TRULY WILDLY DEEPLY

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ONE

I am sitting on a train waiting for my adult life to begin. If my mum wasn't standing on the platform watching me this would be a really kick-ass moment.

'Go away,' I mouth through the glass, but she just smiles, sips at her frappuccino and stays exactly where she is. So I stick my tongue out at her and she sticks her middle finger back at me. For an infant-school teacher, she can be very rude.

'Annie!'

I look up to see Jackson Wood, a boy from my old school, walking towards me. He's got a skateboard tucked under his arm and everything about him is relaxed and floppy: his walk, his hair and definitely his jeans.

He drops into the seat opposite me, spreads his arms wide and grins, as though his presence is the greatest gift I could ever receive.

'What are you doing here?' I say, laughing.

'Same as you. Starting Cliffe College.'

'But I thought you were staying on at school?'

He shrugs. 'I was, until yesterday, when I finally looked through that stuff they sent us and found out we had to wear *business dress*.' He says these last two words with a tone of utter disgust. 'So I rang Cliffe and they said I could enrol today.'

'Jackson, let me get this straight: you've decided to go to a college that's twenty miles away from where you live just so you can wear denim?'

He nods earnestly. 'And trainers.'

'Wow …' I say.

He smiles and relaxes back in his seat. 'Guess what I did this summer, Annie.'

'Read all of Dickens's novels?'

'Not quite. I learnt to put my fist in my mouth. Do you want to see?'

I glance around the carriage. It's packed full of commuters and teenagers – teenagers who might also be starting at Cliffe College and so could become my future friends.

'Yes,' I tell Jackson. 'I do want to see that.' If any of these teenagers are going to Cliffe, they might as well know what I'm like right from the start.

I watch in fascinated horror as Jackson pulls at his lips and slowly, slowly crams his fist into his mouth. Jackson has this beautiful, sophisticated girlfriend called Amelia and it's at moments like this that the whole Amelia–Jackson thing baffles me. Amelia plays the electric harp and got into the semi-finals of the Junior Fencing Championships; Jackson puts his fist in his mouth … *What* do they talk about? Perhaps their souls meet on some amazing cosmic level that I'm too cynical to understand … Looking at Jackson, the majority of his fingers now squished into his mouth, I find that hard to believe.

'Ta-da!' Jackson mumbles, and I give him a round of applause for effort. He wipes his slimy fist on his jeans then leans towards me and lowers his voice. 'Annie, don't freak out, but there's a woman standing on the platform staring right at you.'

'I know. It's my mum. Ignore her.'

'It's hard. She's standing so close to the window.' Jackson turns and gives Mum a wave and she waves back. Mum was supposed to just drop me outside the station, but then she insisted on coming right on to the platform. Amazingly, even though I'm sixteen this is the first time I've ever been on a train on my own.

I'm lucky my dad lives in Greece, or he'd be standing on the platform next to her. Dad can be a little

overprotective and he doesn't really want me to go to Cliffe College. This morning, he put all his anxiety into one text: Annie, I hope today brings you many riches! I also hope you have a coat as there is a 50% chance of precipitation. DO NOT leave your drinks unattended, even for a moment. Boys are wicked. And wear appropriate clothes. Daddy xxx

I replied: Clothes?! I didn't realise I had to wear clothes ...

Jackson sits back in his seat, leans forward again, then wriggles around, like he can't get comfy.

'Stop it,' I say. 'You look like you need a wee.'

He runs his hands through his hair, messing it up. 'Well, I don't. I'm just nervous. New college, new friends. I've only had a day to get used to the idea and it's making me feel sick.'

I know what he means. I've had all summer to get used to the idea of going to Cliffe, but I still couldn't eat any breakfast this morning. 'Listen, Jackson,' I say. 'All the best, *coolest* things in life begin with nausea: bungee jumping, freediving, kayaking down rapids –'

His eyes light up. 'You're right! Wrestling crocodiles, going over waterfalls in a barrel –'

'No, Jackson, those things aren't cool. They're ways of dying.'

But he's not listening. Instead, he's running through some bucket list of death he's got. 'Riding an angry bull, jumping off a cliff in a wingsuit, zorbing a wave, cuddling a tiger …' He breaks off. 'This isn't helping, Annie. It's making me feel worse.'

'What you need, Jackson, is a Tic Tac.' I find the little box in my bag and shake a couple of mints into his hand.

'Why do I need these?'

'Because these are *magic* Tic Tacs.' I pop one in my mouth. 'They make you invincible so you don't need to worry about anything.' That's almost word for word what Mum told me this morning when she dropped them in my rucksack. She's been telling me that foodstuffs are magical for years – super-strength Snickers, mega maths Maltesers. She should have stopped doing it a long time ago, but it makes her happy so I don't complain.

Jackson sits back and sucks. 'We're definitely doing the right thing,' he says, mainly to reassure himself. 'I mean, look at us: we're going on an adventure.'

An adventure … A ripple of excitement runs through me. 'You're right.' I say. 'The journey's only half an hour, but this definitely feels good. It feels …' I pause as I try to find the right words, 'like the *start* of something.'

'Put it here, partner,' he says, raising one hand in the air for a high five.

'No way,' I say. 'Not doing that.'

Suddenly, the train lurches forward and my eyes shoot to the window. Mum starts trotting alongside the train, blowing kisses with both hands. Jackson pretends to catch the kisses then stuffs them in his mouth.

'Stop eating my mum's kisses!' I say, thumping his arm.

Then the train picks up speed and when I turn to look out of the window again, Mum has gone. I didn't even get to wave goodbye.

My stomach lurches. I'm all on my own. Jackson doesn't count.

The train snakes out of town, past rows of houses with net curtains and rectangular gardens. I stare through the window and see washing drooping on lines, a broken goalpost, a man smoking in his T-shirt and pants. The man raises a mug to his lips, but before he's taken a sip, we've left him behind and the train is crossing the marsh. Then we're sliding past green fields, rolling hills and munching cows. One of the cows lifts up her heavy head and looks right at me.

Just then, the sun breaks through a cloud and shines on my face, and the train sways from side to side. *That's right, cow. Check me out. I'm on a train, on my own, going on an adventure!*

Then happiness washes over me, pushing away any worries I have and filling me up from the top of my curly hair to the tips of my Nikes.

I see this little kid peering between the seats at us. He's not staring at my wheelchair – although it is an eye-catching lime green – he's staring at Jackson, who is now trying to fit a whole apple in his mouth.

'Go on then,' I say, lifting up my hand. 'Put it here.' Jackson gives up on the apple and we slap hands. 'But we're *not* doing this on a daily basis.'

TWO

For me, it was an obvious choice, leaving my old school and going to Cliffe.

My teachers and the students were nice enough – some were amazing – but I wanted a fresh start. At school you get assigned a role on day one – the brainy one, the pretty one, the one who turned up with his leg in a plaster cast because he fell down a badger hole (Jackson) – and that's it, you're stuck with it.

For fair enough reasons, I was assigned the role of Mouthy Girl With Cerebral Palsy and I enthusiastically fulfilled this role for five years. But when my Learning Support Assistant, Jan, told me that she was going to carry on being my LSA in the Sixth Form, I realised I needed a change. Jan's lovely – she used to give me a home-made flapjack every Friday – but I knew it was

time for me to go out into the world alone. No Mum, no Jan. No support. No assistance. Just Annie.

Jan got it. In fact, she suggested Cliffe. Mum put up a bit of a fight, pointing out how much she'd have to pay on train fares, but I reminded her that Dad would contribute. He only sees me a few times a year so experiences a lot of guilt. Guilt that can be eased by sending cash my way. I try not to exploit this vulnerability of Dad's … but I do own thirteen pairs of trainers.

And that's why, right now, I'm flying through the countryside, wearing cut-off dungarees instead of sitting in assembly wearing business dress.

'There it is,' says Jackson, pointing out of the window.

Cliffe College is spread out on the edge of the town, all modern buildings with lots of glass. As the train slows, people start to get their stuff together, and then, with a final hiss of the brakes, the train comes to a stop.

Jackson jumps to his feet and follows me as I swing my wheelchair round. The doors slide open and as arranged there's the porter, slamming the ramp into place and checking it's secure. Behind me, I feel the prickly impatience of the other passengers waiting to get off. I don't care. They can shuffle and check their phones all they like: this is a rare occasion where I get to go first.

'The funny thing is,' Jackson says in a loud voice, 'she can walk. I've seen her!'

I make a grab for him, but he dodges round me and jumps off the train.

Outside the station, Jackson darts towards Tesco Express. 'Back in a minute,' he says. 'Do you want anything?'

'Yeah, a Twix would be good.' Now I've survived the train journey, I'm regretting skipping breakfast.

'I'll catch you up,' he says, leaving me to go up the hill towards Cliffe.

This hill is one of the reasons I'm using my wheelchair today. Jackson's right – I can walk – and I was fine on the train, but the five-minute walk from the station to college would have been hard work. I don't want to turn up exhausted on my first day.

Soon I'm in the middle of a stream of people all moving in the same direction. I could go faster, but I hang back so I can take everything in, or, more precisely, so I can indulge in one of my favourite hobbies: people watching.

I notice how much thought everyone's put into their appearance, especially the people who want to make it look like they've put in no thought at all. Take the girl walking in front of me. Her hair is plaited, but just the

right amount of strands have been pulled loose and I can see that the price label is still stuck to the bottom of her undone trainers. A random collection of charity bracelets, leather thongs and beads rise up her left wrist, but they've been arranged by colour. There's nothing random about them, or her, at all.

I've put a lot of thought into what I'm wearing today because: a) I love fashion; and b) if people are going to stare at me, then I might as well give them something awesome to stare at. I've made my hair big and curly – kind of a Greek Afro – and I'm wearing a varsity cardigan, buttoned shirt, cut-off dungarees and my gold letter 'I' necklace. I'd describe my look as Sporty Vintage High School Greek Geek … With A Touch Of Bling. Mum described it as 'a bit odd', but what does she know?

Jackson catches up with me just as I'm going into college.

'Here you are,' he says, handing me my Twix.

I tear it open, then Jackson and I watch as people swirl round us – the older students shouting out to each other; the new students eyeing each other cautiously. Suddenly, a salty smell hits me and I notice that Jackson's holding a greasy bag.

'Jackson, what *is* that?'

'A roast chicken.'

I shake my head and put down my Twix. The meaty smell is hard for a vegetarian to take first thing in the morning. 'You are so very surprising, Jackson.'

'Thanks,' he says, with a nod and a smile. 'Right, I'm going to find my form room. Wish me luck.'

'You don't need it. You've had two magic Tic Tacs.'

'Oh yeah!' he says, then he disappears up a flight of stairs, giving me a final wave.

I turn and head towards my own form room. I know the way because I had an orientation day during the holidays. I stop outside S12, pouf up my hair, check the corners of my mouth for caramel, then pop another Tic Tac – I need a lot of invincibility to see me through the next few minutes.

I take a deep breath and push open the door.

A group of teenagers turn to look at me and I look back at them. I know it's wrong to judge people on first impressions, but I'm fairly certain it's what they're doing with me so I allow myself to indulge, just for a moment.

I see three big sporty boys looking uncomfortable in their plastic chairs; one boy sitting on his own with his hands clutching a briefcase; four girls with perfect everything – hair, make-up and clothes; a girl with cornrows and massive yellow specs; two clever-looking

boys; and a couple of smiley girls, the kind that get asked to babysit.

An awkward silence fills the room. I'm fairly certain it was like this before I came in, but I still feel a certain responsibility to break it.

'Hi. I'm Annie,' I say.

I get thirteen smiles and nods back, but the specs girl gives me a big grin.

With all their eyes on me, I move my wheelchair over to the wall and put on the brakes. Then I tighten the straps on my rucksack, put my feet on the floor and grip the push rings. You know when you go swimming, and you can either jump straight in or inch slowly deeper and deeper into the water? Well, I'm a jump-right-in kind of person. I push myself up and out of the wheelchair, then I walk across the room.

Well, I say I *walk* …

My knees and toes point inwards, towards each other, and with each step I take my hips jerk from side to side. So I don't lose my balance, my arms swing about too … oh, and my butt sticks out. It's my walk, but it's not most people's walk, which is why thirteen pairs of eyes are watching every step I take. I look up and meet their gaze. Thirteen pairs of eyes flick away.

'I've got mild cerebral palsy,' I say, 'spastic diplegia.'

Cautiously, the thirteen pairs of eyes rise again as I take a seat next to the specs girl.

I take a sip of water and another Tic Tac – projecting immense confidence is tiring – then, when I'm ready, I look up.

'Hi,' I say, smiling.

She grins back at me. She has big eyes and beautifully round cheeks that for some reason remind me of apples.

'I like your dungarees,' she says in a rush. She's got this throaty voice that doesn't match how sweet she looks. 'I've got a pair like them, but in blue.'

'Thanks,' I say. 'I love them, but they're annoying when you go to the toilet.'

'Totally! I keep dropping the straps in wee.'

I like this girl. She says whatever pops into her head.

She pushes up her specs. 'My name's Hilary.'

'Hi,' I say. 'I like your glasses.'

'I know, yellow frames – how cool? I got them in a charity shop in Devon.'

While Hilary and I discuss the pros and cons of dungarees, yellow and charity shops, everyone around us starts chatting too. I love moments like this. The start of things. The smiley girls swap numbers, the clever boys have an earnest chat and the perfect-looking girls talk to

the sporty boys. I glance across the room and notice that the only person not joining in on this high-speed bonding exercise is briefcase boy. My heart goes out to him, but I don't go over because Hilary has just claimed that I once tied her to a chair and this I need to follow up.

'I did *what*?'

She does her gravelly chuckle. 'It was at playgroup. You tied me to a chair in the Wendy house and I missed the apple and toast.'

'Apple and toast … that rings a bell.' I have no memory of Hilary, but Mum's told me I did some crazy stuff at playgroup so she could be telling the truth. 'Sorry about that,' I say.

'That's OK. I enjoyed it.'

Interesting …

Hilary's eyes light up. 'I thought you were amazing because you wore boys' clothes and had all these T-shirts with dinosaurs on them.'

Yep. She definitely knows me.

'Was there anything else I did? Only, we should probably get it all out in the open right now.'

'Well, you taught me the words "willy" and "guff" and you told me that one of the helpers would be pleased if I painted her handbag with Tippex.'

'I'm guessing the helper wasn't pleased?'

'No. Oh, and once you made me do a wee in the sandpit.'

Oh, God. 'How did I *make* you do that?'

'You said you'd make me eat it if I didn't.'

'The wee or the sand?'

'The sand.'

'Wow,' I say. 'I was a psychopath … Can I just apologise all in one go for everything my four-year-old self did?'

'You don't need to.' She hits me with her massive smile. 'You were so funny!'

I'm saved from hearing any more revelations by our new form tutor walking in. Mr Cobb apologises for being late, sloshes coffee over his desk and then hands round soggy timetables. I see that my first lesson today is English literature.

Hilary leans towards me and whispers, 'Do you remember when you told me we were only allowed to use the trampoline if we took off *all* our clothes?'



THREE

One of the perfect girls, Romilly, has the same first lesson as me so I leave my wheelchair in S12 and we walk there together. I've got a pair of crutches stored in Mr Cobb's cupboard – Mum dropped them off last week – but I decide to see how I'll get on without them. With difficulty, it turns out. The corridors are packed and I have to concentrate hard on keeping a conversation going, getting up a flight of stairs and not falling over. Falling over is one of the more out-there side effects of my cerebral palsy.

By the time we reach the classroom, I'm hot and my heart is racing. Thank God for Mitchum Ultimate. Seriously, the stuff's amazing.

While Romilly goes to sit with a couple of friends, I go to an empty desk by an open window. I take another sip of water and let the cool air from the window wash over

me. I could have sat with Romilly, but I prefer sitting on my own – I like to spread out – plus I don't want to get sucked into a gang of girls on my first day and then have to hang out with them for the next two years.

Our teacher, Miss Caudle, is a young, slim woman with flame-red hair. She takes the register then hands round copies of the book we're studying, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. I pick up my copy, hold it close to my nose, then flip through the pages and breathe in deeply.

'Ah, a fellow book sniffer,' says Miss Caudle.

I nod and take another sniff. 'New book is my favourite smell in the world.'

'Well, that's your new book now so write anything you want in it.' She turns to the rest of the class. 'That goes for all of you: record your thoughts inside your books. *Wuthering Heights* is arguably the most powerful love story ever written and I want to hear your opinions about it.'

I take in the mist-shrouded couple on the front cover and have to stop myself from rolling my eyes – I'm not into romances – but then Miss Caudle starts describing the 'terrible violence and cruelty in the novel' and I perk up.

We're just going through the characters when the classroom door swings open and an exceptionally tall boy with short blond hair strolls in. He's wearing jeans, a tight

zipped-up tracksuit top and black trainers. Curiously, draped round his neck is a fringed scarf. He looks like a gymnast who's had a rummage through his mum's accessory drawer. He walks straight up to our teacher and clasps her hand.

'Miss Caudle,' he says, although he has a strong accent and it actually comes out as 'Miss Cuddle'. 'I'm sorry I am late, but an error on my timetable sent me to the wrong room.'

'Ah …' Miss Caudle stares wide-eyed at her hand that's being pumped up and down. 'Are you Fabian Kaczka?'

'Yes, that's me. Fabian Kaczka.' He says his surname much more smoothly than Miss Caudle, with a long 'sh' sound in the middle. '"Kaczka" means "duck",' he adds, then he quacks. Loudly. In Miss Caudle's face.

Across the classroom, people gasp and stifle giggles.

Fabian Kaczka turns to face us, points at us and says, 'But you guys call me Fab.'

A boy at the front bursts out laughing, then says, 'All right, *Fab*.'

Fab, either not caring or oblivious to the fact that this boy is laughing at him, sticks out his hand and says, 'You've got it, my friend. Put it here.'

The boy watches in horror as Fab involves him in a blokey hand grab.

Quickly, as if she fears Fab might shake hands with everyone in the class, Miss Caudle tells Fab, 'Take a seat. Anywhere you like.'

His eyes sweep across the classroom, studying everyone in turn, before finally falling on me.

Ah, *come on*. *Move on*, *eyes*, I think. I'm enjoying sitting all on my own at the back, watching everything that's going on. But Fab's clearly made up his mind because he gives a determined nod then walks straight towards me, past several empty seats.

He stops in front of my desk, does this little bow and says, 'Please may I sit with you?'

Well, this is awkward.

As everyone watches to see what I will do, I feel my cheeks go red. I've just done my special walk across college, totally blush free, then Fab Kaczka bows at me and I go red!

'Sure,' I say, with a nonchalant shrug, then I take another drink of water to suggest my redness is solely down to dehydration and I move my stuff across.

Fab unwinds his scarf, places it carefully over the back of his chair, then sits down. He's so tall that I have to shift towards the window to stop our shoulders from touching. Next, he takes a fountain pen, a yellow notebook and a pad of paper out of his bag, then turns to look at me.

Woah. Those are *blue* eyes. They are the *exact* shade of Mum's Bombay Sapphire gin.

'Hello,' he says.

'Hi.' I pointedly keep my hands on my book. There will be *no* handshaking going on here. This boy clearly doesn't understand boundaries and I don't want to encourage him.

After looking at me for a moment longer, Fab turns to the front of the class, rests his chin in his hand and shifts his intense attention back to Miss Caudle – or, should I say, Miss C*uddle*.

Finally, the lesson can begin.



FOUR

I love reading. I mean, I'm obsessed with it. I'm a book pervert, and I do it everywhere and at every opportunity, even when I probably shouldn't be doing it at all: during assembly, when I'm talking to my Greek nan on the phone (or rather when she's talking to me), when I get bored during films. Some people think that when you read you're shutting yourself off from the world. But they're wrong. When I read, my world just gets bigger and better.

Occasionally, back at secondary school, I'd get a sympathetic look from a girl in my year – *Bless, Annie's* READING *again, like someone from the olden days!* But I didn't care because generally I was reading a high-octane, violent thriller that I knew had to be better than whatever she was doing (usually her hair). Plus, the difference between what you can get away with reading about in public and *looking at* in public is mind-boggling.

So, I'm pretty much in heaven as Miss Caudle, eyes glittering, carries on describing the various characters in *Wuthering Heights*. She shows us pictures of the Yorkshire moors where Emily Brontë lived, and of the waterfalls and crags that appear in the book. As she talks, I type.

Next to me, Fab writes an endless stream of notes in large, flowing handwriting. I don't recognise the language he's writing in, but I see that it's bouncy, with lots of curly 'K's and 'J's.

Soon Miss Caudle tells us to read the opening chapter and make notes of our first impressions.

With a tingly sense of anticipation, I open the book and start to read. On the surface, nothing particularly dramatic happens – a man called Lockwood goes to this isolated, sinister house to pay a visit to his grumpy landlord, Heathcliff – but every word is loaded with menace and I get the feeling something very bad is about to happen.

It's a good feeling, which is why it's annoying when Fab leans towards me and says, 'Excuse me.'

I put my finger on the book, then look up. 'Yes?'

'What is your name?'

'Annie.'

He nods. 'So, *Annie*, I have a quick question: what is a "misanthropist"?'

'A person who dislikes human beings.' *Like me right now*, I think.

'Thank you.' Fab writes something in his yellow notebook.

I turn back to a description of Heathcliff as a 'dark-skinned gypsy' and 'gentleman'. I draw a line under the words and write *race and class?* in the margin.

Two minutes later, I get another 'Excuse me', followed by: 'Annie, what is "peevish"?'

'When you feel irritable.' *Like me. Right now.*

Ten seconds later: 'Annie, what is "penetralium"?'

'I don't know.' I hold up *Wuthering Heights*. 'This was written over a hundred and fifty years ago – it's full of archaic words.'

His eyes widen. '*Archaic?* What is "archaic"?'

'Words that aren't used much any more, but –'

Fab shushes me as he jots something down. 'Annie, it is very important that I learn the meaning of every word.'

'OK, but I don't know the meaning of all the words.'

A cough from the front of the room makes us look up. 'If you two could keep it down,' says Miss Caudle, 'just so everyone can concentrate on the task.'

Great. Now Fab's got me into trouble. Me getting into

trouble was another thing I wanted to leave behind when I came to Cliffe. I wasn't out of control at school, but I did get *a lot* of detentions. I blame this on my fiery Mediterranean temperament, but Mum's less generous and says that sometimes I can be a right pain in the ass. Whatever the reason, I don't want to draw attention to myself on my first day.

'Sorry,' I say to Miss Caudle. Then I whisper to Fab, 'You need a dictionary.'

'Like this?' He pulls a red book out of his massive rucksack. It says *POLSKO–ANGIELSKI* on the front. So he's Polish.

'Wouldn't it be easier to use your phone?'

He dismisses my words with a shake of his head. 'No. I prefer this.'

'But wouldn't your phone be more practical?'

'More practical, yes, but less reliable.'

'Well, OK,' I say with a smile, then I turn back to *Wuthering Heights*, leaving Fabian Kaczka tutting, drumming his fingers and flicking through his massive dictionary.

For the rest of the lesson, he keeps relatively quiet, but when Miss Caudle tells us to pack up, he unleashes a torrent of questions. 'Annie, why were you using different coloured highlighters in your book?'

'I'm using a different colour for each theme. It's something my teacher in my old school taught me to do.'

He nods then says, 'Why do you have the letter "I" on your necklace when your name is Annie?'

I'm a bit taken aback by this – my necklace is tiny, a gold 'I' on a thin chain, too small for anyone to notice. 'My mum got it for me for Christmas.' Automatically my fingers touch it. 'She ordered it online, but they sent the wrong letter. We only found out when I opened it on Christmas Day. I told her I liked the "I" and wanted to keep it.'

All the time I've been talking, Fab has been putting things in his bag and listening intently. He starts to wind his scarf back round his neck. 'And *Wuthering Heights*? Do you like that too?'

'Yes, so far I love it. It's very dark.' I shut my laptop and start gathering up my things. Break's going to be over if I don't hurry up.

'Dark? In what way?'

I turn to look at him. He's standing there, patiently waiting for my answer.

'I like the way everything feels claustrophobic and also the words that have been used: *devil*, *fiend*, *possessed swine*.'

He nods. 'Yes, words are very powerful.'

I'm not used to boys saying this kind of thing. Or girls. I'm used to them saying things like 'Shakespeare's boring' and 'God, I hate poetry'.

I nod. 'Yes, they are.'

The classroom's almost empty, but Fab is still hovering by our desk. 'It's breaktime,' he says. 'Let's go to the canteen and talk about books. I will buy you a coffee. Or tea. Do you prefer tea?'

I laugh and shake my head. 'You go ahead. I want to get organised.'

'No. It's fine. I can wait.'

I shrug, then I deliberately take my time checking my phone, slipping it in my pocket, pushing my chair back. I guess I'm hoping Fab will give up and go, but he just stands there, arms folded, like he's got all the time in the world. Having him hovering next to me makes me feel like I've got my old teaching assistant, Jan, back.

Fab's eyes follow me as I tighten my rucksack straps and a familiar flutter of irritation rises inside me, just like it used to at school when I'd have to convince Jan that, no, I really didn't want her to wait outside the toilets for me, and, yes, I really would be fine in DT without her.

I must be frowning, because Fab says in a concerned voice, making him seem even more Jan-like, 'What is the matter, Annie?'

'Nothing,' I say, standing up.

He steps aside and I walk past him towards the door, and, just as I expected, he watches me closely. I mean, he was curious about my laptop so my walk must be absolutely fascinating for him. Suddenly, he rushes ahead, pushes the door and holds it wide open for me.

I look from the door to Fab, then say, 'Why are you doing that?'

He shrugs. 'To help. You're an invalid.'

I blink and stare at him. My heart instantly speeds up. All morning I've felt so strong, almost invincible, but with one word, Fab Kaczka has whisked my confidence away from me.

And this bothers me more than what he actually said. I thought I was stronger than that. I thought I was over being hurt by words.

Suddenly I feel mad – with Fab, and with myself.

I take a step towards him. 'A piece of advice, Fab: probably best to avoid that word. It's a bit offensive.' I see Miss Caudle look up from her desk. My voice is raised, but I don't care. 'It suggests worthlessness. *In*-valid. Like you said, words are powerful.' I take the door from him and step through it. I wiggle it backwards and forwards. 'And look: I can open doors all by myself!'

I'm halfway down the corridor when I wonder if I was

too hard on Fab. It's hardly his fault if he hasn't fully grasped the complex nature of the English language yet. And all that door wiggling I did … For a moment, I consider waiting for him to catch up so that I can explain that personally I think 'disabled' is a better word to use than 'invalid' and take him through the numerous ways that language can cause offence.

No. I've already missed five minutes of break because of Fab and I'm hungry.

I push him to the back of my mind and head for the coffee shop, taking the stairs instead of the lift and saying a cheery 'Hi there!' to a girl whose eyes are glued to my bare, wobbling legs.

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