

13 Gifts

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SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

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Chapter One

Like all big mistakes, mine started with a goat.

But if I'm being totally honest, I wouldn't be riding my bike to school at dusk, with nefarious deeds ahead, if that telegram hadn't arrived last month. The goat came a little later.

The telegram came all the way from Madagascar, where maybe they don't have access to phones or computers or other modern ways of communicating. Mom's been preparing for months for our summer trip to the large island off the coast of Africa. Dad and I get to tag along while she studies the mating habits of the bamboo lemur. It might not sound like it, but this will be more fun than last summer, when we watched her catalog the scat of various woodland creatures in the forests of Ecuador.

Scat = Poop.

Mom had never gotten a telegram directly from Madagascar before, though, so I figured this must be really important. Her face went totally white when she read it. The guy who delivered it just stood in the open doorway. I think he was waiting for a tip. He didn't get one.

Mom crumpled up the telegram before I could read it, but she told Dad and me that she'd just been made head researcher

of the lemur project. I'm not sure why this news freaked her out so much. It was just a matter of time until she got this responsibility.

Since the telegram arrived, Mom's been really distracted. She's even stopped asking if I've finished my homework or made any new friends (usually her two favorite topics). Whenever I try to strike up a conversation, she mumbles something and wanders out of the room. This morning I found her keys in the freezer next to the ice cream sandwiches.

Her normal approach to mothering has always been to smother and overprotect. While I was still in my crib she taught me that talking to strangers would cause my tongue to turn green. (I believed this until I was eight.) I've never been allowed to sleep over at anyone's house, and my cell phone has a GPS tracker in it that links up to her computer. Mom promised me she'd only activate the tracker if I went missing, but when I stopped to buy gum after school last month, she texted me to get a quart of milk. Coincidence? I think not.

So if I happened to have a lapse in judgment by agreeing, during a moment of temporary insanity, to steal the middle school principal's beloved goat for Shelby Malone and her DFs (devoted followers) based on the promise that I'd then be allowed to sit with them at lunch for the last two weeks of seventh grade, who could blame me? I have been set adrift by my own mother.

Tonight I'm actually going to do what Mom's been pushing me to do for years — something social with a group of my peers. Scary and illegal, but social. As much as she likes to keep tabs

on my every move, she's always bugging me to make friends and do things. She's complicated like that.

I've found that standing on the sidelines works very well to keep all the middle school drama from touching me. The problem is, that sometimes trying to stay *out* of trouble actually gets you *into* trouble. Choosing not to participate in any group projects or activities isn't a popular option with my teachers. Every time I get in trouble, Mom seems so disappointed in me. She must never have done anything wrong in her entire life. She doesn't ever punish me, though. The look on her face is enough.

Well, tonight's activity probably isn't exactly what Mom has in mind, but the plan is already under way. There's no turning back now. I pedal hard, and my bike brings me ever closer to the middle school parking lot and the unsuspecting goat. I had hoped to blend in to the background during my mission (or as much as possible since I'm about a foot taller than most seventh-grade girls, thanks to my Jolly Green Giant of a father). Mom may currently be distracted with her job, but not everything slips by her. The only way I'm allowed to go riding at dusk is with bright yellow reflectors practically all over my body, a whistle around my neck, and a container of pepper spray dangling from my wrist. All this in a town where the biggest crime during the two years we've lived here was when little Richie Simon stole a hot pepper from Mr. Jones's garden. Richie claimed it had gotten stuck on the bottom of his shoe when he went to retrieve his lost baseball, but if that were true, he likely wouldn't have eaten it. Poor kid threw up so many times, and in so many

colors, that even grouchy old Mr. Jones couldn't bring himself to press charges.

Actually, the biggest crime in our town's history just might be the one I'm about to commit. But I have to focus on being careful, and not let fear creep in. In the movies it's always the scared ones who do something dumb like drop their wallet with their driver's license in it. And I had a big pimple the day our student ID photos were taken, so no way is that going to be displayed on the front page of the town paper. When I reach the middle school, I hide my bike in the bushes and pray that it remains safe. It's my favorite possession.

Earlier today, Shelby had stuck a ruler in the doorjamb of the gym door so it wouldn't lock. I would never have thought of that. Not that I've considered breaking into school buildings before. Breaking *out*, yes, but not in.

I enter without a hitch and sprint through the empty gym, which feels bigger than ever. The only person I need to watch out for is the night custodian, who, according to Shelby, spends most of his time in the cafeteria, listening to music and mopping the same spot on the floor over and over. We chose this entrance because it's the farthest from the caf.

Once in the hall, I stay close to the lockers as though they offer some small bit of protection. I've gone to so many schools by this point (six at last count) that they all blend together. Same VOTE FOR ME! posters slapped up on the walls, same mud-brown lockers with papers sticking out of them at odd angles, same unmistakable smell of gym clothes, old tuna sandwiches, and cleaning solution. This could be in Anywhere, USA.

The doorknob to Principal Murphy's office turns easily. He must be pretty trusting not to have locked it. I slip inside without so much as a creak. I can literally see my heart thumping under my T-shirt, and I bet I could wring a cupful of water from my palms. Other than the events of the last five minutes (and one harrowing occasion in preschool when I snuck into the supply closet for more animal crackers and got locked in), I have very little experience going where I'm not supposed to go. Shelby and her DFs are stationed at posts outside the school, ready to text me if we have any unexpected visitors. I pull out my phone. No texts. That's a good sign.

The closed blinds allow only slivers of light to filter in from the parking lot, but I don't want to risk discovery by opening them or switching on the desk lamp. It helps that I've spent enough time inside these four walls to know the layout of the office even in the near darkness. That, and the fact that, at three feet tall, the goat is hard to miss.

I don't doubt my decision to steal him until I'm standing only inches away from his long, furry face. I never noticed before how one deep brown eye is almost an inch higher than the other. When combined with his slightly upturned lips, he looks sweet and goofy and a little bit confused.

I reach for him, then hesitate. Yes, it's strange that the principal keeps a goat in his office, but who am I to judge where one's affections lie? Personally, I hail from the school of thought that says the fewer things you care about, the less you'll get hurt. But that doesn't mean I should fault someone else for bringing a huge goat to work and taking him to every school activity like a trusted sidekick.

The clock is ticking and this goat isn't going to steal himself. Shelby and the DFs are probably wondering what's taking me so long. I make my decision. To make my mom happy, I will steal the goat. And I will sit with Shelby and the DFs for the next two weeks and pretend to both understand and care about everything they say. Then I'll put it all behind me and immerse myself in the courtship rituals of small, furry tree dwellers halfway around the world.

I'm not sure in what order, but as I stretch my arms around the goat's flank, light suddenly floods the room. The words "Unhand that goat!" fly at me from the doorway. My "getaway car" (Shelby's older brother's pickup truck) peels out of the parking lot with Shelby and the DFs piled in the back, and Principal Murphy gets a face full of pepper spray due to my oversensitive startle reflex.

When my parents arrive to pick me up, I try my best not to cry. Principal Murphy is doing enough of that for the both of us. Hopefully his eyes will stop watering soon and he'll regain full use of his sight. At least that's what the small print on the container says should happen in about two to three hours.

"Your daughter will be suspended for the last two weeks of the school year and will be expected to take her final exams at home," he announces to my parents.

They nod from their chairs, looking down at the large desk, rather than up at Principal Murphy. I can't blame them. Between the watering and the twitching, it's pretty gruesome.

"I will be willing to shave a week off her punishment if she gives up the names of her accomplices."

I shake my head. I may not be a joiner, but I do know that you don't rat out your partners in crime.

Principal Murphy's face darkens. But oddly, Mom's expression changes from anger and disappointment to something that almost looks like . . . relief? Happiness? Yes, there's a definite gleam in her eye. Does the fact that I had been invited to participate in an activity — *any* activity — with other kids make her so happy she is willing to overlook the fact that I just got kicked out of school?

No such gleam in Dad's unblinking eyes, though. It takes a lot for my usually laid-back father to get mad, but I can tell by the firm set of his jaw that I won't escape some sort of punishment this time.

Imagine all the trouble I'd have gotten into if it had been a *real* goat.