

THE
MYSTERIOUS
BENEDICT
SOCIETY

AND THE RIDDLE OF AGES



TRENTON LEE STEWART

ILLUSTRATIONS
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For Maren

—*T.L.S.*

Also by Trenton Lee Stewart

The Mysterious Benedict Society

The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Perilous Journey

The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Prisoner's Dilemma

The Extraordinary Education of Nicholas Benedict

The Secret Keepers



In a city called Stonetown, on a quiet street of spacious old houses and gracious old trees, a young man named Reynie Muldoon Perumal was contemplating a door. The door, currently closed, belonged to his study on the third floor of one of those houses – in this case a grey-stoned edifice half covered in ivy, with a magnificent elm tree in its courtyard and, surrounding the courtyard, an old iron fence quite overgrown with roses. From his study window Reynie might easily have been looking out upon that tree or those flowers, or he might have lifted his gaze to the sky, which on this fine spring morning was a lovely shade of

cobalt blue. Instead, he sat at his desk in an attitude of attention, staring at the door, wondering who in the world could be standing on the other side.

For a stranger to be lurking in the hallway should have been impossible, given the fact of locked doors, security codes and a trustworthy guard. Yet Reynie's ears had detected an unfamiliar tread. His ears were not particularly sharp; indeed, his hearing, like almost everything else about him, was perfectly average: he had average brown eyes and hair, an average fair complexion, an average tendency to sing in the shower, and so on. But when it came to noticing things – noticing things, understanding things, and figuring things out – 'average' could hardly describe him.

He had been aware, for the last thirty seconds or so, of something different in the house. Preoccupied as he'd been with urgent matters, however, Reynie had given the signs little thought. The shriek and clang of the courtyard gate had raised no suspicions, for not a minute earlier he had spied Captain Plugg, the diligent guard, leaving through that gate to make one of her rounds about the neighbourhood. Hearing the sounds again after he'd turned from the window, Reynie had simply assumed the guard had forgotten something, or was struck by a need to go to the toilet. The sudden draught in his study, which always accompanied the opening of the front door downstairs, he had naturally attributed to the return of Captain Plugg as well. He had wondered, vaguely, at the absence of her heavy footsteps below, but his mind had quickly conjured an image of that powerfully built woman taking a seat near the entrance to remove something from her boot.

Too quickly, Reynie realized, when he heard that unfamiliar tread in the hallway. And now he sat staring at the door with a great intensity of focus.

A knock sounded – a light, tentative tapping – and in an instant Reynie’s apprehension left him. There were people in Stonetown right now who would very much like to hurt him, but this, he could tell, was not one of them.

‘Come in?’ said Reynie, his tone inquisitive. There was no reply. He glanced at his watch, then at the clock on the wall, and then at the two-way radio that sat – silent, for the moment – on his cluttered desk. ‘Come in!’ he called, more forcefully.

The doorknob rattled. Slowly turned. And at last the door swung open, revealing – as Reynie had by this point already deduced – a child. It seemed the most unlikely of developments, but the fact remained: the stranger was, of all things, a little boy.

‘Well, hello,’ Reynie said to the boy, who stood grinning shyly with a hand on the doorknob, swinging the door back and forth. The boy’s hair, very fine and black, was in a frightfully tangled state. His skin, of a light olive tone, was smudged here and there with a dark, oily substance, and the fur of at least two kinds of animal was stuck to various places on his shirt and trousers (both quite filthy). But the boy’s large eyes, so dark brown as to be almost black, were shining with excitement.

‘I’m Tai,’ said the boy, still swinging the door back and forth. ‘I’m five.’

Reynie feigned confusion. ‘Wait, which is it? Are you Tai or are you five?’

The boy giggled. ‘Both!’ he said, letting go of the

doorknob and approaching Reynie's desk in a rush. He drew up short, resting his hands on the edge of the desk and his chin on the back of his hands. 'My *name* is Tai Li, and I'm *five years old*.' He said this without lifting his chin from his hands, and thus with some difficulty.

'Oh!' Reynie exclaimed, with another glance at his watch. 'I think I understand now. Well, Tai, my name is—'

'Reynie Muldoon!' the boy interrupted, with a delighted laugh. 'I know who you are! I have a name that starts with *M* too! My middle name does. I'm not going to tell you what it is, though. You have to guess.'

'It isn't Muldoon?' Reynie asked, quickly moving the radio, which Tai had noticed and reached for.

'No!' said Tai, laughing again.

'Tell you what,' Reynie said. 'I'll make more guesses later. And I'll let you touch the radio later, too, OK? Right now it's important that we don't touch it. Right now we're expecting to hear from a friend—'

Tai gasped. 'Is it Kate Wetherall? The Great Kate Weather Machine? Who always carries around a red bucket full of tools?'

Reynie raised an eyebrow. 'Well . . . she used to, anyway. These days she's more of a utility-belt-and-secret-pockets kind of weather machine.' A wistful expression crossed his face at this, like the shadow of a swiftly moving cloud. Reynie fixed the little boy with a curious gaze. 'You seem to know an awful lot about us, Tai.'

'You saved the world!' Tai whispered excitedly, as if he'd been bursting to let Reynie in on this secret but knew he wasn't supposed to.

'Oh, I wouldn't say the *whole* world,' said Reynie with a

sceptical look. ‘And I assume you’re talking not just about me, but—’

‘All of you!’ Tai whispered. ‘The four of you! And Mr Benedict, and Rhonda, and Number Two, and Milligan . . .’ Here the little boy frowned and consulted his fingers, counting off names in a whisper. He interrupted himself to scratch furiously at an itch on his arm, then began again.

‘Hold that thought, Tai,’ said Reynie, and raising his voice, he said, ‘Intercom. Sticky’s office.’

A beep sounded from a speaker on the wall near the door, and Tai whirled to look. The speaker hung at an imperfect angle, with plaster peeling away all around it, and was speckled with ancient paint. It would not appear to be a functioning speaker. Nonetheless, its green indicator light flickered to life, and after a brief initial crackling sound, a young man’s voice rang out.

‘What’s the word?’ said the voice, quite loudly and brusquely.

Tai gave a little jump. He glanced at Reynie, then gawked at the speaker again.

‘No word yet,’ Reynie replied. He cleared his throat. ‘But, George, were you aware that a five-year-old boy named Tai Li has entered the house, evidently by himself, and is now standing here in my study with me?’

There was a pause. Another crackle. Then: ‘Huh.’

‘Right?’ said Reynie, as if they had just discussed the matter at length.

‘The timing is not exactly what one would wish.’

‘I’m guessing the timing has everything to do with it.’

Tai turned to Reynie with huge eyes. ‘Is that Sticky Washington?’ he whispered. ‘Who’s read everything and

knows everything and never forgets anything? But gets ner—'

'That's him, all right,' Reynie interrupted. 'Although lately he prefers his given name, George. And by the way, Tai, he can hear you even if you're whispering.'

Reynie wouldn't have thought the little boy's eyes could get any wider, but wider they got, and two small hands flew up to cover his mouth. They were very dirty hands, too. Reynie supposed now wasn't the moment to discuss hygiene.

'Hello, Tai,' said the voice through the speaker. 'I look forward to meeting you.'

Tai made as if to clap his hands, then seemed to think better of it. He ran over to stand directly beneath the speaker. 'Hi!' he shouted, gazing up at it. He stood on his tiptoes, trying to reach it with an outstretched finger.

Reynie leapt up from his desk. 'Let's not touch the speaker, either, OK, Tai? It might fall off. Let me find something you *can* touch. How about—?'

The speaker crackled. 'So, Reynie, would you say this matter needs immediate attention, or—?'

'No, I've got it. Just keeping you in the loop.'

'Roger that. Intercom off.'

'Intercom off,' echoed Reynie, and the green indicator light turned red.

'It turned red!' Tai declared. 'So that means it's off!'

'Right you are,' said Reynie, casting about for something to give the little boy.

Tai, seeing what he was up to, also looked around. The study in general was rather less cluttered and unruly than the desk, with less to offer his curious eye. Overstuffed

bookshelves stood against every wall; an overstuffed chair stood in one corner; and behind the desk sat an antique chest covered with tidy stacks of papers, which Reynie now hastily began to clear away.

One particular stack of papers, however – a thick bunch of envelopes – seemed to catch in Reynie’s hands. Each envelope was addressed from one of the world’s most prestigious universities. Most were still sealed, but the few letters that Reynie *had* read said almost exactly the same thing: *Delighted to inform you . . . would be among the youngest ever to attend this university in its long, illustrious history . . . naturally covering your tuition and room and board, along with a generous stipend for expenses . . . an extremely rare honour . . . if you will please reply as soon as . . .*

The envelopes all bore postmarks from months ago. Reynie had yet to reply. He looked at the stack in his hands for a long moment, as he had done many times in recent weeks, before finally setting it aside.

Meanwhile, as this clearing away of papers seemed to be taking a minute, Tai turned and spotted, on the back of the door through which he had just entered, a large map of the greater Stonetown area. Concentrated in the centre of the map, in the heart of Stonetown itself, were thirteen drawing pins. Tai counted them out loud – twice to be sure.

Reynie, without looking, knew full well what Tai was counting, and as he felt beneath the lid of the locked chest for its two secret catches, he prepared himself for the inevitable question. Under normal circumstances, it would hardly seem wise to inform a young child that those drawing pins represented thirteen of the most dangerous men in the world; that those men, just as the location of the drawing

pins suggested, were now gathered right here in Stonetown; and that Reynie's sole purpose at present was to deal with them – which meant that the child, simply by being associated with Reynie, might be in great peril.

Tai's presence in Reynie's study was a clear indicator that these were decidedly *not* normal circumstances, however. Perhaps, given time, Reynie would sort out an appropriate answer. For now, he opted for distraction.

'... thirteen,' Tai said, finishing his recount and turning to ask the question.

'Do you know what a baker's dozen is, Tai?' Reynie asked before the boy could open his mouth.

Tai knitted his brow, thinking. He scratched his chest and then, holding his palms out in a very adultlike fashion, announced, 'Well, you know, a dozen is twelve. I know that.'

Reynie couldn't help smiling. He tapped his nose and pointed at Tai. 'That's right. And if you add just one more, some people call that a baker's dozen.'

Tai thought about this, making a great show of knitting his brow again. Then a look of understanding came into his eyes, and he laughed. 'You told me that because I was counting the pins! Because there's thirteen!'

'Right again!' Reynie declared. He did not explain that 'the Baker's Dozen' was the rather pleasant term that he and his friends used for some extremely *unpleasant* men, eleven of whom had just escaped from a supposedly escape-proof prison in Brig City. Nor did he explain that the breakout had been engineered by the remaining two men (who had never been captured in the first place) with the assistance of a mysterious figure whose identity was yet unknown.

Reynie said none of these troubling things. Instead he opened the antique chest and said, 'Have you ever seen a kaleidoscope?'

By way of reply, Tai dashed towards Reynie, stumbled over evidently nothing at all, recovered his balance, and arrived at Reynie's side with face alight and hands outstretched. 'Can I hold it?' he said, bouncing up and down on his toes. 'Can I *look* through it?'

'Be very careful,' Reynie said, placing the large kaleidoscope in the boy's hands. 'It's heavier than you think.' He felt Tai's small hands dutifully tighten their grip; only then did he let go.

Tai studied the kaleidoscope reverently before putting it to his eye (his other eye remained wide open) and directing it at Reynie's midsection. 'Wow,' he breathed. 'This was on a submarine?'

Reynie blinked. 'You're thinking of a periscope. This is a kaleidoscope. It has colours! Try pointing it at the light.'

Without lowering the kaleidoscope, Tai turned his whole body around and craned his head upwards. 'Oh, that's even better!'

'Isn't it, though? Try closing your other eye.'

Tai tried ever so hard but couldn't quite manage it. 'I'm still learning to wink,' he said, half squinting in a way that gave him an air of great seriousness. He kept staring through the kaleidoscope, moving it slightly back and forth, and uttering quiet expressions of delight.

Reynie felt an urge to tousle the little boy's hair. He resisted, however, because of the tangles, and was instead about to pat Tai on the shoulder when the radio on his desk gave an extremely loud squawk. So sudden and so loud was

the noise, in fact, that Tai dropped the kaleidoscope. Or rather, he did not drop the kaleidoscope so much as fling it up and away from him, and only by diving forward with hands outstretched and landing painfully on his belly did Reynie manage to catch it. For a moment he remained in that position, emitting an involuntary moan of both pain and relief.

‘Hooray!’ Tai cheered. ‘You caught it!’ He tumbled down on to the floor next to Reynie and lay with his face a few centimetres away. ‘I’m sorry I dropped it, though,’ he whispered, and again Reynie noticed how the little boy’s dark eyes shone. He also noticed how badly Tai needed to brush his teeth.

‘That’s OK,’ Reynie whispered back. ‘I know you were trying to be careful.’

The radio squawked again. Reynie hauled himself to his feet. Tai followed suit, and together the two of them stood looking at the radio. ‘Sometimes it takes a second or two,’ Reynie whispered. He opened a drawer in his desk, took a peppermint from a tin, and handed it to Tai. ‘Don’t run or jump while you have that in your mouth, OK?’

Tai nodded happily, slipped the peppermint into his mouth, and went back to staring at the radio, which rewarded him with yet another squawk. This one was followed by the sound of a young woman’s voice.

‘Secret password!’ said the young woman. ‘Are you there?’

Reynie adjusted a knob on the radio, pressed a button, and replied, ‘Roger that.’ To Tai he explained: “‘Secret password’ is our secret password. It’s just a joke.’

Tai giggled.

‘Confirming all clear?’ came the young woman’s voice.

‘Copy that. Confirming now.’ Reynie released the button and hailed Sticky’s office on the intercom. ‘We have her!’ he called. ‘How’s the frequency?’

‘Checking,’ came the reply. And then: ‘All clear!’

‘All clear,’ Reynie said into the radio.

‘Well, great!’ said the young woman. ‘What’s the word?’

‘Both major airports and all private airports compromised. Still awaiting word from Grand Central.’

‘I got the word from Grand Central myself. Also compromised.’

‘No, no, no,’ Reynie muttered. Then, remembering Tai, who was following everything with riveted attention, he glanced down and explained, ‘I’m just a bit frustrated, Tai. Everything’s going to be fine.’

‘Oh, good!’ Tai said brightly. He made a loud sucking sound on the peppermint, which seemed to fill his whole mouth.

After a long pause, during which Reynie made various private calculations, the radio squawked again, and the young woman’s voice returned. This time she sounded as if she was shouting in a windstorm. ‘Stand by for ETA!’

‘That means “estimated time of arrival”,’ Reynie said to Tai, who nodded agreeably, though without evident signs of comprehension. ‘We’re not exactly sure where she is right now,’ Reynie went on, ‘but my guess is that by tonight or tomorrow morning – wait. Why did it sound so windy?’

‘I wondered that too!’ Tai said.

‘Oh boy,’ Reynie whispered, just as the radio sounded again.

‘ETA three minutes,’ shouted the young woman. ‘Give

or take thirty seconds. Going silent now. Will update you shortly.’ The radio went quiet.

‘Did you get all that, George?’ Reynie said, as if into the air.

‘I got it. Do you think it means what I think it means?’

‘I don’t think it can mean anything else, do you?’

A long sigh issued from the intercom speaker. ‘At least we won’t have to wait long to see how this turns out.’

Tai tapped Reynie on the elbow. ‘Why don’t you just ask her what it means?’

‘Good question,’ Reynie said. ‘Did you hear her say she was “going silent”? That means I couldn’t get through to her even if I tried. We just have to—’

The radio squawked. ‘Hi again!’ shouted the young woman. She rattled off a string of data. ‘ETA two minutes. Meet me on the roof?’

‘Roger that,’ Reynie replied, shaking his head.

‘What were those numbers and things?’ Tai asked.

‘Coordinates and altitude,’ came the voice from the intercom, followed by another sigh.

‘Here,’ Reynie said, removing the kaleidoscope lens and ushering Tai to the window. ‘See? It’s actually a spyglass – probably the best in the world.’ He handed the instrument to the astonished boy and showed him where to aim it.

‘She’s coming from the *sky*?’ Tai exclaimed.

‘Evidently,’ Reynie murmured. He put a hand on Tai’s shoulder. ‘And that, my friend, pretty well sums up what you need to know about Kate Wetherall.’

Reynie returned to his desk, amused to hear the little boy repeating him in a whisper (*‘pretty well sums up . . .’*) but also troubled by something he had yet to lay a mental finger on.

He began flipping rapidly through various piles of paper and folders on his desk. What was he forgetting, he wondered, and why did it matter?

‘Is she going to land way over there?’ asked Tai, for Reynie had directed his aim to the north-east.

The intercom speaker, with a crackle, explained that a projectile possesses both vertical and horizontal velocities, to which Tai responded by asking if those were real words.

‘She’ll be coming in at an angle,’ Reynie muttered. ‘And quite fast.’

Tai, meanwhile, had lowered the spyglass, which had grown heavy. When his thin arms had recovered, he raised it again and gasped. Far away, against the backdrop of blue sky, he could see a figure falling.

‘I see her!’ he squealed, and started jumping up and down.

‘Good job,’ Reynie said distractedly. He glanced over his shoulder. ‘Hey, what did I say about jumping? Also, *please* be careful with that spyglass – it’s actually Kate’s.’

Tai had already stopped jumping, anyway, in order to hold the spyglass steady. The distant figure was now coming into focus: a young woman in a black flight suit, plummeting at a steep angle, arms tight against her sides. Yellow hair streamed like flames from the back of her visored helmet, which was fire-engine red.

‘There’s a dot following her,’ Tai said. ‘Oh! It’s a bird! There’s a bird following her! It’s diving just like she is!’

‘Stooping,’ said the intercom speaker.

‘Stooping?’

‘That bird is her peregrine falcon, Madge. When falcons dive like that, it’s called stooping. ETA one minute, Reynie.’

Shall we head up there or not? I'm thinking it might be better not to watch.'

Reynie snapped to attention, realizing what had made him uneasy. 'Stick—I mean, *George!*' he cried, fanning the pages of a bulky day planner. He found the page he wanted and jabbed his finger on an entry that read *Experiment 37-B: Effects of Decreasing Atmospheric Pressure, etc.*

'What is it?' the intercom speaker asked. 'More trouble?'

'Well, on the night of the evacuation, you were scheduled to run your chemical experiments on the rooftop patio, but then everything went haywire. I don't suppose you cleared—'

The answer to his unfinished question was the banging open of a distant door, followed by footsteps charging down a hallway.

Reynie flew to the window. An elderly neighbour had emerged to work in her flower bed, and a postman was whistling down the pavement, depositing letters in mailboxes. The street was out of the question. It would have been a risky option, anyway.

He jumped back to the radio. 'Hey, can you slow down at all?'

'Copy that,' came the reply. 'Only a little, though.'

'She *was* doing *this*,' said Tai from his place at the window. He clapped his hands to his sides, narrowly avoiding striking the spyglass on the windowsill. 'But now she's doing *this!*' He threw out his arms and legs as if to do jumping jacks.

Reynie was already hurrying from the study. 'That's great! Please be careful! I have to go to the roof now!'

'Wait for me!' Tai exclaimed, racing after him.

Reynie ran pell-mell down the hallway, turning the

corner just in time to see a large square section of the floor settling into place. He ran over to stand on it. ‘Sticky’s already up there,’ he said as Tai caught up. ‘Hang on – this is a shortcut.’ He stomped on the floor four times, then grabbed Tai by the shoulders to steady him.

A trapdoor in the ceiling fell open, and suddenly, with a terrific rattling sound, they were racing upwards. Tai, thrilled, shouted something Reynie couldn’t make out. They passed through the trapdoor and kept going, up and up, through a gloomy attic filled with seemingly infinite contraptions and oddments scattered in all directions, through yet another trapdoor in the attic ceiling, and at last into fresh air.

‘We’re on the roof!’ Tai exclaimed.

‘Yep!’ Reynie cried, leaping to an open instrument panel nearby. He threw a lever to secure the platform, then spun to face Tai. ‘Promise me you’ll stay right there!’

Tai looked utterly amazed to be asked. ‘I promise!’ he said in a reverent tone, and clutched the spyglass to his chest.

The rooftop patio, a flat expanse situated between two of the house’s gables, was about half the size of a tennis court. Kate would have had little room for error under even the best of circumstances – and these were hardly those. Wind gusted fiercely from what seemed like every direction, sending scraps of paper dancing in the air like a wild mob of butterflies. Even worse, Reynie realized, those scraps were labels that had come loose from innumerable stoppered beakers arrayed on folding tables all across the patio. Every single one of those beakers, he knew, contained a different substance or mixture of substances, some of them quite dangerous.

Reynie glanced at the sky to the north-east. His eyes detected what might have been a tiny insect hovering a few centimetres above him, but he knew it was actually a far-off Kate. She hadn't even pulled her parachute yet. He glanced at Tai to make sure he was staying put. Yes, the boy was rooted to his spot, safely out of Kate's line of approach, and staring past Reynie with an expression of excited fascination.

That expression was more than warranted, Reynie knew, for moving frantically among the tables, snatching up beakers and placing them into a wicker basket, was George 'Sticky' Washington. The young man looked exactly as the young boy watching had expected him to look: naturally slender and muscular (this was easy to determine, as Sticky wore a tank top, shorts and flip-flops), with light brown skin and a well-shaped, perfectly bald head. Tai had also expected Sticky to be wearing unusually stylish new spectacles, and sure enough he was. So stylish were the spectacles, in fact, and so well did they suit the young man's features, that under different circumstances Tai would have thought him an altogether dashing figure. Under the current circumstances, however, Sticky looked slightly ridiculous: his face was awash in panic and self-reproach, his feet shuffled awkwardly in their flimsy sandals, and his basket was beginning to overflow with beakers – as if he were an overgrown, desperate child on some bizarre variety of Easter egg hunt.

'There's no time to clear all of them!' Sticky shouted as he worked. 'I'm just getting the lethal ones!'

'The *lethal* ones?' echoed Reynie. (He'd been thinking 'dangerous', which seemed more than sufficient.) He glanced at the beakers on the nearest table; only a few still

had their labels. Two days of rain, and now this wind, had done their damage. ‘What can I do?’

‘I set it all up like a chessboard!’ Sticky yelled, shoving a stopper into a beaker. ‘Eight tables, eight beakers per table—’

‘Got it!’ Reynie cried, seeing the pattern. Each table represented a row on the chessboard, each beaker a space. ‘So, which ones?’

Without looking up from his work, Sticky shouted chess notation instructions: ‘A2, D4 and C5! I’ve got the rest!’

‘A2, D4 and C5!’ Reynie repeated, already hustling to grab A2, a stoppered beaker in the first spot on the second row. It contained a liquid of an alarming vermilion colour, which Reynie tried not to think about as he scrambled around to the fourth table. D4 contained a colourless liquid that looked like water but moved like sludge when Reynie picked up the beaker. He shuddered. Fortunately, this one was stoppered too. He ducked under the table and came up next to C5, an open beaker full of what looked to be harmless black pebbles. ‘Uh, should there be a stopper for C5?’

‘Oh, yes! Believe me, you don’t want *those* to spill! Use the one from C6! It’s fine!’ Sticky shuffled past with his precariously full basket. ‘This is all of them!’ he panted, his eyes swivelling skywards. He gave a yelp and doubled his pace. ‘Reynie! Here she is!’

Reynie, still shoving the stopper into the last beaker, didn’t even have time to look up before he heard Kate’s voice from shockingly close by.

‘Get down, boys, I’m coming in hot!’

Reynie, clutching the beakers, dropped on to his back.

In the next instant his vision was filled with Kate Wetherall, a parachute, a glimpse of sky, a falcon with wings widespread – and then the rooftop seemed to explode. Kate’s boots, having cleared the first four tables, caught the fifth and sixth in quick succession. Two rows of beakers shattered in a fraction of a second; the air was suddenly filled with glass, powder, liquid and Kate – and still she continued, crashing through the seventh and eighth tables, her parachute dragging behind her, gathering wreckage. And still she crashed, right across the end of the rooftop patio, through the low railing, and out of sight. Her parachute, full of debris, dragged after her to the broken railing, where it caught and held.

Reynie sat up. He glanced at Sticky, who was crouching with the basket in his arms and his jaw hanging slack, and then at Tai, whose eyes seemed too huge for his head. Reynie peered back across the rooftop patio. A purplish haze, not exactly smoke, shifted this way and that in the contradictory breezes. For a moment, the three of them stared at the parachute in shocked silence.

And then they found themselves staring at two gloved hands, which had appeared from beyond the patio edge, clutching at the parachute silk. The hands were followed by a fire-engine-red helmet, and finally a figure in a black flight suit. Boots crunched on broken glass, gloved hands went up to remove the visored helmet, and there stood Kate Wetherall, grinning.

‘Hi, boys,’ she said, brushing glass and splinters from her broad shoulders. She gestured at Tai. ‘Who’s this little guy?’

Reynie and Sticky, neither recovered enough to speak yet, exchanged a look.

Tai, on the other hand, was bouncing up and down. 'I'm Tai!' he squeaked excitedly. 'Reynie let me hold your spyglass!'

'I see that,' said Kate, levelling an accusing look at Reynie before bursting into a laugh and striding forward to greet him.

Reynie, who had long ago learnt that Kate's greetings could be painfully enthusiastic, was quick to show her the beakers. 'We're holding dangerous chemicals, Kate!' he said, climbing unsteadily to his feet.

'Why would you be doing that?' Kate asked, laughing again. 'You boys need to be more careful!' She gave him a peck on the cheek, then swooped over to Sticky (who flinched) to do the same.

At the sight of Tai raising his own cheek expectantly, Kate put on a dubious look. 'Let's get you a bath first, mister. Have you seen your face?'

With a worried expression, Tai shook his head.

Kate pretended to be shocked. 'What? Never? You've never seen your own face?'

At this Tai giggled, and with a quick 'Fine, one kiss for the dust bunny,' Kate swooped in on him too.

After Reynie and Sticky had very carefully put down their burdens, the three friends stood regarding one another. Despite having grown at different rates, they had all arrived – perhaps only temporarily, but still much to their amusement – at precisely the same height. Thus, Reynie's and Sticky's brown eyes were at the same level as Kate's familiar ocean-blues, but that was not the reason they communicated so much, and so easily, without speaking. The three of them had been through more together as children than most

people experience in a lifetime, and they had been best friends for years. So it was that everything they had been through, not just over the years but also in the last few days, everything that remained to be done, everything still at risk – these things and more passed among them without a word.

‘Boy, am I hungry,’ Kate said, breaking the silence. She reached up to retie her ponytail; a sprinkle of debris fell from her hair and was carried off by the wind. ‘Are we under imminent attack, or is there time for a sandwich?’

‘We don’t think they’re making a move today,’ Reynie said. ‘They’re holed up in different parts of the city, awaiting some sort of message – most likely instructions from Mr Curtain, though we don’t know how they’re going to manage that. It’s not like he’ll be granted permission to make a quick phone call to his former henchmen.’

‘I should say not. And Mr Benedict?’

‘He’s safe at the moment as long as he stays put.’

‘Super,’ said Kate. ‘How about we have some lunch and catch up, then? I especially want to know how *you*’ – this she said to Tai, who stood in the middle of their little circle, gazing up at their faces – ‘came to be *here*.’

‘I want to know the same thing,’ said Sticky. ‘By the way, Tai, it’s nice to meet you in person. I’m . . . um, *George*,’ he said with some hesitation (for, like his friends, Sticky still thought of himself as Sticky, despite his recent declaration to the contrary). He extended his hand, and Tai, beaming, shook it so energetically with his free hand that his other one almost dropped the spyglass.

‘How *did* you come to be here, anyway?’ Kate pressed Tai, kneeling to be on eye level with him (and reaching, ever so subtly, to take hold of the spyglass).

Tai shrugged and scratched his chest. ‘She told me how. She told me all about you, and she gave me directions, and she kept me company the whole time!’ Lowering his voice secretively, he added, ‘Even though I couldn’t *see* her!’

Kate raised an eyebrow. ‘Even though . . .’

‘Oh boy,’ Sticky muttered.

‘I wondered,’ said Reynie, nodding. ‘I mean, I thought as much.’

‘That’s right!’ called a strident voice from behind them. ‘I told him. *I* brought him here. If not for *me*, he’d be in hot water right now. But I guess you’re all having your happy reunion on the roof without me? You don’t even send the platform back down – you make me take the stairs?’

By this point everyone had turned towards the stairwell doorway, in the frame of which stood – with arms crossed and eyes flashing – a very angry-looking girl.

‘Hi, Constance,’ sighed Kate.

And just like that, the Society was reconvened.