

CHAPTER 3

Break a Leg

FOUR WEEKS LATER

It was the night of the play. The school stage was covered in big fake wooden trees and four big golden thrones for the main characters. Everyone was packed into the backstage area, getting into their costumes and putting on make-up. Nerves were at fever pitch. We only had twenty minutes left until the play started.

Just enough time to put Robyn's plan into action.

"Ready, everyone?" I whispered.

My crew ran up. It had been Robyn's idea to ask Petra, Taylor, Tomi and Leo to help us. They were just as annoyed as we were about getting bad parts, and we'd had weeks in rehearsals together to practise the plan.

I turned to Petra and Taylor. "Have you got the itching powder?"

"The itchiest on the market!" said Petra as she held up a giant bottle of SCRATCH ME IF YOU CAN.

"They use it on bears," said Taylor.

I gave them a thumbs up. "Remember the plan – you're going to put some in Ruby's costume so that she makes a big fuss. She's so loud, everyone will be looking at her! That way, Leo can get Blake out of the room and no one will notice." I turned to Leo. "Remember what

you're going to say to Blake so that he looks in the cupboard?"

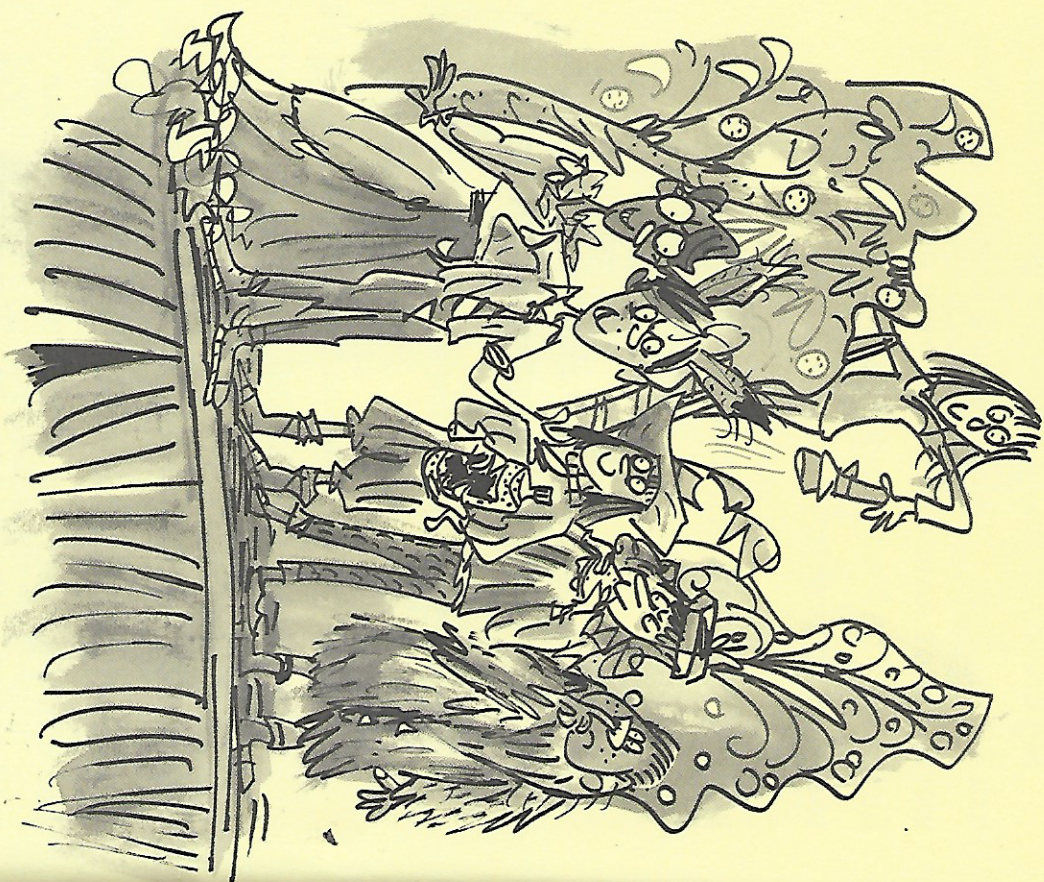
"BLAKE, LOOK AT THIS COOL CUPBOARD," said Leo, hungrily probing his nose for bogies.

I nodded. We had spent weeks getting those lines perfect – Leo wasn't exactly the smartest kid in class. "Perfect! Tomi will slam the door shut when Blake looks inside ..."

"And then I pull off the door handle so he can't get out again!" said Tomi, and sprayed me with a mouthful of eggy sandwich.

I wiped my face. "Brilliant! When no one can find him, I'll offer to step in and take his place at the last second. Then I'll wow the crowds with my amazing performance and make Jessie fall head over heels in love with me!"

The plan was foolproof. Frank and I were going to stay in plain sight so no one suspected



we had anything to do with the way things were going, and Robyn was on lookout to make sure Miss Plant didn't see anything. By the time anyone worked out where Blake was, I'd already be on stage and winning Jessie's heart! I had spent weeks learning Blake's part as well as my own, until I knew it better than the back of my hand. Even better, Miss Plant would have no choice but to cut Bottom's play. That meant Frank wouldn't have to make an idiot of himself either!

"Nick, are you sure you want to do this?" said Frank, giving me a worried look. "If it goes wrong, you could get in serious trouble."

I gulped. I had to admit that I was feeling pretty nervous.

"It can't fail!" I insisted. "We've been practising for weeks now – so long as everything goes the way we planned ..."

"Everyone, quick! Over here, please!"

Miss Plant, the drama teacher, ran back in. She was looking much smarter than normal – her explosion of hair had been brushed, sort of, and she'd even ironed her shirt – and she was trembling with excitement. The entire cast crowded around her.

I turned to my gang. "Quick! Everyone's distracted – go and put the itching powder in Ruby's costume while no one's looking!"

Petra and Taylor ran off, and Tomi and Leo got into position by the cupboard. Frank and I pushed to the front of the crowd to hear what Miss Plant was saying.

"I've just been given some important news!" she said. "We're going to have a very special visitor in the audience tonight – *the Mayor* himself will be watching your performance!"

Everyone gasped. The Mayor had never come to see a play at New Forest Academy before – this really was special!

"That means tonight's performance has to go perfectly!" said Miss Plant. "This is a huge opportunity for me ... I mean, for you! So remember your lines! Pronounce your vowels! Project your voice to the back of the room!"

"I wish someone would project *her* to the back of the room," muttered Robyn.

Miss Plant clapped her hands. "Break a leg, everyone! We've only got fifteen minutes left. Where are my leading couples – Jessie? Ruby? Dom? Blake?"

Jessie and Ruby walked up beside her, but that was it. Miss Plant looked around.

"Dom? Blake? Where's Blake? Has anyone seen Blake?"

I grinned – it looked like Leo and Tomi had already locked Blake in the cupboard, and we hadn't even had to use the itching powder to

distract anyone! The plan had gone even better than expected. I coughed.

"Oh, how strange!" I said loudly. "I think I saw Blake running out the back door saying that he was moving to China or something ..."

"Here, Miss."

Blake walked up, staring down at his phone. Miss Plant groaned.

"Blake! How many times have I told you? Put that phone down and pay attention!"

My mouth fell open – Blake was still here! Right then, Leo and Tomi came racing back.

"We did it! Blake's in the cupboard!" said Leo.

"And we broke off the handle, just like you asked!" said Tomi proudly.

My eyes boggled. "What are you talking about? Blake's right there!"

Leo frowned. "That's Blake? I thought that was Dom."

I gawped. "No! How do you not know who Blake is?! You've been in the same class as him all year!" My face fell. "Wait! If Blake's here, who have you trapped in the cupboard...?"

Miss Plant was spinning around. "Where's Dom? Has anyone seen Dom?! DOM!"

My stomach did a backflip. Leo and Tomi had trapped Dom in the cupboard instead of Blake!

"What do we do?!" I cried. "We can't tell anyone where he is – we'll be found out!"

"Can you take Dom's part?" said Frank. "Do you know his lines?"

I shook my head. "I only learned Blake's!"

Meanwhile, Miss Plant looked like she was having a heart attack. Jessie grabbed her sleeve.

"We can't do the play without Dom," she said. "We'll have to cancel the performance!"

Miss Plant started sweating. She clearly didn't want to lose her chance to impress the Mayor. "N-no – the show must go on! I'll cut Dom's part, and we'll work around him!"

Jessie frowned. "But he's one of the main characters. How can we work around him? The play won't make any sense!"

Miss Plant shushed her. "We'll make it up! I've written *hundreds* of plays in my time – nothing a few clever re-writes won't fix!" She turned to Robyn. "Robyn – take Dom's throne off stage. We don't need it any more – you can

put it in the front row for the Mayor. He'll have the best seat in the house!"

With that she started going over her script with a red pen and raced into her office. I grabbed Robyn.

"What do we do? The whole plan's turned to pool! Blake's still going on stage!"

Robyn shrugged. "A mere hiccup. There's still plenty of time to take Blake out of the picture! We'll just have to find another way to get rid of him ..."

Robyn looked around. She spotted it first – a wooden trapdoor in the middle of the stage.

"There! That trapdoor opens into the basement – if Blake falls down it, he'll be stuck under the stage until the play's over. You can take his place and no one will be able to do anything about it!"

Frank was shocked. "What if he gets hurt?"

Robyn snorted. "It's just a small drop onto a stack of gym mats. He'll have a soft landing and be a little dazed, that's all! I'll go and open the trapdoor, and you find a way to make him walk across the stage. He'll be so busy looking at that stupid phone of his, he won't even notice the trapdoor's there!"

Robyn ran on stage and grabbed the throne like Miss Plant asked, then sneaked off to open the trapdoor. I ran off to get Blake ... but Frank grabbed my arm.

"Nick, no! This is going way too far! You could hurt him!"

I shook my head. "I have to do this, Frank! If I miss this chance, I'll lose the love of my life and we'll both make complete idiots of ourselves. It's just a little fall! What's the worst that could ha—"

“AAAAAAAARGH!”

Everyone swung round. Ruby was running out of the drama studio, scratching at her dress like she was covered in a million fleas.

“MY COSTUME!” she screamed. “WHY IS IT SO ITCHY?!”

I jumped – she really *was* loud. Petra and Taylor were suddenly back, looking pleased with themselves.

“Sorry we took so long!” said Petra. “We didn’t know how much powder to sprinkle in her costume because the instructions were in Turkish ...”

“So we just used the whole bottle,” said Taylor.

I almost choked. “THE WHOLE BOTTLE ...?!”

No wonder Ruby looked like she was on fire – she was covered in enough itching powder to fell an elephant! I watched as she charged across the stage, itching herself into a frenzy ...

Just as the trapdoor opened in front of her.

“NO!” I cried.



But it was too late. Ruby fell through the trapdoor like a sack of spuds. Everyone gasped and ran to the trapdoor. Ruby lay on the mats below, clutching her ankle. Miss Plant suddenly appeared beside us with her hands full of bits of torn script.

"Ruby! What are you doing down there?!" she cried.

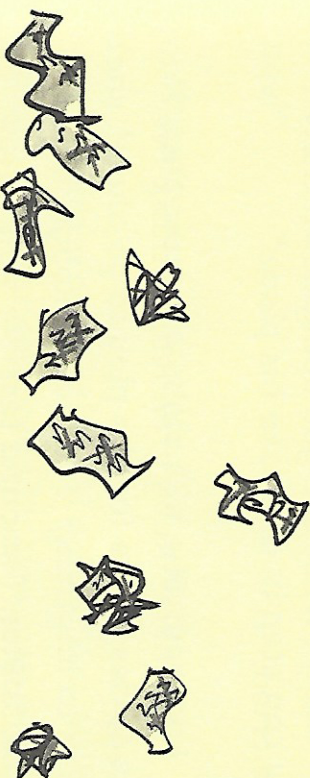
"My ankle!" Ruby groaned. "I think I've twisted it!"

Miss Plant let out a terrible wail. "Now we've lost Hermia too! Why is this happening to me?!" She pulled herself together. "It... it's fine! The show must go on! I'll cut Ruby's scenes and re-write them!"

Jessie looked horrified. "Are you serious? We've lost two of the four main parts! You can't fix that!"

But Miss Plant wasn't listening. "Robyn! Take away Ruby's throne too! Does anyone have a spare red pen?"

She ran off, ripping out pages of script and howling. Jessie stormed off after her just as Robyn came back in, rubbing her hands.



"So! How did it go?"

I grabbed her. "It's even worse than before! Now Ruby's hurt, Blake's *still* going on stage, and we've only got ten minutes left until the play starts!"

Robyn waved me quiet. "Calm down! There's still lots of time to take Blake's place.

I happen to have a genius idea to make him leave the play all by himself, without anyone getting hurt ...”

Frank and I looked blank.

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Robyn. “*Stage fright!* Make Blake too freaked out to go on stage, then you can step in and take his place!”

I gasped. She was right – by now, Miss Plant was so desperate for the play to go ahead, she’d agree to anything! I turned to Robyn, Frank, Petra, Taylor, Tomi and Leo.

“Right – I’m doing this myself. No more mistakes this time! I’m not having *anyone else* mess this up for me!”

I ran over to Blake, who was still staring at his phone. The rest of the cast were waiting beside him, ready for the play to begin and peeking nervously through the curtains.

“Hi, Blake!” I said. “Nice phone!”

He looked up. “Oh. Hi, Neville.”

I smiled. “It’s Nick, actually. So ... excited about the play? It must have been really hard, learning all those lines. Wouldn’t it be sooooo embarrassing to forget them when you’re on stage?”

Blake looked confused. “Er ... sure.”

“It happens all the time!” I said. “You walk on stage, those bright lights hit you, you see all those hundreds of faces, and BAM! Your mind goes blank! That would be *terrible*, wouldn’t it, Blake?”

Blake didn’t look frightened – he didn’t even look bothered. The other kids seemed far more worried than he did.

"You ... you don't think that's going to happen tonight, do you?" said Claire, the girl who was playing Puck.

"Oh, definitely!" I said. "After all, there are HUNDREDS of parents watching – as well as all the kids and teachers. And don't forget the Mayor! THE MAYOR!! Think of that, Blake – forgetting your lines in front of the Mayor! How bad would that be?"

Blake just shrugged. Why did he have to be so cool?! I gritted my teeth – I had to frighten him!

"Let's face it, we all know this play's going to be a disaster!" I said. "We've already lost two lead characters and no one knows what's happening. We're all going to be the laughing stock of the whole school! Everyone's going to point at us and say how stupid we are ..."

I was cut off by the sound of crying around me – lots of crying. I gasped. The rest of the

cast were sweating and shaking with fear. Some were even racing to the toilet.

"Mummy! Help!"

"I ... I don't feel so good ..."

"I don't want to go on stage!"



My face fell. I'd managed to give the entire cast stage fright, *except* Blake! Miss Plant ran up, with Jessie close behind. They looked at the crowds of sobbing, fainting, puking children, and their faces turned white.

"It's a stage-fright epidemic!" cried Jessie.

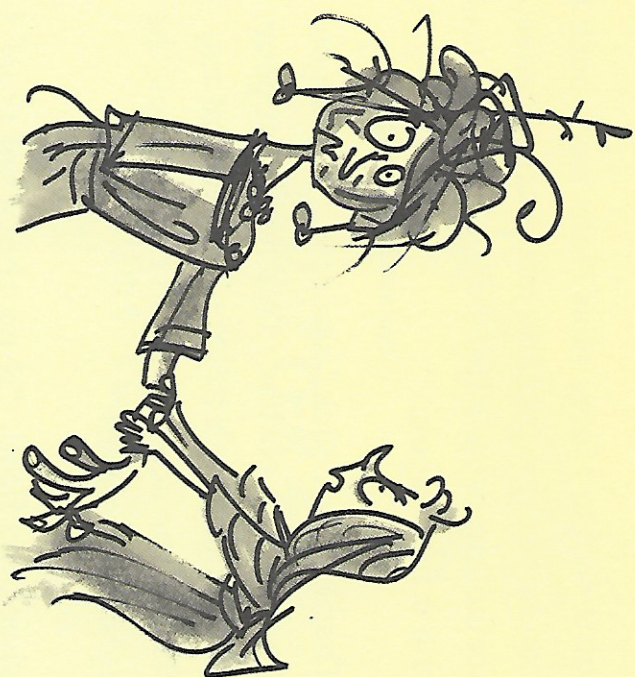
"This is the final straw – we have to cancel the play!"

Miss Plant's left eyelid twitched. By now her hair was falling out in tufts and her face was covered in streaks of red pen. She was a woman on the edge.

"No – the show must go on! I promised the Mayor a play, and I'm giving him one even if it kills me!"

Jessie finally lost her temper. She grabbed Miss Plant and shook her.

"The show *can't* go on! We've lost the entire cast!"



Miss Plant looked around with desperation – and saw me and the rest of my crew. She pointed at us and gave an enormous smile.

"No, we haven't!" she said. "Look! We still have Bottom and the rest of the rubbish actors. We'll just do their scene. Bottom will be the star of the show!"

I gasped. "What? No...!"

But it was too late. Miss Plant went back to work on her script, ripping out entire scenes and scribbling in new lines with red pen. Jessie shot me a filthy look.

"Thanks a lot, Rick," she said. "I saw you talking to Robyn earlier. This has been your plan all along, hasn't it? You've wrecked my last play at the school so you can take all the limelight for yourself!"

I shook my head. "N-no, that's not true! I never ..."

But Jessie wasn't listening to me. She took Blake's hand. "Come on, Blake. Let's go."

Blake looked up from his phone. "Huh? Oh yeah, cool. Bye, Neil."

I watched the love of my life walk off, hand in hand with Blake. My heart sank.

"It ... it's Nick," I whispered.