

EVEN SUDDENLIER....!

by Joe Bromley

A Really Big Pants story for tough times (2020)



with illustrations by Rosie Alabaster, and
hopefully YOU

Chapter One

“Ow!” yelped Red, hopping on one foot and clutching the other one. “That hurt!”

Grandma and Red were at the seaside. They loved the beach at East Waffling and had spent many a happy hour there. It was a sunny day in late March, and they were well wrapped up against the brisk breeze.

“Stubbed your toe again, dear?” said Grandma, reaching down to see what had accosted Red. Grandma always carried a bag with her to pick up rubbish they found along the shore.

“Why do people do it, Grandma? Just chuck stuff they don’t want anymore?”

“Well, not ALL people do it, my darling. There are some good people in the world too, you know. Like our friends. And our neighbours. And us. Let’s see what waylaid you.”

Something shiny was glinting in the sand.

“What makes a person ‘good’, Grandma?” wondered Red aloud.



But Grandma wasn't listening. She'd loosened the shiny object from its sandy hiding place and was turning it over and over in her hands, rubbing at years of encrusted dirt. It was an ancient bottle with a stopper firmly in place at the neck. “Look, Red,” she said. “See how old this bottle is? Let's give it a sluice.”

They crouched at the edge of the ocean and dunked the bottle to wash it clean. It took a while, but between them they started to remove layer upon layer of grime. With every incoming wave they gave it another rinse. Finally, all the thick opaque glass of the bottle revealed itself.

“We'll take it home and recycle it, Grandma. Shall we go and have our sandwiches now?” The little girl turned away and started up the beach.

But Grandma was holding the bottle up to the sunlight and squinting at it. “See that, Red? I think there's something inside.” Her infamous hair, piled high as ever, sent out a shower of sparks. “How curious,” she murmured. “It couldn't be...”

“What is it, Grandma? What's inside?” said Red.

Grandma began to search the ever-increasing stash of items in her hair for something to furtle the stopper with. “I don't know, my darling. Let's find out.”

Muttering to herself, Grandma begin to tip things from her hair into Red's outstretched arms. "There must be a tool in here handy. A corkscrew, or a little chisel should do it."

Precariously balancing it all, Red sifted through the contents. "Spare leg warmers, a CD of Kenny Rogers' greatest hits, a jar of raspberry jam... Grandma - a multipack of loo roll? Really? You're not stockpiling in your hair, are you?"



"As if." Triumphantlly, Grandma brandished a sharp hat pin. "Ah! Perfect. That'll do it."

As she pierced the stopper, the blue sky filled with looming black clouds, blocking out the sun. A flash of lightning streaked across the heavens, followed by menacing rumbling thunder.

"Grandma! What's happening? Where did that come from?" Red was a very brave child, but she was not keen on storms, and didn't particularly want to get struck by lightning. She huddled further into her trusty red hoodie.

Grandma was wrestling with the stopper. The little bottle seemed to give off an eerie pale glow as she struggled to open it. Suddenly, it gave way with an almighty



followed by a deep sigh, and an even deeper guffing sound.

Grandma's hair produced another scattering of sparks. A vicious wind whipped round them but, just as suddenly, the weather changed again.

"This is weird, Grandma," said Red, looking up at the sky. "I know there's climate change and all, but that was totally spooky."

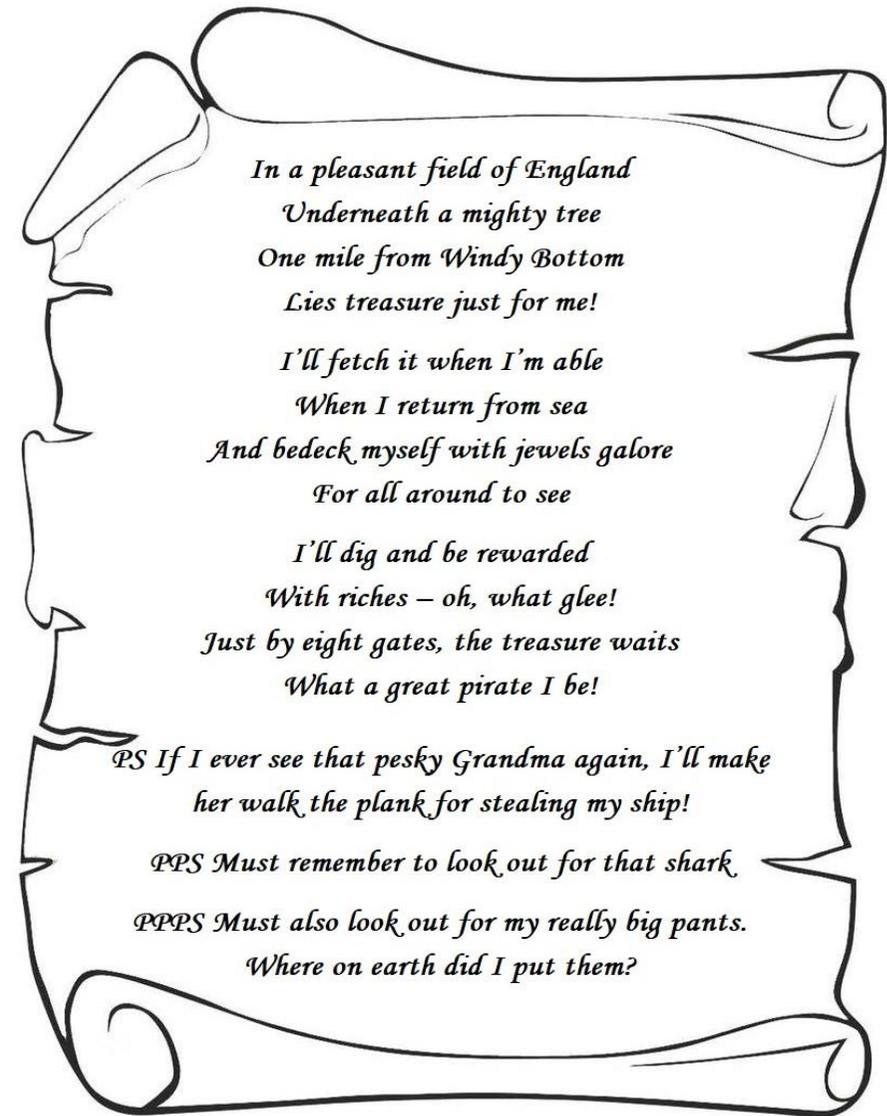
"Take heart, my darling. We just need to fish this out," replied Grandma, poking the hat pin inside the bottle. She grumbled and cursed, intent on retrieving the mysterious cargo. Eventually she tipped it up and gave the end several good wallops.

With another deep guff, a tiny scroll of parchment finally plopped onto the sand.

"A message in a bottle!" exclaimed Red. "Wow!" She picked up the parchment and carefully unrolled it.

"What does it say, Red? Tell me."

Grandma sat down and made herself comfy as Red cleared her throat and began to read aloud. And it went like this:



“Just as I thought. That chump was forever writing bad poetry,” Grandma said to herself. And then brightly to Red: “Windy Bottom! Hidden treasure in our very own neighbourhood! How exciting. Shall we have a sandwich now, to celebrate?”

But Red was gaping at her grandmother in shock. “Grandma! Was this really written by a pirate? What’s this bit about stealing his ship? He can’t mean YOU, can he?”

Grandma had already started eating. With her mouth full, she replied, “Oh, don’t worry about that, my love. Pirates were always borrowing each other’s ships. Here – have a bite.”



“I don’t want a bite! I want you to tell me what this means! Grandma – surely you weren’t... weren’t... weren’t...”

“A pirate?” finished Grandma airily. “Yes, dear. There’s no need to look so flabbergasted. Although I was in disguise most of the time as a boy, because women weren’t allowed on boats in those days for some ridiculous reason. And all that awful grammar – ‘here I be’ and the like – it was exhausting. And as for the food, well -”

“Grandma! Stop! You said we were good people! Pirates aren’t good people.”

“Red. My darling. Come and sit down beside me. You know full well that I’ve had a busy and varied life. For example, when I was a revolutionary with Che Guevara, we would -” She paused, glanced at her granddaughter, and changed tack. “You have to remember that this was all a long time ago. I never did anything *too* dreadful. And aren’t you the tiniest bit excited that there might be treasure buried just down the road from us?”

“No, I’m not!” shouted Red, stomping off. “And I dread to think what he means about those really big pants too,” she yelled, over her shoulder.

Grandma finished her sandwich, and gazed out at the ocean. She smiled. “You old trouble-maker,” she whispered. She got to her feet, dusted sand from her bottom, shook out her high tops, and followed her granddaughter up the beach.

Chapter Two

Meanwhile, in a vast mansion in Windy Bottom, a young boy called Edwin had been whizzing about on his brand new gold-plated motorised scooter. He’d already been twice round the building on it, until his father, Mr Wolfe, shoed him outdoors.

“Look ’ere, son, I know yer getting yer daily exercise and all that, but do us a favour and take it outside. Svetlana’s having a nap.”

Svetlana was Edwin’s stepmother, a former prima ballerina from Russia. She had unfortunately melted after breaking her magic mirror, leaving only her trademark purple hair behind, but her devoted husband was doing his best to help her grow back.



Even though Svetlana still took up a large part of his dad's time, Edwin was much happier these days and their little family had become much closer.

Now the boy was scooting round their huge estate: past the swimming pool, round the tennis courts, veering out of the way of the statue of rearing horses in the fountain on the driveway. He avoided the orchard though, where the apple and pear trees that had been the family business of *'Wolfie's Juices – Our Money DOES Grow on Trees'* were also doing their best to grow back, after a regrettable incident with a faulty genie (who had been rather a snazzy dresser with outfits including tennis whites, a big velvet frock, and a wetsuit with a bowler hat).

Mr Wolfe had since invested in a bookshop – *'Wolfie's Bookshop – Our Books DO Grow on Trees (Well, The Paper That Makes Them Does)'* which was not quite as catchy but was doing a brisk trade.



Edwin used to hate reading and writing and was convinced he was no good at it, but since his adventure with his neighbours, Grandma and Red, he had really got into stories and spent a lot of time at the bookshop.

Suddenly, Grandma appeared beside him. He was so startled he nearly fell off his scooter.

“Hello, dear,” she said. “That’s a fancy piece of kit. Puts my battered old skateboard to shame.”

Edwin looked at the sturdy gates at the end of his driveway which remained resolutely closed. How on earth did she do that? He then clocked her watching him. “Oh, er, would you like a go? I’m always happy to share,” he added hurriedly. She immediately hopped on and sped in circles round him. “Where’s Red?”

“Oh, she’ll be along presently. We’ve just been to the beach. It’s a lovely day, isn’t it?”

Just then Red trudged past the gates on her way back to the treehouse she shared with Grandma. She stopped and eyed her

grandmother doing wheelies on her neighbour’s scooter, and scowled.

“How’s Svetlana doing, dear? Growing well?” asked Grandma, expertly zipping about.

“Well, Dad’s doing his best to nourish her like you said, but she’s a bit... spindly.”

“Hmmm. I’ll pop in with some more ‘friendship’. That might do the trick. After all, we did used to be best friends.”



“Was that before or after you were a blood-curdling pirate?” bellowed Red.

“After, dear,” replied Grandma smoothly.

Red humphed and stomped on up the lane.

“Pirate?” said Edwin, baffled.

“Yes, dear. And guess what. There’s treasure buried near here. Perhaps you and Red would like to see if you can find it?”

“You were a pirate?” repeated Edwin.

“Do close your mouth, dear,” said Grandma. “Honestly, you kids. Why is it so hard to grasp? I thought you loved playing at pirates and things like that.”

Edwin was a lonely only child and didn’t spend much time playing with anyone. But he closed his gawping mouth and dutifully nodded.

“As I said to Red, it was all a long time ago. I ran away to sea when I was a young slip of a girl, and fell in with the most inept crew you could ever hope to meet. The captain had a long black beard, which he liked to plait with little red ribbons, and his name was –”

“Blackbeard!” interrupted Edwin.

“Slackbeard, actually, dear,” said Grandma. “He really was the most dreadful man. An utter buffoon, if truth be told. He was forever drinking rum and falling into swamps and losing things. A shark had taken a big bite out of his bottom and he lived in fear of getting off his ship, the Smelly Mermaid.”

Edwin watched Grandma scooting around him, and wondered if this could be true. It sounded very much like a rumour he had heard at his school, Windy Bottom Primary, about two Year 4 children, Maggie and Roy, who had miraculously travelled to a treasure island during a school trip to a maritime museum and battled a dastardly pirate. Nobody had ever believed the rumour, but could it have actually happened? He opened his mouth to ask Grandma and then closed it again.

“He was also a horrible litterbug. Forever throwing rubbish everywhere.” Grandma shuddered. “I can only assume he put that corny poem in a bottle and chucked it overboard of whichever vessel he was clinging to at the time. Still – treasure is treasure. Why don’t you go after Red and see if you can persuade her to hunt for it? A nice little adventure for you both. I think I’ll just whip up a quick batch of shortbread for Svetlana. Thanks for letting me have a scoot, dear.” And with that, she vanished.

Chapter Three

Even meanwhilier, in a pleasant field of England, one mile from Windy Bottom, a peculiar man and his daughter were pacing underneath a mighty tree. It was rather difficult to describe the pair, especially him. Best see for yourself:



One thing was blatantly obvious though. They were total and utter baddies. His name was Mr Covid. And his daughter was called Corona. She was 19.

“This spot will do just fine, Corona,” said Mr Covid nasally, gazing around.

“Yes, Papa,” she agreed, consulting a map. “I can imagine it all perfectly. We’ll bulldoze all these ridiculous places. Windy Bottom, East Waffling, Flappington – it will all be ours.”

Mr Covid stroked his beard, then flung his stumpy arms as wide as they would go. “Finally, we’ll get to build a spectacular lair. When I think of those wasted attempts – outer space, under the sea, the top of Mount Everest. Those builders were all completely useless. Cowboys, the lot of them.” He gave the tree a kick with his pointy shoe, and coughed. “But this... this is the place. And then we’ll begin our plan for WORLD DOMINATION.” He mwah-ha-ha-ed a sinister laugh. “People will soon be marking ‘Earth Hour’, Corona. Let’s make it a memorable one.”

Chapter Four

By the time Edwin had caught up with Red, she'd calmed down a bit and was sitting on a tree stump, holding the little piece of parchment from the beach.

He tentatively approached her. "Alright, Red? What's that you've got?"

"You don't need to pretend, Edwin. I'm sure Grandma told you all about the message in a bottle, and I bet she sent you after me, and told you we should look for the treasure together."

Edwin was impressed. "Cor. She did, actually. Budge up." He squeezed onto the stump next to Red. "I don't understand why you're not excited. Buried treasure, right on our doorstep! We don't even need travel dust, or a Go Glove or anything. It sounds like fun."

"If Grandma wants that treasure, she can go and dig it up herself," retorted Red. "I don't want anything to do with it. She was a pirate, Edwin! A PIRATE! She stole things!"

Edwin, whose own father was somewhat dodgy when it came to business dealings, shrugged. "Chill, Red. I think it's pretty cool."

Red jumped up so suddenly that Edwin tipped backwards off the stump. "It's not *cool*, Edwin! What if she did worse than stealing? What if she... what if she killed people?? Made them walk the plank, and stuff like that? Had swordfights, and shot people with a pistol, or cannons and gunpowder or whatever? All my life I thought she was a good person. A role model. A superhero!" She slumped back onto the stump. "And now I think she's horrible."



Edwin lay on his back, looking up at the clear sky, pondering. And then quietly he began to speak. "I think Grandma IS a good person, Red. And a role model. It doesn't mean that EVERYTHING she did in the past, or even might do in the future, was the right thing. But of all the people I know – and I include my own family in this – I trust Grandma, and I believe she would always try her best if you needed help. She can be a bit scary at times when she's stern, but she's always kind, and she's always been there for you. I really respect her. She's a superhero to me."

Red didn't respond for a while. And then slowly, she reached out and helped Edwin back onto the stump beside her. She squeezed his hand, and gave the slightest of nods.

Edwin indicated the parchment that Red still held. "The other thing is, she told me about the pirate who wrote that. She said he was a buffoon and she didn't like him at all and that he was a terrible litterbug. And I know how you

and Grandma hate litter and go and pick rubbish off the beach sometimes – I saw you clear up after a picnic I'd had there once with my dad."

"Edwin! Was that your mess? Honestly!"

"Ha – got you talking again!" He held his hands up in surrender, as she threatened to push him back off the stump. "And guess what – you remember Roy, that swot in Year 4?"

"The one who always sings that song about recycling?"

"Yeah – and tries to get everyone to call recycling *Roycycling*. It turns out that he and his mate Maggie might have been telling the truth about meeting a pirate. Captain Slackbeard! The same one Grandma knew!"

"What? That's a bit too much of a coincidence, isn't it?" said Red doubtfully.

"Well, it's a small world. And they did mysteriously donate all that gold to the museum." He nudged Red. "Be good if WE found some treasure though, eh? I could do with an adventure," he added wistfully.

Red looked at Edwin and got to her feet. "Come on, then." She peered at the parchment again. "I've been thinking about these clues. There's a field with a mighty tree right next to the Windy Bottom Animal Sanctuary. We could go and see if it has got eight gates?"

"Woo-hoo!" shouted Edwin, scrambling up and capering around Red. "We're going to totes smash this! Look out, treasure, here we come! You're ours, all ours!"

Red rolled her eyes and pointed to his gold-plated scooter. "I think you've got enough treasure, Edwin. Besides I doubt it will even be there, if that pirate is as dodgy as he sounds."

She set off down the lane, with Edwin scooting after her. His spirits were not dampened. He started to hum the recycling song. "How did it go again? All those kids in Miss Squelch's Green Fingers Gang used to sing it – Olive and Messy Jesse and that lot."

"Until nasty Trixie in Year 6 made them stop."

"Oh, yeah. But then her sister, Clare, in Reception started singing it. And her friend, Cory. The whole school knows it."

They both hummed it for a while, before breaking broadly into song.



Reduce it, reduce it

If you can't reduce it, reuse it, reuse it

If you can't reuse it, recycle it

Let's save Planet Earth!



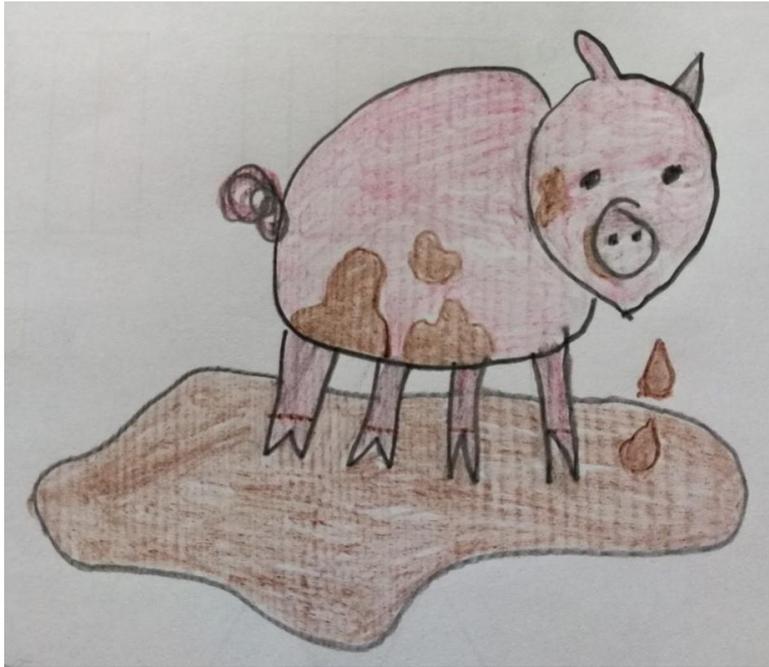
They laughed, then lapsed into silence.

"Jeez, there are a lot of weird kids in our school."

"Yeah."

Chapter Five

At the Windy Bottom Animal Sanctuary, the owners were having a tricky time with one of the rescue pigs. Wide Bertha was experiencing a flashback to her days on a factory farm. Mud was flying everywhere as she stormed round her sty on the rampage.



Pedro and Pavlova Petluvver and their children, Max, Minty and Monty, were trying to settle her.

Pedro, a swarthy Argentine, was swearing vividly in Spanish. Pavlova, an elegant half-Polish, half-Indian lady, rumoured to be of noble heritage, was wafting a tempting lemon ring doughnut. Max, 16, half-heartedly called out a few suggestions, then went back to his battered Xbox. Minty and Monty, twins aged ten, were trying to soothe the enraged pig with a story. It was only the sight of Duncan the donkey clip-clopping round the corner that finally calmed the creature down.

“Phew,” said Minty, as she caught hold of Duncan and gently led him forward. “Shall we let Wide Bertha out in the field with him, Mum?”

“Good idea,” said Pavlova, tucking into the treat she had set aside for the pig. “Go and open the gate, Monty.”

The boy had already run across and was swinging on the gate. “There are people in our field, Mum! And they’re kind of... odd.”

The Petluvvers went to the gate to see who was in their field. Mr Covid and Corona were standing underneath the huge tree. Pedro started to swear in Spanish. Pavlova sighed, opened the gate and crossed the field.

“Greetings!” called out Mr Covid with a cough and a wheeze, as she approached. “I am Mr Covid. And this divine creature is my daughter, Corona. She’s 19.”

“Ah, Mr Covid, I’m afraid this is private property. You’re more than welcome to come back during opening hours at the weekend, but we can’t afford to keep the sanctuary open for visitors at all times,” said Pavlova.

Mr Covid looked at her and then across at Pedro and Minty and Monty at the gate with Duncan and Wide Bertha.

“This is your land, Miss, er – Miss...?”

“Mrs Petluvver. Yes. My family and I live here and run the Windy Bottom Animal Sanctuary. This field is ours.” She turned and indicated behind her. “And that’s my husband

and two of my kids. And a donkey. And a pig.”

Mr Covid and Corona took in the scowling Latino, and the children’s abundant afros and black skin. “Why do your children look different from you?” asked Corona, dismissively.

Pavlova thought this was a bit rich considering how odd Mr Covid looked, but politely explained that they had adopted the twins from Madagascar. No need to mention their eldest son, Max - inside, glued to his Xbox – best to keep it simple. “And as I said, we’re not open to the public right now, so we’d be very grateful if you’d come back another day.”

Mr Covid coughed. “Mrs Petluvver, you are obviously an excellent businesswoman. But I can see even from this distance that your house and outbuildings are in a state of disrepair and if you have no money to pay for staff then you must be exhausted. I have a very tempting offer for you. My daughter and I would like to buy your land. All of it. We will give you a very good price. What do you say?”

Pavlova was taken aback. “Our home is not for sale, Mr Covid.”

“My dear lady,” he began to wheedle nasally. “Why not take a moment to think it over? Just imagine what you could do with the money. Bathe in caviar... shark fin soup for supper every night... fur coats galore –”

“Mr Covid! I run an animal sanctuary! None of those things are remotely appealing. Will you please leave before I –”

Corona smoothly stepped in. “Forgive my father, Mrs Petluffer. His little joke was in poor taste. What he meant to say was more along the lines of imagine treating yourself to a relaxing spa break. Leisurely frothy coffees with friends. Being pampered at the hair salon.” She paused. “And not forgetting treats for your dear family too. I’m sure there are many luxuries you would love to indulge them with?”

Pavlova sighed and her mind drifted to a hot frothy coffee. It was true – every day she felt the struggle of trying to keep everything afloat,

and everybody happy. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the light, leaning forward slightly to inhale.

Suddenly, Wide Bertha gave a loud squeal and hurled herself against the gate. Duncan the donkey brayed and kicked his back legs up.

Pavlova snapped her eyes open and took a step back. She could hear her husband swearing profusely in Spanish. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s simply not for sale.”

Mr Covid looked across the field to where the beleaguered Petluffers were battling to calm the angry pig again. “Just do me one small favour, madam. Discuss our proposal with your family. And then you can give us your final say.”

Exhausted, Pavlova nodded. “But now please excuse me. I need to feed George and Michael.”

“Ah, your twins?” Mr Covid coughed uncertainly.

“No. The hippos.”

Chapter Six

Max, eldest son of the Petluvvers, inside on his Xbox, also looked different from the rest of his family. He was ginger and freckled and pale, and had been adopted from Wales. He had been revelling in an excellent achievement against his friends Youssef, Kerry and Honor online, when he'd heard Wide Bertha hurl herself against the gate, and had reluctantly torn his eyes away from the screen and glanced outside. And now, game forgotten, he was gazing at Corona from his bedroom window, utterly smitten.

Chapter Seven

As they approached the animal sanctuary, Red halted at the signpost at the crossroads.



“Edwin! When did you do that?”

“Oh, ages ago,” he said airily.

She considered the graffiti. “You do realise that *ere* is not – oh, never mind.”

Chapter Eight

The Petluvvers were having a heated discussion by the creek, when Red and Edwin arrived. The hippos were wallowing happily, but everybody else was getting increasingly upset.

Pedro was swearing in Spanish.

“We’ve got no money,” wailed Pavlova. “The bills haven’t been paid, I’m way behind on the paperwork, and this place is falling apart. It is a LOT of work keeping it going.”

“But we LOVE this place!” yelled Monty furiously. “And what about the goats and the sheep and the chickens and the alpacas and the hedgehogs and the turkeys and the horses and the greyhounds and the cows and the cats and the zebras and the gerbils and the chimps? Don’t *they* get a say? You’re always telling us animals should have a voice!”

“Mum does look really knackered though,” declared Minty, in what she thought was a supportive way.

Max had joined his family outside. “I totally think we should have a meeting with the Covids. Close up. Maybe, erm, invite them round for dinner?”

Everybody stopped shouting and/or swearing and stared at Max, astounded.

“What?” he said. “I’m trying to be helpful.”

“Have them round for dinner?” echoed Pavlova. “Why?”

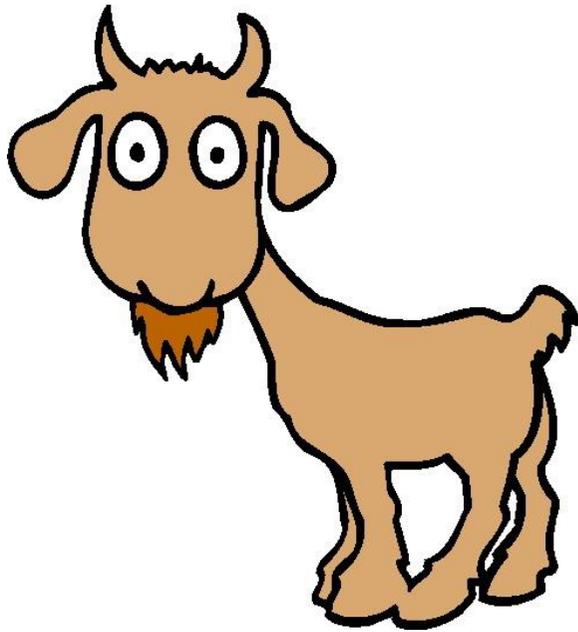
“So we can, er, you know, talk about their offer. After all, we DO need money.” He pointed at the twins’ feet, with their toes poking through holes cut in the front of their wellies. “And the only reason I’ve got an Xbox is because Dad found it at the tip and gaffer-taped it back together.”

At this point, Edwin, slightly bored of waiting to be noticed, turned to Red and announced proudly, “That was *my* Xbox! I dump them as soon as I get the latest model.”

The Petluvvers all wheeled round to see who else was trespassing on their land today.

“Oh, alright, Red?” said Monty, scuffing his toes awkwardly (and quite painfully) in the gravel. (He had a little bit of a crush on her.)

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said, stepping forward. “We can see you’re very busy. We just wanted to ask a question about your field.” She turned and looked at Edwin, now fending off a young goat who was trying to chomp his scarf. “Come on, Edwin. Stop kidding around.”



“Don’t ask if it’s for sale,” said Minty, elbowing her brother. “You’ll tip him over the edge.”

“Er, no, we don’t want to buy it. We just wondered if we could... have a little dig in it,” said Red lamely.

“A little dig in it?” said Pavlova.

“Whatever for?”

Red held up the piece of parchment from the beach. “Treasure,” she replied.

There was a stunned silence.

A butterfly flapped past.

The goat bleated.

Pedro swore in Spanish.

“Treasure?” said Monty. “You mean like gold and silver and stuff?”

“We don’t know,” said Red.

Edwin butted in: “But obviously we have first dibs on it if we find it.”

“Edwin!” cried Red. “It’s the Petluvvers’ property, therefore it’s *their* treasure if we find it.” She paused. “Erm, maybe you’ll let us keep a little bit?”

They all crowded round the piece of parchment, as Red read out the clues. “We think the mighty tree is the one by the old wall in your field. It’s the biggest tree for miles. But we couldn’t see a gate, let alone *eight* gates. Do you know where they are?”

Pavlova looked at her husband, who swore in Spanish and left to feed the turkeys. “I don’t I’m afraid, Red. Couldn’t Grandma help you with this?” she said.

Red’s face darkened.

“Don’t mention the G word, Mrs Petluvver,” said Edwin. “Red’s got a mardy on because Grandma used to be a pirate and looted stuff. Hold on – so technically if we DO find this treasure, it belongs to Grandma? Which means she’ll definitely let me keep it, as she was the one who told me to go and look for it.”

“Shut up, Edwin,” said Red. “This treasure is Captain Slackbeard’s, remember.”

Pavlova smiled. “I’ve got to get on, but you children are welcome to go and have a quick

look at that tree and see if you can spot anything. But there’s a lot to do here, so don’t be long.”

“Yesssssss!” said Edwin, punching the air. “We’re going to find it, I know we are!”

“Come on, you freak,” laughed Minty, leading the way up from the creek.

Red and Monty followed. “I like your hoodie, Red,” said Monty, after a while.

“Oh, thanks,” she replied. “I wear it pretty much every day though, so you’ve probably seen it before.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He fell silent.

“I like your peep-toe wellies. It’s a really good idea. Grandma and I are forever trying to repair things to make them last.” Her face darkened again. “Not that I’m talking about Grandma at the moment.”

They headed towards the field. Max slouched along after them, clearly hoping to catch another glimpse of Corona. But would they find eight gates?

Chapter Nine

Mr Covid and Corona were discussing world domination. They were still by the mighty tree but, in an effort to appear respectful of the Petluvvers wish for them to leave, were now reduced to lurking on the lane on the other side of the old wall. Mr Covid looked with disdain at the overgrown hedge looming over the wall. “All this nasty nature needs to go. I want my lair! It’s time to play dirty,” he rasped.

“Way ahead of you, Papa,” said Corona. “I’ve been WhatsApping our lawyer Mr Fever. He says the bills on this place haven’t been paid, and at midnight their lease runs out but they’ve ignored the paperwork to renew it. Which means in the morning, WE can buy it all for just one penny. And get to work demolishing this whole place.”

“Excellent! This calls for an evil laugh! Mwah ha ha ha!” He started to cough violently. Corona dutifully banged him on the back.

Sitting silently above it all in the mighty tree, was an owl. Disturbed from his daytime slumbers, Hootie had been observing the antics beneath him.



Now he spread his majestic wings and took flight.

Chapter Ten

Over at the Wolfes' mansion, Grandma had been enjoying a cup of tea and several pieces of shortbread with Svetlana. They'd been having a catch-up, but with Svetlana still being mostly melted, it was mainly Grandma providing the gossip.

She had gone for a wee, and was idly looking at all the pictures adorning the walls of the toilet of Svetlana posing with very minor celebrities. Peering at a few, Grandma muttered some facts about them to herself, as she washed her hands. "He likes being pushed around in a wheelbarrow by his wife... she ate all her kids' Easter eggs... *he* tried to nick my really big pants off my washing line!" She humphed. "Still, never kiss and tell. After all, when I was performing with JLo, we would always –"

Suddenly, there was a tap on the window. Hootie the owl was hovering outside, flapping his huge wings. Grandma quickly opened it, and

he settled on the ledge beside her. "Hootie! Goodness me, what are you doing out and about in the daytime? That doesn't bode well." She listened as he softly began to hoot and twitter. "Thank you, Hootie. I'm on it." She saluted him as he flew off, then closed the window and rushed back to Svetlana.

Grandma hurriedly sprinkled a hefty dose of 'friendship' on her old friend and, grabbing a last bit of shortbread, vanished.



Chapter Eleven

In the field, Max leaned lovelorn against the tree. He absentmindedly ran his fingers around a heart etched in the ancient bark. The others were searching the hedge by the old wall for signs of eight gates. It was a prickly business and there were regular yelps and ouches.

Dusk was falling. A bunny hopped by. On the lane, three funny men cycled past on a triplet bike. They were definitely not baddies.

“Oh, it’s no use,” said Red. “There are no gates at all. Maybe we should give up.”

“No!” cried Edwin, Minty and Monty simultaneously.

“Petluvvers never give up!” said Monty.

“If we give up, we’ll have to go and muck out Wide Bertha,” said Minty.

“I want that treasure!” finished Edwin. He poked feebly at the undergrowth. “I don’t see why we don’t just dig up ALL the grass round this tree! We can borrow my dad’s digger.”

“We’re not doing that, Edwin,” said Red firmly. “Look how massive that trunk is. I bet we could all stand around it and reach our arms out and they would barely touch. We’re not going to risk damaging the roots.”

“And look how much land we’d have to dig up. I don’t think Mum would agree to that,” said Minty. “Are you sure the clue is right, Red?”

Suddenly, Grandma appeared. “Hello, everybody,” she said, patting her giant hairdo. “How are you getting on?”

Hurriedly stepping back and falling over his scooter in the process, Edwin asked, “How did you know where we were, Grandma?”

“Hootie tweeted me,” she replied.

“Cool. iPhone 11?”

She gave him a withering look. “Top of the range Mother Nature, actually, dear. But it seems everything is alright here. Perhaps I misunderstood his message. He’s very wise but he does tend to mumble slightly.” She turned and sniffed the air. “Still, better safe than sorry.”

Red turned back to the hedge with a huff, and a tummy rumble.

“Would you like to eat your sandwich now, Red? You must be ever so hungry,” said Grandma, holding it out. “I must confess I had a little nibble.”



“No, thank you,” said Red petulantly.

“Ooooh, if it’s going spare, Grandma, can I have it?” begged Edwin.

Grandma had already scoffed it. “Pardon, dear?” she said with her mouth full. She held her hand up before he could reply. “Did anyone hear that cough?”

They all stopped to listen.

A cow moored.

A dog barked.

A horse neighed.

Pedro swore in Spanish in the distance. Red’s tummy rumbled.

“Nope. No coughing, Grandma,” said Edwin. “Maybe you’re losing your marbles?”

Grandma raised an eyebrow, archly. “Maybe, Edwin, maybe. Now, what are you all doing by that hedge? Didn’t old Slackers say the treasure was underneath a mighty tree?” She gestured at the giant branches reaching high into the sky above them. “And they don’t come much mightier than this.”

“We were looking for a gate,” said Minty.

“We can’t just dig randomly round the tree, Grandma. It would take forever,” added Monty. “And Dad would have a fit.”

Suddenly, Max cried out. “Ow ow ow ow ow!” He had been circling the heart etched in the bark, and now had a splinter in his finger.

“Let me see that,” said Grandma. Max held his sore finger out to her. “No, not that. THAT.” She pointed at the heart. “THIS is where you should dig!” she declared triumphantly.



They all peered at the carving.

“So Eightgates is a person?” said Edwin.

“Yes. An old beau of mine. I met him when I used to do motorbike stunts for Evel Knievel. He’d ride around in my sidecar. A bit of a rogue, actually.” She drifted into a reverie. “But such lovely brown eyes.”

“Oh, this is getting better and better!” stormed Red. “First a pirate and now someone with boyfriends in every field?!”

“Hardly, dear,” said Grandma, unperturbed. “And now we know where to dig!”

Monty was puzzled. “But how long ago was this? Surely pirates were before the time of motorbikes? How would Captain Slackbeard know about Eightgates carving this on the tree? This doesn’t make any sense!”

“Don’t worry, dear. Some things simply *don’t* make sense. Right, time to head home, it’s getting dark. You can hunt for the treasure first thing tomorrow.”

“But Grandma!” exclaimed Edwin. “What if somebody else comes and finds it before us?”

“I very much doubt that’s going to happen, dear. And besides, Hootie will keep an eye on things.” She craned her neck up at the branches of the mighty tree.

But Hootie was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter Twelve

After waving off Grandma, Red and Edwin, Max scraped the front gate of the animal sanctuary shut. The twins had rushed off to help their parents with all the endless tasks to be done before bedtime. As he clunked the rusty padlock shut, his finger reminded him of the splinter embedded in his tender teenage flesh. He gave a little whimper.

“That looks sore,” said a voice from the shadows.

Startled, Max jumped back. “Who’s there?” he quavered.

Corona stepped forward. “Sup. I’m Corona. Do you live here too?”

Max’s heart beat faster. The girl from the field, close up! Her sneering face, her tilted-hip stance, her disdainful attitude. Oh, she was gorgeous!

She didn’t wait for a reply. “Can’t be much fun constantly cleaning up after animals.” She

reached over the gate and took his finger. “And I bet you’re a LOT of fun.” She expertly removed the splinter with her sharp painted nails.

“Shame we missed the supermoon. Boy meets girl. Girl takes out boy’s splinter. Boy professes undying love for girl. How romantic would that’ve been?”

Max was too overwhelmed to speak.

“Cat got your tongue? Or a hippo or a donkey?” she teased with a sly laugh.

Still no answer.

She cocked her head. “Wait, you’re not rinsing me, are you? Or roasting me?”

He shook his head, dumbfounded.

She laughed again and ran her fingernail across the palm of his hand. “Whatevs. See ya.” She blew him a kiss and sank back into the shadows.

Max stared after her. Oh, he thought, her laugh is infectious. He vowed then and there to do whatever it took to get Corona.

Chapter Thirteen



First thing next morning, Edwin was banging on the door of Grandma's treehouse.

Red opened it, yawning. "What's all the – Edwin! What are you doing? Stop banging on the door!"

He brandished a spade. "Why are you still in your pyjamas?! Come on! We need to dig up that treasure!"

Grandma appeared, clutching a cup of tea. "Goodness me, I thought the sky had fallen in." She eyed the spade. "Well, Red, are you off to help Edwin? Or are you still sulking?"

"I'm not sulking," said Red sulkily.

"Suit yourself. Shall I go with him instead? It's a lovely day for a treasure hunt."

"Do what you like, Grandma! You always do!"

"I see. In that case, I'll go and have another piece of toast," said Grandma calmly, and vanished.

"Red! Stop being an utter doof!" shouted Edwin, hopping about dementedly. "Go and get dressed and let's find that flipping treasure BEFORE SOMEONE ELSE GETS THERE FIRST!"

Red stomped upstairs and got changed. As she yanked her trusty red hoodie on, her arm got tangled in a sleeve, knocking a picture off the cluttered bookshelf in her bedroom.



It was her favourite photograph of her and Grandma, taken on the beach at East Waffling, where they had found the message in a bottle only yesterday. Why was she so cross with her grandmother? She thought about all the adventures they had had together and how Grandma had always taken care of her. But how

could she call herself a good person, having been a *pirate*? She would help Edwin dig for the treasure, but that was it.

Red left the photo on the floor. Without saying goodbye, she ran to the other side of the treehouse and clambered through a trapdoor out to the giant slide that went down into the garden like a helter-skelter. As she whizzed round and round, her mood improved. She landed with a



making Edwin jump.

She couldn't help it – she grinned. The sun was shining. Maybe finding treasure would be fun after all.

Chapter Fourteen

At the Windy Bottom Animal Sanctuary, Minty and Monty Petluvver were speeding through their morning chores. Their mum had said they could help Red and Edwin dig for the treasure when they arrived. They had just finished feeding Wide Bertha when the buzzer sounded at the gate.

“Mum!” yelled Minty from the pigsty.

“What?” replied Pavlova, deep within the chicken shed.

“MUM!” Minty yelled again.

“WHAAAAT?” yelled back Pavlova.

“Red and Edwin are here! We’re off to the field.”

Pavlova was chasing Gary the cockerel back to his little house. He had been rescued at the same time as the chickens from a factory farm, and they let them roam free as much as possible, but Gary was intent on making as many new chickens as he could manage.



“Okay,” she called to the twins. “Have fun!” With Gary safely in his place for a while, she let out the chickens, stopping to cuddle her favourite plump one, Banners, and give her an extra treat.

Minty and Monty had already reached the gate and let Red and Edwin in. Edwin was nearly beside himself with excitement. He was panting heavily, having let Red ride his gold-plated motorised scooter all the way down the lane, with him running behind it. But even his poor fitness levels were not going to get in his way. He thrust the spade in the air. “Let’s dig!”

Hopes high, they all rushed to the field. There was the mighty tree. And there was the clue, etched in the bark, guiding their dig.

Edwin took first go, as it was his spade and he was the most excited. He started attacking the ground willy-nilly, with grassy clods flying everywhere. "X marks the spot," he repeated over and over breathlessly.

Slightly concerned about the state of the field, Monty spoke up. "Er, Edwin, I think we need to take a more measured approach. Why don't we walk five paces straight from the heart in the trunk, and dig there?"

They all agreed it sounded like a good plan, and paced it out.

One by one they dug with the spade. Each child had mud all over them. It was hard work and they weren't having much luck. Until Max appeared, walking Merlin the dog. He was a very enthusiastic creature who bounded over, took one look at the holey mess, and immediately started to dig with his large paws.

"Why didn't we think of Merlin sooner," said Minty. "This is brilliant! He'll find it in no time."

Encouraged, they all sat down to watch. But time wore on and there was still no sign of any treasure. More and more soil had been upended.

"Are you sure this clue is right, Red?" whined Edwin. He had expected instant results.

"Look, it's not MY clue, is it," said Red defensively. "It's Grandma's."

Suddenly, Merlin's ears pricked up. He stopped digging and raced away across the field.

"What happened?" said Edwin. "Where's he gone?"

Almost as suddenly as he had raced off, Merlin returned with something in his jaws.

"Ooooh, will this help us find the treasure?" said Edwin hopefully.

"No," sighed Minty. The dog was carrying his beloved bedraggled teddy bear. He dropped it in the huge hole, and wagged his tail proudly.

“Woof,” he barked expectantly. The children praised the happy dog and made a big fuss of him, but couldn’t help feeling disappointed that they hadn’t found anything. Before Merlin could start filling the gigantic hole, Red bent down to rescue the teddy. As she reached in, her finger caught on something sharp. “Ow!” she yelped. “That hurt!”

Out of nowhere, a flash of lightning streaked across the sky followed by a crack of thunder. Merlin howled and both Minty and Monty edged closer to their big brother.

“What did you do, Red?” wailed Edwin.

“Nothing!” she said, sucking her sore finger. “It wasn’t me!”

The weather cleared again, instantly. Red thought back to the sudden storm that had occurred on the beach when they had opened the message in the bottle. *Did that mean they had found the treasure?*

“Pass me that spade, Edwin,” she said urgently. She crouched down by the huge hole,

and began to carefully remove the soil around the sharp object that had caught her finger.

Edwin was clapping his hands and hopping from foot to foot again, giddy with pleasure. “Is it the treasure? It’s the treasure, isn’t it! We’ve found the treasure! It IS the treasure, isn’t it, Red?”

She stood up and wiped her brow. “See for yourselves.”

They all peered in to look at what she had unearthed.

Chapter Fifteen

Suddenly, Grandma and Pavlova appeared. Pavlova had a large jug of drinking water and several cups. Grandma was lugging a bucket of soapy water but had gone a bit overboard and bubbly suds were billowing far and wide.

“Besos, Abuela,” called Pedro from the gate.



Grandma waved at him then turned to the children. “We’ve been having a nice cup of tea and thought you could all do with a drink too. How are you getting on? Find anything?”

The children were covered in mud. It was EVERYWHERE. On their hands, smeared on their faces, clumped in their hair, all over their clothes. Edwin was trying to fish some out of his ear. He pointed to the bucket. “Is that for us?”

“No, dear. I thought the treasure might need a dunk.” She nodded at the hole. “Need a hand?”

With a determined grunt, Grandma

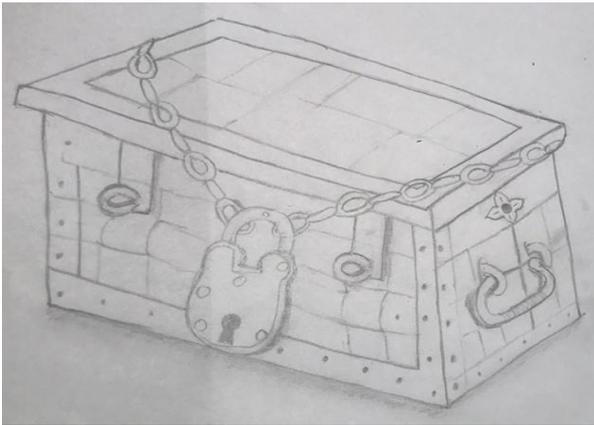
H
E
A
V
E
D

the object out of the hole and laid it on the grass.

It was a large iron chest.

With a really big padlock.

Everyone gawped at it in wonder. Even Max was excited, and he'd spent the morning moping over Corona. Edwin began to caper around. "Open it! Open it!" he cheered.



"But look at the padlock!" said Monty. "The chain is welded to the chest."

"Fetch the bolt cutters, Minty," said Pavlova, practical as ever. "What do you think, Grandma – a hammer for that lock?"

"Oh, I can pick that with my hatpin, no problem," said Grandma. She turned to Red. "Unless you disapprove?"

"She approves! SHE APPROVES!" yelled Edwin. And Red did have to admit, she couldn't wait to see what was in the chest.

As Grandma set to work, the children began to guess the contents.

"Gold. Obviously," stated Edwin.

"Pearls?" wondered Monty.

"I hope there's an emerald in there. A really big one," said Minty. "You love emeralds, don't you, Mum."

Pavlova laughed. "I am partial to emeralds, darling. And what about a ruby for Red?"

"Erm, if there's a diamond ring in there, can I have it?" squirmed Max. "No reason."

They all looked at him.

"I was never a huge fan of so-called precious metals and stones," said Grandma. "With people plundering the earth and then fighting over them. I think true treasure is best left in nature. Still, here we go." And with that, the lock fell away. The chest was ready to open.

But before Grandma could lift the lid, there came a cough. Everyone looked up.

Mr Covid and Corona stood there, smirking. The strange man swirled his cape in an evil manner, and coughed again. "How kind of you to give us a welcome present."

Merlin growled.

"Oh. It's Mr Covid, isn't it?" said Pavlova.

"And Corona," sighed Max, gazing at her. She flicked her hair in a dismissive but enticing teenage way.

"Yes, and Corona," continued Pavlova. "I'm afraid we're not open today either –"

Mr Covid held a stumpy hand up and wheezed. "Lady, you are right to be afraid. You won't be open ANY day. Tell them, daughter."

"Yeah, well, it's like you didn't fill in your paperwork, so basically you don't own this place anymore and we're going to take it over and Papa is going to build the evil lair he's always dreamed of for our world domination. So, like, sorry," – Corona taunted Max – "but not sorry."

Utter bewilderment followed.

"Eh? I don't get the joke?" said Minty.

Grandma stepped forward. "I don't think it is a joke, dear." She narrowed her eyes at the Covies. "But I'm sure we can sort this out."

"Listen, old lady," sneered Corona. "I don't know who you are but this has got nothing to do with you. Go and have a sherry or something."

Red gasped. Edwin gulped. A spark flew from Grandma's hair. She raised an eyebrow and smiled tightly at Corona. "Listen, *young* lady, I don't know who YOU are either, but perhaps you should mind your manners."

"Oh, yeah, Grandma's big on manners. I learnt mine the hard way," piped up Edwin.

Pavlova had been working things out in her head. "Let me just get this straight. You think you can take our *home* because we're a bit late with the paperwork?"

"And because we haven't got any money," added Monty, rapidly hushing when Minty elbowed him.

“That’s correct, Mrs Whatever-your-name-is. Your lease on this property expired at midnight. We know you don’t have any money to renew it. We’re simply waiting for Mr Fever to arrive with the paperwork and then you, your husband, your kids, and your endless animals will be all out on your ear!” rasped Mr Covid. “Mwah-ha-ha!”

“Nice evil laugh, Papa,” said Corona fist-bumping him.

Everybody was burbling with questions, but Edwin got his out first. “Who’s Mr Fever?”

“Our *excellent* lawyer,” jeered Corona.

“Well, that’s handy,” said Grandma. “OUR excellent lawyer is already on site. I came here with him today, as it happens, so he could help Pedro with Wide Bertha. Turns out she’s having piglets.”

Everybody took a moment to absorb this. Then Red asked, “Who’s our lawyer, Grandma?”

“Bevan Enaitchess. He’s a doctor, actually. He was there at your birth, Red, and when you

broke your arm. And when our dear friend had cancer. He does our legal paperwork in his spare time. He’s desperately overstretched, but what can you do.”

There was a LOT to take in.

Max was gaping at Corona. She was a baddie?

Minty was gaping at Monty. Wide Bertha was having piglets?

Pavlova was gaping at Grandma. Bevan Enaitchess did paperwork in his spare time?

“No matter! Our Mr Fever will trounce your Mr Enaitchess! And you still don’t have any money to pay for this place!” crowed Mr Covid.

“Er, well, we do actually,” said Red. She pointed to the trunk. “Because we’ve just found some treasure.” And with that, she lifted the lid.

Chapter Sixteen

As the lid creaked wide open, another clap of thunder suddenly rumbled across the sky.

Merlin howled and crouched low.

The Covids clutched each other and looked up anxiously. “It’s not going to rain, is it?” said Corona. “Quick, Papa, we must take shelter!”

Grandma eyed them. “It’s not going to rain. It’s that ridiculous scoundrel of a pirate, telling us he’s attempted a joke. Look.” And she pointed into the chest.



It was filled with rubbish. Bags and bags of it.

Edwin’s mouth fell open. “But... but... but...” was all he could manage.

“Quite, dear,” said Grandma. “I told you Old Slackers was a nasty piece of work. This is a low trick though, considering he was forever chucking litter about.”

Even Red couldn’t manage to hide her disappointment. “There’s a note here, Grandma. Attached to a mug. It says, ‘To Grandma. Ha ha ha. NOW who’s the mug? I know how much you treasure a cup of tea. So have this one on me! PS I broke it. PPS I want my ship back! PPSPS You don’t know where I left my pants, do you?’”

Grandma raised a fist to the heavens. “Curses to you, you old fool!” she cried. “You were a RUBBISH pirate, so this is fitting!”

Lightning flashed. And then, across the ages, a faint cackle could be heard. Followed by: “Oh no! It’s that shark again! Run! Run! Ow!

Ow! OW!! Oooh, my bottom!”

“Serves you right,” muttered Grandma darkly.

Everybody was quiet for a moment. Until Mr Covid coughed. "Ahem. It seems your 'treasure' will not pay for much. You're back where you started – with nothing. And I spy a man at the gate! Mr Fever, no doubt, with the paperwork to make this place ours!" He turned to Corona. "I can't wait to start building my lair. I think the evil control room will be right on this spot, to mark how easy it was to take over this land, and how easy it will be to take over the WORRRLLLD! Mwah-ha-ha!" He coughed again.

Suddenly, a dog bounded across the field, woofing in delight. It was Buster, who ran to greet Merlin with happy tail wags and lots of sniffing and snuffling.

"That's interesting," said Grandma. "Buster is Mr Enaitchess's dog. Which makes me think that the man at the gate is OUR lawyer, Mr Covid, not yours."

And indeed it WAS Bevan Enaitchess now walking briskly towards them with Pedro. "Hello, everybody," he boomed. "Just had an

interesting encounter with some bloke called Mr Fever. He came to the pigsty just as Wide Bertha finished giving birth. She's had eleven piglets, by the way. He was awfully hotheaded and waving some papers about and as you know it's not a good idea to get Wide Bertha overexcited at the best of times. Well, I tried to cool him off but he was all sweaty and went redder and redder and insisted on coming in."

Pedro swore in Spanish.

"Oh no," murmured Pavlova. "I can only imagine what happened."

"Yes," said Mr Enaitchess. "Wide Bertha considered Mr Fever a threat and went for him. To begin with she only ate his paperwork. But then... well, er, well, he's met a sticky end, I'm afraid. Still, the piglets are all in good health."

"You lawyer-gobbling fools!" cried Mr Covid. "I'll destroy you all! Nothing stands in the way of my evil lair! And you can have THIS back for a start!" He threw a twitching sack onto the ground. A feather fluttered from it.

Grandma instantly reached down and opened the sack. Inside was Hootie. The Covies had watched him take flight the night before and on his return to the tree had laid a trap for him. Just for fun. His wing was broken.

“Oh, Hootie, my friend,” whispered Grandma to the stricken owl. “What have they done to you?”

She stood slowly, and straightened her back. Eyes blazing, she turned on the Covies. Her hair crackled with rage and sparks flew. But before she could do anything, there was an almighty **“HIIIIIIIIII-YAAAHH”** from an unlikely source.

Pavlova, wearing REALLY BIG PANTS over her overalls, zoomed through the air and kick-boxed Mr Covid right in the chest.



He fell backwards into the hole where the trunk had been. Then she karate-chopped Corona.



Corona floundered and desperately windmilled but couldn't stay upright and landed on top of Mr Covid with a resounding



They both lay cowering in the hole as Pavlova towered above them. “How DARE you attack a defenceless animal? You are despicable! Get. Off. My. Land,” she seethed. “Before I do you some real damage.”

Everybody else was staring at Pavlova in astonishment, apart from Grandma, who gave her a respectful nod.

And Pedro. He stepped forward and tenderly scooped up Hootie, cradling him in his arms. And began to speak softly to him. “Come with me, amigo. Your wing may be broken but I know your spirit is not. Let me bandage you. You will rest, and you will heal.” He turned and carried the bird away to safety.

The baddies were having none of it. Coughing, Mr Covid got to his feet, adjusted his cape and dusted off his bizarre outfit.

Corona joined him, hands on hips. "You lot must be really reeeally thick," she taunted scornfully. "How hard is it to understand we're here to TAKE OVER THE WORLD? Max, you're a clever boy, aren't you? Can you explain it any better?" She leaned menacingly towards Grandma. "Especially to this interfering old hag. She's clearly the thickest."

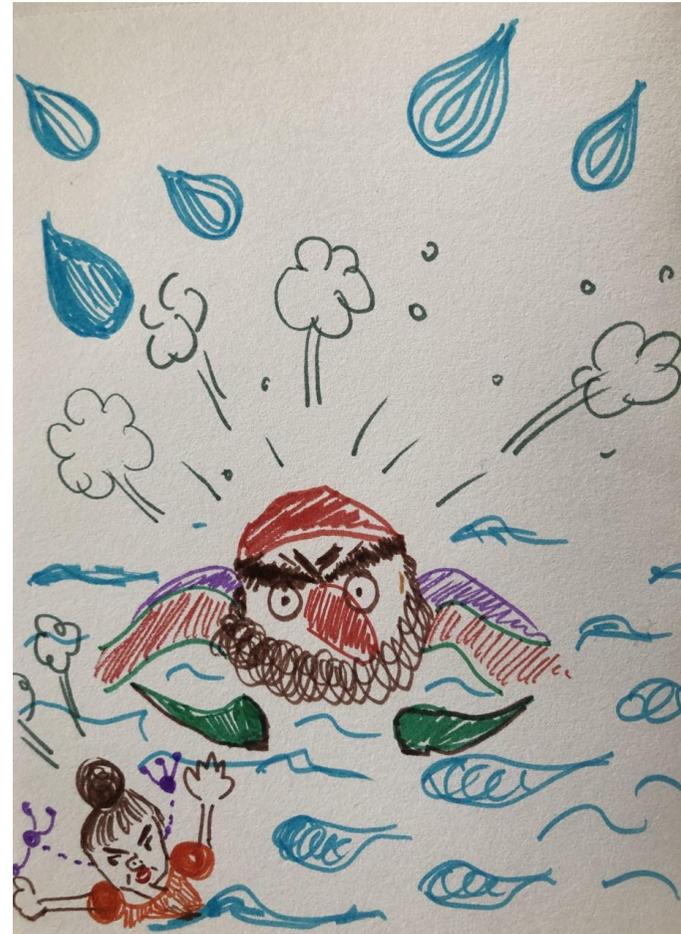
That did it. Red saw red. "Don't you talk to my grandmother like that! She's an absolute hero!" She picked up the bucket of water and threw the soapy remains over Corona.

Who immediately began to fizz and sizzle. "Papa!" she shrieked. "PAPAAAAA!"

Mr Covid reached out and grabbed his soggy daughter. His hand started to foam and sputter too. "Aargh!" he coughed. "I'm melting!"

"What's happening, Grandma?" asked Red, taken aback. "Have I done something awful?"

"No, my darling. I think you've done something brilliant. Everybody – quick! Fetch more buckets! Full of hot soapy water. Run!"



The children all pelted across the field. They lugged buckets back, splashing suds along the way.

Grandma, Pavlova and Mr Enaitchess stood two metres apart watching the Covies writhe and sizzle on the ground. They'd both toppled back into the hole where the trunk had been, and the earth was turning blue and red as they gurgled and slowly melted.

"Soap and water, eh," said Mr Enaitchess. "Works wonders."

Red and Edwin had slopped most of their soapy water on the grass. But Minty and Monty managed to chuck their bucket over Mr Covid. "Petluvvers never give up!" shouted Monty.

The dogs, Buster and Merlin, were capering around barking wildly, joined by screeches and honks and bleats and squawks and grunts and cries from the other animals on the sanctuary. Revenge for Hootie!

But as everybody began to celebrate their victory, Corona made one last attempt at world

domination. She reached for Pavlova's ankle. "You've ruined our evil plans. Look at the state of my papa!" she hissed. "We're the Covies. You're nobodies! Don't think you're safe. I'll take you down with me!"

And then Max appeared. With a hosepipe. He turned it on at full power, aimed at the furiously frothing Corona. "Nobody threatens my mum," he said to her quietly. "Consider yourself rinsed."

Mr Covid and Corona gave their final fizzle and dissolved.

Chapter Seventeen

They all gathered round to watch the last few soap bubbles burst. The blue and red suds drained into the soil and all that remained was a damp patch of earth. The Covids were gone.

Minty whistled to Merlin, who began to enthusiastically fill the huge hole. Buster joined in with gusto. Mud flew everywhere.

But apart from the happy dogs, the mood was more subdued than jubilant.

Edwin had been very quiet. "Can I just get this straight? So, we were here looking for treasure, which turned out to be a load of old rubbish, and *they* were here on a weird world domination mission but they got defeated by some soapy water?"

"Yes, that sums it up, dear," answered Grandma, taking a seat on the chest. "Quite the adventure! That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah," said Edwin uncertainly. "But it wasn't a very good one."

"Times are tough, young man," said Mr Enaitchess. "Sometimes you just have to do the best you can within the constraints you have."

"Times ARE tough," said Pavlova, putting her arm round Max. "You'd taken a bit of a shine to that girl, hadn't you, sweetheart? Sorry it turned out like this."

Max blushed. "S'alright," he mumbled.

"But we still don't have any money to renew our lease, do we, Mum?" said Monty. "And we don't have any treasure either. Our animals are in trouble."

"And our home," added Minty.

The mood became even more subdued. Then, after a moment, Edwin stepped forward with his gold-plated scooter. "Mrs Petlurve? Would you like this?"

"Er, now's probably not the best time for a scoot, Edwin," whispered Red.

"No, I mean I want to donate it. You could sell it and use the money towards your lease thing. If it would help?"

Pavlova clasped her hands together. “Oh, Edwin, what a lovely gesture. Thank you, but I can’t take your scooter.”

“Really, you can. I’ve got loads of them at home.” He paused. “And I’d like to share.”

Red spoke up. “And I’d like to donate my pocket money savings, Mrs Petluvver. It’s not very much.” She turned to her grandmother. “That’s okay, isn’t it, Grandma?”

“Of course, my darling. Bravo, the both of you. But I was just wondering about something, actually. Pavlova, where did you get those pants from?”

Pavlova looked down at the really big pants she was still wearing over her overalls. “They were in the trunk. Somehow it just felt fitting to pop them on to fight the baddies.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Grandma. “But could I borrow them briefly?”

Pavlova whipped the pants off and passed them to Grandma. Some of the soapy water had splashed onto the chest and she had been

doodling in the dirt on the lid. It was a lot shinier underneath than she had expected for iron. Now she bundled the pants into a cloth and polished a little area. “Bevan, you take an interest in precious metals, don’t you? When you’re not being a doctor and a vet and doing legal paperwork in your spare time?”

“Why, yes, Grandma. And if I’m not mistaken...” He examined the chest and gave it a good knock. “Solid platinum!”

“Wait, you mean –”

“So the chest itself is –”

“Hang on, are you saying –”

“Does this mean –”

“Ow, Edwin, get off my foot –”

“SO, THE *TRUNK* IS THE TREASURE?!”

Grandma smiled. “Yes, dear.” She looked up at the sky. “And that poor excuse for a pirate never even noticed.”

Chapter Eighteen

This called for a party.

Mr Wolfe agreed to do a little deal with the Petluvvers and bought the platinum chest for a very high sum. "I'm happy to pay over the odds. My Svetlana loves expensive stuff. This is just what she needs to give her a boost. She can sit in it and do a bit more growing."

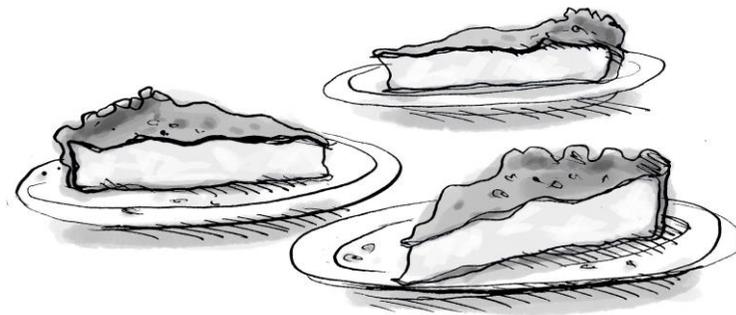
Bevan Enaitchess sorted out the paperwork in no time and renewed the lease on the Windy Bottom Animal Sanctuary. They all clapped to show him their gratitude. There was money left over for repairs on the house, and on the chicken shed. Pavlova gave Banners, her favourite chicken, a big cuddle and an extra snack to celebrate. There was also money to mend Wide Bertha's pigsty, which was now filled with excitable piglets. And there was also enough for some new wellies.

The guests all arrived laden with treats. Miss Squelch from Windy Bottom Primary was

hanging up reusable bunting with the help of Olive and Trixie from Year 6. Mrs Roberts, the twins' teacher, was belting out karaoke. George and Michael, the hippos, honked along from their creek. Messy Jessie was the DJ. Roy and his two dads were dancing with Cory and his two mums. Clare was crying in the corner, until Maggie from Year 4 spotted her and helped her give Duncan the donkey some carrots.

Youssef, Kerry and Honor had got off their Xboxes and were talking to a witch on roller skates.

Red ran to greet her friends Benoit and Gig and the rest of the Bookflaps reading club. Norma and Rusty Buildup from the Flappington library had brought pie.



Pavlova and Grandma were toasting each other with gin, and sharing a doughnut. They watched Monty ask Red if maybe she'd like to help him feed the alpacas later. Grandma nudged Pavlova. "Petluvvers never give up!"

Pavlova raised her glass to Grandma. "How can I ever thank you?"

"There's nothing to thank me for, dear. This is the most wonderful place, and deserves a LOT more visitors and support. Heaven knows we need to take care of nature. I'll ring my good friend Jane Goodall. She'll help spread the word. And David Attenborough. When we were in the Galapagos, we would always – oh, look at Max!"

Max had been moping until Mr Enaitchess introduced him to his teenage daughter Pam, who was wearing a lot of lip gloss. He was now smitten again.

Pedro swore in Spanish.

Hootie slept through the party from his safe perch in the attic where he was recovering from his ordeal.

A brief downpour couldn't spoil the fun, and afterwards a rainbow arced across the sky.

Red raced over to tell Grandma that Bungle, her half-brother, and Heather, her mum, were on their way with Ashè, Heather's assistant in her science lab. "I'm so happy! I can't wait to see them all again."

"Well, I invited them because I thought you were so miserable living with your dreadful ex-pirate of a grandmother."

Red flung her arms around her. "Oh, Grandma! You know I love living with you," she said fiercely, into her hair. "You are the best. A real superhero. And *definitely* a good person."

"Ah, that's nice, my darling. I'm glad –"

But Grandma was interrupted by a sudden shout. The coastguard had arrived from East Waffling. "Grandma! A ghost ship has washed up on the beach! The 'Smelly Mermaid'. And there's a flag raised with YOUR name on it..."

Grandma raised an eyebrow. "What do you think, dear? Fancy another adventure?"



THE END

Or is it...?

We hope you enjoyed *EVEN SUDDENLIER...!*,
written and shared during lockdown in the
spring of 2020

**A really big thank you to everyone who
contributed illustrations and suggestions for
character names**

All illustrations by Rosie Alabaster or clipart
apart from:

P2 by Cosmo, age 7

P10 & 39 by Naomi Gane

P14 by Hebe, age 10

P21 by Joe's dad, an oldie

P22 by Lee Wemyss

P33 by Isabella, age 20

And this rainbow – which has become the
symbol of hope during this pandemic – by Hebe
and Cosmo

**Keep safe, keep reading, and keep smiling!
Love Joe, Willow, and our really big pants**