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In the Country

Chloe was prepared for the Lowther's house to be big, but she and Jess were totally blown away when the car turned in at the open gate and pulled up outside. Jess clutched Chloe's arm. "It's *huge*!"

Despite its size, Chloe thought the house looked very welcoming in the early evening sun. It was built of soft, yellow stone, with large windows that looked out over a wide gravelled area and lawns beyond.

Mrs. Lowther stopped the car outside the wide front door and gave a contented sigh. "Home at last," she said.

Pop undid her seat belt, and leaned towards her mother. "Which rooms are Chloe, Jess and Tara having?" she asked.

"Tara can have the yellow room," said Mrs. Lowther. "And I thought Chloe and Jess might like to share the nursery."

Chloe could feel Jess looking at her but she refused to meet her gaze. She didn't want anyone in the Lowther family to realize that she and Jess might not be overly enthusiastic about sleeping in a nursery! The yellow room sounded much more sophisticated.

They carried their bags into the large hall, which had dark, polished floorboards, and doors opening off in several directions. In front of them rose the stairs, and Pop eagerly led the way. "Come on!" she said. "If we hurry we can get you settled before it's time for dinner."

They saw Tara's room first. It was quite small, but beautifully furnished with antique furniture that gleamed with polish. And the mottled, butter-yellow wallpaper and duvet cover were lovely. Chloe and Jess exchanged glances and Chloe knew exactly what Jess was thinking. If only they could have a room like that!

But then, once Tara had dumped her bag, Lolly led them along a short corridor and threw open another

door. Chloe gasped. One wall of the large room was taken up with a huge window. Below it was a comfy window seat, and the view, over the rear garden, was magnificent.

"Here you are," said Lolly, with a smile. "I hope you like it."

"It's a wonderful room!" said Chloe. She glanced at Jess and was rewarded with a beaming smile. Jess obviously liked it too.

The curtains and bedding glowed with bright Indian prints and weren't babyish at all. The only real evidence that it had once been a nursery was a large rocking horse with a rag doll perched on its saddle.

"Hello, Dobbin!" said Pop, hugging the spotted, wooden horse extravagantly and setting it rocking.

"And hello, Jemima," said Lolly quietly, catching the doll before it could slide to the floor.

"We keep talking about turning this into a proper guest suite, but Mum has never got round to it," said Lolly.

"It's perfect, just as it is," said Chloe. "And the view is fantastic!"

"And that's not all," said Pop, opening another door. "You have your own bathroom too."

The bathroom was wonderful, with two towelling bathrobes hanging up on the back of the door for them. Chloe felt as if she and Jess had just arrived at a very upmarket hotel. She wasn't at all envious of Tara now. After all, she'd have to pad along a corridor to get to her bathroom.

"Right," said Pop crisply, once they had seen the rooms. "Dinner will be in half an hour. I hope that's okay. I'm starving already."

"Me too!" said Chloe.

"We'll come and fetch you," added Lolly. "So don't worry about finding your way downstairs. We'll give you a proper guided tour after we've eaten. See you soon."

"Well!" said Jess as soon as the others had gone. She went and sat on the window seat, kicked her heels and grinned at Chloe. "This is fantastic!"

"Isn't it?" agreed Chloe. "Let's unpack. We are *so* going to enjoy our time here."



Mrs. Lowther was on the phone when the girls eventually went down for their meal. “Honestly!” she said once she’d rung off. “I asked for a pink lining in the marquee, and now they say I can only have a white one.”

“It won’t matter,” said Pop helpfully. “It means you can have lots of different-coloured flowers instead of just pink and white.”

“The marquee is for Mum’s party,” Lolly explained to Chloe and Jess as they ate. “She has one every summer.”

“And she gets totally stressed about all the tiniest details,” said Pop with a grin.

Jess laughed, but stopped and looked embarrassed when Mrs. Lowther gave Pop a disapproving look.

“We mustn’t forget to give you three a tour of the house,” Lolly said, neatly changing the subject.

“Oh yes,” Pop agreed at once. “We’ll show you downstairs first, and end up in our bedrooms.”

As soon as they'd finished eating together in the kitchen, Chloe, Jess and Tara followed the twins into the hall. Pop whisked them all over the house, chattering gaily as she went. After visiting the dining room with its huge polished table, the drawing room, their father's study, and the morning room, Pop led the way upstairs. They didn't bother with all the bedrooms. "They're all pretty similar really," she said dismissively. "But come and see the attic rooms."

At the top of the house it was like another world. Here, the ceilings sloped and the stairs were much narrower. But there were several rooms. "Years ago, houses like this had live-in servants," explained Lolly. "And they must have all lived up here."

The rooms were simply furnished, but looked comfortable enough to Chloe.

"Just think about the winters though," said Pop. "We've got central heating up here now, but it must have been freezing for them a hundred years ago. They wouldn't even have had warm water to wash in, unless they lugged it up the stairs!"

"Come on. We haven't got to our rooms yet," Lolly reminded Pop.

"Let's go there now," said Pop, closing the door of an attic room and heading for the stairs. "We kept the best for last!" She shot them a grin as she started down the narrow staircase.

"Wow!" Jess was seriously impressed by the Lowther twins' suite of rooms. Pop and Lolly had a big bedroom each, with connecting doors that led to a shared sitting room. It was a comfortable place, with easy chairs and a table large enough to do homework on or even to eat at. There was also a shared bathroom and next to that, another large room, fitted with floor-to-ceiling mirrored doors.

When Lolly opened the doors Jess gasped again. "And this is where we keep our clothes," Pop explained.

Lights came on inside, and the girls could see rails of clothes, with an aisle between them, and a large mirrored wall at the far end. There were also rows of pull-out baskets for tops, underclothes and shoes. The whole room was filled to bursting, and most of the

baskets were a jumble of clothes, that spilled over onto the carpeted floor.

"It's a vast walk-in wardrobe," said Chloe admiringly. "It's bigger than my whole bedroom at home!"

"You can see why Mum wants us to have a clear-out," said Lolly ruefully. "It's our major task this holiday, now we've finished our modelling jobs."

Tara had been pretty quiet during the guided tour, but now she had something to say. "Well, if you plan on sorting clothes while I'm here, I'll go and do some songwriting," she said. "I brought my acoustic guitar, just in case I had some spare time."

The others laughed. "Trust you," teased Pop. "But why don't you serenade us while we sort?"

"I suppose I could do," said Tara.

"And we won't do *too* much clothes sorting while you're here, Tara. Promise!"

"Don't worry," grinned Tara. "I'll survive."

"Tell us about this summer party your mum is organizing," said Chloe once they were all comfortably settled in easy chairs. "It sounds really exciting."

"It would be if our friends were allowed to come," said Pop gloomily. "I asked if you could all stay for it but Mum wouldn't agree."

"It's a shame," said Tara. "Our mums know each other quite well," she explained to Jess and Chloe. "My parents get invited to the summer party every year. But I'll have to go and stay with my granny while they party. It would have made much more sense to stay here."

"Wouldn't it!" said Pop. "It's not fair. Mum expects us to be there, and she gets an amazing guest list of people coming, but none of them is anywhere near our age. And after a group of musicians let them down a few years ago she's insisted on hiring a terrible disco ever since."

"Well we think it's terrible," added Lolly. "But her friends seem to like it."

"It's a shame she won't use real musicians," said Tara.

"Why doesn't she use Rockley Park pupils as entertainers?" asked Jess.

Everyone stared at her, but no one said anything and she blushed. “Sorry!” she apologized. “What do I know? Of course it’s a silly idea.”

“No it’s not,” said Lolly. “Actually, it’s not.”

“I can’t believe we haven’t thought of it before,” said Pop, her eyes shining.

“Hang on though. We did suggest we do a catwalk show a few years ago, and she hated the idea,” said Lolly.

“But that *was* ages ago,” protested Pop. “And it wasn’t music. We’re much older now. And think! We’ve got Chloe and Tara here already. If we got the boys along as well we’d have a great band.”

“You mean have a Wizard Monkey Breath gig, here?” said Tara, looking astonished.

“Why not?” said Pop. “You could play *Sky Blue*.”

“All Mum’s friends would know the song that won the International Battle of the Bands,” said Lolly thoughtfully. “I bet her guests would be really impressed.”

The twins looked at their friends. “What do you

think? Would you like to play? It would mean staying on an extra couple of days."

Chloe and Tara stared at each other questioningly. "I don't see why not," said Tara slowly.

"But how long would we have to play for?" said Chloe. "After all, we don't have an hour's set rehearsed, or anything like!"

"But," Pop said, looking more and more excited "it wouldn't need to be just your band. We could all perform our end-of-term concert pieces. We can do those really professionally. And how about inviting Marmalade? He did a brilliant dance at the end-of-term concert. If he came too we could easily entertain the guests for an hour, or more, if they could stand it."

Pop and Lolly were grinning at each other. "It's the perfect way to get Mum to let us have our friends to the party!" laughed Pop.

Lolly turned to Jess. "How come you have such brilliant ideas?" she asked. "Three cheers for Jess!"

Chloe grinned at Jess. She felt really proud of her for fitting in so easily with the Rockley Park bunch. And to

have come up with the idea of them performing at the summer party was brilliant.

Jess's face went as pink as her hair with pleasure. "And of course," she added happily, "you've got loads of spare rooms for people to stay in." Then she caught sight of the expression on Lolly's face and her smile faded. "What's the matter?" she asked. "What's up? Did I say something wrong?"