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## A NOTE FROM WORLD BOOK DAY

World Book Day's mission is to offer every child and young person the opportunity to read and love books by giving you the chance to have a book of your own.

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*For Oscar and Matilda*







# ONE

I wedge myself into the tiny space between the empty gas cylinder and the back of our tent and pull Dad's waterproof jacket over me. It's a perfect hiding place: far enough away from the camp's central area to make my little cousin have to run around as he looks for me, but easy enough for him to find me once he's here.

'*E-wen!*' Charlie yells. 'I coming!' His three-year-old voice makes the *ls* in my name, Ellen, sound like *ws*. I can hear how excited he is. Hide-and-seek is his favourite game.

I huddle under the jacket and grin to myself. It's half-term, the last week in May, and I'm camping



in the countryside with my whole family. Not just Mum and Dad, but a bunch of aunts and uncles and cousins too. Their voices drift towards me: chattering and laughing as they make plans to go out for the day. After three days of rain, the sun has finally come out and everyone's in a good mood.

Well, almost everyone.

Through the mesh of Dad's jacket, I can just make out Charlie's yellow wellies, padding across the grass. I press myself against the tent fabric. Its sour smell mixes with the scent of damp earth. The yellow wellies draw closer. I hold my breath.

'I *finded* you!' Charlie squeals with delight. 'I *finded* you, E-wen!'

He tugs Dad's jacket off me and I make a face at him.

'You're too good at hide-and-seek,' I say. 'You're a *superstar* finder!'

'Superstar finder!' Charlie echoes. He hurls himself at me, all chubby arms and legs.





I hug him tight. His breath is hot on my ear. Charlie wriggles away and I ease myself out of my hiding place.

‘Again! Again!’ he cries.

‘There you are, Charlie!’ Auntie Mo appears around the tent. ‘Now the sun’s out, how would you like to go to the playground at Harmer, then get an ice cream?’

‘Yay, ice cream!’ Charlie cries. ‘Go now, Mummy!’

Auntie Mo raises a weary eyebrow at me. ‘I’m guessing that a trip to some swings with all the little ones isn’t your idea of a perfect teenage afternoon, Ellie?’

I grin at her. Auntie Mo is my favourite aunt. She was there when I was born – and she’s one of only two people who still call me Ellie. To everyone else now, I’m Ellen. My proper name.

‘I already told Mum and Dad, I’ll stay here,’ I say. ‘Mind the camp.’

‘I totally get it,’ Auntie Mo says with a sigh. ‘I can’t remember the last time I had a moment to myself. Talking of which, do you mind watching





Charlie for another few minutes? I just need to chuck a few things in a bag.'

'Sure,' I say.

Auntie Mo disappears.

'Nother hiding time!' Charlie demands.

'Okay, then, one last go. It's your turn to hide. I'll count.' I shoo him away. 'One ... Two ...'

Charlie speeds off as fast as his chunky little legs will carry him. As I carry on counting loudly, I watch him disappear around the corner of the tent. He's not the greatest at hide-and-seek, usually just picking a tent and snuggling under the nearest sleeping bag, making a Charlie-shaped bulge that isn't exactly hard to spot.

'Nine ... Ten,' I finish. 'Ready or not, here I come.'

I take a step towards the edge of the tent. A dark shadow blooms on the grass. As I look up, I get a split-second view of a black hoody hurtling towards me. Then *wham!* A bony shoulder rams against my side.

I stagger back, losing my balance. Gasping for breath, I fall to the ground.

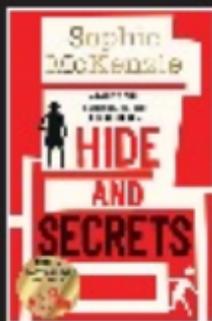


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