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End

'Shirts?'

'Yes.'

'Socks?'

'Yes.'

'Pants!'

I look up and see Chloe grinning next to Mum.

'Well, you'll need pants,' she adds.

I try to glare but end up smiling.

It's hard to glare at Chloe. Also, this time tomorrow I will be gone. I turn back to the wooden trunk, my possessions piled within, including pants.

No one else will have a trunk like mine. There is an entire section of ROOM devoted to school kit. Especially luggage. Luggage which weighs itself, keeps itself cool, keeps warm, transports itself. I am almost relieved that I have no choice in the matter.

Mine opens and closes. That's it. I lower the heavy lid. It doesn't quite match up with the rest of the trunk, so I put my foot on top and press down. It still doesn't close. I guess it just opens then.

'That's an heirloom,' Chloe reminds me.

'I thought you had to be dead before your things became heirlooms. Dad is in the kitchen making pancakes.'

On cue, a disembodied voice calls, 'Does someone need me?'

I sigh. 'I just wish this trunk wasn't so—big. Or grey.'

'We could paint it!' Chloe cries. 'Purple! With yellow stars.'

Mum is watching me. She puts down the list. 'Come on, Chloe, let's go out and pick some lettuce for lunch.'

Chloe hops up and grabs Mum's outstretched hand. 'Rainbow stripes?' she shouts from the kitchen.

I take the list from the arm of the chair where Mum left it. We've been through it a thousand times. Once was enough. I know there's nothing missing. Even so, I scan through one last time, then sit in the chair and stare at the trunk. I should be making the most of every last second with my family. For some reason I want to be on my own.

I've looked forward to this day for fourteen years. Now that it's here, the butterflies in my stomach

have gone, leaving behind a strange, empty feeling. Instead of wondering who I'll make friends with first, I find myself thinking about Chloe. About whispering goodnight from the top bunk. About crating up the apples and harvesting the honeycomb. About herding the goats to their pen in the low evening sun. Mum brushing my hair from my eyes. Dad brushing his hair from his eyes when we play chess. About Finn.

It's annoying.

Shock

'Jess?'

The voice startles me. I drop my toothbrush in the sink. In the mirror a pale face with grey smudges beneath the eyes, hovers behind my right shoulder. Most of the time, you would never guess Chloe was ill. Sometimes, like now, the reality seems closer to the surface.

'Sorry, I thought you heard me get up.'

I shake my head and pick up my toothbrush.

'Will we have time to go down to the treehouse before you leave?'

We don't have time, but I nod my head anyway. I finish brushing then grab my portal watch and try connecting to Finn. Seconds later a sleepy face topped with messy brown hair appears on the small screen. Chloe leans in to look.

'I am so glad you called,' he says sleepily. 'Mum's working and I didn't hear my alarm. I could have missed my first day completely.'

'Treehouse in ten?'

Finn rubs his left eye with his free hand. 'What? I haven't even finished packing.'

'If it wasn't for me you'd still be asleep. Come on. I'll bring breakfast.'

Before he can argue I disconnect.

Chloe squeals with excitement.

'Grab your hoodie,' I say, 'it's cold outside.'

We creep downstairs. Soft morning light blooms around the edge of the kitchen door. As I push it open, warm cooking aromas waft out.

'I was just coming to check you were ready.' Dad looks up from the hob. 'Scrambled egg?'

Dad is always up early, just normally outside with the animals. He'll say there's no time for the treehouse.

'Chlo and I were going to let the goats out.'

'Scrambled egg in a bun?'

'Yeah!' says Chloe.

'Can I have two? I'm really hungry.'

Dad slices three buns and stuffs them to bursting, before wrapping a piece of beeswax paper round the outside.

I pull on a pair of wellies and Chloe lifts the latch on the door.

The morning air smells like cut grass. Pale blue sky is tinged with a sunrise glow where it meets the hills.

The cockerel calls nearby as Chloe marches ahead past neat rows of winter vegetable seedlings, and the rich brown soil from which we harvested peas, beans and carrots. Beyond is a meadow, with a miniature village of beehives.

I take a bite from the soft roll with its warm filling. As we cross the meadow, there is another scent in the air—of damp leaves. Of summer turning to autumn.

The field dips to meet a line of oak trees. As we approach, I spot a figure running down the hill opposite, arms spread like the sails of a wind turbine.

At the base of the largest oak dangles a rope. Chloe gives a tug, and a ladder tumbles down, parallel to the trunk. She climbs up, disappearing beyond the leaves of a low branch. I wait at the bottom, clutching a scrambled-egg roll.

Footsteps thud across the nearby ground. Moments later a boy lurches into the clearing.

He sees me and grins, then bends forwards, hands on knees, trying to catch his breath. After a few seconds, he pants, 'Breakfast?'

I pass him the roll, now only a few centimetres thick, with a large dip where my thumb pressed down.

He wolfs it in a couple of bites.

'Thanks. Any more?' He looks hopefully at my hands.

'Sorry, the chef doesn't take bulk orders.'

'Are you coming?' A voice floats down from the canopy.

I steady the rope ladder with my right hand and begin to climb. Once I'm above the lowest branches, the ladder sways as Finn follows.

The top rung marks the entrance to a small wooden shelter, nestled in the 'v' where the massive trunk diverges. Each plank has been shaped so perfectly, it looks as if the tree was bored one day and instead of branches, grew a hut.

I climb inside and wait as my eyes adjust to the gloom. Light filters through two canopied windows.

There are bean bags, a low bench, and at the back a few wooden boxes with snacks and any other stuff we might need. Finn squeezes in behind me.

'Hey, Chlo!'

She grins at him, eyes shining in the dim light.

'What's that?' she asks.

Finn is clutching a small bundle which I hadn't noticed until now. He passes it to her.

'For you.'

She takes the bundle with two hands.

'Should I open it?'

'Definitely not.'

'Then what should I do with it?' she frowns.

'Open it after we've gone. I don't want you moping around, so I've made a few things to keep you busy.'

A smile creeps slowly towards the dimples in her cheeks.

'There's a treasure hunt, and some puzzles. There's also a secret code. Only you, me and Jess will have the cypher.'

'The what?'

'The cypher—the way to work out what it means. That way we can send messages to each other and no one will be able to read them. By no one, I mean your mum and dad.'

As Chloe turns the package over in her hands, hot tears well in the corners of my eyes. I blink them away.

'She'll be too busy to miss us,' I add. 'Mum and Dad are going to need extra help for my jobs, and then she'll have to look after Kit, too.'

'Kit?' asks Finn.

Chloe and I exchange a look.

'It's all right, Chlo, I think you can tell him. He won't share.'

'Kit's a kitten. Mum and Dad found her near the composter. I waited nearby for the mother to return. After two days, there was no sign, and Kit was starving. We couldn't just let her die.'

Finn sucks air in over his teeth. 'Keeping a pet. That's an offence, Miss Chloe. I hope you like prison food.'

Chloe giggles.

'Mum says when she was little everyone had pets.'

'I guess one more animal round your house isn't exactly going to stand out,' adds Finn, grinning, 'even if pets *are* illegal.'

He glances at his port-watch, then leaps up, banging his head on the roof.

'I really *really* have to pack, or else I'll be turning up in the clothes I'm wearing and nothing else,' he says, rubbing the top of his head.

'Look after everyone, Chloe.' He bends to give her a hug. 'Bye, Jess.' He puts his arms around me and squeezes. His messy brown hair is the last thing I see as he climbs down the ladder. 'Send me messages!' he calls up.

'I will!' Chloe stares at the hole through which Finn disappeared moments before. She lifts the lid from the largest wooden box and places the package gently inside, then turns towards the rope ladder and follows Finn down.

My port-watch vibrates. The word MUM flashes on the screen.

'We're coming!' I say to my wrist, before Mum can speak.

I clamber down as fast as I can in oversized wellies, then tug the rope, raising the ladder above the canopy, out of sight.

When I turn round, Chloe is already ten metres away, running through the field.

'Chloe, slow down!' I shout. I feel a thrill of fear in my stomach.

Morning sun slices through the trees, scattering sparkles across the dewy grass. I stomp after her, running as fast as my wellies allow.

'Let me catch you up!' I call, trying to think of a way to make her stop.

Finn's parcel or the sunshine or both seem to have filled her with a new kind of energy.

She reaches the brow of the hill, and begins to slow. I run alongside and reach for her hand.

'Walk with me for a bit?' I pant. 'I accidentally put Mum's wellies on and they're way too big for running.'

We walk side by side. My breathing gradually slows, but Chloe's does not. I glance over. Her face is white, her lips pale. We are only halfway to the house. I try not to panic.