



‘Stop the car!’

‘What?’ Dad swivels round in his seat. The car jerks into a swerve.

‘Good grief, Tom!’ Mum squeals, gripping her armrest as she pulls a wad of tissues out of her bag.

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

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

The car stinks of sick for the rest of the journey.

I sniff pointedly. ‘Mmm, get a load of that fresh country air.’

Craig pinches me. ‘I didn’t even do it in the car, Jenni,’ he mumbles under his breath as I open my window and stick my head out.

Welcome to the Green family holiday. Green by name, green by nature, if my little brother’s face is

anything to go by. Mum's isn't much better, either. But then she is eight months pregnant so she's got an excuse for feeling a bit delicate – 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 round the bendy 'A' roads, during which Mum 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 motorway with ten trillion other families who have suddenly realised there's only one more week of the summer holidays.

Then we'll arrive at our timeshare apartment which will look exactly the same as it does every year, and exactly the same as all the other apartments 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 telly. Microwave, sandwich maker, washing up rack, fruit bowl – everything labelled and ticked off in the Guest File, and sitting neatly in its place. In the place it's been when we've come into the apartment 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 timeshare apartment; 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 drive. 'Fourteen hundred hours.' Which is two o' clock for normal people. The exact time we're allowed into the apartment.

'Bang on time,' Mum says with a smile. 'Well done, darling.'

That's what they like to be, my mum and dad. Bang on time.



There's a strange comfort as we unpack the car and settle in. It's a bit like when winter comes and you dig out those big fluffy jumpers 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 telly in the middle of the room that swivels all the way round, so you can watch it from anywhere. 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 get in a James Bond film. Not that we ever use it – but just knowing it's there feels a bit exotic and mysterious. And there's always a tray of sweets on the table to welcome you. I let Craig dive for the sweets while I take my bags to the room we share, so I can get the best bed by the window.

I hate sharing 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—

'Budge up, sis.'

Right on cue, the little monster barges in, plonks his rucksack 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 Lego pieces, five packets of sweets, three pairs of dirty trainers, and about fifty model cars, buses and tractors.

'Done!' he says, shoving his rucksack under the bed and folding his arms.

'Done?' I say. 'Done what?'

'Unpacked,' he says simply. He grabs a handful of Lego bricks 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 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 year 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 corridor and Craig appears in the room again.

He grabs another handful of Lego bricks, then rifles through various jeans pockets till he finds a bag of sweets left behind goodness knows how many eons ago. He peels a lemon bonbon 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 winds me up, 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-round fabulouset! And she's my best friend!



Dad pokes his head round the door. 'Fancy a wander, 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 rucksack into the wardrobe. On the way downstairs, I pull my hair into a pony tail with a scrunchy. It's driving me mad at the moment. It falls all over my face in loopy ringlets if I don't tie it back.

'Depriving us of your lovely curly locks again?' Dad says with a wink as I join him and Mum 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 make-up, multiple piercings and a tattooed neck, but they're not convinced yet. So I just smile, and discreetly pull my scrunchy a little bit tighter.

Craig is sprawled out on the living room floor, making an incredibly complex-looking robot out of Lego. Mum'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 of 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 nose so I can let go.

We walk past the second block of the complex. Together with ours, it's the modern part of Riverside Village. These two buildings were only added on about ten years ago. The other two buildings have been here for nearly a hundred years. One of them, the reception block, is ahead of us, an elongated cottage with a thatched roof and bushy green ivy all over the walls. Autumn's block is almost opposite reception, and is the grandest of the lot. Autumn's family have one of the posh apartments on the first floor. They were updated at the same time as our block 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 round to see a red Porsche roaring towards us.

'Autumn!' I run over to meet them as they pull up in the car park.

Autumn waves madly from the tiny back seat 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 mum 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 fab. It's always crazy round at their house. There are always loads of people coming round to visit and they're always throwing dinner parties and having mad conversations where everyone talks at once, and no one ever tells Autumn or Mikey it's time for bed, and she gets to do things like bake bread and paint murals on the walls. We even helped her dad make cocktails once, for a party they were throwing. 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 holiday or other. I feel like I'm on holiday myself when I'm round 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 Mum?' She comes over and kisses me on both cheeks.

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

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

Autumn's mum and my mum are best friends too. They met at about the same time as us. While Autumn and I were splatting paint at each other and sharing books way back in Year One, our mums were swapping recipes and gossiping about our teachers outside in 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 electronic game he's more or less attached to. Autumn runs straight round the car to me, red hair flying.

'Jenni!' she yells, and we fling our arms round each other and jump up and down on the spot.

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 across 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’s 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.’

‘Right, well they’ll all have to wait, because I need a hand with these,’ Mr Leonard says as he pulls the last of their cases out of the car.

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

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

Autumn beams at me. ‘It’s the Tardis – didn’t you know?’ she says, her eyes glinting with mischievous delight. She spins round and waves her arms around her, making creepy time-machine noises.

Mikey looks up for the first time. ‘The Tardis?’ he says. ‘Where?’

Mrs Leonard strokes his cheek. ‘Your sister’s joking, sweetheart,’ she says. ‘It’s not a Tardis at all. It’s a Porsche. Otherwise known as a middle-aged man’s mid-life crisis.’

Mikey screws his nose up and looks at his mum. ‘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.

‘Kid 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. I guess he's to her what Craig is to me. We love them to death – but we wouldn't tell them in a million years!

Mikey's eight. 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 on his latest game and Craig being given the privilege of watching. Still, it works for them.

'Right, come on,' Dad says, reaching for my hand and pulling me away. 'Let's leave them to it. I'm sure the million and a half things can last till later. See you guys at Reception for the welcome meeting?'

The welcome meeting is when the Riverside Village people tell us what activities are going to be on during the week. There's a little cinema inside the reception block where they show a different film every night, and there are always loads of things going on each day, trips out and stuff. Everything from bird watching trips 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 in the air as she runs off to help her parents with the 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 laughter on her face. You always know that if she suggests something, it'll probably be half mad, half bad but 100% better than anything else – as long as you do it with her. She could 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 with my mum. I know that sounds boring, but I don't think it is. Museums open my mind and make my imagination run away with itself. All those old objects and strange artefacts make me think about all the people who existed and used them before me, 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 pen to paper, but that's just my opinion.

He's really a maths teacher. Deputy head of maths at the same school that I go to! How embarrassing is *that*? Actually, Year Seven wasn't too bad. I wasn't in his set, and as long as I never get him as my form tutor, I don't mind *too* much. Mum's a counsellor at the university in the next town. She doesn't talk much about her work because she has to virtually sign the official secrets act every time someone speaks to her.



Dad and I walk along 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 gushing past quicker than we could run.

'River's full,' 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 torn cigarette packet lids 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 a bit too, but only in my diary. I've never shown it to anyone. I'd die before doing that, although

I sometimes read bits out 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 about, preferably outside, even when it's raining. She can't bear to sit still. She goes rock climbing with her dad and goes to a weird dance class that a friend of her mum's runs. She's tried to get me to go to it with her but I can't dance. I've tried it but I just freeze up. I turn so stiff I feel as though I'm wearing a suit of armour.

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 have to 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 lads in trainers and shorts climb on to 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 laugh. ‘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; just, 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.

