

*For Mike and Joy,
the best parents an author could ever hope for*

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THE
SECRET
OF THE
STONE

KATHRYN LEFROY



FREMANTLE PRESS

DEAD FROG

Olive checked the clock on the wall. Twenty minutes more and this class would be over. Twenty minutes more and she could leave the poor dead frog on her desk and go another day without being subjected to the inner workings of an amphibian.

Olive was not easily grossed out, but when she was five, she accidentally cycled over a frog and squashed it. She decided then and there that she never needed to see the insides of another one ever again — and this still held true today, seven years and eight months later. But, if she didn't do this dissection, Ms Ogier (who was not-so-affectionately known as 'The Ogre') would fail her. And Olive needed a good grade on this assignment. Really, *really* needed a good grade. Her entire future happiness depended on it.

At the workstation in front of her, Jake Webster stabbed the scalpel into his cadaver.

'Slice the skin, Webster, don't jab it,' Ms Ogier barked as she marched between the desks. 'We are scientists not barbarians.'

Olive glared at the back of Jake Webster's stupid head. How did he even make it into Advanced Science?

Ms Ogier stopped next to Olive and eyeballed the pristine frog. She was one of those stern, frosty teachers who you couldn't imagine having a life outside the classroom. It made her seem older than she probably was; like she'd never once been a kid herself. 'Are you planning on joining our lab exercise today or do I detect an "F" in your future?'

Olive scrambled for her scalpel. 'I was just about to start.'

Ms Ogier raised an eyebrow then continued her lap around the classroom. 'Being squeamish will get you nowhere in life, Olive Selverston-Myers.'

Next to Olive, Lola finished her dissection and was labelling body parts on the activity sheet. 'You can copy my answers,' she whispered. 'But you still have to cut the thing open or The Ogre will know you've cheated.'

Olive shook her head. She wasn't a cheater and she didn't plan on becoming one. She regarded her frog sadly. There was no escape now — not for her or the frog. Very tentatively, she touched a finger to its skin. It was cold, but not as slimy as she imagined. 'I wish you'd come back to life and hop out of here,' she muttered under her breath.

For a fraction of a second her insides fizzed and popped, sort of like she was filled with soda and someone had given her a really good shake. She leaned against the workstation to steady herself.

Lola frowned. 'You okay?'

The fizzy feeling was there and gone so quickly that Olive

thought she must have imagined it. ‘Yeah. Just wishing I didn’t have to do this.’

‘It’s not so bad,’ Lola said. ‘Think about slicing roast chicken or something.’

Olive grimaced. ‘Do you want me to puke?’

‘On the count of five,’ said Lola. Olive took a breath and positioned her scalpel over the frog’s stomach. ‘One ... two ... three ...’

And then the frog moved.

Olive and Lola jerked back. Olive’s chair clattered to the floor. They looked at each other, and then the frog. Its belly was rising and falling. Rhythmically. Like it was breathing.

Like it wasn’t dead.

‘Ms Ogier!’ Lola squeaked. ‘Olive’s frog is alive!’

Ms Ogier narrowed her eyes and stalked through the rows of desks. She took one look at the frog and jumped back. Another chair clattered to the floor.

Within seconds, the whole class was gathered around Olive’s desk. ‘That frog’s totally alive!’ Geoffrey Wong exclaimed.

‘Thank you, Wong,’ Ms Ogier said, regaining her composure. ‘Your scientific skills of observation are impeccable.’

Carefully, Ms Ogier started to remove the pins holding the frog’s limbs in place. The frog let out a delicate croak, performed a rather impressive flip, and landed the right way up. Even Ms Ogier screamed.

The creature was the same green as apple-flavoured candy and about the size of Olive’s hand when she made a fist. It

took one look at its audience and headed straight for the open window. For freedom.

‘I can see it!’ Geoffrey Wong cried. ‘It’s hopping across the basketball court!’

As the small green shape passed between the metal bars of the school gate and out into the wilds of San Francisco, the whole class let out a loud cheer.

Olive was the only one who didn’t make a sound. She stared at the spot where the frog had just been.

I did that, she thought. I made that frog come back to life.

THE EDGE OF EVERYTHING

At lunch, Olive and Lola met Theo at their regular table. Theo gave Lola his weird, mushy cafeteria lunch, Olive handed Theo the artichoke and provolone quiche Dad made, and Lola gave Olive her chicken and rice.

Theo stuffed half the quiche into his mouth and eyed the chicken and rice, which Olive hadn't touched. 'You're not going to eat that?'

'I'm not really hungry.'

Theo reached over and helped himself to a mouthful. 'Because of next year?'

Olive supposed the whole frog-coming-back-to-life thing had served one vaguely useful purpose. It temporarily supplanted the horrible, awful, world-shattering news that Olive's parents broke to her that morning.

As Olive was eating toast in the kitchen before school, Dad and Papa sat either side of her at the bench and gently told her they could no longer afford to send her to The Kiera School next year.

'We're so, so sorry, Ollie,' Dad said. 'We've spoken to the

bank and looked into loans. But things are really tight and we just can't make it work at the moment.'

'We know how upset you must be,' Papa said, squeezing Olive's hand. 'We're upset too, if it's any consolation.'

Upset didn't begin to describe how Olive felt. The Kiera School was where Lola and Theo were transferring to next year. It was where Olive was supposed to transfer to as well, so the three best friends could finish school together.

The fact that Olive had to leave Santa Lucia at all, a small charter school she'd been at since first grade, made her feel queasy. But the prospect of starting a new junior high without her best friends sent shockwaves of panic through her. To make matters worse, she would be thrust into the seventh grade with a cohort of kids who'd already been in classes together for a full year, because, unlike Santa Lucia, which allowed kids to stay on through grade six, most other schools finished after fifth grade.

She wanted to burst into tears, to shout and scream at her fathers. But Olive hated conflict as much as the idea of not going to Kiera. And besides, Dad and Papa looked so miserable that she actually felt a bit bad for them.

'There is one option,' Papa said, tentatively. He and Dad shared a glance. 'Kiera does offer scholarships.'

'It's not a guaranteed solution, of course,' Dad added. 'But we can help you apply, if you'd like to give it a shot.'

When Olive got to school and shared the news with Lola and Theo, they were as horrified as her. Now, with the hubbub of the cafeteria flowing around them, they went

into problem-solving mode.

‘Okay, just brainstorming here ...’ Lola ate a forkful of nondescript cafeteria mush. ‘But we could combine our allowances and buy lottery tickets. Or, forge the admissions paperwork. No, actually, I’ve got it ... Olive should pretend she’s the daughter of some tech billionaire and get Kiera to send them the bill instead! Billionaires are so loaded they’d never even notice!’

‘Yeah, genius ideas,’ Theo deadpanned. ‘Although, I vote that Olive should apply for a scholarship.’

‘Yeah, but scholarships aren’t just handed out,’ Lola said. ‘What if she doesn’t get one?’ She forked more food into her mouth. ‘This could be macaroni or mashed potato. Hard to tell.’

Theo made a face. ‘I don’t know how you can eat that stuff.’

‘If I didn’t eat it, you’d have to.’ Lola chewed thoughtfully. ‘Definitely macaroni. I think.’

‘Seriously, though,’ Theo continued. ‘Olive gets great grades. Teachers love her. She’s never been in trouble in her life. A scholarship is worth a shot, right?’

‘I’m sitting right here,’ Olive said. ‘And for your information, my Advanced Science grade is not great, and Ms Ogier does not love me. Especially now.’

Lola shrugged. ‘The Ogre doesn’t love anyone. And it’s not your fault the frog wasn’t dead.’

Olive shivered. ‘It was dead.’

‘It hopped out a window,’ Lola said. ‘Dead frogs don’t do that.’

Olive knew what she was about to say would make her sound insane. But these were her best friends. If they didn't believe her, no one would. 'It's what I wished for last Saturday.'

Lola and Theo both stopped eating. They flashed a look at each other then stared at Olive as though she was losing her mind. Maybe she was. Olive ploughed on. 'Remember? We each said something we wished we could do?'

'Yeah, but Ollie ... every person in the history of human-kind has made a dumb wish about something they want to do.' Lola spoke slowly. 'There must be gazillions of people who've said, "I wish I could fly!" or "I wish I was invisible!"'

'I'll bet no one's ever wished to bring dead frogs back to life,' Theo said. 'Except Olive.'

'I was thinking of ways to get out of the dissection,' Olive protested. 'I figured Ms Ogier wouldn't be mean enough to make me cut up a frog that was alive.'

'My point is,' Lola continued, ignoring the interruption, 'it's total fantasy. No one actually *gets* what they wish for.'

'But last weekend was different,' Olive said. She swallowed, hard. There was no going back now. 'Last weekend I found that stone at Lands End.'

Lands End was a nature reserve a short walk from Theo's apartment, and the three of them often went there on weekends. On a clear day, it swarmed with people hiking along the cliff-edge trail, taking in the spectacular view of the San Francisco Bay and Golden Gate Bridge to the right, the Pacific Ocean to the left, and the Marin Headlands straight in front.

But other days — grey, blustery days — Lands End lived up to its name. The soupy fog swallowed up the view, and the wind slammed at you so fast it snatched words out of your mouth before you could say them. On those days, it felt like you were right on the edge of everything. That the entire world only existed behind you.

Last Saturday was one of those days. To avoid a torrential, bone-drenching downpour, the three friends took shelter at the back of a sandstone cave, down by one of the beach inlets. That's when Olive saw it — a glimpse of something grey-green, the colour of over-chewed spearmint gum, half-buried in the sand and completely out of place against the cave's pocked sandstone walls and coarse floor. The stone was smooth and glassy, warm to the touch. But more than that, when she held it, it felt ... right. That was the only way to describe it. Like it was something important she'd lost, and now found again.

'When I said what I wished for, this weird sort of fizzy feeling went through me,' Olive continued, trying to ignore the incredulity on her friends' faces. 'I had the exact same feeling today when I touched the frog and said I wanted it to come back to life.'

'You didn't tell me that bit,' Lola said.

'Because I didn't think it would work!' Olive exclaimed.

'Where's the stone now?' Theo asked.

'In my terrarium at home.' Olive had slipped the stone into her pocket last Saturday without telling the others. She just had this strange feeling that she didn't want to let it go.

'Ollie, you don't really believe this, do you?' Lola said it

gently, but her scepticism was evident. ‘That you’re now the proud owner of a stone that ... what ... grants wishes?’

‘The frog came back to life,’ Olive said. ‘What other explanation is there?’

‘That it wasn’t dead in the first place!’

Olive glared at her. They both knew the frog was dead.

Theo broke their stand-off. ‘Well, we need to find another dead frog and see if you can bring it back to life.’

‘Where are we going to find another dead frog?’ Olive asked.

‘Where do they put the Advanced Science frog leftovers?’

Olive wrinkled her nose. ‘They’ve all been cut up.’

‘Then they’re definitely dead, right?’

‘I guess.’ Olive didn’t love where this was going.

‘Lola?’

Lola shrugged a yes. ‘But it’s not going to work.’

‘Then we have a plan.’ Theo popped the rest of the quiche into his mouth. ‘After school, we break into the science lab, find another frog, and see if Olive can bring it back to life.’