

**JACK FORTUNE**  
**AND THE SEARCH FOR**  
**THE HIDDEN VALLEY**

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otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

THIS BOOK IS FOR MY PARENTS,  
WHO PUT SO MUCH LOVE  
INTO THEIR GARDENING.



# CHAPTER ONE

## The Final Straw

Jack Fortune was in a filthy temper. He stared crossly through the window of the coach as it rattled along Wild Hunt Lane, carrying him towards Cecily Smythe's stupid birthday party. The woods were thick and dark on either side of the road, so he could see his reflection in the glass. For a few minutes he had fun pulling fierce faces. They were splendidly scary, and he wished stupid Cecily could see them. That would make her think twice about asking him to her wretched party!

If it wasn't for her and Aunt Constance (who'd told him he had to go to the party, like it or not), he could be out there in the woods, digging up the dead rat he and his best friend Will Puddy had caught in a trap three days ago. They'd buried it, but they had left its tail sticking out of the ground like a flag, so they would

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be able to find it again. They were going to dig it up every few days to see how long it would take to turn into a skeleton. But no. Instead of doing something really interesting – a scientific experiment – he had to waste his time going to a stupid birthday party. He heaved a great sigh. It was *so* unfair.

The coach turned into the drive of Cecily's house. Jack eyed it gloomily. It wasn't so much a house as a mansion. Coombe Lodge, Aunt Constance's house, would fit comfortably into the cellars alone.

The cellars. Hm, there was a thought... damp, dark spaces. Water trickling down the walls. Cobwebs, rats, spiders. Girls didn't like that kind of stuff. They didn't like it at all. A plan began to form in his mind, and he smiled happily. Yes!

Cecily and her mother were waiting at the door to greet their guests. He jumped down from the coach and beamed at them.

"Cecily, thank you so much for asking me!"

Several hours later, he was back at Coombe Lodge, and Aunt Constance was holding his ear in a savage grip. Cecily's mother was glowering at him, and Jack was feeling a little queasy.

"Please, Lady Smythe, tell me what has happened. I promise you, nothing you have to tell me about my nephew can possibly surprise me. Indeed, I

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would venture to say that I have probably heard it all before.”

Lady Smythe darted a look of fury at Jack, and said, “Oh no, Mrs Greville – I don’t think you’ve heard anything quite like *this* before. Whilst I was attending to arrangements for tea, *that boy* persuaded my darling Cecily to play a game called ‘Sardines’. Perhaps you know it? One child hides, then, as the other children find her, they hide in the same place. By the time the bell was rung for tea, there wasn’t a child to be seen. We searched the house from top to bottom. I was most *fearfully* worried. Can you guess where we eventually found them, Mrs Greville?”

Jack really was feeling *very* sick.

“I fear I cannot,” said his aunt, twisting his ear painfully. “Please enlighten me.”

He didn’t think he could hold it in much longer...

“In the cellar!” declared Her Ladyship, her eyes flashing with anger. “Between them they had drunk a whole bottle of sherry and started on His Lordship’s best port. Can you *imagine* the state they were in? Can you conceive of my feelings, Mrs Greville, as a mother and a hostess? Can you picture my distress? Never, never in my entire life...”

...Oh, he did feel bad. He’d never, ever felt this bad. His stomach was heaving and there was a horrible taste

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in his mouth. No – it was no use – he just couldn't hold it in any longer! He pitched forward, opened his mouth – and sprayed the contents of his stomach all over Aunt Constance's best Wilton carpet, the hem of her lavender silk dress and the toes of her fine kid shoes...