

## 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...*

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‘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.

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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.

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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'.

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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.