



Anne Droyd

*and*

Century Lodge

Will Hadcroft



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and Century Lodge

*Will Hadcroft*



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London and Philadelphia

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*To Grandma,  
for always believing I could do it*

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Prologue

## On the Run

**S***witch on.*

*It is dark. Adjust eye lenses. It is still dark. Switch to infra-red. I can see wood, wood all around. I can feel it. Deduction: I am in a box.*

*The box is moving. I believe I am on some kind of trailer.*

*A voice. Elderly. Data banks identify: My father. Are you all right, Anne?’*

*Activate speech circuits. Reply: ‘Yes, Father, I am all right.’*

*‘I do not think that our team leader was very impressed with you.’*

*‘Why not, Father?’*

*‘You remind her of someone she wants to destroy.’*

*‘Who is that, Father?’*

*An alarm bell has started ringing. I can hear footsteps, lots of them. My father is not speaking. I am hearing another voice. It sounds as though it is coming from loudspeakers in the ceiling. Data banks identify: A woman’s voice. It is the team leader. ‘Alert! Alert! The Professor has not returned to his laboratory with the project. Security cameras show him on level one heading to the lift. He must not reach the surface. I repeat, he must not reach the surface.’*

*My father: ‘Oh no, Anne. They have discovered that we are missing. They are coming after us.’*

*The leader’s voice: ‘The Professor has the project with him in a tall wooden box. Get it from him. Do whatever it takes. But do not kill him. I repeat, do not kill him. We still need his knowledge and expertise.’*

*The alarm bell is still ringing. The running feet are closer. I can hear voices, many voices. ‘This way! They’re down here!’*

*I hear electronic doors sliding open. I feel the box bumping against something. ‘Father, are you all right?’*

*‘Yes, child. I am just getting you into the lift.’*

*'You must release me, Father. I am stronger than them. I can protect you.'*

*'No, Anne. You need to stay hidden for when we get on to the surface. I have transport waiting.'*

*The running feet are loud now. There are many voices. I can hear guns being readied. The running has stopped. I can hear my father's heart beating fast. He is very frightened. One voice is shouting now. 'Halt! Stay where you are, Professor, or we will shoot.'*

*I can hear the lift doors closing. The voice is angry. 'Fire, men, fire! Stop the lift!' There is heavy gunfire. I can hear bullets hitting metal, I can hear them. My father has cried out.*

*'Father, are you all right?'*

*'Yes, child. I am not hurt. I was just a little scared.'*

*The floor is shaking faintly. The lift is rising. The voices and feet and alarm bells are far away now. We are going up to the surface.*

*'Anne.'*

*'Yes, Father?'*

*'You must switch off, now. You must deactivate yourself.'*

*'They will be coming after us. How will we survive?'*

*'Let me worry about that. You need to save your energy cells. Deactivate. Switch off. I will bring you back online once it is safe.'*

*'I will switch off now, then. Deactivating in two seconds. Two... One...'*

## School's Out!

Gezz collected up her dolls and put them into her satchel. The bag dangled limply from the back of her hard wooden chair. 'Come on, it's nearly home time,' Mr Davies announced as he picked up a board duster and began wiping the blackboard with large swipes of his arm. Gezz watched as the white blocky writing vanished in zigzag arcs across the cloudy board with patches of black poking through.

'Where's Sindy?' she shouted, a little panicked. 'Who's got Sindy?' Her voice carried across the hustle and bustle of the classroom, only to be left unanswered. The girl's eyes scanned the sea of heads. They were all sorts of colours and shapes and sizes. Some blond, some brown, some ginger, some short, some long, some with ponytails, some without. Gezz didn't like ponytails because boys had a tendency to pull at them. Jane Middleton, a quiet, shy girl with gorgeous long brown hair tied in a single tail, had hers pulled all the time. The lads called her 'Jane the Chain' and pulled her tail whenever they went by. Gezz couldn't understand why the girl didn't change her hairstyle. All she ever did was burst into tears.

Short hair with a hairband, now that was sensible. Not one boy had thought of a single name for her hairband. They just called her 'Gezz', which was short for Geraldine. Mr Davies, having wiped the board clean, turned to face the class. He smiled in that gentle way he always did and urged the reluctant mob, 'Come on, hurry up! Normally you can't wait to get out.'

Gezz smiled back. It was true, they did normally pack their things away very quickly. But today was different. Today was not just the end of term. Today was not just that great last day

when you brought in toys instead of doing lessons. Today was the last day of primary school – the last day *ever*. They would have six long weeks of freedom, and then it would be back to school – but not back to this school, no. Not back to ‘Christ the King – Church of England School for Juniors’, no. It would be a new school, a different school, a school where each lesson was taught by a different teacher and not just the same one for everything like Mr Davies. Crompton Green High School was where most of them would be going.

Gezz shuddered. *I hope it's not going to be like Grange Hill*, she thought. *Horrible kids swarming the corridors and teachers struggling to keep them under control*. Suddenly her trance was broken. The sea of faces blurred as she homed in on one ginger-freckled girl on the opposite side of the classroom. The girl's back met a row of bookcases as she swiftly snatched something long and plastic with tiny clothes and long blond hair from inside her desk into her satchel.

‘Emma Bingham!’ Gezz screeched across the room. ‘Give me back my Sindy doll, right now!’ All heads turned as Emma quickly dropped into her chair and rested her chin on the palm of her hand. ‘Give it back now!’ shouted Gezz, making her way through the maze of tables and chairs. She came to a halt beside the obstinate ginger head.

‘Are you talking to me, Gezz?’ asked Emma with an air of surprise.

‘You know I am,’ said Gezz, sternly.

Mr Davies huffed to himself, as if wishing he didn't have to deal with this sort of thing so close to home time. He towered above the two girls, folding his arms and scratching the side of his nose. He broke into another kindly smile and Gezz softened a little. ‘Now, what's going on over here?’ he said.

Gezz looked up into his friendly brown eyes. ‘It's Emma, Sir. She's got my Sindy doll.’

Emma made a show of looking shocked. ‘I have not!’

Mr Davies looked down at Emma and sighed. He had had a lot of trouble with this one all year, and even now, on the eve of starting a new school, she was still a handful. 'Come on, Emma, give Geraldine her doll back.'

'But I haven't got her doll,' said Emma.

'All right,' Mr Davies said. 'Turn out your bag.'

Immediately Emma began protesting. 'But, Sir. She's making it up. I haven't got her doll, honest.'

'Turn out your bag.' Mr Davies was clearly not impressed now. He folded his arms even tighter and his face lost its smile. Emma reluctantly complied. She lifted her satchel and began placing objects on her desk. A pencil case, her old exercise books full of writing which the teacher had let her keep, some artwork which had been taken down off the wall earlier in the day (complete with BluTack in the corners) and an empty sandwich box. The girl next to her, Jodie Hill, the prettiest girl in the class, retracted her arms to make room for all of Emma's things.

'That's it,' the ginger head offered.

'Tip the bag up,' said Mr Davies.

'There's nothing else in it,' Emma protested.

Mr Davies did not argue and pulled the bag from her. He reached in through the floppy opening and took out the Sindy doll. 'Here you are, Geraldine,' he said, handing the doll to a relieved Gezz.

'Thank you, Sir,' she said with sudden contentment.

Davies turned to the troublemaker as she started to pack her bag again. 'It's a good job this is the end of term, Emma.' Emma closed up her satchel, folded her arms, and said nothing in reply. The teacher returned to his desk.

As Gezz sat down at hers, she caught sight of Emma through the corner of her eye, glaring. The troublesome girl muttered something, but Gezz didn't catch it. Immediately, the girl sitting next to Emma piped up, 'Aw! You *swore*. I'm

going to tell Mr Davies of you.’ The girl simultaneously raised her hand and voice. ‘Sir, Emma Bingham swore.’

The teacher closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘All right,’ he said. After a few seconds he opened them and looked at his watch. Then he raised his head and smiled at the class. ‘In just under a minute it will be home time and time for us to say goodbye.’

A fair-haired boy at the front of the class burst into tears, catching everyone by surprise. Mr Davies turned, ‘What’s the matter, Justin?’

‘I don’t want to say goodbye, Mr Davies.’

The teacher smiled softly. ‘I know you don’t, Justin,’ he said, and then addressed the class. ‘But in a few weeks I’ll be teaching a new class and you will be going to the big school. You will all enjoy it and you will be glad you’re there.’

Gezz wasn’t sure about that last bit. The only thing that comforted her was the fact that Luke, her next-door neighbour and best friend, would be there with her. She liked Luke very much.

Suddenly the bell sounded in the corridor. This was it. The end of her primary school life.

The roar of screeching chairs filled the room as children got to their feet and made for the door. Gezz joined one or two at the front who wanted to say a proper goodbye to Mr Davies. He patted her on the head and winked that wink which always made her feel good inside. It was the last time she would see him do that as well.

After that she walked down the corridor, took one last sneaky look at the hall with its plastic chairs piled up in the corner against the folded dinner tables, and the big box made of long segments which they used in PE, and then joined the crowd at the main door.

The traffic was heavy and made a din, and Gezz could taste petrol fumes in the air. It was hard to see anyone through the mass of boys and girls and mums. Not to mention the odd

dad. She patiently pushed her way through until she came to the railings at the edge of the pavement. Her eyes scanned the car park on the other side of the busy road.

The car park sat at the end of a row of shops and terraced houses and had clearly been left over from some past time. Gezz could tell by the way the road leading to its entrance wound round and round the newer houses further back. She wondered momentarily what it might have been part of. Another school perhaps? An old church or chapel? Or part of an old playground with swings and a see-saw and a round-about? She'd heard Grandma talk in a hushed voice about when she was a girl and how different everything was. She always sounded excited and sad at the same time. Excited by the memories, and sad that now that's all they were.

Gezz wished she could go back in time like the man on the old show she'd seen on her Auntie Beryl's cable TV, *Quantum Leap*, and witness the old times for herself. She imagined herself glowing with blue electric light, shimmering and warping as the road in front of her changed. The cars would disappear and be replaced with old-fashioned ones. They would go a lot slower and everything would be quieter because only rich people could afford to drive them so there wouldn't be so many. The car park would become an old Victorian school with a church-type roof and long narrow windows. Children would play simple games like skipping and hopscotch, because games with batteries and computers wouldn't have been invented. And everyone would say please and thank you and kids wouldn't swear. Gezz wanted to live in her Grandma's old world. She wanted to talk like them and be like them, like the kids in the *Famous Five* books. She loved the *Famous Five* books.

'Yoo-hoo! Gezz, darling!' The voice was faint, in the distance. Suddenly the traffic was loud again and Gezz could taste petrol heavy in the air. A nearby mother was ranting at her son, waving a finger in front of his scowling face. The boy

glared back in defiance. Gezz knew what word was coming. The mother looked shocked and cracked the boy sharply across the head. Then she grabbed him tightly by the arm and dragged him through the swarming crowd. The voice called again. 'Gezz, love, I'm here!' Gezz looked across the road and saw her mother standing at the railings waving. Their red Nissan car was parked at the far end.

She smiled and joined the large queue gathering around the lollipop man. He stood at the curb in the gap where the railings broke and a zebra crossing stretched black and white across to the other side. The man looked both ways and then plonked his lollipop sign into the road. Cars on either side slowed down immediately, their drivers taking note of the 'Stop! Children' command written on the disc. The whole road became piled with still vehicles, lorries, buses, cars and a lone motor bike. Their drivers tried not to look annoyed and tapped their steering wheels impatiently as the white-coated man stalked out over the black and white stripes and smacked his staff down in the centre.

The assortment of mothers, children and prams heaved forward as the lollipop man waved them over. Gezz couldn't help thinking of Moses in that cartoon film *The Prince of Egypt*, when he put his rod in the sea and the waters parted high up into two massive walls leaving a corridor of dry land for the Prince's people to walk through, escaping from the angry Pharaoh and his army. She stepped out on to the zebra and pretended that the cars were the sea held back by the power of God. She passed Moses and he smiled, his hat strap stretching over his baggy chin.

When she reached the other side, she looked back at her old school. She thought of Mr Davies packing his books up and going to his car. *I wonder what he'll be doing in the six-week holidays*, she thought. *He'll probably be glad of the peace and quiet. Maybe he and Mrs Davies will be going on a proper holiday, to Butlin's or somewhere like that.* In just over a month, Mr Davies

would be teaching a whole new class of ten- and eleven-year-olds all over again. It will be their last class at junior school then. It seemed strange to think of it like that. But it was true.

Moses strolled back to the pavement and gave a nod of thanks to the drivers. No sooner had he left the road than the cars and buses and lorries began to move again, like the sea crashing in on the Pharaoh's soldiers. The din gave Gezz a headache. She was glad to reach the car park.

'Well,' said her mum with a smile on her face. 'How was your last day?'

Gezz reflected for a moment. 'It was OK.' They walked together, mother and daughter, through the maze of cars. They were all different shapes and sizes, some old, like their Nissan, some quite new like Gary Innes' car. All new and shiny. Some children's parents didn't have a car at all, of course, and had to walk home or catch a bus. 'We played with our toys all day,' Gezz enthused. 'And we swapped them as well. But Emma Bingham had to spoil it as usual. She took my Sindy doll.'

'I hope you got it back,' said her mum, a little worried.

'Oh yes, I got it back,' Gezz confirmed. 'Justin cried as well.'

'Did he?'

'Yes. He was sad because it's our last day.'

'And how do you feel about it?'

Gezz turned to face her mother, whose hair was long and brown and fell over cardiganned shoulders. At this moment her eyebrows were raised, anticipating the answer to her question. Gezz pondered. 'I was sad for a bit,' she said. 'But now I'm all right.' She grinned, unable to contain her excitement as her mother pulled open the passenger door of their red Nissan. 'It's the six-week holidays!'

Gezz tossed her satchel from off her shoulder and gave it to her mum, who put it in the boot of the car. Then she slipped

on to the seat, found the catch underneath, lifted it, and slid her chair forward until her knees stopped just short of the glove compartment. Then, after shutting the door, she reeled her seatbelt round and buckled it into its holster. Her mum slipped into the driving seat and shut her door. In no time, she too was belted up. The car engine burst into life and after a few neat turns was suddenly on the road trudging along with the rest of the traffic.

Gezz took one last look at her school as they drove over the zebra crossing and down into town. She watched the shops and old buildings whizz by. Farnton Common was like that, new mixed with old. Bolton was even better, though, with more of Grandma's time shining through.

A sudden sharp turn brought them to Century Lodge, a long stretch of houses semicircling an old patch of wild grass dominated by a dirty pond. Lone fishermen sat dotted about its banks daydreaming and drinking from flasks of coffee. Sometimes, at weekends, Gezz would stroll through the long grass and go and stand on the raised slopes of the water's edge. It was relaxing just staring into it and watching the ripples spreading across as birds attempted to land on bits of old tyre dotted about in the middle.

Immediately facing the housing estate, on the opposite side, was Century Mill, a large disused factory. Grandma told her it used to be an old cotton mill and just about everyone worked at it in the olden days. The pond had served as a kind of reservoir for the mill, and people in the North of Britain sometimes called these stretches of water '*lodges*'. Bolton and Manchester were famous for their mills and factories at that time. But now the factory was dead, with all its windows and doors boarded up, left abandoned, standing in the distance like a ghost haunting the lodge.

The place had been there for over a hundred years, and now this was all that was left. When the council built the new houses they called the estate Century Lodge as a memorial to

the old times. Gezz knew from her history lessons that a century is one hundred years, and that was why they called the factory Century Mill and the pond Century Lodge.

Their car pulled into the drive. Gezz quickly noted the open front door and the tricycle left abandoned on the lawn. That meant that her father had got back from picking up Ross from nursery. As her mum yanked the hand brake and switched off the engine, Gezz hurriedly unbuckled her seatbelt, flung open the door and rushed into the house to greet her father.

He was busy uncoupling the harness on baby Ross's buggy. He turned at the sound of her running footsteps, his back still arched. 'Daddy, I'm home!' said Gezz excitedly. She reached out her arms and the man hugged her softly, crouching down to her level.

'How was your last day, love?'

'OK,' she said. 'I'm glad it's the holidays though.'

'You can say that again,' puffed her mum as she followed her in. 'I've heard nothing but how glad she is to be on holiday all the way home.' She held Gezz's satchel in one hand and the car keys in the other.

Her dad reacted to her voice with a smile and walked over to kiss his wife gently on the lips. 'Hello, darling,' he said. 'How was the traffic?'

'Murder as usual,' she replied. 'I'm glad we don't have to do it again for another six weeks.' The couple embraced and smiled at one another. As an afterthought, she added, 'Even if it does mean having to put up with these two.' They laughed, rubbed noses a couple of times, and then released each other.

The sound of another car rumbling close by caught Gezz's attention. She raced to the window and watched the snazzy sports car zooming into next door's driveway. Gezz jumped up and down in excitement. 'Luke's home!' She turned to her mum. 'Can I play out?'

Her mum was walking to the open front door. 'Not yet, love. Not until we've had tea.' She stepped into the garden and picked up the trike.

'Aw, *please?*' Gezz begged.

'No!' came the emphatic reply. 'There'll be plenty of time after tea.' She carried the trike into the hallway and, after giving a quick wave to the new arrivals, shut the front door. Baby Ross interrupted the moment with a few warning moans to let his parents know about his little problem.

'The baby's nappy needs changing,' said Gezz's mum irritably. She held the palm of her hand to her head. 'I've got a thousand and one things to do as usual.'

'Don't worry about that, love,' said Gezz's dad. 'I'll see to it. You get tea started.'

Looking relieved, she said thanks and headed for the kitchen, as he began unsticking Ross's nappy and carefully rolling it back. His face said it all and he screwed up his eyes as the whiff hit his nostrils. 'We've got that charity do at the chapel tomorrow, Ness. Don't forget.'

Gezz's mum had not even heard him above the clatter of plates and pans in the kitchen. 'What was that, John?'

'I said we've got that charity do at the chapel tomorrow. For Barnardo's. So, don't forget.'

'Oh, yes,' came the reply after a couple of minutes. 'I *had* forgotten about it. It's a good job you said.'

Gezz was bored already. The conversation continued as her dad put the finishing touches to Ross's new nappy. She shrugged off her coat and hung it with her satchel on one of the hangers in the hall and then made for the kitchen.

Her mum was busy filling a large pan of vegetables up with water. Empty packets of frozen carrots and green beans lay strewn on the work surface. Gezz coughed nervously, knowing she was pushing it now. 'Mum?' she quizzed in a sickly nice voice. Her mum put the pan down on a gas ring and turned a knob. 'What?' she said absent-mindedly. The