How to ROLLER-SKATE with ONE LEG





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For George





Prologue

On the day my life changed forever, there was going to be a maths test. It was a crisp October morning, a month into Year 7. My best friend, Sophie, met me and our other pal Vita at the bus stop as usual. Her dad drove her to school every day, but we liked to go into school together.

'Could you two try and smile?' Sophie nudged me with her elbow.

She was holding her phone out in front of her, making a TikTok as usual. This one was going to be a reel of her day – that is, if she could get away with sneakily using her phone at school.

'How's this?' I switched on the biggest beaming smile I could manage. It made my cheeks ache.

Vita laughed and Sophie rolled her eyes – this only encouraged me.

'Oh, Soph, of course.' I did a little bow in her direction. 'How could I not be happy about failing another maths test? I'm ecstatic. Over the moon. In fact, this might actually be the best day of my entire life so far . . .'

I started to skip, my feet bouncing along the pavement in huge, exaggerated steps, my wild curls flying in all directions. I threw my arms out dramatically.

'Careful, Maya,' Vita said, always the worrier.

'What a beautiful, wonderful day!' I yelled. Behind me, I could hear Sophie laughing.

'Okay, fine. Point made,' Sophie said. 'Maths tests are the worst.'

'You are ridiculous, Maya,' Vita added with a chuckle, 'you know that?'

I grinned. 'Just trying to help my best friend achieve her ultimate dream of going viral.'

'You are just too thoughtful.' Soph smiled back at me.

Vita had joined our primary school in Year 3, but Sophie and I had been best friends since we were four, when I grabbed her hand on our first day and demanded she sat next to me. She said I chose her because I could tell she was scared of school. I said it's because I was jealous of her glittery lunchbox and strawberry-shaped pot with her cut-up fruit inside. In fact, I pestered Mum until she bought me the exact same ones.

Sophie and I had a plan – we'd finish school together,

maybe go to the same university, and we'd live together one day too. When we had our own place, we'd get a pet, maybe a rabbit, and we'd eat pizza every night – ham and pineapple for me, even though she thought that was weird, margherita for her because she liked to play safe. I couldn't wait to finish school and hang out every day in the real world together. But, aged twelve, that felt like years away. I sometimes wished time would speed up – mainly because when school was over, there would be no more maths.

'Have you actually done any revision at all?' Vita asked.

'How dare you?' I put my hands on my hips, pretending to be outraged. 'I've opened the textbook loads of times.'

'Opened it, sure,' Sophie said. 'But did you read it?'

'Soph, you're sounding a lot like Mrs Brainport right now.' I turned my walk and my voice into our maths teacher's, bouncing up and down on my tippy-toes just like she did. '"Now then, everyone, have I ever told you just how absolutely fascinating algebra is? It's almost as beautiful and amazing as probability, and we all know how *wonderful* that module was . . ."'

As Sophie giggled, I became even more dramatic. I threw back my shoulders, lifting my face to shout loudly about percentages and calculating the area of a triangle.

Totally caught up in the impression, I bounced across the road, still being Mrs Brainport. I didn't look.

Sophie's laughter suddenly became a shriek.

'Stop!' Vita yelled.

A white van was speeding towards me. The screech of brakes pierced the air as I dived, frantic to get out of the way.

But I was too late.

The driver was going too fast to stop. The seconds seemed to slow as the van's bonnet came towards me.

For a moment, I thought I'd somehow made it – but then I heard a sickening crunching noise and felt white-hot pain burning through my right leg.

I couldn't move. I couldn't get up. My schoolbag was in the middle of the road. My maths textbook had fallen out. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears. As the pain intensified, the world swam in and out of focus. I closed my eyes, faintly aware that somewhere in the distance, someone was screaming. It was me.

Chapter One



When my alarm went off, the first thing I saw was my neatly ironed school uniform. It was hanging on my wardrobe door, one blazer sleeve pointing upwards slightly like it was waving at me. My tummy flipped at the sight of the crisp shirt, the purple tie and new black trousers. Today was the day. I was finally going back to school for the start of Year 8.

I sat up and threw off the covers. Just like every day since the accident had happened, I felt a jolt of surprise when I saw my 'little leg', which stopped just below my knee. Would I ever get used to only having one foot? In my dreams, I still had two full legs.

But I didn't have time to feel sad today. In fact, I was suddenly awake and alert, fizzing with excitement as I reached for the prosthetic leg leaning against my bedside table.

It had been a long year – six weeks in hospital and months of hospital checks, appointments and horrible physiotherapy exercises as I'd slowly learned to walk

again. But that all changed today as I finally went back to my old life. Well, *most* of me was going back. My right leg wouldn't be.

Yes, it's okay to laugh. I'd lost my leg – but I was determined not to have lost my sense of humour.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I rolled the silicone liner over my little leg and slid my stump into the prosthetic, which made its usual clicking sound as I stood up, ten clicks locking it in place. Twenty minutes later, I was washed and dressed, standing in front of my bedroom mirror. I turned this way and that, smiling approvingly at myself. Apart from wearing trousers instead of a school skirt, I didn't look that different at all. You could just about see the metal pole of my lower leg and ankle poking out, but it wasn't too obvious. It was weird to think that this thing made of carbon fibre and metal was now a part of my body forever.

'Maya? Are you awake?' Mum flung open my bedroom door without knocking.

'If I wasn't before, I am now,' I answered with a cheeky grin.

'Oh, you're up and dressed already. I was going to

bring you breakfast in bed.'

Mum was holding a tray with two orange juices and plates of toast on it – peanut butter and Marmite. Weird, but my favourite.

'For the thousandth time, Mum, please stop fussing.'

'Sorry.' Mum gave me a guilty look. 'It's what mums do, I'm afraid.'

She was wearing a fluffy pink dressing gown, her curly hair as wild as mine looked when I'd just got out of bed. The end of a carrot was sticking out of her two pockets. And inside each of them, poking its little head out, was a guinea pig.

I should probably explain – my mum, Celia, was a guinea pig breeder. We've always had pet piggies, but after my accident she'd insisted on giving up her job as a research scientist. Dad had said he could look after me, but Mum was adamant that she never wanted to leave my side. After that, she'd got even more into the little fluffy creatures. Now, instead of just two or three pets like a normal family had, they were everywhere in our house – running around the kitchen, watching TV in the living room and scuttling around our legs when we went

to the toilet and forgot to shut the door.

'Thought I'd bring Harry Styles and Elton John to wish you luck,' Mum said.

That was the other thing, she liked to name the piggies after famous people, even though most of them would be getting different names when they went to their new homes.



We sat on the bed together and munched our toast. When I stood up, my little leg felt stiff, as it often did in the morning. I winced and took a couple of steps, bracing myself for the pinching sensation that always came when I started walking first thing.

Mum's brow creased. 'Are you sure you're ready for this, Maya?' she asked. 'We can always wait a few more weeks.'

'No, Mum. Honestly, I'm fine.'

I walked across my bedroom, deliberately focusing on my steps. Head high, shoulders back, equal weight through both legs, just like the physiotherapists had taught me.

Mum was still frowning. 'Okay, well, if you're sure. I forget how stubborn you can be sometimes.'



'Spirited,' I corrected.

She smiled. 'Sure. *Spirited*. But promise me you'll take your fold-up walking stick?'

'Already on it.'

I pointed to the corner of my room, where I'd laid out my notebook, pencil case, water bottle and everything else I needed.

Mum nodded. 'Good. You know, I'm going to miss home-schooling you.'

'I won't,' I replied. 'I mean, no offence, Mum. My science grades have definitely got better. But maybe you can go back to your real job now?'

'Maybe.' Mum's tone was vague, unconvinced. 'We'll see.'

Mum and Dad had become super protective after the accident. I completely got it – the thought of losing their only child must have been so scary. They probably needed therapy. Ever since I got home from hospital they'd tried to wrap me in cotton wool. Mum didn't even like me going up and down the stairs on my own. So the idea of school must have been totally freaking her out. But it was now September and it was time to

start living my life again. And that started with going back to the world of school bells, cafeteria smells and gross boys.

I'd worked so hard to get to this day. I'd seen physiotherapists, who gave me exercises to get stronger again, like horrible side planks to strengthen my muscles. I'd visited prosthetists, who are the people that make artificial legs and arms for amputees. Finally, I could walk on my new prosthetic leg without crutches or a walking stick, and while I was sometimes a bit wobbly, I was mostly totally fine. Now, I couldn't wait to get back to normal and to see my best friends Sophie, Vita and Miles again. We were all turning thirteen this year, teenagers at last. Time for a new adventure!

Dad knocked on my bedroom door. 'Nearly ready, Maya?'

'Nearly!' I called back, securing the top layer of my curls with a hairband. I was hoping the teachers wouldn't tell me off about the pink chalk I'd put in my hair. Mum hadn't been too happy when she saw it, but it looked so cool and I wanted to make a good impression with

my class on my first day back.

Dad poked his head around the corner and grinned when he saw me. 'You look so smart.' His green eyes glittered with emotion.

'Dad . . .'

'Sorry.'

He was wearing his usual uniform of an old T-shirt and paint-splattered boiler suit. Dad was an artist, and spent most of the day in his 'studio', aka our garden shed. Sometimes, he hosted his own gallery showings, which were really cool. His paintings were bold, bright and usually a bit weird. He once did a collection that was animals wearing hats – Mum wasn't sure, but I loved it. I still have a tiger wearing a beret on my bedroom wall.

'Honestly, this is a big day for us too, love. We're so proud of you. There might be a bit of traffic, so we should probably get going soon.'

'Daaad, you know I normally go on the bus.'

He shrugged. 'We're driving you today. Take it up with your mother.'

For a moment I thought about arguing, but from the

look on his face there wasn't any point. I had no choice. A feeling I was becoming annoyingly used to since becoming an amputee.

'Five minutes and we're off, okay?' Dad said.

'Fine. Whatever.' I sighed. 'I just need to pack my stuff.'

There was no way I was taking a walking stick to school. Sorry, Mum, but that was just way too embarrassing. I didn't want to look like an old lady. I quickly shoved it into my wardrobe, then grabbed my backpack from behind my bedroom door. As I did so, something fluttered out of it – a piece of paper ripped from my notebook, which landed face down on the carpet.

Lifegoals List.

The list was decorated with swirls, stars and smiley faces, the heading underlined loads of times. I read through the items, remembering the day I'd written it. We'd all had to write one for English homework in the first term of Year 7, and I'd sat under the big oak tree on the school field with Soph, Miles and Vita at lunchtime, the four of us discussing in great detail all the things we wanted to achieve. I looked at the list:



This last one was written in Sophie's loopy handwriting. Sophie was obsessed with Snapchat, BeReal and TikTok. Or at least, she *used to be* obsessed. I had only seen her once since the accident, when she visited me in hospital right at the start. I was a bit out of it because of all the drugs, but I remembered her visit was weird, tense and strained – kind of like we were strangers. It was like she didn't know how to be around me.

In all the time we'd known each other, I'd never, ever run out of things to say to Sophie, so I was a bit worried.

In fact, we were the two who always got told off for talking at school – much to good-girl Vita's annoyance. In maths – my worst subject – we'd been separated, because if I'm bored, I talk even more.

Things were normal with Vita, who had come to visit me every single week, the most out of everyone. She'd brought my schoolwork (teacher's pet) and baked me all sorts of creations (her Biscoff brownies were amazing – the Marmite flapjacks she'd invented, not so much). She was desperate to own her own bakery someday – so was I, so that I could just eat her cakes all day every day. Vita had treated me exactly the same as she did before the accident. She'd made me feel normal, even when everything was different.

Things were fine with Miles too. He'd sent me about fifty TikToks and memes a day and suggested endless games I should download – his nerdy way of trying to cheer me up. But with Sophie, I wasn't sure what was going on. I'd had a few messages from her, on and off, but nowhere near the constant WhatsApps we used to send.

I checked my phone before putting it in my blazer

pocket. Sophie still hadn't replied to my message telling her I was going back to school. Maybe she'd lost her phone – it wouldn't have been the first time. Or maybe she'd got in trouble and her phone had been taken away as a punishment. I hoped she was okay. I was looking forward to being back at school with her – hopefully getting back into our usual routine would mean everything went back to normal.

'Come on, Maya!'

Mum appeared in my room. She was dressed too now, in a long flowery dress. She'd even put lipstick on for the first time in ages.

'What's that you've got there?' she asked, pointing at the list in my hand.

I passed it to her. 'I just found it,' I said. 'We wrote it last year for English. I was just thinking about it . . . kind of wondering if I could still do any of it.'

Mum gave a sad smile. 'The thing is, your life's a bit different now, love.'

I could tell Mum was trying to let me down gently, but her voice sparked something deep inside me – a fire I hadn't felt for so long. For the past ten and a half

months, I had been stuck, forced to do what I was told all the time. Mum had washed me, pushed my wheelchair and helped me with the bandages on my little leg. But everyone who knew me knew I wasn't someone who liked being told what to do. 'Spirited' or 'strong-willed' were the words my teachers always used on school reports. 'Stubborn' was what Mum and Dad said.

'I'm sorry, but you know lots of these things you just can't do any more.' Her tone was soft but firm as she crumpled up the list and tossed it into my bedroom bin. 'It's just a silly piece of paper – best to forget about it. Now, let's go downstairs and we'll take you to school, shall we?'

'I want to catch the bus.'

I knew I sounded sulky, but I felt it. When I was really little, my favourite phrase had been 'I do it'. I'd said it every time my parents tried to help me, which meant my hair had always been a mess and my shoelaces so loose that they'd come undone all the time.

'Maya, we've been through this.' Mum sighed. 'It's your first day. You need to pace yourself. And we want to look after you. You can't do it.'

If there was one word I hated more than any other, it was 'can't'. 'But—'

'No.' She shook her head firmly. 'You need to pick your battles, because I assure you, you'll lose this one. Downstairs, two minutes, okay?'

'Fine,' I huffed.

'Oh, and bring Elton John down with you. He's behind the door.'

When Mum left my room, I paused for a few seconds, listening to the sound of her feet clomping down the wooden stairs. Elton and I stared at each other.

'You thinking what I'm thinking?' I asked him.

His beady black eyes seemed to glint with mischief. He let out a little squeak.

'You're right, Elton John. I *can* do it.'

I gave his head a little stroke and suddenly remembered that there was an Elton John song Mum liked called 'I'm Still Standing'. It goes on about being a 'true survivor', even when things are going wrong. Despite my frustration, I smiled. It felt weirdly appropriate now.

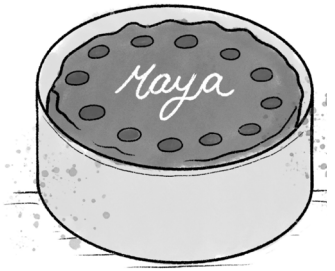
I bent down and grabbed the creased-up list from the

bin, smoothing and folding it carefully before zipping it into the side pocket of my backpack. There were still a few months left before I turned thirteen. Maybe I could complete my list before then. Maybe after all these months of recovery, I'd prove everyone wrong, once and for all.

Maybe, just maybe, this year would turn out to be my luckiest year yet.



Chapter Two



Vita was waiting for me outside the doors, a huge grin on her face. Her hair was plaited neatly, as it always was, her school skirt too long, her enormous backpack weighing down her tiny frame. Balanced in her arms was a purple cake tin. The sight of my friend – so familiar and warm – brought hope to my rapidly beating heart. Some things hadn't changed. Maybe everything would go back to normal after all.

'Maya! Welcome back!' she said, giving me a hug. 'How are you feeling?'

'Nervous.'

I felt all wobbly as I stared up at the red-brick school building. Built just before the Second World War, it was grand and old, with long corridors and stone staircases. As Larkwood High had got bigger, temporary blocks of classrooms had been added to the quad at the back of the main building. They had been there for a very long time.

'I'll look after you,' Vita said. 'Promise.'

I shot her a grateful smile. 'Thank you. So, what's