

## The Boys of Summer

She'd seen them many times before. Watched them all summer. And she'd wondered about joining in. There was no denying that. This particular morning she'd seen Steg shove his old camera in his pocket, watched Jack pump the tyres of his bike and Cal fill his water bottle. There was clearly some big adventure in the air.

So she made her move. Waited for them to hit the woods then leapt out of the undergrowth into their path, sending them screeching left and right, fists gripping at the brakes, tyres squealing and skidding in the loose grit and dirt. She grinned at them as they looked back at her, their faces grimy and covered in solid scowls.

'You idiot!' they snarled.

But she only laughed. Laughed and helped them up with their bikes.

'No harm done,' she said as they dusted themselves off and nursed their knuckle scrapes. 'Where you lot going? Can I come?' she said.

'No.'

She made a face. Her turn to scowl. 'Why not?'

'Cause we're doing stuff.'

'I can do stuff, I can do better stuff than you.'

'Like what exactly?' Cal squinted at her and sniffed.

She sniffed back. 'Scooter rail,' she said and she gave them the biggest grin in the world.

'Scooter rail?' It was obvious they'd never heard of it.

'I do it all the time,' she said. Her hands on her hips now. 'Wanna come?'

Cal looked at Steg who looked at Jack. Jack shrugged.

'Maybe,' he said.

'Good!' And she was off, bounding through the bushes, leaping fallen trees and snagging her dark, wild hair on branches. They did their best to keep up but it wasn't easy dragging their bikes along too.

Eventually she stopped beside a disused rail track. She wiped a hand across her mouth and pointed across the track towards a pile of dead branches.

'In there,' she said.

'What is?' Jack asked.

She waved at the branches, got them to shove them aside. There was the scooter rail. An old hand-powered rail cart. Now with added pedals.

'Pump the handles and hit the pedals here,' she showed them, 'and you can go like... ooh, maybe forty miles an hour. Something like that. You just have to lift it onto the track.'

The thing was covered in heavy duty ivy and nettles, but they tore the stuff off and dragged it to the rails. It wasn't too heavy for the four of them and before long they were powering along the track, bikes long forgotten, left lying derelict back there in the trees. The sun was high and the wind tore at their faces, as they whooped and yelled and laughed. This felt like freedom.

'Wow!' yelled Cal suddenly, 'mineshaft up ahead, where's the brake!'

'There is no brake, use your feet,' she said.

The boys jammed their heels in the dirt and the cart slowed up. There was a cave mouth ahead. Jack was for going in but Cal and Steg were against it.

She tutted and sighed. 'Come on, it'll be an adventure.'

They went in, probably because they didn't want to look weak in front of a girl. They regretted it when the tunnel darkened and there was a rumbling behind them on the track. Cal jumped off and ran back towards the tunnel mouth. He came back to them in a second, limping and shaking his head.

'Roof's collapsed, we must have disturbed it rattling over the rails with this thing.' He jabbed his finger at her. 'Your fault!' he said, the whites of his teeth flashing at her.

She shrugged. 'There'll be another way,' she said and she grinned, but it was too dark to see her expression now.

They pedalled on deeper into the mine until the track ran out and they came to a junction, four tunnels, four options, so they split up. Jack took charge and told them which to take. Cal suggested they meet back in five. Seven minutes later the boys returned, the girl had not. Cal and Jack had drawn blanks at dead ends, but Steg was more hopeful. He'd found a loose slope and the smell of fresh air.

'If we dig we may get through,' he said, pointing back along his tunnel.

'So lets dig,' came a voice, and the girl stepped out of the darkness.

They went. The track ended at another fall, a fresh one, rocks and earth were piled high but there was a definite breeze in the air. They dug for a while, the girl doing as much as the boys, when they felt like giving up she refused to let them. She cracked jokes, bullied them, even booted backsides occasionally. The boys didn't like it but they dug on, forming a chain to pass rocks back into the tunnel. Steg was at the head, and at one point he reached out, yelped and recoiled, falling back on Cal.

'What was that?' he said, his voice thick with wonder.

They squinted into the darkness, something with fingers protruded from the pile of earth. They dived in, the boys digging like dogs around the hand. Eventually, they found him, still breathing. Another adventurer, an old guy, buried but alive. As they pulled his body free they saw daylight appearing. They scrambled through the gap they'd made into freedom. Outside they paused to catch their breath.

'Man, we saved this guy's life,' Cal said and the others grinned.

'Lucky, eh?' said Jack. 'He'd never have been found. Steg, get a shot and then we'll get him home. Quick.'

Steg pulled his old camera from his pocket and the others posed beside the mineshaft and the unconscious rescued man. Steg set up the camera then ran back to join the group. The camera fired in quick succession, like a machine gun, four shots. Blam, blam, blam, blam. They grimaced and grinned. Back home, when the old guy was safe and Steg developed the pictures, there was only the three boys and the rescued man in the shots.

She was not there. She was always missing in the pictures.

Psalm 46.1.

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