

Alex T. Smith

MURDER!
BY NARWHAL!

*A
Grimacres
Whodunnit!*

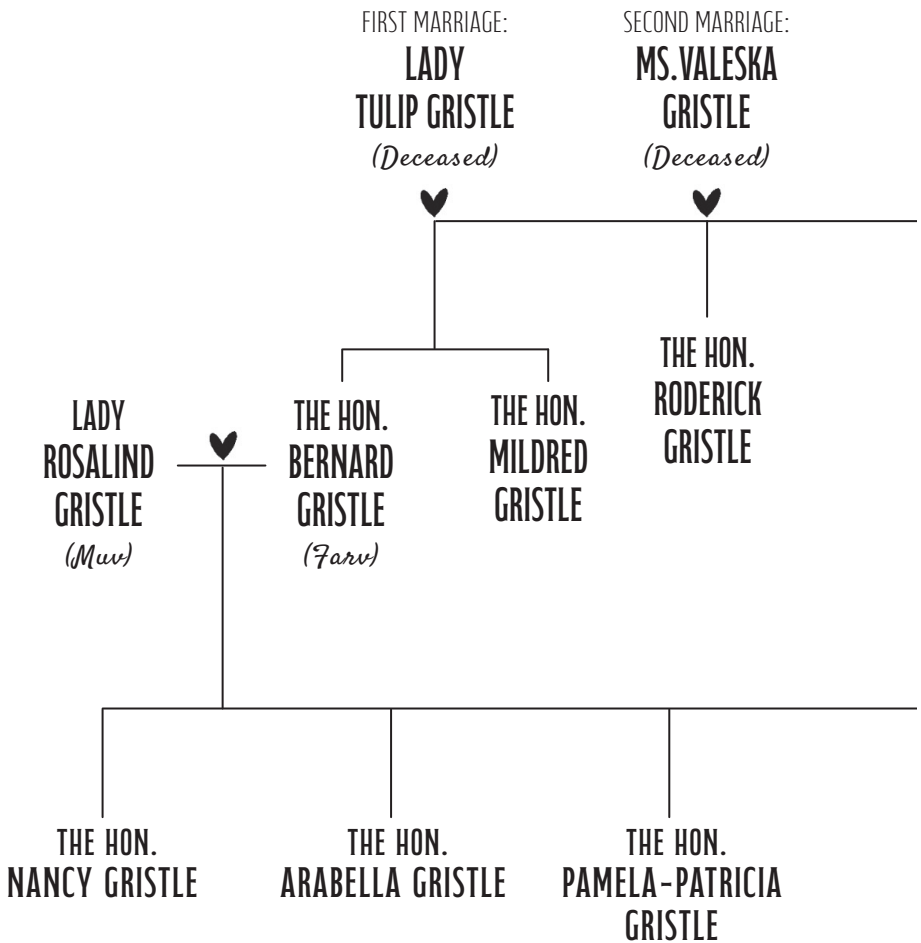


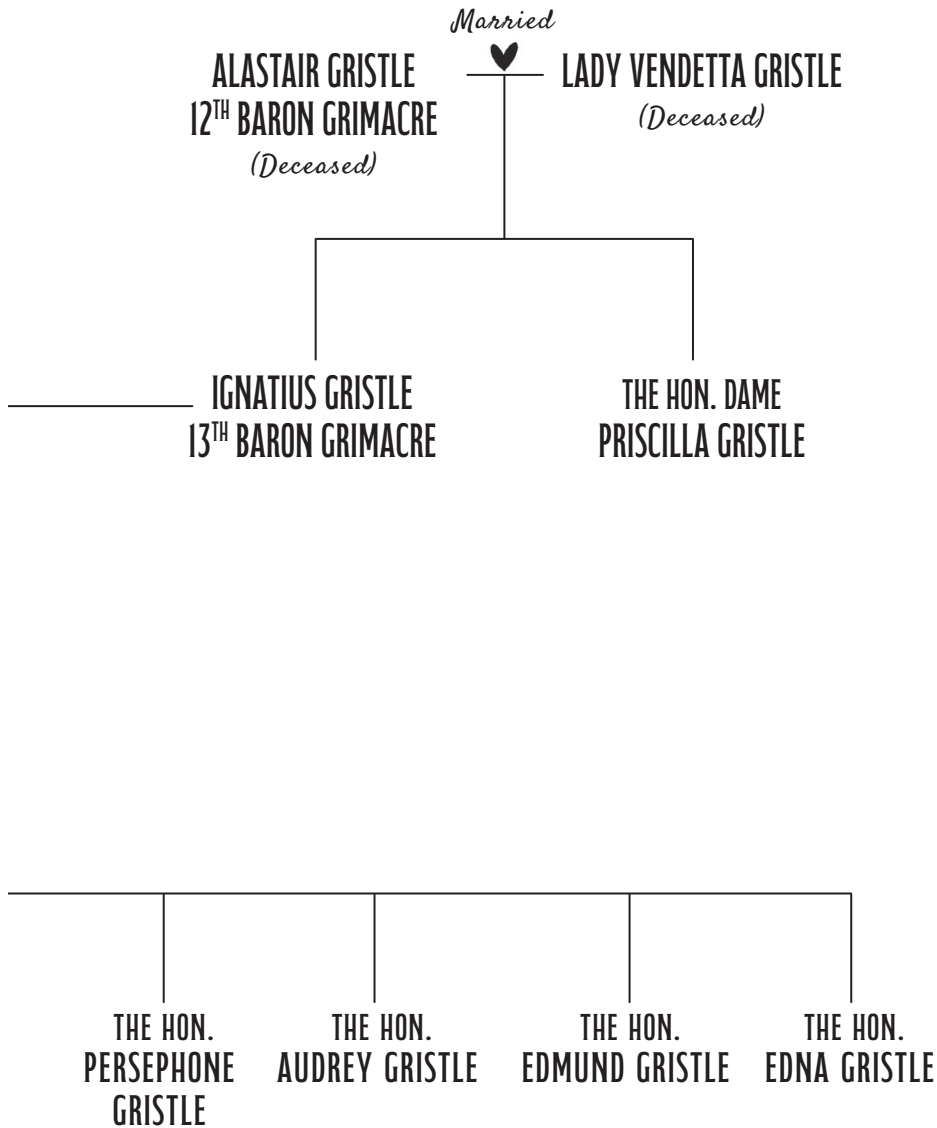
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HODDER

An account of the
first murder investigation
conducted by
the Honourable Edna Gristle
(human), aged 11,
and Charles Darwin
(tortoise), age Undetermined.



The GRISTLE FAMILY TREE









IGNATIUS GRISTLE, 13TH BARON GRIMACRE



MRS DEIRDRE CRUMPET



DR. LILLIAN MCDUGAL



DETECTIVE BADGER (RETIRED)



THE HON. AUDREY GRISTLE



THE HON. DAME PRISCILLA GRISTLE



MISS GIOVANNA BELLISSIMA



MISS GLORIA BLOUSE



PROLOGUE

I never thought I would be lucky enough to stumble across a dead body because I don't have a dog.

In the newspapers, corpses are always found by people out on bracing morning walks with their spaniel, or whatever. Might be a Labrador, of course. Could even be a chihuahua. Anyway, the walk will begin perfectly normally, but then suddenly the hound will go racing ahead excited by an enticing pong. They dive into a hedge and disappear into the undergrowth, and you can call them until you are blue in the face but they will absolutely not come back. You might as well talk to a rock.

Then, five minutes later, the panting owner (mud-covered now with twigs knotted in their hair and their specs on sideways) comes hoofing through the bracken and discovers



their pooch sniffing about at a corpse with an axe in its head. It doesn't have to be an axe in their head. They might have been twanged by a crossbow, for example, or throttled with an old bootlace or something. That's not the point. The point is that some people have dogs and those people have all the luck.

I always hoped that one day one of the corpse-finders would be me. I think I could strike the right balance between being shocked whilst at the same time taking in all the details so I could be terrifically useful to the police. I'd gasp in startled amazement so beautifully because I've been practising for years. But like I say – so far no dog: no dead bodies.

What I *do* have though is a pet tortoise called Charles Darwin. He's marvellous in many ways but as a rule, tortoises aren't the best at finding anything. Well, they are good at finding a bit of cucumber to furiously chomp on, but nothing much else. So really it was *quite* a stroke of luck that Charles Darwin should actually lead me to find my first dead body. It wasn't (as I'd imagined) in a woodland clearing, but you don't always get everything in life and you have to celebrate the successes you do get.

But I'm gabbling ahead of myself. If I am going to tell you about what happened that weekend at Grimacres, I probably need to start from the beginning. But where IS the beginning? The murder wasn't the start of it all, but it was the start of *my* investigation, or as SOME members of my family called

it at the time, my ‘nose-poking’. Of course the real story started well before then. Well before even the narwhal got involved.

Oh, I forgot to mention that a narwhal, that great tusked, swimming mammal, is involved, but more on that later.

So where DO I begin? I’ve been sitting here chewing the end of my pencil trying to decide. I suppose, for me at least, it all began on the Friday . . .

EXHIBIT A: *An extract from:*

GREAT ANCIENT HOUSES OF ENGLAND : THE GOOD AND THE DREADFUL .

by Felicity Wattle-Daub.

Without doubt the most foreboding of England's great houses, Grimacres crouches, all blackened brickwork and maliciously glinting windowpanes, like a great, evil toad in a deep valley six miles from the picturesque ancient market town of Much Maudlin.

Set within extensive and sprawling grounds and surrounded by a thick ring of its own privately owned forest, Grimacre Wood, the house is accessed via one thin and winding road which in

bad weather regularly, and by design of the Gristle ancestors, cuts the house off from the rest of civilisation.

A residence has stood on the current Grimacres plot since well before medieval times, and the house and grounds have been added to and altered significantly since then by successive members of the Gristle family. The current facade of the house was built by Lord Hades Gristle and looks not unlike a fortress or even a prison.

Due in part to its remote location, but mainly because of the owner's dim view of – to use their phrase – 'sticky-beaked, nose-pokers', the exact design and construction of the interior of Grimacres is clothed in myth and mystery. It is unknown how many rooms the vast, sprawling property has, and rumours abound of secret passages, ghostly occurrences and even hidden treasure!

(It ought to be added that the author of this book did write to the owner for verification of these facts and we received our letter back, ripped up with a large note stuck to it that simply said 'NO'.)

It's believed that the current owner, Ignatius Gristle, Baron Grimacre, lives at the property with some members of his extended family as well as an enormous collection of artefacts collected from around the world.

Despite his age, Ignatius Gristle remains the CEO of The Jolly BonBon LTD confectionery company, although the management of the company is handled by his only daughter, the Hon. Mildred Gristle.

More information regarding the family can be found in the book
**'A GUIDE TO THE BRITISH
ARISTOCRACY'**
by Sir Henry Fox-Hunt.

WARNING:

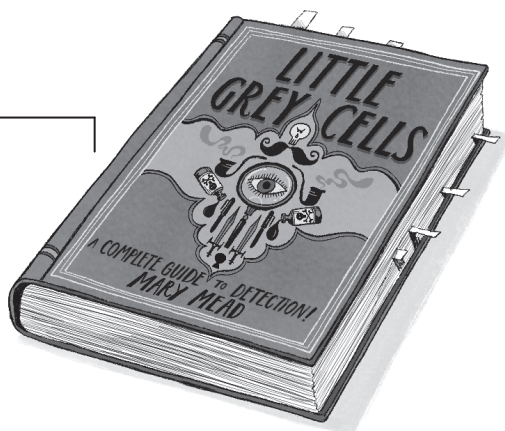
Unlike many great country houses that welcome visitors wholeheartedly with a cafe full of buns, the author of this book would advise readers NOT to enter the Grimacres estate under ANY circumstances.

Visitors are NOT welcome and anyone who does call at the property does so at their own tremendous risk.

PART ONE: A MOVEABLE ZOO



'Little Grey Cells: A Complete Guide to Detection'
by Mary Mead. Published
by Machette Books. From
the personal library of
the Hon. Edna Gristle.



CHAPTER 1.

UNSUITABLE BOOKS FOR CHILDREN ABOUT MURDER

We arrived at Grimacres on Friday afternoon just in time for tea, which was good because I was absolutely gasping for a scone.

I was keen to be out of the rusty old Daimler and back in the familiar shadowy walls of my Grandpa's house. The journey from London had taken HOURS and every bit of it had been awful because Sid, our chauffeur, has disappeared so Farv was driving us himself. Outside, the snow that had been threatening for days started to fall the minute we set off and it only got worse as we crawled out of the city and travelled up north to Grimacres. By the time we'd squeezed down the narrow lane through the woods into the Grimacres estate, a full blizzard was swirling around us.

The mood inside the car had been just as chilly. Ice cold

and crow black. Everyone (apart from me and Charles Darwin) was in a frightful mood and hadn't uttered a word to each other for the entire journey. Muv was up front, sleek as a she-wolf and hunkered down in her fur collar, livid that she'd had to cancel all her tennis lessons with her very dear friend, Valentino. Farv was growling with temper too about, well, everything. A bad mood had been inflating him like a balloon for weeks, but Grandpa demanding we leave that morning *immediately* seemed to have finally made it burst. Farv crouched over the steering wheel, huffing and puffing like a grampus and driving terribly.

In the back I kept schtum, cursing myself for having eaten the last of my Halloween bonbons before we'd even made it out of our road. After I'd put Charles Darwin into the tea cosy he wears as a jumper on trips to Grandpa's, I realised I had NOTHING to do. As a rule, I don't believe in boredom, but after I'd spent a few nice minutes chewing the end of my plaits, I had to admit that all I *could* do for the rest of the journey was sit quietly with Charles Darwin on my lap and twiddle my thumbs.

What I was panting to do, of course, was get stuck into the book I was reading. It was a terribly good one – all about MURDERS: how they were committed (grisly!) and how the killers were eventually caught (cunning!). REALLY THRILLING STUFF! But Muv (spoilsport) disagrees.

She says my preferred reading matter is *distasteful*. She

wishes I'd read nice books about flower arranging and tittering behind fans and how to seat guests correctly at candlelit suppers. She says these are Useful Subjects for Young Ladies, but honestly who has time for all that sort of nonsense? I don't and neither does Charles Darwin.

The reason I couldn't read my book secretly in the car was because my sister Audrey was sitting beside me and like all siblings she does have a tendency to ruin things. She sat glaring sullenly out of the window, seemingly lost in her own furious thoughts. I knew from experience that didn't mean anything though. All I'd have to do was turn the page too loudly or chortle too uproariously and she'd be tattle-taling on me until the cows came home, and I didn't want to risk another row erupting.

There'd already been a stinker earlier that day when Grandpa's invitation had plopped on the mat. Audrey had immediately started her caterwauling: she COULDN'T leave London this weekend, she HAD to stay. WHY couldn't she be left on her own? URGH, everything was so unfair – NONE of the rest of our other sisters or our brother had to go!

'They don't live here any more,' I said, helpfully, 'and anyway *I'm* one of your sisters and *I* have to go . . .'

Audrey looked at me with one of her narrow-eyed snake looks and spat: 'You don't count!'

There's absolutely no arguing with her when she's in a poisonous mood like this, so I just stumped upstairs to throw

some pants in my suitcase. Eventually, after a lot of shouting and door slamming, and Audrey even storming out of the house for a bit, we finally set off. And now, hours later, and almost frozen solid, we had arrived at Grimacres.

As we stumbled, stiff-legged from the car, I took a moment to look up at the house. It loomed over us, big and black against the darkening sky and the white falling snow. I saluted to the two hideous gargoyles that leered down at us from above the porch, but they didn't salute back. They never do. Despite that, I couldn't help but grin. I was delighted to be back at Grimacres, but little did I know then that the countdown to a murder had already begun.

TICK

TOCK . . .

A stuffed deer head, slightly moth eaten, from the main hall at Grimacres.

CHAPTER 2.

A SHIVER OF DANGER AT THE BACK OF THE NECK



Aunt Mildred met us at the door, crossing her cardigan tightly over her bust and telling us to ‘Get in! Get in! Get in!’ before we all froze to death.

We got in! Got in! Got in! And she slammed the door firmly behind us.

Aunt M looked like she always did and by that I mean she looked just like Farv. They really could have been twins, except that they aren’t. Farv’s a bit older, but the likeness is extraordinary. If you cut Aunt M’s hair and drew a moustache on her she’d look just like him, or if you shaved Farv, gave him a wig and threw some pearls around his neck he’d look just like her. I might suggest us doing that one day to see if my theory is correct. Now wasn’t the time though.

‘Goodness, it’s absolutely FREEZING out there!’ said Aunt

M with a shiver. Her voice sounded tinny and echoey in the cavernous entrance hall.

It was hardly warmer inside. In fact, as I reluctantly wiggled free from my coat, I decided it was definitely colder inside than out. There was an enormous fireplace in the hallway but no fire crackling in it. There never was. Grandpa was a selfish cockroach of a person who only believed in heating the rooms that *he* was currently in. As he left a room he would tip water over the flames. For that reason, the temperature inside Grimacres was always so arctic it would have sent a polar bear reaching for a flask of hot chocolate and a couple of pairs of thick thermal knickers.

As everyone messed about with coats and taking off hats I looked appraisingly around the place. I was glad to see nothing had changed in the hallway since I was last there. That's one of the things I like about Grimacres – it's always exactly the same.

The entrance hall, as big as a ballroom, was panelled with wood stained so dark that it looked black. The vast stone staircase twisted like a broken leg into the gloom above us, and from every wall hundreds of pairs of glass eyes peered at us from the stuffed deer heads mounted on every vertical surface.

I saw Muv and Audrey shudder as they looked at them.

Muv really hates Grimacres. She says the entire place pulsates with a sinister energy. She likes light, bright fussy

fabrics with tasselly trims, and vases of pungent flowers. She doesn't like the sorts of houses that have stuffed deer heads staring at you from the walls, or samurai warrior outfits lined up along a landing, or an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus leant up against a chimney breast or an enormous sixteenth-century canon parked outside the dining room. Grimacres has all of those things.

I don't find it spooky at all. Of course I'd prefer it if the deer weren't dead, but they were dispatched that long ago by Gristles since departed that they're now just like objects in a museum to me. Also, a house as big as Grimacres could make you feel a bit like a lonely little pea rattling about in it, so it's very nice to have a few fluffy snouts sticking out of the walls to pat when you are on your way to the bathroom for a wee for example.

'Right – tea?' said Aunt M briskly. She pointed down the hall. 'We'll take it in the drawing room.' Then she dropped her voice. 'I've got a great big fire lit, but don't tell Daddy.'

I was about to dash off and find Archie, but at the mention of 'tea' my stomach growled angrily and I decided that Archie could wait. If I didn't have a scone immediately, I would simply collapse. I set off at a march down the hall to the drawing room because I don't need telling twice when food is involved, but Farv started to turn the other way.

'Actually, Mil, I . . . er . . . I'll just stick my head in to see the old man – he's in his study, I presume? Just er . . .

need to have a quick word with him about.’ – ‘he swallowed hard and looked a bit tight about the collar – ‘something er . . . important.’ He tried to sound jolly, but I could tell he was nervous. He was pulling at his moustache which is a sure sign that he’s feeling jumpy. I wondered what the important thing was that he needed to chat to Grandpa about because usually we all try to avoid speaking to him if we don’t have to. Grandpa has a horrible habit of being obnoxious and biting your ear off every time he speaks.

Farv was heading for Grandpa’s study, but Aunt M stopped him with a hand placed on his arm.

‘Oh no, you can’t do that I’m afraid, Bernard,’ she said quietly, and I noticed for the first time that she too was looking a bit tight and tense about her edges. ‘Daddy said that under no circumstances must he be disturbed. He doesn’t want to see anyone until dinner this evening. He’s very busy this afternoon.’

I strained my ears and sure enough I could hear the distant clack of a typewriter coming from the direction of Grandpa’s study.

‘Doing what?’ said Farv, all crinkle-browed. ‘*You* run the company!’

‘Oh yes,’ said Aunt M, doing that thing she does when *she’s* a bit unsure of herself which is to fuss with the tissue she keeps shoved up the sleeve of her twinset. ‘But he’s busy with *separate* business matters at the moment.

With his new secretary . . .’

Muv and Farv’s eyebrows hit the ceiling. ‘New secretary?’ said Farv, tugging at his moustache. ‘First I’ve heard of it.’

‘Yes, well,’ said Aunt M. ‘Hired her whilst he was away in Italy . . .’ She pursed her lips after that and said something to Muv and Farv with just her eyes that I didn’t quite understand.

I knew enough though to know that the look meant Aunt M had *quite* a lot she wanted to say about this new development but only when my earholes were out of the room.

‘Fine,’ sighed Farv like a deflating balloon ‘Plenty of time to speak to him later, I suppose.’

‘Just you make sure you do,’ hissed Muv under her breath, but of course Big Ears (me) heard her all right.

If there was one thing I knew about Grandpa, it was that he hated strangers – loathed them – so this information about a new secretary made my brain twitch. The arrival of a person not just to the grounds of Grimacres, but actually *into* the house and into Grandpa’s study – well, that was unheard of. And Farv was acting very strangely too. I didn’t know why at the time, but it made all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I think it was then that I got my first hint that something unusual, maybe even dangerous, was going to happen that weekend.

China teacup from the Gristle Family tea set, decorated with a pattern of poison ivy and toxic mushrooms. Mid 17th century.



CHAPTER 3.

A SUNBURNT FERRET

Aunt M threw open the door to the drawing room and I raced in to find a woman warming her hands in front of the fire. She had short hair and was wearing a pair of flannel slacks and a thick jumper. I beamed when I saw her.

‘LIL!’ I cried.

She turned round and groaned. ‘Oh no! Not YOU!’ she sighed in a soft Scottish accent. Then she smiled a twinkley smile and ruffled my hair.

OOH, I LOVE LIL! It’s Doctor Lillian Mc Dougal, actually, but because we are really rather great chums. I call her Lil. She calls me Trouble.

What I like best about her is that she is the only adult who will sit down and have a really good natter with me about infected blisters. Glorious!

‘I’ll ring for tea now,’ said Aunt M, pressing a little button on the wall that ding-dongs down in the kitchen. ‘I expect you’re all gasping for one after your journey!’

‘I certainly am!’ said Lil. ‘And I’ve only come up from Much Maudlin. Foul day out there!’

‘Look, is everything all right?’ asked Farv anxiously as he and Muv sat themselves down on one end of the long sofa. Audrey threw herself sulkily into an armchair and Charles Darwin and I plumped down on the enormous tiger skin rug in front of the fire. ‘With Father, I mean?’

‘What, medically?’ said Lil. She perched on the arm of Aunt M’s chair. ‘Yes, everything’s perfectly OK. I’m here as a guest today.’

She flicked her head in the direction of Grandpa’s office. ‘He’s ticking over fine – not that he ever believes me . . .’

She sighed. ‘I can’t do right by him at all. Do you know just before he went away to Italy, he said that he actually thought I was poisoning him! Ha! I said, ‘You can get yourself another doctor, Ignatius!’ But he wouldn’t, of course. Had me up and down here like a yo-yo demanding medicines for this, tablets for that. I’m telling you – these last few months without him here has been like a holiday for us, hasn’t it?’

She gave Aunt M’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

‘It’s been lovely!’ said Aunt M, smiling up at Lil.

As well as being our family doctor, Lil is also Aunt M’s special friend. They are always together and Lil is one of the

few people Grandpa will allow in the house – although that’s for selfish reasons of course. He likes to be checked over daily to make sure nothing is wrong with him. Mum says he’s staying alive out of spite.

Aunt M has a nice face, but often – like earlier when we’d been in the hall – it can look rather cloudy and pinched with worry. She runs the family business – The Jolly Bonbon Ltd practically on her own. It’s a big job and Grandpa, who is *meant* to be retired, will insist on causing trouble. He’s a horrible bully who enjoys sticking his nose in. He MEDDLES and often poor Aunt M has the look of someone who is quietly trying to work out fiendish sums in her head, which I suppose with her job, she often is. But whenever Lil is around, Aunt M brightens, as if the sun has just come out.

‘But he’s back now,’ said Lil, her brow furrowed, ‘and worse than ever!’

‘Oh . . .’ said Farv, wrinkle-browed.

‘I rather wondered if we’d been called here because he was dying or something?’ said Muv hopefully, as she flung one slim leg over another.

Aunt M laughed a rather hollow laugh. ‘Oh no, dear. Daddy’s too hearty for words!’

‘Pity . . .’ said Farv darkly.

‘Then what’s all this about?’ huffed Muv. ‘Mildred, it’s obviously always pleasant to see you both, but really – coming up here for the weekend with no notice is too inconvenient

for words! I've had to cancel a weekend FULL of tennis lessons with Valentino and I barely had a chance to let him know – had to leave a message for him. Goodness knows what he'll think . . .'

'I'm sure he'll cope . . .' said Farv dryly.

His eyes flickered to mine and a slight smile twitched under his moustache. I stifled a laugh. Valentino is Muv's very close friend and tennis teacher. She finds him delightful, but Farv and I can't stand him, although I do find him rather fascinating in a scientist-observing-a-specimen sort of way. Valentino really is extraordinary to look at. He must be about seven foot tall and handsome too, I suppose, if you like that sort of thing, which I don't. All year round he's tanned the colour of a polished mahogany table and his arms are so bumpy with muscles that he looks like he's shoved a load of balled-up socks up his sleeves. He's not what I call ha-ha-bonk funny, but Muv titters at everything he says. The pair of them are always off together in their matching pristine tennis whites, her with their expensive rackets and him with the balls. It's a blessing really, because when Muv's off playing tennis, she's not bothering me about standing up straight or brushing my hair or not wiping my mouth on my sleeve.

Muv ignored Farv and ploughed on. 'So go on, Mildred, what's he playing at demanding we come up at such short notice?'

Aunt M shrugged her fluffy shoulders. 'I've no idea! This

morning he just ordered Mrs Crumpet to get the rooms ready and told me you'd all be arriving later today. It was the first we'd heard about it, although obviously we're delighted you're here!'

Farv's forehead was a concertina of frowning wrinkles.

'I wonder if it's something to do with his birthday tomorrow? He'll be ninety . . . Although he usually just ignores birthdays.'

Before anyone could answer, the door creaked open and into the room came not as we'd expected, Mrs Crumpet, the Grimacres housekeeper and cook, but a man. He was carting an enormous tray heaving with toast and butter, scones and jam and teapots and teacups. It looked delicious and made my belly growl like a bear.

The food at home in London had taken rather a nose-dive recently, both in quality AND quantity. Our cook, Mrs Crabb, used to keep us well fed with all sorts of lovely things. You couldn't move for jam jars at breakfast for example, all different varieties. But that's changed recently and for the past few months we'd been rationed to one pot of blackcurrant jam (the worst flavour) and the bread's been like cardboard. The sight of Mrs Crumpet's glorious tea tray filled me with bursting confetti cannons of joy.

The man carrying the tray advanced at a snail's pace all hunched over, the tray shaking and the cups jangling in his jittering hands.

‘You . . . rang for tea, m’lady,’ he said in a quavering voice as he placed the tray on the table. Then in a flash he straightened up and grinned round at everyone and in his normal, drawling voice said, ‘I make an excellent elderly butler, don’t I?’

Well, no actually, he didn’t, because he’d sloshed hot tea over half the tray. Also he couldn’t have looked less like a butler if he’d tried. It was my Uncle Roderick, and he looked, I thought, like a very sunburnt ferret.

Uncle Roderick is Farv and Aunt M’s younger brother. Step-brother, actually. He was born much later when Grandpa remarried after my granny died yonks before I was born. He’s very tall and slim with a pencil-thin moustache and hangs about with the type of people that Farv sniffs at and Muv calls ‘Most Unsuitable’. He lives abroad in roasting hot places and swans about there in pastel linen slacks and open neck shirts. He was wearing that now which looked completely out of place in the dark, arctic gloom of Grimacres.

‘Oh Roderick, you are silly!’ said Aunt M. ‘Now, when did you get here?’

‘Just now,’ said Uncle Roderick. ‘Flew in this morning, got a car and came straight up. Filthy weather as per! People are abandoning their cars out there – one’s wedged in a snow drift just up the road, but I battled valiantly through!’ He puffed out his chest. ‘Couldn’t deprive you of seeing your dearest baby brother, could I?’

Farv snorted. He doesn't like Uncle Roderick.

'Oh! I didn't hear the front door go . . .' said Aunt M.

'It was unlocked anyway, but I met dear Mrs Crumpet in the hall and she saw me in. I said I'd bring the tray in for her. Told her it would give me a chance to slip some poison into the pot first!'

He grinned a devilishly devious grin. I laughed loudly – I rather like Uncle Roderick when he is in this sort of mood – but no one else did so I piped down pretty quickly and stroked Charles Darwin on the tea cosy.

'Well, that was very kind of you,' said Aunt M, vaguely, 'Well, sit yourself down and have some tea and – oh! Who's this?'

We all turned to look.

Uncle Roderick had thrown himself on to the sofa allowing us all to notice for the first time that behind him, in the darkness beyond the flickering light of the fire and the dim, little table lamps, someone was lurking.