not GOING TO PLAN

Tia Fisher

HOT KEY BOOKS

First published in the UK in 2025 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
5th Floor, HYLO, 105 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LZ

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Illustrations by Tia Fisher, based on the concepts by Marnie Staedler

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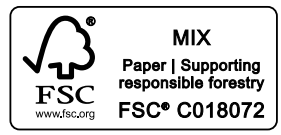
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-1837-2
Also available as an ebook and in audio

1

Typeset by Envy Design Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



The authorised representative in the EEA is
Bonnier Books UK (Ireland) Limited.
Registered office address: Floor 3, Block 3,
Miesian Plaza, Dublin 2, D02 Y754, Ireland

bonnierbooks.co.uk/HotKeyBooks

For Will and Em, with my love.

Chapter *One*

MARNIE
Everybody hates me.
I press myself back in the seat.

Mum grips the wheel tighter.
No, they don't.

They do.

But she won't listen and we're nearly here.
The ten-foot-high prison-style electronic gates
swing open with barely a
whisper
and we're sucked inside the Death Star that is
Wynford Independent
Highly Selective
College for Girls.

Our cheap little car creeps up the drive,
mindful of the sign that says
Careful of Children Crossing.

Children?
Spawn of Satan, more like.

Marnie, don't mess it up, I'm begging you.
Mum's voice is all flat,
like it got run over.

She sounded different when I was ten,
when I got into Wynford.

Back then, she screamed with joy.
You passed the entrance test!

She was dancing in the kitchen,
tilting the letter in her fingers
so the gold crest sparkled
like a party invitation.

Better yet, you got the scholarship!
She high-fived me.
Boarding school is such a great chance –
a chance to get away from here.

She meant away from this particular postcode,
from the smell of poverty and no-hope
clinging to the walls of the bus stop
like grease in a chicken shop.

She had a point,
but I hated Wynford College all the same.
After four and a half years of
feeling homesick, of not fitting in,
I know
it doesn't matter
how small the space, how lazy the landlord,
or how black the mould spores
on the winter walls –

home is home.

Just keep your nose clean,
Mum says now, crunching the gears.
Stay out of trouble until the exams are over.
It's less than two more terms.

'Fewer,' I say –
to piss her off,
even though she wasn't wrong –
'Fewer' than two terms. Not 'less'.

Mum's mouth snaps shut so hard
her teeth clack in her skull.

Grammar-flexing.
That's what sixty thousand pounds of
someone else's money
gets you.

The girls at Wynford College
knew I was a charity case
the minute I opened my mouth,
but what really bugged them
was how I didn't
know my place.

It's not your accent, one girl said,
moving my bed to the draughty corner.
It's your attitude we don't like.

I know I shouldn't generalise, but honestly,
Wynford girls are such
bitches.

That first night of Year 7
I lay awake under scratchy blankets
listening to the mouth-breathing
of seven hostile strangers
and learned to cry
as quietly as
a lie.

Mum pulls into the car park to the left of reception.
You're so close now, she says,
narrowly missing the bumper of a Land Rover.
Just get your GCSEs and stay out of trouble.
No more floral foofies, please.

FOOFIES?
Please tell me she didn't say *foofies*?
Mum's a nurse. She shouldn't be coy.

She means my GCSE art coursework.
I've chosen the topic of FREEDOM.
I'm working on a *homage*
to Georgia O'Keeffe,
a
bold
vibrant
affirming
celebration of
female sexual freedom –

which Wynford College, of course,
deems completely inappropriate to submit.

I fold my arms and stare out of the window
as our crappy tin can creaks
between the rows of glossy SUVs.
I think I'm the last to arrive –
there's already a parade of parents
pouring down the entrance steps.

We're late because I hid the car keys –
which only worked
till Mum negotiated a prisoner swap
with my phone.

I shade my eyes against the February sun
while Mum makes a
monumental mess of parking.

Something's up.
The crowd has stopped.
They're pointing at the lawn, that
precious rectangle
of bright green
(Keep Off The)
velvety grass.

As the strangled vowels
of upper-middle-class outrage
spiral into the freezing air,
I remember that thing I did last autumn.

Oops.

It was months ago.
I nicked a ton of bulbs
from the gardener's shed.
Thought I'd planted duds actually.
Who knew nature took so long?

But now spring's sprung my swear words
from their trap. It's interesting
how the ugly f-word
can look so pretty
spelled out in the
colourful language of
crocus.

The very next day I'm being *de-selected.*
They know it was me.

Perhaps I shouldn't have ticked
Horticulture
on the careers options form?

Apparently my flower display
was just the final daisy in the chain.
I had been warned before.
Many times.

'Froggy' Norton,
the Head Warden,
opens his flabby mouth
and flicks his sticky tongue
around the word *excluded*

before coming out with
managed move
instead.

Marnie Staedler, he says with relish,
you are just too much of a
***d**isR**u**p**t**io**n**.*
You will have to take your exams elsewhere.

You will need to show
a real commitment to change before
Wynford Independent
Highly Selective College for Girls
can allow you back for sixth form.

Come back *here*?
He has to be kidding.
Turns out my middle digit can talk crocus too –
I must have green fingers.

Mum takes time off work that she can't afford
and drives to Wynford to fight my case,
but the governors have heard about me.

My raised middle finger,
my customised school uniform,
my self-expressions in shaving foam,
the painted political protest pinned to the noticeboard,
the empty vodka bottle in my bin, vapes in my drawer,
compass ear piercings, stick and poke tattoos,
rainbow-coloured plaits down to my waist,
and the fee-paying parents' faces
when they set eyes on
the message I'd
embedded
into the
grass.

The governors say, *No*.

I say, *That's discrimination!*

On what grounds? Mum asks,
shrugging off her best coat
in the hall.

Age? It's a protected characteristic after all.

I don't think 'teenager' counts, Mum says,
and leans her forehead against the front door,
like her face suddenly got
too heavy.

If I wasn't sure before
who my mum was maddest at –
me or the school –
I'm pretty certain now.

Mum says I've really
crocused-up my career prospects.
I'm terrified
she could be telling
the truth.

I can't even figure out
how to say I'm sorry,
but I don't need to worry –
Mum's got it all worked out.

She says I need to face the
consequences of my actions,
learn to think before I act.

Tough love, she calls it, and she
makes me ring up the local comp
and tell them I've been
kicked out
excluded
manage-moved.

The secretary of Downham High
has blocked sinuses.

I ask if they'll let me in,
just for seventeen weeks
so I can take my GCSEs.

She asks me why I lost my place at Wynford.
Nosy cow.

I dig my nails into the
Play-Doh of my arm
and grind my teeth through a
censored version of the truth.

She listens to the whole
humiliating story
before she tells me
it's already been arranged:
I start after their half-term.

Well, thanks a bunch, Mum.

You're welcome, Mum says,
scraping out the peanut-butter jar.
Think of it as paying penance.

At least I don't have to tell Dad.
The last time I tried to ring him
I got number unobtainable.
Mum said that sounded about right.

The email arrives.
I start at Downham High School in a week.
Ofsted reckons the school requires improvement . . .
Maybe they think my grades will help?

But it was having more than half a brain that got me into so much trouble at Wynford.
They say they want you to think for yourself,
but they don't –
not really.

It's weird being out of school.
I swiped some pens and paints from Wynford
so I could do some coursework,
interpret my new-found *freedom*
through the medium of art.
But I don't feel very creative.

Mostly I wander lonely around my town,
freaking out about my GCSEs.

In the library, the refugee kids
crowd around a study book
like it's an open fire,
warming their heads with knowledge that's
cheaper than fuel,
waiting for their number to come up
on council waiting lists.

I don't talk to them,
because what would I say?
Sorry?

Sorry
that they have risked their lives
for the chance
I've simply

thrown away?

Chapter Two

ZED

Teenage life forms
bump against me as I spin
the Fibonacci sequence
to crack open my locker.

Four & a half years
of being digested in this ecosystem,
trapped inside the noisy, smelly gut of Downham High,
pushed along the intestinal tract of education,
by the peristalsis of the syllabi.

I'm nearly through.
Only a term & a half to go
before the colonic squeeze of GCSEs
pushes me out like a –

*Sh*t!*
Omar Jones slams his hand against a locker door.
I didn't do my physics!
Ms Rahman's gonna steam me for sure.

No doubt about it, I agree.

There are one thousand & sixty-three students
at Downham High,
which is just above the national average –
unlike our results.

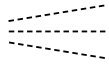
The twenty-three students in 11R
sit two
to a desk
every desk full
except for one
empty seat beside me.

Actually,
    that suits me just fine.
I do like my own
    space.

Soon there will be no more Omars.
I'm aiming at a super-selective
    scientific sixth form,
a sure-fire springboard to Oxford.

I watch 11R bouncing around,
rubbing up against each other's desks,
creating so much *friction* as they
    jostle against each other, modelling
    atoms in a liquid state.

My classmates never get tired of
    talking, boasting, joking, flirting.

A stink of body spray 
    has to fight against
    the daily assault of hormones.

Some of the sexual bragging
    might be true, but
    most undoubtedly isn't.

I don't care.
If anybody was to
    ask me how I spent my
    half-term break,
I'd have to say I left the house just once:
    to purchase the three hundred jelly babies
    I judged to be sufficient
    to see me through my
    programme of revision.

Harry Borman holds court, with
    one leg hitched on Rakel's desk,
flashing a white sports sock
    as he riffs on her virginity,
talking mostly to her chest.

Rakel tells him to piss off,
& his girlfriend Jessica
    calls him back to heel with
    the dog whistle of a
    dirty look.

Omar Jones is laughing in the corner,
    homework all forgotten –
    again.

Hey, Zed!
Luca Moreno swans by my desk,
    slapping it lightly,
    the current of air he creates
    lifting the papers
    ever so slightly.

In his wake,
    they are minutely disarranged.

I don’t reply.
I’m not so keen on conversation.
It has all the
    unpredictability of ping-pong.
Between the opening serve &
the ricochet of reply,
words can go

anywhere.

That’s why, on the whole,
    I prefer to keep
    my thoughts
    to myself –

especially the ones about Luca.