



'You can't stay in there for ever.'

I rolled my eyes dramatically even though she couldn't see me and climbed into the bath fully clothed. I lay down and crossed my arms like a snoozing vampire. And then a bottle of Herbal Essences fell on my head.

I *did* realize that living in the bathroom was not a long-term life plan. It was a last-chance-saloon act of desperation. At some point I was going to have to either jump out of the window, or just unlock the door and skulk back out. Not exactly *Braveheart* material. I wonder if anyone has ever locked themselves in a bathroom and come out victorious?

I let my head tilt back against the cold tiles. I'd never been in a bath fully dressed before. If I hadn't been having a mental breakdown, it might have been quite relaxing. I turned the tap on with my Converse and a trickle of water came out. I picked up my bright-blue Christmas bath bomb and cupped it in my hands under the water. It started to fizz and come alive.

'If you really don't want to go, you don't have to.' Mum's

voice came gently through the door. She made it sound like *she* was the one whose life was over.

‘Do you really mean it?’ I thought it would sound defiant but it came out jagged and gumpy.

‘You’re fourteen, Mouse,’ she said. ‘I can’t exactly pick you up and drag you there.’

An image popped into my head of her hauling me down the road by my ponytail, politely waving to the neighbours. Mums and random pointless comments are like dads and bad jokes. Just *why?*

‘But I do think that going on this trip is the best thing to do,’ she added. ‘In a week’s time you’ll know all the stories and the in-jokes and the gossip, and maybe it won’t feel so strange being back there.’

Back there. Her saying it made my stomach churn.

‘I don’t have any friends there any more. Everyone will be with their groups. I’ll be all alone. You don’t understand.’

I heard Mum sigh and sit down. ‘I know Connie isn’t your best friend any more, but she’ll look after you.’

‘Everyone thinks Connie is weird. That’ll make it worse.’

And then I felt horrid. I’ve known Connie-May always. And maybe she’s not weird any more. A lot can change in two years. A lot can change in five minutes if you think about it.

‘Well, I told you to ring Lauren,’ Mum sighed. Hearing Lauren’s name out loud made me panic.

I hid the disintegrating bath bomb inside Dad’s nearly empty tub of shaving cream, then I got out and started pacing the tiny bathroom. I was going stir-crazy and I’d only been in

here ten minutes. Inside the bathroom cupboard there was just an ancient bottle of nit lotion, some ear drops, Mum's sponge bag and the boot from Monopoly.

I unzipped the bag and sat on the toilet seat, opening a heavy gold pot of 'bronze sculpting mousse'. As if *mousse* is the right tool for sculpting; Michelangelo didn't go around carving the statue of David with Petits Filous.

I scooped a big dollop of it on to my fingers and rubbed it in to my cheeks.

Next, I took out a medical-looking bottle of 'Forever Young youth elixir capsules', squashed one of them open and rubbed the cooking-oil-type liquid on to my nose.

I sprayed myself with the Chanel perfume that Dad got her and put 'Monaco Dreams highlighter' over where I'd put the mousse.

'I love you,' I heard Mum say softly. 'I can't bear how hard this is for you. But you are stronger than you think you are, Mouse.'

I knew I had to go on the ski trip. It wasn't her fault.

I unbolted the door.

Mum was sitting on the floor, legs outstretched in front of her, drinking tea out of her *DANCE MOM* mug. She saw me looking at it and cupped her hands to hide the words. I crumpled down next to her and she handed me a cold-looking toast sandwich.

'Weird or not, Connie will be here in five minutes,' she said, putting her arm around me.

I opened the sandwich and scooped the jam off with my

finger. We both sat in silence. Ahead of us near the top of the stairs was a picture of me in a pale-blue leotard, my *grand jeté* perfect. When I got in, they put that picture of me in the paper with the headline: 'Local girl beats 1200 to place at ballet school.' We both just stared at it.

The doorbell rang.

Mum kissed me on the head. 'Mouse, you look like a Smurf. You'd better wash your face.'

I walked back in to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Smurf was an understatement. A compliment, even. Looking back at me was a huge, blue moon-face with two golden-brown stripes down either side. I looked like a cartoon badger that had gone wild in Barry M. I turned both of the taps on full and started to scrub but it just seemed to wipe the mixture round more.

A little, round freckly face and a halo of tight brown curls poked around the bathroom door. Connie. She flung her arms around my waist and started screaming, jumping up and down with such force that she carried me with her. She looked the same but different. She had grown really tall. It looked a bit ridiculous. Like she wasn't supposed to *be* that tall, somehow. Like she was on stilts.

'Mouse, your face is so colourful!' she squealed. 'I *love* it. Can I do it too or is it your thing?'

'It was an accident.' I couldn't fake being excited. But if she noticed, she didn't let on.

'The best things are accidents,' she said. 'Like me.' And then she picked up my hands and put one on each of her cheeks, so

she had a blue handprint on either side.

She started singing and dancing wildly around the bathroom: 'Everybody look left/Everybody look right/Can't you see I'm in the spotlight/Oh I just can't *wait* to be skiing.' She climbed on to the edge of the bath and jumped off. 'Oh, I just can't *wait* to be skiing.'

I scrubbed at my cheeks with nail polish remover to try and get some of the blue off. It sort of worked but I still had faint Smurf-badger outlines. I unfurled my hair from its tight bun and pulled it forward to try to hide them.

Connie stopped dancing for a second. 'Oh my god, Mouse. Your hair's got *so* long. You could basically walk around naked and wear it as a cloak.'

She stood next to me and draped some of my hair over her head.

I've been growing my hair since I was three. It's the one thing everyone notices about me. There's nothing else to notice, really. I have blue-grey eyes, a ski-jump nose and a little sprinkle of freckles on each cheek. Not as many as Connie but they are there. I'm tall for ballet school, but average otherwise.

I didn't really talk in the car, just let Connie ramble on to Mum about avalanches and what French people eat for dinner ('Not snails usually, I googled it. Phew.'). But as we got closer to school I felt a knot in my tummy.

'Are you nervous, Mouse?' Connie said out of nowhere.

I was so nervous I couldn't speak. And then I saw her.

Across the road with Scarlett and Melody. Her hair was in fishtail plaits that must have taken ages. We spent a whole week once learning how to do them. She was wearing tiny denim shorts over thick grey tights, and a tartan shirt. She looked the same, just more polished somehow. Like a perfectly coloured-in picture, nothing outside the lines. She wasn't even wearing a coat.

From a distance you could tell that she was still the queen bee. She's not the prettiest – Scarlett is by far – and she's not the sportiest or the cleverest, but she just *is* that person. The person the other ones follow. The person they want to be. There was a part of me that wanted to be her, too. Even though she hated me.

'Ooh, look, there's Lauren Bradley,' said Mum brightly, and I felt my insides turn to stone.

Jack

Max tore into his third family bag of Monster Munch as the coach pulled out on to the motorway.

'You know you can get anything you want in France,' he said, stuffing a handful in his mouth and spraying crumbs everywhere. 'Like, literally, *anything*.'

Toddy snorted. 'You can get anything you want anywhere. You just have to know the right people.'

'Yeah, but that's what I'm *saying*,' he sputtered, showering me and Toddy with another dusting of pickled-onion scraps. 'We don't know the right people, do we?'

'We don't even know the wrong people,' I said. 'We don't know any *people*, full stop.'

Max nodded impatiently. 'Yeah, exactly. But in France, you don't have to. You can literally buy fireworks and bangers and ninja stars and *whatever* at the local shop with your chocolate and crisps!'

Toddy frowned. 'I'm not sure about that.'

The three of us were sat smack bang in the middle of the coach, where we always sat on school trips. This was our natural position. Where we belonged. We're not geeky enough to sit right up front, near the teachers, but we're also definitely not cool enough to be mucking about at the back with the football players and the psychos. We're middle-of-the-coach material, through and through.

Max leant right over the back of his seat towards us. 'I'm *telling* you, boys!' he hissed. 'You know Nathan Freeman from the year above, yeah? He went on this trip last year. He said, you know how in England we pop to the shop for some milk or bread or whatever? Well, in France, they pop to the shop for, like, a baguette and a broadsword and a massive Catherine wheel. You come out of their corner shops looking like someone off *Game of Thrones*! That's just how things are over there.'

I laughed. 'You do realize this is a *snowboarding* trip, yeah Max? We're not going to the Alps to spend five days stockpiling weaponry.'

Max clicked his tongue against his teeth and picked out another Monster Munch. 'Mate, the snowboarding is the thing

I'm *least* excited about on this trip. In order of excitedness, it goes: snowboarding at number three, buying fireworks at two, and at number one . . .' He lowered his voice to an excited whisper. 'Girls!'

Toddy rolled his eyes and turned to stare out of the window. 'How do you know there's even gonna be any girls there?' he muttered.

'Toddy, have you been living in a cave?' Max hissed. 'This is the *February half-term snowboard trip!* Everyone knows the February half-term snowboard trip is basically wall-to-wall girls! French girls, German girls, random English girls from other schools . . . It'll be a miracle if we get any actual snowboarding done, what with all the girls we'll be getting off with.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I mean . . . considering none of us have managed to get off with *one* girl in fourteen years, I wouldn't bet on that, Max.'

Max ran a hand over his shaved red hair exasperatedly. 'Listen, Jack. Nathan Freeman was on zero just like us when he went on this trip last year. By the time he came back, d'you know how many girls he'd got off with?'

'I'm sure you're gonna tell us.'

'*Sixteen,*' hissed Max. 'He says he got off with *sixteen* girls in five days!'

'Yeah, well, Nathan Freeman also says his nan invented Tippex, so he's hardly a reliable source,' I said.

'Whatever,' Max huffed. 'All I'm saying is this week is definitely our best chance yet.'

He *was* right about that, to be fair. In my fourteen years and two months on this planet, the closest I'd come to kissing an actual, live, human girl was Maria Bennett last October. And that had gone so horribly that I'd barely spoken to another girl since. But I couldn't think about Maria Bennett right now. I'd thought about her way too much over the past few months already.

I pushed all girl-based worries to the back of my mind, and jammed my hand into Max's crisp packet.

'Oi!' He whacked me hard on the arm. 'I never said I was sharing!'

'It's a 'family bag'!'

'Yeah, exactly. And last time I checked you weren't a member of my family. So keep your fingers out.'

'You're ridiculous, Max.'

Out the window, a huge road sign flew past with the word 'Southampton' on it. We'd only left Winchester half an hour ago, and we were already only five miles from the ferry. Max licked his oniony fingers clean and crumpled his crisp packet into a little ball.

'Chuck us that French phrase book then, Toddy,' he said.

Toddy raised his eyebrows. 'Oh, right, so you spend all week rinsing my phrase book, and now you want to look at it?'

'Well, your mum bought it for you *specialy*, didn't she,' he said, making his voice go all high-pitched and squeaky on 'specialy'. 'So we might as well get some use out of it.'

Toddy dug into his rucksack and chucked the shiny new

French phrase book at Max. He started thumbing through it.

‘What are you looking for?’ I asked. ‘I don’t think you’re gonna find “I would like to buy some ninja stars please.”’

‘Nah, nah,’ Max muttered, still flicking through the pages. ‘I want to learn how to say “We’re in a band.”. Guarantee you the French girls will go mental for us if they know we’re in a band.’

‘Oh god, you’re not still going on about your stupid *band*, are you?’

We all looked up to see the spiky-haired head of Jamie Smith looming over us. That’s the problem with sitting in the middle of the coach – you get people eavesdropping on your conversations while they wait for the toilet.

‘You lot have never played a gig, and you don’t even have a name,’ Jamie sneered. ‘You’re not exactly a *proper* band, are you?’

‘Yeah, well, we’re working on both those things,’ Max shot back. ‘And we’re an amazing band, *actually*, Jamie.’ Sometimes I don’t know whether Max is brave or stupid. Jamie’s not pure back-of-the-coach material, but he is a bit of a nutter. I once saw him punch a year eleven for taking the last muffin at lunch.

‘If you’re so *amazing*,’ laughed Jamie, ‘then how come your lead singer bottled it at Band Night the other week?’ He turned his sneer on me, and I felt myself going red straight away. I really didn’t need Jamie Smith reminding everyone on the coach what had happened that night. I’d spent the last ten days trying to forget it.

'I – I didn't bottle it . . .' I stammered, feeling my cheeks get hotter. 'I just . . .'

'You totally bottled it!' Jamie snapped over me. 'Everyone saw you! In fact, *there's* a good name for your band: The Bottlers.'

I heard a burst of laughter from Jamie's best mate Ed further down the coach. I suddenly realized everyone was listening.

'Shut up, Jamie,' snarled Max. 'We're not calling ourselves The Bottlers.'

'Actually, The Bottlers isn't a bad name, to be fair,' said Toddy, absent-mindedly.

Max slapped him on the arm. 'Shut up, Toddy! We're not The Bottlers, because we didn't bottle anything! We just didn't . . . feel like playing Band Night, that's all.'

I felt a sudden flash of gratitude. No matter how much of an idiot Max can be sometimes, he will always have my back.

'Whatever,' Jamie said. 'I can't wait to see you lot trying to tell the French girls about your lame band. They'll laugh you off the mountain, man. No wonder you're all still on zero.'

There was another howl of laughter from a few seats back. I looked at Max. His face was even redder than mine and you could see the vein on his neck wiggling. He was now gripping his Sprite bottle so tightly that it was shaking.

'You shouldn't shake that,' said Jamie. 'It'll explode.'

'Yeah,' said Max, looking him straight in the eye and unscrewing the cap. 'That's the idea . . .'