PRAISE FOR

TAMSIN WINTER

"FAST BECOMING A FAVOURITE FOR YOUNGER TEENAGERS"
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"SO MUCH HEART AND WARMTH"
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SUNDAY EXPRESS

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THE GUARDIAN

"BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED AND VERY IMPORTANT"
LUCY STRANGE

"FUNNY, SMART, MISCHIEVOUS"
THE I

"BOLD, BIG-HEARTED AND VERY NECESSARY"
THE BOOKSELLER

"FUNNY BUT THOUGHT-PROVOKING"
THE IRISH TIMES

"A POWERFUL ANTIDOTE TO CASTING SHADE"
THE SUNDAY TIMES

For my brilliant big sister

Content note: This book contains mild swearing and teenage themes

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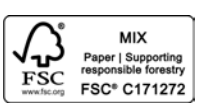
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USBORNE

TAMSIN WINTER

BAD INFLUENCE



1

It started on the way to school. My entire life unravelling, that is. Like one of those itchy, pastel-coloured jumpers Nana used to knit us for Christmas that always fell to bits by New Year. A few people were giving me funny looks as I walked up the hill, so I already knew something was up. But my sister Hannah told me to stop dawdling. It was spitting and neither of us had brought an umbrella.

It's uphill all the way to school from our cottage and the muscles in my thighs were aching. It was only the second week back after the summer holidays and my legs weren't used to it again yet. I stopped for a second and someone on a bike yelled, "Get out of the way!" instead of ringing their bell like a civilized human being. There aren't too many civilized human beings at my school.

I have Orchestra practice Monday lunchtimes, so I had my cello strapped to my back and leaned forward as

I walked. When you get about halfway up the hill you can see the North Sea behind the row of houses. A flock of kittiwakes was floating on the surface of the water, bobbing with the choppy waves. It was really windy, and I was slightly worried about over-balancing and getting swept over the cliffs out to sea. I'm pretty sure my cello case would float, but I'm not particularly confident in my open-sea survival skills. I can get into difficulty rock pooling. I was just imagining using my cello as a makeshift raft when I noticed a group of girls on the other side of the road laughing at me. The tallest one, Madison Hart, gave me the kind of look you might give your shoe if you'd just stepped in a dog turd.

It's not like I hadn't seen that look before. Last year, I overheard Madison and her friends talking about Venus flytraps. It was during our library lesson so we were supposed to be reading but they weren't. I'm a Library Ambassador and I'd seen a book about Venus flytraps so I thought, *This is my chance. A legitimate reason to talk to the popular girls!* I turned my chair around to join their table and said, "There's a book about Venus flytraps in the non-fiction section. I can get it for you if you like?"

Only they all burst out laughing. Madison looked at me as though I'd just crawled out of the bin, and said,

"Don't talk to us, Maggot, like, ever."

Gracie Chapman added, "You are such a freak."

Then Mrs Gordon shushed us, so I turned my chair back around and carried on reading *I Capture the Castle*, blinking tears of humiliation back into my eyes. I found out later they were talking about a new song called "Venus Flytrap", and I felt even more like an idiot.

I can't exactly blame Madison. It was DJ who started it all. He's the one responsible for my "Maggot" nickname and subsequent major unpopularity. It was right at the beginning of Year Seven when he blurted out, "Oi, how come you're so pale? You look like a maggot." The name stuck like he'd tattooed it to my face. I'm in Year Nine now and I still hear it on a regular basis. I try not to let it bother me. There are more important matters, after all. Like marine ecosystem deterioration and reading the entire Classic Books List Mrs Gordon pinned up in the library and my dad being constantly disappointed in me. But still, DJ and his friends enjoy reminding me how low I'm placed in the social hierarchy at school. I'm pretty much rock bottom. Once DJ put his hand up in science and asked if my freckles were a form of facial disease. Everyone except my best friend Nisha laughed.

But there was something in Madison's sneer that morning on the way to school that put me on edge. Like

she knew something I didn't. And I got a really bad feeling in my stomach.

"Hannah, do I have breakfast on my face or something?" I asked the back of my sister's head.

Hannah briefly glanced over her shoulder at me, her shiny red hair whipping about in the wind. "Nope," she said, matter-of-factly. "But you do have a massive spot on your forehead."

"Yes, thanks, I know about that." I ran a finger over the volcano-sized lump above my left eyebrow. Maybe I should have squeezed it. Just then, a boy a little way ahead of us turned around and shouted something. It was Arran Parsons. I recognized him immediately because he's the only boy in my year with a moustache. He's in one of the popular crowds so he usually ignores me. I didn't catch what he said, but the eruption of laughter that followed from his friends told me it wasn't very nice. My stomach flipped over. *Why is Arran shouting at me? Maybe my humungous spot is visible from all the way up the hill.*

I put my hand over my forehead, but Arran shouted again, even louder. Then there was no mistaking it. Obviously, I'd heard that repulsive word before. I'd just never heard it directed at *me*. Hannah must have heard him that time too, because she stopped walking and I almost crashed into her. My cheeks burned crimson and

a sick feeling pooled like salt water in my stomach.

"What did you just say?" Hannah shouted back at him. Hannah's always been more daring than me. It's like she doesn't care what anyone thinks of her, not even Dad. I'm the exact opposite. I hardly think about anything else.

I tugged on the edge of Hannah's coat. "Leave it, Hannah. Please."

"Ask your sister! She's the one sharing!" Arran shouted back, holding up his phone. His blond hair was shaved at the sides, but dyed black and gelled into spikes at the top. I don't know what that style is called, but it reminded me of a great crested grebe. Then he said it. "Nice bangers by the way." And I felt as though I'd plunged feet first into the freezing depths of the North Sea.

"What does he mean by that?" Hannah asked, turning to me. My cheeks were probably deep scarlet by now. "Amelia, what's going on?"

I stared at the ground. Tiny dots of rain were spattering the concrete and the tops of my shoes, and the wind was swirling autumn leaves about like sparks from a bonfire. *Now, wind,* I thought. *Now would be a really good time to pick me up and carry me out to sea.*

"Amelia?" Hannah said again. "Why did he say *that*?" My sister repeated the horrible word Arran had shouted

at me. It felt like an arrow had struck me in the chest. I couldn't catch my breath.

"How am I supposed to know?" I said, trying to hide my scarlet cheeks with my hair. "I don't even know him."

Then my phone started going. My phone never goes on the way to school. Nisha gets a lift early with her dad on his way to work and goes straight to the library where you're not allowed to use your phone. And let's face it – who else was going to message me?

"Why is your phone going off like that?" Hannah asked, stepping towards me. For a moment I thought she was going to frisk me like security guards do at the airport. Inside my pocket, I held on tight to my phone.

"It's not my phone," I said weakly.

"Right," Hannah replied. "Like someone else has the opening bars to Fauré's Élégie as their message tone." I immediately regretted letting Ju-Long show me how to download that message tone after Orchestra practice last week. We were almost at the school gates, and crowds of people were starting to appear from different directions. Most of them seemed to be looking at me.

Hannah took my arm and gently pulled me to one side of the pavement, out of the surge of people heading up the hill. "What's going on, Amelia? Why is everyone staring at you?"

I stood there for a few seconds, summoning up the courage to lie to my sister. I knew from experience it wasn't a good idea. But I couldn't bear for her to know what I'd done. "Arran's just joking around," I said, feeling my heart sink low enough to meet the tide. "I'd better go. I don't want to be late." But I couldn't disguise the tears collecting in my eyes.

"Amelia!" Hannah shook my shoulders to try and make me look at her, but I kept my eyes fixed on a flattened piece of chewing gum stuck to the ground, wishing I could somehow trade places with it. "Tell me what's going on."

"Nothing," I said quickly, my voice quivering slightly. I couldn't meet Hannah's eyes. Because the truth was, I knew exactly why people were staring. And that knowledge was almost drowning me. I had to find somewhere to hide. "I'll see you later."

I brushed past Hannah, accidentally knocking her with my cello case, and carried on into school. One of my socks had slid down and gathered under my heel, but I didn't stop to pull it up even though I'd probably get a blister.

Once I was a few metres away from the music block, out of the crowds, I allowed myself to glance at my phone. It wasn't some stupid meme or so-called "joke" DJ had created about me this time. It was the thing I'd feared the

most since hearing Arran Parsons shouting "*Slag!*" at me: The Photo.

Hot tears blew across my face into my hair, the ones I'd been holding in so Hannah wouldn't find out. I didn't bother wiping them away, even though the salt stung my skin in the wind. Now I knew for certain why people were staring at me. And why my phone was going off as though I was a member of the popular crowd instead of the maggoty-nobody I actually was.

I still don't know why I was striding *towards* school instead of running in the opposite direction – to one of the docked boats on the shore and setting sail for a desert island or something. Maybe because right then, I didn't have the faintest idea just how bad it was all going to get.