

## Chapter 9

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

They headed down to the basement.

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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.

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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.

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*'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.

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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.

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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.

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'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*

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