



Stop the car!”

“What?” Dad swivels around in his seat. The car swerves.

“Good grief, Tom!” Mom squeals, gripping her armrest as she pulls a wad of tissues out of her purse.

“Stop the car!” I repeat. It’s going to be too late in a minute. I grab the tissues and shove them over Craig’s mouth.

Dad pulls over just in time, and Craig lurches out of his seat, runs to the side of the road, and doubles over.

The car stinks for the rest of the trip.

I sniff pointedly. “Mmm, get a load of that fresh country air.”

“I didn’t even do it in the car, Jenni,” Craig mumbles as I open my window and stick my head out.

Welcome to the Green family vacation. Green by name, green by nature, if my little brother's face is anything to go by. Mom's isn't much better, either. But then she is eight months pregnant, so she's got an excuse at least — especially when Dad's behind the wheel.

Honestly, I could predict this journey with my eyes closed. It's the same every year. An hour of Dad driving too fast around the bendy back roads, during which Mom will ask him to slow down at least ten times and Craig will puke at least once, followed by three hours of crawling up the highway with ten trillion other families who have suddenly realized there's only one more week of summer vacation left.

Then we'll arrive at our time-share, which will look exactly the same as it does every year, and exactly the same as all the other condos at Riverside Village: big open-plan living room and kitchen, both beige and cream, both spotlessly clean and tidy. No dirty stains on the brown leather sofa. No finger marks on the TV. Microwave, toaster oven, dish rack, fruit bowl. Everything labeled and sitting neatly in its place, checked off in the Guest File. In the place it's been when we've come into the condo on the last Saturday of August every year, ever since I can remember.

But we like it like that. That's the thing about my

family. We like order; we like to be in the right place at the right time. We don't like surprises or change very much. I guess that's why we have a time-share — so we know exactly what to expect. Same thing every year. I could even tell you which leaves will have started to turn red. It's always the same ones. Every year.

“Perfect,” Dad says with a satisfied nod as he pulls into the parking lot. “Fourteen hundred hours.” Which is two o'clock for normal people. The exact time we're allowed into the condo.

“Right on time,” Mom says with a smile. “Well done, darling.”

That's what they like to be, my mom and dad. Right on time.

There's a strange comfort as we unpack the car and settle in. It's sort of like when winter comes and you dig out those big fluffy sweaters that you haven't thought about all year but you suddenly remember you love, and you're glad you've got the chance to wear them again.

There's a huge TV in the middle of the living room that swivels all the way around, so you can watch it from anywhere in the room. And there's a bed that folds out from the wall, which you'd never notice

unless you knew it was there; it's like something you'd see in a James Bond movie. Not that we ever use it—but just knowing it's there feels exotic and mysterious. And there's always a tray of candy on the table to welcome you. I let Craig dive into the candy while I take my bags to the room we share so I can get the best bed by the window.

I hate sharing a room with Craig. For one thing, he snores and grunts all night, and I have to creep around in the dark when I come to bed so I don't wake him up. And then he babbles about all sorts of nonsense in the morning, telling me about his dreams of monsters made from jelly. And for another —

“Watch out, sis.”

Right on cue, the little monster barges in, plonks his backpack on the other bed, and starts pulling out its contents.

Approximately thirty seconds later, his bed and half the floor space are completely buried under a pile of clothes, a small mountain of LEGOs, five packs of candy, three pairs of dirty sneakers, and about fifty model cars, buses, and tractors.

“Done!” he says, shoving his backpack under the bed and folding his arms.

“Done?” I say. “Done what?”

“Unpacked,” he says simply. He grabs a handful of LEGOs and heads for the door.

Once he’s gone, I stare at the bomb site he’s left behind and take a deep breath.

Like I said, I *hate* sharing a room with Craig.

I guess I’m quite mature for my age. Everyone says so. “Twelve going on twenty,” my dad says. I’m the oldest in my class at school and the oldest child in the family. Sometimes it gets a bit annoying always having to be the older, sensible one—but I suppose that’s just how I am.

There’s a *thump-thump-thump* along the hallway, and Craig appears in the room again.

He grabs another handful of LEGOs, then rifles through various jean pockets till he finds a bag of candy left behind goodness knows how many eons ago. He picks a lemon ball from the bag and hands it to me. While I’m looking at it and wondering exactly where it’s been, he unwraps a chewy lollipop for himself.

“What goes ‘Ha-ha, bonk’?” he reads from the wrapper.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“A man laughing his head off.”

There’s a pause as he lets the joke digest. A second later, he falls forward on his bed and guffaws in his

inimitable half-choke/half-hyena giggle that I can't help smiling at, despite my irritation.

That's the thing with Craig. He's the only person who really annoys me, the only one who can make me want to scream with frustration, but then sometimes he can make me laugh so much I cry. The only other person who can do that is Autumn. She's the funniest person in the world and the brightest and smartest and all-around fabulousest! And she's my best friend!

Dad pokes his head around the door. "Fancy a walk, Jenni bear?"

"Yeah, why not?" I reply, wincing slightly at the pet name he's had for me since I was about three. I haven't got the heart to ask him not to use it; he'd be all hurt, and that would be even worse than being called baby names.

I put the last of my clothes into a drawer and shove my backpack into the closet. On the way downstairs, I pull my hair into a ponytail with a scrunchie. It's driving me crazy—it falls all over my face in loopy ringlets if I don't pull it back.

"Depriving us of your lovely curly locks again?" Dad says with a wink as I join him and Mom in the living room. If they had their way, I'd let it grow

down to my knees, but I'm determined to get it cut, once I can persuade them it's not the end of the world. They're scared it'll be the start of a slippery slope. I've tried to explain that a change of hairstyle doesn't automatically lead to two-inch-thick makeup, multiple piercings, and a tattooed neck, but they're not convinced yet. So I just smile and discreetly pull my scrunchie a little bit tighter.

Craig is sprawled out on the living-room floor, making an incredibly complex-looking robot out of LEGOs. Mom's propped up on the sofa with a magazine and a cup of tea.

"Take it easy," Dad says, reaching over to kiss her forehead and pat her eight-months-pregnant tummy.

He ruffles Craig's hair on his way across the room. "See you later, kid," he says. Craig doesn't look up. He's concentrating too hard on the robot, his tongue poking tightly out the side of his mouth.

Dad takes my hand while we walk along the gravelly path. I stop myself from pulling away and reminding him that I'm not five years old. Instead, I let him hold it for a minute, and then pretend I have to scratch my neck so I can let go.

We walk past the second building of the complex. Together with ours, it's the modern part of Riverside

Village. These two buildings were added on only about ten years ago. The other two buildings have been here for nearly a hundred years. One of them, the reception building, is ahead of us, an elongated cottage with a thatched roof and bushy green ivy all over the walls. Autumn's building is across the way from reception and the grandest of the lot. Autumn's family has one of the fancy condos on the second floor. They were updated at the same time that our building was added, and they all have huge bedrooms, massive terraces, and Jacuzzis in all three bedrooms!

We're just walking between the two buildings when the sound of a loud horn behind us nearly makes me jump out of my skin. I spin around to see a red Porsche roaring toward us.

"Autumn!" I run over to meet Autumn and her family as they pull up in the parking lot.

Autumn waves madly from the tiny backseat, where she and her little brother, Mikey, are both scrunched up with their knees practically behind their ears, suitcases on their laps, and most of the window space taken up with bags.

Autumn's dad is an artist, and her mom is the manager at the gallery where he sells his work. He bought the car as a present for himself when they sold one



of his paintings for a whopping amount. He wouldn't tell us how much it went for, but Mrs. Leonard said it could have bought them a new kitchen. So that was what he bought as *her* present when they sold the next painting!

Autumn's parents are totally fabulous. It's always crazy at their house. Lots of people are always coming by to visit, and her parents are always throwing dinner parties and having loud conversations where everyone talks at once, and no one ever tells Autumn or Mikey it's time for bed, and Autumn gets to do things like bake bread and paint on the walls. We even helped her dad make cocktails once for a party they were having. That was so cool. Bright red-and-green drinks, and we served them to all their artist friends in glasses that we frosted with pink sugar.

Their house always smells of incense that they've brought back from some exotic vacation. I feel like I'm on vacation myself when I'm over there. It's so different from our house. Nothing changes from one day to the next at home, and nothing's ever a mess. Although I kind of like that, too. At least you know where you are.

I guess Autumn's folks must like having at least one week of the year where life is a bit more ordered.

I can't think of any other reason why they'd come to Riverside Village—except to see us, of course! Although I don't understand that one, either. Sometimes I wonder why Autumn would want me as her best friend. I'm nowhere near as interesting as she is. Whenever I tell her that, she just laughs and says I'm being stupid and we're best friends forever. And even though I still don't get why she chose me, I know it's true. She'd never lie to me.

Mrs. Leonard peels herself out of the car and smiles at me. "Hello, Jenni love," she says. "How's your mom?" She comes over and kisses me on both cheeks.

"She's fine," I say, blushing at the exotic greeting. "She's back at the condo with Craig."

"Putting her feet up for once," Dad adds.

Autumn's mom and my mom are best friends, too. While Autumn and I were splatting paint at each other and sharing books way back in kindergarten, our moms were swapping recipes and gossiping about our teachers outside on the playground. Dad and Mr. Leonard have become friends as well.

Autumn and Mikey tumble out of the car. Mikey doesn't look up from the video game he's more or

less attached to. Autumn runs around the car to me, red hair flying.

"Jenni!" she yells, and we fling our arms around each other and jump up and down.

Mr. Leonard gets out of the car and gently closes the door behind him. "Watch the car, girls," he says, warding us away from his pride and joy. He reaches out to shake Dad's hand and nods over at us. "Wouldn't think this pair only saw each other yesterday, would you?" he says with a smile.

"*Yesterday?*" Dad replies in mock horror. "But that's a whole *day* ago. That's practically a lifetime!"

"Ha-ha, very funny," Autumn retorts. "For your information, there are a *million* things Jenni and I need to share since yesterday. Aren't there, Jenni?"

I giggle and grin at Autumn. "At *least* a million," I say. "Maybe even a million and a half."

"Well, they'll all have to wait because I need a hand with these," Mr. Leonard says as he pulls the last of their suitcases out of the car.

I stare at the pile of matching designer suitcases next to the Porsche.

"How on earth did you get it all in?" I ask.

Autumn beams at me. "It's a clown car!" she says,

her eyes glinting with mischievous delight. She does a silly walk while humming circus music.

Mikey looks up for the first time. “A clown car?” he says. “Where?”

Mrs. Leonard strokes his cheek. “Your sister’s joking, sweetheart,” she says. “It’s not a clown car. It’s a Porsche. Otherwise known as a middle-aged man’s midlife crisis.”

Mikey screws his nose up and looks at his sister. “What’s that?” he says.

Autumn smiles affectionately at her brother. “Just boring grown-up stuff. Nothing for us to worry about, kid,” she says, ruffling his hair.

Mikey shrugs off the ruffle and goes back to his game.

“Little brothers,” she says with a dramatic sigh. “Don’t you just love them?”

She’s joking, but I know she means it, really. Mikey brings out Autumn’s love and protectiveness like no one else can, just like Craig does with me. We love them to death—but we wouldn’t tell them in a million years!

Mikey’s two years older than Craig, so they’re not best friends or anything, but they hang out a bit when we’re here, which makes Craig feel very grown-up.

Although “hanging out” might be a slight exaggeration. It’s generally a case of Mikey sitting around playing his latest video game and Craig being given the privilege of watching. But it works for them.

“OK, come on,” Dad says, reaching for my hand and pulling me away. “Let’s leave so they can unpack. I’m sure the million and a half things can last till later. See you guys at the welcome meeting?”

The welcome meeting is when the Riverside Village people tell us what activities there will be during the week. There’s a little movie theater inside the reception building where they show a different film every night, and there are always lots of other things going on every day: everything from bird-watching to hot-air balloon rides.

“Absolutely!” Autumn’s parents say in unison.

Autumn jumps to attention and salutes. “Aye, aye, Cap’n. See you there,” she says, and blows me a kiss as she runs off to help her parents with their bags.

I can’t help wondering what crazy activity Autumn will rope me into at this year’s welcome meeting. She always tries to drag me off on some zany trip—and I usually end up going. I can’t imagine saying no to Autumn over anything. I think it’s got something to do with the gleam in her eyes and the smile on her face.

You always know that if she suggests something, it'll probably be half crazy, half goofy, but one hundred percent better than anything else—as long as you do it with her. She could even make bricklaying seem exciting! Don't ask me how; she just could.

If it wasn't for Autumn, I'd avoid any of the adventure trips. I prefer to visit museums. I know that sounds boring, but I don't think it is. Museums open my mind, and my imagination runs away with itself. All those old objects and strange artifacts make me think about all the people who used them and wonder what their lives were like.

And Dad usually drags us out on at least two mammoth walks while we're here. Walking is Dad's big thing. That and writing. He's—well, he'd say he's a writer, but that's just because he's been going to this creative-writing class and the teacher told them they all have to call themselves writers. She says that's the first step. Personally, I'd have thought the first step would be putting words to paper, but that's just my opinion.

He's really a math teacher. Assistant head of math at the same school I go to! How embarrassing is *that*? Actually, sixth grade wasn't too bad. I wasn't in his

class, and as long as I never get him as my homeroom teacher, I don't mind *too* much. Mom's a therapist at the university in the next town. She doesn't talk much about her work—she pretty much pleads the Fifth every time someone asks her anything about it.

Dad and I take a walk beside the river. A great big swan and two fluffy brown cygnets are paddling in the water, swept along sideways by the rush of the current. It's flowing by faster than I've ever seen it.

"The river's high," Dad says swinging my arm as we walk.

"It's in a hurry," I say.

Dad stands back from me and stares for a second. "That's good," he says. "I like it." Then he gets out his notebook and scribbles down what I said. You have to be careful around Dad. When he's in one of his "creative" moods, pretty much anything you say could get jotted down and saved up for the day he writes his best-selling novel.

I say "novel." What it really is, if we're honest, is a notebook that he's had for years, stuffed with scraps of paper and napkins where he's scribbled tiny half-ideas and the odd line of poetry.

He says that's the mark of a real novelist, the fact that he carries this notebook around. I've tried telling him the mark of a real novelist is a real novel, but he just closes his eyes and smiles to himself in that way that means he knows the real truths about life and I'll understand when I'm older.

I write, too, but only in my diary. I've never shown it to anyone. I'd die before doing that, although I sometimes read snippets to Autumn. She always points out hidden meanings in what I've written, picking up on every little thing to tell me something about myself that I hadn't noticed when I wrote it. She makes me sound much more interesting than I really am!

Autumn doesn't keep a diary. She wouldn't have the patience. Everything she does has to involve moving, preferably outside, even when it's raining. She can't bear to sit still. She goes rock climbing with her dad and takes a weird dance class that a friend of her mom's runs. She's tried to get me to go to it with her, but I can't dance. I've tried, but I just freeze up. I turn so stiff, I feel as though I'm wearing a suit of armor.

You might be wondering what exactly we have in common. I do, too, sometimes. But it's as if we're



two different halves of one whole or something. I can talk to her about absolutely anything, and she's the same with me. We never get bored of each other's lives. We share everything—every last detail.

Dad and I stand watching the water foam and fight as it rushes to get under the bridge. A couple of boys in sneakers and shorts climb onto the wall, and we watch them prepare to jump into the swirling water.

"I tell you," Dad says, shaking his head as the first boy splashes loudly into the water, "if either of you kids ever thinks about doing that—"

"Don't worry, Dad," I say, laughing. "I wouldn't dream of it!" We have the same conversation every year. How he even thinks I might consider it, I don't know.

"GERONIMO!" Another splash as the next boy pounds into the river.

I shudder as we move on, down to the weir. One year we'd had a really hot summer, and the weir had completely dried up. You could see a wall running across the river, only a tiny layer of water covering it up. Autumn skipped across it and dared me to do the same.

I tried to say no, but like I said, Autumn doesn't really do "no." In the end, she held my hand and practically dragged me across. I clutched her hand so tightly, she had red marks from my nails in her palm for a week.

It felt amazing once we got to the other side, so I was glad she'd insisted—as I usually am. I'd never do something like that of my own accord, though. Never in a million years. It's not that I'm a complete wimp. It's just that, well, it's dangerous! It might *look* safe, but you never know what's underneath or how slippery it is, or if the river will suddenly change and you'll get washed away and knocked unconscious on the rocks below. Too risky by half, and the Green family doesn't do risky.

We like things to be ordered, safe, predictable. That's why we come here. It's *always* predictable here. At least it always has been up to now.



Dad points to the mist swirling above the weir as we pick our way across moss-covered rocks. The water's crashing down so hard, we have to shout to hear each other. It's like Niagara Falls.

"Not surprising after all the rain we've had this summer!" Dad yells in my ear.

I stand back as some of the spray splashes a rock below us. "Let's go back!" I shout.

We pass Mr. Andrews, one of Dad's friends, on the way back to the condo. I study the woods on the other side of the river as they chat. Row after row of tall, sturdy trees—they look proud and aloof, as if they know more than we do. They've seen it all. The leaves on a group of them have turned red. The same

trees every year, just one small section of the woods. How do they do it? How do they know?

“Come on, cupcake.” Dad nudges me, and I give Mr. Andrews a quick wave and an embarrassed smile as we set off. Will Dad *ever* realize I’ve grown out of his pet names? Will I ever have the heart to tell him?

We go into the rec center so Dad can book a squash court for him and Mr. Andrews. He never plays squash except when we’re here; I don’t know why he bothers. I watched a bit of his game once. He’s really thin and spindly. He looked like a spider on ice, slipping about all over the court, crashing into walls, and coming away purple with bruises. Mr. Andrews had hardly built up a sweat.

Dad books the court for tomorrow afternoon and then stops to talk to the receptionist. I look around the shop while they talk. There’s a rack of tiny workout clothes and skimpy swimsuits and six shelves of chocolates and candy. I’ve never quite understood how these go together.

“Just a little surprise for your mom,” Dad says, linking his arm through mine as he pockets a gift card for a facial.

It’s their wedding anniversary tomorrow. Fifteen years. They still get all gooey about each other, and

they hardly ever argue. They bicker sometimes, of course. But only as much as anyone's parents and about a hundred times less than Autumn's. *Their* arguments are like volcanic eruptions. One minute they're so laid-back they're practically lying down, and the next they're at each other's throats. Autumn says it's because they're artists. It's the creative temperament.

"If I could have your attention, please." Mr. Barracrough taps the side of his glass with a spoon, and the room gradually quiets down. Mr. Barracrough's the manager here. He's really tall, with a wavy mop of gray hair and blue eyes that always seem to shine without sparkling, if that makes sense.

He wears sharp suits and always has his shirt collar turned up. I think he looks like a cross between an old rock star and a really cool principal.

Everyone's at the welcome meeting, looking up at him and waiting to hear about the week's goodies. Well, everyone except Autumn's family. They aren't here yet—but that's no surprise. They're late to everything. I think they like to make an entrance.

Mom looks at the drinks and raises her eyebrows. "Champagne this year. What's that about?" She pats

her stomach. "Shame I can't have any," she says. I grab three cups of orange juice for her, Craig, and myself as Dad helps himself to a glass of champagne and downs half of it in one gulp.

Mr. Barraclough has started talking again. "So, as this is my last year, I thought we'd do it up," he says.

"Bit young for retiring, aren't you?" a red-faced man at the side of the room calls out. "Or are we paying you too much?"

"I wish!" Mr. Barraclough says, half frowning, half smiling. "No, I just thought I'd do some traveling. See some of the world beyond Riverside Village," he adds. "I'm fifty this year. Can't put your life on hold forever." Then he stares out the window and pauses. For a moment, he seems to have forgotten about all of us. The pause is just starting to feel awkward when he coughs and raises his glass with a smile that looks really sad. You'd think he'd seem a little happier about leaving his job to go traveling.

"Anyway, I hope you all settle into your condos without any problems," he says. "I'm here whenever you need me, as are my staff. Try to remember, if it's a sink you need unblocking, there's Johnny and Rita and Pete, and if you need someone to share a long drink and chat with in the bar, you've got my number."

A few people laugh while Mr. Barraclough takes a sip of his champagne. “We’ve got a whole bunch of top-notch events planned for you this week, as always,” he continues, “so please take your time to check out all the activities, sign up before it’s too late, and, most of all, have a wonderful week. Thank you.”

With that, he raises his glass and nods to a small round of applause.

Mom grabs my arm. “Come on. Let’s see what they’ve got planned.”

I grab a handful of dry-roasted peanuts and follow her to join the others crowding around a table that stretches down one side of the room. It’s covered with leaflets and brochures and sign-up forms. Dad and Craig wander over to a board at the other side of the room. It shows pictures of a local steam train. That’s another thing that happens every year. Craig’s world would be turned upside down if we didn’t have at least one ride on the steam train while we’re here.

“Look. They haven’t done a trip here before, have they?” Mom passes me a leaflet about a candle museum. “You can make your own candles,” she adds.

I study the leaflet. There are pictures of candles shaped like mermaids and fairies and trees and all sorts of things. I imagine Autumn and me making

matching candles and giving them to each other as presents. "It looks good," I agree.

Mom picks up the sign-up sheet. "They're doing a trip tomorrow afternoon. Shall I sign us up?"

"Yeah, great," I reply, glancing at the door for the twentieth time to see if Autumn's here yet.

A second later, Dad comes over, pulling Craig along by the hand. Craig's walking like a bowlegged cowboy; his pants are soaked.

"He knocked his drink over," Dad says. "I'll take him home to change. Back in a minute."

He pauses at the door to talk to someone who's just arrived. I peer around the corner. Yay! It's Autumn!

She screams my name so loud that half the room turns to see what's going on, then she runs over and squeezes me so tight that she practically knocks the wind out of me as her parents come in behind her. They're dressed in matching linen pants and bright tops: his baby blue, hers bright pink. Autumn's wearing old jeans and a red T-shirt with a white donkey in the middle. When they come in, the room changes, as though it was black-and-white before and they've flicked a switch that's turned it into color.

"Didn't you girls see each other about two hours ago?" Mom asks.



“Yeah, but we haven’t had time to catch up on the two million things we need to tell each other yet,” Autumn says.

“Two million? It was a million and a half at the last count,” her mom says with a smile.

“That was two hours ago! There’s more now!”

I laugh, but she’s right. There’s always so much I want to tell her. Just stupid things, stuff most people wouldn’t bother with but I know she’ll want to hear about.

“I suppose I know what you mean,” Mom says, kissing Autumn’s mom on the cheek and pulling her to one side while Autumn’s dad goes over to speak to Mr. Barraclough.

“Let’s see what they’ve got lined up for us, then,” Autumn says with a wink as she snatches up a handful of leaflets. “Nope, nope, nah, no way,” she says, quickly scanning each one before dropping it back down and moving along the table.

“Candles!” she snorts, throwing down the leaflet Mom and I had been looking at. “Who’d want to go and visit a candle museum? I mean, *please!*”

I don’t say anything as I shuffle some brochures on the table so she can’t see the sign-up sheet—and I turn away so she doesn’t see my pink cheeks, either.

Suddenly, Autumn's pulling on my arm and jiggling up and down like a toddler. "Look at this, Jenni," she says.

It's a brochure for an outdoor adventure park in a village about ten miles away.

"We've got to go!" Autumn says. "Listen to this. They do rock climbing, rappeling, hiking, all sorts of things."

I *knew* she'd try to talk me into something like this. "I don't know," I murmur, playing for time. I mean I know it generally feels great *after* I've done some scary stunt that Autumn's persuaded me is a good idea—but that doesn't mean I'm desperate for the next one. "Rappeling? Rock climbing? Don't those involve heights?" I ask nervously. "I mean—don't you think it could be a bit dangerous?"

"And horseback riding! That's it—we're going!" Autumn bursts out, instantly clicking her teeth and jumping around me, trotting like a horse. "Remember the wooden horses we had in first grade, Jen?"

We'd persuaded our parents to buy us matching hobbyhorses, and we used to trit-trot *everywhere* on them. We pretended we were cowgirls out on the plains hunting for long-lost treasure.

I laugh. "Mm, but like you say, we were in first

grade—and they *were* wooden. No danger of having one of them trample on your feet!”

Autumn stops trotting and turns to look for her mom. She’s standing in the middle of the room, her hand on my mom’s stomach, smiling as they talk.

“What’s going on?” I ask as we join them.

“He kicked,” Mom says, beaming.

“He?” Mrs. Leonard asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, we don’t know for sure,” Mom says, “but he feels like a ‘he’ to me. Feel the kick on those legs, and tell me we haven’t got a little soccer player in there!”

I reach out to touch Mom’s stomach. A tiny *thump* pushes at my hand. It fills my heart to think there’s a little life in there. My baby brother. I can’t wait to meet him.

Autumn puts her hand next to mine. “*Awesome!*” she cries. Then she bends down and talks directly to Mom’s stomach. “Hey, Jenni’s little bro,” she says. “Please will you tell Mrs. Green that Jenni and I are going horseback riding?”

“What’s that?” her mom asks.

Autumn opens up the brochure. “Horseback riding! We’re going tomorrow!” she announces. Autumn

doesn't generally do requests. There'd be no point; no one ever says no to her.

"It's tomorrow?" I falter. "But I've just signed up for the trip to . . ." My voice trails off.

"They only do the horseback riding on Sundays," Autumn says, studying the brochure. She started riding lessons this year and thinks it's the best thing ever. I went with her once. I didn't like it all that much, even though I knew I probably should. All girls my age love horses, but I just think they're so . . . well, big! My favorite animals are generally the type you can cuddle without worrying about them standing on your feet and crushing your toes to dust. Cute fluffy ones like puppies and kittens.

"Mom, we can go, can't we?" Autumn persists.

"I don't see why not," her mom answers, looking at the times of the class. "As long as you can get a ride back. We could drop you off, but I'm booked for an aromatherapy massage later on." She turns to my mom. "Can you pick them up?"

"I thought you wanted to go to the candle museum, Jenni," Mom says.

Autumn bursts out laughing as my cheeks heat up.

"I was only doing it for you," I say quickly. "You go

with Craig. I'd rather go horseback riding." And it's true. Suddenly the idea of a candle museum sounds dull to me, too. Even if horseback riding *is* scary, if Autumn's there, I know it'll be more fun than anything else I could be doing.

And, anyway, both of us want to be together as often as possible this week since we're not going to see each other as much once we get home. We go to different middle schools. I go to the local one, while she goes to a magnet school in the next town. Autumn went through months of agony last year, trying to decide where to go. She wanted to be with me, but her dream is to be a famous artist, and everyone said that she should go there, since it's got a great art department. Even I agreed—reluctantly. And apart from missing each other, we're both really happy where we are.

We've always promised each other that it won't change anything between us and that we'll be best friends forever. So far, that seems to be the case. But now that it's the start of another year, I can't help worrying a little. I mean, you never *really* know what's going to happen, do you?

Wouldn't it be great if you did, though? If you

could just have a little glimpse of what the future holds. Just so you'd know. That would be so cool.

"All right, love. Your dad can pick you up," Mom says with a smile. "I'm sure he won't want to be dragged around a boring museum, either."

"Thanks, Mom," I say as Autumn grabs my hand and drags me off.

We pass Dad and Craig coming back in as we leave. "Don't be late," Dad calls after us. "I thought we'd all have a game of Monopoly before Craig's bedtime."

Autumn laughs as she runs outside. "Honestly, Jen. Monopoly? It's nonstop thrills with your family!" Then she pinches me, tickling me till I fall to the ground, laughing hysterically.

Two girls are walking toward us as we chase each other down the path: Christine and Sally. They've been coming here as long as we have. They're about our age, but as different from us as you can get. Both perfect and pretty, with their long blond hair and little pink handbags swinging on their arms. Their pace quickens and their smiles widen when they spot us. Correction: when they spot *Autumn*.

"Hi!" they enthuse in unison, crowding around Autumn and hardly noticing me.

"You want to hang out with us tomorrow?" Christine asks. "I've got a new straightening iron we can try out on each other, or we could go shopping or something." Both girls hold their breath while they wait for Autumn to answer. It's like being best friends with a movie star. Everyone always wants to know Autumn.

"Sorry, we're busy tomorrow," Autumn says lazily. I don't think she even realizes how much everyone craves her company. "Catch up with you later in the week maybe."

The girls try not to show their disappointment. "Cool," Sally says. "See you later."

"Bye, then!" I say pointedly as they turn away.

"Oh, see you, Jenni," Christine calls over her shoulder as an afterthought.

Autumn nudges me once they're out of sight. "Why would I want to hang out with Barbie One and Barbie Two, anyway?" she says.

"Autumn, that's mean!" I say, secretly trying not to smile as we head back down the path, away from the buildings, along the river, and across the long bridge that curves over to a field on the other side.

A bit farther up, the river opens out into its widest

stretch. It's almost a lake, virtually still and shallow. If you watch closely, you can just about see the current slinking forward.

Across the bridge, you can creep around some bushes at the very edge of the lake to a tiny rocky bay hidden around the corner. It's our secret place.

Autumn kicks off her shoes and rolls up her jeans. She splashes into the water, picks up a stone, and skips it across the lake. It bounces six times. "Oh, yes! The stone-skipping champion of the world strikes again!" she whoops.

I edge into the water behind her. It's freezing.

"So what's new?" she asks, scavenging for another flat stone. "Any gossip?"

I laugh. "Gossip? Me? *You're* the one with the exciting life!"

"That's true," she says as she flicks her stone across the lake.

"Hey!" I laugh, kicking water at her.

She bends down to splash me. Laughing and screaming, we chase each other back to the pebbly cove.

Autumn flops down on the stones. "Come on," she says, wiping her feet off with her hands before putting her shoes back on.

"But we just got here."



“Let’s go down to the weir and see how full it is.”

“It’s full. I’ve seen it.”

“Yeah, but not with me, you haven’t.”

That’s how it is with Autumn. As soon as we’re doing one thing, she’s ready to move on to something else. I follow her as she dances along the path. On the way, I tell her about Craig being sick on the way up and about the book I’m reading, and I point out the leaves that have gone red like they always do. Silly stuff, really, but there’s something about sharing things with Autumn that’s important. As though nothing’s quite real until I have.

It’s just starting to get dark when we get back to the condos. The steam train puffs through the woods across the river, letting out its comic little “Toot!” before it disappears under a bridge.

“I wouldn’t believe that train was for real if we hadn’t actually been on it,” Autumn says. “It’s like something out of a cartoon.”

“Yep. It’s definitely real,” I say, remembering last year when Craig and Mikey stuck their heads out the window and tooted at the tops of their voices, making an elderly lady jump out of her skin. I thought they’d given her a heart attack.

"It's all so organized here, isn't it?" Autumn continues. "Not like normal life."

"It's certainly nothing like *your* life!" I say with a laugh. "*Nothing's* organized at your house!"

"Don't you ever think it's not like the real world here?" Autumn grabs my arm, her eyes dancing. She hops backward as she talks. "Hey, maybe it's an alternate universe!" Her tone gets higher; her eyes become even more animated. "Or a movie! Maybe we're in one and we don't even know it! Like the one where that guy keeps living the exact same day over and over again."

"Or the one where he finds out that his whole life is really a television show?"

"That's it! *Nothing's* real up here. It's all just a TV show!" Autumn leaps behind a bush, pretending to hold a camera as she jumps out next to me, filming me as I walk along.

"Yeah, right." I laugh. "Who'd want to make a film of *me*?"

Autumn keeps filming. "Maybe you're not really you but a clone of yourself, and the real you is carrying on a parallel life somewhere else!"

A cold shiver flashes up my back and neck. What if something like that was really possible? Then I

laugh. "You've been reading too much science fiction," I say.

Autumn pretends to throw the camera over her shoulder. "You're right," she says, laughing. "Did I tell you about the book I'm reading now?"

And the conversation's forgotten as she recounts the story of a boy who lives his whole life not knowing that he's a clone of his dead brother. Creepy.

We've reached her building.

"You coming in?"

"I'd better get back," I say. "Dad'll start looking if I'm not in soon."

"See you tomorrow, then," Autumn calls as she pushes the big glass door open. "Enjoy Monopoly!" She blows me an elaborate kiss and waves as I leave.

A second later, I hear a loud clanking noise from inside, like something falling. Autumn!

I run into the foyer. It's all marble and water features. Autumn's building is different from the others: fancier and older. The elevator's on one side, next to another, older elevator that doesn't work, and there's a big arch leading to the first-floor hallway opposite. An ornate mirror hangs on the wall across from the entrance, in between a couple of other doors. One of them is open.

“Hello?” I call. “Autumn?”

No answer. She’s gone; there’s no one around, and there’s nothing out of place, either. I turn to leave, but just as I’m about to open the door, I look back to see someone coming out of the old elevator. He’s got a pile of logs in his arms, so high I can’t see his face, and an ax gripped under his elbow. Must be the caretaker.

But then I notice his hair over the top of the logs. It’s Mr. Barraclough! What’s he doing here? I mean, I know he does do a few odd jobs around the place—doesn’t mind “rolling up his sleeves,” as he puts it—but why is he taking the logs out of the elevator?

It’s one of those really old-fashioned ones with a big metal gate that you have to pull across. It’s never worked, as far as I know, and it’s just used as a storage space. The new elevator next to it works fine, so I don’t think anyone’s ever bothered to try to get it working.

“Hi,” I say from the doorway. As he glances up at me, a couple of logs fall from his arms.

“Drat,” he mutters, bending to pick them up, but dropping more in the process.

“Can I help?” I ask, hurrying to pick the logs up for him.

“Thanks.” He points to the open door. “I’m transferring all these things into that closet.”

“Why are you doing that?” I ask, stacking the logs on a shelf in the closet.

Mr. Barraclough shakes his head slowly as he returns to the old elevator for another stash. “Good question,” he says, his voice cracking slightly. Almost in a whisper, he adds, “Trying to get the old thing working, like the silly fool that I am.” He gets a wrench out of his pocket and waves it at me. “Broken wires, you see. Thought I’d have a go at fixing them. Silly,” he says with a laugh. “But you never know. It just might have . . .” His voice fades away. He doesn’t look at me as he speaks. It doesn’t even feel as though he’s talking to me.

He stands there, looking down at his feet, till I start to feel awkward. Has he lost his mind? He’s not making the slightest bit of sense.

“Um, I’d better be . . . um . . .” I point to the entrance, my voice trailing away.

Mr. Barraclough suddenly seems to remember I’m there. “Yes, of course.” He fixes a quick smile in my

direction. “Sorry. Ignore me — silly old fool. Thanks for your help. Off you go, now.”

“Right. Bye,” I say before I scurry away, wondering if perhaps he’d had a tad too much champagne at the welcome meeting. It was as though he’d slipped off into another world — sort of like he did at the meeting, too.

And I don’t know if it’s because of the sci-fi story or all those things Autumn was talking about, but the thought suddenly fires up my imagination. What if we *could* slip into another world, just by thinking about it? What if we could travel into a different dimension whenever we wanted, travel through space and time with a click of the fingers?

For a second, the idea grips me so hard, it makes my whole body twitch and prickle, and I can’t wait to share it with Autumn. But when I try to imagine putting it into words, the idea seems to dissolve and slip away from me, and a moment later, I can’t recapture it at all.

As I walk back to our condo, I laugh at myself. That’s what hanging out with Autumn does to you — makes you start believing in impossible things. I mean, fantasy worlds and different dimensions — as if!