

20. The Perfect Parents

Call Me Graham was renowned for being a soft touch and Elliot had always managed to talk himself out of serious punishment. But this time, Mr Boil stayed too and no amount of sob stories was going to help.

‘Elliot, I’m very sorry to hear that your great-aunt has died. Again,’ said Call Me Graham, nervously flicking his fringe. ‘But Mr Boil is right, this time you have gone too far. You will have to be disciplined.’

‘Expelled!’ cried Boil triumphantly.

‘Oh, r-really?’ stammered Graham, turning to look at Mr Boil. ‘I was thinking more along the lines of a stern letter home. Maybe. If that’s OK?’

‘The boy is a menace,’ said Boil, not taking his piggy eyes from Elliot’s angry face. ‘And the girl has "Trouble" written through her like a stick of rock.’

‘I can assure you that my physical composition has nothing to do with rock,’ said Virgo disdainfully. ‘I am a carbon-based entity who—’

‘You see!’ screamed Boil. ‘I will not see the Brysmore name dragged into the dirt. You’re both expelled!’

‘But that’s ridiculous!’ cried Virgo, nudging a belligerent Elliot into defending himself. ‘It wasn’t even a real exam.’

‘Not another word!’ yelled Boil. ‘The headmaster’s decision is final!’

‘Er – I haven’t actually made a decision,’ Call Me Graham piped up.

‘Yes, you have. And an excellent one it is too,’ said Boil, slamming his hand on Call Me Graham’s shoulder in approval.

‘Right. Oh. Well, then. I’ll need to see your parents,’ said the head, and Boil gave an enthusiastic wobble.

Elliot’s blood froze. This was exactly what he’d been trying to avoid. There was no way Mum could come to the school. If Call Me Graham found out about Elliot’s home life, the head would have to tell the authorities, then all the months he’d spent trying to keep Mum safe would have been in vain. He looked desperately at Virgo.

‘Why. Don’t. You. Call. My. Parents?’ said Virgo loudly, with spectacularly bad acting skills.

Of course. The Gods. Elliot asked permission to telephone Home Farm from the school office.

‘Helloooo,’ Aphrodite breathed down the line after a few rings.

‘It’s me,’ he whispered furiously. ‘We’re in trouble.’

‘Thanatos?’ gasped Aphrodite.

‘No. School,’ said Elliot, ‘We need some parents, quick.’

‘Hang in there, sweetie,’ said Aphrodite, instantly catching his drift. ‘Two prize parentals coming up.’

‘Thanks, Aphrodite,’ he said, hurrying back to Call Me Graham’s office before Virgo’s mouth could get them into any more trouble.

Ten minutes later, the screech of Aphrodite’s car tyres broke the tense silence in the headmaster’s office. There was a thundering knock on the door and Mr Boil sprang to answer it, clearly delighted to have a ringside seat at Elliot’s expulsion.

‘Hi,’ boomed a vast man in an American accent, grabbing Boil’s hand in a handshake so violent it made him wobble like a jelly. If the huge, muscular body and cropped hair were unfamiliar to Elliot, the orange Bermuda shorts and red shirt were not. He tried not to laugh at Zeus’s disguise. ‘I’m Brad. And this little cutie is my wife, er . . .’

‘Bridget,’ purred Aphrodite, extending her lovely hand towards Boil’s sweaty paw, just giving him time to adjust the glasses that Zeus-Brad’s shaking had dislodged.

‘You must be Mr Boil. I’d know that handsome face anywhere from Elliot’s description.’

Aphrodite shot the youngsters a shifty wink as she walked towards them.

‘Now what have you two scamps been up to?’ she said, wagging a finger at Elliot and Virgo as she perched on the edge of the headmaster’s desk. ‘You know how seriously I take your education.’

‘Welcome to Brysmore School,’ said Graham. ‘I’m Mr Sopweed. But please, call me Graham. . .’

Call Me Graham came out from behind the desk to shake hands, allowing Boil to breeze past him and sit in his chair, leaving the headmaster looking rather lost in the middle of his own office.

‘So,’ murmured Call Me Graham as he took a seat on a footstool to one side, ‘I’m afraid the children have disrupted a school examination.’

‘And been insolent to a teacher! And it would take me all day to list your nephew’s crimes!’ roared Boil.

‘I’d happily spend all day with you, Mr Boil. All night too, if necessary,’ said Aphrodite breathily, leaning so far over the desk that Boil spat out the mouthful of the tea he’d just slurped.

‘Now, kids,’ said Zeus-Brad, manoeuvring his huge frame behind Mr Boil at the desk. ‘Sounds like you owe Mr Wart here an apology.’

‘It’s Boil,’ shouted Boil, tempering his volume when he considered the size of the man behind him. ‘And an apology won’t come close. What little I’ve seen of your daughter doesn’t impress me, but Elliot Hooper is a disgrace to the Brysmore name and must be expelled!’

‘Oh, come on now, Graham,’ boomed Zeus-Brad sternly, moving to the headmaster and bringing a hand the weight of a bowling bowl crashing down on his weedy shoulder. ‘I’m sure we can work this out. They’re just a couple of excited kids.’

‘I love the way your chins wobble,’ said Aphrodite to Boil, perching on the desk so that her lovely legs were right in front of Boil’s third chin. ‘And the way the spit glistens on your lips is just heavenly. But expelled – that’s so, so final. Is there any way I could persuade you to give our little Elly one more chance?’

‘Absolutely not,’ gasped Boil, not taking his eyes from Aphrodite’s long legs. ‘He’s had too many chances.’

'Aw, you seem like a reasonable guy,' said Zeus-Brad, squeezing his huge hand on Call Me Graham's shoulder, releasing a pained whimper from the headmaster.

'Let's not be hasty.'

'Please,' implored Aphrodite, puffing her lips into an irresistible pout.

'Well – I – the Brysmore rules state—' spluttered Call Me Graham, earning him another painful squeeze from the hulk of a man behind him.

'Pretty please,' said Aphrodite, batting her luscious eyelashes.

'I s-s-suppose Mr Boil here might have been a little harsh,' he stammered, wiping the sweat from his brow with a frilly handkerchief.

'Wh-WHAT?!' shouted Boil. 'No, headmaster, expulsion is the only possible consequence—'

'I think you'll find that Graham here has spoken,' said Zeus-Brad, striding over to Mr Boil and towering over him. 'Unless there's anything you wanna add?'

'No – no,' whimpered a gibbering Boil. 'But they are both suspended. I don't want to see either of these children until the end-of-term exams next month. And if they get half a mark beneath eighty-five per cent, they'll be out of this school.'

'Oh, thank you,' cried Aphrodite, leaping off the desk and planting a big kiss on Call me Graham's clammy cheek, turning him a shade of pink that put Elliot's blushes to shame. 'You won't regret it. Now come along, you naughty children, let's get you home.'

'Yes. Mummy,' droned Virgo, showing little improvement in her acting ability.

'Yes, Aunty Bridget,' squeaked Elliot, running from the room before exploding with laughter in the corridor.

'Good to meet you, Wart,' boomed Zeus-Brad, his blue eyes as cold as steel. Mr Boil winced in his handshake. 'I'll be keeping my eye on everything, don't you worry.'

'IT'S BOIL!' shouted the incensed history teacher as Zeus slammed the door in his fat face, blocking the hysterical laughter coming from outside.

‘Well, I think I handled that very nicely,’ said Call Me Graham quietly from his footstool. ‘Time for lunch.’

As the head tripped over some fresh air on the way to the canteen, Mr Boil looked out of the window to where the quartet was piling into Aphrodite’s car in giggling fits.

‘You wait, Hooper,’ he muttered under his pungent breath. ‘The last laugh will be mine.’

Zeus, Aphrodite, Elliot and Virgo couldn’t stop giggling all the way home. But when they reached the farm, Athene didn’t see the joke.

‘Suspension is a very serious business,’ she said sternly to the four, who hung their heads before her. ‘Think of all the school they’ll miss. Why did you give Elliot that pearl?’

‘Oh, be quiet,’ pouted Aphrodite guiltily. ‘I was only trying to help Elly rub that pig-faced buffoon’s nose in it. Besides, this suspension is just what we need – it’s too dangerous letting them out of the house until we know where Thanatos and Hypnos are. They’re safer here and you know it.’

‘Let’s talk in the shed,’ said Athene, looking over at Josie, who was happily knitting a colourful scarf in the kitchen.

From outside, there was nothing apart from the fixed roof to show that Demeter, Hestia and their teams of penates had touched the shed at all. But as Athene swung the door open, it took Elliot a moment to comprehend what he saw. His rundown old cowshed had turned into a marble-floored palace, complete with fountain, statues and rows of olive trees growing inside the barn. On an upper level were the Olympians’ opulent sleeping quarters, complete with a library for Athene.

Although the outside appeared no larger, the inside of the shed now seemed vast, not least because of the two lush meadows growing on either side. To the left was Pegasus’s residence, a hay-lined golden stable with a mineral-water fountain, where the splendid horse reclined on a velvet bed reading *Black Beauty*. To the right was Bessie’s new home, with a luxurious hay-bed and giant water feeder set in the softest grass. Elliot’s pet cow was clearly delighted with her new pad – although perhaps less pleased with the pink frilly knickers Aphrodite had put over her udders – and was happily leaping around thanks to a new golden calliper on her lame leg.

Elliot could hear the chink of hammer on iron in Hephaestus's new forge underneath the shed and despite the cold, grey weather, inside the barn it felt warm and sunny. 'Hope you don't mind the alterations,' said Zeus, struggling to manoeuvre his portly frame on to a comfy chair. 'Hestia tends to go a bit overboard. If there's anything you don't like, pipe up.'

'It's awesome,' gasped Elliot. 'Thanks.'

'Hephy, how's the fence coming along?' shouted Zeus.

'All done,' said Hephaestus, lumbering into the shed. 'Not bad, if I say so meself. Which I'll have to. It's a smart fence, so it knows who you are. The gate'll only open automatically for Elliot's family and ours. Everyone else needs our permission. Or they're in for a surprise . . .'

'Good show, old boy!' grinned Zeus, giving Hephaestus a back slap that could have dislodged a lung.

'But you 'ave to tell it to shut behind you,' warned Hephaestus. 'Zodiac Council won't give me planning permission any more for self-closing gates in case anyone gets squashed. 'Elth and safety gone mad, if you ask me. It was only the one time ...'

'Capital!' boomed Zeus. 'Now has anyone heard from Herm—'

An explosion of feathers cut Zeus short as Hermes blasted into the shed and landed in the marble fountain, knocking it sideways.

'Maaaaaaaate! Hypnos is coming! Not even joking!' the bedraggled messenger yelled, spitting out a mouthful of water. He lifted his panting, soaking head and saw Elliot, alive and well.

'Boom!' he cheered as he propelled himself towards him. Elliot tried to retreat from the approaching hug, but within seconds, he and Hermes were one big, wet heap.

'Nice one!' Hermes laughed. 'You're alive! You're – mate – absolutely soaking. Anyone got a towel?'

As soon as Hermes was refreshed by a takeaway nectarchino from Café Hero, the six immortals and Elliot crowded around Hermes's iGod.

‘So Hypnos said he’s going to steal the crown from the Queen’s home this week, but why and when?’ said Hermes, tapping away on his device. ‘Blah, blah, blah – ah, here we go – "The Imperial State Crown is worn by Her Majesty the Queen at the State Opening of Parliament. This ceremonial occasion usually takes place in the summer months, but this year will be on the eighteenth of November, due to the early general election." Boom.’

‘That’s this Thursday!’ said Athene.

‘What is this "general election"?’ asked Virgo.

‘It’s how we decide who runs the country,’ explained Elliot. ‘Every five years there’s a big vote.’

‘Every five years!’ snorted Virgo. ‘What a ridiculous system! What if you don’t like the people you chose? What if they prove terrible at the job?’

‘Then you’re stuck with them,’ said Elliot. ‘Unless you have another election. Or a revolution or something.’

‘That’s just silly,’ scoffed Virgo. ‘On the Zodiac Council, we change leaders every month, so everyone gets a turn. If you don’t like what the last person did, you just change it.’

‘How do you get anything done?’ asked Elliot.

‘Quickly,’ said Virgo.

‘On the morning of the State Opening, the crown is escorted to Buckingham Palace to allow the Queen to become accustomed to its weight,’ read Hermes.

‘So if Hypnos is planning to steal the crown from Buckingham Palace, we need to get to it first,’ said Athene. ‘Which means we need to intercept it at . . .’

‘The Tower of London!’ laughed Elliot. ‘You’re going to steal the Crown Jewels! Epic . . .’

‘Stealing it is going to be harder than my abs,’ said Hermes. ‘Security at the Tower of London is well tight.’

'I should hope so too,' huffed Athene. 'Besides, we can't steal it. Breaking a mortal law is against the Sacred Code.'

'Fat lot of use the code's going to be when Thanatos is pelting the mortals with mountains, genius,' said Aphrodite sarcastically. 'Sorry, Elly, no offence,' she added with a dazzling smile.

'None taken,' mumbled Elliot, immediately bursting into his Aphrodite blush.

'It's a good point,' Zeus conceded and Athene smiled smugly at her sister. 'Hypnos can steal the crown, we can't. But we must get our hands on the Earth Stone first.'

Everyone waited for inspiration. Elliot's mind was whirring. He was good at finding ways around rules. There must be a loophole. He watched as Hephaestus skilfully fixed the broken fountain.

'What if we just swapped the crown?' he said. 'That wouldn't break the Sacred Code. Hephaestus, would you be able to make a replica?'

'I can make a ruddy better one,' snorted Hephaestus, mildly miffed.

'You're welcome to use my jewellery collection,' offered Aphrodite. 'Admirers are always giving me tokens of gratitude . . .'

'For leaving them alone?' murmured Athene.

'But Elliot's right. All we have to do is swap the original for our replica and we've got the Earth Stone. Tomorrow's Tuesday. We only have two days.'

'How will we do it?' asked Elliot.

'We're not doing anything,' said Athene. 'There's absolutely no way you are coming on such a perilous mission.'

'Yes, I am!' said Elliot, looking to Zeus and Aphrodite for support. But for once, all the Gods were in agreement.

'It's too dangerous, Elly,' said Aphrodite, coming over and giving him a squeeze.

'We have to keep you safe.'

‘The girls are right,’ said Zeus. ‘The best thing you can do is take care of yourself, leave the silly stuff to us. Nothing and no one can get past Hephaestus’s new fence. You’ll be safer here.’

‘A mortal simply isn’t equipped for something as risky as this,’ added Virgo condescendingly. ‘Your place is here.’

‘So’s yours,’ said Aphrodite.

‘What?’ cried Virgo. ‘But for the mission to be optimal, surely I’m coming with you?’

‘No, you’re not, old girl,’ said Zeus softly, but firmly. ‘You need to stay here with Elliot. You two are sitting this one out.’

‘Well, that’s not . . . I should . . . you all . . . fine. That’s just fine,’ snapped Virgo as she strode out of the barn.

‘Are you all right, dear boy?’ Zeus asked Elliot with one of his soul-piercing looks.

‘Aphy’s little gizmo must have been quite an ordeal.’

‘I’m fine,’ said Elliot. ‘And thanks for helping out at school. I just don’t want them to-’

‘You don’t have to explain anything,’ said Zeus knowingly. ‘We’re here to help.’

‘Thanks,’ said Elliot quietly, his fears about the farm on the tip of his tongue again.

‘Er . . . Zeus?’ he began.

‘Yes?’ said Zeus gently.

But the words were still unable to find their way to Elliot’s lips.

‘Nothing,’ he said, and he wandered up the path to the farmhouse with the weight of the worlds on his shoulders.

That night, when Elliot was tucking his mum into bed, his brain felt like a beehive. Mum, the farm, the Earth Stone, Patricia Porshley-Plum, school . . . all his worries buzzed around his head, deafening his clarity with their drone.

He felt a soft hand on his cheek.

‘Penny for your thoughts?’ smiled Mum.

‘I’m fine,’ Elliot sighed.

'You sure?' she sang, pulling back the quilt and patting the space next to her invitingly.

Elliot hesitated. Every now and again, Mum had these moments – moments where she seemed just like her old self. The first time it happened, he had let himself hope that she was cured, that her illness had simply gone away, that he had his mum back. Elliot had experienced many new emotions over the past year – grief, fear, rage. But when Mum wandered off that very same night, he learnt that hope could be the cruellest of them all.

'What are the rules of the bed?' she cajoled with a cheeky smirk.

Elliot grinned in surrender as he clambered in next to her.

'No shoes, no lies, no farts,' they recited together.

Mum pulled the quilt over them both and Elliot snuggled into her arms.

'If I don't know, I can't help,' she whispered.

'Do you ever get scared?' Elliot asked eventually.

'Mums are always scared,' she laughed. 'Comes with the job.'

'How do you stop it?'

'You don't. You embrace fear like an old friend.'

'Why?'

'Because if you are afraid, you are alive,' she said, squeezing him tight. 'You make your fears. They don't make you.'

'What are you afraid of?' Elliot asked.

'A single day without you,' said Mum softly, kissing his hair.

They lay in silence for a while. Elliot bathed in the calming peace of his mum's hug as his mind finally quietened. It had been so long since he'd been able to confide in her. Perhaps he was wrong to keep so much from her? Mum was still his mum. She'd know what to do. She always did.

'Mum,' he began quietly. 'There's something I need to tell you.'

'Anything, my darling.'

'It's about that loan . . .' said Elliot, his heart thumping.

'Loan?' laughed Josie. 'I wouldn't take out a loan. Remember what Grandad says – neither a borrower nor a lender be . . .'

'You did,' said Elliot gently, as he felt Josie's arms tense around him, 'to pay for Grandad's funeral.'

'What do you mean?' she said anxiously, her voice trembling as she pulled away from Elliot and ran her hands through her hair. 'Funeral? What are you talking about? Grandad's outside, feeding the chickens, why are you . . . ?'

Elliot climbed silently out of the bed. It was cold outside the covers.

'Shhhh. Don't worry, Mum – my mistake,' he whispered, smoothing the quilt until it looked as though he'd never been there. 'Time to sleep.'

She instantly calmed down and settled back into bed. He kissed her on the forehead and stroked her hair.

'Are you all right, Elly?' she smiled sleepily. 'You look worried. Penny for your thoughts?'

'I'm fine, Mum,' whispered Elliot. Turning away, he switched out the light and wiped his cheek. 'Night night.'