

The Trophy Trap



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The Trophy Trap

Chapter One

“I am the champion! I am the tops! Nobody can beat me!” chanted Abby. She danced down the road holding the silver trophy high in the air. It was as big as her head. And it had *her name* on it.

“*We* are the champions,” said Liam, walking behind her. “Us. Two of us. It was doubles, remember?”

Her older brother was not nearly as excited about the trophy as Abby. He did not dance: he trudged.

“I played the winning shot!” she reminded him.

“And I made eighty per cent of the other winning shots. That means eighty out of a hundred. Four out of five.”

“I know what per cent means! Anyway, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did, and you know it,” growled Liam. “I won four times as many points as you because I’m four times as good.”

“No, you’re not!”

“Yes, I am,” said Liam. “So I should have the trophy. Give it here.”

With three loping strides, he caught her up and tried to wrench the trophy from her grasp.

Abby shrieked like a steam train. She kicked him in the shins and sprinted off with the trophy. Although she was three and a half years younger than Liam and a good deal smaller, she was quicker off the mark. The more Liam grew, the clumsier he seemed to get.

So she reached their house a fraction before he did. She burst through the door, yelling,

“Mum Mum MUM look look LOOK! I won, we won the trophy, isn’t it beautiful?”

She thrust it out to show Mum her name.

“Wow,” said Mum. As Liam came in, Abby hugged the trophy to her chest.

“I want to put it in my room,” said Liam.

Abby shrieked like a steam train again.

“NO!” said Mum, clapping her hands to her ears. “Not in the house.”

“Sorry,” said Abby. “But *why*? Why should Liam have it? I’ve never won a trophy before, and I’m younger than he is. Why can’t I keep it?”

“We can put it in the living room,” said Mum.

“He’ll nick it.”

“She’ll nick it.”

They glared at each other.

“Here,” commanded Mum. She held out her hands. Reluctantly Abby placed the trophy in them.

“I am not having a ping-pong ding-dong in this house,” Mum announced firmly.

“It’s table tennis,” said Liam.

“Whatever.” Mum took off her glasses and peered at the lettering. “That’s very good. Well done to you both. I see Liam’s name is first, so he gets to keep the trophy first.”

“Yes!” Liam punched the air.

Abby was appalled. She opened her mouth to shriek, and then thought better of it. Instead she shouted at the top of her voice.

“That is *so unfair!* That’s just because he’s older! He gets everything first, because he’s older.”

“And better,” said Liam.

“Stop it, Abby,” said Mum. “You are not five. Liam gets to look after the trophy for a week. Then you get it for a week.”

“But that’s *too late!*” yelled Abby.

“Too late for what?”

“The prize assembly in school! It’s on Friday!”

“Tough,” said Liam.

Mum took her glasses off again and rubbed her eyes. She looked tired. “Abby, they have a prize assembly every month. You can take the trophy in when it’s your turn to look after it. Or if you’re very nice to your brother, he might let you have it this Friday.”

“No chance,” said Liam. “She kicked me.”

Abby turned round and kicked him again. Mum handed the trophy to him over Abby’s head. Liam grabbed it and ran upstairs.

“Abby, you are grounded for kicking,” Mum said sternly.

“I hate Liam.”

“No, you don’t. You’re just not good at sharing.”

Abby did not attempt to answer this. She did not want to think about it. Instead she said, “Can I be grounded in the garage?”

Mum sighed. “If you must. Anywhere that Liam isn’t.”

“Excellent!” Abby ran off to the garage, leaving Mum shaking her head.

There was no car in the garage. It was not actually big enough for a car: as Mum said, once you'd driven in, you would have no room to open the car doors and would therefore be trapped inside for ever. Abby had declared that having a car with a sun-roof, or possibly a built-in blowtorch, would solve this problem. Having any sort of car would be nice, said Mum.

Instead of car, the garage was full of ping-pong table. You had to climb over or under it to get to the other end. Over was easier, because under it were toolboxes and paint tins. However, this did mean that there was a long crack in the table, as well as several dents and scratches.

Abby crawled over the table and set up her smash-board at the far end. This was a sheet of hardboard which Mum had cut for her so that she could practise against herself.

Then she crawled around the floor to collect the scattered ping-pong balls. When she had twenty-three, she began to practise her smashes. She was already pretty good at smashes and really should, she knew, be trying to master topspin: but she felt more like smashes.

Today the smash-board was Liam. He was hopeless. Lame. He returned her smashes with limping shots that barely made it back across the table. She smashed again and wiped him out.

After ten minutes of this she felt better. She felt calm enough to sit on the table cross-legged and contemplate revenge.

She would get that trophy. Easy. Liam's bedroom door had no lock.

No, not so easy. She couldn't just walk in and take the trophy: Liam would complain to Mum, who would make her give it straight back.

Abby let out a deep sigh of longing. She wanted to see that trophy. To hold it. To read again those magical words engraved on the silver surface: *Winners*. And her name.

It occurred to her that Liam might well hide it. But if she found out where it was, she could sneak it out of the house on Friday morning and take it into school for prize assembly. Liam would be as mad as a wasp in a bottle, but so what?

"Easy peasy," said Abby. "Lemon squeezy. Nothing is too hard for me. I am ingenious. Bring on the ping-pong ding-dong. *I want that trophy* – and I'm going to get it."

Chapter Two

Abby told everybody at school about winning the trophy. She wasn't sure if they were all that interested, but it was important. They needed to know.

Especially Maya, who went horse-riding and was inclined to be snooty about it. She was always going up in prize assembly to be given rosettes that she had won.

"It's only ping-pong," Maya said.

"Table tennis," corrected Abby. "It's an Olympic sport."

Maya rolled her eyes in an incredibly annoying way. "It's not a sport at all, if you ask me," she said.

"I don't ask you," said Abby.

"How many people were in the competition? One?"

Abby thought about kicking her. "Loads," she said. "It was a proper tournament at the sports centre. We had to play six matches."

"Who's *we*?"

"My brother Liam helped me."

Maya looked down her nose. "My brother Bradley plays football with your brother. He says he's got two left feet."

Abby was startled. "Well, he's good at table tennis."

"Ping-pong," corrected Maya. "I bet it's not a real trophy. I bet it's a little pimple, just like you."

"I am not! And it's *this* big!" Abby cried. "You'll see, on Friday. I'm going to bring it in for prize assembly."

Maya shrugged and strolled away.

"She didn't have a smart answer for *that*!" said Abby with satisfaction to her friend Kate.

Kate was quiet, as always. Miss Lewis said she didn't have much choice when Abby was around. Now Kate said, "Is it a real trophy?"

"Of course it is! I'll show you it on Friday," Abby assured her.

If she told enough people, she reckoned it would have to happen. She could say to Mum, "I've told *everybody* I'm going up in assembly on Friday. So I've *got* to have the trophy now!" And Mum would be forced to agree.

That evening, over tea, she said, "I've told *everybody* I'm going up in assembly on Friday. So I've *got* to have the trophy now!"

“Then you’d better untell them,” said Mum. “And tell them again next month. Don’t you dare scream at the tea-table.”

Abby managed to restrain herself. She wanted to finish her pizza. But it turned to cardboard and old socks in her mouth as she thought of how Maya would sneer on Friday, if she arrived at school with no trophy.

She turned to Liam. “Dear dear lovely favourite brother, I’m ever so sorry I kicked you, and I’ll share my pocket money with you and I promise not to kick you any more for, ooh, three weeks, if you’ll only—”

“No,” said Liam.

“But you don’t—”

“Yes, I do,” said Liam, “and the answer is No.”

“I only want it two days early!”

“No, NO, **NO**. It’s mine for a week. That’s not much to ask.” He pushed his chair back.

“Neither is borrowing it for one measly morning!” yelled Abby after him. But Liam had grabbed his last slice of pizza and marched out.

Abby turned to her mother. “Mu-um!” she wailed.

Mum helped herself calmly to more salad. “You’re reaping what you’ve sown, Abby. And you have sown an awful lot of kicks. It’s entirely up to Liam what he does with the trophy.”

Abby smouldered. It was absolutely, totally not fair. But it was also obvious that Mum and Liam had no intention of being fair. It was up to her to impose fairness.

So after tea she skulked in her bedroom, waiting for the right moment. She heard Liam go downstairs to use Mum’s computer; he didn’t yet have his own.

As soon as the coast was clear, Abby scuttled out of her room. Liam’s door was slightly ajar.

She inspected it carefully. Yep, sure enough, he’d done exactly what she would do herself. The door was booby-trapped with a lunchbox balanced on top of it.

Abby fetched the laundry basket from the bathroom and stood on top of it. She held the lunchbox steady while she opened the door wide enough to lift it down.

It was full of forks. “Nice one,” she muttered. Prickly and clattery at the same time. She tossed them in the now somewhat squashed laundry basket and returned it to the bathroom.

Tiptoeing back to Liam's room, she saw the trophy straight away. It had pride of place on the shelf above his bed. On the point of running over to it, Abby stopped. *This is too easy*, she thought. *What would I do next?*

She looked down.

In the middle of the floor there was a multicoloured rug. All over the rug, well-camouflaged, were marbles. One more step and she'd have gone flying.

She picked a way around them carefully. She knelt on Liam's bed, reached up for the trophy: seized it, hugged it, screamed.

Mum came bounding up the stairs and burst into the room.

"What have you done? Have you hurt yourself?"

Numbly, Abby held out the trophy. It slid from her hands. Mum caught it deftly before it hit the floor. "Oh," she said.

Abby couldn't speak properly. The words lurched and staggered out.

"Look what, look what he's d-done to my tr-trophy! He's slimed it! He's *ruined* it!"

Mum wiped a cautious finger round the trophy. It was slick with something greasy and transparent. She sniffed.

"Vaseline," she said. "*Liam?*"

He was behind her, grinning widely. "Gotcher," he told Abby.

Mum held it out at arm's length. "Wash this. Now."

"She shouldn't have been in my room," said Liam, taking the greased trophy. "Little sneak. Little thief. Little sneak-thief."

"Half of it is mine!" yelled Abby.

"I don't know what to do with you," said Mum.

"Why me? *I* didn't slime the trophy. You never say *I don't know what to do with Liam!*" shouted Abby.

"Do not go in his room," commanded Mum. "And do not touch that trophy. You can have it in a week."

"Six days," corrected Abby. "Am I grounded?"

"Why can't the pair of you just get on?" asked Mum despairingly. "You should be a team. You won a tournament together, for goodness sake." She ran her hands through her hair.

"He's a drongo," Abby said.

"She's a muppet," yelled Liam from the bathroom.

Mum took her hands from her head and looked at them. "Oh, good grief. Now I'll have to wash my hair."

"You can't," called Liam. "The trophy's in the shower."

“Can I be grounded in the garage?” demanded Abby.

Mum closed her eyes. “I think you’d better.”

Abby raced down to the garage. Her smash-board was still in place, and she needed it badly.

“That trophy’s *mine*,” she panted as she smashed a ball. “It’s *mine*, you drongo muppet. You’re a loser. You’re a pimple. You’ve got two left feet. It’s *mine, mine, mine.*”

Chapter Three

Next morning, when Liam was downstairs eating breakfast, Abby peered into his room. The trophy had vanished from the shelf.

Well, of course, she told herself. *I’d hide it too.*

She smiled evilly and crept away again. Liam had football practice after school. She would be home before him, with at least an hour to search the house and find that trophy.

During the day at school, she began to make a list of all the places it could be. In the wardrobe, or on top of it. Under the bed. Behind the curtain.

But these were all obvious places. Liam was better than that...

“Abby? Just what are you doing?”

Miss Lewis stood over her table. Abby closed her project book.

Miss Lewis picked her book up and reopened it. “This is not a diagram of a river,” she said.

“No. It’s a map of my house.”

“Does your house suffer from erosion of its banks, Abby? Does it meander? Does it have an ox-bow lake?”

“No,” said Abby. “It has about a hundred hiding places for a trophy. You see, my brother—”

“I don’t need to know about your brother, Abby.” With one swift, practised movement, Miss Lewis ripped the page out of her book. “Now,” she said.

“Start again on the clean page. With a river.”

Abby started again. Although it wasn't yet half-term, her project book was already considerably thinner than Kate's. Kate had never had a page ripped out.

"Copy mine," Kate whispered.

"Thanks," said Abby. She sketched the river. Along its meandering and eroded banks, she wrote: *Airing cupboard. Toilet cistern. Under the bath??*

"Does the side of your bath come unscrewed?" she asked Kate.

"What?"

"The wooden bit."

Kate looked bewildered. "I don't have a wooden bit."

"Never mind." Abby added to the river, *Behind the water tank!!*

Maya put her hand up. "Miss Lewis?" she called. "Miss?"

"Don't bother," Abby said. "I can tear it out myself."

*

By the time she got home from school, her mental list was long and comprehensive. She began to work her way through it.

She searched the obvious places first, more to get them out of the way than from any real hope of finding the trophy there.

If she had been double-guessing Liam, he had also been double-guessing *her*. A note inside his wardrobe said HA HA. Under the bed, two pairs of ancient football boots were labelled WERE YOU LOOKING FOR THESE?

Behind the curtains was practically a letter. OH, COME ON. TRY HARDER! DID YOU REALLY THINK I'D HIDE IT HERE?

"Nope," said Abby, and set off to tackle the bathroom.

"What are you doing in there?" called Mum through the locked door after a while.

"Cleaning," Abby called back.

"You're *what*? Let me in," said Mum.

"In a minute," said Abby. The side of the bath was almost unscrewed. Sure enough, it did come off, and there was quite a useful hiding space in there, although it did not currently hold a trophy or indeed anything other than an impressive amount of fluff.

She opened the door and gave the screwdriver to Mum.

"What the..."

"It won't screw on again," said Abby. "You'd better do it." She ran downstairs to scour the living-room.

She looked in the cupboards, the dresser, behind the sofa and under the desk. The notes said HO HO, OH NO, NOT EVEN WARM and YOU SHOULD BE SO LUCKY, LITTLE STICKYBEAK. The trophy was not there.

Abby sat back on her heels, ticking off her mental list. Then she went into the kitchen. By the time Mum came downstairs, she had already checked the breadbin, the freezer, the vegetable rack and the pan shelf, and was burrowing in the corner cupboard.

“What are you doing?” demanded Mum. “And why is the fridge open? And what are all these notes in Liam’s hand-writing?”

“I’m just looking for something.”

Mum read a note. “GUESS WHAT ISN’T HERE. What isn’t here, Abby?”

“Nothing,” said Abby, throwing empty jam jars out of the corner cupboard in order to search behind them. They rolled around the floor.

“Put those back,” said Mum. “It’s that trophy, isn’t it? Liam’s hidden it. And I don’t blame him. Come out of there.”

Abby pulled her head out of the cupboard and glared at Mum. “It’s my trophy as much as his! He has no right to hide it from me! I should be allowed to look at it!”

“Next week.”

“Five days,” said Abby. “That’s still too late. Have *you* got it? I bet he’s given it to you to look after! Has he, Mum? Has he?”

“He has not. Stop digging in my kitchen. Put those things away. And I do not want to find any more cutlery in the laundry basket.”

Abby threw the jam jars back into the cupboard with a reckless clatter, and headed for the stairs.

“And you may not go in my bedroom!” shouted Mum after her.

“All right,” said Abby. *Aha! I bet it’s there, she thought. Otherwise she wouldn’t forbid me.*

So after five minutes of banging around in her own room, just to make it clear to Mum exactly where she was, she glided silently across the corridor into her mother’s bedroom. She checked under the bed and then began to riffle through Mum’s clothes.

It seemed like years since she had played in here. She remembered how Mum used to let her empty out her jewellery box and try her dresses on.

Abby paused in her ransacking as an unexpected warm waft of nostalgia wrapped itself around her like a hug. Life had been so much simpler back then,

when she was five. Liam had been eight: younger than she was now. He had still been human.

“I said, you may not go in my bedroom!”

“Nearly finished,” Abby said.

“OUT! OUT! OUT!”

“I’m not a cat,” said Abby. “You don’t need to shoo me.”

“I am very annoyed!”

“Garage?” said Abby hopefully.

“No!”

“But I haven’t searched in there yet.”

“I said *No!* Go to your room.”

Abby shrugged, meaning, *that’s not a proper punishment.*

But it was. She scuffed her feet as she mooched into her bedroom.

Her room was boring. It was full of old toys that she never played with but wouldn’t let her mother throw away. Stuffed bunnies and teddies; and hundreds of craft kits that Mum had bought her in vain attempts to get her to sit still. It had never worked. Abby didn’t like embroidery. What she really wanted was an archery range, and that wouldn’t fit in a bedroom.

She wrote out her list again, on the bedroom wall. Mum refused to redecorate her room until she stopped writing on the wall. Abby pointed out that this would never give her any incentive to stop writing on the wall. So? said Mum.

So. Now she wrote the list underneath the windowsill and crossed out every hiding place she had already checked, which was most of them.

“Eighty per cent,” she muttered. “But Liam isn’t four times better than me at hiding stuff. He isn’t as ingenious. I *must* be able to work out where he’s put that trophy.”

She was so frustrated that she banged her head against the wall.

“Ow,” she said, and read the list again.

She hadn’t checked the garden or the garage. He could have buried it in the compost bin. Abby shuddered. The compost bin was full of thin red worms and fat yellow slugs, which Liam hated almost as much as she did. So that might rule it out.

And the garden only had space for a tiny flowerbed. She didn’t think Liam would risk Mum’s anger by digging it up.

The garage was a possibility, although Abby spent so much time in there hunting for ping-pong balls that she knew all the hiding places. All the same, she would search it as soon as she could get herself grounded in there again.

But if the trophy wasn't there, then she was stuck.

"NO!" declared Abby. "I am not stuck yet. I can't be stuck. I am the champion of ingenious solutions! And that trophy's mine! Come on, mighty brain. Where is it? What would Liam do?"

She pulled all her bedclothes off the bed into a heap, fell on top of them and tried to throw her pillow up high enough to hit the lightshade while she thought herself inside her brother's head.

She'd looked in all the obvious places.

She'd looked in all the unobvious places.

She was at a dead end. Where could that trophy be? A dreadful thought struck her. Maybe Liam had given it to Jack or Tom or one of his other friends to look after.

Abby hurled the pillow up again, furiously, and this time it hit the lightshade. The lightshade slithered off the bulb and plummeted into her old toybox with a sound of splintering plastic.

"Bother it," said Abby. The lightshade was only a cheap one. But it was the third time in two months. That was why the lightshade was only a cheap one. Mum said she was like a cross between a moth and a cannonball, with her fatal attraction for lights. Fatal to the lights, she meant. Mum still hadn't forgiven her for trying to hang the Christmas tree lights on next door's dog. The dog had survived, but the lights had not.

So Abby decided it might be prudent to try and mend the lightshade. It was only in four pieces, after all. She had glue somewhere in her toybox, in the underused craft kits.

She rummaged, throwing out embroidery sets, scraper boards, modelling clay and tangles of beads and felt and string. Somewhere under here should be a model aeroplane kit, requiring too much concentration to put together and therefore with its tube of glue intact.

Now she was down to the stuffed toy layer. A battered bunny, a squashed snake, a crushed koala... and something wrapped in her old baby blanket.

She unwrapped the blanket, with its familiar muggy smell. Inside it was a new smell: Vaseline, shampoo and steel.

The trophy.

Chapter Four

Abby stopped breathing. She picked it up. It was still slightly slick with grease. She didn't care.

"My trophy my trophy my trophy!" she murmured and hugged it to her chest. She was blissful. Liam had not expected her to hunt in her own bedroom, in her own toybox, amongst her most familiar things.

And he was right. It would never have occurred to her. She would never have found it if it hadn't been for the broken light shade and her need for glue.

"Oh, I love you," announced Abby to the trophy. Liam must have hidden it while she was in the garage. She looked around, wondering where she could hide it, in turn, from him.

"No, stop!" she commanded herself. "*Think.*"

She thought. At the moment she had the advantage. She knew where the trophy was, and Liam did not know she knew. If she hid it somewhere else now, he would go squealing to Mum, Mum would get all stern and Abby would have to hand it back again.

So she needed to pretend she didn't know it was here.

Abby frowned, trying to puzzle it out. If she just left the trophy in her toybox, Liam might remove it before Friday morning. She couldn't be in her room to guard it all the time. She had to use the bathroom, eat, and watch TV.

She wanted to take the trophy, but she needed to leave it where it was. She couldn't do both.

Abby stared at her toybox. "Oh, yes, I can," she said.

She could make a dummy trophy, wrap it in the blanket, and put it in the toybox. If Liam checked, he would feel it through the blanket. He wouldn't bother unloading the whole box. It would take too long. Meanwhile the real trophy would be safely hidden somewhere else.

So all she needed to do was make something that felt just the same.

Abby ran downstairs and crept into the kitchen. She borrowed the small mixing bowl, a plate, and on reflection, the large mixing bowl as well. Liam came in through the back door in his football kit. He looked muddy and bad-tempered.

He looked at the bowls. "What are you doing with those?"

"Just an experiment. Don't tell Mum. I'm grounded in my bedroom."

Liam shrugged. He threw his boot bag in the corner, and reached for a banana out of the fruit bowl. Abby thought he looked a little worried at the mention of her bedroom.

“It’s to do with school,” she said. “Miss Lewis wants us to try dissolving things.”

“I wish you’d dissolve,” said Liam, squirting salad cream on his banana. But his worried expression stayed. Abby slid out again before Mum came in.

“Liam?” she heard Mum say. “Was Abby in here? She’s grounded. Don’t encourage her. And put that kit in the washing machine now, before you do anything else.”

Liam grunted.

“*Don’t*,” said Mum. “You’re not fifteen. And don’t forget your boots.” Liam always forgot his football boots, or rather, he ignored them. They festered in his boot bag from week to week. Mum refused to touch them, on principle.

Safe in her bedroom, Abby cut out two cardboard handles from her scraper-board kit and taped them to the small mixing bowl. She glued the plate to the bottom of the bowl and then taped it too for good measure. Now she had an approximate trophy shape.

She made a quick visit to the bathroom to fill the big mixing bowl with water. Then she fished out one of the plaster-casting kits from her toybox, read the first line of the instructions and emptied half the bag of plaster powder into the bowl.

It was as fine and pale as flour, but interestingly gungy once she mixed it into the water with her fingers. She plastered the small bowl, its scraper-board handles and its plate base; and also, less intentionally, her jeans, her towel and the carpet.

The plaster of Paris began to set quite fast, within ten minutes or so. Abby stood the fake trophy upright, proud of her work. While it continued setting, she drew a picture on the wall over the bed.

It showed her being presented with the trophy at the prize assembly. Miss Hill, the Headmistress, had a speech bubble coming from her mouth that said:

“Well, Abby, I am very impressed. I did not know that you were so talented.”

Abby drew the speech bubble coming from her own mouth and chewed her pencil, trying to think of a response that was both dignified and modest. In the end she wrote:

“I am very proud to be a champion at table tennis. Horse riding is not the same at all, as the horse does all the work.”

Immediately she imagined Liam with *his* speech bubble saying, “And I did eighty per cent of the work for you.”

“No you didn’t,” said Abby. She dropped the pencil and clambered off the bed. There were greyish smears of plaster on the quilt now, but that would wash, along with the pillowcase. She quite admired the plaster on her jeans: it made her look like a workman. And it could probably be chiselled off the carpet once it was fully dry.

Now she needed a hiding place for the real trophy. It didn’t need to be an ingenious hiding-place, because Liam wasn’t going to go looking for it. He would think it was still in the toybox.

So she just needed to put it somewhere out of sight. She wrapped it in two carrier bags and hid it in her wardrobe. That was good enough.

And the fake trophy, once it was fully set, was also good enough. When it was wrapped in the blanket, the lumpy bits were hardly noticeable at all. You could certainly tell it was a round cup sort of thing with two handles and a base.

She buried it carefully in the toybox and piled the kits on top of it until it looked about right.

Satisfied with her evening’s work, she went down to tea.

Liam eyed her plastered jeans.

“It didn’t dissolve, then,” he said.

“Some of it did.” She smiled at him, quite good-tempered now that she possessed the trophy. He didn’t smile back. He looked fed up.

“What didn’t dissolve?” asked Mum.

“Just stuff for school.” Abby hoped Mum would not need the large mixing bowl for a while, since it now appeared to be concreted. She had stowed it under her bed.

Remembering that she was supposed to hate Liam, she switched her smile to a scowl.

“Are you going to lend me the trophy for Friday? I haven’t kicked you all week.”

“No,” said Liam roughly.

“I only need it for one morning!”

“Stop nagging me. I need it too.”

“No you don’t!” cried Abby, astonished. “What do you need it for? You’re just being mean. You’re selfish. You just want all the glory for yourself.” She was only saying it for form’s sake: but Liam slammed down his fork into his pasta.

“I can’t stand this,” he said. “Stop going on about that trophy. It’s *mine*. I won it, I deserve it, and you’re just a little squirt with no co-ordination and two left feet.”

“*You’re* the one with two left feet!”

Liam flushed red. “A little squirty non-stop nuisance.”

Abby screamed like a steam train.

“Honestly,” said Mum, as Liam stamped out of the room. “Stop winding him up. I’d like to have him staying at the tea-table for longer than ten minutes. You know you’ll get that trophy in a week.”

“Four and a half days,” Abby said complacently, and she tucked into her tea.

Chapter Five

Friday morning came. Abby dressed carefully for her big day in assembly. She even put on matching socks.

She knew that Liam had been into her room since she replaced the trophy. She had taped a hair across the bottom of the doorway every time she went out. And twice it had been broken.

But that was all right. Both trophies were still where they should be: she could feel them, one in the box and one in the carrier bag. Liam hadn’t guessed a thing.

Now she emptied her rucksack onto the plastered carpet in a shower of pencil tins and reading books. Flinging open the wardrobe door, she pulled out the trophy with a sigh of satisfaction.

She unpeeled one carrier bag. She put her hands into the second bag to lift out the trophy...

...and shrieked. Not just like a steam train; but like a steam train that is heading at a hundred miles an hour, with no brakes, towards a tunnel that has been bricked up.

Abby leapt backwards, frantically shaking her hands. She couldn't stop screaming.

Mum shot into the room.

"What is it? What have you done this time?"

Abby could not speak. Shuddering, she flapped her hands at the carrier bag.

Mum peered inside. "Oh, good heavens," she said. "Are you trying to breed worms now? You've a good crop of them there, I must say."

Then her voice changed. "Abby – this is the trophy! You filled the trophy full of compost!"

"No," said Abby; or rather, she tried to say it, but her voice would not come out. Abby never cried. She didn't like crying; it made her feel so helpless that it was as bad as being sick. So she did not cry. But the effort of not crying meant she could not speak.

Instead she kept shaking her hands, trying to get rid of the terrible feeling of wet, worm-wriggling, slug-infested compost that she had thrust her fingers deep into. There were still a few startled wood-lice clinging to her sleeves.

Liam put his head around the door. "Everything all right?" he asked innocently.

"No, it is not," sighed Mum. "I'm sorry, Liam, but Abby has taken your trophy and filled it with compost."

She looked at Liam. Then, her eyes narrowing, she studied Abby. "At least, I assume she has. Abby, how did this trophy get into your wardrobe?"

Abby just looked back at her, still speechless.

"I see," said Mum. "So it *was* you. Liam, would you mind? I'm going to be late for work." She handed him the trophy.

"I'll clean it out," said Liam. Even in her state of shock, Abby thought he looked strangely flat for somebody who had just won.

Because he *had* won. There was no doubt about that.

She had to walk to school empty-handed. And she had to sit through prize assembly with her head held high, trying to ignore Maya's frequent looks and sniggers.

“When are you going up to get your trophy, Abby? Are you next? Is it now?”

Eventually Abby was reduced to kicking her to shut her up. And that meant she got a reprimand from Miss Hill, in front of the whole school, instead of a gleaming, silver trophy with her name on it. Abby wished she could scrunch up the day like a spoilt page in a project book, and throw it in the bin.

By the time she got home she had formed many possible plans for revenge. None of them seemed terrible enough for what Liam had done to her.

When she walked in, the trophy was on the mantelpiece in the living-room. The sight of it made her feel sick.

“You’ll have it next week,” said Liam.

“Next week is too late,” announced Abby in a voice of doom.

“You can have it tomorrow,” said Liam. “Once I’ve taken it to football.”

“Football? What for?”

“I said I’d show it to the team before the match.”

“Do what you like with it,” said Abby. “Paint it green and stick it on your head. It doesn’t matter now.”

“You can have it tomorrow after football. That’s a whole day early. I promise.”

But it was too late to promise anything, thought Abby. Too late for him to try being nice.

That wasn’t to say she wouldn’t take him up on it. And once she’d got that trophy off him, he wouldn’t get it back. Maybe she’d go along and grab it before he even played his stupid football match... Selfish two-left-footed drongo muppet.

She had an idea.

It seemed like such a brilliant idea that she turned it over and over in her head, looking for flaws. There were plenty. But they didn’t matter. She couldn’t waste such a beautiful, immaculate revenge.

While Liam was raiding the biscuit tin downstairs, she crawled into his room to look for the old football boots under his bed. They were still there, complete with the dusty label: WERE YOU LOOKING FOR THESE?

“Yes,” said Abby, “thank you.” She crawled out again with two left boots. The commando crawl was not really necessary, but it made her feel like she was on a military campaign.

She decided she had better not use her bedroom this time. Mum had had words about the carpet. Apparently a chisel would not do the trick. So she took everything down to the garage and unloaded it onto the ping-pong table.

This time she was careful. Cracked or not, she didn't want her table ruined. So she found a piece of plastic sheet to spread on it while she stirred the plaster of Paris in the large, already heavily-plastered mixing bowl. When the mixture was suitably squidgy, she poured it into the football boots.

She squeezed in as much as she could. The plaster oozed through the lace-holes and erupted somewhat disgustingly from under the tongue. She put the boots down on the floor to set while she practised her backspin and her topspin, which was getting better.

When they were dry, she planned to sneak the boots into the boot bag in the corner of the kitchen. Liam would never check them. He never cleaned his boots. They just went to and from the football field getting more and more caked in mud until he finally grew out of them. Which was quite quickly, these days.

There was just one problem, she thought, as she spun ball after ball. The boots were now much heavier than before.

But she had thought of a way round that as well.

"I am ingenious!" sang Abby. "I am the ingenious one and only ping-pong champion! I've made you a trophy trap that you'll never forget. You've got it coming, buster!"

Her backspin was perfect. She started to lob. Dunk dunk dunk, went the balls against the roof, followed by a trail of little dunks as they bounced around the garage. She kept lobbing until the space was full of flying ping-pong balls like giant, friendly hail.

To their gentle percussion, Abby began to sing *John Brown's Body* at the top of her voice. It had a good, loud, stirring chorus for a ping-pong ding-dong sing-song.

Chapter Six

“I’m coming with you to your football match,” she told Liam the next day. He immediately looked suspicious. “What for?”

“What do you think? I’m going to make sure you hand that trophy straight over to me as soon as you’ve shown it to your friends. Here, I’ll carry your boots.”

Casually Abby picked up the boot bag, pretending it was light. She hefted her school rucksack onto her back.

“What do you need your rucksack for?” demanded Liam.

“To bring the trophy home in, dummy. I’m not risking getting mugged.” In fact, it held Liam’s real, unplastered boots. It had occurred to Abby that to expect him to play a football match with concrete boots would be unsporting. It was also likely to bring the wrath of Mum down on her.

Just to see his face when he pulled the two left boots out of his bag would be enough. She could barely stop herself from laughing.

Liam was still suspicious. “You’re not going to hang around, are you?”

“No chance.”

He stowed the trophy carefully in his kit bag. “Well, all right. Come on, then.”

On the way to the sports centre she chattered about school to put Liam at his ease. He was as twitchy as a cat in a kennel.

“Hallo Tom hallo Jack hallo Kamal!” she said airily to his friends when they arrived.

“What’s she doing here?” demanded another boy whom she did not know.

“I’m the bodyguard,” said Abby. “I mean the trophy guard.”

“She’s your weird kid sister, isn’t she?” said the boy. He laughed. There was something familiar about that laugh.

“Shut it, Bradley,” said Liam. He bent over his kit bag.

“Let’s see this amazing wonderful trophy then,” said Bradley, and Abby identified him. Maya had a brother called Bradley. This boy had Maya’s laugh.

She heard the laugh again when Liam took the trophy out and held it up. And she heard the other boys join in.

“That’s it, is it? That tin-pot thing?” Bradley grabbed the trophy off Liam. He tossed it in the air and caught it.

“Careful!” cried Abby.

Bradley looked at her as if she was made out of mud. Then he inspected the trophy, and laughed again.

“You played ping-pong doubles? And your partner was your weird kid sister?”

“Table tennis,” said Liam. He looked very tense.

“And I am not—” Abby paused. “I’m proud to be weird,” she said.

Bradley tossed the trophy back carelessly. Liam only just caught it.

“I’ve got sixteen football trophies back home,” Bradley said. “What a pity I haven’t got a *ping pong junior doubles* trophy with my little sister.” He said it in a stupid voice. He was taking the mickey.

And with a cold shock, as if a giant freezing wave had swamped her as she lay sunbathing, Abby was hit by a number of discoveries at once.

She realised that Bradley always took the mickey; that he was tormenting her brother; that Bradley’s sixteen trophies were why Liam had been so anxious to bring this one along; and that Liam was in trouble.

She glanced at the other boys. She had thought that they were Liam’s friends. But now they were smiling along with Bradley, if a touch uncertainly. Bradley was the boss. He was the top dog, and they weren’t about to interfere.

Abby knew all about top dogs. She could have told Liam he was wasting his time trying to impress Bradley. Nothing would ever impress a boy like Bradley. He had a built-in sneer, just like his sister.

“*Ping pong*,” Bradley said derisively with that sneer. “I thought it was a game for little kids. Weird little kids.”

The wave kept washing over Abby. Standing quite still, she let herself fill up with it: a huge, cold surge. She could feel the chilly tide rising higher and higher inside her. Her desire to show up Liam had been washed away entirely, and replaced by an icy resolution to show up his tormenter.

“So you can’t play ping-pong, then?” she said.

“What? Of course I can. I just wouldn’t bother.”

“I challenge you,” she said. “I challenge you to a game of ping-pong.”

“What?”

“*I challenge you to a game of ping-pong!*” Abby yelled. “*Here*. In the sports centre. *Now*.”

“What?”

“Is that all you can say? *What?* Do you take up my challenge?”

“You might as well,” put in Tom. “The other team’s not here yet. We’ve got some time to kill.”

Abby felt such immense gratitude that she dared not look at Tom. Now Bradley could not refuse without seeming to back down.

She swiftly picked up the boot bag and began to march towards the sports hall. She turned round and glared at Bradley. "Well, come on!"

And it was Tom who moved first, so that the others followed. They had to. Abby decided that when she was older she might marry Tom.

It was Tom who hired the bats and booked the table. She knew this table: it was a nice flat one, not gouged or cracked like the one in the garage.

Tom gave the bats to Abby. She offered them to Bradley.

"We can knock up for a bit if you like," she said, because that was the correct thing to do.

"No." Instead, Bradley served a few balls across the table. He was looking more confident now. And he *had* played before: that was obvious.

"But he hasn't played *me*," said Abby to herself.

"You can serve first," she told him. "That gives you an advantage."

He smiled at her. "You think I need an advantage?" It was not a nice smile.

"Go easy on her," said Tom. "She's only a kid."

Abby decided that she might not marry Tom after all. She was not *only* a kid. She was not *only* anything. She was a crouching, fiendish tiger full of concentrated fury who was ready to wallop Bradley right through the back wall of the sports hall, smash, smash, smash.

And from the glower on his face, he felt exactly the same way.

Chapter Seven

Bradley served. He had a fast serve, and she couldn't immediately get the measure of it. He won the first two points on his serve, and it wasn't because Abby let him. The other boys were silent. Liam turned his face away.

Abby put the audience out of her head. All that mattered were the ball, the table, and the net.

And the net was where her first service went. It was her ninety mile an hour special. Wasted. She was three points down.

Abby knew that a sensible player would make their next serve a little safer. She did not. She aimed for ninety-two miles an hour.

It cleared the net, and Bradley's bat. He got nowhere near it. Tom clapped, politely.

If she'd been playing Liam, Abby would now have jumped around and crowed. Instead, she focussed on returning Bradley's serve. This time she got to it, and managed a decent rally before she hit the ball too hard and lost the point. And she did lose it, Bradley didn't win it: she was quite clear with herself on that.

Well, she wouldn't lose another one. She won the next point with a fierce chop. Now he was only four-two up. Tom clapped again, and this time the other boys joined in; except for Liam.

But at least he turned around to watch, with an expression of faint incredulity, as if he could not believe that this silent, intent, crouching tiger of a player was his little sister.

Abby served, and aced Bradley. He returned her next serve, but with such a poor, tame shot that Abby's eyes glinted. She smashed it into oblivion.

Bradley was taken aback. That was the first smash she had subjected him to. However, it was not the last.

After she'd won the next two points with a smash and her deluxe lob which sailed at least six feet into the air, he flung his bat down on the table.

Tom handed it back. "Come on," he said. "Don't throw the towel in yet. You're only four-six down."

"I'm not throwing the towel in!" Bradley yelled. "She's not playing properly!"

"Oh, yes I am," said Abby. "This is properly. You just don't know what properly is." And she put so much spin on her next serve that it was unable to bounce but skidded across the table like a duck on a frozen pond. Bradley missed it by a mile.

"That was properly too," she said. "*That* was backspin."

"Shut up."

"That was a lob," said Abby, staring at the ceiling.

"I said shut up."

"*This...* is a smash. And so was *that*."

"I said SHUT UP!" roared Bradley. The score was now four-ten.

Abby shut up. She only needed one more point to win the game.

Chop. Block. The last point.

“Yes!” yelled Abby. “*Topspin!*”

And now she danced a jig and crowed. “I love topspin!” She bent down and spread her arms across the table. “And I love this table.”

“Game to Abby,” said Tom, grinning.

“Look at her!” cried Bradley. “She’s a nutcase.”

“I’m a winning nutcase,” Abby said. “Change ends? Best of five?”

“You have got to be kidding,” Bradley snarled.

“In that case, Abby wins,” said Tom.

“As if I cared,” said Bradley.

“You’re not bad,” said Abby generously. “You started out quite well. But I’m used to playing Liam. Liam’s tough. You should play Liam if you want a proper match.”

Bradley stared at her; then glanced at Liam.

“Liam’s four times better than me,” said Abby. “I don’t mind. He’s three years older. I expect he’ll win the singles trophy too next year.”

Bradley said something very rude about the ping-pong trophy.

“Ooh,” said Abby, wide-eyed. “What does that mean? Can you draw me a diagram?”

“Hey, lighten up,” said Tom. “She’s only a kid.”

“She’s a freak! That’s what my sister told me, and she was right,” said Bradley furiously.

Abby opened her mouth to say that Maya would know all about *freaks*. Or something like that.

But by the time she’d thought of the right words, she’d also realised that she was about to make exactly the sort of spiteful remark that Maya enjoyed making. And she didn’t need to. The icy wave had flowed right through her and away.

So instead she said, “Champion freak, that’s me. Yay.” And she twirled round on her toes.

“Come on, Brad! Why don’t you give Liam a game?” said Tom.

“Sure,” said Liam. “Any time.” He wasn’t looking quite so strained and anxious now.

“At (rude word) ping-ping?” Bradley said. His voice was loud. At the rude word, Abby saw the supervisor’s head jerk up. He started to stroll over to their table.

“Then at least admit he must be good at it,” said Tom.

“He’s a freak too. It’s not a real sport,” Bradley growled. “And that trophy’s just a piece of (rude word) tin.”

“Oh,” said Abby. “You’re right. I expect your sixteen football trophies are all made of solid gold. You’re a trophy trap, aren’t you? Just can’t stop winning them. I’d like to give you something to add to your collection.”

And picking up the boot-bag, she handed it to Bradley.

“What’s this?”

“A football trophy for you. Actually, a pair.”

He unzipped the bag. The plastered boots fell out onto the table, clunk clunk.

They looked even worse than when Abby had made them. They appeared to be vomiting plaster. The other boys thought they were hilarious, to the point where two of them collapsed and rolled on the floor laughing, with gasps of “*Concrete boots!*” “*Ol’ lead boots!*”

“Rofling,” said Abby with interest. She had never seen anybody do it for real.

Liam did not laugh. He looked bewildered.

Bradley did not laugh. He picked up the plastered boots and hurled them, hard, across the table.

There was a loud crack. The studs gouged a gash along the wood: the net collapsed.

“Oh!” said Abby. “My best table!” And she burst into tears.

The supervisor came running over, brisk and busy. He said a number of sharp things about the damaged table, and told Bradley he was banned from the sports hall.

At which Bradley swore at him, and promptly got banned from the entire sports centre.

“But he’s meant to be playing football,” said Kamal.

“Not on our premises,” declared the supervisor firmly.

“I wouldn’t play on your (rude word) team if you (rude word) paid me,” shouted Bradley. Abby thought that he really needed to learn some new swear words.

Plungedogs. Cuffmangly. Woogling. Thinking up swear words helped her to stop crying. As Bradley stamped off, leaving his new trophies behind on the table, she wiped her face on her T-shirt.

“Sorry,” she said to Liam.

“What about?” He was grinning.

“About the boots. They were meant to be for you. I brought your real ones, though, as well.” She emptied her rucksack of them.

“Come on, Liam,” said Tom. “We’ll be late for the match. Great game, Abby. Brad was getting too big for his boots anyway. Especially those concrete ones!”

Laughing, the other boys ran after him out of the hall. Only Liam lingered.

“It’s usually me who shouts and throws things,” said Abby with some wonder. “It’s strange watching somebody else do it.”

“You play better when you don’t.” He handed her the ping-pong trophy. “You keep this now,” he said. “That’s fine.”

She hugged it. “It’s not cheap tin, is it, Liam? It is a proper trophy?”

“Absolutely,” he assured her. “With your name on it.” He ran off after the others.

Abby read it again to make sure. Then she threw the concrete boots into a bin, put the trophy in her rucksack, and rang Mum to tell her she was coming home now. As she crossed the football field, the match had already started.

She watched Liam for a while. He possibly did have two left feet. But they were quite fast feet, and he looked happy.

“So am I,” decided Abby. On the way home past the shops, she took the trophy out of the rucksack and raised it high above her head in triumph.

She saw Maya and her gang of girls across the road. How sad to spend your Saturday mooching around the chemist’s shop, thought Abby, instead of walloping your brother’s enemies at ping-pong.

Maya and the girls all turned to look at her. They were saying things to each other that she could not hear.

Abby bounced the trophy up and down on her head. “The horse does eighty per cent of the work!” she yelled, and jumped in the air to click her heels together. A perfect Nijinsky.

She bet Maya couldn’t do Nijinskys. She bet Maya would be too stuck-up to try.

So with the trophy on her head, she did Nijinsky after Nijinsky, the dance of champions, all the way back home.

The End



* * *

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