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Opening extract from

Eco-Worriers: Tree Trouble

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Chapter One

WHUMMP! With one massive sideways thwack from her pillow, Evie fells me like a tree across my bed. I am laughing too much to get up again, so she brings down the pillow with a soft thwump on my shoulder, and collapses, giggling, on the bed beside me.

Evie and I like to have sleepovers together – we only live two doors away from each other along Frog Street. But we are not allowed a sleepover tonight as it is the first day of the autumn term tomorrow. So instead of our usual Eco-Worriers' Night In Pillow Fight, we have just had a special Last Night of Freedom Before the Day of Doom Pillow Fight.

'I'll have to go home soon,' Evie sighs. 'Mum told me not to be late on pain of death or doing all the washing-up for a week.'

'It's not that late!' I protest. 'I could walk with you.'

We pass Mum on the landing, sorting out my school uniform.

'Is it OK if I walk Evie home, Mum?'

'Yes – but come straight back.'

I nudge Evie with my elbow. 'Stop staring!' I whisper.

'I can't help it!' Evie giggles as we make our escape. 'Your mum looks like an emo – only not as scary.'

This is true. Mum's hair has changed colour at regular intervals this year, and yesterday she dyed it jet black.

'If she starts getting piercings and wearing thick black eye-liner, I am moving OUT!' I groan.

At Evie's house, her mum and dad are sitting at the kitchen table, poring over travel brochures.

'You are sooo lucky!' I sigh. 'I wish I was jetting off to the sun at half-term. Couldn't you hide me in your luggage, or something?'

'I wish I could!' Evie exclaims, fishing two organic strawberry-and-mango smoothies out of the fridge.

'I'm sorry, Lola,' says Evie's mum, looking up from her brochure. She has the same mass of red curls as Evie, and the same green eyes. 'We thought we'd have a family holiday before Liam has to knuckle down to some serious revision. Perhaps you could come with us next time.'

'Oh, yes!' I reply, nodding. 'That would be great.'

We take our smoothies up to Evie's room. Big dark clouds have rolled across the sky, and a light drizzle is misting the window panes.

'I bet you can't wait to swap weather like this for all that sunshine!' I say, trying not to be jealous.

'You're right – I can't wait!' Evie enthuses, her eyes

shining. Then, with an unconvincing attempt to look serious, she says, 'Of course, I'm concerned about all those aeroplane fuel emissions literally sending our carbon footprint rocketing sky-high, so I'm going to plant a tree.'

I raise my eyebrows. 'Will that help?' I ask.

'Of course it will. That's what everyone does these days. If you go on a plane, you should plant trees to offset the carbon emissions, because trees reabsorb some of the CO_2 which your flight has belched into the atmosphere.'

'So if you're always going on planes, do you have to plant a whole forest?'

'Probably.'

We sip our smoothies through recyclable straws. Evie reaches the loud slurrrp at the bottom of the carton first.

'I'd better go,' I say. 'Mum told me to come straight back – I'd better not wind her up or she might put a spell on me. She already looks like she's dressed up for Halloween. Did you notice she was wearing black to match her hair?'

Evie laughs. 'Oh, come on! She doesn't look that bad!'

We pass Evie's brother, Liam, on the stairs. I can only see his dark hair as he has his nose buried in a magazine and doesn't appear to notice us.

'Since when has Liam been reading women's magazines?' I can't help asking, as we leave the house – Evie has asked her mum if she can walk me home.

'Oh, don't worry about it,' Evie replies, breezily. 'I know it's weird. But Liam's weird. He's obsessed with

some supermodel called Jadene, and there's an article about her in Mum's magazine. He's even got pictures of her on the wall in his room.'

'Airhead Amelia's always raving about Jadene,' I remark. 'She brought in loads of magazines at the end of last term and was bragging to her friends about how her mum and dad know all these celebrities, including Jadene. Then she said that she was going to be a supermodel just like Jadene when she leaves school.'

Evie snorts derisively. 'Fat chance!' she exclaims.

Neither of us likes Amelia very much, especially since her dad, David Plunkett, a successful businessman, tried to get the Ecological Gardens closed down. He wanted to buy up the land and expand his horrible Plunkett's Plastics business. Amelia and her mum, a journalist, were involved in spreading ugly rumours about the Eco Gardens. Evie and I managed to expose the Plunkett plot, and the sanctuary was saved. Amelia was furious, and now she never misses an opportunity to be mean and spiteful to us.

'It seems like ages since we helped save the Eco Gardens,' Evie says. 'But it's only been a few weeks. We actually got to speak to Dodo – or should I say "squeak" to her – because I was so nervous I couldn't actually speak! Did I look like a complete idiot, Lola?'

'As I've told you a hundred times, Evie – no.'

Dodo is our favourite singer, and she gave a concert at the Eco Gardens last week after Kate Meadowsweet, the principal keeper of the gardens, took up our suggestion

to invite her. The concert was sold out and raised loads of money for the Pablo Appeal to save wildlife and stop global warming.

'It was soooo cool!' I say dreamily.

We have reached my house after d-a-w-d-l-i-n-g in our usual manner between houses in order to have time to talk. We hover in the hallway, reminiscing about our exciting summer.

Mum comes out of the kitchen, and I ask her if I can walk Evie home again. She gives me a look which I interpret as 'no'. I decide that her new incarnation as a kind of emo mum has definitely made her look scarier. Evie obviously feels the same way and leaves hurriedly after saying that she will meet me in the morning as usual to walk to school.

I find Dad in the living room, watching TV. I decide to have a go at him about holidays.

'Evie's family are taking her to the Costa Fortuna Sunshine Resort for half-term,' I remark, pointedly.

To my surprise, Dad doesn't erupt like some kind of human volcano, spewing out stuff about how money doesn't grow on trees and he has bills to pay and so on – I have often thought of harnessing Dad's occasional outbursts of anger to a power generating station as a source of alternative energy – but instead he gives me a slight smile. 'I'm not promising anything,' he says, 'but you may be in for a nice surprise in the not too distant future.'

Oh, wow! Does this mean what I think it does? Sunshine Resort, here I come! I fly across the room and

give Dad the hugest of hugs.

'Oh, thanks, Dad! You're the best! And I promise I'll plant at least ten trees!'

Dad looks faintly surprised. 'Er – OK, love. Whatever you like. Only I'm not sure if we have room in the garden for ten trees. It might have to be just the one.'

'I love you, Dad!'

Upstairs in my room, I send a text to Evie to tell her the fantastic news that I may be heading in the same direction at half-term. I hope Mum and Dad decide to go to the same resort as Evie and her family. That would be so cool!

After checking that my school bag is packed ready for the morning, I prepare for bed. I like to read in bed, and particularly enjoy browsing through *Green Teen* magazine, which is packed full of fascinating articles about the planet and what can be done to help save it. The magazine now has an Eco-info box on every page with an eco-fact in it. As I drift off to sleep, my mind swims hazily in a calm blue sea off a golden coast . . . Dodo is performing on a stage on the beach . . . Evie is with me . . . We have turned into mermaids . . . *Green Teen* magazine slips from my hand on to the bedroom floor . . .

Eco-info

Carbon emissions into the upper atmosphere are three times more damaging than at ground level. Because of this, one short-haul flight contributes as much to the greenhouse effect as running a small car for three months.



Chapter Two

'I'm sooo happy you're coming on holiday, too, Lola!' Evie exclaims, giving me a hug. 'I really hope your mum and dad decide to come to the same resort!'

We are sitting in the dappled shade of the school tree, waiting for the first bell. Shrubberylands Comprehensive has only one proper tree, which stands in a tired circle of earth in the middle of the main courtyard, and there is a circular bench around its greyish trunk. Some people used to scratch their initials into the bark until the whole school was threatened with being thrown into the school dungeons if anyone dared to deface the tree again.

'There should be more trees,' Evie remarks. 'It's sad that the school has only one.'

I nod in agreement. The scruffy bushes and thorny shrubs which line the paths between the various school buildings can hardly be called trees.

'It would be nice if the school looked more like a park and less like a big redbrick prison,' I muse. 'Couldn't they

at least grow climbing roses up that awful wire mesh that fences us in? Wouldn't that look pretty?'

Evie shakes her head. 'No one cares enough,' she says. 'The place is a dump.'

Amelia swans past with her best friend, Jemima, followed by an eager gaggle of giggling hangers-on.

'It's pathetic!' I hiss. 'They all want to be Amelia's friend just because she's been bragging that her family knows some stupid celebrities!'

I don't know if she hears me say this, but she turns in our direction and, curling her upper lip slightly, lets an empty crisp packet drop to the ground.

Evie immediately leaps across the courtyard, picks up the crisp packet and says, 'There's a bin over there, Amelia. Go and put your rubbish in it.'

Amelia's eyes have narrowed to slits as I walk over to Evie. She gives us a look which is obviously meant to shrivel us on the spot. 'Go and put it in the bin yourselves, you remnants!' she snaps, spitting like an angry cobra. 'Me and the So Cool Girls don't do dirty work, do we?'

'No way, Amelia!' Jemima and the other girls chorus, obediently. Three of our friends – Cassia, Ellen and Salma – have seen what is happening and come to stand beside us, lending us their support.

Amelia tosses her long blond hair contemptuously and, with a little swagger, wanders slowly away, followed by the so-called So Cool Girls, who keep throwing us stupid backwards glances, grinning and whispering to each other.

'Why did she call us remnants?' I ask, puzzled.

'She means we're like the leftovers that no one else wants,' Evie explains. 'You know what Amelia's like. If you're someone she doesn't rate, you're nothing – you're lower than an earthworm.'

Cassia, Ellen and Salma nod in agreement.

'And she's meaner than a hyena!' Cassia says, angrily. 'I don't know why all those girls want to hang around with her!'

'Because they're all airheads, that's why,' Evie replies. If you sent them all for a brain scan, you wouldn't find any brain. That's why they hang around in a gang to make themselves look big – because they're associating with the biggest airhead of all! And Amelia has to be the centre of attention, of course.'

'I don't like gangs,' I remark. 'Gangs make people stupid. They make people do things they don't want to do. They make them all follow the leader, like stupid sheep.'

'We're not a gang, are we?' says Ellen. 'We're just friends. I would never suck up to someone just to impress them!'

'I prefer sheep to Amelia,' Evie comments. 'But she's given me an idea . . .'

'So tell me about your idea,' I say to Evie at morning break, since our earlier conversation was interrupted by some lessons. We are back under the school tree.

'I think we should greenify the school! Clean it up

and green it up! When I saw Amelia drop that crisp packet, I really saw red. And then I saw green. If you see what I mean.'

'I think so . . .'

'There are so many stupid wasteful things going on here – people dropping litter, leaving lights on, wasting water, piling up rubbish instead of recycling, wasting paper – can you think of anything that's green at this school?'

'The uniform?'

'That doesn't count. It's a yucky slime-green, anyway. No one in their right mind wears slime-green, except at Shrubberylands Comprehensive.'

'Some of the food in the canteen is green.'

'If you're referring to the mouldy sandwich I had at the end of last term, that is definitely the wrong sort of green!' Evie pulls down the corners of her mouth and makes a gagging sound. 'Pleeurgh!'

'You're right, though,' I say. 'There's certainly room for improvement around here – it would be a challenge.'

'It might even be the eco-worriers' biggest challenge ever!' Evie pronounces. 'So what are we waiting for? Let's start the war on waste. We can start by not wasting time!'

'Great!' I agree. 'But where do we start?'

We look at each other doubtfully. Then Evie's green eyes light up. 'I know!' she exclaims. 'We need a teacher to help get things going. And I know which teacher to ask . . .'

'Mr Woodsage!' we shout in unison.

'You called,' says a voice, making us both jump.

Mr Woodsage appears from round the other side of the school tree where he has apparently been sitting, eating a banana. He is a tall, thin man with little round glasses and short, stubbly hair and a beard.

'I couldn't help overhearing your conversation,' he says. 'And I think it's a great idea. This school could definitely benefit from going green.'

Evie and I are both taken aback by Mr Woodsage's sudden appearance, but pleased by his reaction. He is the most eco-minded teacher at school, and is also one of the most popular teachers, managing to make geography fun and interesting. We particularly enjoyed his lessons on climate change last term.

'Since I know how concerned you are about the environment, I wonder if you'd be interested in helping to raise money for a charity I'm involved with. It's called Tree-aid, and it aims to stop the destruction of tropical rainforests and encourage reforestation in Africa and South America. Did you know that tropical rainforests produce forty per cent of the earth's oxygen? But people are destroying rainforests at a terrifying rate – an area the size of a football pitch disappears every minute through logging, farming, prospecting for oil and other human activities. It's vital that we stop this destruction, otherwise the trees and all the creatures which depend on them will die. And if the trees aren't there to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, global warming will get much, much worse!'

Evie and I exchange horrified looks. We have already heard about the rainforests, how important they are, and how they are under threat – but Mr Woodsage has brought home to us the fact that, as committed eco-worriers, we really should be doing something about it.

'Oh!' I exclaim. 'There are so many beautiful birds in the rainforest. I can't bear to think of them losing their habitat. They might become extinct, and that would be awful!' I'm passionate about birds.

'What can we do, sir?' Evie asks. 'We'd really like to help.'

Mr Woodsage smiles. 'I'm glad I've got your support. I'll have a think and let you know what we can do for Tree-aid. In the meantime, perhaps you'd like to have a brainstorming session about ways to make the school greener. Write down your ideas, and I'll arrange a meeting with Mrs Balderdash to discuss how to translate your ideas into positive action.' Mrs Balderdash is the head teacher at Shrubberylands Comprehensive.

'Thank you, sir!' we exclaim together.

'Don't mention it,' says Mr Woodsage. 'I'm sure we'll make a good team, and hopefully we can get lots of people involved in your Clean Up and Green Up campaign – maybe even the whole school! And if you have any good ideas for helping Tree-aid, write those down as well,' he adds. 'I suppose you could call Tree-aid a "chari-tree"!'

'Very funny, sir!' OK, so it isn't the funniest joke ever, but Evie and I are thrilled to have Mr Woodsage's support, and I am determined to think of a way to help save the rainforest, as well as greenifying the school.

The bell goes and, with a cheery wave, Mr Woodsage wanders off to the next lesson, leaving Evie and me full of eco-worrier excitement and determination, tinged with a feeling of, 'Help! What do we do NOW?'

Liam walks past at a slight distance with his group of Sixth-Form friends. Liam and Evie ignore each other at school. I am used to this now, although I have to suppress a strange urge to wave wildly at Liam and call out, 'Hi, Liam! It's me – Lola!' or even worse, rush up and hug him in front of his friends. I am terrified by the possibility that one day I will lose all control and actually do this, after which I will be a social reject and no one, especially Liam, will ever talk to me again.

'Er, hello? Lola? Are you OK? You've got a strange expression on your face.' Evie is peering at me closely.

'Oh, I'm fine! Stop staring at me! We need to get to the next lesson.'

Eco-info

Rainforests are often regarded as valuable only because of the timber they provide. However, many experts believe that harvesting natural produce from the rainforests, such as fruits, nuts and oil-producing and medicinal plants, would be worth more than the timber, and wouldn't destroy the trees.

