Darke Academy 1: Secret Lives

Gabriella Poole

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

'Hey, is that you?'

She peered hopefully into the darkness, her heartbeat already quickening.

No reply. Something rustled in the undergrowth; a mosquito whined. Disappointed, she shifted her position on the old temple wall and hugged her knees. Not a footstep after all. Just some night creature. Well, he'd warned her he might be late.

Wait for me, though! Wait for me, Jess, and I'll be there . . .

She allowed herself a little grin. Of course he'd be here. They were like two magnets. He could find her instantly, in any crowd, any classroom, and he wouldn't lose her now, even in the dark. She'd scold him lightly for being late, and his laughter would make her heart turn over, just like his beautiful voice.

I love you, Jess. Don't laugh. I swear it.

No boy could fake it so well. Especially not *him*. He'd be here.

Frowning, she held up her wrist to the moonlight to peer at her watch. Ten minutes had become twenty. So what? It wouldn't feel so long in daylight. It wouldn't feel so long in a crowded noisy bar. Here in the eerie shadows of the ancient temple ruins it was easy to get spooked, that was all.

Come on.

Slipping down from the wall, she stamped her feet, rubbed her arms. Goosebumps all over them, though she wasn't cold. Another mosquito buzzed in her ear and she slapped it angrily. Gotcha.

OK, she was starting to get cross now. *A bit late* didn't mean he had any right to leave her standing here in the darkness. For thirty minutes now! This was supposed to be a romantic stroll, not a test of her nerves.

Best to let herself get mad at him, though. If she didn't get mad she could be pretty frightened, alone here in the silent shadows. Or not so silent. Her head snapped round as a dead branch cracked, as leaves rustled. That was one big rat. She shivered.

She'd liked this place in the daylight. The green lushness of jungle, gigantic roots embracing crumbling beautiful walls, warmth and life and mystery. It wasn't so

great in the dark, in the shifting moon shadows that made a monster out of every massive tree, a stalking horror out of every unseen animal.

Forty-seven minutes!

Time to go. He'd had his chance and all he'd done was make a fool of her. Boy, was she going to give him an earful . . . She began to walk purposefully, then stopped. Uh-uh, she wasn't going towards the oversized rat. Shivering, swallowing hard, she took two steps back and turned.

Rustling. Creaking wood. That would be the wind.

There wasn't any wind.

Another huge rat, then, in front of her. Fine, she was going to have to go past it, but it would run as soon as it heard her coming. It was only a rat, for God's sake. Or a snake. Or . . .

Oh, just go, Jess!

She'd taken one more step when she caught the movement. That was no rat, and no snake. It was big – as big as she was. A shape moving swiftly in the hanging tangle of leaf and branch. She stepped back, and back again. It moved. Towards her. There was breathing, soft and confident and human.

'Is that you?' she called. 'Hey! Quit fooling!'

No reply.

'I mean it! Quit it!' She tried to make her voice angry, but it trembled, high-pitched. 'It's not funny.'

That sound: it might have been rotten wet leaves, stirring as a creature passed through. Or it might have been laughter, breathy and low. It couldn't be him. *Couldn't*. Anyway, there were two of them. She felt the other approaching from her right, slow, menacing. Once more she tried to shout, but when she opened her mouth all that came out was a gasp of terror.

She turned and broke into a stumbling run. It was so hard, in the darkness, keeping to the tracks. Vines and leaves slapped her face, branches tugged at her, roots snatched at her feet. Was this the path she'd taken to get here?

Path? It wasn't a path. She'd lost that, and run blindly into the trees. Her heartbeat was thunder in her ears but still she could hear them behind her, or perhaps she could only sense them. They were behind her, alongside her, herding her. What a stupid notion. But they were. *Herding her . . .*

She slithered down a low slope, scrambling over a massive root and tucking herself into the space behind. Biting hard on her knuckles, she tried not to cry. OK, she wanted to be back at home now.

Mom, this is crazy. Not real, so you can come in and

wake me up now. Dad, go on and laugh at me, tell me I dreamed it. Scoob . . .

Scooby. She remembered him almost bursting with pride as he waved her off to her thrilling new school: 'Bye, sis!'

'Bye, little bother! Oops – little *brother*!'

Giggling. Waving back.

Scooby . . .

Was that a sound? She breathed hard. Above her, ancient temple buildings were outlined in silver moonlight. A tree root wrapped round a pillar like the arm of a lover. Like *his* arm.

Where was he? What happened to him?

Roots, tendrils, branches: they snaked into the ancient walls, choking, hugging, strangling. Something moved in the foliage by her ear and she almost screamed, but clamped a hand over her mouth just in time. This was stupid, she thought again. Crazy. If it wasn't a dream it had to be a prank. A dumb prank.

Her body didn't think so. She was drenched in sweat: from the humidity, from running, from terror. A mosquito hummed again, and she slapped her hand against her face, suppressing a shriek. It was only an insect. Something far worse was lurking in the ruins. Hunting . . .

Don't panic, she thought. Stay cool. There were thick entangled vines behind her, and the black maw of an ancient door, its wood long rotted away. She backed into the space, kicking frantically until the slimy leaves inside half-covered her, no longer afraid of rats or snakes or even spiders. Nothing scared her any more.

Except *them*.

She'd stay here, huddled in the ruins, until dawn broke. She'd get in trouble, she'd get laughed at, but so what? A few hours, and this place would be crawling with tourists. By then she'd probably laugh at herself. Right now those tourists were asleep in some air-conditioned hotel, dreaming of the day ahead, and of Angkor Wat, the temple of the ancients: civilisation overrun by brute nature. Wildness and beauty, sacredness and fear. So romantic and mysterious, for a tourist or a stranger.

A few hours. It wasn't so long to wait.

There were voices now in the night: distinct, hushed, but tense with the thrill of the chase. Maybe she shouldn't wait after all. Maybe she should run now. She couldn't decide. Ferociously, she rubbed her temples.

You idiot, what are you doing here anyway? You never did fit in.

A rattling flutter of wings on her cheek. She slapped at the cockroach, but only succeeded in brushing it on to

her neck. It scurried down her chest and she sobbed out loud. Slamming her palm against her breastbone, she felt the bug explode into black gunge and shell fragments. She whimpered: a high-pitched noise.

The sticky roach blood made everything real. This was no dream. Out there something was hunting her down, and it was more real than school, than home, than *him*. Of course he hadn't come. Who did she think she was? Sad little, stupid little scholarship girl. He'd left her here alone and now *they* were coming . . .

Only twenty-four hours ago they'd been together, getting drunk in the streets of Phnom Penh. In love – she'd thought – and wildly excited about the flight to Siem Reap and Angkor Wat. She remembered his high laughter, both of them cheering on her beautiful, funny best friend as she struck poses and sang 'It's Raining Men' in the karaoke bar. Thrilled with her happiness, she'd turned to trace her finger across his cheekbone. Loving him . . .

She froze. A voice, clear now, close and hungry. A familiar voice, but no longer a friend's. Not singing, not flirting, not joking, but baying for her. Close. So close. And she knew it for sure. *She knew that voice*. She should run, but her blood was liquid ice in her veins.

Please. Pleasepleaseplease . . .

The voices, and a cool breath, were in her ear. 'Gotcha.'

Just for a moment, one crazy hopeful moment, she thought it was OK. Yeah, it was all a prank. A cruel joke. Hazing the girl who didn't fit in. *Oh, thank God.*

She smelled skin and sweat, tasted electric excitement and fear on the air.

'It's you,' she whispered hoarsely.

A smile, a hand reaching out to stroke her cheek. 'Not quite.'

And then she could see them clearly.

She screamed and bolted, out of the ruins, back into the jungle. She heard running feet and panting, hungry breath; saw a fast figure hurtling through the trees; smelled her own terror. And she ran.

But she knew, even then, that she could never run fast enough.

CHAPTER ONE

I don't belong here.

Cassie Bell came to an abrupt halt, almost tripping up the woman behind her.

'*Merde! Imbécile!*'

'Sorry!'

With a flurry of glossy shopping bags the woman stalked off, tossing another curse over her shoulder.

Cassie's temper flared. 'Waste of breath!' she yelled. 'I don't speak French!'

Either the woman didn't hear or she didn't care. Cassie felt herself shrink once more.

'Oh, hell,' she muttered. 'I *really* don't belong here.'

The buildings around her were just like that woman: tall, proud, impossibly elegant. The air was heady and rich, an elusive combination of expensive scent, late summer and exhaust fumes. Even the name of the street

mocked her, since she could hardly pronounce it. What was she doing in a street with a name like that? Whatever made her think this would be a good idea? *Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré!* Her second-hand trainers must be an affront to the paving stones. She belonged back in Cranlake Crescent, in what they liked to call 'care'. She didn't belong in Paris.

Shoving her streaky brown hair out of her face, Cassie glanced at the scrap of paper in her hand. Considering she'd made it this far, all the way from the Gare du Nord, it'd be kind of embarrassing if she failed to find the school now. But she'd expected something in-your-face, architecturally speaking. There were some huge mansions on this street, but they were almost missable, set behind imposing walls and wrought-iron gates. The street stank of money, but not much of it was directly on show, except in the boutiques she'd passed with her jaw gaping.

Come to think of it, maybe it would be better if she couldn't find the school. It'd be a good enough excuse, because this had been a Big Mistake. OK, so she'd have to slink home to Cranlake Crescent looking like an idiot. OK, so she'd have to stomach the jeers of the other kids, the snotty told-you-so smirks from the hateful Jilly Beaton. Even worse, she'd have to face the sad

disappointment in Patrick's eyes that he wouldn't quite manage to hide.

But it'd still be better than making a fool of herself like this . . .

Her heart jolted.

Cassie had barely realised she was still walking, trundling her battered suitcase behind her. She didn't know what made her glance up and across the road just at that moment. In her daze of dislocated panic she must have been on autopilot, because she was staring at a gleaming brass plaque set into a stone pillar.

THE DARKE ACADEMY

Nothing else, not so much as an invitation to Please Ring the small brass bell-push set into the stone below. It all seemed very understated. Cassie could almost have been disappointed, except that even from this side of the road she could see a suggestion of the building – imposing stone pillars and pediments, the green-bronze curve of a half-hidden statue in the courtyard – behind the elaborate wrought-iron gates.

Gulping, Cassie tightened her fingers on the scabby handle of her case. She stepped off the kerb, the case bumping down on its wonky wheels behind her.

Her case.

And what was inside it? The letter that said she *did* belong here. That Cassandra Bell, of all the unlikely people, was good enough for a scholarship to the Darke Academy. The brief letter was typed on thick, expensive, parchment-like paper, and just as well – cheap paper would have fallen to bits by now, the number of times she'd unfolded and re-folded it, soaking in the words until they were acid-etched on her brain. Now it was tucked carefully inside the leatherbound notebook Patrick had given her as a leaving present, the one that must have taken a big chunk out of his council wages.

So what was she going to do? Shove the notebook back at him, and say she was sorry, she was a failure before she even arrived?

No way. That letter confirmed it. She was a student at the Darke Academy!

Grinning, Cassie ran out across the road, her case bumping behind her. A driver braked hard and yelled at her, and cheerfully she gave him the finger.

She had a right to be here. She *was* going to fit in. And what was more, she was going to *love it*.

Breathless, she let her forefinger hover over the bell-push. This is it, she thought. Here goes . . .

She retreated, startled. The gates were already swinging

wide, silent and smooth. Clenching her hand into a fist, she bit her lip. She hadn't touched the bell.

'Watch it!'

A hand on her shoulder pulled her away as a black car, long and sleek, bumped very gently across the pavement and nosed into the gates. Cassie got the impression that nothing would have halted its smooth progress, not even a careless pedestrian.

The hand let her go abruptly. As she turned, smiling, its owner backed off a step. He was a boy of about her age, tall and broad-shouldered, his brown hair close-cropped. He had the healthy look of an outdoors type, so she doubted he was usually so pale. The expression on his handsome face was one of shock; he looked as if all his blood had just drained into his scruffy trainers.

'Thanks,' she said, to break the stunned silence.

He didn't reply. Instead, turning on his heel, he walked on without another word and disappeared through the gates of the Academy. Cassie stared.

Macho, rude, and American.

It wasn't just the two drawling words that had given him away, but the downbeat clothes and his cocksure loping stride. Well, she was glad she wasn't the only one in non-deliberately-ripped jeans. Nervous again, she took a breath.

Get in there, Cassie! It's where you belong, remember?

Cassie grinned. It was like she could hear Patrick's voice right inside her head. Before the gates could swing shut again, she tugged her case through them and into the courtyard beyond.

Wow.

It was huge, far bigger than it looked from the road. Sunlight filtered through chestnut trees, dappling flagstones worn lustrous with age. The paved drive curved in a great circle round a pool that was green with ferns and exotic fleshy-leafed plants, their exposed roots trailing like twisted serpents. In the centre of the pool was the statue she'd glimpsed: a slender bronze girl on tiptoe, dreamily stretching her arms and tilting up her face to a swan. There was nothing dreamy about the swan, though. Its webbed feet clawed at the girl's body like talons, wings arched above her, its neck and savage head raised like a snake about to strike. It looked brutal and triumphant.

Cassie felt a shiver run through her. She'd always thought of swans as serene birds. Delicate. Pretty on ponds.

Not this one.

The statue was beautiful but unsettling. She turned instead to the clusters of gossiping students, voices raised with the excitement of a new term. Cassie gulped. Every

single one of them was sleek with wealth and beauty. As she blew a strand of hair away from her face, she wished she'd had the cash to invest in a chic haircut. Hell, she should have *made* the cash. Mortgaged her soul to the devil or something.

When she risked a smile, they turned away, disdainful. A Japanese girl gave a bark of incredulous laughter before turning back to her friend and muttering something that made them both giggle. Like the rest of the students, they had an arrogant sheen of money and class. Of the scruffy American boy, there was no sign.

A ball of anger formed in Cassie's gut, and she tightened her grip on her case. The letter. It was in there. *Her* letter. *Her* scholarship. This crowd had bought their places here. She'd earned hers. She wasn't going to walk away from it. No way.

The black limousine was parked at the foot of a flight of stone steps and its driver was opening the rear door, black sunglasses screening his expression. Cassie watched, cynically waiting for it to disgorge another spoiled rich kid. Instead an elderly woman emerged, frail and beautiful as a withered flower.

Cassie had never imagined someone so old could be beautiful. But this woman was. Fragile, impossibly thin, like a cobweb, but still strikingly lovely. If that was what

Paris life did for you, Cassie wasn't just sticking it out, she was staying for ever.

The smile on her face died as the limousine driver closed the door with a soft clunk and slid back into the driving seat. Wasn't he even going to help the old girl up the steps? What kind of a chauffeur was he? Cassie glared at him and then at her fellow students, who weren't taking the slightest notice of the old woman.

'Unbelievable,' said Cassie loudly. Dumping her case at the foot of the steps, she went to the woman's side.

'Do you need a hand?'

Slowly, so very slowly, the old woman turned her head.

Cassie almost flinched. The woman leaned on her silver-handled stick as if it was all that was holding her up, yet there was nothing feeble about that gaze. Her eyes glittered fiercely. They weren't hostile, though. More . . . assessing.

Her skin was like crazed porcelain, translucent and webbed with lines. Perfectly white hair was swept up into a chignon. The bones of her face might have been lovingly sculpted out of granite. Cassie swallowed hard.

'I mean, if you'd rather I didn't . . . I don't want to sound . . .'

Pale lips pursed. 'Are you offering to help me, young lady?'

'Well, yes.' Cassie fidgeted, feeling a little stupid.

'How perfectly charming of you!' The imperious coolness melted into a sparkling smile. 'May I take your arm?'

Awkwardly, Cassie held it out, and gnarled fingers curled round her bicep. For an instant Cassie thought of the swan in the courtyard, its webbed feet gripping the bronze girl like talons; then she shook herself and smiled back. Behind them she heard the leopard-purr of a powerful engine, and the black car slid away.

'So lovely to have a young body,' murmured the woman.

'What?' Cassie blinked. 'I mean, I beg your pardon?'

'A young body,' she smiled, 'to help me. How kind you are.'

The grip on Cassie's arm felt surprisingly steely, but the rest of the woman was as light as a leaf skeleton. Cassie took care as she helped her up the steps. There seemed to be a lot of them.

'Thirteen steps,' mused the woman, as if reading her mind. Pausing to take a breath, she stared up at the classical façade of the school. 'It's been so long since I was last here, but I remember these steps as if it were yesterday. You're new, my dear, aren't you?'

'Is it that obvious?' Cassie grinned.

Her laugh rang like a gentle bell. 'Yes – but in the best of ways. Take my advice, ah . . . ?'

'I'm Cassandra. Everybody calls me Cassie, though.'

'Cassandra! How lovely. I shall call you Cassandra. And I am Madame Azzedine, but you will call me Estelle. And my advice is that you should take all that the Academy has to offer.'

Halting again, Madame Azzedine turned to her, fierce with excitement. 'It is the finest of schools. Indeed, the Academy is so much more than a school. Make the most of all that it can give you, Cassandra, and it will change your life. *For ever*. Do you understand me?'

'Er . . . yes.'

Madame Azzedine gave a sharp laugh. 'I think perhaps you do not. Not quite. But you will learn, my dear. You will learn so much. The Academy can change your life.'

They were only a few steps from the top now, and the old woman's breath came in rapid, shallow gasps.

'That's what I want.' Cassie almost wanted to place her hand on the one that gripped her arm. But touchy-feely wasn't in her nature, however strong her instant empathy with this kind, imperious woman. Anyway, she wouldn't put her bitten nails anywhere near that paper-skinned, immaculately manicured hand.

Madame Azzedine put the hand to her chest for a

moment, catching her breath. 'What is that, Cassandra? What do you want?'

'I want to turn my life around—'

'*Turn* it?' As they reached the top of the steps, Madame Azzedine released Cassie's arm. 'No! The Academy will teach you to conquer life, to beat it into submission and bend it to your will. True graduates of the Darke Academy take life by the throat, Cassandra! Remember that!'

A strange shiver ran down her spine, but Cassie shook it off and grinned. 'I will,' she said. 'I will!'

Smiling, Madame Azzedine clasped both Cassie's hands in hers. 'Good!'

A cough from the shadowed doorway, and Cassie almost jumped out of her skin.

'Madame, welcome.' A squat, sombre-uniformed man inclined his head. 'Sir Alric is expecting you.'

She laughed gaily. 'But of course he is! Excuse me, Cassandra, my dear. And good luck.'

'Thank you, Madame Azz— um, Estelle,' mumbled Cassie.

'And may you have many, *many* rewarding years at the Academy.' Madame Azzedine gave her a contented smile. 'I'm entirely sure you will.'