

Once Upon A Cubby House

Olive frowned so hard that it made her mother chuckle.

"Turn that upside down, miss," she said, hefting a large cardboard box out of the boot of her car, "I don't need your sass today."

Olive sighed, but lowered her eyes and stared at the pavement under her red rain boots.

"Come on, you can either help me here at the car or you can go inside and find your Dad - he'll give you a job." her mother grunted, shifted her weight and brought the box to her hip to slam the boot shut.

Olive looked from the now-empty car to the house it was parked in front of. Their new house. In a new street. In a new city. Where she was the new kid.

"Fine." she muttered and slowly trudged up the driveway to the front door. It was held open with another cardboard box labelled 'pots and pans' and Olive stepped over the top of it.

The entryway was filled with yet more boxes, a pile of wire coat hangers, several pairs of shoes and her older brother's guitar case.

"Dad?"

"In the bedroom!" a voice floated down the hallway.

"Which one?" Olive called back.

"Yours', honey." That made Olive frown again. *Her* bedroom was back in their *old* house. She didn't want one in this new place.

She stomped down the hallway, the floorboards creaking, to the furthest room. The carpet was a dusty pink, slightly worn down from years of feet coming and going across it. The walls were a cream colour with curtains to match and there was a full length mirror on one side of the wardrobe.

She had to admit, it was a pretty room. She liked pink. It was bigger than her old room and she could see the backyard from her window...but it wasn't *home*. Home was hours away and she already missed it so much it was making her chest hurt.

"Hi honey, what's up?" her Dad was kneeling on the carpet using bolts to assemble her bed frame. He smiled up at her, but then paused when he saw her face.

"Did Mum send you in here for a job? You look like you need a project - distract you a little bit, help you work out your feelings." he added.

Olive sighed dramatically which made her Dad grin.

"I don't *want* to work anything out, Dad," she said, folding her arms across her chest,

"And unpacking is boring. Nathan doesn't have to be here, why do I?"

Her Dad cocked an eyebrow at her as she reached for his toolbox.

"Nathan is picking up dinner, honey, he'll help when he's back - besides, you haven't even explored the place yet! Don't screw your nose up at it until you really *know*, ok?"

Olive blinked at him.

"Here's your project then - *explore*."

"Where?"

"Olive, just go outside - go into the backyard and look around. We've never had a yard this big before. Check it out." Olive and her Dad looked at each for a moment and finally, she managed a small smile. She liked being outside, he knew that. It was a good idea.

"Ok, fine - I'll be out there," she pointed through the window, "But call me when the pizza arrives!"

The sun was turning a golden yellow and casting orange and pink ribbons across the sky. Olive closed the back door and stood with her red rain boots on the concrete. Her Dad was right, the backyard *was* big! There was enough space under the verandah for a party, and there was probably enough space for a huge trampoline on the grass. Maybe she could ask for one for Christmas.

She was scanning the space, her eyes running up and down the tall gum trees in the corner beside the fence that bordered with their new neighbours. Next to them were what her Mum had said were mandarin trees. Olive hoped she was right, she liked mandarins.

Then something caught her eye.

Behind some lavender bushes, sort of out of sight of the back of the house, was the side of something made of wood.

Olive looked around. It wasn't the tool shed, that was made of metal and stood on the opposite side of the yard.

Whatever this was, was small and forgotten.

Olive heard her Dad's voice in her head.

Explore. He'd said. She shrugged. Ok, she would.

Trudging over the grass that needed a lawn mower, she headed for the mandarin trees and the lavender bushes.

The closer she got, the stronger the smell became. There were four huge bushes and each one in flower. Covered with the pretty purple buds, they made Olive smile, though not for long. She was surprised at what they were covering up.

Behind the bushes, as if it were hiding from her, was a handmade cubby house.

"Well, hello there." Olive murmured to herself. She squeezed between a bush and the side fence and stood in front of the wooden structure. The lavender bushes had probably been small once, and would have looked like a garden just for the cubby house. Now, they almost shielded it entirely.

Olive stood in front of the cubby. It was a bit taller than she was, and smelled of damp wood and earth. There was a rickety door with rusty hinges, two windows like eyes on either side and a small front porch. An old wind chime hung from a corner, slowly swaying from side to side. It was quiet and Olive shivered.

She peered past the lavender bushes. No one was waving her back to the house. No one was calling her name.

So she turned to the cubby and stepped forward.

It was dark inside, and colder than out in the garden. The smell of damp, rotting wood was stronger too and it took a moment for Olive's eyes and nose to adjust to her new space.

Eventually, she could see what the previous owner had left for her to discover. The cubby house was just one room and mostly empty. On her left there was a rough wooden table, sloping slightly to one side with one wooden stool.

On the opposite side of the cubby house was a kitchen made of cinder blocks and slabs of wood. A chipped white basin sat in the middle and two plates and two forks sat beside it.

Olive grinned.

"Awesome!" she said, stepping forward and picking up a plate. She held it in her hand and looked around her new cubby. It was old and falling down in parts; covered in moss in one corner and spider webs in another - but it made Olive feel happy. She'd never had a cubby house before, and this was a secret one! No one else knew it was there.

Dropping the plate into the basin, she turned back to the front door but stopped when something at the rear of the little house caught her eye.

A back door.

A door? Wasn't the back of the house flat up against the neighbour's fence? Maybe it didn't open. Maybe it was just pretend.

Without really giving it another thought, Olive walked the few steps across the old wooden floorboards and grabbed the door handle.

With one yank, the back door thudded open, sending her stumbling backwards.

Olive could hardly believe her eyes.

Instead of looking straight at a corrugated iron fence, she was now staring out into the dark, leafy greenery of a forest.

"Uhh..." was all she could get out as she faced the open back door of her cubby house.

Quick as a flash, she turned and ran back out the front door and past the lavender bushes. Standing in the middle of the lawn, she turned around. Sure enough, there was the fence that separated their yard from the back neighbour's. No forest. No towering trees or swaying leaves. Just a cloudy sky above a fence. That was it.

Heart pounding a little faster now, she took off again.

Back inside the old cubby, she stood stock still in front of the back door. The forest was still there.

Olive blinked and then rubbed her hands over her face.

Still, there was a forest.

She turned a complete circle, squeezed her eyes shut and then popped them open again.

Still, there was a forest.

A cold gust of air blew in through the open door, ruffling her hair and a shiver ran down her spine again.

Well, clearly she was meant to go into the forest.

Wasn't she?

Olive bit her bottom lip and nervously rubbed her hands on the sides of her jeans.

Should she go through the back door even though she wasn't entirely sure it was even *there*?

Explore. Her Dad's voice drifted in again from before.

Taking a slow breath, Olive stood a little taller and stepped forward before she paused, turned and snatched up one of the old forks.

"Just in case." she said to no one, and walked through the back door.

The air changed as soon as her feet crunched over the leaves on the ground. It was colder, sharper and darker than in her backyard. The tops of the trees shielded her from

the sky and swayed to and fro in the wind. It smelled of nature - dirt, animals, wet leaves and fallen bark.

There was no more noise from the streets surrounding her house and no more smell of lavender that had filled the cubby house. She was in a completely different place, she knew it.

"Maybe I hit my head in the cubby." she murmured, clutching the fork a little tighter.

She was about to turn back to the door behind her when something pricked her attention.

What was that?

A cold chill crept inside her jacket and Olive zipped it all the way up, listening intently.

There it was again.

"Psst!"

A voice.

"Psst! You - over here!"

Olive's head snapped to the left where a gloved hand was waving her over from between the twigs and leaves of a large bush. She froze, her heart racing. She wasn't alone.

Desperately wanting to take a step backward into the cubby house, she found herself walking toward the bush instead.

More leaves crunched under foot and as soon as she was close enough to the bush to smell the sweet pink flowers that covered it, the hand reached out and grabbed her by the front of her jacket.

"Ow! Hey - let me go!" she cried. Trying to wrestle herself free, her fork flew out of her hand and tumbled somewhere into the dirt.

She fell in a pile at the base of the bush and quickly scrambled away from the hand that had yanked her.

"Are you her?" the voice asked.

Olive blinked, looking up.

The gloved hand was attached to a girl with black pants and a black jacket. She was wearing something that looked like a motorbike helmet. Her jet black hair sprayed out from underneath it and her green eyes were sharp, but nervous. They darted over Olive from head to toe.

"Are you *her*?" the girl asked again, more intently. She brought her face down close to Olive's, looking her over. Olive sniffed. She smelled of something familiar. What was that - dessert? Apple pie maybe?

"Can you back up please." Olive muttered, scrambling to her feet. She had to hunch her shoulders so that her head didn't scrape on the leaves and branches. It was as if they were inside a tent, the bush was so large.

"*Are. You. Her?*" the girl was gritting her teeth now, desperately waiting for an answer to her important question.

Olive brushed her jeans off and frowned. Her backside hurt from falling on the hard ground.

"Am I *who*?" she asked, "Who are you waiting for?"

"Red."

The girls stared at each other.

"You're waiting for a...colour?" Olive asked, confused. The stranger frowned at her.

"No," she hissed, her lips drawn back over her pearly teeth, "I'm waiting for Red - are you her?"

"You mean - am I this person, this Red?"

The stranger raised her eyebrows expectantly.

Olive shrugged.

"I don't think so - I'm Olive."

"You're *wearing* red though."

Olive looked down. The girl was right. Her jacket *was* red. As were her boots.

"Yeah but that doesn't mean I *am* red - like I said, I'm Olive." she replied. She was now feeling a mix of confusion, annoyance and fear. As well as cold - she was *really* cold.

The girl opposite her, also hunched over inside the bush, jabbed a gloved hand in the direction from which Olive had just come.

"But you came from in *there*," she said urgently, "And only 3 people have ever been inside there - Wolfie, Nan and Red."

Olive blinked.

"In - in the cubby house? You're talking about the cubby house?"

The girl in the helmet shrugged one shoulder.

"If you wanna call it that, sure."

Olive narrowed her eyes and then elbowed a part of the bush out of the way so she could peer out at the clearing she'd been standing in.

She felt her stomach fall down into her boots.

Instead of a cubby house, there was a cottage. Instead of a small, open *back* door, there was a large open *front* door. Smoke billowed from a chimney that jutted out of a thatched roof and there was no sign of a back fence or of her new house at all.

"You're not Wolfie and you're definitely not Nan - so that just leaves Red." the girl with the jet black hair said, like it was a fact.

Olive took a step back, disbelief and confusion fighting for centrestage in her chest. Her heart drummed a fast rhythm against her ribcage and her breath was coming out quickly in small white puffs.

"Wait, wait just - um, wait a second here," she stumbled over her words as her brain tried to make sense, "Wolfie, Nan and Red - are you, um, are you talking about *Little Red Riding Hood*, the fairytale?"

The stranger in front of Olive blinked, now also looking confused.

"What? Fairy's don't have tails, they have wings."

The two girls stood face to face, both confused and both wanting answers. The wind whipped the trees and bustled the bush they were crouched inside. The door of the cottage banged shut and somewhere, something cawed loudly.

Olive shivered. Fear won over her confusion and she could feel tears begin to prick the corners of her eyes.

The girl with the helmet noticed and offered a half smile.

"Look, I'm sorry I grabbed you like that - but we've been waiting for Red to get here for like, well, I don't even know how long now. It's probably years!" she said, attempting to explain her side of things.

"You've been in this bush for years?" Olive was surprised.

"No, dummy! The people have just been waiting and if you're not her, then I don't know what I'll go back and tell them."

Olive nodded slowly and then looked down at her red jacket and her red boots. *Was* she this Red person? Was that why she'd stumbled upon the door and the forest?

She shook her head.

"I don't know what to tell you, um - what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Snow."

Olive blinked at the girl opposite her. Her jet black hair rippled in the wind that shook the bush around them.

"Like, Snow - as in, *Snow White*?" she asked cautiously, almost afraid of the answer.

"First name Snow, last name White - so what? It's a pretty common name, you know."

Snow replied.

A tiny smile crept across Olive's face. She could hardly believe her ears.

"Nothing - it's nothing," she replied and then blew her breath out, "Look, if I'm not this Red person, I think I should get going."

The words were barely out of her mouth when there was a loud crashing noise followed by a roar and the whole forest seemed to shake.

Olive fell to her knees in the dirt, holding her arms over her head as Snow also dropped low and peered out through the leaves.

"It's coming!" she hissed, panic flooding her voice.

Olive's eyes were wide with terror as she stared at the girl across from her.

"What's coming?! What's happening?!" she cried, her heart racing out of control. Her hands began shaking as she pressed them into the cold ground.

Snow only glanced at her before she peered back out into the clearing.

"Oh, I want to go home!" Olive whimpered to herself, the tears pricking her eyes again and a lump forming in her throat.

Snow waved a hand to shush her and they were both silent as a rumble, something like an earthquake, rolled through the forest. Birds flew everywhere, escaping whatever it was that was headed their way.

"Rumple." Snow hissed, her green eyes wide.

Olive opened her mouth to reply, but stopped short.

A third person suddenly tumbled head-long into their hiding place.

Olive fell backwards and did a double-take as the new-comer scampered to their feet, panting.

A wolf, standing on its two hind legs, leaned on Snow's shoulder with an elbow to catch his breath. Jeans and a puffer jacket could have led anyone to mistake the animal for a human, except up close, Olive could see teeth. Sharp teeth.

"Wolfie, you made it!" Snow hugged the animal and then nodded at Olive. The wolf turned to size her up and Olive just hoped it wasn't because he was hungry.

"She Red?" he asked. His voice was low and with a distinct growl.

"I don't know - but Nan will. We have to get her to Nan, Wolfie - we have to get her to Nan before Rumple gets here." Snow sounded desperate now.

Wolfie nodded once and looked from Snow to Olive and back again.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Now's our chance!" he growled.

Snow raised her dark eyebrows at Olive.

"Are you willing to find out if you're Red or are you going to go home? It's up to you, Olive - but you need to choose *now*!"

