

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.

‘Owww!’ 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.

‘Owww!’ 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.

‘Owww!’ 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.
