

## Chapter 17

‘Let’s go down to the basement again’, said Clara excitedly, remembering the fun they had had the previous week, with JoJo and Ned.

‘Sorry’, said her brother, ‘chores to do. We have nothing to eat, we need to go shopping’.

Freddy was usually the responsible one. He looked at her a little sternly, then smiled when he saw the disappointment on her face.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll go to MegaMart, you always like it there’.

It was true, Clara loved that place. The whole experience of going there was exciting, the journey, the sheer size of the store, and the amount of stuff they had there. She cheered up.

‘I’ll make a list’, she said enthusiastically, skipping over towards the fridge.

Now it was true that the fridge had not been opened in nearly a week. They had been to stay at Ned’s mansion house following the treasure hunt, and had not returned until the previous evening. Even Clara, who was game for most things, approached the door with a little trepidation. She put her hand on the handle of the big double-door fridge, and pulled. Nothing. Stuck fast. She pulled again. A sticky creaking noise. Still stuck.

‘FREEMAN!’, she yelled.

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Freddy had gone down to the basement to get a bag for the shopping.

‘Coming’, he shouted back up the stairs, ‘don’t worry’.

He was proud of the way he looked after his little sister. She looked up to him, and he responded by making sure she was happy and safe. They were inseparable, always playing the same games, doing similar things, sharing similar friends. Of course there were arguments, but whenever she was lonely, or scared, or worried about something, he was there for her.

The big house frequently scared her. Because of its mainly wooden construction, it was always creaking and groaning and moving just a little, and at night she would often go to sleep thinking that something was there, or someone was coming.

As he tramped up the stairs from the basement, he thought of these noises too, as his boots crashed up each step of the wooden staircase.

Half way up, he heard a scream.

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‘Aaaagggghhhh!’. She screamed again.

‘What’s up, sis?’, he replied nonchalantly, as he reached the door to the kitchen.

‘Look!’

She had managed to prise open the door of the fridge. But she had regretted it immediately.

The top shelf, which usually stored the dairy products, was now covered with a whitish grey goo, which was slowly dripping from some of the rungs of the shelf.

It was dripping down onto the second shelf, where two sausages, left for nearly two weeks, had developed a nasty green/grey fur on them. Next to them, a chicken carcass was lying mournfully on its side. Two large brown caterpillars were gnawing enthusiastically at a leg.

At the bottom of the fridge, where the vegetables used to be, was a green slodge, part-liquid and part-solid. Swimming in the mess were a little family of green frog-like creatures. Just a bit darker in colour than the slodge, they swam away towards the back when the door was opened, then turned, each raising a little green paw in the air, before diving beneath the surface. A few seconds later, the lead creature re-emerged at the front of the lake, raised a paw in the air again, and spoke, or rather sang,

*It’s much too late*

*We are your fate*

*Because you missed*

*The sell by date*

‘It’s definitely time for chores’, laughed Freddy, shutting the door quickly. As he did so, there was a whirring from the ice-making machine built into the fridge’s door, and a stream of ice-cubes spat out of the dispenser, knocking Clara to the ground, and half-burying her in a mountain of freezing ice.

‘Right, time to clean the fridge, sis!’ Freddy ran over to the sink and started to prepare a large bowl of hot water and detergent.

As he worked, grunting occasionally at the smell and yelling out as one of the green creatures latched onto his thumb, Clara started making out a list of what they would need for the next week.

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Clara waited outside at the bus stop. As the stop was directly beside the house, she could wait until it was in sight before calling for Freddy.

‘It’s here!’, she yelled back to the open front door. Freddy pulled off the rubber gloves he had been wearing, and sprinted out to the bus. He jumped on just as it was pulling away. He and Clara ran upstairs. The top deck was empty so they settled in the front seat as they always did.

As they looked down, they could see the long, sleek shape of another bus going in the opposite direction. This was not an ordinary town bus like the one they were on, but a silver bullet shaped vehicle, heading out of town. They knew not where. This was the bus that had taken them to Bruinlarroch in January, to the mysterious party and the peat bogs. The one that had flown at six hundred miles an hour.

The bus they were on could not have been more ordinary. Plying its trade between their village of Bishop's Bottom, and the town of Frogsmere, it took about half an hour to make the journey to town, and another five minutes in town, making its way over to the MegaMart. It only stopped once on the way, in the suburb of Nohope. They looked out as they approached the stop.

Standing at the stop were the usual array of travellers, no doubt involved in the same daily shopping routine.

Two mothers, nattering urgently, with babies in prams.

Two more, with toddlers straining to escape from their clutches.

An old man holding a guitar.

And three elderly ladies supported by a variety of different appliances – one with a walking stick, one with a zimmer frame, and one sitting on a red motorised buggy.

As the bus pulled in to the stop, the little throng made its way forward. Freddy turned away from the window, and returned to reading through the list that Clara had bought with her.

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After a minute or so, they looked out again, because the bus seemed to be taking a long time to set off.

*'You can't bring that thing on here, love, sorry'.*

The words were from the driver directly below them.

*'Don't you tell me what I can and cannot do, young man'*

*'I'm just telling you that company policy is that we cannot take buggies on board our buses'*

*'Company policy! Company policy! I've had more company policies than you've had hot dinners! Don't be sharp with me young man'*

*'It's not coming on'.* The driver was resolute.

*'Fine, but just wait. You will regret this. What's your name? I said, "what's your name?"'. She sounded very angry.*

*'Andy',* replied the bus driver politely.

*'Sandy! Sandy! What sort of a name is that? You young people, I don't know...'*

They watched from above as the lady pulled her buggy back from the door. She reached into the bag behind her and pulled out a large black coat which she proceeded to put on. Reaching back again, she took out what looked like a motorbike helmet. Across the front was written in flame red, *'Born to Ride'*.

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The bus started on the five-minute ride to Mega-Mart.

*'Upstairs, Marjorie?'*

*'Upstairs, Phyllis'.*

Clara and Freddy turned round.

Coming up the stairwell were the two ladies who had just boarded. The first one used the handle of her walking stick to pull herself up. The second one was carrying her frame above her head.

'Hey, what've we got here, Phyllis?', said the zimmer lady, looking at Freddy and Clara in the front seats. Freddy looked round, to see who they might be talking to, but the top deck was still empty.

'Looks like someone's in our seats', said the first lady. Freddy looked around again, at the rows of empty seats ranging right to the back of the bus.

They looked as the two old ladies, both quite obviously in their seventies, stood staring at them from the stairwell. They were both similarly dressed, wearing smart tweed suits in a pinky red colour. Both were wearing leather motorcycle jackets. Both were wearing long lace-up leather boots. Lady number one dropped her frame. As she bent down to pick it up, they could make out the same words *'Born to Ride'* picked out in studs on the back of her jacket.

'Well, are you going to move, or not?' demanded zimmer lady.

'Erm, no, we were just sitting here', Freddy replied politely.

'Well, we've just got on',

'Ah, yes, I know that,'

*'Daft old bat! What did you call me?'*

'I said "I know that", I didn't call you anything'. Freddy sat still.

Walking stick lady jumped over two sets of seats to get closer. One of her support stockings slipped down revealing her pasty white skin underneath. She sat in the seat just behind them.

'If you don't move now, you'll regret it', she said, as zimmer-lady marched down the aisle,

frame held menacingly above her head.

'I advise you not to mess with us, young man'.

'OK, OK, we're moving'. Freddy beckoned Clara to follow. As they passed, walking stick gave Freddy a whack on the leg with her stick.

*'Ner, young people, eh!'* she muttered to her companion as they sat down.

Clara giggled as they made their way to the back, and were flung into their seats as the bus turned a corner.

Looking out of the window at the back, they could see in the distance a small figure on a buggy, head down, scarf flying out from under a black helmet, on two wheels as she chased the bus round the corner.

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