had only ever dispensed a substance known as 'Carbonated Dust', wore a sad, yellowing 'Out of Order' sign like a medal of supreme dishonour.

Through this chaotic wasteland stepped Matt Flynn.

Now, Matt was a THOROUGHLY GOOD EGG. He was the kind of boy you could trust with:

- * Your last tenner.

- * A deep, dark secret about your embarrassing middle name (like Barnaby or Petunia).

- * Your most prized possession: your pet hamster, Sir Fluffington.

Matt was undeniably handsome, lightning-fast with a joke, and possessed the remarkable, if somewhat useless, superpower of being able to trip over a perfectly flat surface.

"The Headmaster is looking for you," chirped a voice that sounded like a seagull with a throat infection.

It was Jeff Partridge. Jeff was Matt's best friend, despite the fact that Jeff spent sixty percent of his waking hours staring into mirrors and the other forty percent convinced he was the most romantic heartthrob to ever walk the earth, a modern-day Romeo. This was despite the unfortunate fact that Jeff still insisted on wearing thick woollen socks with plastic Velcro sandals.

"He looked annoyed," Jeff added, pausing to check his reflection in the cracked glass of the broken vending machine. He puffed out his chest. "Properly, steam-coming-out-of-the-ears, volcano-about-to-erupt annoyed."

"Mr. Frank has been annoyed since the summer of 1974," Matt sighed, expertly sidestepping a stray, rusted protractor. "Nobody's in trouble, Jeff. He probably just lost his spectacles again."

"Maybe he's annoyed that I finished my homework and you didn't," Jeff smirked, smoothing his hair back with a flourish that he definitely thought looked suave.

"I would have finished it!" Matt protested, narrowly avoiding a head-on collision with a Year 7 boy who was carrying a tuba twice his own size. "But my computer did a somersault, let out a pathetic whimper, and then literally EXPLODED!"

"Save the excuses for the Big Boss," Jeff laughed, flashing a grin at a passing lunch lady (who completely ignored him).

Matt took a deep breath, tripped slightly over the doorframe (standard procedure), and knocked on the heavy oak door of the Headmaster's office.

Mr. Frank was seventy-something years old. He possessed a brain that was brilliant, but which occasionally decided to go on a spontaneous holiday to the seaside without telling the rest of his body. However, he had a heart made of PURE, 24-CARAT GOLD.

(Note: Not literally. If his heart were actually gold, he would be very heavy, extremely valuable, and probably in need of a very sturdy wheelbarrow to get around.)

He was currently squinting at his computer screen as if it were a magical artifact from a distant galaxy.

"Sorry to interrupt, sir," Matt said, sliding into a squeaky plastic chair. "Am I in trouble? Because if this is about the history report, I have a very logical explanation involving a toasted cheese sandwich, a faulty socket, and a massive short circuit—"

"Matt, I don't care about the deadline," Mr. Frank interrupted, waving a thin, papery hand vaguely in the air.

"Really? Because you usually care quite a lot, sir. You once gave me a three-hour detention for using the wrong shade of blue ink. You called it 'an affront to the alphabet'."

"I'm not as young as I used to be, Matt," the Headmaster sighed. He looked, at that moment, like a very tired, very wise old owl. "I need a spy. A secret agent. Someone to be my eyes and ears in these corridors of chaos. I need... YOU."

Matt blinked. His jaw dropped. "But you love this job, sir! You love the school! You love those long assembly songs about being kind to spiders and sharing your sandwiches!"

"I love the potential," Mr. Frank corrected gently. "I love knocking down barriers and making children believe they can fly. But the daily grind? The endless mountains of paperwork? The constant battle to stop Year 8s from

sticking chickpeas up their noses? It's exhausting, Matt. I'm simply too old for the chickpeas."

"You're not old!" Matt said loyally. "You're fitter than a prize-winning whippet!"

"That's very kind of you to say. But I've realized something, Matt. I was afraid of having too much free time because I thought I'd develop problems. Then I realized I've already got loads of problems—bad knees, a whistling ear, and a strange obsession with digestive biscuits. The only thing left to fear is the Great Beyond. And that's coming for us all eventually, like a very slow, very purple bus."

"So... what happens now?"

"I focus on the big picture," Mr. Frank said, leaning forward until his nose almost touched Matt's. "And you be my lookout. My Deputy. A school SHERIFF, if you will."

Matt frowned. A Sheriff? In a school where the most dangerous weapon was a soggy spitball? "That's not going to make me very popular, sir. I'll be about as welcome as a FART IN A SPACESUIT."

Mr. Frank looked incredibly solemn. "Matt, you must choose. Do you want to be popular, or do you want to be successful?"

"I'd quite like to be both, please. Like Ed Sheeran."

"Well, you can't. Not everyone has his hair. Now, keep this under your hat until after lunch. I'm sure the school is in safe hands with you."

"Thank you, sir," Matt said, feeling a strange, fizzing tingle of excitement in his chest.

"Now, hop it! Skedaddle! Vamoose!" Mr. Frank suddenly turned back to his computer with the intense focus of a hawk. "I'm in a ferocious bidding war on eBay for a magnificent WOODEN COFFIN. It's got a purple velvet lining and built-in cup holders! I simply must have it!"

Matt nodded, stood up, and walked out of the office. And, for the first time in his entire life, he didn't trip over a single thing.

Chapter Two

The school cafeteria of St. Piddle-on-the-Puddle Comprehensive was a place of high drama, higher stakes, and even higher smells. It was a cavernous, echoing room that smelled primarily of damp floor mops, industrial-strength bleach, and the daily culinary enigma known as ‘Mystery Meat Surprise.’

The dinner ladies, who all seemed to be named Gladys and wore hairnets that looked like spiderwebs, referred to it as ‘Beef-ish.’ It was a substance that was definitely brown, possibly edible, and arguably from an animal—though which one was a secret closely guarded by the Ministry of Food.

Every single pupil was crammed inside, perched on bright orange plastic chairs that possessed a very specific and annoying quality: they SCREECHED like a parliament of dying owls whenever anyone so much as twitched a buttock.

At the front of the hall, standing precariously on an upturned plastic milk crate that groaned under his weight, was Mr. Frank. He held a megaphone that looked like it had been salvaged from a shipwreck.

"I'll make this brief!" the Headmaster bellowed, the megaphone let out a screech of feedback that made everyone's fillings ache. "Mostly because at my grand age, I have to pee every two minutes. It's like living with a leaky tap in your trousers. Drip... drip... drip..."

The children groaned in a magnificent, three-hundred-person unison.

"EEEEWWWWW!"

"While I shall still be lurking around the corridors like a particularly friendly ghost," Frank continued, wobbling on his crate, "my office is now strictly OFF-LIMITS. If you have a problem, a complaint, or you've accidentally got your head stuck in a tuba again, I'm looking at you, Barnaby, you must speak to my brand-new Deputy... MATT FLYNN!"

The room didn't just clap. It ERUPTED.

It was like a last-minute goal had been scored in the World Cup Final.

* Boys whistled through their fingers.

* Girls cheered until they turned purple.

* A boy in the back row started a slow, dramatic clap that quickly accelerated into a thunderous standing ovation.

Matt was thumped on the back so hard by his classmates that his teeth rattled in his gums like a bag of marbles. He floated toward the front of the room, feeling like a King, a Rockstar, and a Galactic Hero all rolled into one. He reached out and grabbed the megaphone.

"Thank you, thank you very much," Matt said, suddenly dropping his voice three octaves into a perfect Elvis Presley impression. He wiggled his hips

with such vigour that his trousers nearly gave way. "I'm sorry, I've just always wanted to do that. It felt... hunka-hunka burning GREAT!"

He cleared his throat, wiped the grin off his face, and tried to look 'Deputy-ish' (which mostly involved frowning and sticking his chin out).

"Anyway! As your new Deputy, I have one official order of business..." He paused for dramatic effect. The room held its breath. "YOU'RE ALL SUSPENDED!"

The silence that followed was so heavy you could have dropped it on your toe and broken a bone. A hundred forks, laden with quivering chunks of 'Beef-ish', stopped halfway to a hundred open mouths.

"Just kidding!" Matt grinned, breaking the tension. "I haven't actually got that kind of power. I don't think." He leaned toward Mr. Frank and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "Have I, sir? Can I fire the Geography teacher? He smells of damp cardboard."

Mr. Frank just stared at him with a blank, milky-eyed expression that suggested he'd completely forgotten who Matt was, where he was, and possibly what a 'Matt' even was.

"Didn't think so," Matt muttered. He stood tall again. "On a serious note, this is a huge honour. We're going to do great things! Now, let's all raise our lukewarm milk cartons to the greatest Headmaster this school has ever seen!"

A forest of tiny, crinkled blue milk cartons rose into the smoky air. Matt and Mr. Frank clinked their cartons together with a wet, satisfying SQUELCH.

But just as Matt was about to take a triumphant, heroic gulp of semi-skimmed milk, the heavy double doors at the back of the hall swung open with a THUD.

In walked a girl.

But she wasn't just any girl. She walked with the kind of supreme confidence usually reserved for people who own their own private islands or have mastered the art of the perfect eye-roll. This was Miley. She was fourteen, remarkably pretty, and possessed a gaze so piercing she could probably stare down a charging rhinoceros without so much as blinking.

The cafeteria went deathly quiet again.

Jeff Partridge immediately shifted into 'Ultra-Heartthrob Mode.' He leaned back in his screeching chair, gave Miley a slow, oily, and slightly creepy wink, and tried to look ruggedly handsome. Miley looked at him as if he were a particularly uninteresting piece of grey chewing gum stuck to the bottom of a very dirty shoe.

"Ah!" Mr. Frank beamed, his wrinkled face lighting up like a Christmas tree with a fresh set of batteries. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet my granddaughter, Miley. It is my absolute, total, and utter pleasure to announce that she will be joining us as our... SENIOR DEPUTY."

"PFFFTTTT!"

A magnificent fountain of semi-skimmed milk exploded from Matt's mouth. It sprayed across the front row of Year 7s like a dairy-themed fire hose.

Matt coughed and spluttered, his eyes bulging like a frog's. His glorious 'Deputy' dreams, which had felt so big only seconds ago, were suddenly feeling very, very crowded.

Chapter Three

Matt stormed into the Headmaster's office with a face like a wet weekend in Bognor Regis. He had the expression of a boy who had just bitten into a juicy red apple, discovered a worm, and then realized, with a jolt of horror, that he had only found HALF a worm.

"What was that?!" Matt demanded, his arms windmilling so violently he looked like he was trying to take flight. "What was that... that... AMBUSH?!"

Mr. Frank was sitting behind his mahogany desk, looking remarkably busy doing absolutely nothing. He was intensely studying a paperclip. He didn't say a word. He just blinked slowly, looking very much like a bewildered tortoise that had lost its way to the lettuce patch.

"So, let me get this straight," Matt continued, pacing the small, dusty room. "I'm the Deputy. Hooray! But your granddaughter is the SENIOR Deputy. Which means she's the Big Boss, the Grand Poobah, the Queen Bee—and I'm just a... a... a lowly STOOGE! Nothing's changed for me at all! I'm still at the bottom of the food chain, right next to the plankton!"

"Yep," Frank nodded. His 24-carat gold heart was clearly taking a day off, as he didn't look even the slightest bit guilty. "That pretty much sums it up, Matt. Top marks for comprehension."

"I can't believe this!" Matt cried, nearly tripping over a stack of National Geographic magazines from 1982. "Since when has this school needed a Senior Deputy? I can do this role! I'm capable! I'm responsible! I'm—"

"Would it make you feel better if I got you a nametag?" Frank interrupted, his eyes lighting up. "I've got a label maker in the drawer. It's very satisfying. Click-clack-snip!"

Matt stopped mid-pace. "Yes! No! Maybe! ARGH!" He pulled at his hair until it stood up in frantic tufts. "I can't believe you just sprung this on me out of the blue. Don't I deserve better? Don't I deserve... a warning? A memo? A carrier pigeon?"

"I'm sorry," Frank sighed, suddenly looking about a hundred and twelve years old. His shoulders slumped. "I thought I already told you. My mind is failing me lately, Matt. It's like a sieve. A leaky, old, rusty sieve that someone has used for target practice."

"Don't go pulling the 'Old Man' card again!" Matt pointed an accusing finger. "You used that to get out of judging the Year 9 Talent Show!"

"Yeah, you're right," Frank admitted, brightening up instantly. "I have used that one a lot this week. It's a very good card. I was just waiting for the best time to tell you about Miley. But that time never arose. Like a loaf of bread with no yeast. Or a soggy soufflé."

Matt groaned. "Look, I'm sure Miley is perfectly nice in a 'granddaughterly' kind of way..."

"Oh, she is. She's delightful," Frank beamed. "She even knits her own yogurt."

Matt paused. "How do you knit yogurt?"

"I've no idea. She's very clever."

"But what does she know about St.

Piddle-on-the-Puddle, Frank? Nothing! Zero! Zilch! NADA!"

"She's already graduated from Oxford University," Frank said calmly, leaning back in his creaky chair. "The youngest person to do so in the history of the world. She's got a brain the size of a small planet. Possibly Jupiter."

"So she's got some poxy qualifications from Oxford?" Matt scoffed. "What does that prove? She doesn't know the unique, soul-crushing smells of this school! She doesn't know which floorboards creak when you're trying to sneak to the toilet! She's going to want to change things for no reason. It'll be all healthy kale salads, mindfulness breathing, and ABSOLUTELY NO RUNNING IN THE HALLS!"

"I'm sure she won't."

"She will! It's just what girls do," Matt insisted, thinking of his older sister, who once rearranged his entire sock drawer by 'vibe' and 'spiritual energy'.

"I get that at home. I don't need it at school too!"

Mr. Frank looked at him seriously. "I have to think about the long-term future of this school, Matt. You're like the son I wish I had... if that son was constantly falling into industrial-sized bins. The problem is, you're a little accident-prone. And a bit overzealous. You need a North Star. A guide. A babysitter."

In a fit of righteous despair, Matt flung his arms up. "I AM NOT ACCIDENT—"

CRASH!

His trailing sleeve caught a pot of pens, a leaning stack of "Important Testing Papers," and a very small, very sharp stapler. They went flying across the room like confetti at a disaster-themed wedding.

"My point exactly," said Frank, not moving a muscle.

"That was just an unfortunate coincidence!" Matt shouted, his face turning the exact colour of a very angry, very ripe tomato.

"So, who does that leave?" Frank mused, tapping his chin. "Jeff? That fool can't do anything right. He's too busy trying to flirt with his own shadow. I saw him giving a 'smouldering look' to a fire extinguisher earlier."

"He did finish that homework before me," Matt muttered defensively.

"What homework?" Frank asked, looking genuinely confused. "Do we give homework here? I thought that was just a suggestion."

"You really have to start getting on top of things, sir."

"Oh well, I don't need to worry about any of that now," Frank chuckled, rubbing his hands together. "Miley will handle the boring bits. The budgets. The chickpeas. The plumbing."

Matt leaned over the desk, his eyes burning with ambition. "Why don't you give ME the job? I can train my brother, Adam, up and he can replace me when I leave. It'll be a Flynn Dynasty! We'll rule the school for a thousand years!"

Mr. Frank began to laugh. It started as a tiny wheeze in his chest, then a giggle, then a full-blown, rib-shaking belly laugh that made his spectacles wobble precariously on the end of his nose.

"Alright, I get your point," Matt huffed. "I know Adam's not exactly the brightest bulb in the chandelier—"

"—Matt, I'd be surprised if he could even CHANGE a bulb," Frank wheezed, wiping a tear of pure joy from his eye. "The boy tried to eat a glue stick last Tuesday because he thought it was a giant marshmallow."

"You know I'm the best guy for the job," Matt said, his voice dropping to a quiet but determined level. "Just give me a chance to prove you wrong. That's all I'm asking of you. One chance."

He paused, then added: "Oh, and a nametag. A gold one. With my name in fancy, loopy writing. And maybe a little picture of a lion on the side."