

ANTE'S INFERNO

Chapter 1

Solo

The grass was wet underfoot. It soaked through Ante's shoes, chilling her feet till they felt as numb as her fingers, curled around the cold metal trumpet. Wriggling her toes, she fought the impulse to jump up and down. Not a good idea when the breeze was already blowing her black hair in wild, frizzy strands across her face and flapping the hem of her skirt against her knees – her *knees*! How many other girls had hems that long? Very few, judging by the groups making their way across the football pitch towards her, interspersed by knots of boys in their grey trousers or shorts.

She grimaced. The uniform had felt wrong from the start, grey pleats and long woollen socks doing nothing either for her solid build or for her dark skin. Now it felt even worse as the whole of Northwell School gathered in a semi-circle before her, staring...

She shook herself. *Don't be stupid*. People were looking at her because of where she stood, that was all. OK, so some of the younger ones might be whispering and giggling but it wasn't directed at her. It wasn't *them*. Glancing around, she felt a flicker of hope rise in her chest. They weren't even there. They must have decided to bunk off. *Yes!* One thing less to worry about.

A stillness settled on the crowd. Gusts of wind shook raindrops from trees nearby and tugged at red poppies, loosely tucked into button holes. All eyes turned to the headmaster, standing on the other side of the tall stone cross from her, about to begin.

Not all. A movement, there, on the left... *no*. Not them, it couldn't be. They should be

hiding out in the changing rooms, too cool for this whole Remembrance thing. Not here, calmly threading their way to the front, the others shrinking back to let them through. Ante forced her gaze upwards, above their heads, above everyone, trying to focus on the jumble of roofs and tall chimneys that marked the school buildings in the distance. Anything not to see what was now straight in front of her.

There was no point. The figures were etched on her brain. With her eyes closed she could have picked out Florence's delicate features, the wave of blonde hair across her forehead; then Shelley's shining braids, smooth against her perfect black skin; and finally Alex's pale, pinched face and sharp green eyes. She could even have predicted Alex choosing the moment the Head began to speak to turn to Florence and mouth those horrible words, making Florence crease up with laughter.

Pain shot through her fingers as they tightened round the trumpet. That name again! If Alex had chanted 'Ante E-le-phantee, Ante E-le-phantee!' out loud it couldn't have rung in her ears more than it did now, as she stood like a great clumsy idiot, waiting to sound her trunk, oops, no, *very* funny, her trumpet – while they waited for her to mess it up.

Don't look at them. Don't look at them and everything will be OK. She fixed her attention on the Head's stern profile, letting his words swirl in her mind before being lost to the wind. 'First World War...tragic slaughter in the trenches...many old pupils from this school, some barely out of their teens...terrible hardship, as those of you in Year Seven are learning in History....' History! She'd forgotten her homework on trench warfare, Mr Matthews would go *crazy*.... Her gaze wandered away to encounter – *them*. They were still staring at her. Three pairs of eyes, blue, brown and green, stared into hers, above smiles playing over pursed lips.

'John Hawkins, Edward Horrocks, David Lonsdale....' The names of the fallen blended into one solemn, continuous murmuring. *Please, please, let the list go on. On and on forever.*

Then I don't have to play. But at last the Head ceased; a brief echo from the crowd, and away in the distance a church clock struck eleven.

Silence. A steady hum of traffic drifted across from the far side of the school buildings. Ante moistened her lips and breathed softly down the mouthpiece, making no sound.

Then Mr Randall caught her eye and she raised the trumpet. All fidgeting in the crowd ceased. People stood still, head bowed and hands by their sides, until the final notes of the *Last Post* faded on the air.

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‘Well done, Antonia – I mean, Ante. I’m sure your father would’ve been proud of you.’ Mr Randall strode through the crowd making its way back to the classrooms, his eager eyes sending wrinkles all the way up his large forehead, over which grey wisps of hair floated in the wind.

Pride swelled in her chest. ‘Really?’

For that alone it was worth it. The practice, the nerves, the loneliness – not just standing there on her own, but from the beginning of term, joining the school for the last two years instead of in Year Four like everyone else. Her dad would’ve stood at the back, head on one side, not looking at her, not wanting to break her concentration; then at the end there’d be a quick, warm smile from his eyes, a wave and he’d be gone.

‘Definitely. Keep it up and you’ll be the one with your own jazz band one day.’

‘Thanks, Mr Randall!’

‘Next thing we’ll have you playing in is the Christmas concert. Let’s see now – I’ve got a music class in the assembly hall first lesson this afternoon. Come by just before – ten to two, say, and we’ll talk about it.’

She gazed after him, aching to burst into a grin, her insides in turmoil. That rush of feeling, like when the letter first arrived – months ago now – with the news she’d won the music scholarship, when her mother had squealed and hugged her and they’d both danced round the room, that same sensation surged through her again. She was *good*. She could do this! Northwell School with its odd traditions and uniforms, its cluster of ancient, turreted buildings, parkland and playing fields rolling down to the river – so different from the crumbling concrete and brick walls of St Dunstan’s – the whole place might still feel strange but things would work out. Surely, once she got used to her being there, even Florence would –

‘Thanks, Mr Randall. Quite the performer, aren’t we?’

Her chest tightened.

Florence came nearer. ‘You just have to be the star, don’t you, Ante? You and no one else.’

How could hissing sound so gentle? She shrank away but immediately straightened; Shelley and Alex had positioned themselves uncomfortably close on her other side.

‘Standing up there, all eyes on you, I bet you think you’re *really* something.’

Heat swept up Ante’s throat. ‘I – I don’t, I just – look, I didn’t ask to do that. It was Mr Randall. He – made me.’

‘Oh, come on, Ante, we’re not at St Dunstan’s anymore. You can stop pretending.’

Ante stopped dead at the edge of the playground. ‘What do you mean? Pretending what?’

‘No one can make you do something, Ante Alganesh. It’s your choice. Like when you chose to –’ Florence broke off, biting her lip.

Ante stared at her. ‘Chose to what?’

But Florence shook her head and set off across the playground so fast that Shelley and Alex had to run to keep up.

‘Chose to WHAT?’ Ante didn’t care if people were staring; what was this all about? ‘St Dunstan’s? Florence, you left after the first term!’

The doors to the classroom block swung shut. Ante stared at the empty space. ‘*That* term,’ she murmured.

December, six years ago. Frost in rivulets on the pavement and sparkling on car windscreens. Light catching her mother’s hair and separating it into strands of spun copper as she bent to zip up Ante’s anorak before swivelling round to wave goodbye. And Ante, dazzled by bright metal of wheels and handlebars, screwing up her eyes to catch her father’s last smile as he set off, ear flaps of his ridiculous sheepskin cap lifting in the wind, down the road that took him away forever.

Chapter 2

Breaking Point

Oh hell, they'd waited for her.

If staying on after History to explain about her missing homework had made Ante late for lunch, at least it should have meant she could eat it in peace. Florence, always at the front of the queue, should be finished and gone by now; not sitting round a table right by the food counter, Shelley and Alex beside her and a few other classmates who'd be perfectly nice if Florence wasn't there.

Clutching her tray, she focussed on the grey-flecked lino under her feet. Not on the sniggering and exchanged glances and – worse – the silence that fell as she approached. A silence broken by the slight, fair-haired figure in the middle who began to hum, beating time gracefully with her slim hand as Ante's still-soggy feet clumped closer.

'Ah, Ante. There you are.'

Ante's heart thumped in her chest. *Take no notice.* No way was she going to sit with them. She could go somewhere else, sit by herself like the other loners. Slowly, she walked past the table.

But Florence's words seemed to wrap themselves around her legs and pull her back. 'Ante, perhaps *you* can help. You're the musical one.'

No. Don't stop. Don't turn round.

'Naa-na-naa-na-naa-naa,' sang Florence, as if to herself. 'No, I can't work it out. Which do you reckon works better? "*Ante E-le-phantee*" or "*Antonia E-le-phan-tonia*?" The second one's a bit clunky but—'

Something rushed through her. She couldn't hold it. Her tray crashed down on the table

between Florence and Shelley. Water from the glass splashed her hand but she felt nothing. All she could feel was the bright blue eyes laughing up at her as she leaned over, speechless, gripping the tray so hard her finger nails cut into the wood.

‘Woah, temper, temper. Isn’t it time you learnt to control that?’

Faces around the table seemed to dissolve. Dimly from the right came Shelley’s voice, trying to intervene. ‘Florence –’

All was drowned as her own voice tore through her, scraping her throat and bursting out in a cry that wouldn’t stop. ‘I hate you, Florence, I hate you, I *hate you!*’

She shot out her hand and grabbed the nearest thing within reach: a pepper pot. Her arm jerked through the air and suddenly the blue eyes were no longer laughing. Florence fell back in her chair, face screwed up, sneezing and coughing.

‘You *c-cow*, Ante,’ she choked, ‘I’ll get you for this!’

Ante’s hand fell to her side. She felt limp suddenly, exhausted.

What had she done? The pepper... Florence’s eyes...no! She hadn’t been as close as that, hadn’t meant–

‘Out of the way!’ An elbow hit her in the ribs as Shelley lunged forwards holding a glass. Bodies crowded round, blocking Ante’s view of the water hitting its target so that all she could hear was spluttering and gasping and at last, Shelley’s soothing tone: ‘It’s OK, Florence, you’ll be OK. It’s not that bad.’

A wave of hope rose in Ante’s chest. Through a gap in the shoulders turned towards her she glimpsed pale features dappled with red blotches, eyes blinking... *blinking*. Florence must be all right then, surely she wouldn’t be able to do that if–

A flick of lank hair. From the other side of the table Alex’s sharp chin raised in her direction. ‘*Get her,*’ she hissed. ‘We’re going to the Head *right now.*’

Faces spun round, mouths set hard. Hands seized her arms. No, not the Head, not that!

Twisting away from the fingernails digging into her flesh she wrenched herself free, scarcely noticing the stabs of pain, and ran from the dining room. Along the passage, through the door to the outside, cold air striking her face – damn! The pepper pot was still in her hand. Stuffing it into her pocket, she shot down the steps and into the playground. She had no idea where she was going, all that mattered now was to get away. Fast.

A clunk behind her as the door swung shut, muffling the sound of feet thundering in the corridor, the cries of outrage – they were all after her! She dashed across the playground towards the main school building, scattering marbles and getting in the way of football games as she went. People yelled but she didn't stop. Up the steps, into the lobby – here at last she paused, breathing hard.

Dark panelling covered all four walls. Straight ahead wide polished wooden stairs led upwards. To her left, glints of aluminium and glass marked school photographs hanging either side of the door into the assembly hall; to her right lay the corridor along the science labs. If she slipped down this she could emerge at the other end and – no! Of course the door would be locked during lunch, why didn't she think of that? Stairs then, but which way? Down to the changing rooms, gloomy, hidden away, ideal if you wanted to corner someone – or risk the floor above, only containing staff room and store cupboards and out of bounds to pupils?

No time to think. Heart beating hard, she shot up the forbidden staircase, reaching the landing just as the main door banged open and feet charged through, racing down the stairs to the changing rooms. Pressing her hot palms against the wall, Ante leaned back and closed her eyes. They would never dare come up here. She was safe.

Familiar voices emerged back up the changing-room stairs, arguing angrily.

'Well, I don't know, do I? It was Florence who reckoned she'd be in the dungeons, not me.'

‘She must’ve gone into the hall instead.’

‘Yeah, well, she won’t be in there now, it’s no use looking. I said we should check there first.’

‘Why didn’t you then? If you thought it was such a brilliant idea...’

The main door closed and the voices ceased. Ante remained where she was, trying to gather her thoughts.

She was in deep trouble. That was certain. Her first term not yet over and she’d done something so awful as to send her straight to the Head. To the Head! What would he do? An answer shot into her mind and her knees turned to water.

Not that. Please, please, not that. She clenched her fingers so tightly the nails cut into her palms. She’d do anything, take any punishment, if only he’d give her another chance, prove the scholarship hadn’t been a mistake, she could handle herself...

Handle herself. That was a joke.

It wasn’t as if it had been an equal fight. Hadn’t she just attacked a girl half her size and strength? What did that make her? Supposing – a new thought struck her with a force that made her reel – supposing she really *had* hurt Florence, *had* damaged her eyesight? It didn’t look like it; but what if Florence had collapsed just afterwards, that even now she was being rushed to hospital... Ante’s blood ran cold.

Then she remembered. *It was Florence who reckoned she’d be in the dungeons, not me.* Someone in that state wouldn’t be up to reckoning anything. Nor would Shelley and Alex have abandoned their friend to chase after her. She began to breathe more easily.

Click. Her heart jumped. The main door opened again and someone with light footsteps walked to the bottom of the stairs. Too light for a teacher. Someone who knew exactly what she was looking for and where to find it.

‘Ante. I can tell you’re up there. It’s no use hiding, you know. Not after what you’ve done.’

You might as well come down now and save me the trouble.'

She pressed herself back against the wall, gripping the wooden panelling to stop herself shaking. *Keep calm. She's bluffing. She won't really come up here.*

'Fine. If that's the way you want it.' The stairs creaked.

Ante looked around her. No escape. The oak-panelled wall rose straight ahead. To the right, the corridor that led to the staffroom: it might be empty, all the teachers being at lunch, but she couldn't be sure. Suddenly her eye fell on a door she hadn't seen before, cut into the panelling at her side. Seizing the handle, she slipped through, closing the door behind her.

For a minute she couldn't think where she was. Gradually shapes and lengths of darkness sharpened into the outlines of a wooden balcony sticking out half-way up a huge room, no, a hall... of course. The assembly hall, the oldest part of the school, dating back hundreds of years apparently, long before Dr Northwell arrived on the scene. And this must be the organ loft, now used only to hold the lights for school plays and concerts.

Her body tensed. She was no safer than before; Florence could find the door any second. Deeper into the gloom, that was her only hope...*ouch*. Those damn lights! She grabbed at the balcony rail for support and – *it moved under her hand*.

Shrinking back, she scrabbled behind her for the wall. The blood beat in her ears as she flattened herself against the plaster. That had been a close one. Best keep away from the rail.

'Ante.' A crack of light appeared. 'You're in here, aren't you? Come on, Ante, I know you are.'

Don't move. Don't even breathe.

The crack of light grew. 'Congratulations, scholarship girl. You just got yourself expelled.'

Against the brightness of the landing the blonde head wore a halo of gold. Ante bit her lip, feeling the skin tighten under her teeth.

'Did you really think you could attack me and get away with it?' Stepping forwards,

Florence peered into the darkness. ‘Thought you could barge into Northwell School and have everything your own way, just like at St Dunstan’s?’

Sweat trickled down Ante’s neck. In the blackness behind her eyelids Florence lunged at her, nails aiming for her face. Wincing, Ante struck the back of her head on the wall.

‘Because I have news for you.’ The voice became sweeter than ever. ‘Things have changed since we were little. You got away with it then. Not anymore.’

Florence’s hand was on the rail. Ante inhaled sharply.

‘*There* you are,’ Florence cried. ‘Think I can’t see you?’

She walked forwards. Ante, trembling, watched the hand move along the rail. *I should warn her*. She opened her mouth but no sound came out.

‘Scared of me, are you?’ jeered Florence. The rail moved slightly but she didn’t notice. ‘You should be,’ she added softly, letting her hand bear more weight as her feet squeezed past a spotlight.

Ante gasped. *I must warn her!* But it was as if her throat had closed and she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t form the words, and the image flashed across her mind of this hand creeping towards her freezing suddenly, of something happening to prevent—

Crack. A tremor seemed to go through Florence. The smile vanished from her face. And in that moment Ante saw what she hadn’t seen before.

They were not alone. Next to Florence, intense, grey eyes gazing straight into Ante’s, stood the dim, shadowy figure of a boy. No time to think who he was or how he’d got there.

‘Get back from the hand rail,’ she cried, her voice suddenly free. ‘It’s not safe!’

The next moment came a crash and a scream and the sound of old, dry wood breaking into splinters. For a split second Florence’s face, white as death, seemed suspended in the air; then something hit the floor below with a sickening thud.

Dizziness swept through Ante. Her legs gave way. She fell against the wall but the wall

itself seemed to be sliding away from her, sending her toppling backwards. A shape rushed past her, followed by a hard edge scraping the length of her shin, like the bottom of a door swinging back into place – then all was darkness.

