

Praise for

TAMSIN WINTER

**"FAST BECOMING A FAVOURITE
FOR YOUNGER TEENAGERS"**

THE OBSERVER

"A TOTAL TREAT TO READ"

BETH GARROD

**"SO MUCH HEART AND
WARMTH"**

SARA BARNARD

"AUTHENTIC AND SENSITIVE"

THE METRO

**"UPLIFTING AND
HEARTENING"**

SUNDAY EXPRESS

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DRILY FUNNY"**

THE GUARDIAN

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AND VERY IMPORTANT"**

LUCY STRANGE

**"BOLD, BIG-HEARTED AND
VERY NECESSARY"**

THE BOOKSELLER

**"FUNNY, SMART,
MISCHIEVOUS"**

THE I

**"FUNNY BUT
THOUGHT-PROVOKING"**

THE IRISH TIMES

"A POWERFUL ANTIDOTE TO CASTING SHADE"

THE SUNDAY TIMES

For my mum and dad,
who are no doubt enormously grateful
social media wasn't invented when
I was a teenager.

I DARE --- YOU

First published in the UK in 2025 by Usborne Publishing Limited, Usborne House,
83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. usborne.com

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Limited, Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg,
Deutschland, VK Nr. 17560

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Author photo © Tamsin Winter, 2025

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

JFM MJJASOND/25 ISBN 9781805075721 9592/1

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY.



TAMSIN WINTER



A message from the publisher:

This book contains descriptions of dangerous and life-threatening challenges that should not be replicated under any circumstances. Please do not try them at home.

AFTER

I've heard people talk about the crackle and roar of flames. But I don't remember that. Maybe because the sound was drowned out by the smoke alarm. But I remember the intensity of the heat, the chaos of it. It seemed almost funny at first, like I could put a wet towel over where it was burning and the fire would go out and both of us would laugh our heads off and say, "Woah, that was close!" or "Thank God for that!" or something.

But then in a split second the flames soared upwards and it was like I blinked for too long and suddenly they were consuming the room – gulping up the table, licking the walls, spewing onto the carpet and then stretching all the way up to the ceiling. People think in situations like that, you act quickly and do the right thing, but it wasn't like that. Not for me. I didn't even think anything. I just stood there, frozen, my mind blank with terror. I remember the thick smoke billowing towards the window, and how weird that seemed to me, like it too wanted to escape. And hearing her scream. That's what I remember the most.

BEFORE

WILLOW

“And don’t you dare slam the—”

My timing’s perfect so the slam hits exactly as Mum yells, “DOOR!” It’s weirdly satisfying, even though I know she’ll tell me off later. Tom will no doubt join in, despite him being absolutely no relation to me. Not yet anyway.

I shake my head to stop thinking about Mum and Tom’s wedding. In less than three weeks, I’m supposed to wear the most hideous bridesmaid dress known to humanity. A flamingo pink ankle-length gown with gigantic poofy sleeves that have massive bows on them – and I have to smile as though I’m happy I look like a milkmaid from the 1800s while my mum is marrying the weirdest, most idiotic loser on the planet.

Tom thinks playing air guitar in public places is normal. He constantly talks about bands from a million years ago. They all have strange names that aren’t proper words like Zarpo and Kajagoogoo, or randomly stupid phrases that don’t make any sense, like Strawberry Alarm Clock and

Peanut Butter Conspiracy. I’m not even joking. He thinks wearing cardigans and corduroy dungarees at his age is normal; he has a moustache that he deliberately waxes into curled points at the ends, and he eats cheese that smells like stinky feet. I don’t know what else to tell you, he’s weird.

I am dreading Tom becoming my stepdad. Mum says we’re already related because of the twins – my two-year-old half-brothers who tragically share this man’s DNA. But there is no way on earth I am ever calling Cardigan Tom my stepdad. I can’t even form the word without feeling sick. He was wearing proper cowboy boots this morning and pretending he was Beyoncé. My mum thinks he’s amazing and hilarious, and she’s started eating the stinky cheese too. It’s a hopeless case.

I try not to notice how angry she is as I cross the road. But it’s impossible. Mum’s glare is an invisible lasso. I turn my head back and spot her standing at the living room window with her hands on her hips. She’s not just mad because I slammed the door, although slamming doors is pretty high on her never-ending list of bad things I do. It’s because I’m grounded. I can tell she wants to run outside, drag me back into the house and keep me prisoner for the rest of the day. But Tom’s at work and she can’t leave the twins on their own. Even from this distance, I can see she’s Code Red Level annoyed. Her eyes could burn holes through the net curtains.

I shout, “Prison escape challenge completed! Thanks for

watching!” because I know it will annoy her even more, then I run across the road. She’ll lecture me later, using big words from her teacher training manual that are supposed to make me feel bad. But she’s always in a stress with me over something, so what difference does it make?

I scuff my trainers kicking stones across the pebbled alleyway that leads to the park. It’s the only decent place to hang out in our village, but Alma can’t meet me until she’s done her history homework, so I’m not exactly in a hurry. Two pages on what we learned at the Bristol Museum trip last week. And we’re not allowed to mention our prank, even though it was genius.

“*Mr McLachlan almost had a heart attack!*” our Head of Year bellowed at me and Alma the moment we set foot back on school grounds. “*I hope you think it was worth it!*” were her parting words after she’d added our names to the detention list. I bit my tongue to stop myself saying that yes, it totally was. Ms Sykes used to be okay before she became our Head of Year. Now she carries a walkie-talkie everywhere and acts like she’s our overlord. She put us in lunchtime detention for two weeks and said we should think ourselves lucky it wasn’t the entire term. We still have a week of detentions to go, which is annoying because the weather’s nice now and they’re finally letting us on the back field.

What annoyed Ms Sykes the most is that we’d already got caught sticking googly eyes on the fruit in the canteen last month. I’d said we’d made their “healthy options” more

appealing to their customer base. But Ms Sykes didn’t see it that way. It didn’t help that Freddie Powell in Year 9 said he’d accidentally swallowed an eye that was stuck to his apple. I swear he only said that to get us into trouble. Ms Sykes’s already freakishly wide nostrils flared like parachutes, which kind of distracted me from what she was saying. “*It was an extremely stupid and dangerous thing to do!*” and “*not amusing in the slightest!*” Sorry, not true. Loads of people laughed at our anthropomorphized fruit (Alma taught me that word) and besides, the plastic eye would have passed through Freddie’s digestive system in like two days. Best of all, the TikTok we made of it got two hundred and sixty-four views and three people in the year above shared it. Plus, now I only have to go slightly cross-eyed at Alma and she bursts into hysterical laughter.

So when the trip to the museum came around, I knew we had to pull an even better prank to post. I’m laughing just thinking about it. We used Alma’s phone to play a sound effect of smashing crockery at full volume in the Ancient Egypt exhibition, while we secretly filmed from behind the longboat reconstruction. A security guard came sprinting into the exhibition room, followed by Mr McLachlan, our history teacher, who probably hadn’t accelerated into a run since 1985, and should consider never doing so again in public. A museum lady arrived too, her face kind of terrified as she put white gloves on and inspected the bits of broken pottery we’d planted. I had to hold my nose to stop from

laughing too loud. She realized immediately it wasn't Ancient Egyptian clay. I'd nicked it from the tray in our art room where Miss Sterling puts pieces that smashed in the kiln. But still, it was hilarious to watch.

We would have got away with it if Constance *Crabface* Crawley hadn't shown Mr McLachlan the TikTok we made of it on the coach home. Constance voluntarily sits next to teachers on the coach. It's no wonder she has no friends. So technically, it's her fault I'm grounded. I clench my jaw at the thought of her smug face squashed through the gap in the coach seats as Mr McLachlan exploded at us. Alma and I had to hand over our phones, which I'm pretty sure is a breach of our privacy. Anyway, Mr McLachlan didn't enjoy watching the TikTok any more than he enjoyed our prank in real time. History teachers don't appreciate true art, that's the problem. And Mum grounded me indefinitely. But I've done an entire week and most of this bank holiday weekend. Personally, I think that's enough.

I reach the end of the shaded path and tilt my head up to feel the sunlight on my face. The only good thing about living on Pike Close – a bungalow estate for the decrepit and dying – is the alleyway connecting it to the park. Mum says once Vinyl Destination – Tom's record shop in Bristol – becomes a success, and once she finishes her teacher training, we'll be able to buy somewhere instead of renting. She says we'll move to a nicer place, with an upstairs and a bigger garden and no ancient neighbours who complain about their

cataracts and constipation. On a street not named after a fish, hopefully. It's nice to dream, but the only way Tom's record shop will become a success is if he invents a time machine.

As soon as I'm eighteen I'm leaving Belston Green for good. I count the five years on my fingers as I head towards the swings. I'll be a rich and famous content creator and the old biddies on the parish council will invite me back to open the new village hall or something, and I will say, *No, I'm too busy and important to open your boring little village hall*. I'll never have to wear the used clothes Mum buys on Vinted. I'll go to celebrity parties and probably get invited on that TV show in the jungle where they make you eat koala testicles and I won't even care. I don't think there's anything I don't dare do. Anyway, koala testicles probably taste nicer than Mum's "happy casserole" made from whatever's left over in the fridge. I'll travel the world making content, even into space if I feel like it. I'll never have to wear these stupid scuffed second-hand trainers, and this boring, dead-end village will be light years below me. Literally. The only person I won't leave behind is Alma.

Alma lives on Meadow View, the posh estate on the opposite side of the village. Her house has three storeys and her bedroom has its own bathroom so she doesn't have to share with anyone. She's got a neon light of musical notes above her bed, and a swinging chair that hangs from the ceiling. It looks like a giant bubble and we can still both fit in

it if we squash up. They always have the heating on, even if it's not that cold, and it smells of candles scented with expensive stuff like fig and cedar wood; Alma told me once they cost sixty-five pounds each! Her parents must earn a fortune if they spend that much on something that basically burns away to nothing. The carpet in the living room is so thick and soft your feet properly sink into it. They have a 120-inch TV that feels like you're at the cinema, and Alma can turn her bedroom light off using her phone. Her mum's a vet and she's constantly adopting and fostering cats so they have like seven or eight at the moment, I can never keep track. The outdoor enclosure thing for them is bigger than my living room and kitchen put together. My favourite is Catzilla, a giant ragdoll. He got run over so he only has half a tail, and his nose is squashed and his whiskers are kind of wonky and no one wants to adopt him. Alma's mum said I can adopt him if I want. But Mum says the last thing she needs is another mouth to feed, and anyway Tom is allergic to cats, which is so typical of him.

The only bad thing about Alma's house, apart from all the litter trays, is that it's almost a mile from the park. I can walk to the park from mine in two minutes flat. But still, I'd rather live in Alma's cat-filled, neon-lit three-storey mansion than my dingy bungalow on Pike Close. Sometimes it's awesome having a best friend who is way richer than you. But sometimes it kind of sucks. She'll show me her designer trainers, or latest iPhone and I'll get this jolt of jealousy in

my stomach. I mean, if she ever got kicked out of school her parents would send her to one of the fancy private ones in Bristol. Whereas I'd be sent to the dodgy one nearby that looks like a prison. Mum likes to remind me of this any time I get in trouble at school. Not that we'd ever get excluded. We'd never take a prank that far and anyway, I'm planning on getting so famous I don't even have to go to school.

I run across the playing field, through the net-less goalpost and jump onto the nearest swing. I message Alma telling her I'm here and wait for her reply. The park's empty except for a few kids on the skate ramp and an older boy shooting a basketball on the court next to the playground. I push myself off until my toes are only just skimming the ground and close my eyes. The sunlight feels sweet on my face. My phone buzzes but it's Mum so I don't answer. I know she'll only tell me to go home and remind me I'm grounded. As if she hasn't already told me eighty thousand times this weekend. But you can't keep a thirteen-year-old prisoner. It should be illegal.

My phone vibrates with Alma's reply: **On my way** ♥

There's one from Mum saying **Willow come home NOW. You know you're still grounded!! I'm seriously considering cancelling your phone!!**

I sigh and stuff my phone back in my pocket, then push my feet hard off the floor to get some height. Mum always says she'll cancel my phone but she never does it. How else would she moan at me when I'm out? Alma did the museum

prank too but her parents don't believe in grounding. She only had to clean the kitchen as a punishment. I mean, seriously! I have to do that as a normal part of my life. AND they have a cleaner, so how dirty could it have been?

I shake the annoyance out of my head and before long, I'm swinging so high it feels like my feet are kicking clouds. I lean back and listen to the creaking of the chains, the leaves rustling in the breeze, the thump of the basketball, the distant sound of traffic on the main road. I love this feeling. The wind in your face, the weightlessness, and your stomach flipping over like a pancake. It feels like no one can stop you.

I get the same feeling making TikToks. It's what I love best about them. When you're in that moment, filming, all the stupid rules you have to follow in real life don't apply. It's like this secret place where you can do whatever you want. Like the best game you've ever played but it's real. And your best friend is right in it with you. My skin prickles with excitement as my eyes fix on the basketball hoop. It disappears and reappears from sight as I swing. This is going to be our best one yet.

ALMA

"Finally!" I say to myself as I click off my pen and put it in my desk tidy. I have no idea why Mr McLachlan made us handwrite this homework. It's like being in the Victorian times. It would have been way more efficient to use my laptop. Maybe it's his love of history. Or maybe he's punishing the whole class for our prank. I feel really bad if that's the reason.

"Finished my homework!" I shout to Mammy as I grab my phone, stuff my new tripod in my bag, and run downstairs. I tap a quick text to Willow saying **On my way** ♡, pull on my Golden Goose hi-tops – the ones with the big glittery star on each side – and head out of the door humming a song from *Wicked*. Our theatre group hasn't allocated parts yet, but I'm hoping I get Glinda the good witch. The bad witch gets the best songs, but Willow has her heart set on that part. She says my golden hair is perfect for Glinda. My hair's not golden, it's ginger, but she says that's the same thing. And it does sparkle kind of golden under the stage lights if you squint your eyes.

“Alma-Rose!” Mammy calls from the sitting room. “Where’s the kiss for your mammy?”

I reverse and quickly plant a kiss on Mammy’s cheek. Her face feels downy and soft but smells faintly of cat drool. Boomer Cat, my favourite of all our cats, is curled up on her lap. I cover him with kisses until Mammy says to stop or I’ll trouble his arthritis.

“Back later, Mammy, love you.” Mammy says that she loves me too and tells me to be back before it gets dark. Like anything bad would ever happen to me in Belston Green. The only crime that’s ever happened here is Mrs Grosvenor catching Ralph Aston stealing a Creme Egg from her shop last summer. She phoned his dad, and just about everyone else in the village. You’d think he’d tried to steal the Mona Lisa the way everyone still talks about it. But that’s what this village is like. You do one stupid thing like stick a Creme Egg up your blazer sleeve and you’re labelled a criminal mastermind for the rest of your life and treated with suspicion wherever you hang around. Which is limited to the shop, the church, the duck pond or the war memorial, since there are no other places to hang around here. Except the park, of course. But adults don’t tend to hang out there, which is why today’s TikTok is going to be perfect. We’re definitely not going to get into trouble for this one. Once we’ve climbed up, it should only take a minute or so. I get a flutter of nerves in my belly as I think about it. It’s the height, mainly. I’m not so great with heights.

I hear Willow before I see her. A row of beech trees obscures the playground like a green stage curtain, but Willow’s rhythmical creaking on the swing carries on the breeze and I run the last few hundred metres.

“Oh my God, Alma! You took a million years!” she calls as I dart through the goalpost and take the swing next to her.

“I know!” I say, checking my trainers for dirt. “TWO pages on The Museum with No Sense of Humour. *Ridiculous!*” I say, mimicking Mr McLachlan’s Scottish accent.

“*Ridiculous!*” Willow echoes. “I guess that’s one benefit of being grounded. I got all my homework done early.”

“First time for everything,” I say with a smile. “What did you put about what you learned at the museum? I had to google it since I forgot to take any notes.”

Willow shoots me a look like it was a stupid question. “Just made it up.” She laughs and jumps off her swing from such a height it makes my tummy clench. She takes out one of her earrings and holds it out for me to swap. Today it’s a gold lightning bolt (mine) and a black plastic stud (Willow’s). We’ve been doing this ever since we got our ears pierced at the top. A helix piercing it’s called. We’d been desperate to get it done after we’d become obsessed with Zendaya when we were in Year 7. Betty Fernsby, who was in Year 12 and without a doubt the coolest person in our village, heard us talking on the bus and told us about the place in Bristol where she got her daith piercing. I said Mammy would never let me get it done and Betty turned around in her seat.

Her nails were painted dark blue and filed into points. She said, “No one owns your body except you.” It was possibly the coolest moment of my life. That weekend we begged our parents to let us get the bus into Bristol by ourselves. We went straight from the bus station to Gemma’s Gems and tossed a coin to see who went first.

Willow held my hand as the woman put a dot on my ear cartilage with a purple pen. I screwed my eyes shut and didn’t open them until after the pain was over. I held Willow’s hand as she had hers pierced, but she didn’t close her eyes. She winked at me as the woman with skull tattoos up her arms pushed the needle through her ear, but I could tell it hurt because her eyes were watering.

Afterwards we got milkshakes and rehearsed what we would say to our parents when we got home. I decided to cover mine with my hair, since I knew Mammy would go spare. But by the time I got home, my ear was bright red and felt boiling hot and I was worried I had blood poisoning. I spent half an hour googling it and checking my pulse every few minutes before I got myself in such a panic, I confessed everything to Mammy.

I didn’t get blood poisoning, only a lecture from Da about the dangers of “sticking things in your body that have no business being there”. Mammy made me take out the stud and she disinfected my ear three times. I tried using Betty’s line, that no one owns my body except me. But for some reason they found it funny.

“Next thing you and Willow will come home with matching tattoos!” Da said as I made my way upstairs.

Mammy said, “Don’t give her ideas, Gil!” but she wasn’t mad or anything.

My sister, Niamh, shouted from her bedroom that she would have been killed if she’d done anything like that when she was my age. “Alma gets away with everything just because she’s the youngest!”

“Pipe down, Niamh, I’ll take you to Gemma’s Gems for a manky ear-piercing next weekend if you like,” Da called, and he and Mammy both started laughing again.

Willow’s mum was completely furious and I felt bad for my parents being so laid-back about it. Willow wasn’t allowed to see me outside of school for two weeks, even though it was her idea in the first place. Anyway, we decided to swap a normal earring on the bus home every day as code for missing each other outside of school. And partly as a reminder that we dared get our helixes pierced without permission, even if we did have to take them out. We don’t swap earrings all the time now, only when we remember. I do worry sometimes that it’s unhygienic but Willow doesn’t seem to care and nothing bad’s happened so far.

“What are we going to do about him?” Willow asks, nodding her head towards a boy playing basketball on his own. My stomach dips as I look over and remember what we’re doing here. Don’t get me wrong – I love making TikToks with Willow. But every time before we start, this

juddery feeling of dread makes its way around my bones. I told Willow this once and she laughed and said I was chicken, so I haven't mentioned it since. Not that I need to; we can tell how each other's feeling just by looking.

I take a deep breath through my nose so Willow doesn't notice. "Wait?" I suggest. "He'll get bored soon. He doesn't even have an opponent. How long's he been there?"

Willow shrugs at me then looks up at the sky. I follow her gaze. It was sunny when I left home, but now pale grey clouds are gathering and the wind's picking up like it's about to rain.

"Did you bring your new tripod?"

I pull it out of my bag. "Of course! It attaches to pretty much anything." I demonstrate its mega flexible arms until Willow looks bored. "Shall I attach it to that fence at the side of the hoop? I can angle it so it catches everything. Once that boy's gone, we can climb up the pole, right?"

Willow beams. "This is going to be hilarious."

Half an hour later, the basketball boy has gone. A couple of skaters are sitting on the ramp talking but they're not paying us any attention. Willow and I stand directly beneath the basketball hoop, figuring out how to get a decent grip on the pole so we can climb up. It's squared, not round, which Willow says will make the climb easier than we imagined, but I'm not so sure. It's rusty and I wish I'd brought some gloves.

"I'll go first, okay?" Willow says, wrapping both hands around the pole and putting a foot against it, ready to climb.

"I'll start recording." I take a quick glance around the park, double-checking no one's looking over. The last thing we want is to get stopped before we've even started. I jog over to the nearest section of fence and set my phone to record.

"You'll catch me if I fall, right?" Willow says.

"Obviously!" I walk back to the spot beneath the hoop. "But don't fall because I'm not exactly certain I can catch you without being crushed to death."

"Got it!" Willow laughs as she shifts her weight onto her arms and begins climbing. She makes it look easy and I wish I'd spent more time climbing trees when I was little. We had some perfect climbers in our garden back in Portstewart in Northern Ireland, but I was too little to climb them. Then we moved to London for Da's job and the only trees were in the parks and my parents never let me climb those. We only lived there for a year before Mammy said she missed the countryside. Da wanted to keep his job in London, so we moved here, to Belston Green, when I was eight, as a compromise. I met Willow on my first day of school at Belston Primary and we've been inseparable ever since. We went away for the summer last year to Malaysia and Da threatened to confiscate my phone for messaging Willow so much. But Da doesn't get it. Everywhere is boring without her.

I keep one hand on the pole, humming to distract my nerves, as Willow expertly pulls herself up. I pray to Saint

Bernard that she doesn't fall. I think he's the saint who protects climbers. Specifically mountain climbers, but I can't remember learning about a saint of basketball.

My palms feel sweatier as it gets closer to my turn to climb. I focus on the views we'll get for this once it goes online, the little conveyer belt of hearts sailing upwards as people like it, like a visual applause. I remind myself that actors are always respected for doing their own stunts. That if I want to make it in the West End, I need to get over my nerves. I'll be expected to do all sorts of stuff onstage. If I got a part in *Starlight Express*, for example, I'd have to perform on roller skates. Mammy took me to see a musical last month where the actors jumped off balconies. If I want to be a West End star, then I can't be defeated by a basketball pole. These thoughts manage to dissipate the nervous ones I'm having about landing face first onto tarmac.

"Jeez!" Willow's voice jolts me out of my thoughts. She clambers up the top of the pole until she's sitting against the backboard, one leg resting on the rim of the hoop, the other dangling through it, with an enormous smile on her face. She wipes the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve. "That's harder than it looks, by the way!" She stretches out her fingers and blows on them. "Oh my God, my hands kill!"

"You're really not making this sound appealing!" I call up to her.

"It's fine!" she says breezily, as though she just sprang straight up there like a cat.

"Okay," I say to myself as I place my hands around the pole. "You've got this, Alma." Bits of peeling paint get stuck to my sweaty palms so I wipe them on my jeans and start again. I look up at Willow. "Any last-minute tips?"

"Sure." She grins. "Don't look down."

WILLOW

I hold onto the backboard and lean over to watch Alma climb up. Let's just say her talents do not lie in climbing. She's wrapped her legs around the pole, trying to shimmy her way up. It's kind of painful to watch. "Put your feet on the pole and walk yourself up! Use the grip on your trainers!"

"Walk myself up? I'm not Spider-Woman!"

"You're telling me." She looks at me like my comments are completely unwelcome, so I look away and watch the skaters head out of the park through a gap in the hedge. A huge veil-like cloud is shielding the sun, but I still have to squint. I look back down at Alma, who is making slow progress.

After a million years, Alma edges close enough to reach my fingertips. I lean as far down as I can and reach out my arm. "Grab my hand!"

"I'll fall!" she says, her voice quivering with panic. "That hoop doesn't look stable!"

"It's fine!" I tell her, although obviously I have no real idea. I guess it's designed to take the weight of basketball

players, who are way over six feet tall. I've seen them dangle on the hoop after they slam dunk, so our combined weight is fine, probably. "Grab my hand! I'll pull you up." I sound more confident than I feel. This is the riskiest stunt we've done so far and I can't let Alma know the hoop is wobbly or she'll change her mind.

"Okay." Alma squeezes her legs tight around the pole, then shoots a shaky hand towards mine.

"Gotcha!" I grip the backboard with my other hand and stand up to get some leverage. Her hand is really sweaty, but I manage to hold on and pull her up. As soon as she's up, I wrap an arm around her and hold tight until she's steady. "See!" I say, as we both slowly sit down on opposite sides of the hoop rim. "It's not so bad."

Alma laughs, but her knuckles are turning white from gripping the hoop so tightly. She always gets way more nervous than I do before stuff like this. But it will be worth it as soon as we post the TikTok. Alma adjusts her position, trying not to look down. She's been taking ballet classes since she was four, so technically she should be the confident one. Although I guess balancing feels slightly different this far off the ground.

"So, how do we get through the hoop exactly? It looks a lot smaller now we're up here." She puts a hand on the backboard and it wobbles. "This is definitely not stable!"

I give the backboard a gentle shove with my free hand to show her how sturdy it is. Only it starts the whole thing wobbling quite a lot and Alma screams. I can't help laughing.

“It’s fine!” I reassure her. “We just better get through the hoop before this whole thing collapses.”

“Oh my God!” Alma squeals. “Why did I ever agree to this?”

“Because it’s going to be epic.” I grin and go cross-eyed and she lets out a long breath then starts laughing.

Alma’s eyes dart to the ground, exactly three metres below us, then back to mine. “We go at the same time, right?”

“Yep. I’ll count to three, then we lower our legs through first, then our bodies – keep holding onto the hoop until I say – then we’ll drop down to the ground at the same time.”

“You sure we’re going to fit?” Alma asks. “It looks really small.”

“It’s fine, Alma,” I say for the millionth time. “We fitted into your laundry basket together, like three weeks ago.”

Alma laughs at the memory of bursting out on her mum. “And it won’t hurt when we drop?”

“Honestly, I’ve seen loads of people do this online.” Okay, that’s a slight exaggeration. I’ve only seen one person make it through the hoop at a time, but I need to make Alma feel confident. I mean, we’re up here now so there’s only one way down. And if she panics, we’re screwed. “Once we’ve got our bodies through, the ground is like a metre from our feet. It’ll be like jumping off the stage.”

“Okay, but just to remind you, the last time we did that, we bumped heads and had those humongous egg-shaped lumps on our foreheads for a week.”

“At least we matched.”

Alma laughs, kind of hysterically, and I know we need to do it now or she’ll chicken out. I glance over at her phone and feel a surge of confidence as I imagine how awesome this will look. Beyond the fence, I can see for miles. There’s no feeling like this. It’s like being invincible.

I count to three, then slowly lower my body until I can feel the rim of the hoop against my hips. Alma starts lowering herself in, until we’re so squished together it’s hard not to laugh.

“It’s okay,” I say as I feel her whole body trembling. “We’ll be back on the ground in less than thirty seconds.”

“Okay.” Alma takes deep, steady breaths, and each time she breathes out I feel my ribs getting squashed. I keep shifting down into the hoop, but it’s feeling more and more restricted, like we’re running out of space.

“This reminds me of country dancing,” Alma whispers right into my ear, giggling, or possibly hyperventilating, I can’t tell.

“Do not make me think of country dancing right now, Alma-Rose!” I say, laughing. Our teacher would screech, “*Do-si-do your partner!*” and “*Girls in, boys sashaaaaay!*” and “*Willow!!! Remember you’re the boy!! Sashaaaaay!!*” and tap a tambourine, shaking her hips to the music so vigorously it looked like she was twerking. Alma and I would barely be able to dance properly from laughing so much.

Alma’s juddery breath feels hot on my face as we both try

to lower our bodies further into the hoop, then her elbow rams into my ribs. I'm trying to breathe through the tears of laughter, but the further into the hoop we get, the harder it is to get a proper breath. Then suddenly we both stop. Her face is against my chest, our arms are squashed around each other, and neither of us can move. I try to wriggle myself out of the tangle we're in, but my hips are at a weird angle, and my left side is squashed right up against the hoop.

"I think I got winded," I say, trying to take gulps of air. "I can hardly breathe!"

"Pivot!" Alma shrieks in between laughs. She turns her head but her nose squashes right into the ticklish spot in my armpit and I start laughing again. "Oh my God, I can't move!" she says. "Willow, you'll have to drop down first."

"You're lower than me!" I say. "You need to drop down."

"But I'm stuck!"

I try to twist my body so I'm at a different angle, try to create some space, but it's impossible. There is no space to find. The metal hoop is digging into my back and any time I move, it's agony. My legs flail around as I try desperately to get some kind of leverage against the pole, to push myself back up out of the hoop, but my feet can't find it. I don't know where my body ends and Alma's begins. "Alma! You'll have to shift your body down. I can't move back up."

"Shift down?!" Alma says breathlessly. "I can't move a muscle!"

I realize the laughter has vanished from our voices.

"I can't move either," I say. "My arms are going dead." My mouth starts filling with saliva in that horrible way when you're scared. Like, your actual body knows you're in danger. I wriggle my body as much as I can before Alma shouts that it hurts. "We literally can't get out."

"Oh my God!" she cries, twisting her neck so she's looking up at me. "What are we going to do?" Her pupils are dilated with terror. I look around, hoping the skaters came back, but they haven't. "Okay, okay, so we're stuck in a basketball hoop!" Alma's saying. "And there's literally no one around to help!" She glances down at our legs dangling metres from the ground. I feel her try to take a deep breath, but it's impossible with us squashed together. I want to hold her hand, hug her, but I can't move. She closes her eyes.

For a second, I consider shouting *HELP!* at the top of my voice. But there's no one around to hear. Then I remember my phone's in my pocket. "Can you reach my back pocket?" I say desperately.

"Um." Alma stretches her arm as far as she can, and I somehow manage to twist so she can slide my phone out of my pocket. I pray she doesn't drop it. As soon as she's got it, she holds it out to me. Bits of flaked off paint from the hoop are stuck to my palms.

"Oh my God, Willow! Quickly!" Alma says.

I think for a moment. "I can't phone my mum, she'll kill us."

"Okay, okay. Let's just think logically..."

A few seconds go by before we figure out what to do. Then I hand the phone to Alma and with trembling fingers she logs into her Snap and calls Cormac until he picks up.

4

ALMA

It feels like ten years have passed before I spot my big brother heading towards us. Despite the obvious urgency of our predicament, Cormac strolls over, eating an apple. He has an inquisitive look on his face like he's examining one of his biology experiments in a test tube. As he gets closer, he lets out a chuckle.

"Girls, what the hell possessed you to..." He doubles over laughing.

"Yes, okay, Cormac, we get it!" I try to keep the annoyance out of my voice. He'll turn around and leave us here if I don't show maximum gratitude. "Just help us get out, will you?"

Cormac straightens up and surveys the basketball hoop from every angle. I can tell from all the way up here that he's enjoying this.

"I mean, you know those things are designed for a ball to go through, not the players, right?"

I force a smile. "We've made a slight error of judgement, Cormac," I say. "Now please can you help us get down?"

“A *slight* error of judgement?” Cormac lets out a laugh, as though Willow and I aren’t up here facing certain death. “So just run me through what you *thought* would happen?”

“Well, obviously not this!” I say, and that’s when he spots my phone fastened to the fence. I can almost see the light bulb illuminate over his head.

“A-ha!” he says, like he’s found a crucial piece of evidence. “Now I get it. Another one of your carefully curated TikToks. Of course! Didn’t you just get detentions for your latest movie masterpiece at the museum?” He takes a final bite of his apple and launches the core into the hedge. He wipes his hands on his jeans that are ridiculously tight on his beanpole legs, but I’m not stupid enough to mention that right now.

“Cormac,” Willow calls. “Please help us. We know it was a stupid idea, okay.”

Cormac grins, hands on his hips, shaking his head. He’s considering what to say next, which will likely be a lecture on the physics of trying to squeeze two human beings through a basketball hoop. Cormac was diagnosed as being exceptionally gifted when he was in primary school and although I don’t doubt that it’s true – he can solve a Rubik’s Cube in less than thirty seconds – it’s completely ruined his personality. If his head was any bigger, it would require its own orbit. He pulls a packet of chocolate chip cookies out of his pocket. It’s typical of my brother to bring a picnic.

“Can I just say—” he starts, but I interrupt.

“Cormac!” I shout, though I can barely spare any breath with Willow’s body pressed against mine. “We get it, okay. We’re all aware of your genius. We don’t need a lecture. Just help us get down!”

He slowly tips his head back and pours the entire packet of mini cookies into his mouth. “I was just going to say,” he continues through his mouthful, “Da was bragging to Mr Soloman next door only yesterday about how you’re destined for great things, Alma. I’ll certainly have to disenchant him of that particular opinion.” Cormac takes his phone out of the back pocket of his spray-on jeans and bounds over to the centre line of the court to take a photo.

“Cormac, please!” I beg. The thought of Da seeing a photo of me like this starts needle-pricks of tears at the back of my eyes. I’d had to beg Da not to make me delete TikTok after the museum thing. I’d promised I wouldn’t do anything so “spectacularly daft” ever again. Da would definitely consider getting stuck in a basketball hoop spectacularly daft. Worse than daft.

“It’s okay, Alma,” Willow says quietly. “He’ll help us once he’s done gloating. It’ll be okay.”

I lean my head against Willow’s chest and she plants a kiss on the top. I’m glad we’re in this together at least, but my lungs feel heavy and sore, like they’re full of rubble. The hoop is digging into my spine and my legs have gone all pins-and-needley.

“Fine, Cormac!” I call. “This was a bad idea that

demonstrates a truly inferior understanding of physics, and a general lack of brain cells. Now will you please help us?”

Cormac walks over, his phone still in his hand. “It’s just...” He looks at us from the three-point line. “I don’t know what you expect me to do, girls.” He walks closer so he’s directly underneath us and reaches his arms up. The tips of his fingers brush against the soles of my trainers. “I mean, I’m tall, but I’m not three metres tall!”

“But...” I say, desperately trying to think of a plan. “Can’t you get a ladder?”

“A ladder? And then what? Break the metal hoop open with my Wolverine-style upper body strength?”

Willow laughs but then stops when she realizes I’m not laughing, even though it’s true Cormac is about as muscular as a stick insect. I lean over as far as I can so I’m looking straight into Cormac’s face. “So, what do you suggest, Einstein?”

He squints into the greying sky. “I’m calling Da,” he says and my stomach lurches. “And the fire brigade.”

Fear bolts through my body like an electric current.

“What?!” Willow and I yell out together.

“No, Cormac!” I shout. “We’ll get in trouble!”

Cormac tuts. I wish my foot could reach his stupid massive head. “I don’t know what to tell you, girls. This feat of exceptional stupidity requires professionals.”

I look at Willow and see fear in her eyes too. I blink and tears spill on to my cheeks.

“Don’t worry,” Willow whispers. “They can’t blame us for a genuine mistake.”

But I know that’s exactly what Da will do. And the firefighters. And Willow’s mum. She’ll blame us the worst of all. She’ll ground Willow for a decade. Cormac checks the bench at the side of the court isn’t too wet then sits down. I watch as he makes the call. I can’t tell what he’s saying because all I can hear is my heart pounding in my ears and Willow’s groaning as she tries one last furious attempt at squirming free. I stay still, as if my limbs are frozen solid, hardly daring to breathe, desperately listening out for the sound of sirens.