

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



# Classroom Cereal

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Chapter 1

### “The Fire Starter”

#### Part 1 of 5: Chased Through the Trees

##### **Directions**

*As you read the story, fill in the blanks with the missing word.*

Richie was by himself when he snuck into the woods. This late in \_\_\_\_\_ summer, he didn't even have to think about the directions Lauren had given him back in June. *Go to the chain link fence. Find the big white sign with red letters. It says PRESTO'S PLAYLAND AND WILDLIFE ADVENTURE. NO TRESPASSING. The fence is loose at the bottom a few yards to the left. Just yank it up and shimmy through.* This had to \_\_\_\_\_ Richie's tenth time into the woods, but he still felt a nervous rush every time he pried up the stabby bottom of the fence and held it just barely high enough \_\_\_\_\_ slide under.

Presto's Playland \_\_\_\_\_ long gone, but Wildlife Adventure was still alive and well, saved by a private investor when the amusement park went under. It was a massive expanse of land, separated safely from the woods and filled with wild animals. Every weekend, kid-packed cars flooded in to see the elephants, lions, and giraffes. But Richie and his new group of friends encountered the wildlife in a different way, from their secret spot deep in the woods. To get \_\_\_\_\_, you needed the only remaining artifact of Presto's Playland: an old wooden roller coaster, its arched peak visible just over the tree line. *Walk straight at the roller coaster \_\_\_\_\_ about five minutes,* Lauren had said. *You'll run right into the spot.*

Richie felt someone behind him. He whipped around. “Lauren?” he said. “Fitz?”

Nothing. No one. Richie froze for \_\_\_\_\_ extra second, staring into the trees, the light from the setting sun shimmering their branches. He turned to resume his trek, but the instant he \_\_\_\_\_ a step, he heard behind him the unmistakable sound of a body in motion. Richie took off in a sprint. As he ran, he heard the body in close pursuit, crunching leaves and snapping branches. Finally, after what felt \_\_\_\_\_ miles, he stumbled through the entrance to the spot. He was relieved to finally see Lauren, Fitz, and Daffodil. Except \_\_\_\_\_ everyone was here, who was chasing him?

##### **Question**

Where is Richie going?

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“Finally,” Lauren said, taking Richie’s arm. “Come on. Daffodil’s up.”

Catching his breath, Richie let Lauren pull him to the old chalkboard they’d wheeled in at the beginning \_\_\_\_\_ the summer. It was divided into columns, each one with an animal name at the top. LION and OSTRICH were circled. Richie felt Lauren’s hand on his arm and thoughts of the chase melted away. It was probably just the wind anyway, he thought.

“Lauren has lion, as usual,” Richie said. “And Fitz is going with ostrich. What are \_\_\_\_\_ thinking, Daffodil?”

Daffodil was gazing over the tree line, at the wispy moon just starting to materialize as the sky tinted purple. “Tonight,” she whispered. “I choose the mighty \_\_\_\_\_.”

Lauren circled WOLF and Richie’s pick, ZEBRA. She remained at the board, chalk at the ready, and the other three plopped into weather-beaten chairs around the rusty chiminea they’d gotten from Fitz’s grandpa. Then \_\_\_\_\_ settled into silence, and the game began. What was the game? Just listen for the animals. Every time they heard a roar or a rummage or a growl far off in the distance, Lauren \_\_\_\_\_ put a check in that animal’s column. If your pick had the most checks by the end of the night, you won. Most nights, the board was filled. But tonight, for whatever reason, the animals \_\_\_\_\_ silent. After twenty dull minutes, Lauren hadn’t added a single check.

“Let’s just do the smores!” Fitz shouted.

In agreement, they all reached for their assigned ingredient. Lauren revealed a bag of marshmallows, Daffodil the graham crackers, Fitz the chocolate. Richie reached in \_\_\_\_\_ pocket for the lighter. The lighter. \_\_\_\_\_ was the lighter? Richie was sure he’d stuffed it in his back pocket before he left. It was the one his dad used for the grill, with the long snout, plastic trigger, and yellow handle. But \_\_\_\_\_ matter how hard he patted his pockets, it wasn’t there.

## Question

“You forgot the fire starter?” Fitz accused.

Why is the night so lame?

This was their last night in the woods before school started. And \_\_\_\_\_ to Richie, it was now officially the lamest one of the summer.

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The only noise came from the crickets chirping in the trees. Far \_\_\_\_\_ the distance, the safari animals remained silent. Lauren sat on the ground, leaning against the chalkboard. Fitz twirled a leaf in his fingers. Daffodil sat in a meditation pose, gazing at the moon. Richie was looking just over the tree line, at the roller coaster's peak about a hundred yards away.

"Did you guys ever go to Presto's Playland?" Richie asked.

"*Of course* we went to Presto's Playland, Richard," Fitz replied. "It was only one of the \_\_\_\_\_ popular amusement parks in the country. You still have a lot to \_\_\_\_\_ about this town, don't you?"

"Really, Fitz?" Lauren said. "You went to Presto's Playland? Did \_\_\_\_\_ take a time machine? Because it closed 10 years before you were born."

"My parents told me about it," Fitz said, refocusing \_\_\_\_\_ his leaf.

"If it was so popular, why'd it close?" Richie asked.

Richie swore he saw a flicker of a glance pass between Lauren and Fitz. Lauren was about to respond, but she was interrupted by a sound behind the chalkboard. Shaking branches. Suddenly alert, they all shifted cautiously toward \_\_\_\_\_ noise. The shaking grew louder, then the branches started to bob up and down. A burst of leaves, and then, perched on \_\_\_\_\_ of the chalkboard, a monkey. A chimpanzee, smiling ear to ear.

The humans shuffled backward. After a minute of silent shock, Fitz finally spoke.

"I know this monkey. I've seen him before."

Lauren brushed off Fitz's comment. There were no chimpanzees at Wildlife Adventure. No monkeys at all. In all \_\_\_\_\_ their nights here, \_\_\_\_\_ they ever heard a monkey? Fitz insisted he knew this particular chimp, but he fell silent when the monkey pulled something \_\_\_\_\_ behind its back. Still grinning, it revealed a lighter, one with a long snout, plastic trigger, and yellow handle.

## Question

Who is the newcomer?

“The monkey brought the fire starter!” Fitz exclaimed. The chimp tossed him the lighter, and with a yelp of glee, Fitz skipped \_\_\_\_\_ the chiminea.

“That’s my lighter! How’d you get my lighter?” Richie cried. But no one seemed to notice. Lauren and Daffodil were enthralled by the chimp. They squealed with delight when it hopped \_\_\_\_\_ from the chalkboard to help with the smores. And then they \_\_\_\_\_ it. A lion’s roar far in the distance, followed by the honk of an elephant.

“You’re our lucky charm!” Lauren yelled. She \_\_\_\_\_ the chimp high-fived as Daffodil started passing out graham crackers. The safari animals kept calling, Lauren gleefully checked the chalkboard, Fitz dished out toasted marshmallows, and everyone quickly found \_\_\_\_\_ in the middle of a party. Everyone except Richie. When he watched the chimp wrap Lauren’s legs in \_\_\_\_\_ hug, his frustration reached its peak.

“You were the thing chasing me through the woods before,” he \_\_\_\_\_ to the chimp. “And you stole my lighter. You little thief.”

The chimp’s smile vanished. It looked dead at Richie, and for a terrifying instant, Richie \_\_\_\_\_ something eerily human in the monkey’s brown eyes. It snatched the lighter from the ground, hopped onto the nearest branch, and disappeared back into the trees.

“Good going, Richard,” said Fitz.

The party ended as quickly as it started. The safari animals stopped calling. The laughter ceased. No one felt like another smore. And then \_\_\_\_\_ smelled the smoke. Too strong to be the chiminea. When they turned their heads, they felt the blazing heat on their cheeks. They saw the flames erupt skyward. About a hundred yards away, the old wooden roller coaster was on \_\_\_\_\_.

## Question

Why doesn’t Richie like the chimp?

Richie was running through the forest once again, following Fitz, Lauren, and Daffodil as they darted through the dark trees. The fire's smoke was seeping into the forest around them, and they could hear the rising wail of the fire engines approaching.

"It was the monkey," Richie gasped. "It \_\_\_\_\_ have been the monkey."

"Of course it was the monkey," Fitz replied. "The problem is, they're \_\_\_\_\_ to think it was us."

As they ran, Richie pictured the police investigating the spot, dusting the chiminea for prints. He pictured the forensics team discovering his dad's \_\_\_\_\_, carefully placing it in a plastic evidence bag. He snapped out of it when they veered in a direction away \_\_\_\_\_ the chain link fence. Fitz said they would take his way out.

A few minutes \_\_\_\_\_, the four of them crouched behind a tree near the road, watching a team of fire trucks roll by. When they were gone, Fitz crept to a splintery wooden fence, his secret entrance. Fitz held aside a dislodged section of the fence as the others went through. When Fitz was out too, they started down the road \_\_\_\_\_ town. But they stopped \_\_\_\_\_ Daffodil spoke.

"Look," she whispered.

She was facing the fence. On this side of it were the remnants of an old mural advertisement for the amusement park. In chipped paint, *PRESTO'S PLAYLAND AND WILDLIFE ADVENTURE* across the top, and below it, a cartoon of Presto himself, a grinning magician with a black top hat and twisty black mustache. Next to Presto were a few animals. A lion, an elephant, a giraffe, and most prominent among \_\_\_\_\_, a chimpanzee.

"That's him," Fitz said. "I \_\_\_\_\_ I recognized that monkey."

And Fitz was right. Richie focused on the chimp. Even through the faded paint, \_\_\_\_\_ was no mistaking it. He was looking at the same eerily human eyes he'd seen just before the fire.

### Question

How did Fitz recognize the chimp?

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