

ADVENT CALENDAR

Street



R.J. BERRY

It's the 1st of December and Christmas is coming to Raucous Road, Manchester, but twin sisters Rachel and Clara Hart have a problem. In fact, they have several.

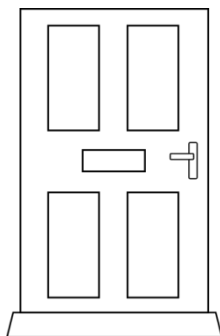
They've been banned from talking about Christmas, their enemy Eric Fergus is tormenting them, and worst of all, Dad has forgotten to buy their advent calendars. Is everything going to go wrong this year?

Then Rachel and Clara realise that the answer to their problems is right in front of them, on their street, where behind every door there is a new surprise waiting to be discovered. Their entire street can become a living advent calendar!

One day at a time, the sisters try to bring their community together. Just as well, because an even bigger threat is coming, and soon Rachel and Clara will need all the help they can get. Is this going to be the last ever Christmas on Raucous Road for the Harts?

There's never a dull moment on Advent Calendar Street, in a December full of deception, dastardly plots and deep-fried chocolate truffles. Rachel and Clara face a race against time to save their home before that final door opens, or their lives will never be the same again.

ADVENT CALENDAR STREET



R.J. BERRY

SMASHER

First published by The author 2026.

This edition published by The author 2026.

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For support, advice and inspiration, thanks to

Kurt Berry, Lucy Brant, Nathaniel Berry, Bradley Berry, Sylvia Berry, Miriam Berry, Lyla Berry, Craig Berry, Steven Berry, Pat Berry, Rob Berry, Jenny Duong, Colin Wray, Cat Weldon, and all the fine people of Greater Manchester.

For Kurt

Chapter one

Banned!

The first thing Rachel noticed was that the skeletons had disappeared.

It was early November, and Rachel Hart was looking out of her bedroom window, from the flat above the cafe at 24 Raucous Road, Manchester. She pressed her face up against the glass so she could see every house along the street, and confirmed that they had all taken their Halloween decorations down by now. Although Rachel was sad that all the skeletons, bats, pumpkins and witches had disappeared for another year, she also knew that this meant Christmas was coming.

Rachel smiled. She noticed there was condensation on the window where she had been breathing onto it. Quickly, before it faded, she drew an image of a man with a round belly, a bushy beard and a floppy, pointed hat.

“Bye bye skeletons, hello Santa,” she said.

Rachel’s twin sister Clara, who shared the room, was sitting on her bed trying to read *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, illustrated edition. Last night she had fallen asleep while reading it, and slept all night with her head resting uncomfortably on pages 36 to 37.

Clara looked up at Rachel, not really understanding what she had just heard. “Pardon?” she said.

“Come and have a look outside,” urged Rachel.

Clara put down her book and joined her sister at the window.

“See?” Rachel said.

“See what? Everything looks normal.”

“Exactly. Bye bye skeletons, hello Santa,” Rachel repeated.

Clara scrunched up her face in puzzlement, so Rachel grabbed her sister’s hands and initiated eye contact, maximum intensity for maximum impact.

“It’s nearly Christmas!” Clare yelled, before doing a little jump on the spot.

“You got it!”

Clara stopped jumping and stared hard at her sister. An idea was forming in her mind. Finally, she blurted it out: “We need to start planning!”

Linking arm in arm, the sisters ran out of the bedroom and bounced down the stairs, chanting, “Christmas! Christmas! Christmas!” in unison with every step as they descended.

At the bottom of the stairs they nearly bumped into Stanley, their big brother, wearing his apron, carrying a tray full of dirty plates and cups. He was in sixth-form college now, so if he didn’t have a class in the morning, he would help Dad in the cafe. “What are you two shouting about?” Stanley asked.

“We need to speak to Dad,” Rachel blurted out.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea right now,” Stanley replied. “We’re in the middle of the morning rush. Six builders have come in and ordered mega deluxe breakfasts.”

“But it’s urgent!” said Clara.

The girls ran past Stanley, accidentally knocking his tray so it started to wobble. Knives and forks rattled while a half-drunk mug of tea slid all the way across the tray and launched itself over the edge. Quick as a flash, Stanley steadied the tray with one hand and grabbed the mug by the handle,

mid-air, just in time to stop it smashing on the floor. Not a single drop was spilt.

Clara and Rachel found their Dad in the kitchen. He was sweating as he stood over four pans on the hob, one full of bacon, one of sausages, one of eggs and another of baked beans. The girls approached and stood on either side of him.

“Dad, do you realise it’s nearly Christmas?” Clara asked.

Dad glanced down at her, trying to keep an eye on his pans at the same time. Clara had her long, light brown hair tied back into a neat ponytail. She stood looking up at him expectantly.

“Christmas?” he responded. “Isn’t that months away?”

Rachel answered. Her hair was darker, and messier, but she had the same, hopeful expression on her face that her sister did. “It’s less than two months, Dad! We need to start making plans,” she said.

“Plans?” He was distracted by a sausage. He had tried to turn them all over with his spatula, but one had got loose and rolled into the bacon pan.

“Yes, Dad, plans!” Rachel said. “We haven’t even got the tree up yet. Please could you get it down from the loft later?”

“It’s a bit early for putting the tree up, Rachel.”

“Come to think of it, I need a new Christmas jumper,” said Clara. “I saw one with a robin on it that I liked last time we went to the market. We should buy it before they sell out.”

“And while you’re out shopping for the jumper, Dad,” Rachel said, “maybe you could make a start on our presents,” she said. “First of all, I want some new trainers because mine are getting a bit worn out.”

“And I want a new notebook, a really good quality one,” Clara chimed in.

“A tennis racket would be nice, too, because I’ve wanted to start playing ever since we watched Wimbledon in the summer,” Rachel went on.

“I’ve been thinking that surely we’re old enough now to get our own mobile phones,” Clara added. “Don’t you agree, Dad?”

“I’m not sure,” Dad said. “Money might be a bit tight this year, girls. Christmas is about more than just getting new things, you know.”

“We’re not asking for a lot, Dad,” Rachel protested. “I was going to ask for a dog, but if you really need to save money, maybe we could just get a parrot.”

“I doubt that a parrot would be much cheaper than a dog,” Dad said.

“I’ll accept a goldfish, a turtle, or a stick insect,” replied Rachel.

Now Dad was trying to scrape a burnt rasher of bacon from the pan, sweating even more as he struggled. “I can probably afford an ant,” he said. “Just one.”

“I’d like a treehouse,” said Clara. “You can make it yourself, Dad, so it doesn’t cost anything.”

“Well, I’d have to buy the wood,” Dad replied. “Plus, we don’t have a tree.”

“Okay, then I’d like a tree,” Clara said.

“I’m finding it a little hard to concentrate at the moment, girls,” Dad said. “Could you please drop this for now and let me finish this order?”

Stanley appeared again and called over from the doorway. “The builders are getting agitated, Dad. Are the breakfasts nearly ready?”

“What’s ‘agitated’?” asked Rachel, ignoring Stanley.

“A-G-I-T-A-T-E-D,” replied Clara. She always knew the long words. “It means they are getting fed up, impatient, angry.”

“It means they’re getting hungry!” said Stanley.

Clara carried on talking. "And would you be able to have a word with our teacher about the school nativity play, Dad?" she asked. "I really want a good part this year. Last year I was the front end of the donkey."

"I was the back end," said Rachel.

"I thought you two made a great donkey," said Dad, before tutting as he accidentally broke the yolk in one of the eggs he was frying, sending yellow ooze all over the pan.

With a pop, four slices of toast shot up from the toaster beside him. "I'll butter these and take them out," Stanley said. "That might keep them quiet for a minute."

"Speaking of getting hungry," Rachel said, "I think we should get a huge turkey this year, because I like the leftovers."

"Yes, that's very economical," Clara said. Rachel gave her a quizzical look, so Clara did her thing again. "E-C-O-N-O-M-I-C-A-L. It means we'll get good value for money."

"Perfect," Rachel said. "We can have turkey sandwiches, and turkey soup, and turkey curry."

"And turkey pie," added Clara.

"Yes, and turkey toasties."

"Turkey stew."

"Turkey burgers."

"Turkey noodles."

"Turkey salad."

"We could even dry some and make turkey jerky."

Dad's face had turned a deep shade of red. He was losing his temper. "Please, please, please stop saying 'turkey'," he begged. Clara and Rachel tried not to laugh.

“Okay, Dad,” said Clara. “We need to talk about our advent calendars anyway. Maybe you should get them next time you go to the newsagents.”

“Ones with nice pictures inside,” added Rachel.

“I really can’t talk about this right now,” Dad said.

“We also need to buy a box of Christmas cards as soon as possible,” Clara said, “so we can start giving them out at school.”

Suddenly Dad slammed his spatula down and it landed in the baked beans, sending them flying everywhere. One bean landed on Rachel’s shoes, another whizzed past Clara’s head, and another hit Dad right between the eyes. “That’s it!” he cried. “I can’t take any more of this.”

“But it’s Christmas, Dad.”

“No it isn’t, Rachel.”

“I think you’ll find it is, Dad.”

“I think you’ll find it isn’t, Clara, because, as of this moment, I am banning Christmas!”

What!?!? Suddenly, the whole kitchen fell silent, apart from the sizzling of the bacon and the plopping of the remaining beans.

Stanley had returned to the kitchen. “I don’t think you can just ban Christmas, Dad,” he said, cautiously.

“Let me clarify,” said Dad, wiping his head. “I am not banning it completely. But I am banning all talk of Christmas until the 1st of December. Starting...” he paused for dramatic effect, looking at his watch, “...now!”

“But, Dad, that’s—” started Clara.

Dad held up his hand to interrupt. “Banned,” he said.

“Can I just say—” started Rachel.

The hand went up again. “Banned,” said Dad.

“But what about—”

“Banned,” said Dad.

“Not even”

“Banned.”

“Maybe we could–”

“Banned.”

“I promise we’ll–”

“Banned! Banned! Banned!”

He sounded like he really meant it.

Chapter two

The best advent calendar ever invented

Three very long weeks later, on Friday the 30th of November, Clara and Rachel were walking along Raucous Road on their way home from school.

“I can’t believe it’s the 1st of December tomorrow,” Clara said, beaming. “The ban is nearly over, and we can finally start planning for Christmas properly.”

“I’m really surprised Dad kept it going so long,” Rachel said. “He’s not usually this strict, is he?”

“He’s the opposite of strict,” Clara said. “Remember that time he started to tell us off for not tidying our room, but then he tripped up over a shoe, banged his head on the bookshelf and started laughing hysterically, and then thanked us for cheering him up?”

“That was so funny,” Rachel said. “It was like that time he was having a serious conversation with Stanley about how he hadn’t done his maths homework, and Stanley got upset about how hard it was, so Dad ended up doing it for him.”

“He did his English homework, too,” Clara said. “Still only got a B grade though.”

“I think he must be stressed out at the moment,” Rachel said, “and we did take the pestering a little bit too far. Hopefully he’ll start getting excited now Christmas is closer.”

“And the best bit,” said Clara, “is that we get our advent calendars tomorrow. That’s actually my favourite part of Christmas.”

“Mine, too,” said Rachel. “It’s the pictures I love. A different one every day, so there’s always something new to look forward to.”

“I think the chocolate is the best bit,” said Clara.

“At school today I heard about all the amazing types of advent calendars you can get now,” Rachel said. “For instance, I heard there was one where you get a whole bar of chocolate every day instead of just one piece.”

“Really?” said Clara.

“And I heard there was one that plays a different Christmas song every day,” Rachel went on.

“That’s amazing.”

“There are loads of other types, too. There’s one that shoots out snow every time you open a door.”

“Surely it’s not real snow. It’s probably sugar or something.”

“I know, but still, it’s like your own personal snowstorm every morning.”

The two of them were standing outside the cafe now, so Clara put her finger to her lips, suggesting they should lower their voices. Dad hadn’t said they couldn’t talk about Christmas when they were out, but doing it so close to the cafe where he might hear them was risky.

Rachel didn’t seem concerned. “I heard that in France, you can get one where there is a croissant behind every door,” she said. “In Italy, you get a slice of pizza .”

“That’s breakfast sorted,” laughed Clara, quietly. She glanced inside the cafe. Dad was behind the counter, but thankfully he was busy talking to Charlie from number 14.

“You can even get advent calendars for dogs, so they have a dog biscuit every day,” said Rachel. “Isn’t that cute?”

“Very cute.”

“And you’ll love this one, Clara,” Rachel went on. “I heard there was one where you get a brand new book behind every door. A whole book!”

Clara was starting to doubt that these Rachel’s wild and wonderful advent calendars were all genuine, and she was about to say just that, when the girls were interrupted by another voice.

“I bet you two will just get one of those boring advent calendars with silly pictures in and tiny bits of chocolate,” said the voice.

Clara and Rachel turned to look in the direction that the voice came from. Both of their hearts sank. It was Eric Fergus, who was in the year above them at school, and lived at number 6 Raucous Road. He was leaning up against a lamppost, trying to be cool, with his blonde, spiky hair. He had his school shirt untucked and his collar turned upwards. He always had his collar turned upwards, for some reason.

He was smiling at Clara and Rachel, or rather sneering at them. Eric always tormented the Hart sisters whenever he got the opportunity. They didn’t really know why, although Stanley had a theory that Eric was jealous because he used to be the cutest child on the street, before Clara and Rachel came along and everyone stopped paying attention to him. The sisters didn’t really agree with Stanley. They thought Eric had just been mean since the moment he was born.

“Oh, hello, Eric, how are you?” said Rachel, nervously.

Eric ignored her. “I’m getting the best advent calendar that’s ever been invented,” he said. “It’s got money in it.”

Sometimes, if they really needed to, Clara and Rachel could communicate without speaking. Right now, Rachel looked into Clara's eyes, and Clara looked back into Rachel's, and they knew what each other was thinking. The thought they were both having was that Eric was a massive idiot, and they wished he would go away.

"Yeah, I get a £10 note every time I open a door," Eric went on. "I'll be loaded by the end of the month."

"And do you get a picture?" asked Rachel.

Eric scoffed. "As if I want a picture of some holly or a snowman, or a stupid reindeer with a stupid red nose. With £20 a day, so I can buy whatever I want."

"I thought you said it was £10," said Clara.

"No I didn't," snapped Eric, angrily. "I said it was £20. You should try listening, Rachel or Clara, whichever one you are."

The girls looked at each other. Of all the things that could annoy Rachel and Clara, getting the two of them mixed up — or not even bothering to learn the difference — was easily the most annoying.

He's so horrible, they thought.

Just then, Stanley poked his head out of the front door of the cafe. "Are you two coming inside?" he asked. "I need a hand wiping down the tables."

"I doubt that," said Eric, loudly. "You probably haven't even had any customers in there today. No wonder you can't afford decent advent calendars."

Stanley shot Eric a dirty look. "And what are you hanging out around here for, Eric? Can't you find anyone else to pick on?"

“I’ll hang out wherever I want,” snapped Eric. Stanley was surprised. Eric was often mean to his sisters, but he usually ran away when Stanley scared him off. Not today. Eric was getting bolder.

“Okay, well maybe you can carry on leaning on your lamppost. I’ve seen about six dogs use it as a toilet today, by the way,” Stanley said.

Clara and Rachel followed him, and looked back to watch as Eric finally skulked away.

The girls were too preoccupied to think much more about Eric’s taunts, and went to bed that night very excited. In the morning when Rachel woke up, she sat upright suddenly, as if she’d been electrocuted. She jumped out of bed and hopped over to Clara, who was still asleep in the bed opposite, with *Hard Times* open on her pillow beside her. It was taking Clara a long time to finish that book.

“Clara, wake up! It’s Christmas!” Rachel shook her sister a little more vigorously than she had intended.

“What!? Now!?” Clara was waking up, very slowly. She rubbed her eyes, then gave her own cheek a little slap. “It’s... Christmas Day?” she asked.

Rachel felt a little silly. “Actually,” she said, “I got over-excited. It’s only the 1st of December. Sorry.”

Clara was fully awake now. A huge smile spread across her face. “1st of December? That’s even better. The ban is over!”

Rachel hugged her sister in joy. She never felt silly for more than a second when talking to Clara, who always understood what she was thinking.

Clara and Rachel marched downstairs in their pyjamas. It was a Saturday so the cafe opened an hour later than on weekdays, but Dad was already up, humming to himself as he swept the floor.

The girls burst into the cafe. "Merry Christmas, Dad!" they shouted.

He turned and looked at them, confused. "Oh, is it the 1st of December already?"

"Yes!!!" Rachel grabbed his broom and sat him down. "We need to start putting the decorations up straight away," she said. "Please can you get them down from the loft now, Dad?"

"And you'll be pleased to know we've been working on our lists of presents we want for the past three weeks, and they are now much longer," added Clara.

"Oh, great," said Dad, laughing. Then he switched to his serious voice. "Listen, girls, I just wanted to say I'm sorry I banned you from talking about Christmas. I kept thinking that I should end the ban, but to be honest I was enjoying the peace and quiet too much."

"Don't worry, Dad," said Clara. "We forgive you."

The three of them came together for a group hug. "And we're sorry for pestering you," said Rachel.

"I really hope we can just have a nice family Christmas," said Dad. "Unfortunately I'm a bit too busy to get the decorations now, as I need to finish getting things ready to open the cafe. If you can wake up Stanley he might be able to help."

"Okay, but first we should open our advent calendars," said Rachel. "Where are they, Dad?"

He stared back at Rachel with a blank expression for a few seconds. Rachel turned to look at Clara. Clara turned to look at Dad.

“Ah,” Dad said, finally, “I haven’t bought them yet.”

“But it’s the 1st of December,” said Clara. “We have to open the first door this morning. This is the start of Christmas.”

“I know, I’m really sorry,” Dad replied. “You two usually remind me to get them.”

Clara held her arms out wide. “We couldn’t remind you, because we were banned from talking about Christmas!”

“Good point,” said Dad.

A thought occurred to Rachel, and she felt a sense of relief. “It’s fine, Clara, I bet he’s just joking. Good one, Dad.”

“Sorry, Rachel, I’m really not joking.” Dad did look genuinely upset. “Tell you what, I’ll nip out this evening when the cafe is closed, and buy some then.”

Dejected, Clara and Rachel left Dad to his sweeping and went back upstairs. This was a very worrying start to Christmas.

Chapter three

The first door

Clara always got quite upset when things she cared about went wrong, and things had definitely gone wrong this morning. "My mouth was watering at the idea of that first piece of chocolate", she said.

Rachel sympathised. "Mine, too," she said. "But let's look on the bright side, at least we can talk about Christmas now."

"Yeah, we can talk about how bad it is."

Rachel knew her sister would feel better soon. "Why don't we go and see Coleen? She must have opened her advent calendar by now."

"She will have already eaten the chocolate," said Clara.

"But she'll be able to show us the picture," said Rachel.

The girls had a quick breakfast, got dressed, and told Dad they were going round to Coleen's. Coleen Dunne was their friend from school, who lived on their street. While the Hart family lived at number 24, Coleen's house was at the other end of Raucous Road, at number 1.

There was a chill in the air as they walked up the street. As they went along, it seemed like everyone else was just like Dad, and hadn't realised it was Christmas yet. There were no decorations. They went past number 19, where the Palmer family lived. Nothing. They peered at number 16, where Stanley's friend Deyna lived. Nothing. They couldn't believe their eyes at number 10, where Mrs Witter lived. Absolutely nothing.

"What's wrong with everyone on this street!?" Rachel asked.

When they got to Coleen's house, Clara and Rachel stopped to admire the garden. There were no decorations here yet, either, but it did look nice and wintry. Mrs Dunne had a row of tiny trees just in front of the house, with beautiful red and brown leaves. In the summer, there would be hundreds of flowers, blooming in many different colours. Clara and Rachel knew the back garden didn't look like this. Coleen loved football, so she and her mum had made a deal. Coleen could have the back as a football pitch, if she helped her mum keep the front nice. It seemed to be a good deal. The front looked beautiful. The back was basically a huge patch of mud by now, but it was fun to play in.

Clara was just about to knock on the front door, when Rachel suddenly had an idea. An amazing idea, actually. One that might just save Christmas. She grabbed Clara's arm just in time to stop her from knocking.

"Hang on a second, Clara," Rachel said. "Look at the door."

Clara looked at the door.

"Do you see?" Rachel asked.

Clara looked again. It was a nice door. A good, solid, brown wooden door. But just a door. Clara could tell her sister had an idea she was excited about, but she wasn't yet on the same wavelength.

"Look at the number," Rachel said.

Clara tried again. She stared at the big, golden number 1 in the middle of the door. It was so shiny she could see her face reflected in it.

Rachel leaned and whispered in Clara's ear. "What's the date?"

It was the 1st of Decem... wait, that's it! Suddenly, Clara got it. "There are twenty-four houses on our street!" she gasped.

"Exactly!" Rachel yelled. "24 houses, and 24 doors."

"The whole street can be our advent calendar!"

By now the sisters were bouncing up and down, clinging onto each other. They must have been a little too loud, because the front door started to swing open. They stopped bouncing and tried to calm down.

“Oh, hello girls.” It was Mrs Dunne. “Are you here to see Coleen?”

“Erm... we’re not sure,” replied Rachel, still out of breath.

“You’re not sure?” asked Coleen’s mum.

“Well, we are, sort of.”

“Sort of?”

Clara thought they should explain the situation to Mrs Dunne. “See, the thing is,” she began. This was when she realised it was going to be quite hard to explain. “Because we were banned... hang on, that’s not important, let me start again. Our Dad forgot—”

“We’re turning the whole of Raucous Road into an advent calendar!” Rachel blurted out. “And your house is the very first door!”

Mrs Dunne looked confused. “I’m confused,” she said.

“We don’t have advent calendars because Dad forgot to buy them.” Clara had composed herself by now. “But we have just this moment realised there are twenty-four houses on our street. So, obviously, we’re going to turn it into one big, real-life advent calendar.”

Mrs Dunne looked even more confused. “Now I’m even more confused,” she said. “What am I supposed to do? Give you chocolate?”

Clara and Rachel both sensed that might seem a little rude, demanding chocolate from a neighbour. “Well, only if that’s okay,” Clara said. “You don’t have to.”

“But it would be nice to see a picture, though,” Rachel added.

“Fine,” Mrs Dunne said. “If it’ll make you happy, and let me get on with my day.” Clearly she wasn’t quite as excited about the advent calendar as Clara and Rachel were.

Mrs Dunne left the sisters at the door and went into the house. After a few seconds, she came back, and their friend Coleen was with her now. She still had her pyjamas on, and looked just as confused as her mother. “Hiya,” she said. “My Mum told me to come and show you the picture from my advent calendar.” She held it up to them and showed them the small image of a snowman. Classic.

“Right girls, here you go.” Mrs Dunne handed them one packet of crisps. “My shopping hasn’t arrived yet so that’s all I’ve got in.”

“Thanks!” Clara and Rachel said. It wasn’t chocolate, but they were delighted just the same.

Clara and Rachel politely retreated from the house, waving at Coleen and Mrs Dunne. “Merry Christmas!” they yelled. Back on the street, they exchanged smiles, and began stuffing the crisps into their mouths. Their real-life advent calendar was underway. Maybe this hadn’t been such a bad start to Christmas, after all.

Chapter four

We're not carol singers!

The next morning, Clara woke first. This time it was her turn to jump up like she'd been electrocuted. "Hey, Rachel," she said, somehow both whispering and shouting at the same time, "let's go!"

Rachel stirred, rolled over, and rubbed her eyes. "Go where?"

"To door number 2, of course."

"Oh, right," said Rachel. She remembered the real-life advent calendar, but her sleepy brain thought it may have all been a dream. "Is it morning?"

"Yes, and it's time to go! We always open our advent calendars first thing in the morning," Clara said.

The girls got dressed and sneaked downstairs. They didn't want anyone to hear them going out. Although they knew they should tell Dad, they thought he might stop them from going.

The clock on the mantelpiece said it was seven o'clock. Dad always said that on a Sunday they should add at least two hours to the time, so maybe it was really nine o'clock.

No-one else was awake yet. Careful not to make a sound, Clara and Rachel put on their shoes in the hall. Unfortunately, Rachel had chosen her black boots with the velcro straps, which made a ripping sound as she undid them. She froze. Thankfully, there was no sign that anyone had heard, so they carried on.

Just before Clara opened the door, she stopped and gave her sister a look. One of their special looks. Sometimes, Clara and Rachel could communicate without speaking, when they really needed to. *Are we sure this is a good idea?* she asked, with her eyes. Rachel gave a look back. *It's the best idea we've ever had,* she replied.

They went outside and walked down the street to door number 2. The air was very cold, and made their eyes water. As they hurried up the street, they noticed that many of the houses had put up their Christmas decorations now. There was a lot of tinsel and some twinkling lights in the windows. Number 18 had an inflatable Father Christmas in the front garden, swaying in the breeze. They had surrounded him with elves, although they were really just regular garden gnomes. The salon at number 12 had a cardboard cut-out of a snowman in the window, waving and smiling at passers-by. Number 9 had covered a tree in the front garden that was covered in blue fairy lights. Number 5 had a beautiful wreath hanging on the front door. It seemed Christmas had finally arrived on Raucous Road.

Mr and Mrs Sheron lived at number 2. Clara and Rachel had seen them in the cafe a few times, but didn't know them very well. Their friend Coleen, who lived opposite, always said they were not particularly friendly. "You know how some old people are really generous and always seem to be happy when they're around kids?" Coleen once said.

"Yes?" replied Rachel and Clara.

"Well, the Sherons are like that, but the opposite."

Number 2 was a small house, and didn't have any decorations up. It had a rickety, old wooden gate, which nearly came off its hinges when Clara pushed it open.

It was Mrs Sheron who opened the door. She had curly hair and was still wearing her pyjamas and dressing gown. "Good morning," Clara announced, in her friendliest voice. "I'm Clara Hart, and this is my sister, Rachel."

"Pleasure to meet you," said Rachel. "We live at number 24. We're delighted to tell you that we've turned the entire street into an advent calendar, and you are door number 2."

"We're very friendly," added Clara.

Mrs Sheron looked like she was about to respond, when a man shouted from inside the house.

"Is that the milkman?" the shouting man said.

Mrs Sheron shouted back. "The milkman? We don't get milk delivered anymore, remember?" She turned back to Clara and Rachel. "My husband is very forgetful. Our old milkman died years ago. We even went to the funeral."

Mr Sheron shouted again. "Is it the window cleaner?"

"The window cleaner? Have you seen the state of our windows? I wish we did have someone to clean them," Mrs Sheron shouted back.

"As we were saying," Clara continued, "it would be lovely if you would like to be part of our advent calendar by perhaps sharing a chocolate or a sweet, or something similar."

"And a pic-", said Rachel.

"Well, who is it then?" Mr Sheron interrupted with another shout.

"It's two girls who live at number 24, Claire and Michelle," Mrs Sheron shouted back.

"What do they want?" he shouted.

"Sweets, I think," shouted Mrs Sheron.

Clara and Rachel waited patiently smiling their friendliest smiles while Mr and Mrs Sheron had their very loud conversation.

“Are they trick or treaters?”

“No, of course they’re not trick or treaters.”

“I don’t want any tricks played on me.”

“It’s Christmas, not Halloween, you silly old fool.”

“Oh. Are they carol singers?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, ask them.”

“I will if you give me a chance.”

“Go on then.”

Mrs Sheron finally turned back to Clara and Rachel. “We’re not carol singers,” Rachel said. “We’re just–”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” interrupted Mrs Sheron. “I think I’m in the mood for a Christmas carol. As long as it’s one of the classics. Not one of those modern ooo-ooo-ooo songs where they dance around all over the place. I get out of breath just watching them.”

Clara and Rachel gave each other a look. One of their special looks again. Unfortunately, it went a little bit wrong this time. Just as Clara started to sing ‘Silent Night’, very softly and sweetly, Rachel launched enthusiastically into ‘Ding Dong Merrily on High’. Oops. They both stopped.

“Tell them to sing louder,” shouted Mr Sheron. “I can’t hear anything.”

Clara and Rachel gave each other another special look. It went wrong again. Just as Clara started singing ‘Ding Dong Merrily on High’, Rachel sang ‘Silent Night’. Double oops.

“They’re not very good, are they?” shouted Mr Sheron.

“He’s so rude, isn’t he?” said Mrs Sheron. “You’re very rude!” she shouted back at her husband.

Clara and Rachel didn’t know what to do next. It seemed like they hadn’t explained themselves very well. They thought it best to give up, so they said goodbye and ran back home, slightly disappointed that things didn’t go as planned.

Despite what happened at door number 2, Clara and Rachel were determined to carry on with their advent calendar. The next day was a Monday, so Clara and Rachel would be back at school. They were relieved because this would make getting out of the house a little easier than the day before. As it was completely normal for them to be leaving early in the morning, they wouldn’t have to sneak out.

“The only problem,” said Clara, “is that we’ll have to leave ten minutes earlier than usual, to get down to number three and back, because it’s in the opposite direction to school.”

“Don’t worry,” said Rachel. “You’re the only person who keeps track of the exact time every second of the day. No-one will notice if we are ten minutes early.”

Clara looked thoughtful. “Maybe I should go and move the time forward on all the clocks, just to be safe,” she said. “Then Dad won’t realise we’re leaving early,”

Rachel fell backwards onto her bed, laughing. “I’d love to see you trying to adjust Dad’s watch while he’s wearing it, without him noticing!”

Clara started laughing, too. “You’re right, I suppose that would seem a bit odd.”

They got ready as quickly as possible, brushing their teeth, combing their hair, putting their uniforms on and packing their bags in record time. They went into the kitchen downstairs at exactly 8.20am, said goodbye to Dad, and grabbed a banana each for breakfast.

It must have been a quiet morning in the cafe, because Dad was cleaning the hob rather than cooking on it. He looked up and waved, wearing his yellow rubber glove. "Have a good day, girls," he said.

Rachel was right, Dad didn't notice the time. But Stanley was a different matter. He came up behind them as they were putting their coats on in the hallway, taking them by surprise.

"Something fishy is going on with you two," he said.

Clara and Rachel stopped what they were doing, the zips on their coats paused halfway up, and looked at each other. They had the same thought. *We've been rumbled.*

"What are you talking about, Stanley?" Clara replied, trying to sound innocent. "We're just going to school, like we always do."

"Exactly," Rachel said. "Nothing fishy here. No cod, no tuna, no mackerel, no sardines. Absolutely *zero* fish."

Of course, Stanley didn't believe them. Clara was the one who cracked first. She broke into a sweat when Stanley asked her why they were leaving early, and started telling a long, rambling story about how she'd lost her pen at school and needed to buy a new one from the newsagent's up the road. When Stanley pointed out she always had at least five pens in her pencil case, and that she tested them every night to make sure the ink hadn't run out, she finally admitted the truth about how they were trying to turn the street into an advent calendar.

“Actually, I think that’s a cool idea,” Stanley said. “Opening real doors with real people behind them has got to be better than a flimsy bit of cardboard.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Rachel.

“I knew this would have been your idea, Rachel,” Stanley replied. “Little miss five pens could never come up with anything so crazy.”

“Hey, that was a bit harsh!” exclaimed Rachel, defending her sister.

“But fair,” added Clara, and they all laughed. “I might not have crazy ideas but I know how to stick to a schedule, and we really need to get going.”

Before they set off, Stanley got the girls to agree that he would accompany them to door number 3 that morning to make sure they were safe, but they had to tell Dad what they were doing later, as he might not be happy about them bothering the neighbours.

“We know the man who lives at number 3,” said Rachel as they walked along. “He’s Coleen’s neighbour, and he’s called Mack. Coleen said he used to be a soldier, but he’s not anymore.”

“I know Mack,” said Stanley. “He comes into the cafe every Saturday at exactly ten o’clock. Three scrambled eggs on brown toast, little bit of pepper, no salt. Glass of water with the food. Then afterwards a cup of tea, dash of skimmed milk, no sugar, while he reads the newspaper. Costs £8.75. If I’m serving him, he gives me a £10 note and tells me to keep the change.”

“That’s very generous,” said Clara.

Rachel told Stanley about how the girls knew Mack. “Sometimes, when we’re playing football in Coleen’s garden, we have to ask him to give us the ball back if it goes over the fence.”

“Sometimes?” asked Stanley.

“Actually, all the time,” said Rachel. “But he doesn’t seem to mind.”

“Once,” said Clara, “he was in his garden when the ball went over. Rachel took a penalty that rebounded off the post. He jumped up and headed it back before it had even hit the ground.”

“Then I volleyed it straight into the net,” Rachel said, beaming with pride. “It was the most spectacular goal I’ve ever scored.”

“It was impressive,” said Clara, “but it didn’t count as a goal because of outside assistance.”

“I still think that was wrong,” said Rachel.

“Coleen agreed with me,” replied Clara.

“Who needs VAR when you have Coleen to adjudicate?” said Stanley.

“A-D-J-U-D-I-C-A-T-E,” said Clara. “It means when a judge makes a decision.”

“I adjudicate you as jealous of my skills,” said Rachel.

There were no decorations up at number 3. The garden was tidy but plain, with a hedgerow at the end that was perfectly straight. Stanley stood at the end of the path when Clara and Rachel went to knock on the door. Mack answered straight away. He was wearing a plain blue t-shirt and grey shorts, the same as he always wore, whatever the weather. He looked a little surprised to see them.

“Morning, girls,” he said. “Do you need me to throw the ball back?”

“Not today,” Rachel said. “It’s a bit early for football.”

“Is it? I’m always up at the crack of dawn myself,” Mack said. “A habit I can’t break.”

“We’re here because you’re the next door on our advent calendar,” Clara said.

"I'm the what?" Then a look of recognition appeared on Mack's face. "Oh, I remember Mrs Dunne mentioning this to me last night. She said you might come by, but I have to admit I didn't understand what she was talking about."

"Well, let me explain," said Rachel. "Every house on Raucous Road now has the opportunity to be a part of our living advent calendar. We live at the end, number 24, so there are the exact right number of doors for us to open, one every day until Christmas."

"All we need is a small piece of chocolate or something similar, if you don't mind," said Clara.

"And show us a Christmassy picture!" added Rachel, eagerly.

"I see," he said. "The problem is, girls, that I don't have that kind of food in the house. I don't have much of a sweet tooth."

Stanley stepped forward. "That's okay," he said. "Come on, you two, let's leave Mack to get on with his day and head to school."

"Hang on, I think I might have something," said Mack. He disappeared and came back after a few seconds. "Digestives," he said. "Just plain ones, but they're perfect for dunking in your tea." He held out a packet to Clara and Rachel and they took a biscuit each.

"Thank you so much," said Clara.

"Thank you," said Rachel. She hesitated for a second, but then felt she had to ask the next question. "What about the picture?"

"Ah, the picture," said Mack. "I haven't really prepared for Christmas yet. I have nothing festive to show you."

Stanley spoke again. "Never mind, they are very grateful for the biscuits. We should be getting to school anyway."

“Actually, I think I might have something,” said Mack, again. He disappeared, and took slightly longer to come back this time. At least a minute. When he came back, he was holding a photograph.

“This was my squad, in Afghanistan. Christmas Day, about fifteen years ago now. There’s me, in the front row. I was so young then”

Clara and Rachel peered closely at the photo. There was a group of about twenty soldiers, all dressed in camouflage gear, except for that they were all wearing red Santa hats, too. Everyone was smiling.

“That’s amazing,” said Clara. “Looks like you were having fun.”

“Aye, we did,” said Mack. “It was a difficult time. Very difficult. Some of my friends were badly hurt. But that day...” He paused. He blinked a few times, like there was something in his eye. “Anyway, it’s nice to see the photo again, this is a happy memory. It’s very special when you feel like you’re part of something bigger than yourself.”

Clara remembered what Coleen had said once about Mack, that he seemed lonely.

“Do you still see your friends?” she asked.

“No, we lost touch,” he said. “It’s been years since I spoke to any of them.”

“You should invite them round for Christmas!” said Rachel.

Mack stared past them, looking at something in the distance. “I don’t know,” he said. “They’re probably all busy with their families.”

Clara and Rachel thanked Mack again and left him. Stanley pointed out again that they were going to be late for school, but none of them felt like running. The girls nibbled at their biscuits, both of them feeling sad at the thought of Mack missing his friends at Christmas.

“Are you crying?” Rachel asked Clara.

“No,” she replied, lying.

“Neither am I,” Rachel said, also lying.

Stanley offered both of them a tissue, and then used one to dab a bit of moisture off his own cheek. “Neither am I,” he said.

Merry Chipmas!

“I’ve been doing some serious thinking about your living advent calendar idea.” Dad announced. The family was all gathered around as he laid out tea on the table. It was a lasagne he’d made as a lunch special for the cafe, but no-one had ordered it.

Clara and Rachel had told him about their advent calendar when they got home from school, about singing for the Sherons and number 2 and talking to Mack at number 3. Dad hadn’t said much in response, just looked a little puzzled and nodded, but now he had a more serious expression on his face.

“I know it was partly my fault for forgetting to buy you advent calendars, and for banning you from talking about Christmas, so you couldn’t remind me.”

He was dividing the lasagne up into portions as he spoke, but because he was distracted he made them all very uneven. Rachel’s slice was three times bigger than Clara’s. Rachel cut it and put half on her sister’s plate. Then Clara had more, so she cut a little piece off and gave it back to Rachel.

Dad continued. “So,” he said, “I’ve decided to support your idea, with some conditions.”

Clara and Rachel both smiled in amazement. “Oh, Dad, that’s–”

“First,” Dad interrupted, “you promise not to leave the house again without telling me where you’re going.”

“We promise, Dad. Thank–”

“Second,” he interrupted again, “and this is very important. No pestering the neighbours. If they don’t want to give you anything, leave them alone. In fact...” Dad pulled out his phone and unlocked it. “I’m going to put a message on the *Round R Way* app right now, telling people about what you’re doing. I think most of the neighbours are signed up to the group for our road.”

Dad started typing, then afterwards showed them what he had sent.

Hi neighbours, Philip Hart here from number 24. This will probably sound odd, but my daughters have got it into their heads to turn the whole of Raucous Road into an advent calendar. They’ll be visiting everyone’s house, one door at a time until Christmas Eve. It’s only a bit of fun but if you don’t want to take part, just let me know. Merry Christmas! (PS We have a 2-for-1 special on lunch at the cafe tomorrow if you want to drop by.)

“That’s brilliant,” beamed Rachel. “Now everyone will have chocolates and pictures ready before we even arrive.”

“Hmm, we’ll see,” mumbled Dad. “I’m not sure everyone is as full of the Christmas spirit as you are. Anyway, let’s eat.” He stared down at the plates. “Stanley, why do you have so much more lasagne than me?”

The next morning, Clara and Rachel were standing outside Potato Heaven. That was the name of the fish and chip shop at number 4 Raucous Road, the next door in the advent calendar.

The chippy had opened about a year ago and was run by Dean, who also lived in the flat above the shop. The chippy was closed now but Rachel knocked on the front door, and Dean suddenly appeared from the back of the shop, wearing his funny white chef’s hat, and his apron with the potato

on the tummy. The potato stuck out because Dean's tummy was quite big. Dean was only nineteen but already had his own business, and always seemed cheerful.

"Oh look, it's the Harts, my favourite customers," he exclaimed, with a wide grin on his face. "Would you like the Friday night usual?"

The Harts always had fish and chips on a Friday, no matter what leftovers there were at the cafe.

"Actually, no," Clara said. "It's Tuesday morning, Dean."

"I know! I'm only joking, Clara."

Clara and Rachel smiled at each other. They loved being twins, but were always happy when people knew which one of them was which, without asking.

"We're here," Rachel said, "because this is door number 4 on our advent calendar."

"I know that, too," Dean said. "I saw your Dad's message on the app, so I've been expecting you. Welcome to Potato Heaven!"

"Wow," said Clara, "So far people haven't been very excited when we arrive."

"Well, I'm excited," said Dean, "because I've decided this is the perfect opportunity to try out my new chip recipe. Sit down and I'll give you a sample of my latest creation."

Clara and Rachel went in and sat down on one of the tables, wondering what was about to happen. Dean went behind the counter, lifted up the hatch on his fryer, and started taking out chips with his scooper. He prepared two small portions, wrapping them up and putting a bow on top of each one, like they were Christmas presents.

“Here you go, girls.” He placed them on the table. “I’m sure you’ll agree with me, there’s no food more Christmassy than a portion of chips.”

“Erm... turkey?” said Clara, nervously.

“Turkey, schmurkey,” said Dean. “At Potato Heaven, Christmas dinner is a nice big plate of chips, with some chips on the side and chips for dessert. I even put chips inside my crackers.”

The girls thought Dean might be joking, but there was not even the hint of a smile on his face.

“Anyway, like I said,” Dean went on, “this is my new recipe. I’d love to hear what you think.”

“How is it new?” asked Rachel, unwrapping the parcel. She had never realised before that chips could have a recipe. She thought you just cut up potatoes and cooked them.

“Have you heard of the King Edward potato? Well, these chips are made from the King Dean potato.” Dean puffed out his chest with pride. “It’s my own variety, cultivated on my allotment.”

Rachel looked at Clara. “C-U-L-T-I-V-A-T-E-D. It means he grew them,” Clara said.

“Grew them with love, and with science,” said Dean. “They are perfect for making chips. When I fry them for ten minutes on a medium heat, it gives them a texture that has the perfect balance of fluffiness and firmness, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Oh yes,” said Clara, who had her mouth full now. “Perfectly fluffy.”

“And perfectly firm,” added Rachel.

It was true. These were some very good chips.

“See, aren’t you glad I’m at door number 4 on your advent calendar?” Dean said. “Which reminds me, you need a picture, too, don’t you?”

“Yes, we do!” yelled Rachel. “I almost forgot.”

Dean picked up a roll of paper that was leaning against the wall, and unfurled it. “I just had some of these posters made for my festive advertising campaign.”

It was a picture of a snowman, but instead of being made of snow it was made of potato. A big one for the body, and a smaller one for the head. The eyes and mouth were made with peas, and the nose appeared to be a battered sausage.

‘HAVE A MERRY CHIPMAS!’ it said, in large writing across the top. ‘AND A CHIPPY NEW YEAR!’ was written underneath.

Brilliant.

Clara and Rachel were buzzing when they woke up on the 5th of December.

“I’ve got a really good feeling today,” said Rachel.

“Me too,” replied Clara.

They both felt like the advent calendar had started to take off. It had been nice talking to Mack two days ago, and yesterday Dean had been really excited to see them. They hadn’t been given any chocolate yet, but now Dad had told everyone about their advent calendar, people would surely start to join in like Dean had.

Clara and Rachel practically skipped down the street on their way to door number 5. They saw Dean again, waving from the window of his flat above Potato Heaven, across the road. They waved back, smiling, but suddenly feeling a little queasy at the memory of eating a portion of chips before school.

Clara and Rachel didn’t know the people who lived at number 5, who had only recently moved onto the street. They hadn’t even seen them.

Whoever they were, they had a small, pretty house. The hedge at the front of the garden was cut so it made an arch above the gate, which was wooden and painted blue. The house had vines climbing up the bricks on the outside, and there were stepping stones in a curved line across the lawn. Clara and Rachel skipped along them to the front door. This was painted blue, too, the same shade as the gate, and had a Christmas wreath hanging on it. The wreath was made of holly and pine cones, and had red baubles and four artificial candles in it.

“That’s beautiful,” said Clara.

“Yes,” said Rachel, “they must really love Christmas.”

Clara rang the doorbell, and then they waited. After a minute, nobody had come. They listened for any sound of movement inside, but there was nothing.

“Maybe we should go,” said Rachel.

“There’s a light on upstairs,” said Clara. It was true, the curtains in the window above were closed, but there was a bright patch in the corner. “So they must be home.”

“Maybe the bell’s not working,” said Rachel. Clara stepped forward and knocked on the door. Again, nobody came. She knocked again, louder. Still no answer.

After about a minute, they decided to give up. Dad had told them not to bother the neighbours if they didn’t want to be involved in the advent calendar, so they had no choice.

“I guess they don’t love Christmas that much, after all,” said Rachel, as the girls left the pretty house and set off for school.

Rachel was still feeling optimistic when she got up on the morning of the 6th of December, despite the failure of the sisters' visit to number 5 the day before.

"I really think we'll get the advent calendar back on track today," she said over breakfast.

"I'm not sure about that," replied Clara. She was the more pessimistic of the Hart sisters. "Two out of five doors have been unsuccessful. That's almost half."

"Almost half is less than half, technically," said Rachel.

Clara thought for a second. "I suppose you're right, technically. But don't forget, number 6 is where Eric Fergus lives. I doubt he'll want to give us anything."

"Maybe it'll be one of his parents who answers. They can't be as horrible as Eric."

Clara had her doubts. They had never met Eric's parents, but they often saw his father, Mr Fergus, driving his big, loud, flashy car up and down Raucous Road, really fast. He didn't even slow down for the speed bumps, almost launching into the air when he hit them. Sometimes Eric was in the back seat, and he would make rude gestures at anyone passing by (which he didn't really need to do, because Eric's face was offensive enough on its own).

Number 6 was one of the biggest houses on Raucous Road. The metal gate outside was taller than Clara and Rachel, and very heavy. When they arrived at the house, they both had to push it to get it open. Strangely, there was a sign on it saying *BEWARE OF THE DOG*, even though they had never seen a dog here, or seen Eric or his family walking one. Besides, Clara and Rachel had never met a dog they didn't like, so why would they need to

beware? The front garden was all concrete, with the flashy car parked in the drive, and no lawn or plants to be seen.

There were no Christmas decorations up, but Clara did notice something else.

“What’s that?” she asked, her head nodding toward the front door.

“I’m not sure,” Rachel replied. “It looks like a piece of paper.”

They carried on toward the door, moving slowly, as they were both feeling nervous.

Rachel was right, it was a piece of paper stuck on the door, with something written on it. They couldn’t tell what it said until they were closer. Standing just in front of their door, on their tiptoes, the girls both peered at the note. Immediately, they wished they hadn’t. Clara and Rachel’s hearts sank when they read what was written on it. Without knocking on the door, they just turned and walked away as quickly as they could.

This is what it said:

This House is Not an Advent Calendar!

Up above, one of the residents of 6 Raucous Road was highly amused. Eric Fergus had opened the curtains in his bedroom just enough to get a view of what was happening down below.

Eric had heard Rachel and Clara at school talking about their living advent calendar, so he knew they were planning to come to his house that morning. That’s why he had woken up early, to put up the note on the front door warning the sisters that they shouldn’t expect to get anything from his family.

He had waited patiently at his window for them to come. He laughed when they finally arrived and began to struggle with the gate. He laughed even more as they gradually approached the house. He had to cover his mouth so they didn't hear.

At that moment, there was a thump on Eric's bedroom door.

"Eric, are you ready yet? I've got important things to do today, so I need to drive you to school now."

Eric was startled, and banged his nose on the window. His father shouted a lot when he was in a rush. He shouted a lot when he wasn't in a rush, too.

Eric hurried to the door and opened it. "Dad, come and see what these stupid Hart sisters are doing," he said.

Mr Fergus came into the room and went to the window with Eric.

"What's going on?" he asked. "I haven't got time for this."

"They came here as part of their stupid advent calendar. They think our house is the next door for them to open, but they're about to be disappointed."

Eric looked down into the garden again. He couldn't quite see the expressions on Rachel and Clara's faces as they read his note, but he saw them turn and hurry away.

"Is this what you've been waffling on about all week? Two silly girls begging for sweets?"

"I'm proving that they haven't got a better advent calendar than me."

Mr Fergus glanced down at Rachel and Clara as they pushed the gate closed behind them. He smiled. "Ah, it's those two from the cafe."

"Yes, they're so annoying."

“Don’t worry about them,” Mr Fergus patted Eric on the shoulder.
“Something tells me that their whole family is going to have a really bad Christmas.”

“Really, why?” Eric asked.

“No time for that now.” Mr Fergus turned and headed out of the room.
“Just hurry up and get ready to go. I’ve got people to see and money to make,” he shouted from the hall.

“Okay, I’m coming,” Eric shouted, while thinking about what else he might do next to help ruin Rachel and Clara’s fun.

Wunderbar!

“You know what I find most strange about that note yesterday,” said Rachel, as she and Clara were still in their beds, early on the 7th of December. “The *is* and the *an* don’t start with capital letters.”

“What do you mean?” asked Clara.

Rachel produced the note from the drawer on her bedside table. She stared at it. **This House is Not an Advent Calendar!** “Look,” she said.

“Capital T, capital H, small i, capital N, small a, capital A.

“Well, it’s like a book title, isn’t it?” replied Clara. “Only the important words have capital letters.”

“Really?” asked Rachel. “I don’t understand. If a word isn’t important, why would it be in the title of a book?”

Clara pulled herself out of bed and walked over to the bookcase on the other side of the room. She grabbed as many books as she could carry and dropped them on Rachel’s bed.

“They have to put in the small words so the big ones make sense,” she said. She picked up one of the books at random and showed it to Rachel. “Otherwise, for instance, this book would just be called *Lion, Witch, Wardrobe*.”

Rachel laughed at that idea, and picked up a different book. “And this one would be *Charlie Chocolate Factory*,” she said.

Clara chose another one, playing along. “*Wind Willows*,” she said.

"Stig Dump," said Rachel

"Alice Wonderland," said Clara.

"Harry Potter Chamber Secrets," said Rachel.

"Diary Wimpy Kid," said Clara.

"Charlotte's Web," said Rachel. "Oh wait, that one stays the same."

They rolled around the bed laughing for a minute. The truth was that they were trying to cheer each other up, because the last two days had been difficult.

Clara got up and started re-organising the books to put them back into alphabetical order. "Maybe this advent calendar just isn't going to work," she said.

"I understand why you're saying that," Rachel said, "but I think we should try one more day."

"I'm not sure I can face another disappointment."

"But it's bound to go well today. Number 7 is the newsagent's. It's literally a shop full of chocolate."

"Yes, but they *sell* it," said Clara, insistent. "They won't give it away."

Rachel looked into her sister's eyes, and knew she had to agree. "Okay, we can stop if you want to," she said. "But let's go to the newsagent's anyway. They sell advent calendars there, too, so if you want to, we can just buy some normal ones."

"Great idea," said Clara, perking up. "And because it's already December, we might even get them for half price!"

Rachel and Clara walked into the newsagents at number 7 half an hour later, and said a cheery good morning to Mr Nash, the owner. He had put up absolutely loads of Christmas decorations, so the shop looked amazing.

There was snow sprayed on the windows, tinsel along the edge of every shelf, model reindeers hanging from the ceiling, and even a full-size Christmas tree by the front door (which was actually quite inconvenient because it was in everyone's way).

"Merry Christmas, girls!" Mr Nash beamed. He was a very old man, with a bald head and a moustache that was completely white, in contrast to his hands, which were covered in black smudges from newspaper ink.

"Merry Christmas, Mr Nash!" they replied in unison.

Then their eyes were drawn to the large display of chocolate bars. There was every conceivable type of chocolate, and other sweets. Milk chocolate, white chocolate, dark chocolate, chocolate-covered coconut, nougat, wafer, caramel, chocolate eggs, big, chunky chocolate, delicate flaky chocolate, orange-flavoured chocolate, mint-flavoured, chocolate with nuts in, with raisins, crispy chocolate, smooth chocolate. Basically, everything.

"What can I do for you this fine winter's morning?" Mr Nash asked.

Slowly, Clara and Rachel looked up from the display.

"Well, we were hoping to buy some advent calendars," said Rachel. "I know we're a bit late, but we were trying something else this year which didn't quite work."

Unfortunately, Mr Nash's face suddenly fell.

"Ah, I have some bad news, girls," he said. "I've sold out of advent calendars."

"Oh no," Rachel said.

"Really?" Clara asked.

"I'm afraid so," Mr Nash replied. "I had a few left yesterday so I put them on sale for half-price, but the man from number 6 came in for his

newspaper and bought the lot of them. He said he was stocking up for a few years to save himself the hassle of buying one every Christmas.

“Number 6!?!?” Clara and Rachel exclaimed together. They couldn’t believe what they were hearing. Number 6 was Eric’s house. After his claim he had an advent calendar that gave him money every day, but it was hilarious to hear that he just had an ordinary advent calendar that his dad brought for half price.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Mr Nash. “I heard about your living advent calendar idea from your Dad, and I think I can help you out. I have some chocolate in the back that’s just past its sell-by date, and I could let you have some of that. As long as you don’t tell the health and safety department at the council.”

Clara and Rachel shared one of their looks. They were both very tempted by the offer, but they also thought it might be wrong. After all, they’d already decided to stop their advent calendar, so if they accepted the chocolate it would be a little bit like lying to Mr Nash.

Mr Nash saw them pondering. “Don’t worry about the sell-by date, girls,” he went on. “If everything past its sell-by date was no good, I’d have to close the shop and retire!”

“No, it’s not because–” started Clara, but she stopped talking when she realised there was a woman standing beside her. Someone she hadn’t seen before. A short woman, wearing a thick duffle coat and a woolly hat with a few strands of blonde hair poking out.

“Excuse me,” the woman said, “I’m very sorry for interrupting, but I have to ask, are you the two girls from the cafe? The ones doing the advent calendar with all the houses on the street?”

“Yes, we are,” Rachel answered. “I’m Rachel, and this is Clara.”

“Oh, *wunderbar*,” said the woman.

Rachel looked at Clara to spell the strange word, but her sister shrugged her shoulders.

“Sorry, I always slip back into German when I’m excited,” said the woman. “I’m Ingrid, from number 5, next door. I’m very glad I’ve bumped into you.”

“You are?” asked Rachel.

“I am. I saw the message about your advent calendar on the app, and I thought it would be a great way for me to meet some of the neighbours, as I only moved onto the street recently. I made you some of my chocolate truffles especially.”

“Really?” asked Clara.

“Yes, really,” said Ingrid. “But I overslept. I’ve been visiting my family in Berlin, you see, and my flight landed very late the night before.”

“I’m really sorry if we woke you up,” said Rachel.

“I wish you had woken me up. You must have been so disappointed. I’ll tell you what, why don’t you stop by my house now, and I’ll give them to you.”

Clara and Rachel agreed happily, said goodbye to Mr Nash, and dashed out of the shop with Ingrid. They had forgotten all about the chocolate that was past its sell-by date. Ingrid took the girls into her garden, skipping along the stepping stones again, then they waited inside while Ingrid went in to fetch the truffles.

When she brought them out, Clara and Rachel were amazed. This was beyond all expectations. Ingrid handed them both a small brown box, each with a gold ribbon tied around it. Inside were six beautiful-looking

chocolates, perfectly round, brown balls, with a very light dusting of sugar on them.

The girls were almost afraid to eat them, but they soon got over that feeling. They both placed a whole truffle into their mouths and let it melt on their tongues. They were so good. So, so good.

“Wow,” said Rachel.

“This is so generous,” said Clara.

“Not at all,” said Ingrid. “Christmas is a time for giving, so I should be thanking you for making me feel so warm and fuzzy inside. And before I forget, here is your picture.”

She handed them a postcard, with a photograph of a large building, with huge columns, and four horses on top. It was covered in snow, and there were lots of tiny people walking under it. “This is the Brandenburg Gate, in Berlin,” said Ingrid. It’s such a pretty picture, I thought you’d like it.”

“We love it,” said Rachel, “it’s amazing.” Then she turned to Clara and said, “See, this is exactly why I said we should keep doing the advent calendar!”

“Oh, were you thinking about stopping?” Ingrid asked.

“Well, most people didn’t seem to want to be part of it,” Clara said.

“But you can’t stop!” Ingrid exclaimed. “It’s such a lovely thing that you are doing, involving the whole street in celebrating Christmas.”

Clara and Rachel thanked Ingrid again and headed toward school. They had a lot to think about.

The reverse advent calendar

“I’m so proud of you two. I’ll admit I was sceptical of your motivations when all this started, but you’ve really shown me that you are incredibly generous and caring young women.”

Urgh. Dad was doing one of his ‘I’m so proud’ speeches again. Clara and Rachel had heard it many times before. He gave the same speech when Clara gave up her seat on the bus for an old man a few months ago. He gave the same speech when Rachel decided to wash the pots by herself one evening. He gave the same speech when they both helped him find his keys the last time he lost them. Without fail, he always ended the speech with a very serious and solemn ‘I love you’.

“I love you,” said Dad, in a very serious and solemn way. Except this time, he seemed to be even more serious and solemn. Were those tears in his eyes? Clara and Rachel both got up and gave him a hug.

“You’re such a dork, Dad,” said Stanley. He’d been hearing the ‘I’m so proud’ speech even longer than Clara and Rachel had.

The night before, Clara and Rachel had made an announcement. After they got home that day, they had taken out the boxes Ingrid gave them and both immediately scoffed another chocolate. Then they shared one of their looks, and both just knew it was going to be the last one they ate. No matter how good the tasted, they realised it would feel even better to share this with other people.

As the family ate some leftover chilli con carne that night, Clara and Rachel had blurted out together: "We're going to do a reverse advent calendar!" They explained that they were still going to visit every house on the street, but from now on they would be *giving out* chocolates and pictures rather than asking for them.

This is what prompted Dad to give his 'I'm so proud' speech the next morning, the 8th of December. Door number 8 was where they would start the reverse advent calendar, which was exciting because that's where the baby lived. And the baby's parents, of course. Little Mario was the youngest resident of Raucous Road, having been born just a few weeks ago. There has been a big banner saying 'congratulations' in the window, and lots of balloons on string tied to the door. Clara and Rachel had met the baby once, when Dad took them round there to drop off a card, and a bag full of Clara and Rachel's old baby clothes.

"I hope there isn't too much mess on these," Dad had said, giving the bag a sniff before they dropped it off.

"What kind of mess?"

"Unmentionable mess."

Clara and Rachel knew what that meant. Poo, or wee, or vomit. Or maybe all three.

The balloons were still attached to door number 8 when Clara and Rachel arrived that morning. Except now they were deflated, and hanging limp. Clara squinted and could just make out the words 'new baby' printed on them, with the letters upside down and distorted into odd shapes. Rachel looked around the garden and saw several things lying on the ground: a dummy, a small blanket, and a little teddy bear.

Rachel was just about to tell Clara that maybe knocking on door number 8 was a bad idea. But it was too late, Clara had already knocked, rather loudly. The crying started almost instantly.

“Waaaaaaaaa!!!!!!!” came the sound from inside the house.

“Oops,” said Clara. She took a step back from the door.

“Waaaaa!!! Waaaaa!!! Waaaaa!!!”

The sound was getting louder. “Shall we leave?” asked Rachel.

“Waaaaaaaaa!!!!!! Waaaaaaaaa!!!! Waaaaaaaaa!!!!

Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!!”

Clara was inclined to agree, but then the door suddenly opened. It was Ellen, Mario’s mum, holding the baby in one hand and trying to brush her hair with the other hand. Clara and Rachel could only see Mario’s face, which was very red, as the rest of him was wrapped up in a towel.

“We’re really sorry, Ellen,” said Rachel. “Did we wake up Mario?”

“No, that’s okay Clarachel,” replied Ellen, wearily. Yes, she started to say Clara but then corrected herself halfway through. “I was just giving him a bath in the kitchen sink. He was covered in something yucky.”

Poo, or wee, or vomit. Or all three.

“Waaaaa!!” Mario cried, apparently when he heard the word *bath*.

“Oh,” said Ellen, “I just remembered you’re doing your advent calendar, aren’t you?”

“Yes, we are,” said Rachel, “but we really didn’t mean to disturb you. I tried to tell Clara not to knock on the door.”

“It’s fine, honestly,” said Ellen. “I’m just sorry I don’t have anything to give you. I meant to get something, but then I completely forgot it was the 8th today.”

“Actually,” said Clara, “we’ve flipped it. Now it’s a reverse advent calendar, so we’re giving chocolates to everyone on the street.”

“And pictures,” added Rachel.

Clara opened the box of Ingrid’s chocolate truffles that she was holding, and offered one to Ellen. A look of amazement spread across Ellen’s face.

“For me?”

The girls nodded.

“Really?”

They nodded again.

Ellen put her brush down, selected a chocolate, and placed it slowly into her mouth.

“Wow, that’s gorgeous,” said Ellen, as the chocolate melted on her tongue. “It feels like ages since I had a little treat for myself.” She licked her lips. “I haven’t had a moment to relax, you know.”

“Here’s your picture, too,” said Rachel. She showed Ellen the picture she had drawn, which was a sketch of a Christmas tree, but with baby Mario on top of it as the angel.”

Ellen laughed and said she’d put it up on the fridge. “Thank you, girls,” she said. “You’ve really made my day.”

Clearly, giving was the way forward. Door number 8 had gone perfectly, and door number 9 was successful, too. This was where Mr Flitcroft, Ellen’s father, lived. He had recently retired as an electrician, and now helped Ellen with the baby.

“I’ve been salivating at the thought of this since yesterday,” Mr Flitcroft told the girls when they visited his house. “Ellen told me all about your reverse advent calendar when I went to pick up Mario for a walk.”

“S-A-L-I-V-A-T-I-N-G,” Clara spelt out for Rachel, after they had left. “It means his mouth is full of spit.”

“Ewwww, is that supposed to be a good thing?” asked Rachel.

“Apparently.”

After speaking to Mr Flitcroft, the girls realised that they should re-visit all of the earlier doors to give people the chocolate and pictures they had missed out on. If everyone on the street was talking about the chocolates they were giving out, people would be sad if they didn’t get one. As this was a Sunday, they had some free time, and started re-visiting houses straight away.

They started at their friend Coleen’s house, door number 1. She was thrilled. “That’s the best idea for an advent calendar ever,” she said. Clara handed her the chocolate, which Coleen stuffed into her mouth before her mum could tell her that it would spoil her lunch. Rachel gave her the picture of some children playing football, but using a Christmas pudding for a ball.

“That was one satisfied customer,” said Clara, as they left.

Unfortunately, the Sherons at door number 2 were less pleased to see Clara and Rachel again.

“It’s those twins from up the street again,” shouted Mrs Sheron to her husband, after she opened the door.

“Oh, not them again,” Mr Sheron shouted from inside. “What do they want this time?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t asked them yet,” Mrs Sheron replied.

“If they’re singing carols again, tell them they need to improve their performance. Last time they were rubbish!”

“Be quiet, you old fool. Don’t you realise they can hear you?”

“Good!”

Clara and Rachel had no intention of singing again. They eventually interrupted Mr and Mrs Sheron’s very loud conversation and calmly explained why they had returned. Mrs Sheron seemed confused, but she gladly took one of the chocolates that Clara offered her. “I’ll take one for Mr Sheron, too,” she said, quietly.

“What was that?” Mr Sheron shouted.

“Nothing, dear,” Mrs Sheron shouted back, and winked at the girls.

Rachel handed her the picture she had drawn. It was Father Christmas, but with a black witch’s hat on instead of his usual red and white hat. ‘Ho-Ho-Halloween’ it said across the top of the image. Mrs Sheron squinted. “I don’t get it,” she said.

“It’s because Mr Sheron thought it was Halloween,” said Rachel, although that didn’t seem to help.

Clara and Rachel left as quickly as they could and went back across the road to door number 3, where Mack lived.

“I didn’t expect to see you two again so soon,” he said. “Would you like some more biscuits?”

They told him about the reverse advent calendar.

“Ah, what a nice idea,” Mack said. “I bet that’ll cheer up the whole street.”

Clara offered Mack his truffle, but he said he didn’t eat chocolate, so they should save them for other people. Then Rachel showed Mack his picture. “As you were in the army I thought about drawing some guns and tanks and things like that, but it didn’t seem very Christmassy.”

“You’re probably right about that,” Mack laughed. “Actually, during the first world war, the British and German soldiers stopped fighting on Christmas Day and had a game of football in the middle of the battlefield.”

“Is that true?”

“Aye,” Mack said, “Christmas is no time for fighting.”

“Tell that to Mr and Mrs Sheron,” Clara said.

Instead of guns and tanks, Rachel had drawn Mack a picture of a Christmas cracker, which had been pulled open, and there was a cup of tea inside.

“Lovely,” said Mack.

They went to Potato Heaven to see Dean next, but it was nearly lunchtime by now, so there was a queue of people waiting to order fish and chips. The girls nipped to the front of the queue and handed Dean his picture, which was a Christmas tree, but with a pile of potatoes under it rather than presents. Dean saw it and started laughing, as he also reached for a chocolate from the box Clara was holding out. Distracted by the picture, Dean dropped the chocolate directly into his fish fryer. Oops.

“Are you serving deep-fried chocolate truffles now, Dean?” joked one of the customers in the queue.

“That’s quite a good idea,” smiled Dean. “I might try that.”

Clara and Rachel waved and said goodbye, as Dean was trying to scoop his chocolate out of the fryer.

“I’m not really sure that is a good idea,” Clara whispered into Rachel’s ear, as they left.

“Neither am I,” Rachel whispered back.

Door number 5 was Ingrid, their new friend. Clara and Rachel were a little nervous to tell her that they had been giving away her truffles to the entire street, rather than eating them, but she wasn't upset at all.

"I'm so glad to hear that," she said. "I haven't had a chance to meet many of the neighbours yet, so it makes me happy to know I am helping spread a little bit of joy around Raucous Road."

"The only person so far who didn't want one is Mack at number three," Rachel said. "He's really friendly, but he said he doesn't like chocolate."

"Oh, that's a shame," Ingrid said. "Perhaps I'll have to go over there and insist he tries one."

Ingrid also insisted that she would make some more truffles for Clara and Rachel, so they would have enough for the whole street. This was fantastic news, but as they left Ingrid's house they also felt a little worried. The next house they needed to return to was number 6. The Fergus house.

Clara and Rachel stopped and stared at the house from across the street. It has been a few days since they visited and found that horrible note on the door. They'd seen Eric at school, and he'd sneered at them from across the playground. He must have told his friends about it, too, because Clara and Rachel noticed a few people laughing at them.

"We should tell them all he's been lying about having that expensive advent calendar," Clara said.

"Then we'd be just as bad as him," Rachel said.

Clara felt a raindrop hit her head. Then Rachel felt one, too.

"Fine, but I don't think we should give them any chocolate," Clara said. "Let's just skip this house."

“But we said we’d give chocolate to everyone,” she said. “And maybe now we’re giving out chocolate, he’ll stop being so horrible.” She was trying to convince herself, as well as her sister.

“Okay,” Clara said, reluctantly. “If you think we should, let’s do it.”

They were about to cross the road and go toward the house, when suddenly the heavens opened and torrential rain began to fall. The girls yanked their hoods over their head, but in just a few seconds they were soaked through.

That was just the sign they needed to give up on the idea of visiting number 6 again, and make a quick dash home.

The reverse reverse advent calendar

The rainstorm lasted all day and all night, but the weather was clear by the morning of the 10th of December. The next house Clara and Rachel needed to visit, number 10, was where Mrs Witter lived.

“Mrs Witter used to come into the cafe quite a lot,” Dad told the girls at breakfast, “although she hasn’t been in for a while. I think she’s quite frail nowadays.”

Before going to Mrs Witter’s, Clara and Rachel had to stop by number 7 again, Mr Nash the newsagent, as they had missed it when rushing home the previous day. Mr Nash was pleased to accept his chocolate, and didn’t mind even when some of it got stuck in his moustache. “I’ll save that bit for later,” he said. Mr Nash chuckled when he saw the picture Rachel had drawn for him. It was a picture with a family of elves all sitting down reading copies of a newspaper, *The Daily Elf*, which had the headline *Elves Save Christmas Again* on the front page.

Number 10 had an old wooden gate that wobbled a little when Clara pushed it open. The front garden was made of big, rectangular slabs, with lots of green, stringy things poking up through the gaps.

“Impressive,” Clara said, looking down at them.

“What, the weeds?” asked Rachel.

“Weeds are just another name for a very clever plant,” Clara said, smugly.

Rachel went ahead and knocked on the door, which had a pair of white handles fixed to the frame on either side.

Clara and Rachel waited patiently, and Mrs Witter eventually arrived to open the door.

“Oh, hello girls,” she said. She smiled, but also looked a little disappointed. “I thought you might be my parcel.”

“Good morning, Mrs Witter,” announced Rachel. “We’re not a parcel, but we do have something for you, if you’d like to be part of our advent calendar.”

Mrs Witter shivered suddenly. “Sorry, dear,” she said. “It’s quite chilly out here for my old bones. Why don’t you both come inside for a minute?”

She led the girls into the living room, where there was a small, plastic Christmas tree in the corner, with an angel on top. Clara and Rachel sat down side by side on the sofa, while Mrs Witter descended slowly into the armchair opposite.

“My son Francis said he’d sent me a Christmas present, and I thought it might come today. That’s why I’m up so early, to make sure I don’t miss the post.”

Clara and Rachel glanced at each other uneasily. Mrs Witter has always been cheerful in the past, whenever they had seen her in the cafe, but now she seemed quite sad.

“Couldn’t your son give you the present when you see him at Christmas?” asked Rachel, trying to brighten the mood.

“Unfortunately, he moved to Canada a few years ago. He does come to visit occasionally, but this year he’s spending Christmas with his family over there.”

Rachel realised she'd said the wrong thing, even before Clara nudged her with an elbow. "That's such a shame," Rachel said, then elbowed her sister back.

"Anyway, listen to me chattering on," said Mrs Witter. "You said something about me being part of an advent calendar? I remember Francis having them when he was little. He got so excited every morning, wondering what he was going to find." Mrs Witter paused. "Oh, I've done it again, haven't I? Please, just tell me to shut up!"

"No, we'd never do that, would we Clara?" said Rachel. "We're just sorry you won't be with your family at Christmas."

Mrs Witter looked at the photographs hung up in frames on her wall. There were lots of happy, smiling faces. "I do miss him," she said. "But when you have children, all you want is for them to be happy."

There was silence in the room for a few seconds. Clara noticed the ticking of the clock, up on the mantelpiece. It was golden, with Roman numerals for numbers. With a small movement of the head she pointed out the time to her sister. It was nearly half past eight already, meaning Clara and Rachel were at risk of being late for school.

But, for once, Rachel misunderstood what Clara was trying to say to her. Instead of the clock, she noticed that there were about twenty Christmas cards up on the mantelpiece, too.

"At least you have your friends to keep you company," she said. "You have loads of cards."

"No, those are all old cards," Mrs Witter replied. "I just put them up every year to fill the space. Most of my friends are dead now."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Rachel. Clara elbowed her again.

“Don’t worry, dear,” said Mrs Witter. “Now, I’ve got something for the two of you.” Mrs Witter began to lift herself up out of the chair.

“But we need to give you–” Clara started.

“Just hang on while I fetch it,” Mrs Witter interrupted. After a few groans and moans as she stood up, Mrs Witter disappeared into the kitchen.

“I was trying to say we’ll be late for school,” Clara whispered to Rachel.

“It doesn’t matter,” Rachel replied. “Mrs Witter seems so lonely, I wanted to cheer her up.”

They heard a variety of sounds coming from the kitchen. Cupboard doors opening and closing. Tins and other things being moved around. Some tutting, and a little bit of grunting, and finally, a cry of, “Ah, there you are!” from Mrs Witter.

She re-emerged into the living room, looking out of breath. “You girls can take these chocolates with you,” she said. “They were a birthday present from my Francis last year. Or was it the year before? Anyway, I could never eat all of this myself,” Mrs Witter said.

Clara and Rachel shared another look. *She wants to give chocolates to us!?*

“We’re very grateful, Mrs Witter, but we actually came here to give you some chocolates ourselves,” Clara said.

“And we couldn’t take the present that your son gave to you,” added Rachel.

Mrs Witter didn’t seem to be listening to them. “I thought he would come to visit and bring his family, so we could all share them, but he hasn’t yet. Now the box just reminds me how much I miss him.”

Clara and Rachel knew they should take the chocolates, even though that would mean turning the reverse advent calendar back into an advent calendar, or a reverse reverse advent calendar.

“Thank you, Mrs Witter, that’s really generous of you,” said Rachel, accepting the box. “We’ll share them with our Dad and our brother, too.”

“You’re very welcome,” Mrs Witter replied.

“We hope your parcel arrives soon,” said Clara. “Perhaps we could come to visit at Christmas so you can show us what it is.”

“That would be lovely.”

Clara and Rachel said their goodbyes and raced off to school as fast as they could, a little sad, and slightly surprised to be carrying much more chocolate as they exited door number 10 than they had been carrying on the way in.

As it turned out, Clara and Rachel were thankful for the extra chocolate the next day, when they went to door number 11. The family from number 11 had been away for a long time, while having some building work done on their house. The entire house was covered in scaffolding. It even had a slide, like the kind you see in water parks, going from the top to the bottom. The builders threw rubble down it and it landed with a crash in a skip on the ground.

“It would be amazing to climb up that scaffolding,” Rachel always said, when they walked past.

“It would be amazing if you didn’t fall and break your neck,” Clara always replied.

The front garden of the house had various pieces of building equipment and materials scattered across it. There was a cement mixer and a power saw, with a large pile of bricks and several long beams of wood. The builders were all busy, rushing around in their hard hats and hi-vis jackets, making all sorts of noise. Banging, hammering, drilling, and shouting things

to each other that Clara and Rachel found incomprehensible.

“Aaaaeeeeoooouuu,” called the builder who was filling the cement mixer, to the one sawing wood. “Oooooiiiiiaaaeeee,” the sawing builder called back.

One of them spotted Clara and Rachel loitering by the gate and came over to them. He was wearing an luminous yellow jacket and white hard hat, like all the builders were, but he was also holding a clipboard and had a pencil behind his ear.

“Oh, hello,” he said. “It’s the girls from the cafe.” He had to shout over the noise.

“Yes, it’s us,” Rachel shouted back.

He turned back toward the house and yelled, “Quiiiiiiiiiieeeeeet!” It was pretty obvious what that meant, because all of the builders suddenly stopped what they were doing.

“That’s better,” he said, “I’ll be able to hear you now.”

Clara and Rachel were familiar with the builders working on the house, because they sometimes visited the cafe for breakfast. Some of them had been there on the morning they were banned from talking about Christmas. They had all ordered the mega deluxe breakfast, which stressed Dad out so much that he overreacted to Clara and Rachel’s gentle pestering and banned them from talking about Christmas. At least, that’s how Clara and Rachel remembered it.

The builders had heard about the ban. In fact, the entire cafe had heard Dad’s manic repetition of *Banned! Banned! Banned!* coming from the kitchen that morning. They thought it was hilarious, and the next day had all come into the cafe wearing Santa hats and singing Jingle Bells.

“It must be the 11th of December,” the builder with the clipboard said. “Your Dad told us you might be coming to see us today. It’s Clara and Rachel, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Rachel, who was pleased to have such a warm welcome.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Andy, the foreman. You’re just in time,” he said. Then he turned his face away from them and shouted again. “Breeeeaaaak!”

Within a few seconds, another six or seven builders had appeared from all over the site. One of them was swinging down the scaffolding like an Olympic gymnast! They all had the same yellow jackets on and white hard hats. Andy opened the back of the van parked behind him and brought out a hat and jacket each for Clara and Rachel. They were way too big, but they put them on anyway.

All the builders introduced themselves, and took pride in telling the girls where they were from. The first two were Raz and Shaun from London, then Ellie from Sheffield, Martin from Bulgaria, Niall from Ireland. Then there was Bunny from Jamaica, the scaffold-swinging gymnast. Niall brought over some mugs so they could all have tea, and Clara took that as her cue to produce the chocolates from Mrs Witter’s house. Everyone took one.

“You know, girls,” said Bunny, unwrapping her chocolate, “your Dad makes one of the best fry-ups I’ve ever had.”

“Agreed,” said Raz. “If it was up to me I’d be in there every morning, but the gaffer’s always making us start work really early.”

Raz smiled and winked at Clara and Rachel. His smile disappeared quickly when he noticed Andy looking at him sternly.

“Gaffer means boss,” Andy said, patting his clipboard.

“G-A-F-F-E-R?” asked Clara.

“Erm, yes, I think so,” replied Andy.

Niall took a huge gulp of his tea, then lifted the mug into the air and shook out the last few drops onto his tongue. “It’s a real shame, what’s happening to the cafe,” he said, when his mug was finally empty. “We really love that place.”

That was an odd thing for Niall to say, Rachel thought. Did he just mean it’s a shame he couldn’t go for breakfast today, or something else? She glanced at Clara, who seemed to have had the same thought, as she was raising her eyebrows, although it was hard to be sure because the hard hat suddenly slipped and covered half her face.

Rachel dismissed the thought and, now that everyone had finished their chocolate, pulled out the picture she had drawn for the builders. It was a picture of a house, made of bricks, with a door, windows and a roof, but instead of being a square or rectangle like a normal house, it was shaped like a Christmas tree. And up on the roof there were several builders installing a large star on the chimney.

“Brilliant,” said Andy. “I’d love to build a house like that.”

“Clara and Rachel laughed and said they’d better be on their way to school. “We were late yesterday,” Clara said, shivering at the memory, as she hated to be late. Everyone thanked the girls and wished them a happy Christmas. Clara and Rachel were taking off their hats and jackets, when Andy said something strange. Even stranger than what Niall had said.

“Oh, and please tell your Dad that I’ll come round sometime in the next few days to take some measurements for the refurbishment,” he said. “Our client is in a bit of a hurry to get started after Christmas.”

Clara and Rachel both smiled and nodded, then slowly turned away. As soon as they were out of sight of the builders, their smiles dropped.

“What’s going on?” Rachel asked. “Why is the cafe being refurbished?”

“Maybe Dad thinks it will help get more customers in,” replied Clara.

“But then why didn’t he tell us about it?”

“I don’t know,” Clara said, “but it doesn’t sound good.”

The Truth

“Let’s go through it one more time,” Clara said. “Methodically.”

It was the morning of the 12th of December, and the Hart sisters were still in their beds. They had both had an uneasy feeling since meeting the builders at number 11.

“Okay, just one more time,” said Rachel.

Clara reached for the notebook and pen she kept on her bedside table. She opened it to a blank page and wrote ‘Weird Things Builders Said’ at the top of it.

“The first thing was that Niall said it was a shame, what’s happening to the cafe,” Rachel said.

“Which implies that something bad is happening,” Clara added, as she scribbled in her notebook.

“But then Andy was talking about doing measurements for a refurbishment,” Rachel said. “That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“So, maybe Dad is having the cafe decorated, or changing the layout?” Clara asked, hopefully.

“It could be that,” Rachel replied.

“But then why would Niall say it was a shame?” Clara said. “That would be good news, surely?”

"I suppose so," Rachel said. She got out of bed and started to get dressed, still thinking. "I think we should just go downstairs and ask Dad, like I suggested last night."

Clara took a deep breath and closed the notebook. "Okay," she said, quietly.

Rachel looked at her inquisitively. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," replied Clara.

Rachel wasn't going to give up that easily. "Come on, tell me."

"It's just..." Clara paused, and took another deep breath, "...I'm scared about what he might tell us," she said.

The girls put on their school uniforms and headed down into the kitchen. Stanley was there, buttering a pile of toast. He didn't notice his Clara and Rachel coming in.

"Hey, where's Dad?" Rachel chirped.

Stanley jumped, startled. His butter knife flew into the air, did a complete somersault and landed with a clang on the floor.

"Flipping heck," Stanley said. He turned to see his sisters. "We need to put bells on you two, so I know when you're coming."

Clara tugged at Rachel's arm and pointed through the hatch, the opening from the kitchen to the front of the cafe. There was only one table occupied in the cafe. It was Mr and Mrs Sheron from number 2, both looking rather grumpy. But that's not who Clara was looking at. It was Dad, standing with his back to them at the counter. More accurately, she was looking at the man he was talking to. The girls crept forward to get a closer look.

Stanley stepped in front of them and waved to get their attention. "Good morning, by the way," he said, "Would you like me to make you some breakfast?"

Clara shook her head, preoccupied. "Not right now," she said, sharply.

The girls went toward the hatch, and ducked down, so just their heads were poking up from the bottom. This was no ordinary customer that Dad was with. Clara and Rachel looked at each other, not wanting to make any sound in case they were spotted. Thankfully it was one of those times they could communicate without speaking. "*Mr Fergus!*" Rachel said, in her head. "*Eric's dad!*" Clara replied, in her head. There he was, in his business suit, blue shirt and red tie, with a flashy gold watch on his wrist. They watched as he ran his finger along the counter, as if he was checking how clean it was. Dad took a cloth and wiped it.

Mr Fergus seemed to be just as horrible as his son. In fact, he was probably the reason Eric was so horrible. As far as Clara and Rachel knew, he had only ever been in the cafe once before. It had been a Saturday morning, a few months ago, and he'd come in and ordered a "Full fat double shot vanilla caramel macchiato with extra foam." Stanley had been serving him, and had to admit that he had no idea what that was, so Mr Fergus tutted loudly and said, "This place is a dump," before stomping out.

But now he was back. Clara and Rachel kept watching as he placed a briefcase on the counter, took out a bundle of papers, and handed them to Dad. What were those? As Dad turned to place the papers on the shelf behind him, the girls dived to the floor to avoid being spotted, but they were too late. Dad's head emerged above them, poking through the hatch.

"Is everything okay, girls?" he asked.

Clara looked up at him. "No!" she blurted out.

Stanley was looming above them from the other side now, with a full toast rack in each hand. "They're acting very strangely," he said to Dad.

Mr Fergus tutted loudly, in his trademark fashion. "They've always been trouble, those two," he said.

Dad seemed annoyed by that comment, but before he could respond they were all interrupted by the sound of a car horn beeping from outside. Rachel and Clara peered through the window, and saw who it was. It was Eric, in his dad's flashy car.

Mr Fergus picked up his briefcase. "I forgot he was waiting for me," he said. He began to stomp off toward the door, before turning back to look at Dad. "Have your solicitor look over the contract. I'd like it signed as soon as possible."

The contract!? Rachel and Clara were stunned. They didn't understand what they had just heard. Why would Mr Fergus be giving Dad a contract to sign? What was he agreeing to? The girls looked at Stanley, but he had the same open-mouthed, wide-eyed expression on his face as they had.

Dad saw they were all shocked. "Perhaps we should all sit down for a minute, so we can talk. Come through."

Rachel and Clara stepped into the front of the cafe, and Dad led them toward one of the empty tables. Stanley followed, delivering the toast to Mr and Mrs Sheron before he joined the family.

They waited for Dad to start talking, but he started fidgeting with the menus on the table, straightening them out. He seemed nervous, and wouldn't make eye contact with them.

Rachel decided to speak first. Under the table, Clara was gripping her hand tightly. "We really want to know what's going on, Dad. We spoke to the builders from number 11 yesterday..."

"And they told us something bad was happening here!" Clara blurted out.

"They didn't say that exactly," Rachel clarified.

“Well, let’s see.” Clara had been clutching her notebook. She opened it, to the page where she had been recording what the builders had said, and laid it out in front of Dad.

He looked at it for a second, and was clearly shocked. His eyebrows rose so high they were practically on top of his head. Then he sighed, and slowly nodded. “I should have known you were going to work it out.”

“Work what out, Dad?” Rachel asked.

“I can see that I’m going to have to tell you the truth.”

“Go on then!” Clara pleaded.

Dad hesitated. “I’m trying to decide how best to say it.” He scratched his head, and then his ear, and then his chin. “This is very difficult.”

Rachel put her hands together, like she was praying. “Please, Dad, we can’t take it anymore.”

“I wanted to wait until after Christmas to tell you this, so I didn’t spoil your fun.”

“Just tell us, Dad!!!” Clara and Rachel yelled.

Stanley interrupted to speak for the first time. “Maybe we should be a little quieter, so we don’t disturb the customers.” Everyone looked around at the only customers in the cafe. Mrs Sheron was sprinkling sugar on her toast, while Mr Sheron was stirring ketchup into his tea. “Although to be honest, I think they were already a little disturbed.”

Dad cleared his throat with a little cough. “Okay, here goes.” He paused, again, to scratch his nose. “Well, you all know the cafe has been struggling for a while. The builders at number 11 have helped keep us busy for the past weeks, but they’ll be finishing that job soon.” Dad reached for the mug of tea in front of him and took a swig, before immediately screwing up his

face and spitting it out. The mug had been there when the family sat down.

"Oops, I really should have cleared this table."

"Don't change the subject, Dad!"

"Sorry," he continued. "To cut to the chase... the truth is I'm selling the cafe, and we're moving to Blandington in January."

Clara and Rachel looked at each other in utter shock, then at Dad, then Stanley, and then back at Dad.

"What!?"

"I said—" Dad began.

Clara shot up from her chair and screeched. "You're selling the cafe!?"

Then Rachel was on her feet. "In January!?"

Even Stanley joined in. "And we're moving to Blandington!?"

"Erm... yes," stuttered Dad. "I've reluctantly agreed to sell the cafe to Mr Fergus, so he can renovate it and turn it into an upmarket coffee shop. But I still need to earn a living, so an old friend of mine has offered me a job as a chef in her new restaurant, which happens to be in Blandington."

Clara and Rachel were now clinging to each other, and started asking Dad so many questions, so rapidly, that they sounded like a pair of wild hyenas.

"Excuse me, could you keep the noise down, please?" Mrs Sheron shouted across the cafe. "You're ruining our breakfast."

"I'm just glad they're not singing," Mr Sheron added.

Dad waved at them and mouthed an apology. "Look," he said to the children, "I know this is a shock, but please calm down. I really don't have much choice. We're at risk of going bankrupt."

But Clara and Rachel weren't ready to calm down yet.

"What about all of our friends? What about school?"

“We don’t know anyone in Blandington!”

“What about the neighbours?”

“I’ve never even heard of Blandington!”

“How could you do this to us, Dad?”

“We can’t let Eric have our cafe!”

Eventually, Stanley stood up and put his arms around his sisters. “Look,” he said, “Dad’s clearly upset.” It was true. Dad had started fidgeting with the menus again. In fact, he was holding one of them up so he could hide behind it. “Let’s calm down.”

Everyone sat down again, and Dad came out from behind the menu.

“This is a bit of a shock for all of us,” Stanley said. “But if you really need to do this, Dad, we’ll support you.”

Stanley looked at his sisters. “Won’t we?” he added. Clara and Rachel looked at each other. They weren’t so sure.

We're moving to Blandington

After their Dad's revelation, Clara and Rachel were in a state of shock all day long.

At school, in maths class, the teacher Mr Plevin would usually expect Clara's hand to shoot up every time he asked a question, but today Clara's hands stayed by her side. The questions kept getting easier and easier, until eventually Mr Plevin asked Clara directly what two plus two was. She just stared at him, before appearing to mouth the words, "He's selling the cafe."

In football practice at lunch, the coach Ms Mansell put Rachel in goal, her favourite position, but she let in every shot the opposition took. Even when she faced a penalty, Rachel failed to move and let the ball go straight past her. Ms Mansell asked her what the matter was, and she didn't reply, except to mumble the words, "We're moving to Blandington".

To make matters worse, on the way home from school, the girls realised they had completely forgotten about their advent calendar. They hadn't been to door number 12 that morning.

"I can't believe we forgot," Rachel exclaimed.

"It's all Dad's fault," replied Clara.

"I'm not sure I'm in the mood to go anyway," said Rachel.

"Me neither," said Clara.

As they turned onto Raucous Road, and saw all the houses and their decorations, they started to change their minds.

“But I suppose people are expecting us, and might be disappointed if we don’t come,” said Rachel.

“Also, Ingrid and Mrs Witter gave us all that chocolate, which we need to share,” added Clara.

It was hard to stay cheerful, however, when the girls kept remembering what their Dad had planned. Number 12 was a hairdressing salon, owned by their friend Charlie. The sign on the front of the salon said, *Charlotte Hinchliffe: Scissor Technician*, in fancy letters. It meant that she was very good at cutting hair.

Dad had always cut the girls’ hair when they were little, but one time when they were eight, things went badly wrong. He was giving Rachel a trim, and somehow, the hair on the left side of her head ended up shorter than the hair on the right side. “Oops, I need to even that up,” he had said. So Dad cut more off the right, but somehow made that even shorter than the hair on the left side. “Just a couple more snips on the left,” he had said. This went on and on, until Rachel had almost no hair left. “There we go, perfectly even,” Dad said. When it came to Clara’s turn, she locked herself in the cupboard under the stairs and wouldn’t come out until Dad promised he had thrown his scissors away.

That was the day Charlie met Clara and Rachel. It was on the very first day she opened her salon, and Charlie had been busy arranging all her hairdressing equipment, polishing her mirrors, testing the swivel in her chairs, and laying out some magazines in the waiting area. In burst two twin girls, crying their eyes out, begging for haircuts. She had done some

amazing work to fix Dad's disastrous mistakes, and the sisters had been coming to Charlie for their haircuts ever since.

Now here Clara and Rachel were again, years later, bursting into the salon, and again looking like they were about to cry. Charlie was looking stylish as usual, wearing her jeans and a leopard-print top, sweeping some hair from the floor.

"Hi girls, is everything okay?" Charlie said, concerned. "Please don't tell me your Dad has tried to cut your hair again."

Clara and Rachel tried to laugh, but they couldn't.

"No, it's even worse this time," Rachel said. "We have to move house."

The girls told Charlie the whole story. When they'd finished, Charlie put down her broom and gave them both a hug.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I had no idea things were that bad at the cafe. But you can't blame your Dad. I know he's tried his best to make it work."

"Well, it's not good enough," said Clara.

"Try to understand, Clara. Running a business can be really tough," Charlie explained. "Some days I only have one or two customers, and I barely make enough money to cover the bills. Actually, come to think of it, I had that Mr Fergus in here the other day. He brought Eric in for a trim."

"I wish you'd trimmed his head off," laughed Rachel.

"He was talking about how he had a 'very profitable venture' lined up on the street," Charlie went on. "I wasn't really listening, you know, some customers just drone on about their boring lives, and I have to pretend to be interested. But I bet he was talking about your cafe."

Charlie made some hot chocolate for the three of them, and they carried on talking for a while, each of them sat in one of the swivel chairs. It wasn't until the sisters were getting up to leave that Clara felt the box of truffles in

her coat pocket, and remembered why they had come to the salon. “We forgot all about the advent calendar,” she said to Rachel. Clara gave Charlie a truffle, which she loved, and then Rachel handed her the picture she had drawn. It was, of course, a picture of Santa having his beard trimmed by a team of elves.

Charlie laughed and said she’d put it on the wall for all her customers to see. “I’m really going to miss you two,” she said.

Back at home in the flat, there was a very frosty atmosphere for the rest of that night. Dad kept apologising, saying it was a very difficult decision, explaining he had no choice, and so on. Stanley did his best to try to lighten the mood, although he was just as disappointed as his sisters were at the prospect of moving.

While they were having tea, leftover lentil curry from the cafe, Dad tried to convince them all how good it would be to live in Blandington. “My friend says they have a great museum.”

This piqued Clara’s interest. “Really? What is it the museum of, Dad?” She was thinking science, history, sport. All the ones she loved to visit in Manchester.

“Actually,” Dad said, “it’s a museum of museums.”

“What!?” A lentil flew out of Clara’s mouth and landed on the other side of the table.

“Yes, they have exhibitions about all the other great museums of the world.”

Stanley was laughing as he spoke. “What else have they got, Dad? An art gallery that only has paintings of other art galleries?”

"I guess it sounds silly," Dad said. "I'm just trying to look on the bright side."

"We do understand, Dad," Rachel said.

"No, we don't," Clara said.

"Okay," Rachel corrected, "we're *trying* to understand."

"I'm not," Clara said.

The next morning was the 13th of December. Clara and Rachel decided that despite the bad news, they wanted to carry on with their advent calendar, so they went to the next door.

House number 13 was known, appropriately, as the messy house. It was rented out to university students, who tended to stay for a year or two before moving on. And every group seemed to leave a piece of junk in the garden, which was never cleared away. Currently, there was a deckchair, an old vacuum cleaner, an empty fish tank and a bicycle with no wheels in front of the house. But there were also some lovely Christmas decorations in the window, which was covered in lots of intricate paper snowflakes, each one sprinkled with gold glitter. It was quite a contrast to the junkyard outside.

Today, when Clara and Rachel arrived, there was something new in the garden. Although it didn't seem to be junk. It looked like... a robot? By the front door, propped up on top of a very large, upside down plant pot, there was a metallic figure, about a metre tall, painted red, with a beard made of cotton wool.

Suddenly, as the girls approached, the robot lifted its arms and made a sound, a very slow "Ho... Ho... Ho," in a creepy computer voice. Clara and Rachel both jumped back.

"Is that a robotic Santa Claus?" asked Rachel, in amazement.

"Fascinating," said Clara. "It must be motion-activated."

The front door opened before Clara and Rachel had knocked.

"Good morning," said the person standing behind it. It was a young man, probably a couple of years older than Stanley. He was wearing glasses and was holding a bowl of cornflakes. "I see you've met my friend," he laughed, nodding at the robot.

"Yes, he's very..." Rachel paused, trying to think of the right word, or the least offensive word. "...friendly."

Suddenly a young woman appeared next to the man. She was wearing a headscarf and a t-shirt that said 'The Stone Roses' on it. "I told you it was creepy, Bradley," the woman said.

"He's not an *it*," said the man, looking annoyed.

Another woman appeared behind them. She was wearing a fluffy dressing gown and was drinking a cup of coffee. "Come on, Demi, you know how he gets attached to his inventions," she said.

Rachel decided to interrupt. "Hello, we're Rachel and Clara, and we live at number 24."

The Stone Roses woman smiled. "Sorry, we were being rude." She held out her hand and shook Clara and Rachel's in turn. "I'm Alex, and these are my housemates, Demi and Bradley."

"And this is Nick," said Bradley. He pointed at his robot.

"Actually, I've seen you both before," said Alex. "I've been in your cafe a few times, whenever I need somewhere nearby to study."

"It won't be our cafe for much longer," blurted out Clara. "Our Dad has to sell it, so it'll probably be something like a Mega Bucks Coffee or a Cost A Lot Coffee next year."

“That’s a shame,” said Alex, “Those big coffee shop chains are really boring.”

The group carried on talking for a few minutes, as Clara and Rachel explained their advent calendar and offered everyone a chocolate. Rachel gave them her drawing, which was a picture of elves playing charades. One of them had its arms outstretched, pretending to be an aeroplane, but all the other elves were making bad guesses. One was saying “pterodactyl”, another was saying “tree”, and another was saying “Angel of the North”.

“That’s really good,” said Demi. “I’m an art student, so I know what I’m talking about!”

“Wow, thanks,” said Rachel. “Do you all study art?”

“No, I do mechanical engineering,” said Bradley. He pointed at his robot again.

Clara took a deep breath. “M-E-C-H-A-N-I-C-A-L-E-N-G-I-N-E-E-R-I-N-G. It means he builds machines, I assume.”

“Impressive,” said Alex. “And I study politics.”

“Dad’s always talking about politics,” said Rachel. “The Big House of Parliament and the Prime Minister in Downton Street, and all that stuff.”

“The *Houses* of Parliament and *Downing* Street,” corrected Clara.

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. “Isn’t that what I said?”

“Actually, politics is all around us, even on this street,” said Alex. “It’s all about taking action to make the world a better place. Think about your cafe, for example. If you want to stop it being turned into a Mega Bucks or Cost A Lot, you could run a campaign.”

Suddenly, Rachel’s face lit up. “A campaign?” she asked.

“Yeah, why not?” replied Alex.

“What would we need to do?”

“The key is to mobilise people. If you can get everyone on the street involved in helping to save the cafe, that could make a huge difference.”

Rachel and Clara looked at each other, excited.

“Is this really possible?”

“Anything is possible if you believe in the cause,” Alex said.

Rachel and Clara said their goodbyes to the students and made their way to school, chatting about ideas for a campaign to save the cafe. They didn’t yet know how they were going to pull this off, but they were already determined that they would.

Save Our Cafe

In her bedroom on the evening of the 13th of December, Clara had her stapler out. She had an industrial strength one, almost as long as her arm, for all of her emergency stapling needs. It was a Christmas present from last year. So far, Clara hadn't actually had any emergency stapling needs, but she was prepared. "Someday, your time will come," she would say, stroking the shiny black plastic.

Today, she was sure the moment had finally arrived. The future of the cafe depended on Clara's stapler. Or so she thought.

Rachel had designed a poster for their campaign to save the cafe. "Eye-catching images with a simple but powerful message," was her assessment of her own work. She was very proud. The posters had a picture of the smiling Hart family, standing in front of their cafe. Around the edge of the page, she had drawn 24 doors, all numbered, representing every house on the street. (Rachel had been tempted to draw a big X over door number 6, the Fergus house, but resisted the urge.) In stylish lettering at the top of the poster was their simple slogan:

SAVE OUR CAFE!

The sisters agreed that they would keep the campaign secret from Dad at first. He might think they were pestering the neighbours again, which he

wouldn't like. He was also too proud to ask for help. It was obvious he would see the posters sooner or later, if people put them up, but Rachel and Clara wanted to give themselves a chance to get some supporters behind the campaign before then.

The plan was to give one poster to every house on Raucous Road as they did the advent calendar. This would be the advent calendar picture, instead of the drawings Rachel had been doing so far. Rachel and Clara would have to go back to the houses they had already visited, too. Some of them for the third time! On the back of the poster, Rachel had written an instruction for everyone to display the poster in their window if they supported the campaign. "Hopefully, when Dad does notice them he'll be convinced that everyone wants us to stay."

"Yes," agreed Clara, "and because there will be a new poster going up each time we visit a new house, he will see that support is growing every day."

Rachel had photocopied her design in the computer room at school. This was no easy task, because she had to sneak in without the IT teacher Mr Silva seeing her. There was a strict rule at school that the printers could only be used for school work.

Their friend Coleen agreed to help distract Mr Silva. Rachel and Clara had told her about Dad selling the cafe, and she wanted to do whatever she could to help. Clara and Coleen went into the computer room while Mr Silva was there eating his lunch and said they had an important IT question for him.

"Okay, how can I help?"

"We were just wondering what the difference is between a computer mouse and a real mouse?" asked Clara, trying not to laugh.

Mr Silva nearly choked on his cheese sandwich. "Pardon?"

"We really want to know, Mr Silva," said Coleen. "They look very similar, and they do have the same name."

"I don't really know where to start with that question, girls."

Behind Mr Silva, Rachel crept past, through the side door into the print room. She put the poster into the printer and pressed the copy button, but nothing happened. Rachel realised the printer wasn't plugged in. She heard Mr Silva speaking, in a very hesitant way.

"One is alive, and the other...erm...is not."

"So a computer mouse is dead?" asked Coleen.

Rachel found the plug and pushed it into the socket in the wall. The printer lit up. She pressed to make thirty copies – one for each house on Raucous Road and a few spares – and hit the big green button to begin. A message popped up on the screen. 'Out of paper', it said. Oh no!

"A real mouse is born as a baby then grows up into an adult. A computer mouse isn't born, it's made in a factory." Mr Silva seemed to have started enjoying the conversation with Clara and Coleen. He was speaking very enthusiastically now. "But it's not dead, technically, because it was never alive."

"And I guess a computer mouse doesn't need to eat, does it?" Coleen asked.

"Well," Mr Silva said, "a computer mouse doesn't digest food like a real mouse, but it does still need an energy supply."

In the print room, Rachel opened a cupboard and found a ream of paper. She ripped the packaging off and loaded it into the tray. Now it should work. She pressed the green button again, and finally it started churning out copies. It did make rather a lot of noise, though.

Clara started talking louder to cover the sound. "So, in conclusion, the most important difference is that a computer mouse needs a battery for energy, while a real mouse eats various foods like seeds, grains, insects..."

The printer finished, so Rachel grabbed the posters and crept back out.

"...and cheese!" Clara exclaimed, as Mr Silva took a bite of his sandwich.

Back at home that night, Clara and Rachel were laughing about the success of their plan, and discussing tactics for the campaign. They were feeling optimistic, although Clara still thought they needed more than just the posters. This is where the stapler came in.

"It's not enough for people just to say they support the cafe," she explained. Clara loved the posters, but she wasn't sure they would be enough to save the cafe on their own. "We need to get people to come into the cafe, and see how good it is, so the cafe can start making money again."

"Okay, so how do we do that?"

"With these..." Clara had been working on her own idea, and now showed Rachel what it was. From the drawer in her bedside table, she produced a pile of vouchers for people to get a free mince pie from the cafe on Christmas Eve. "Dad makes delicious mince pies, so we can encourage people to come in by offering them a free one."

Clara didn't quite have the artistic talent of her sister, unfortunately. The picture of a mince pie she drew on the voucher she designed looked more like a toilet bowl than a delicious treat, but nevertheless, it got the message across. Clara started to fix a couple of vouchers to every poster. In truth, she could have used a paper clip, or just folded them together, but Clara was determined to use her favourite piece of office equipment. So she pressed that stapler down with a very satisfying *thwack* on every copy.

“We’ll give these vouchers to people instead of the chocolate. They’ll still get an advent calendar treat, just not straight away.”

Rachel wasn’t completely sure she agreed with her sister. “But if the cafe is losing money, how does it help to give away free food?”

“The mince pies get people in the door. Once they’re here, they’ll probably buy a meal or a drink, too. Dad could make loads of money in just one day, and convince people to be regular customers.”

Rachel did like the sound of that. Clara let her have a go stapling some of the vouchers. Yes, she agreed, it was a very satisfying *thwack*. The campaign was ready to begin.

Chapter twelve

Fierce winds

The next morning, on the 14th of December, Clara and Rachel set off without saying a word to anyone. Luckily, they were able to get off to a flying start. Their friend Charlie the hairdresser owned number 14 Raucous Road, the house next door to her salon.

"Hello again, girls," Charlie said when she opened the door to Clara and Rachel. "I wondered if you'd be coming this morning. Are you feeling more cheerful today?"

The sisters beamed. "We're going to save the cafe!" they said together.

Charlie raised her eyebrows. "Really, how?"

"We are asking everyone to put up one of these posters." Rachel thrust the poster into Charlie's hands. "To show how much they want the cafe to stay open."

"Oooh, that's a good idea," said Charlie.

"And..." Clara took the poster back and turned it over to show Charlie the voucher, "you can go to the cafe for a free mince pie on Christmas Eve."

"Great, I'll take two posters, one for here and one for the salon. Does that mean I get double the mince pies?"

"Yes, of course," said Clara, replying instantly.

Charlie laughed "Are you trying to save the cafe, or fatten up the neighbours?"

After this promising start to the campaign, things got a little weirder the next day. The 15th of December was a Saturday, so the girls had some spare time to deliver posters to the earlier houses. But first, they had to visit door number 15.

The people who lived there were quite new to Raucous Road, so Clara and Rachel hadn't met them yet. The house had lots of decorations up, including lights strung up on a tree in the front garden, but it seemed like they were still celebrating Halloween rather than Christmas. Where there should have been robins, elves, reindeer and angels, this house had some very odd-looking creatures on display.

The door knocker was a huge, golden dragon, with eyes that seemed to stare directly at Clara and Rachel. Somehow, that was the most normal thing Clara and Rachel could see. Hanging from the door frame was what can only be described as a long, spiky purple caterpillar. In the window, there were three models standing on the windowsill: a half-man half-horse ("What's that?" asked Rachel), a big cat with the head and wings of an eagle ("What's *that*?" asked Clara), and strangest of all, a big, pink blob that had a large eye on it, and tentacles coming off it in all directions, each with another eye at the end ("I don't even want to know what that is!" said Rachel.).

Then the door opened, to reveal a man wearing a silky, blue cloak with yellow stars printed on it, and a large, pointed blue hat. He was holding a long, crooked stick. He looked down at Clara and Rachel,

"Greetings, young friends." he said, in a booming voice. "Might I enquire as to the reason you stand before me on this frosty morn,"

"Erm... Merry Christmas?" said Rachel, a little unsure of herself.

"I receive your yuletide wishes with gratitude," he replied, and "return them forthwith."

Rachel and Clara looked at each other, both confused.

"I see that my vocabulary obscures my meaning," the man said. "Perhaps the young ladies would prefer I use a more modern parlance."

"P-A-R-L-A-N-C-E," said Clara. "It means his way of speaking."

"Erm... okay?" said Rachel.

Suddenly, the man's face relaxed. "Oh good," he said, in a normal voice. "I like to stay in character as long as I can, but it's difficult when I haven't even had my morning coffee yet."

"Are you a wizard?" Rachel asked.

The man straightened out his cloak, clearly proud of it. "Just for today. I take part in role-playing adventure games with my friends, and we're meeting for an event today. This is my character, Edresonus the Wise. In real life, I'm Eddie."

"That sounds like so much fun! Where do you play?"

"It is lots of fun. But unfortunately we're only playing online today. We used to play in a room above a local pub, but it closed down. No-one in the group has a house big enough to fit everyone, so now we just do a video conference."

"Actually, we have a similar situation," Clara said. "We live at the cafe at the end of the road, and we're trying to stop it from being closed down."

Eddie stared off into the distance, and spoke in a very solemn voice. "Ah, the fierce winds of recession threaten the institutions of our once-prosperous territory," he said, before looking down at the girls again.

"That's too many words for me to spell," said Clara.

“Sorry,” Eddie said. “I slipped back into character for a second there. I’m always doing that. I just meant that businesses aren’t making money and people might lose their jobs.”

“That’s okay,” said Clara. “If you could just put up one of our posters in your window, it would really help us.”

“Yeah, you could put it above your horse-man or your eagle-cat, or the pink blobby monster,” Rachel added.

Eddie laughed and took the poster. “I think you’re referring to the *centaur*, the *griffon* and the *beholder*. Anyway, yes, I’d be glad to display the poster. Now I’ll let you get on to the other houses you need to visit.”

The girls thanked him and turned to leave. “Bye,” Rachel said, “We hope you enjoy your game today.”

“Nice to meet you both.”

“You too, Edresonus.” Clara waved. “I’ve really got to get myself one of those costumes,” she whispered to Rachel as they emerged back onto the street.

The girls had enough time to visit a few houses that morning, so they headed first to the students at number 13. Nick the robot was still outside the house, greeting them with its creepy *Ho Ho Ho*. Clara and Rachel waited for ages after they knocked on the door, until Alex finally answered, looking very sleepy.

“Hey,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “What time is it?”

Clara looked at her watch and told her it was half past nine.

“In the morning?” Alex asked.

“Erm... yes. Did we wake you up?”

It seemed that the students didn't get up this early on Saturday mornings, but Alex said she didn't mind. Rachel showed her the poster for their campaign, and she looked very impressed with it.

"You have a real talent," she said, yawning.

The girls gave her three copies, so Demi and Bradley could each have one, with their own mince pie vouchers. They carried on up the street. They'd already seen Charlie the day before, so they didn't need to go back to her salon at number 12. Number 11 was the house with the builders, who weren't working today. The house didn't have any windows yet, anyway, so there wasn't much sense asking them to put up a poster there.

As they crossed the road toward number 10, they saw Ingrid waving at them from down the street. She was with a small dog on a lead. Clara and Rachel hurried over to see her, excited. As they got closer, they realised that while the dog was short in height, it had a long body, like a sausage. It had lovely, dark brown fur.

"Girls, I'm so glad I bumped into you," Ingrid said. "I want to introduce you to Bert. He's come to live with me at number 5." Bert the dog yapped, at them, as if to say hello.

Rachel and Clara both knelt down to pat and stroke Bert. "He's so gorgeous," said Rachel.

"Careful when you stroke him, girls, as he has a sore neck. I got him from a dog shelter, and they told me his previous owners didn't treat him very well."

"That's so sad," said Clara.

"He likes being tickled behind the ears, though."

Rachel and Clara didn't need telling twice. Bert seemed to realise that making friends with a pair of twins was a good idea, as they could take an ear each and tickle both at the same time. He wagged his tail in joy.

"He's a *dachshund*," said Ingrid. "In German, that means badger dog, because originally this type of dog was bred to hunt badgers." Rachel and Clara were shocked to hear that. "But don't worry, Bert wouldn't hurt anyone."

After one more tickle, Rachel stood up to tell Ingrid the bad news about their Dad deciding to sell the cafe. Clara showed her the poster and explained their campaign.

Ingrid said she was really sad to hear that, and agreed to put a poster up in her window. "But what does this mean for your advent calendar?" she asked. "Have you stopped giving people the chocolate truffles I made?"

"We're really sorry," said Rachel. "Clara thought it would be better for the campaign if we encouraged people to go to the cafe for their treat."

"That's a shame, because I loved the idea of bringing the whole street together to enjoy my chocolate," Ingrid said. "But I understand it's very important to try to save the cafe. What did you do with the leftover chocolate, by the way?"

Rachel and Clara shared a guilty look. "We were going to bring it back to you..." Rachel began.

"...but we just wanted to have one more each, because they were so nice," Clara added.

"Then one became two..."

"And suddenly they were all gone!"

"I see," said Ingrid. She clearly didn't find it quite as funny as Rachel and Clara did, although she didn't seem *too* upset. "I suppose I can make more."

The girls said goodbye to Ingrid and Bert, and carried on to number 10. This is where Mrs Witter lived. She'd been so nice to them when they visited her, Clara and Rachel were sure she'd want to support their campaign, too. She also took quite a long time to answer the door, although not quite as long as Alex had.

"Oh," she said when she answered. Clara and Rachel remembered the last time they came here, when she'd be disappointed they weren't delivering her a parcel from her son. There was no attempted smile this time, just a frown.

"Is everything okay, Mrs Witter?" Rachel asked.

"I'm fine, dear," she replied, but Rachel could tell that wasn't true. "It's just that my parcel hasn't arrived yet." I've been getting up early every day so I don't miss the delivery.

"I'm sure it will come soon. It's Christmas, so they must be busy with lots of presents being sent."

"I don't know," said Mrs Witter. She pulled her cardigan closed to protect herself from the cold. "I really think he's forgotten about me this year."

"No, that can't be true!"

Then Clara had an idea she thought could help. "You could phone him, just to check if he's sent it."

"Yeah," said Rachel. "You could even do a video call so you get to see him, too. That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

Mrs Witter looked thoughtful for a second, before she shook her head. "I can't do all those video chatty things. Francis gave me a computer and set it up for me last time he was here, but I can never get that techno web thing to work."

Rachel and Clara looked at each other. She means the internet, they thought.

“You could come to the cafe at lunchtime,” said Clara. “We have a laptop so we’ll set it all up for you. That’ll be breakfast time in Canada, won’t it? So Francis and his family should be up.”

A huge smile spread across Mrs Witter’s face. “Really, you would do that?”

“Of course we would. And you can even have a free mince pie.”

Clara handed Mrs Witter the poster for their campaign, with the voucher. She put on her glasses, which had been hanging on a string around her neck, and looked at it. The smile left her face instantly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry girls. Is the cafe really closing?”

“Not if we can help it!” Clara and Rachel said together, and skipped off towards home.

It's never going to work

On the 16th of December, Clara and Rachel got out of bed with a spring in their steps. Their campaign had started well. They were both up before Dad, so they crept into his room. He was still asleep, with his eye mask on and his toes poking out from underneath the covers.

"Hey, remember when we used to wake up Dad by jumping on his bed?" Rachel whispered.

Clara had a wicked grin on her face. "Let's do it, for old times' sake."

They both took a run-up and launched themselves onto his bed, then started bouncing up and down, trying to see which one of them could touch the ceiling first. Dad started making groaning sounds.

Suddenly Rachel tripped over one of Dad's legs, and landed directly on top of him.

"Ouch!" Dad yelped. "What the flip...?!?"

Clara and Rachel burst out laughing. Clara was rolling around so much that she left the bed and landed with a bump on the floor.

"We haven't done any flips yet, Dad, but we could try if you like," Rachel said, clambering off him.

"Why oh why oh why have you decided to wake me up on a Sunday morning by using my bed as a trampoline?"

"It's a lot bigger than our beds, Dad," Clara said. "It's only logical."

“I see. And does this mean you’ve decided to forgive me for selling the cafe?”

Clara and Rachel looked at each other from opposite corners of the bed, with Dad’s toes in between them.

“We’re thinking about it,” Rachel says. “It really depends how it all turns out.”

“What do you mean by that?” he asked. But it was too late. The girls had already jumped down off the bed and were on their way downstairs.

The next house they had to visit for their advent calendar was number 16. A school friend of Stanley’s called Deyna lived there, with her parents. Deyna came over to their flat to study with Stanley quite often. Stanley always got nervous when she was there, and told Clara and Rachel to not talk to Deyna in case they embarrassed him. This was an instruction they ignored, obviously.

It was Deyna that answered the door. “Hi Clara, hi Rachel,” she said. She knew how to tell the girls apart, of course. “I’ve been expecting you. I’ve been looking forward to the 16th of December ever since I heard about your advent calendar. It’s such a brilliant idea.”

“Hi Deyna,” Rachel said. “We’re actually doing something a little bit different now.”

Rachel explained about their campaign to keep the cafe open

“Wow, that sounds amazing,” Deyna said in response. “I was really gutted when Stan told me you were leaving. But he didn’t tell me anything about your campaign, which is weird.”

“Well, we haven’t actually told him or Dad yet. “We’re waiting for them to spot the posters for themselves. Then they’ll see how much support there is for the cafe.”

Deyna took a poster and said she’d be happy to put it in the window. “I’ll do anything I can to help keep Stanley here,” she said, before adding quickly, “and the rest of the family, of course.” Clara and Rachel thanked her and headed toward the far end of the street, where they needed to deliver more posters.

It was pleasing to see on the way that, among all the brilliant Christmas decorations, there were already a few of the posters on display. Eddie from number 15 had put one up, positioned above his pink blob creature. Charlie had put one up at her house at number 14, and at the salon next door. There were three on display at the students’ house at number 13, one in the front room next to the snowflake decorations, and two more in the upstairs bedrooms. “Ho... Ho... Ho,” said Nick the Robot as they went past.

They went to number 8, where Ellen answered the door with baby Mario. Unfortunately, Mario decided the poster was food and put it straight onto his mouth. He didn’t have teeth to chew it, but he did get spit all over it, so Clara and Rachel gave her another. They also delivered one to her father, Mr Flitcroft, who lived across the road.

They visited Mr Nash, the newsagent, at number 7, who was happy to put a poster up. They skipped number 6 because that’s where awful Eric Fergus and his father lived. If it wasn’t for them, Dad wouldn’t be selling the cafe and none of this would be happening. They also skipped Ingrid’s house at number 5, because she already had a poster up. It was a pleasing thought, for both Rachel and Clara, knowing that Eric’s house was about to be surrounded by other houses that were supporting their campaign.

The girls were about to visit Dean's chippy, Potato Heaven, at number 4, when they heard a familiar voice behind them.

"It's never going to work," the voice said.

Clara and Rachel turned around and saw Eric, smirking at them. He must have sneaked up on them and hidden while they were in the newsagents. He was leaning up against a lamppost, like he always did, wearing a polo shirt with the collar turned up, like he always did. Never before in human history had anyone ever tried so hard to look cool, and failed so badly.

The girls stopped, and glared at him. They both had scrunched up noses and pursed lips. They looked, in fact, like someone had let out a revolting smell from their backside, which was exactly how it felt to be speaking to Eric.

"We don't need any advice from you, Eric," said Rachel, as fiercely as she could.

"Exactly," added Clara. "Mind your own business."

"I think you'll find this *is* my business," Eric replied. "Or more accurately, it's going to be my father's business, very soon. He told me all about his plans."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Rachel,

Eric wagged his finger at her. "I know you're wasting your time with your stupid posters."

"Whatever, Eric. Just look around." Rachel gestured at all the nearby houses. "More and more people are supporting us every day."

"Yeah, so why don't you just go home and count all the money from your advent calendar?" Clara said. "How much did you say you get, £50 every day?"

“That’s right.” Eric had clearly forgotten what lies he’d already told. “It’s better than getting a mince pie voucher. I could buy a thousand mince pies with all my money.”

Eric turned away and stormed off toward his house. Clara and Rachel breathed a collective sigh of relief and unscrunched their noises.

“I wish he would buy a thousand mince pies,” said Clara. “If he stuffed them all in his mouth at the same time, maybe he’d shut up for once.”

“Me too,” replied Rachel. “But it is quite funny to think that Bert the dog has probably had a wee up against that lamppost he was leaning on.”

Clara and Rachel both giggled at that thought. But deep down they were trying to cover for the fact that Eric had spooked them, more than they wanted to admit.

The famous advent calendar twins

Just before bed on the night of the 16th of December, Dad came into Rachel and Clara's room to tell them that he was going to be going away for a couple of days.

"Where are you going?" they asked.

He started scratching various bits of his face before answering, so the girls guessed he was nervous about telling them.

"I'm going to Blandington to have a look at some houses where we might live. "My friend is going to show me around the town."

Rachel and Clara did not like the sound of this. It showed Dad was serious about his plan to move there. They both stayed silent.

"I know you're still a bit upset," Dad said, "but I have to sort out some practicalities. Stanley doesn't have any classes at college so he will look after the two of you and the cafe, with Deyna helping him out."

Clara buried her entire head in her pillow to avoid the conversation. Rachel was a little more cooperative. "Okay, Dad."

"Hey, maybe I'll get a chance to visit the museum of museums," Dad said, trying to be cheerful. "Or the art gallery with pictures of art galleries."

"Okay, Dad," Rachel said.

"Actually, I heard there was also a library, but all the books in it are books about libraries."

Rachel couldn't help but laugh at that one. Then there was a muffled sound from under Clara's pillow.

"Pardon? We can't quite hear you, Clara,"

Clara's red face emerged from under the pillow, and she gasped for breath. "I said I hope it burns down!" She dived back under the pillow.

"Charming," said Dad.

Clara came back up. "Not with you in it, obviously."

"Well, that's something, I suppose. Anyway, I'll probably be gone when you wake up, but I'll be back soon." Dad came over and gave both girls a kiss goodnight.

The next morning, the sisters woke up with a sense of urgency. Now that the sale of the cafe seemed more real, Clara and Rachel were even more desperate for their campaign to succeed. Even Eric's taunting the day before hadn't put them off.

As soon as they were ready they headed for house number 17, where Esme lived. The girls knew Esme well because she came into the cafe occasionally, although they hadn't seen her for a few weeks. Esme had a son, Shaun, who was in the year below Rachel and Clara at school.

The girls were surprised to notice there weren't many Christmas decorations up at number 17. There were some lights around the window and a wreath on the door, but nothing else. When Esme opened the door, they understood why. She had all the decorations on herself.

"Hello, good morning and merry Christmas to the Hart sisters," Esme said when she saw them.

Rachel and Clara were amazed by the sight of Esme's jewellery. She had big hoop earrings on, with little snowmen hanging from the hoops. She had

a necklace that seemed to have nine reindeer hanging from it, including Rudolph at the front with what looked like a red ruby for his nose. She was wearing several bracelets with different designs, including one that looked like tinsel, and a colourful one that was made of little Christmas presents. Even the green jumper Esme was wearing seemed to have diamonds sewn into it.

"Wow," said Rachel and Clara in unison.

"That's a nice greeting," said Esme, smiling.

Clara was still staring at Esme's jumper, her eyes wide. "You look like a human Christmas tree," she said.

"I'll take that as a compliment!" she replied. "I've probably gone a little over the top, but it's not just for fun. I've started a business teaching people to make their own jewellery, and it's really taken off in the run-up to Christmas."

"Oooh, we'd love to come to one of your classes," said Rachel. "Can we?"

"Yes of course, but I'm fully booked until March. I teach here in the house, and I don't have that much space so my classes are quite small."

Rachel's face fell. She told Esme about Dad's plan to sell the cafe. "So, we're not sure we'll still be here in March, unfortunately," she concluded.

"We will be here!" Clara said. "We just need to get Dad to change his mind."

Esme was very sympathetic. She agreed to put up a poster and do whatever else she could to help. When she waved goodbye, all her jewellery made a lovely jingling sound.

After school that day, Rachel and Clara came home and were happy to see a friendly face in the cafe. It was Mack, from number 3. The sisters had been planning to go to his house soon to ask him to support the campaign.

Mack didn't usually come to the cafe on a Monday afternoon but there he was, drinking tea, talking and laughing with another man. When he saw Rachel and Clara, he waved them over.

"Hi girls, lovely to see you again."

"Hi Mack," they replied together.

"I want to introduce you to my old mate Vinny." He nodded at the man, who had a shaved head and very big muscles. "Vinny was in the photograph I showed you when you came to my house, except he had a bit more hair then."

Mack and Vinny both laughed, and waved their fists at each other in a jokey way. "Vinny," Mack said, "this is Rachel and Clara, the girls I was telling you about."

Vinny smiled and held his hand out to shake Rachel and Clara's. They were surprised Mack had been talking about them. "Ah," Vinny said, "so you're the famous advent calendar twins from number 24?"

The girls blushed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," Vinny went on. "It's just that Mack told me you inspired him to get in touch with me and the others from our platoon."

"Really? That's amazing."

"Aye, we're planning a reunion in the new year," Mack added. "Maybe I'll bring everyone by for breakfast." Suddenly Mack's smile disappeared. "Ah, I'm so sorry. Coleen told me the news about your family moving away. I just forgot for a second."

"It's okay," Clara said, jumping in before her sister could respond. "We're not really moving away. We're going to make Dad stop the sale." She pulled out one of the campaign posters and put it on the table.

"Ah, this one's a fighter," said Vinny.

"Well, we don't know anything for sure yet," said Rachel.

Suddenly, Rachel and Clara became aware of someone looming over them from behind. The shadow being cast on the wall was very large, and growing larger. They turned and saw Mr Fergus, pretty much the last person in the world they wanted to see, except perhaps for his son Eric. There he was, wearing his suit and flashing his gold watch around.

"Where is your father? I need to speak to him."

Rachel and Clara wanted to be brave, but it wasn't so easy when you've got someone like that standing over you, rudely barking questions.

"Erm, we don't know," Clara said, nervously.

"You don't know?"

"Actually, he's gone away somewhere."

"Where?"

"Blandington."

Mr Fergus tutted. "That sounds made up. I've never heard of it."

"It's real. We don't tell lies," Rachel said, finding a bit of courage.

"Whatever. Just tell him I need to see him." He tapped the gold watch on his wrist. "Time is money."

Mr Fergus turned and stomped off toward the door, slamming it behind him as he went out. The room got brighter again.

"He's a nasty piece of work, that man," Mack said.

"We'd better go tell Stanley he's lurking around," Rachel said.

The sisters hurried off toward the kitchen, where they were met with a sight that instantly made them forget about Mr Fergus. What an absolute mess. There were several frying pans piled up on the hob. The door of almost every cupboard was hanging open. There were multiple used teabags on the worktop and a red handprint on the fridge (later confirmed to be jam). In the middle of the floor was a smashed egg, with yellow yolk oozing out of it and spreading across the tiles. Clara and Rachel realised just how good their Dad must be at keeping the kitchen clean and tidy, when they saw how filthy it was after only one day under Stanley's management.

"I know what you're thinking," Stanley said. "I'll admit things got a little bit out of control here today." Clara and Rachel also noticed that he had brown sauce – at least they hoped it was brown sauce – smeared across his cheek. He noticed them looking, then wiped it off with his finger and licked it. "Hmm, tangy."

"It looks like you must have had loads of customers, so that's good," Rachel said.

Stanley looked down at the floor and muttered, "We had six."

"All this for six customers!?"

"Dad tried to teach me his system for keeping things clean and today before he left this morning, but I was half-asleep at the time."

Deyna appeared in the hatch, the opening between the kitchen and the front of the cafe, and shrugged her shoulders. "I really don't know how your Dad keeps on top of everything that needs doing," she said. "It's such hard work." She had bean juice down the front of her top.

"Anyway," Stanley said, "I wanted to tell you that I already know about the campaign, and so does Dad."

Clara and Rachel were taken aback by this news. "Really!?"

"Of course he does. Several people from the street have been in the cafe and they've been talking about it."

"Brilliant, that's exactly what we wanted," said Rachel. "But why hasn't Dad said anything about it to us?"

"I guess he just didn't want to stop you because he sees how strongly the two of you feel. You know he doesn't like having difficult conversations."

"Or maybe he's happy we're doing it because he wants our help to save the cafe," Clara said.

"I'm not sure about that," Stanley said. "But I do think you need to talk to him when he's back tomorrow, before you carry on with the campaign."

Rachel and Clara looked at each other. They looked at Deyna, who smiled and nodded. They looked back at Stanley, who was rubbing off the rest of the brown sauce. Then they looked at the pile of pots, and decided to get out of there before anyone asked for their help with their washing up.

"We'll think about it," Clara said as they left the kitchen.

Chapter fifteen

Michelle and Zara?

“Clara, do you realise it’s still a whole week until Christmas?”

On the morning of the 18th of December, Rachel was sitting up in bed, contemplating the events of the past few weeks, while her sister was reading her book in the next bed.

“Yes, I do,” Clara replied, not taking her eyes off the book. “Twenty-five minus eighteen equals seven. Seven days is one week.”

“But so much has happened, it feels like it should be Easter already.”

“I know. Louisa married Bounderby. The bank was robbed. Stephen fell down the mineshaft. And Mrs Pegler–”

Rachel interrupted her sister. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Oh, I thought you meant a lot has happened in my book.” Clara held it up. She was still reading ‘Hard Times’ by Charles Dickens, and was very nearly at the end.

“No, I mean here, on this street, in our real lives!”

“Sorry, Rachel. Yes, that makes more sence.”

“I feel like things have become so stressful. We started the advent calendar for fun, but I’m not sure it is anymore. We’ve been so busy, we haven’t even had time to get Christmas presents for Dad and Stanley. They’re probably already annoyed at us for doing the campaign without telling them.”

Clara climbed over onto her sister's bed and held her hand. "Our present will be saving the cafe."

"But what if it doesn't work?"

"It will."

"Maybe we should buy them socks, as a backup plan."

Clara tutted, and her tone changed from comforting to sarcastic. "I can just imagine what we'll say on Christmas morning... *sorry we couldn't save the cafe, but here's some socks instead.*"

Rachel laughed. "You're funny, Clara. Thanks for cheering me up." But Clara just stared back at her with a blank expression.

Stanley was busy re-destroying the kitchen when the girls went down for breakfast, so they quickly grabbed some fruit and got out of his way. As they ate, Rachel made a suggestion.

"I really think we need to talk to Dad about the campaign when he gets home today. Like Stan said, he already knows about it, anyway."

Clara was reluctant, but she knew her sister was right. "Okay," she said, "but I still want to go to number 18 this morning. Another house showing their support will help us convince him we should stay."

"Then maybe we should just go to all the rest of the houses on the street today," Rachel said, "if we want to show him that the whole street is behind us."

"I think that would be going against the spirit of the advent calendar," Clara argued. Once Clara had a plan, she liked to stick to it. "Besides, people are expecting us on their own specific day."

So they agreed to visit house number 18, where the Houghton family lived, that morning. But as soon as Rachel and Clara stepped out of number

24 and looked down the street, they could see there was something different about number 18. This had been one of the first house to have Christmas decorations up, including an inflatable Santa in the garden. Now that had disappeared, and something else was there instead.

It was a big board, on top of a pole, by the front gate. It looked suspiciously like an estate agent's sign. As Rachel and Clara got closer, they realised that's exactly what it was. Even worse, when they got a little closer they saw which estate agent the sign belonged to. 'FERGUS ESTATES LTD' was written on it, in big, red letters. There was a phone number and website address underneath, with a slogan that didn't really seem to mean anything: 'Because every home has a value'.

"Oh no," the sisters said in unison. They'd had no idea the Houghton's were selling their house, and certainly not with Mr Fergus involved.

"Let's just forget it and go to school," Rachel suggested.

"Really? We're here now, we might as well see if they're in," Clara replied.

"I don't think they are. There are no Christmas decorations up. Maybe they've moved out already."

"Surely they would have said goodbye."

As the sisters were debating what to do, there was a clicking sound from the front door, and it swung open. Rachel's fears were confirmed, because behind the door was Mr Fergus. He was here!

"Oh it's you two again. I was wondering if you'd show up here today. What are your names, Michelle and Zara?"

Mr Fergus had the same sneering expression as he'd had the day before at the cafe, and he was staring at them in an intense way. He was wearing a grey suit, which was obviously too small for him. His neck fat bulged above

the collar of his white shirt. Maybe he should have turned up his collar, like his son always did.

The girls had stood up to him yesterday, but that was with other people around. Now it was just them and Mr Fergus. They were too scared even to tell him their correct names.

"We've come to see Mr and Mrs 18 because they live at number Houghton," Clara stuttered.

"What?" Mr Fergus snapped back.

"Sorry, I meant Mr and Mrs Houghton at number 18."

"It's just for our advent calendar," Rachel added.

"Well, bad luck," Mr Fergus laughed, "because the Houghtons have gone to visit relatives for Christmas. I'm getting their house ready to be sold. I just had to get rid of all these tacky decorations before the potential buyers come for viewings." Mr Fergus was carrying a cardboard box, which he now dropped down onto the ground. A small model of Father Christmas fell out of the box and rolled away.

"Which reminds me," he went on, "I think it's time you dropped your little campaign now. I'm sick of seeing your posters everywhere."

"But it shows that people want us to stay," Rachel said.

Mr Fergus scoffed. "No-one wants your dirty old cafe on this street. They want something new and modern that sells coffee with foam in it. That's what I'm going to give them, and make lots of money while I do."

"Hey, it's not dirty," Clara protested. Then she remembered the state Stanley had left the kitchen in. "Well, not when Dad's here, anyway."

"Dirty or not, this area needs something more upmarket. And I need you two to stop interfering." He pointed above their heads toward the street.

"Take this as a final warning and run along, or I'll make sure you regret messing with me."

Clara and Rachel retreated from the garden and hurried down the street towards school.

"I knew we shouldn't have gone there!" said Rachel, when they were at a safe distance.

The curse of six

Mr Fergus's warning stayed with Clara and Rachel, making them feel uneasy all day long at school. At the end of the day, as the sisters walked home with their friend Coleen, Clara had realised something important.

"It's the curse of six," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Rachel.

"There's a pattern," Clara went on, holding up a finger. "One times six is six. On the 6th of December we saw that nasty note at the Fergus house." She held up a second finger. "Two times six is twelve. On the 12th of December we found out that Dad was selling the cafe."

Clara looked at Rachel and Coleen to check they were still listening. She held up another finger. "Three times six is—"

"Eighteen!" yelled Coleen, excited to have the right answer.

"Exactly. And on the 18th of December, today, we had that warning from Mr Fergus."

"Okay, so what's the point?" asked Rachel. In truth, she was still a little annoyed that Clara had made her go to number 18 that morning.

"That when the date is in the six times table, something goes wrong. It's the curse of six."

"That's spooky," said Coleen.

"It's probably just a weird coincidence," said Rachel. Although secretly she was worried about what would happen when the date was four times six. That would be Christmas Eve.

When Clara and Rachel arrived back at the cafe, Stanley said Dad had phoned while they were at school to say that he'd be home in time for tea. He'd suggested they have fish and chips from Potato Heaven, even though it wasn't a Friday, so the girls were sent back out straight away to fetch it.

"Brilliant, fish and chips," said Rachel. "Maybe today isn't cursed, after all."

They ran up the street toward the chippy. In the window, they saw that Dean had put up their campaign poster, next to his poster showing the snowman made of potatoes, wishing everyone a Merry Chipmas.

Inside the chippy, Dean was behind the counter, delicately placing fish into his fryer. They sizzled as they hit the hot oil. "Hello, Harts!" Dean said when the girls came through the door. He always had a smile on his face.

"Thanks for putting up our poster," said Clara.

"Anything for my best customers. And that's not all, I've started this." Dean wiped his hands on his apron and picked up a clipboard from the counter. There was a piece of paper on it that said: 'Petition to save our cafe (one free chip for everyone who signs).'

"Wow, that's amazing Dean."

"Yeah, thank you so much."

Clara and Rachel looked at the list of names underneath. There were around twenty so far, including lots of the neighbours.

"Look, even Mr and Mrs Sheron from number 2 have signed," Dean said. "Although it was a tough negotiation. They wouldn't add their names until I offered them five free chips each."

A few minutes later the girls set off for home with their usual order. Haddock, chips and mushy peas for everyone, except Stanley, who had a battered veggie sausage. It was the choice of sauces that always caused debate within the family. Dad and Clara preferred gravy on their chips, while Stanley and Rachel always had curry sauce.

"I can't believe you prefer your chips with that slime on it," Clara said, as they walked home.

This was the same debate the girls always had on their way back from the chippy. A weekly tradition. But today, Rachel wasn't interested in discussing the merits of gravy versus curry.

"I'm a bit worried about what Dad will say about the campaign when we see him."

Clara didn't seem to feel the same way. "I think he'll be pleased," she replied.

Rachel was surprised at her sister's confidence. "Even after that warning from Mr Fergus?" she asked.

"Definitely." Clara's confidence was only growing. "Dad wants us to save the cafe."

"Then why didn't he say that to us earlier?"

"Because he doesn't know he wants it yet."

Rachel was beginning to feel a little frustrated with Clara. Why did she have to insist on being right all the time? "Fine," she said, "but I still think curry sauce is nicer than gravy."

"Nonsense," Clara shot back.

Dad arrived home just as they were laying the food out on the table. When he walked in, the girls ran to hug him. Clara grabbed him from the

left and Rachel from the right. Unfortunately, they had moved too quickly, and butted heads in the middle. "Ouch!" they both yelled.

The girls sat down, rubbing their heads, while Stanley asked Dad if he'd seen any nice houses in Blandington. "I saw a few places, Stan, but first I really need to talk about what's been going on here."

Stanley looked at the ground. "Sorry. Things did get a bit messy in the cafe."

"No, I mean what's going on with your sisters' advent calendar."

Dad's tone was firm. He wasn't doing that thing where he gets nervous and starts scratching himself. He had obviously prepared what he needed to say. "I know about the campaign," he said, directly to Rachel and Clara.

Rachel heard those words and felt a sense of relief. She never liked keeping secrets, especially from her family.

"Obviously I suspected you were up to something the past few days, but I thought it was harmless," Dad went on. "But then I had a very worrying phone call from Mr Fergus while I was on the train home this afternoon."

Rachel looked at Clara. They should have realised Mr Fergus was going to say something to Dad about them.

"We're really sorry, Dad," Rachel pleaded. "We didn't realise he was going to be at number 18 this morning. We never would have gone there if we'd known."

Clara clearly didn't feel the same way, however. "I would," Clara said. "I'm not scared of him, and I'm not sorry."

Dad poured some gravy on his chips. "The point is that he said he's going to reduce his offer for the cafe, if the campaign carries on. He said it would go down by one per cent every day."

Stanley reached for the curry sauce. "But haven't you already signed the contract, Dad?"

"Not yet. My solicitor is still looking it over."

Clara did not like being threatened by Mr Fergus. "He's just a bully," she said. "And one per cent doesn't sound like much to me."

"One per cent every day could add up to thousands of pounds, Clara. Not only would we lose the cafe, but we might not even be able to afford a new house."

"Well, it doesn't matter because you shouldn't be selling the cafe, anyway," Clara said, crossing her arms defiantly and turning her head away.

"I understand that's how you feel, but I have to insist that this stops now. It's okay to carry on with the advent calendar as you were before, but no more campaigning."

Rachel hated the idea of being threatened by Mr Fergus just as much as her sister did, but she could also see how worried her Dad was. "We never meant to make things difficult for you, Dad. We can stop the campaign if that's what you want."

"No! Don't say *we*, Rachel. I can speak for myself!" Clara was getting very upset now. "I'm not stopping the campaign. We're trying to save the cafe so we can stay living here!"

Rachel tried to reach out to hold her sister's hand, to calm her down, but she accidentally knocked the tub of curry sauce over, with half of it spilling onto Clara's plate. The one place curry sauce is never allowed to be.

"Oops," said Stanley, wincing.

Clara's face went red. "What did you do that for?" she demanded to know.

"It was an accident!" Rachel responded.

Clara was in no mood to believe that. She grabbed the tub of gravy and with a sudden movement, and held it over Rachel's plate. She kept it there for a second, tilting it so the gravy was at the rim of the tub, ready to be released.

Rachel felt her heart pounding and her own face getting redder. "Don't you dare, Clara!" she said.

"I dare!" Clara yelled, as she tipped the tub and the gravy splashed down onto Rachel's plate like a meaty brown waterfall.

"Eugh," Rachel cried. "You've ruined my chips!"

Clara calmly put the tub back onto the table, smiling to herself.

"Payback," she said.

"Girls, stop this right now," Dad said. "There's no need for this."

"There *is* a need, Dad," Clara said. "There's every need."

"Why?"

"Because Rachel is saying she'll stop the campaign, just when it's started to work. Even though the whole thing was her idea in the first place!"

"My idea!?"

"You designed the posters."

Rachel was shocked. She was sure they'd had the idea together, and she wasn't going to let Clara put the blame on her. "You added the mince pie vouchers! With your precious stapler!"

"Don't bring my stapler into this!" With that, Clara picked up one of the curry-soaked chips from her plate, and launched it at Rachel's face. "Seeing as you like chips with curry sauce so much, have that one."

It was a direct hit, and there was a green smear left on the tip of Rachel's nose. Of course, Rachel wasn't going to let this go without retaliating. She picked up a gravy-soaked chip from her own plate, and threw it at Clara.

Clara had been expecting this response, so she was prepared to duck out of the way at precisely the right moment. Except, Rachel had also been expecting Clara to duck, so her first throw had been a dummy throw. As soon as Clara was upright again, Rachel threw a chip for real, hitting Clara right between the eyes.

Then things got really messy, as the sisters picked up fistfuls of chips and launched them wildly at each other. Dad jumped up and stood between them, and was immediately pelted with soggy chips from both directions.

"Enough!" he shouted. "You're both going to your bedroom right now. I can't believe you could be so immature."

"I-M-M-A-T-U-R-E," Clara said as they left the table. "It means you're being childish, Rachel."

"You're the one who's being I-M-M-A-T-U-R-E, Clara," Rachel said.

"They could have just swapped plates," Stanley said, dipping one of his chips into the pool of curry sauce on the table.

"Shut up, Stanley!" the sisters yelled in unison.

There was a frosty atmosphere in Clara and Rachel's bedroom when they woke up on the 19th of December. The sisters hadn't spoken a word to each other since their argument at teatime the day before.

Clara was lying with her back to Rachel, reading her book, making no sound or motion except occasionally turning a page. Rachel got up and pulled back the curtains. It was frosty outside, too. There were droplets of ice on the window pane. Rachel saw Ingrid walking past, wearing a thick coat, woolly hat and gloves. Burt the dog was scampering behind her, wearing a red tartan jacket. Across the road at number 23, Mrs Lescott's

fairy lights were twinkling on and off. It all felt very Christmassy.

Everywhere except in the Hart sisters' bedroom at number 24.

Rachel looked over at the desk, where she kept her art supplies and her sketchbook. Clara's stapler was there, too. When she saw it, Rachel regretted making fun of it. She thought about drawing a picture for Clara, to apologise. She could draw the two of them bouncing on a giant stapler. Or she could draw the two of them in a hot tub full of gravy, to show she regretted spoiling her tea. Or maybe a picture of the two of them knocking on a front door doing their advent calendar, a reminder of all the fun they had before things went wrong.

Rachel liked that last idea best. Even though Dad had asked them to stop the campaign, there was no reason why they couldn't go back to doing the original advent calendar. Well, not the original, but the reverse advent calendar where they just gave all the neighbours pictures and chocolate. Maybe a picture showing how nice that was could persuade Clara that's what they should do.

Before Rachel could even pick up a pencil to start drawing, Clara suddenly threw back her covers and jumped out of bed and started getting dressed. Rachel was alarmed. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Fully dressed in a few seconds, Clara opened the draw where they kept the campaign posters and grabbed a handful. "What does it look like? I'm carrying on with the campaign."

"What? You can't!"

"I think you'll find I can, Rachel."

"But Dad said–"

"I don't care what Dad said!"

In a flash, Clara was out of the bedroom and flying down the stairs. Rachel could only think to call for help. "Dad, stop her!" she yelled. But it was too late. Rachel heard the front door opening and then slamming shut. She raced back into the room, got dressed as quickly as she could, and ran downstairs.

Dad popped his head into the hallway as she was putting her shoes on. "Did you shout me?" he asked.

"No time to explain," Rachel gasped, and flung herself out of the door. Only when she was outside did she realise she had odd socks on, and her jumper was on backwards. Even worse, it was freezing and she'd forgotten her coat.

But she wasn't going back. Rachel sprinted up the street and caught up with Clara just as she was knocking on the door of number 19. This is where the Palmers, who were good friends of Dad's, lived. Rachel arrived, breathless, just as Mr Palmer was opening the door to Clara. He looked like he was in the middle of getting ready for work, as he was trying to tie a Christmas-themed necktie.

"Oh, hi girls," Mr Palmer said, as he looped one end of the tie over the other. "What can I do—"

Clara interrupted him. "Good morning, Mr Palmer. I am here to request your help in saving our cafe."

Rachel, who had her breath back by now, spoke before he could respond. "And I'm here to request that you don't help us save the cafe."

Mr Palmer tried to tuck the tie under the loop, but it all fell apart and was soon hanging loose around his neck again. "Erm..." he began.

"Please ignore my sister, she's very confused," Clara said.

"No I'm not!" Rachel responded.

"I think *I* am," said Mr Palmer.

Clara continued, in her loudest but most polite voice. "I would be very grateful if you could display this poster in your window, and as a treat you have a voucher for a free mince pie." She handed the poster to Mr Palmer. He took it, rather nervously. "There's also a petition at Potato Heaven that you can sign to show your support."

"Hang on, that reminds me, I think your Dad put something on the *Round R Way* app about this last night." Mr Palmer pulled his phone from his pocket and perused the screen. "Yes, that's right. He thanked everyone for their support, but then said your campaign was ending and the cafe was being sold. Sad face emoji, love heart emoji."

"Please ignore my sister *and* my father," Clara said. "They're both very confused."

Mr Palmer laughed. "What about your brother?"

"I'm not sure about him yet."

Rachel opened her arms out wide in protest. "No-one is confused!"

"Okay, let's all cool down," Mr Palmer said, "I can see there's something going on here, and I don't think your Dad would want me to get in the middle of it. Besides, I'm running late for work and I still need to tie my tie!"

Rachel dropped her arms. "We're really sorry," she said. "Please don't tell Dad about us arguing, he'd be really upset. Wouldn't he, Clara?"

"He should be upset."

"She means yes," Rachel said.

"Alright," Mr Palmer said. "I'll forget this ever happened. Maybe I'm still asleep and this is all a dream. But I really hope you work things out."

He closed the door as Clara and Rachel retreated from the garden. "I can't believe you did that," Clara said.

“Pardon? You’re blaming me!?”

“I’m trying to save our home from being sold to Mr Fergus, and you’re completely undermining me.”

“But we’re not allowed to do this anymore, Clara. You heard what Dad said. It could cost him lots of money.”

“It won’t cost him money because we’re going to stop him from selling the cafe. Or more accurately, *I’m* going to stop him from selling the cafe.”

“But we’ve tried. To carry on would just upset everyone. Why don’t we go back to doing the advent calendar like it was before, where we give people lovely chocolate and pictures?”

“How come you’re so concerned about upsetting other people, but you don’t care about upsetting me? You don’t care that we’re going to be forced to leave our entire lives behind.”

“We’re not leaving our entire lives behind, Clara. We’ll still be together.”

Clara didn’t say anything else. She stared at Rachel for a second. Rachel was sure she was about to cry, which is exactly what Rachel felt like doing herself. But then Clara turned her face away and walked past Rachel, in the direction of home. Rachel was left alone in the street, shivering with the cold, wondering how this had all got so messy. A few seconds later, she sensed someone approaching her from behind. Before she could turn around, a warm coat was draped over Rachel’s shoulders. It was from Clara, who rushed away again without another word.

Wet sheep

The argument between Rachel and Clara carried on into the 20th of December, and Clara had woken up in a foul mood. Even after Clara had given Rachel her coat when she was outside in the cold, Rachel had snitched to Dad about her still running the campaign. Such a betrayal, thought Clara.

Dad had been a little upset, and told Clara again about the possible financial consequences of what she was doing. "Ultimately, Clara, it's your decision," he said. "This is your home and your life, and if you feel you have to carry on campaigning then I can't stop you."

"But Dad," Rachel protested, "you said we weren't allowed any more. Also, I'm trying to finish our advent calendar and Clara is ruining it."

"I understand," Dad said, "but I can't keep her locked up in the loft, can I?"

"Are you sure?" Rachel had asked.

Such a betrayal.

In the morning, Clara was determined to get out of the house before Rachel again and beat her to door number 20. This is where Kyle Bronze lived, who was a boy in the year above Clara and Rachel at school, with his family. Clara knew she couldn't set an alarm clock because the sound of it going off would wake up Rachel, too, but luckily she had her own internal

alarm clock that worked perfectly. If Clara just thought about what time she wanted to wake up before she went to sleep, she knew it would happen.

And so it did. At six o'clock exactly, Clara opened her eyes and smiled. Rachel was still fast asleep in her bed. Clara watched her sister for a few seconds, admiring how peaceful she looked. Rachel was wearing her Rudolph pyjamas with the big red nose made of sequins. It moved up and down with her chest as Rachel breathed in and out. Clara admitted to herself that she felt sad they were arguing, but she also knew she was campaigning for both of them, and she had to carry on.

She took some clothes from her drawers, opening and closing them as gently as possible, and crept out of the room, getting dressed in the bathroom. Downstairs in the hall, Clara went to put on her shoes, but they weren't there. That was odd, as she always left them by the front door. She looked for her trainers, which she had also left here, but they were missing, too. She went to have a look around the living room, and then the kitchen, but they were nowhere to be found. She checked the hall cupboard, nothing. Even her wellies were missing. It soon dawned on Clara that there was only one possible explanation... Rachel must have taken them!

Clara sprinted back upstairs and flung the bedroom door open with such force that it crashed into the wall. "J'accuse!" she yelled. Clara had taken a few French lessons and sometimes used the language for dramatic effect.

Rachel's eyes were suddenly open. "Pardon? Did you say something?" She seemed suspiciously wide awake for someone who was apparently fast asleep a second ago.

"I said I accuse you of stealing my shoes. And my trainers and my wellies!" Clara blurted out.

In a flash, Rachel threw off her bed covers. Clara saw that she wasn't in pyjamas anymore. In fact, she was fully dressed. Now Rachel leapt up and darted for the door. "You'd better find them quickly if you want to beat me to number 20," she said as she went past.

Rachel disappeared, leaving Clara behind in a state of shock. A few seconds later, Clara heard the front door opening and closing. She sprang into action, finding her slippers under the bed and putting them on. At least Rachel hadn't taken those. Clara ran downstairs as quickly as she could, which wasn't very quick, as her slippers were shaped like sheep, meaning they were very big and fluffy. Not exactly designed for running fast.

When Clara got outside she noticed the ground was wet. It must have rained in the night. Her slippers were soaking up all of the water, like she was wearing two huge sponges on her feet. Clara made a squelching sound with every step she took. She made it to number 20 just in time to see Kyle waving goodbye to Rachel.

Rachel had a smug grin on her face, and winked at Clara as she passed her at the front gate. "You really need to be better prepared, Clara," she said.

Such a betrayal, thought Clara, again. She considered going to knock on Kyle's door anyway. But in her haste she had forgotten to bring the campaign poster and mince pie voucher. She also saw that the garden path had several large puddles on it, and Clara really didn't want to absorb all that water into her slippers. So she trudged off toward home, squelching all the way. In that moment, Clara was determined that she would get her own back on Rachel, and that nothing else would stand in the way of her campaign.

Of course, Rachel was anticipating that Clara would be planning revenge for her shoe trick. That's why she decided to go to bed fully dressed on the night of the 20th, and wearing her shoes, which she discovered was extremely uncomfortable. But necessary. In fact, Clara did exactly the same thing.

Rachel didn't have Clara's internal alarm clock – or if she did, her sleeping brain was fond of pressing the internal snooze button – but she usually woke up whenever she heard Clara moving around. The morning of Friday the 21st of December was no different. When Rachel heard Clara trying to sneak out, she immediately jumped out of bed, and checked that she still had all her clothes and shoes. She did, although she was upset to see how crumpled her school uniform had become. Today was the last day of the school term and she wanted to look her best, but being a little messy was worth it.

“Not so fast,” Rachel said as Clara pulled open the bedroom door.

Clara turned to look at her, with a smug grin on her face. Rachel recognised the expression from seeing it on herself in the mirror yesterday. “Oh, I don't need to go fast to beat you today, Rachel.” She was sounding very confident, which had Rachel worried.

Rachel opened the drawer on her bedside table, to fetch the chocolate coins she had bought to give to the Coombs family, who lived at number 21 – now that all the chocolates from Ingrid and Mrs Witter were gone – and the picture she had drawn for them. She knew they loved to ice skate, so she had drawn a scene of Santa's elves at a skating rink. Two of them were performing a daring acrobatic move, but behind them there were four elves sprawled across the ground. But to Rachel's horror, she saw that the drawer was empty.

“Looking for something?” Clara laughed as she popped one of Rachel’s chocolates into her mouth. Then she tossed a handful of confetti into the air, which was weird. Except it wasn’t confetti, Rachel realised. It was the torn remains of her picture.

Such a betrayal, thought Rachel.

“How could you do that, Clara? That’s my art!”

Clara snapped back. “How could you do what you did yesterday? My slippers are still drying on the radiator downstairs!”

Rachel tried to pick up the pieces of the picture from the floor, but it was no use. She found a scrap of an elf’s hat, another of a skate. There was no way it could be put back together, and Rachel knew she didn’t have time to draw another one, or to get any more sweets. As Rachel stared at the floor, thinking about what she should do, she heard Clara leaving. It was already too late. She was going to have to let her sister have door number 21, and just hope she could make it to number 22 the next day.

It's all her fault!

There were no tricks and pranks on the morning of the 22nd of December. Things had gotten so bad between Rachel and Clara that they weren't speaking at all. They wouldn't even acknowledge each other, and had refused to sleep in the same room the night before. Clara had taken Dad's room, and Rachel had taken Stanley's. This meant Dad and Stanley had to share the girls' room, which was quite an experience. Rachel and Clara's beds hadn't exactly been designed to hold the weight of a full-grown adult – or a nearly full-grown adult in Stanley's case – so they had creaked very loudly all night long, whenever Dad or Stanley made even the slightest movement. It made it very hard for either of them to get a peaceful night's sleep.

"I don't think this is going to be our best ever Christmas, Dad," Stanley said, while they were waking up.

Dad rolled over. Creak, went Rachel's bed. "I fear you might be right," he replied. "I just don't know what I should do about those two."

Stanley sat up. Creak, went Clara's bed. "I doubt there's anything you can do. Rachel and Clara need to sort this out for themselves."

"But I feel guilty that I caused them to fall out."

"It's not your fault, Dad. You run a great cafe and make lovely food. I guess it's just not possible to make enough money running an independent, backstreet cafe anymore."

Outside on the street, oblivious to the chorus of creaks inside the flat, Clara and Rachel were racing. They'd both managed to get out of the house fully dressed, Clara with her poster and vouchers, and Rachel with her picture and chocolate coins. It was only a very short distance across the road to number 22, but they were wrestling with each other along the way. As they stepped off the pavement into the road, Rachel thought she was racing ahead, but Clara grabbed hold of her arm and yanked her backwards and got in front. Then Rachel thrust out her leg to trip Clara, who stumbled and couldn't get away.

A car was approaching and beeped its horn, so they both quickly jumped out of the road. This was when Clara realised she had dropped her poster when she was tripped by Rachel. There was nothing she could do but watch with a sinking feeling as the car drove over it, leaving a large, dirty tyre print across it.

Number 22 was where Mrs Lescott lived. She was Coleen's grandmother, and had always been a little bit like a grandmother to Rachel and Clara, too. The sisters kept their wrestling match going all the way to Mrs Lescott's front door. Rachel had a fistful of Clara's hair, while Clara was performing an extra strong pinching manoeuvre on Rachel's ear. They both fell into the door, and hit it with a loud bang.

They were still grappling when the door opened. Somebody might have thought it looked like they were dancing, but Mrs Lescott wasn't fooled. She stared at the girls when she saw what they were doing. She was wearing a floral dressing gown and holding a cup of tea. Beneath her curly grey hair, her face had a stern expression.

"Clara and Rachel Hart, what on earth are you doing?" The girls immediately stood to attention. Hands behind their backs, shoulders

straight, facing forward, like they were in the army. "Making all this racket at my door so early in the morning. I've never seen such a thing in all my life."

"It's all *her* fault, Mrs Lescott!" Clara and Rachel said that in unison, pointing at each other.

Mrs Lescott tutted. "Something tells me you're both right," she said.

Rachel and Clara both started talking, each trying to be louder than the other as they shared their own version of events.

"I'm trying to save the cafe," said Clara.

"I'm trying to finish our advent calendar," said Rachel.

"She doesn't care that we have to leave."

"She's going to cost Dad thousands of pounds."

"I don't want to live in Blandington."

"I want our last Christmas here to be nice."

"She hid my shoes."

"She tore up my picture."

"And my trainers and my wellies."

"It was one of the best I've done so far."

"Such a betrayal."

"Such a betrayal."

Mrs Lescott held up her hand, to make them stop. "Coleen did tell me about your disagreement, but I didn't believe it until now. Two sisters as close as you are, fighting at Christmas. It just isn't right girls."

Rachel and Clara both opened their mouths to speak, but a look in Mrs Lescott's eyes told them not to. "Now, my tea is getting cold, and I have no more time for this nonsense. Please come back when you can be civil with each other."

“Will you just take a poster for your window, please Mrs Lescott?” pleaded Clara. Then she remembered the car driving over it. “I could bring one for you later.”

“Or you could take this picture I’ve drawn for you, and these sweets?” said Rachel.

“No, I won’t take either. I wish I could, because you know how fond I am of the two of you, but I can’t pick sides and I won’t reward this behaviour.”

Mrs Lescott closed the door, leaving Clara and Rachel to glare at each other. *That was all your fault!* they both thought, and wanted to shout, but neither did, because they didn’t want Mrs Lescott to come out and tell them off again.

Later that day, Mrs Lescott had gone into the cafe and told Dad all about the scene at her front door. That’s why Rachel and Clara ended up being on the receiving end of Dad’s ‘I’m so ashamed’ speech that evening during tea. It was the exact opposite of his ‘I’m so proud’ speech, which he had delivered to them earlier that month.

Dad insisted that he couldn’t let the girls behave that way at the neighbours’ houses. The only way he would let Clara and Rachel out of the house the next morning was if they agreed a truce, or at least a temporary ceasefire. After some tense negotiations, it was decided that Stanley would accompany his sisters to door number 23 the next morning. They would each get one minute to calmly explain why they were visiting, without touching, interrupting or shouting over each other.

“I’m glad I finally get to be involved in your advent calendar again,” Stanley said as they left the cafe in the morning. “Although I wish it was under better circumstances.”

Number 23 was where Mr Edghill lived. He was a PE teacher at Rachel and Clara's school, so he was already aware there was a dispute going on between the Hart sisters. That much was obvious during a game of dodgeball in class the day before, where Clara and Rachel had kept aiming at each other and throwing the ball ferociously, ignoring all the other players. This was especially weird because they were on the same team.

Mr Edghill was already out in his front garden, talking to someone. Stanley thought perhaps they shouldn't disturb him, but Mr Edghill saw them and waved them in. Then his companion turned around and they saw it was Andy, the builder who was working on house number 11.

"Oh, hello, Hart family," he said, cheerfully. "Are you doing takeaway deliveries from the cafe now?"

They all laughed. "Unfortunately not," Stanley replied.

"That's a shame, Andy said. "My crew would have been placing an order every day. So would half the builders in Manchester, probably."

"And half the teachers," added Mr Edghill.

"We're actually just here for Rachel and Clara to speak to Mr Edghill about their advent calendar."

Clara and Rachel had been uncharacteristically quiet in the conversation until now, both of them eager to start speaking, but patiently waiting their turn. After the official coin toss that morning, Rachel had won the right to go first. Stanley timed his sisters on his watch, which beeped when their minute was up.

"Mr Edghill, you have the honour of being behind the twenty-third door of our real-life advent calendar, although admittedly you're not actually behind the door, but that's okay..." She showed him her picture of Santa doing one of Mr Edghill's PE classes. He was trying to do a pull-up, with a

group of elves pushing him up from below to try to help him reach the bar. Rachel went on to describe her advent calendar and how she was trying to spread Christmas cheer along the street.

Clara couldn't help but smile when she saw the picture, but she stopped when Rachel noticed. Then it was her turn to speak. "I have troubling news, Mr Edghill. I know how much you love to visit the cafe for one of our Dad's fruit smoothies, but I need you to imagine a world where our cafe no longer exists. I know, it's shocking..."

Clara finished her speech, and Mr Edghill took the poster and voucher from her. Then he took the picture and chocolates from Rachel. "You really don't expect me to choose between you, do you?"

Andy clapped. "That was really impressive, girls," he said. "The entire time I've been working on Raucous Road, I've been really touched by your advent calendar and your campaign. It was nice to see how you spread the Christmas spirit around the street, and then how everyone came together to support you when they heard the cafe was closing. You helped to convince me that I should consider buying a house here."

"Really?" asked Stanley.

"Yes, that's why he's here this morning," Mr Edghill said. "I'm going to be leaving soon, because I've got a new job at a school in Oldham. Andy is thinking about buying the house."

"All thanks to the two of you," Andy said. "I've even told Mr Fergus I'm not going to work on his refurbishment project, if he does buy the cafe from your dad. He'll have to find another builder. I don't think that will put him off buying it, but it just doesn't feel right to me anymore."

Clara and Rachel were stunned into silence. They were deeply touched by what Andy said. A few people had told them in the past month that their

advent calendar had meant a lot to them. Now there was someone saying he wanted to move to Raucous Road because of it. For the first time in days, the girls looked at each other. Really looked at each other. Rachel stared directly into her sister's eyes, and Clara stared back into her eyes. Suddenly they both knew they were having exactly the same thought.

Reconciliation

After leaving number 23, they had gone for a walk together to the park at the end of Raucous Road. The sisters were sitting on the swings, side by side, both of them gently swaying backwards and forwards.

“I’m so sorry, Rachel. I shouldn’t have carried on the campaign without you.”

“No, *I’m* so sorry, Clara. I should have supported you when you were upset.”

“But I’m *really* sorry.”

“I’m *really* sorry, too.”

“Not as sorry as I am.”

“I’m twice as sorry as you.”

“I’m ten times as sorry.”

“Shall we just agree that we’re both sorry?”

“Yes, good idea.”

There were a few other people from the street around. Ellen was pushing baby Mario in his pram, but she was looking a little bit like a zombie. Clara and Rachel waved. Ellen didn’t wave back, but started walking slowly toward them. She smiled, or it seemed like she did. Her mouth was twisted into a strange shape, like a half-smile, half-yawn.

“Are you sleepwalking, Ellen?” Clara asked.

Ellen stared into space for a second, then shook her head. "Oh no, I just need coffee. Mario kept me up all night."

"You should stop by the cafe," Rachel said. "Dad will make you an extra strong one."

"That would be love—" Ellen started, before Mario suddenly started screaming. The girls looked into the pram and saw his face poking through the blankets, all red and scrunched up. "Actually I'd better just take him home. I can't disturb all your other customers with a crying baby."

Ingrid was in the park, too, walking Bert the dog. She was carrying a small plastic bag, which the sisters assumed contained Bert's poo. "Sorry I can't stop to chat, girls," she said as she went past the swings. "I've got some apfelstrudel baking at home, which I need to take out of the oven."

"I hope she washes her hands first," said Rachel.

Mack was also here, on one of his runs, in his shorts and t-shirt despite the freezing cold weather. The only other person there was a man on the other side of the field. He waved when he saw Clara and Rachel, but they didn't recognise him, which was a little worrying. But after a minute or so when he'd walked closer to the playground and they got a better view, they realised who it was.

"Oh, hello Edrosonus," Clara said as he strolled past, before adding, "oops, I mean Eddie."

"We didn't recognise you at first, without your wizard's cape on."

"It's a *cloak*, not a cape," corrected Clara.

Eddie laughed. "I do take it off sometimes, if it needs washing."

Rachel and Clara shared a smile as he walked away. It was nice to be friends again.

"We've gotten to know so many people this month," Rachel said.

“Yes,” Clara agreed. “It’s such a shame we have to leave them all behind.”

Rachel was surprised to hear her sister say that. She dragged her foot on the ground to stop her swing. “I thought you were refusing to accept that we’re moving house?”

Clara stopped her swing, too. “I don’t know anymore. I just want to stop fighting.”

“So do I,” Rachel said. The sisters both reached out their hands. They couldn’t quite get close enough to hold hands, so they pressed their fingertips together. “But I have to admit, I was proud of you for keeping the campaign going. Secretly, I still wanted you to succeed.”

“I have to admit something, too.”

“What?”

“I didn’t rip up your picture. The one you drew for number 21.”

“But I saw you tear it to pieces. It was all over the floor!”

“That was a copy I drew myself while you were asleep. A very bad copy. I had to rip it up into such tiny pieces so you didn’t notice how rubbish it was. My elves looked more like deformed gerbils in silly hats.”

Rachel got up and hugged her sister. “Somehow, I just knew you couldn’t do that to me. Even after I hid your shoes.”

“That was quite funny, in retrospect.” Rachel looked puzzled, so Clara added, “R-E-T-R-O-S-P-E-C-T, it means looking back on it.”

“That’s interesting, Clara, because I think a bit of retrospect is exactly what we need right now.”

Now Clara was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“We need to look back on everything we have achieved with our advent calendar. All of the people we’ve met. Just think about the people we’ve helped, and who have helped us. I think that’s the key to saving the cafe.”

Clara was excited. As ever, her sister's enthusiasm was infectious.

"How?"

"I'm not completely sure yet, but it's really important we try to get all of the neighbours to the cafe tomorrow, or as many as possible. That's why it's so great we gave everyone those mince pie vouchers."

The excitement suddenly drained away from Clara's face. "Oh, there's something else I need to admit," she muttered. "After you stopped doing the campaign, I got a little reckless. I might have produced a few more vouchers than we originally planned."

"Might have?"

"Definitely did, to be accurate. I gave a lot of them out at school. Then I made some for Dean to give to his customers at the chippy. Then a few more for the newsagents, and Charlie's salon. I even gave some to the students at number 13, so they could share them with their university friends."

"Oh Clara, do you realise how much trouble this could cause?"

Clara nodded. "What are we going to do?"

Rachel paused, head bowed, deep in thought. When she looked up again, there was the hint of a twinkle in her eye. "I think the answer to that is pretty obvious," she said.

"What?" Clara asked.

"We're going to make a whole load of mince pies."

Fifteen minutes later, Rachel and Clara burst in through the front door of the cafe. Mack was already there, with sweat patches all over his t-shirt, eating his usual poached egg on toast. Andy the builder and Mr Edghill were on the next table, both enjoying a fry-up.

To Rachel and Clara's horror, Mr Fergus was also there. He was standing at the counter with his back to the door, holding another stack of papers in his hand. Even more horrific for Rachel and Clara, his son Eric was also there. He was repeatedly pressing the bell on the counter, which was there for customers to call for service. The sound was getting louder and louder as the sisters advanced towards him.

Dad came out of the kitchen, flustered and sweating. "What's the emergen—" he began, before he saw his daughters together. Then his face lit up. "Oh, are you two friends again now?"

"Excuse me, Mr Hart," Mr Fergus interrupted. He spat out his words. "I'm waiting to speak to you. My son has been pressing your bell, but it seems to be producing a sound that no-one in this establishment but us is able to hear."

"If only it was the same with his mouth," Clara whispered to Rachel. Eric must have realised she'd made a joke about him, because he shot Clara a dirty look.

"Very sorry, Mr Fergus, I came as quickly as I could," Dad said.

"I've brought the new contract for you to sign, with the reduced sale price."

"No!!!" yelled Rachel and Clara. Dad and Mr Fergus were both taken aback.

"We just need one more day, Dad," Rachel said. "Please don't sign it yet."

"One more day? What for?"

"Just trust us, Dad, we have a great idea. But we need your help first."

Eric piped up. "Don't let them have an extra day. Those two can't be trusted."

Mr Fergus slammed his contract down on the counter. "Shut up, Eric, I'm not interested in your childish squabbles. And I've had enough of this chit-chat," he said. "I'll be back for the contract tomorrow, Mr Hart. I want it signed by then, no more excuses, no more delays." He stomped out, with Eric following, slamming the front door behind them.

"Good riddance," Clara said.

"Are you two going to tell me what you've got planned?"

"We will," said Rachel, "but first we need to ask a quick question. How long would it take you to make about fifty mince pieces?"

Dad's eyebrows shot up into his forehead. "Pardon?"

"Ahem." Clara coughed, not so subtly, to get Rachel's attention. Rachel realised what she was saying, and her own eyebrows shot up, too.

"Sorry, Dad, I meant a hundred mince pies."

"A hundred mince pies? What for?"

"Ahem. Ahem."

"Maybe closer to two hundred."

"Two hundred mince pies!? Somebody had better tell me what's going on, right now."

"The truth is, Dad, that our campaign got a little out of hand, and now there are lots of people with vouchers, who may be coming here tomorrow to claim their free mince pies."

"And whose idea was this?"

Rachel wasn't going to snitch on her sister again, after they had just made up. "It was my idea."

But equally, Clara wasn't going to let Rachel take all the blame. "Actually, Dad, I'm responsible for giving out all the vouchers."

"I see, you're covering for each other again," Dad said. "In some ways it was better when you were fighting."

"You should take this as a compliment, Dad," Rachel said. "Your mince pies are so good that we expect all these people to come here especially to get one."

Dad suddenly started scratching his nose, like he did when he was nervous. Then he scratched his ear. This is odd, thought Rachel. We're supposed to be the ones in trouble. Why has Dad suddenly become all jittery?

"Let's go into the kitchen," he said, glancing around at the customers. Rachel and Clara stepped around the counter and followed him, intrigued.

"You see, the thing is," Dad started, once they were in the kitchen. He scratched his chin.

"Come on Dad, we're in a massive hurry to make these mince pies."

"That's what I'm trying to say." He scratched his nose again. "I don't actually make the mince pies."

"What!?!?" Clara and Rachel exclaimed in shocked bewilderment.

Dad's face went red.

"I can't believe this, Dad," Rachel said. "I thought everything you sold was homemade."

"Look," Dad said. "I've never been much of a baker. I've always been better with bacon and eggs and sausages. I did try to make the cakes and pastries when I first opened the cafe, but they weren't very good. So I started buying them from a shop."

"This is almost as bad as finding out we're moving to Blandington," Rachel said.

"I'm really sorry," said Dad, "I never meant to lie. Things just got out of hand."

"Well, we've got bigger problems than that right now," said Clara. "Where are we going to get three hundred mince pies in time for tomorrow?"

"Three hundred!?" This time, it was Rachel and Dad that yelled in unison.

"I really don't know how many. I lost count."

"There's no chance of getting even half that many mince pies," said Dad. "The local shops aren't going to have that many left in stock, the day before Christmas Eve. Even if they did, it would cost a fortune."

Clara and Rachel looked at each other. It was another one of their special looks, where they could each tell what the other was thinking. They needed some expert help, and they knew where to get it.

Mince pie emergency

Clara and Rachel knocked rapidly and incessantly on the door of number 5 Raucous Road.

“Ingrid!” shouted Rachel, still knocking.

“It’s an emergency!” shouted Clara, still knocking.

“Hello? Are you home?”

“Guten tag?”

Rachel stopped knocking and looked at her sister. “What does that mean?”

“It’s German for hello,” Clara replied.

“Clara, do you seriously think that Ingrid is refusing to come to the door because we’re not speaking German?”

Clara shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe.”

Now that they had momentarily stopped knocking, the sisters could hear Burt inside the house, barking. She must be here, they thought. Then the door finally opened.

“Oh, hello again, girls,” Ingrid said, “or should I say ‘*guten tag*’?” She was wearing an apron and a pair of oven mitts. Burt arrived, too, and was scampering around Ingrid’s feet. “I was just taking my strudel out of the oven. Would you like some?”

The smell of Ingrid's baking wafted towards them. Clara and Rachel desperately wanted to say yes, but they resisted. "We need your help to make hundreds of mince pies to save the cafe," Rachel blurted out.

"Ahem," came a noise from Clara.

Rachel turned to her sister, alarmed. "Thousands?"

"No, that was a real cough."

"Oh, phew. As I was saying, Ingrid, we need hundreds of mince pies."

"Do you mean minced meat, like beef or lamb?"

"No, I don't think so," Rachel said, although she doubted herself for a second. What exactly is in a mince pie?

Clara helped her out. "The filling is made of fruit. Currants and raisins, things like that."

"Minced currants?"

Even Clara didn't know the answer to that. "I'm not sure. It's all gooey and gloopy inside."

Ingrid took off one of her mitts and pulled her phone from pocket. "I'll look up a recipe. I take it from your knocking that you're in a hurry?"

"Yes!"

Ingrid tapped on the screen of her phone a few times. "Ah, I see," she said, then muttered a few words in German to herself. Clara thought she heard her say the word 'British' and then something that sounded like 'seltsam' (Clara looked up that word later. It translated as 'strange', which seemed appropriate).

"Right," Ingrid said, looking up. "We're going to need to get lots of ingredients and lots of equipment."

Rachel and Clara beamed. They knew it was a good idea to ask Ingrid for help. "What do we need?"

“We need flour, butter, raisins, currants, lemons, apples, sugar, suet, nutmeg and cinnamon. I have some of this, but not enough. We’ll also need large saucepans, bun trays, mixing bowls, rolling pins and a juicer. Maybe you could ask the neighbours?”

The sisters each took a deep breath. They’d had quite a bit of experience knocking on the doors of their neighbours’ houses over the past few weeks. Now they needed to do it once again.

“We’ve got this,” they said.

On Christmas Eve morning, everything was ready. Well, as ready as it could be. Rachel and Clara had spent the previous afternoon running up and down Raucous Road, explaining their strange predicament to the neighbours and gathering as many supplies as they could. Weirdly, no-one seemed that surprised that the Hart sisters were knocking on their doors again to ask for mince pie ingredients and baking equipment. After being asked to take part in a living advent calendar, then a reverse advent calendar, then a campaign to save the local cafe, all in the space of a single month, perhaps the residents of Raucous Road had learned to expect the unexpected.

Rachel and Clara surveyed their stock, which was piled up in the kitchen of the cafe. The neighbours had been really generous. Clara made a list of everything they had.

Equipment

8 bun trays

9 mixing bowls

4 large saucepans

3 rolling pins

1 juicer

Ingredients

10 packets of plain flour

14 packets of sugar (7 granulated, 4 caster, 2 light brown, 1 demerera)

17 apples (6 Braeburn, 5 Granny Smith, 4 bramley, 2 pink lady)

8 packets of raisins

5 packets of currants

7 lemons

12 blocks of butter

2 jars of nutmeg

1 jar of cinnamon

6 packets of vegetarian suet

Rachel and Clara still didn't know what suet was, and none of the neighbours had it, but Ingrid had insisted it was essential so Dad had driven round all the local supermarkets last night to buy as much as he could find.

Even better than the large stockpile was that some of the neighbours had offered to come over and help with the baking. Clara looked at her watch. It was seven o'clock, so people might start arriving any minute. There was no way Dad could open the cafe this morning while all this was going on, so the sisters hung a sign on the front door. It said:

Closed due to baking emergency – please come back at noon

Clara wasn't sure that was enticing enough so she had made another sign to go underneath. It said:

Your taste buds will be euphoric

Then, when Rachel pointed out that people might not know what that means, Clara added '*That means they'll be very happy*' in small writing below.

Dad and Stanley both came downstairs into the kitchen. Dad looked at the huge stockpile, strewn across his worktops. "This could all go very wrong," he said.

Stanley put his arm around his father. "Come on Dad, have some faith," he said.

"Yeah," added Rachel. "Our helpers will be here any minute. We need some enthusiasm to keep everyone motivated."

"I'll try," Dad said. "I suppose this could be a spectacular way to say goodbye to the cafe before we leave."

Rachel and Clara glanced at each other. Clara wobbled her bottom lip, while Rachel wiped a fake tear from her eye. Looking sad was the best way to make sure Dad didn't realise they were working on their cafe-saving plan.

People started arriving a few minutes later. Ingrid was the first, and immediately started organising the supplies. Charlie from the salon and Mack from number 3 came next. The three of them had soon arranged the whole kitchen into different zones for preparing the fruit, mixing the filling,

making the dough, rolling and cutting the dough, filling the pies and cooling the pies.

Then Coleen arrived with her grandmother, Mrs Lescott from number 22. Coleen hugged Clara and Rachel when she came in. "I'm so excited, this is even better than Christmas Day," she said, before having second thoughts. "Well, almost."

"I'm glad to see the two of you aren't fighting anymore," said Mrs Lescott. "And you're going to be doing something more productive with your time today."

"Gran used to do a lot of baking in the olden days," Coleen said. "You know, before we had microwaves and electricity."

"I'm not that old!" Mrs Lescott said. The girls thought Coleen might be in for a telling off, but Mrs Lescott kissed her on top of the head. "You're so cheeky."

Next to join them was Deyna, Stanley's friend from number 16, and Esme from number 17. Esme was wearing a lot of her handmade jewellery. "It's Christmas Eve," she said. "If I can't sparkle today, when can I?" Esme did a twirl and showed off the rings she had on almost every finger, the bracelets, necklace and tiara she was wearing. "Although maybe I should take it off while we're baking. We don't want anyone getting my gemstones in their mince pie."

"That would be cool, actually," said Clara. "A mystery prize for one lucky customer."

"As long as they don't swallow it," Esme added.

There was a gentle knock on the front door, so Dad went to open it. It was Mrs Witter from number 10, which was a surprise, because she hadn't been home when Rachel and Clara visited her house the day before.

She came into the kitchen with a huge smile on her face. “Oh, am I interrupting something?” she asked, when she saw half the street assembled before her. “I only came to tell the girls my good news.”

“What is it?” Rachel asked.

“My Christmas present from Francis arrived.” Mrs Witter began rummaging in her handbag, before eventually pulling out an envelope. “I know I shouldn’t have opened it until tomorrow, but I couldn’t wait. Francis has bought me a plane ticket to Canada so I can spend New Year with him and the whole family!”

“Wow, that’s amazing. We’re really happy for you, Mrs Witter,” Rachel said.

“It’s the best present I’ve ever had,” she said.

“Francis must be missing you as much as you miss him. You’ll have a brilliant time.”

“I hope so. You two were right when you told me the present would arrive eventually.” Mrs Witter stepped towards Rachel and Clara and planted a very firm kiss on each of their cheeks. “Oh, I’m just so excited, girls.”

“Speaking of excitement,” Clara said, “would you like to help us bake a huge number of mince pies?”

“Mince pies? Oooh, yes, I’d love to. I always used to make them for Francis when he was growing up.”

“See, just like in the olden days,” Coleen said. Mrs Lescott tutted loudly.

Ingrid started directing people into different zones and giving them instructions for what to do, when a strange sound started coming from the front of the cafe. Everyone went quiet to listen. There it was again. It sounded like a voice, sort of, and it was saying “Ho... Ho... Ho.” Rachel and

Clara rushed to the front and saw Bradley, one of the students from number 13. And accompanying him was his robot, Nick, owner of the creepy voice they had heard. His cotton wool beard was looking very ragged and patchy now.

Bradley greeted the sisters cheerfully. "Hello Rachel. Hello Clara. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, Bradley," said Rachel.

"Ho... Ho... Ho," said Nick.

"Oh, sorry. Merry Christmas to you, too, Nick."

"So, you haven't expanded Nick's vocabulary yet?" Clara asked.

"Or built him some legs," Rachel added. Bradley was pulling the robot along on a skateboard, with some string attached.

"No, but I've done something much more useful." Bradley patted Nick on this head. "Nick's had an upgrade. He can grip a tool in his hand and move it, left and right or up and down."

"So he can mix things in a bowl? That could come in handy."

"Exactly, and unlike humans, Nick's arms never get tired. Unless his battery runs out, of course."

"Then I hope he's fully charged, because we have a lot of mince pies to bake and not much time to do it in," Rachel said, leading the way toward the kitchen.

A few minutes later, the kitchen was a whirl of activity. Packets being ripped open, ingredients being poured, chopped, mixed, squeezed. The sounds of people talking, laughing, shouting instructions at each other. Pots clanging, doors slamming, rolling pins thwacking the worktops, and the occasional "Ho... Ho... Ho" from Nick.

Everyone had a job to do. Esme and Coleen were in the lemon zone, with Esme zesting and Coleen juicing. Next to them was the apple zone, where Deyna was peeling and Mack was chopping. Bradley had the job of mixing in the rest of the fruit, sugar, nutmeg and butter, and then it was over to Nick to do the stirring.

Bradley controlled the robot with his laptop. When he pressed go, Nick's arm would move rapidly, with a wooden spoon attached to it, in the mixing bowl. Most of the group thought Bradley would have been able to do that himself without Nick's help, although it was still quite impressive. Next in the production line was Mrs Witter, who put the mixture into a large saucepan – with a little drop of brandy from Dad's special cupboard – and simmered it for a few minutes until it was all gooey.

Meanwhile, Mrs Lescott's job was mixing the ingredients for the pastry. When it was the perfect consistency, Charlie rolled it out, and then Ingrid cut out the pieces for the bases and lids of the pies. She put the bases into the bun trays, where Clara and Rachel had the important task of filling them with the gooey fruit, once it had cooled a little. Ingrid would add the lids, coat them in egg and sprinkle a bit more sugar on top.

Dad had an important role, too. His job was to do what he was best at, which was making breakfast for everyone. Even while there was an entire production line working frantically all around him, Dad found space to cook bacon, eggs, sausage, mushrooms, beans and toast for everyone, so they had something to look forward to when they stopped for a break.

Of course, not everything went exactly to plan. Mainly because Bradley hadn't quite got the settings right for Nick's new baking abilities. The side to side motion of the robotic arm was sometimes too fast, and the grip function for the spoon attachment too weak. This meant that Nick would

occasionally fling the mixing bowl across the worktop, sending bits of fruit flying everywhere.

“Watch out!” Bradley would yell when he saw things getting out of control.

“Aaargh!” screamed everyone standing nearby, as they were pelted with raisins and sultans.

“Oh, you naughty little metal man!” Mrs Witter would say.

Stanley had been placed on clean-up duty, so he was running around with a cloth, wiping up the remnants of Nick’s accidents from the floor, worktop and the neighbour’s faces.

“That’s ironic,” Clara whispered to Rachel.

“What does *ironic* mean?” Rachel asked.

“I-R-O-N-I-C. It means... actually I’m not sure what it means, to be honest.”

“Let me take a guess. Does it mean that after Stanley left the kitchen looking like a nuclear bomb had gone off inside it while Dad was away, it’s a surprise that he’s the one who was asked to do the cleaning?”

“Yes, that sounds about right,” Clara laughed.

“Oy! I heard that,” Stanley said, flicking his dirty cloth in his sisters’ direction.

About half an hour after they started baking, Ingrid banged two rolling pins together to get everyone’s attention.

“Okay everyone, great work so far. After a few hiccups...” she glanced in Bradley’s direction, “we’ve finished preparing our first batch and they are ready to go in the oven!”

Everyone clapped, and Ingrid waved her arm across the seven bun trays, each with twelve mince pies in. "Eighty-four in total," Clara whispered to Rachel.

"Phil, please can you do the honours and open up the ovens, and I'll load the trays?"

The cafe had a double oven, which had been pre-heating ready to bake the pies. Dad went to open the doors, but stopped with his hand on the handles. Something was wrong. Dad started scratching his chin.

"Erm, we have a problem, he said, before scratching his nose.

"What is it?" Rachel asked.

"Well, I know I'm not an expert baker, but I assume it's quite important that the oven is hot?"

Clara stepped forward. "Dad, we really don't have much time left. What's going on?"

"Well, unfortunately the oven seems to be broken."

"What!?"

Left! Left! Left-right-left!

The whole group had started to close in around Dad, after his surprise revelation.

“What are we going to do?” Rachel asked.

“Don’t worry,” Dad said, although his scrunched up eyebrows suggested he was worried himself. “I just need my toolkit and I’m sure I can fix it.”

Rachel and Clara looked at each other, and then back at Dad. They weren’t convinced. “*You* can fix it?”

“I’ve done it before, the last time this happened. I was planning to replace the oven, but they’re expensive and I just couldn’t afford it.” Dad’s face was growing redder. He was clearly embarrassed.

Clara felt herself beginning to panic. “This is a disaster! We can’t give people raw mince pies!”

“I have an idea,” said Ingrid, who was still holding two of the pie-filled trays. “We just need to find some more ovens we can use. There’s one in every house on Raucous Road, so surely it can’t be that difficult.”

A few minutes later, it had been agreed that two of the bun trays would go into the cafe’s one working oven, and the other five would be taken by Ingrid, Mack and Coleen to their houses, to bake the pies in their ovens, with Clara and Rachel coming along to help carry the trays. Everyone else would stay behind to eat breakfast, while Dad tried to fix the oven in time for the next batch.

Ingrid told everyone they had to be careful. "It's frosty outside today, so the ground might be slippery," she explained. "These trays have all been greased, so it'll be quite easy for the pies to slide out of their holes if they are not kept perfectly flat."

Mack cleared his throat. "I believe this is my area of expertise," he said.

"Really?" Ingrid asked.

"If you need people to walk very straight and very stiffly, ask a soldier."

So it was that Mack – after a quick tutorial on how to walk army-style (not that soldiers usually carried baked goods into battle) – led the group in a march along Raucous Road. Anyone watching would have seen a very strange spectacle: a former soldier leading a small platoon of bakers on Christmas Eve along the whole length of Raucous Road. Each of the marchers had their arms outstretched in front of them, perfectly horizontal. Resting on their forearms they each had a bun tray full of mince pies, which they gripped tightly with their hands. All of them marched with their backs completely rigid and straight, with shoulders pushed upwards.

"Left! Left! Left-right-left!" chanted Mack from the front of the formation. "Left! Left! Left-right-left!"

Mack had taught the group to walk with their knees lifted to the level of their waists, with every step. That felt very odd to Clara and Rachel, but they had to admit it was effective. Not a single pie was dropped, even as a chilly wind began to blow in their faces when they were halfway along.

Someone did see this strange spectacle, of course. At number 6 Raucous Road, Eric Fergus had just gotten out of bed. He was still wearing his flannel pyjamas, with the collar turned up. He'd opened up the final door of his advent calendar, gobbling down the chocolate and tutting at the picture

inside the door. "Stupid reindeer with a stupid big red nose. Does he think it's Comic Relief or something?" he muttered to himself. He much preferred the idea of the advent calendar he'd told people he had – the so-called best advent calendar in the world, with a £20 note behind every door – but unfortunately it didn't exist.

"Eric! Eric! Are you up yet?" Eric's father was shouting at him from downstairs.

"Yes, Dad," Eric replied, "Just getting dressed."

This is the moment Eric heard a strange noise from the street below. Someone was shouting. "Theft, theft, theft-bite-theft." Is that what they were saying?

Eric went to the window and looked out. He had to rub his eyes to make sure he wasn't seeing things. There was that Scottish man from number 3, that new woman with the silly dog at number 5, and that girl from school who lived at number 1. Eric didn't know the names of his neighbours. But he did know the other two, Clara and Rachel. Everyone thinks the Hart sisters are so cool and smart and fun, but Eric just thinks they're annoying. With their stupid haircuts and jokes, and worst of all, their stupid advent calendar. They all seemed to be carrying trays of pies down the street, walking in a very odd way and chanting as they went along. "Left, left, left-right-left." That's what they were saying. What kind of idiots need to remind themselves how to walk?

Although it was an unexpected sight, Eric soon realised what was going on. These must be the mince pies they were making, to give away as part of the campaign to save their cafe. Eric couldn't wait until his father bought that place and threw them out. That's why, when he noticed they were giving away the vouchers at school the other day, he'd forced one of them

younger pupils to give him one of them, and then photocopied it a hundred times when he got home. You're a genius, Eric, he'd told himself.

Suddenly, Mr Fergus burst into the room. "I thought you were getting dressed," he said, noticing that Eric was still in his pyjamas. "I don't care if it's the Christmas holidays, there's no excuse for being lazy!"

"Sorry, Dad, I got distracted."

"Well, hurry up. I want you to go over to the cafe and get my signed contract from Mr Hart. I'm sick of going into that dump, so you can go instead."

Eric liked the sound of that. He went over to his cupboard, where he had hidden his stash of mince pie vouchers in his underwear drawer.

"Okay, Dad, I'd love to," he said, and laughed at the thought of how he was going to ruin the Hart sisters' big day.

Rachel, Clara and the others arrived back at the cafe half an hour later with their batch of mince pies, freshly baked and giving off an irresistible smell. All of the neighbours had finished their breakfasts and were back in the kitchen, working on the second batch. There had been a bit of a reorganisation of jobs to make up for the missing people. Esme had been promoted from the lemon zone to the pastry zone, so she was now cutting out the bases and lids of the pies. Stanley had been entrusted with lemon duty – both zesting and juicing – while Deyna was peeling and chopping apples. Bradley and Nick were still in charge of mixing the filling, and as there wasn't evidence of any major spillages, it seemed Nick's settings had been adjusted properly for the task. Finally, Mrs Witter had taken over Rachel and Clara's job placing the filling into the pie bases.

Everyone cheered when they saw that the marching group had arrived back with the baked mince pies, and those that had free hands clapped. Nick spun his robot arms around. Dad was nowhere to be seen, however. Then Clara spotted that the oven had been pulled away from the wall, and she saw Dad's legs poking out from behind.

"I hope the rest of him is still attached," she said.

There were sounds of clanging metal coming from behind the oven, and a few grunts and groans. "I think it is," Rachel said.

A few seconds later, Dad stood up and the top half of his body appeared. "I'm done!" he exclaimed, delighted with himself. "The oven is fixed."

Rachel and Clara wanted to congratulate him, but there was something odd about his face. It had strange black smears across it.

"What's that on your face, Dad? It looks like war paint."

Dad ran his finger over his cheek. "Oh, it's probably just grease. The walls are covered in this stuff."

"Ewwww," the sisters said.

"Some of that probably came from bacon butties he cooked before you two were even born!" Stanley laughed.

"Anyway," Dad said. "I repeat, the oven is fixed!" This time, everyone gave another cheer. Dad pushed it back toward the wall. "Now for the crucial moment," he said. "Let's get it pre-heated before the next batch goes in. He flicked on the power supply using the socket on the wall, and then twisted the knob above the oven door.

"Voila!" he exclaimed, when it lit up. And then a second later, the entire cafe suddenly went dark.

Power cut

Dad's voice rang out in the darkness. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

Clara didn't know if her eyes were open or closed. Everything was pitch black. She reached out her hand and her finger touched something soft.

"Hey, that's my eye!" Rachel yelled.

Clara was startled and stumbled backwards. She reached out with her other hand to try to grab something to steady herself.

"Hey, that's *my* eye," Coleen yelled.

"Everyone should just stay calm and still," Mack said. "In a few seconds our eyes will start to adjust to the darkness, even if they've been poked."

"There must have been a power cut," Dad said. "Maybe I connected the wrong wire."

"I've got an idea," Bradley said. "Nick has another new feature I forgot to mention." There was the sound of a click, and then a red light came on with a flicker. It was coming from Nick's belly.

"Ho... Ho... Ho," Nick said.

"I knew this would come in handy one day," Bradley said.

Stanley found his way to the hatch between the kitchen and front of the cafe, which he opened. This let in a bit more light from the window, although it was a dull day, so there wasn't much.

"I'm not sure what to do now," Dad said. "I might need some professional help."

Clara had her own idea. "What about Mr Flitcroft from number 9? He's an electrician."

"Oh yeah! Let's go and ask him!"

"Brilliant," said Ingrid. "In the meantime, we haven't got time to waste. I want everyone to go and fetch whatever they can from their houses to light up this kitchen. We can't prepare the rest of these pies if we can't see what we're doing."

When Mr Flitcroft opened his door, Rachel and Clara saw immediately that he had a piece of sticky tape on the end of his nose.

"Hello, girls. Merry Christmas. What brings you here? Is it my turn in your advent calendar again?"

"Erm..." The sisters couldn't stop staring at his nose, but they didn't know whether to say anything. Thankfully, Mr Flitcroft seemed to realise he was getting some odd looks, and spotted the tape.

"Oh, I'm always doing that," he said. "I've been wrapping presents all morning. I've probably got bits of tape all over the house."

"We need your help, Mr Flitcroft," Rachel said. "Do you have time to come to the cafe?"

He yanked the tape from his nose. "Of course. What's wrong?"

"Well, you know how our Dad makes the best fry-ups in the whole of Greater Manchester?"

"Yes, everyone on the street knows that."

"Unfortunately, he's not so good with electronics. He tried to fix the oven, but somehow he's caused a power cut."

"I see."

"And now we can't finish baking our mince pies!" Clara blurted out.

“And if we can’t get all the neighbours to come to the cafe later, we’ve got no chance of stopping it from being sold to Mr Fergus!”

Rachel and Clara were both getting quite worked up now.

“He’ll turn it into a Cost A Lot Coffee!”

“Or a Mega Bucks Coffee!”

“And Eric will have won!”

“And we’ll have to move to Blandington!”

“Say no more,” Mr Flitcroft said, when the sisters paused for breath.
“Please.”

“Sorry, Mr Flitcroft. We just really need your help.”

“I’ll just get some of my old tools from the shed.”

Fifteen minutes later, Rachel, Clara and Mr Flitcroft arrived back at the cafe to an eerie sight. The kitchen was a hive of activity like before, and was still very dark, but the areas where people were working were illuminated.

Over in the lemon and apple zones, there were torches on the shelves, shining down on Stanley, Deyna, Mack and Esme. Next to them, Bradley was mixing the pie filling by the light of Nick’s flickering red belly. At the gas hob, Mrs Witter was simmering the mixture, surrounded by candles. In the pastry zone, a string of fairy lights had been put up above Mrs Lescott, Charlie, Esme and Ingrid. The effect made it seem like the bakers were moving around the darkness with parts of them lit up, as if they were glow worms flitting through the night.

“It looks magical,” said Rachel.

“It looks creepy,” said Clara.

“It looks like I’ve got work to do,” said Mr Flitcroft.

Everyone kept baking, working surprisingly fast. Even Clara had to admit it was quite exciting in the kitchen, with the darkness and the twinkly lights. It even felt Christmassy.

Mr Flitcroft worked on the electrics, moving between the oven and the cupboard under the stairs, muttering to himself with words like surges, fuses, earthing and wiring. Dad was following him around, offering assistance, but Mr Flitcroft kept insisting he didn't need any. He was right, because in hardly any time at all he had got the lights back on, and a few minutes later the oven was working.

"Ideally it needs replacing," he said, "but it'll get you through Christmas."

There was a round of applause for Mr Flitcroft, who gave a bow to the group. With the kitchen fully functional again, the neighbours sped through another two batches of mince pies. Then, finally, they were done. Rachel and Clara had scraped the final spoonful of the filling into the final pastry base. Not a single raisin or currant was left. The last little bit of suet – whatever that was – had been stirred into the mixture. Every drop of juice had been squeezed out of every lemon. There had only been enough to fill three trays in the final batch, but they still had an impressive grand total of two hundred and forty mince pies.

Of course, all of the bakers had to try one, for quality control purposes. This left Clara a little uneasy. "I'm still not sure we'll have enough for all the customers," she whispered to Rachel.

"Don't worry, Clara. We'll be fine."

Everyone sat down in the front of the cafe, with teas and coffees to go with their pies. They all looked a little worn out.

"What do you think, Philip?" asked Ingrid. "Are these better than shop-bought?"

Dad tried to speak, but his mouth was full after he'd shoved a whole pie in there. A shower of crumbs flew out when he finally answered with, "Yes, definitely."

Stanley appeared instantly with a brush to sweep up the mess. "I'm getting the hang of this," he said.

Gradually, everyone started to become aware of something happening on the street outside the cafe. Through the window they could see Dean from Potato Heaven at number 4, standing in front of Mr Nash, the newsagent from number 7. Next to them was Kyle from number 20 with his parents, and then Ellen and baby Mario from number 8. The noise from their chatting seemed to be getting louder and louder.

Rachel went to the front door, opened it slightly and looked through the gap. She saw a whole queue of people waiting to come into the cafe, stretching down past several houses along Raucous Road. Behind Ellen and Mario, Rachel could also see Mrs Dunne, Coleen's mum, from number 1. Then came the students Alex and Demi, Bradley's housemates from 13, who had helped inspire their campaign to save the cafe. Eddie from number 15, again wearing his normal clothes instead of his Edrosonus costume, was behind them. Rachel saw more people were walking down the street in their direction, too.

"There's a queue of people going all the way down the street!" Rachel said excitedly to everyone inside, after she closed the door.

"We'd better start letting them in," Dad said. "Can't keep the customers waiting."

"Hang on a minute, Phil," Charlie said. "Aren't we forgetting something? We should let Rachel and Clara finish their advent calendar first. They

haven't opened door number 24 yet."

The final door

Rachel and Clara put their coats on and slipped out the cafe through the back door, walking round to the front. Dean tilted his head and looked at them with a confused expression. "Weren't you inside a second ago?"

Yes, but we have something important to do out here," Clara said. "The cafe will be open very soon, we promise."

"Merry Chipmas, by the way," Rachel said.

Dean laughed, "Merry Chipmas to you, too."

The sisters each took a deep breath. They paused for a second to look at the number 24, printed in a gold circle on the front door of the cafe, the place that they had called home for their entire lives. When they began their advent calendar at the start of December, Rachel and Clara had no idea how many twists and turns there would be along the way to the final door. They turned to each other and shared one of their looks, their special looks where they could both tell what the other was thinking. *It all comes down to this.*

They knocked on the door together, and Dad answered a few seconds later.

"Hello," said Rachel. "My name is Rachel Hart, and this is my sister Clara."

"Erm... I know that," said Dad.

“We live at number 24 Raucous Road, and we’d like to give you the opportunity to take part in our living advent calendar.”

“Oh, I see,” Dad said. “I’d love to.”

“Excellent,” said Clara. “Please accept this delicious treat, and this festive picture.” Clara handed Dad one of the mince pies, which she had snuck into her coat pocket, and which Dad immediately shoved whole into his mouth. Rachel handed him one of the posters from their campaign to save the cafe. *To Dad, Never give up! Love from Rachel and Clara xx*, she had written on it. Crumbs flew out of Dad’s mouth when he tried to say thank you.

Dad hugged his daughters, and they all went back inside. “Right, everyone, thank you so much for your help this morning,” Dad announced. “We’ve got a lot of hungry customers outside waiting to eat these mince pies, and the cafe will officially be opening any second now.”

Rachel jumped up on a chair to lead the group in a countdown. “Ten... nine...”

Clara was waiting by the door poised to open it. She was so excited she couldn’t help but interrupt Rachel’s countdown. “Maybe you should start lower, so it doesn’t take as long.”

“Good idea,” Rachel said. “I’ll start at five.”

“What about three?”

“Even better. Three... two...”

Now Stanley interrupted. “You know you could have finished the countdown by now if you’d just kept going, don’t you?”

“Stanley!” Rachel and Clara both turned to their brother with identical grimaces on their faces.

“Sorry, that wasn’t helpful.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” That was Mrs Lescott, whose patience had worn very thin by this point. She stomped over to the door and threw it open. “Zero!” she bellowed.

Dean was still there, and was clearly startled by Mrs Lescott. He took a step back and hesitated. In that split second, Eric Fergus took the opportunity to dart past Dean and force his way into the cafe before everyone else.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Rachel cried, stepping in front of him.

Eric sneered at her. His face was very close to Rachel’s making her feel very uncomfortable. And making her realise how bad his breath was.

“I’m here for a mince pie.” Eric pulled a single voucher from his pocket and waved it above his head.

“I think you need some mouthwash instead,” Rachel said, covering her nose.

“Just get out of my way, whichever one you are.”

By now, Dad and Stanley and a few of the neighbours had lined up behind Rachel, and Clara was by her side.

“There is a queue, you know,” Clara said. She pointed back toward the people still waiting by the door. “You’re pushing in.”

Eric turned around and looked at Dean. “You don’t mind, do you, Mr Potato Head?”

“Erm... I suppose...”

“See?” Eric said, turning back toward Rachel. “He’s fine with it.”

With that, Eric side-stepped everyone and headed toward the counter. All of the mince pies had been laid out

“I’m sorry,” Dean said to Rachel and Clara as he came in. “I wasn’t sure what to say.”

"It's not your fault," Clara said. "We'll just give him his mince pie and then get rid of him."

Eric put down one voucher on the counter. Stanley took one mince pie from the display on the shelf behind the counter, and handed it to Eric. "Okay, Eric, you've got your freebie now," he said. "Would you like anything else?"

"Hmmm," Eric said, theatrically stroking his chin. "Yes, I would. In fact, I think I'd like another mince pie." Eric reached into his pocket and pulled out another mince pie voucher, and placed it down on the counter.

A crowd had gathered behind Eric now, trying to see what was going on.

"You can't do that. It's one voucher per customer," Stanley said. Then he turned to Rachel and Clara, who were standing to the side. "Isn't it?"

The sisters looked at each other, recognising the same look of alarm on each other's faces. Meanwhile, Eric picked up the voucher again and waved it around. "Actually, it doesn't say that anywhere on here," he said. "Where are the *terms and conditions*?"

"What does that mean?" Rachel whispered to Clara.

"It's the rules that we were supposed to set, about how the vouchers can be used. I forgot," Clara whispered back.

"Well?" demanded Eric.

Rachel couldn't stop herself from responding. "The *terms* are, Eric, that you're a massive idiot. And the *conditions* are that you need to get lost."

"I'm shocked," Eric said. "I know this dump is closing down soon, but that's no way to speak to a customer."

Now Dad stepped towards the counter, to try to calm things down. "Come on, can't we all be friendly today? It is Christmas Eve, after all. It seems we've made a small error with the vouchers but it's no big deal.

Stanley, please give Eric another mince pie, and then we can start serving everyone else.”

“Fine.” Reluctantly, Stanley took another pie from the display and handed it to Eric. “Would you like anything else? Maybe a nice glass of milk to wash them down with?”

“Or to be thrown in your face,” whispered Clara.

“I think I might need more than one glass of milk by the time I’m finished.” Eric laughed, and reached into his pocket again. But this time, he pulled out something much bulkier. It was a huge wad of mince pie vouchers, which he slammed onto the counter with a loud thud.

Rachel and Clara both felt a shockwave pass through their bodies. “Oh my god!” they screamed.

An eerie silence fell over the whole cafe for a few seconds. Rachel and Clara stared at Dad, who was frozen still, with his mouth hanging open. They turned to Stanley, who looked exactly the same. Nobody knew what to do.

“That’s not right, lad,” came a voice from the crowd. “That’s just not right,” it repeated. It was Mr Flitcroft. Suddenly, everyone else started calling out, too.

“Leave some for other people!” said Deyna.

“You’re so selfish!” said Esme.

“He’s always been such a rude boy!” said Mrs Lescott.

“Just like his father!” said Mrs Witter.

“Waaaaah!” said baby Mario.

“We worked for hours on those mince pies!” said Charlie.

“He’s ruining Christmas!” said Coleen.

“Ho... ho... ho,” said Nick.

“My name isn’t Mr Potato Head!” said Dean.

Dad finally unfroze himself, and put his hands up. He asked everyone to be quiet so he could speak. “I don’t know how this happened,” he said. “but Eric has vouchers, and it’s only fair that I honour them.” There were murmurs of disapproval from the crowd, but Dad carried on. “Eric, you can have your mince pies if you really want, but I’m very disappointed at this behaviour. I know you don’t get on with my daughters, but this affects our whole community. I’ll have to speak to your father about this.”

“Good,” Eric snapped back. “He needs your signed contract anyway, so you should go and take it to him right now.”

Dad’s face fell. He knew that Eric had been taunting his daughters all month, but he was still surprised to hear a child being so rude, even one with the surname Fergus. “Okay, fine. Stanley, give this young man his mince pies.”

“But Dad–” Clara began.

“No, I’m sorry, Clara. We’ve got no choice. We’ve always treated our customers respectfully and I’m not going to stop just because we’re closing down. Now, I need to go and get that contract from upstairs. I’ve been putting it off for too long.”

With that, Dad left them and went into the back of the cafe, and they heard his footsteps on the stairs. Clara was going to chase after him, but Rachel pulled her back. “Not yet,” she said.

“But he’s going to sign the contract!”

Rachel squeezed her sister’s hand. “I think we still have time.”

The sisters watched as Stanley counted out every single one of Eric’s vouchers, and piled up the mince pies one at a time. It took ages. Eventually, he had filled four large plates, holding a total of ninety-six mince pies.

Almost all of the pies from the shelf behind the counter had gone. Eric took his plates, sat down at a table, and immediately began eating. He was looking very pleased with himself.

Ingrid approached Eric's table. "What do you think? Since you have so many mince pies, I do hope you're enjoying them."

Eric looked up and scowled, then made a strange sound, like he was struggling to talk. "Raaarrrazziffguuufffzzzurr." Something like that.

"Pardon? Was that English?" asked Ingrid.

Eric swallowed, and a big clump of pie could be seen bulging down his throat. "They're disgusting," he said. "The worst mince pies I've ever had." Then he licked his lips, grabbed another pie and stuffed it eagerly into his mouth.

"I don't think you really mean that," Ingrid laughed.

Suddenly, there was a loud cheer from the crowd. Stanley had been into the kitchen and brought out another batch of pies, to refill the display. Although there were fewer than before, there were still lots of mince pies for the waiting customers, and they were getting excited.

Dean was the first person from the queue to receive his mince pie, then Mr Nash, then Kyle and his parents, then Ellen. Slowly but surely, everyone was being served, and they all said how delicious they were. "I would love to have one of these deep-fried, with chips," Dean said. People were ordering other things, too, spending lots of money. Stanley said he'd never seen the till so full. Dad was back in the kitchen to make the food people wanted. At least until the last of his stock ran out.

There was such a lovely atmosphere throughout the cafe that nobody wanted to leave. Soon, every table was full, except for the one where Eric was sitting, alone, still scoffing his pies. People from all along Raucous Road

and the nearby streets were there, as well as lots of people from Rachel and Clara's school, everyone mixing together, talking, laughing, having fun. Ingrid had been home to fetch Bert, who was jumping up and down and yapping excitedly. A few people had even broken into song, with Mrs Witter and Mrs Lescott leading several the crowd in a performance of 'Good King Wenceslas'.

When the inside of the cafe was full, the party started spilling onto the pavement outside. People had mugs of hot chocolate to keep them warm. It was turning into a gigantic street party. Several people that had seen Mack leading the mince pie march down Raucous Road earlier in the day insisted that he teach them the moves. Soon enough, dozens of people were following him in performing the steps, shouting "left, left, left-right-left," as they did.

"It's getting so loud," Clara said to Rachel. "Do you think the neighbours will complain?"

"The neighbours are the ones making all the noise!" Rachel replied.

Everyone wanted to speak to the sisters, so they flitted from one group to another, hugging and high-fiving as they did. So many people told them how thrilled they were that the sisters had brought everyone together.

"We've lived here for years without meeting some of the people who live on the same street," said Mr Palmer from number 19. "Now I'm getting to know everyone, and it's all thanks to you two."

"This is even more fun than dressing up as a wizard to fight dragons," said Eddie from number 15.

"I'm really glad I sold out of advent calendars, because the one that you two created has been really special," said Mr Nash.

"If only we could do this every Christmas," said Charlie.

“You two are brilliant campaigners,” said Alex from number 13. “If I ever want to get myself elected, I’ll be asking for your help.”

“You don’t really think my head looks like a potato, do you?” asked Dean.

Even grumpy old Mr and Mrs Sheron from number 2 had arrived. While they weren’t exactly full of the same joyful Christmas spirit as everyone else, they did seem excited about getting their mince pies, judging from how tightly they were clutching their vouchers. The queue had been gradually getting shorter as Stanley was serving everyone, but as the final mince pies were being given away it was clear there were going to be some people who missed out. Raz and Bunny, two of the builders who’d been working on number 11, got to the front of the queue and used their vouchers to get the last two pies available. Mr and Mrs Sheron were behind them in the queue, which meant Stanley had the difficult job of telling them that they had all gone.

“That’s outrageous,” Mrs Sheron said. “Do you know how long we’ve been waiting?”

“And we had to listen to all this awful singing,” Mr Sheron.

“I’m really sorry,” Stanley said. “We can offer you some jam doughnuts instead, or a toasted teacake.”

Mrs Sheron put her hands on her hips and gasped. “A jam doughnut? A jam doughnut! What’s that got to do with Christmas?”

“Actually I like jam doughnuts. and teacakes,” said Mr Sheron. “I’ll have both.”

Mrs Sheron turned to her husband. “You shut up and stop interfering. It’s your fault we’re late, so you’re having nothing.”

“How is it my fault?”

"I was ready to go hours ago, but you said you had to cut your toenails first."

"I did have to cut them. They were poking out of my socks. I couldn't go out for a walk like that."

"It's hardly going out for a walk, just coming to the other end of the street."

People had started to notice the argument taking place at the counter, and were watching it unfold. Rachel and Clara rushed over to try to help calm things down, then Bunny and Raz came back to say they'd be happy to give their mince pies to the Sherons. Just as Mr Sheron was reaching out to grab them, he spotted Eric and his huge pile. "Hang on a second," he said, "why's he got all that to himself?"

"Oh," Rachel said. "He brought in ninety-six vouchers."

"Ninety-six!? He's a greedy git!"

The Sherons marched over to Eric's table, with Rachel and Clara following. "What do you think you're playing at, taking all those mince pies?" Mrs Sheron said.

"And why have you got your collar turned up like that?" asked Mr Sheron.

Eric looked up at them, but didn't answer. He was clutching a pie in his hand, but not eating. He was looking rather queasy, in fact. His face was very pale. There was a groaning coming from somewhere, too. When Rachel leaned in and listened carefully, she realised that it was coming from his stomach.

Eric's hand suddenly shot to his mouth. He jumped up and ran toward the toilet, which was on the other side of the cafe. It wasn't easy to get through the crowd, so he was barging into people, who all tried to get out of

his way. They didn't want whatever was going to come out of Eric to land on them.

There were still nearly three plates full of mince pies on Eric's table, and Mr Sheron had his eye on them. He called after Eric. "You don't want these anymore, do you?"

Eric turned his head back toward Mr Sheron as he ran. Unfortunately, Ellen picked that very moment to push her chair back so she could stand up, and Eric went crashing into it. He fell to the ground and then had to crawl the rest of the way to the toilet, making it just in time.

"I'll take that as a no," Mr Sheron said.

"It would be a shame to waste them," Mrs Sheron added.

The Sherons picked up the pies. Mr Sheron put a few in his coat pockets, and Mrs Sheron put a few more into her handbag. Then they took the plates around the cafe and started handing the rest of the pies out to whoever wanted one.

What we've learned

When every customer had been served, Dad came out of the kitchen. He looked around in amazement at all the people in the cafe and out on the street. Rachel and Clara weaved through the crowd and went to his side. When they hugged him, they both spotted the contract, folded up in the back pocket of his trousers, although they couldn't tell if it was signed. They all noticed that he was sweating heavily from all the hard work he'd been doing in the kitchen, with big wet patches under his arms. Disgusting, but they kept hugging him anyway.

"Why don't you go outside for some fresh air, Dad?" Clara asked.

"I will in a minute, love. I've got something to do first."

The girls saw a glistening in Dad's eyes. Tears were forming. That's when they knew he was about to give one of his 'I'm so proud' speeches. These were usually highly embarrassing for Rachel and Clara, but this time they weren't embarrassed. They wanted to hear it.

Dad grabbed an empty mug and a teaspoon from the nearest table, and started knocking them together to make a clinking sound. He stepped up onto a chair. Everyone stopped talking, or singing, and looked in his direction. Some of the people in the street squeezed back into the cafe, and the rest gathered around the door.

After clearing his throat, Dad began.

“It’s fantastic to see so many friends and neighbours here today. As many of you know, we’ve had quite a day here in our little cafe. In fact, we’ve had quite a month. All of this is thanks to my daughters. There’s never a dull moment with Clara and Rachel around, and I’m so proud of how they inspired all of you to be here.”

The sisters beamed and, very theatrically, they each took a bow.

Dad went on. “I hope everyone has had a great time. It’s really sad that we’ll be closing and moving away soon, but this has been a lovely way to say goodbye. You have all been wonderful neighbours, and we will miss all of you very much.”

“Here, here,” people shouted back. “We’ll miss you, too.”

Just as Dad stood down from the chair, Rachel and Clara found their own chairs, and jumped up onto them. They both had mugs and spoons, which they clinked like Dad had. “Oh, it looks like my daughters have something to say, too.”

“Yes, Dad, we do,” Rachel said.

“As always,” Stanley muttered from behind the counter.

Clara had a speech written in her notebook, which she opened and started to read. “We wanted to tell people about what we have learned this month, since we started our advent calendar,” she said. “We’ve gotten to know the people of this street better than ever before.”

Clara handed the notebook to Rachel so she could take over. “We learned that the people of Raucous Road really care about each other. Some of them are old, some are young, some have only just moved to the street, while some have been here for many years. But all of us enjoy living here, and love being part of this community.” Rachel glanced toward the toilet. Eric still hadn’t emerged yet. “Well, almost all of us.”

Clara carried on. "We learned that the people of Raucous Road really like chocolate truffles. And judging from today, they really, really like mince pies." There was laughter from the crowd. "They also really, really, really like our cafe. When people heard it was closing, everyone wanted to know what they could do to keep it open, and help us to stay."

There was applause from the crowd, but Dad interrupted. "Girls, I know this is sad, but--"

"Hang on, Dad, let them finish," Stanley said.

"Clara and I also learned a lot about each other," Rachel said. "I learned that my sister is incredibly passionate about the things that are important to her."

"And I learned that Rachel is the cleverest and most imaginative person I know. She might not know the meanings of all the long words, but this whole thing was her idea."

"Both of us learned that if you give something to the people around you, you get a whole lot back in return."

There was even louder applause from the crowd, and a big cheer. Rachel and Clara didn't notice straight away that Mr Fergus had entered the cafe. Then they saw Mrs Witter and Mrs Lescott both suddenly stumbling as someone shoved them out of the way, and the sisters saw his big bald head coming straight toward them. "Eric! Eric!" he was shouting. He made it to the front of the crowd, directly under where Rachel and Clara were standing on their chairs. "Where's my idiot son?" he barked. "I sent him here ages ago to get the signed contract."

They pointed toward the toilet. From inside, the sound of Eric heaving and moaning could be heard. Mr Fergus marched over and banged on the door. "Pull yourself together, Eric. You're an embarrassment."

“Go easy on him, Mr Fergus,” Dad said. “He’s been a bit silly, but I think he was only trying to impress you.”

“You deal with your family, Mr Hart, and I’ll deal with mine. Mr Fergus spat his words out. “Now where’s my contract?”

“Fine. I’ve got it here. I just need to sign it.”

Dad asked Stanley to pass him the pen they kept on the till. As Stanley reached out to hand it to him, Clara and Rachel leapt from their chairs, lunged at Stanley and tried, unsuccessfully, to grab the pen. “Nooooo!” they yelled. They landed with a thud on the ground, and sent their chairs flying.

“What on earth are you doing, girls?” Dad asked, while helping them up.

“We haven’t finished our speech yet, Dad,” Clara pleaded. “Please let us finish it before you sign the contract.”

“Why?”

“Please, Dad, just trust us.”

The customers began chiming in to support the sisters. “Let them speak, Phil,” said Charlie.

“We really want to hear them,” said Coleen.

“They’ve earned it,” said Mack.

“As long as they don’t sing,” said Mr Sheron.

When everyone in the crowd began chanting, “Speech, speech, speech,” Dad gave in and said he’d listen before signing.

Mr Fergus huffed loudly and threw his arms up in the air. “I’m going to fetch that puking moron from the toilet, and then I want my signed contract,” he said.

Clara and Rachel put their chairs upright and jumped back up. They looked at each other, and both took a deep breath. This was it. “Thank you, everyone,” Rachel began. “We just have a few more things to say about

what we've learned this month. They're all very practical things that we know you'll be interested to hear about, Dad."

"Okay, I'm all ears," Dad said.

"Firstly," Clara went on, "we've learned that our new neighbour Eddie from number 15 – also known as Edrosonus the Wise – needs a place to play his role-playing games with his fellow wizards. Our cafe would be perfect!"

"That's true," called Eddie from the middle of the crowd. "We could hire the cafe for an evening every week."

"Secondly, we've learned that Esme also needs a place to teach her jewellery-making classes. She could do that here, too."

Esme clapped and jangled her bracelets. "I'm in!" she said.

At that moment, Mr Fergus burst out of the toilet, dragging Eric behind him. "What a load of rubbish," he snorted. "I heard what you were saying. People playing silly dress-up games and other people making vulgar necklaces? That's not going to make you much money."

Rachel ignored him and continued. "Thirdly," she said, "We've learned that Ellen needs a place she can just relax without worrying about Mario disturbing people by crying."

"Waaaah," wailed Mario.

"Precisely. So how about one morning in the cafe every week, where mums and dads can bring their babies, have a nice time, and they can all cry as loudly as they want. The babies, I mean."

"A parent and baby morning? It would be amazing to be able to get out and come here to relax and chat with my friends," said Ellen.

"Or you can come to my new coffee shop, which isn't full of screaming babies," Mr Fergus announced to the crowd.

“Yeah, and pay about ten pounds for every cup of coffee,” Charlie muttered.

“Fourthly,” Clara said, “We’ve learned that students from the university like our new friends Alex, Demi and Bradley sometimes need a quiet space to study. We could encourage them to come in with free refills, in the mid-afternoon period when the cafe is often empty.”

“That’ll never work,” Mr Fergus said. “You don’t even have any plug sockets in the cafe. How are all those scrounging students going to charge their laptops?”

Mr Flitcroft piped up. “Don’t worry, girls, I’ll help you install some more,” he said. “Phil, you can pay me in bacon butties.”

“Fifthly,” Rachel said, “we’ve learned that lots of people would like to order our food but don’t always have time to come into the cafe.”

“Yeah, like builders needing their breakfast,” shouted Bunny.

“We could start a breakfast delivery service for the local area. Stanley could deliver the food on his bike before he goes to college.”

Stanley gave them a thumbs-up.

“That’s... okay, that one’s actually quite a good business idea,” Mr Fergus said.

“Sixthly, and finally,” Clara said, “we’ve learned that everyone loves Ingrid’s baking. So much so that they’ll cram themselves into our cafe just for a mince pie.” A loud cheer went up from the crowd. “So wouldn’t it be a good idea to ditch the shop-bought cakes and sell Ingrid’s creations instead? You could split the profits.”

“I would love to do that,” Ingrid said.

“All these ideas, and lots of others we might have if we just ask the people around us, could help keep the cafe in business. What do you think, Dad?”

Rachel and Clara looked at Dad. They could tell he was in shock. He stared back at them with his eyes wide open, saying nothing.

“Come on, Dad,” said Stanley. “These are brilliant ideas. Let’s give it a try.”

“I think... I just... I want...” Dad was mumbling to himself, processing what he’d just heard.

“It’ll never work,” Mr Fergus said. “Just take the money and run while you still can.”

Dad’s hand went to his face. Both hands. He scratched everywhere – chin, ears, nose, head – all at once.

“Come on, time’s up. Hand over the contract.”

Finally, Dad pulled the contract out of his pocket. He held it up and looked at it. He turned to look at the expectant faces of all his customers. Then at the angry face of Mr Fergus and the queasy face of Eric. Finally, he looked at his daughters, and smiled. Then he methodically tore up the contract into a hundred pieces and threw it up into the air like confetti. Rachel and Clara ran to his side and showered in the tiny pieces of paper as they floated to the floor. The crowd let out a loud cheer.

“There’s your contract,” Dad said. “We’re staying!”

Christmas morning

Rachel and Clara overslept on the 25th of December. This was something that had never happened before on Christmas Day. Not just to Rachel and Clara, but to any child in the world, ever, since Christmas was invented.

This was almost certainly due to the fact that the sisters had stayed up late into the night talking. There was nothing unusual about that, but this was a particularly long and deep conversation. They talked about everything that had happened in the past month, and all the plans they had for the cafe now that Dad had cancelled the sale. There was one intense laughing fit somewhere around midnight, when Rachel did an impression of Mr Fergus's red and puffy face when he saw Dad rip up the contract. They laughed so hard that if Father Christmas and all of his reindeers had stomped through their room at that moment – and who knows, maybe they did – Rachel and Clara probably wouldn't have even noticed.

Rachel was the first to wake up. She stretched, yawned, and then looked over at her sister. For once, the built-in alarm clock in Clara's head must have been switched off. Oh well, there's always a backup plan. Rachel picked up one of her pillows and launched it towards Clara's bed. Oof, direct hit on the head.

"Huh? What?" Clara began to stir, and was now muttering to herself. "Where am I?"

"It's Christmas!!!" Rachel exclaimed.

“The 1st of December?” Clara asked, rubbing her eyes.

“No, it really is Christmas this time! Look, we’ve got things in our stockings.”

Dad always put stockings at the end of Rachel and Clara’s beds on Christmas morning, with a few little presents in.

The sisters threw back their covers and grabbed the stockings, emptying the contents onto the bed. There were so many different things in them. Firstly, they both had a little cardboard box with a note from Stanley: *I put these aside for you, as you deserve the last ones*. Each box had a mince pie inside.

“That’s so sweet of him,” Clara said.

Next, they both had a bracelet, wrapped in tissue paper. Rachel’s had red gemstones and Clara’s purple.

“These are gorgeous, Esme must have made them,” Rachel said.

The third gifts were two rolling pins, each with a gift tag on, from Ingrid: *You’re a superstar baker and a brilliant neighbour*, they both said.

Then Rachel picked up a wrapped gift that looked like a book. “I gave it to Dad to sneak into your stocking,” Clara said, “since I’ve finished it.” Rachel ripped off the wrapping paper and saw it was the copy of ‘Hard Times’ that Clara had been reading all month.

“That’s funny, because I had a very similar idea,” Rachel said, “except I found another Charles Dickens book with a much better title.” She pointed at the gift on Clara’s bed. Clara unwrapped it and smiled. It was ‘Great Expectations’.

“Very appropriate,” Clara said.

The final gift they both had was an envelope, with their names written on them in Dad's handwriting. "I wonder what these are," Rachel said. The sisters opened the envelopes and found a ticket inside.

"What!?!?" they exclaimed together.

The sisters were both looking at entry tickets for the Blandington Museum of Museums.

"It must be one of his attempts at being funny," Rachel said.

"I think it sounds great. I can't wait to go," Clara said, "as long as we get to come home again!"

With all the presents now open, Rachel jumped out of bed. "Now for the best bit." She opened the curtains with a whoosh. "Wow," she said, looking out of the window.

"What is it?" Clara asked.

"Come and see."

Clara joined her sister at the window, and they stood for a few seconds, admiring the houses of Raucous Road. Almost every house twinkled with fairy lights. It was still dark enough outside that these could be seen shining brightly, giving the whole street a magical feel. "Isn't it beautiful?" Rachel asked. "It's nice to think of all our friends and neighbours in their houses, enjoying Christmas together."

"That's lovely, but it makes me feel sad, too."

"Why?"

Clara turned to her sister and held her hand. "There are no more doors for us to open. The advent calendar is finished."

"Oh, right."

"I never knew the build-up to Christmas could be more exciting than Christmas Day itself."

"I bet we've got loads more presents to open downstairs. Shall we go and wake up Dad and Stanley?"

"I can't even remember what other presents we asked for."

Rachel paused and thought for a few moments. "Actually, neither can I." Then she smiled. "But we've already got the thing we really wanted, haven't we? We saved the cafe."

"That's true."

"And I've got another idea."

Rachel and Clara looked into each other's eyes. It was one of their special looks, where they could tell what each other was really thinking.

"I like it," Clara said.

The sisters put on their dressing gowns and slippers, and skipped out of the room, to go and tell Dad that he should forget to buy their advent calendars next year, too.

THE END

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