THE NOT-SO GREAT ESCAPE



To my beautiful children, for making me
try to be a better person.

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USBORNE

CHAPTER ONE

When the police officer dropped me, Dad and Lilly back home to our flat after the Crash, he said to me, "Rotten luck there, Hedley."

Which is a silly thing to say because, of course, people don't die through bad luck alone.

In fact, the Department for Health and Statistics says that:

The average life expectancy for a human being in the UK is seventy-five years, but when certain risk factors are considered this average drops down to sixty.

Not that Mum was sixty when the car killed her, but you get the point. And after, when we got inside, Dad went straight to the bed he used to sleep in with Mum and he's been in it ever since. He says his legs don't work properly since the accident.

But I don't think it's his legs that need fixing.

Anyway, before he left us, the police officer gave me some advice.

"Keep your head down and things will get easier."

So, I turned the words into something spiky and hard

which squished up the scream inside me, covered it tightly and promised never to let it go.

And I'm still keeping my head down even now, one year later. Well, the real truth is I'm being forced to do it by my roommate, Aiden. That is because he's currently holding me upside down, while he tries to simultaneously punch and fart in my face.

He's actually doing quite well.

I suppose the word roommate is wrong on all accounts. Firstly, as you can see, we're not really mates. Secondly, we both only stay at Bridlebank Therapy Activities Centre from Friday night through to Sunday, and that's only because, apparently, we both need help with our emotions and things; and thirdly me and Aiden don't exactly "share" the room. In fact, when I first stayed at the Guff Cave (as I call it), Aiden drew a line (literally with a great big marker pen) in a small corner and piled all my stuff behind it. Since then, I've been under strict threat of a front wedgie to not even breathe outside of the pen line on my visits, which actually isn't as difficult as it sounds because there is always a strong smell of eggy fart coming from Aiden's bed.

Another reason Aiden is a terrible roommate is because he never has any stuff of his own, and therefore he is always stealing my things, despite the marker-pen line.

And I'm now suspended in mid-air because Aiden has once again stolen my hat.

Listen, it's not just any old hat. It's my favourite stripy one that Mum gave me on the last Christmas we had together before the Crash. It's got long knitted ears that reach my shoulders, but the really bestest thing about it is that it activates my golden shield of protection. Before, whenever I got scared or I had to do something that made me nervous, which was surprisingly a lot, Mum would pull on the ears and say, "There you go, Hedley, you're invincible now."

Normally, when Aiden takes my stuff, I don't say anything. But my therapist, Dr Rosenhaus, says avoiding fights is not always a good thing. That sometimes confrontation is necessary.

So, when I saw him wearing my woolly hat and wiping his sticky fingers all over it, I said, "Give me my hat back."

And of course Aiden said, "No. What you going to do about it?"

Which is exactly the moment when I realized that despite telling me that avoiding fights was bad, my therapist hadn't actually told me how to *win* them. So, now I'm just letting Aiden hit me until he gets tired. Or I pass out from the blood pooling in my head – whichever happens to happen first.

As it goes, I'm saved by the telephone.

"Hedley!" someone was shouting up the stairs. "Telephone call for you. It's Nic."

Usually, Nic, my weekend support worker at the centre, can do one as far as I'm concerned, but this time, I could have kissed him. Aiden smirked back at me with his arms folded across his chest as I squeezed past him and ran down to the ground floor corridor where the telephone was hanging on the wall. Something must be up for Nic to call me on a Friday evening rather than wait until he was working tomorrow.

"Hiya, Hedley, looking forward to our session this weekend? How are you feeling?"

This presented me with a bit of a dilemma. I didn't want to hurt his feelings and say I preferred double maths to my weekend sessions at the centre – not because Nic's activities were boring, you understand, don't get me wrong. The centre goes all out to make everything as exciting as possible. That's exactly the problem. I've been coming here for a while now at the weekends, because of Dad not getting out of bed and stuff, and so far, in my opinion, every single activity is designed to kill me. Surely sitting in a corner, reading my book would be a far less risky way of spending the weekend? When it comes down to it, I am just not built for zip lines that dangle me high

above the ground, suspended by a wire cradle chafing my unmentionables.

Nor apparently am I any good at talking about my feelings.

They showed us a documentary in science once, when a caterpillar creates a chrysalis to turn into a butterfly. There's a stage when its body releases enzymes that dissolve its own cells leaving only the life-supporting ones. So really it's just a blob of nothingness. Sometimes that's how I feel. But telling that sort of thing to Nic always makes him talk even more.

"Fine."

Nic has an earring and thinks that he is "uber-cool" – which is what he calls things a lot. I think the fact that he says things like "uber-cool" means that he isn't.

He gave a little sigh but, for once, let it go. "Hedley, do you want the good news or the bad news?"

Seriously, what kind of question is that to ask someone who had to be told his mum died in a car crash? Sometimes, I'm not even sure Nic went to therapy school.

Eventually, he realized that he wasn't getting an answer. "Okay! So…"

He always starts his sentences with "So," like we've been in the middle of talking about something. It's both confusing and factually incorrect.

“So, actually both of them are good news. It was a trick question.”

It was a dumb question.

I wiped the handpiece of the phone, trying to focus on something other than the crusted bogie trail that Shona Calcutt, another regular at the centre, always leaves smeared across the wall whenever she phones home. Someone had drawn dog ears in a black biro around one of them.

“Anyhooo…” There was a weird banging noise on the phone which was probably Nic drumming his hands on something. “So, guess who’s got a new weekend job working at Farmer Bert’s Petting Farm?”

It wasn’t that big a shock – I was surprised he’d managed to last this long as a support worker before being sacked. He was pretty rubbish at it, if I’m honest. “Aren’t you a bit old, though?” I asked.

“What? No. Not me, Hedley. Why would you think that I— Never mind. Look, the job is for you. Weekend mornings. Starting tomorrow!”

Oh god. No. The whooshing noise in my ears was back again. Now I really did want to zip myself up into a chrysalis. Mush and all.

“But I hate animals!” I could feel the panic rising up from my tummy to my throat, and I wanted to spew my guts everywhere. Animals, by definition,

were a Big Risk. They were unpredictable at BOTH ENDS!

"Hedley, think of this as a Good Thing. Kids your age, they need hobbies."

There was something in his voice.

"Hang on, is this actually a job with proper money or…?" I asked.

There was a pause before he cleared his throat. "Well, it's part of your therapy, really. Dr Rosenhaus has recommended it. You know, studies have shown that spending time with animals can be therapeutic."

"But a farm?" I stood on tiptoes and rested my forehead against the wall, taking care to avoid the bogies. The SAS call it the stress position.

"It's just the focus that you need to take you out of yourself," replied Nic. What did that even mean? Being taken out of myself sounded bad. Very BAD.

"Have you ever given any thought to what you want to do or be when you leave school, Hedley?" Nic's voice was quieter, and I pushed hard against the wall.

"A librarian." I've researched the Department of Health and Safety statistics for accidents and deaths in the workplace. And other than a bed tester, librarian has the lowest number of fatalities.

"Oh."

There was a silence apart from me cracking my

knuckles. “I think it will be good for you, Hedley. Face a bit of unpredictability. Sometimes when we’ve experienced a big trauma, then…”

Oh, nuggets! To Nic, everything was connected to grief. Could this get any worse?

“You know, Hedley, if you ever want to talk…”

Obviously, it could.

“No. I am FINE, Nic. F.I.N.E.” Hopefully Nic would think that someone who could spell out the word “fine” needed no help whatsoever.

“I don’t think you are fine, Hedley. I spoke to Dr Rosenhaus yesterday. She had a lot of interesting things to say about your last session. She thinks you are trying too hard to convince everyone that you are okay.”

“Oh.”

“So, anyway, while you’re still on the phone, here’s the next good news. We’re having a really great dinner and disco over Christmastime here at the centre. I have it on good authority that Father Christmas is DJing.” There was a pause, and I could tell Nic was leading up to something. “Actually, I wondered if you’d given any thought to staying here during the holidays? Everyone really enjoys your visits.”

“Let me check my diary and get back to you,” I said. I mean, I was sure it would be fun and everything, but I had Dad and Lilly.

“Ha ha, Hedley. I’ll have a chat with your dad about it.”

Why bother asking me, then?

“I can’t really leave Dad for that long,” I muttered.

“You know he’ll have someone in helping him, just like at the weekends.”

My calves had started to burn.

“Why are you practising ballet, Hedley? Do you want me to show you first position?”

My heart sank.

Lilly, my annoying six-year-old sister, was hovering in the hallway. Her plaits all tangled and smelling of poster paint.

I blinked and lowered myself back to the ground.

“So, can I at least tell them you’ll go to the farm tomorrow?” Nic sucked in some air.

Hmm. According to the publishing of the Department of Works and Pensions, farmers have the youngest average age of mortality of any other occupation. Mainly from machine operations.

“I’ve got a really good joke, Hedley! Want to hear it?” Lilly was tugging on my jumper. I pushed her hand away and glared at her to shut her up.

“Will I be operating heavy machinery?”

“Now, Hedley, don’t overthink this,” Nic said. “The petting farm has good reviews; I think you will really like it there.”

“Statistically eighty per cent of pet owners end up with respiratory issues,” I replied.

Lilly interrupted, “Sam Ardent told me it, and he doesn’t always tell me his jokes because he says girls aren’t funny and it would be a waste of his time, but I followed him all the way to the toilets and said I wouldn’t leave unless he did tell me it, and that actually if he was really worried about saving time then he should change his diet, because it’s not normal for a person to spend that long on the loo anyway, and my older brother Hedley – that’s you – only goes to the toilet once every two days… That’s right, isn’t it, Hedley?”

“Shut up, Lilly,” I hissed.

I could hear Nic sighing.

“You know it’s really important to accept some help, Hedley. You’re not on your own.”

I watched as Lilly wandered back to the TV room.

I looped my finger into the hole in my jumper and squeezed it until one end went white and the other red. “Can Lilly come too?”

Nic’s breath came out all in one big blast down the phone and I could imagine the vein that ran down his forehead sticking out. “Listen, mate, we’ve been through this before and I really think it would be better if you try this by yourself first.”

There was a buzzing in my ears.

“I’ve got to go,” I shouted. I was hardly able to hear him now above the noise in my head.

“Hedley!” His voice sounded far away, as if down a tunnel. “Hedley? Just try, Hedley…”

I slammed the telephone down and slumped against the wall.

The wool had left a mark around my finger.