



Escape From

**Charlesington
Manor**

By Harry Lee

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Prologue

23rd of October, 1919. The passing bells rung, beckoning over the small town. It was in a wreck, the engines of busses groaned, solitude was spreading rapidly around the park. Only a few people would go on holiday there- one of those being Anna. She was a young lady with dark brown locks stroking her pale white neck. Her hair was in plaits and she was sitting down in an uncomfortable dress her mother had sewn. The park bench was cold and its ebony black paint was peeling off slowly, softly, sadly.

The ducks from the pond were long gone. Mostly shot for food since the whole town was running low on money and supplies. Tiredly, Anna ate her sandwich and watched pigeons fly by and land near to her bench. Anna had been staying in one of her father's houses for the past week and she had loved it. Anna didn't really get on with people so some peace and quiet was like paradise for her. Of course, coming from a rich family, Anna had lots of luxuries including: living in a mansion with many maids and servants, having one of the largest boats in England named after her, a five acre garden and thirteen dogs.

However despite all of those Anna never felt happy. Some would call her spoilt and some would call her a brat but despite what they said she never accepted the

life she was born with. Her parents never raised her- her mother was a secretary and her father was a well-known politician. When her father died all of his possessions and his whole business was given to Anna's younger brother. For some reason Anna didn't care, she just wanted to travel around the world peacefully as a normal person. Maybe no normal person would sit down in an abandoned park eating a cheese sandwich and feeding the crusts to one-legged pigeons but Anna felt normal.

The autumn leaves brushed against her feet felt like when Anna stroked every single one of her thirteen dogs. The clouds were grey and most leaves had already fallen off the trees. The lake was clear and would be lovely on a sunny day, unfortunately this wasn't a sunny day. The café had closed during the world war and didn't open back up. The wooden planks on the doors weren't needed since the whole place was empty. The windows were steamed up from the damp and the drawn curtains were ripped.

Anna fed her last crust to the pigeon and then rested on the bench. It was then when a tall figure emerged out of the mist. He was a handsome man with his hair combed to one side- the right. His eyes were blue and his hair was blonde. He reminded Anna of her father, except he was younger and seemed a lot poorer. Anna didn't know if his trousers had been ripped or it was just a

fashion trend. Despite all of that Anna loved him. When they say love at first sight they mean this. He was tall and skinny and his eyes twinkled like stars in the night sky. He sat down on the bench, next to Anna. He didn't say anything. Anna knew if she didn't speak, he would soon leave but she didn't know what to say. He had walked into a foggy park and sat next to her-she loved that.

Anna took a deep breath and spoke. "Hello," her voice was clear but not high. "My name's Anna, it's a lovely day to be at the park isn't it?" Anna sighed. She had messed up, it clearly wasn't a lovely day- that was the reason she had come. Now her only chance of having a husband was ruined. Like the pigeon with one leg, Anna was nothing, or so she thought.

"Nice to meet you Anna and yes it's a lovely day to be at the park," he'd actually listened! Anna was overjoyed but she managed to keep it in. She just had to go slowly and try not to mess anything else up.

"Are you here on holiday, umm?" she tried to remember what his name was but it was no use. Did he even say it? Anna calmed down, he probably didn't say it.

"You can call me John," he spoke softly and Anna relaxed.

“Would you like a sandwich John?” Anna asked beginning to pull it out of her bag.

“No thanks, I think the pigeon wants it,” John smiled. Caring, he was the perfect match. All Anna had to do now was ask him out, easy-not. Anna couldn’t bring herself to it, maybe she should just let him ask. That was what John was thinking. *Bring it together Anna* she said to herself, *you’ve got this*. It was simple, all she had to do was tell him that he could come to her father’s house and then she would carry on talking to him there.

“John, you may have heard of my father’s company, well my brother’s now. I’m staying in one of his houses and I thought you might want to stay over tonight,” Anna asked hopefully.

“Cool, I’ll go and pack my things- there’s more than one bed right?” John wondered uncomfortably.

“Of course, I’ll see you later. Here’s the address,” Anna handed him a piece of paper and waved as he walked off. Now she only had two things to do: tidy the house and buy a bed before John arrived.

It was seven-thirty and John was meant to be there by quarter past. If you said Anna was panicking that would be an under-statement. Biting her fingernails she glanced out of the misty window. A man holding an assortment of flowers was frantically running in the

rain. John knocked on the newly painted door and closed his umbrella.

Anna opened it, smiling as she handed him a towel. They sat down by the fire and John started to warm up. He put his suitcase on the floor and hung his coat up on the rack.

“Lovely place,” he smiled admiring the ceiling’s architecture. “And to think I thought you only had one bed in here!” Anna turned pale as she faked a laugh. She could tell John was trying to start a conversation and was clearly struggling so she thought she’d give it a go. “So, what do you do for a living?” Anna held her hands out to the fire.

“I don’t actually have a job, I prefer to explore.” John said casually like he’d answered that question before.

“No way, me too!” Anna exclaimed excitedly. “But eventually my father’s money is going to run out and I’ll have to get a real job,” Anna sighed. John picked up his suitcase.

“Can I take this upstairs?” John smiled at a confused looking Anna.

“You do know this is a bungalow?” Anna questioned light-heartedly.

“Of course, there are rooms, though?” John asked.

“Yes, follow me,” Anna led John to the room with the brand new bed. “I hope this will do,”

“Anna, my house only has one room- this massive one will definitely do me for one night!” Anna laughed as John organised his clothes on the bed. And they chatted for a while. Small talk at first like: what’s your favourite ice cream flavour (they both chose strawberry) soon became John asking her out on a date.

8 o’clock evolved into 10 o’clock and they were still going on. “So, Anna, you’re so rich and could make a lot more money. Why did you decide to travel the world?” It was the question Anna didn’t want to be asked. She didn’t normally get emotional but when she told the story- she’d always cry. However she knew John would understand based on the caring and loving gentleman he’d been.

“I was seventeen, thirteen years ago, and I was in my parents’ house. Now my father was a very rich man but that meant he also was wanted by many criminals. I was sleeping in bed when they came, five of them. They got through the door when our dog found them. They shot him but missed. The bullet went flying past the dog and hit the wall. In anger, they threw a wooden plank into the fire pit causing it to burn uncontrollably. At the first smell of fire, my younger brother and I climbed out of the window and down the ladder. Our mother followed us but not our father. He wanted to save the dog. Five

minutes later the police and fire brigade arrived and our dog came running out of the house. But not our father." Anna wiped a tear from her eye and paused. "I was so traumatised by the experience that I moved out. I travelled to here and luckily I met you."

John gave Anna a warm hug. "Look Anna, not all people are like that, in fact the majority aren't. Remember to never hate people because you are one of them" John sniffled "And so am I," Walking slowly, John went to his room and put on his fleece pyjamas. Anna wept sadly in memory of her late father. She got in her bed and looked out of the window. It was black outside but for the faint glow of the street light. In her own darkness she too had a streetlight- she had met John.

You may have predicted what would happen next but I should summarise for those of you who didn't. John and Anna really enjoyed that night and he even stayed for another. After a month Anna had decided to return home to England and John went with her. He proposed one evening and before they knew it they were married. A few years later they had a baby boy and if we skip 11 years that brings us up to the first chapter of this story.

Chapter 1: Robert

It was August the 31st 1939. That may seem like a strange first sentence but it's a fact. Robert lived in south London in a small house, which probably wouldn't class as a house since it only had one room. He lived with his father because his mother died when he was only young. As you probably figured out August the 31st was the day before World War 2 started so the whole city, if not country, was in distress. People were panic buying food and soon the shops' shelves were deserted.

Robert, on the other hand, wasn't too worried. He knew his father wouldn't go out to war and would probably end up still selling milk throughout the war. However Robert was wrong. As he walked back from the park on the 31st Robert could tell something was wrong. Robert's father was in the front window of the house distinctively weeping whilst holding a letter written in a thick black ink- clearly nothing the two could ever afford.

Robert hung his coat up and thoughtfully asked his father: "What is it?"

"It's nothing, son don't worry."

"What is it?" Robert began to get angry.

“It’s fine,” Robert’s father spoke firmly. Robert snatched the letter from the table addressed to the ‘master of the house’. It read:

To the master of the house,

You have been chosen to represent your country and fight in the war. Although you are a milkman we are running low on soldiers and think you will be perfect for the job – considering your previous experience in the army. As you will have known, despite your young age, England easily won the first war and we can assure you we will win again. The risk of dying is very rare considering the modernised technology of our planes and guns. We will be grateful of your service and will welcome you home with wide arms.

We understand that you have a young son.

Robert brought the letter closer to his face since it finally mentioned what would happen to him.

Do not worry, we have taken care of that too. Your son, with many other children, will be sent on a train to a countryside house where he will be safe. A lovely family has offered to give him a home for however long the war will last. The children are his age and I’m sure they will get along very well.

The train will arrive on the 1st of September and if this letter arrives too late then there is a train on the 5th. We

hope you are ready considering how much training you have had in previous years. If you have any queries or concerns please feel free to write back.

Robert snorted. The only thing they could write a letter with would be cigarette ashes.

Sincerely the London city council.

Robert couldn't believe it. His father would be going to war and he would be living on some animal farm with about thirteen dogs! He soon understood why his father was worried; *he* was worried. What if his father didn't come back? Would he grow up working with dirty animals? Robert took a deep breath, he had lived in a one room house for eleven years- perhaps this farm could be an improvement. After all, like the letter said: the risk of dying is very rare. Robert handed the letter back to his father. "I believe in you Father," they hugged and Robert sat down, enjoying the last few hours of his tiny house.

Saturday the 1st of September

Robert had never been to a train station- unless selling old newspapers counts- but he knew this one was special. The buzz of businessmen cramming onto trains like a sack of potatoes. The extremely large clock hanging over the wall, the little hand pointing to the

seven. However Robert was mostly fascinated by the steam trains, noisy yet beautiful. He had never known anything like it, and it hadn't cost the family anything. His father had boarded the train with him to Shropshire station, waved goodbye and then took the train back to London. The council had supplied him with a suit, a warm coat and a note tied around his neck- with string-saying:

Robert James Smith

It was seven fifteen and the family were set to arrive at seven thirty. Other children were coming off the train waiting for their families too. Some were Robert's age and some were younger. Robert noticed them sit down for a while and their new families arrive in their posh, velvet clothes. Robert saw the bench was free and took a seat. After gazing at the ceiling for a while another boy, with dark skin who looked the same age as Robert, sat down next to him.

The boy smiled and his eyes wandered around the station. Robert tilted his head as he tried to read the other boy's name tag: *Billy Jones*. "So, you like sport?" Billy asked, his attention span was short but his hair was shorter.

"Yes, I always play football," Robert replied, he had to admit he wasn't very good at it but he still played.

"I do too! Are you going to a house somewhere around here?" Billy questioned Robert.

"Yeah, they should be here in 10 minutes." Robert told him looking at the giant clock. "Are you?"

"Yeah," Billy looked a bit disappointed "Mine live at a farm, I guess that's still better than my flat in Birmingham!" They both laughed and continued staring at the brick wall. 10 minutes passed. The two had chatted about their lives, parents and hobbies. Billy was eleven, lived in Birmingham, his mother was a cleaner, father a bus driver and his favourite hobby was playing football.

Eventually a skinny woman with fair hair going down to her shoulders came out of the carriage. She wore a long black dress with a white sleeves and a collar the colour of her skin- pale. Her eyes were as blue as the Thames (when it was clean) and her red lipstick looked cheap. Spots of soot were slowly covering her dress and her hair had a feather stuck in it.

"Sorry I'm late," her voice was angelic but she was panting. "I'm Martha, you must be Robert Smith." She reached out to shake Robert's hand but he avoided it considering the amount of dust. "Oh, I see. Well we'd better get going; the family are waiting for you." She smiled and they both got onto the train.

“Bye Billy!” Robert waved out of the window, stained with drawings of smiley-faces. The mechanism of the door kicked in as it closed in. Rob followed Martha to their seat which had the numbers thirteen and fourteen. Thirteen, a very unlucky number. Rob thought for a while, if the family were farmers then a black dress wouldn’t really be the best thing to wear. Although, why were Martha’s hands so dirty? Martha saw Roberts puzzled face and asked him a question: “Are you ok Robert?” her face seemed sympathetic.

“I’m fine thanks,” he answered.

“Would you like a snack?” Martha reached into a leather handbag and got out a selection of sweets.

“Wow!” Robert open his mouth in awe as he looked down at the sweets. He started opening the first package when the train came to a halt.

“That’s our stop!” Martha exclaimed. They walked out of the train and into a Duesenberg. A driver in a tuxedo was waiting in there and he started to drive once they got in. Suddenly Robert had begun to think the family were farmers.

The journey was exiting and comfy. Martha and Robert sat in the back of the car whilst it drove down the main road in the countryside. It was a warm drive and after a couple of minutes Robert took his coat off. Martha tried

to start a conversation but Robert was astonished by the view.

“So Robert, how is life in the big city? Must be very exciting to live in somewhere so important with so many people.”

“Yeah, I like it and all but it’s never peaceful. Nice car by the way!”

“I’m glad you like it, we don’t really go in it that often so don’t be surprised if it breaks down!”

They both laughed and then continued to ignore each other (in a friendly, fascinated by the view, way). After driving for 5 minutes they arrived at a metallic gate with a posh sign outside. “Robert,” Martha grinned, as if she had just spotted a freshly baked doughnut, “Welcome to Charlesington Manor!” The gates slowly opened. They were in.

Chapter 2: Inside the manor

A manor defines as a large country house with lands- normally Tudor. To say that the family lived an extremely spoilt lifestyle would be an understatement. Hedges, trimmed into artistic shapes, made a path leading straight to the front door. The floor was cobbled and a colossal building towered above the car.

It was a misty day and that hadn't changed when they arrived in Shropshire. Grey clouds were the only thing that reminded Robert that he was still in England. Beyond the hedges was a green landscape, with a view which could have just been picked out of a painting. No cars, houses or even people were nearby and the only detail on the horizon was the infinite grass reaching out to the city, but at the same time hiding away.

The walls of the house were made of stone and the windows were rounded at the peak. As the car began to move forward, Robert's mouth opened wider. In the front of the house a statue of a rich-looking man was balanced on a large stone which was surrounded by a pond. The car stopped and the chauffeur got out. As he opened the door Robert took a look at the house and his eyes opened almost as widely as his mouth.

Was it a dream? Would he wake up in his own house and find out that none of this ever happened? He felt a

something hit his foot and he began to fall quickly into the water. He was pretty sure that it wasn't a dream.

The last ten minutes had been a bit of a blur to Robert but he really wanted to forget it. He remembered walking through the beautifully designed doorway and being greeted by a tall man with blue eyes. He had seen Martha too and she brought him a towel and wrapped it around him as he sat down on a chair. The velvet on the chair was much softer than the one on the train.

The interior of the house was just as impressive as the exterior with chandeliers, a long, wooden dining table and large picture of the same man as the statue. Robert guessed he was the owner. Three children lived at the house too. The oldest was a boy called George, his hair was brown and he wore a fancy suit- he was finding the whole situation hilarious. The second oldest was Alice, George's twin sister, she was a pretty girl and three minutes younger than George. She seemed unsettled and her dress looked too tight for her.

The youngest was only a baby, Betty, who suffered with lupus. So far Robert hadn't seen her and he only heard the adults talking about her. George was standing with his arms crossed and looking down at Robert. "I'm George, my room is upstairs down the corridor and on the left- don't go in it!" George sounded comforting at first but soon became quite stern.

“Hi, my name is Robert but you can call me Rob!”
Robert reached out to shake George’s hand and he grudgingly shook it before wiping his hand with a checked handkerchief. Robert began to regret trying to make friends with him.

Next Alice walked over, seeming happier than her (slightly) older twin. She went to shake Robert’s hand and he shook hers too. He hands were smooth and her hair was in plaits. He had no idea how Alice and George could be related- their personalities were so different. “Are you ok?” she asked.

“Yes thanks, just a little accident”

“I thought you fell into the water,” she looked confused.

“I did, I was just so amazed by your house.”

“I guess it is pretty fancy, although I’ve never been to another one”

“Really?”

“Yeah, my parents are pretty over protective. I don’t know why we need a chauffeur when we don’t ever go anywhere!” Alice smiled. She turned around and started to walk up the stairs. After a few steps she turned back around. “Sorry I have to go and look after Betty,”

“I hope she’s ok,”

“Of course, we’re sure she’ll be fine. She’s just a bit ill,” Alice carried on walking up the stairs and Robert relaxed on his chair. The towel was still wet but he wasn’t.

With nothing to do he walked to the kitchen. The tiles on the floor were black and white. An envelope addressed to Mrs Charlesington rested on top of the cupboard. In the corner Martha was standing on a stool reaching for a pan. “Hello Martha,” Robert waved. Martha almost slipped off her stool, shocked by Robert.

“Oh, hello Robert,”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you!” Robert exclaimed.

“Oh it’s fine,” Martha climbed down with the pan in her hands. She made space on the cabinet knocking the envelope along with some other pieces of paper. Robert reached down to pick them up and Martha thanked him.

“So when do I meet the others?” Robert asked

“The others?” Martha wondered

“You know, the adults”

“Ah yes, they are very busy with work right now but they will have dinner with all of the family at five thirty” Martha smiled and opened the cupboard.

“What are you making?” Robert asked peering over Martha’s shoulder. The tins in the cupboard were all

polished and fresh. Rob wondered where they got them from.

“My speciality: a chicken casserole and for dessert a cheesecake!” Martha smiled.

“Yummy, anyway I’ll let you get cooking!” Robert walked out of the kitchen and took a tour around the house. First he went to the dining room which was right next to the kitchen. It was decorated nicely with the long table and three candles on it. A grandfather clock was ticking in the far corner and a bowl of fruit was on the cabinet. Next, he walked up the long staircase, which seemed to take forever.

At the top he paused. On his left was a hallway and the first room and a sign saying: *GEORGE’S ROOM- DON’T SAY I DIDN’T WARN YOU!* Robert walked past it. There was a bathroom, a master bedroom, a nursery and another bedroom- presumably Alice’s. There also was an office with a name Mr Charlesington printed on it. Robert was about to gently knock on her door when he heard a loud sound coming from downstairs. He ran down to see what all the noise was about.

The sound was coming from a room he hadn’t yet been to- the library. It was most definitely the most intriguing room in the house. The bookshelves reached up four times Robert’s height and the room was big enough to play a professional game of football. There were

portable ladders to reach the higher books and leather sofas with a coffee table in the centre of the library.

As Rob ran in he noticed a thin bookcase had fallen over. Standing by it was a stubborn woman, slim with grey hair. Robert guessed she was Mrs Charlesington. She looked frightened but unharmed. "Hello?" Robert asked the woman, who was looking a lot like a statue.

"Who are you?" her voice was stern and she seemed very arrogant.

"I'm Robert"

"Robert? I don't know a Robert! Martha there is a random boy in our house!" Mrs Charlesington seemed very shocked and confused.

"I'm staying with you, you know whilst the war is on,"

"Oh yes, of course!" she realised "My apologies. False alarm Martha, false alarm!" Robert was beginning to like the woman; although she seemed cold she was very entertaining. She felt like a person who hadn't had much experience with people. "Well, I've got to go now." She picked up her book and left without helping Robert lift up the bookcase.

It had fallen onto the rug and seemed heavy. It was wooden and filled with very thick novels. Rob thought he spotted Oliver Twist and a few other Charles Dickens stories. Pushing his foot against the coffee table, Robert

managed to lift it up but a book fell out- an English dictionary. Perhaps he would come back later to find out what a casserole is. Robert cautiously placed it into the shelf and then walked back out of the room.

The clock ticked four o'clock. The sweet scent of the casserole drifted throughout the manor. A cheesy odour also wafted around. Alice was walking down the stairs and her hair was messed up. She had bags beneath her eyes and was holding a half bitten baby bottle.

"Are you ok?" Robert asked now noticing the milk stains on her dress.

"Have you met the baby- Betty?" she was looking more tired than before.

"No." Robert wondered why she was asking him.

"You don't want to!" Alice brushed off some milk. As she did Mrs Charlesington walked past.

"Alice!" she looked horrified "please tell me you aren't wearing that for dinner!"

"No mother, I'll get changed now," Robert noticed the way she acted around her mum, almost as if she was scared of her.

"And you, Robert, it wouldn't hurt you to put something nice on." Robert looked down at the suit the council had given him and for once he agreed with Mrs

Charlesington. “There’s a spare suit in the guest room which you can put on.”

This was the first time Robert had been in the guest room and he loved it. It had an ensuite which came with three white towels on a shiny towel rack. The floor of it was tiled and, unlike anything Robert was used to, there were no dirty areas in the gaps between them. A light-grey bath robe hung on the door.

The bed was king-sized and the sheets were already tucked in. There were four pillows and he could tell that he would have a comfortable sleep that night. The window showed a view of the front of the manor. Looking down, he saw the pond he fell in, the hedges he was fascinated by and the mysterious statue of a man who used to own the house.

There was a clock hanging in the centre of the back wall and Rob looked at the time. Four fifteen- he could have a short nap before dinner. He lay back into his bed and closed his eyes, feeling the luxury of the four pillows he was resting his head on.

Chapter 3: Dinner

When you are sleeping two hours go very quickly. Robert woke up at six-fifteen to the call of Martha who had set out dinner. His nap was a well needed one; he hadn't slept the night before and it had been a busy day. When he was asleep he felt normal for once: his father was still at home, no war was on and he was still sleeping in his normal bed (the sofa).

Robert had to admit that he was worried. If his father didn't make it back from the war then he might have to stay with the Charlesingtons. Although he liked Martha and Alice, the rest of the family didn't seem to like him and he felt the same. He still hadn't met Mr Charlesington and Betty but he doubted they would change his mind.

As Robert glanced out of the window he realised it was much darker. He wasn't surprised. He had slept in his clothes (the ones Mrs Charlesington didn't like) but had completely forgotten to change. The window was slightly open which must have been why there was a draught, but the bed was cosy enough to warm him up.

His eyes adjusted to the light; he had been asleep for a while but he hadn't blown out the candles as he thought they might not have enough matches. He did remember closing his door so it was probably Martha who'd opened it when she woke him up. Stretching,

Robert finally climbed out of his bed. He yawned and headed for the arrangement of clothes, hanging on the chair.

There was a brown tie and the suit was a chalk grey, almost reminding him of the pavements in London. The suit must have cost more than his house and the buttons, sewn on to the pockets, looked brand new. The suit was probably two months old, certainly no older.

Even the richest children back at home wouldn't wear anything as nice as this suit. He cherished the moment of putting on something fresh- an experience he hadn't had for many months. He guessed the rest of the family were waiting for him so he got dressed quickly and went downstairs.

The first thing he noticed was how the family were dressed. Alice had changed out of her milk-stained clothes. There were sixteen white buttons hanging down the centre of her dress. It was fabric and a chocolate brown. The sleeves were short and white on the ends. Alice wore it well.

The others were changed too- Mrs Charlesington in a long white dress with matching gloves reaching her elbows. Betty had been brought down too, she was in a flowery pink dress and her hair was done neatly for the occasion; two tiny pigtails. She looked similar to her

older sister: the eyes and hair were almost identical except Betty's hair was much shorter.

George was looking in horror noticing that he and Robert were wearing the same suit. Had it been anyone else, Robert might have found it funny but he found it annoying how George kept giving him evil stares. And Mr Charlesington was there too. He had a moustache and seemed very cheery. His eyes suited his smile: a peaceful and friendly blue. His hair was combed to one side- the right.

There was a spare seat in between Alice and George and Robert sat down. Opposite him was Mr and Mrs Charlesington, the baby was sitting on the end of the table. Robert noticed somebody was missing: "Where's Martha?" he asked looking around the room.

"She's cooking," George answered, rolling his eyes.

"So, she'll join in after she's finished?" Robert wondered aloud.

"No, our servants don't eat dinner with us." Mrs Charlesington replied this time, presumably to shut Robert up. He was disappointed since he really liked Martha but, on reflection he wasn't surprised that a rich family like the Charlesingtons wouldn't want some poor servants interacting around with them.

Finally, Mr Charlesington spoke: "So, you live in London. How is it there Robert?"

"Busy, there are so many people, so many cars and so many buildings. I guess it's pretty much the opposite around here!"

"Yes that's right, nothing other than an occasional car passes here. Peace and quiet can be rather beautiful," Mr Charlesington explained light-heartedly.

"Do you ever miss, well, people?" Robert asked hoping they weren't a family who didn't really like other human beings.

"I guess we do, I mean the children could have so many friends if they went to school!" Mr Charlesington seemed sympathetic.

"Maybe not George" Robert muttered and Alice giggled.

"We prefer that Mrs Charlesington teaches them here. But this house was made in the countryside, it needs to stay in the countryside!" Mr Charlesington smiled- Robert really liked him. At that moment Martha walked in from the kitchen holding a few trays with steam blowing out of them. Robert's stomach rumbled and he took a breath, smelling the casserole.

The food looked delicious and Robert thought that if Martha wasn't a maid she would make a great chef! It was an achievement that she hadn't got any splashes on

her dress. A normal maid's dress: a long black one with a white apron but this one was clean. Robert got the first serving since he was the guest and George, once again, looked jealous.

"Thank you Martha, this looks scrumptious!" Alice exclaimed whilst tucking her napkin into her dress. It was wise, Mrs Charlesington would not have liked to see that dress get dirty. "Mama, papa, may we start?"

"Yes dear," Mrs Charlesington said, Robert could tell she really wanted to tuck in too. Robert wasn't familiar with how to use a knife and fork. At home he would have a battered spoon and he had to cope with that. In his right hand he picked up his fork and George sighed- he then swapped hands. He stuck his knife into his beef and tried to eat it with his fork. It didn't work.

George laughed a lot but Alice helped. She taught him how to use it and, within no time, he was an expert. The meat was still warm so he blew on it, unaware that he was going to sneeze at the same time. Despite the eating failures, Robert loved the food and when Martha came back he asked for second helpings.

"So, do you like the house?" Mrs Charlesington asked trying to ignore the fact that Rob had gravy dripping from his mouth onto his clothes.

"I love it, it's really nice!" Robert said with his mouth half-full. Mrs Charlesington frowned as the gravy finally

reached the (once clean) clothes. “Who’s that man on the painting, and the statue?”

“That’s my father,” Mrs Charlesington said “Charlie Charlesington, he used to own this house before he died.” It was the first time Robert had seen Mrs Charlesington had shown any emotion.

“I’m sorry. So you kept your name? Didn’t you take Mr Charlesington’s?” Robert was quite puzzled.

“This isn’t the 19th century Robert!” Mr Charlesington laughed. “Oh, and you can call me John,” he grinned. The sky was now pitch black and a moon was in the view of the window. The long, red curtains had a gap between them and from it you could see the countryside landscape.

An unfamiliar car pulled up on the driveway. A man got out and walked to the front door. For a moment Robert got scared, a strange man in a car coming to a house belonging to a rich family at night. Maybe he was here to rob it! Martha opened the door: “Mr Charlesington, somebody is here to see you,” she called in. Robert was shivering. John looked at his watch.

“Is it that time already? I’m sorry Robert, Anna, children I’ve got a work meeting with Richard. It’s been lovely having dinner with you Robert, I’ll hope to have a talk tomorrow!” Mr Charlesington walked upstairs with his guest to have a conversation in the office.

It was a shame John didn't stay for pudding because the cheesecake was the highlight of the dinner. There was a balance between not too much cheese and not too much of the biscuit base. Various fruits like blackberries and strawberries were on the top of the cheese to add some flavour. Since Mrs Charlesington was the only adult she invited Martha to have a slice of cake and that put George in a bad mood- he hated the lower class. Robert was sure that the taste of cheese would stay in his mouth all night.

George was the only one left to finish the cakes and Martha had already started cleaning up. Mrs Charlesington was putting Betty to sleep upstairs so Alice suggested they played cards. Robert was keen and, since George had nothing to do, he too joined in. "Pontoon?" Alice asked and the boys both nodded. Alice started dealing. Robert picked up his cards: six of hearts and seven of spades. George was looking very confident but Robert guessed it was all for show.

"Stick or twist?" Alice was holding the rest of the cards in her hand.

"Twist please," Robert said. A five, which gave him eighteen. Should he risk it? The chances were ten to three. He would go bust if he got a four or over.

"Stick or twist?" Robert was still working out what to do. Maybe he should go for it, it was just a game after

all. Although maybe he should stick, seeing George's face if he lost would be as bad as the accident with the pond earlier that day.

"I'll stick," was it the right decision? George's turn was next, maybe he would go bust- or go under eighteen. Robert's fingers were crossed even though he didn't believe it would help.

"Stick or twist?" Alice was becoming impatient.

"I'll stick." Oh no. Maybe it he wasn't bluffing after all. What if George actually did have twenty-one! Robert frowned. He should have gone for it. Taken the risk. All he could hope was that Alice would also have twenty-one. Alice dealt herself- without cheating- and it was time for them to all turn their cards over.

Please say George lost, please say George lost was all that filled Robert's head. He did not want George to become any more of a boaster. Alice turned over her cards: a seven, eight and five. Twenty. That would do, now Robert had to have a nineteen or twenty. He highly doubted it. George turned over his cards, one at a time intending to build suspense but simultaneously building hatred.

The first card: a queen, worth ten. If he had an ace he would have twenty-one. The second card: a king, also worth ten. George jumped up, "I won!" he shouted, joyfully sticking his tongue out at Alice.

“You realise Alice also got twenty, George.” Robert told him, intentionally ruining the moment.

“Yes, but I got twenty-one!” George smiled and carried on jumping. Robert looked confused but Alice seemed like she had experience with this kind of thing.

“No, you have twenty. A king and a queen equal twenty,” Alice reminded him. George stopped, looked down at his cards and whispered:

“Oh.” He then took a breath and spoke normally. “Well since it’s a draw, you and I must play another round.” He chuckled “I’ll deal!” Robert wasn’t going to let that happen.

“It’s ok, I can deal,” he smiled and so did Alice. George, however, was not smiling. Robert picked up the cards. First he shuffled them then he dealt, two cards each. They sat opposite to each other so they (George) couldn’t cheat. “George, you can go first,” Robert tried to smile but it was pretty much impossible seeing his evil grin. “Would you like to stick, or would you like to twist?”

George looked at his cards: “I’ll twist.” Robert handed over another card. In fairness to Robert, he didn’t know that it was a queen. “Nooo!” George shouted. “I hate this stupid game! You two did this on purpose.” George stormed off and up to his room. Robert smiled at Alice and they both continued to play cards in peace.

Chapter 4- Finding Betty

The train passed and people got off. It was time for Robert to go. Martha picked up his bags and passed them to him then headed for the car to drive back to the manor. Robert took the step to go onto the train but- it went. Before he could get on.

Now he was stuck in a train station. Perhaps he could run back to the manor. It might take him a few hours. But what would he say when he got there? He had just left and they wanted him to leave. Maybe sorry? Would a simple apology work this time? He doubted it.

Maybe he could wait for the next train, it shouldn't be that long. And wherever it went, it would still be closer to home than Charlesington Manor. Did he even want to go home? Why had he left in the first place?

Another train zoomed past, but didn't stop. Somebody was on it- his father! But he was holding a baby in his hands. Robert didn't remember having a brother, or was it a girl? Still he was an only child. Then he recognised her from the dinner: Betty. Why was she on the train with Robert's father?

Robert tried to run. Maybe he could catch up with the train and it would stop for him. Panting. Running. Could he make it? He leapt forward like a gazelle in a desert.

The window was open. Maybe, just maybe he could reach it. This was the time- he jumped.

Yes! He got it. "Excuse me driver. Could you stop the train please?" he shouted but over the engine's noise the driver couldn't hear. He would have to climb in himself. He grunted as he pulled himself up and into the train. The driver was shocked and almost fainted. He had to get to his father.

He was running through the train frantically, then he saw them. He rushed over to the seat where they were. Well, where they used to be. Nobody was there. Had he just imagined it?

Robert woke up with a start.

His quilt had travelled from over him to over the floor during Rob's unsettling dream. It was an odd one. He guessed it had come from feelings of never seeing his father and worries for some of the Charlesington family. He looked at the time on the clock behind him. He'd really slept in.

He wondered how good the breakfast was at Charlesington Manor. Back home in London his father made the softest, best scrambled eggs. It was the only thing Robert's father was good at cooking! He was sure Martha would make something nice but nothing could compete with the texture of those scrambled eggs.

Robert climbed out of bed and neatly tucked in his sheets. He then went to the closet. There were a wide selection of clothes from suits to woollen jumpers or shorts and vests. Robert opened the curtains. The light of the sun nearly blinded him. He would probably take the shorts and vest.

Martha was in the kitchen cooking. “Morning Robert, you’ve slept in!” she smiled and continued making breakfast. “Must have been that late night last night!” Robert wondered around, unsure of what to do. “Why don’t you go out the front? The others are playing volleyball and I’m sure they’d be willing to let you join in!”

“How can they be playing volleyball in a garden?” Robert asked curiously. He knew about the game but it wasn’t something he’d had chance to play at home.

“They got a net last Christmas so we’ve hung it between two hedges!” she laughed. Robert had missed that when they had driven through the driveway.

“Well I’ll see you later then,” Robert waved and walked out of the front door. A ball was flung at his face, fortunately it was soft. George giggled.

“Oops,” he said which caused Alice to roll her eyes. Robert picked up the ball and walked over to the siblings. He went on Alice’s side of the net and threw

her the ball. Despite the appalling throw, she managed to catch it. Robert assumed she was already winning.

The game had simple rules: hit the ball over the net and don't let it touch the ground. George started. He hit it extremely high and it only just landed in Alice and Robert's side of the net. Robert ran to it but missed it by an inch. Luckily Alice was there and hit the ball to George who had had lost concentration of the game, assuming he would win. He missed it. Volleyball was fun.

They continued to play for around half an hour until they began to get hungry. It was very warm anyway so it was a relief to go inside for a while out of the sun. They sat down on the same table where they had eaten dinner the night before. This time it was only the three of them. Martha carried in four plates.

"One for Robert," she placed Robert's plate. "One for Alice," she also put Alice's plate on the table mat "One for George" who seemed annoyed he didn't get his first. "And one for Betty," she put a plate down on Betty's seat. "Where is Betty?" she asked and everybody looked around the room.

Robert guessed she was still sleeping, she was a baby after all. "Is she still in bed?" he asked casually.

“She can’t be, she wakes up at half past five each day,” Alice explained looking slightly worried, “I’ll check her room.” Alice took a breath.

“I’ll come too,” Robert announced, not wanting to be alone with George. The two walked upstairs.

They opened the door of the nursery, the room after the master bedroom. It was decorated a baby blue with a white-painted cot in the far corner. Nobody was in it. “She’s not here,” Robert added, rather unhelpfully. But it was true: nobody *was* in there. She couldn’t be hidden; there was nowhere to hide.

“Come on, we’ll check the other rooms,” Alice said. They looked in Alice’s room and the guest room, but the baby was nowhere to be seen. They checked the master bedroom and snuck into George’s room but there was still no sign of Betty. They checked in the library and all of downstairs but still had no luck.

Then they came upon the office.

“This is the only place she could be,” Robert declared trying not to stare at the gold sign reading: *Mr Charlesington*.

“We can’t go in there, it’s the only place father forbids us from going in. It has all of his private work things. If we go in you’ll probably be sent home and he will never

be able to trust me again.” Alice’s voice was soft but meaningful.

“Okay then, I’m sure Betty will turn up somewhere,” Robert sighed and they went downstairs.

“I’m sure you’re right. In fact, father has probably taken her for a walk around the grounds.” Alice seemed happier now and she walked downstairs.

Two hours. Two hours with no sign of the baby. Although Alice assumed she was out for a walk Robert wasn’t so sure. In that time Mrs Charlesington had come downstairs. She was sunbathing outside. Alice was going to tell her mother but she was sleeping and gets angry when she’s woken from a sleep.

Alice had no clue where the baby was but Robert did- although he just wasn’t allowed to go in the office. Rob had been outside for a while, playing volleyball against Alice. If anybody found out about how much Alice won by he would be the laughing stock of the school.

George was reading in the library. It was colder in there. It was the house’s newest extension and was definitely the biggest room. Robert wasn’t the best reader and he wanted to avoid having another argument with George so he stayed outside. It was half past twelve. He had to find Betty, just to make sure she was fine.

“I’m going to go for a nap,” he lied, he didn’t need anybody to know he was going to the office- not even Alice. He walked into the house and up the stairs. The office wasn’t far away. He opened the door, unlocked. It was too easy. I guess Mr Charlesington just had to trust his children to not sneak in. Would Betty have obeyed that rule?

The first thing he noticed when he walked in: no Betty. Maybe he should just leave, he slowly turned around expecting the baby to jump out of the cupboard; she didn’t. He walked out of the door, wait, what was that? His name, a piece of paper with his name on. Robert blinked, it was still there.

He walked closer to it, it was his name: *Robert James Smith*. Oh, well it was probably just something he’d had to sign before inviting him to the house. It wasn’t signed though. Maybe a reminder? Robert grunted and walked for the door. Footsteps, somebody was coming- he had to hide. The cupboard. It was open, and he would be able to fit in it.

Robert climbed in, and closed it gently; trying not to make too much noise. There was a small aperture and he peeped through it. He remembered what Alice said: “If we go in you’ll probably be sent home!” he couldn’t be sent home. Imagine his father’s face, his son had been sent home from his only chance to be safe and

have a luxurious life because he disobeyed the orders of Mr Charlesington.

The phone on the desk rang. It was one of the first times Rob had heard that sound- none of his friends had a phone in their house, they were way too expensive. John Charlesington walked in and closed the door. "Hello who is it?" he asked picking up the phone. "Richard! How are you?" Rob knew it would be a long conversation.

"Yes, work talk okay." Mr Charlesington laughed and continued talking to Richard. Robert got comfortable in the cupboard he was sure he would be in there a while. "Yes of course, let me write it down." Mr Charlesington picked up a feather pen, Robert was allergic to feathers they made him sneeze uncontrollably.

"Yes, yes." Mr Charlesington was writing with the pen. The sneeze was coming along. "Of course we do," John was still writing. Robert covered his mouth and nose in hope of blocking out the noise when he needed to sneeze. It was coming, he could feel his nose tingling. "Excuse me Richard, my feather snapped, I'll just go and get a new one." Mr Charlesington walked straight out of his office. What luck!

The coast was clear. Robert opened the cupboard and climbed out, one leg at a time. Could he make it? He walked out on his tiptoes and finally reached the

staircase. He had done it. He watched Mr Charlesington walk back into his office holding a feather. Oh no, Robert had left the cupboard open- Mr Charlesington would know that somebody was in there. He was a caring man, maybe he'd let Robert off; Robert didn't want to wait to see what happened though.

The library was empty, George had gone outside. It was a calm space of tranquil- Robert sat down on a seat. He couldn't read that well, he wondered if they had some lower levelled books for him to have something to do. He scanned the shelves; colour coordinated, every single one of them. There was a ladder with wheels to reach the higher books and Robert climbed up it. There was a shelf with navy blue books- the writing on them was in a bright yellow and curly. One book surprised Robert: *A brief history of the Charlesington family*. How had they managed to publish a book about their family? They really must be rich and strangely not famous.

Rob moved the ladder to the next shelf, the beige one. He climbed up that one, a children's book- great! He took it out of the shelf and climbed back down the ladder. An Arthur Ransome, Robert had read one of his books before. This one had a beige cover with an interesting looking map on the front. Robert was just opening the first page of the book when Alice came in the room. "Hello Robert, how was your nap?" she asked.

“My nap? Oh yes my nap, it was great thanks.” Robert had only just got away with that one. “Have you found Betty?” Robert asked hoping for a positive answer.

“Yes actually, I found her crawling around in the corridor in the end!” Alice exclaimed. Robert couldn’t believe he’d spent the whole day worrying about a baby but he was glad she was safe, he opened the book and he started on page one.

Chapter 5- Stray Dog

It was October the first and Robert was really starting to feel conformable in the manor. The routines of the days were all practically the same but Robert liked it that way. Mr Charlesington worked most of the time but when he wasn't working he was a sweet, caring man who didn't just think of himself as a multi-millionaire but also as a father.

Alice had stayed the same kind and pretty girl as before and even George had started to grow on Robert. Betty, luckily, didn't go missing again and she was crawling around the house more. Martha had continued cooking meals but had been accepted more as a member of the family, and even Mrs Charlesington was smiling more. It seemed that Robert was having more of an impact on the family than anyone realised.

There was just one thing Robert didn't like- he hadn't heard from his father since he went to war. The newspapers kept arriving and there was always a page about how many more soldiers were dying. Could it be possible that Robert's father was among those? Every night Rob would look outside his window at the starry skies and dreamt of the moment when he would be reunited with his father. Would that moment ever come?

Robert had to stop thinking negatively. He knew if he did he would never get through it. He just had to carry

on and live a life at Charlesington Manor. When he would play with Alice and George in the garden he would forget the war, the bombings, the fact his father's life was in danger every second of the day. All he would think about was what was happening to him; sometimes the best way to think, sometimes the worst.

In the past month Robert had learnt so much about the Charlesington family- even Betty. He thought: why read a book about them when you can experience their warming (if sometimes rather awkward) presence in real life. Since Betty went missing Robert hadn't ventured into Mr Charlesington's office and it was better that way. He did not want to leave this family, at least not yet.

The day was cloudy, like the one when Robert first arrived. It was October now, it was bound to be cloudy or wet. Robert hadn't slept in this day, in fact he'd done quite the opposite. When he awoke it was five-thirty: Betty would probably be up any time now. He knew that George and Alice would be asleep but he didn't know about the others.

He knew there was no way of him getting back to sleep- not even with the super comfy bed- so he decided to make his bed and get up. He put on his bath robe because he hadn't the energy to get changed- especially not at half past five. It was so soft that he nearly closed

his eyes and drifted off- but he didn't so he carried on walking.

He tip-toed down the stairs, being careful not to wake the rest of the family. There was a light coming from downstairs and the grey clouds weren't the source. Robert wondered who it could be- surely the baby couldn't light a candle? Ah yes, maybe it was Martha. She might have woken up and decided to make breakfast. However the light wasn't from the kitchen, maybe she took a break.

Robert followed the flicker to the library. It could be George, he loved reading- maybe Robert was wrong about him being asleep. Either way he wanted to go and see who was in there. Robert opened the door, and slowly scanned the room. Nobody, nobody, nobody, nobody, somebody, nobody, nobody. Wait- somebody, who was it sitting on the sofa with the candle? "Mr Charlesington?" Robert asked.

"Good morning Robert, and remember you can call me John," he turned around and smiled at Rob.

"Oh, sorry Mr Char- John. Sorry Mr John." John laughed. "Why are down here so early Mr John?" Robert questioned, noticing John Charlesington was wearing reading glasses.

"It's what time I normally come down. I need to do my job in peace and quiet and the library is your best

option if you want that!” John smiled. “Take a seat,” he tapped the space next to him on the sofa and Robert took the hint. Sitting down on the velvet sofa, Robert looked at Mr Charlesington’s work paper.

“Mr John, what is your job?” Robert realised that he had never found out how the man got so rich.

“I’m an accountant, the head of the accountants actually. I own many businesses- that’s how I make my money.” He had stopped scribbling numbers.

“What about Mrs Charlesington? I know she teaches the twins but does she have another job?” Robert asked, curious to know if the wife of a millionaire would still need a job.

“Ah yes, Anna. Well since her brother inherited most of her father’s money she wasn’t the richest person when we met. She was feeding pigeons in a park on holiday in Germany, staying in one of her father’s many properties. From the moment I approached her I fell in love. She must have felt the same because she invited me to stay overnight.”

“In the same bed?”

“No, she had another bed. We stayed for a while and then her brother took pity on her: he gave her this house. I got a job and it managed to pay off the bills- more than enough. That’s how we found ourselves

living in this luxurious manor. So no, Anna doesn't have a job."

"Well, I should probably leave you to work." Robert stood up and left the room.

"Thank you for stopping by Robert," Mr Charlesington waved before picking his feather pen from behind his ear. Robert walked out of the library and into the kitchen. There might be some spare food to make breakfast with he thought. It was very clean but he wasn't surprised. Every time Martha used the kitchen she would make sure it was left spotless.

A strange noise was coming from behind the kitchen island. What was it? The Charlesingtons didn't have a pet, did they? No, he'd been there for a month surely he'd have noticed a pet. It may have been mice, they could have smelt the cheese in the cupboard and were hungry. Yes, probably mice. Mice didn't grow! Robert knew exactly what was behind the counter. Slowly he crept round and jumped out.

A dog!

Robert recognised it as a Border Collie- one mostly used for rounding sheep. It was black and white, and its eyes were midnight. The tail was as soft as the guest bed at the manor Robert thought as he stroked it. It must have been a stray- or escaped from a nearby farm. No collar.

It was a normal dog- except from one thing: a strike of blood on his left hind leg.

The poor thing must have been injured. It was small for a Border Collie. If Robert wasn't mistaken that meant it was a female. She didn't run from him as he walked towards her. She looked fierce, maybe she would even try to round him up. The little dog may have not known it was lost. What if she'd got her home mistaken?

Robert was curious, how had she gotten in. The doors were locked and there was no other entrance or hole. It was almost as if she was already in the house. A draft of wind blew against Robert, was that the kitchen door-open? Yes, although it was only open a bit the dog must have come in through it! But Robert couldn't let her go back to the wild or any fields, not without helping her leg.

The scar was looking deadly, how could it have happened. Could she have been attacked? No. She must have caught it on a branch or some ivy whilst running in the fields. Was there anything he could treat it with? He scanned through the kitchen drawers. Possibly a wipe or a bandage might be hidden near the pots and pans? Nothing.

They had to have a first aid cupboard with plasters... or anything! There were still the cupboards Robert couldn't reach but (obviously) he couldn't reach them.

Ah yes, a stool. Just what he needed! It was over a foot off the ground- if Robert stood on it he'd be sure to reach the top shelf. He was right. Opening the top drawer, he spotted the first aid kit. He lifted it down. What was inside? A bandage, some wipes, a plaster and some anti-septic cream. Perfect!

The dog was still in the corner, Robert was afraid if he went any nearer she would hurt him- thinking he was a threat. He had to go steadily and hope she was too. All he needed to do was wipe her cut and wrap a bandage over it. Slowly, he crept towards the motionless collie. He just hoped she wouldn't notice him. 3. 2. 1. No!

She had run out of the kitchen and into the dining room. He could catch her, hopefully. She stood there face to face with Robert and in a blink of an eye she was under the table. He could just about fit under but when he did she was straight out of the dining room and into, oh no, the library.

If Mr Charlesington saw her then he'd assume Robert let her in. Consequently he'd be sent back home. Maybe his unsettling dream would come true (apart from the strange vanishing baby part). He had to go to the library before the Border Collie got there.

Robert climbed out from under the table and went round the fast way, through the kitchen. The library wasn't far. Robert was getting closer and felt like he was

running for his life! He had to keep going. Through the hall and past the stairs and door. He didn't care about making too much noise any more. All he had his mind set on was stopping the dog. If he stopped he wouldn't make it in time!

Finally he reached the library. He burst the door open with happiness in his eyes. Until he saw the most horrifying sight: the Border Collie had beaten him. She was happily chasing around the library whilst Mr Charlesington was standing on the sofa and trying to not get bitten. Robert had a feeling that a simple 'sorry' would not help his case this time. "Mr Charlesington I can explain!" Robert tried to reason with the panicking man.

"Don't worry Robert, I'm sure it wasn't your fault. Just send the dog back to the fields."

"But Mr Charlesington"

"John," Mr Charlesington interrupted.

"She has a cut, I was trying to treat it but she ran away."

"Oh I see, then you should do that first. However the dog must stay away from me at all times, I have a severe allergy." Mr Charlesington sneezed and Robert ran over to pick up the dog. She was worn out after the run in the library and when Robert placed her on the kitchen counter she was perfectly still.

The cut looked painful and when Robert wiped it he imagined the stingy-pain the dog must have been feeling. He wrapped a few layers of bandage around it and then left the dog to relax before she would go back to the farm, or field.

The time was now seven and Robert heard somebody getting up. When Martha walked downstairs, Robert assumed that person was her. She wasn't dressed yet and looked a lot different in a bath robe. She had some pimples on her face and probably put cream on them every morning. She must have slept in. Unfortunately, Robert hadn't warned Martha about the injured dog in the kitchen.

"Aaaahh!"

Robert concluded she was more of a cat person.

Chapter 6- Murder in the Manor

If Martha's scream hadn't woken up the whole of the family, Robert didn't know what would. It had. Who wouldn't be scared if a random, injured dog was lying on the counter? It wasn't Robert's fault, although it would have helped if he'd warned her. Martha's heart was beating faster than the dog running around the house.

Mrs Charlesington stormed down the stairs followed by George in extremely embarrassing pyjamas. "Whatever is the matter!" she exclaimed walking into the kitchen. "Aaaahh!" Mrs Anna Charlesington; another victim of the scary Border Collie. "Why is there vermin in my kitchen?" she cried out. Perhaps Robert was right about there being mice in the kitchen.

"I hate dogs!" Robert was wrong. It was quite harsh considering the beauty of the Border Collie. It seemed none of the family liked dogs. At that moment Alice came running down the stairs with Betty in her hands.

"A dog!" she ran down to the dog, putting Betty down on the way. "We finally got a dog!" she seemed so happy. Robert wondered who would be the one to break the news that it wasn't actually staying.

"Actually Alice, this is a stray, it's not staying." Mr Charlesington answered Robert's question. Alice

seemed upset but decided to make the most of it anyway. She and Betty ran over to the dog and started petting it eagerly; the Border Collie liked that. Robert also joined in, trying not to think about Martha's face when she first saw the dog.

As they were stroking the dog, there was a knock on the door. Rob wondered how they'd even got past the large gate outside the manor. Whoever had locked up the last night didn't do a very good job. They knocked again. Martha went to the door and opened it.

There stood a man with a flat cap smoking a pipe. He had loose trousers, a belt and a striped shirt. He also had a very dirty jacket on top. There was string tied around his neck and a whistle on the end of it. He took the pipe out of his mouth and Robert saw his face a lot clearer. He looked familiar yet Robert didn't know who he looked like. "I'm sorry to bother you madam, I don't suppose you've seen a Border Collie. She went missing last night."

"I wish I hadn't seen her! She is in the kitchen and you can take her." Martha laughed and the man walked to the kitchen. There was something that didn't seem quite right about the dog and the owner. They didn't have that special bond you would see with most. It was when the owner got closer that everybody could tell something was amiss. He stepped forward.

The dog ran!

Faster than earlier, maybe even faster than a greyhound. Through the kitchen and into the dining room. Then up the stairs. The old owner followed her but it was no use. She was just too fast! She ran up past the guest room, and then into the only room with the open door: Mr Charlesington's office! Martha ran up after her and so did John- it was his room after all.

Would the old man go into the office? Yes! In his defence he didn't know he wasn't allowed in. Robert tried to go upstairs but he stopped himself; he didn't want to get in trouble. He stayed down and the dog soon came. Followed by his owner, she ran out the front- a reckless mistake. The owner picked her up and put her in the truck.

It was eight o'clock. The odd day continued. To give Martha a break, Mrs Charlesington cooked. Anna Charlesington's cooking skills weren't the refined but Robert knew that Martha deserved a break. After breakfast, they decided to play a game.

Nobody fancied cards so they went to pick a board game. They chose Monopoly since it could go on as long as they wanted. Robert rolled a four, probably an unlucky start. Income tax. Not great; he had to pay 200 pounds to the bank. George was the banker so he took

the money, Robert wasn't sure if George took for himself but he probably did.

Alice went next, she rolled a two. She landed on a community chest. What would her card be? She had won second prize in a beauty contest and got to collect ten pounds from the bank. In the end Robert actually won with more money than the rest of them. By the time they'd finished it was ten o'clock; Mrs Charlesington would start teaching them soon.

It was now seven thirty in the evening. Martha had cooked a pie and was serving it to the family when the door knocked again. If it was the old man again, Martha didn't want to open it. It was the old man.

"Hello again, I'm very sorry for the trouble caused earlier today. In return I've brought you some milk fresh from my cows. Oh, I also may have left my watch. It must have dropped when I was chasing my dog." Martha rolled her eyes and told him she'd help him find it. They both went upstairs.

Five minutes later he walked downstairs. "Sorry again." he apologised and walked out of the front door. Robert noticed something in the man's back pocket; black. When the family finished their pie they didn't realise that above their heads, lying on the ground, was a dead maid.

“Aaaahh!” the third scream of the day and the most necessary. Martha was lying on the floor of the hallway with blood dripping from her chest. She was dead alright. Dead as a doornail. Passed. Gone. Never coming back. Grief and shock were in equal measure looking at her body.

She had been shot.

It didn't take a genius doctor to work that out. But there wasn't a gun in the house, and certainly not a deadly murderer. However maybe the deadly murderer had left the house. In a tractor. Could it be possible that the 'farmer' wasn't a farmer at all? It was easy, he walked upstairs with Martha and came down without her.

“Stop that tractor!” Robert called out and soon everybody realised why. They ran down the stairs and out of the door. Robert knew it was dangerous to chase a murderer but he had to act before the man got away. It was like the Sherlock Holmes books Robert had found in the library.

He had a killer: the old farmer.

A weapon: a gun.

All that was missing was a motive. Why would he need to kill Martha? Robert had no time to think- he had to stop the man. The most sensible thing to do would be to

call the police but the family had a chance with catching up with and confronting the farmer.

They got into the Duesenberg and Mr Charlesington drove it out of the gates and to where the farmer had been. It was exciting yet nerve-racking. Adrenaline was rushing through Robert and everybody else in the car. The engine started.

It was quite cold in the car, it was reasonable since it was a night in November. They had the element of surprise- or so they thought. It normally wouldn't be safe for children to be in the car chasing a murderer but. Actually there was no reason why the children should be in the car.

They drove for five minutes. Everybody was ready to spot the tractor but it was nowhere in sight. They passed the woods and all fields. No cars were parked in the nearest farm. They travelled further but there was no sign of the man. Perhaps they should just go home.

When they arrived at the manor, Mr Charlesington phoned the police to report Martha's body. Meanwhile the children went to bed. Robert couldn't believe it, Martha was dead. He wished the war hadn't happened- he wished he was at his home with his father. Not in a house recently the place where an innocent maid was murdered.

Alice walked into the guest room. "Alice, is that you?" Robert asked sitting up from his bed.

"Yes, I came to see you. I can't believe that Martha is dead!" there was sadness in Alice's normally happy voice. "I guess I'll leave you to sleep," Alice waved and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

It was hard to get to sleep that night but Robert was comforted by the fact the killer was far away. Little did he know that in the forest was a tractor, a killer and a stolen dog. The fact was that he wasn't safe in Charlesington Manor. He needed to escape before it was too late.

Chapter 7- “Ello, ello, ello”

The next day- half past ten in the morning. In the hallway of Charlesington manor staring at Martha’s body. The police had informed them that they couldn’t get to the manor due to a flood on the road; they were told to leave the body but cover it with a light bedsheet. Mr Charlesington, Mrs Charlesington and a detective were standing together. “Ello, ello, ello.” The detective had a cockney accent and was wearing a Sherlock Holmes type of hat. He had a long moustache which was curly at both ends.

The three adults were looking at the dead maid. The blood had (disgustingly) dried up. The carpet was still stained but nobody had cleaned it; that was the maid’s job. George and Alice were both downstairs eating breakfast at the dining room table. They were both on the other ends of the long table. “George,”

“What?” he had cereal in his mouth and Alice gagged when he spoke.

“I’m worried.” Alice told him, it was one of the first times she’d ever expressed her emotions with her twin brother.

“Why?” George kept spooning the milk-drowned cereal into his mouth.

“There was no reason for that farmer to kill Martha. She’s poorer than a pickpocket!”

“You’re saying,” for the first time in the conversation George put down his spoon and swallowed his cereal.

“I’m saying Martha’s death was a warning. A clue in a plan far, far bigger. George, I think whoever that farmer is; I have a feeling we’ll be seeing him again.”

The detective pulled out a large magnifying glass out of his pocket. “I must investigate the body,” he announced stepping closer to Martha.

“Why? We know she’s been shot. Plus Martha is a victim, not a killer!” Mrs Charlesington told the detective.

“I know, but I may find clues for a motive.” the detective explained to Mrs Charlesington. “Now please go do somethin’ else. A detective needs his privacy.” He smiled and the two adults walking down the stairs.

Robert had been thinking that night when he couldn’t get to sleep. Was it the fact a dead woman was in the hallway or was it because there was no reason for her to be dead? So many questions were whizzing around in Rob’s head ‘why Martha?’ was the main one. The fact he couldn’t get to sleep the last night was the reason he woke so late.

He climbed out of bed, put on his bath robe and opened the door. Out there he saw Martha's body but no one was around it. He wondered why they hadn't moved it. As he walked out he noticed a figure walking into Mr Charlesington's office. And, unless Mr Charlesington was playing Sherlock Holmes in a movie, it wasn't Mr Charlesington.

Robert followed him. He knew he'd promised himself not to go in again but it was necessary. What was the man doing? The detective had closed the door behind him. No! If Robert wanted to creep in, the man would instantly know somebody had followed him. Perhaps he could wait outside. Ah yes, a keyhole. Robert poked his eye through it.

Nobody was in there. How had the detective gone in and not come out? Robert burst open the door. He was right, the detective was nowhere to be seen. A gust of wind blew from the open window. Had the man committed suicide? Another gust came in, this time closing the door behind him. Click!

Somebody had locked the door from the outside! It must have been the detective, but how was he there? Robert had a problem; he was stuck in Mr Charlesington's office and the only way out was to jump out of the window. He looked out, two stories felt like the view from the top of St Paul's Cathedral. How was he going to jump out?

The only way to get out would be to open the door. Maybe there was a key somewhere in the office. Robert pulled open the first desk drawer; all files, documents and bills. Would the second one bring any more hope? Robert opened the next drawer; stationary. Wow, an accountant needs a lot of stationary. The third drawer had to have a key. He tugged but it wouldn't open. He tried again; it was locked! The key clearly wasn't in the room! There was nowhere to go but down.

Robert tried not to loosen his grip when he hurled himself out of the window. He was holding on to the ledges and his feet were dangling 13 foot off the ground. Nobody was outside which was reasonable considering the weather. He shivered. Just as he did, one hand loosened grip and fell to his side. He hadn't really thought ahead but he'd hoped there was a way to get down without breaking any bones.

He pulled his hand back up onto the ledge and looked down. If he dropped from here, breaking bones would be the least of his worries. He couldn't just dangle there all day though, even if the office was safer. Wait, there was a brick sticking out. He could use it as a ledge. He put his foot on the wonky brick and stood up. Now he was closer to the ground, he just had to hope there were other bricks.

Meanwhile in the manor....

“Don’t you think that detective has been up there a while?” Mrs Charlesington asked her husband who was reading a newspaper in the library. Mr Charlesington lowered his reading glasses to just under his eyes.

“I do suppose so. We mustn’t disturb him though, he said he needs privacy” Mr Charlesington put his glasses back on and continued reading the article.

“Privacy for half an hour!” Anna Charlesington exclaimed.

“What the detective says goes. He is the professional after all.” Anna shrugged and walked out of the room, unfortunately not noticing a boy’s arm dangling out of the library window; the arm of Robert Smith.

It was beginning to get windier on the outside of the manor. Robert was struggling to cling on to the ledge but there was no going back now. The ground was still far away and there were no bricks to help him down. Then he realised; he was in reach of the library window. He peered inside, Mr Charlesington. If he wanted to get caught he would have stayed in the office in the first place.

However, now was different, he couldn’t get back up and he was in danger of falling to the ground. He just needed help down. He knocked on the window. Mr Charlesington didn’t look up from his newspaper. Robert knocked again. John Charlesington didn’t even

flinch. Third time lucky? Robert knocked for the third time. He looked!

Robert was so happy when Mr Charlesington helped him down that he didn't even think about the punishment which would come after it. He and Mr Charlesington walked back into the house, it was the first time he had seen John angry. His eyes were staring at Rob intimidatingly and Robert tried his best to look innocent.

Before Robert tried to explain himself he had to say what was more important. As he was holding on a ledge for his life he had realised. Two men had turned up on both days, they had both acted suspiciously and they had both done something criminal. What if those two men didn't commit a crime, maybe one man committed a crime? Could it be possible that the farmer and detective were the same person?

"He isn't a detective!" Robert shouted, the whole family looked at him confused. The detective acted shocked. "That man is a liar, he locked me in Mr Charlesington's office!"

"You went in my office!" Mr Charlesington wouldn't normally shout but it seemed right based on the occasion.

“You’re missing the point. That man was the one who killed Martha!” the family gasped like they were watching a play. But this was no play, this was real.

“Young man, when we allowed you here we thought it would be nice. A fourth child. But this nonsense- I know it is traumatic that Martha died but to accuse this man.” Mr Charlesington turned around to point at the detective only to find he was not there. “Where did the detective go?” he asked scanning the room.

“He must have escaped from Charlesington Manor!” Robert exclaimed.

“He can’t have gone through the front door.” Alice said. “He must have gone out of the kitchen.” All of them, with the exception of Mr Charlesington, ran through the kitchen and out of the kitchen door. Mr Charlesington dialled for the police and waited for an answer.

They ran out the door and Robert looked to the horizon. Nobody was there. The police were coming, maybe they’d find him. They walked back in the house and closed the kitchen door. “Have you called the police?” George asked his father.

“The line wasn’t connected.” Mr Charlesington sighed, “I’m sorry for not believing you Robert. That detective did seem rather suspicious. I guess those Sherlock Holmes books I recommended really can come in handy” Mr Charlesington smiled, laughed and rubbed

Robert's hair. What Robert didn't know was that when he was checking the outside of the house, he should have been checking the inside

He didn't know what was coming for him- nobody did.

Resting in bed was hard for all of the Charlesingtons that night- especially Alice. She had questioned the motive of the murder of Martha, she had suggested it was a warning. She was, partly, right. Once again, the farmer had come back and he was as close as in the same room as the Charlesingtons.

When he had left she knew it wouldn't be forever- it never was with criminals. He would be back, and this time he wasn't going to let anyone get in the way. Her father may not have believed Robert at first but she certainly did; like she had suspected Martha's death was only a warning not a one time job.

He had come back once, she was determined to not let it happen again. Restless in bed she glanced out of the window. Her view was the back of the house, the fields, the farms and the woods. Some nights Alice would look out of this window; hoping for somebody to be there, a friend who wasn't in her family.

She was looking out of it on the day Robert arrived. As others saw a fancy car driving down a countryside lane,

she saw a friend, somebody she was longing to be with. Perhaps without all of the murders and mysterious going-ons in the manor, she could have been Robert's friend. Unfortunately she could not blame her misfortunes on the murder; she had herself to blame.

Alice was never a people person, rather like her mother. She didn't go to school; she didn't have any friends. If her mother would have allowed her she would have played with the farmer's daughter- Grace. Mrs Charlesington said: "She is a peasant. People in the upper class do not mix with peasants."

Robert was a different story. Her parents were expecting a rich, posh Londoner only to get Robert. Alice couldn't say she didn't rather like him- she did. She admitted it, only to herself and one other person: Martha. The one person she trusted with her secret was now dead.

Alice was too afraid to admit it to Robert. She had always tried to plan the right moment but it never seemed to work in her head. What if he said that he didn't like her and it would be awkward between them for the rest of the visit? The truth was that Rob would go back to London soon and if she didn't tell him she would end up regretting it.

She looked out of the window, longing for hope or an answer in any form. The farm had been abandoned for a

couple of weeks, the family had gone to their second home- this time being a real home. But it was still far away. It felt even lonelier not having anybody at all nearby.

A light flickered from the barn. What? Was she seeing things? The family weren't due to come back until the end of the war. No it couldn't be possible! She looked away and back again. It was on indeed. Somebody had lit a candle in the barn house.

Should she go out and investigate? No, that would be ridiculous especially since she was hardly dressed for an evening stroll. Yet again she couldn't ignore the fact that somebody was in the neighbour's house; somebody who wasn't her neighbour. She put on a robe. Creeping as quietly as she could, Alice opened the door of her bedroom, snuck down the hallway and got to the top of the stairs.

Alice looked at the big clock on the wall, ten thirty, her father would still be up. She stealthily got to the bottom of the stairs, eager to investigate the light. Her father was in the library doing his work, if she was quiet she could make it out. She reached out for the door handle and pulled it- locked! There was a spare key in the library; the exact place her father was!

She instantly regretted coming down, it was no use. It was probably just a reflection- or her imagination. She

walked back up the stairs unfortunately stepping on the loose plank. Mr Charlesington walked in, startled by the noise. "Alice? What are you doing down here so late at night?" he asked, looking at Alice halfway up the stairs.

"I was getting a glass of milk." Alice tried to explain. She would sound mad if she told him she was going to the neighbour's barn.

"Where is the milk?" Mr Charlesington asked confused.

"I wasn't thirsty anymore." Alice's plan really wasn't working. She was like a milk glass; John Charlesington was seeing right through her. "Fine, I saw a candle light coming from next door's shed. I wondered who it was and I was going to see." Alice finally admitted.

"A light? I thought they'd gone away." Mr Charlesington seemed more confused than when Alice was carrying the invisible milk. He walked upstairs to Alice's room and Alice followed. When he got in he peered out of the window. "Alice, there is no light on next door."

"But, but" Alice stuttered trying to work out why it was not there.

"Children and their overactive imagination!" Mr Charlesington laughed and he took the robe from Alice. "You, young missy, need to get some sleep. I know it's been a hard and long day- but this criminal business will

all be over soon.” Mr Charlesington walked out, turned off the light and then closed the door.

The next day...

They woke up to the smell of fresh breakfast, Mr Charlesington was surprisingly a good cook. It was his day off and he wanted to make the most of it- waking up at six o'clock was a bit extreme though. The family all sat down at the table and it felt just like the dinner on Robert's first day at the manor. As they finished their poached eggs on toast Mr Charlesington made an announcement.

“Thank you every one for attending.” That brought a few giggles, but not from Robert; adult humour was not the humour he liked. “As you know it has been a traumatic few days with the murdering of our maid to that same man sneaking back into our house. That is the reason why we are not letting anyone in or out of the manor until further notice.” Alice and Robert agreed that it was the safest thing to do. “From here and for as long as we need to the Manor is in lockdown.”

Chapter 8- Lockdown

Why does everything feel so long when you're stuck inside? Of course they could go out of the front but no further than the locked gate. Mr Charlesington had installed extra locks for safety precaution. So for a couple of months there had been no escape from Charlesington Manor.

Today they were finally out. The family had decided that it was safe now, they had seen nothing strange happening and a couple of months is long enough. They were wrong. It was a cold month but this day was a lot better. It was snowing! When Robert awoke and looked out of the window he was already eager to make a snowman and throw snowballs.

The family went outside- even Mrs Charlesington. The snowball fight would be great fun! There were two teams, the girls and the boys. It was a change being on the same team to George but Robert liked it. The girls appeared to have a disadvantage since snowballing is not a skill a baby needs to learn. However, it was not so; the girls were gifted, especially Mrs Charlesington!

George, after being hit on the head by his mother's snowball, started crying and ran inside. Now the game was even. Of course if the girls could win at two against three, they could definitely win at two against two. Robert knelt down to the ground, made the best

snowball he could and launched it towards his opposition.

Robert would have expected the lady of the house to get cross after being hit with a snow ball but instead she fired back at him.

Robert wanted to carry on but the gloves he was given by Mr Charlesington were too thin to keep his hands warm. He couldn't just give up though, that would be admitting his loss and Robert never admitted he had lost. Toughen up, hands! Robert told himself. He bent down to the ground and almost like an ice-cream scoop he picked up a perfectly round snowball and hurled it at Alice.

It hit her. Alice's face must have been very cold because Robert had managed a head shot. The ladies were eager for revenge but this time Robert and Mr Charlesington were prepared. They hid behind a hedge whilst many snowballs hit it- but not them. Still hiding, they were also preparing lots of snowballs. If they hadn't been too distracted with that they wouldn't have noticed Mrs Charlesington and Alice creep behind them.

Splat! Two birds with one stone; those two birds being Mr Charlesington and Robert and the stone being a massive snowball flung at them by Anna Charlesington. They had to admit it, they were covered in snow. The girls had won the snowball fight. The boys held both of

their hands up above their head, spaced apart: /
surrender.

They went inside the manor and had hot chocolate. It was steamy and when Robert held it in his hands, they soon became warm. The family were sitting in the library, it was the first time everybody had been in there together. It had stopped snowing outside but there was still a lot on the ground. Robert looked through the library windows, it was a while since he was dangling from them. He felt so close to the family, he had been there a few months after all.

He was getting used to the rich-people lifestyle; living in a house where the bathroom cost more than his entire school. Although everything was different he really liked living with the Charlesingtons. He would miss them and their house when he would leave after the war. But he wouldn't miss them as much as he missed his father.

He hadn't written in weeks and Robert just wanted to know he was well. The family sat down on the sofa, resting their legs. George was still sulking after being hit with a snowball, somebody should have told him that that's what happens in snowball fights.

Once again, another day had passed in Charlesington Manor. Little did they know what lay ahead.

Chapter 9- The secret room

The sun rose and hid. It was of course early December, so even when the sun shone it was cold. Eight o'clock. A normal time for Robert to wake up, he got out of his bed and walked to the door. The snow had gone, it was a shame; Robert was really looking forward to a rematch. It looked icy outside but without snow it was no fun.

Downstairs was Mr Charlesington and Betty. The rest of the family were still in bed. Mr Charlesington was in the library with Betty but he was struggling to work with her crawling around. Robert, of course, knew he would be in there so that was where he went first. "Good morning Mr Charlesington. I mean John- Mr John." John laughed. It was an old joke now but the man seemed to still enjoy it.

"Good morning Robert, how are you today?" he asked trying to do his work at the same time as watching Betty.

"I'm well thank you, how about you?"

"Very good, although this baby won't stop crawling."

"That's what babies are good at." they both laughed.

"Maybe I could take care of Betty for a little while!" Robert suggested.

“Are you sure?” Mr Charlesington said in a way which meant: *Yes please*.

“Don’t worry, how hard could it be to look after a baby for a short while? Plus, it will give me something to do!” Robert went over to pick up Betty. She was crawling around near a bookshelf. Rob recognised it as the one which fell over on his first day at Charlesington Manor. He hurried over to lift Betty just to be on the safe side.

Fifteen minutes later. It wasn’t that hard to look after Betty. Robert was sitting down on a stool in the kitchen whilst she scurried around the kitchen island. He had been staring for about ten minutes. He hadn’t noticed an envelope on the table addressed: *Robert James Smith*. Could it be from his father? Or about his father? Had his father died? No. That surely wasn’t true.

Was he ready to read the letter? Maybe somebody was going to give it to him. But it was addressed to him, it would be against the law for them to read it without his permission! He could always come back to it later.

“Betty, do you think I should open it?” Robert realised that she wouldn’t answer but it was worth a try. He hadn’t spoken to the baby in a while. “Betty?” he looked around but there was no sign of her.

Robert continued looking, he got on the floor to see where she was. At that moment Alice walked in, she had some writing on her hand. “Robert, there is

something I'd like to ask you." Her voice was sweet and she was looking at her hand. Robert looked up at her.

"Betty!" he shouted pointing in the direction of Alice.

"No, it's me Alice. Are you feeling well?" she asked confused.

"No, Betty is behind you. She's going upstairs." Robert ran up the stairs after the baby. Alice sighed and sat down on the stool. She spat on her hands and washed the writing off. Maybe Robert just wanted to be a friend with her. It was understandable.

Betty had crawled up the stairs, impressively and unfortunately. Robert followed her to the top and then he stopped. She had gone into Mr Charlesington's office. How did Robert always end up needing to go in the only forbidden room in the house? All he would have to do was go in, pick her up and go straight out.

Robert walked into the office and looked around the room. How was it possible? Every time he'd seen somebody to go into the room they had disappeared. From what he could see, there were no trapdoors or hiding spaces so where was Betty? Then it occurred to Robert- a secret room. Rich people always need a secret room- like a safe room. In case of emergency, Mr Charlesington could hide in the room and be safe.

All Robert had to do was find the entrance. It couldn't be too complicated otherwise Betty wouldn't have managed to open it. It also had to be complicated enough to mean that Robert missed it every time he went in. He scanned the room.

A bookcase! That had to be what was hiding the secret entrance. But a baby couldn't push a bookcase. There could possibly be a lever, in disguise as a book? Rob tried pulling some books, a dictionary and a novel, neither of which opened the secret entrance. Footsteps; somebody was coming! Robert turned to the door, leaning on the bookshelf. Looking for somewhere to hide.

Suddenly the bookcase pushed backwards. A secret passageway! Robert stopped leaning on it and walked in. He was ready to push the bookcase back so nobody would see him but it did it automatically. He knew for sure only a rich person would have mechanism in their doors like that. The passageway would have been dark but a fire was on a stick and rested on the wall bringing light.

He needed to find Betty but he first had to admire the futuristic secret passage. How modern it appeared in such an old house! The light flickered gently- the heat made up for the fact Robert was only wearing a vest. He reminded himself that he needed to look for Betty, that she was the reason he had snuck into here. After the

hallway was a staircase; a steep, curled one leading downwards. He knew that wouldn't be easy to descend in the darkness.

He put his foot on the first step. He waved his hand around trying to find a banister. The disadvantage to having a secret passage was that you couldn't have a window. There was a curved piece of wood that he rested his hand on as he carefully took the next step. Robert heard a sound. He turned around quickly- assuming it was coming from behind him.

Was somebody following him? He listened as the sound occurred again. No, it was at the bottom of the stairs. It had to be Betty. Robert ran towards the noise, completely forgetting how steep it was. He headed for the ground like a cheetah after resting its eyes on a gazelle. He couldn't feel his legs nor control his arms. It was as if he was motionless for a few seconds.

Until he hit the ground.

Darkness. Pitch black. The newly polished marble hurt a lot more than when he fell in the river. He didn't know how long he'd been lying on the floor but he knew he had missed a chance of finding Betty down here. Could she have opened the door in the office? The mechanism on the door from the inside was a lot different. Robert, limping, climbed back up the stairs- this time more carefully.

He got there- now he had to walk through the hallway. When he looked at the fire he wondered if it ever went out. Surely. But who came in to change it? He had no time to worry, he had to get out of the secret room. It was bringing him more trouble than when he was out. He finally reached the door. He pushed. It wouldn't open. He had pushed when he had come in.

Then something occurred to him. The second and most important of Isaac Newton's three theories. Something he had learnt in school- at times when he had bothered to listen: *Every action has its equal opposite reaction*. And the opposite to push was pull. There was no handle. How was he going to open the door?

Maybe he could attach a handle. He looked around. He had to find something which would stick to the door. Nothing. He was annoyed at himself. The only weapon to help him escape was a stick with fire but if he used that, the whole house would burn down.

Then Robert realised- the baby wouldn't have been able to attach a handle to the door. There had to be another entrance or one just for an exit. He went back down the stairs- this time not tripping over. He cleverly worked out that the stairs were the same height as the stairs in the manor. Where could there be a secret entrance? Bookcase- that was how he'd got into there and that was going to be how he would get out.

The library wasn't far from being right underneath the office. If he went through the hallway then he could have been directly above the library. He had gone down the stairs, now he just needed to find a way to get out. The downstairs was about as big as the office- how hard could it be to find an exit? Apparently hard. This was harder than the way he had gotten in.

It had to be a moveable part of the wall. Robert patted his hands on the wall as though he was flattening it. It all felt solid. Then one part moved a slight bit. Okay, he had found the exit but he needed to be able to open it. If books were on the other side he had expected it to be heavy but Betty must have pushed it. He pushed the same part again. Like before it had moved slightly, but not a lot.

He lowered his hand. The opening was not visible to the bare eye but Robert knew it was there; it was almost as if he could feel it. Robert thought for a moment: the baby would not reach higher up on the door. Betty must have opened it from below but it seemed unusual that a baby and a murderer could find the entrance when Robert couldn't.

He descended to the floor slowly- feeling the door as he went down. When he got to the bottom he knew he was nearly there. "Aha!" he exclaimed although nobody was there. He had found a small part of the door with a pressure plate. He pushed against it. This had to work.

Nothing. A few seconds passed. Perhaps pressing it again would work. Robert reached down again. He heard a click and looked up. The door was ajar. He pushed for it to open fully and stepped out. Not surprisingly he was in the library. He closed the secret door behind him.

Nobody was in the library. He walked through and out of the library door. Standing there was Alice holding Betty in both hands. Not the people he had expected. "Robert, where were you?" she asked as she gently rocked the baby. There was no way Robert was going to tell her about the passage- it would prove he had been creeping around in Mr Charlesington's office again.

"I was looking for Betty," he replied.

"She's been with me for a while. The family's been looking for you too!" she told him to Robert's surprise.

"They have?" Robert exclaimed, wondering why.

"Yes, you have been missing for two and a half hours after all. I even wondered if you were in my father's office," Alice explained making Robert feel guilty. Two and a half hours though- time had flown by.

Robert went to his room to get changed, but throughout the day he couldn't stop thinking about the secret room and the way time had taken a new meaning.

Chapter 10- Maid Mourning

There had been no funeral for Martha yet. Her body was still being investigated by detectives- apparently the local police had needed to call in help from the city but this had taken longer than anyone had anticipated. Obviously, the police had been informed of the fake detective and they were all 'keeping an eye' on any suspicious people nearby.

Martha's blood still stained the carpet- stained it with despair and hopelessness of her return. Martha had no known family or friends; it seemed that all of the time in the countryside had gotten the better of her social life. In her closet her work clothes rested, in there was the black dress Robert had first seen her in.

He'd always wondered why the family never asked questions to Martha about her family or where she used to live. Robert had always been easy with small talk and kicked himself for not asking either. She didn't seem like somebody who was close to her family, she was probably closer to the Charlesington's than her own family. It didn't make sense though that there were no records of her own family.

It had come to Robert that he had never known her last name even though she took the time to learn his. She

was the one who had been there to pick him from the station when he had been waiting, expecting a poor family of farmers. She had been the first person to welcome him to Charlesington Manor, the place he had loved staying. The place where he had met Alice and George and little baby Betty who was now fast approaching her first birthday. Where he had met the first strange but likeable Mrs Charlesington and the man who he had been expecting to not like had turned out to be probably the kindest person in the family.

It was sad for Robert to think of Martha, the maid who was always there for the Charlesington's. If she had not led the mysterious farmer upstairs to find his watch she would still be here- Robert thought. A single tear dropped from his eyes. Although he had felt sad and homesick he had never cried. It wasn't part of his personality.

Crying made him think of his father. Robert hadn't had a letter from him for ages and he just wanted to know if he was okay. Then Robert remembered: he had seen a letter addressed to him in the kitchen. Why hadn't it been given to him? It had been long enough since the delivery and he needed to read that letter.

Like he had done many times, Robert climbed out of his king-sized bed and put on his bath robe. He walked down the stairs quickly being careful not to wake anybody. He knew the last time he had run down stairs

it hadn't gone so well. When he got to the bottom he walked into the kitchen.

There was no envelope in sight. Rob got closer to where it had been in hope that the envelope would be there. Nothing. Robert remembered before how he had seen Mrs Charlesington's letter on his first day of the visit. Both times they had vanished. He had assumed Mrs Charlesington had taken her letter and read it.

How Robert wished he could have read his letter when he had seen it. He opened the top drawer, remembering trying to find a bandage for a Border Collie. He had no luck before. Would the letter be inside? He peeked his head in. The drawer was about fifteen centimetres tall so he didn't need to look too far in.

As far as he could tell the envelope wasn't in there. But something else was. Something that he would discover was crucial. He looked straight to the bottom of the paper where he could see a signature: *Martha Young*
It was Martha's signature! Robert looked back up to the top of the page. It was a letter, but to who? Robert read it:

Dear Mother,

I am writing about the manor I work in. It is called Charlesington Manor as I told you. This lovely young boy

named Robert has arrived and he is from where our home was. I deeply apologise for not writing for so long, it is as if nothing normally happens at this manor. That was until this boy arrived.

He is the kindest young man mother, he is always so polite. When he first arrived at the manor he was so shocked that he fell into the pond. I have never felt respect as the maid of this manor- I have never been treated like a member of the family or even a friend. Robert changed that. The whole family has begun to accept me more.

He has always respected me, he's a curious lad but a sweet one. One time he shocked me so much that I fell off my stool with all of my pots and pans but he immediately apologised. I do feel for him, his father has gone off to war and hasn't sent a letter to say he's well. I can't imagine a world without you and father although I haven't written to him, I've heard he's not well lately and I didn't want to trouble him.

I really want to see you two again soon but hopefully the money I'm being paid will be making you happy. I love you so much, that is why I came to this Manor- for you. I have this long black dress and I wear a white apron on top of it. You should see me before I'm dressed though- I look like father when he wakes up after a night at The Bull's Inn.

How is The Bull's Inn? I've heard that it's been running low on money recently. Remember when we would go there every Sunday for lunch and Uncle Timmy would get drunk and dance on the table. I miss those Sundays. We would laugh and stay until four o'clock. We would have the best time. I would go and play with the cousins in the big grass area whilst you and the adults would have an adult conversation.

Do you think the pub will shut down? Uncle David and Auntie Flo used to own that place, remember. Then they sold it when the family started running low on money. Edward and Jack got married and I came here. Why did my immature brothers get married before I did? But I shan't be disheartened. I'm getting used to life at the manor.

I know that one day I'll find my love of my life and I'll walk down the aisle and you and father will be there. And he'll be rich and we will make enough money to buy back The Bull's Inn and things will be back to normal again.

O, how I miss you all. I know that I'll come home soon and we'll be around the fire altogether. I love you so much and be sure to tell father the same. For now, be careful. Stay in unless you hear the bomb sirens. If you hear them then run to the shelters with father. Do not stay inside, the nasty Germans may blow up your house. All I want is to see you again.

Lots of Love Martha

Robert brushed his eyes with his sleeve. He had cried reading that letter- knowing that Martha would never see her parents again. And that her parents would never know she had tried to send the message. They would be expecting her to come home, and she never would. Robert was in a state.

Would anybody hear him crying? Robert put the letter into the drawer and closed it. He then walked upstairs and back into bed. Not to sleep; he knew he wouldn't. To think, he preferred to do it in a comfy king-sized bed. He took off the bath robe and got back in. He pulled the quilt over him and rested his head on the comfy pillows.

What Robert didn't know was that George was awake in his bed. He had been thinking too. Had he been a bit too harsh on the maid; Martha? Yes he had. He had disrespected her just because he was technically her boss. He wished she were alive so he could apologise. But she wasn't.

It had been a while since her death and he couldn't stop thinking about why there were still blood stains on the carpet. Who was there to clean it up when the maid was the one dead? The killing of her could have been the warning that the family were in danger. Nothing had happened but he was worried: was Alice right? Were the Charlesington family in danger?

His room was a lot bigger than Robert's. He had a door sign telling people to stay out and he had a reason. The carpet was checked and had a beige rug on the floor. There was a black chair with a soft cushion on it. He had a bookshelf and translucent curtains. He also had a desk and a chalkboard which had math calculations on it. George loved maths.

Martha was the only one who had been in his room for a while. She had to clean it for him; if only he'd appreciated that. His bed was comfier than Robert's, and bigger. As he lay in it he looked around the room. It hadn't been cleaned in a while. As an eleven year old he should have cleaned his room but he never felt like it.

Robert also didn't know that Alice was lying awake in bed too, thinking about Martha like the two boys. She had missed the maid who had been so kind. She had never been mean to Martha but had never accepted her as somebody in the family; something she admired Robert for doing. She looked out of the window longing for the maid to be with them.

She may have not known much about the maid but she did know that Martha was only doing the job to give money to her parents. Imagine those parents, expecting the money only to find a note saying that their daughter had died. Alice wept and lay back in her bed.

Chapter 11- In the dark

The phrase 'in the dark' is often used to mean that somebody is unsure about something. They don't quite know what's happening in the same room as them, even if it's happening right next to them, because it's a dark room. Obviously 'in the dark' can also mean that the room is dark, in Robert's case it was both.

It was around half-past ten in the manor. Robert had been lying in bed for over an hour and wouldn't get to sleep. Something was getting to him although he was unsure what it was. You could say he was in the dark. It was cold in the room, even under the quilt and in the bed. Robert didn't feel like sleeping that night.

Was it the death of Martha which was still getting to him? The fact that whoever was underneath that disguise could be coming back to the manor. Or was it the secret room? The passageway which so many people could sneak through, and why would it lead to the library? All of this was travelling through Robert's brain, but separately. Was it all connected? Was there a link between all of Robert's queries?

He took a deep breath and relaxed his head on his pillow. It just felt like there was something wrong. It felt like the killing of Martha wasn't the end to a plan- it was

the beginning of one. He'd had enough. Robert knew he wouldn't get to sleep without finding out what was happening. Just then he heard a noise. He climbed out of bed and looked out of the window. A figure was out there opening the gates to somebody. The metal clanked as the large gates opened slowly. A car drove through them and parked on the drive.

It seemed familiar but it wasn't the Charlesington's car. A man got out and was greeted as though he was famous- or rich. They opened the door to the house and walked in. If Robert was quick enough he would be able to find out who it was. He rushed out of the room and the door clicked as he closed it behind him. Although he was urgent to see who it was, Robert was subtle.

He peered over the banister but he could only see their coat from the back- he couldn't make out a face. The person turned their head towards the banister as though they knew somebody was there. Robert hid until they turned back. Then he saw they were coming up the stairs. Robert hurried to his door and pulled the handle; "NO!" he whispered anxiously.

The door had locked behind him. He'd been in Charlesington Manor since September and he hadn't noticed that his door had an automatic lock! He couldn't hide in Mr Charlesington's office- it was too far down the hallway and he had little time before the figure got

up the stairs. Then it came to him- the bathroom. He could hide in there and it had a lock too!

He rushed into the bathroom and locked the door immediately. For a moment he caught his breath whilst leaning his back on the bathroom door. His back slid down and he felt himself hit the floor. He realised that he might be in the bathroom for a while. Was there anything in here that could help?

The tiles on the wall were a light blue and the bathtub was in the far corner. There was a small window in that corner too. It wasn't big enough for a human to climb through and even if it was they would have to get up there first. There was a sink with an oval-shaped mirror and a cupboard beneath it. He had never looked in there before. I had two doors and Robert opened one to look inside.

It had liquid shampoo, a bar of soap, a bathing cap and a roll of toilet paper. Robert tried to open the other door. It was locked. Robert was tired of always coming across locked doors or shelves or cupboards. He pulled with all of his strength. Snap!

It opened. Robert was curious about what was inside. He pulled it open slowly, resisting the temptation to look inside straight away. Inside displayed a wide range of jewellery: there were diamonds, necklaces and bracelets. Robert carefully picked them up, fascinated

by how beautiful they were. He noticed a ring and he could tell it was something he would never be able to afford in his whole lifetime. He lifted it and put it on his index finger. It was practically pulling him down the ground- he wondered how anybody would be able to wear it. The ring had enough carrots to feed an entire family of rabbits. Robert laughed at his joke.

He was about to close the cupboard again when he noticed something. No. He couldn't. It would be stealing. In the back of the cupboard was enough money to change his and his father's life. It was something he'd never seen before. Where the Charlesingtons would have seen money, he saw hope. Hope for him and his father, to take them out of poverty, out of the lower class and maybe even to the upper class. When he went home he would take the money and he would live like the Charlesingtons, they would even have enough to buy a bigger house. However Rob knew he couldn't do it, he couldn't betray the people who had given him a home in the manor. Robert felt like they were his family and he wouldn't steal from his own family.

The Charlesingtons were kind to him. He couldn't just turn his back on them. Yet Robert couldn't take his eyes off the money. It was like it was a magnet and his eyes were the metal. The magnet was slowly pulling the metal towards it. And the metal couldn't turn back; the

force was too strong. Robert fell to the ground- with the money in sight. He reached out his hand. He couldn't resist the force. Slam!

Robert shut the cupboard door; he wasn't going to let some money ruin his bond with the Charlesington family. Robert sat down once again. It was only when he did that he remembered why he was in the bathroom in the first place: to hide from the mysterious figure who had come into the house. He crept over to the bathroom door trying to make as little noise as possible.

He peeped through the keyhole to see if he could spot anybody. Then he saw them and realised why he had recognised the car; the man who had come to the house was Richard, Mr Charlesington's co-worker. Robert relaxed, he was safe. There was no reason to hide anymore. He would come out of the bathroom and pretend to have only been in there for a short time. He picked up the key from the edge of the sink.

He pushed it delicately into the keyhole and then softly turned it clockwise. With the key still in it, Robert opened the door and stepped out. The men were walking down the stairs, John taking the lead. As soon as Robert's foot pressed on the floorboard Richard's head turned around to look at him. "Hello!" he said excitedly. He was a friendly man and Robert immediately liked him. "You must be Robert!" It

seemed as though Richard didn't care about everybody who was asleep in the house.

"I am." It struck Robert that, in all these months, he had never before met the man.

"You've not been hanging out of windows recently, have you?" Richard chortled.

"You know about that?" Robert was almost embarrassed.

"Mr Charlesington always talks about you."

"He prefers to be called John," Robert told him with a straight face. Richard laughed, although it seemed rather fake.

"You're a funny little one you are!" Richard rubbed Robert's hair- something the boy despised. "Now you better be off to bed. It is already eleven o'clock!" Richard opened the door to Robert's room. It was strange how he knew that was his room. Robert walked in and got into his bed. Richard stood at the door and smiled, but there was something in that smile which made Robert uneasy. He thought for a moment: what if Richard was actually planning against Mr Charlesington... or John? What if his co-worker was planning to steal some money from the Charlesington family? If that was the case, Robert would have to alert somebody in the family. But first he needed evidence.

And there was only one place to get evidence, the place where he would have been many times.

He waited until he heard Richard descend the stairs. Robert, unlawfully, had been in Mr Charlesington's office many times but never at eleven o'clock at night. He needed to be careful. Robert snuck in and discreetly closed the door behind him. He looked up at the bookshelf which opened the secret passage. There may have been some evidence hidden in those books; he had remembered that in his Sherlock Holmes book the rich man had hidden his will in his favourite book.

But Robert had no time to search through every single book. He needed to be out of the room before anybody heard him, even though he needed the evidence. He decided to look on the desk. A sticky note was resting on it. It read: *Saturday the 15th of December 1939*. Robert had remembered that it was Thursday night. Whatever happened on the date would be happening very soon.

Robert tried to work out what it was: there was nothing planned for Saturday. Other than what was on that note of course; what could it mean? It didn't have to be something important, it could just be something about Mr Charlesington's work. He cleared the rest of the desk to the corners with his hands. Oh no. He had knocked over a picture in a frame- he picked it up in his hands.

The glass on the front was smashed. He took out the picture. It was a faded photograph, in black and white. On it was a tall, blonde haired man and a pale-faced lady with dark brown locks. It must have been Mr and Mrs Charlesington. Rob turned it over: *In Germany*- 23rd of October, 1919. That was after the first war. Robert was surprised they had met in Germany.

But none of these items were evidence. Robert almost gave up hope but he knew he was so close. He continued searching; a key! It must have been the key to open the drawer. Robert turned it and it was. The drawer opened and Rob was both surprised and angry with the contents. Inside the drawer were about ten letters addressed to Robert. Had Mr Charlesington been hiding them from him?

There was one which wasn't for Robert, it was already opened. He picked it up, it was addressed to Mr Charlesington. Otherwise he wouldn't have picked up the letter but on the envelope it also said B.A.R. *Burn after read*. What type of letter would need to be burned after read? Perhaps one which contained a secret plan.

Then a spark came to Robert; it was like he was struck by lightning. Although this was more dangerous than lightning. Perhaps who he thought was a victim was actually the ring-leader of the plan. "Mr Charlesington!" he cried out realising that everything was beginning to fit together. What he didn't realise was the figure

coming up behind him. He was tall with blue eyes and blonde hair which had been combed to one side.

“You can call me John.” he smiled evilly.

Chapter 12- Heil Hitler

It was all starting to come together for Robert yet he was still unsure about some things. Like the reason he was tied to the chair in Mr Charlesington's office. The door was locked and John Charlesington and Richard were staring at him like they wanted something. He wanted something too- answers.

He wanted to know if it was them who had killed Martha and if so why. Or what they were going to do to him- that was the most obvious question. What were they going to do to him? The rope was tied very hard, it was close to cutting off Rob's circulation but by the looks on their faces he guessed they wouldn't mind if he did. It was an awkward silence so Robert just blurted it out.

"Who are you?"

"Why would you say that young Robert?" John was continuing to smile evilly.

"I don't believe your name is John. And I don't believe his name is Richard. You are both liars!" Robert argued at the two men. They both pretended to be shocked.

"What gave it away? The incredibly British names or the fact I never told you directly that my name is John?" Mr Charlesington asked glaring at Rob.

“But you told me your name was John!” Robert exclaimed, he could no longer keep his anger inside of him. Perhaps it was the cut to his circulation that was letting everything out.

“No, I said you can call me John. I never said it was my name.” Robert rolled his eyes at the cunningness and boldness of the undercover criminal.

“That was why you chose Anna Charlesington’s last name!” Robert knew why now. Each strange going on was like a jigsaw piece and it was all coming together.

“Legally her name is Anna Schumacher” John announced. Robert started to speak. “Shut your mouth!” Robert quickly stopped speaking.

“So you’re German. Well, I’m just going to go now.” Robert tried to act not scared as he stood up. The chair was moving quickly and the two adults were watching him with their hand over their faces. Robert sat back down. The men weren’t moving, they looked like human robot people.

“Heil Hitler!” they both said talking in one tone. Robert recognised that: it was the Nazi’s way of respecting their evil leader. “Heil Hitler!” they said it again but this time they held their hands in the air with their arm straight. The Nazi salute. The two men were...

“You’re Nazis!” Robert exclaimed.

“Indeed.” John Charlesington agreed.

“But what are you doing here in Britain?” Robert asked being his curious self. Of course, though, he needed to know. It would change everything.

“We’re here for you.” Richard answered. Although it may sound like a comforting or even flattering sentence it really wasn’t.

“But I came here to Charlesington. I came to you!” Robert reminded them aggressively.

“And we were waiting. Let us explain,” Mr Charlesington began, “It all started after the first world war. I was living in my home town in Germany- it was a wreck. So many of our men had died and our village was destroyed. My family were running low on money, we only had one room in our house. I needed to help them, but most of all I needed to help my country. I had to find a way to get some money for Germany. Get back some power for Germany. The fees we were paying were taking away all of our glory which we once owned. I hadn’t fought in the first war and I’m not now in the second. Although I may not be fighting I’m sure helping. Spying in a way to help Germany win. When the war was announced, my friends, including Richard,” Richard smiled at this looking proud, “decided to put together a plan to assure Germany would win the war. Here’s what we came up with.” Robert took a breath to get ready.

He was about to find out what they were planning.
Would it put him in danger?

“We knew that there would be evacuees in this war. Germany had made sure of it. They would drop bombs on British cities so it wasn’t safe for children to stay there. That’s when Anna finally came to my gain: Charlesington Manor. A house in the countryside, perfect for the plan. Some of our other friends had found ways to do what we were doing. Of course your father is working in the army so we wanted you. Saturday the 15th of December. Ring a bell? Being your nosy self you probably saw the post it note and being your curious self you probably wondered what it meant.”

Robert looked a bit disappointed that the man had predicted that he would do that. Robert wouldn’t think of himself as that nosy.

“Well I’ll tell you. On Saturday my good friend Heinz will arrive at Charlesington Manor. He will pick you up and take you to an abandoned farm half an hour away from here. Nobody will be near the farm except Heinz, some other of my German friends and more children of British soldiers!” he laughed viciously as he finally announced his evil plan. His voice seemed a lot stronger. He was almost excited, Robert wasn’t.

“So you’re holding children of soldiers as hostage? How could you do that?” Robert cried angrily almost ripping the rope. Not quite.

“It’s pretty easy. Once we have all of you we will inform the British politicians. If they don’t surrender you will all die. And they won’t want to be the country who let fifty children die because they didn’t want to lose power. Will they?” the man was evil.

“So what will you do if they say no?” Robert asked not knowing what to expect.

“We will kill you of course. We’ll kill you all. And every member of your families will be so angry at the British government. It will work either way. It’s checkmate, there is no way to escape.” Robert was furious. John Charlesington, or whatever his real name was, had seemed to be the kindest member of the family and it had all been a hoax.

“So this was all planned out!” Robert exclaimed.

“All of it.” Schumacher laughed. He was, of course, who Robert called John Charlesington. Although Robert hated the plan, he wanted an explanation- perhaps that could help him stop it.

“Start from the beginning,” Robert told the man, starting to feel a bit more confident. Perhaps there was a way out of this crazy mess.

“Very well. We have nothing to lose. It was a few days before you came. We had a letter requesting a home for a poor son of a British single father. Of course we told them yes but by then me and a few of my friends had already come up with the plan. We sent Martha, that dreadful maid, to go and collect you but you didn’t realise that we sent another man too- my good friend Heinz. He is the leader of the plan, I took the role of deputy. He wanted to come and see what you were like before we kidnapped you and held you hostage. He noticed on the journey your curious mind, you gazed out of the window stunned by the beauty of the fields, spotting everything. He knew you could be a disruption to our masterplan but you wouldn’t be able to do it if you were distracted. And if you didn’t like somebody, that would definitely be a distraction.” Robert knew exactly who he was talking about: George. “That was why when you got out of the car Heinz discreetly put his foot out in front of yours, you tripped on it and fell in the pond. He tells me that he attempted for you to bash your face on the gravel but the pond worked just as well. George found it hilarious that you had fallen in the lake, Heinz knew you would be very annoyed by that. So you didn’t like George- a useful distraction to stop you from ruining our masterplan!”

Robert couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“However your hatred for George wasn’t big enough of a distraction. You were sneaking around the house and I knew soon you would find something that would give it all away. So when Betty got up as early as usual in the morning I hid her in my secret passageway, which I’m sure you’ve already been in considering the countless times you’ve poked around in my office.” Robert gulped. “So you spent hours trying to find Betty. I knew you would. Alice and George were happy to assume she was with me, but not you, not curious Robert. In that day I hid most of my things which could help you find out more about me. But it only lasted a short while, which was why I released Katlyn, the Border Collie who you found in the kitchen. Another distraction.” Robert was shocked.

“You named a dog Katlyn, short for cat. You named a dog cat!” Robert was surprised that a masterminded criminal could be so stupid.

“That was Richard’s idea.” Schumacher looked at Richard and he turned red. It was momentarily amusing for Robert that these two criminals were sulking like younger children. “Anyway we stole the Border Collie from the other farm, it was vicious but we managed to tame it.”

Robert gasped, “You were the ones who made those marks.” The two men were revolting.

“We did indeed and be quiet or the same marks will be on you.” Richard pulled a knife out of his pocket and Robert shivered. “We then got Richard, here, to disguise as a farmer to retrieve the dog and come up with an excuse for a left behind watch. He was really sending a written message to me and making sure you didn’t do anything stupid. But that Martha had to come after him and she was beginning to ask questions. He shot her.” Richard now looked very pleased with himself and Robert growled, almost like the Border Collie. “Of course I didn’t call a real detective. Richard dressed up as one and it was all part of the plan. You would see him head towards my office and follow, he would then go through the secret passage and I locked you in there. We did not need you getting in the way which, of course, you did. When you tried to climb down I would have just left you to fall but I needed you alive. I had the plan to for a Lockdown so you couldn’t leave the house.” Robert hated the man so badly. “Now if you don’t mind me, I have a war to win.” Mr Schumacher walked out of the room.

“If you don’t mind me, I have a war to win.” Robert mimicked his in a low voice.

“I heard that!”

Chapter 13- The Escape

This was not something Robert had imagined happening at his stay at Charlesington Manor. To be honest nobody would have predicted this happening- it all seemed surreal. Like a crazy dream. But no part of this was a dream- it was all real and was happening to Robert that very moment. He had managed a few hours' sleep even though he was tied to a chair in a locked office. The shock had brought on exhaustion.

When he had awoken the sun had already risen perfectly along the horizon. Robert just wished his life was going so well. There was no way out. No keys, a locked window and a locked door. The secret passage, he assumed, would have been blocked. Robert took a slow and unconvincingly-calm breath. It was Friday. One day until Heinz came to pick up Robert and his chance of survival or escape would be as small as the baby mouse who lived in his house in London.

Maybe Alice would notice he was missing- you surely couldn't ignore the fact that he didn't go downstairs all day and wasn't in his bed either. She would have to notice something. But how would she know to find him in the office. That definitely wouldn't be the first place the rule-following girl would search. And even if she knew he was in the office Robert would assume Mr Schumacher wouldn't have given her a key.

He had to face it- it was hopeless. Robert wondered if he could try to break the window- if so he could try to climb out of it like last time. He scanned the bookshelf for heavy books: *A German to English Dictionary*. Robert was very annoyed with himself- how had he not noticed that before. The fact Mr Charlesington- or Mr Schumacher- was a Nazi was the reason he was trapped in the stupid office and it was going to be the reason he got out.

Robert leant his weight onto the chair. There were a few seconds of total silence before it hit the floor. The wooden chair's legs smashed and Robert winced in pain. But he was out. Robert slid the rope off before getting back onto his feet.

He then picked up the extremely heavy book- and wondered if he would manage lifting it to the window. "Uuugh!" Robert slowly lifted the book closer to the window. He was bent-double and his back was in pain. Robert was getting nearer to the window, but he wouldn't have much time. If he smashed it Mr Schumacher would hear so once he broke the window he would need to be quick. Robert could see the window and for a moment he thought he could make it. Only a moment.

"Well, well, well. Trying to escape are we?" Mr Schumacher was standing at the door. Why did villains always have to have impeccable timing? Mr

Schumacher snatched the book off Robert and hurled it straight towards the window, the dictionary bounced off the window. Not even a crack was made in the double glazed glass. Robert rolled his eyes. That was his only chance of getting out.

“Look, Mr Shoemaker!”

“It’s Schumacher!”

Robert felt his confidence grow. “Whatever! Look, sometime soon somebody in this house is going to notice I’m missing and they will find me, I know it! So you may as well give up on your dumb and rather terrible plan because I know that somebody will save me.”

“Oh, you mean like Alice.” Mr Schumacher seemed a lot calmer when asking this question.

“Yes, exactly!” replied Robert before realising what was happening. Richard was grabbing Alice by her ear and pulling her into the room. She was trying to pull him off her but it was no use. “Alice!” Robert cried out extremely angry at the pair of Nazis.

“She was asking too many questions,”

“Well Mrs Charlesington and George will surely know if we’re both missing!” Robert argued in hope that he would let Alice go.

“Really, or will they think it’s one of your little games again? By the time they start to get suspicious you will already be gone and so will I.” Mr Schumacher grabbed his daughter and pushed her into the room before closing the door and turning the key to lock it. Well, his plan was hopeless. At least he wasn’t still trapped alone. But it was almost worse seeing Alice so sad. Her father was a Nazi who didn’t care about her. All he cared about was his country. The man was evil, her father was evil.

Alice was quietly weeping hoping Robert wouldn’t notice. He did. “Alice it’ll be okay. Don’t worry.” Robert tried to comfort her but it wasn’t working.

“My father is a Nazi. He trapped me in here because he doesn’t care about me- he doesn’t love me,” she sobbed. Robert put his arm around his friend and she smiled at him. “I’m so sorry, Robert.” she snuffled.

“For what?” Robert asked Alice with his arm still wrapped around her.

“My father is a Nazi. He has kidnapped you and may even kill you. He wants nothing more than his country to win the war.” Alice was getting more upset the more she talked.

“Alice, none of that is your fault!” he argued, he hated to see the girl who had become his best friend cry.

“We’re going to get out of here, I promise.” he told her, suddenly confident.

“How?” Alice wondered.

The secret passageway was dusty, Robert didn't realise that it was unlocked. He guessed that the other side probably was locked though. But he had a plan, a risky plan but it still was a plan. There may have not been enough items in the passageway to unlock it last time but there were certainly enough in the office. Even just tiny pencils with pointy edges could help them. They carefully climbed down the stairs and Robert tried to open the passage door. As he had guessed, it was locked.

They went back up to the office to collect supplies, a lot would be needed to open the steel door, possibly barricaded with a hundred books on the other side. Robert looked for anything he could use. There was a telephone but the line was cut off, maybe he could use that wire to help. He picked it up. Alice had gathered some stationary including rulers which would be thin enough to slide through the tiny aperture in the door.

They both hurried back down the stairs with all of the things they needed. Robert tried once again to push the secret pressure plate and open the door. Nothing, it was worth a try. Robert first suggested using the ruler, they fed it through the gap and pulled. The ruler snapped in half, they should have known that it wouldn't work with a steel door.

Next they tried with the telephone wire, they tied it to the bottom of the pressure plate until it was secure. Then they pulled. Nothing happened, it was hopeless. In fact it was worse than hopeless. There was no chance of them getting out. At least not through the secret passage. They climbed back up the stairs. Looking out of the window, Robert could see George. He looked like he was having the time of his life, he probably thought that the two had overslept. Robert tried knocking on the window to get George's attention. The boy stopped and looked up but he couldn't see anyone. The window was too far away. Robert sighed and searched the room with Alice. Could there be something that Mr Schumacher had missed?

A hidden key? Something heavy enough to break the window? A spare telephone which they could have used to call the police? But the room was full of stationary and worksheets. Nothing which could help them get out. They both sat down on the chairs in the room. Time passed slowly but it passed. It was seven o'clock and the two were craving food.

Mr Schumacher walked in with some hard bread and green broccoli soup. Alice almost vomited. "Children," Mr Schumacher rolled his eyes. As he walked out he slammed the door behind him. He was like a toddler in a sulk. Robert was worried. It was already getting dark and when it got light it would be worse.

In the morning Heinz would arrive and all hope would be gone. The moon was full and rising above Charlesington Manor, Robert didn't know how the night could be more eerie. The sky was a dark blue and the room was beginning to feel chilly. Robert rubbed his hands together to create friction. Then he heard a sound. A sound which wasn't Alice slurping her broccoli soup. Footsteps, and he knew they didn't belong to any of the Nazis. The footsteps were light, as if somebody was creeping on their tiptoes.

Bang! Robert and Alice were both shocked by this sound. Bang! The same sound again but this time followed with an "Oww!" What was happening out there in the hallway? Then a clicking sound occurred, somebody was turning a key in the door. Alice and Robert both ran over it hoping they were there to save them.

Standing out there in a nightdress was no other than Mrs Charlesington. "Mother!" Alice exclaimed happily. The two hugged touchingly and Robert suddenly felt awkward sitting there. "How did you?"

"Well I knew you would be in here somehow. Your father had been acting suspiciously and when you both went missing I knew something was wrong. So I found the only locked room in the house and assumed you would be in here!" Mrs Charlesington seemed a lot braver than when Robert had first met her.

“But how did you get the key?” Robert wondered if the answer would also explain the loud bangs.

“Well, your father,” she said directing that part to Alice “always keeps a key on him so I grabbed a big dictionary and hit him on the head with it. I also hit that colleague of his- Richard. I knocked them both out cold,” she grinned.

“Mother!” Alice laughed.

“Now come on, it’s time to escape from Charlesington Manor!” and with that the three ran down the stairs and started to open the door.

“Wait, what about George and Betty?” Robert asked.

Chapter 14- Final Farewell

Robert asked again, "I said, what about George and Betty? You surely can't leave your two children behind." Mrs Charlesington and Alice both gulped. It was like there was something they were keeping from him. There was.

"Robert, we're not coming. None of us, we have to stay here- there is nowhere else to go." Alice sighed. Robert almost felt emotional- he had stayed with the Charlesington family since September and he wasn't ready to leave them. How was he going to get home- and if he did who would be there to greet him? His father wouldn't be home from the war; he was sure of it. How even was he going to get home?

"Our driver will drop you home, we're sorry we couldn't come with you."

"That driver works for Mr Charlesington! I'm not going in a car with him- it's too dangerous!"

"It's dangerous for you to stay here!"

"It's just as dangerous for you. Mr Charlesington knows you are on to him. When he wakes up, you will be in as much danger as I am!" Robert argued. A car pulled up in the driveway and everybody froze to the spot. A man with a short moustache got out of the car and looked up at the house, admiringly. That man's name was Heinz.

“Everybody! Hide!” They rushed to different rooms: Rob went to the kitchen, Anna went to the library and Alice hid in the dining room. Nobody made a sound. They heard the security chain slide creepily off the door. Danger was in the air.

“I’m home!” the man joked in a German accent. He shut the door behind him- holding a gun. He took a shot without bullets at first to let anybody nearby know that he had a weapon and he wasn’t afraid to use it. “Don’t be scared, I only want the boy,” he paused, “Dead.” The man laughed at his own joke.

Robert quietly opened the kitchen drawer looking for anything he could use to defend himself. A spoon fell to the floor causing the German to turn around suddenly and point his gun towards the kitchen. “Oh, I see. You’re hiding in the kitchen are you? Real smart.” the man spoke sarcastically. Robert was really annoyed with himself- it wouldn’t be long before the man found him.

Then there was a step, coming from the top of the stairs. Standing there, in his blue pyjamas, was a confused and scared looking George. The man pointed his gun, he must have thought it was Robert. “Well, well, well. Looks like you gave yourself up, come here boy.” George stood still on the stairs for a few seconds. “Come here or I’ll shoot!” the man lowered his German voice.

George walked down the stairs slowly, scared. Heinz could see George clearer now he was closer to him. "You're not that little boy who was visiting," Heinz exclaimed. George shook his head. When the man was distracted Robert crept round the kitchen to the spare telephone in the corner. 9-9- before he could finish dialling the door was blown off its hinges.

On the other side was a group of men with tall hats; they must have been the police. "Surrender, or we'll shoot," the man, who seemed to be the leader, called out. Heinz held both of his hands up in the air slightly above his head. He had dropped the gun on the floor when he was surprised by the shooting. Robert could see from behind the kitchen counter that the men were taking Heinz out in handcuffs and more of them running upstairs. He, Alice and Anna had come out of the rooms.

Anna was talking to the police and Robert listened in. "Yes we were called by a young boy- he said his name was George." George was smiling smugly listening to this. Robert went up to him.

"So you called the police?" Robert was surprised. How had he even known?

"Yes. I did see you in that window, you know."

"Then why didn't you do anything?" Robert was almost angry.

“I did. I waited until my father wasn’t there then- using the spare telephone- I phoned the police.” Robert was impressed that the boy had managed that. “I hear that you’re leaving.” George almost seemed sad.

“Yes, I don’t know where I’ll go.” Robert spoke in a softer voice. “I’m really sorry I never made friends with you George, I hope you can forgive me.” Coming down the stairs were Mr Schumacher and Richard, in handcuffs and being pulled by three police officers.

“Of course I can. I can’t believe my father is a criminal. He has always been so nice to me.” George frowned sorrowfully.

“I’m so sorry George. It’s all my fault that he will be in prison until you are in your forties.” Robert had the sense of guilt on his face.

“No, it’s his fault. He was the one who planned this all out just because of that Hitler. You have no reason to feel any guilt at all.” The boy shook Robert’s hand. Although it may have not been much, it certainly meant a lot. Robert walked back down the steps, Alice was there staring out of the window.

“Hi Alice.” Robert smiled.

“Hi. Have you heard? They’re sending you to a new home- I wish you could have stayed for longer.”

“Me too, I’m really going to miss you. I am so sorry about your father.”

“He deserved it. Any man who would lock you away I would not be proud to call them my father.”

“Thank you Alice, I’ll think of you every day when I’m staying at this new house.”

“Will you write to me?” Alice asked hopefully.

“Of course I will Alice. And I will always treasure my times with you here in Charlesington Manor.” The girl kissed Robert on the cheek. “Alice!” he said and she put her fingers on her lips.

Robert walked over to Mrs Charlesington, on the way passing Mr Schumacher. “I hate you boy, I should have just let you fall out of my window!” the man exclaimed.

“Well we all have regrets. I, for example, regret ever liking you. Have a nice time in prison.” Robert walked off and then turned round and walked back. “On the other hand, don’t.” The man rolled his eyes and Robert continued to the door. Anna passed him a bag full of clothes for every weather. “Thank you so much, I’m going to miss this place.”

“And we’re going to miss you. If only you could stay here with us in Charlesington Manor. Now, you had better be going.” She smiled. It was one of the first times Robert had seen her smile, it suited her.

“Bye Robert!” Robert turned around to the stairs. A mischievous –looking Betty was waving from the top. Robert waved back.

Robert then, for the final time, walked out of the door of Charlesington Manor with tears swelling in his eyes. From out there he could see the room he had spent so long in. The library where he had not only discovered a secret passage exit but had discovered a love of reading. He could also see the office, where he had- unlawfully- been in many times discovering clues which led to the arrest of Mr Schumacher.

Looking back at the manor brought so many memories of recent things or things which happened on his first day. Like playing cards with George and Alice or accidentally shocking the maid, the dear maid who was killed by an evil man. He knew he would miss everything from the snowball fight to saving the stray dog who had been released in the manor. He wiped his right eye with his index finger.

Then Robert stepped in the car with the policeman inside. He was impatiently tapping on the wheel. Robert took the hint and closed the door. He looked at Charlesington Manor for the final time before the car turned around and drove towards the gates. It then sped down the long highway. The house was getting further and further away from Robert but still it stayed close in his heart.

And that was the story of an eleven year old who might not have saved the war but certainly many lives. After a short drive, Robert arrived at a new house, a large one but it was nothing compared to Charlesington Manor. The policeman led Robert to the door and knocked. A young boy opened it and Robert recognised him immediately- Billy Jones.

As you probably know, the Germans lost the war. Who knows, without Robert's quick thinking and curious mind they may not have lost every battle. Mr Schumacher suffered many years in prison with his accomplices. Robert continued to write to Alice and he had a great time with Billy. When the war finally ended he went home and lived a happy life with his father. But he never forgot his experiences- or his escape- from Charlesington Manor.

When 11 year old Robert is evacuated to Charlesington Manor during World War 2 it looks like he will have a great time. All until he discovers a deadly secret- one

which changes everything. Can he do something about it or is it already too late?

Harry Lee