

## Chapter 26 Home Alone, Too

The Wagley's garden was full of life. Birds sang, squirrels did what squirrels do, butterflies flitted around the flowering bushes and bees buzzed. Unfortunately, Meldy couldn't join them because she was confined to her room. All she could do was watch enviously as her sisters played badminton with some friends on the lawn.

"It's not fair Mummy. I said I was sorry! Please can I go outside? Please? I'll stay in the garden, I promise!"

"Meldy, you know what you did and you know it was wrong. Poor Nicky, dragging him away from his family like that. His mother was worried sick."

"But there was nothing to worry about, I looked after him."

"Yes, by getting yourself kidnapped. Some looking after!"

"But we had to help Lady Pastena!"

"I'm sure she didn't need your help. She can manage perfectly well on her own."

"But she did need it, honest! We had to find Parsley Pierre."

"Well I'm annoyed with her. She shouldn't have persuaded you to go."

"She didn't. She told me to stay here but I had to help."

"That's enough. We've been through this already. You'll be telling me next that 'Ladies must stick together'."

'Well they do,' thought Meldy as her mother left the room and closed the door behind her. All alone again, she paced up and down and periodically went to look out of the window.

'I could climb out,' she thought. 'I could jump over to that tree and shin down and....' But, she had to be honest. Jumping across a gap that wide was more dangerous than going to the Departement de Londres. She was stuck where she was so she paced up and down some more. Soon that lost its appeal so she rummaged around in a box of old toys.

'Ah! A skipping rope. I'll try skipping.' At least she could get some exercise. At first she was a bit rusty but then it all came back. Thump, thump, thump she went on the floor. It was not long before the door was flung wide open.

"What are you doing?" cried a frustrated Mr Wagley.

“Skipping.”

“Well stop it! I’m trying to work down below.”

“I’d rather be doing it outside but...”

“I’m sure you would but you know why you can’t leave your room.”

“Well I need exercise. You know what the doctor says. Lots of fruit, vegetables and fresh air.”

“You could lean out of the window.”

“But I might fall out.”

“Er... .” She could see by his expression he was weakening.

“I’ll have a word with your mother.”

“Thanks Daddy,” she said as she hugged him. “You know I had to help Lady Pastena don’t you?”

Half an hour later she was running round the garden.

“I thought you were grounded,” said Kick.

“Well they said I needed more exercise.”

“How did you manage it?”

“I used your old skipping rope to get Daddy on side.”

“Very clever. He couldn’t stand the noise I suppose.”

“Well I was jumping as high as I could!”

It wasn’t long before Nicky was released as well. They could hear Meldy out in her garden so he increased the pressure on his mother.

“It’s not fair. They’ve let her out. Why can’t I go out too?”

“You don’t have to do everything she does or what she tells you.”

“But you like her don’t you?”

“Yes but she shouldn’t have persuaded you to go with her.”

“But it’s just as well I did because they needed me to rescue them. The Empress realised it too so that’s why she gave me my medal.”

“Yes, it’s very impressive, but you should have said no to Meldy. Then she might have stayed here. Her mother was really worried.”

“But she would have gone by herself anyway.”

“Maybe you’re right. She can be very determined when she wants to be.”

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One week later, Meldy had a visitor. At first, her parents didn’t know who it was because she had arrived in a shabby little car. It turned out to be Lady Pastena.

“Mr and Mrs Wagley,” she said in her customary imperious manner, “may I speak to your daughter Esmerelda?”

Meldy was summoned and the three of them sat with their august visitor. She made herself comfortable in the middle of the sofa then started to speak.

“Mr and Mrs Wagley, words cannot express how grateful we are for Esmerelda’s courageous action. She faced danger, kidnapping so I hear, and heaven only knows what else in order to trace the one man who could save my dear husband’s reputation.”

“Yes, but....” started Mrs Wagley.

“I know what you are thinking Mrs Wagley. She should not have put herself in danger like that. I told her so myself. I did not realise how resourceful she and her young friend Nicholas would prove to be. You see, Mr Plinkoff told me all about it.”

“But surely....” started Mr Wagley.

“Once again, surely there was another way to save my poor husband’s reputation? Unfortunately, there was not. Mr Plinkoff has produced confidential papers, records and documents that prove his enemies have been plotting against him.”

“What about....” started Mrs Wagley.

“Of course. School. Esmerelda must resume her education as soon as possible. I will see to it. Such a brave girl, Mr and Mrs Wagley, you must be so proud! Such a brave, brave girl.”

“Lady Pastena,” said Mr Wagley, “if you could smooth the way, as it were, for Meldy’s re admittance to St. Hildegard’s...”

“I don’t want to go back there!” said Meldy, “the Chunk doesn’t like me.”

“And who is the Chunk?” asked her father.

“That’s what we all call the head.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed the visitor, “we called our head the Badger!” “Yes Esmerelda, I believe you were badly treated. They will be made to apologise. You leave that to me. After I have finished with them, they will beg you to come back!”

They walked to the door together. “Have the reporters gone Lady Pastena?” asked Meldy.

“No, Lady Esmerelda, they’re still there but I think they smell something in the air. They saw Mr Plinkoff arrive so they have put two and two together.”

“If they did they probably got five,” laughed Meldy.

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed Lady Pastena in return. “Or a hundred and four! I borrowed the housekeeper’s car to put them off the scent.”

“Why don’t we have a housekeeper?” asked Meldy after she had gone.

Mr and Mrs Wagley looked at each other. “I think we know the answer to that,” she said.

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A larger crowd than normal had assembled outside Nether Tofton Manor.

“He’s gone!” said one reporter

“Who’s gone?” asked another.

“The Backstabber. He’s skipped the country.”

“Well that settles it. Sir Desward must be innocent. It was a plot all along. You don’t run away unless you’re guilty!”

There was a buzz amongst the assembled reporters as a large car approached.

“It’s Sir Desward!” someone cried.

“Sir Desward,” cried another, “how does it feel to be off the hook?”

The car stopped and an electric window swished noiselessly down.

“Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen of the press. As you already know, certain events have unfolded but I cannot say any more at this time.”

With that the window swished up and the car swept off through the gates. Parsley Plinkoff, who was already there, was soon reminiscing with Sir Desward.

“Thank you so much for coming back to help us.”

“Well, as soon as I heard the full story from Lady Esmerelda...”

“Of course. What a remarkable girl she must be. My wife told me all about her.”

“You heard about her friend Nicholas with the red ink spots?”

“Ha, ha. Just the sort of thing we did to fool matron at school!”

“You skipped rugby practise in sub zero temperatures, remember?”

“Just quick thinking Parsley, quick thinking. That’s the sort of thing that helped me in my business.”

“Maybe, but I was the one who nearly froze to death!”

“But you covered for me then and you’ve done it again. I owe you big time.”

“And Lady Esmerelda of course.”

“Yes. We’re going to tackle that school of hers. They’ll soon be begging her to come back!”

One morning a few days later, Lady Pastena paid a visit to St Hildegard’s. “I have come to see the head,” she declared.

“Well, let me see. No you do not have....”

“Out of my way. I have not got time to argue. She will see me!”

She stormed off down the corridors towards the head's study. Nervous students scattered as she approached.

"What's she doing here? I thought she was in disgrace," said one.

"You there! Stand up straight and do not drag your feet like that!"

"Yes, Lady Pastena, I'm sorry Lady Pastena."

When she arrived at the aforementioned study she barged in without knocking.

"Lady Pastena, I cannot see you now. You do not have an appointment!"

"And when exactly did I need such a thing as an appointment?" she replied as a nervous teacher scuttled out of the door behind her.

"But I cannot see you now, given the situation as it exists at the moment. The parents..."

"I am about to announce the largest endowment ever given to this school and all you can do is whittle on about parents. Show some backbone woman! Of course, if you do not wish to discuss it I am sure St. Ursula's will be only too happy. As a matter of fact, I have been aware for some time they are more forward thinking. They would not have treated Lady Esmerelda so shabbily."

"But she..."

"All she did was show some backbone! She stood up against lying and bullying. Is that not what all your students should be doing?"

"Well I..."

"Be in no doubt. If it wasn't for her I would not be offering this endowment. Do you want it or not? Make up your mind, You are supposed to be a leader aren't you?"

"Um, well, er..." Lady Pastena swept out of the door, scattering more students as she went. The door had been left open so they heard it all. The news spread like wildfire.

"She really laid into the Chunk!" said one.

"My mother said the governors think she's not up to the job anyway," said another.

“I hear Lady Pastena’s husband will be proved innocent. My father thinks he’ll end up with a bigger empire than ever,” said a third.

“And he’s bound to sue that criminal,” said someone else.

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A few days passed. Meldy twiddled her thumbs in between doing some school work that had been recommended by her sisters. On one particularly dull day, they had another visitor. Mrs Wagley went upstairs to collect her youngest daughter.

“It’s the new head of St. Hildegard’s. She has asked to see you.”

“Kickster said the Chunk had gone. What’s this one like?”

“She seems very nice. She’s quite young but come down and see for yourself.” Meldy tidied herself and went downstairs.

“Ah, Lady Esmerelda. It is a pleasure to meet you. Lady Pastena speaks very highly of you and I have come to apologise for the way you have been treated. Please will you come back, your classmates miss you.” She did not let on that the promised endowment was conditional on Meldy’s return.

“Thank you Miss but Missy Prissy...”

“Do not worry about her. Her mother has sent her to another school. They, shall we say, did not wish to show Lady Pastena the respect we feel she is due.”

Then it hit Meldy. ‘Prissy’s name is Backstabber!’ she thought. ‘Her dad’s the criminal!’ “Yes Miss,” she replied, “I’ll come back,”

“One other thing. Lady Pastena wants you to choose a name for the endowment.”

“The endowment?”

“Yes. Sir Desward and Lady Pastena have very generously decided to give a large sum of money to our school.”

Meldy thought for a bit. “I like the sound of ‘The Court Manteau Endowment.’”

“Ah, I see you are interested in history.”

“Yes,” she replied. It was easier than telling the truth.

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Parsley Pierre Plinkoff woke up in the Place de Napoleon. Alain and Claudette were there to meet him.

“Welcome back,” she said as she hugged him. They walked over to the carriage. Georges was standing there talking to another man.

“This is Emile,” said Claudette. “Georges is teaching him how to handle a four horse carriage.”

After greeting Emile, he made himself comfortable next to Claudette and the carriage moved out of the square. He looked out of the window.

“It is good,” he sighed, “to be home again.”

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It was a dark night somewhere in Continental Europe. A searchlight swept across a yard and a high prison wall. After it had passed, a ladder was thrown up against that same wall and a figure scrambled up. It was carrying a large bundle which unravelled as it was dropped into the yard below. Another figure hurried from the shadows and started to climb what turned out to be a rope ladder.

“Faster!” whispered the man on top of the wall. “We do not have much time!”

His companion reached the top then followed him down to the bottom. Together, they sprinted across an open space to some distant trees then removed a pile of branches to uncover two bicycles.

“How does it feel to be free Madame Mathilde?” asked the man.

“I can never be free,” she hissed, “until I fulfil my destiny and become Empress. And, I will have my revenge on those children!”

THE END. (For Now!)