

# • CHAPTER 1 •



## IT BEGAN WITH A LETTER

Clarence and Pilar Fillmore didn't even have time to drop their bags on the floor of the lobby before surprising things began happening at the Whippet Hotel. It had been a long travel day and they'd arrived home late. They'd expected to see no one until morning, but Captain Rickenbacker was sliding down the banister, wearing his red cape, which flapped in the breeze behind him. It felt very much like he'd been waiting for the door of the hotel to open so he could descend on an unsuspecting visitor.

When Captain Rickenbacker arrived at the bottom of the stairs, he produced a white envelope from his vest pocket.

“This came for you in the afternoon post.”

He said the words like they were part of a grand conspiracy.

“Hello, Captain Rickenbacker,” Clarence said. “It’s nice to see you, too.”

“It’s from *him*.”

“Him? Who is *him*?” Pilar asked. She had the most charming Mexican accent Clarence Fillmore had ever heard — he never grew tired of hearing it — but Captain Rickenbacker’s voice was all business.

“There is only one him — *the* him,” Captain Rickenbacker said.

Pilar looked at Clarence, puzzled but amused. She loved all the quirky people who lived in the Whippet Hotel.

“Merganzer D. Whippet,” Clarence said, for there really was only one *him* in their world, it was true.

“Of course. What was I thinking?” Pilar said, batting her deep brown eyes in the direction of the envelope as she gently removed it from Captain Rickenbacker’s hand.

The captain fluffed his cape and turned to go, then looked back and added one more piece of information he’d nearly forgotten to share.

“Oh, and the top of the hotel has vanished. I’m investigating.”

Clarence should have been highly alarmed, but he was used to the extraordinary goings-on at the hotel. He took it in stride.

“Where are Leo and Remi?” Mr. Fillmore asked.

But Captain Rickenbacker was already leaving, on his way back up the stairs in the direction of the Pinball Machine, where he solved crimes and ate donuts. He was not one to dawdle after a mission had been completed.

“Better read it,” Pilar said, stepping out of her sandals. She liked the feel of the cool marble floor on the bottoms of her feet.

And so Clarence popped the wax seal on the envelope, removed the letter, and read it out loud.

*Clarence and Pilar,*

*Welcome home! I trust you had a marvelous time on your honeymoon in the Riviera. You have been missed!*

*Things have been quiet as usual in your absence. Humdrum, dull, a real snooze. The boys were practically dying of boredom, so I decided to intervene on their behalf.*

*I hope you won't mind that I've taken them on a little adventure. Nothing too exciting. There will be a lot of naps and checkers, that sort of thing.*

Take good care of the hotel in their absence.  
I'll have them back in a week.

With fondness on your return,  
Merganzer D. Whippet

The truth, of course, was there had been no hum-drum, no dull, no snoozing at the Whippet Hotel while Pilar and Clarence had been away. Leo and Remi had been in the vast underbelly of the hotel most of the time, searching through a hidden jungle, a mad scientist's underground laboratory, and the realm of gears, which had all been every bit as dangerous as it sounds.

Pilar shrugged. Though she still had a bride's glow about her, she was also exhausted from all the traveling.

"It's Merganzer. How dangerous could it be?" she asked.

But Clarence knew better. *A little adventure* could mean almost anything when it came to Merganzer D. Whippet. At least Leo and Remi were smart, resourceful, and careful.

"They'll be fine," he said with a half smile, for he was only half sure. "How about we start our week by getting some sleep?"

If only they'd known how Leo and Remi's little adventure was beginning, the last thing on their minds would have been turning in for the night.