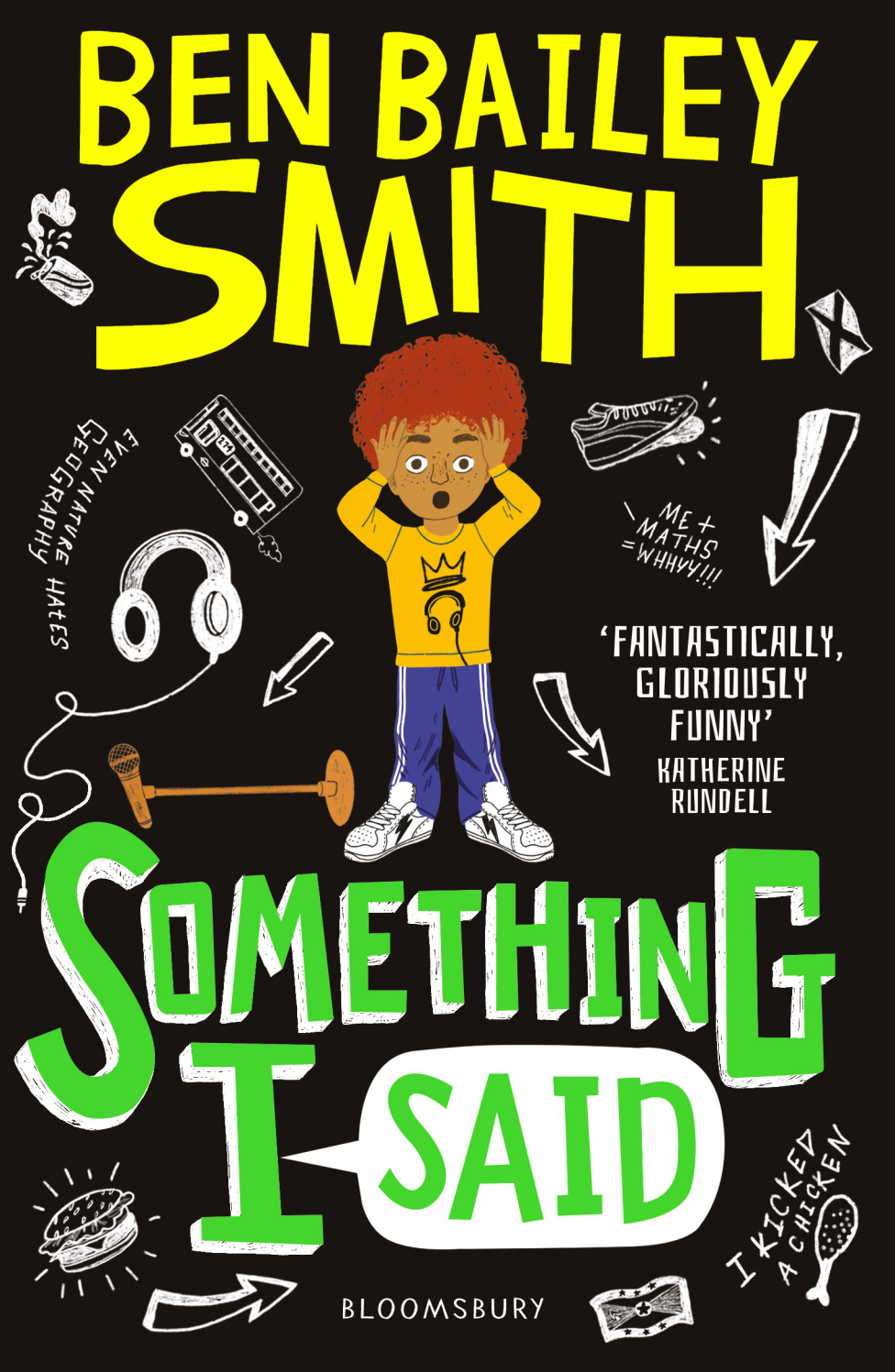
BEN BAILEY SMITH



'FANTASTICALLY, GLORIOUSLY FUNNY'
KATHERINE RUNDELL

SOMETHING I SAID

BLOOMSBURY

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For Luke, who knows funny

CHAPTER 1

Life's a Joke

'Is *everything* a joke to you, Carmichael?'

Ugh.

That question.

Again.

I don't know how to write a sigh but just know that I'm sighing as I write this.

Hearing it once more that afternoon at school, I felt like I'd been asked the same question my whole LIFE, or at least the majority of my near fourteen years on the planet.

And yet, for as long as I can remember I've found LIFE a bit of a laughable pastime.

LIFE:

- Wake up: why? Sleep is amazing.
- Go to school: put on a miniature suit (weird)

and travel through the rain (probably, because: London) to a building to find out about long division, split infinitives, how to bake rock cakes and other things you will NEVER NEED TO KNOW IN THE FUTURE.

- Come home: tell your parents about your day (yuck).
- Tomorrow: do the EXACT SAME THINGS AGAIN.

Pretty ridiculous. And you have to laugh at ridiculousness, don't you? I mean, if you don't laugh at it, how the actual heck do you live through it?

'Is *everything* a joke to you?'

I sometimes wonder if I was asked that as a toddler. I definitely remember Mum asking it when I was around five years old. My older brother, Malky, had dropped his ice cream into a pile of dog poo, and I laughed and said, 'Three-second rule?'

Three-second rule was something Mum often said when we'd drop a chip in the kitchen or a grape in a museum or something. She'd encourage us to pick it back up and eat it before the lurgies of the world descended on the morsel, so in my five-year-old brain I'd assumed it was a funny observational reference. She didn't think so. She said I was being *vindictive*.

Words are important.

Words can surprise you, hurt you, make you laugh.

Words are powerful.

In fact, words have the power to change your life, *forever*.

Considering how important words are, you'd think we'd know all the ones we need, wouldn't you? But if you keep your eyes and ears open, there are new ones to discover every single day.

Like *vindictive*.

In that moment, I had to ask my mum what *vindictive* meant. (I was *five years old*, guys, give me a break!) When she told me it meant that I was being cruel, I tried really hard to explain the events – unseen by her – in the build-up to me laughing at my brother's expense. Unfortunately I was missing a couple of crucial words in my pre-school vocabulary: *context* and *karma*.

Of course, now I know all too well that *context* is like a frame around a picture. It gives you all the elements that make up the whole story and helps you to focus on it clearly.

And *karma* describes the practice of *cause and effect*: do a good thing and good things might happen; do a bad a thing and bad things might happen.

So if I could go back to that day as a five-year-old outside the park, me and my seven-year-old brother licking

99s with Flakes and strawberry sauce in the crisp early September sun, I'd say to my mum, *'Hold your horses there, Mother, that was actually KARMA. Let me give you a little CONTEXT so you know I wasn't being VINDICTIVE.'*

And I'd go on to eloquently describe how Malky had kept nudging my shoulder, trying to make me drop *my* ice cream, exactly the type of meanness in which my brother would regularly – and gleefully – partake.

So when Malky nudged too hard and lost his grip on his own frozen trophy, sending it hurtling not just towards the earth but all the way into a putrid, fly-infested point of no return, YES, I laughed. I laughed heartily and delivered the most stinging of rebuttals – a recognised Taylor Family saying, fiendishly turned on its head for ultimate humour and justified revenge.

Oh, you better believe it – if I knew then what I knew now, I would've defended my corner like a debate team champion. Unfortunately, I was only five so I just cried, *'I'm NOT binvictive!'*

'Is *everything* a joke to you?'

Yep, I'd heard that one throughout most of the following years of primary school, like when I laughed in a Year 5 assembly because Magid was awarded a certificate for one hundred per cent attendance but missed the presentation due to a dental appointment. Or in Year

3 when we missed our tour slot at the London Transport Museum because of severe delays on the Central Line.

My laughter wasn't appreciated by my teachers, which was odd because I wasn't laughing at anyone's hardship or bad luck. I was laughing at the *irony* of the situation, which is actually an impressively mature form of humour, thank-you-very-much, and should, in my opinion, have been celebrated and encouraged.

The first two years of secondary school had been much like the last two years of primary school: life had become a series of events that I found funny in ways that the vast majority of adults around me just didn't.

Kids, on the other hand? I mean, I don't wanna blow my own trumpet (although, hygiene-wise, shouldn't we stick to blowing our own?), but I'm kind of a big deal when it comes to making other kids laugh. I'm the go-to guy for chuckles. Kids from all walks would invite me to parties and outings, sit with me at lunch, generally get me involved in stuff – I guess the thinking was, if I was there, something funny might happen. I was literally a funny sort of popular.

A big part of school is purely about survival. To survive, you need an identity and I had one. That identity was known and celebrated throughout Year 8.

My speciality is the ability to say what most kids want to say out loud but don't. Because when you're

doing a practical science test, the act of holding up two flaming Bunsen burners whilst yelling 'I AM THE GOD OF HELLFIRE!' tends to get you a couple of detentions and an eye-wateringly boring one-hour safety course alone with Mr Clarkson, Head of Science.

It was worth it.

Look. I'm not going to pretend I'm the *Cool Kid*. I'm not the fastest. I'm below average in goal, defence and up front. I'm not the best looking. Girls never fancy me. I'm definitely bottom of the league in the Quality Trainers category. But in that exclusive league of Oh My Days, Remember That Time?, I'm top of the table every season. I mean my stats are through the roof.

I'm the undisputed champ in Unnecessary Outbursts in Double Maths ('Guys, I've nailed the algebra problem! Me plus Maths equals Y! *Why, why, WHY?*').

I'm number one in Witty Comebacks to Bullies ('Well, technically, Jack, if you're gonna "eat me for breakfast" we'll need to postpone this until tomorrow morning at the earliest. What's your schedule looking like?').

I'm also unparalleled in Sarcastic Comments to Teachers ('Sir, what does it feel like to achieve your life goal, live your dream and teach PE?').

Sarcasm's kind of a mean one, pretty low, so I try to save it only for those who deserve it. Sometimes it just pops out. I mean, when you're soaking up the pleasure

Mr Jenkins takes from making you do push-ups in the rain you just have to go with your instinct.

As much as I love playing with words, I will say I am a lifelong fan of slapstick. Actual, physical stuff happening at random, preferably involving muck, liquid or falling – ideally all three – to someone. Anyone. Even me.

Don't get it twisted. I have no issue with being the butt of a joke. When I'm not making stupid people look stupid, I'm all for looking stupid myself.

Anyway, slapstick was sort of the reason I was where I was at this very minute.

FOURTEEN MINUTES EARLIER:

You see, me and my Year 8 Geography class were outside on the playing field with the tightly wound Miss Stillman, trying to identify different types of cloud formations. She was screaming '*Nimbus! Nimbus!*' at an uninterested Dion James when, out of the very blue which we were looking up at, A PIGEON FLEW DIRECTLY INTO HER FACE.

It was in the weird silence, after both the stifled laughter of the class and the wild yelping of Miss Stillman had subsided, that I said what I said.

THIS VERY MINUTE:

'Is *everything* a joke to you, Carmichael?'

Miss Stillman tilted her head down and her eyebrows up, hoping to coax a response from me by using my full, admittedly ridiculous, first name.

I did that thing of looking at my feet, partly to display that kind of '*I'm really sorry for everything, even existing*' body language, but mainly to avoid eye contact, both with her and Mr French, the Head of Year whose office she'd dragged me into.

'Well, is it?'

WHAT I WANTED TO SAY:

No, not everything. But lots of things are, and it's like no one else wants to admit they're funny. I mean, if you're genuinely asking me did I find it amusing that whilst you were unnecessarily screaming at a child, you were head-butted by a flying rat? Like, if you're actually questioning whether it felt like a joke when you panicked and then the pigeon panicked and pooed all over your clipboard? I'm sorry but the answer is yes. Life is full of really stupid jokes and I'm going to enjoy them. Is that so wrong? DOES THAT MAKE ME A MONSTER, MISS STILLMAN? DOES IT?

WHAT I ACTUALLY SAID:

'No.'

'I could have been *blinded*!' Miss Stillman squawked, appealing for similar levels of outrage from Mr French. 'Infected with *God knows* what kinds of germs. Most people would have rushed over – *"Are you OK, Miss*

Stillman?", "*Shall I get help, Miss Stillman?*" But no, not Carmichael. You know what his response was?'

She paused for dramatic effect and Mr French raised his eyebrows as if to say, 'No, what?'

'He said, "*See? Even nature hates Geography*."'

The Head of Year performed an involuntary gulp-cough combination, took a sharp breath inwards, as if sucking on an invisible straw, then looked to his colleague.

'Thank you, Miss Stillman, I'll take it from here.'

She nodded, brushed past me, paused at the office door.

'Send him back when he's ready to take life seriously.'

I glared at the door as it closed behind her. Mr French let a moment of silence hang in her wake, then pulled a file from a cabinet behind his desk, opened it and tapped it as he spoke.

'There's a pupil in Miss Miller's English class – she came to me raving about him. *Attentive, confident, engaged, incredible ability* … basically a joy to teach. Know what his name is? *Carmichael.* When I heard that, I thought what are the odds? *Two children born in the same year, in the same class, both with the unusual name Carmichael!* The other Carmichael? Grades slipping, attitude worsening, respect for almost all other subjects and their teachers at a worrying low.'

He turned a page of the file.

'So I pull out the contact details to send a commendation to the parents of Carmichael One and a *third* behaviour warning to the parents of Carmichael Two and *whaddaya know*?'

He waved a single Personal Information Sheet with a School ID photo of me in the top right corner, pulling a subtle goofy face – nostrils ever so slightly flared, eyes ever so slightly crossed. They said we shouldn't smile in the photos, but straight faces have never been my bag, so I'd improvised. I kept a straight face as Mr French held up the sheet, but my internal smile was beaming.

'Sir, can I—'

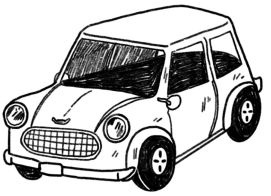
'We're an Academy with a strong focus on *respect*, Car. Something I'll have to reiterate to your parents yet again in the email home I'm about to write. In the meantime, why don't you spend some time with the other Carmichael? I hear he's a *fantastic* influence.'

Mr French did a smile that wasn't a smile and gestured to the door. I nodded and shuffled out.

Sarcasm.

Ugh.

The lowest form of wit.



CHAPTER 2

Car. YES, Like a Car

I stood in front of the mirror of Wainbridge Academy's ground-floor boys' toilets, nose slightly wrinkled, breathing through my mouth as I always did because: *boys*.

I stared at my reflection, pondering.

In adverts for perfume and hair gel, glamorous models look to the camera as if to say, '*Hey, I can't help being this gorgeous.*'

In selfies, taken and retaken, edited, deleted and reposted online, people pose as if to say, '*Yep, this is my AMAZING FACE, I think you'll find it's pretty darn pretty – enjoy it, world.*'

In movies, actors look past the camera as if to say, '*I already know how good I look, I don't even need to make eye contact with you – get a load of this beautiful right ear.*'

But when I looked at my own close-up in the

smudged and graffiti-spattered mirror, I patted my unruly nest of hair and shrugged as if to say, *'That'll have to do.'*

OK, listen – I'm not a gargoyle. But I'm also no supermodel. How do I put this? My appearance is a lot like my humour – under-appreciated.

At thirteen and three quarters, I was shorter than average with a round, light-brown freckle-covered face, eyes with odd swirls of hazel and green, and a badly behaved ginger Afro.

This was my parents' fault.

If you ever wondered what happens when a black woman from Grenada and a white man from Aberdeen have kids, well, the answer is there's no answer.

Me and my fifteen-year-old brother, Malky, looked totally different. Almost weirdly different. Like *one-of-us-was-actually-found-in-a-bush-as-a-baby* different. Malky was darker skinned with deep brown eyes, wavy, tameable black hair and the pointed, chiselled features of a young athlete. Which – annoyingly – was exactly what he was.

As much as I'd love it if it turned out that Malky really was a poor bush child, the simple explanation for our physical difference was that Malky looked like our mum and I looked like our dad. And while my mum, the pint-sized, youthful-looking Jocelyn Taylor, had smooth, blemish-free features, permanently kissed by an eternal

Caribbean sun, my dad, Stuart Taylor, reminded me of the rough granite blocks of Aberdeen's city centre, weather-beaten and starved of natural light, with silver-blue eyes topped by a shock of frizzy red hair. Lanky and awkward at six feet and four inches, he basically looked like a Scottish lamp post on fire.

And together, they looked like they weren't together.

I'd been handed down everything from my dad except the height. That blessing I was lucky enough to inherit from my mum, who was only an African headwrap taller than an Ewok. *Thanks, guys.*

Then there was the name.

The name, the name, the name.

Carmichael.

Ugh.

I was called Carmichael because my parents were idiots.

I've always suspected a lot of parents are. Forever searching for 'unique' and 'unusual' names with which to tarnish their offspring, when all any kid wants to do in their young life is FIT IN. Simple rules:

- Kids don't need a name that rhymes with a body part (Peter, who I play football with, is forever 'Tiny Feet Pete'. Rose in my RE class is 'Big Nose Rose' – her nose is actually smaller than

average, but to be fair, she is super nosy. Isaiah in my form group probably thought he'd got away with it until we found out his surname was Cluttock).

- They don't need a name that is also a brand (I had a Dior *and* a Chanel in my primary school class. I mean, you might as well go all out and call your kid Reebok – at least it'd be funny).
- And they really, *really* don't need to be named after a great-great-great-Scottish-grandfather who, rumour had it, was the first to think of putting poppy seeds on a bun, although was never recognised for it, never got any money from it to pass down, and now his great-great-great-grandson was still wearing the same Pumas with the flappy sole on the right foot from last winter.

Yet ultimately I was ambivalent about all of these things. That's right – *ambivalent*. It's a versatile little word that means having mixed feelings about something. Ambivalence is neither one thing nor the other, which seemed a perfect way to describe someone who looked and felt like neither of his parents.

The name is a perfect example. I can see how, at this point, that was partly my fault. Let's be honest, I had the chance to reinvent myself in Year 7 – to use the more

normal half of my name by becoming a 'Michael' or a 'Mike', but I didn't. Partly just an oversight, partly because the four or five friends – including my best mate, Alex Kember – who came with me to Wainbridge from primary school had always called me Car and I couldn't change that now. Plus my Uncle Lan always called me 'Carm', which I kind of liked, and which both of us felt was – enjoyably for word enthusiasts – something of an ironic nickname, considering how often my behaviour was the opposite of *calm*.

I remember telling him a story about a detention I'd got for surfing down the newly waxed corridor floor of the Science Block. Finding myself unable to stop, I'd continued my uncontrollable journey into an A-Level display of handmade helixes, destroying a term's worth of papier mâché DNA.

'You remind me of me at your age, Carm,' he'd said, 'A penchant for impetuousness.'

I screwed my face up.

'*Penchant*. It's like a strong tendency to do stuff. In your case it was to be *impetuous* – you made a slightly mad decision on the spur of the moment. Your grandad used to say it about me.'

Not 'Carm' enough, then.

Oh well.

So I'd grown ambivalent about my name. And my

appearance? Well I mean, *come on*, I lived in *London*, where everyone looked – and sounded – different, so … *So what?*

Yes – my height, my face, my name could all be described as weird and used against me by some new idiotic adversary at any given moment (*'Ha-ha! Car? What type of "car" are you? A Mini? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.'* Genius), but you know what? I *lived* for those moments. In my opinion, no one at Wainbridge had a smarter, quicker, sharper tongue than me. So if someone wanted to have a go, my default position was largely:

BRING.

IT.

ON.

CHAPTER 3

Get Me

I stepped out of the boys' toilets into a June afternoon sun that bathed Wainbridge Academy's playground in a warm glow, as if celebrating the arrival of 3.30 p.m. along with the rest of us.

Alex Kember stood waiting for me, leaning against the outer wall of the gym with sunglasses on, arms folded and one leg bent, foot flush against the wall, doing little nods and muttering 'Sup?' in a low, tough-guy voice to anyone that passed, like those dudes you see outside shops who seem to know everyone in the neighbourhood. Except most of the kids who passed Alex screwed up their faces in vague confusion. Berkan from our History class walked by. Alex nodded at him.

'Sup, Brian?'

'My name's Berkan.'

'Cool, cool. Sup, Mr Hargreaves?'

'Lose the sunglasses, Alex.'

'Yes, sir.'

I chuckled watching my old friend at work. Without the shades it was easy to see Alex had the plump, rosy cheeks of the well loved, blue eyes that bounced positivity back off their bright surface and the type of hair that did what it was told – a chin-length, smooth blond mop that nits could be evicted from within minutes. Back in our Reception days anyway. I tended to be up till midnight, my parents deep into a bottle of wine to ease the stress.

But ever since we were five years old, no nit infestation, no bully, no new friend group, no house move had ever kept us apart. We never argued.

In fact, one of our biggest differences was the very same thing that kept us close: Alex was an optimist and I was a cynic. In practice that meant Alex would celebrate a sunny morning for the additional joys it would undoubtedly bring; I would celebrate if the heavens broke at lunchtime to wash out the playground dance performance planned by those Year 9 girls who always 'joke' about my hair.

Alex thought the best of everyone whilst I expected people to disappoint me, either straight away or in the near future. We both had big mouths, and if you'd just met us, you might assume that I was the sharp one and

Alex was the daydreamer, but actually Alex could *feel* stuff better than me.

When we were being coached on creating our own self-portraits in an Art class early into Year 8, Miss Salter had urged us to 'define and express your own *attributes*: the qualities or features central to your characters'. My best mate always found tasks like this tricky because most of the obvious attributes that the casual observer might see in Alex would traditionally be seen as standard for a boy.

But Alex wasn't a boy.

Like me, Alex used an abbreviation of a birthname, in this case, Alexandra.

Her attributes included enjoying a well-timed public fart, chewed fingernails, what some considered a 'boyish' hairstyle, permanently grass-stained trousers from playing football, an eternal love of goofiness, and – despite the confusion sent through both her male and female schoolmates – a tirelessly sunny demeanour. Loads of them assumed she wanted to be a boy or wanted to kiss girls. To Alex, it really wasn't that complicated. She loved being a girl, her best friend was a boy and she spent her days simply doing what felt good and what felt right.

It's fair to say that I found Alex's *attributes* pretty cool, and to each other we made perfect sense.

I ambled over, chuckling at Alex's performance.

'What you doing?'

Her voice returned to its normal pitch.

'Trying a new stance.'

'Why?'

'I saw a boy doing it in the hallway in some American high school movie and everyone who passed him gave him a high five.'

'How many'd you get so far?'

'None.'

We both laughed and I gave her a consolatory fist bump.

'Don't say I never do anything for you.'

We walked through the gates and crossed the road, settling at a crowded bus stop. Alex offered me a stick of bubblegum.

'What did Mr French say?'

'The usual.'

'Is he gonna write to your parents?'

'Already has.'

Alex blew a bubble until it popped.

'Peak.'

I shrugged.

'The way I see it, *school* … school is a process. It's a process of narrowing your interests.'

Alex furrowed a questioning brow, so I continued.

'You start off studying *everything*, yeah? You know,

pointless stuff – like Geography. Then you ditch all the dead weight and it's down to nine GCSEs. Then you choose three A Levels and finally you're down to one subject at University – the one thing you actually *wanted* to learn more about in the first place, true?'

'O-K …'

'So what am I really in trouble for? I mean, *really*? I'm in trouble for basically being good at only one subject, and not showing enough respect for the rest, right? But if you look at it another way, I'm light years ahead of everyone else … I just found my one thing earlier.'

I put my wrists together out in front of me, as if handcuffed, enjoying myself now. I did my best/lamest American accent.

'And if that makes me an outlaw, *Your Honour*, then maybe you should just go ahead and lock me up! But maybe, *maybe* I'm right, and your whole damn justice system is wrong!'

'Huh. Reckon your parents'll buy that?'

'Nah.'

We laughed and hopped on to the newly arrived 274.

'Check this out,' Alex said, pulling out her phone. She opened a link to a video and we both lit up and yelled in faux-American unison:

'*Those Crazy Kids!*'

'Those Crazy Kids' was a segment on an American talk show called *Missy*. It was only on British TV in the daytime but you could watch all the latest clips on YouTube, and Alex and I had been hooked for at least three years now. We huddled over the small screen to watch a five-year-old boy singing a seriously dramatic love song by Adele – seriously passionately and seriously out of tune. It was hilarious. *Missy* always was.

The eponymous Missy was a former comedian who now hosted her own fluffy, shiny-floored talk show, a large feature of which was kids from all over the world doing crazy stuff. I loved the chaos of it, the way anything could happen. Missy and her audience would often react with stunned silence or uncontrollable laughter at the unpredictable nature of their underage guests. Alex and I would battle to find clips one of us hadn't seen and we shared our favourites with other kids in our year.

'You can't write this stuff.' Alex chuckled.

I leaned forward and pressed the red button on the pole by my seat in the bus. Alex tightened her face with gentle concern.

'Scale of one to ten, how bad d'you reckon it'll be?'

''S'like a seven,' I replied with a shrug. 'Mum'll shout for a bit, Dad'll nod, I'll do my time. You think I can't handle a seven?'

Alex smiled.

'Some days I'll *want* a seven,' she said. 'Just cos I'm bored. Remember when I found that massive sheet of plastic on the street?'

'And you put it over the doorway to the kitchen.'

We both started snickering.

'I've still got the video of my dad …'

'When you were crouched behind the fridge …'

'The way he's whistling, then – WHAM!'

We both whistled the tune from memory and creased up.

'Some things are worth a seven!'

'Yep.' I chuckled, heading to the door. The bus slowed to halt at my stop and I stepped off and turned to give Alex a nod. She was up on her feet, walking to the door whistling, aping her dad in the video. As she reached the door it closed and she feigned whacking her nose on the glass. The bus pulled away with the other passengers staring at her curiously before leaving my sight. Although I couldn't hear or see her, I knew Alex would be laughing too.