

Chapter 7 New Beginnings

Antoinette was rehearsing for the music festival and Kick was playing the piano. They had selected two pieces and had already practised the first. When they got to the second song there was a knock at the door. Mrs Wagley ushered in a middle-aged man who was an organiser for the music festival.

“Miss Court Manteau, I stood outside and listened to your last piece. Wonderful. You will certainly enhance our little celebration of music.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied Antoinette.

“We are especially pleased that you have come all the way from France. We have wanted to attract more artists from further afield and now, with your appearance, we might have more success in future.”

“It is my pleasure, Sir. I love to sing.”

“Yes, well, it has come to our attention that you can hardly be classified as an amateur. You have, I hear, sung before royalty and, having heard you just now, I can quite believe it. Trebiana Tipperley is an amateur so you will be classified as a professional on the programme.”

“What does that mean?” asked Kick.

“It means we don’t, for obvious reasons, award ‘highly commended’ certificates to professionals. If artists become professional, they are, of course, already highly commended.”

Once they were on their own, the friends discussed what had been said.

“I bet it’s Tansie Tipperley,” said Popster. “She doesn’t want Trebiana to face any competition.”

“Well, I do not mind,” replied Antoinette. “I am happy to sing at the Festival. I will listen to Miss Tipperley and will be pleased if she is very good.”

“She’s good alright,” said Kick, “but her grandmother wants her to be the star in her category. She just couldn’t wait to get you excluded.”

“Come, let us rehearse some more. Let her have her triumph. She needs it more than I do.”

“That’s very mature of you,” agreed the twins.

“Well did you not hear what he said?” she replied with a smile, “I am a professional!”

Later, final preparations were being made for the Wood Tofton Music Festival. Flags had been hung across the main street and buskers played at various prominent locations round the village.

Cheddar ambled up the High Street and stood awhile listening to a saxophone player. A woman approached him with a festival brochure and some names caught his eye. Someone with a French-sounding name was being accompanied by ‘Miss Katherine Wagley’.

‘Bingo!’ he said to himself. ‘The house will be empty because they’ll all be watching their daughter do her bit at the festival. I’ll tell Parsley right away.’

Parsley was excited when he heard the news. “It’ll still be light but the trees will shield us from the neighbours. We’ll find a way into the house somehow. They don’t have a burglar alarm, you said?”

“I didn’t see one and they don’t have a dog either,” replied Cheddar.

“Good. We’ll meet up in the bushes near the house. We’ll go in and out of the village separately so as not to attract attention. I’ll wear my bird-watching disguise and you can be a jogger.”

Trebiana made her way to Eustace’s house for the final rehearsal. Before she went in, she hovered around outside the Wagley’s hoping to hear Antoinette. A couple of girls appeared out of the bushes.

“You’re Trebiana Tipperley, aren’t you,” said one. “I’m Meldy and this is my best friend Sophie.”

“Yes, I am. I heard that your friend Antoinette has sung for royalty. Where was that?”

Sophie and Meldy looked at each other. Meldy turned back to Trebiana. “We’re not supposed to say. We’re supposed to keep it confident.”

“You mean confidential?”

“Yes, that’s it!”

“You can tell me, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Well, it was a Princess and a Prince.”

“Princess who?”

Meldy wanted to say more but she’d already been in trouble at school for talking about her experiences.

“A Princess whose brother’s a Prince.” They both giggled.

Trebiana rolled her eyes, turned, then went back to Eustace’s house.

Two hours later the Wagleys, the Court Manteau sisters and the Berringtons headed off towards Wood Tofton church. They were surprised to see how many people were already there.

At the church, some villagers were keen to meet Antoinette and Sophie. The twins were impressed by Antoinette’s manner in what was for her an unfamiliar setting. They even heard someone remark on her ‘old fashioned good manners’. Trebiana must have been hiding backstage.

The amateur performers went first, this was so they could relax and listen to the professionals later. Trebiana sang beautifully and Eustace’s playing was excellent. Antoinette listened intently and was impressed by her voice but Popster thought she was a bit wooden. Kick agreed and felt she just stood and sang without putting her heart and soul into it.

After the interval, the professionals took to the stage. The performances were, of course, all excellent and, judging by the enthusiastic applause, Antoinette was correctly placed in this category.

Kick played the piano well and Antoinette came even more alive when faced with the audience. Everyone agreed that she had given a truly excellent performance. Trebiana, watching from the audience, was secretly very impressed but wouldn’t admit it. She listened, with a rising feeling of jealousy, then started to feel annoyed at her grandmother.

On the way home she had a go at her. “Why did you tell them she’d sung for royalty?”

“Well dear I thought....”

“I wish you hadn’t said anything. I got a ‘highly commended’ certificate and, as an amateur, she would have got one as well. That would have made me her equal. As it is, she’s got this high status, everyone thinks she’s wonderful and what was it they all said? Gracious? Give me a break!”

“I was only trying to help.”

“Well I don’t need any help.”

“Did you thank Eustace?”

“The applause was for him as well.”

Tansie thought it was rude not to thank Eustace for all he had done. She had heard someone remark, ‘Trebiana sang but Antoinette Court Manteau performed.’ Perhaps this was not a good time to point this out.

After talking some more with the villagers, the Wagley family walked home with their neighbours. Once inside their house, Mr Wagley noticed a window had been left open. On closer examination he found that it had been forced.

“Someone’s been in our house,” he said to the others.

Meldy raced upstairs to her room. Her worst fears were realised. It had been ransacked and her prized possession, her Order of Napoleon the Second with laurel leaves, had gone.

Her parents tried to comfort her but she cried her eyes out.

“It’s gone! It’s gone! I’ll never get another one!” she wailed.

Her friend Sophie sat with her the whole time but was confused. “Who would do this?” she asked but no one could give a satisfactory answer.

“I could give you mine,” offered Popster.

“But you earned it Popster. It wouldn’t be right.”

Mr Wagley phoned the police but he did not expect them to recover the medal.

“Meldy,” said Sophie, “if I had mine with me, I would give it to you. It is not fair. I hate the person who did this to you!”

“You’re my best ever best friend,” replied Meldy through her sobs. “I wish you could stay with us for always and always!”

On that same evening, Daniel Masterton had been in his shrubbery. He found his way through into the Wagley's garden and went into their bushes. He wanted to retrieve the pellets he had fired at the strange man with the wig.

From his hiding place, he saw two men leaving Meldy's drive. One of them was dressed as a jogger but his tracksuit looked a size too small. A wallet, precariously jammed in a back pocket, soon gave up its fight against gravity and dropped to the ground. Neither of the two men noticed but Daniel was quick to pick it up once they were out of sight. He took it round to his mother.

Holding it out he said excitedly, "Mum! Look what I've found."

Cheddar Cheasley and Parsley Plinkoff split up after the break-in. They were confident no one had seen them and nothing could connect them to the theft but they both agreed to lie low for a while. However, two days later Parsley was back in Wood Tofton with his binoculars, eager to try out his latest invention.

'There's something about those woods up there,' he thought as he strode up the track to the top of the hill. 'My new signal detector should pick up anyone or anything coming from that other world if, as I suspect, it does actually exist.'

He walked along the track to the tree where he had first seen Antoinette and Sophie. He stopped and had a good look round then he switched on his detector to be greeted by a low hum. He sat on the grass and thought about his next move. 'Does this portal, or whatever it is, open from time to time or is it open all the time?' he mused. 'So far nothing seems to be happening but best to be patient.'

The birds sang in the branches above his head and a squirrel chased its mate around the tree trunk. The hum from his detector remained at a constant monotone. It was so peaceful that he slept for a while.

Suddenly, he woke with a start. The hum was no longer there but it was now a frantic beeping noise. Then there was silence. No beeping, no Parsley, because he, his binoculars and his electronic device had vanished into thin air.

A few minutes later, a young woman was on the grass in his place. She yawned, stretched and stood up. She seemed to know exactly where she was going and set off with a purposeful stride towards Woodhayes Lane.