The Chocolate Box

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Juliette finds a mysterious chocolate box ...

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Juliette went to her closet, took out a coat, grabbed a five-dollar note and some silver coins, and tip-toed out of her room. She made her way, carefully, to the stairs. 'Where are you going?' She jumped at the sound of her mother's voice.

'Just to the candy store,' she said, not turning round. 'I won't be too long.'

'Your father will take you,' said her mother.

Juliette spun around. 'But he's still asleep.'

'Then wait till he's up.' Her mother glanced at the old clock on the wall. 'It's only 6:30. You've got plenty of time.'

'But mother, I've been waiting for this all week.' She remembered she could barely sleep last night, becauseshe was so excited. 'Please let me go.'

'Julie, honey, you know you can't go alone.' She tightened the dressing gown around her body and hugged herself.

'But why not? I know the way there. I've been there heaps of times and it's not that far at all.'

'Ssh, don't shout. You'll wake your father.'

'Mother, please can I go?' she whispered. 'I'm nearly thirteen. I'm old enough now.' The coins were getting hot in her hand as she played with them in her pocket.

Juliette's mother rubbed her eyes and sighed. 'Okay, you can go - '

'Thank you, mother!' She went and hugged her.

'But make sure you're back by 8:30,' said Clare. 'Or you'll be in big trouble.'

'I'll be back, don't worry. I promise,' she said, already running down the stairs.

'Don't talk to strangers,' she her mother called.

Juliette paused at the door and shouted, 'I won't.'

She pulled on her boots, unlocked the front door, and stepped outside. The sky was a heavy mass of gray. She braced herself against the cold wind and began the two kilometre long walk. If she closed her eyes, she could see snow. She thought about how, even though she'd never visited the city, she knew she lived in a small town, where the main attraction for her and most of the other children, was the candy store. Every Sunday, they would visit the shop, rain, hail or shine. Every Sunday, her father would walk her there. But today, she was alone.

It's not that she didn't like her father's company. She'd always enjoyed their walks together. They'd talk about funny things, happy things, sad things. Anything. But recently, she had become more quiet and wanted to keep more of her thoughts to herself. She found herself thinking less about squirrels and rock collections, and

much more about boys.

She knew Roger would be there and she wanted to talk to him, without her father's overprotective eyes watching her. Roger was the newest kid at school and had only been living in Dutchworth for a month now. She'd noticed that he was kind and strong. And popular with the other kids at school. He was always telling them about his adventures in the city. She'd had a crush on him for three weeks now. Of course, she was a bit anxious about speaking to him; she hadn't had a boyfriend before. In fact, she wasn't sure she'd even be allowed to have one.

All this contemplating meant she hadn't really taken in the scenery. She was already in town and could see the candy store just ahead of her, with its red and white neon sign; a refuge in the middle of winter. It was small, and bustling with children; some with parents, some without. The atmosphere was warm and inviting. She spotted Roger by the giant gobstoppers. Clive, a troublemaker, was whispering to him. Juliette took a deep breath and walked over to Roger, her heart thumping so hard, she was sure it would burst through her chest.

'Hi, Roger,' she said, squeezing her hands tightly.

'Hi, Juliette,' said Roger.

'It's freezing outside,' she said, and hugged herself.

'But it's hot in here,' said Clive, giving Juliette a not-so-subtle full-body look.

'So, what are you getting today?' said Juliette, ignoring Clive.

'Well, Clive and I are thinking about getting some giant gobstoppers.'

Clive laughed. Then, in a hushed voice, he said, 'We're going to steal them.' He laughed again.

'You can't do that,' said Juliette.

'Why not?' said Clive, crossing his arms. 'That old man behind the register didn't let me have the gobstopper I wanted last week.'

'But you were short on change and he let you have one for free,' said Juliette. 'I was there, Clive.'

'I wanted the big one and he wouldn't let me have it, so now he's going to pay.'

'No,' said Juliette. She looked at Roger. 'You can't do this, Roger. It's wrong. And Mr. Newberry has always been very kind to us.'

'Yes, I know,' said Roger, hesitating. 'But, nothing exciting ever happens in this town. I come from the city, where there's so much to do and so much to see.' He shrugged. 'It's pretty boring here, Julie.'

'But what about the fortnightly markets?' said Juliette. 'The monthly fares. The annual carnivals. The candy store.' Roger laughed.

'It's nothing like the city,' he said, shaking his head. 'I miss it, but my parents hated it, so now I'm stuck here until I'm old enough to leave. There's nothing good around here, nothing fun. Nothing that would ever want to make me want to stay here.'

'Nothing at all?' said Juliette. 'Well, Roger, I don't think you deserve to live here.' She looked at Clive, who was laughing. 'And neither do you.'

'Bugger off,' said Clive.

Roger grabbed Juliette's hand just as she was turning away. 'Wait,' he said.

Juliette opened her mouth, then shut it. He heart was trying to break free of her body again. 'What?' she said.

'Your hand's starting to sweat.' He sighed. 'Look, all the girls like me.' Clive laughed. Roger whispered, 'If you steal some giant gobstoppers with Clive and I, I'll let you be my girlfriend.'

'What?' Juliette realised she was breathing heavily, but it was not nerves anymore. It was shock and anger. She pulled away from Roger's hand. 'You are unbelievable,' she said, shaking her head. 'You are not at all like I thought you were.'

'Well, now I feel sorry for you, Julie. Because you'll probably never leave this tiny village you call a town.'

'Goodbye, Roger,' said Juliette. All she wanted to do now was leave. She wanted to go home. She headed for the door and on her way out, something caught her eye. She turned back and picked it up. It was a small, brown box. A chocolate box? There was a round metal circle on the front of it, with the letter 'B' on it. She turned it around. There was no list of ingredients, no manufacturing information, not even an expiry date. She went to the cashier. 'Morning, Mr. Newberry,' she said, holding up the chocolate box. 'How much is this?'

'Good morning, Juliette.' The old man took the box from Juliette's hand and studied it. He scratched his head, and pulled his glasses back up. 'I don't know how it got in here,' he said, still looking at it. Then he looked at her and said, 'Where exactly did you find it?'

'Between the licorice bullets and the choc-coated sultanas.'

'Ah,' he said, looking over her shoulder. He looked back at her. 'Sorry, not for sale.'

'Why not?' she said, reaching for the box, which he pulled away.

'No expiry date means I cannot sell it. I'm sorry.' The old man placed the box behind the counter, then came down from his step and led Juliette towards some rose-shaped lollipops. 'Why don't you try one of these?'

Juliette sighed. 'Please, I really would like that chocolate box. I don't care about there not being an expiry date, and I promise I won't sue if I do get sick.' She held out her hand. 'Please?'

The old man sighed. 'Juliette, you've been coming to my shop every Sunday for nearly ten years now.' She nodded. 'You always find something interesting to try and you even have old favourites. Can't you be satisfied with what is already available to you?'

She almost felt ashamed of herself then, as if the old man was right. She should be content. She was lucky. But then, she thought differently. 'I'm curious, that's all,' she said. 'Really curious. You can't say you've never been curious.'

The old man looked very serious now. 'I was curious once, I admit it. And you know what? I let it get the better of me.' It seemed like he was warning her now.

'How? What do you mean?' she said.

'Never mind that,' he said. 'Here,' - he gave her a chocolate ladybug - 'you can have this, free of charge.' Then he ushered her towards the door. 'Have a nice day.'

Juliette stared at the deserted countryside before her and shivered when a wisp of cold wind came in through a tiny gap at the bottom of the door. Then she heard Mr. Newberry's voice. 'Out, out!' he said. She looked behind her and saw that he was talking to Roger and Clive. She ran back to the counter and grabbed the chocolate box, tucking it inside her coat. She left the shop. It was starting to rain now and the winds were growing stronger, icy. Juliette felt a bump and was knocked to the ground.

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