

**KATY CANNON**

THE  
SWITCH  
UP

**L.A. EXCHANGE**

**LITTLE TIGER**

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# WILLA

Everything was perfect.

The lighting – natural Californian sunlight streaming between the buildings, illuminating my set. The setting – a quintessential all-American high school in Los Angeles, on the last day of term before spring break. The cast – giggling quietly just off camera, waiting for their big moment. The music – all queued up and ready to burst out of the speakers the instant I gave the signal. The camera angles – my friend Matty behind one camera, ready to get the static shots, and me darting in and out of the action with my trusty mini-camera, getting the really interesting views.

This was going to be *phenomenal*.

I'd been planning this day for months now, more or less since my second week at school here in LA. I wanted to create an *event*, the sort people would be talking about all through spring break, and beyond. I wanted to get noticed, in a way that my fledgling YouTube channel just hadn't achieved yet.

When Matty and I had been paired to work together on a small project at Film Club, we'd realized our styles melded well. Which was why I'd asked him to help me ... and suddenly everything had come together.

There'd been a lot more to it, of course. People to persuade, rehearsals to schedule, blocking and planning and costumes and make-up ... but finally we were there.

Today was the day I was going to make a real impression on my little corner of LA. Today, St Saviour's High School; tomorrow, the movie studios! Or, at least, *some* recognition.

"In five, four, three," I whispered into the mic linked to my assistant's earpiece. She watched me carefully from over where the cast were waiting as I held up two fingers, then one, then gave her the nod.

The music blasted out from the front steps of the school and over the grass verges, loud enough to be heard all the way to the far end of the car park. Students passing by looked up, some confused, some smiling. On the beat, my first few dancers emerged from their hiding places, their coordinated costumes and moves spectacular in the sunlight. With a quick glance to check that Matty was capturing the action in a wide

shot, I darted into the dance to get the close-up shots.

We'd rehearsed this to the second and everyone knew exactly what they were supposed to do. As the beat changed, five students who'd seemingly just been hanging around the steps suddenly jumped up and started jiving, fast and furious, to the music.

It was just as I'd planned it. Right down to the cartwheels over the cars parked by the main hall, and the dancing on the edges of the concrete planters. I spun around in the middle of it all, catching the carefully coordinated chaos on film. Around us, people were laughing, clapping, cheering – even joining in. It was everything I'd dreamed it would be.

Right up until the moment I saw Principal Carter stalking across the grass towards me.

# ALICE

Everything was horrible.

OK, fine, not everything, not all the time. But right now, as I hid in the girls' toilets at school, waiting for everyone else to leave, things felt pretty horrible.

I wasn't *supposed* to be in the girls' toilets. I was supposed to be at Climate Change Club, in the science classrooms. But it was the last day of the spring term, and no one else had even bothered to show up. Not that many people had shown up most of the other weeks this term either. Some days it was just me and Miss Morris, the teacher who ran the group.

This week, even Miss Morris had gone home early.

I always watched the climate protests on the telly, saw teenage activists across the world speaking on social media, yet I couldn't even get *my* school to change the name of the club to Climate Crisis Club. News reporters told me that my generation were fired up about climate change but apparently 'my generation' didn't go to Bollingsdale High School.

At my old school, we had recycling drives and

designed awareness posters and no one got in too much trouble for skipping school to attend the march in central London. I went with Dad and his girlfriend, Mabel, and the whole day was incredible – being surrounded by people who cared about the same things I did.

Basically the opposite of my new school.

When Dad and I moved from Cambridge to London in January, I tried to think of it as an adventure. I was happy that he'd got a new job at the university where Mabel worked. But living in Mabel's tiny flat until we found a new home, taking the Tube to school every day instead of riding my bike, and sleeping with the noise of London outside my window took a lot of adjusting to. And then there was school.

Bollingsdale was a good school – great reputation, outstanding inspection reports, higher than average exam results. Dad never stopped telling me how lucky we were that I was able to get in there. And I was sure it was a good school for lots of people.

Just not for me.

I didn't fit in there. I didn't want to be there – and from what I could tell, the other students didn't want me there either. Everyone already had their group of

friends – I mean, they’d had fourteen or fifteen years to sort that out.

I tried to go to an after-school club most days, because that meant leaving later than everyone else. To be precise, it meant leaving later than Cassidy, Mollie and Jana, the three girls in my year who seemed to get a peculiar joy out of making me miserable.

“Alice?”

My name echoed around the empty room and I smiled. OK, fine, maybe there was *one* person in the whole school who didn’t mind me being there.

“Hal, you are definitely not allowed in the girls’ toilets,” I told him as I unlocked the cubicle door.

He was standing in the doorway, waiting for me. “I’m not in. I’m hovering on the boundary. Plus you’re hiding and I want to get home, so come on!”

Hal spent last summer helping my best friend Willa pretend to be me (long story) and they became pretty good friends. I think she must have told him to keep an eye out for me because ever since I started at Bollingsdale, he’d checked in on me most days. He had his own friends but he still made time for me, walking me to and from the Tube station nearest our school. I appreciated that a lot. Willa said he had a crush on me, but I didn’t believe her.

Grabbing my bag, I followed him out and we headed for the Tube together.

“When do you leave for LA?” he asked as we walked along the busy London pavements.

“Tomorrow morning.” I had my bags packed, my passport and paperwork triple-checked, and a book already picked out for the plane.

“Are you excited?”

“Very.” This time tomorrow I’d be almost there – in fact, by LA time, I *would* be there! I’d be in Hollywood, with Willa, a world away from Bollingsdale. Me and my best friend, relaxing in the sunshine and having fun for two whole weeks. I couldn’t wait.

“Just don’t let her talk you into anything crazy this time, yeah?” Hal joked.

I laughed. “I think we used up all our craziness last summer! We’ll probably just go to the beach and stuff.”

Which was true. But I couldn’t stop a small part of me hoping there might be a touch of Willa’s unique mayhem about my trip. Because I couldn’t deny that last summer had been *fun*. And I hadn’t had a lot of fun lately. I thought about how, if I had been pretending to be Willa, Bollingsdale wouldn’t be nearly so bad. Willa wouldn’t care what other people thought about

her. And when *I'd* been Willa last summer, I'd had some of that magic confidence too.

Maybe hanging out with her for a fortnight would help me find it again.

# WILLA

So it turns out that school is school, wherever you are.

When my mum's contract got extended, and she told me we'd be staying in California for at least a year, I thought that going to school in LA would be the best. I mean, I'd be living and studying in Hollywood. I'd be starting September as a 'freshman' in high school. I'd seen the teen TV dramas, not to mention the reality shows. Finally I'd be living and learning somewhere that *got* me, Willa Andrews, star in the making. This was the place where all my dreams of becoming a famous director (who perhaps starred in her own films) would come true.

Except apparently, when you organize a student flash mob to perform near the car park and one or two cars get a little dinged, and the presentations the tenth-grade students were being tested on get a tiny bit disturbed, nobody praises your directorial ability...

No, instead I just got hauled to the principal's office. Which felt exactly the same as being dragged into the headteacher's office back at home.

My mum sat statue-like beside me as we waited for Principal Carter to pass judgement. She'd already had a long talk with him while I kicked my heels outside, waiting my turn. I could predict exactly what he was going to say – the same as all my other annoyed headteachers.

We'd already done the 'very disappointed, not the behaviour we expect from a St Saviour's student' spiel. He'd thrown in an 'appreciate you're still adjusting to a new country as well as a new school, and it's good that you're making friends and joining in', which I thought was nice. Unfortunately it was followed by a 'but behaviour of this nature cannot go unpunished, especially when the grades of other students are involved.'

So now we were just waiting to find out exactly what that punishment was.

Great.

I could almost hear Alice's voice in my head, telling me that I should have planned it better. If I'd only held the flash mob *after* school, or somewhere else. But that would have missed the point. It had to be at school, and during school hours, or no one would have seen it – and what good would that be?

I might not be a planner like Alice, but that didn't

mean I didn't have an end goal in mind. I'd joined the Film Club as soon as I started at St Saviour's, but I was a freshman, and just showing up every week and sharing my YouTube posts wasn't enough to get the older students to take notice. I wanted more. And I saw my chance: the Senior Film Class short film project. Last year, the film the class made had actually won awards and got some buzz. Everyone who worked on it got into film school and I wasn't willing to wait another two years to get that kind of experience. I wanted to do it *now*. This year, the hot ticket project was being directed by Fran Levine, the coolest senior in the school, who was already tipped as the Next Big Thing in local indie film circles. This was *absolutely* meant to be.

And working with Matty had given me the opportunity. I wanted him to put in a word for me. "Show me what you can do first," he'd said.

So I'd shown him.

See? I had a plan. I just had to get through whatever punishment Principal Carter dreamed up for me first.

Across the desk, he steepled his fingers and rested them against his lips. He was a big guy in a perfectly cut grey suit and, normally, I liked him. He sometimes played basketball and soccer with the students after

school and showed up for every performance of the Glee Club, even joining in with a deep harmony now and then. I had a sneaking suspicion that, had it not been for the interruption of the oral presentations, he'd have *loved* my flash mob.

“Willa, over this spring break, what I would like is for you to work on thinking about others before you act.” His dark brown eyes were serious. “So, I’ve had a discussion with your mother and we’ve come up with the following plan. This spring break, you’re going to spend at least four hours every weekday volunteering at the Shore Thing Project. It’s a charity venture the school is involved with.”

“*Sure thing?*”

Mum shook her head. “The *Shore* Thing,” she repeated, as if I could tell the difference in spelling from her pronunciation (which I couldn’t). “It’s run by my friend Darla down at Santa Monica Bay. They’re working on cleaning up the shoreline around LA, and educating school children, locals and tourists on the importance of looking after our seas.”

“The future of our planet is in all our hands,” Principal Carter continued, “and people like the volunteers at the Shore Thing Project are really trying to take charge. A lot of our students are already

involved as part of their environmental science studies, and Darla has agreed to let you volunteer there during the two-week break. I think it will be a real learning experience for you.”

“Sounds ... great.” Actually, it sounded incredibly boring. Or like something Alice would love. Or both.

Wait. Alice.

“Do I have to do it over spring break?” I asked, sitting up straight in my chair for the first time since the meeting started. “I mean, I get that it’s really important, that I need to make amends, and think of others and all that ... but could I start thinking about others *after* spring break?”

Principal Carter barely hid his smile at that. “Willa, this is what your mother and I have agreed, to avoid a suspension on your permanent record.”

“Right. It’s just ... I have a friend visiting from England for spring break. I haven’t seen her since last summer!”

“Alice’s dad is a marine biologist,” Mum reminded me. “I’m sure she’ll love spending some time at the Shore Thing too.”

“Fine.” I slumped back in my chair. “I’ll spend my spring break counting seahorses or whatever.”

“Learning to think about others,” Principal Carter

corrected me. “And how we’re all equally important parts of the larger world around us. Even seahorses.”

Mum got to her feet, shaking Principal Carter’s hand. I followed her out of the office to the car. The rest of the school had already broken up and the car park was almost deserted.

Yeah, so I now had to spend forty hours volunteering at some seaside thing but I reckoned it was worth it for the footage I’d got. Tomorrow Alice would arrive, and I knew we’d still manage to have fun. Everything would be fine.

Mum gave me the silent treatment as I climbed into the car. From past experience, I figured that would probably wear off in time for her to read me the riot act over dinner. For now, I just enjoyed the peace.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out. It was a message from Matty.

*Got you in on the project! Fran says we start filming Monday – it will be every day over spring break, except weekends. I’ll swing by tomorrow and fill you in on the details. You owe me!*

My eyes widened. Matty had come through for me! Everything I’d worked on so hard for weeks and weeks had been worth it – I’d be the only freshman involved with the best Senior Film Class project! That made even my punishment worthwhile.

Wait.

I re-read Matty's message. Filming was over spring break. Exactly when I was supposed to be volunteering at the Shore Thing project *and* showing Alice the LA sights.

Even *I* couldn't be in three places at once.

Could I?

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katy was born in Abu Dhabi, grew up in Wales, went to university in Lancaster, then spent a few years splitting her time between London, Hertfordshire and an assortment of hotels across the world. She now lives in a little market town not far from Cambridge. She has a husband, two children, a goldfish and far too many notebooks. As a teenager, Katy was constantly in trouble for reading when she should have been doing something else. These days, she mostly gets in trouble for dreaming up new stories when she should be writing the ones she's already working on.

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