BIG WORDS



"An intense and compulsive ride"
KEITH GRAY

LUKE PALMER

Published by Barrington Stoke
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 Robroyston Gate, Glasgow, G33 1JN

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper,
Dublin 1, DO1 C9W8, Ireland

First published in 2026

Text © 2026 Luke Palmer
Cover illustration © 2026 Andy Gellenberg
Cover design © 2026 HarperCollins*Publishers* Limited

The moral right of Luke Palmer to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

ISBN 978-0-00-878984-8

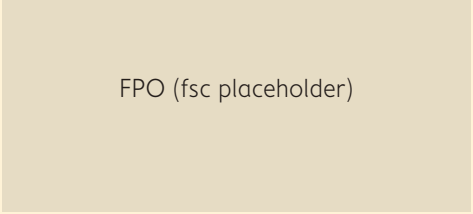
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in whole or in any part in any form or by any
means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without
the prior permission in writing of the publisher and copyright owners

Without limiting the exclusive rights of any author, contributor or the publisher of
this publication, any unauthorised use of this publication to train generative artificial
intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited. HarperCollins also exercise
their rights under Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790 and
expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception

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

Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd.



For all the lost pilots

CHAPTER 1

It's my idea. It's always my idea.

"Want to go sledging?" I say.

We're at Kiln. We're always at Kiln – a big patch of wasteland on the edge of town. We call it Kiln because that's what it was: kilns. You can still see the remains of the old ovens for making bricks or something. We have fires in the ruins of them sometimes. But now the site is pretty much a dump, full of other people's junk – old fridges, a couple of abandoned cars and mangled motorbikes. All fringed by patchy grass and a few scrubby trees with crisp packets and plastic bags in their branches. It's not a bad place to hang out.

It's not like there's anywhere else to go.

"I want to go sledging," I say again.

Jamie looks up at the sun, hanging high above the houses at the edge of Kiln. Then he points at it and makes a big deal of looking around at the

ground, which has no snow on it. What with it being the middle of May.

I smile back at Jamie – at everyone. I have a plan. I don't know why I haven't thought of it before. I walk over to one of the abandoned cars, then I point to the top of the slope. The car's been sitting there for years, rotting.

"But it hasn't even got wheels, Sam," Greg says. He kicks at the long grass under the empty wheel arches.

"Don't need wheels," I say. "Not on a sledge."

I put my hand under the bonnet, which has always been loose, and give it a good rattle. Most of the car's silver paint is still intact, but the edges of the bonnet are red with rust. It crumbles a bit in my palm. There's something sharp beneath it, and I almost pull my hand back, but I don't.

"I reckon this'll make a good sledge," I say.

Taylor comes and stands next to me. He peers at the metal arms that hold the back of the bonnet in place. They are rust red, too. The bolts have lost all their corners and look like little warts.

Taylor gives one of them a tap with his knuckle. "Sam, we'll never get that off, mate," he says.

I look at him and reply, "Wanna bet?" Taylor's my best friend and would never back down from a challenge. Especially a challenge that I set.

Taylor smiles at me.

*

It takes longer than I'd thought it would. Pushing and waggling doesn't work. We open the bonnet as far as it will go while Taylor stands on the engine. He kicks the bonnet against its hinges, which scream with complaint. But it still doesn't shift. Ben finds a length of old metal from somewhere, and we use it to bend the hinges as far as we can. At last, the bolts break with a pop.

The bonnet slides off onto the dirt.

Greg tries to pick it up and pulls his hand away, swearing. There's a short, ragged gash in his palm. He looks at it as it oozes blood. "It'll be fine," he says, and shakes it off.

It's always fine. Whatever happens. No complaining. No backing down. Those are the rules of Kiln.

I give the sheet of metal a nudge with my foot. The bonnet is a lot heavier than I expected. I roll my sleeves over my hands, grip the edge that looks least rusty and tug it over to the top of the hill. The effort brings the sweat out under my arms. I drop the bonnet on the hill's summit with a bang.

"So who's going first?" I ask.

Four blank faces stare back at me.

That's another rule of Kiln. Biggest goes first.

I always go first.