

FELIX DASHWOOD
AND THE
MUTATING MANSION



LUKE TEMPLE

Luke Temple was born on Halloween, 1988. As a child, Luke didn't enjoy reading and found writing



hard work. Yet today he's an author! When not writing, Luke spends most of his time visiting schools and bringing his stories to life with the children he meets.

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FELIX DASHWOOD
AND THE
MUTATING MANSION

Chapters 1 to 5

plus

an extract from
chapter 17

LUKE TEMPLE



Gull Rock Publications

*Dedicated to the two Cyrils:
one fictional, one real,
both no longer with us.*

*With thanks to Jessica Chiba, Catherine Coe, Gareth Collinson, Mike
and Barbara Temple, Kieran Burling and the Highfield Hall Jury*

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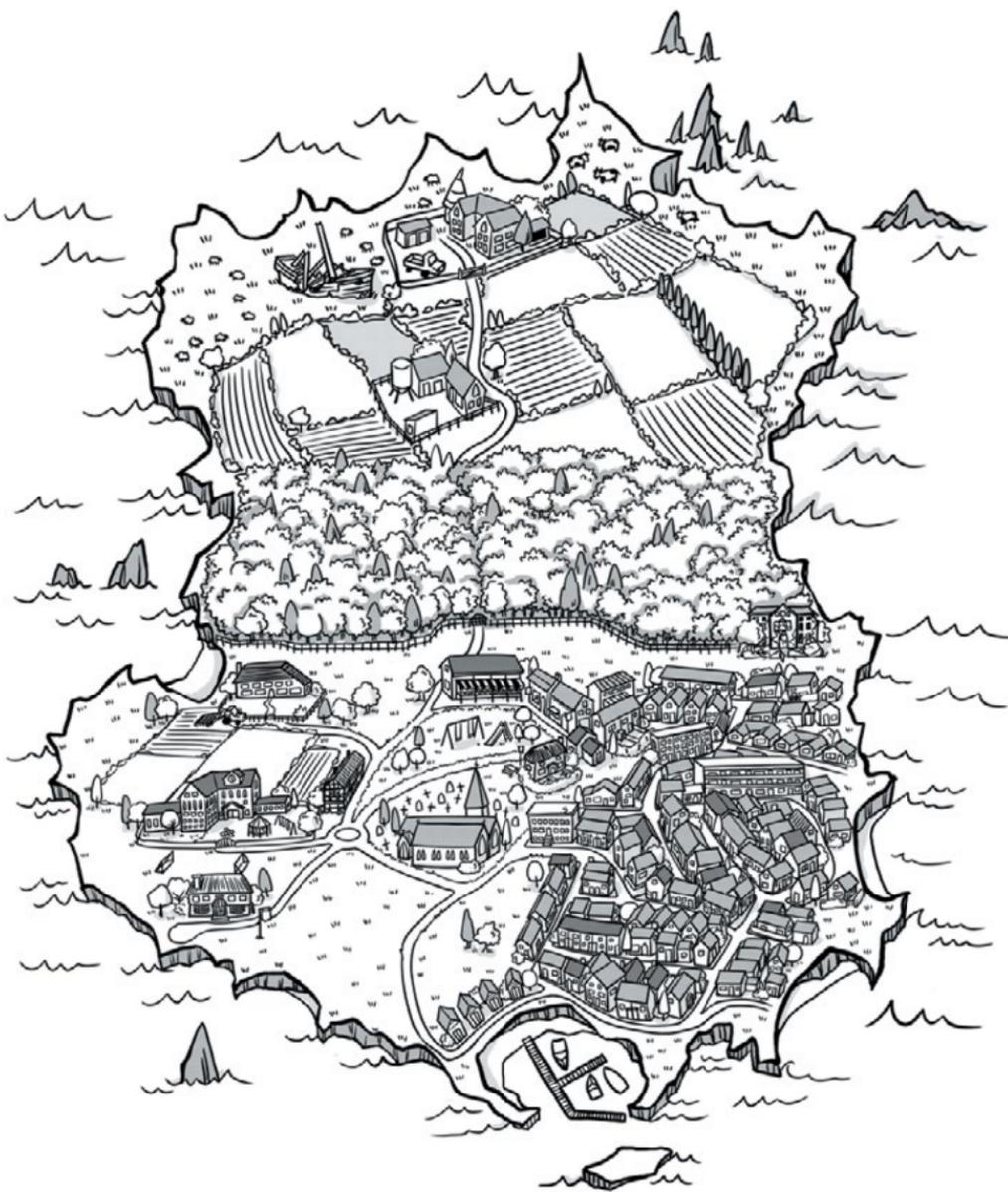
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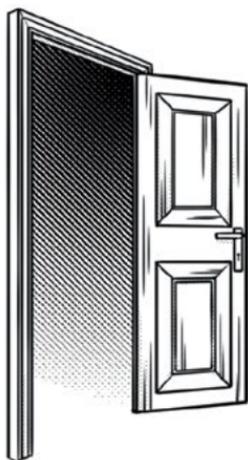
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Thistlewick Island



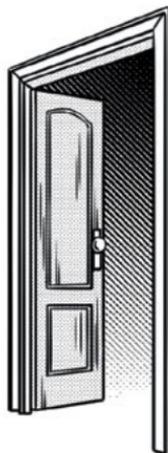
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1

The Old Abandoned Mansion



Felix heaved another load of newspapers onto the shelf at Thistlewick Island Newsagent's. She had given up doing it neatly and just dropped them down into a scattered pile. She was fed up.

It was all her mum's fault. She'd gone to a Thistlewick Island council meeting half an hour ago and had asked Felix to sort out all the newspapers for her. Ask was probably the wrong word – threaten was more like it. And on the first day of the summer holidays too.

Felix wished she was with her friends, Caspar and Drift. They could be having some kind of adventure now, even if it was unlikely to be as exciting as the one they'd had a month ago, when they'd been hunting treasure. They'd ended up battling an evil, ghostly pirate crew and also discovered that their head teacher was actually an escaped criminal called Tristan Traiton, who'd been trying to steal the treasure himself.

She looked back at the shelf and rolled her eyes. She

would have to neaten the newspapers up. If she didn't, Mum would just make her do it all again.

As she straightened a stack of *The Chronicles of Thistlewick*, she glanced at the front page. There was a large photo of an old building under the headline, **'MURKHILL MANSION TO BE DEMOLISHED, FINALLY'**.

Felix wasn't usually interested in reading newspapers, but something about the photo made her curious – maybe it was because Murkhill Mansion looked so run-down. She focused on the first paragraph of writing.

Murkhill Mansion, on Forest Lane, was, for a few years, a mysterious place. Little is now known about the mansion's last occupants, except that they were the Summercroft family, who lived there until 1965. They had rented it from an eccentric English inventor, Mr Blaze. Then, one night in July 1965, the family went missing. What's more, several others who were alleged to have visited the mansion in the days after the family's disappearance are themselves rumoured to have vanished. Maybe they all moved away from Thistlewick, or perhaps it was something more sinister.

For a while, Murkhill Mansion was feared and people believed stories about curses and evil goings-on. Now, over fifty years later, the mansion is simply an old ruin. The council have wanted to knock the

place down for many years, but until very recently it was still under the ownership of Mr Blaze.

'Mr Blaze was an odd chap,' Mayor Merryweather told this newspaper. 'He had not visited his mansion on Thistlewick for fifty years, and failed to find new tenants to rent it. I have sent him countless letters requesting that the mansion is demolished – it is an unsightly place to look at – but he has always flatly refused.'

However, Mr Blaze passed away in England last month. With no heir listed in his will, the ownership of Murkhill Mansion has transferred back to the Thistlewick council.

'Plans are now in place to have the mansion demolished, and we hope that this will take place very soon,' said Mayor Merryweather.

When the demolition happens, the mayor is hoping to turn it into a big event and invite everyone on Thistlewick to watch. To find out more, turn to page 15.

Felix looked up as a thought struck her. Murkhill Mansion was an abandoned, run-down place that hadn't been lived in for years. There were rumours of curses and evil goings-on.

She couldn't stay at the newsagent's now – not when there was something so interesting to investigate.

Felix placed her hand on the rusty gate and carefully pushed. It gave way and she walked through into a badly overgrown garden. Caspar followed close behind and Felix could tell he was already getting nervous. He looked far too neat and tidy, wearing a perfectly ironed T-shirt and spotless shorts.

Drift leapt over the garden gate and landed next to them. Like Felix, he had on his usual scruffy jeans and a T-shirt caked in mud and sand.

‘Won’t your mum be annoyed that you’ve left the newsagent’s?’ asked Caspar.

‘I’ll worry about that later. Anyway, I deserve a lunch break.’

‘You’d only been working for half an hour!’

Felix shrugged.

‘Well, I have to go and help my dad down at the harbour this afternoon, but I’ve got all morning,’ said Drift. ‘So what’s the plan?’

‘Let’s have a look around.’

Felix walked cautiously through tall weeds and over roots, which ran along the broken stone path like dead snakes.

The building loomed tall in front of them now, far bigger than any of the other houses on Thistlewick. If anything, it looked more of a wreck than the photo in the paper.

‘Why have I never noticed this place before?’ Felix wondered.

‘I don’t think we’ve ever been around here, have we?’ replied Caspar.

‘That’s true.’

They were on a high cliff as far east as it was possible to go on Thistlewick. All that surrounded the building was the forest on one side and the sea behind it. The buildings back in the main part of Thistlewick were small specks on the horizon.

Halfway up the garden path, Felix found a sign. She cleared the weeds from around it and could just make out some cracked, swirly writing: ‘Welcome to Murkhill Mansion’.

‘This is definitely the place!’

She looked up at the building again. The walls were grey where the paint had peeled off and had thick ivy growing up them, there were cracks running through the bricks, windows were smashed, half of one of the chimneys was missing and the roof looked like it might collapse at any minute.

Caspar glanced at the mansion, eyebrows raised. ‘I am *not* going in there.’

‘Last month we were trapped in a cave, about to be killed by a group of ghost pirates. Why are you scared of this place?’ asked Drift.

Felix smiled at her friends and walked up to the large oak front door, which was sheltered in a porch. She took hold of the knocker and hit it three times against the door. The loud noise echoed through the mansion.

‘If there’s anyone inside, they’ll definitely hear that,’ said Drift.

Felix waited several minutes, but there was no sound of movement.

Caspar shuffled uncomfortably. ‘Can we go now?’

As Felix stared at the door, she noticed the doorknob standing out. She had never seen one like it before – it had a smiling, golden face on it. Unlike the rest of the mansion, the doorknob was far from dirty and shone brightly at her. This made Felix’s mind up.

She reached out and turned it.

The door swung open.

Felix stepped inside and Drift soon joined her.

She looked back out into the garden. ‘Come on, Caspar!’

He stared up at the crumbling walls, then sighed and stepped forwards. ‘Fine, I suppose someone has to keep an eye on you. But I am not staying in here for long.’

Felix grinned. She knew Caspar didn’t like adventures as much as her, but she was really glad to have him there. He had nearly had to move away to England earlier in the year after his mum lost her job. Then, when they won the treasure, they used it to buy Caspar and his mum a house, so they could stay on Thistlewick.

As Felix’s eyes began to adjust to the dim light she saw a vast, tall hallway with a white marble staircase in the middle. She couldn’t help feeling a bit disappointed. She didn’t quite know what she’d expected – perhaps

loads of golden statues leading to a gigantic throne at the top of the stairs; or maybe something spookier like a gruesome ghost chamber filled with skeletons. But the entrance hall just felt empty.

‘This stinks,’ said Drift.

‘We can’t give up yet.’

‘No, I mean it literally stinks. Where’s that smell coming from?’

Felix sniffed and a mixture of rot and old cabbage ran up her nose. She screwed it up and walked towards the staircase, her footsteps echoing on the stone floor.

As she placed a foot on the first step she felt something brush against her.

She looked behind her, but in the darkness she couldn’t see anyone there. There was another movement and she turned quickly around. A dark figure stood in front of her.

Felix slowly stepped back, her heart thudding in her chest. The figure had a giant head with devil’s horns coming out of it.

Just then, a beam of light flickered across the entrance hall. Felix let out a sigh of relief. It was just a statue – a marble carving of a large eagle, perched on the staircase banister.

Felix turned to where the light had come from. Drift was at the left of the entrance hall, standing in the doorway to another room, from which the light emanated.

‘Hey, Caspar,’ he called over. ‘Need the toilet?’

‘Why would I need the toilet?’

‘There’s one here. Don’t want you to wet yourself.’

Caspar glared at Drift. He always teased him.

Felix looked past them and another door caught her attention. It had intricate markings carved around its edge, with swirls curling in various symmetrical patterns. There was a word cut into its wood at the centre, in the same artistic lettering as the sign in the garden: ‘Library’.

‘Caspar, look.’

He followed her gaze. ‘That doesn’t sound too scary. Is the door—?’

Before Caspar finished his sentence, Felix had shot over to the door and twisted the handle. The door glided open with ease.

Inside, two of the walls were completely covered from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, a third contained a large fireplace, and the wall opposite Felix had a tall window which gave a magnificent view of the sea and the sky.

‘A proper library,’ Caspar said, mouth wide in awe.

Felix smiled. ‘Bet you’re glad you came into Murkhill Mansion now.’

Caspar went straight over to one of the bookshelves.

Felix looked back to Drift. ‘You coming in?’

Drift shook his head. ‘A library doesn’t sound that interesting. I’m going to see what’s behind some of these other doors.’



Felix turned back and began to search around the library, keen to find anything that might tell her more about the mansion and why it was abandoned.

On the mantelpiece above the fireplace she spied a collection of silver photo frames. The smallest one, circular with a thin crack running through the glass, contained a black and white photo of a girl who looked about the same age as Felix. She had shoulder-length hair and a freckly face. The photo was faded, but the girl's eyes and smile seemed alive.

The photo behind it was bigger, in a rectangular frame, and showed the same girl with a man and a woman. In this photo, the girl was in a wheelchair and, although she was smiling, she didn't seem as happy.

'This must be the family that used to live here.'

'Felix, come and look at this,' Caspar called over.

She turned away from the mantelpiece and found Caspar staring at one of the bookcases, a curious look on his face.

'You really do like books, don't you?'

'Look at them, though.'

It didn't take Felix long to realise what Caspar was getting at. 'They all have white covers.'

'Except that one.' He pointed to a book with a bright red cover.

'Why's it different to the others?'

'I suppose whoever put it there must want us to look at it.'

‘Go on then, pull it out.’

Caspar took hold of the book and slid it off the shelf. It was in perfect condition except for the cover, which had some thick vertical scratches down it. Felix counted them: eight. Under the scratches, in golden lettering, was written, ‘Amelie’s Diary’.

The book fell open to the first page and Felix and Caspar began to read.



July 1st 1965

Dear diary,

Hello! My name is Amelie Summercroft and I live in Murkhill Mansion on Thistlewick Island. OK, so that is a bit of a boring way to start, but this is my first ever diary entry and I couldn't think of anything better.

Today was my 10th birthday. I couldn't have cake, because that would make me too sick, but all the presents made up for it.

Mum and Dad's present was you - my first diary. What should I use you for? There would be no point in me writing down what happens each day, because not many exciting things happen in my life. It's kind of difficult to have adventures when you're stuck in bed. Mum and Dad think I should use you to write stories. They are always telling me that I have a big imagination. Mum also thinks that if I write down all the nightmares I have, it

might stop them. Dr Ralph said I should write about it too, but I really don't want to think about that.

I know a diary doesn't sound like a big present, but it's OK. Mum and Dad have to spend a lot of money on me. They haven't said that to me, but I know that all the medical equipment in my room is expensive.

I also got some drawing pencils from Uncle Ferdinand and a sketchpad from Aunt Cariola. Other than the fact this stinks of Aunty Cariola's horrible perfume, it is a perfect present - I love drawing.

Another thing I love is reading. If you can't have adventures of your own, the next best thing is to read about them. Most of my other presents were books, and I am almost looking forward to lying in this bed all day now that I have all these adventures to go on.

The best present of all, though, was a surprise one. It was wrapped in shiny red paper and the label on it read: 'Dear Amelie, I hope this helps you to make your dreams come true. From Mr Blaze'. I didn't even know who Mr Blaze was until Dad told me he is the person we are renting this mansion from. Murkhill Mansion is far too big for the three of us, but apparently Mr Blaze insisted we take it. He lives in England and we have never met him, so Mum and Dad were really surprised he even knew it was my birthday.

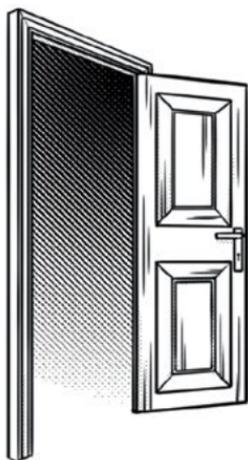
Dad helped me to unwrap the shiny red paper and I pulled out a rag toy. It is about twenty centimetres tall and wears a long black coat, like a magician's cloak. Its

face is the best bit, though - like a golden, smiling theatre mask. I turned it round to show Mum and she said it gave her the creeps. But I love it! How did Mr Blaze know that my favourite thing in the world is theatre? I have always dreamed of writing my own plays and acting. (Not that that's ever going to happen now.) I decided to call my rag toy Shakespeare, after the most famous playwright in the world.

The only thing that could have made my birthday even better today was if I had seen my classmates from school. I really miss them - even Bartley, who always annoyed me.

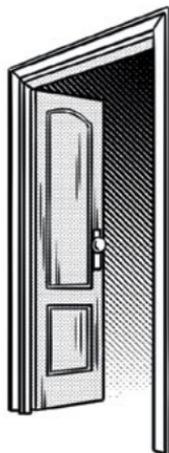
I haven't talked to my toys since I was about five, but this evening I found myself telling Shakespeare how much I wished all my friends could have been here today. But none of them came. It was just me and Shakespeare, who smiled at me as I told him all about them. Of course he smiled - he's a toy, that's all he can do. He's sitting at the end of my bed now. I've just told him that I am writing about him. A 10-year-old girl talking to her toy. It's a bit sad, isn't it?

Still, I do love his smile.



3

Changing Rooms



‘I feel sorry for Amelie, not having any of her friends there on her birthday,’ said Felix.

‘It sounds like she wasn’t allowed out of bed,’ said Caspar. ‘I wonder why?’

‘That must be so boring.’ Felix tried to imagine that happening to her and just couldn’t. It was bad enough when Mum grounded her in the house. But to be trapped in bed all day must be awful. ‘No wonder Amelie started talking to her toy. When did she write that diary entry?’

Caspar looked at the first page again. ‘July 1st 1965.’

Felix remembered the newspaper article. ‘So Amelie and her parents disappeared soon after she wrote that.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘Don’t know – the newspaper just said they mysteriously disappeared. Come on, let’s go and show Drift the diary.’

Felix walked over to the library door and opened it. She blinked – it took her a few seconds to realise what

she was seeing. In front of her was a thin, narrow kitchen. Frowning, she closed the door, waited a moment and opened it again.

It was definitely a kitchen, with work surfaces along two walls and an ancient cooker and fridge at the far end.

Felix closed the door, turned back and scanned the library.

‘What’s up?’ asked Caspar.

‘I’m not dreaming it – we definitely came into the library through this door, didn’t we?’

Caspar nodded. ‘There aren’t any other doors in the library. What are you getting at?’

‘Open the door.’

Frowning, Caspar did so. Felix watched as he took two steps backwards and turned to face her, eyes wide. ‘That doesn’t make any sense.’

Felix stepped into the kitchen and called, ‘Drift! Drift, can you hear me?’

There was no reply.

Felix walked along the kitchen until she came to a window. It gave a view of the weed-covered garden, and behind that the towering trees of the forest.

‘We must be in a different part of the mansion.’

‘How did we...?’ Caspar’s voice trailed off.

‘I don’t know, but let’s try this next door.’

They walked to the door next to the fridge at the far end of the kitchen. It opened out into...

‘A bedroom?’

Felix quickly took in her surroundings – a large double bed, two oak wardrobes and a dressing table to the right. She went straight over to the window on the left. The view out of it was similar to the one out of the kitchen window, except from higher up – Felix was looking down on the garden from above.

‘We’re on a different level, Caspar. It looks like this bedroom is above the kitchen.’

He joined her at the window and shook his head. ‘But how can we have gone through a door in the kitchen and ended up in the room above it?’

Felix looked around the bedroom. ‘We need to find Drift.’

She ran over to a door next to the bed, calling out Drift’s name. The next room was a living room, with three plush armchairs facing a tiny square box that Felix realised was an old-fashioned TV. She opened another door and found herself in a toilet – the same toilet that Drift had discovered in the entrance hall, with a long metal chain dangling down from the cistern above it. There were no other doors in there, so she stepped back out into the living room.

‘Over here,’ said Caspar, beckoning Felix to a door on the other side of the room. It creaked open to reveal a small corridor with light green walls, leading to a narrow staircase.

‘Brilliant. If we go down those stairs it should take us to the ground floor,’ said Felix.

At the bottom of the staircase, Felix felt something sticky on her face. She went to brush it off and felt her hand cutting through thick spiders' webs. She pushed through them and in the dim light realised she was surrounded by cardboard boxes in a triangular-shaped room. Felix looked up – wooden beams stretched across the ceiling.

'We're in the loft!' Caspar realised.

'So the stairs going down took us *up* to the loft? This is crazy. How exactly do we get out of here? The stairs have disappeared!'

'There must be a loft hatch somewhere.'

Caspar squeezed himself around the boxes and Felix began searching too, careful not to bang her head on the wooden beams.

'Aha!' Caspar bent down over a square of light and felt around. 'If I can just find the...'

Something clicked and the loft hatch flew open, sending Caspar catapulting downwards head first.

Felix ran over to the hole and saw Caspar in a heap on the floor below. She carefully manoeuvred herself through the hatch, landing next to him on the floor.

'Drift!'

He was sitting in what looked like a grand, golden throne. He wore a shining silver crown that matched it.

'Well, you two certainly know how to make an entrance. How did you end up up there?'

'You won't believe it...' said Felix, taking in their

surroundings. The walls were made of rough, giant pieces of stone, more like a castle than a mansion. In fact, behind the throne there was a tapestry on the wall of knights on horses fighting in a medieval battle. ‘Hang on. Where are we?’

‘Pretty cool, huh? This crown was just sitting on the throne, waiting for me.’ Drift grinned. ‘Now, why don’t you kiss your king’s feet?’

Caspar pushed himself up. ‘Where did you find this room?’

‘I got here through a door in the entrance hall.’

‘Go and have a look back out of that door again, Drift,’ said Felix.

‘Why? Did you find something out there?’

‘Just open the door.’

Drift went over, turned the handle, looked out and reacted in exactly the same way that Felix had in the library. His eyes widened and he quickly shut the door and opened it again.

‘Woah! What on earth...?’

‘All the rooms are muddled up,’ Felix explained.

Drift stepped through the door and Felix heard him say, ‘Cool!’

Felix and Caspar joined him. This room had a red rug down the middle leading to the window with a view of the sea, and the walls were covered in paintings, like a small art gallery. They were mainly of children playing with dolls, climbing trees and riding horses – or was it

all the same child, just at different ages? One painting in the middle of them all stood out – a portrait of a tall, thin man. He had black, greased-back hair, and his facial expression was hard to read. It was almost a smile, but there was sadness behind it. Felix read the name written on the painting's frame: Mr Blaze.

'That's the man who Amelie's parents rented Murkhill Mansion from,' said Caspar.

'Who's Amelie?' asked Drift.

'We found her diary in the library. She lived here with her parents until they all mysteriously disappeared,' explained Felix. 'But anyway, how did we end up here? This room-changing thing is weird. Me and Caspar have been going all over the place.'

'We can't find our way back to the entrance hall – which means we can't get out of the mansion,' Caspar added.

Drift's eyes landed on the window. 'Sure we can. We'll just have to climb out through there.'

'I am not doing that,' said Caspar.

Drift shrugged. 'You can stay here then.' He walked over to the window and tried the latch, but it wouldn't budge. 'It's locked. Well, I guess one more won't make a difference.'

'One more what?' asked Felix.

'Broken window – we can smash our way out.'

'Drift, you—'

Before Caspar had a chance to protest, Drift elbowed

the window and the glass splintered into a thousand tiny pieces.

Drift stuck his head out through the hole. ‘Easy. The garden’s right outside this window. We can climb straight out and— Aaahhh!’

He jumped away from the window as the glass that had smashed flew up off the floor and floated in the air like many tiny daggers pointing straight at Drift. Then it shot into the window frame and started to stick itself back together, like a see-through jigsaw puzzle.

The repaired glass glowed bright white ... and suddenly a face pushed out of it. Felix gasped and staggered backwards. The face was looking straight at her, its eyes shining menacingly and with a wide, evil grin. It was like a demonic version of the golden face on the doorknob of Murkhill Mansion.

There was a blinding flash of light. When Felix’s eyes had recovered she saw the window was as good as new. It didn’t look at all like Drift had just smashed through it.

‘Did you see that face?’ asked Felix.

Caspar nodded and said in a shaky voice, ‘That was freaky. And how did the window repair itself like that?’

Even Drift looked shocked, his usual cool exterior replaced by a tense frown. ‘So much for finding an easy way out.’

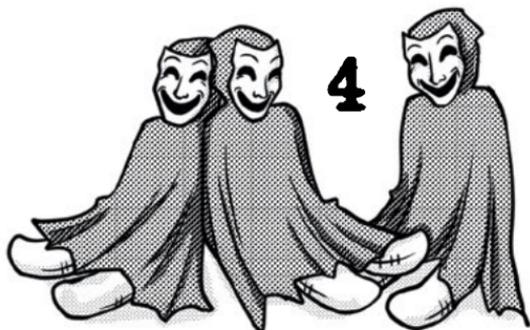
‘Any other bright ideas, Drift?’ asked Caspar.

Drift glared at him and puffed out his chest.

Sensing her friends were about to start arguing, Felix

said, 'Come on, there aren't any other doors in here. We'd better head back into that castle room.'

But when she opened the door, the castle room was no longer behind it. Her eyes fell on something even weirder.



July 2nd 1965

Dear diary,

I had a nightmare last night about school. I always loved school, except for geography with our head teacher, Mr Thrasher. He was really strict and, although I never usually got told off, I still found him terrifying. But the worst thing was that Mr Thrasher made me sit next to Bartley.

In my nightmare we were doing a geography test. About halfway through it, I noticed Bartley was looking over my shoulder at my answers. I looked at his paper - his answers were the same as mine. He had been copying me.

I whispered, 'Stop cheating, or I'll tell Mr Thrasher.'

Bartley grinned, but then I saw that he wasn't looking at me - he was looking behind me.

I turned around and Mr Thrasher was there,

towering over me, his fiery eyes burning into mine.

'This is a test! Why are you talking?' he roared.

'I ... it was...'

'She's copying my answers, sir,' Bartley interrupted.

'Look, she's written the same as me.'

I tried to protest, but Mr Thrasher grabbed hold of my paper, glanced at it, then ripped it to pieces. I felt warm tears running down my face and realised everyone was now staring at me.

'Why are you crying?' Mr Thrasher boomed. 'I am appalled at you, girl. I will not tolerate cheating! You will spend the rest of the lesson writing out the following lines: I am a cheat. Cheating is wrong. If I ever cheat again, I will be shut in Mr Thrasher's cupboard for the whole day.'

I tried to stop myself crying but it was no good. He was like a huge red dragon spitting fire at me - then he really did turn into a dragon, with razor-sharp teeth. I looked into his bloodthirsty eyes as his snake-like head hovered over me.

I tried to remember the technique Mum had taught me for getting rid of my nightmares. I had to tell myself I was in charge of my imagination and turn my mind into a castle, which I was the queen of. I had to imagine that in the castle's dungeons there were prison cells with thick iron bars. Then, as queen, I could order the bad thing in my nightmare to be locked away in the dungeons.

I tried this with the dragon Mr Thrasher. I imagined

him being chained up and dragged into the dungeon. Behind the bars, he thrashed his dragon tail around. But he couldn't break them - the bars were too strong. I allowed myself to smile slightly and my nightmare started to fade.

But then the dragon Mr Thrasher turned back to me and his eyes glowed bright red. He opened his dragon mouth and a ball of fire shot straight at me.

I woke up with a scream. It was morning - bright light beamed through the curtains.

I turned over and saw a plate full of food, a glass of water and my medicine on the bedside cabinet. Mum and Dad must have left it there while I was sleeping. That was odd, because usually they wait until I'm awake to give me my breakfast, help me take my medicine and have a chat.

The morning seemed to drag on and there was still no sign of Mum or Dad. Maybe they'd had to go out. But wouldn't they have come in and told me?

My nightmare made me think back to all the bad times at school. I sat my Shakespeare rag toy on my lap and told him about the day I was playing snakes and ladders with my best friend, Elfie. There was a giant snakes and ladders board painted onto the playground and we played using really big counters and a dice the size of a cardboard box.

I rolled the dice and it landed on a six. Just as I went to move my counter, Bartley came up and grabbed hold of it. He started running around the playground with it,

sticking his tongue out at me. I chased after him. Round and round the playground we went and everyone else stopped their games and watched.

Then my shoelace came undone. I tripped and fell straight into a puddle. I wiped the dirt from my face and looked up, and saw Bartley standing there, grinning down. Right then I wished that one of the snakes from the board would come and eat Bartley up.

I stood up and looked around the playground. Everyone else was staring at me, laughing. Even Elfie couldn't stop a giggle.

Maybe none of my classmates like me. Maybe that's why none of them came on my birthday.

I felt tears welling up in my eyes. I hugged Shakespeare and held him out in front of me.

'You're my only friend right now. Look at you, with that smile. You'll always be happy listening to me. I wish I had more friends like you.'

I must have fallen asleep in the afternoon. When I woke I had a fresh plate of food and what looked like two more presents sitting on my bedside cabinet. Had I missed Mum and Dad coming in again?

I leant over and picked up the presents, both wrapped in emerald green paper with no label. I felt them - they were squishy. It took me a while to open them, because my fingers aren't very strong now. As I peeled the paper away from the first one, I recognised a familiar face - a golden mask with a big smile, just like Shakespeare's. In

fact, it was identical to Shakespeare - a rag toy with a long black coat. The second present was exactly the same.

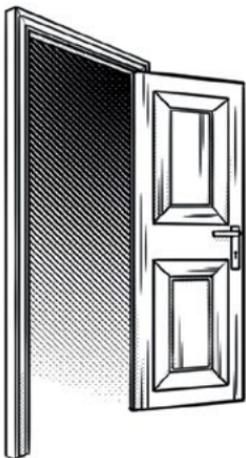
I decided to call them Romeo and Juliet, after characters from one of Shakespeare's plays. I even made them name badges out of paper, so I could tell them apart.

'Now you've got friends,' I told my Shakespeare, sitting them down next to him.

This evening I decided to teach Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet how to play snakes and ladders. The only problem was that my snakes and ladders board was somewhere in the bottom of my wardrobe and I couldn't get out of bed to find it.

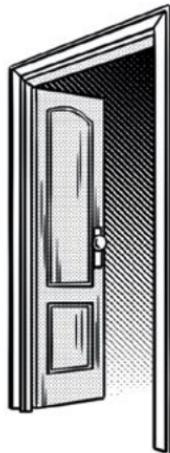
But I had an idea. I used my new sketchpad and pencils to draw the game, and told my rag toys about throwing the dice and moving your counter up ladders and down snakes.

Reading all this back, it feels like I have had a busy day. I still don't know where Mum and Dad have got to, though.



5

Snakes and Ladders



Stretching out in front of Felix was the biggest snakes and ladders board she had ever seen. The windowless room was probably the largest they had been in so far, but the board took up most of the floor. It was lit by spotlights from above and divided into red and yellow squares, numbered from 1 to 100. Scattered around the board were various full-sized ladders and a number of green snakes – painted on, but they looked like they might slither off the board at any moment.

Caspar froze solid. ‘Those snakes almost look real!’

‘Wow!’ said Drift. ‘Look at the size of them. That snake over there must be about five times the size of me.’

He wandered over to the board to take a closer look.

Felix frowned at her friend. ‘You don’t seem that bothered by all of this, Drift. A giant snakes and ladders board, rooms changing around...’

Drift shrugged. ‘It’s just a trick, isn’t it? Some sort of

optical illusion, like at a theme park.’

He stepped onto the snakes and ladders board.

‘That’s interesting,’ Caspar muttered.

‘What is?’ Felix turned to see him studying Amelie’s diary.

‘In the second diary entry, Amelie talks about drawing a snakes and ladders board.’

Caspar showed Felix the diary.

‘She also talked about turning her mind into a castle,’ Caspar explained. ‘That room we found Drift in looked like the inside of a castle, and now we’ve found a snakes and ladders board. That’s a bit of a coincidence.’

‘Amelie’s parents probably built them for her,’ Felix suggested.

‘Maybe, but that doesn’t explain how the rooms are all muddled up.’

‘Like Drift said, it’s an optical illusion.’ Felix wasn’t sure if she really believed this, but what other explanation was there for the strange things that had happened?

‘Er ... guys,’ said Drift. ‘I’m stuck.’

Felix turned to see him standing on square 1 of the board.

‘I can’t move.’

‘Don’t be an idiot, Drift,’ said Caspar.

‘I mean it. Look.’

Drift lifted his leg up and tried to move it onto the floor outside the board. But as soon as his foot reached the edge of the board, it just stopped, as if there were

an invisible wall around him. Drift screwed up his eyes in concentration and kicked outwards again, but it didn't help.

For the first time, a flicker of panic appeared on his face.

'Try moving along the board to square two,' said Felix.

Drift moved his foot, but as soon as it reached the line that divided square 1 from square 2, it shot backwards.

'I think,' Caspar said slowly, 'that you're the counter. You have to play the game.'

'Look – there's the dice.' Felix had noticed it sitting next to the board. It was black with white spots and to scale with the board – almost the size of a sheep.

'If Drift is the counter, maybe we have to roll the dice for him to move,' Caspar suggested.

Felix walked over to the dice. Bending down, she gripped the bottom of the shiny dice with her fingers and levered it up. She didn't get very far before her fingers gave way.

'It's too heavy. I need your help, Caspar.'

Caspar came over and pressed his hands against the side of the dice.

'Can you two hurry up, please? I'm getting bored now,' said Drift.

'Ready?' said Felix. 'One, two, three!'

Felix and Caspar pushed the dice as hard as they could. It swayed forwards and rolled straight along the

floor to the other end of the room.

‘A three,’ Felix announced. ‘Try moving now, Drift.’

Drift tentatively put out his foot – this time it kept going. He stepped over to square 2 and then onto square 3, then 4. When he tried moving onto square 5, though, something stopped him.

‘It’s definitely linked to the numbers on the dice then,’ said Felix.

‘So the only way you can get off the board is to reach square 100 and win the game,’ said Caspar.

Drift rolled his eyes. ‘Great! The last time I played snakes and ladders it took me an hour to get to the end. Hurry up and roll the dice again.’

Felix and Caspar positioned themselves behind it.

‘One, two, three!’ called Felix.

The dice rolled back along the floor.

‘Five,’ Caspar called out.

Drift moved along 5 squares.

The next roll produced a 4 and Drift walked along to square 13.

‘Hey, there’s a ladder on this square. I wonder if it’ll let me climb— Whoa!’

Felix gasped as Drift’s feet were whipped from under him. He fell down onto the ladder and was dragged up it by some invisible force to square 33.

He laughed as he stood back up. ‘I want to do that again!’

Felix looked at the squares that came after 33. ‘Right,

we need to roll anything but a 2 – that snake on 35 would take you all the way back to square 11.’

Felix and Caspar braced themselves and heaved the dice again. It rocketed along and bounced off the wall opposite, eventually coming to land on ... a 2.

Drift jumped over to 35 and stared down at the head of the snake. ‘Does this mean I have to slide back down?’

He jolted backwards. It took Felix a second to realise why – the snake’s head was lifting itself up off the board and moving towards Drift.

‘OK, that’s not cool,’ said Drift.

The snake no longer looked painted. It was 3D and very alive – just like a real, giant snake. Felix tensed as the snake hissed at Drift, its tongue flickering. She watched, wide-eyed, as it started to wrap itself around his left leg. He gasped and tried to move away but it was no good – he was trapped within the square as the snake slithered up him.

Felix looked at Caspar. ‘What can we do?’

‘Roll the dice again!’ he suggested through deep, panicky breaths.

They rolled the dice away from them. It landed on a 1.

‘Try moving one square to your left, Drift,’ said Caspar. ‘Drift?’

But when they turned back to him, Drift was almost completely covered by the snake, its scaly skin glinting in the spotlights. Only his head was now visible and his



eyes were wide with fear. He tried to call out but no sound came.

Felix ran towards the board, but Caspar grabbed hold of her arm. ‘No, Felix, you can’t! You’ll only get trapped in the board too.’

‘We have to help Drift!’

But Drift’s head had disappeared inside the snake’s grip. It was too late. The snake hissed at Felix and Casper, and its head started to glow red. It changed shape, contorting into a mask-like face, with a wide grin – just like the face that had appeared in the smashed window.

Felix looked on, open-mouthed, as the grin widened further. Then, with a thud, the snake collapsed back into the board, once more stretched out from square 35 to square 11, a motionless painting, its head that of a snake again.

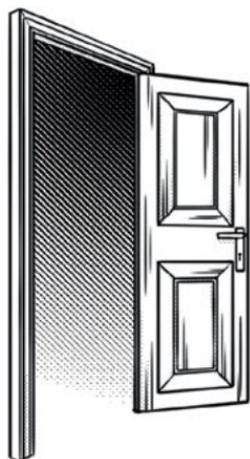
‘Where ... where’s Drift?’ asked Felix.

‘He’s disappeared!’ Caspar mouthed.

If you want to find out what has happened to Drift, and whether Felix and Caspar can escape from Murkhill Mansion, you'll have to read the rest of



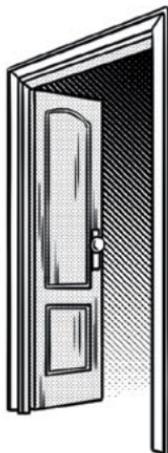
Included on the following pages is an extract from chapter 17. Some information has been removed so that it doesn't give away the story. However, it means you can read the exciting ways Luke describes a dragon!



An extract from

17

Mr Thrasher



Felix went over and peered into the fireplace. It was just as full of soot as the one she had climbed down. She looked up into the chimney and could only see darkness. There was no circle of light – maybe this chimney was blocked at the top by a bird's nest.

Out of nowhere came a ball of light, blinding Felix as it shot straight down the chimney. She blinked, trying to clear her eyes, and felt intense heat on her feet. She looked down and saw that a fire had started in the fireplace. Large orange flames were licking up her legs.

'Arrrgggh!' She jumped backwards.

'What caused that?' asked Caspar.

'Don't know!'

A deep rumbling noise sounded above them. It got louder and louder, making the floor shake under them.

'It sounds like the chimney's about to collapse!'

The rumbling got closer. Felix backed away from

the fireplace, just as white-hot flames shot out of it, reaching far into the room like horizontal lightning. Felix threw herself to the floor just in time as the flames fired over her, straight towards Caspar. He jumped out of the way and the flames hit the wall, leaving a scorching brown mark in the place Caspar's head had been seconds before.

The flames cleared and Felix looked back at the fireplace. It took her a few seconds to realise what she was seeing.

‘A dragon!’

Its red, snake-like head filled the whole fireplace. Teeth the size of daggers protruded from its wide mouth and its eyes opened to reveal slits of pure blackness.

The dragon didn't seem to see Felix and Caspar at first. Still on the floor, Felix held her breath and tried not to make any sound that would attract its attention. But her heart was racing, making a loud thudding noise in her chest.

The dragon's large nostrils sniffed the air slowly, dangerously, as if searching for its prey. It started to climb out of the fireplace. Had it sensed them?

Felix's instinct was to run, but she didn't dare – a creature this size could reach out and gobble her in one bite. She edged her way slowly backwards to where Caspar stood frozen.

The dragon pushed its front legs out of the chimney, its sharp claws cracking the stone floor instantly. Its



long tree-trunk of a neck stretched out over Felix as the dragon lurched towards Caspar. Felix looked up at the creature's scaly belly, and in between the scales a fiery orange glowed, emitting a burning heat.

The dragon's mouth was centimetres away from Caspar, whose eyes were wider than Felix had ever seen them. The dragon tilted its head sideways and sniffed. This wasn't like the snake attacking Drift earlier – it looked like the dragon was about to eat Caspar!

Thinking fast, Felix stretched her arms out and grabbed hold of Caspar's ankles. She pulled at them and he lost his balance and crashed to the floor. He was a dead weight, but Felix managed to heave him under the dragon's belly.

'Are you OK?' she whispered.

Caspar barely nodded. He held a hand up to protect his face from the heat of the dragon's belly.

The dragon flicked its tail angrily around, obviously wondering where its prey had disappeared to. As the tail hit the walls it sent stone shooting everywhere and dust flew into their faces.

'Where has this dragon come from?' mouthed Felix.

'It must be Mr Thrasher.'

'Mr Thrasher?'

'From Amelie's nightmares. She imagined her head teacher turning into a dragon and tried to lock him away in her mind castle.'

The dragon opened up its wings now, blasting air

about as they filled the entire room, like the out-of-control wings of an aeroplane. Felix felt her skin burning as the dragon swung its whole body around, sending sparks of fire flying everywhere. She rolled sideways, just avoiding a claw the size of her arm as the dragon stepped over her.

The rumbling sound started again, but now it was directly above Felix and Caspar – it came from the dragon’s belly. The cracks in the belly glowed orange, then red, then white. Sweat poured down Felix’s face in the unbearable heat.

The glow of fire travelled up the dragon, along its neck and shot out of its mouth with an ear-splitting shriek. Flames soared through the room, circling around the dragon as it flicked its tail and flapped its wings. The temperature got even hotter.

‘We’re going to be eaten, aren’t we?’ cried Caspar, no longer whispering.

‘What did Amelie say Mr Thrasher got angry with her about?’ asked Felix, an idea forming in her mind.

‘He ... he thought she was cheating in a test.’

‘Right, give me the diary.’

Felix took it from Caspar’s shaking hand. She turned to the back, found an empty page and ripped it out of the diary.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Caspar.

‘You’ll see.’

Felix rolled out from under the dragon and stood up

next to its tail. Careful not to touch the green spikes, she yanked on the tail and the dragon's neck whipped round. She was suddenly face to face with the beast. It bared its razor-sharp teeth at her – one bite would cut her in half – but she tried to keep her cool.

‘Oi, Mr Thrasher, look! I’ve been cheating on my test.’

She held up the piece of paper. The dragon sniffed at it, smoke billowing out of its nostrils. It blinked. Felix knew if this didn’t work, she was toast.

She flinched as the dragon let out a shattering wail, its mouth open wide, revealing rows of vicious teeth and a forked tongue. She had definitely made it angry. It raised its head up, but Felix was already running along the side of the room.

She reached the prison cell Caspar had been in.

‘Mr Thrasher, over here!’

The dragon turned, the swish of its tail on the wall sending several large bits of stone clanging into the bars of the cell. It stomped over to Felix.

She screwed the piece of paper up and chucked it inside the cell. Then she threw herself out of the way as the dragon charged after the paper like a dog chasing a stick. It squeezed its way into the prison cell, wings clattering against the bars.

‘Quick, Caspar, help me close the door!’

Caspar ran over and together they swung the thick iron door of the prison cell shut. Felix put the key in the

lock and took a deep breath in relief as she turned it.

The dragon spat a ball of fire in their direction but the fire hit the iron door and petered out harmlessly.

‘Let’s get out of here before anything else tries to stop us!’