Wild about Harry

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Chapter One

My mother, God bless her, had two abiding mantras. That a smile is the first thing you should put on every morning and that a well-cut suit will take you anywhere.

I hate to sound picky because I loved my mum dearly, but she was absolutely wrong on both counts.

A smile, as any teacher will tell you, is the very last thing you should stick on your face, certainly not before first play on any weekday, and definitely never before Christmas. And though a well-cut suit will take you all sorts of places, it will not take you across a raininfested playground, round the back of a climbing-frame, through an enthusiastically manured conservation area or, indeed, the bit of battered beech hedge that separates said area from the aged oak tree that resides in Mr Tinkler's back garden. Well, it will, but not half so efficiently as full fatigues, a gas mask and a pair of stout boots.

Which is a pity, because today I am in such a suit, and kitten heels too, worn for what at the time seemed the entirely reasonable purpose of persuading the advisers who are arriving at noon that I Am Fully In Charge of This School.

'He won't come down,' announces Glenda Heaven, with an air of complete confidence, having followed me through in her mac.

I don't have a mac. Just a well-cut suit. And a suspicion that a gauntlet's just been thrown at my feet. Testing times, these. Every day a challenge. It's late January now, but I'm not smiling yet. But I am, I am, I am, I am, I am in charge of this school.

'Of course he will,' I say crisply. 'Won't you, Harry? You know, you can't sit up there all day.'

There is a little light rustling overhead and a sprinkling of sappy water rains down. 'Leave me alone,' he growls.

His tone suggests he's been saying it for a while. I don't suppose he's smiling either. 'Now you know I can't do that, Harry,' I counter. 'What would your father think of me if I left you sitting up in a tree all day, eh? I don't think he'd be very impressed, do you?'

There is no response to this because, in the three weeks I have been back at Cefn Melin Primary, I have learned that Harry is the sort of boy who doesn't

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feel the need to concern himself with the largely uninteresting twitterings of the women who populate his life. He has much more important things to do. Like getting into trouble. Which he does very well. There's been barely a day since the beginning of term that he hasn't had an input in seizing.

Another child bursts through the luckless beech. A girl called Millie with a lisp.

'Mish! Mish! He's hurt himself, Mish! You know he's hurt himself, don't you? Mr Patterson just told me to come through and tell you, because we saw blood on the trim trail, didn't we, Owen?' Another child behind her mumbles assent. 'And he fell off ever such a long way, and there's, like, this really big splodge of it on the bark under the monkey bars-'

Glenda Heaven, who is the school secretary and, as such, always prides herself on being fully conversant with anything that happens, wherever it happens, however it happens, in this school, at all times, glares at Millie through narrowed eyes. 'Fell?' she barks accusingly. 'What do you mean, fell? I wasn't told that anybody fell.'

'He fell off the trim trail, Mish. He was doing an assault stunt thing - wasn't he, Owen? - we saw it. We told him he wasn't supposed to be on the trim trail because it was our class's turn today, but he did, and he-'

'Harry!' I shout up, with feeling. 'Are you hurt?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Are you bleeding?'

A short pause. 'Er . . .' Then a longer one. 'Yes.'

'Then, Harry, you must come down at once.'

'You'll tell me off.'

'I won't tell you off, Harry.' I pause to consider this. So, evidently, does he. One of his trainered feet stirs the green canopy. 'Well, I will tell you off, of course, but not nearly as loudly as you might expect, because I will be much more concerned about how badly you're hurt. Whereas if you refuse to come down and you bleed all over Mr Tinkler's tree, I cannot be held responsible for the consequences. There. Are you going to come down?'

Glenda Heaven looks at me as if I am quite, quite mad.

Another rustle. 'Are you going to tell my dad?'

'That depends on how badly you're hurt.'

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'I'm okay.'

'I think that's for me to decide, don't you?'

'But I am.'

'So come down, then, Harry, and prove it.'

It's a tense thirty seconds. Reputations are at stake here. And it remains to be seen whose will win out. But today is my day to prevail, it seems, because, to my probably illconcealed elation, he does.

My mother had another pearl of wisdom. The thing to do with blood, she always said, is to take quick action and make sure the water never goes above thirty-eight degrees. Otherwise the proteins denature and you can't get it off. I don't know if this is true (it sounds feasible enough) but as I help Harry slither down the last bit of tree-trunk it occurs to me that my suit and I may soon find out. He has two bloodied knees, a badly scraped palm, and a gash below his mouth you could slip a pound coin in. The legacy, I think, of a run-in with his teeth.

'Oh, my Lord!' says Glenda, and begins bustling around him. Glenda bustles most of the time. Into rooms, under desks, around vomiting children. The bustle is her weapon against all forms of anarchy and the currency with which she negotiates the day.

'Minging!' say the two year-sixers, in unison. Glenda bustles them back through the hedge.

It's raining steadily now, but nevertheless quite a crowd has gathered at the perimeter of the sensory garden (most children in this school being conversant with the rules regarding trespass on it outside the prescribed times), which John Patterson, my deputy, who has been on playground duty, is attempting to corral into orderly lines. Harry's gash, stimulated by the attention most probably, pours blood profusely and obligingly as we walk.

I almost say, 'show over,' because they're such a rapt audience, but instead I help him back across the playground, stern-faced, while Glenda click-clacks behind us.

I sit him down on a chair in the medical room and inspect him. He's been crying. There's a brown abstract study on his cheeks. But now he's chewing his top lip and being brave.

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