

Chapter 1 - with Freddy the Scientist

Freddy carefully poured the water onto the glass slide. He straightened it up over the light on the microscope's stand, and stared into the little eyepiece.

He first caught sight of one of his own eyelashes which had got trapped in front of the lens. A big ugly black stripe across the viewfinder. He removed it quickly and readjusted his right eye to the eyepiece.

As usual, all he could see to start with was a blurry mass of grey stuff, still and confusing as his eye adjusted to the unfamiliar feeling of being pressed up against the eyepiece, and his left eye muscles became accustomed to being forced tight shut. He adjusted the little light source so that the messy grey mass became a messy white mass.

He reached down and started to adjust the focusing knob.

The first attempt had the usual result. A move from one greyish mess to another, interspersed with a split second when the lens was in focus. In that brief time a little world of blue and yellow swam before his eyes, until the focus knob took the world away from him.

More carefully now, he turned the knob very slowly back towards him, and saw the bright white circular light come into proper focus. As his eyes adjusted to the new clarity he drew suddenly back from the lens. His long fair hair flew back as he jolted his head away and rubbed his right eye, hardly daring to believe what he had just glimpsed.

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Other than that, all was quiet on New Year's Day.

The big house was cold.

In the distance, Clara could hear footsteps. She strained her ear a little as she made her way up the stairs. Straining her ear put her a little off her balance as she climbed higher, but she was then able to make out the footsteps more clearly. The steps stopped when she did, and started again when she started. But when she stopped walking she was puffing and panting so much she couldn't make out that the steps had stopped too.

The house played tricks on you like that. It was so big and old and cold that things like your own footsteps on the wooden stairs seemed not to be yours, and seemed to belong to some far-off person or place. Of course, when Clara looked down, walked, looked down, stumbled again, and listened, she realised that the steps were hers.

She relaxed and made the final few steps up to the fourth floor. At the top step, she sat down, and got her breath back. She sat there silently for a few minutes, then she got up, refreshed, and bounced her way onto the landing. Clara always bounced, or boinged, or banged her way into things, and today was no exception. She barged straight into Freddy who was

sitting at the desk with a pained expression on his face. He nearly lost his balance.

'What's up, mate?' she sung, in that annoyingly chirpy way she had.

He didn't respond to her chirpiness. She reached over and slapped him hard in the small of his back.

'No!' he yelled, 'I'm busy, look at this'.

'Busy is as busy does', she replied, cryptically. She didn't look.

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He turned back to the table and the microscope, and peered once more down the lens.

Far from the grey goo he had seen before, as he slowly refocused his gaze and his thoughts to what he thought he had seen, and sure enough, at the bottom right corner of the circle of light was a blueish round object. It was slightly out of focus. He turned the knob a miniscule amount in a clockwise direction.

The object swam into sharp focus. It had a translucent, circular body, and it had eyes of a deep blue colour. It appeared to look straight up at him before swimming away beyond the circle of magnified light.

He pulled away again, but this time went straight back to looking.

Moving the slide slightly across the bed of the scope, and keeping the same focal length, he caught sight of the creature once more. Whatever it was doing down there, this time it definitely looked upwards towards him. The deep blue eyes were clearly in view, and this time the round body split open about a quarter of the way up, with the bottom quarter hinging downwards. The effect of this was that a light blue circular object was staring up at Freddy's eye, smiling slightly, and showing off a full set of orange teeth! It shut its mouth, and darted out of view again.

A second or two later, it returned into his line of sight, and this time it seemed to be pulling some kind of worm-like creature with it. The worm was brownish-grey, but also had very clear blue eyes and a hairy blue tail. The first creature appeared to point up at Freddy. Both appeared to be laughing. Then they swam off.

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Freddy's head was swimming too. A few drops of ordinary tap water, blue bugs, brown worms, sharp teeth. It didn't add up. He tapped frantically at the device on his belt, and waited for an answer.

Clara stared out of the big picture window, uninterested in the danger lurking in their water.

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'What's your New Year's Resolution?', Freddy asked no-one in particular.

'New Year's Revolution?' replied Clara, as she spun clumsily around, half falling over his feet on the top step.

'Resolution', he repeated patiently. 'It's something you make at this time of year. You have to think of something that you are going new that you are going to do in 2006, or maybe something that you did in 2005 which you are going to stop this year'.

'I'll stop bouncing around', she said unconvincingly, and half jumped, half skipped across the landing into the big room. As she went through the door, she planted her foot on a stray roller skate which she had left lying there, and crashed headlong into the standard lamp by the bed, bringing lamp, bike, and a pot plant flying on top of her. He could hear her laughing maniacally in the next room.

Freddy sighed. 'It's going to be a long year', he muttered to himself wistfully.

As she giggled on, another more familiar sound broke the now silent landing. The handset on Freddy's belt crackled into uncertain life.

'Over, over, do you read me, over, over, over...'

Freddy took the radio from his belt.

'Speak to me, friend', he said.

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Chapter 2 - Freddy and Wil's Secret Handshake

'Over, over, do you read me, over, over, over...'

Freddy took the radio from his belt.

'Speak to me, friend', he said.

* * * * * 'Water, microscope, bugs', stuttered Freddy into the radio, struggling to make himself understood through the crackling and hissing of the primitive walkie-talkie.

'Whoa, calm down mate,' was the reassuring voice on the other end, 'I'll be round in two minutes'.

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They stood there facing each other, about a metre apart. There was complete silence apart from a vague crackling from their radios, and the heavy sound of their breathing. They had done this so many times before, but it was always a ritual that they both enjoyed.

'Secret handshake?'

'Secret handshake?' came the reply in agreement, and they started. The way they always started when they had things to do, or plans to make. Today they would have plans to understand the mysteries lurking in their tap water.

First, Freddy took a purposeful step forward with his left foot. He stamped it hard down on the ground as they had discussed. Bits of dust from the cracks in the old wooden floor flew up from around his sole. Wil took the same big step forward, so that their feet were overlapping slightly. Freddy then took his right hand, and stooping slightly, slid it behind his left knee, bent his wrist a little, so that his legs formed the two long sides of a triangle and his arm went across the middle – like a letter A.

They reached forward, each trying to grasp the other's hand. If you've ever tried to put one hand on the outside of your left leg whilst leaning forward, you must know how difficult it can be. You feel unstable, and unsafe, and you might well fall over (try it sometime).

Anyway, in grasping each others' hands, as they always did, and in a way which seemed to provide endless amusement, they fell over.

Into a big heap, a tangle of arms and legs. A giggling mass.

'Secret handshake concluded', giggled Freddy. As he always did. Wil just carried on laughing.

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They headed out towards the woods. Although they had been there a million times, it was several weeks since they had been to the base they had constructed the previous summer.

That was

where they had their best thoughts, their most audacious plans, and where they solved the problems of their day.

They went by their usual route, down the lane by the mill pond, through the big field, up the hill towards the entrance. They jogged down through the bushes where the adults picked blackberries in the autumn-time, and into the thicker trees and the fallen logs.

As they rounded a corner, they saw it.

What looked like a hand was dangling down from the branch of a tree. They stopped in their tracks, and peered around an imaginary corner the way you do if you are confronted by something unusual and surprising. On closer inspection, the hand belonged to a brownish creature. The body was human, but the hair and face was wild and dangerous-looking. It looked very much at home hanging from the tree.

'Hello Mate', said the creature, with a broad smile and a friendly wave. Not what you would normally expect from brownish creatures dangling from trees.

'I'm Boggy'.

Nervousness at the meeting meant that they both shouted 'BOGGY!', almost in unison, without thinking that they had just bumped into this guy. Neither of them really thought about who or what he was, and whether he was friend or foe.

'Er, what are you doing here?'

'I live here', Boggy replied. 'I've been here for months. I live under the ground mostly, out in that big hole.

He was pointing to a big tear in the ground where a tree had been uprooted some years earlier, but which had left a large cave-like hole and a network of uprooted roots and dark corners. It was the hole that (the last time they were there) had been their favourite place for a base. There was now a sign on the side of this entrance, which they couldn't read from where they were standing, but it looked as if Boggy probably used it as home. And right in the far distance, deep into the hole, a light was shining, perhaps from a torch, maybe from a fire. Boggy continued with his cheerful explanation of why he was in the forest.

'I came here nearly five years ago, when this forest was rarely visited. Then some guys came along with saws and axes and started working on the forest and I just thought it was wrong and so I came and I started off living up in the trees with the snakes and monkeys and then I decided that I would try to live with the underground creatures so I found this big hole and started living in that and and and...

Boggy spoke very quickly without taking any breath. Miss Crotty at school always told them that they should use punctuation when they read and talk. This Boggy just talked. No full stops or commas in his conversation. But they liked him, despite frustrations at his lack of grammar.

'Boggy', said Wil with a hint of trepidation in his voice, 'do you really mean there are snakes in these trees?'

'OK, I haven't seen any snakes yet, and although I heard a squeal the other day, it may not have been a monkey. I did see a squirrel though', he added as if this would make up for the lack of serpents and squealing primates.

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'Why don't you come down into Death Valley with me – I'll show you around.

'Deaf Alley?', said Freddy inquisitively, assuming a narrow road full of people who couldn't hear very well.

'I said DEATH Valley', repeated Boggy. Louder this time, and with a little frustration in his voice. He didn't seem in the mood for jokes.

They looked at each other a little nervously, but they remembered the handshake and what it meant. The handshake meant they would always be friends, no matter what difficulties or adventures they faced. They both instinctively knew what the other was thinking, that this odd Boggy might scare them a little, but he might lead them on a voyage of discovery and adventure.

Boggy half walked, half swung on tree branches to the entrance to the hole in the ground.

I wish Nicholai was here, thought Wil, and he knew Freddy was thinking the same thing. Nicholai was their best friend and also their strangest. They had many friends, but apart from their mate Hardy (who was also the toughest guy in the village), Nicholai was the one person they felt that they could always trust. Actually they could have done with both of them at that moment.

But they weren't there, they were on their own with Boggy, who was now leading them to the opening to the hole.

'I've set up this as a quick way into my cave', he said, pointing upwards with his right hand, to a long rope stretching from one of the biggest trees in the woods, high above them, down towards the hole.

They could see the rope above them, with two handles hanging down from either side. Boggy was pointing up at the handles, and was motioning for one of them to hang on.

Wil looked at Freddy, who nodded back to him. Wil moved towards the a large rock which seemed to have been put there for the purpose of getting high enough to hang on to the handles. He climbed up as instructed and each grabbed the handle either side of the rope.

It was clear that the device that he was hanging on to was attached to the rope. Freddy stood below and waited for something to happen.

Then Boggy did something very unexpected...

Chapter 3 - with Boggy, Wil and Freddy

It was clear that the device that he was hanging on to was attached to the rope. Freddy stood below and waited for something to happen.

Then Boggy did something very unexpected... With a sound that was a cross between a groan and a scream of triumph, Boggy knelt down and heaved the big stone away with a combination of his knees and his hands.

Wil and Freddy looked at each other briefly, then Wil looked down at the ground, as the stone he had been standing on disappeared beneath him. As he looked down at the ground it seemed to fall away. It was certainly too far down to drop with any level of comfort.

They looked at each other again.

'We...we...we're moving', stammered Wil. Freddy just stared, open mouthed. No words came out.

With Boggy dancing maniacally beside Freddy, the slide began to gather pace and move down the rope towards the big hole.

'Dead Man's slide, dead man's slide!', sang Boggy, his shaggy hair shaking like a rag doll's as he carried on a mad dance beneath the rope.

As Wil slid down the rope, gathering pace all the time, he was faced with a combined feeling of euphoria and fear, mixed with despair and dread and sheer terror. He could see the hole in front of him, completely dark, and he could see the sign that they had spotted before (the one they thought was the name of the owner). It was coming clearer now as he got closer, a grubby yellowing scrap of paper, about thirty centimetres square, with writing in black felt tip pen. As he got close to the mouth of the hole, with the breeze caused by the speed he were travelling now blowing his hair away from his face, the notice was becoming much clearer. As he sped towards the black hole, Wil yelled back to his best friend.

'We're going in, and look what it says on the sign, aaagghhhh!'

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Clara was still on the top floor of the house, lying more or less in the same place she had been during their discussions on New Year's Day. The house was still silent, apart from a CD she had put on her new CD player earlier that morning. There was a function on the machine that let you play the same song again and again.

'You know where I've come from, you know my story...' went the song for the twentieth time that day.

'I wonder where the boys are'. Clara almost spoke the words to herself as she thought.

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The sign said 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here...'

Although Wil didn't really know what this meant, his apprehension at the sign was tempered a bit by the fact that he still trusted Boggy (who he could still hear laughing uncontrollably back up the slope), and by the fact that it was clearly written by someone with a sense of humour, as each of the letters was represented by an animal figure, so the first A was rough picture of a giraffe, the 'b' was a baboon, and so on. Someone had actually spent a lot of time doing this.

He entered the hole at some speed, and as they got in he could see that there was indeed a fire burning in what seemed like the far distance. He was still travelling fast when he was suddenly wrenched upwards.

The slide had come to an abrupt ending and he was thrown upwards so that he had trouble hanging on to the handles. In fact, Wil was so shaken by the impact of the halt that he lost the grip of one hand and was left hanging precariously by the other.

'Free, I'm going to fall, I can't hold on any more'. He sounded a bit panicky as the words came out. Freddy had run down the long slope after him, with Boggy in hot pursuit.

As he swung there, Wil looked down to where his feet should be, and saw that they were actually not far from the ground. It looked a bit soggy, but Wil let his remaining hand go and fell to the floor.

Because he had been unbalanced on the slide with his one hand, he fell awkwardly and dropped onto his left foot which buckled as he came down. He cried out as the ankle turned over and fell to the floor. Freddy, who had arrived breathlessly in the cave, helped him up.

They just inside the mouth of the cave, with a wide opening behind them, a tree to their right (to which Boggy had attached the rope, which ran from a much larger tree some sixty metres back out of the hole), and the fire burning not far away from them. The cave had not changed much since when they had last used it, and it was not actually that big after all. They felt reassured as their eyes adjusted to the darkness and they could make out most of what was in it.

They sat down on the stump of an old tree which had clearly been dragged into the hole, as they could trace the tracks made by the heavy stump as it had been pulled in from the outside.

Boggy bounded into the cave, holding an old can, and a stick. He looked half menacing and half mad, as he had all afternoon.

'Didj'ou enjoy that, mate?' he smiled at Wil. Before Wil could answer, he moved over to the corner close to where the fire was burning.

In the half light they could see a complicated arrangement of sticks and old bottles and cans, mostly filled with clear liquid.

Boggy went over and poured a light brown liquid from his can into the top of the set-up.

'What's that?' asked Freddy inquisitively.

'That's what I drink, like some?' said Boggy pointing generally to the device. Then he added, 'actually, *that* is what I drink,' pointing towards the receptacle at the bottom of the cascade, which was three-quarters filled with what looked like very clear clean water.

'Most beautiful, fresh, pure, filtered water, strained through the finest natural filter on earth.' This time he took a pace towards the device, unhooked two clear plastic tubes from it, and opened one of the containers in the middle. Inside was a thick dark brown sludge.

'Pete', he said, pausing, and staring at Wil.

'It's Wil, actually,' replied Wil.

'No, peat, the finest natural filter on earth. I get it myself from up North. Have you ever seen what is in normal water'.

Freddy thought back to the morning and his experiments with the microscope. He was anxious to try the filter.

'Can we take some', he ventured to Boggy.

'No way, this is my last lot, I need to go back up North for some more later this week'. He took a long drink from the bottom container and offered it to Freddy.

'Wow. Cool'. Freddy was lost for words.

'Meet me tomorrow and I'll show you how to make it', said Boggy, 'ten o'clock, just up there by the road'.

No options, no discussion, Boggy had spoken. He got up and walked out of the cave.

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'How're you', said Wil after a few seconds.

'Cool', replied Freddy, 'but let's get out of here. Clara's on her own back at the house, and we've got an early start tomorrow'.

They got up, Wil letting out a slight groan as the pain of his ankle hit him, and made their way up the path of where the tree stump had been dragged. It was getting dark as they got towards the mouth of the hole, so it was difficult to make out the shadows that were playing on the sides of the cave. They got to the entrance and looked around for Boggy, but he was not to be seen.

Then they heard a noise. A shuffling sound. Quite close to them. They stopped, as you do when you think you hear

something. Stood quite still. Freddy grabbed Wil's shoulder. They were shaking slightly. There it was again. A shuffle, then a snuffle, then silence.

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Clara moved over to the big window as she did every day, and looked out again. As dusk fell there was not much to see, although she was aware of a light close to the road, about fifty metres from the front of the house. An odd light actually, not the normal glow from the street lights.

It was coming from the bus stop.

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Freddy and Wilis had stopped completely now, as the shuffling and snuffling was very close. In the shadows they could make out the shape of creature of some sort. It was silhouetted against the front of the hole, a grey shape against the pitch black entrance. It was about half a metre tall, a metre long, and hairy. It snuffled and snorted again. Wil whispered nervously.

‘What is it, it looks like some kind of pig?’.

‘Boar’, whispered Freddy.

‘Don’t be like that’, said Wil in reply.

‘Wild Boar’, Freddy added, ‘must have escaped from somewhere, I’ve seen them on TV. Hairy, big, nasty. Stay still.’

The animal seemed oblivious to their presence, and carried on rooting around until, clearly finding nothing of interest. It disappeared into the undergrowth. The boys breathed more steadily, and staggered up the steep slope towards the road.

As they got there, they looked to the right before crossing, and then to the left. As they looked left, they noticed an odd light about a hundred metres down the road. Not a street light, it wasn’t that bright. And it was coloured. A sort of three or four coloured glow, moving, at one time the colours were in stripes, then they shifted, forming coloured hoops, then they swirled together and temporarily faded before reappearing brighter, just hanging there in the air.

The light was coming from the bus stop...

Chapter 4 - Clara gets up early

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The light was coming from the bus stop...

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The next day Clara was up early, as usual.

As she got dressed, she pondered the journey that lay ahead of them. 'It's January, it might be cold', she thought, and so she put on her green beanie hat, pulling it down well over her ears, so that her hair only just showed beneath the hat, and the single coloured plait she had weaved in to it that morning was pressed to her face. 'Depends where we go, it might be hot', she thought again, so she tucked a t-shirt into the waistband of her jeans, just in case the three layers she was currently wearing got too warm. For luck, she slipped a shiny pebble she had found on the beach the previous summer into her pocket.

Finally she put on her boots. These were also green in colour, and appeared to be several sizes too big for her, but actually they were quite a snug fit inside. It is just that they were made so thick and so waterproof, with different sections made of different materials, that the outside of the boots seemed to be a few sizes larger than the inside. Clara left the laces loose.

Her New Year's resolution to stop bouncing everywhere had come to an abrupt halt yesterday when she had tried to spin down three flights of stairs and had ended up in a ditsy, dizzy mess on the landing of the second floor. She was lucky she fell where she did, because the next flight, down to the ground floor, was much longer and had a number of sharp angles which might have hurt. In the end she was embarrassed rather than injured, but she resolved to end her resolution at that point. Many others had already done the same.

Instead of spinning, she had developed a new approach to the descent. By sitting on the t-shirt, she discovered that the quickest way down was to perch on the banister rail and slide gracefully down each flight. The only dangers in this approach were excessive speed, and the bump at the end of each rail where she had to climb around the banister post to get to the next flight.

She slid down successfully this time, and bounded out towards the hallway.

It was nine-forty five.

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There was a heavy clomping sound as Freddy made his way up the thick wooden stairs from the basement. He too was warmly clad, and he too had his biggest boots on, the ones that he had banged nails into the heels of, to make sure they didn't wear down too quickly. Actually,

he had banged them in last winter because he liked the sound they made, but it made him feel grown up and responsible, to believe that he had done it for this sensible reason. He clomped on up and met Clara in the hallway.

They didn't speak, but they both made their way over to the window. Wil was jogging briskly up the road towards the bus stop.

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They had all been on the bus before, but not since the timetables had changed and they had put the new buses on the route. The old timetables showing the routes to Frogsmere and Mamba Park via Devils' Bottom had been replaced by new electronic signboards with their vandal-proof Perspex screens.

In daylight, the odd glowing and streaming of light that they had seen on Wednesday were less prominent, but as they got to the stop, the sign was still behaving as if it had a life of its own, with different coloured lights and text alternating with brightly lit maps, the first one a cool blue colour, then a bright orange map of what looked like an island, followed by a sharp green image of a country they didn't recognise. They stood for three or four minutes staring at these strange images, which never stayed still for very long, until, at around nine fifty-five, the screen seemed to settle on one particular map, which filled the screen.

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'Give me some clues', muttered Freddy cryptically as the map settled on this unnamed and untitled place.

'I remember this from Monday when I first saw the glow from the new signs, I remember coming down and looking and just seeing this country without names, the day the boy was staring out of the back of the bus'. Clara was excited by the prospect of going somewhere unknown.

The boys looked much less convinced as they stared hard at the green map, showing a place, a country maybe, a country that was almost rectangular in outline, with a very jagged edge on the western side.

Above the screen was another much smaller screen with numbers on it, showing the date (written as 050106), and the time. The clock, with numbers showing hours, minutes and seconds, which were counting down slowly, read ninety fifty-nine.

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In the distance they could hear the familiar rumble, then the roar, but the whoosh didn't come, instead the roar started to

fade to a low hum, and the bus with the conical nose appeared around the corner.

The route the bus normally took meant that people from all walks of life and of all types were thrown together on a daily basis, going about their business in their own way. Most buses just took a bunch of the same sort of people to work, or a group of kids to school, but not this one.

As the bus pulled alongside them they could see a small boy wearing a black hat at the rear side window. Either he was very tall, or else he was standing on the seat. There was a sign in the bus to say that you shouldn't stand on the seats, but this boy must have been, because he had his arms outstretched against the rear window. It was almost as if he was trying to get out.

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They stood silently as it approached the bus stop, indeed by the time it reached them, it too had become almost noiseless.

The bus was almost completely conical in shape with a sharp nose, rising through a thin midsection to the rear, which was just about the height of a normal bus. It was about as long as a normal single-decker too, but because of the cone-shape it looked rather longer and much thinner. The seats were arranged in rows, so that the front row (at the pointy bit of the cone) only had one seat (the lady with the chicken), the next row two seats, the row behind that three seats, and so on until there were about 8 seats across the back row.

The door opened without a sound, and they climbed up the three steps up to the interior. As they did, Wil glanced back at the signboard. It had gone blank. He entered the bus, and took one more look behind him, but the door had closed. Very quietly.

The bus was not full, but Freddy quickly reckoned there were about 15 people on board. In the third row back, he noticed a lady with a chicken.

But there was no driver.

Clara led the way to the first row of seats which had three across. In doing so they had to pass only the lady with the chicken. Clara settled in close to the window, into the deep, comfortable seat. In front of her, set into the seat in front was a video screen. It was black.

Wil sat next to her, with Freddy taking up the rear. As he passed the lady with the chicken, he heard little high-pitched sneeze. He watched as the chicken pulled out a miniature handkerchief and wiped its beak. It sneezed again, and shuddered slightly. 'Poor little thing', he thought to himself, 'caught a dose of flu or something'. He sat down.

'*Seatbelts on please!*'. All three of them jumped as this announcement came from somewhere, they knew not where. The message was very clear, the voice slightly echoey. They complied immediately and pulled the belts over their shoulders, and locked them in place in front of them, with the big aluminium clasp which joined the two shoulder belts to the lap strap. They pulled the straps down tightly.

'*All aboard, hold on tight, next stop Bruinkilloch*', said the voice.

'BRUINKILLOCH!', they shouted in unison...

Chapter 5

'All aboard, hold on tight, next stop Bruinkilloch, said the voice.

'BRUINKILLOCH!', they shouted in unison...

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They held their breath, and waited.

The bus was almost completely silent inside as it started moving away from their stop. Out of the tinted windows they could see the familiar sights of the house, the woods, the other houses move past them, but they could hear very little. But it was obvious that they were starting to accelerate very quickly.

'Whoah...!', murmured Wil, who was sitting in the middle, quietly. He had wanted to shout, but in the general silence of the bus, and in the absence of any noise from any of the other passengers, he had consciously kept his comment as quiet as possible. But the words had been forced out, as he had been gradually forced more and more back into his seat by the movement of the vehicle. The other two were equally pressed back.

'I don't know where Bruinkilloch is, but we're sure going to get there fast', struggled Freddy, as the G-forces on his face and chest got stronger. If he had wanted to get up he could not have done, the combined forces of gravity pulling him down into his seat, and the rapid forward motion and acceleration pushing him back into it, were too great for any other movement.

Clara just looked worried, her features flattened.

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The screen in front of her glowed into life. An image appeared, faint at first, then clearer.

The screen was split into four parts. In the upper left part was the map they had seen at the bus stop; beside that was the time, ten zero one; in the bottom left of the screen was a series of numbers which changed constantly, currently the largest of them was reading nine hundred and twenty- three; and finally in the bottom right quadrant of the screen was a moving picture which appeared to be the view from the front of the bus.

This last image proved to them that they were not in an ordinary bus and that the new routes that had recently been introduced were quite out of the ordinary. Bruinkilloch, wherever it was, was a long way from home, and they were going there very quickly. The video they were watching showed houses, fields, trees, cars, all moving by at amazing speed. They seemed to be travelling along roads, but at the same time it felt like they were flying. And the number nine twenty-three on the bottom left of the screen had the letters '*kph*' written after them.

'Wow – that's six hundred miles an hour', Freddy spoke excitedly now, his fears forgotten. He tried to turn to Wil in the seat next to him but failed – his face was still pressed to the firm headrest behind him.

'Where are we going,' Clara asked this question with some concern now. They were going to be a long way from home, and they knew nothing of how to get back.

* * * * *

Wil was staring at the screens. He had always been interested in technical things, and the screens diverted his concern into a fascination with the letters and numbers he saw on the big screen in front of him.

In the top left screen a small red dot had appeared on the map, and the name *Bruinkilloch* had been added to the map, just next to the dot. There was also a small picture of a bus (with a conical nose) which was moving rapidly towards the red dot.

The top right screen now read *10:10*

The bottom left was the screen full of statistics. There was the speed, now a bit less (down to two hundred kph), the distance travelled (four hundred kilometres), and several other numbers representing temperature, pressure, and other stuff he didn't quite understand.

The bottom right screen now showed recognisable objects as the speed declined to less than one hundred kilometres per hour, and Wil made out broad fields of scrubby vegetation, some rolling hills in the near distance and some bigger ones on the far horizon, some sheep, and a few small houses.

* * * * *

They came to a noiseless halt.

Almost every passenger on the bus immediately released their seat belts, and got up (because they now could), and started to roll their eyes, open their mouths wide (some started yawning). The chicken sneezed again. The lady sneezed too. Wil, Freddy and Clara moved across to the aisle and made their way to the front of the bus.

As they did, a small figure dressed entirely in black ran from the back of the bus, without a word, pushed past Clara (almost knocking her back into the seat), paused briefly, said 'Bless you' to the chicken, and scrambled down the steps onto the muddy ground outside. As he went, his black hood briefly blew away from his head, but his face was not revealed.

'That's the boy I saw trying to get out of the back of the bus on Monday', said Clara as he ran off, 'I'm sure of it'.

As they got down from the vehicle, they watched the small hooded figure who was now sprinting away across the rough ground where they had parked and into the hills beyond. They watched for a full minute until he was a tiny blur in the distance.

* * * * *

'Good morning', came a voice from behind the bus.

'Welcome to Bruinkilloch, it is great to see you here'. You've come to see a place of beauty,

a place of madness, and a place of mystery.

When he said the word 'madness', he pointed at his chest. When he said the words 'beauty' and 'mystery' he pointed at the hills and landscape beyond.

* * * * *

The man appeared from behind the bus. To Wil and Freddy he looked strangely familiar. He was tall, had a long straggly beard, several layers of faintly dirty clothing, and huge brown boots, covered almost completely in mud.

'Oh, I almost forgot', he said, 'I'm Robbie', pleased to meet you'.

'Come inside and we can talk about what you would like to do. I've got something in there that I'd like you to look at. It's on the table.' The man appeared nervous as he talked, then added, even more strangely,

'Oh, I shouldn't have told you that'.

Freddy turned the others away from the man and whispered,

'I don't know about you, but I don't like the sound of this. First, I don't really like the look of the guy, secondly I'm not going into his little hut, and thirdly, this all sounds a little too familiar, and I want to move on. Let's go and explore.'

* * * * *

Chapter 6

'I don't know about you, but I don't like the sound of this. First, I don't really like the look of the guy, secondly I'm not going into his little hut, and thirdly, this all sounds a little too familiar, and I want to move on. Let's go and explore.'

* * * * *

As they watched the boy disappear into the far distance, something caught their eye. Just beyond the hut, but in line with it, was a larger building, also wooden, but two-storey, slightly obscured by the scruffy hut in front of it.

As the light began to fade, and the bus (with all its passengers) had mysteriously disappeared, they could hear a commotion coming from inside the bigger building. They went to investigate.

This involved heading round the scruffy shack on a small path, part covered in grass, part gravel. Their feet crunched a little on the gravel, although as they got closer to the hall, they were less able to hear their steps, thanks to the general noise which was coming from the inside.

Wil, who was in front, held his arm out to one side, as Clara stepped eagerly ahead of him. Freddy was a metre or so behind.

'Stop a minute, we need to be careful here, let's just look at the facts.' Wil said, with a note of determination in his voice.

'We've pitched up here on a bus, our local bus, which we thought was taking us on a field trip. We appear to be on our own. The others on the bus have left, either going back somewhere, or else they've run off sneezing, or left in a big hurry over that hill there. Things don't look good, do they? How are we going to get back? Clara suddenly looked panicked at this point, as she realised the situation they were in. Her lower lip began to tremble just a little. She was the youngest, and although the one with the most general *joie-de-vivre*, she had less experience of these kinds of trips than the other two.

'It's going to be OK,' said Freddy, less than convincingly, ducking to avoid a chicken apparently heading for the same building, flying awkwardly and unsteadily towards the door.

'The bus brought us here. And I'm sure it will be here to take us back when we have finished.

'Finished what...?' said Clara.

'Our Mission, the one Boggy told us about'. They had almost forgotten about Boggy's promise to be there with them. Unless he had been hiding on the bus, he was not there.

'Who's Boggy?' At this point, Wil and Freddy, despite their nervousness, couldn't help a little smile, as they remembered their meeting with Boggy and the secret handshake which had preceded it. They also recalled Boggy's promise to help them understand how peat could be used as the ultimate form of water purification system.

'Come on,' said Freddy, taking Clara by the end of her braid, like a puppy out for walk. She shook her head angrily and marched on between the two of them.

As they reached the door, they realised that a serious party was happening inside. The building itself was made out of what appeared to be sheets of corrugated metal, and it was topped off by a wonky looking chimney, out of which a sad stream of wispy smoke was emerging. The front door was wooden, but served little purpose; like the rest of the building, it was shabby and careworn.

Just as Freddy was about to push gently against the door to investigate the goings-on inside, the door swung open uncertainly on its hinges, and a mad-looking man stumbled out, brushed past Freddy, turned to Wil with his wild, popping eyes, turned away again, finally settling his gaze on Clara, at which point he stopped, completely still, stared into her eyes, and said,

'Time is running away from us,' then, as if it just occurred to him, 'over there.' His eyes moved imperceptibly upwards and to one side, indicating that somewhere behind him, there was something. Then as a seeming afterthought, he added, very quietly,

'Trust me, I'm a Doctor'. Then he ran, stumbling again, across towards the place where the bus had been, and followed the route the boy had taken, over the scrubby heathland and towards the mountains beyond.

Wil and Freddy looked at each other again. One the one hand this crazy fool should be ignored, on the other he seemed strangely familiar, like some of the other characters who had appeared in this bizarre first week of 2006.

'What did he say?' Wil asked Clara. 'He's a what?'

'He said he's a Doctor, and that we should trust him, but he didn't say Doctor who'.

Freddy reviewed the situation. 'OK, so we have a bus that flies to this far-flung village or town, we have a boy apparently desperate to get off the bus, but we don't know why. We have a silent lady with a sick chicken, and now we have a dodgy doctor but we don't know who he is.'

'I'm scared again', Clara added, unhelpfully.

They were still standing outside the door, still a little bemused, when an even more arresting sight met their eyes.

A man emerged unsteadily into the doorway, clutching a large clear bottle, which was about a quarter full of a light brown liquid. He took a pace beyond the threshold of the doorway, staggered to where Freddy and the others were standing leaning up against the corner of the building. He only had to stagger a metre or so, but it took him several attempts.

He first tried a roundabout route, hanging on to the door frame, then sliding up against the side wall, before slipping downwards as his legs buckled, ending up flat on his backside, with the bottle now sideways on, oozing brown liquid onto his suit.

His second attempt was better. From the sitting position he found himself in, he rolled onto his

knees and started to crawl towards the group, but on the way (so about half a metre into his journey) he found something on the ground which clearly interested him, and he stared at it for fully three minutes, before suddenly standing up and taking his third attempt at bridging the metre gap. This was simpler – he just flung himself at Freddy and Wil, who had to grab an arm each to avoid him falling straight over again.

The man groaned slightly as they held him, but stood uncertainly between the three of them, muttering about ‘fire water’.

Maybe he knew something about how to make water pure?

To add to an already weird day, he started singing,

Red-head Ken

And his merry men

.....

The song faded away as he staggered off towards where the others had gone, swaying rhythmically to the music thumping from the party.

They were just about to go in, when the large hairy man they had seen when the bus had originally stopped appeared from around the side of the building where they were standing. The door to the hall remained closed.

‘C’mon, guys’, he said briskly, ‘let’s find the source of the purest water in the world’.

Boggy was right! Out on the moor it was cold.

The distant humming and throbbing of the music reminded them of home in a way. The party they didn’t go into felt more secure than the wild looking moor, and the gloom of the late afternoon seemed to be encroaching on them as they made their way over the scrubby bushland towards the hills to which the redhead, the small boy, and the chicken had seemed drawn.

The ground under foot was squashy, and their boots sunk a few centimetres into it with every pace. Most of the ground they were walking on was grassy, although the grass was on top of big clods of rough earth. These clods were interspersed with deep indentations in the ground, again covered with grass but a good twenty centimetres lower. Because of this, it was difficult to move quickly, and it soon became tiring, like walking in thick snow. Clara was falling behind them, so the two boys took an arm each, and half helped, half dragged her over the scrub towards the hills.

They staggered across the rolling hills, following a well-worn path. The only landmark they passed was a small river which ran close to the path on the left-hand side. The path ran beside it for a few hundred metres. As the path was leaving the riverside to head inland again, they heard behind them a snorting sound. As they turned to look, the river was obscured by a huge plume of water spraying high into the air. All three stepped back from the path in surprise, as the wind whipped some of the spray into their faces. As the spray subsided, they

caught brief sight of a long smooth dark coloured object, which slowly disappeared beneath the surface.

Robbie, who had met them off the bus, was a hundred or so metres ahead of them, laughing hysterically at the sight of them getting soaked. He yelled something back at them, which sounded like,

‘Northern Bottlenose, don’t see many of them round here.’

Wil and Freddy looked back at the lake. Whatever had caused the spray had gone.

* * * * *

They had walked for fifteen or twenty minutes when the walking started to get more arduous as the terrain rose ahead of them. Leaving Clara to pant behind them, the boys themselves were struggling now.

‘Nearly there chaps!’ It was the Doctor they had encountered back at the party. He was striding across the moor as if it was a stroll down the garden, so it was obvious he did this journey often.

‘The most wonderful filtration equipment in the world’, he said to no-one in particular, although he now had two companions, a woman he referred to as Billy, and a dog which apparently didn’t have a name, because the Doctor referred to it only as ‘canine’. Wil mused on the fact that he probably has a cat called ‘feline’ and a horse called ‘equine’. Wil never had much time for people who gave their pets (or their children) unusual names. He didn’t really like Nicholai, but because they were Freddy’s two best friends, they had to get along.

The dog was of indeterminate breed – one of those mongrel pooches with short legs and a squat, almost square body. This one was dressed in one of those tartan doggy-coats beloved of old ladies, and the one he was wearing was considerably too big for him. As Wil turned round to look at the dog, it stared back at him blankly with its big, bright, red eyes.

* * * * *

They rounded the top of the third or fourth hill they had climbed that afternoon, and gazed down into a small valley. A few metres from them, several people, including the redhead, the poor chicken, and the man with the egg, were standing a deep hollow watching a small stream of water flowing from inside the earth.

‘Welcome to the home of the best peat the earth produces, and the best free filtration system’, said the Doctor.

Clara looked puzzled. ‘Filtration system?’ she turned to her cousin, as always, expecting an answer.

‘It’s a way of purifying water and liquids,’ Freddy replied. ‘Look at the water, it is totally clear’.

‘And fresh’, added Wil, putting his forearm under the little waterfall tumbling off the side of the

hill, then pulling it away sharply as the cold water iced over his hand.

‘And this is what keeps it clear and fresh, my friends’. The Doctor handed Freddy a large block of brown earth, neatly cut from one of the many small overhangs cut into the ground around them. The block was thirty centimetres long and about ten centimetres square. It smelt earthy but at the same time clean and pure.

Freddy wrapped the peat in his coat.

They stayed at the peat bogs for half an hour or so, marvelling at the range of people they could see stretching off into the far distance. Most were digging or scraping the peat into bags and barrows. Some of them looked like they did this regularly (one man was driving a small mechanical digger), others appeared, like them, to be first time visitors to this strange mystical place. One group over at the far side of the valley seemed to be very well organised, and were digging in unison, singing some kind of work song as they dug. They were working harder and faster than any of the others. They also seemed to be all of a very similar height. The distance made them all look very small.

Freddy examined the thoughts that were going round his head and the confusion that swirled around him. He started to feel uncomfortable at the situation they had got themselves into. Or rather, he had got them into.

* * * * *

Just then they heard a low rumbling sound. Just back up from where they were standing, was a glow coming from behind the hillock to their rear. Clara was the first to run up the small hill.

‘It’s the bus!’ she cried excitedly, turning back to Wil and Freddy who were twenty metres beneath her, ‘and the sign says *Bishop’s Bottom*’.

Wil pretended not to be bothered by this news, but as he turned his head insouciantly away from her, inside he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. They had apparently found what they were looking for, the trip was over, they had been scared, interested, and they may have learnt something about how water can be purified. And now the bus was waiting to take them back to their home in Bishop’s Bottom.

They jumped on and took their places as before.

‘Anyone want to buy an egg?’ they heard a man cry. His voice faded as the doors shut and they cruised away.

‘Atishoo’, said a small voice.

* * * * *

Chapter 7

'Yes...yes...','Oh, I know...''Really...?''He did what?''Oh I know...''And what did you do?''Really?','Oh I know...''And you won it, really, well, well done babes, I'm really proud of you...yes...I am...''Oh I know...''*****Freddy listened to this nonsense for at least ten minutes before getting up to shut the door and block it out. Although they had never met, he felt like he knew Clara's friend Chantelle himself. But their conversations were always like that, with Chantelle blabbering on the other end of the phone, and Clara occasionally contributing to the conversation with a brief 'Oh I know...' or something similar. Freddy simply could not understand the attraction of this kind of conversation. To be fair to his favourite half-sister, Clara did not normally talk like that, and it was only when talking to certain of her friends that she seemed to be reduced to this daft state. Apart from Chantelle, Clara's dotty schoolmate Paris also brought out the worst in her. Their conversations were even less logical to Freddy, as usually they were the opposite, with Clara being the chatty one, and Paris apparently contributing nothing at all to the call. Freddy had once challenged Clara on this and had been told in no uncertain terms that there was more to Paris than most people realised, and that although she behaved a little empty-headed, she was actually a surprisingly deep person, who cared passionately about animals and wanted to work with children. On this particular January morning, Freddy had allowed the conversation with Chantelle to run on a bit longer before shutting the door, in case he could work out anything interesting from what he was overhearing. Inevitably, he had not been able to, but he remembered that just after Christmas, Chantelle had been treated to a surprise three-week holiday, which had just come to an end, and he thought that there might be something interesting to report. He made a mental note to ask Clara about the holiday later in the day. But he never remembered to ask.*****

He rubbed his eyes. He had spent the weekend staring into his microscope, working out the differences between water that had come straight from the tap, or from the pond at the bottom of their garden, and water that had been filtered. He had tried a variety of different ways of filtering, including sand, salt, and the peat they had picked up on their amazing journey to Bruinlarroch.*****Wil had had a more active weekend, and was now sitting at the table in the kitchen, also running his wet hands delicately over his eyes, trying to coax some action out of them. He would go down to the big house later in the day, he thought, but he first had to record what he had seen over the weekend. He had spent most of it sitting under a blanket in the garden. Early on Saturday, he had draped a dark grey blanket over the three lowest branches of the big oak which stood in one corner of their garden, its main boughs overhanging the lawn, and extending back into the wooded area behind him. He had settled down underneath the blanket, with a mug of hot cocoa and a packet of Jammy Dodgers for company. And he had waited. And waited. And carried on waiting, staring at the empty patch of lawn in front of him. He had tried to persuade the others that counting birds might be interesting, but apart from Clara, he could get no response from them. Clara, who had always been close to Wil, had seemed keen, but she had explained that she was expecting a phone call, and that unless she could bring her mobile with her, she was not going to come. Wil had refused, knowing that a single note of Clara's Arctic Monkeys ringtone would deter any self-respecting bird from coming anywhere close, even though he had really wanted a companion. Privately, he thought the others might be right in finding other things to do that weekend, but he was determined to do what he had promised, with or without them. Actually he had really wanted Clara to join him. They had always been close, he respecting her energy and enthusiasm, and she looking up to his calm independence. He had been sitting for the best part of an hour, when two sparrows had descended towards the bird feeder he had hung from a smaller oak which grew from the

middle of the lawn. They had toyed with the feeder for a while, before flying off, apparently not impressed with the food on offer. But he marked '2 sparrows' on his sheet. A little later, he had been surprised when in the sky above the house he had seen what appeared to be a sheet of white paper fluttering down towards him. He trained his binoculars on it, and realised that it was actually an envelope, which then landed just in front of his hide. In order not to disturb any other birds that may come to the garden that day, he reached gingerly out towards the envelope with his right hand. As he was within touching distance, he heard a tremendous squawking sound, a flapping of wings, and saw a pair of sharp talons grab the envelope and take off over the hide, disappearing from view.

behind him. All he had seen of the bird (which must have had a wingspan of at least sixty centimetres) was its flat face and prominent ears as it departed. He guessed it was some kind of owl, and noted down 'some kind of post-owl' in his notepad. The rest of the day had passed smoothly until dusk. He had lit a fire just outside the hide to keep himself warm. With the fire burning strongly as the last light of day disappeared, he rubbed his hands together and soaked up the heat from the flames, staring into them as you do. As he watched the yellow and orange colours dancing around the sticks and paper he had fuelled it with, a shape appeared before him in the fire, formed itself into a striking, metre-high bird with bright red plumage, and shot up into the air, spitting sparks and flashes of light onto the trees below. 'I've had enough of this,' thought Wil, and, pulling the hide with him, marched back into the house. ***** He rubbed his eyes again as he sat at the kitchen table, and just remembered to write 'Phoenix' on his pad to complete his record keeping from the weekend. He went to fetch an envelope so that he could send his observations off. ***** Both Freddy and Clara were staring out of windows. Clara was doing what she normally did at this time of day, which was to look out for the bus. Even if they had nowhere to go to, she was fascinated by its distant rumbling, which drew her to the window. As the vehicle made its way up the road, a bit faster than most buses, the rumble turned into a kind of a roar, developing into a definite whoosh by the time it passed the bus stop and raced past the front of their house on its way. Freddy was looking out of a different window, and was trying to connect a distant tapping sound with the empty vista in front of him. He opened the window, jumping back slightly as the cold wind hit him. He stuck his head out and looked down the road towards the village in the distance, but saw nothing. Turning the other way, he could see the bus departing smoothly up the road, but there was not a human or a trace of life in either direction. The tapping grew louder, and was becoming more uniform. 'tap, tappety tap, tap tappety tap tap... tap tappety tap, tap tappety tap tap...' Whilst Freddy was used to all sorts of strange sounds in that old house, he was sure that it had to be generated by a human being, because it started to become more regular still, 'tappety tappety tap te tap... tappety tappety tap te tap...' It was more regular, but also more worrying. He looked left and right again, then up. From where he was he could see across several gardens to the big oak tree in Wil's house. Above the tree high in the sky were two distant aircraft leaving their sky-writing vapour trails. But no sign at all of the tapping sound.

But there it was again, even louder now. He realised that he had been looking in the wrong place. The sound was coming from beneath the window. He climbed up on the sill so that he would have the possibility to lean over and see what was making the noise. He put his hand on the window-sill, and started to pull himself up. Kneeling now beside the window, he peered over and adjusted his eyes to the half-light of the dusk. The tapping started again, and this time he could see what was making the sound. Two sticks were tapping together. They appeared to be coming from under a large pile of black hair...

Chapter 8

Kneeling now beside the window, he peered over and adjusted his eyes to the half-light of the dusk. The tapping started again, and this time he could see what was making the sound.

Two sticks were tapping together. They appeared to be coming from under a large pile of black hair...

‘Hardy! Man, you gave me the creeps, what’re you doing down there?’

‘Just thought I would scare you, chicken’, retorted Freddy’s second-best friend, ‘and it worked!’.

Freddy reached down and yanked on Hardy’s huge mop of black hair. Hardy yelped and whacked him on the wrist with one of the drumsticks he was carrying.

‘Why the sticks?’, Freddy asked as Hardy started to climb in through the window, and his friend helped him down off the worksurface.

‘I’m thinking of reforming the band’, replied Hardy, in a rock-god sort of way, ‘you interested?’.

‘The band was useless’, Freddy shot back, remembering the weeks they had spent preparing for their first gig, which had never happened because the prospective bass player and drummer had got stage-fright the night before, and had cancelled. ‘And you were the drummer who didn’t show up for the first gig...’

Hardy tappety-tapped his drum sticks on the surface in front of him. He didn’t speak for a long while, and then, uncharacteristically, he admitted,

‘OK, I suppose you’re right, we were never going to be any good anyway.’

This comment was very unusual for Hardy. He was the tallest, strongest and loudest of their friends, and he normally inspired them (in an aggressive kind of way) to do all sorts of things they otherwise would not do. He was the kind of person who got into enough trouble to earn the respect of his mates, but never too much so that he personally had to suffer. He often got other people into situations that they could not handle, but for himself, he always went just to the edge but not too far.

They thought he was pretty cool, but at the same time they were a little scared of him. But he was very handy to have around if anything got a little heated.

Freddy poured them both lemonade as they discussed the prospects for reforming the band. They had watched last night as the Arctic Monkeys boasted of having sold 360,000 CDs in a week, and they had wanted a bit of that.

Wil was walking down the road towards the village shop to post his letter to the RSPB about what he had seen at the weekend. The walk would take about ten minutes as he meandered slowly down the road, past the ranch on the right where the mad farmer lived.

They often walked past the farm on the way into the village, and when they were younger it had always given them the creeps. In fact, if they had the chance they would take their bikes, or even walk round by an alternative route, because the farmer had a reputation for not liking children at all, and when they were small he had freaked them out on numerous occasions. Not by doing anything specific, just by being there.

Except one time.

One time, the three of them, Freddy, Hardy and Wilis, had been strolling down the road towards the village, minding their own business, when one of them had seen the farmer in the yard, whispering into the ear of one of his cows.

They had stopped walking, and all three of them crouched down in a ditch at the side of the road. Wil remembered the ditch as having been half full of water because he had gone home afterwards to change his boots. They had crouched down, and peered over the top of the ditch into the farmyard.

It had looked like the farmer and the cow were having a serious conversation. The cow was nodding its head as the farmer spoke, and often bellowing loudly when the farmer had said something funny. In fact, the two of them were clearly enjoying a joke. They listened intently, but could not pick up anything that was being said, until,

‘Mad Cow!’, shouted the farmer suddenly.

‘Crazy Man!’, bellowed the cow in reply.

‘Mad!’

‘Crazy!’

The two of them had then staggered across the farmyard, slipping this way and that on the greasy surface, shouting abuse at each other, until the boys had had to go home. The last thing they had heard as they left was a sort of a whimper from the cow and a brief

‘Don’t call me a mad cow’.

They left laughing, but it had always made them wary of the farm as they passed.

Wil arrived at the shop.

The lady who ran the shop greeted Wil with her usual cheery welcome.

‘Vot do you vont? Get out of my shop’, she said. An unusual way of greeting a customer in a shop, I’m sure you will agree. But they still visited the shop every day, and they had got used

to her strangeness. 'Her bark is worse than her bite,' Freddy used to say.

'Out, out OUT!', she reiterated, screaming at the top of her voice.

'Good morning, Mrs Touretz, how are you today?'

'Oh, I am fine, thank you, Wilis my dear', she replied, in an altogether calmer and more polite voice. 'What can I get you, dear?'

'I need some pencils, some pads of paper, and a very large bottle of water.'

'Ah, Helga is coming! Very good, wait here please'.

The phone was ringing somewhere in the house. Clara had seen Freddy disappear into the basement with it earlier in the day, but she had not seen it since. There were about three or four rings then it went silent, and no-one else could have picked it up as she was alone in the house.

She ran to the base unit in the hallway and pressed '*page*' to call the handset. She heard a distant ringing, but not from the basement. She pressed it again to try to identify where it was coming from.

She picked up the phone.

'*Yes, hello, hello...*' her heart sank as she heard the familiar voice on the end of the line. A voice that never waited for any response from the other person.

'*Are you there...?*' persistent or what? The person on the line would keep on talking, without waiting for a reply. In fact she would often hang up before you got a chance to say anything at all.

'Hello Helga, how are you?'

'*Ah, Clara, good to talk to you, calling re our telecon of last week, will be round in the morning. Eight o'clock, sharp, breakfast, see you*'.

There was a click at the end of the line. Helga had spoken.

Just then Clara heard the front door open, and saw Freddy and Wilis walk in, closely followed by Hardy, who was clutching a huge bottle of water, and a bag.

'Sorry guys, I just had a call from you-know-who'.

'Wh...wha...what...not Lady Vol....?', said Freddy in mock-horror.

'Almost. Anyway, we didn't have much option. Sorry'.

Clara felt a bit responsible for not standing up to her friend, but as usual Helga had been brisk,

no-nonsense, and uncompromising.

'When's she coming, coz' this time she's not going to mess us around', said Hardy strongly (although even he had melted before her last time she had come).

'Tomorrow morning'

'Oh well, we'd better get ready, you know what she expects.'

They headed down to the basement.

Chapter 9

'Oh well, we'd better get ready, you know what she expects.'

They headed down to the basement.

The next morning, Freddy was woken by the doorbell ringing. Not at his best in the mornings, he tried to open his eyes, failed to do so, groaned slightly, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

'*Ding, dong*'

The bell rang again. This time he lifted his head off the pillow, groaned a little louder, and stretched his neck to the left to glance at the clock.

'*Seven forty-five!*'. His voice came alive at the shock of the time of day.

'*Seven forty-five!*', he repeated, dragging himself up and out of bed, putting on his dressing gown, and tramping downstairs.

Although his room was on the fourth floor, he had rigged up a wiring system which allowed him to hear the doorbell from his room. The wires ran from the hallway, up the outside of the house, in through the skylight in the attic, and then back down to his room on the fourth floor. They were connected to a model of Big Ben which sat on top of the cupboard in one corner of the room. The sound was an accurate copy of the genuine Big Ben.

'*Ding, dong*'

'OK, OK, I'm coming'.

Freddy reached the front door and opened it, just a crack, to see who was calling at that time in the morning.

'Morning Freddy, and isn't it a great morning', said Helga breezily as she pushed the door open and forced her way straight past him into the hall. Freddy glanced outside at the miserable February morning, glanced inside at the formidable Helga who was now standing in the hall, and decided the morning was particularly un-great.

'Hi Helga, how're you doing?' He mustered the words grudgingly.

'Excellent, excellent, now where're we meeting this morning?'

'Helga, it's not yet eight o'clock...give me a break. The others won't be here for hours yet'.

'Well, I have been up for nearly two hours already, and I distinctly remember telling Clara yesterday that we would make plans over a breakfast meeting'.

'We don't normally have breakfast until ten', he moaned miserably, knowing that he wasn't

going to get anywhere with this conversation.

'Look, the bottom line is we've got a busy week ahead of us. Let me get into the room at least'.

Freddy stared at her coldly, half admiring her sheer energy, half loathing her cold and ruthless efficiency.

'Any chance of a black coffee?' She marched down towards the basement.

Helga was something else.

Her mother was something big in finance, so she told them. Freddy had never understood what this meant. When he was younger he had assumed that the woman spent her time counting money, but Clara had explained that she actually travelled to London most days to work in a bank, and that most weekends she had to attend meetings in New York. Helga had explained to Clara how great it was that each Monday when she got back, she would bring a small present for her daughter, filled with handcream, mouthwash, toothpaste, a useful little blindfold, and a pair of socks. Helga had several of these in her bedroom, indeed she rarely needed to buy socks (or toothpaste), and her hands were always super-smooth. Clara had thought at the time that New York must have more than just cheap chemists' shops, but she had been pleased when Helga had actually given her one of the presents, a black folding wallet with the letters 'BA' printed stylishly on the side.

Then there was the time Clara had been to Helga's for tea.

'Yes, yes, OK Larry, I know, but let's just have one more kick at the can on this one',

Helga's mother almost threw a plate of baked beans at Clara and Helga as she talked on the phone. Half the beans slid menacingly off the plate onto the table, revealing a congealed fried egg underneath.

'Look, it's no good you saying that again, if we don't think outside the box, at the end of the day we'll have no chance of nailing the jelly to the tree going forward'.

Even at the age of twelve, Clara had marvelled at the sophisticated way the woman spoke, and at how important what she had to say must be.

The beans oozed over the table. To be polite, Clara had tried to scoop them back onto the plate, although she noticed Helga just ate them off the table. Helga smiled at Clara. It was difficult to speak because her mother continued bellowing into the phone.

'Oh for goodness sake Larry, pull yourself together man. You're herding cats and you know it. I'll be right over'.

Helga's smile became a little more fixed as her mother slammed the phone down into its

cradle. Clara thought she saw a little wobble of Helga's lower lip and chin as her mother announced that she would have to quickly pop to the office.

'Here girls, here's a DVD I rented for you. Be good now. Bye'.

'Bye Mum', Helga said dejectedly.

'Good bye Mrs Hardball', Clara added politely.

They had finished their tea and stuck the disk into the DVD player. The opening credits had come up.

'HOW TO MAXIMISE YOUR CHILD'S FREE TIME POTENTIALITY'

'Oh great, this is my favourite!', Helga had said.

The clock had crept round to nearly eleven by the time Freddy had eaten and got dressed, Clara had gone downstairs to help Helga in the basement, and Hardy and Wil had ambled over.

'So, whassup this week?', Hardy said in his disdainful, cool way.

'We'll see, their ladyships are downstairs'.

'Oh no, not the poison dwarf, I'm not going down there', Hardy groaned, 'I'm too tired for all that'.

'Come on, it's always good for a laugh', said Wil. They tramped downstairs to the basement.

They always gathered down there. When they weren't meeting outside (usually in the big hole, the one that Boggy had now adopted in the woods), the basement was their base, where they made their most exciting plans, and where most of their games started.

Whenever they imagined a secret mission, it started in the basement.

Whenever they went out on a bike ride, they used the door at the back of the basement as their exit.

Whenever they played board games, or computer games, it was always in the basement.

And when they were smaller, their games of hide and seek had always started there.

'Hi guys', said Helga cheerily as they entered the room.

'Morning', said Clara, to no-one in particular, although she had waited until Wil, who was bringing up the rear, had fully entered the room.

'Humph', said Wil.

'Ummm', replied Freddy.

'Yeh', said Hardy gruffly.

The boys shuffled in and sat down around the big table.

The room was brightly lit and contained the usual clutter of books, bikes and bits and pieces which had been dumped there over the years. But Helga and Clara had obviously made some preparations for the morning. They had moved a smaller table to one corner of the room, under the shelf where Freddy had installed a small CD player. On the shelf was a bowl of satsumas, and on the table below a basket with some apples and bananas. On the floor, stretching right around the table, was a length of rope. It was not tied anywhere, but it ran around the table, outside the chairs, ending up just under the chair at the head of the table. Down at the end where the stairs came down. On the table was a large jug full of iced water.

'What shall we do, today then', Hardy added a bit more cheerily.

Helga stood up at one end of the room. There was a loud crack as she thumped the flat of her hand down onto the surface of the table.

'We have an agenda', she said tartly, lifting up a large sheet of paper on the wall.

Under the sheet of paper was another one, which had been carefully blu-tacked to the wall. On it, in large letters, was written

APOLOGIES

SHORT TERM

Mission statement

Objectives for Thursday

Friday follow-up

LONG TERM

The end of the Potter

Queen's Birthday Party

Chapter 10

Under the sheet of paper was another one, which had been carefully blue-tacked to the wall. On it, in large letters, was written APOLOGIES SHORT TERM Mission statement Objectives for Thursday Friday follow-up LONG TERM The end of the Potter Queen's Birthday Party*****

'Would anyone who is not here please say so now', said Helga with a broad smile. They laughed politely. 'I wish Nicholai was here', muttered Wil under his breath. 'Share the joke, Wil', she looked down her nose at the end of the table, over half-moon glasses. She really was a nightmare. 'OK people, let's get started, Clara you take notes'. Although they were there to think about how they would occupy their time over the next week or so, Wil had had enough already. 'Why do we let her do this?', he muttered again to Freddy who was sitting to his left. 'Oh, let her get on with it, she doesn't bite'. He tried to reassure his friend. They let her drone on and on for ten minutes or so, going through her agenda. All the boys really wanted to do was to get outside on their bikes and cruise around the neighbourhood, like they usually did. All this talking was unnecessary and boring. Hardy stood up. 'What do you mean by The end of the Potter?' 'Thank you Hardy, I'm glad you asked that question. I'd like to propose that we vote on banning the reading of Hardy Potter literature, the viewing of Hardy Potter visual material, and the discussion of Potter topics, in this house. I mean have you seen the papers this morning? Most papers are full of Luna Lovegood in the new film, and even the financial press is obsessed by the profits from the books. I feel that the entire country is being taken over by a form of Potter-mania, and that we should at least have a break from it in our own house. All those in favour?'

'It's not her house, anyway,' murmured Freddy to Wil. 'She really is something else, isn't she?' Wil sounded half-admiring as he said this. No-one had responded to Helga's request for a vote, so Wil got up from his seat, stepped over the rope, and helped himself to an apple from the bowl on the table in the corner. 'Why don't we just head out on our bikes, or play hide and seek, or something. Let's just stop talking, please!' 'Well, Wil, thank you for your input, but I think you are rather out of the loop on this one. Now, stop going for the low-hanging fruit, and try to take a 360-degree view of the problem'. 'She's gone mad', he said to the assembled company.***** Freddy stood up, stepped out of the loop, and made his way to the area under the stairs where the bikes were kept. 'Freddy, please, we haven't finished the agenda yet!' Helga's voice had suddenly become shrill and whiny. 'Sorry, I can't take this any more, I just want to do something'. 'But what about the Queen's Birthday party? I really want to go'. 'Fine, go to it then, give her a kiss from me', he said dismissively. Hardy also got up and followed Freddy to the corner of the room. 'Kiss Her Majesty, oh my word!' Helga almost swooned over the table. She sat down, and started examining the notes that Clara had been taking, which had actually turned into a series of words and doodles. Helga read out what she could make of the notes. 'Hide the bikes; bake a fruit; 360 degrees; low-hanging Potter; kiss the Queen' 'Sounds like a plan to me', said Hardy, laughing with relief that the meeting was over. He headed over towards the door. As he reached the door which led up the stairs back into the hallway, he turned back to the group, reaching behind him for the handle. 'C'mon lads, let's...AAAAGHHHH!' He let out a deep scream as a shaft of pain shot through his hand, up along the nerves of his arm, and registered with his brain. In a split second he had removed his hand and was running towards the sink in the corner.

'It's red hot! Ow, ow ow ow'. He didn't sound like the school hard-man as he squeaked and moaned and jumped around the room. The boys moved over towards the doorway and stared at

the doorknob. Not only was the handle evidently hot (it was almost glowing with the heat), but around the frame of the door they could see a bright light. It was as if the light was trying to breakthrough the door, so bright was it around the edges. The room went silent. In the distance, music was playing. 'A-Ileluia, A-Ileluia'. Quiet at first, but growing louder. Coming from behind the door. Celestial music. Trumpets. Strings. Building to a crescendo of drums and gongs.***** Helga was cowering in the corner now, all pretence at confidence gone. She had not been friends with them for long, but had once stayed over with Clara for a weekend when her mother had been called to Kuala Lumpur at short notice. They had got to know each other quite well in the intervening months, and Helga obviously liked Clara's company. She looked to her friend now, who looked remarkably unconcerned. 'Funny things happen in this house, don't worry', Clara sounded unconcerned as well. 'I think I know what it is'. 'What is it, then?' replied Helga, half sobbing. 'Just wait and see'. She sounded confident, but at the same time slightly edgy and excited about the prospect of what was behind the door.***** The music had now reached a volume which made talking difficult, but the way the sound had developed over the previous three or four minutes indicated to them that something was about to happen. Clara strolled nonchalantly over, and pulled a chair away from the door area. There was a clear space of two or three square metres around the glowing, pulsating doorway. She stood back. The music reached a tremendous crescendo and stopped. Silence. They watched, fascinated, as the door handle slowly began to turn.*****

Chapter 11

The music reached a tremendous crescendo and stopped.

Silence.

They watched, fascinated, as the door handle slowly began to turn.

Helga gave another little whimper as the door handle turned to its full extent, and slowly the door started to open. Clara went over and sat with her.

Slowly, slowly, the door opened.

As it opened, the light around it faded slightly, and a few puffs of white smoke emerged from around the door frame. The handle, which had been red hot, visibly cooled down. Hardy rubbed his hands together.

As the door opened wide, the smoke billowed into the room. They watched and listened intently as it wafted over them. A shadowy figure appeared in silhouette in the doorway. Very quietly, they heard a voice say what sounded like,

'Tonight Matthew, I'm going to be... shobbalob...'

'Eh?' said Hardy, still vigorously rubbing his hands on the table.

Striding through the door, as Clara had expected, came the dashing figure of their greatest friend. Nikolai had arrived at last. He strode through the smoke and stood in front of them, the faint glow that they had seen at the door now surrounding him in an ethereal light.

Immediately the tension of the morning was gone.

Nikolai walked confidently round the room, high-fiving each of the boys, and with Clara and Helga, taking their right hands in his, and planting a delicate kiss upon the back of their hands.

'What a gentleman!', Clara almost said out loud. She stared up at him.

'My dear Clara, how long has it been?', he said in his rich deep voice, and then

'Helga, my princess, it must be weeks, *wie gehts, wie gehts?*'

Although Helga was not German, Nikolai was prone to these grand gestures, and always greeted her with something personal and teutonic. She too swooned before him, her head lolling on one side like an obedient puppy as he took her hand in his.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' he said suddenly as he finished embracing Freddy with an enormous bear-hug.

'Please may I introduce my dear friend...'

At this he swept his arm upwards in a grand gesture towards the doorway, which was now clear, although the smoke and light was still in evidence beyond. There was no-one there.

'Ah, it seems my companion has a touch of the nerves today, please bear with me'.

He moved elegantly towards the doorway, chassaying across the floor with his usual style and grace. He disappeared through the door briefly. The room was silent as they waited for what he was going to bring out.

From outside they could hear a female voice.

'No, no, I cannoot'. 'Absolooootlee I will noot' 'Oh pleeeze, no'

Then Nicholai's calming voice,

'Oh come, come, my dear, I assure you there is nothing to be afraid of'

With a flourish he reappeared, half dragging behind him a small girl, probably thirteen years old, but looking much younger. She was dressed in a blue and white stripey jumper, blue jeans, and she wore on her head a little felt hat. As they came through the doorway, some music in the distance started playing, as it had when Nicholai had appeared.

'Sheeee, may be the beauty or the beeeest, maybe the fameeeene or the feeeest, may be the one I lurve for everevermooooore....'

It stopped, and she stood beside Nicholai in the space which Clara had cleared earlier.

'My dear friends and esteemed colleagues', he began. Sometimes he really went over the top with his little formal touches, but none of them ever questioned him or criticised him or teased him about it. There was something about him (even though he was younger than most of them) which made them respect him, and which made them listen to what he had to say. But more of that later.

'My dear friends and esteemed colleagues, may I present to you one of our continental cousins, fresh from the land of cheese and Chirac....'

'What is he on today?', muttered Hardy with his usual cynical tone.

'Now, introduce yourself, friend'.

The girl looked down at the ground. She looked left and stared at the Arctic Monkeys poster on the wall. She looked up at the single bare light bulb which lit the dingy basement. She looked around at the assembled company.

'Oh come now, don't be shy'.

The girl cocked her head to one side, so that it was resting on her left shoulder. She lifted her eyes slightly, so that they were just visible through the fringe of dark hair that crept out from

under her beret. Deep, brown, eyes.

'My nem', she began,

'ees JoJo, and I kurm frurm Or-lay-on'.

Hardy let out a grunt, trying to suppress a laugh. Freddy kicked him hard on the left shin.

'Owaaaggh', he yelled, half grimacing, half smirking.

Nicholai marched over to him and stood very close, face to face. Noses almost touching, although Nicholai was several centimetres shorter than Hardy, and several kilos lighter.

'Don't... mess with me'. He said it slowly, very deliberately. The statement was not open to question.

JoJo suddenly spoke, rapidly, like a volley from a machine gun.

'Ca na va vide non plus imbecile de la salutation et la piscine tu total plume de ma tante, hula oop!'

'Sorry', said Hardy quickly to both of them, surprised by the harshness in Nicholai's voice, and confused by the sophistication of JoJo's response. His Year Four French classes had not prepared him for such advanced comprehension. She spoke again.

'I am JoJo. You may reeemembare zat I veeseeted your skule last yeeear. Well, I 'ave reeturned. Bonjour tout le monde'.

'*Bonjour JoJo*', they all spoke, as one.

'We have set up a little game for you', Nicholai began. 'It is based around the well-known game of hide and seek, although we have invested it with a little Gallic flavour'.

'Eh?', said Wil, looking round the room to see if anyone had a clue as to what he was saying.

'A French game', Nicholai simplified his explanation.

'Around the garden and in the house, you will find a series of clues which will eventually lead you to a grand prize'.

'Great!, a treasure hunt'. Clara jumped up and down excitedly, span round twice, then lost her balance and fell over Helga, who was still sitting on the floor.

'There are two small differences from a normal treasure hunt', Nicholai continued,

'Firstly, the clues are in French, and secondly, JoJo will be trying to catch you'.

JoJo grinned for the first time. A sly, menacing little grin from under her fringe.

'Oh, I forgot something, JoJo has a black belt in the ancient French martial art of *casse doigt*

’.

‘Eh?’, said Wil again.

‘It loosely translates as ‘*broken fingers*’, my friends. Have a good weekend!’

And with that, he was gone, slipping quietly through the door, the mysterious and dangerous JoJo on his arm.

Chapter 12

*'Eh?', said Wil again. 'It loosely translates as 'broken fingers', my friends. Have a good weekend!' And with that, he was gone, slipping quietly through the door, the mysterious and dangerous JoJo on his arm.******

The next Monday, they all gathered again at the house as arranged. Nicholai and JoJo were nowhere to be seen, but Clara and Helga, Freddy, Hardy and Wil gathered outside the house at ten in the morning. It was cold, but bright. A great morning for being out in the open air. Wil had arrived on his bike, early. He had brought with him his cousin who was staying with them whilst his parents (Wil's Uncle Mick and Auntie Aretha) were on holiday. They called him Little Chris. His name was Chris, and he was a bit younger than them (and he was quite small). He was wearing a hooded top that was at least three sizes too big for him, and a baseball hat, which he always wore slightly off centre, half covering the left side of his head. 'So what are we doing?' Little Chris chirped in his little voice. Although he had met most of them before the previous summer, he didn't know them well. But then he was never shy in new company anyway. Most people liked him, even though his squeaky little voice and infectious energy could get on their nerves at times. His Mum and Dad had gone to Detroit for a few days, and they had promised that next year he could go with them. His dream was to go to America one day, but this time, he had been happy to stay at Wil's place for the week. They had talked on the phone and Wil had told him the story of the trip to Bruinlarroch and the people they had met there. The bumbling redhead, the spooky doctor, and the huge hairy man who had helped them. He also told him about the bus. Little Chris was excited by the prospects of today's treasure hunt and hide and seek. Wil had also told him about JoJo. Even more interesting. They all had their bikes, most of them some kind of BMX, apart from Helga who had a strange looking upright bike with large wheels and a basket at the front. In the basket she had put a canvas bag. It was stuffed completely full, and could not be done up. They could see food, what looked like a complete change of clothing, maps, and a large torch sticking out of the bag. She was obviously prepared for the worst.***** Hardy was late. He quite often was, but this morning he was already more than half an hour past the time they had agreed to meet, and there was no sign of him. Freddy had tried the walkie-talkie, but if he was in his house, it was often out of

range, and anyway there was never any guarantee that Hardy had actually switched it on. He tried again. 'Over, over, H1 come in, H1 come in...' Nothing, except a loud hissing and occasionally a loud booming sound. 'Listen to this,' Freddy called to Wil. They listened to the open channel on the radio again. 'Hiss, hiss, BOOM...hiss, hiss, BOOM', the sound went on. 'H1, do you read, do you read...' 'Yes, yes, yes, OK, BOOM, BOOM', came the reply suddenly. 'Hardy, you OK?', Freddy spoke, anxiously. 'I'm fine, mate, just trying to get the BOOM! bike started. See you in a minute. BOOM, BOOM. A few minutes later, they heard, coming from down the road, the familiar sound of Hardy's motorbike. 'Phut, phut, BOOM, hiss, phut, BOOM, BOOM, Pow!' He appeared round the corner. Under the helmet they could see he was both angry and embarrassed at keeping them waiting. But he was always the same. Even though he had a perfectly good bike at home, when there were others (other than his two key friends, Freddy and Wilis) involved, he had to bring the 'motorbike'. It was a motorbike in name only, really, one of those small bikes with thick balloon tyres. Although they teased him about it, when it worked it was pretty cool, and could get up to a reasonable speed, even with two people on board. But it was temperamental, noisy, consumed huge amounts of oil, and sent enormous clouds of blue smoke into the environment. He could only really use it on private land, although he had made the short journey to the house on the road. A huge plume of smoke

shot from the back of the bike as he stopped in front of them and turned off the engine. 'All set?' he said in his usual businesslike manner. Freddy and Wil were helping to fix a problem with Clara's bike. Although they had tools in the house, on finding that there was a loose bolt close to the saddle, Helga had reached into her bike basket and proudly pulled out a full set of brand new bicycle tools, still in the packaging. 'We're only biking round the garden', whispered Wil to no-one in particular, reaching out and taking the set from her. 'Covering all the bases', she replied, illogically. Just then, as they stood debating the next move, there was an enormous flash of light. No noise. Just a flash which blinded them for a moment. Clara screamed in pain and confusion.

*****Several kilometres away, outside Nicholai's mansion, JoJo pulled on her black leather jacket. 'Thees weel teeach ze leetle Eeengleesh to teease my accent', she muttered to herself as she slipped a small package into the side of her jacket. She wrinkled her nose a little as she zipped up the pocket. *****They stood rubbing their eyes for several seconds. Hardy was the first to try to open his eyes. He looked around. Nothing apparently out of the ordinary. Almost at the same time, they all noticed a burnt patch on the grassy area on which they were standing. Embedded in the turf was a small black container, about the size of a small box of chocolates. The lid had come partially open, and a small green light could be glimpsed inside. On the top of the lid was a small sign, painted roughly in white letters, saying 'Open here'. Helpful. Hardy reached down and opened the top to its full extent. Inside was a small device with several small buttons along the side, and two large circular discs. They started turning. *****JoJo finished her preparations, inserting several more small packets into the rucksack which lay on the ground beside her. She stood up, and dusted off her jacket and trousers. 'Are you OK, my little French chum?', said Nicholai's familiar, aristocratic voice. They had spent the weekend preparing the grounds for their friends' unwitting adventure. 'OK, I am off now'. She climbed elegantly onto her scooter, both legs perched to one side of the saddle, and effortlessly started the engine. 'I will see you there'. And she was gone, purring off into the distance. *****They bent down to look more closely at the machine on the ground. Faint music was playing from it. Hardy held up his hand to the others. Everyone crouched around it, and listened. 'Dun, dun, dun-dun, dun dun, dun-dun, dun dun, dun dun...' The heavy bass line faded away and they heard a voice, familiar, but at the same time slightly menacing. Three times it repeated the statement, 'Your kingdom is under attack. Marauding French invaders from the South are at your gates. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to secure your lands. Use only natural defences. Victory will bring fame and great fortune upon you. Your first clue is in the secret

garden. Proceed on wheels at snail's pace. This tape will self-destruct in five seconds'. Five seconds after the third running of the tape, a wispy smoke started to waft from the box. Within a minute, before their very eyes, it had been destroyed, leaving only a brown scorch on the grass below it. 'Blimey, did you get all that?'. Freddy took charge, as Helga produced a clipboard from her basket and handed it to him. A pen was dangling off a string tied to a hole drilled in the corner. Freddy quickly noted down the main points of the message that he could remember. 'French invaders; secure the lands; natural defences; secret garden... anything else?' 'We have to go there on wheels, like a snail', added Clara. 'Victory will bring great fortune', Helga said, licking her lips slightly. 'Vive la revolution!', someone said quietly. 'Pardon', said Freddy, looking round the group. They all looked at each other. No-one said anything. In the distance they could hear the smooth whirring sound of a scooter's engine. 'Vive la revolution!' came the sound again, from the far distance. The time it was accompanied by a shrill Gallic cackle. *****

Chapter 13

'Pardon', said Freddy, looking round the group. They all looked at each other. No-one said anything. In the distance they could hear the smooth whirring sound of a scooter's engine.

'Vive la revolution!' came the sound again, from the far distance. The time it was accompanied by a shrill Gallic cackle.

They jumped on their bikes and headed for the secret garden as instructed on the tape.

Clara was in front, her purple and gold BMX leading the way. She got a few metres ahead of them, then, without warning, she fell flat on her left side. No toppling, no wobbling, just fell. Straight down. Luckily onto soft, long grass.

'Wait!', cried Helga as they set off, 'it said we have to go at snail's pace. Go slowly.'

She was right, the message on the tape had instructed them to proceed, on their bikes, but at 'snail's pace'. They jumped down off their bikes and went over to where Clara was now sitting, stunned but apparently unhurt, next to her bike.

'What was that?', she said groggily. 'I just felt this thud on the side of my head, and then I was down'.

'Urghh, look...!', exclaimed Helga suddenly.

She was pointing, transfixed, at something dripping down the side of Clara's neck. A thick green and white liquid was slowly oozing down over her jacket.

They all looked at it for a moment, then Freddy stepped forward to help his sister. He grabbed a handful of some of the longer grass and started wiping. Helga helpfully passed him a box of tissues from her basket. She smiled in a self-satisfied kind of way.

Whatever it was that had hit Clara washed off quite quickly and easily, although it had a foul smell which lingered around them even though Freddy sealed the tissues in the black bin bag which Helga had helpfully provided.

They got back on the bikes.

'Remember what the tape said. Go slowly. We have to follow the instructions'. Helga was enjoying this now.

The secret of riding slowly was to keep riding, but as soon as you felt like you were going to have to put a foot down, to put a little more pressure on the pedals. Wil was the best at this, and Hardy had a natural advantage because with his fat little tyres (which were hardly ever inflated properly) he was able to bobble along quite happily at slow speeds.

They made their way slowly up the gravel path which led to the secret garden. There were no

more incidents along the way.

The Secret Garden was not really secret at all. When they were younger, Freddy and Clara had spent long hours there. It felt secure, surrounded as it was by a high wall, with only one way in and out. In former times it had been used as a place to grow vegetables, but these days it was overgrown and disorganised, although they did try to keep the large grassy area in the middle free cut so that they could play games of football and cricket there.

But today the garden did not appear any different. Still the rough grassy patch in the middle, the overgrown flower borders, the greenhouse in one corner, with almost all its glass shattered.

Because of the high wall and single entrance, the garden was home to all sorts of different animals and birds, some of which they would bump into during the day, as they searched for the clue that the tape had promised them.

Freddy and Wil, working at the far end of the garden near the most overgrown section of undergrowth, were surprised by a black bird with a bright orange patch on its face, nonchalantly sipping from an old but very useful pot, labelled 'Hunny'.

Clara and Helga, were busy looking around by the greenhouse.

'What was that?'

'What?'

'A rustling'

'Oh that's bound to be one of the boys messing', said Clara in an effort to reassure her friend.

'Oh jeepers creepers', Helga exclaimed suddenly, as a large furry creature flung itself towards her. It had jumped from a distance of about a metre, and was now on top of Helga, enthusiastically licking her nose and cheeks.

'The were-rabbit, the were-rabbit', she wailed.

'Don't worry H', said Clara calmly, 'it's not a were-rabbit, it is just a very large bunny. It seems very friendly too'.

The rabbit turned its attention to Clara., gently pushed her to the ground, and started licking off the remnants of the sticky stuff that had assaulted her earlier.

'*Herman*'.

'Sorry', said Clara.

'*Herman the German*', said the rabbit, in a jaunty, rabbity voice. And with that, he scampered

off, back into the undergrowth.

'Look!'. The voice was high-pitched and urgent. Little Chris, who had been searching at the base of the wall, was now standing in the middle of the grass, pointing at the long high wall. They stared as he read out the word that was written there.

'*Minuit*'

'What does *minuit* mean?'

Helga produced a large bundle from her basket. Placing the instructions on the ground, she expertly manhandled the bundle, shook it a couple of times, walked a few paces to her left (to just where the lawn joined onto the area of longer grass), and, with a considerable flourish,, threw the bundle to the floor. It lay there inert for a moment until she gave it a little prod with her shiny black shoe. It almost jumped into life, inflating itself into a huge tented structure, orange on the outside, and with a series of white compartments on the inside.

'Well, its not exactly camouflaged, but it will do for tonight', Hardy commented admiringly.

'Be prepared,, that's my motto', Helga added proudly.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a tablecloth, ready-laid with six place-settings. She sent the boys out to collect vegetables from the garden, and Clara to the greenhouse to pick up some of the fruits which continued to grow there, reproducing happily even though the glasshouse had not been planted for many years.

'What does *minuit* mean', Little Chris repeated once they had dined and settled into the sleeping bags Helga had provided.

'It is the French word for *midnight*', replied Helga, consulting the French dictionary she had brought with her.

'I think it means we have to wait'. Freddy had some idea of how Nicholai's mind worked, and as they hadn't found any clues all day, he knew that this sign would lead them to the clue, probably at midnight.

As they were drifting off to sleep they were aware of a strange light through the thin nylon of the tent fabric. Freddy saw it first, and shook Wil awake. Without a word, he pointed to the direction from which it was coming. He thought it was probably away from the house, although, half-awake, he was a bit disorientated, so he couldn't be sure.

It didn't matter much, because Wil, who had kicked Hardy to wake him, was now pointing in

the opposite direction, where there was a similar light, growing stronger. Not a single shining light (like a torch), more like a general brightness. Growing brighter by the minute.

Wil glanced at his watch.

‘Just before midnight’, he whispered quietly, calculating that they had had about three hours sleep.

‘That smell again’, said Clara suddenly. She and Helga had bedded down at the far end of the tent, so she spoke louder so the others could hear.

There was a crackling sound from outside.

Freddy stooped in the confines of the tent, and gently unzipped the front. He peered out.

Surrounding the tent were a series of white disks, each about the size of a small football. The light that had woken them was coming from a dozen flaming torches, hanging from the walls of the secret garden.

They all got out of the tent and stared at the scene around them. There was nobody to be seen.

Chapter 14

The torches were burning brightly on the walls of the garden, at least 12 of them, maybe more.

Freddy felt a sense of excitement.

Wilis, standing close to him, felt secure.

Hardy, for all his bravado, was standing to one side of them, but moving closer in, shuffling up so that they could not sense his concern.

Helga was clasping tight onto Clara's arm. Clara was smiling, standing, waiting, at the entrance to the tent.

Little Chris was dancing crazily, laughing, riding his bike in and out of the little white disks on the ground, sprinting round the garden at top speed.*****SPLAT!

Something soft and white hit Freddy on his left arm. He reeled away from Wilis, examining his spot where it had hit,

SPLAT!

Another one hit him on the shoulder. It didn't hurt, but he was aware of the smell that they had encountered yesterday.

WHOOMPH!

Two in quick succession hit Hardy in the chest, and he was knocked backwards. As he stumbled, he fell over the prone figure of Little Chris, who had just been taken out in the centre of the lawn. Uninjured, he was still laughing madly as he tried to get the sticky white mess off his leg.

'Take zat, ha!'

A split second after the crazed voice spoke, a larger white mass caught poor Hardy straight in the face. SPLOOSH! He was still on the ground and the mess covered most of his torso. He grimaced at the sight of it, the sound as it hit, and the smell as it dawned on him what they were dealing with.

*****Outside the garden, Nicholai was directing operations.

'OK, let them have the next round', he instructed JoJo.

She reached into her bag, and pulled out more of the white disks, lobbing them over the wall at the victims inside.

'I need more aim', she called back to him.

'Get up on the wall, I'll pass them up'

She clambered up onto the top of the wall. She could now see her targets more clearly, and started flinging missiles straight at them. Laughing maniacally, she repeated,

‘Take zat, ha, leetle Eengleesh, you want your clue, zen stand up and fight!’

*****They had all been hit, and began to realize that in order to get to the next clue they would have to show some response.

‘We need to return fire, guys, quick, regroup in the tent’.

They started moving back towards the tent for cover from the flying objects, which were dropping all around them. As they reached the entrance, Helga, who had been the only one not to come out, suddenly appeared at the entrance. She stuck her head out, and narrowly missed being hit by a flying camembert.

‘Stay where you are!’ she commanded. ‘Now we fight!’

She had changed into a khaki t-shirt, and had tied a red scarf around her forehead. She was carrying the basket from her bike as she emerged. She bent down in the doorway. They gathered round. A small Boursin caught Freddy on the side of the head, leaving its garlicky trails down his cheek.

‘We are under attack! take cover behind the tent and return fire!’ Helga was in her element.

‘With what?’ piped Little Chris.

‘Take this, and fight!’

Nicholai and JoJo were now both standing on the wall, like soldiers manning the ramparts of a castle. They were silhouetted against the night sky by the light of the torches. Both wore camouflage clothes, and carried rucksacks. They continued pulling their missiles out as the group took cover behind the structure of the tent.

‘Let them have the Camembert!, shouted Nicholai as he launched a series of large Emmentals at the tent.

‘OK, my friend, wiz pleasure!’*****

‘Fight, fight’, said Helga crazily, reaching into her bag with both hands and pulling out a series of artillery rounds – three small Cheddars, a Wensleydale, and two Cheshires. They took them enthusiastically, and started launching them in the direction of the two silhouetted figures standing on top of the wall. Two fell short, and the others, although well-aimed, only succeeded in decorating the wall below them.

‘Ha! Is that all you’ve got’, laughed Nicholai, as he directed two Bries towards Clara, who had broken ranks from behind the tent and had started moving towards the wall. She retreated back quickly.

Helga kept producing more lethal varieties from her basket, both hard English weapons, plus some selected international firepower – a couple of Belgian Blues, and some processed slices from the USA. These were effective when flicked sideways. They then sliced through the air and almost flew towards their target. Wil managed to get one to dip and bobble in the air, before hitting JoJo on the thigh, making her wobble slightly on top of the wall.

The conflict continued, the air full of the stench of battle.

*****Little Chris retreated inside the tent.

‘Give me two of your best Stiltons’, he whispered to Helga, ‘I’m going in’.

‘Take care, little one,’ she replied, attaching two deep blue cheeses to his belt and patting his shoulder in encouragement.

He slipped outside. The others continued launching the heavy artillery towards the wall.

He first moved backwards, and crawled into the undergrowth behind the tent. His objective was to move around the wall, hiding in the bushes, so that he could get close enough to launch an effective attack. He was on his belly now, sliding under the trunk of a tree which had long since fallen. He moved stealthily and quietly along the long side of the wall. They had not seen him. No-one knew he wasn’t inside the tent. He crawled around the corner of the long section and onto the shorter side. Here he was more exposed as there was less vegetation, but two of the three torches on that wall had burnt out, so there was less light to expose him. He looked up at the third torch, and waited. It flickered, popped suddenly, and was out. The wall was almost completely in darkness. He half ran, half stumbled along the length of the wall. Although this took less than 30 seconds, he felt very exposed, especially when he heard Nicholai’s voice yell out ‘Ha, we’ll get you now!’ But in glancing across the lawn he saw that the comment was aimed at Helga, who had created a decoy by running right into the middle of the lawn, lobbing Edams and Goudas as she went. She was a perfect decoy, and he was able to slip unnoticed into the bushes on the long side. He was less than 20 metres from where they were standing.

Crawling along on his belly, flat to the ground, he got to a point where he thought they were. He glanced up, his view obscured by the bush he was standing in, but at the same time concealing him. Three metres above, they were standing on top of the wall, about a metre from each other. He would have to make his shots count. It was all or nothing. He picked up a stone from the ground in front of his face. Just a small pebble. Rocking back into a sitting position, still concealed in the bush, he threw the stone to land on top of the wall, just in front of JoJo. Perfect. It landed on the wall with a loud crack before bouncing off to the outside of the garden.

‘What was that?’ said Nicholai urgently, turning his head to the left to where JoJo was standing.

As he did so, a Stilton, about 20 centimetres in diameter, caught him straight in the back of the head. He wobbled slightly, lost his balance, and jumped off the wall to the rough ground outside.

In the split second that remained to him, Little Chris knew that the second shot had to be the

shot of his life. He stood up, his position already revealed, and drew his arm back, just as JoJo prepared to let him have both barrels of a deadly Roquefort.

Almost in slow motion, the Stilton left his hand and flew unerringly towards its target.

She knew she was done for. The Roqueforts had not left her hands before she took the missile straight in the face and was lifted off her feet and disappeared behind the wall.

‘Sacré Bleu!, she said as she dropped.*****Little Chris walked nonchalantly back to the others, who raced over to him, cheering and laughing.

‘We did it, people!’ said Helga, triumphantly.

‘Mainly down to you and Little Chris’, Hardy replied admiringly. They strolled back towards the tent.

Only one light was burning now, and the garden had returned to its silent state.

As they approached the tent, Little Chris called out,

‘Look!’

A small parachute was descending from the night sky, outlined by the single remaining torch. It settled close to where they were standing. A note was attached.

‘OK, you win. Congratulations my friends. For your next clue, proceed to the empty room with the creaky floor. You will find what you need where the coats are hung’.

Chapter 15

'OK, you win. Congratulations my friends. For your next clue, proceed to the empty room with the creaky floor. You will find what you need where the coats are hung'.*****

They made their way over to the big old house in the late afternoon. Everyone was tired but the elation of winning the cheese fight was such that they were eager for the next challenge. Up the grand old staircase to the empty room. They must have made an odd sight that afternoon to anyone looking in on them, walking urgently up the old staircase with the faded red carpeting. The big ones, Freddy and Hardy, at the front, the medium sized Wil and Helga chatting animatedly in the middle, and the small ones, Little Chris and Clara, bringing up the rear. They marched confidently into the room and up to the big oak wardrobe which stood there. On the front door was a small handwritten note. They crowded around as Little Chris, who had slipped to the front of the bunch, read out the details, 'Your mission is simple. Select one of your group to spend one night in the wardrobe. Stay in until daybreak, and the task is complete'. They looked at each other nervously. The floorboards creaked ominously as they each shifted from foot to foot.*****'I'll do it'. They were so surprised that they looked for where the voice had come from. Freddy and Wil both turned towards the door. But it was Little Chris. 'I'll do it', he repeated. They surrounded him, looking down, happy that he had taken responsibility. 'Are you sure?' 'That's very good of you' 'Well done, mate' 'Excellent' The voices were just murmurs really, most of them looking down at the ground, no-one talking to him directly. 'Come on you lot! None of you wanted to do it. Let me do it. What's a night in a wardrobe anyway? Eight lousy hours.' He tried the door. Locked. 'Hang on', said Freddy, taking charge, 'if you're going in there, we'd better get you prepared properly.'

For the next two hours, they did their best to get Chris ready for his ordeal, or adventure, or nightmare. They didn't know which. Wil produced crisps and chocolate from his sports bag, and transferred them to a small carrier bag with 'Fortnum and Mason' written on it. Helga added a carton of orange juice, and Wil insisted Chris eat carrots, straight away, 'Good for the eyesight. I looked in there once. Very dark.' 'It's a wardrobe, Wil, of course it is dark,' said Chris, munching nonchalantly on a piece of raw carrot, and playing with the handle on the outside of the wardrobe door. 'Stuck fast', he said as he tried to open the door, 'feels like something is pulling it back'. There was not a trace of concern in his voice. It was dark outside now.*****As they got Chris's things ready for him, Hardy pulled him to one side. 'Look mate, I would go in there for you, but unfortunately I had a little accident yesterday...' he pointed to a small graze on the inside of his arm, '...you know, injuries and all, don't want to make it worse...you understand?' 'No problem,' said Chris with a smile, 'especially as you don't know what you're going to find in there. Last time I looked it was just full of coats, but that was months ago. Don't worry.' Hardy felt happy that he had offered to do it.*****They were just speculating on what might go on inside the wardrobe that night, when there was a light click from the door, or from inside. They all turned to look. Freddy tried the handle. 'OK, it's open now,' he turned to Chris, quickly moving away from the door and making sure the handle was re-latched. 'Right then, see ya', said Chris in his squeaky little voice. He pulled his cap down further over his left eye, and marched round high-fiving his friends. The looks on some of the faces were like they would never see him again, but his jaunty manner reassured them. They were probably more scared being in the big room for the night.*****Chris pulled open the door. They took a little pace backwards, mouths a little open. As the door opened to reveal a wardrobe full of what looked like fur coats, all of them, except Hardy,

moved a little pace forwards, trying to make it look like they hadn't taken a little pace backwards. Chris almost jumped into the wardrobe, over the high step. 'See you in the morning'. The door shut behind him. The same click. Freddy tried the handle again. Locked. Not a sound in the room. Creak, as Hardy moved closer to Wil. Creak again. ***** Fur brushed his face. Unable to really tell whether his eyes were open or closed, Chris blinked a few times. No difference. He couldn't see anything. He felt his way along the front of the wardrobe, from one corner, across to the door, past the door, and over to the other corner. It felt like some distance, but was probably only a couple of metres. His heart pounded a bit. He stopped. 'OK, so I've covered the front, let's move towards the back. All I need is somewhere to sit for the night, somewhere comfortable'. He lifted his arms up in front of him. Once again he was disorientated, not knowing exactly which way he was facing. He pushed against the material, heavy, furry, swinging back and forth, that stood in front of him. He considered kneeling down, but then thought again, reckoning that he wanted to be ready in case they had sprung any surprise for him inside. He pushed through towards the back. The wardrobe was large, he thought, as he took several small paces. Pushing through again, he stumbled slightly over something soft on the floor. As he stumbled he felt something push against his back, which made him start to fall. He put his arms out straight in front of him to cushion the fall. He fell, now uncertain about where he was going to end up. He covered his face, as the fabric brushed past it and he fell straight into.....the back of the wardrobe. Bang!. There was a loud crack as his head hit the back wall of the wardrobe, cushioned slightly by one of the coats which he had clutched at as he fell. There was a second thud as he plonked down heavily on the thick wooden floor. He felt a little afraid now, and sat down, breathing quickly. All of a sudden, he was aware of a presence in the cupboard with him. More strong breathing. Not his. The arm of a coat grabbed his bare arm. He tried to resist. 'La résistance est futile', said a familiar voice, 'now, you listen carefully to me, it is time for your education to begin'. *****

The group outside had sat down on the floor on a blanket Helga had provided. Periodically, they stopped speaking, and Freddy called for silence. They listened intently to the sounds of the house. A little groaning from the timbers as the wind blew outside. A miaow from a distant cat. But from the inside, nothing. The wardrobe was constructed from heavy timber, the contents insulated any sound from reaching the outside. Freddy went closer and put his ear to the door. A dull, low thud. Otherwise, nothing. ***** JoJo, sitting close to Chris in the darkness, started, *Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre, Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour, Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière. De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles: Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!* This stuff continued for nearly an hour. Chris was intrigued at first, then confused by the fact that he understood nothing of what she was saying, and after she carried on and on, he started to laugh in the darkness, quietly at first, then his high-pitched giggle started to penetrate the darkness. 'Why are you laughing?' JoJo demanded at length, 'this is not funny, this is important. By the morning, you will understand the importance of literature, poetry, and culture'. Chris giggled again. 'Listen to this then, he said, still laughing. There was a fly upon a wall, it said buzz buzz and that was all'. 'Ah, you are teasing me now, huh!'. You are a nasty, uncultured little boy'. 'And you are a nasty girl'. 'Ordinary Boy!' 'Well it's under my skin so I can never win, so thanks a lot we cheat and we lie and we fight we don't cry while we try' He sang the verse three times, then ran through the chorus another three or four times. 'No, no, no!' came her voice, piercing through the darkness in indignation, 'please stop it'. 'You spin me right round, baby right round,

Like a record baby right round, round round' Chris went through the whole of this song three times, as well. JoJo was moaning softly. He then went through his full repertoire of songs, jokes,

puns and nonsense poems. She had no chance. There was a stumbling, a bump, a click, and the wardrobe was suddenly full of light. Chris blinked several times, and saw JoJo crawling out of the door on all fours. The others were standing round her, cheering. She held her hand up wearily. 'OK, you win again. I can't take that little creep for one more minute. Take this.' Freddy took the envelope from her, and she tramped miserably out of the room.*****

Chapter 16

'OK, you win again. I can't take that little creep for one more minute. Take this.'

Freddy took the envelope from her, and she tramped miserably out of the room.

*****The envelope had contained a simple invitation.

You are invited to an evening of Entente Cordiale

at The Mansion

7.30 for 8.00pm

10th February 2006

Black tie and posh Frocks

At 7.45 p.m. they gathered outside the gates as they had been invited to do. They had never been to a posh do like this one. They had each interpreted '*Black tie and posh Frocks*' slightly differently.

Freddy was in classic black bow-tie, a white shirt with winged collar, and jet black suit with shiny lapels.

Willis was dressed the same, except he had taken the term black tie to mean any kind of bow tie. His was yellow.

The two friends shook hands solemnly as they went up to the front door.

Hardy and Chris looked like they had swapped clothes.

Hardy had on a black suit, with vertical white stripes on it, like chalk lines up and down the whole jacket and trousers. He also wore a little black hat on his head. Chris was dressed the same, pinstripe suit and a hat, which seemed to be several sizes too big for him. It perched precariously on his ears. In fact, Chris' suit was much too big for him, the jacket slumping down from his shoulders, and the trousers overhanging his shoes. He moved to the door, and tripped over several centimetres of extra trouser leg. Hardy caught his arm as he fell, and there was a ripping sound. It came from Hardy's armpit, as the tiny jacket which was stretched over his large frame gave way as he stretched to catch Chris. The leaning forward revealed several centimetres of bare flesh between his socks and the base of his trousers.

Clara was in a posh frock.

It was bright red, and stretched from high on her neck right down to the ground. She looked

elegant and debonair, and she knew it.

'Wow!' Wil had said, when she first appeared.

Helga had misinterpreted the dress code. Or at least, she wasn't in a posh frock.

'Sorry guys, this is all I have', she said, looking herself up and down.

Her hair was tightly held in a bun at the back of her head. She wore a white blouse buttoned up to the neck, and a black suit, the jacket buttoned three times at the front, the skirt straight and narrow, and ending just above the knee. The same black shoes as before.

The door opened, and a gentleman, dressed in a similar way to Helga, stood to attention in the doorway.

'Good Evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to the Entente Cordiale this evening', he said officially, *'please proceed to the dining hall'*.

With a grand sweep of his arm, he directed them to the dining room, which was at the end of a corridor. They entered and were greeted by Nicholai and JoJo, one standing at each end of the table. Nicholai was wearing a long black coat, under which he wore a bright white shirt and white bow tie. JoJo was smart and efficient in a green trouser suit.

On the table were three large silver plates, each sealed with an extravagant silver cover.

'Good Evening, my dear friends...', said Nicholai expansively. He sounded like he was about to embark on a speech.

'You have one task left,' interrupted JoJo sharply, 'it starts now. We call it the Bouche Trial. The rules are simple. Each one of you eats one of what is on each plate, then we tell you what you have just eaten. Simple, huh?'

'Simple...', they replied uncertainly.

The boys stood on one side of the table, the girls on the other. A waiter appeared from a doorway, and gradually lifted the lid from the first plate.

On the plate were some thin strips of meat which had apparently been fried in some kind of batter. Hardy went straight for one, picked it up, sniffed it quickly, then popped it in his mouth.

He chewed briefly, then spoke,

'Nob lad, ginny at rye'

'Eh? Finish what's in your mouth!', said Wil.

'Not bad, give it a try', repeated Hardy.

They all took one and ate. There were a couple of minutes of silent chewing.

'Formidable!', said JoJo, smiling broadly, 'you have just had your first taste of frog's legs. Now try this'.

They had time only to exchange quick, dark glances about what they had just eaten, before she lifted the second plate with a flourish. Under the cover were six small rocks.

'Rocks...', said Freddy uncertainly.

'No, I know what these are,' said Helga, producing six small forks from her handbag. She picked up a rock, and prised it open with the fork. It fell into two halves. She held the bottom half in two fingers, put it to her mouth and delivered whatever was inside straight down her throat. She gulped extravagantly. She turned a little green.

'You have to do it, it's not so bad', she said, gulping again, 'they're oysters'.

One by one, they followed her lead and managed to down the slippery white flesh. It seemed best not to question it, not to look at it, and not to taste it. Just to down it.

The last oyster gone, the waiter returned to pick up the last dish cover. He waited a few seconds with his hand on the ornate handle. A sly smile played across his lips.

As the lid lifted, there were six loud gasps, and two quick giggles.

Six brown snails lay on the plate. If snails had eyes, it felt like they were staring up at them.

'Let's just do it', said Chris, picking up the shells and handing one to each of them. 'Don't think about it, just suck. One-two-three, GO!'.

They had no option. They each did it. The shells were banged down on the table six times. Six big gulps. Five slight shivers as the contents slid down. A broad smile from Hardy to JoJo. He rubbed his stomach in a satisfied way.

JoJo leant over to Nikolai and whispered something briefly into his ear. He cocked his head to one side as he listened. He smiled.

'Well done, well done,' said Nikolai carefully, 'you have succeeded in winning round our continental colleague with your commitment and your courage. 'Waiter, please bring on the main course'.

The waiter disappeared briefly, returning moments later bearing a huge silver tray laden with red and yellow boxes, and large cardboard cups with straws sticking out through small holes in the top. He threw the boxes roughly onto the table.

They all laughed, and talked and talked as they enthusiastically attacked the food.

'Bon Appetit!' said JoJo as she tucked into her *McFrites*.

Chapter 17

'Let's go down to the basement again', said Clara excitedly, remembering the fun they had had the previous week, with JoJo and Ned.

'Sorry', said her brother, 'chores to do. We have nothing to eat, we need to go shopping'.

Freddy was usually the responsible one. He looked at her a little sternly, then smiled when he saw the disappointment on her face.

'Don't worry, we'll go to MegaMart, you always like it there'.

It was true, Clara loved that place. The whole experience of going there was exciting, the journey, the sheer size of the store, and the amount of stuff they had there. She cheered up.

'I'll make a list', she said enthusiastically, skipping over towards the fridge.

Now it was true that the fridge had not been opened in nearly a week. They had been to stay at Ned's mansion house following the treasure hunt, and had not returned until the previous evening. Even Clara, who was game for most things, approached the door with a little trepidation. She put her hand on the handle of the big double-door fridge, and pulled. Nothing. Stuck fast. She pulled again. A sticky creaking noise. Still stuck.

'FREEMAN!', she yelled.

Freddy had gone down to the basement to get a bag for the shopping.

'Coming', he shouted back up the stairs, 'don't worry'.

He was proud of the way he looked after his little sister. She looked up to him, and he responded by making sure she was happy and safe. They were inseparable, always playing the same games, doing similar things, sharing similar friends. Of course there were arguments, but whenever she was lonely, or scared, or worried about something, he was there for her.

The big house frequently scared her. Because of its mainly wooden construction, it was always creaking and groaning and moving just a little, and at night she would often go to sleep thinking that something was there, or someone was coming.

As he tramped up the stairs from the basement, he thought of these noises too, as his boots crashed up each step of the wooden staircase.

Half way up, he heard a scream.

'Aaaaggghhhh!'. She screamed again.

'What's up, sis?', he replied nonchalantly, as he reached the door to the kitchen.

'Look!'

She had managed to prise open the door of the fridge. But she had regretted it immediately.

The top shelf, which usually stored the dairy products, was now covered with a whitish grey goo, which was slowly dripping from some of the rungs of the shelf.

It was dripping down onto the second shelf, where two sausages, left for nearly two weeks, had developed a nasty green/grey fur on them. Next to them, a chicken carcass was lying mournfully on its side. Two large brown caterpillars were gnawing enthusiastically at a leg.

At the bottom of the fridge, where the vegetables used to be, was a green slodge, part-liquid and part-solid. Swimming in the mess were a little family of green frog-like creatures. Just a bit darker in colour than the slodge, they swam away towards the back when the door was opened, then turned, each raising a little green paw in the air, before diving beneath the surface. A few seconds later, the lead creature re-emerged at the front of the lake, raised a paw in the air again, and spoke, or rather sang,

It's much too late

We are your fate

Because you missed

The sell by date

'It's definitely time for chores', laughed Freddy, shutting the door quickly. As he did so, there was a whirring from the ice-making machine built into the fridge's door, and a stream of ice-cubes spat out of the dispenser, knocking Clara to the ground, and half-burying her in a mountain of freezing ice.

'Right, time to clean the fridge, sis!' Freddy ran over to the sink and started to prepare a large bowl of hot water and detergent.

As he worked, grunting occasionally at the smell and yelling out as one of the green creatures latched onto his thumb, Clara started making out a list of what they would need for the next week.

Clara waited outside at the bus stop. As the stop was directly beside the house, she could wait until it was in sight before calling for Freddy.

'It's here!', she yelled back to the open front door. Freddy pulled off the rubber gloves he had been wearing, and sprinted out to the bus. He jumped on just as it was pulling away. He and Clara ran upstairs. The top deck was empty so they settled in the front seat as they always did.

As they looked down, they could see the long, sleek shape of another bus going in the opposite direction. This was not an ordinary town bus like the one they were on, but a silver bullet shaped vehicle, heading out of town. They knew not where. This was the bus that had taken them to Bruinlarroch in January, to the mysterious party and the peat bogs. The one that had flown at six hundred miles an hour.

The bus they were on could not have been more ordinary. Plying its trade between their village of Bishop's Bottom, and the town of Frogsmere, it took about half an hour to make the journey to town, and another five minutes in town, making its way over to the MegaMart. It only stopped once on the way, in the suburb of Nohope. They looked out as they approached the stop.

Standing at the stop were the usual array of travellers, no doubt involved in the same daily shopping routine.

Two mothers, nattering urgently, with babies in prams.

Two more, with toddlers straining to escape from their clutches.

An old man holding a guitar.

And three elderly ladies supported by a variety of different appliances – one with a walking stick, one with a zimmer frame, and one sitting on a red motorised buggy.

As the bus pulled in to the stop, the little throng made its way forward. Freddy turned away from the window, and returned to reading through the list that Clara had bought with her.

After a minute or so, they looked out again, because the bus seemed to be taking a long time to set off.

'You can't bring that thing on here, love, sorry'.

The words were from the driver directly below them.

'Don't you tell me what I can and cannot do, young man'

'I'm just telling you that company policy is that we cannot take buggies on board our buses'

'Company policy! Company policy! I've had more company policies than you've had hot dinners! Don't be sharp with me young man'

'It's not coming on'. The driver was resolute.

'Fine, but just wait. You will regret this. What's your name? I said, "what's your name?"'. She sounded very angry.

'Andy', replied the bus driver politely.

'Sandy! Sandy! What sort of a name is that? You young people, I don't know...'

They watched from above as the lady pulled her buggy back from the door. She reached into the bag behind her and pulled out a large black coat which she proceeded to put on. Reaching back again, she took out what looked like a motorbike helmet. Across the front was written in flame red, *'Born to Ride'*.

The bus started on the five-minute ride to Mega-Mart.

'Upstairs, Marjorie?'

'Upstairs, Phyllis'.

Clara and Freddy turned round.

Coming up the stairwell were the two ladies who had just boarded. The first one used the handle of her walking stick to pull herself up. The second one was carrying her frame above her head.

'Hey, what've we got here, Phyllis?', said the zimmer lady, looking at Freddy and Clara in the front seats. Freddy looked round, to see who they might be talking to, but the top deck was still empty.

'Looks like someone's in our seats', said the first lady. Freddy looked around again, at the rows of empty seats ranging right to the back of the bus.

They looked as the two old ladies, both quite obviously in their seventies, stood staring at them from the stairwell. They were both similarly dressed, wearing smart tweed suits in a pinky red colour. Both were wearing leather motorcycle jackets. Both were wearing long lace-up leather boots. Lady number one dropped her frame. As she bent down to pick it up, they could make out the same words *'Born to Ride'* picked out in studs on the back of her jacket.

'Well, are you going to move, or not?' demanded zimmer lady.

'Erm, no, we were just sitting here', Freddy replied politely.

'Well, we've just got on',

'Ah, yes, I know that,'

'Daft old bat! What did you call me?'

'I said "I know that", I didn't call you anything'. Freddy sat still.

Walking stick lady jumped over two sets of seats to get closer. One of her support stockings slipped down revealing her pasty white skin underneath. She sat in the seat just behind them.

'If you don't move now, you'll regret it', she said, as zimmer-lady marched down the aisle,

frame held menacingly above her head.

'I advise you not to mess with us, young man'.

'OK, OK, we're moving'. Freddy beckoned Clara to follow. As they passed, walking stick gave Freddy a whack on the leg with her stick.

'*Ner, young people, eh!*' she muttered to her companion as they sat down.

Clara giggled as they made their way to the back, and were flung into their seats as the bus turned a corner.

Looking out of the window at the back, they could see in the distance a small figure on a buggy, head down, scarf flying out from under a black helmet, on two wheels as she chased the bus round the corner.

Chapter 18

Looking out of the window at the back, they could see in the distance a small figure on a buggy, head down, scarf flying out from under a black helmet, on two wheels as she chased the bus round the corner.

They rounded another corner, more slowly, and pulled into the bus stop at the MegaMart. A few seconds later, the lady on the buggy shot past them, drove through a crowd of shoppers, scattering shopping and children either side of her as she went, and disappeared into a door that (luckily) happened to be open. The door was marked '*Warehouse Staff only*'. They heard a small thud and a distant cry of '*...now listen to me, young man...*'.

Clara and Freddy each grabbed a trolley from outside the store. Freddy pushed his a few metres, realised that it had a wheel that was not running true, then took it back and selected a newer model.

'OK, sis, where's the list?', he asked Clara, as they pushed their way through the crowded entrance, past the newspaper section where every front page featured Thierry Henry's stunning goal against the *Galacticos* on Tuesday evening.

'The list...', Clara reached down into her jacket pocket. Nothing. She searched the pockets of her jeans, she looked all around her. No list.

'Great', said Freddy sarcastically, trying to remember what they needed.

'Whoaaaah!'

They turned round to see their great friend Wil approaching them from the back of the store, clinging fast to an empty trolley. He was standing with both legs on the base of the trolley, which seemed to be moving under its own power.

He blew past them, grabbing at things on the shelves as he went, trying to slow down. All he succeeded in doing was pulling items off the shelves which either went in his trolley, or flew off the shelf at some innocent shopper. Small children scattered in all directions.

As he headed off to the back of the store, Clara turned to her brother with a smile.

'I'm having some of that,' she shouted, and put one foot aboard her own trolley. She gave a little push with her free leg, and the trolley accelerated wildly away, skewing this way and that, until it found a straight course in pursuit of Wil. Freddy did the same and gave chase.

The three of them motored up through the greeting cards section to the back of the store, scattering cards and paper as they went. When they got to the back of the store, they noticed

that the old lady who had been on the bus (the one with the walking stick) was standing at the end of one of the long aisles that ran the length of the store, slightly stooped but with stick held high.

'Chocs away!', she yelled demonically, and brought her stick down with a mighty crack onto the floor.

They needed no second invitation. Wil, who was in front, manouevred his trolley down the furthest aisle, Clara turned into the long aisle next to the stick-lady, and Freddy pirouetted smartly into the nearest walkway to him. With a quick push on the floor from his right leg, he sped off down the aisle.

He gathered speed rapidly, shooting past childrens' toys, babycare, and health and beauty. As he came towards the bakery section, he glanced up one of the transverse aisles to see Clara riding her trolley like a chariot, in a crouching position but with her right arm high in the air like a rodeo rider.

'Whooo-hooo!', she yelped as she caught sight of her brother. She was laughing hysterically.

As he passed, Freddy could see Wil in the far distance, who had slowed down almost to a stop under a hail of missiles from a group of children who had clearly prepared themselves with a battery of doughnuts, bread rolls, and muffins. These were raining down on Wil as he passed. As Freddy zoomed by at the other end of the section, they turned their attention to him, and he narrowly missed being assaulted by a well-aimed French stick, thrown javelin-style from distance.

The race was really on now. Clara, in the middle lane, was slightly ahead, and could not see the other two on either flank. Wil had caught up some lost time, and was close behind her, approaching the drinks and sweets section of the store. Freddy was being held up by an altercation at one of the checkouts, involving a young assistant, and an old lady in a red buggy. He ground to a halt.

Wil could see the end wall of the huge superstore in the distance. Standing there, arms crossed, was the bent old lady with the zimmer frame. She looked determined, and was clearly not going to move.

Clara, in turn, glanced across from her position, to where zimmer lady was standing. She was close now, only two or three more aisles to cross and she would win.

She could see Wil closing fast on the finish line as well. He had just taken out a sweet counter, and the contents were rolling, fast, right to where Clara was heading. Both of them were part-rolling on their trolleys, part sliding along on the assortment of sweets, chocolates, and candies that had spilled onto the floor.

Freddy, meanwhile, had enlisted the help of buggy-lady. She had appeared beside him at the checkout, and he had grabbed hold of the handle of the little cart she carried at the back of the buggy. He was now being pulled along at a startling rate as the supercharged buggy raced through the store. Buggy-lady was still cackling, waving her arms around, steering with her

knees, and jabbing the horn with her left foot.

As they rounded the last aisle, they saw Wil and Clara. And they saw what was about to happen.

Wil had his head down, only glancing across at the action across the aisle. Although Clara was more aware of where he was, she was too busy trying to stay upright. Aniseed balls from the sweet counter were all around her, and her trolley was swaying wildly from side to side as the wheels struggled to grip on the shifting surface.

To reach the point where zimmer lady was standing, her frame now raised in the air ready to acclaim the winner, Wil would have to make a half-turn to the right as he reached the end of the aisle. Gripping the handlebar tightly, he shifted his weight from left to right, leaning out over the right-hand side and bringing his head down to the level of the top of the trolley.

Then he hit the bread truck.

An innocent teenage shelf-filler was just emerging from the stockroom, just behind where zimmer lady was standing, pushing his huge wheelie-crate full of the finest sliced white bread. He was whistling contentedly to himself. Not a care in the world.

He was certainly not expecting a teenager on an out-of-control trolley to cut across his path at high speed, but that is exactly what hit him.

It was a full-on blow, such that Wil was thrown from the trolley, whose wheels made contact with the base of the truck, into the soft wall of massed loaves.

As the trolley stopped, Wil just carried on.

In the split second he had to contemplate his fate, Wil actually thought that he ran the risk of suffocating in the huge doughy mass in front of him, but in fact the effect of hitting it was the opposite. He was enveloped briefly by the bread, but then the elasticity of the mass meant that having gone in, he was now being catapulted back out again.

He tried to grab something, but there was nothing to hold. He was flung upwards and backwards, out of control. Flying. Through the air.

Just as Clara was passing.

Clara was at the end of her crazy, wild zig-zag down aisle three.

She arrived at the end where zimmer-lady was standing just as Wil fell to earth. There was a loud rattling noise as he landed straight in the trolley, his legs and arms flailing wildly, sticking out of the top. He looked stunned as zimmer-lady brought her frame down with a flourish to greet the winner (or winners). But Clara couldn't stop.

About five metres behind them were buggy-lady, with Freddy still hanging on for his life. Buggy-lady was shouting and cursing as the others shot past the finish, and put on a final spurt of speed. They passed zimmer-lady at full tilt. But they weren't stopping.

There was a large open door from where the bread truck had emerged, which led to the storeroom. It was large enough to let the wheeled trucks come and go.

Both vehicles shot straight through the door into the stockroom, followed by zimmer-lady who had turned and was now using her frame to half-run, half-vault her way through the door.

'Live fast, die young!' she screamed as she came through the door.

As they all ground to a halt in the large, dark, slightly damp room, the doors slowly swung shut with a gentle *crump* noise. The room went almost completely dark.

In the darkness, Freddy could make out his friends. Emerging from the shadows came a bent old lady brandishing a walking stick.

'Ha, ha...got you now!', she cackled wickedly.

Chapter 19

In the darkness, Freddy could make out his friends. Emerging from the shadows came a bent old lady brandishing a walking stick.

'Ha, ha...got you now!', she cackled wickedly.

There was some basic lighting in the warehouse, but all the doors were shut, so there was no natural light. The effect was a kind of gloomy glow all around, which allowed them to see, but only really to make out shadows. Freddy checked his watch. It read 11.30 p.m. The store outside was dark and empty. They had been there at least four hours, since their capture by the gang of elderly ladies.

Who were still in the warehouse with them!

The warehouse was large, but was divided into sections by the merchandise that was inside. It was arranged in sections, according to the types of goods stored there, with huge towers of boxes and pallets. Although they could not make out the types of stuff stored in each section, in some areas there were brown boxes stacked haphazardly in small piles, whilst in others the stacks and pallets rose right up to the ceiling. In these areas, the stacks cut out the light, making them very dark. They huddled in one of these dark areas contemplating their next move.

The gang of ghastly grannies was hiding in a separate part of the room.

'We've got to get rid of them, or we'll be found out...' said one, quietly.

'Never did like kids', said another in the shadows, with a sour, menacing tone in her voice.

The third lady was busy opening boxes and stuffing items into the bags which she kept inside and on top of her buggy.

Wil and Freddy started discussing their next moves in the darkness.

'They're up to no good, we need to stop them'.

'OK, but where are they?'

'I don't know, but they must be in here somewhere'.

They listened quietly, intently, for over an hour. All they could hear was a low drone from the generators and deep freezes around them, and the sound of their own movements. Then, a sound. Very soft, distant laughter. A cackle. A brief whirr from an electric motor. No movement. Clara started looking around for things to use as weapons. She stayed close to her brother and to Wil.

After maybe two hours, sitting, listening, Freddy presented his plan.

'We need to create a blind alley. We need to lure them into the trap somehow, then seal off the aisle with them inside'.

'Great. So how do we lure them in, and how do we keep them in?' Wil sounded highly sceptical.

'I know how we keep them in'.

'So...?'

Wil gazed at Freddy through the murk. He was pointing behind him, where a large fork lift truck was standing, with a huge pallet of boxes stacked neatly onto its forks.

'No way!' said Wil,

'Shh!' replied Freddy, 'we can do it. The keys are inside, it's like a ready-made door. We can use it'.

'OK, so how do we get them into the trap?', whispered Wil, still sceptical.

'I don't know, Clara...'

'No way!' Clara spat the words out, but at a whisper.

'What do you think I meant?', replied Freddy, 'actually I don't have much of an idea, I thought you might have...'

Clara was reassured by this trust placed in her.

'Well, from the sounds of it, they are busy stealing from the store, and they seem to be well practiced at it. What we need to do is to get all three of them to come into the area – the blind alley – that we choose, at the same time. You saw in the store last night that they are quick, they are well organised, and they know the store, and probably this storeroom, better than we do...'

She stopped to draw breath, but they were impressed with her logic so far. As they paused, they heard the whirring sound getting a little closer.

'*They're moving...*', whispered Wil, '*listen*'. They listened intently for a few minutes. The ladies were definitely on the move. Clara continued.

'We have to move fast. What we need to do is to entice them down this alleyway...',

She pulled them both a few metres forward, to the head of an aisle bordered on both sides by boxes of canned petfood.

'Look, the end is over there, and it is just a blank wall. The aisle is narrow, it's ideal. Also, canned food is heavy, they wouldn't stand a chance'. She shoved hard at one of the boxes

which formed the wall. It didn't budge.

'How we get them over here is the main problem, but here's how we do it. I will be the main decoy...'

'What do you mean the decoy?', interrupted her brother, 'you're not going to confront them, you've seen, they could be dangerous...'

'Don't interrupt', she replied tartly, '*I'm* doing this. Bro, you are going to drive the forklift. Go over there and work it out. You will need to move quickly, but you cannot go anywhere until they are inside. Wil, you need to sing.

'*Sing!*', Wil almost screamed, although, aware of the situation, he did so quietly,

'*Sing!*', he said again, quieter this time.

Singing was not a problem in itself to Wilis, in fact he had a superb voice, and he knew it. It was just that in the middle of the night, in this situation, in the dark...well, it just wasn't right for singing. Clara carried on urgently.

'You need to sing to attract their attention. Then you need to sing to make them come over, and then you need to sing to mesmerise them'.

'Wow, thanks Clara,' he said mockingly, 'you think it'll work?'.

For the next hour, Clara was a woman on a mission, directing her two helpers to their task. Freddy was quite enjoying it now, listening to the ladies rummaging about in the distance, occasionally stopping whilst they wondered if the noises were getting closer. He had opened one of the boxes nearest them, and they were drinking Coke and eating crisps as they prepared.

'Ok, go,' instructed Clara, motioning Freddy towards the fork lift.

'Now, Wil, this is your chance, as we discussed'.

Wil started to let out a high pitched warble, which slowly morphed into a song,

'You're beautiful,

You're beautiful,

You're beautiful,

It's true'

He stopped and they listened for a moment. Lots of scrabbling about in the distance. The

singing seemed to bounce around the huge warehouse.

'What was that?

I don't know?

A whirring noise from the buggy. Getting closer.

Wil continued,

I saw your face,

In a crowded place

And I don't know what to do

'Cause I'll never be with you

'Ooh, young man', cried a distant, ancient voice.

Wil carried on singing the song, and started climbing on top of the boxes which formed their dead-end alleyway. Clara moved towards the entrance. The whirring from the buggy and the steady *clump clump* from either stick or zimmer frame got closer still.

'We'll get you, you little blighters', squeaked a croaky old voice, *'we'll find you'.*

'Not far away now, keep going', instructed Clara to Wil.

'You're beautiful,

You're beautiful,

You're beautiful,

It's true'

'Oh, thank you son', muttered one of the murderous old grannies. The three of them were moving steadily towards the sound of the voice, which was now perched on top of the boxes, towards the end of the aisle-trap they had set. Freddy started the engine on the forklift.

'Now, change!', Clara whispered through the gloom.

'You're just a devil woman,

With evil on your mind

Beware the devil woman

She's gonna get ya!

The change of easy listening artist had the desired effect.

'Oh, Cliff Richards, my favourite,' said a voice, much closer now,

'Ooh, mine too, Phyllis, so handsome, so young!'

'Come on, baby, light my fire!', added the third voice.

From her vantage point, Clara could see the three hags approaching the entrance to their aisle. She signalled to Freddy, who started to move the huge pallet into position, ready to seal the entrance.

'There's one of them! Get her!', cried zimmer-lady as she caught sight of Clara. Hitching her skirt up she sprinted towards Clara, closely pursued by the other two. As they entered the alleyway, Wilis crooned,

'We're gonna get ya!'

As they raced down the alley, Wil jumped down off his boxes to the ground outside the line of boxes, and helped Clara through the hole they had made by removing one of the boxes from the wall. As she scrambled through, he picked up the box they had pulled out and shoved it with all his might back into the hole. He just glimpsed the buggy scream to a halt as he sealed the escape route. They could see back up the corridor that Freddy had done his bit. After a triumphant toot of the horn, he sat astride the pallet of boxes that he had used to seal the entrance, avoiding the blows and the insults from below.

It would not be possible to print here what was said that evening. Suffice it to say that three spirited old ladies, living long lives of crime and misdemeanours, were able to spend the next two hours swearing, shouting, and mouthing abuse at the three teenagers.

As one of them was finally making a spirited attempt at escape by standing on top of the buggy and trying to use the zimmer as a kind of climbing frame, the shutters on the stockroom door clattered open, and a shaft of light fell upon them. It was 7.00 a.m.

Chapter 20

As one of them was finally making a spirited attempt at escape by standing on top of the buggy and trying to use the zimmer as a kind of climbing frame, the shutters on the stockroom door clattered open, and a shaft of light fell upon them. It was 7.00 a.m.

'You've just helped to solve a long-running mystery, kids', said the store manager as the three old ladies were released from their petfood prison into the custody of three burly security staff.

'*Meddling kids,*' yelled one of the group as they were led away.

'We don't know how to thank you enough for what you have done. Not only did you stop three dangerous criminals, you also had to endure a night in our stockroom. Please accept our invitation to come back to the store this evening, at closing time, and we will organise a little party to thank you properly'.

'A *party,*' laughed Wil as they headed back home.

'Yeh, a party in a supermarket!', added Freddy mockingly.

'Don't be so quick to judge', said Clara, 'it could be fun, and they could have sent us away with nothing, after all'.

'Well, they have sent us away with nothing, so far, what is there to say that we will get anything this evening?'. Freddy was speaking as the older brother, even though his younger sister had come up with the plan and executed perfectly.

They spent the day resting from their night out. Freddy popped over over to see Hardy in the afternoon, who had not been seen for several days. It turned out he was quite unwell, and was had been told to rest in bed until they had completed some tests to see exactly what was making him feel poorly.

In the evening they made their way over to MegaMart once more. No bus this time, they were picked up in a limousine (run by the MegaLimo company), which was entirely orange in colour, but inside had the most amazing array of gadgets and gizmos they had ever seen. In the course of the half-hour journey they managed to watch three DVDs, make themselves dinner, make ice for their drinks, recline the seats to beds, unrecline the seats to make them seats again, heat the seats, cool the seats, and spend ten minutes wallowing in the jacuzzi.

Drying themselves off, they poured out of the back of the car into the carpark in front of the store.

A banner above the entrance said

‘Congratulations Wilis, Freddy, and Clara. Megaheroes’

‘Megaheroes’, squeaked Clara excitedly, as she pointed up at the banner.

As they made their way to the front entrance, the store manager, slipped out from somewhere and came over to greet them.

‘I’m soooo pleased to welcome you back to our store this evening’, he oozed, ‘and thank you soooo much for what you did last night. MegaMart loves you’.

The smile on his face remained fixed throughout this statement. In fact his features did not move at all. To his left, and just behind him, was a man of the same height, wearing the same beige suit, the same green tie with the knot slightly too large, and smiling the same kind of smile. To his right, was someone very similar.

‘Mega-good show’, said right-hand man.

‘We’re mega-glad you showed up, kids’, said left-hand man in what sounded like an American accent.

‘Yeah, Mega,’ chorused a group of about a dozen similarly-clad MegaMart employees.

Freddy could have sworn someone in the group had said, ‘*suits you, sir*’.

‘As a token of our Mega-appreciation for you efforts, please do join us for a cocktail party and then your special reward’.

They went in.

Inside, everything was also Mega, except for the party, which consisted of a few glasses of warm apple juice, and some Megasandwiches which looked as if they had been left over from that day’s lunchtime, and which tasted as if they had been left over from last week’s lunchtime.

‘Ergh!’, cried Clara as she tried to force down a sausage roll and talk to one of the megaexecutives at the same time.

They chit-chatted for a while, before the store manager finally cleared his throat, tapped his watch on the side of a glass to get everyone’s attention, and smiled more broadly than ever.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, unnaccustomed as I am...’ he paused for effect, and a few of the beige suits giggled nervously.

'I would just like to say a big mega thank you to Freddy, Bill, and Clara for their brilliant performance last night. I am pleased to be able to inform you that our three friends have each been given an ASBO and a community service order, and will be spending the next year teaching knitting and crochet to delinquent teenagers. I'm sure you'll agree that the two groups deserve each other!'

More cheesy smiling and a big guffaw from one of the keenest young executives (in fact the one who resembled most closely the store manager).

'Now, children, for your prize',

He wasn't even looking at them now, as two photographers from the local *Bottom Gazette* had turned up, and were standing just to his left. He spent a few seconds inching towards a large MegaMart sign, bringing his entourage with him in an ungainly shuffle, which only stopped when he was clearly satisfied that the photographers could fit in all the detail behind him

'Your prize is very simple. You have five minutes in the empty store. You can do exactly what you like.'

Two of the suits looked nervously at each other. Then they smiled again.

The manager stuck his hand out a suit deposited a stopwatch into it.

'Your time starts...NOW!'

Chapter 21 - Freddy and Clara go mad!

'Your prize is very simple. You have five minutes in the empty store. You can do exactly what you like.'

Two of the suits looked nervously at each other. Then they smiled again.

The manager stuck his hand out a suit deposited a stopwatch into it.

'Your time starts...NOW!'

They looked at each other.

'Aagghhh!', said Freddy.

'Aaggghhh!', said Wil.

'Oooghhh!', said Clara. 'Trolleys!', said Clara. 'Get trolleys, now!'

They sprinted into the store, which was completely empty, except for a few staff who were dotted about at the end of most of the aisles.

They each picked a trolley from the front of the store, and scooted into the empty space. They stopped. Freddy looked at his watch.

'Four and a half minutes left, let's get busy'.

'Busy with what, though...?' Wil's voice was thin and panicky.

'Come on, just get stuff, things you want, things you need, loads of things, anything. I'm off'. With that, Clara disappeared towards the CDs and books section.

Freddy shot off into fruits and vegetables.

Wil stood there. Numb. He looked around him, desperately. Some of the staff were staring at him as he stood, motionless.

'Go on mate, start moving!', someone shouted.

'Come on love, start here...!' Friendly voices. Trying to help. Still he was rooted to the spot. His lower lip began to tremble. His body started to move, almost involuntarily, first to the left, then to the right, then he pushed his trolley a metre to the front. Then he pulled back again. Unable to move, he grabbed at a packet of nappies which were within his reach. Then he put them back again. No need for those. Another look round. He ran, with his trolley, towards the aisle selling hair care products. He grabbed at a large bottle of shampoo. He started to read the label. *For greasy hair*. 'Is my hair greasy?' He put it back. Picked out one labelled *for frequent use*. 'I don't want to wash my hair every day'. He put it back.

Wil was aware of the commotion going on in other parts of the store. He could hear Freddy racing around the store with his trolley. He could hear Clara, closer to him, methodically placing goods into hers. A regular clicking-clacking sound. The sounds made him even less able to make up his mind about what to do next.

There was a huge crash from the back of the store. More clickety clicking from closer to him. Another crash and a yell from the back. In the distance he saw Freddy come out from the end of an aisle, swinging from the shelving at the end, which gave way as he swung off them, coming smashing to the ground as he passed. A lake of milk formed behind him as he shot up the next aisle.

At the end of four minutes of work, Clara and Wil met up with their hauls, just outside the store.

Clara's trolley was bursting with CDs and DVDs. Despite only having four minutes to load up, she had filled the trolley to the brim with CDs from a section that she liked. She had every title in the Top 100 and another hundred or so titles from the DVD section, including several films which had won awards at the Oscars ceremony the previous night. She sat on top of her trolley in triumph.

Wil was almost crying. In fact he had that look in your eyes that you get when you have cried but the tears have not quite come out of your eye. Full of water, ready to spill out. He just kept control of it and Clara surveyed his trolley from on high.

Three tubes of toothpaste. A child's toothbrush. A girl's hair slide.

'Here, this is for you,' he muttered miserably as he leant down and handed the hair slide to Clara. She smiled. A smile of pity and warmth. He had always been that way, indecisive and naïve. But she liked him for that.

She reached into her trolley and pulled out the first CD that came to hand. *Moodswings*, by Charlotte Church.

Then they realised that Freddy had not yet emerged from the store.

But they could see him in the distance. Or rather closer. Or rather, getting closer. *Quickly*. Or rather they could see his trolley. There was no possibility of seeing Freddy himself as he was hidden behind the most immense mountain of stuff they had ever seen.

Where Wil had been indecisive, where Clara had been precise, well, Freddy had been neither. He had just gone for it. Armfuls of stuff. His trolley was submerged beneath food, bread, rolls and rolls of kitchen paper, a whole tray of large soft drinks, eggs, packets of flour, cereals.

And now he was heading straight for them.

In fact, he had to make a small turn to align himself with the exit, and what had clearly become the end of their five minutes. A suited man with a stopwatch was counting the time down.

'Five, four, three, two, one!', he counted.

On the '*three*' Freddy made to execute the little turn he needed to get out of the store.

There was no way he was ever going to make it.

Well, *he* made it, as he was flung off the back of the trolley through the exit, just as the suit said '*one*'. He slid for several metres along the shiny floor, and ended up at Clara's feet.

But his trolley didn't make it. It just careered straight on. And on. And into the breakfast cereals area. With a mighty crash it exploded into the fragile boxes. Many burst open. The eggs, the flour, everything else he had loaded into, onto and around the trolley piled into the melee. Liquids, solids, mixtures, flew everywhere.

'*Finish!*', said the suit as he clicked his stopwatch to signal the end of the five minutes.

Freddy looked up at them and smiled.

'Let's go home and put on a DVD', he said, looking at Clara.

They laughed. Wil managed a smile. They went home.

Chapter 22

'Clump, clump, clump'.

The noise echoed around the big house as Freddy made his way up the stairs from the basement. The house was huge, but as it was largely of wooden construction, wherever you were in the house, you could hear people moving about. Sometimes, at night, the house itself seemed to be moving, or at least moaning and groaning as the timbers shifted against each other.

He reached the hallway, and waited for his sister.

'C'mon sis, we'll miss the bus!', he yelled up the stairs, glancing outside at the grey, wet, day outside. It was March 7th, the seventh official day of spring, and it was wet, cold, and thoroughly unpleasant.

He turned to the mirror in the hallway, and adjusted his glasses. *'Not bad'*, he thought to himself

Clara skipped down the stairs from the fourth floor, almost tripping up on her

They headed out to the bus stop just opposite the house. They went with some trepidation, given what they were wearing, but they boarded the bus happily enough

Hardy was ill. Very ill. And unhappy. And miserable. Sitting in his hospital bed, he looked out at the snow which had fallen the previous evening. A thin covering, but enough to make the ground completely white, and the trees that frosty grey colour. It looked beautiful.

He thought of all the things he could be doing that day and started to feel even more miserable. Football. Snowballs. Biking through the woods.. Three floors below he could hear shouting from kids playing in the snow outside.

He turned back to his hospital room. Apart from the bed, a chair in the corner, the usual range of complex-looking equipment, and a big sign on the door which read *'Nil by mouth'*, it was bare. No pictures. No people. No music. *No fun.*

And for Hardy, this was not a good thing. As the self-appointed Godfather of their little group, Hardy had to be in control, he had to be the top dog, he had to lead the others. He was the oldest, the biggest, the strongest. And tough.

The only practical thing in the room was a pile of books which a nurse had brought in earlier.

'National Book Week, love,' she had said, in a heavy Irish lilt.

'You'll be liking these, now, make you feel better. Have a good read, lovey, it's World Book Day, after all, seeya!'

He hated her cheerfulness. He felt bad, and lots of chirpy, chirpy, chatty...chinwagging...did not help.

And the books. Three cookery books. A dictionary. Two old Enid Blyton books, for seven-year olds. And a copy of '*Jamie's School Dinners*'. All that food, and him on *nil by mouth*!

There was a knock on the door. Hardy shifted from his sitting-up, stretching, looking-out of the window position, into a more slumped, twisted, tortured position. He hung his head to one side, ruffled up the blankets a little, and moaned, quite loudly. He always did this before a nurse entered, although often they were moving a bit quickly and they caught him off-guard.

'Come...', he half-spoke, half groaned. No answer.

'Come in...', he repeated, a little louder and clearer. He didn't want them to go away.

The door was pushed slightly open, but no-one entered. Instead, a small brown stick appeared through the crack in the door, and he heard his friend Freddy say,

'*Recuperamos!*' The little stick waved extravagantly up and down at the door.

'Come on, man, I'm not in the mood for jokes', Hardy grunted at them.

'Sorry mate,' said Freddy, breezily as he pushed the door open and waltzed on through. 'It's just that it is World Book Day and we all had to dress as our favourite book character'.

'Yeah, so who did you go as?', said Hardy ironically, looking at his friend, who was wearing a dark red cloak, small round glasses, and who was carrying the small brown stick.

'Very funny', said Freddy, who was accompanied by Clara, dressed as an old lady in a shawl, with a single top tooth that stuck out over her bottom lip.

'Where's Wil', said Hardy, trying to peer through the open door.

'Shhh, he's on the way, he's got to get past Security', replied Freddy.

'Why, what's he done?'

'You'll see'.

Clara pushed the door so that it was just ajar, and they waited for Wil to make his way to the room. There was a brief commotion outside as the lunch trolley passed by the room.

'*Oh, Nil by mouth, poor love*', said a female voice.

'Don't I just know it', Hardy moaned. Then a man's voice, just outside the door.

'*Ok, love, let's drizzle a bit of olive oil on there, lovely job, check that out, totally pukka...*'

'They've got some bloke in, advising them on how to make the food better. Keeps popping in and asking me what the food's like, which seeing as I haven't eaten for three days, is pretty pointless. Looks like the bloke on that book', Hardy muttered, almost to himself, and pointed

to one of the books the nurse had brought in.

‘So what’s wrong with you?’, said Clara, poking Hardy playfully in the chest.

‘Owwww!’, he cried, ‘don’t do that, my chest really hurts’. He didn’t sound like their strong tall, tough-talking mate.

‘Don’t worry, you’re being well looked after here,’ said Freddy, tapping the bedclothes near the foot of the bed.

‘Owwww!’, moaned Hardy, ‘my feet, my feet, they’re aching so much...!’.

‘Ah well, you really are in a bad way today, aren’t you love?’. It was the nurse who had slipped in to fluff up the pillows.

‘Owwww!’, he yelled again as she worked on the pillows behind his head, ‘my head, my head, I think there’s something wrong with my *brain!*’.

The nurse giggled quietly, shook her head, and then left, after writing something down on the clipboard which was hung over the end of the bed. Freddy went over to the window to look out at the snow. Clara was arranging some flowers she had brought, into a vase by the door. Hardy sat up straight in bed, checked his hair in the mirror at the end of the room, and manoeuvred himself into an even more sympathy-inducing position. He moaned again.

‘I’m so hungry...’ he said to no-one in particular.

A man entered without knocking. He strode over to the bed and took out a stethoscope. He listened to Hardy’s chest, heart, lungs.

‘Have I got pneumonia?’

‘No’

‘Have I got a heart attack?’

‘No’

He took Hardy’s temperature, looked in his ears, used a kind of torch to peer into his eyes. Made him say ‘Aaah’, several times.

‘Have I got a fever?’

‘No’

‘Am I going blind?’

‘No’.

The man left the room and slammed the door shut.

'Who was that?', asked Freddy.

'Doctor No', replied Hardy. Comes in here every couple of hours, does those tests, and leaves. Never speaks. Oh, except yesterday, when he told me that my problems were very complex and may be *psychosomatic*'.

'PSYCHOSOMATIC?' they both shouted the word, 'what does that mean?'

'Erm, erm, I don't know...', said Hardy hastily.

'I'll look it up', piped up Clara, grabbing the dictionary from the table. There was a marker in the book, just around the 'ps' section.

'Er, no, don't do that', added Hardy quickly, grabbing the book from her. 'Oh look, here's Wil'.

Wilis entered the room quickly and stealthily, half crouching down, holding a large paper bag. The room was immediately filled with the smell of fast food.

'Wow, that was close, lucky I was dressed the part'.

Wil had gone as Dr. Frankenstein, so with the removal of some of his makeup, and the bolt from his neck, he had passed as some kind of junior medical staff as he smuggled the food in.

Hardy sat bolt upright in bed and smoothed the covers down around him, beckoning the others to come and sit on the bed. He pulled the table, which was on wheels, over the bed. Wil dumped the food on the table. Hardy pulled at the packaging and started to gorge himself on burgers and chips.

'Have to be careful round here,' he said, his mouth bursting with food, *'I'm supposed to be nil by mouth and they're like dragons. Always on at you. Keep telling you what you can and can't eat. And in my case it's nothing'*. He had hardly finished his sentence before he took another huge mouthful.

Just then the door opened. A man in a scruffy brown suit stood at the doorway. Just stood there. Didn't move.

Chapter 23

Just then the door opened. A man in a scruffy brown suit stood at the doorway. Just stood there. Didn't move.

*****Hardy gave a loud groan in an attempt to hide the mouthful of food he was still trying to force down his throat. In almost the same movement, he arched his back up from the bed, groaned again, and slipped the box of food under the small of his back. As he slumped down again, the box was crushed underneath him, and he could feel the damp hamburger squash against his pyjamas. Mayonnaise oozed out onto the bed.

Clara waved the flowers she had been arranging around her head, to try to get rid of the smell of cooking that had filled the room.

Wil whistled, trying to look innocent. Freddy looked out of the window nonchalantly. On the TV in the corner the presenters chatted away about Chelsea's loss to Barcelona the previous evening.

They all look at the man in the doorway.

The man at the door just stared. He seemed to be breathing very very slowly, almost not at all, which gave him a sort of other-worldly appearance. He didn't blink. He could have been dead, if he wasn't standing up.

Then he raised his left eyebrow slightly, and a flicker of a smile played across his face. Just for a moment it looked like he might speak. Hardy adjusted himself into a less comfortable position to make sure he looked as ill as possible. He felt ketchup spurt across his back. He groaned again.

The man gradually entered the room. He looked around slowly, with a slightly confused look on his face, as if he had stumbled into the wrong part of the hospital. Then he fixed his gaze on the bed and its contents. Hardy froze as the man's deep brown eyes met his. Even if he had wanted to move, he probably couldn't have. A chip jabbed him in the side.

Although the man had the appearance and a kind of authority like a doctor, his brown striped suit, his unkempt hair, and his white trainers suggested more that he was some kind of foreign visitor or perhaps an eccentric but brilliant inventor who had come to check on one of his machines.

As Hardy was starting to get worried that this man might really be some kind of imposter, he leant over the bed and looked at one of the dials above Hardy's head.

'Fascinating', he murmured, almost to himself. *'Haven't seen one of those in years'*.

He withdrew again, and started fishing around in his pocket.

He pulled out a small device, similar to something Dr No had used. It was about the size of a

large pen, silver in colour, fairly thick around the middle. At one end it had a circular bulb-shaped object. He pointed it at the TV, as if to test it. The channel changed instantly.

Then he held it up to Hardy's face. Hardy recoiled slightly. The device started to glow. It buzzed quietly.

Just then, Dr No returned. As brisk as he had been before, he marched into the room without knocking and strode over to the far side of the bed.

The man in the brown suit put the silver pen device back in the pocket of his trenchcoat, stood straight up and stretched his out his right hand to greet the visitor. They shook hands across the bed. Hardy squirmed as a bun attached itself to his shoulder blade.

'Who', he said, quietly but confidently.

'No', replied Doctor No.

'No, Who', said the first man, firmly.

'I said, No!', Dr No repeated, tripling his vocabulary. He sounded angry.

'And I said Who',

'Who's who? I'm No, who are you?'

'Who', repeated man number one.

'Doh!', said a voice from the TV in the corner, to add to the surreal conversation going on in the room.

Man number one then seemed to lose interest in introducing himself, because he turned to Dr No and, waving his hand in the general direction of Hardy, said,

'Have you established the cause of the problems?'

'No', said Dr No, predictably.

What are the main symptoms?

'Don't know', said Dr No.

There was a loud beep which seemed to surprise the first Doctor. Dr No looked at the small bleeper attached to his white coat. He reached over to the phone in the corner of the small room and picked up the receiver.

'NO!' he yelled into the mouthpiece. He slammed down the phone and ran out of the room, shaking his head.

Doctor Brown Suit reached back into his pocket and started running his tests on Hardy again. At no point did he actually touch the patient, but he used the buzzing, glowing device to run down his throat, chest, arms, legs, feet. When the device was close to Hardy's back (and the soggy mess underneath), it started buzzing madly, at a much higher pitch. They were sure to be found out now.

'Fascinating, fascinating', muttered the Doctor several times as he took readings from the little device.

'Doh!' went the TV again. The Doctor zapped it and it went silent.

He slipped the device back into his pocket, and grabbed the lapels of his coat with his two hands, like a lawyer about to make a big speech. He moved over towards the window where Freddy was sitting. He stood still again for a few minutes, hardly breathing. They all looked at him with considerable trepidation.

'Hmmm...one of the most unusual cases I have come across in five hundred years of medical practice', he said eventually.

'Five hundred?', whispered Wil to Clara. They must have misheard him.

'Here is what we shall do. I shall recommend that we move you to another location, so that we can try alternative treatments. There are many possible causes for your problems, and we need time to decide how to heal them. Follow me, please. Rose will show you to your room.'

A blonde haired woman appeared at the door to the room. She didn't look like a nurse, and she wasn't dressed like a nurse, although she did look vaguely familiar.

Groaning extravagantly, and trailing fast food behind him, Hardy managed to struggle to the doorway, following the strange doctor and his assistant. They made their way along the deserted, cold corridor, the Doctor and his assistant in front, Hardy limping along behind, with Freddy, Wil, and Clara bringing up the rear.

'This way please', said the assistant, They turned the corner in the middle of the long main corridor. They entered a short cul de sac corridor, at the end of which was a large blue box.

Chapter 24

They moved down to the end of the short corridor. Rose reached up to the door handle, then turned around and smiled at them. 'You OK, guys?', she said pleasantly. 'Have we got a treat in store for you!'. She pulled at the door handle, still turning to look at them. It didn't budge. She pulled again. She looked at The Doctor quizzically, then pulled one more time. There was a huge cacophony of crashing and banging as the door opened, and Rose was submerged in brushes, dustpans, and cleaning fluid. 'Oops, wrong box!', she said, her cheeks turning a shade of deep red. The Doctor smiled. 'Not just the wrong box, the wrong corridor!. Let's go!'. In the confined space of the little passageway, it was difficult for them all to turn round at the same time. At the back of the queue, and therefore at the front when they turned, were Wil and Clara. They looked down at their feet as they turned, making sure they didn't step on anyone's toes. 'And WHERE do you think you're going?', boomed a huge, deep, female voice. Clara looked up. Standing at the end of the corridor was the most enormous lady she had ever seen. Not fat, just tall, wide, and apparently extremely annoyed. The light at the end of the passage was partly obscured by her bulk. On her head she wore a turquoise scarf over a set of plastic rollers. Her coat was also a light blue colour, sort of see-through. Through it you could see a t-shirt with the words 'born to ride' written on the front. 'Um, sorry....', started Clara uncertainly. 'SORRY, SORRY, YOU'LL BE SORRY...that cupboard is CONFIDENTIAL', the lady boomed, waving a broom aggressively at the group. She started advancing down the corridor, brandishing the broom like a jousting pole. Freddy, who was still in his Hardy Potter disguise, moved forward in an attempt to protect his sister. 'I'm sorry, madam, we made a mistake, we....we went the wrong way...' 'And you're just about to find out how wrong you were', replied the crazy cleaner, marching to within a metre of Freddy's face. (Actually it wasn't a metre, but it felt like that to

Freddy, because the glasses he had borrowed for the Hardy Potter disguise were not his, and they made everything look much closer than it actually was). In an attempt to make light of the situation, Freddy raised the piece of stick he still had with him and pointed it at the lady. 'There's no time for jokes', Clara whispered, 'do something'. 'Stupefy!', said Freddy, pointing the stick at the lady's ample chest. To his astonishment, the cleaning lady stopped dead in her tracks. Just stood there. Didn't say a word. Freddy looked at the stick, then looked at Clara. A buzzing sound, and a bright blue light behind them faded away. 'I'd had enough of that', said the Doctor behind them, returning his sonic screwdriver to his pocket. 'She should be good for five minutes or so'. They made their way out of the corridor, pushing their way past the fleshy immobile object in front of them. When they reached the main corridor, Rose went to the front, looked left and right, thought for a moment, then led them towards the left. They walked for some distance up the corridor. Rose pushed through some double doors. On the right hand side as they passed were a row of cheap plastic chairs of the kind you only find in hospitals. Several were in a state of disrepair, with legs missing or broken plastic. On one of the few good ones sat an elderly lady. Wrapped in a shawl on her lap was an elderly chicken. 'A chicken, in a hospital?', said Wil to no-one in particular. 'Shhh! Maybe it's ill', said Clara. 'Atishoo!', said the chicken, miserably. 'There, there', said the old lady, offering the chicken a tissue. The chicken blew its beak extravagantly, and settled back into the shawl. 'Must have a dose of the flu or something', Freddy commented, covering his nose with his hands as they passed. 'Oh no, I can't catch anything else,' groaned Hardy. He almost sprinted past, his handkerchief covering his mouth and nose. They passed several more empty seats until they got to the end of the row. Two men were sitting there, both dressed in white football shirts. From a distance it looked like they were hugging each other, but when the group got closer to them

it was clear they were crying, and trying to console each other. The man nearest them had the word 'Beckham' and a large number twenty-three on the back of his football shirt. 'Es terrible, es terrible', he sobbed uncontrollably.

'Los Galacticos...finitos', added his friend, in a similar state of distress. As they passed him, they saw the word 'Zidane' printed on his back. As they passed the inconsolable Spaniards, Rose ran to the front, turned to the group, and said, 'He we are friends!'. She waved her arm extravagantly towards the corridor which branched off to the left. It was indeed, almost the same as the previous one, an easy mistake to make. At the end was a similar blue box, although this one was rather taller, dark blue in colour, with a small blue light on the top. 'I'm not getting in there', moaned Hardy, 'I'm too ill. It's too small'. He had resumed limping, having forgotten to do so briefly in the main corridor. 'Come now, Hardy, my friend,' said The Doctor cheerfully, 'as I said to you before, time may help us to heal you. Please, step inside'. Rose, who had opened the door without incident, held it open for Hardy and the others to enter. As they peered through the door, they could see a kind of desk, full of dials and gadgets, with lots of ethereal-looking lights glowing in the semi-darkness. Hardy approached the door, accompanied by The Doctor. 'Are you sure?', Hardy said, half-turning to the others. 'Don't worry about a thing', said The Doctor cheerily. It was true that The Doctor spoke with such confidence that they didn't feel bad about entering. And on top of all the other strange things that had happened to them that day, being asked to enter a blue box by a fake Doctor was the least of their worries. It was amazing enough that there even was a blue box at the end of a hospital corridor, and amazing that no-one in the hospital had seen it or done anything about it. But the most amazing thing of all about the blue box was its size.*****

Chapter 25

It was true that The Doctor spoke with such confidence that they didn't feel bad about entering. And on top of all the other strange things that had happened to them that day, being asked to enter a blue box by a fake Doctor was the least of their worries. It was amazing enough that there even was a blue box at the end of a hospital corridor, and amazing that no-one in the hospital had seen it or done anything about it. But the most amazing thing of all about the blue box was its size.

It was tiny!

They could barely all fit inside! Along one side of the box, for that is what it was, was a small shelf.

'Come on then, where's the patient?' said Dr Who pleasantly, seemingly not noticing the extreme crush that was developing inside. 'You go up there, old chap, lie down, make yourself comfortable'.

Predictably, Hardy groaned, complained about some new part of his anatomy that was hurting, and climbed reluctantly onto the shelf. By folding his legs right up under his chin, he could lie there in a way that approximated to lying on a bed. He groaned again.

'Don't touch that!', cried Rose, as Freddy grabbed hold of a lever on the central console, to steady himself. Freddy pulled his hand away quickly, but as a result, stood straight on Wil's foot, which was positioned inches from his own. It was Wil's turn to yell this time.

'Now, now, don't worry about a thing', said the Doctor in his easy, reassuring tone, 'we are almost ready to move, is everyone comfortable?'

'Not really', said Clara, who had been squashed up against the door when Rose had pulled it shut.

'Oh we'll only be a couple of minutes, my dear', the Doctor replied.

'But-but-but...where are we going?', said Hardy, pathetically.

'Oh, about 1850,' replied the Doctor nonchalantly, fiddling with some dials on the central console.

'1850!', they all screamed in unison. In doing this, Hardy sat up on his shelf and smashed his head against the top of the box. Freddy in his surprise and anxiety, grabbed hold of the lever Rose had told him not to touch just seconds earlier.

The box gave a lurch.

The box gave a shudder.

The box started emitting strange sounds, like the grinding of rocks or metal deep in the earth somewhere. The shuddering was like being in a lift in a tall building. A slight jerk, and a sensation of speed, but no apparent movement.

'Well thank you Freddy my man, we are off. Perhaps a little earlier than expected, but here we go. To the year 1850. The middle of a fabulous century for medical science. The century of x-rays, of bacteria, of penicillin, the development of anaesthesia, the era of Florence Nightingale and Louis Pasteur. If they can't cure you, no-one can'

There was a bump.

'Here we are, we've arrived'.

The Doctor stretched over Wil and Clara and unlatched the door. They stepped out.

They were in a dark corridor, of about the same dimensions as the one they had left in the hospital. But it was much darker. The floor was made of wooden blocks, and the walls were lined with wooden paneling. There was a smell about the place which reminded Freddy of that smell you get in swimming pools – that heavy atmosphere that can sting your eyes. They made their way to the end of the corridor. A tall man was coming in the opposite direction, accompanied by a smaller woman. The man was wearing a black suit and tie, a white shirt, a tall black hat, and he had the longest white whiskers they had ever seen. He pulled a watch out of the pocket of his waistcoat. It was attached by a chain.

'Eleven of the hour, precisely, step forth this way if you please'.

He was looking at Hardy, and it seemed like he was expecting them. The Doctor smiled.

'Dr Crippen, good to see you after all these years',

'Absolutely, Who, spiffing to see you too. Now, which one's the patient?'

Hardy, despite his discomfort from the journey, had managed to straighten himself up. He tried to stand behind Freddy and Wil and blend into the background, but as he was the only one wearing pyjamas, that was impossible.

'Ah, *you* are Hardy, are you', said Dr Crippen sinisterly, 'in here please'.

He pushed at a door to his left and they went through. They found themselves in a large room. Candles were burning in holders on the walls. There was a single bare light bulb hanging from a winding flex in the middle of the ceiling. The room was dark. Dark wooden walls. A dark wooden floor, slightly damp, so that when they walked on it, their feet just stuck before coming off the floor again. On one side of the room a row of cabinets running from floor to ceiling. Dusty bottles on the shelves. Larger bottles with specimens inside. A skeleton hanging on a stand by the door. A bench up against one wall, with an array of medical instruments lying on it. Bowls, scalpels, spikes, saws.

And in the middle of the room, a large slab, or maybe a table.

'Come now, young man, onto the operating table'.

'I don't need an operation, I'm f-f-fine', stammered Hardy.

'Oh come now, there's nothing to worry about, we just need to examine you,' said Dr Crippen, reaching over to the bench and picking up a large claw-like implement.

Suddenly six men entered the room. They were all dressed exactly the same as the first Doctor, in black suits, white shirts, and top hats. And they all had immensely long whiskers. Not one of them was under seventy years old.

Hardy started to panic, and moved towards the door. But resistance was clearly futile, as the six men descended upon him with a speed and enthusiasm that belied their age, and lifted him onto the slab. They held him there, fast. He couldn't move.

The door opened again, and a slightly younger man, but dressed the same, entered the room. He marched over to where Hardy was lying, quivering, on the table.

'Hmmm,' he said, shaking his head.

He lifted up the front of Hardy's pyjama top and looked at his stomach.

'Nay', he said, shaking his head again.

'Nay, nay, nay', he said, louder this time. He looked up at Dr Crippen, shouted 'Nay!' one more time, whispered something in the doctor's ear, and left the room.

'That was the famous Dr Nay,' whispered Doctor Who to Wil, who was standing next to him. 'All he ever says is 'Nay'. Quite brilliant though.'

Dr Crippen looked a little disappointed, but he went over and replaced the claw-like thing he had enthusiastically picked up.

'Take two of these, twice a day', he said, passing a relieved Hardy a handful of small white tablets, 'and come back in two weeks if you're not feeling better'.

'Y-y-yes, thank you,' muttered Hardy as he climbed down off the operating table.

'See you again, Who!', said Crippen cheerfully.

'Absolutely, my good man'

As they made their way back along the corridor, Hardy looked at the tablets in his hand. Each one was stamped with a large 'C' and the sign of a skull. He showed them to Freddy.

'Well, I know I wouldn't take them', said Freddy helpfully.

'Shhh!', said Hardy, surreptitiously dropping the pills into a pot plant handily stationed on the

corner where they had left the police box. The Doctor was striding well ahead of them so could not see what he had done.

Immediately, the plant drooped, and with a sort of sighing sound, fell gently to the floor. Hardy looked at Wil. They ran, without looking back, and joined the rest of the group back at the police box.

'Please take us back to 2006, please...' Hardy was almost crying.

'Well, how are you feeling, did the tablets do any good?'

'Erm...well...I may be a bit better....but....'

'There's only one thing for it', said the Doctor decisively, turning dials and pressing buttons, *'let's go!'*. He pushed the big handle forward.

Chapter 26

'Please take us back to 2006, please...' Hardy was almost crying.

'Well, how are you feeling, did the tablets do any good?'

'Erm...well...I may be a bit better....but....'

'There's only one thing for it', said the Doctor decisively, turning dials and pressing buttons, 'let's go!'. He pushed the big handle forward.

*****The box lurched again.

Rose, who had been silent and sultry during the trip back to 1850, glanced at the dials that The Doctor had been turning.

'You're going to love this one', she said, '2050, a brilliant year for medicine'.

'Why is it brilliant, will it be able to cure me?,' moaned Hardy. His ailments had clearly returned to haunt him.

'2050 is the year that they finally discovered the ultimate secret of human life, the key to *immortality*,' said Rose grandly. As she said the word 'immortality', she ran her hand over the perfect skin of her face and smiled broadly.

'I just want to be rid of these terrible *pains*', said Hardy. As he said the word 'pains', he ran his hands pathetically over his whole body.

Jolt. The Tardis jolted to a stop. The Doctor spoke.

'Now, we have to be a bit careful here, my friends. By about 2060 things had settled down a bit, but in 2050 they were still suffering from the effects of the 2049 Great Reboot, when all civilised society had been re-programmed, but a bug in the computer code had meant that all human minds were scheduled to work at double speed, like a film on fast forward. You have to be ready for them being a bit unpredictable. Especially in medical matters, there was a lot of pressure on them to get operations completed in the shortest time possible. For a while medical staff were grabbing people in corridors and just operating on them, there and then. There was often no time to lie down, they just grabbed you, held you down, and started work.

'Er, I think I'm feeling a bit better'. The voice was Hardy's. Pathetic.

The Doctor either did not hear, or ignored him, because he was busy opening the front door. But he was being rather cautious, which in turn made everyone nervous in turn. He looked carefully around the side of the door before exiting.

The corridor was empty. It was unbelievably bright, and they each had to blink several times before they could focus on the scene in front of them.

The corridor was bright white, with high fluorescent bulbs producing the uncomfortable level of

light. The floor was white. The walls were white. The ceiling was plain white, broken only by several small grilles out of which was playing quiet music. They listened for a while before proceeding.

'You're beautiful,

You're beautiful,

You're beautiful, it's true,

sang a familiar voice.

'Still number one then,' said the Doctor turning to Rose and smiling.

A man appeared at the end of the corridor, and stood with his arms across his chest. He was wearing a long silver coat, and some kind of helmet which sat on the top of his head, but which had curly wires leading down his back, and a set of glasses, rather like diving goggles, which covered half his face. In his hand he carried a small metallic stick which glowed menacingly.

'Beep', he said, approaching Hardy with the stick.

'No, I'm fine, really,' stammered Hardy quickly.

'Beep', said the man again, slightly louder this time, coming much closer now. The stick started bleeping.

'Beep, beep, BEEP!', said the man, seemingly irritated. 'Bleep, bleep, bleep, BLEEP', went the little stick.

'Ah, Doctor Bleep, g-g-good to see you'. Even Doctor Who sounded nervous now. They all recoiled a little as he tried to step in between the good doctor and Hardy.

'BLEEP!', said Doctor Bleep again, turning to look behind him, really loud now, and really angry.

Two females dressed head to toe in silver, with large backpacks and complicated-looking hoses and pipes leading to various parts of their suits and helmets, appeared at the end of the corridor. Doctor Who drew out his sonic screwdriver and pointed it at Dr Beep, who froze quite still.

'Uh Oh, cybernurses, you don't want to mess with them, quick, get back inside'. He grabbed Hardy's collar and pulled him away from the temporarily disabled doctor. The cybernurses started advancing slowly down the corridor.

'I'm much better, really...' said Hardy pathetically.

'When they were rebooted, President Cameron gave the order for re-programming but the order got encrypted incorrectly, wires got crossed and the nurses have been out of control ever since. Get inside, now'.

They scrambled inside the Tardis, and Rose and the Doctor leant on the door to close it, just as the errant nurses were making their advance. The Doctor almost climbed over Clara to get to the controls.

'2006, *please*', said Clara.

'Yes, yes, that's where we were going, my friends'.

Another jolt. Another whoosh. And another bump.

'This is where we part company,' said the Doctor cheerily, 'Ten past three, on March 15th 2006. How are you feeling, my dear boy?' he said, turning to Hardy.

'I'm fine, absolutely fine', Hardy replied, jumping up and down on the spot for emphasis.

'Well, I knew we could fix you one way or another!', said the Doctor as they all piled out. 'Come on Rose, we've work to do, I hear Mr Dickens has some problems with a ghost!'.

And with a deep booming sound from the Tardis, they were gone.

Freddy, Hardy, Wil and Clara looked at each other, and breathed a huge collective sigh of relief, of muted excitement, and of tiredness at what had happened to them over the past few days. Where they had been, and where they had ended up.

Where they had ended up.

Good question, where exactly had they ended up?

It didn't look very familiar. Some grass. Some large trees. A slightly strange smell. A wooden hut.

They looked at each other questioningly.

'Well, I suppose we can't just stand here all day, let's see if anyone is around,' said Freddy, reassuming his role of leader.

He marched up to the hut, followed by the others. He tried the door. He knocked once. No answer. He knocked again. He pushed at the door, and it opened. They peered round the corner of the door.

Inside was a most bizarre sight. Twenty-eight children, dressed in red, sitting quietly at their desks, writing, drawing, or constructing things. They stared at the children for a while. Occasionally the children would speak,

'Yes Mr Davis, no Mr davis, of course we will Mr Davis.'

Freddy looked round at the others. None of them had ever seen such well-behaved children before. Everything seemed so normal.

Suddenly, there was a shout. Uproar. Children everywhere, running to the window, bumping

into each other, knocking over chairs and tables.

'*Look, up there!*', shouted one of the children, pointing to the sky.

Everyone looked up. *Not so normal after all.*

There, in the distance, clear as anything, a flock of cows flying south for the winter.

THE END

A Hallowe'en Story

Freddy...do not read this scary story!

I said don't read it!

OK...it's your choice.

Here we go (it's not too scary really).

Boo!

Freddy's annoying little sister slapped him on the arm as he entered the kitchen. Freddy sighed loudly.

'Just stop it, will you?' Freddy exclaimed, 'I'm so tired of it'.

Clara laughed for the forty-third time that day.

'You deserve it! You are always horrid to me, and today is Halloween! The day when the ghosts and the ghouls and the Grandmas terrify the toddlers!'

'Why are you speaking like that, it's annoying?' asked Fred.

'Alliteration!' replied Clara, 'we've been doing it!'

Freddy sighed again, and thought back to Year Three, when he and JoJo had practiced their alliteration and got into dreadful trouble, especially with '*Miss Smith is a terrible teacher who tells children tremendous tall tales*'.

Clara slapped him for the forty-fourth time that day, and left the room, laughing (again). Her elephant footsteps echoed as she clumped upstairs.

Freddy sat at the kitchen counter and as he had nothing better to do, and as he was sitting at the counter (hee hee!), he counted the footsteps. He often did this. He often had nothing better to do.

Three, four, five, six....

Eight, nine, ten...

Twelve...

Fourteen...

Twenty-three, twenty-four...

He kept counting. And counting. He got up to sixty-three, and his heart started beating a little faster. They lived in a small house in Lancaster Road. Their staircase had no more than fourteen steps. He carried on counting.

Seventy-one, seventy-two...

'Clara?' he called out nervously to Clara. The lights in the kitchen flickered.

There was no reply from his sister. His heart beat a little faster, and a little louder. The footsteps continued, perhaps fading a little then becoming louder again.

'Clara?' he called again, his voice sounding slightly hoarse this time. The lights in the kitchen flickered then went out. Fred gulped, then stood up, moved towards the door, and tried the switch.

Nothing.

He retreated into the gloom, away from the door and the staircase.

His heart was booming in his chest. His forehead was beaded with sweat.

From somewhere far distant, he heard a groan. The footsteps got fainter.

'Help me! Help me!'

Someone was calling! It sounded like his sister, but it was too far away.

The footsteps got louder for a minute, then fainter. They carried on.

Fred moved towards the door in the darkness. A faint light was emerging from the stairwell.

Another groan, louder this time.

He pulled back.

Come on Freddy, you can do this... he said to himself, not feeling as brave as he sounded.

He forced himself to the doorway, and forced himself to peer around the corner and up the stairs.

Sitting at the top.

Still clumping her feet on the top step.

Still laughing.

Clara!

'Help me!' She groaned.

'Oh I will!' screamed Freddy, racing up the stairs.

