Praise for

# TAMSIN WINTER

"FAST BECOMING A FAVOURITE FOR YOUNGER TEENAGERS"
THE OBSERVER

"A TOTAL TREAT TO READ"
BETH GARROD

"SO MUCH HEART AND WARMTH"
SARA BARNARD

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THE METRO

"UPLIFTING AND HEARTENING"
SUNDAY EXPRESS

"CLEAR-SIGHTED... DRILY FUNNY"
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

LoveReading4Kids

For my mum and dad,
who are no doubt enormously grateful
social media wasn't invented when
I was a teenager.

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# I DARE YOU

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TAMSIN WINTER



USBORNE

## A message from the publisher:

This book contains descriptions of dangerous and life-threatening challenges that should not be replicated under any circumstances. Please do not try them at home.

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# AFTER

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I've heard people talk about the crackle and roar of flames. But I don't remember that. Maybe because the sound was drowned out by the smoke alarm. But I remember the intensity of the heat, the chaos of it. It seemed almost funny at first, like I could put a wet towel over where it was burning and the fire would go out and both of us would laugh our heads off and say, "Woah, that was close!" or "Thank God for that!" or something.

But then in a split second the flames soared upwards and it was like I blinked for too long and suddenly they were consuming the room – gulping up the table, licking the walls, spewing onto the carpet and then stretching all the way up to the ceiling. People think in situations like that, you act quickly and do the right thing, but it wasn't like that. Not for me. I didn't even think anything. I just stood there, frozen, my mind blank with terror. I remember the thick smoke billowing towards the window, and how weird that seemed to me, like it too wanted to escape. And hearing her scream. That's what I remember the most.

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# BEFORE

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# 1

# WILLOW

"And don't you dare slam the—"

My timing's perfect so the slam hits exactly as Mum yells, "DOOR!" It's weirdly satisfying, even though I know she'll tell me off later. Tom will no doubt join in, despite him being absolutely no relation to me. Not yet anyway.

I shake my head to stop thinking about Mum and Tom's wedding. In less than three weeks, I'm supposed to wear the most hideous bridesmaid dress known to humanity. A flamingo pink ankle-length gown with gigantic poofy sleeves that have massive bows on them – and I have to smile as though I'm happy I look like a milkmaid from the 1800s while my mum is marrying the weirdest, most idiotic loser on the planet.

Tom thinks playing air guitar in public places is normal. He constantly talks about bands from a million years ago. They all have strange names that aren't proper words like Zarpo and Kajagoogoo, or randomly stupid phrases that don't make any sense, like Strawberry Alarm Clock and

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Peanut Butter Conspiracy. I'm not even joking. He thinks wearing cardigans and corduroy dungarees at his age is normal; he has a moustache that he deliberately waxes into curled points at the ends, and he eats cheese that smells like stinky feet. I don't know what else to tell you, he's weird.

I am dreading Tom becoming my stepdad. Mum says we're already related because of the twins – my two-year-old half-brothers who tragically share this man's DNA. But there is no way on earth I am ever calling Cardigan Tom my stepdad. I can't even form the word without feeling sick. He was wearing proper cowboy boots this morning and pretending he was Beyoncé. My mum thinks he's amazing and hilarious, and she's started eating the stinky cheese too. It's a hopeless case.

I try not to notice how angry she is as I cross the road. But it's impossible. Mum's glare is an invisible lasso. I turn my head back and spot her standing at the living room window with her hands on her hips. She's not just mad because I slammed the door, although slamming doors is pretty high on her never-ending list of bad things I do. It's because I'm grounded. I can tell she wants to run outside, drag me back into the house and keep me prisoner for the rest of the day. But Tom's at work and she can't leave the twins on their own. Even from this distance, I can see she's Code Red Level annoyed. Her eyes could burn holes through the net curtains.

I shout, "Prison escape challenge completed! Thanks for

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watching!" because I know it will annoy her even more, then I run across the road. She'll lecture me later, using big words from her teacher training manual that are supposed to make me feel bad. But she's always in a stress with me over something, so what difference does it make?

I scuff my trainers kicking stones across the pebbled alleyway that leads to the park. It's the only decent place to hang out in our village, but Alma can't meet me until she's done her history homework, so I'm not exactly in a hurry. Two pages on what we learned at the Bristol Museum trip last week. And we're not allowed to mention our prank, even though it was genius.

"*Mr McLachlan almost had a heart attack!*" our Head of Year bellowed at me and Alma the moment we set foot back on school grounds. "*I hope you think it was worth it!*" were her parting words after she'd added our names to the detention list. I bit my tongue to stop myself saying that yes, it totally was. Ms Sykes used to be okay before she became our Head of Year. Now she carries a walkie-talkie everywhere and acts like she's our overlord. She put us in lunchtime detention for two weeks and said we should think ourselves lucky it wasn't the entire term. We still have a week of detentions to go, which is annoying because the weather's nice now and they're finally letting us on the back field.

What annoyed Ms Sykes the most is that we'd already got caught sticking googly eyes on the fruit in the canteen last month. I'd said we'd made their "healthy options" more

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appealing to their customer base. But Ms Sykes didn't see it that way. It didn't help that Freddie Powell in Year 9 said he'd accidentally swallowed an eye that was stuck to his apple. I swear he only said that to get us into trouble. Ms Sykes's already freakishly wide nostrils flared like parachutes, which kind of distracted me from what she was saying. "*It was an extremely stupid and dangerous thing to do!*" and "*not amusing in the slightest!*" Sorry, not true. Loads of people laughed at our anthropomorphized fruit (Alma taught me that word) and besides, the plastic eye would have passed through Freddie's digestive system in like two days. Best of all, the TikTok we made of it got two hundred and sixty-four views and three people in the year above shared it. Plus, now I only have to go slightly cross-eyed at Alma and she bursts into hysterical laughter.

So when the trip to the museum came around, I knew we had to pull an even better prank to post. I'm laughing just thinking about it. We used Alma's phone to play a sound effect of smashing crockery at full volume in the Ancient Egypt exhibition, while we secretly filmed from behind the longboat reconstruction. A security guard came sprinting into the exhibition room, followed by Mr McLachlan, our history teacher, who probably hadn't accelerated into a run since 1985, and should consider never doing so again in public. A museum lady arrived too, her face kind of terrified as she put white gloves on and inspected the bits of broken pottery we'd planted. I had to hold my nose to stop from

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laughing too loud. She realized immediately it wasn't Ancient Egyptian clay. I'd nicked it from the tray in our art room where Miss Sterling puts pieces that smashed in the kiln. But still, it was hilarious to watch.

We would have got away with it if Constance *Crabface* Crawley hadn't shown Mr McLachlan the TikTok we made of it on the coach home. Constance voluntarily sits next to teachers on the coach. It's no wonder she has no friends. So technically, it's her fault I'm grounded. I clench my jaw at the thought of her smug face squashed through the gap in the coach seats as Mr McLachlan exploded at us. Alma and I had to hand over our phones, which I'm pretty sure is a breach of our privacy. Anyway, Mr McLachlan didn't enjoy watching the TikTok any more than he enjoyed our prank in real time. History teachers don't appreciate true art, that's the problem. And Mum grounded me indefinitely. But I've done an entire week and most of this bank holiday weekend. Personally, I think that's enough.

I reach the end of the shaded path and tilt my head up to feel the sunlight on my face. The only good thing about living on Pike Close – a bungalow estate for the decrepit and dying – is the alleyway connecting it to the park. Mum says once Vinyl Destination – Tom's record shop in Bristol – becomes a success, and once she finishes her teacher training, we'll be able to buy somewhere instead of renting. She says we'll move to a nicer place, with an upstairs and a bigger garden and no ancient neighbours who complain about their

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cataracts and constipation. On a street not named after a fish, hopefully. It's nice to dream, but the only way Tom's record shop will become a success is if he invents a time machine.

As soon as I'm eighteen I'm leaving Belston Green for good. I count the five years on my fingers as I head towards the swings. I'll be a rich and famous content creator and the old biddies on the parish council will invite me back to open the new village hall or something, and I will say, *No, I'm too busy and important to open your boring little village hall.* I'll never have to wear the used clothes Mum buys on Vinted. I'll go to celebrity parties and probably get invited on that TV show in the jungle where they make you eat koala testicles and I won't even care. I don't think there's anything I don't dare do. Anyway, koala testicles probably taste nicer than Mum's "happy casserole" made from whatever's left over in the fridge. I'll travel the world making content, even into space if I feel like it. I'll never have to wear these stupid scuffed second-hand trainers, and this boring, dead-end village will be light years below me. Literally. The only person I won't leave behind is Alma.

Alma lives on Meadow View, the posh estate on the opposite side of the village. Her house has three storeys and her bedroom has its own bathroom so she doesn't have to share with anyone. She's got a neon light of musical notes above her bed, and a swinging chair that hangs from the ceiling. It looks like a giant bubble and we can still both fit in

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it if we squash up. They always have the heating on, even if it's not that cold, and it smells of candles scented with expensive stuff like fig and cedar wood; Alma told me once they cost sixty-five pounds each! Her parents must earn a fortune if they spend that much on something that basically burns away to nothing. The carpet in the living room is so thick and soft your feet properly sink into it. They have a 120-inch TV that feels like you're at the cinema, and Alma can turn her bedroom light off using her phone. Her mum's a vet and she's constantly adopting and fostering cats so they have like seven or eight at the moment, I can never keep track. The outdoor enclosure thing for them is bigger than my living room and kitchen put together. My favourite is Catzilla, a giant ragdoll. He got run over so he only has half a tail, and his nose is squashed and his whiskers are kind of wonky and no one wants to adopt him. Alma's mum said I can adopt him if I want. But Mum says the last thing she needs is another mouth to feed, and anyway Tom is allergic to cats, which is so typical of him.

The only bad thing about Alma's house, apart from all the litter trays, is that it's almost a mile from the park. I can walk to the park from mine in two minutes flat. But still, I'd rather live in Alma's cat-filled, neon-lit three-storey mansion than my dingy bungalow on Pike Close. Sometimes it's awesome having a best friend who is way richer than you. But sometimes it kind of sucks. She'll show me her designer trainers, or latest iPhone and I'll get this jolt of jealousy in

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my stomach. I mean, if she ever got kicked out of school her parents would send her to one of the fancy private ones in Bristol. Whereas I'd be sent to the dodgy one nearby that looks like a prison. Mum likes to remind me of this any time I get in trouble at school. Not that we'd ever get excluded. We'd never take a prank that far and anyway, I'm planning on getting so famous I don't even have to go to school.

I run across the playing field, through the net-less goalpost and jump onto the nearest swing. I message Alma telling her I'm here and wait for her reply. The park's empty except for a few kids on the skate ramp and an older boy shooting a basketball on the court next to the playground. I push myself off until my toes are only just skimming the ground and close my eyes. The sunlight feels sweet on my face. My phone buzzes but it's Mum so I don't answer. I know she'll only tell me to go home and remind me I'm grounded. As if she hasn't already told me eighty thousand times this weekend. But you can't keep a thirteen-year-old prisoner. It should be illegal.

My phone vibrates with Alma's reply: On my way ♡

There's one from Mum saying Willow come home NOW. You know you're still grounded!! I'm seriously considering cancelling your phone!!

I sigh and stuff my phone back in my pocket, then push my feet hard off the floor to get some height. Mum always says she'll cancel my phone but she never does it. How else would she moan at me when I'm out? Alma did the museum

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prank too but her parents don't believe in grounding. She only had to clean the kitchen as a punishment. I mean, seriously! I have to do that as a normal part of my life. AND they have a cleaner, so how dirty could it have been?

I shake the annoyance out of my head and before long, I'm swinging so high it feels like my feet are kicking clouds. I lean back and listen to the creaking of the chains, the leaves rustling in the breeze, the thump of the basketball, the distant sound of traffic on the main road. I love this feeling. The wind in your face, the weightlessness, and your stomach flipping over like a pancake. It feels like no one can stop you.

I get the same feeling making TikToks. It's what I love best about them. When you're in that moment, filming, all the stupid rules you have to follow in real life don't apply. It's like this secret place where you can do whatever you want. Like the best game you've ever played but it's real. And your best friend is right in it with you. My skin prickles with excitement as my eyes fix on the basketball hoop. It disappears and reappears from sight as I swing. This is going to be our best one yet.

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