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Only two of us make it up onto the roof – me and Dean. Ash declared he never had any intention of trying. Zara caught her silk halter-neck on the wire and got very upset about how much it cost. And Ben isn't built for climbing – although without a leg-up from him to the top of the fence, I'm not sure we'd have got any further either. Dean and I aren't as athletic as we used to be.

I step away from the edge towards the middle of the roof, and the others are swallowed up and hidden from view. Without their presence pressing on me, with a summer sunset blazing out across the sky above, I feel free, light as a feather, as if I could float off and leave them all behind.

But Dean's here, tying me down.

"What now?" he says.

"Why does everyone think I have a plan?" I say. I can't keep the irritation from my voice, even though it's the first time Dean's looked to me for an answer. Unlike Ben and Ash, and even Zara, who act like this is all my idea.

"We don't," Dean says. "We think Millie had a plan." He stares at me, harder to read than Zara – harder to read than any of us. "And we think she told you what it was."

But I made Millie a promise, not a plan.

"Promise you'll try, Alix," she'd said. "They'll come if you ask them."

"They'll come if you ask them," I told her.

"By the time the holiday starts, it'll be the same thing," Millie insisted. "My question, your voice."

I'd not known what to do when she said that. Perhaps if we'd stayed in touch more I'd have felt comfortable giving her a hug, or holding her hand. Instead I just squeezed her foot, propped up next to me on the sofa. And I'd promised, not really believing it would ever come to this. Death was something that happened in other people's stories.

Not mine. Not Millie's.

My eyes feel as hot as my heart when I think of her mum pressing *send* on the email

Millie had written to tell us it had happened.

“I don’t think Millie had much of a plan for getting the box,” I tell Dean, pushing my grief deeper inside. “She thought the hard part would be getting us to meet up.”

We both know she was right. Neither of us was a safe bet on that front.

I squint against the sun at Dean as he looks out over our old territory. What does this boy, this almost-man, remember of the time we spent up here making memories that couldn’t be whittled down into words and stored in a box?

“Let’s go,” he says and he starts walking towards the dark grey square in the middle of the roof that marks the courtyard between the upper school and the lower. When we get there, we stare down at the paving slabs, the benches donated by old pupils and local service clubs. The box is hidden in one of the ventilation bricks around the edge, but neither of us remembers which one.

We go to the first corner.

“This doesn’t feel right,” I say.

“No.” Dean frowns across the courtyard. “None of this does.”

“You mean without Millie?”

“Yeah,” is all he says, before he walks round to the next corner.

But I don’t think that’s all he means. Of all the people here tonight, Dean’s the most like me, closed off and quiet. Maybe he’s like me in other ways too. Maybe he’s struggling to remember why we were all friends in the first place, wishing he hadn’t come, wanting to be with the friends he has now – or someone closer?

“Weird how Zara brought her boyfriend along,” I say.

Dean shrugs. “Not really.” Which I assume puts an end to that, but then he says, “Zara likes belonging to people.”

“You mean boys?” It sounds more snide than I meant it to.

“I mean people,” he says. “Family, boyfriend. Friends. You.”

This brings me up short. That isn’t how it seemed to me, not at the time and not now.

Zara was my closest friend at school, before we fell in with the others, but Zara had never *belonged* to me any more than she belonged to anyone else.

Dean's stopped walking. He nods across the courtyard to where a metal grille is winking gold in the last of the daylight.

"Over there."

It's only after we've worked out which ventilation brick it is that it occurs to me what we need to do to get inside. Dean hands me a penknife and the arch of a single eyebrow triggers years-old envy.

"Your turn, Alix."

My shoulders hurt where my vest's digging in as I hang upside down in it like a harness. Dean's holding onto the back of it with his weight braced to stop me from falling.

Was it really this dangerous when we did it before?

Thankfully there are only two screws holding the grille in place and they come out more easily than I was expecting. The grille clangs on the courtyard below.

"What was that?"

Dean must have leaned forward because my shoulders dip slightly.

"Just the grille!" I shout. "Stop leaning over!" Most of me remains on the roof, but I'm still very scared of falling. It was Dean who put the box here before and I'd have preferred it if he was the one getting it out again. Back then Ben was the one doing the bracing while me and Millie sat on Dean's legs and Zara faced the other way so she wouldn't see what happened when we fell.

If I tried to hold onto Dean, we'd both be splats on the paving slabs by now.

Bending my arm round is hard. My elbow isn't exactly designed to bend that way and I try not to think of the gritty, sticky, cotton-y things my fingers brush against as I reach inside the

shaft behind the brick. When I touch the smooth surface of the box it catches me by surprise and I jerk back so that I graze my knuckles on the brick. I grab the handle and try to tease it out. Every bump and scrape shoots arrows of agony along my arm and into my shoulder.

When at last I get the stupid thing out, I hang there for a moment, enjoying how it feels to have my arm pointing in the right direction again.

Dean gives a sharp tug on my vest. "You coming up, or what?"

Back on the roof, we sit on one of the air vents and study the box. It's locked shut with a cheap combination padlock. Dean reaches over and starts rolling the numbers round.

"Two-two-eight," he says with a thin-lipped smile. "My birthday."

We needed a number we'd all remember and Millie had suggested the date we decided to make the box. The date we'd stood outside the door to Dean's flat, daring each other to be the first to knock, until his dad flung the door wide open and we'd all screamed. Even Ben.

"We're calling for Dean." I'd been surprised to hear my voice doing the asking. *"We want to wish him happy birthday."*

All of us were scared of Dean's dad and when he turned away to call for his son, we released a collective breath out in the corridor. Later that night, high on sugar and the adrenaline of too many fairground rides, we sat on the sand banks and stared out to sea and Dean told us it was the best birthday he'd ever had.

"I wish I could fold it up and put in a box, y'know?" he'd said. *"Keep it safe for the rest of my life."*

When we put the box together, the card we'd made for his birthday was one of the first things to go inside.

Before Dean has a chance to open the box, my phone starts buzzing in my pocket, then blares out 'Happy' as I stare at the screen. It's Ben. Dean understands my eye-roll as I answer.

"Yeah, all right we're com--"

"Someone's here!" Ben hisses into the phone.

And even though there's no reason to, I duck down. "Who's here? The police?"

Dean stiffens beside me. “The police are here?”

I shush him because Ben’s talking low and fast and I need to focus. I nod as I listen and then hang up.

“One of the neighbours must have seen us,” I say, and my heart is already thumping at the prospect of getting caught. “There’s a van parked up the road and a couple of men in uniform came in the gate.”

“What uniform?” Dean runs his thumb over the lock on the box to jumble the numbers. He looks worried.

“Ben’s certain it’s not the police,” I say. Dean doesn’t seem reassured and I babble on. “Zara and Ash had already gone back to the car to wait, but Ben’s hiding in the trees by the Lower School. He reckons it’ll be faster if we get down onto the roof of the library and jump from there onto the ground. Then we can bolt for it across the playing fields – there’s that cut through to the main road. The other two will meet us there.”

A cut that will be sealed off by a gate as secure as the one across the main entrance. Dean grits his teeth and shakes his head like he thinks it won’t work, but we both know there’s little choice.

My phone goes again.

“They’re walking round the other side of the building – now’s your chance!” Ben’s voice is charged with excitement – he’s enjoying the drama.

I hang up. “Go, go, go!”

We dash across the flat roof, bending low, making ourselves harder to see from the ground. Dean’s got the box and I’ve my phone out in case Ben calls with further intelligence. As I run towards the edge, a manic brand of joy builds in my chest.

Maybe I’ve got more in common with Ben than I thought.

“Down!” Dean hisses and he seems to melt into the roof in front of me as I stumble and sprawl forward. I dislodge a clump of moss with my chin, and gravel scrapes my skin, tumbling down my vest and into my bra. We commando crawl towards the edge, my vest scooping up

more gravel, until we're close enough to peer over.

I'm grinning, but when Dean turns back to me, he's far from amused. I guess it's hard to find the fun in running when you know what happens when they catch you.

It's a short drop from here to the pitched roof of the library, where the tiles slope down towards the prep playground beyond. Dean nudges me and points to where there's a little playhouse just beyond the edge of the roof. His meaning is clear. The library is too high to jump straight down – better to leap from library to playhouse to floor.

My phone goes and I press it to my ear.

"Where are you?" Ben says. "You won't have long before they get round here ..."

Instead of wasting time arguing, I hang up and nudge Dean.

"Now!"

In a scrabble of gravel we try to get down. Dean's faster than me. He rolls onto his front, swings his legs over the edge and drops down onto the library roof. I'm still dangling over the edge when I feel hands on my hips steadying me and I let go. The tiles are steep and slippery and if it weren't for Dean, I'd have fallen and rolled off the roof like a pebble.

"Thanks!" I gasp.

But Dean's already pulling me with him. Our feet thunder on the roof as our legs race to keep up with gravity and I'm forced to let go of his hand to leap over the skylight. I kick a tile loose as I land, sending it tumbling ahead of us to smash on the ground below. My phone's singing in my hand, my toes straining against the ends of my shoes and I'm running out of roof ...

I jump, a giant, ungainly leap, limbs flailing, legs stretched in a giant stride.

One weightless, noiseless moment and then I thump onto the roof of the playhouse. My feet, legs, chest squash together like a concertina and my free hand grasps at the ridge of the roof too late so that I tumble onto the ground.

"ALIX!"

Dean's sailing over my head and I've no time to get out of the way before he slams into the roof of the playhouse. With a creak and smash, the walls cave in, taking Dean with them.