

slow
coach





Slow coach

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For all the slowcoaches



PROLOGUE

I'm dying. I'm sure of it. I'm literally going to EXPIRE right here, right now. Tell my mother I love her. And my dad and Sasha, and maybe Jake if you absolutely have to.

This run may be the death of me.

'Come on, slowcoaches!' Mr Pearce bellows. Is this the first time I've heard such a thing being yelled at me by a demonic PE teacher? No. Will it be the last? Also no. There he is, looking all smug, standing around with most of the class, including my various BFFs who all have an anxious expression on their faces as they witness my humiliation. The rest of them are just staring at us blankly like we're these weird curiosities.

We had been warned. I'll give him that. 'Anyone who doesn't complete a lap of the playing field in less than three minutes will be made to do fifteen burpee star jumps,' Mr Pearce had told us. First and foremost, the word *burpee* is a hate crime in itself, and that's before we even get on to the physical exertion required to *do* such a thing.

And I'm doing this *after* trying and failing to run a lap of the playing field in less than three minutes! In what world was I ever going to be able to do that? I might as well have just given

up before I started. To be honest, I thought I was going to be the *only* one who failed, but here I am with Bolade and Sam, who also fall into the category of *slowcoach*. They're not fat and slow – they're just slow, which is less embarrassing overall but still pretty embarrassing because Mr Pearce has *decided* to make it embarrassing.

'UGH!' I shout indignantly, but I carry on my torture and I feel the burn of a) the unseasonably warm sun b) the eyeballs of my entire class (minus Sam and Bolade) c) every muscle in my body and d) the perfectly calibrated humiliation of Mr Pearce's PE lesson. What a way to finish the last day of my GCSE year.

'There must –' Sam pants as he hauls himself up off the ground into a star jump – 'be another way . . . to do this . . .'

'Do what?' Bolade asks, her eyes facing forward, determined, focused.

'PE . . . It doesn't need to . . . be like . . . this,' he says.

'I'm . . . pretty . . . sure . . . it . . . does,' I manage to utter breathlessly, unable to imagine a world in which PE is anything other than completely vile and embarrassing and frustrating.

'Nearly there. Come on, you lot! Ten more to go!' Mr Pearce says in a tone that I think is meant to be rousing but just makes me want to karate-kick him in the head.

I feel like I'm going to pass out right here and now. Ten more to go. My legs feel like they're going to give out, but I make them spring forward as springily as I can manage and then jump up into a star jump. Nine to go. Eight. Seven. Six –

'Ruby? Roo? Ruby! Wake up!' My best friend April's voice floats into my brain.

All I know is, I'm lying down and it's nice here. Nice on the ground. Nice not to be jumping around.

'Oh my days is she *dead*?' Jessica sounds indignant, veritably furious at Mr Pearce.

'I think she fainted!' That's Salma.

'Now, girls, please get out of the way.'

I open my eyes to see Mr Pearce's craggy visage looming above me. A sneer on his face makes my humiliation boil over into rage. If my cheeks weren't already on fire from the relentless workout, I would be pink with fury. Sure, it's embarrassing, but more than anything this kind of bullying just makes me *angry*. Like if the Incredible Hulk was a chubby sixteen-year-old girl. And not green.

'There you are, slowcoach. You're all right, aren't you? Nothing like a bit of a challenge to show you what you're really made of.'

CHAPTER 1

'WURRRRRGH!' I emit not so much a scream as a strangled wail.

Whose idea was it to roller-skate in a park built on a hill? I think, in the microsecond between losing my centre of gravity and ending up on my bum. Someone falls over every time we go skating (except for Jessica, who hasn't fallen for weeks). And today it appears it's my turn!

'You all right, Roo?' Jessica skates over and holds out her hand to grab me, but I'm laughing too much to reply.

'I'm fine!' I finally say as she hauls me back to my feet with great elegance. 'The benefits of extra padding.' I run my hand over my bum and feel the place where it made impact with the ground, then skate over to where April and Salma are doing elegant laps, leaving Jessica to her more impressive backwards skating that's drawing the attention of all the skateboarders at the nearby park. None of us had skated before Easter but we all got a bit obsessed with watching videos and decided it just looked *too* fun. We had to wait for ages for skates that didn't cost a million pounds to come into stock in all our sizes, but that time came! And now we're a regular little roller-skate

gang, zooming around without a care in the world now we've finished our GCSEs.

Jessica is definitely the best. I guess gymnastics has given her some amazing centre of gravity or something, but it's amazing to watch, her long blue braids swinging behind her as she goes. She doesn't even wear knee pads or wrist guards. Then there's me, April and Salma. April in her pure black skates with black wheels – she insisted on waiting until she could get them because she didn't want her skates messing with her look. And Salma and me, in our matching pink pairs just doing our best. We've gone out a few times on the tennis court in Mayow Park when no one's booked it. A nice even surface for us to cruise around on. Find our feet. But Jessica had a need to live more dangerously, so here we are. On a hill.

'If you saw me fall on my bum . . . firstly, no you didn't. Secondly, erase it from your memory,' I say, joining April and Salma.

'I feel like I'm about one second away from doing it myself,' April says, clinging to Salma with her black-lace-gloved hands.

'Confidence!' Salma says, ever the optimist. 'Don't let the skates smell your fear! They're like sharks or something.'

'You're right,' I say. 'The second I feel nervous, that's when I do something weird and illogical with my feet and end up on the floor.'

'We've all ended up on the floor at some point,' Salma says encouragingly.

'But some of us are looking at the stars,' April says with a sly smile.

Am I good at roller skating? No. Is it fun? Yes. I haven't

broken any bones so far, so I'm chalking that up as a win. Either way, it's just a good excuse to be outside on a sunny day with my pals.

I catch sight of Jessica talking to Joshua Jones from my GCSE history class. 'Oh,' I say, nodding towards the skate park. '*That's* why we're here.'

'Good luck to her,' April says, elegantly pressing the back of her wrist to her forehead to stop a droplet of sweat emanating from her blonde pixie cut. Amid April's goth stylings, that's one thing she's always held out on. No black hair dye . . . yet.

'Why?' Salma asks. When she blinks I can see the electric blue liquid eyeliner in a sharp strike across her eyelids. Truly a make-up mastermind. 'He seems nice.'

'*Seems,*' April says, raising her eyebrows meaningfully.

'Oh, I see,' I say, laughing. 'So you don't actually know there's anything wrong with Joshua, you just suspect it because there's no way there *isn't* something wrong with him.'

'You know it, baby.'

Jessica skates over to join us. 'I am *obsessed* with him.'

'Last week you said he was too much hard work,' I remind her. 'Too strong and silent. Or something?'

'I don't caaaaaare!' she says, throwing her arms wide and doing the roller skating equivalent of a pirouette. 'Nobody's perfect!'

'Well,' Salma concedes, 'you do look great together. But you said, literally with your own mouth, that you didn't think he was boyfriend material.'

'He isn't, but I don't care!'

'I'm really appreciating the amount you're saying that you don't care,' April says, grinning.

‘It’s because I don’t!’ Jessica says gleefully, high on the crush. ‘I’m just obsessed with him!’

‘And I’m obsessed with your skating,’ I say.

I would *like* to be able to skate like Jessica but for me skating is purely for lols and japes, so I’m not going to sweat it too much that I’m not a pro.

‘My goal is to be able to do the splits on skates by the end of the summer.’ She takes her phone out of the back pocket of her short denim shorts to check the time. ‘Oh shit, I gotta go. Mum needs me to look after Marcus this afternoon. But, yeah, Operation Splits is *on*.’

‘Excited to find out how low you can go,’ April says as she plonks down on the metal bench to start unlacing her skates.

Jessica shrugs. ‘Practice makes perfect.’ Then she thinks for a moment. ‘No wait . . . practice makes *better*.’

‘And will you just happen to do the splits in front of Joshua Jones?’

‘Maybe I will, maybe I won’t . . .’ She winks and cackles devilishly.

We shove our skates in our bags (no *way* am I skating all the way home) and hug goodbye, Salma and Jessica heading up towards Crystal Palace and me and April taking the nearby exit towards Sydenham.

CHAPTER 2

When we reach the little car park by the park, we gasp with delight. The ice-cream van is there.

‘How are they called a ninety-nine when they’re never ninety-nine p?’ April asks me in the queue.

‘Maybe the ninety-nine doesn’t refer to the price but instead some mysterious cosmic force that makes them so delicious.’

‘It’s possible. Definitely possible.’

Once I’ve tapped my phone to pay the extortionate price of two ice creams, we leave the park and head towards home. It’s so warm that my ice cream is already dripping on to my hand by the time we’ve crossed the main road next to the park.

‘I think I would have died without an ice cream,’ April says, crunching the end of her wafer cone. ‘I’m not cut out for this.’

‘Yeah, I’m actually quite shocked that you came,’ I say. ‘Firstly the sun, secondly . . .’

My words hang in the air. She doesn’t answer. I nudge her with my hip.

‘You know, you’re allowed to talk about it. I *am* your best friend. If you can’t talk to me about it, who can you talk to?’

‘I don’t want to talk to anyone! It’s too shit. What’s there to even talk about?’

‘Fine,’ I sigh. ‘But I’m here if you want to talk about *you-know-who*.’

‘All right, all right,’ April says, waving the topic away. ‘Hey, do you want to go to the park? It’s still kind of early.’

We may have just *come* from a park, but when we say *the* park we mean Mayow Park. ‘Yeah, why not? I have nothing to do today and the longer I’m out, the less I have to share physical space with Jake.’

April shudders in horror. We continue our stroll under the hot afternoon sun. Eventually it becomes too much for April and she pulls her black mini parasol out of her backpack and rests it against her shoulder. The slightly ostentatious sight of someone dressed all in black with a black parasol catches the eye of a girl across the road walking a sausage dog in the opposite direction. April doesn’t notice, so ensconced is she in her shady little goth oasis, but I realise it’s Liv, aka The Other Fat Girl. We give each other a nod of acknowledgement.

Our school is pretty big so I don’t know everyone there by any means, and next year there’ll be even *more* people I don’t know when we get an influx of new students for sixth form. But Liv’s been there the whole time and I can’t honestly say that I know a thing about her, other than that she’s, well, The Other Fat Girl. And that she appears to have a sausage dog. I know the word *fat* makes a lot of people prickly, but I’m pretty fine with it, so if she thinks, *Oh, there’s Ruby, The Other Fat Girl*, I’m down with that. It’s what I am. My feelings on the word are just one big shrug. But seeing her out and about

makes me wonder . . . maybe it would be cool to have a fat friend. An ally. Or maybe she's all stressed out and self-hating and wouldn't *want* to be my friend. Who knows!

Finally we make it to Mayow Park and flop on the grass under a tree near the playground. April rests the parasol on the ground so it shields her face. We just chill on the grass, not saying anything. I've known April for long enough to be able to tell when she's in a quiet mood, and things not working out with Juliet have definitely left her a little more subdued than usual. The sound of summer is all around us. Some adults are playing rounders in the big central grassy patch, the sound of ball hitting bat uniquely satisfying. Kids giggling as they go down the slide or get pushed on the swings. Intense-looking dudes using the outdoor exercise equipment. Sometimes a dog ambles over and sniffs around our little corner of the park with great interest.

'Ruby?' A voice cuts through the static summer air. Not April's – she's never sounded this bright and keen. I open my eyes under my heart-shaped sunglasses and sit up.

'Hi?' I say slowly, suspiciously, looking at this girl who at first glance is a complete stranger, but then I realise was a couple of years ahead of me at school. Pretty, blonde, wearing extremely short shorts – so short, in fact, that the pockets are visibly poking out of the bottom.

'Oh, it is you!' she says, clearly delighted. 'I'm Megan Harper. I don't know if you remember me from school? Anyway, I just wanted to say . . . tell your brother I said . . . hey.' She looks embarrassed all of a sudden, her cheeks reddening.

'I will be sure to tell Jake that Megan Harper says hey,' I tell

her, smiling as sweetly as I can manage. 'Maybe he'll drop you a message or something when I jog his memory.'

Her face brightens again. 'Oh, yes, maybe!'

We stare at each other in silence for a moment. April is still lying next to me, under her black parasol. No movement at all. Not so much as a twitch of an eyelid.

'Well,' I say.

'I'll leave you to it . . . ' Megan says.

'Yeah . . . '

She turns to walk away, before turning back a second later. 'Don't forget!'

I lock my teeth in a rictus grin. 'I won't!' I say with a cheeriness of such intense falsity that I'm sure she'll think I'm taking the piss. Which I am. If I could go one day of my life without someone fawning over my awful brother, I would be a happy Ruby Morgan. Then, finally, this Megan interloper is gone and April and I are alone again. Pretty much how we like it.

'Jesus,' April chuckles, finally reanimating her immobile body.

'Tell me about it,' I sigh, flopping back on to the grass, trying to match the exact pattern of flattened greenery I'd left behind.

'Does that happen often?'

'I wouldn't go as far as to say *often*, but she's definitely not the first girl from his year that's greeted me with great enthusiasm and messages for the boy himself.'

'Straight people are weird,' she says, shaking her head slowly.

I shrug. 'Some of us are OK.'

'You'll do, I suppose.' She resumes her position under the black-lace parasol. April may be a goth but the amount she

avoids the sun you would think she was an actual vampire. 'So are you going to tell Jake that Megan Harper says hey?'

'Yeah. I feel sorry for anyone who fancies him because he's such a dickhead. Which puts me in a bind, because either I don't tell him and I feel disloyal to the poor girl, or I do and she risks getting tangled up in some bullshit with him.'

'A vile beast,' April intones solemnly. 'Is he still being a dick to Sasha?'

'Yeah,' I sigh. 'I mean, he's a dick to me too, but I mind it more when he's a dick to her. She's ten! Like, literally a baby! Leave her alone! She is a perfect little princess!'

'What's his latest crime?'

'Oh my God, so the other day my mum asked Sasha if she wanted to start getting her own breakfast in the morning over the holidays – a classic scam to make Sasha feel like a big girl and to save Mum the work when she already has loads to do – and this morning I came downstairs and Jake was standing there with her with the bowl of cereal on the digital kitchen scales and he was, like . . . taking cereal out of the bowl *flake by flake* until it was precisely the portion size stated on the box!'

April shudders. 'Big, big yikes. What's the monster up to today?'

I don't even have to think about it. 'Probably lifting weights in his room or shoehorning the fact he goes to Oxford into whatever conversation he's having at the present moment.'

'Classic Jake. Can you actually imagine wanting to work out on a day like today? *Wanting* to sweat?' April asks.

'Jesus, no. I can't imagine it at the best of times, and this is very much the worst of times.'

It's a hot day at the end of June so we still have *loads* of the summer holidays left and the sunshine is feeling like a promise of more sunshine to come, nothing but blue skies from here until September. It doesn't matter if that doesn't come true. It's just that feeling of infinite possibility. Delicious.

'I'm still traumatised by memories of the bleep test, even though I know we don't have to do PE ever again.' April sighs, bathing in the idyllic thought. 'God bless sixth form.'

'Yeah, but . . . you always did fine at stuff like that,' I say, frowning.

'I disagree with it *on principle*. Like, *politically*. It seemed like it was designed to make us all feel like shit. It's not even like . . . *the law* or the curriculum. It's just something Mr Pearce wanted to do to assert his dominance. Like, remember what he was like with *you* with those sprints?'

Just the mention of that cursed lesson has got my blood boiling. Of *course* I remember the sprints! It was the most humiliating thing ever! Mr Pearce decided I wasn't running fast enough when the class was doing timed sprints so he made me run on my own in front of everyone while the rest of them took a break. Can you imagine! I was scarlet with cringe. Pure humiliation. All those eyes on my fat body, and me just trying my best but not being as good as everyone else, which to him *obviously* meant I wasn't trying. It was on that day that I knew I was *never* going to enjoy exercise. Nope. Not the one.

'Well, all that is behind us,' I say, throwing my arms wide, ending the PE chat right there. 'Isn't life so much better now we're headed into sixth form?'

‘One million per cent. And you know what’s even better than sixth form?’

‘What?’

‘Summer holiday before sixth form.’

‘So true.’

‘We get to do nothing. Nothing!’

‘Summer of chill,’ I say, reaching lazily behind me for my water bottle. And chill is exactly what I need. Maybe a little roller skating and watching horror movies with April and Salma and Jessica. Maybe a little helping my mum with her baking business, maybe a little doing nothing with April, just the way we like it.

Except this summer feels different. No Dad.

Well, it’s not like he’s *dead* or anything. But not having him around is weird. Manchester’s not the ends of the earth, but it’s not the end of the road either. It’s easy to forget he’s gone sometimes because the rest of us are still there so it just seems logical that he is too. But then you realise his stuff isn’t there any more, and, oh yeah, you remember hugging him goodbye at the end of the garden path a few months ago, and, yes, he really is gone. Five became four.