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To Emma Middleton
with love and thanks



‘I haven’t got a clue what I’m going to give anyone for Christmas,’ I said, sighing.

‘Me neither,’ said Sam.

I was lying on the bedroom rug with my dog, Bear. He was taking up more room than me because he’s a gigantic long-haired German Shepherd. He was dozing and I was doing my maths homework. Well, Sam was the one actually doing it. I can barely add up accurately, whereas he’s a total genius at maths. At more or less everything. He’s even better than me at English, which is seriously annoying, seeing as I’m the one who’s desperate to be a writer. I’ve started a novel in a special notebook with a

skull pattern on the black cover. It's a dystopian novel written in the first person, present tense, and it's very dramatic and depressing. *I* like it but I'm not sure anyone else would. Girls like my sister Zara just want to read love stories. I definitely don't want to write anything remotely romantic. I don't think I'm ever going to fall in love.

Sam was sitting at Zara's dressing table, experimenting with hairstyles while dictating all my maths answers. His hair had grown quite a bit, so he was seeing if he could twist the top part into a man bun.

'What do you think, Frankie?' he asked, peering at it from all angles.

'I think you look ridiculous. Zara would go completely crackers if she knew you were using her hairbrush,' I said.

I wasn't just being snippy – I truly thought it a ridiculous hairstyle, but he still managed to look OK with it. Sam is effortlessly good-looking, no matter what. He's got blond hair and brown eyes and that peachy sort of skin that never gets spotty. All this, *and* he's really clever. But he's not the slightest bit vain or conceited. That's why I'm so glad that he's my best friend in all the world.

We've been best friends since we were four, when he moved into the Turret House next door to us. It's got three storeys, so it's much bigger than our house, and real turrets, and a wisteria climbing up the white walls that looks beautiful in spring. They have a very formal box garden – little hedges cut into an elaborate pattern of triangles. It's an enormous house for a family of three – just Sam and his parents, Michael and Lucy. Our house is

called Rose Cottage. It's small, as the name implies, Victorian red brick, with two and a half bedrooms upstairs. Mum has one, Zara and I share another, and Rowena squeezes into the box room with her hundred and one Sylvanians. Mum's made the garden really pretty with red and pink and white rose bushes and beautiful big ferns, but they're all tangled up together because she can't garden much any more. I still think our garden looks much nicer than the Turret House one. Sam does too.

We started at primary school together, in the same class. We made sure we always sat next to each other and we played together at dinner time. We had a habit of walking down the school corridors hand in hand. Our teachers called us the Heavenly Twins, though we don't look at all alike. I'm a bit taller than Sam, and I'm skinny, with brown eyes and long brown hair that never stays tidy. I've always been a bit of a scruff. Even now I can't seem to help spilling stuff down my front, and my woolly tights wrinkle, my school shoes need heeling and my Docs new laces.

Sam and I were in the nativity play in Year One. He was the Angel Gabriel, and looked adorable in his long white dress and wings, though he said he felt silly. I was the ass.

I thought we'd spend all our school days together, but when we were seven Michael and Lucy sent Sam to a posh prep school instead of letting him stay on at Wickstead Road Juniors. It was so lonely without him. And of course we're at different secondary schools now. I'm at Barlow Community College. Sam's at Barlow Grammar School. They're both called Barlow but they are worlds apart.

Sam poked his tongue out at me now, a trio of Sams reflected in the three mirrors. He unknotted his hair and ran his fingers through it. It stuck out a bit at the side. He'd obviously slept on it the wrong way and hadn't bothered to wash it this morning.

'It keeps going weird. I'd better have it cut,' said Sam. His hand reached out for Zara's manicure set.

'Don't!' I said as he pulled out her nail scissors. 'You'll just make a terrible mess of it.'

I should have held my tongue. It was as if I'd dared him to do it. He held out the stray lock and gave an experimental snip.

'Are you completely nuts?' I said, scrambling to my feet. Bear moaned softly, not wanting to be disturbed. 'Oh, Sam, what have you done?'

He looked as if a giant sheep had come along and mistaken his hair for grass.

'It does look a bit weird, doesn't it?' he said. 'I'd better do the whole lot now to make it look even.'

'Stop sawing at it! You'll make it worse,' I said, snatching the scissors from him.

'You do it then,' he said.

'Me? Look what I did to Pearl!' I said ruefully.

I quite liked dolls when I was little. I didn't take off their clothes and put them to bed and wake them up and dress them all over again, the way Zara played with *her* dolls. I didn't see the point. I liked to turn our bedroom into Yosemite and make my dolls climb El Capitan (our wardrobe) and then get into mortal combat with my teddy

bears. Sometimes they trekked to the hot springs in our bathroom, where they swam naked and fought the giant ducks with toothbrushes. They all looked the worse for wear after their adventures – but Pearl stayed pristine.

She'd been given to me by my godmother, Coral, Mum's best friend from way back. She lives in Hong Kong now. Pearl was a Chinese doll, with glossy black hair down to her shoulders. She wore a scarlet silk jacket and trousers with a tiny gold dragon pattern, and had a little scarlet cap to match.

I couldn't help taking the little red cap on and off though, and brushing her hair every day. (Strange when I could never be bothered to brush my own.) One day I scraped her hair back and plaited it. It suited her. She looked just like a boy. I decided she'd *like* to be a boy, so I tried giving her a haircut. It kept getting shorter and shorter as I tried to even it up – until she was practically bald.

Zara said I'd ruined my best doll. I said I *liked* her new haircut, but I didn't really. She looked all prickly and peculiar and her hat didn't fit her any more. I stopped playing with her after that, and passed her on to our little sister, Rowena, who has a whole orphanage of waifs and strays on her windowsill.

Sam remembered Pearl and put the scissors down. 'What am I going to do then?' he said, pulling a face. 'My mum won't be too thrilled. Do you think your mum could sort it out for me?'

I hesitated. 'She *would*, but she's in bed at the moment. She's not feeling very well,' I mumbled.

'Oh. Sorry,' Sam said. 'Well, maybe I'd better go and get a proper haircut in town then.'

'Have you got enough money?' I asked.

It was a daft question.

'I've got heaps,' said Sam. 'Dad gave me a handout this morning so that I could buy Christmas presents. Hey – you could come to Whitelands with me, Frankie. We'll buy our Christmas presents together.' He paused and added delicately, 'We can pool our money, if you like.'

'It's OK, I've got lots saved up,' I said.

This wasn't true, and Sam knew I was lying, but he also knew that I was too proud to take his money. I did have a *little* saved. I hadn't been able to get a babysitting job, but I ran various errands for an old lady down the road, who gave me a pound for my trouble each time. It was clear she thought this a small fortune, but it didn't add up to much. Eleven pound coins precisely.

Eleven pounds wasn't nearly enough for proper presents for seven people: Mum, Zara, Rowena, Sam, Granny, my godmother Coral, and Mr White at school. He's the school librarian and I adore him.

I'm not giving Dad a Christmas present this year. I don't see why I should. I utterly despise him now.

'Do they have a Poundland at Whitelands?' I asked.

'I don't know. Maybe. They've got all sorts of shops,' said Sam vaguely.

The girls in my class love going around Whitelands after school and at weekends. When I was much younger I liked going there too because they have these animatronic

polar bears. In summer they dress them up in Hawaiian shirts and shorts, and they sit on a sandy beach making sandcastles to 'We're All Going on a Summer Holiday'. In the winter, slightly more logically, they give each polar bear a woolly hat and scarf, and they build a snowbear and jerk about to 'Walking in a Winter Wonderland'.

The bears were ready to be retired now, their white coats tinged with yellow. One day their mechanism failed so they froze mid-action, looking so creepy they made the little kids cry. They were soon working again, but they'd lost all attraction for me now. I didn't like the shops much either. I wasn't into clothes and make-up like Zara, or little toy animals like Rowena. But I was looking for presents for them, not me. I wasn't silly enough to think eleven pounds would be enough, but I could maybe get some ideas. And I was really sick of doing my maths homework, even with Sam's help.

'Come on, Sam. Let's get going. What do you want for Christmas? Shall we go to Claire's and buy you a hairband?' I said, getting up.

'Cheeky muppet,' said Sam, giving me a shove.

We had a mock wrestle, and Bear joined in and won.

'We can't take him to Whitelands,' said Sam, fondling his ears the way he likes best. 'No dogs allowed.'

'I'll ask Zara to look after him,' I said.

She was in the bathroom. Zara can stay in there for hours and hours. She'd been plucking her eyebrows into surprising shapes, and now she was sitting on the loo painting her fingernails. She was doing it very carefully,

with tiny silver stars on top of navy polish. She jumped when I opened the door, and made a little splodge on the last nail.

'What did you have to come barging in like that for? Now look what you've made me do!' she wailed. 'My star's gone all blobby.'

'It can be a little moon instead of a star,' I suggested. 'Zara, could you possibly keep an eye on Bear for a bit? He'll need to go out for a quick wee in a while,' I said. 'Sam and I are just going to Whitelands.'

'I thought you hated Whitelands,' she said. 'Anyway, I can't, because *I'm* going to Whitelands.'

'How can you be so mean? You weren't even thinking of going there until I mentioned it!'

'Yes I was! I'm meeting Julie and Tamsin and Joy for lunch at McDonald's,' Zara insisted.

'Like you've got enough money to go to McDonald's,' I said.

'Julie always gives me half hers.'

'Sponger!'

'I am not! I'm doing her a favour. She says she's on a diet. So *anyway*, I can't have Bear.' Zara paused. 'Is Mum still in bed?'

'Yes, and I'm not disturbing her,' I said.

I left the bathroom and went towards Rowena's room.

'Are you asking Rowena? She's too little to take Bear for a walk by herself,' Zara called.

'She could just pop him out into the garden. He'd be fine with her. He loves her best, after me,' I said.

Rowena was kneeling on her bedroom floor, arranging her Sylvanians into neat family groups. I could see all the mummy bears and bunnies and pandas and badgers, and the little girls and little boys and babies, but there weren't any daddies.

'Hey, Rowena,' I said, squatting down beside her. She's only six and a half – perhaps it wasn't fair to ask her – but she's very good with Bear. He doesn't growl a bit when she brushes him. He's always extra gentle with her.

'Hey, Frankie,' she said, smiling.

'I have to go to Whitelands with Sammy,' I said. 'Do you think you could be an angel and look after Bear for me? Perhaps take him in the garden if he looks like he needs a wee?'

'All right,' she agreed.

'You're a star,' I said. 'You're totally my favourite sister.' I made all the little girl Sylvanians dance and sing '*We love Rowena!*' in tiny voices. Rowena giggled.

'Where have all the daddies gone, eh?' I asked.

Rowena pointed to the windowsill. They were marooned up there, in a shoebox.

'Aha! Are you banishing the fathers because ours has cleared off?' I asked, flicking each little figure over onto his back. 'Are they in prison?'

'No, they're at *work*,' said Rowena.

'What about the mummies then? Why aren't they at work?'

'They're tired because they're a bit ill. They're having a nice rest at home.' She stroked their heads in turn.

'Poor mummies,' I said softly. 'So, Bear's lying on my rug at the moment.'

'He's like a great big rug himself,' said Rowena.

'Maybe you'd better not let him in your room in case he tries to eat your Sylvanians,' I said. 'Only joking!' I added quickly when she looked alarmed.

I thought I'd better peep in at Mum just to make sure she was all right. She'd insisted on getting up early and making us our favourite Saturday pancakes, but she'd looked particularly pale, and had purple shadows under her eyes. She said she was absolutely fine and started making a list of all the things she wanted to do today on the telephone pad.

Lesson plans! (Use Gingerbread Man as folk-tale example)
Make gingerbread men for class???
Tidy up!
Put on a wash. Several washes.
Emails.
Juggle bills.
Take in seams of baggy blue dress.
Lunch – soup?
Take Rowena to feed ducks? Then charity shops?
Discuss Zara's exam results!
Find new laces for Frankie's Doc Martens. Ribbons?

The list went on and on. We had cleared the breakfast dishes, and Mum had sat down with her school briefcase

and started writing lesson plans, but five minutes later her head started nodding and she fell asleep, her pen still in her hand. Zara and I helped her upstairs and put her to bed.

I opened her door very cautiously now and crept inside. She was still lying on the bed in her pyjamas and the bedsocks with the penguin pattern.

Mum's eyes were shut, so I backed away towards the door – though perhaps not quietly enough.

'Hey, Frankie,' she murmured.

'Hey, Mum. Sorry to wake you. Go back to sleep,' I said, tucking the duvet over her.

'I've got so much to do,' she protested.

'Tomorrow. You need to rest now,' I said. 'Nurse Frankie says.'

'Oh, love. I feel so lazy, sleeping in on a Saturday morning.'

'You're not the slightest bit lazy, you're simply tired out, running around after all those little kids all week – and us lot too.'

'I'll just have ten minutes more, and then I'll be fighting fit and raring to go,' said Mum.

We both knew perfectly well that she never felt fighting fit and raring to go any more. We knew why. Mum had glossed over the details to us when she first got her diagnosis. One day her eyes had gone funny. Another day she could only see in black and white. Then she went completely blind, but only for a few terrible hours. The optician sent her to hospital and they did all kinds of tests. Her eyes got better, but they still said she had this

awful illness. Mum insisted that it wasn't all doom and gloom. People with MS often went into remission and never got ill again. I think Rowena believed her, but Zara and I googled multiple sclerosis in private, and panicked.

We don't always get on – in fact, we *rarely* get on because we're so different – but that night I squeezed into Zara's bed and we hugged each other tight and cried, our heads under the duvet so that Mum wouldn't hear.

Mum hasn't got better. Now her legs are playing up and she's terribly tired all the time.

'You have your little nap, Mum,' I said. 'I'm just going to Whitelands with Sammy. OK?'

'Mmm, OK,' she murmured. Then her eyes opened properly. 'Hang on. *Not* OK. Zara's here, right?'

'Yes,' I said, but I had to add truthfully, 'Only she might be popping out too. But it's all right, Rowena's playing happily in her bedroom and she's going to look after Bear.'

Mum struggled up onto one elbow. '*I'm* the mum. *I* do the looking after,' she said.

'No, Mum! Please, it's all sorted. You need your rest,' I said, feeling dreadful.

'I've been sleeping for hours already,' said Mum, looking at her alarm clock. She sat up properly and made an attempt to swing her legs out of bed.

'Mum! Look, I won't go. I don't *need* to. You're making me feel so bad,' I wailed.

She slid out of bed and took hold of me by the shoulders.

'You mustn't feel bad. You're nearly fourteen. You have a perfect right to go out with your friends. It's not your job to stay home looking after your little sister,' she said, looking into my eyes.

'It's my job to look after my dog. I promised I would when I begged to have him,' I said guiltily.

'And you do look after him nearly all the time. And you do a great job looking after Rowena too. You're lovely with her.'

'I'm not lovely with Zara,' I pointed out.

'Well, nobody's perfect. Where's my dressing gown? If Sammy's around I don't want to scare him silly prancing around in my PJs,' said Mum.

They were very old pyjamas, with a faded pattern of blue roses. Mum always looked extra cuddly in them, even though she was so frail now.

'You look lovely in those pyjamas,' I told her, giving her a hug.

Mum hugged me back. It wasn't a very strong hug. She seemed so much weaker now. I worried that if Bear got overexcited and jumped up to give her face a lick, he might send her flying.

'I don't think I can be bothered to go to Whitelands actually,' I said quickly. 'It's boring. I was just going to keep Sammy company because he has to go to the barber's to sort out his hair. He tried to give himself a haircut but it went wrong. Still, it's his fault. He can sort it out himself.'

Mum gave me a long look. There was no fooling her. 'Frankie, perhaps I won't be able to look after you all

properly in the future,' she said huskily, 'but I can manage now. So let me. Please.'

I swallowed and then nodded.

'Off you go then,' she said, sniffing. She gently pulled on a strand of my hair. It's nearly down to my waist now – it's a terrible bore trying to keep it washed and tidy, but I know it's my best feature. My *only* good one. 'Don't *you* try giving yourself a haircut, young lady.'

'I won't, promise,' I said, miming crossing my heart and hoping to die if I told a lie.

It was just a silly rhyme we'd said at nursery school, but nowadays anything about death made me shiver. You could die of MS. Mostly not for years and years. But it could happen.

'Don't frown like that, poppet,' Mum said, rubbing my forehead.

'I'm not frowning,' I said quickly, and gave her the biggest, cheeriest grin I could manage.