

Chapter One

In which everything starts with some changed summer plans

Mrs Jaqueline Neckova got up slowly from her rocking chair, dragged herself to the window and briskly pulled the curtain. A huge hole gaped in it and the view in front of her eyes made her frown. She reached into her pocket and took a carrot out. She waved it just under the nose of Beauty the rabbit, trying to catch her attention. Beauty didn't move but continued to nibble the corner of the tattered rug under her paws.

The rabbit was Beauty by name, but not by appearance. Just the opposite: she was quite mangy, one of her eyes was half-closed and she limped on her right front paw. The rabbit was almost certainly a thousand years old, just like her owner, or at least they both looked that age. And as the old lady had two of her front teeth missing, she couldn't speak clearly. As a result, the name of the poor rabbit sounded like 'Booty,' which made Lady and Niko laugh up their sleeves. They constantly made fun of their strange neighbour anyway. Once Lady laughed so hard that she almost fell off the cherry tree that grew at the front, on the boundary between the two gardens. The twins had a habit to climb it and spy on their neighbour under the cover of the leaves and the branches. Once Lady actually did fall from the tree, but we will tell of that later. The important thing was that it was clear as a day that the old lady Jaqueline was as mad as a balloon. Why else would they have nicknamed her Wacky Jacky?

The feud between her and the children started at the beginning of June, a few days after the kids finished third grade and when the Stoyanovs moved to the village of Bagel, a ten minute drive away from the broken bridge near the sign at the exit of Great Town. The meeting with their neighbour was predetermined and the conflict inevitable because of the following reasons:

First, Lady simply didn't want to move. She had planned to spend her summer holidays with her friends behind the apartment block in which they all lived, happily gossiping about the other kids who annoyed them. She was also determined to learn how to skateboard and roller blade. She had a scooter and she was brilliant on that, but even small kids could ride a scooter quite well. Also, they'd already planned the big summer wedding of Squirrel, Lady's favourite fluffy toy, and Mr Troll, Chrissy's doll. And the ceremony required some very serious organisation.

Second, Nikko took his sister's side even though where they lived didn't matter that much to him. He didn't have many friends, unlike his sister. He sometimes hung around with Lady and her friends but preferred to perform different scientific experiments. All through the year, he had collected a folder full of instructions for experiments that could be done at home during the summer, and he couldn't wait to spend all his time on them now, with the distraction of the school left behind. Because he preferred science to computer games the other kids from the neighbourhood thought he was weird. Third, Jaqueline Neckova hoped to spend that summer the same way she had spent her last few summers in the village of Bagel. In other words, she was planning to continue sneaking through the wooden fence that separated her property from the deserted neighbouring garden and let her rabbit stretch its legs over there and graze in complete freedom. Her plans also included a total and complete

lack of communication with anyone else, as she had always managed so far. But it was clear that she wouldn't be able to do this again as someone had built a large villa on the land the other side of her fence. That 'someone,' as you've probably already guessed, were the four Stoyanovs – the twins Lady and Nikko, and their parents Christo and Marianna.

Lady remembered the village of Bagel well. Last autumn, her father took her there for a walk and a picnic while her brother was at scout camp on Rabbit Mountain and their mother was away on a business trip. Her dad didn't explain why he chose to have a picnic there of all places. Once they arrived in the village, Christo chatted to the local people as they passed through, just short conversations about this and that, whilst Lady was looking around absentmindedly at the surrounding gardens. At the time she didn't think much of her dad's chattiness. He was the kind of person who would start a conversation with anyone. The last thing she could ever imagine was that they would be moving to that place. It was true that for months in a row she would sometimes hear her parents talking in secret whispers as she passed quietly near the kitchen, but she only thought that they were planning something for her and her brother's upcoming tenth birthdays at the end of August. Ah, if she had only even guessed what they were planning, she would not have allowed it! So, when their parents finally revealed that the family was actually going to LIVE in the village of Bagel, the first thing that came back to her and hit her on the nose as strong as a boomerang was the smell of cows. She winced in disgust.

'We will have fresh air and you'll be free to play outside, undisturbed,' her parents told her.

'Yeah, fresh air, stinking of cows. Superb! What am I going to do in that dull village?' Lady shouted and stomped her foot. 'All my friends are here!'

'That's not true. Your brother will be with you,' explained her mum.

'He's my brother, not my friend,' the girl retorted with no mercy. 'He's boring and stupid'.

'Lady, language!' her dad scolded her.

'No problem, I'm used to it,' Nikko mumbled.

'We've made up our mind,' Marianna said. 'You'll visit your friends here. The village is not far, less than 13 miles away. Who knows, you may meet other children from the neighbouring villas.'

'It's a village! Like the one where Granny and Granddad live. There are no children there. I've seen it with my own eyes!'

Lady announced and turned away to hide her angry tears. She felt that she might struggle not to cry so she ran quickly to her room and slammed the door. That was the moment when she decided she wasn't going to eat anything until her parents changed their minds. She opened the door and shouted as loudly as she could, 'Just to let you know that I'm not eating any more. That'll serve you right!'

But during the first night of her protest she was starving so she silently sneaked into the kitchen and stuffed herself with cold spinach croquettes straight from the fridge. Then she decided to continue eating secretly while maintaining the same coolness and composure with which she announced her decision in front of her parents and her brother.

The next morning her mother found the empty plate in the fridge and knew she had nothing much to worry about.

Chapter Two

In which a huge garden turns out to be the ideal place for the Big Eggstanding

The villa had two floors, it was spacious and light and still smelled of fresh paint. The dining room on the ground floor merged into a big lounge with French windows that led directly to

the garden. But the best part of the house was its huge garden, the front of which was covered with fresh grass. A slender sycamore tree shaded the massive wooden table in the left corner, close to the fence. Behind the house there was a thick lush bush of wild raspberries which Marianna insisted on keeping. The garden was separated from the neighbouring one by a wooden fence that Christo promised to change next summer, but not this summer as things were 'a bit tight' after buying the villa. For Lady, things being 'a bit tight' meant that on top of everything else they'd have to skip their usual seaside holiday, which made her bad mood even worse. For a while, Nikko decided to pretend he was sulking too but when he saw the garden, he couldn't help but exclaim, 'Wow, what an enormous garden, isn't it?' After spending a few moments looking at it, he charged off. Lady went after her brother, pulled him by the sleeve and whispered in his ear, 'Nikko, are you thinking about the same thing as me?'

He wondered if she had realised how his scientific talent could blossom with such a huge field for self-expression. A whole garden for experiments! He imagined himself and his sister, both leaning over a box of eggs, mugs full of water, vinegar, toilet rolls, matches and all sort of other substances and equipment needed for performing all the possible experiments with eggs in one single day. He had even come up with a name for that notable date – 'The Big Eggstanding'.

'You've finally decided to become my assistant?' Nikko asked, hopefully.

'What! What are you talking about? Hmph, I wonder why you read all those books if you can't put two and two together? A big garden means a big dog, don't you understand?' Lady withered at him. 'We're finally going to have a dog. We're finally going to have a dog!'

She started jumping around and her brother lowered his eyes to the ground. It was true that he wanted a dog, too, but he would be much happier if she was to take part in the Big Eggstanding with him. That's why his only response was, 'I don't think Mum and Dad will agree.'

'We'll see! Let's go into the house and ask them right away. You'll be the one to talk!' Lady ordered.

'You wish!' Nikko retorted. 'I have no desire to be the one to be shouted at.'

'Don't worry. They always shout quieter at you. And they calm down quicker when they see your tears.'

The two children stopped dead at the lounge door. Nikko fixed his eyes on the floor and mumbled their wish, and Lady only whined hopefully next to him, locking her fingers together in a passionate plea.

'A dog?' their dad repeated. 'Do you have any idea how much care a dog requires?'

'No,' Nikko faltered, and Lady shot him a piercing look, full of disbelief.

'I am going to take care of the dog,' she declared and straightened her back.

'Not now. I don't want to talk about things like this. We've just arrived. Go and unpack your luggage,' their mum ordered.

Lady clenched her teeth. As the twins headed upstairs to their rooms, she hissed at her brother, 'Coward. Baby!'

'Stop it!' Nikko cast a warning look at her.

'It's your fault that we're going to die of boredom here!'

Nikko didn't feel particularly guilty. He was still under a spell of joy from the revelation that the experiments from his folder were going to be completed to the very last one. He gave it one last try.

'Do you know how many experiments I've planned?' he started hopefully, but the slamming of her door scattered his words in the air.

Lady dropped down heavily on her bed and hugged Squirrel but at the same moment a weird stench from the floor hit her nose. She leaned down and saw the cow dung smudged on her soles.

'Disgusting!' She took her trainers off and threw one of them towards the door with all the strength she possessed. 'What a wonderful welcome! I am speechless!'

Marianna tended to get very angry when her daughter behaved like this. But Lady felt she had the right to be very angry, too, as she was being made to move house, so she decided they were quits, all equal. She turned her eyes to the window. She could clearly see the neighbouring house. It didn't look anything like their new and neat villa. The one she could see from her window was old, wooden and rickety, like it had jumped out of a witch's fairy tale. Lady raised on her toes to check, just in case, if there were hen legs under it. The small garden was stuffed with old junk. It looked like no one lived there. On the first floor of the rickety house there was a window, looking straight towards hers. Lady squinted her eyes and stared.

She managed to catch the outlines of a silhouette, approaching the window. The silhouette pulled the curtain briskly. A huge hole gaped in it.

'Wow! So, some weirdo lives there, after all!' Lady mused. She pressed her nose to the glass and stuck her tongue out.

In response, someone pushed her head through the hole in the curtain and stuck her tongue out, too. That polite exchange marked the first meeting with their neighbour at the opposite side of the fence.

Chapter Three

About a plate with fried dough balls and an acquaintance with a neighbour, as well as the Tree of Discord

Lady was awoken by a horrible clamour. Someone was using a saw or mowing the grass or hitting nails with a hammer. She sat up on her bed. The clock on the opposite wall showed that the time was close to ten and the sun blazed hot through the open window. When she saw that the door between her and her brother's rooms was ajar, she got up and shoved a drawing pin in his bed. 'I've warned you not to open my window in the morning!' she mumbled to herself, then leaned over the windowsill. Her father was mowing the lawn and her brother was hammering nails into a wooden plank, probably getting ready for one of his experiments. 'Two out of three! Phew, I am good,' she told herself.

'Good morning, Lady!' Nikko shouted from below and turned his face in her direction, shading his eyes with his hand. The sun was sliding over his blond hair, making it look even shinier than usual. His brown eyes smiled warmly while he was waving at her as if nothing had happened and life was beautiful.

'Good! I wish! You woke me up!' Lady snapped.

'Get downstairs. I want to show you something,' her brother continued.

Although the two of them were twins, they differed considerably not only by character but by looks, too. Lady's eyes were huge and blue, and her hair was not as light as Nikko's. Her friend Monnie insisted that Lady was the better looking one but always asked whether Nikko was going to join them.

'I want to show you something,' Lady repeated mockingly, imitating her brother.

And then she saw it.

'What an ugly rabbit!' she exclaimed.

The rabbit was munching the grass in the garden at the other side of the fence but immediately stopped chewing and looked at the girl, as if it had heard her words.

'What's the matter, Booty?' a hoarse voice asked and a moment later something appeared from behind the shed door.

'What the hell are you?' Lady stared at the neighbour's garden, her eyes big and round in surprise. She could see it clearly from the first floor, spread in front of her.

'Are you hungry, my girl? Eat now and we will go for a walk after that. I know, I know, we can't do it over there anymore,' the figure from the yard continued, casting furtive glances in Lady's direction.

Lady didn't even try to hide, she hung over the windowsill with her mouth gaping. The figure suddenly straightened her back and turned towards the girl.

'Oi, why are you staring at me? Is that how they've taught you in the town? No manners at all!' the woman shouted and waved the saw she was holding in the air (yes, even though it could be questioned, the figure turned out to be a woman, after all). Then she grabbed the rabbit, tucked it under her arm and disappeared in the house.

Lady recovered her senses, 'Aha! And here is the saw! Three out of three! Well done, me.' She dressed quickly and ran out of her room, but less than five blinks later she returned to retrieve the drawing pin from her brother's bed. She would keep it for another occasion. She wasn't that angry at him right now.

Her nose caught the smell of fried dough balls.

'Yum,' Lady licked her lips. 'Mum, do you know who our neighbour is?'

'Yes, she's called Mrs Jaqueline Neckova. According to some of our neighbours, she moved here about ten years ago. She looks like a person with lots of worries. I don't want us to cause her any trouble.'

'If you ask me, she looks more like someone who causes trouble to other people herself. Kind of Wacky. Wacky Jacky. Ha-ha!'

'Lady!'

'All right, all right! Nikko and I can take some dough balls to her and introduce ourselves. What do you think?' Lady smiled.

Her mum frowned, 'Are you sure you are not up to something?'

'Cross my heart.'

'Ok, but please, behave yourselves and don't embarrass us.'

Lady grabbed the plate with the dough balls and ran outside.

'Come on, Nikko. Let's go and meet Wacky Jacky!'

'Who?'

'You'll see,' his sister answered and a minute later the twins were out on the street.

'Come on, knock on the door!' Lady ordered when they stopped in front of the small wooden door.

'Why me?'

'Come on, knock! You, yes, you. I'll do the talking.'

Nikko knocked and Lady instantly bit her teeth in one of the dough balls. When Jaqueline answered the door, Nikko wasn't prepared for the view and shouted, terrified, as if he had just seen his worst nightmare. From up close, the neighbour looked even more sinister than from a distance. Her eyes, beady and grey, were barely noticeable. A huge beaked nose took half of her face. Two deep wrinkles ran at the both sides of her nose, crossing their way

with a few black curly hairs. Her clothes successfully completed the first horrible impression. The woman was wearing two different knitted socks (in the middle of summer!), rubber shoes of the kind the twins' grandparents wear, cropped jeans, an enormous faded t-shirt with a print at the front and a blue warehouse coat. Her tangled greying hair was flowing in all directions under her baseball hat. Lady laughed and bits of dough ball flew out of her mouth.

'Have you come here to tease me?'

'Actually, we are here to introduce ourselves,' Lady said, passed the plate to her brother, stuck the dough ball in her mouth, wiped her oily hands in her shorts, took the dough ball out of her mouth again and stretched out her other hand towards the old woman. 'I am Lady.'

'And I am Nikko. We moved in yesterday,' her brother added.

'I know. You've come from the town. Soon it'll be full with the likes of you here,' Jaqueline hissed. 'Is there anything else?'

'As a matter of fact, yes. Are those cherries tasty?' Lady asked and nodded in the direction of the tree in front of the fence that separated the two houses. The cherries on the top branches had started to turn red and looked quite appealing.

'What does this have to do with you?' Jaqueline demanded. 'This is MY cherry tree. I have taken care of it ever since I moved here.'

'Hm,' Lady said, 'it seems to me that it is as much in front of your house as it is in front of ours.'

Jaqueline turned to Nikko, 'Don't you dare climb on the tree or eat from the cherries. If you do it, you'll bitterly regret it.' With those words she moved to close the door.

'Wait, wait,' Lady stopped her and shoved the plate in her hands.

'Actually, we came to bring you some fried dough balls. Try them. You can return the plate later.'

The old lady stared at them for a second, then took the plate with a snort and slammed the door in their faces.

'I'll never ever eat from that plate again,' Nikko declared. 'Why are you so nasty? Do you want me to have nightmares?'

'All right, I had to warn you how terrible she was, but I have an idea. Just wait and see,' Lady grinned, looked at the tree and decided that it is ideal for climbing. Then she headed towards their villa, hopping happily. Icing sugar fell abundantly on the road from her half-eaten dough balls.

Chapter Four

About an experiment with nails and a violated ban

'Are you ready?' Lady was standing in front of her brother, her arms crossed. She had taken her flip-flops off and now she was wearing trainers. Trainers were more comfortable for climbing trees.

'Come and look first!' Nikko shouted and showed her the plank with the nails that were sticking out of it.

'And?'

'Now look!' urged her Nikko. He blew a balloon, then put it on the top of the nails and pressed it hard. The balloon didn't burst into pieces. 'It works! It really works!'

'Give it to me!' Lady snatched the plank and the balloon from her brother's hands and pressed the balloon again. The balloon flattened a bit but stayed undamaged.

'How cool! Dad, look!'

'Yes, there is a similar stunt with a woman who lays on nails and doesn't hurt herself. That's because the weight distributes equally on the surface of the nails,' Christo explained.

'So, we should try it with a person?' Lady asked.

'Nonsense! Do you have any idea how many nails we'll need for that?' Nikko snapped.

'I know!' Lady pulled her brother to one side and whispered something in his ear.

'Are you crazy? They'll kill us!'

'Don't shout,' Lady scolded.

'Plus, I am scared of that weirdo,' Nikko mumbled under his nose. 'And how do you think we'll do it exactly? I don't want to be going in there.'

'You won't have to go in anywhere. It'll get out itself. The only thing for us to do after that will be jump, smack and – done!' She made some strange signs with her hands.

At the far end of the garden, Marianna turned to her husband.

'The kids are plotting again; we have to keep an eye on them.'

'You worry too much, they are fine. Look how well they are getting along with each other today,' their father smiled.

'You always say that and then I am the one who has to listen to the teachers' complaints.'

'Yes, their class teacher will see some peace and quiet when they finally reach fifth grade – she'll not have to deal with them after that,' Christo laughed.

'It's not funny. It's time for them to stop being trouble. They know what they are doing, and they continue doing it anyway!' Marianna insisted.

'OK, Boss! I'll keep an eye on them, I promise.'

In fact, the children were not bad at all. They had good marks in school. Nikko was very good at maths and he learned to read at the age of 5. Lady drew beautifully. But during the breaks, their demons came out. Lady's favourite thing was to grab a girl by the hand and drag her around with all her strength - along the corridors, up and down stairs and through rooms. Lady was tiny but strong and her impulse came with such a surge of adrenalin that her victims had no choice but to go with her and do their best not to crash into anything. Nikko's naughtiness was of a different character. He often sneaked in the science room, used by the older students, to stare at the stuffed animals. Once, using his sister's hairpin, he managed to unlock the safe room, attached to the chemistry lab, and stole a jar full of sulphur from there. His mother had to apologise to the headmaster, blushing with embarrassment, but his father was a little proud. He couldn't tell the twins off and couldn't control them or even keep a watchful eye on them. This time, though, he was determined to watch them closely. He spent ten minutes, lurking behind the newspaper in his hands, but the kids only wandered quietly around the garden, not showing any signs of plotting or scheming and no signal that they were about to do anything that was of any concern. Eventually, Christo became absorbed in an article about football and the predictions about the next day's match between Liverpool and Bayern, and so he missed the moment when Lady and Nikko sneaked into the kitchen and tiptoed out with two carrots in their hands. 'What are you up to with those carrots?' their mum shouted from inside the house. 'We'll eat them!' Lady shouted back and giggled in her cupped hand. 'We can't just show the carrots to it and expect that it'll follow. It's not a dog,' Nikko explained.

'We're not going to do it that way. We'll chop them and spread the pieces between their house and ours. Like those two, remember? The boy and the girl.'

'Hansel and Gretel?' Nikko raised his eyebrows.

'Exactly.'

'They threw pebbles to leave a trail to help them find the way home.'

'And we'll throw pieces of carrots in order to find ourselves. For the rabbit to find itself with us. Oh, you're driving me crazy when your thinking process is that slow!'

'It's not going to work.'

'It will.'

'It. Won't,' Nikko insisted, stressing on each word.

'It will!' Lady hissed and clamped her brother's hand. 'It's ugly but have you noticed how skinny it is? It'll come running to us the moment it sniffs food.'

Nikko sighed and took a bite of the carrot.

'What are you doooing! Don't eat it!' Lady shrieked.

'I am not, I am just preparing the pieces. Do you have a knife by any chance?' Nikko spat the piece in his palm and pushed it in his sister's face.

'Good idea,' Lady agreed, and took a bite of her carrot.

When enough pieces were bitten off, they looked back and Lady shouted at her father,

'We're going to go and get our plate from the neighbour!'

'OK,' their dad replied but at that moment he was more interested in reading about why Mohamed Salah wasn't going to play the next day.

Nikko and Lady sidled up to their neighbour's door, but they didn't intend to knock and ask for the empty plate. Instead, Lady squeezed her arm through the hole between the gate and the fence. Her fingers touched the latch, pushed it up and pressed the handle.

The gate quietly creaked and opened.

'Right,' Lady whispered. 'Let's throw the bait and climb up to see how that ugly mug is going to fall in the trap.'

'It's not going to work but we'll do it, as you are so insistent,' Nikko shrugged and started throwing pieces of carrot along the path.

Lady threw a piece or two, then signalled to her brother to get on the tree. Nikko headed there first, but the moment his foot touched the first branch, he stopped.

'She saw us! Quick!' He jumped on the ground and the twins slipped into their own garden before their parents noticed anything.

'What now?' Nikko asked.

'We'll spy from behind the fence to see whether the rabbit has followed.'

But when they opened the gate, instead of Beauty they saw the wizened figure of Wacky. Lady jumped in surprise.

'I came to give you the plate back,' Wacky Jacky smiled and the hole between her front teeth gaped threateningly. 'And to thank you for the carrots. My Booty liked them very much. Almost as much as the grass in your garden.'

'Uh, what carrots?' Lady looked down at her feet.

Wacky leaned so close to her face that Lady felt her breath on her skin and closed her eyes.

The old lady's wrinkles were exceptionally deep! One could lose a needle in them. The words that followed reached her ear very clearly.

'Listen carefully, doll... You really don't want to have to deal with us. Don't annoy me, or both you and your brother are going to be in deep trouble. Ah, and I think I have warned you about the tree. Am I clear?'

With these words, the neighbour straightened up, ruffled Nikko's hair with her bony hand and said loudly to the twins' father, 'Have a good day, Mister Stoyanov!'

"Have a good day, Mrs Whack... Uhhh... Jaqueline."

Wacky Jacky carefully measured the girl, then the boy with her beady eyes, then turned around and, heading home, shouted over her shoulder, 'Come on, Booty!'

But Beauty was nowhere to be seen.

'This one is a complete weirdo. Wacky Jacky!' Lady looked at her brother who hadn't managed to regain his ability to breathe yet.

'But we'll do the nail experiment with the rabbit, come what may!'

'No. No way. Don't count me in. Both Wacky and her rabbit give me the creeps.'

Chapter Five

In which Wacky Jacky makes cherry jam and the twins help her however they can

'Oh, my belly is going to explode,' Lady cried out, her mouth full of cherries, and a trickle of red juice ran down her chin.

It was the middle of June and the cherry season was coming to its end.

'Well, that's hardly a surprise, you're stuffing yourself like a pig,' Nikko said. 'After all, we are on this tree to spy on her, not to eat,' he added, then reached towards a branch that was hanging right above his head and picked two ripe cherries.

'You eat as well!' Lady answered back. 'Plus, the cherries are overripe now. Should we let them rot?'

'I eat but I can control myself! Shhh! Quiet! Here she comes!'

Lady held her breath and squinted through the branches to be able to better see the view below. Jaqueline had come out of her house and was now rummaging through the junk in her garden.

'Look how she's dressed today!' Lady giggled.

The cherry tree was perfectly positioned, it grew through the pavement just over a metre away from the fence, right next to the road. It was almost midday and the sun was burning but Lady and Nikko's secret observatory amongst the branches and leaves was shaded. It looked like their neighbour didn't have a problem with the heat either; she had her knitted woollen socks on again but this time her outfit was something that resembled an orange slip.

'She's in a summer mood today,' Nikko remarked. 'Look how well the orange matches the colour of her teeth.'

Lady was about to burst into laughter, but she quickly covered her mouth with her hand; she didn't want to reveal their presence. Wacky Jacky heard the noise and looked up sharply, scanning the surroundings. The kids heard her murmur but, in the end, the only thing she did was to shake her fist and release a loud sigh. Luckily, she didn't notice them.

'Lady,' Nikko hissed. 'Quiet!'

'OK, OK, OK,' his sister whispered. 'It's your turn to shut up now. Look!'

Wacky Jacky disappeared behind the house but soon reappeared with a huge copper jam pan on her shoulder. She was puffing and panting as she carried it, and the sun was scalding her so fiercely that big drops of sweat were rolling down her face.

'What does she need that pan for?' Nikko wondered.

'Maybe she has finally decided to cook that awful rabbit. See how skinny it is! She probably doesn't have enough money to buy food,' Lady suggested.

'Nonsense! As if that rabbit is going to provide enough food for her! Anyway, it's ill. Haven't you seen how scruffy it is?'

'I think it is because it's as old as its mistress,' Lady whispered.

'Look how it's pushing itself through her legs like some sort of a dog.'

'Booty!' Wacky Jacky shouted and her shrill voice made Lady and Nikko jump on the branch.

'I told you not to push through my legs or I'll put you in the pan!'

'What did I tell you?' Lady said, 'She wants to cook it.'

'Nonsense! Look, look!'

Jaqueline spread charcoal on the ground and stacked a few thin sticks, pieces of wood, small twigs and dry grass on the top. Then she lit a match, threw it in the pile and started to blow in the smoke.

When the fire caught properly, she put a grill on the top and dragged the pan towards it. She had to make a real effort to lift it. After that, she cleaned her clothes, put her hands on her hips and said, 'Right, it's time to get the cherries!' Then she entered the house again.

Lady and Nikko exchanged glances.

'Time to disappear!' Nikko said.

'Wait, wait! You don't think she'll come to pick up cherries right away, do you? Stay for a bit, don't move!'

'You stay! I'm off,' Nikko said and started down the tree.

'Coward! Baby!' Lady shouted behind him and moved to the branches further above. If Wacky Jacky decided to position herself underneath, it would be close to impossible to see her through the thick leaves.

Nikko sneaked back into their garden but the moment he closed the gate behind him, he heard the creak of the neighbour's one. He immediately peered outside.

'Hello, Mrs Neckova!' he shouted with fake enthusiasm.

'Hi,' Wacky answered without a look at him. She was carrying a bucket and a ladder.

'What are you going to do?' Nikko moved a step closer.

'Are you blind or what? I am going to make jam and I need cherries.'

'Ahhh,' Nikko nodded.

'Ahhhhh! Do you have more questions?'

'I can help you, if you want?' Nikko offered. 'I am almost the same height as you, but I am not going to get tired as easily.'

Wacky Jacky finally turned and measured him with her eyes from head to toe.

'All right, if you want,' she said and gave him the ladder. 'Start from the top branches. The cherries are getting overripe there.'

'I see,' Nikko nodded again and moved up the ladder. He looked up and saw the soles of Lady's shoes. 'Well, are you ready to jump in the bucket, sweet cherries?' he shouted to the top.

'We're ready,' Lady smirked from her strategic place and started to fill her hands with cherries. Nikko was just reaching through the branches when he felt the first ripe fruits falling over his head.

'If it continues this way, I'll end up covered in juice,' Nikko moaned.

'I don't care if you get dirty, as long as you are picking the cherries and not eating them!'

Wacky Jacky snapped.

Lady was dropping whole bunches of cherries from the top of the tree. Soon the pavement was covered with a carpet of fruit, and Nikko and Wacky Jacky filled the bucket more than

once. When they were done, she stretched her hand towards the boy and said, 'Thank you, kid. It turns out you're much nicer than your sister.'

Before she finished the sentence, a cherry suddenly dropped onto her head. Jaqueline puffed and looked up, but the sun blinded her.

'No, she is very nice, too,' Nikko said and smiled with a broad smile. 'Honestly!'

'I don't care either way. Just stay out of my sight,' and that finished the conversation.

Jaqueline walked off back to her garden.

'Pssst!' Lady hissed from above.

'Get down quickly,' Nikko ordered. 'We could be in a big trouble!'

'Shut up! I have a plan! Fetch the salt from the cupboard under the sink.'

'Are you mad? Get down immediately!' Nikko hissed.

'Nikko! Go and get the salt, now!'

Her brother sighed and headed towards their villa. A minute later he reappeared with a packet of salt in his hands and waved it at Lady. She raised a victorious finger and made a sign to show him that he needed to stay quiet. Ten minutes passed. Nikko stood silent underneath the tree, looking like a lost soul and waiting. After a while, his patience reached its limit and he whispered up the tree, 'Lady, I'm going back home. I'm sick of hanging around here!'

'Wait! Come back! Now is the moment. Nikkooo!'

But her brother left the salt on the ground and headed home.

'What a scoundrel!' Lady hissed through her clenched teeth and climbed down the tree. She grabbed the packet, stood on her toes and peered over the fence. It was now or never!

Wacky Jacky had just entered her house and the cherries were simmering gently over the fire outside. Lady slowly opened the gate and tiptoed towards the pan. Her heart was about to burst. She opened the pack and poured most of the content into the pan. Then she grabbed the big ladle, stirred the jam to cover the traces of her work, and sneaked out quietly and skilfully – the same way she had arrived. On her way out, she felt a sharp pain on her shin.

'Ouch!' Lady screamed and reached to the scratch on her leg. She looked down and saw the blood-red eyes of the rabbit, staring intently at her.

With her stomach in knots and eyes full of tears, Lady sneaked through the gate, limping, and went home. Nikko met her at the door.

'What happened?'

She looked at him, pressed her lips together and showed him her wound. 'It's all your fault! How could you abandon me like that?'

'How could I suspect what you needed the salt for?' her brother said apologetically.

'As if you couldn't guess! I have to do everything on my own!'

'And? Did you succeed?'

'I did! But in the end the stupid rabbit scratched my leg! I hope that weirdo didn't see me. Let's go upstairs and spy on her.'

Upstairs, the twins crouched at the window and raised their heads just enough to be able to see without being seen. In the yard, Wacky Jacky was fussing around the pan like a witch over her potions.

'She looks like she's boiling bones, chicken feet and other ghastly stuff!' Lady remarked.

'Who knows? The jam may be only a cover, she might have put someone's head inside the pan,' Nikko said.

'Even if it's true, she's not going to find it tasty with all that salt I poured in,' Lady giggled.

'We're back, kids!' their mother's voice came from downstairs.

'Is everything OK?'

'Everything is fine, Mum,' Nikko shouted from above.

'How can it be? Boring, obviously!' Lady added and flashed a grin at her brother.

Chapter Six

About Squirrel, who has disappeared temporarily, and one very mean trick

'She is not here; she is not here! I can't find her anywhere!' Lady was screaming and yelling as much as she could while turning her room upside down.

'Are you sure you didn't forget her in the cinema?' her mum asked very quietly, anticipating a downpour of words after such an insulting question.

'I didn't even take her to the cinema. I didn't even get her out of the car. And I don't remember even moving her from her usual place here! I am sick of you doubting everything I tell you. Get out of my room. I'm mad at you! I want to talk with Dad instead!'

Marianna left the room with a heavy sigh, then shouted, 'Christo, can you, please, come here. She wants you!'

Christo found Lady, covered in tears, rummaging through the room.

'She is not here, I can't find her anywhere,' Lady whined.

'Where did you see her last, sweetheart?' her father asked.

'Last night, after I went to bed, I remembered that I had left her in the living room, but I was scared to go downstairs alone to pick her, so I slept without her. And today we were in such a hurry to go to the cinema that I completely forgot to look for her.' Lady's words gurgled like an overflowing river. She buried her face in her bed, her whole body was shaking. 'My Squiiiiirrel!'

Her father stroked her hair. At that point Nikko's head popped cautiously behind the door. Christo made a sign to warn him to stay outside. Nikko went downstairs and disappeared in the garden to finish his new creation – a worm tower. His mother might be moaning about the worms now, but she would soon realise her own mistake when the worm tower started producing the most nutritious organic fertiliser. Nikko crouched near the plastic container and started filling it with soil. He went on loading his small spade and emptying it, then again, and again, until he managed to fill the container halfway. Now he needed to put the worms inside, then add the food waste, tape the container all around and the tower would be ready. He looked around for the bowl with worms he and his dad had bought from the fishing shop. It had disappeared without a trace! Nikko checked behind the house but suddenly something caught his attention and he ran towards the shrubs at the end of the garden.

'Squirrel! That's where you were hiding!' Lady's fluffy toy was entwined in the raspberry bushes as if it had given up after a long struggle for survival. Nikko carefully pulled it out, shook the dust from it and pressed it tightly to his chest.

'Layyyydeeeeee!' he shouted from the doorway. 'I found Squirrel! She was in the shrubs behind the house!' Poor Squirrel, she's torn all over. Why have you thrown her over there?' By the time he reached upstairs and rushed into his sister's room, he was out of breath.

'Squirrel!' Lady stretched her arms and squeezed her favourite toy, then looked seriously at her brother. 'What are you going on about? I haven't thrown her anywhere. I've said at least ten times that she was downstairs, near the side table. Are you trying to play a trick on me? Are you? Ah! A... achoo!'

'Of course not! Why would I lie to you? Bless you. I hate it when you're crying,' Nikko answered.

'And I hate it when my own brother is... A! A! A... achoo! Is lying to me.'

'Are you crazy? I am not lying. Bless you.'

'Well, how then... A! A! Achoo! For God's sake, what's wrong with me?'

'Bless you. It's probably because of all that crying. That's what happens in the end.'

'Achoo! You're ... Achoo! Talking... Achoo! Nonsense!'

'Are you cold? Bless you!'

'I don't know... Achoo! I'll go... Achoo! To... Achoo!'

'I didn't understand a word of that. I'm going to fetch mum'.

When he returned, followed by their mother, Lady's eyes were already so swollen, that they were barely visible.

'Good God, Lady!' Her mum pressed her hand to her forehead to check for temperature.

'Ha-ha, your nose is so red! You look like a clown,' Nikko laughed.

'Nikko!' His mother shot a warning look at him.

'Achoo!' the sneezing continued. 'I'll... Achoo! Show you... Achoo! A clown!'

'Hahaha,' Nikko was rolling on the floor with laughter, while Lady was already seeing stars with all that sneezing.

'That's allergy!' their mum said. 'Give me that squirrel!'

Marianna pulled the toy from her daughter's hands and threw it in the other end of the room.

'No! I've just found her!' Lady screamed, but then realized that she hadn't sneezed for whole three seconds. She stopped and counted five more. 'I don't sneeze anymore,' Lady observed.

'That proves it's caused by Squirrel. She has probably gathered a lot of dust in the shrubs,' her mum concluded.

'But dust has never made me sneeze before, I only sneeze if I am near hens!' Lady said.

'Maybe it's not Squirrel.' She got up and approached the toy but the moment she reached it, she sneezed again.

'Oh. What now? I've become allergic to Squirrel!' Lady's eyes, or what could be seen of them, brimmed with tears. Her nose became even redder and her brother burst into uncontrollable laughter.

'Nikko, leave the room,' his mother said sternly.

'OK, OK, I am sorry, I'll stop,' Nikko promised, and moved closer to his sister. 'What if we wash her?'

'What do you mean by 'wash her'? Her tail will get ruined!'

'Is it better not to be able to hug her anymore?' Her mother stroked her head. 'Everything is going to be all right. Please, calm down. I promise to brush her properly once she's dry. No one would even suspect she has been washed,' Marianna said, kissed her daughter and took Squirrel downstairs. She filled the sink with warm water, added some washing powder and was just about to soak the toy in the improvised tub, when she noticed that the stitches under the tail were torn.

'I better mend you first and bathe you after that,' Marianna said.

But when she picked the needle and the thread and started sewing, she realised that the stitches towards the top were very uneven.

'Well, I'll have to open you a bit more, I'm afraid. I am sorry, but those people in the toy factory have done an awful job,' she slowly started to unstitch the fluffy coat of the squirrel when...

‘What does this mean? Nikko, come here now!’

Nikko hopped down the stairs and stopped at the living room door.

‘Well, did you bathe her?’ he asked.

‘I haven’t expected that from you! It’s not funny at all! I’ve always thought you’re the better behaved one of the two but this - this is a huge disappointment. Huge! I can’t believe it!’ his mum said and threw the toy on the sofa. Chicken feathers flew out of its open coat.

‘Are these feathers?’ Nikko shouted. ‘No way!’

‘Don’t clown around. Go and apologise to your sister straight away! Do you hear me?’

‘Yes, yes, yes! Yes, give me the toy. Sorry!’ Nikko grabbed Squirrel and ran back upstairs. He couldn’t believe it!

He stormed into Lady’s room. ‘Look! Someone has gutted Squirrel and filled her with feathers! Chicken feathers!’

Lady’s eyes became big and round like saucers. ‘You? Was that you?’

‘Me? Nonsense!’

‘Yes, you are right – you can’t come up with anything that genius! But who, then...’

‘Well, guess! Who was mum telling about your hen allergy just yesterday, hm?’

‘Wacky, when she brought us that chicken to make soup.’

‘Exactly! When mum told her that we don’t eat meat, Wacky only shrugged and didn’t say a word.’

‘No! That crosses all lines!’ Lady was outraged. ‘And then it is us who are the bad ones!’

‘What have we done to her? We only tried to steal her rabbit and put salt in her jam.’

‘And we climbed the cherry tree?’ Nikko added.

‘I wouldn’t even mention that. Excuse me, but hers is at least 14 on a scale of 1 to 10 of nasty tricks!’

‘I wonder how she put her hands on Squirrel. I found her at the back, in the raspberry bushes, as if someone had thrown her over the fence. That’s why she was so entangled in them.’

‘She might have fallen out the car when we got back home and Wacky might have found her. Grrr! Honestly, I am furious. I feel sick from the thought of Squirrel being in the paws of that monster! How am I going to cuddle her now? Even if I wash her, Wacky’s nasty face will keep appearing in front of my eyes! Nikko, we must plan a revenge, do you hear me? Tell me that this time you understand. Tell me!’ Lady shook her brother by the shoulders.

‘Yes, yes, yes, I understand,’ Nikko nodded.

But he didn’t, really. Nikko wasn’t a big fan of revenge, not at all.

Chapter Seven

In which Wacky Jacky ends up with a marvellous portrait

The same evening, Lady armed herself with a sheet of paper and pencils and took the pose of an artist. She leaned her cheek on her left hand, her tongue slightly sticking out, narrowed her eyes and the pencil started dancing over the white paper. Lady had discovered that she had a gift for drawing while she was in the kindergarten, and she regularly used to get back home with a pile of drawings. When she started school, her parents enrolled her in a special art class. Nikko was terrified by that fact, because he completely lacked gift in that sphere, but since he was Lady’s twin, the two of them were seen as one item. Once, while Lady was finishing a water colour painting of her best friend – at that time it was a girl called Monnie, - a classmate passed near her desk and knocked a jar of water right over the drawing. Lady

screamed. The paints trickled down the paper like tiny streams, and the only thing left of Monnie was an eye, a tuft of hair and the blurred lines of her shoulders. Lady cried a lot but the art teacher, Mr Kiriyaov, praised the mix of colours and the mysterious air of the portrait, and promised to include the drawing in the end-of-the-year exhibition. The twins' parents burst with pride. They hung the portrait in their living room and boasted about Lady's first painting. That's how her reputation as an artist began. Now that reputation was about to be justified again. Under the confident strokes of the pencil appeared the contours of a terrifying face, shapeless body, ridiculously dressed in the same orange slip from the day before and unnaturally huge feet in socks, covered in holes. A pair of rabbit ears grew out of the head and a scruffy rabbit tale peered from the back.

'What a beauty!' Lady exclaimed when the drawing was completed. She rose from the chair and shoved her creation at Nikko's face. 'What do you think?'

'It's just like a Quentin Blake picture,' Nikko said.

'I don't know who you are talking about, but I'll take it as a compliment,' Lady said, pressed the sheet to her chest and danced around with it.

'He's the illustrator of Roald Dahl's books. "Matilda", "The Twits", "The Witches", remember? We learned about him at school.'

'Don't. Not now,' Lady interrupted him, 'I haven't finished yet.'

She bent down and added to the bottom of the paper, 'Wacky Jacky lives here. Do not disturb unless you want to be eaten alive.'

'Isn't 'eaten alive' a bit over the top?' Nikko wondered.

'What she did with Squirrel was over the top,' Lady snapped.

'This is funny. And it's not much compared to what she did. But I'll come up with more, I swear.'

'Are you sure it's wise to keep annoying her? She may eat us for real...' Nikko said uncertainly.

'Whose side are you on,' Lady looked sternly at him. She stood up on the tips of her toes, looked through the window and saw that the light was on in their neighbour's house. 'Come on. You distract our parents whilst I sneak out.'

She took the box with the drawing pins, left the villa quietly and stopped in front of Jaqueline's front door. She pinned the portrait on it and sneered.

'You deserve that! This is for Squirrel, you know. Now the whole stupid village will learn what a complete weirdo lives in this house,' Lady spat the words out and turned around. There was a hoarse laughter behind the door, then a voice whispered, 'They don't dare set foot on my side of the pavement, anyway.'

The door squeaked open, a messy head appeared, looked at Lady's masterpiece, grinned widely and remarked, 'Hm, she really is very good!' Even though it was getting dark, she couldn't deny the obvious.

Wacky Jacky took the portrait down, slammed the door and disappeared in the house. A suspicious silence fell, the kind of silence that happens when a child is left alone in a room and after which the parents usually find out that the price of their moment of peace and quiet is at least new wallpaper.

This silence continued for days. After the episode with the portrait, Wacky Jacky literally evaporated. No one heard anything from her, not that evening, nor the following days. The twins climbed the cherry tree to spy on her, but it was all in vain, no one paid any attention to them, no one came to threaten them, no one waved a rolling pin at them. Eventually the lack of activity made them nervous, and so Nikko got back to his scientific activities and

Lady decided to take the initiative in her own hands. She spent days, stubbornly peering through her window or peeping over the fence in front of Jaqueline's house. She even unlocked the small gate that led to their neighbour's garden and looked inside. Jacky Wacky was nowhere to be seen, not in front, not in the shack. Even Beauty had disappeared. There was just one thing left to do before resorting to breaking in. Lady phoned Jaqueline's number and waited.

'Hallo,' the hoarse voice said.

'It's Lady.'

Silence.

'I thought you were dead,' Lady continued.

'I'm not but I can't wait for it to happen so everyone leaves me alone once and for all,' Wacky answered.

Lady didn't have the slightest idea who that 'everyone' was but decided that it was her and her brother. That's why she added, 'Well, OK.'

'Well, OK,' Wacky Jacky repeated, and put the receiver down with a heavy sigh. Was hiding still worth it? It was obvious that they knew where she had moved to. Hence, it was only a matter of time before they came to her. The twins were her smallest problem.

Chapter Eight

In which Nikko experiments, Lady is bored, and Jaqueline is described as 'super-dangerous'

After she decided that Wacky Jacky had given up on her and her brother, Lady got back to her usual annoyed state. The fact that the following days were really boring and dragged slowly didn't improve the situation. Nikko and Lady had criss-crossed the whole village, they now knew almost everyone, and everyone knew them. People waved at them over their fences, the elderly neighbours pushed tomatoes, cucumbers or fruit in their hands, and the younger ones always asked after their parents' health. A few times Lady went out to try to learn how to roller skate but the thought of her being alone while her friends would continue going to school together didn't leave her head. Not only that but she kept falling on the street that was covered in dust and cow poo. She decided to postpone the roller skating lessons until better days. Of course, there was no way for her to know that the better days weren't coming when it came to her plans to learn how to skate.

'What are you doing' she shouted at her brother as she swung higher on the swing.

'You'll see,' Nikko grinned.

'One of your stupid experiments again?' she asked but he only shook his head.

'Wait, wait.' Lady continued swinging but Nikko shouted at her to gain her attention and stepped away from the sand. 'Are you ready?'

'I don't care!' Lady snapped.

'Please yourself!' Nikko snapped back and lit the white pile in front of him.

There was a hissing noise, smoke rose up and suddenly something black and shapeless grew out of the sand. At least at the beginning. The more it grew, the faster it gained speed and height, and suddenly black foamy columns bubbled out from the ground and started creeping towards Lady's swing.

'Whoaaaaa,' Lady screamed and lifted her legs. Her brother shook with laughter.

'Nikko, what kind of a nonsense is that! Is that why you took the sugar and the baking soda?' their mother went outside to check what the fuss was about.

'Fantastic!' his father ran towards him. 'Why didn't you tell me so I could join you?'

'I want you to clean everything,' their mum frowned. Lady jumped from the swing and ran towards her.

'Mum, let's go to a shopping centre.'

'I can't, sweetheart. I have to finish that translation by Wednesday because the publishers are in a hurry to get the book ready for the beginning of September.'

Lady sulked, 'If we still lived in our old neighbourhood, I could go out with the girls instead of watching my brother's stupid experiments.'

'Sweetheart, what about going to the pool on Thursday?' her mum relented.

'If I haven't died of boredom before then.' Lady shrugged and kicked a stone in front of her.

'Please, don't be cross at me. I promise to take you to our old neighbourhood after the pool. I'll have coffee with my friend Rossie, and you'll play with Maya and the other girls. How does this sound?'

'They've probably forgotten me already,' Lady said angrily.

'Nonsense. It's only been a month since they last saw you. Don't exaggerate. Come on, go draw something or read a book. I'll work for a while and then you'll help me cook dinner.'

Lady turned around and disappeared from her mother's sight. Instead of joining her brother and her father, she grabbed her scooter and went out in the street. It was terribly quiet and hot. Only the flies were moving, buzzing around. The road was covered in dust, the air was oppressive with heat. It was as if time itself felt lazy and had stopped completely. Lady had a feeling she was the last post-apocalypse survivor on the planet. '

Maybe Wacky Jacky has cast a spell, and everyone has evaporated. Puff!' Playing that scenario in her head, she headed down towards the gorge at the end of the village, close to the main road. There were a lot of mosquitoes over there but at least the proximity of the trees and the river made it cooler. Lady was drawing smooth diagonals with her scooter from one end of the road to the other, when she heard the noise of an approaching car, coming from behind. She turned and moved to the right, but the car slowed down and stopped next to her. It was grey, covered in deep layer of dust.

'Hey, girl,' someone shouted from inside.

Lady leaned on the scooter's handles and peered through the open window. There was a boy on the back seat, about her age. The boy looked at her, then stared back at the scenery outside. He didn't look very happy.

'Do you know where Jaqueline Neckova's house is?' the gentleman behind the steering wheel asked.

Lady nodded, 'I do.'

'Where?'

Lady looked at him more carefully. The man was around 40- 45, with greying hair, grey eyes and a hooked nose. His face was covered in scars. He didn't look mean, more like slightly insane.

'Why do you want to know?' Lady demanded.

'Because I'm looking for her. I am a detective.'

Lady's eyes became round like circles and the boy on the back seat sneered, barely audibly. The driver reached to the glove box, took out a business card and gave it to the girl. On the back of the card read 'Detective Vladimir Mulberry.'

'Mulberry?' Lady asked.

'Yes,' the boy from the back seat confirmed, 'like the berry.'

Lady blinked, holding the business card.

‘Well... Hm... She... I mean... Is she dangerous?’ That was all that she could think of.
‘Mhm,’ the detective nodded. ‘Super-dangerous’
The boy on the back seat sneered again but this time made a sign to let Lady know the man was a looney.
Lady was confused. She looked around. There was no one nearby except for the three of them.
‘I have to go home,’ she said suddenly.
‘Wait,’ the man said. ‘Tell me where she lives.’
‘There’s not such a person in this village,’ Lady said. ‘You’re mistaken.’
She turned the scooter around and pushed it with all her strength. She was glad that she had taken it! By the time Mr Mulberry managed to turn around to follow her, there was no trace left of her. Lady hurried back home to tell Nikko about the curious encounter.
‘Come!’ she pulled her brother by the sleeve.
The two ran behind the house and Lady started whispering something heatedly in Nikko’s ear. Their father spotted them but the only thing he managed to catch from the conversation was, ‘What, do you mean like mulberry?’ ‘Yes. Like mulberry.’ Christo frowned and strained his ears. Lady noticed him and said with a laughter, ‘Everything is fine, Dad.’
Well, since everything was fine, he had nothing to worry about.

Chapter Nine

In which Lady falls from the cherry tree and Wacky Jacky’s undercover is over

‘Your head must be affected by the heat,’ Nikko said.
‘No, I don’t imagine things! Here, this is his business card! He gave it to me himself,’ Lady showed her brother the card.
‘Phew,’ sneered Nikko. ‘It looks like someone made it with Paint. Look at the font.’
‘Don’t get side-tracked, listen to what I’m telling you!’ Lady snapped.
‘Mulberry? What kind of a name is that?’ Nikko wondered.
‘Like the berry; that’s what the boy told me.’
‘Like the berry? Mulberry – caterpillar,’ Nikko said smugly.
‘“Caterpillar” is a super comparison. Suits him. He was tall, skinny and suave,’ Lady made a disgusted face.
‘What about the boy?’ Nikko inquired.
‘What about the boy? I’ve no idea, he was clicking on his phone on the back seat. He laughed a few times.’
‘Hm.’
‘Hm! Shall we look for them?’ Lady suggested. ‘We may bump into them somewhere.’
‘Dad, we are going out for a while,’ Nikko shouted.
‘Don’t be late for dinner!’ their mum shouted back from the house.
‘Yesyesyesyes,’ Lady promised but stopped dead in front of the door. A car engine noise was coming from the street. ‘Did you hear that?’ she turned to her brother.
The twins looked outside and saw the car Lady described earlier.
‘That’s him! Those are the people I was telling you about!’
‘I don’t see a boy,’ Nikko looked around.
‘Shushhh!’ Lady nudged her brother in the ribs.
Mr Mulberry got out of the car, stretched his limbs and cracked his neck and his fingers as if he was getting ready to take part into a hand-to-hand combat.

'Jaaacks!' he shouted over the fence. 'I know you're inside!'

No answer.

'Jaquelineaaaaa.'

'What are you two snooping around?' the twins' father approached them and opened the door.

'Hello?' he greeted Mr Mulberry.

'Hi. I'm Vladimir,' the Caterpillar introduced himself and stretched his lean hand towards Christo. 'Do you know whether... Aaaaah, hello!' he caught a sight of Lady and his face cracked into a broad smile. 'So, we meet again.'

'Christo,' the twins' dad said in turn. 'Do you know each other?' he turned surprised to his daughter.

'We met a few minutes ago,' Vladimir hurried to answer. 'Lady was good enough to give me the directions to Jaqueline's house.'

'That's not true. I haven't said anything,' Lady protested.

'Except your name, obviously,' her brother rolled his eyes.

'My name. How come you know my name?' Lady frowned.

'How do people learn the names of other people, sweetie? I introduced myself to you and you told me how you're called, have you forgotten already? And they say children are like sponges! Quite an exaggerated statement, don't you agree, Christo?'

The twins' father frowned, too, but at that moment Wacky's front door opened and her tousled head peeped outside.

'Stop nattering away. Get in, if you are that hard-pressed,' she ordered. Mr Mulberry pressed his hand to his chest, bowed and said, 'Au revoir, till we meet again!' then he disappeared into the house.

'Quick, on the tree!' Lady said.

She hadn't seen Jaqueline for ages, and she couldn't miss a second of the event that was promising to be the most interesting thing for days. Who was that person? What did he want? Why did he say Wacky was dangerous? Lady was so curious, she thought she was going to explode. She started climbing up the tree but when she reached the third branch, someone shouted from the top, 'Hello again!' Lady's heart jumped. She lost hold of the branch she was trying to catch, her right foot slipped, she lost balance and flew towards the ground. Lady landed with a muffled thud and a scream but got up and sat on the ground as if nothing had happened.

Nikko looked worriedly at her. 'Hey, are you all right?'

'Of course, I am all right, don't you see!' Lady snapped.

'What's the matter with your arm then?' Nikko pointed at his sister's left arm.

Lady's eyes rested on the unnatural curve of her wrist and even though she didn't feel any pain, suddenly, her eyes filled with tears and she released a deafening scream. Her shrieks were so loud that even Dr Muradjiev in the village surgery two blocks down the street, next to the turn, heard them. He was doing his ninth crossword puzzle for the day and the girl's howl made him jump excitedly. He reached for his stethoscope, that hadn't left its place on the hanger for ages and had to wait for a while for the rubber to restore its original form.

Chapter Ten

In which Nikko makes a new friend and Wacky Jacky reveals the identity of the unknown visitor

'I am Plamen. Call me Patso,' the boy reached out his hand to Nikko, once the hassle around the fall, the medical checks and the arm plastering was over. 'Let me tell you again I am sorry for your sister. I didn't want to startle her. She'll probably hate me now.'

The boys were walking at the front, the adults were following behind. The fracture on Lady's wrist was called 'greenstick'. In other words, a bone was slightly cracked, the same way a flexible twig would crack if bent too much without breaking completely. Lady would have to be in plaster for just one month.

'My name is Nikko,' Nikko said, staring at the ground.

Plamen tried to keep the conversation alive.

'Do you live here?'

'We moved about a month ago. Before that we lived in Golden Vortex in the town. What about you?'

'In Golden Vortex? Really? Half of my classmates live there. I'm from Swamp Vortex.'

'Well, that's not a bad area either.'

'I wish. Everyone is such a loser over there.'

'We used to play football on the Swamp Vortex stadium after the older boys threw us out of the local field.'

'You play football?' Plamen asked.

'Yes,' Nikko lied. He had only played once – that time when the kids were made to move stadiums. And he was spectacularly bad at it, that's why the boys never invited him again. But it was worth lying a bit for the sake of creating a good first impression. 'There are no other kids here to play football with, though, just me and my sister,' Nikko continued. 'Now she will not be fit to play at all.'

'Well, you'll have more time for playing on your tablet instead.'

'The old folks don't allow it. Just an hour a day,' Nikko admitted, before he could stop himself. Damn it, he shouldn't say that. Just a couple of lines were capable of ruining any good impression.

'Oh, maaan!' Plamen exclaimed with disapproval.

Nikko quickly changed the subject.

'Yeah, I know. Who's that person with you?'

'Who, my uncle?' Plamen asked.

'Your uncle?' Nikko was surprised.

'Yes, he's nuts. He thinks that he is a detective. He has imagined strange things about your neighbour and hasn't stopped going around the villages, looking for her, since spring. We turned the world upside down to try and find her. For a long while my uncle believed she was dead but when he found out that she's alive, he completely lost his mind. Then, a few days ago, we found out where she lives and here we are.'

Wacky Jacky lied she was dead! And a detective was hunting for her. Oh, my, he couldn't wait to tell Lady!

'Why are you with him, if you find him that annoying?' Nikko asked, trying to hide his excitement.

'I work for him,' Patso answered.

'What do you mean by "work"? The story was getting more and more complicated. 'How old are you?'

'Ten. Well, it's just like that. I need the money, that's why I do it. The job is not that difficult. I do Google searches for the villages we go to, sort out the sat nav, things like that. Ah, I also made his business cards,' Plamen explained.

'Haha, seriously? I saw one of them.'

'And?'

'And what? Haven't you heard of computer programmes from this century? Your card is awful! Even my sister could make a better one on PowerPoint.'

'Come on, Plamen!' his uncle called from behind the steering wheel.

Patso muttered something about how good the business cards were and 'if you don't like them don't look at them, or, wait, make better ones yourself, to...' The rest of the sentence was muffled by the roar of the engine. Patso hopped into the car, waved at his new friend, rolled the window down and shouted, 'Are you going to be here tomorrow?'

'Of course, where else...'

'OK, I'll see you when we come back'.

'Don't dare come near my house again!' Jaqueline shook her fist after the car. 'To come here and hold me responsible for this and that, who does he think he is, that looser! I'll teach him! He has no idea who he's dealing with!'

'Are you OK, Mrs Neckova?' Marianna asked. 'Do you need any help?'

'If that gentleman is a stranger who...' Christo started.

'A stranger!' Jaqueline mumbled under her nose, 'He's my son.'

Chapter Eleven

In which Lady bemoans her own fate but entertains herself with a book about clowns

Nurse Mihneva put the new clean sheets she kept for special occasions on one of the two beds in the patients' room, wiped the dust from the side table, put some dandelions in the small vase and met Lady with a warm 'Welcome!' as if the girl was coming back home from a summer camp. Lady's parents tried to persuade the nurse and the doctor that their daughter's condition was not bad at all and it wouldn't be necessary for her to spend the night in the hospital – after all, she only suffered from a cracked wrist bone and their house was two blocks away. With a serious tone, the doctor explained that it's a trauma that needed a 24-hour observation and the nurse assured Marianna that they were going to take care of her daughter as if she was their own child. It couldn't be helped. Nothing had happened in the village surgery for the past year except for the monthly visits paid by Granny Niciphora, who came to get her prescription and then stayed there for three hours, chatting. The doctor's handwriting had become almost clear and readable as a result of all that crossword solving, and the village pharmacist never missed an opportunity to praise that development during the annual pharmacists' meeting in Great Town. Hence, you can see why in these circumstances the doctor and the nurse had newly re-discovered sense of self-worth and there was not the slightest chance for the both of them to let the girl go home immediately after her wrist was put in plaster.

'Pff, Doctooooor!' Lady tossed in her bed and snorted like a wounded animal.

'Doctooooooooor!'

'There is no need to shout like that, Lady. Your legs are not broken so you can come and see me if it is something urgent,' the doctor said, throwing his weight around when he entered.

'It is urgent. I need to make a call,' Lady said.

The doctor reached in his pocket and gave her his phone. Lady dialled the number and waited. Soon she heard an anxious voice, 'Doctor Muradjiev, is everything all right?' To be honest, Lady's mum always sounded anxious.

'Mum, bring me the tablet and some food when you visit. They fed me with some horrible concoction here. Totally disgusting. I want something sweet.'

'Actually, we gave you some of the moussaka Auntie Tsena cooked especially for you,' the doctor corrected her.

But Lady only shot him a glance and made a sign to quiet him. Auntie Tsena, the nurse, could continue with her tries to gain her good graces as much as she wanted, but neither her moussaka, nor her dandelions were capable of calming Lady down.

'You know we're not coming, Lady,' her mum said. 'We just arrived home. You have to spend the night in the surgery, and we'll come to get you first thing in morning.'

'Yes, if they let me go,' Lady looked viciously at the doctor. 'If we were still in town, no one would keep me in the stupid hospital.'

'That's enough, sweetheart. You know I wanted to stay but I wasn't allowed. I promise to cook whatever you like tomorrow,' Marianna tried to calm her daughter, but Lady continued with her moaning.

'Do you have any idea how uncomfortable this bed is! The whole mattress is covered in bumps and there isn't even one kids' channel on the TV.'

'Lady, look, your brother brought you a book. He left it on the side table next to your bed. Read for a bit and you'll see how quickly you'll fall asleep. And, please, don't disturb the doctor again. I love you. See you tomorrow'. That was the end of the conversation.

Lady gritted her teeth. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She returned the phone to the doctor and turned her head towards the window. The sky was clear but there were no stars in it. Only the moon glared at her through foggy eyes.

'Do you want me to read you a fairy tale?' the doctor offered hopefully.

'No, I don't!' Lady hissed. 'I don't want to see you until tomorrow morning.'

'Good night then, Lady,' the doctor said quietly. 'Don't be angry at us. We're doing it for your own good. If you need anything, we will be next door. Tonight, both Auntie Tsena and I are staying in the surgery. Just whistle and we'll come.'

'Mhm,' Lady cut him off without moving her gaze from the window. In the distance, at the point where the ravine ended, the poplars proudly raised their slender bodies. They looked like soldiers, guarding the village at its far end. The field started right behind them. Lady reached to the side table and took the book her brother brought her. 'School for Clowns' by Eduard Uspensky.

'Great,' Lady said with a sigh and started reading. Soon she fell asleep unlike nurse Mihneva, who tiptoed in the room three times that night to tuck Lady in bed, and once more, just to look at her.

Chapter Twelve

In which Jaqueline brings Lady cherry jam and it has an unusual taste

On the next morning, when Lady's parents came to the surgery to pick her up, the girl was already halfway through the book.

'What a surprise!' her mother exclaimed.

'Is it interesting?' her father asked.

'Well, yes. There are some funny moments,' Lady said and went a few pages back. 'For example, listen to that.'

Lady read the part that made her laugh because it vaguely reminded her of an incident with a pack of salt that took place a week or two ago.

“When the clowns went to have lunch, Irina Vladimirovna summoned Mr Shakir. ‘The housewives want to take-over our school. You’ll have to defend it tonight. We’ll give you a rifle. And bullets. The bullets are going to be filled with salt. ‘That’s out of question!’ Vasilisa Potapovna sternly butted into the conversation. ‘It’s unacceptable! It’s so cruel to shoot people with salt! It’ll be better to use sugar instead. More humane.’”

Lady changed her voice to make it sound exactly like the voice of the head-teacher from the book and her parents burst into laughter.

‘Unarguable fact!’ a shrill voice came from the corridor. Lady jumped. ‘It’s completely inhuman to have salt thrown at you. But do you know what is much more inhuman? To put too much salt into your dish or, God forbid, to mistake sugar for salt.’ Jaqueline’s crooked nose appeared from behind the door and soon the rest of her followed.

Lady frowned, ‘I thought you didn’t want to see or hear us anymore!’

‘Well...’ Jaqueline started, ‘don’t flatter yourself too much, sweetie. It was simply too hot, and the heat makes me dizzy and my blood pressure jumps up. That’s all. I had to stay at home and take care of my health.’

‘But when she realised what happened to you, Mrs Neckova asked to come with us,’ Marianna smiled.

‘I warned you that there would be problems with that cherry tree but...’ Wacky Jacky raised her bony finger.

‘Mrs Neckova has brought you jam, since you asked for some,’ Christo interrupted. Lady frowned again. That looked like a stinky business.

‘Yes, cherry jam,’ the old lady gave her a small jar and a conniving smile slowly crawled over her lips.

Lady swallowed, ‘I don’t want it.’

‘Lady!’ her mum whispered, ‘that’s a present. You can’t behave like that!’

‘You know what, why don’t we try it right away?’ Lady’s dad suggested.

‘Nonononono,’ Lady shook her head, ‘I don’t want it.’

‘I have a spoon here,’ Jaqueline reached into her apron pocket.

When she realised that there was no escape, Lady whimpered,

‘Where is Nikko, by the way?’

‘Nikko stayed with Patso, they’re going to play football,’ her father said.

So, that’s how it was! Her own brother had chosen to stay with some strange boy, that Patso or whatever his name was, instead of coming to pick her up from the surgery. Not only that, but now she had to eat awful jam, with added salt. Not to mention the fact that she had a broken wrist and it wasn’t very likely that she would be able to climb trees, ride her scooter, rollerblade or do anything else soon. And finally, who knows what else that witch might have added to the jam on the spoon that her mum was moving to her mouth right now, just as if she was still a baby!

‘I am not a baby!’ Lady shouted angrily. ‘I can feed myself with my other hand!’

She pulled the spoon out of her mother’s hand, closed her eyes and with a disgusted grimace pushed it in her own mouth, but instead of throwing up, as she had expected, she swallowed with pleasure. A blissful smile transformed her face.

‘Mmm, it’s very tasty!’ Lady said, and scooped another spoonful of jam, then stared questioningly at Wacky Jacky.

‘What were you expecting, jam stuffed with salt?’

‘Nonononono, nothing of the kind.’

'Well, if you're done, I'd like to have it back,' Jaqueline reached to take the jar. 'There's just one left and I haven't started the new batch yet.'

'But...' Lady looked with surprise at her mum who shrugged without saying anything.

Wacky Jacky shoved the spoon back in her pocket, closed the jar and sneaked out with a few final words, 'We'll meet again in front of my house.'

'What? What was that?' Lady asked.

'She is a little strange but...' Her father laughed.

'A little? She is mega-strange and my brother is mega-rude.'

How could he stay at home to play football with the same boy who caused my accident, instead of coming here!' Lady crossed her arms in front of her chest. At that moment, Dr Muradjiev and nurse Mihneva entered the room.

'Oh, here come the other looneys!' Lady rolled her eyes.

'We're going to miss you, sweetheart!' The nurse hugged her tightly.

'Don't let her climb, do sports, run, ride, jump, do push ups, bend, squat or perform any sharp movements,' the doctor said with a serious tone to the girl's parents.

'Can I breathe, at least!' Lady shouted at his face and stormed out.

Chapter Thirteen

In which Lady finds a letter and discovers what's written in it, and heads off on the heels of Wacky

On her way out of the surgery room, Lady threw her brother's book on the floor, stomped her foot and growled. But after a few steps she stopped because she saw an envelope with her name on the top. "Lady". The girl picked the letter up.

'What the hell is this?' she wondered, then put it in her pocket.

The two boys were busy kicking the ball in front of the villa. Lady heard her brother's laughter before she reached the corner. That made her feel three times worse. She pressed her lips when she passed by them.

'Hey, how are you?' Nikko rushed to meet her.

Lady turned her head away from him, 'What do you care?'

'Come on, no need to talk to me like that. Come to meet Patso.'

Lady turned and her eyes measured the new boy from head to toe. He smiled at her and two dimples appeared on his cheeks. Patso reached to shake her hand.

'Sorry about... uuuh... yesterday. I didn't mean to scare you. I didn't want you to fall out the tree. I was bored, that's why. Phew, it was very dumb, really. But I didn't mean to harm you, honest. Stay with us.'

'Why? So I can break a leg, too?' Lady retorted, then she turned and entered the house.

She went to her room, reached for the drawing pins in her drawer and spread a few in her brother's bed, 'That's what you deserve! Traitor!' She threw herself on her bed and tried to cry but then remembered the letter. She reached into her pocket and pulled the envelope out. Inside, there was a folded sheet of paper, covered with distorted letters, "Your secret is NOT safe with me... Ladybird!"

'What!' Lady's jaw dropped. Who knew her real name? Who?

And how did that person find it out? Were they planning to blackmail her? Was her brother the one who betrayed her? Loud shouting through the open window took her out of her deep thoughts.

Jaqueline and Mulberry were fighting heatedly with Beauty the rabbit getting in their way. The man tried to pick the rabbit up but Wacky kicked him hard in the arm.

‘Give her back to me!’ he shrieked.

‘Get out of here!’

‘How can you be that nasty!’ Mr Mulberry shouted.

‘Easily. Now get out or I’m calling the police.’

‘I am a detective. They are on my side.’

‘Phew! A detective, ha-ha! Self-proclaimed! I’d like to see how they’ll see it,’ Jaqueline giggled.

Vladimir foamed and whizzed around in such a way, that Lady thought his temperature would jump up to 100 degrees. If he was a kettle, his ears would be steaming and his brain would be bubbling, ‘Bloop, bloop’. Lady almost heard the blooping noise and laughed aloud. The flame in her eyes that had died some time ago returned, and she rushed downstairs. Dr Muradjiev definitely wouldn’t approve it. By the time she reached the front door, Plamen and Nikko were saying good-bye to each other. Mr Mulberry was sitting behind the steering wheel, frowning, and the car engine was coughing as if it had smoked a whole box of cigarettes. At the door, Jaqueline followed the car with her eyes and when the vehicle disappeared in a dusty cloud at the end of the street, she got out of the house and headed in the other direction. When she passed Lady, she stuck her tongue out at her. That was what the girl needed. She turned to Nikko and whispered, ‘Cover for me in front of our parents.’ Then, without waiting for his reply, quietly followed the old lady.

Chapter Fourteen

In which the forces clash, and a goat appears

Wacky Jacky was moving slowly, looking over her shoulder from time to time. When she reached the end of the street, she turned left and continued down towards the main road. The road went all the way around the bottom part of the village. That was the route of the bus to the town that went through the centre of the village of Bagel. In the past, that was where the village Easter Fair used to be held, with a big wheel, shooting tents, candy floss boots and caramel sugar roosters. That’s what their parents had told them, but Lady doubted everything unless she witnessed it. Hence, there was no way that she could believe that Wacky Jacky was hiding a super-dangerous secret until she saw it with her own eyes. In order not to attract the attention of her neighbour, Lady decided to take the parallel street. If she was right, Wacky would exit the street on Lady’s right and get out on the main road a few metres away from her. Lady stuck her head around the corner and waited for the familiar figure. Instead, she heard steps on her left. She turned. Wacky was walking in zigzag along the main road and looked like she was heading down towards the ravine.

‘Which path did that cuckoo take, I wonder?’ Lady mused, but there wasn’t any time for thinking.

She waited until Wacky crossed the road, then trotted after her. Now they were officially out of the village. Lady’s heart was pounding. What if the old witch spotted her? She could easily drag her in the ravine, and no one would hear her cries for help. Lady bit her lips. She wouldn’t even be able to fight properly with that cracked wrist bone. Those thoughts caused her to slow down a bit. ‘All right, what could really happen...’ She started building her courage up. ‘The worst thing would be if she started chasing me and after all, I can run faster than her.’

Lady made her way through a thick shrubbery. It didn't feel like going downhill at all. Luckily, at that time of the year the river was only quietly crawling in its bed. It became dangerous in autumn, that's when the water got deeper, and a single slip could propel you into the surging rapids. No one knew how many frogs were hiding in the grass. Once her brother brought a dead one for dissection. Lady didn't take part in it because she felt nauseous the moment her eyes spotted it. But she was present at the funeral afterwards because Nikko had promised to wrap the body in tissue.

Suddenly, Jaqueline's silvery stringy tufts came in sight a few metres ahead. She was closer than Lady had expected. Had she overheard the girl's steps? The old weirdo was sitting cross-legged on the ground. She mumbled something under her breath, frowned and stared in the distance. She was holding a cigarette in her fingers and was billowing puffs of thick smoke in the air like a steam engine.

Lady didn't dare breathe or move, but then something rustled in the grass and she jumped so sharply that her feet slipped on the damp mud. Lady lost balance and staggered straight down into the ravine. Not that it was that deep or that steep, but she would have been covered in scratches and have new fractures if a stringy hand hadn't grabbed her tightly by the right shoulder. Lady's enlarged terrified eyes met Wacky's grey slits.

'Didn't you know it's full of snakes here?' the old woman asked. 'To be honest, I didn't expect you to have the courage to follow me down here. But, since you are here anyway, sit down,' she patted the stone next to her.

Lady sat. Her legs were shaking anyway so maybe that was the wisest thing to do.

'Do you want one?' Wacky shoved the cigarette box under Lady's nose.

'I am only nine!' Lady shouted and that put an end of her stupor. 'I didn't even know that you smoke!'

'Well, nine is the age when I started,' Wacky blew a string of smoke rings out in the air. 'But for your information, I only smoke when I am angry.'

Lady laughed, 'You're such a looney.'

'As if you're very clever with that constant tree climbing to spy on me. See how it ended up for you,' Wacky pointed at the girl's arm. 'And it would have been so much easier to ask...'

'To ask? To ask about what?'

'Anything,' Wacky said.

'The Caterpillar said that you're super-dangerous,' the words left Lady's mouth before she could stop them.

'The Caterpillar? Ah, mulberry tree-caterpillar! Ha-ha, I like it. I hadn't thought of that,' Wacky laughed aloud. 'Of course, I am dangerous.'

'What about him? Is he dangerous, too?'

'He? Ha! He's just a lost puppy. A proper caterpillar.'

'Why are you dangerous?' Lady said, not giving up.

'Because I can do many things that other people can't,' Wacky raised her eyebrows meaningfully. A smile slid over her lips and Lady felt her fear crawling back. 'Don't worry, you haven't annoyed me that much... yet.'

Lady stared in front of her. There were so many questions she wanted to ask but her words were like beads that she had spilled on the grass, and she had to pick them up first and put them together as pieces of jigsaw puzzle. Wacky interrupted her thoughts.

'Why did you throw that book away?' She reached into her blouse and took 'School for Clowns' out.

'Because I was angry,' Lady frowned. 'Where did you find it?'

'Do you want it back? I laughed a lot when I read it.'

'Have you finished it yet?'

'Of course I have. While I was waiting for you. I liked Calico the goat very much. She's my favourite.'

'What do you mean, while you were waiting for me?' Lady was totally confused.

She turned to look at Wacky. The old woman was staring at her with her grey eyes as if she was hinting something, but Lady felt awfully scared. There were too many things she didn't know, and she needed to think. The girl grabbed the book, stood up and asked,

'Were you the author of that letter?'

'What letter?' Her neighbour looked surprised.

'The one that says, "I know your secret".'

'So, you have a secret, too? Well, looks like everyone does. That's one thing we have in common.'

'I have to go,' Lady said.

'Go and if you decide to ask me a question - any question, - you know where to find me,' Wacky said and stared towards the ravine. 'And watch out for snakes!'

Lady almost missed her warning. Suddenly, her whole self-control left her. First, the Caterpillar, then her wrist, then that – that meeting, the book, the letter she was scrunching in her pocket and the Wacky, Wacky Jacky. Lady felt truly relieved when she heard the slamming of the gate behind her back.

'Where were you, Lady?' her mum said. 'Why didn't you tell me you were going out? I would come with you.'

'I went to pick up the book, mum!' Lady waved the book in the air. 'Don't you remember that I threw it away in front of the surgery?'

She went to the garden to look for her brother, but a noise from the neighbouring house stopped her in her track.

'Maaa. Maaa.'

Lady met Nikko's eyes. He read the question in hers and hurriedly explained, 'A goat. It looks like Wacky Jacky has a new pet.'

Chapter Fifteen

About a broken windmill and a making-up

Patso's shaggy head peeked around the door, 'Are you coming?'

Lady got up from the bench and went to meet him, 'Are you going to hang around here every day?'

'Looks like it,' Patso lowered his eyes to the ground when the girl approached him. 'Where is your brother?'

'At the back'. Lady opened the door widely as an invitation for Plamen to come in.

The boy entered the garden and looked around. The grass smelled wonderfully. It seemed like the lawn mower had just shaved its impudent top. Its freshness together with the warm July air invited him to take off his shoes. He took a step forward through the soft green blanket and soon found Nikko in the back of the garden. A smile lit his face. He really liked that place.

Plamen asked, 'What are you doing?'

'He's making a windmill for my Squirrel town,' Lady answered instead of her brother.

Patso frowned, 'What?'

'The town of her favourite fluffy toy, Squirrel. There is a school there, a park, a house, and now Lady wants a windmill as well,' Nikko pointed towards the wooden table where he had arranged all the cardboard buildings.

'Wow! Did you make them yourselves?' Patso turned to look at the girl.

'Who, she? Ha-ha. Mostly Mum; all Lady does is watch and command,' her brother answered.

'Only because of my injury. Otherwise I'd make everything myself,' his sister snapped.

'All right, Boss, then tell us how to attach the spinner to make your windmill work?'

'On the side, clearly,' Lady answered.

'But if there isn't any wind, it'll never spin,' Patso pointed out.

'Why don't you connect it to a battery and magnets?'

'And then it'll be constantly in motion.' Nikko gave it more thought. 'Let's try.'

Plamen and Nikko rummaged about in the basement. Lady stayed in the garden, looking at the windmill. Every rotation inadvertently solidified the friendship between the two boys.

That wasn't fair! She didn't have friends here so Nikko shouldn't have any, either! She shoved the wooden platform and all the parts of the half-constructed windmill spread all over the ground.

'Lady!' her brother shouted when he saw his sister's actions. But Lady only frowned and walked off.

'Hey, what happened?' Patso stopped near her.

'Nothing, go and put your windmill together since you're doing it so well.'

'Nonsense, come join us.'

'I don't want to join you, am I clear?' Lady shouted. 'You're boring. The both of you. You are both very, very boring.'

She headed to the house, leaving the moaning Nikko to collect the parts from the ground.

Patso pulled a long face and looked at Nikko, then at Lady. An idea flashed through his mind,

'What about paying your neighbour a visit?'

The twins turned to look at him.

'Have you gone mad? She'll never let us in her house!' Lady exclaimed.

'Don't be so sure. She's my grandmother, after all,' Patso answered.

'Grandmother!' shouted the twins in unison.

'Don't tell me you haven't figured that out by now! My uncle is her son, isn't he? I just haven't seen her before because she and my mother don't get along.'

'Then your father is her...' Lady started.

'Son, too, but I have never seen him either. He had disappeared when I was born. Currently, my mother lives with a complete loser. But that's a different story.'

Lady cast a look at Patso. She felt sorry for the boy. Who meets his own grandmother in such circumstances? Moreover, who'd want to have a grandmother like that?

'I am afraid,' Nikko whimpered.

'Afraid!' Plamen and Lady exclaimed.

'There are three of us and we'll be together. She can't do anything to us,' Patso added.

'Well, the day before yesterday...', Lady started but came to a halt. That wasn't the right moment to share her secrets with them.

'Listen,' she turned to face Plamen, 'write something for me.'

'Write something for you?'

'Exactly. I'll bring you a sheet of paper right away.'

She flew towards the house. Plamen looked at Nikko who shrugged. Sometimes he struggled to understand his sister himself. Lady came back, presented Patso with a sheet of paper and ordered, 'Now write!'

Patso wrote, 'You are crazy.' Lady took the note from his hand and put it in her pocket. Later, she would compare the handwriting with that in the letter.

'Well, are we going?' she asked.

'We are!' Patso said firmly and the three children left.

They knocked on the door. Once more, Jacky Wacky surprised them with the way she was dressed. She was wearing a man's tank top that hung over her skinny bare shoulders, cropped denim shorts and a pair of checked stockings, showing clearly her wiry shin.

'What's the matter?'

Patso gathered all his courage and said, 'Can we be your guests?'

'Is your insane uncle with you?' Wacky stepped outside and looked around to check whether her son was nearby.

'He's having coffee with our parents,' Lady said. She thought the old woman hesitated at first. She started counting in her head and when she reached eight, Wacky decided what to do.

'Don't touch anything,' she warned and stepped aside. The kids were allowed in.

Chapter Sixteen

About a shop owner who had been turned into an owl by someone who possibly ate children

'A biscuit?' The twins' mother offered the plate to Mr Mulberry.

'Just coffee, thank you,' he answered and continued stirring his drink.

'Well, Nikko mentioned that you're a detective,' the twins' father started.

'Self-employed, yes. Jaqueline is my only case, for now,' the man coughed. 'But I'm progressing quite well. After all, I've managed to find her. If you only knew. It was years until I found out where she had disappeared to. It was sheer luck I remembered that my great grandfather used to have a house in this village.'

'It's now full of new villas,' Marianna said.

'I travelled around all the other villages, I even ended up in Fresh Village, can you imagine it? But then I decided that her powers would fade there; she needed to be somewhere close to a river in order to maintain her energy, anywhere else she would lose her strength.'

Marianna listened and her fingers kept digging deeper and deeper in her husband's thigh.

'Ouch!' Christo cried and she relaxed her grip.

'Excuse me, what were you saying?' Marianna tried to keep the conversation going.

'Yes, she kidnapped my wife and turned her into that ugly rabbit. She couldn't stand me being happy and decided to ruin my life! My dear Francesca, I miss her so much!'

Marianna summarised the situation, 'Sorry, Mr Mulberry, but are you actually claiming that our neighbour, Mrs Jaqueline Neckova, your mother, has the ability to turn people into rabbits?'

'Not only into rabbits, into whatever she chooses. When I was a child, I saw her turn the shop owner into an owl. When I met him on the next day, he didn't remember anything.'

'A shop owner turned into an owl,' Christo repeated slowly, trying to grasp the story.

'Yes, because when he found a chocolate bar in my shopping bag, he called me a thief and smacked me awfully hard.'

'And had you stolen the chocolate bar?' Marianna asked.

'Mum was going to pay for it. I went back to the shop with her afterwards. She handed him the money, but it fell behind the counter and when the man bent down to collect the coins, she rushed out, pulling me with her. As we left, I turned to look back and guess what I saw...'

'An owl,' Marianna raised her eyebrows.

'Exactly – an owl on the counter and no one else. Then I asked my mother directly, "Mum, was it you who turned Uncle Gosho into an owl?" Do you know what she answered?'

'No, but we can't wait to find out,' Christo was struggling to stay serious.

'She said, "Well, do you see anyone else who could do it?" Since then, I am convinced that she can turn people into whatever she likes, so I never drop my guard.'

Marianna kept staring at the detective as if trying to read in his eyes whether he really believed in that story. She didn't find any sign of doubt there.

'This story is very curious, I really don't know what to say,' Christo coughed.

'You don't believe me, do you?' Mr Mulberry frowned.

'Well, you should agree that it is very difficult for someone...'

'... not to think you are an absolute looney,' Marianna thought but didn't say it aloud.

Instead, she turned to her husband, 'Where are the kids?'

'They went to visit Jaqueline.'

'What, in her house? Are you mad? She eats children!' Mulberry exclaimed.

With those words, he ran outside and started banging on his mother's door with his fists but the only thing that came from inside was an absent-minded, 'Maaa!'

Chapter Seventeen

In which three children explore Wacky's home and come upon a familiar, an unfamiliar and a terrifying presence

Patso entered Wacky's house first. Nikko reached for his sister's hand.

'Are you scared?' Wacky asked.

'No,' the three of them answered in unison.

'Well, you should be,' Wacky slammed the door behind them. 'I could eat you, you know. But I have just finished with that skinny rabbit and today I really don't have a huge appetite.'

'The rabbit? What happened to the rabbit?' Lady asked.

'I ate her, may she rest in peace.'

Lady goggled.

'Are you serious?' Patso asked.

'Do you see it anywhere around, smartass?' his grandma snapped. 'You know that if that wasn't true, she would be tripping you up by now.'

The goat appeared from behind the door. It moved towards the children and started pushing them with its horns. It gently pushed them deeper into the house.

'This is Pphran, my goat,' introduced her Jaqueline. 'I'm teaching her to behave like a dog. Like that...' She hesitated.

'Clown Sanya,' Lady said.

'Exactly, and his goat Calico. I can do magic tricks as well. Do you want me to show you?'

The kids exchanged glances. Then stared at Fran. You could count her ribs. One of her eyes was half-closed and she was limping slightly with her front left leg. Wait a second? What? She, too?

'She limps, too,' Nikko said.

'I hadn't noticed. The important thing is that she gives milk.' Wacky led them inside. There was a room with a bed, a table, a cupboard and a doorway, covered with a curtain. Maybe there was another room behind the curtained doorway. Or a storage with human remains. Who knew?

'So, what were we talking about?' Jaqueline sat at the table.

'Magic tricks,' Lady said, trying not to lose her self-control.

'Oh, yes, the magic tricks. Well. In that case, you stay here; I am going to disappear.' Wacky stood up and hid behind the curtain.

After a minute she shouted, 'Are you ready? Pull the curtain!'

Patso made a step forward and sharply pulled the curtain but there was no one behind it.

The kids looked at each other with disbelief. They cautiously entered the room that looked like a normal kitchen. On the left, there was a big sink with tiles, on the right - a fridge and a wood burner, and next to the wood burner – a small couch, covered with a handwoven blanket.

'She is really not here,' Nikko said.

'Look!' Lady pointed at the wall.

The kids looked up. There was a painting there, set in a clumsily made wooden frame.

'This is my drawing,' Lady exclaimed.

'Have you really drawn that? It's a very cool portrait,' Patso said.

'Yes, but to hang it on the wall!' Nikko was genuinely surprised.

He reached towards the portrait, lifted it slightly and behind, he saw... 'A hole! There is a hole in the wall!' he shouted.

Lady went up on her tiptoes, but she couldn't see anything, that's why she decided to push her hand in the hole.

'There is something soft and warm in it!' she told the boys.

'Don't touch!' a voice boomed behind them and the kids jumped.

They turned around and the first things they saw were a few shelves, loaded with jars, filled with different liquids – yellow, green, brown, blood red, blue. Each jar had a label and a teaspoon, stuck in it. Lady read the word on the jar with the orange liquid, screamed and ran. She rushed by the boys, by Wacky, who appeared from a direction, completely different than the one she disappeared to, by Fran the goat, and bumped straight into her parents, who had just entered the garden. Shaking, she only managed to say, 'Over there, over there... it reads "Lady."'

Chapter Eighteen

About a sad and plain woman, a lonely man and a goat that doesn't understand anything

'Calm down, darling, please,' Lady's father hugged her.

'I told you she wanted to eat them.' Pleased, Mr Mulberry crossed his arms in front of his chest.

'What do you mean "eat us"?' the boys asked, jumping out of the house.

'Jaqueline, come and explain everything, you witch!' her son's voice boomed.

Wacky appeared from the house. She squinted her eyes against the sun. The little group in front of her was waiting for her reply. She looked subdued and small. There was no trace neither of her devilish smile nor of her sinister air. Instead, sadness was spread all over her wrinkles, making them even greyer and deeper. She had small glass plates with cherry jam in her hands.

‘It seems like you’re not staying for tea and jam, then?’ She looked at the kids.

‘What was that furry thing in the hole?’ Patso asked.

Wacky sighed and stared at the ground.

‘Bunny rabbits. They were born yesterday but unfortunately Beauty died, while giving birth to them.’

‘Is that why you ate her?’ Nikko frowned.

‘If they are new-born and without a mother, they need help, otherwise they will not survive!’ Marianna worried.

‘I’ll take care of them,’ Jaqueline said. ‘Now, if there is nothing else, you can go,’ she added dryly and frowned again.

‘Nonsense!’ interrupted her Mr Mulberry. ‘Beauty didn’t die! You’ve turned her into that goat. But this time you called her Fran. Very original! You don’t think that I will recognise my beloved Francesca! Look at her eyes...’

He crouched, cupped the goat’s head in his hands and looked straight into her eyes.

‘Oh, my darling! I am going to save you, OK? I’ll take you away from this place and we are going to be together again!’ He hugged the goat under the stunned looks of the others.

‘What’s going on here?’ Nikko turned to his father.

‘Let’s go home,’ Christo said and pushed the kids out.

‘But I wanted to ask about that jar...,’ Lady uttered.

‘Another time. Come on, come on,’ her mother insisted.

Patso followed them but at the door he stopped and turned to face his uncle. He wanted to ask him about when they’d be heading back to the town, but his eyes rested on Jaqueline instead. She was standing there, at the threshold of her home, small and subdued in her blue work coat, as withered as the wreck she inhabited. She looked vulnerable and entirely harmless. What did they think? Patso tried to smile and wave at his granny but something unexpected caught his attention. He felt distraught and his arm froze in the air. She was crying. Jaqueline didn’t notice him. Instead, she was looking at her son, who was tenderly caressing the goat and was whispering in her ear. Yes, Jaqueline Neckova was crying, and her tears were real.

Chapter Nineteen

In which it doesn’t become clear whether Fran likes classical music or simply loves eating mobile phones

‘I told you that everyone is insane here,’ Lady shouted as loudly as she could. ‘Everyone! And what is in that jar with my name on it?’

‘She probably steals your energy,’ Nikko guessed.

‘Or your youth,’ Patso added.

‘Very funny. Did you see the other jars? There could be something she has stolen from you there! Always competent! Might be a hair or a tooth, or a piece of your skin.’

‘We better go back and take them with us,’ Patso suggested.

‘I’m never ever going to set foot in that hole again!’ Nikko was adamant.

‘Don’t you care about me at least a little bit?’ his sister asked.

‘I care about you, of course, but in the end, she’ll eat us for real.’

‘We need a plan,’ Patso said. ‘Let’s lure her out of the house.’

‘Aren’t you finally going to leave?’ Lady snapped.

'At the moment I think I am more afraid of my uncle than of Wacky. He's still there, crying and hugging that sheep.'

'Goat,' Nikko corrected him.

'The same thing. He is convinced that's my aunt who had left him many years ago. He's been completely insane since then and genuinely believes that his mother has something to do with that because she didn't like Francesca. He thinks Francesca is the goat. That my grandmother turned my aunt into that goat, do you know what I mean?'

'Is that possible?' Nikko was surprised by his own question, but one could never be sure, after all. After today, he could believe anything.

'What if she turns me into something else, too?' Lady was seriously scared. Her eyes became as big as apples. Then she remembered the letter and swallowed. She still couldn't solve that mystery.

'Do you hear yourself? Everyone is mad. It's not a surprise that my mum is not in touch with them,' Patso stated.

'Do you know what your aunt's favourite dish is by any chance?' Nikko asked.

'Stuffed vine leaves. Why?'

'Let's see whether the goat is going to eat them. That will show us whether it's really her,' he answered.

'Any animal will eat a stuffed vine leaf, especially if the stuffing is with meat. It has to be something more specific,' Lady reasoned.

'We can try with classical music. I know that she loved it because that's what my uncle listens in the car non-stop,' Plamen said.

The kids went to Lady's room and typed "Classical music" into You Tube.

'Chopin? Bach? Does she have any preferences?' Lady asked.

'Just play something, it really doesn't matter,' Patso said.

They grabbed the laptop and went out. There they turned the volume up and suddenly the tender melody of "The Four Seasons" engulfed the whole garden.

'Ah, Vivaldi! This is "Spring",' the twins' dad shouted from somewhere. 'My favourite.'

'That's right, Dad, we're playing it for you,' Nikko grinned.

The kids pressed their noses, eyes and ears to the fence and waited for Fran's reaction.

Through the gaps between the planks they could clearly see the goat's backside. She didn't even turn.

'It doesn't work,' Nikko said.

'Let's try it on your mobile phone,' Lady turned to Patso. 'We can push it under the fence so it is closer to her.'

Patso hesitated. He had begged for that phone for half a year. It was still new. What if it got scratched or something else happened to it? His mum's boyfriend would be mad! Lady noticed his hesitation and tried a different tactic.

'Pleaaase!' She turned her enormous eyes towards him. They were so blue and so pretty that Patso stopped breathing for a second.

'You're horrible,' the boy said and handed her the phone.

Lady went to Google, found the music again and pushed the mobile phone under the fence. Second attempt. The goat continued munching grass, absent-mindedly.

'Pfran, come here!' Wacky called from the other end of the garden, where she and Vladimir were having yet another fight.

Fran raised her head from the grass and took a few steps in their direction, then stopped and turned back.

'She heard the music!' Nikko whispered.

'Shhh!' Lady nudged him in the ribs.

Fran walked to the phone and her eyes scanned the vicinity around. She lowered her head, then lifted it up. Then lowered it again and started sniffing the mobile phone. She licked it.

'Oh, no! She licked it. Yuck,' Nikko exclaimed.

'Shhh,' Lady snapped again.

'Pfraaan!'

Fran turned back, then looked at the mobile again, then turned back for a second time. In the end she picked the phone up in her mouth and ran towards her mistress.

'Ooops! She nicked my phone!' Patso was desperate. 'She better not break it or I'll be mad at the two of you!'

'What do you think that means,' Nikko asked. 'Is that your aunt or not?'

'It means that we spent too much time dealing with that nonsense!' Patso stood up, kicked a stone and walked off towards the gate.

'Where are you going,' Lady shouted after him.

'To pick up my phone, and then I am leaving.'

'Patso, wait, please!' Nikko rushed after him. 'I'm coming with you.'

'I don't want you to come with me. I want to go home and never ever have to deal neither with you nor with my uncle, my crazy grandmother or anyone else!'

'Nikko, leave him alone! He doesn't give a damn about us,' Lady said. 'Let him go if that's what he wants.'

Plamen turned back and shoot a glance at her. His eyes were burning with anger. She was never happy. She was constantly moaning at him. The boy pressed his lips together and didn't say a word. He slammed the gate and disappeared from the twins' sight.

'Why do you treat him in such an awful way,' Nikko asked his sister.

'Because for him these are just a few hours, then he is back in the town. We stay behind in this hole with the mad blockheads. That's why!'

'Still, it's not fair,' Nikko tried to defend his new friend.

'Defending him is not fair.' Lady went to her room and slammed the door again with such a force that the kitchen windows on the ground floor shook. She took the letter out of the drawer and read it again. 'Your secret is NOT safe with me... Ladybird!' How was it possible? No one ever called her Ladybird because everyone knew HOW MUCH she hated her name and what the consequences would be if she heard it. Still, someone knew. She reached in her pocket for Plamen's note. Her eyes scanned it again and compared all the letters; except the "L", all the other letters were totally different. That was the last thing she needed. Lady screamed with anger, crumpled the paper and then started tearing it with her teeth. She still was not able to use both her hands.

'You promised her to take her to our old neighbourhood, didn't you,' Christo turned to his wife when he heard the noise from upstairs.

'This afternoon, yes,' Marianna nodded.

Chapter Twenty

About a plaster covered in drawings, and a broken heart

'Are you sure you don't want to come with us, Nikko?' Marianna asked again.

'Yeees,' Nikko answered. 'I don't care about Lady's friends.'

'And I don't care about you,' his sister shouted from the car. 'Come on, Mum!'

'Can you, please, stop treating your brother like that,' her mother asked.

'I hope they are all going to be there. Do you think they will be there?'

'Of course, they will be, darling,' Marianna smiled.

The town was not far, it took about twenty-five minutes by car because there was a small traffic jam. Lady timed it. It would probably take an hour by bus, but it would still be worth it. After all, all her friends were there – Monnie, Maya, Steph! When they saw her, the girls started screaming with excitement and surrounded her like sparrows round a piece of bread. But the happiest to see her was Krassy.

'Aw, don't squeeze me like that! My arm hurts,' Lady giggled. And she started telling the girls about everything that had happened during the last month and a half – their moving, the boredom, her brother, Patso, his uncle, her broken wrist, the jar with her name on it, the jam, the goat who loves classical music or mobile phones, and the rabbit. The girls stood there, their jaws dropping, and listened. In the end, Lady stated that it was extremely boring and dull in the village, and she would give everything to be back with them.

'Boring!' It was Maya, who broke the silence first. 'It sounds super cool to me! I almost want to move there with you. "Here" is what I call boring!'

'Yes,' Monnie nodded. 'Is that Patso handsome?'

'You're crazy. It's so cool here. You are all together. I don't have anyone in that village.' Lady felt sad again.

'Come on, you'll be coming to see us. We'll visit you, too,' Krassy hugged her.

'It probably takes an hour by bus,' Lady said. 'Patso, handsome? Phew, he keeps tagging along. I'll tell my mother to come and pick you up next week. Do you want to come?'

'It's Maya's birthday party next week,' Monnie said.

'Haven't I invited you,' Maya asked.

'You have, of course,' Lady lied. 'You wrote to me, remember?'

'Lady, come on, darling, we are leaving!' her mother appeared unexpectedly.

'Leaving? But we've just arrived!'

'We'll come again. Please, we must go, I need to cook dinner, and I stayed too long at your Auntie Rossie's, too.'

'Uh, OK. Just wait for the girls to sign my plaster!' Lady proudly stretched her arm and the girls did their best to create a masterpiece that could win First Prize in any first-rate Kitsch competition. Flowers bloomed on the plaster, lightnings thundered, skulls grinned, hearts flew.

'Leave a little space for my brother and Patso, please,' Lady laughed.

'So, you want us to leave a little space for Patso, uh?' Monnie winked at the other girls and they all shouted in unison, 'Awwwww!'

'Hens!' Lady laughed, got up and dragged her feet towards the car. 'Bye, girls! See you next week! And don't master roller skating before my arm gets better!'

When they entered the car, the euphoria from meeting her friends was still fresh but Lady's heart was so heavy and small that it could fit in a walnut shell.

'So, that's how it all begins,' Lady thought. 'First, they learn how to roller skate without you, then they stop calling you, then they forget to invite you to their birthday parties, in the end they probably completely forget about you.' She tried to convince herself that it wouldn't happen, that she wouldn't allow it but then her mother killed her hopes.

'Darling, I heard you promising your friends a lift next week...' Marianna's words hung in the air before she continued. 'I think we told you. I am almost certain that we discussed it. Next week I am on a business trip and your father took some days off to join me.' Marianna

stammered, then gave up another detail, the last drop that made the cup of Lady's patience overflow. 'Your granny is coming to stay with you for a few days.'

Well, that was it. That was the end. Now she would definitely miss the birthday! Lady stared through the car window and her tears rolled down her chin. If she counted on her parents, nothing would change. She had to act on her own.

Chapter Twenty-One

In which running away from home fails, it becomes obvious that there is something about Plamen Senior, and it is revealed what kind of a woman Francesca really is

Their grandmother arrived from Cowneed on Monday and moved in Lady's room.

'Thank you, Mother,' Christo said.

'Well, I haven't seen them for two months, after all,' the old lady said and pressed the two children to her huge bosom. 'And each next time they are prettier and prettier! But they are only skin and bone, I've brought tasty meat and some vegetables from my own garden.'

'We don't eat meat,' Lady told her.

'Well, well! Who put that stupid notion in your heads?' The old lady said it loudly and slowly, then looked accusingly at her daughter-in-law.

'Children, you're going to do what your granny tells you, all right?' Marianna changed the subject.

'Of course,' the twins promised. As if they had a choice! In fact, they did. Lady had a plan, too. The moment their parents waved good-bye from the taxi, she went to her room and put the twenty lev note her granny had just given her into her rucksack. She had already packed clothes, her toothbrush, a sandwich, the card for Maya's birthday, a bottle of mineral water and 'School for Clowns' (she needed to finish the last few pages.) After she carefully checked to see whether she had forgotten anything, she threw the rucksack over her shoulder and tiptoed down the staircase. She sneaked out as quietly as a cat, but at the door she froze. On the floor, in front of her, lay an envelope with her name on it.

'Not again,' Lady thought, grabbed the envelope and ran as fast as she could towards the bus stop. As she approached, she saw Patso hanging about on the bench, busy with his phone. So, his precious phone had survived, after all. And what was he doing here without his uncle? Hadn't he and Nikko quarrelled, hadn't he sworn he'd never set his foot in the village again? Well, he could do what he liked. He could mind his own business. She decided to wait until he moved so instead of continuing towards the bus stop, she turned to the ravine, where she had followed Wacky some time ago. But now the old weirdo was not there to spy on her. Even better! Lady was sick of her tricks, too. But she was not entirely right because this time it was Wacky who was following her. Lady descended towards the lower part of the ravine and sat on the same stone as before. That's when she noticed the cigarette smoke again.

'Damn it.' She turned back and saw her. 'When did you come here. What do you want?'

'Are you running away?' Wacky asked.

'What's that to do with you?'

'It took you too long. I expected you to do it earlier. Do you have a place to go?'

'I'll find one. All my friends are there, I'll find where to sleep.'

'Hm,' Wacky said. 'Are you sure? They don't even invite you to their birthdays anymore.'

‘That’s not true! She had simply forgotten,’ Lady said angrily. ‘And what do you care, anyway? You’re stealing my youth anyway...’ She stopped, then anxiously added, ‘Am I going to die?’

‘If you die, it won’t have anything to do with me. Why have you decided that I’m stealing your youth?’

‘Because you keep a jar on your shelf with my name written on it.’

‘I don’t have a jar with your name on it.’ Wacky was genuinely surprised.

‘I saw it with my own eyes. “Lady”’.

‘You haven’t seen anything. I have a jar labelled “Lime”. I have a potion made of sloes as well. But the lime one is the one I use regularly; I take a soup spoon of it every morning before breakfast.’

Lady scowled and looked at Wacky. Could she have made a mistake? Then she asked directly, ‘Have you really turned Francesca into a goat?’

‘Is it possible at all someone to turn someone else into something else? It’s like suggesting that I can turn my son into this caterpillar,’ Wacky said and opened her fist. There, Lady saw a huge furry caterpillar, wriggling its length in all directions.

‘Oh, man!’ She remembered that she hadn’t seen Wacky’s son since their fight the previous week.

Jaqueline put the caterpillar in her pocket and looked straight ahead. ‘That Francesca was terribly shallow, the same as Camelia, Plamen’s mother.’

‘Plamen’s mother?’

‘Yes, she married my elder son, Plamen. In other words, your Plamen is named after his own father.’

‘He is not my Plamen,’ Lady huffed.

‘Plamen is four years older than Vladimir,’ Jaqueline continued. ‘When he got married to Camelia, I fought with him and with that empty-headed woman because I couldn’t stand her. Later, he packed his suitcase and disappeared to the other end of the world to become a surf teacher. I don’t get it. He didn’t abandon just me and his wife, but his son, too, as if we’ve never existed.’

‘Patso?’ Lady asked.

‘Patso,’ confirmed Jaqueline with a nod. ‘Nine years passed since then and I haven’t even heard from him. I think he simply couldn’t admit that I was right. Whatever. When I saw that something similar was going to happen to Vladimir, I interfered. I didn’t want to lose yet another son. At that time Vladko worked for a bank. Francesca was one of his clients. She had taken an enormous loan in order to buy a place in the centre of Great Town, near the bell tower, you know. She wanted to be able to go out every evening, party at expensive clubs and buy designer clothes. When her boyfriend left her, she started hanging around in the bank, fawned upon Vladko, made eyes at him and promised him the moon. In the beginning, he talked to me about her, shared his feelings. But when I discovered that the two of them had moved in together and were thinking of getting married, I was firmly against it. It was clear as a day that she was only using him.’

‘Maybe, but you can’t interfere in other people’s lives like this,’ Lady looked at her.

‘No, you can’t. That’s why I packed my luggage and moved to this village. I couldn’t stand to see him like that. Luckily, that bimbo also trotted away and left him. She probably found someone richer.’

Since then, he has become convinced that I’ve cast a magic spell on her and have taken her with me. Like I’ve kidnapped her so she couldn’t have any access to him.’

'By turning her into a rabbit? Was she as ugly as that rabbit of yours?' Lady asked.
'Of course not. She was beautiful,' Wacky said.
'I don't understand. Was she that rabbit and then the goat, or wasn't she?' Lady asked again.
'You don't need to understand anything anyway. It's enough that your head is full of your own problems. Now, you think you are going to be happy at that place you're going to, right? But at the same time your parents will worry senseless about you and all sorts of thoughts will cross their minds. Including the thought that someone might have turned you into something. Sometimes people prefer to look for explanation in various imaginary scenarios rather than accept the truth the way it is.'
'I don't think you can do such things,' Lady challenged.
'It's not a bad idea to be cautious, though,' Wacky winked at her, then exhaled a cloud of smoke above her head. 'Otherwise one day someone may turn you into a ladybird.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

In which someone is stunned, and Dr Muradjev is in action again

Lady's jaw dropped. 'Are you the one who leaves those letters for me?' she asked directly. Since there was no reply, Lady took the envelope out of her pocket and waved it in front of Wacky's face. 'I've asked you whether it's you!'
'Why don't you open it?' Jaqueline suggested. 'Maybe you'll find the answer inside.'
Lady opened the envelope and read, 'I promise that your secret is safe with me, Lady.'
'Now I am totally confused,' Lady frowned. 'Are you going to blackmail me or what?'
'This looks like a love letter to me,' Jaqueline observed.
'Love letter? What do you mean?'
'I mean that it sounds like it's written by someone who wants to get your attention,' Wacky explained and added, 'Nonnna, nonaanam, hassss little.'
'Whaaaat? I didn't get a word of that!'
'Nonnna you little oo no.' Wacky turned her frightened eyes to the girl, which made it clear that she didn't understand her own gibberish either. 'How uhuhuh I don't know ahhhh world.'
'Wait, wait, stop! Don't talk!' Lady looked around. 'Help! Hey! Is there anyone around?' she shouted as loudly as she could. Then she jumped up and continued shouting. The thought to leave the witch here alone and return to her own plan crossed her mind. No one had seen them talking, and it was obvious that it was Jaqueline who had left the letter for her, in other words, she knew her WHOLE name. Who else could that be? From that point of view, it was a good thing she had lost her ability to speak. But something in the old woman's eyes revealed her terror; that stopped the girl. For the first time Lady realised that Wacky was neither pretending nor meaning to scare her. Their neighbour looked awfully frightened herself. At that moment Lady noticed someone coming downhill. Patso!
'Plamen!' Lady shouted. 'Quickly! I think something is happening to her. She started talking gibberish.'
Plamen stretched his hand to Jaqueline. Lady pushed her from behind and the two children dragged the woman on the road, then carefully and slowly positioned her on the bench at the bus stop.
'Nanannno nnnn oii go?' Wacky asked.
'Calm down, calm down. Everything is going to be all right,' Lady assured her.

'It's best if she doesn't move. You stay here with her. I'll go and bring the doctor.' Plamen ran towards the surgery. Lady only nodded. Wacky's eyes were fixed in the distance. From time to time they turned to the girl but were anxious, glazed, as if something unexplainable was happening in her head.

Lady was shaking. 'Rest your head,' she said quietly and offered her shoulder to her neighbour. 'Good girl.'

'What if something happens to her now?' she worried. Well, it HAD already happened. But what? Had one of Jacky's magic tricks hit her back? Or all those memories about her sons? What a life she had had! No wonder she had gone completely mad.

'I bet you haven't finished the book yet, am I right?' Lady started. 'You just said it to scare me again. You want everyone to be afraid of you. But I am not afraid, is that clear? I've never been afraid. I'll tell you something. I reached that paragraph in which Irina Vladimirovna explains that the presence of clowns in the town makes everyone happier. You're not exactly a clown and on the top of it you're completely literate - you've put comma in the right place in that letter. But you didn't scare me. I don't even care how you've found out my real name. When I was telling my friends about my life in the village, they envied me for knowing such a weir-' She paused. 'Such a strange woman.'

'Nooor druuu me,' Wacky answered.

'Hahaha,' Lady laughed. 'Now you completely deserve your nickname, honestly.'

Soon Patso came back, followed by Dr Muradjiev and nurse Mihneva, who were out of breath. This month the sun finally shone on their street, too – first Lady, now Mrs Neckova. They couldn't remember having such luck since 1988, when the doctor had to assist with the birth of Pepi but only because it was an emergency; and on the same evening Mr Petrov broke his leg on his way back from the party in honour of his new born daughter. But this was no time for dwelling in old memories. The situation required quick reaction and the doctor busied himself right away, at the bus stop. Lady was holding Jaqueline's hand while waiting for the ambulance to arrive from the town. Before joining the patient on the ambulance, Dr Muradjiev stopped for a second and put his hand on Lady's shoulder. 'Well done, darling. Who knows what could have happened if you weren't there,' he said.

'What's wrong with her?'

'Stroke,' the doctor from the town explained and gave a sign to his colleague to hurry up. Lady didn't know what 'stroke' was, but she was going to google it. 'She is going to be all right, though, isn't she?'

'We'll do everything we can. We're taking her to the town. Can you, please, let her family know?'

The ambulance squealed and shot off up the road.

'I'm afraid she took you uncle with her; he is in her pocket,' Lady told Plamen.

'What do you mean?'

'It looks like she has turned him into a caterpillar. I saw him in her fist.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

In which Lady, Nikko and Plamen become best friends

It was amazing how the twins' grandmother managed to raise alert in the whole village only five minutes after the disappearance of her granddaughter. When Nikko told her that Lady's rucksack was missing, too, the old woman was convinced that the girl had run away. So, she took immediate measures to get help. When Plamen and Lady entered the garden forty-five

minutes later, they came upon a mini village council, consisting of Mrs Spaska, Granny Nikiphora, the Petrovs and Granny Gina from their street. Mr Petrov was nervously jangling his car keys. His moustache was sticking out in all directions, tiny drops of sweat at the base of it. Granny Nikiphora kept repeating 'What? What?' and because she was partially deaf, everyone was shouting and answering together, which didn't lead to anything productive – Granny Nikiphora continued not hearing or understanding. Mrs Spaska spotted the children first and released a piercing scream, 'Here they aaaaaare!' All heads turned as one towards the door, but Lady's grandmother pushed the others aside and approached her granddaughter, threateningly raising her finger. She had prepared a nice speech for Lady but when she was about to open her mouth and close her eyes to concentrate better on what she had to say, Lady breathed out, 'Mrs Jaqueline had a stroke; they've taken her to the hospital and the caterpillar is in her pocket!'

'What do you mean, a stroke?' Mrs Petrova jumped.

'Which hospital?' screamed Mrs Spaska.

'What?' Granny Nikiphora asked.

'I can drive you there,' Mr Petrov offered.

The crowd rushed out through the door and headed to Mr Petrov's car. Patso noticed a familiar silhouette in the bottom of the garden; the figure was standing aghast, not saying a word.

'Aaaah!' Lady shouted when she spotted him and pointed at him.

'Mum!' the silhouette said. 'Oh my God, it's my fault! What did I do to her!' Vladimir ran towards the gate, following the others.

'And so, the caterpillar was in her hand only to fool me again!' Lady stomped her foot.

'Or maybe she has just taken the spell off him, so he doesn't remain a caterpillar for the rest of his life, in case Wacky kicks the bucket,' Plamen suggested.

'It's time to stop with this sheer nonsense,' Nikko interrupted them. 'Come and tell me everything – Granny tore my nerves apart. Do you have any idea how much moaning I was subjected to when she found out that you'd run away? Do you have even the slightest idea, huh? She even called our parents. Frightened them to death.'

'Where is she now?' Lady asked.

'Back on the phone. To present them with the consoling information that you're back home after saving Jaqueline's life.'

'Follow me,' Lady waved at the boys and rushed to her room. Plamen smiled broadly. He had finally made peace with his new friends. God knows how long he would have stayed at that bus stop, before finding the courage to find them and apologise for the other day and the fuss he had made about his mobile phone. Now he would have many more trips, taking the bus from the village to the town and back only to spend some time with them. He wanted to move to the village, too. It was so boring in Swamp Vortex. The boys there didn't have so much fun. It had been fun playing 'Catapult' but then Vihren broke his leg when he jumped from a roof and they decided that they didn't want to continue playing tug anymore. On good days, they chose football but only if everyone was there. There were so many interesting things in the village – the ravine, the wood, his friends and Lady were here. But his mother didn't want to hear a word about contacting her mother-in-law.

'Plameeen,' Lady shouted from her window.

'Yes, yes, I'm coming!' he shouted back and briskly hopped over the stairs with his long legs.

'Here, it's called "aphasia"'. The children started reading but the more they read, the less they understood.

'Does this mean that she won't be able to talk anymore?' Nikko asked.

'She wasn't talking much anyway, only mumbled,' Plamen laughed.

'Nonsense,' Lady raised her voice. 'You don't know her at all. And you, you should be ashamed of yourself, she is your granny, after all!'

'What's the matter with you?' her brother asked.

'Wacky Jacky is completely different from what people see. She only pretends. I hope she'll get better.'

'Of course she'll get better,' their granny interfered. 'I just talked with Mrs Spaska. They went to the hospital. The doctors said that it was a light stroke, but they are going to keep her there for a week or two. Her son is going to move in and take care of her until she recovers completely.'

'The Caterpillar!' Lady smiled happily. 'That means that you might do the same as well!' She looked at Patso.

'Well, at least until school starts again. Possibly. I have to talk with my mother.'

'There is a whole month till September,' Nikko pointed out.

'Plus, now, while she's away, we can...' Lady started explaining enthusiastically something and the boys sniggered.

The last month of the summer was promising to be even better.

Chapter Twenty-Four

About a patterned goat and her merry mistress

'Plameeen!' Mr Mulberry shouted from Jaqueline's garden so loudly, that the children heard him in Nikko's room on the first floor, where they were having a competition about who was going to build a higher card tower.

'He must have seen her,' Lady startled.

'You tied her up at the back so she doesn't bleat and where no one could see her, didn't you?' Nikko turned to his friend.

'I may have forgotten to tie her,' Plamen cast an embarrassed look at Nikko.

'Plamen, come down immediately or I'll come up,' his uncle's voice reached them again.

'Let's go, we're coming with you,' Lady jumped. 'After all, we are all involved in it.'

The children slowly descended the stairs. When they reached the kitchen, Vladimir was already waiting for them there, together with the twins' parents.

'It's not funny at all to paint the poor goat like that,' Marianna said.

'That's called "art",' Lady started looking for excuses. 'There's a little Monet and a little Cezanne there.'

'In fact, it's a surprise,' Nikko added. 'We were thinking of putting a bow, a red nose and a clown's wig on her, too.'

'To put what on her?' Mr Mulberry was barely containing his composure.

'A wig and a clown's nose. She'll get the joke, you'll see,' Lady said.

'I want you to get the hose and wash her off. Immediately. Am I clear?' Mr Mulberry shouted.

'Well...' Lady mumbled under her nose.

'No "well-s",' her father cut her in the middle of the sentence. 'Mrs Jaqueline is coming home today. Do you want her to suffer a heart attack this time?'

Lady didn't know what heart attack was and she didn't want Wacky to return to the hospital. But she didn't like the fact that they had to wash the goat, either – they'd put so much effort

into painting her with the paint from the basement. She frowned and led the group; the boys followed her. Fran was quietly grazing in the garden. Her whole body was covered in small iridescent spots – an impressionist canvass, created by Lady. The tail glowed in yellow, the ears were blue and so were the hooves, leaving blue traces on the grass.

‘But she’s such a cutie, isn’t she!’ Nikko clapped his hands.

‘We can at least dress her up for a photo and wash her afterwards,’ Plamen suggested.

‘Good idea! I’ll go and get the wig and the nose,’ Lady said.

When she came back, the boys had already put the bowtie – big and pink, covered in yellow dots – around the goat’s neck. Lady plonked the wig on her head but there was a slight problem with the nose because the goat didn’t want to stay still and the red sponge kept falling off.

‘The stupid nose will ruin the whole thing,’ Nikko said.

‘We can glue it on with a silicon gun’ Lady suggested.

‘You are not thinking straight, are you? That would burn her!

We can try with tape,’ Plamen said.

Lady hugged Fran, patted her and told her soothingly how pretty they were going to make her, and how happy her beloved mistress was going to be when she saw her. At the same time Nikko pressed the nose to the goat and Patso attached it with tape that went behind the ears and back down along the muzzle.

‘Done,’ he shouted triumphantly.

‘Voila!’ Lady squealed. ‘She’s so pretty!’

But Fran didn’t want to be pretty at all; in fact, she was quite angry. She started shaking her head and jumping all over the place, and while the kids were trying to hold her, she scratched Nikko’s hand with her horns. Nikko screamed and let her go. Fran jumped and ran. The children ran after her but then the goat took speed and jumped over Wacky’s fence, landing straight in the twin’s garden. She trotted through Marianna’s flower beds, pulled the washing from the washing line, tore the rope and got tangled up in the new bedding with the fairy pattern that her parents had brought Lady as a present from their business trip to Guarantee.

‘My fairiiiiies,’ the girl screamed when she raised on her toes and saw what happened. She ran into their garden but was knocked down on the ground by the rogue goat-clown who, on the top of everything else, was now wearing a cloak, covered with fairies. Fran charged along the street. She ran, jumped and tossed, followed by the stumbling children, Mr Mulberry, Marianna, Christo and Granny Nikiphora, who kept asking what’s going on, but no one had the time to answer. And then, in that exact moment, a car screeched to a halt, and Mr Petrov’s bushy moustache appeared from the left. From the right – the frowning eyebrows of Mrs Petrova. The back door opened, and they saw Jaqueline’s leg. Then – the rest of her body. For a moment, the whole street drowned in complete silence. Wacky slowly got out of the car with the assistance of her son, who was the first to recover his senses and rushed to help her.

‘Mother, please ignore this bustle here,’ he said, waving his hand, but Wacky stared at the small animal in front of her. Fran froze in front of her mistress and stared back, only releasing a random ‘maaa’ from time to time.

‘Is this Pfffran?’ Wacky asked, and her eyes searched for the kids. They met Lady’s eyes.

‘We wanted to...’ the girl started but stopped; a gurgle came straight out of Jaqueline’s throat.

At the beginning, it was barely audible but then it gained momentum and poured out like a hot lava, made of laughter. Guttural and uncontrollable, Wacky Jacky was laughing and laughing, and her laughter was so infectious that soon everyone joined and laughed their heads off. Only poor Fran stood in the centre in all her glory and nervously pawed the ground.

‘I’m coming, sweetheart,’ Patso went up to her and started to unstick her costume.

Wacky approached him and reached for the red nose. When Patso gave it to her, she put it over her own nose and said, ‘Now we are completely alike, aren’t we, Pfffran?’

The audience was totally overtaken by joy and Wacky did an improvised curtsey, crouching slightly and raising her skirts. Fran limped towards her and brushed her horns in her mistress’s thigh. They both limped towards Wacky’s garden, towards the old shabby house, towards the shelves with potions made of blackthorn, lime and who knows what else, towards the memories of the passing summer and the promises of an unusually enduring friendship, which couldn’t happen neither in Golden nor in Swamp Vortex, nor anywhere else in the whole Great Town.

‘Your granny is so cool!’ Nikko patted Plamen on the back and the boy grinned. He had taken that job for the money but ended up gaining a grandmother and friends as well.

‘Hey, Wacky, what happened with the caterpillar?’ Lady shouted behind her.

‘And you’re asking! It is over there, in front of your eyes,’ Jacky nodded towards her son. ‘You didn’t expect me to leave him in that state, having in mind that I might kick the bucket, did you? Who was going to feed him with mulberry leaves then? You?’

Lady laughed. It was great to have Wacky back home. Just in time for their birthday.

Chapter Twenty-Five

About the best birthday at the end of the summer and an equal score

‘Hurry up, Dad! They’ll be here any moment!’ Lady was storming around the garden, setting her birthday table up with napkins, plates, glasses and cutlery, with beautiful handmade paper butterflies, spread among them.

Lady and her mother had been cutting and gluing all day, and her brother had installed a small fan under the table that blew cool air upwards, between the planks of the table, and made the butterflies look like they were going to take off any moment. The doctor had removed the cast of Lady’s wrist a couple of days earlier and now she had a feeling that her arm was light as a feather. She also felt like she was flying because of the whole euphoria around their birthday. Their father was moaning and puffing while trying to hang garlands of fairy lights across the garden – the cords either got tangled in the sycamore tree branches or hung down at one side. In the end he finally succeeded, and the light bathed the garden.

‘It’s so wonderful!’ Lady clapped her hands and pirouetted. The skirts of her dress followed her movements and drew a wide circle around her.

‘Pure lush,’ Nikko added and reached for a sandwich from one of the platters on the table, but his sister smacked his hand.

‘What the hell are you doing? These are for the guests!’

‘I don’t understand why you should mind – I am one of the guests, too,’ Nikko snapped and despite her protests managed to cram a sandwich in his mouth. Lady clenched her fists and cast a sour glance at him.

There was a knock on the door and a tousled head peeped from behind it.

‘Hi, Patso,’ Nikko shouted.

'Hey, man,' Plamen greeted them and sneaked in the garden.

'Wow, Lady!' His reaction was genuine.

Lady felt embarrassed. 'Well, it's only because of the birthday. Otherwise I really hate dresses,' she explained and smoothed the fabric with her hands.

'You are beautiful!' Plamen managed to regain his composure and handed her a bunch of yellow dahlias. 'They are from my grandma's garden.'

'I can see that. Thanks,' Lady said and took the flowers to the kitchen. No one could see her there, so she closed her eyes and spent a long moment, savouring their scent. Then she put the flowers in a vase but while she was arranging them, she noticed a small note, hidden between the stems. Her name was written on it. Her heart jumped. Lady opened the small piece of paper and read, 'Happy birthday, Lady! I think that the ladybirds are the prettiest of all insects but since you don't like being called by your real name, I am never going to use it. Your secret is safe with me, but I want you to know that I learnt it from my uncle, and I cannot guarantee that he'll stay silent.'

Lady folded the note and put it in her pocket. So, that's who the mysterious stranger was! That time the handwriting was the same as the one on the first note. It was clear that Patso had made a good effort in trying to mislead her when she put him under that test. He was good though; she smiled and shook her head.

'Sit down,' Nikko turned to Plamen. 'Let's use the moment and catch up before the hens arrive – then we will not be able to hear our own thoughts because of their clucking.'

'I heard you,' Lady shouted from the kitchen. 'If you continue this way, I am not going to give you your present!'

'And you are not going to get one from me,' Nikko retorted.

Lady got out and her eyes stopped on Plamen, who blushed.

'How did your uncle find...,' she whispered in his ear.

'Well, he is a detective after all, isn't he?' the boy smiled.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sharp sound of a car horn and the three kids jumped like springs. Seconds later Maya, Monnie, Krassy and Steph rushed into the garden. They looked around and started praising the place; they kept exclaiming how beautiful, different and interesting it was and they managed to lift the mood up even higher. The rest of the day continued the same way. The children played, jumped and screamed. At one point, Patso went to fetch his uncle and his granny for a group photo.

When Jaqueline entered the garden, the jaws of all the girls, who were seeing her for the first time, dropped in shock. She had made a special effort to leave an unforgettable impression, of course. A red ribbon was trailing through her tousled hair. She was dressed in a plaited wine-red dress with puff sleeves and stockings in red, blue and white tartan.

'Happy birthday, my darlings!' her voice rumbled, and she handed the twins a pie with cherry jam. 'Your favourite!'

'Come and sit with us,' Nikko invited her.

It was difficult to decide what was the culmination of the day – the appearance of the neighbour or the moment when the twins' mother carried out the big, two-layered birthday cake, decorated with her children's favourite Tortoise Ninjas. Wacky took her seat, Marianna and Christo lit the candles and all the guests sang 'Happy Birthday!' Then the parents said, 'Now make a wish and blow the candles,' then quickly disappeared in the house. When they came back, they placed a huge box on the ground in front of the children.

'This is for you,' Marianna and Christo said but the moment Lady and Nikko moved closer to open it, the box started moving around the garden.

‘What’s going on?’ The children rushed after it.

When the box finally got tired and stopped to catch its breath, Lady and Nikko quickly tore the wrapping paper and Lady peeped inside. She squeaked with excitement – there was a real... sweet...fluffy...

‘Puppyyyyy!’

Lady took the puppy out and covered it with kisses. Nikko was very happy, too. The rest of the children clustered around the unexpected live attraction, waiting impatiently for their turn to hug it.

Then Christo’s voice came from the table, ‘Time for cake!’ The children left the puppy to trot around and get acquainted with its new home in peace and took their seats around the table.

‘Is there any space left in your stomachs for the cherry pie as well?’ Marianna asked when she noticed their empty plates, pointing at Jaqueline’s present.

‘I want some!’ Lady passed her plate to her mother and smiled nicely at their neighbour, who responded with a giggle.

‘Let me do it,’ Wacky offered and started putting the pieces on the plates. After she finished, she wished the children good appetite and stood up. But with the first bite...

‘Yuuuuck!’ All the kids shouted at the same time and started spitting in their napkins.

‘This pie is packed with salt!’ Krassy made a disgusted face.

‘It’s so salty that it’s almost bitter,’ Maya added.

Nikko and Lady exchanged glances and burst into laughter. They laughed so long and so hard in front of the bemused eyes of their friends, that tears ran down their cheeks.

‘Two-two, sweethearts,’ Wacky winked. ‘But the match hasn’t started properly yet!’

With those words, she left the yard, limping, leaving Lady and Nikko’s guests in a state of complete confusion. The episode was soon forgotten when Christo took out the fireworks, made by Nikko a week earlier. The party lasted till dark. When the twins finally found themselves alone after taking turns to hug their new furry friend, they both decided to name him... Can you guess how?

Wacky!

THE END