

## Praise for Niel Bushnell

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*'I loved it from the first page.'* – Zoe (Waterstones)

# ALTITUDE

By Niel Bushnell



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## ONE

Tam didn't want to be here.

The air was damp and didn't smell clean. It was dark and oppressive and full of flies. The canopy of trees pushed down on her, stealing the sky, demolishing its light. In the dingy green shadows branches moved, taunting her with their seeking claws.

*She wasn't frightened, she wasn't frightened.*

Up there in the mess of bark-skinned limbs, unseen birds called out to each other, threatening, territorial, spooked by the invader. Mum thought it was tuneful, a chorus of song. Not Tam. To her ears there was nothing musical about their cries. They were shouting at her, spitting feathered curses, indecipherable swear words falling from hard beaks onto soft moss.

'Piss off,' she whispered back at them, her clipped words evaporating on her tight lips, dying there before they became airborne.

The birds swore back at her, expletives of feather and twig falling earthwards.

*She wasn't frightened, she wasn't frightened.*

The wind rattled through the trees, shaking the

branches, silencing the birds, hitting her skin with flecks of cool moisture. She wrapped her arms into her chest, holding the warmth in.

Her feet moved her along the muddy path, deeper into the heart of the trees. Already her shoes were edged with soil, her white socks spotted with the brown blood of the earth. She should turn round, she should leave, but her feet still moved.

Why was she here? She hadn't planned on coming this way, she hadn't given it a thought. But her feet, without any instructions, had brought her towards the wood, one step at a time.

Even so, arriving here had come as a surprise, for she was so far inside her head, arguing with every imagined person that dared to pop up. The familiar parade of insecurities had infected her thoughts: school, the imminent GCSE exams, her appearance, the argument she'd had with Becca last week, what to do about that weird picture James Pinchin had sent her, going to college, Mum, Dad . . .

Dad and—

She was dancing around that one big thought, that one giant insecurity, avoiding it at all costs.

The dimming sky and the crying birds conspired against her, breaking her thoughts into useless fragments, pulling her back into the now. She focused on the trees and knew it was too late, the damage was done. She was

in the wood.

Tam stopped, circling around to view the prison of trees. The last time she'd been here she had been . . . what? Six years old? Seven, maybe. Back then she came here often, with Dad. They'd walk and laugh and—

No.

The memory was pushed away. She rested against the body of a tree, not caring about getting marks on her school blazer, letting her mind cool.

'What am I doing here?' she said to no one.

Leaves rattled in the undergrowth as something small retreated from her, then silence.

Tam pulled out her phone, looking past the cracked screen. There was no signal here. Maybe that's why she had come, to be alone, to disconnect. Unconvinced, she put her phone away, trying to ease her racing mind.

She forced her attention on the tree opposite, staring at its bark, at the thick valleys gouged into its knotted surface. She allowed her eyes to follow one of the dark grooves up the bulk of the tree until it narrowed and merged with its neighbours and became indistinct.

The sun broke through the swaying leaves, dappling the hard white light into her pinprick pupils. She closed them, letting her hands fall to her sides, finding the solid uneven surface of the tree behind her. Her fingertips traced its contours, building a picture in her mind. She felt calmer,

safe in the shadow of this giant, as if it was protecting her, as if it—

Tam opened her eyes and stepped away from the tree, feeling foolish. 'I'm not a bloody tree hugger,' she muttered.

It was just a tree after all, just a piece of wood with stupid leaves sticking out of it, just water and mud and sunshine, nothing more.

Just a tree. Just a wood.

Shadows fell onto the clearing, sucking the heat from the space. The summer air lost its menace and Tam felt more comfortable. She looked down the weaving path that tempted her deeper into the wood. She could just make out the distant chatter of the stream she knew lay beyond, cutting the wood in two, pulling soil from the roots of the trees to leave them exposed, clawing at the passing water like gnarled witch's fingers. She stood there, uncertain if she wanted to continue. But she wasn't ready to go home, not yet. She needed space alone, time to think . . . or was it time *not* to think? She wasn't sure.

She stepped forwards, towards the sound of the water. The path descended, turning and twisting, until the banks of the narrow stream came into view.

It had seemed so vast before, when she was younger, too wide to jump to the far side without the threat of a wet foot. Now it looked anorexic and insignificant. She could

jump it easily, she calculated. An image came to mind, of Dad lifting her to the other side, laughing and groaning as he carried her in his arms, leaping onto the far bank and—

No.

High above, the massing clouds broke their silence, delivering tiny parcels of moisture onto the waiting trees. Water dropped onto her cheek and ran down her face, an imitation tear from high above. She should really go home.

Tam hesitated in the shadow of the wood, watching the water drift by, trying to convince herself to leave.

Finally, decisively, she cursed, 'Bloody stupid,' and turned back towards home.

She stopped immediately. She was no longer alone. There was someone else there, a dark thin shape at the bend in the path, framed by an arch of ivy that grew over some ancient dying piece of wall.

The pair froze, like two startled rabbits, waiting to see who might move first. Defiantly Tam took a step forwards. The other person jumped, but didn't retreat.

She saw now it was a girl about her own age, dressed in the same school uniform, but the light was behind her and her features were hidden in shade.

'Oh, hi, Tamsin,' the girl said, her voice betraying a tremble of fear.

Tam stopped, trying to identify the shadow. She could see better with her glasses on but she refused to wear them

outside of home. 'Who's that?' she asked, making sure her voice sounded loud and aggressive.

The girl stepped towards Tam. Her face was long and narrow, framed by dark black hair that rested on her sloping shoulders. She smiled nervously, her teeth clenched behind her wide lips. 'It's me, A-Abigail . . . Abigail Longbourne.'

'Long Bone,' Tam acknowledged, recognition filling in the details of the shadowed face. They shared a few classes – drama, art, maybe geography – but Abigail Longbourne was cleverer than her and they moved in very different circles. One of the boys had given her the nickname way back in Year Seven, mocking her slender face, and it had stayed with her ever since. It didn't matter that she'd grown into her face this last year, that she was actually quite beautiful behind the barricade of hair and insecurity, not that Tam would ever admit it. Only the burden of the name mattered, only that and the power it took away from its victim every time it was used.

The other girl reddened. 'Well . . . no. I mean, yeah, that's what you all call me, but it's not my name.'

Tam put her head down and pushed past her.

'It's . . . it's not my name,' Abigail repeated, louder.

'Better than *Horse Face*,' Tam responded, trying her best to ignore the other girl.

Ahead the path narrowed, weaving upwards, following the contour of the wood. The walls of earth towered over

her, a congregation of trees looking down in judgement.

Behind her the girl called out, 'I don't care what you call me.'

'Good!'

The rain grew heavier, collecting on the leaves before falling to the waiting roots. Tam quickened her pace.

'It's still better than what they say about *you*,' Abigail muttered.

Tam stopped and turned round. Abigail stood by the stone wall, her eyes wide with surprise.

'What did you say?'

'N-nothing,' Abigail replied, stepping backwards.

Tam marched towards her, her insecurities condensing into aggression. 'What do they call me?'

Abigail disappeared behind the wall. Tam rounded the bend and saw her further along the track. 'Come here!'

It wasn't worth following her, the rain was getting heavier and she didn't want to go further into the wood. But Tam wasn't thinking logically. All her angry thoughts came back up to the surface and found focus on Abigail.

Her legs began to run, a hunter chasing its prey.

Abigail quickened her pace, navigating the narrow path with ease, as if she knew every twist and turn. The stream came into view again and Tam slowed, her breathing heavy. This stupid heat had brought out sweat on her forehead. Her anger grew.

Abigail stood on the far side of the stream, tensed, ready to retreat further.

'Well?' Tam shouted breathlessly as she walked towards the water. 'What've you got to say?'

Abigail faltered. 'N-nothing.' She turned to leave.

'Stop!' Tam cried. She looked down at the stream. It was as if she couldn't cross it, not without Dad.

Abigail froze, half hidden by the foliage of a tree.

'What *do* they call me?' Tam demanded.

'It's not me,' Abigail began. 'I don't call you anything, I'm not bothered.'

Tam lowered her voice, trying to calm the rage. 'Who? Who's talking about me?'

Abigail shrugged, her eyes dropping to the ground. 'No one. It's nothing.' She went to turn away again.

'I won't hurt you,' Tam reassured her.

The other girl half laughed, not stopping.

'Wait!' This time it was an order, Tam's voice loud and powerful.

Abigail turned back, folding her arms.

'I just want to know,' Tam said. 'What have you heard?'

The rain was heavy now, bouncing into the stream like tiny darts. Tam's short brown hair coated her wet face as water soaked into her clothes. She glared at Abigail, a reflection of her own drenched form.

'Nothing, really,' Abigail replied. 'I just said it. I have to

go.’ This time she turned and didn’t stop, running into the wood, out of sight.

Tam tensed, her fingers forming fists. She should go home, she knew it. Instead she lifted a leg and leaped over the stream. As she landed her foot slipped on the moist soil and she fell on her thigh. Mud coated her skirt and skin . . .

Suddenly her pent-up anger was let loose and rage filled her eyes. She ran down the narrow path, branches snapping as she crashed into them. Ahead was the tiny shape of Abigail Long Bone, a flickering silhouette, hidden behind trees and rain.

A rumble of thunder broke overhead, coursing through the wood, giving voice to Tam’s temper. The rain intensified, shaking the trees, pushing water into her face as she raced to catch Abigail.

The thin girl glanced over her shoulder, saw Tam closing. Her eyes widened and she sprinted harder, over-anticipating the bend in the path, slipping in the dirt, rolling into the grass.

Tam caught up with her and dragged her up by her blazer collar. ‘What do they say about me?’ she demanded.

‘Nothing, not really. I just hear things,’ Abigail cried, her face coated in water and dirt.

‘What sort of things?’

‘About you . . . you and James Pinchin.’

Tam reeled. 'Who said it? *Who?*'

Abigail began to cry. 'James does. He was laughing about it.'

There was no pity left in Tam, just resentment and fury. Her open hand landed on the other girl's cheek.

'I'm sorry, I didn't say anything, I didn't . . .' Abigail's voice faded away.

Tam pushed. 'What did he say about me?'

Abigail's face crumpled. 'That you . . . that you did stuff for him. You did whatever he wanted.' She put a hand over her lips as if to take back the words.

Tam stiffened, shock dragging the breath out of her mouth.

'It's not me,' Abigail pleaded. '*I* didn't say that, I just heard *him* say it, that's all. Please, let me go.'

Tam pushed Abigail to the ground. She looked down on the pathetic girl crying at her feet, and she suddenly saw what she had done. Guilt and remorse took hold, but she couldn't bring herself to apologize. That would be weak. She stepped back, breathing hard.

There was a flash of light, followed by a heavy rumble that coursed up through her feet, and Tam began to run, deeper into the wood. She followed the path, hardly caring where it took her – all that mattered was that she ran.

Ahead the track turned sharply to the left. Tam surged into it, losing her footing. She skidded over the wet earth,

through the undergrowth, sliding down the slope. The trees ended abruptly, and beyond was . . . nothing.

She clawed at the ground, trying to slow her descent, but it was no use. As she fell over the precipice it was as if time slowed down. She knew about the old quarry that ran along the edge of the wood, cut into the rock like a deep wound, but she had never seen it from this vantage point before. Now she was falling through the air, falling towards the pit of the quarry metres below her, falling towards the hard, unyielding rock.

But she wasn't falling, not any more.

Tam was floating, floating above the rock, hanging in the air as the torrent of rain fell about her.

## TWO

Tam screamed. She screamed until her throat burned, until spittle and phlegm fell from her open mouth, down towards the quarry beneath her. She hung there, her arms outstretched, facing down, as if she was pinned to an invisible ceiling.

This must be what it's like when you die, she thought. This is how it happens, in slow motion, a frozen moment before the fall. This was God or the afterlife or karma or whatever laughing at her, taking the piss before it smashed her face into a rock.

But it was still raining. She could feel it hitting the back of her exposed legs, and she felt the chill of the breeze on her hands. She watched as droplets of water fell from her hair, down to the ground, splashing in puddles between the rocks.

Tam lifted her head up, turning to look about her; the trees swayed in the storm, the clouds scratched across the sky.

Why was she the only thing frozen?

But she wasn't frozen. She wriggled her toes, then moved her feet. She waved her arms, testing her body. She

wasn't frozen.

She realized she was crying, breathing hard through her open mouth, her heart beating like a machine gun firing in her chest.

'What happened to you?'

The voice was from somewhere above. She turned her head to see where it was coming from and her body shifted, dropping towards the ground.

Tam screamed, squeezing her eyes shut. After a moment she opened them and realized she was still floating above the quarry, but the rocks were closer to her now.

'Don't move! Don't move anything.'

It was Abigail, her voice further away now, trembling with fear.

'I'm not moving,' Tam said between breaths.

'How are you doing that?' Abigail asked.

'What?'

'That.'

'Doing what?'

Abigail paused, then said, 'Flying.'

'I'm . . . I'm not flying.'

'Well, OK, floating. How're you floating?'

'I don't know!' Tam screamed, and she felt herself drop a few centimetres, her stomach lurching like she was on a sickening roller coaster ride. She held her breath,

tensing everything once more. As her body settled again she continued in a whisper, 'I'm not flying, I'm not floating. I'm . . . falling.'

'Kinda looks like floating from here. You're sure?'

'Yes! Now get down here and help me.'

'Oh, right,' Abigail said. 'Hang on.'

Tam waited. She guessed ten minutes passed; it was hard to tell. The rain eased and the sun broke through, warming her back.

Eventually Abigail came into view beneath her.

'Took your time,' Tam complained quietly.

'Had to walk round. I took the path. Didn't want to take the short cut, like you,' Abigail said as she pulled her phone from her pocket.

'What are you doing?' Tam asked, incredulous.

'Taking your picture.' Abigail held up the phone to Tam. 'Smile.'

'Hey! Stop it! You've got to get me down.'

The phone clicked. Abigail looked at the screen. 'You're really dark against the sky. I'll try again.'

'Forget your phone! Put it down or I'll ram it into your stupid face,' Tam cried. Her body dropped two metres, making her stomach retch. She emptied her mouth, gasped, eyes closed, body tensed again.

Abigail looked down at the puddle of vomit discolouring the rocks beneath Tam. 'Gross.' She put her

phone away and folded her arms, looking up at Tam with an impatient stare. 'And you want me to help you?' she asked, sounding angry.

Tam took a breath, calming her words. 'Please, just get me down.'

'I'm not sure I can. This is really weird,' Abigail observed. 'Are you on a wire or something? It's pretty impressive.'

Tam clenched her teeth, her lips tight. 'Christ, Long Bone, get me down!'

Abigail opened her mouth, shocked, as if she'd been slapped again. She glared at Tam then she rubbed her bruised cheek, her eyes narrowing. She turned her back and began to walk away.

Fear and desperation overtook Tam's anger. 'Don't leave me, please,' she cried as loud as she dared.

Abigail stopped, glancing back over her shoulder.

'Look, OK,' Tam continued, 'I'm sorry I hit you, but—'

'Why?' Abigail interrupted.

Tam stared at the other girl. 'Why what?'

'Why are you sorry?'

'Because . . . I am. Please, Abigail, can you help me—'

'So you do know my name?'

'Yes.'

'Good. So why are you sorry?'

Tam seethed, hardly able to contain her frustration.

She was about six metres off the ground, drifting very slowly to the right. Could she survive a fall from this height? Maybe. She'd break a few bones for sure. She focused on the ground, willing herself down. She felt her body tremble, shifting slightly.

'Are you trying to get down?' Abigail asked, the corner of her mouth forming a smirk.

'You're enjoying this, aren't you?'

'A bit, yes,' Abigail laughed, circling under Tam, pulling her phone out and taking more pictures. 'It's weird, isn't it? You up there, asking me for help.'

'No. That's what you're supposed to do: help people.'

The phone clicked, filling the silence. 'I know that,' Abigail said. 'But you don't.'

'Can we talk about this once I'm down?' Tam pleaded. 'This is getting old now. And I'm wet.'

Abigail returned to face Tam, arms folded. 'I'm wet too. Wet and covered in mud. And my face hurts.'

'I said I was sorry.'

'I mean it really, really hurts. I bet it'll be bruised tomorrow. A big angry purple bruise.'

Tam scowled. 'What do you want me to do?'

'You're a bully, Tamsin Edwards.'

Tam hesitated. Then, blustering, she said, 'Am not!'

'You're a bully, you've always been a bully. You've picked on people like me since we started school.'

'I do not pick on people.'

'You threw my bag over the wall in Year Eight . . .'

'That was ages ago.'

' . . . and you dripped bleach on my coat in chemistry.'

A series of images collided inside Tam's mind. It was as if she was seeing them from a new perspective up there. Doubts clouded her thoughts. Even so, she couldn't bring herself to lower her defences. 'I didn't. Maybe Becca did it, not me,' she said quickly, not giving herself time to think. 'Please, just help me.'

Abigail shook her head. 'You don't even know you're doing it, do you? And now you're saying sorry and you don't know why you're saying sorry. You don't think you've done anything wrong.'

'I didn't . . .'

 Tam faltered. The images wouldn't go away. Maybe she *was* a bully. All of her bravado crumbled, leaving her fears exposed. 'Abigail, I can't get down and I'm scared.' Tam was floating in the air, exposed to the elements, exposed to her insecurities. She couldn't hide her feelings, not any more. Tears choked her words. 'Please, I'm begging you, help me.'

Abigail's face changed, pity and regret taking hold where revenge had been a moment ago. 'You really are scared, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

Abigail began to look around her, searching.

'What are you doing?'

'Looking for a stick.' She stopped and stared at Tam.  
'Maybe I could go back up to the wood and get a branch.'

'And then what?'

Abigail shrugged. 'You're right, we're going about this the wrong way. How did you get up there anyway?'

'How should I know? Please, just get me down.'

'That's what I'm trying to do. But first we need to figure out how you got up there, then we can work out how to get you down. Like Mr Johnstone says, "Gather information first".'

'I'm not a science problem.'

'But the method applies. So, what happened?'

Tam took a breath. Her heart was finally starting to calm down. 'I was running, I slipped off the path, down over the edge of the quarry wall, I began to fall and then . . . this.'

'Did you mean to fly?'

'No! What sort of question is that?'

Abigail ignored her. 'Have you ever flown before, not including in aeroplanes?'

Tam sighed, defeated. 'No.'

'What were you thinking about when you fell?'

'What d'you mean?'

'What were you thinking about?' Abigail repeated impatiently. 'It's a simple enough question.'

'I was . . .' Tam tried to remember. 'I was angry . . .'

'That was pretty obvious. But why?'

Tam looked away.

'OK, you felt angry. What else?'

'I don't know. I just wanted to get away.'

Abigail tilted her head to one side, her dark hair falling over her shoulder. 'From what?'

Images of home filled Tam's head, of the one big problem she was trying to avoid. She saw that terrible discussion she'd had with Mum and Dad. She struggled to remember the details of what they had said, but she'd never forget the look on their faces. Most of all she could remember how she felt, that overwhelming urge to get away. She began to rise.

'You're going up,' Abigail whispered, in awe.

'I know. How do I make it stop?'

Excited, Abigail shouted, 'You're thinking about getting away, about escape. Hold onto that thought.'

Tears dropped from Tam's eyes. 'I don't want to go up.'

'Just try it.'

Tam closed her eyes. She thought about life at home, about Dad, about how she felt about the news. Even with her eyes closed she could feel her body moving higher.

'That is awesome!' Abigail clapped, jumping up and down.

'It's not awesome.'

'OK, clear your mind. Try not to think about running away. Think about coming down to me, where it's safe.'

Tam tensed, her body drifting upwards. 'It's not working.'

'Just relax.'

'That's easy for you to say down there. You're not the one floating above a quarry, soaking wet and probably about to die! Oh God, I'm gonna die in a quarry.'

'Relax,' Abigail said, stretching out the word until it turned into a sigh.

Tam's body was starting to ache. She felt as if she was tensing every muscle, especially around her stomach. She took a breath, trying to put her fear aside and ease the strain in every part of her body. She let her chest open, taking in air, blowing it out slowly. Then she focused on her shoulders, letting them drop. Her arms followed, hanging down towards the ground. She watched her fingers as she stretched and unstretched them. It was as if they belonged to someone else.

'You're doing it,' Abigail shouted. 'You're coming down.'

'Am I?' Tam couldn't tell, the movement was so slight.

'Yes, that's it. Just try to relax some more.'

The sensation was almost pleasant, like floating in a swimming pool and letting yourself drift to the bottom. Tam began to smile.

Laughing, Abigail raised her hands towards Tam's. 'That's it, I can almost touch you.'

As the distance became smaller Tam's anxiety evaporated, leaving in its place an odd sense of elation and excitement. She was flying!

Suddenly she shot upwards again, spinning and rolling.

'Shit!' she cried out, unable to focus on the ground any more. Her world was revolving, faster and faster, a strobe of blue then brown.

'Concentrate!' Abigail called up to her. 'Relax.'

Tam spun higher and higher, faster and faster. Her vision began to tunnel and she felt like she might pass out. She closed her eyes, desperately trying to calm her mind.

*Slow down, relax, slow down.*

The spinning eased and Tam managed to get herself facing down again. She saw Abigail staring up at her, pacing through the quarry. She looked so small. Tam's head was dizzy and she felt an uncomfortable tightness in her stomach.

'Are . . . are you OK up there?' Abigail called to her.

Tam put her hand to her mouth, but it was too late. Her stomach tensed and she threw up again, watching as it fell to the ground with a loud splatter.

'Hey!' Abigail cried out as she ran to dodge the volley. 'You're splashing me.'

Tam sucked in air, sweat forming on her brow. She rested there, gradually feeling better, then she focused on the ground again.

After a moment she began to descend, edging closer and closer to the earth.

'Better,' Abigail encouraged her. 'Keep your focus this time, OK?'

'Shut up,' Tam said through gritted teeth.

She reached out to Abigail and her body tilted towards her, as if she was diving. Tam suppressed the bubbling excitement that was stirring again inside her.

Finally, the girls' hands touched. Abigail lowered Tam to the ground and she landed on all fours, rolling onto her side. She lay there for several long moments, panting, staring up at the clouds in the sky, one hand gripping Abigail's.

'That was fun,' Abigail said enthusiastically.

'No, it wasn't.'

'You flew! Really flew. I saw you. It was . . . amazing,' Abigail laughed, helping Tam to her feet.

'Don't let go of me,' Tam pleaded.

'I won't,' Abigail reassured her, smiling.

Tam's head was still light, and she feared she might fly back up into the air at any moment. Her fingers clung onto Abigail as they walked back towards the path in the wood. The last hour felt surreal, like she was now waking from a

nightmare. Beside her Abigail talked enthusiastically, but Tam could barely take it in.

‘... like nothing I’ve seen before. I mean, people don’t do this, do they? Wait till everyone hears about this. You’ll be famous, be on the telly, and—’

‘No.’ Tam grabbed hold of Abigail by both arms, forcing her to stop and face her. ‘You’ll tell no one.’

‘But—’

‘No one! This never happened, none of it. Do you understand?’

‘Tam, this is huge, we can’t just keep it to our—’

Tam shook Abigail, pushing her to the ground. ‘You’ll tell no one. You’ll never speak of this again. If you say a single word about this to anyone, I’ll kill you, understand? Kill you.’

Abigail, eyes wide with shock, nodded quickly.

‘Good.’ Tam turned away and marched up the path, not looking back.

## THREE

The shower felt good, the hot water cleaning away the dirt from Abigail's skin. Her cheek tingled as the water pushed against her bruise, but not enough to be painful. She wondered if it would show in the morning, if she would be able to conceal it under makeup. Maybe one of the teachers might notice, maybe they'd ask questions, maybe they'd join the dots . . .

Maybe.

Part of her would welcome the intrusion into her life, the opportunity to finally end the cycle of abuse, regardless of the consequences. A chance to help her mum too . . . Her stomach trembled just thinking about doing it. She dared herself not to put makeup on tomorrow, to show off her bruise and to hell with whatever might happen next.

But she couldn't do that. She couldn't be the one to break her family apart. That was up to Mum, not her.

Abigail pushed against the bruise, testing it, seeing how much pressure she could apply before it really hurt. After a few seconds of discomfort she took her hand away and switched off the shower. As she dried herself the pain subsided until it was just a numb afterglow. But the fear in

the pit of her stomach remained and she knew what she'd do tomorrow.

She'd wear makeup. She'd hide the bruise from the teachers and let things work out in their own way. It wasn't up to her to fix this. She was just a spectator, nothing more. Besides, things would get better eventually, she told herself, repeating it often enough that she almost began to believe it.

Abigail pulled on her dressing gown and hid in her room, making sure the door was shut tight. She put some music on and turned it up loud, letting the relentless bass rhythm overwhelm her thoughts. She closed her eyes, resting, recalling the unnatural, impossible image of a girl floating in mid-air. Had it really happened? She pulled out her phone, wanting to be certain she hadn't imagined the whole thing. But there was the proof: a dozen pictures of Tamsin Edwards suspended in the air. Some of the images were dark and blurry, but there was no mistaking it – Abigail had witnessed someone flying. An actual person flying, like in a movie. It had been an amazing thing to see, a moment of unearthly beauty that had almost restored Abigail's faith.

Almost.

If only it hadn't been Tam. Anyone was more worthy than Tam. Someone else and Abigail might have considered it a proper miracle. Someone more . . . more . . . She didn't

know what. Just not Tamsin Edwards. Anyone but Tam . . . maybe even Abigail. And why not? she pondered. *Why not me?*

What did it feel like? To float above the ground, completely free of gravity. She tried to imagine it, grinning to herself.

So what if it was Tamsin Edwards? Did it matter? Abigail couldn't shake the feeling of exhilaration, having shared that moment. For the first time she felt like she was on the inside of an exclusive club instead of being the one on the outside looking in. She was special and she had the pictures to prove it. She'd been there, the only witness to a unique event. Excitement overwhelmed her and Abigail sang along to the music, letting her tuneless voice soar as she thumped her feet into the bed.

She looked again at the pictures and considered sharing them online. She wanted to show everyone she had been there, that she had witnessed the moment of flight. After all, what was the point of being special if no one knew about it? She chose her favourite image, adjusted the brightness and thought about where best to post it.

Abigail put the phone down, feeling guilt sicken her mouth. She was betraying a trust, even if that trust was with Tamsin Edwards. This was between her and Tam, no one else. If she shared it she'd lose control of it. And anyway, everyone would just take the piss! They'd say she faked it.

They'd drain the joy from it and make it poisonous. There would be nothing special left.

No, she'd keep this to herself for as long as she could. But it was no good pretending; the urge to talk about it, to share her experience was overwhelming. There was only one person she could talk to, she realized, only one person she could share this with.

Damn it! Tamsin Edwards.

Abigail searched through Tam's social media profiles until she found what she wanted. Some people were crap at hiding their personal information.

She saved the number into her address book and began to text her. Finished, she was about to hit *send* when she hesitated, doubts creeping in once more. This was Tamsin Edwards, after all. Abigail didn't text people like Tam. They had never been friends and they never would be. She thought for a moment, playing out different scenarios in her mind until she concluded that she should just forget about the whole thing and focus on revising for her GCSEs instead. That was the right thing to do.

Yes, step away, leave it alone. That was the only thing to do.

Abigail stared at the text, immobile with indecision.

The music finished and the room fell silent. Downstairs she could hear the muffled voices of her parents. They were arguing again, stuck on the same old cycle.

She put on another track and, comforted by the music, she returned to her phone. She couldn't bring herself to delete the text. But right now she didn't dare send it either.

Maybe she'd feel differently in the morning. Yes, that's what she would do. She'd sleep on it, see how she felt tomorrow. Perhaps, somewhere between now and then, she'd find the courage to hit *send*.

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