

"A FANTASTICALLY CLEVER NOVEL" SARAH CROSSAN

First date.

First time.



The
last thing
they're expecting.

LITTLE
BANG

KELLY McCAUGHRAIN

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WALKER
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CHAPTER 1

New Year's Eve 2017

Sid

How many people get to turn sixteen on New Year's Eve?

Mel would say, "Well, statistically speaking..." and then she'd work it out and give me an actual number, and I'd say, "Not the point, Mel. Not the fucking point."

Point is, *not many*. And how many will be turning sixteen at *three minutes to midnight* on New Year's Eve? Maybe just me. I know I was born at three minutes to midnight because Lucille reminds me every year. She sighs, shakes her head at me and says, "For the sake of three minutes..." Apparently whoever gives birth to the first baby of the new year gets their picture in the *Belfast Telegraph* and she was hoping 2002 would be her year. Brought make-up to the hospital and everything. I think she imagines her 2002 baby, the one born three minutes later, the one she was *supposed* to have, would have been born with a smile on his gob and a golden light round his head. Newsworthy from birth.

Instead, for the sake of three minutes, she got me.

If you ask me, those three minutes were the best decision I ever made. Because my birthday is always a party. A global bender. And tonight I get to turn sixteen on the biggest night of the year, instead of tomorrow, when everyone's hungover and wishing they hadn't promised to join a gym.

"You *are* going *out*, aren't you, Sid?" Lucille looks warily at me in the mirror doors of her wardrobes.

I glance warily back at the karaoke machine in the corner of her bedroom. "Definitely."

"Not that you're not welcome to stay," she says, unconvincingly, tugging a comb through the damp peroxide frizz over her undershave. "But I'm giving Amy and Jenny your room. If you arrive back here before morning, you'll be sharing with me."

I repress the image of sharing a bed with my mother and her satin pyjama shorts. *Shudder*. No way I'm spending tonight at a karaoke party with a load of old people asking what I want to do at university, then looking pityingly at Lucille when I say I'm not going to university – I'm starting a band. The pity isn't about my education. It's because Lucille has been counting the days until I move out for sixteen years now.

If I'd wanted to go to a crap house party there are a dozen around here I could have crashed, but they'll all be exactly the same as being in school because they'll all feature exactly the same people. Tonight isn't about *same*. In years to come people will ask what I did for my sixteenth, and I don't want to have to make stuff up. Tonight has to be special.

"Where are you going then?" Lucille shouts over the roar of the drier.

"House party at Mac's. Dev's picking me up."

She lets go of the comb, mid-stroke, and it hangs there like an

antenna. “Oh, I don’t know. I don’t like that crowd. And I don’t like you tearing around in cars with people who haven’t been driving very long. When did Dev pass his test?”

“Wednesday?”

“What?!”

“But he’s been driving for *ages*. That was the fifth time he’s done his test.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. You always end up in trouble when you’re with that lot.”

“Not *always*.” I take my lighter out and flick it on and off, on and off. She tuts but she hasn’t time to lecture me about smoking tonight.

“Being brought home in a police car three times is three times too many, Sid.”

“It’s not like I was lifted for robbing houses. You just act really hammered on the walk home and they stop and give you a lift. It’s like a really cheap taxi service.”

“I swear, Sid, if I get a call from the police tonight—”

“You won’t!”

“Or the neighbours.”

“Lucille.”

“Or the hospital! I mean it, I’m not coming to get you.”

“Wow, thanks. I’ll die quietly by myself then.” I reach out a melodramatic arm and say, “If we never meet again, it’s been ... *interesting* knowing you, Lucille.”

She just starts spraying a whole tin of hairspray at herself while I try not to choke.

“Why don’t you go into Belfast? They’re doing fireworks at midnight.”

“Fireworks are for old people at weddings.”

“I suppose there’ll be alcohol at this party?”

“There will be when I get there.” I kick the rucksack at my feet and it clinks.

She snaps off the drier. “Sid!”

I laugh, enjoying this. I could tell Lucille I’m going to an orgy in a crack den and she wouldn’t stop me. Not tonight. I’d like to see her face if I said I *wasn’t* going out.

“Stop stressing, Lucille. It’s all cheap shit. Probably doesn’t have half the alcohol content of your posh champagne.” She buys the posh stuff to show off to her mates. Goes nicely with her big house and her big car. Unlike me. I am the embarrassing bottle of Buckfast in the wine cellar of her life.

She sets down her brush, dabs something unnaturally shiny on her lips and steps back from the mirror. “How do I look?”

She’s wearing too much make-up. And too much jewellery. And her hair’s too stiff and her jeans are too tight. The longer she’s been single, the more she overdoes the wardrobe. It’s been six months since her last boyfriend (Call-Me-Steve Steve), and being single on New Year’s Eve has tipped her right over into desperado territory. To be fair, I can sympathize. Being single on New Year’s Eve is tragic, which is why I went all out on my own clothes tonight.

“You look great!” I tell her. “Very 2018.”

She glances over my slashed jeans and DMs, my lucky Ramones T-shirt and half-shaved head, and doesn’t return the compliment. “Take a jumper,” is all she says.

I grab my bag and guitar. Outside, I hear a car horn and muffled singing.

“So who’ll be there?” she says, following me up the hall.

I shrug and call back, “The usual. Dev, Nev, Mac, Big Murph, Wee Murph, Deckchair, Happy Zac—”

“Do any of your friends have *proper* names?”

“The girls do.”

“There’ll be girls?” She seems more surprised than worried. But actually there *will* be girls. Mel, for completely random example, promised she’d be there.

“Not that girl with the nipple piercing?” Lucille says, before muttering, “I can’t believe she showed me that.”

“Nah, not her.”

“Good.”

“This girl has two nipple piercings.”

She just cuts me a look.

Actually Lucille would faint if she saw Mel, who doesn’t even have her *ears* pierced. And the booze isn’t all for me. And I’m definitely smoking less these days. Dev passed his test a month ago, I won’t be at Mac’s, and I won’t be wandering the streets plastered in the wee hours of the morning. I’ll be up Carnclare Hill seeing the New Year in with the smartest, quietest girl in school and a bird’s-eye view of every firework in Belfast. But I’m not telling Lucille that. It would make her too happy.

She cuffs me lightly round the head. “Just watch yourself. And happy birthday.”

“Thanks!” I’m halfway out the door, rucksack clinking. “See you next year!”

Mel

Firstly, we must understand that the word “firstly” has no intrinsic meaning. How we experience time is a product of our psychology, not a property of time itself.

Isaac Newton believed that time flows uniformly in one direction, like a river. But Einstein suggests that past, present

and future are more like islands in a lake that we can hop between. Einstein's time doesn't "flow"; it just "is"...

Except, trying to write in a corner of our overcrowded living room while Smug Nigel tells us about his youth outreach work with “troubled teens”, it feels like it just *isn't*. Time has fled, left the building. We've been sucked into a black hole of high-density cringe and

the clocks

have

stopped.

“You have to engage them on their own turf,” he's saying. “Be part of the gang. Some of these kids are wandering the streets at all hours, carrying knives, neglected at home. It would break your heart. They're basically being raised by the internet.” He waves his phone at everyone like this is conclusive evidence of something. My aunts, uncles and the cousins who were too young to escape tonight make appropriately scandalized noises over their mini quiches.

“That's why we felt called to start the *Rap for Christ* YouTube channel,” he goes on. I feel called to vomit all over my shoes.

“Oh, you should see Nigel's videos – he's very talented!” says Mum, who is maybe the only person in the world who really *does* believe Smug Nigel is very talented. She's also had one whole glass of sherry already so she's tipsy.

Dad winks at me and sneaks me a tiny glass of fake champagne. I grimace back. Dad and I have an unspoken understanding about Smug Nigel, which is that we both realize he's an idiot, but we never say it out loud, even to each other, because he's Leah's idiot. Once *she* realizes he's an idiot, we can all pile on, but she has to do it first.

I can't concentrate, and it's nothing to do with the cheesy quasi-religious pop music playing by my ear. It's not even to do with Smug Nigel, who I'm used to. It's because it's eight p.m. on the very last night of the year, and I am *at the wrong party*.

You better not mess this up, was the last thing Becca texted to me. She knows what a bad liar I am. The girls only agreed to go to this party because Sid asked me, and boys *never* ask me to parties. They ask if they can copy my homework or borrow my notes. They don't ask me out.

If he *did* ask me out? It wasn't entirely clear. Anyway, Becca said she didn't trust him – “Sid McKee! Are you *mental*? Didn't he punch a cop?” – so the girls were coming too, to be safe. I think, actually, Becca was just curious and didn't want to spend New Year's at another one of Ruby and Jools's Disney Movie Marathons, but if they go all the way up there and I don't even show up, they'll never forgive me. My phone is blowing up in my pocket already, but Becca's only asking where I am and I can't tell her I haven't even had the guts to ask if I can go yet.

Dad and I also have an unspoken understanding about Mum, which is that she's a bit strict but if it's something important Dad will talk her round. But an all-night outdoor party with Sid's crowd? I may as well ask for permission to get a tattoo. Of a swear word. On my forehead.

“Only you would be doing homework on New Year's Eve Mel,” Dad says, loud enough to make everyone turn and look. He's so transparent it's actually adorable. “Top of her year in the Christmas exams, weren't you, love?” The aunts *ooh* appreciatively and ask what I'm working on, and he swells with pride.

“I'm just making notes. For an essay. About time,” I mumble, blushing. I only brought the notebook down so I could hide behind it.

“Time? As in...” Auntie Cath glances at the mantelpiece clock.

“Oh, no, the *nature* of time. You know, like how it’s relative?”

Apparently they *don’t* know. And they look at me like they don’t hold out much hope for the essay if this is the best I can do at explaining. I wish all communication could be done in writing. Or the way me and Dad do it, with grimaces and winks.

“Mel and her theories.” Smug Nigel shakes his head indulgently like I’ve just outlined my ideas on how Santa Claus gets around all the houses in one night.

“It’s not *my* theory, it’s Einstein’s,” I mutter, and he eyerolls at Mum like Einstein is a mate from school with too much to say for himself.

Mum sighs adoringly at him. Leah and Smug Nigel are living upstairs “temporarily” while Smug Nigel is “between jobs”, but it doesn’t matter that he’s an unemployable eejit; he is “in the church” (he is *all over* the church), so he can do no wrong.

Leah distracts everyone by offering them finger food. She knows I hate being the centre of attention.

I’ve always relied on my sister being the sane one in the family. She used to make me cool playlists and give me her old make-up. But then she married Smug Nigel and they started “trying for a baby” and she’s been getting steadily crazier ever since. All she talks about is special foods, and special exercises, and special vitamins that boost fertility. Sometimes I feel like suggesting she try sex. But then I look at Smug Nigel in his polo neck and chinos. I think I’d be pinning my hopes on the vitamins too.

Whether the future is Newton’s river or Einstein’s island, the important thing, according to Heisenberg, father of quantum theory, is that absolutely nothing about it can be predicted.

Heisenberg hadn't met my parents.

I score that last line out.

It's not that my family have no interest in the science of time. "When" is a concept they are fully on board with. *When* you do your A levels, *when* you apply for medicine, *when* you go to university in Belfast, *when* you marry Matt and buy a bungalow in the next street and have three kids and take over from Leah at the Sunday school... Mum and Dad are committed Newtonians who think Einstein could have done with a haircut, and they'll definitely expect me to stay here with them and celebrate the New Year by watching it flow past in one sensible direction.

I try to imagine Sid's party. Sid isn't a Newtonian or an Einsteinian. Sid is a quantum unknown. A tachyon, a quark, a hypothetical particle that may or may not even exist and can't *ever* be predicted. In quantum terms, absolutely *anything* could happen at Sid's party.

The idea of that makes me feel itchy in my own skin, like my very *atoms* are ready to split into something unstable.

Sid

*Cos it was just my place
But now it's the place
I come to think about your face
And...*

Something about *space*? Christ. Lyrics have never been my strong point.

How do you put someone like Mel into words? How do you

say they've filled your head with such huge thoughts you need to be *outdoors* to think them? I want to say she's a mild-mannered tsunami, but the only thing that rhymes with "tsunami" is "salami", and that's not going anywhere good.

I really do come up Carnclare Hill to think about her. It's important to have a place to think. Most people have their bedrooms, but Lucille barges into my room and cleans it so often it doesn't even smell like me, it smells like Mr Sheen. She redecorates without telling me. I stick up posters of Code Orange and Counterparts and she covers them with pastel paintings of waterfalls. *When you get your own place, Sid, you can disfigure it however you like.*

So Carnclare Hill is my place. Gets me out of the house, which is fine with both me and Lucille. I'm too scruffy for her wine-tasting group and too gobby for her Women Entrepreneurs meetings. And God forbid one of her dates should see me and think she's old enough to have a teenage kid. A couple of months ago Constable Oliver found me boking in a hedge and brought me home and we walked into the middle of an Ann Summers party in our living room. I had to move a box of sex toys to sit down, and all Lucille's mates thought we were the strippers and tried to get off with Oliver, until he threatened to arrest them.

I take a swig from the plastic bottle of cheap cider being passed around and watch my own reflection in the car windows as we flash in and out under streetlights. The burn of the booze spreading through my chest is like the feeling I get when I think about Mel. I imagine telling her she's *intoxicating*.

The buzz in my head

The buzz in my skin

*From the things that you said
The way you leaned in...*

Jesus, the lads would burst something.

There are six of us and two guitars in Dev's ancient Ford Fiesta, and by the time we arrive and do the twenty-minute walk up the hill, the others are already there, playing *Knocked Loose* on Big Murph's phone. Whatever Lucille may think, I *do* have female mates. But apparently none of them were up for spending New Year's listening to punk and metalcore in the rain, so only the lads have turned up.

The hill isn't big or impressive. It has a hem of housing estates, and disused quarry pockets have been gouged from its sides. But at the very top there's just fields, a group of boulders perfect for sitting on and a view of the whole of Belfast and Belfast Lough. On a good day, you can see the coast of Scotland to the north, and the Mourne Mountains to the south, at the border with Ireland, with Northern Ireland squeezed in between them. Three countries in one view.

But tonight the Lough is a pool of black ink and Belfast city centre is lit up like a game of tail-light snakes and apartment-block ladders. There's a hushed feeling, like we're all waiting for something to happen.

"Tell me again why we're outdoors in the middle of winter?" Zac tugs his hat down over his face.

"Tell *me* again why we're spending New Year's Eve with the school nuns?" Dev mutters.

"Sid's hoping they're the Sisters of Mercy-Shags," Mac says, and they all piss themselves.

"I bet they don't even drink. Probably have to be home by ten."

“Yeah, cos you lot are so edgy.” I give them the finger and laugh it off. Jesus, what if this was a terrible idea? I like Mel – I *really* like Mel – but what if her mates are just weird? And what will they make of *my* mates? I’ve been working my balls off for weeks to impress her. What if she turns up tonight and sees the sad bottles of cheap cider, the badly rolled joints, the slurred arguments about guitar pedals? What if all she sees is a bunch of wasters sitting in a muddy field because we’re not really welcome anywhere else? What if she sees right through me?

Someone offers me a can but I shake my head and light a cigarette instead.

“Not drinking, big lad?”

“Worried he won’t be able to get it up later!”

“Don’t blame him. Have you seen those munters? Here, I have a whole wank bank on my phone.”

“Fuck away off!” Christ, this was a *terrible* idea. I had visions of Mel gazing adoringly at me while I played guitar by firelight, but even if I had the balls, what would I play? She’d hate the stuff my mates listen to. I hate it. I pretend to like metalcore but actually I have secret playlists full of pop punk that they’d consider practically boy bands.

I heap up damp wood for the bonfire and watch the path anxiously for lights. I hope they’ve got torches on their phones. And that they remember where the quarries are. Shit, did I tell them about the quarries?

Just as I’ve decided that maybe it’s better if she *doesn’t* come, we hear them. Voices. Laughter and shrieks as they climb the fences. The lads eyeroll and quietly fix their hair.

It probably *is* a terrible idea but suddenly I don’t care. All I wanted really was to show her this place. Because she’s only ever seen me in school, where I’m not exactly impressive.

The only reason they haven't kicked me out is that expulsions are a lot of paperwork and they know they'll be rid of me after the GCSEs anyway.

I wave and they wave back and the dots of light become moving shadows, then figures, then people, then girls, and then they're here, lugging bags and giggling behind their scarves.

But Mel's not with them. And that was the whole point of everything.

Mel

The doorbell chimes and I wonder who else has been sucked into our black hole. Dad leads in the new arrivals: Smug Nigel's parents, Mr and Mrs Dunlop, and their other son, Matt.

In the mental vacuum of our living room, no one can hear me scream.

I turn to glare *did you know about this?* at Leah. She shrugs helplessly and knocks back her third Virgin Mary cocktail.

"Hi, Mel." Matt immediately locates himself beside me as I scramble for empty glasses to refill. "Happy New Year."

"Yeah, you too."

He tugs his tie knot nervously (he's wearing a jacket and tie!) and I have a sudden image of people being legitimately allowed to kiss you at midnight.

"Good Christmas?" I ask.

"Yeah!" He pulls a little pouch out of his jacket pocket. "Got some new coins."

"Yeah?"

"I got Mum to order them from eBay."

"Great."

“I was worried she’d mess it up and buy the reproduction ones, but it was grand.”

“Phew.”

This is the kind of scintillating conversation Matt and I have. He also collects vintage toy cars, postcards and cameras. It’s like Matt has visited the future, seen the weird old man he will become and decided not to waste any more time.

“You look nice,” he says, blushing furiously.

“Er ... you too.”

I’m hardly in a position to comment on *his* clothes. Mum has her own theory of time and it consists of one immutable law: the quality of the clothes you buy is directly proportional to how long they last, and *quality* clothes are never *fashionable* clothes. There’s no point in them being fashionable because they’ll last much longer than any trend. I’m worried that the alpaca monstrosity and houndstooth skirt she got me for Christmas – and insisted I wear tonight – will still be around when I’m thirty-five.

“Your mum says you’re leading one of the Sunday school groups next year? We could team up!” Matt says. “And, like, maybe go for coffee or something after?” He rakes a hand casually through his neat, blond hair while his cheeks bloom pink and his square jaw works anxiously. The unfortunate thing is, Matt’s actually quite good-looking. He just manages to be good-looking in a completely boring way.

“Oh. Um...”

“Matt! Lovely to see you!” Mum croons. She attempts to take the glasses from me so I can’t escape to the kitchen, and I attempt to hold on to them. Mum wins the tussle, winking as she leaves us alone.

Leah thinks I have it easy because she had to fight all the parental battles first and I’m just sailing along in her wake.

She was officially allowed to start dating when she was sixteen, so I've been waiting impatiently for my sixteenth birthday for years now. But I didn't realize I was turning sixteen in a Jane Austen novel. I suppose my matchmaking parents know that they're going to have to allow me to go out with a boy soon, and they're taking no chances about who that boy will be. The idea of choirboy Matt being a risk to anyone's daughter is laughable.

Almost as laughable as the idea of Sid McKee being allowed *near* anyone's daughter.

Sid is trouble. Sid and I only *met* because he's trouble.

Three months ago, Sid got moved next to me in History because he was being disruptive. Miss Girvan probably hoped I would bore him into good behaviour. I'm a very minor planet of the "scholar system", so I didn't expect him to even notice me sitting next to him. In fact, I hoped he wouldn't, because guys like him are scary.

For weeks I waited for him to do something mean. Say something nasty. Ping my bra strap. Steal my phone. Make me do his homework. Some days he didn't even show up for class. Others he snored through it, or he sprawled his arms and legs and Lynx deodorant smell out across both our spaces like I wasn't there. Finally he registered my existence long enough to lean over my shoulder and read the book hidden beneath my desk. I gripped it, expecting him to snatch it and read it aloud or something. But he didn't. He yawned and said, "Whas tha about?"

He was sucking a lolly that had stained his lips blue and looking expectantly at me. I took in his hair – half shaved, half pink – leather bracelets, eyebrow piercings, the black anarchy

symbol T-shirt visible through his white shirt. His coal-black eyes and blueberry lips. I was too flustered to lie.

“It’s about time,” I said.

“What’s that about?” Somehow it’s not the same when Matt asks.

He reads over my shoulder. “*The many-worlds theory suggests that every time quantum systems interact with each other, the universe splits into different parallel universes. Every possibility is played out in one of those universes.*” He looks up at me. “Er ... what?”

I close the notebook. “It’s nothing.”

“What’s a quantum system?”

“It’s anything.” He’s just being polite and I wave a hand impatiently. “Any particle, any group of particles. A human being is just a quantum system. So two quantum systems interact... Say you ask me if I want a drink, for example – at that point, the universe splits into two parallel universes. In one, I say yes; in the other, no.” I gently stress the “No”.

He nods slowly.

“*All the possible outcomes are played out in parallel universes. Which means you probably shouldn’t take it too hard if a girl turns you down, right? In another universe, she said yes.*” I nudge his shoulder like I’m kidding. Becca says I should just tell Matt I’m not interested, but he looks at me with these big hopeful eyes, and we’re vaguely related by marriage, which means I have to see him *all the time*, and I just *can’t*. So instead I bore him with science and drop endless hints that he never quite gets.

I sigh. “Doesn’t matter. I’m just writing an essay about it. For a competition.”

“Yeah? What’s the prize?”

“A trip to a college at Cambridge. You get to meet the lecturers and visit the labs and stuff. The last three people to win

it all went on to study there. It looks good on your application.”

“You’re going to Cambridge?” His face falls.

“I’m thinking about it.” I lower my voice and feign nonchalance, like I don’t have prospectuses stuffed under my bed already.

“Sounds complicated,” he says, frowning at the notebook.

“It’s not *complicated*, it’s mind-blowing.” He looks doubtful. I can tell he’s hoping I’ll stop soon and we can go back to talking about the new coin he’s holding. “I mean, *every* possibility will exist. Every version of *you* will exist. There’ll be a universe where I someday go to Cambridge to study Physics and a universe where I don’t.” I’m painfully aware that there’s also a universe where I manage to get to Sid’s party tonight, and one where I don’t; and I’m starting to worry that I’m not only at the wrong party ... I’m *in the wrong universe*.

“Okaaaay, I guess that’s ... interesting.”

“It’s insane. The *interesting* part is: is it random?” I take his coin and flip it while he looks on nervously, twitching to catch it before it lands in someone’s drink.

“With particles, it’s completely random; you can’t predict what they’re going to do. But people aren’t particles, are they? *We* can decide. Every possible universe *will* exist – we can’t change that – but is there anything we can do to make sure that we’re in the universe where I go to Cambridge?” *Or Sid’s party?* I don’t add. “Are we just completely at the mercy of Chance or can we decide our fate?”

The mantelpiece clock strikes nine, bringing me back to *this* universe. The one where Mum is handing round a plate of mini sausage rolls and mini chicken bites.

“Isn’t that the point about fate?” Matt says. “That you *can’t* change it?” He seizes the opportunity to take his coin back, tucking it safely into its pouch.

He's right. Who am I kidding? Thinking I'd be seeing the new year in with someone like Sid McKee? *Me?* Even the laws of physics are against me. All around me, particles with pickled onions on cocktail sticks split the universe again and again while I sit here, immobile, in the alpaca jumper of infinity. If I'm honest, I knew I'd still be here at nine p.m. I knew it when Sid asked me. I knew I wouldn't have the guts. It was as inevitable as mini quiche. I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning and *nothing* will have changed, after tonight of all nights, and all the *whens* will come to pass and the river of time will flow on and nothing interesting will ever happen to me ever, *ever* again.

Someone thrusts a plate of mini food under my nose. I stare at it in despair.

"Matt? Let me see that coin again."

He hands it to me eagerly, already explaining where it came from.

I heft the coin's weight in my palm for a moment. Then, with a flick of my thumb, I send it, one more time, into the air and watch it spin, head over tails over head over tails over... Heads it is.

Sid

*Tangled gorse and winter trees
An empty path where you should be
Belfast glitters by a wrinkled sea
An empty path where you should be...*

I crack open another can. Behind me the lads bicker about how to light the fire and who was supposed to bring the bottle

opener. I'm sitting with my back to them, looking out over the path that leads up the hill.

"I have a bottle opener," Jools says.

The great thing about having half the chess club on the hill is that they do smart things like bring bottle openers and blankets to sit on and candles in jars. By the time the lads had got a pathetically small, smoky fire lit, with the help of a bottle of lighter fluid, the girls had erected some sort of canvas house.

"It's a mini marquee," Becca said. "My mum uses it for barbecues. *Don't* get ash on it."

Mel still isn't here.

Fuck midnight. Fuck the whole of 2018, it's ruined already. When I finish this can, I'm going home.

"Her parents are ... well, they're really *nice* actually, but also kind of a nightmare," Becca said when I asked where she was, trying to make it seem like a casual enquiry. I've sent three unanswered – *just casually wondering where the hell you are* – texts, and that's my dignity maxed out. I can't send another one. Not for at least fifteen minutes anyway.

"So she's not coming?"

Becca shrugged, before running off to whisper excitedly with the girls while the lads crowed, "Yeeeeeeooo, scundered!" I've been sitting here ever since. Can't seem to take my eyes off the path.

The first time I ever talked to Mel properly, she told me her ambition was to invent time travel. Which instantly made her the most interesting person I've ever talked to. Insane, but definitely interesting. I spend most of my time in school daydreaming about my big ambition to start a band. Which isn't even a very ambitious ambition, but thinking about it for two years without actually getting around to doing it is completely lame.

“But if time travel was possible, wouldn’t there be people here from the future to tell us about it?” I said, thinking I was being very clever and that this would impress the hell out of the girl reading *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking.

She was kind to me at least. “That’s a good point,” she said, even though it wasn’t. “Time travel the way they do it in movies, where you’re instantaneously transported to another time and place, probably isn’t possible, because if it was, then, yes, there’d be people here from the future.”

I nodded, trying to keep up.

“But Einstein discovered that the faster you’re moving, the slower time goes. So, theoretically, if you had a spaceship that could travel near the speed of light, then for you, time would slow down. Years would pass on Earth but it would only feel like minutes for you in your spaceship. When you came back from space, everyone else would have aged but you’d only be a few minutes older, so you’d have effectively time-travelled into the future.”

“Whoa. That’s...” I mimed the explosion that was currently happening in my skull.

“I know!” she said excitedly. When she talks about science her green eyes shine like sea glass. And her hair is so fine it kind of floats around her head, so she always looks like she’s in zero gravity anyway. “So it *could* be possible to travel to the future,” she said. “All you need is a really, *really* fast spaceship.”

“Is that all?”

“But it doesn’t work for going backwards, only forwards. Which would explain why—”

“There’s no one here from the future!”

“Exactly!” She made a face at our History textbooks. “Who wants to go backwards anyway?”

“Why don’t they tell us this stuff in Science? I just spent an hour wiring up tiny circuit boards to make a buzzer go *buzz* for no reason.”

“If you hang out in Dr Sloane’s room, he tells you this stuff. Plus I’m doing my A level Physics early.”

“So you’ve time-travelled already!” I said, and she laughed. Comedy was all I could contribute to this conversation, but she didn’t seem to care. She wasn’t the kind of girl lads like me are supposed to talk to in school, but suddenly I couldn’t remember why.

“So would you go?” she said. “To the future?”

“Hmm. It’s a one-way ticket, right? You can only go forward? That means you can’t get home again.”

“Well spotted,” she said, and I felt all pleased with myself.

“That’s a head melter. I mean, what if the future was a post-apocalyptic wasteland and you had no way to escape and no way to go back and warn anyone?”

She spread her hands. “Always a possibility. There could be nuclear fallout.”

“Climate change.”

“Global war.”

“Alien invasion.”

We looked at each other, chewing our lips.

“Fuck it,” I said. “I’d still go.”

She grinned. “Me too.”

Well, what was I supposed to say? *The future? Funny you should ask, Mel, because I’m probably going to get kicked out of school soon, and then kicked out of the house because Lucille says she’s not supporting me if I’m not in full-time education, then I’ll have to find a job with my very useful GCSEs in Music and Art. The future? Bring it!*

That day, the day I first spoke to Mel, I'd just come back from the headteacher's office, where he'd asked me why I seemed to be *lacking any apparent interest in my future*.

"You know you're not on track for high enough grades to come back and do A levels?"

"I do, aye."

"Do you have alternative plans then?"

"Um..." *Start a band* wasn't going to impress Mr Millar.

But I left our History class that day wondering, why *wasn't* I interested in the future? The future was class. Maybe not *my* future, but the future generally. And I started to actually think about where I'd fit into that future. Everyone else would be driving about in their hovercars and I'd be serving McMeals-in-a-pill. It's not like I hadn't noticed my grades tanking recently, but I didn't mind because it pissed off Lucille. I hadn't thought much about how it would affect *me*.

And now it's too late. There are about six months until I'm officially turfed out of school. And then what? When you've spent a History class discussing the distant future, six months suddenly doesn't seem like a lot of time.

I guess that's why tonight was so important. Because maybe it's the last good New Year's Eve I'll ever have. The last good birthday. This is my last year at school, maybe my last year at home. The last year running around town annoying bouncers and playing chicken with taxis. It's all right to carry on like that when you're fifteen and cute, but Constable Oliver won't keep chatting to us on street corners about skateboarding for ever. You get wasted and accidentally punch a cop at fourteen, he takes you home to yer ma and brings you leaflets about local youth clubs. You do it at eighteen, he pins you against the car and reads you your rights.

So when I think about New Year's Eve *next* year, I can't help picturing myself in a pretty shitty place. And I just wanted *one more* blinder of a New Year's. One to remember.

Below us, random fireworks pop prematurely over the city and fizzle out in disappointing puffs of smoke, and the dark path up the hill is still deserted.

"Sid! Becca's got marshmallows! You want one?"

I take one last look, straining my eyes in the darkness. Then I stand and chuck my can at the pile of empties. So much for the future.

"Guys, I'm going to head on."

As I bend to pick up my bag, Becca walks over with a dripping marshmallow on a stick. "Are you not going to stay till midnight?" Then she frowns over my shoulder, laughs and says, "Oh my God, what is she like?"

I turn, squinting at the tiny circle of light bobbing madly as someone comes crashing, stumbling, panting up the path, and a distant voice yells, "Wait! Hold the New Year! I'm coming too!"



CHAPTER 2

Mel

Becca's marquee has three sides, open at the front, and they've got it strung up with battery-powered fairy lights and strewn with cushions like something from a harem. Sid's friends poke the wet wood in the bonfire, sip cans of beer and laugh at my friends as they unpack nachos and salsa and alcopops.

"Yeah, yeah," Becca says. "Laugh all you want. If it starts lashing, you can stay out there." The boys laugh, and one of them – Mac, I think – comes and sits next to her.

I'm nursing a Bacardi Breezer and trying to stay out of the firelight so my hideous outfit is less noticeable. I wish I could have returned it; gone to Primark, and come home with a whole new Mel. A glittery-vest-and-skinny-jeans Mel. A skater-skirt-and-cropped-T Mel. A New Year Mel. It doesn't even matter what kind of Mel, because at £2.50 a vest, she's refreshingly temporary.

Sid looks nice tonight. I've never seen him out of school uniform before. He's wearing slashed black jeans and boots and a huge yellow-and-black striped jumper that's so cosy I can't help imagining what it would feel like if he wrapped his arms around me. His eyeliner makes his dark eyes even more intense and I blush every time he looks my way, smiling his lopsided smile that always makes him look half cheeky, half shy.

Within five minutes of my arrival, he's grabbed a couple of bottles and settled himself next to me in the tent, and five minutes after that we've completely forgotten to be shy, forgotten we're at a party, forgotten other people exist.

"Yeah, but the Millennium Falcon has alien technology," Sid is saying.

"Doesn't matter. It's not possible to travel faster than the speed of light. It doesn't matter what kind of technology you have, you can't invent something that will do the impossible."

"So how do you explain the fact that they totally *do*?"

"Um ... because it's fiction?"

He looks wounded. "Hey. I don't criticize *your* religious beliefs. *Forgive her, Yoda, for she knows not what she's on about.*"

I giggle and grab another bottle. One of the boys changes the music to something that sounds exactly like the last song and they start doing air-guitar and angry roaring along to it.

Sid winces. "Hope you didn't leave a really good party to come here," he says.

"I really didn't, no."

"They're usually much less embarrassing than this. Or I'm much drunker, one of the two."

I laugh. "Did you really punch a cop?" I ask, peeling the label off my bottle.

"I did, aye. But it was an accident! I *meant* to punch the window of his car, but it turned out the window was open so..." He mimes someone being punched in the head and falls sideways.

"Oh my God, you *didn't!*"

"He was decent about it. Constable Oliver. I was very pissed. And fourteen. And he's OK actually. Says he was a bit of a scally at our age. When he sees us out in town now he always comes

over to chat. Some sort of outreach thing they do. I think he's pretty much talked Murph into joining the police when he leaves school, if he—"

But I don't hear the rest because there's a horrible racket as a few of the boys all start playing music through their phones at once.

"Guys! What the—!" Sid yells.

"We're trying to sync them," Dev calls back. "Shithead here was supposed to bring a speaker. Right, on three, everyone press play on 'Counting Worms'."

"That won't work! It's—" The horrible noise happens again as three phones start playing the same song slightly out of sync and everyone covers their ears. Eventually they give up.

"Some fucking party and no music."

"Away and shite, no one told me to—!"

"Why don't you just make an amplifier?" I suggest. To the guy with the metal bar through his cheek. They should call Bacardi Breezer *Bacardi Braver*. I'm on my third now.

"Build one? Aye, I'll just get my toolbox out."

"You just need a material that carries sound waves well."

Becca sighs and pats me on the head. "You'll have to excuse her – she's really, really smart," she tells the boys apologetically. "It has its uses. I told my parents I was with you tonight, Mel, so they'd let me go out."

"Me too," Jools says.

"Me three." Ruby sticks her hand up.

"Seriously, they think if I stay out past ten, I'll get murdered, but they honestly believe if the apocalypse happens I'll be fine – as long as Mel's there!" Becca laughs. As does everyone else.

I am not amused. "Yeah, well, the irony about that is, I told my parents exactly where I am, so if your parents phone them, you're

all screwed.” I’ve never used the word “screwed” before. I never swear, and I hope the girls don’t take this opportunity to point that out. I also didn’t tell my parents *exactly* where I am. I told them some girls from school were having a garden party but it would finish at midnight and I’d go back to Becca’s and sleep there. I had to beg Mum to let me abandon *their* party. Dad looked slightly suspicious – *a garden party in December?* – but he still took my side, even sneaked me some money, which means Mum’s huffing with him. Mum never questioned my version of events for a second though, despite the sweat running down my alpaca-clad back. Why would she? Apparently I’m the world’s most trustworthy teenager, as voted for by the collective parents of Northern Ireland.

“OK, if you’re such a genius, make the music louder,” Dev says.

They all turn to look at me and I get shy again. “Um ... glass is best, but” – I look around – “a Pringles tube will do. The metal bottom is a good reflector and the cardboard won’t distort the sound. Just cut a slit in the side of the tube and slot your phone into it. The sound will be amplified. Just a bit, but ... it’s better than nothing.”

I expect them to laugh at me again, but they just rush off to the bag of snacks with someone’s penknife and I turn back to find Sid grinning at me.

“Is there anything you *don’t* know?” he says.

“I don’t know where they get the idea I’m some *angel*.” I take a drag of my cigarette (my first), trying to look like a badass, and instantly start coughing up a lung. Sid’s lips quiver with amusement.

“It’s because you’re smart,” he says, taking the cigarette and finishing it for me. “You’re one of those people who make good decisions.”

Good decisions? Probably *not* what boys look for in a girl, but Sid says it like it's a compliment and shifts a little closer to me and we grin dopey grins at each other.

When the rain starts, the boys make a dash for the tent and Becca makes *uh-huh* eyes. There's just about room for all of us inside.

"I want to get one shot of everyone before midnight and one after," Becca says, getting her phone out. "To document the New Year."

We huddle closer to fit in the frame, arms round each other, blinking as the flash goes off. Afterwards, Sid stays close to me and I don't move away. My head's swimming slightly and I don't know if it's the drinks or the cigarettes. I don't know how Sid is knocking back all those beers and staying upright. I grab another bottle so he won't think I'm a lightweight.

"Do you like New Year?" I ask him.

"I fucking love New Year!" he says.

"Me too! It feels like it's really uncool to like New Year's, but I do."

He laughs. It's true though. Officially you're supposed to roll your eyes cynically at all the New Year's resolutions that no one *ever* keeps, and the way you feel like a loser if you're not at a really cool party. And New Year's Day isn't special at all; it's just leftovers and reruns. But I can't help wanting to get caught up in it all. In the possibilities. The countdown. The chance to start again from zero.

I hug my knees. "It's like ... peeking round a corner. Peeking into the future."

"What do you see?" he says.

"Everything," I say, like it's obvious. "Infinite possibilities in infinite universes."

Which means there must be a universe where Sid McKee kisses me at midnight.

Sid

Here it is then. The future. Just before midnight the rain stops. The clouds stretch thin and glow like torches under bedclothes. When they part we're lit by moonlight and everyone goes, *oooooh*. Mel smiles up at the sky, like she's fully aware of this mad, cosmic ride that the rest of us don't even know we're on. My mates are glancing at us, giggling in the corner, probably thinking that Mel is some boring nerd. The guys who hang around in parks getting pissed and complaining that they're bored. I bet Mel's never bored. Mel has the whole universe to play with.

I look up at the sky too, and it makes me dizzy, like I can feel the planet spinning, feel it tipping over some invisible line.

“OKOKOK, we've got, like, *ten minutes!* Ten minutes left of this entire year!” Becca squeals. “New Year's resolutions? Quick!”

I do have a resolution. To ask Mel out in the next ten minutes. I need to ask her at the exact right moment though. *Time* is important to her.

But I'm not announcing that, so I say, “I'm starting a band! Who's in?”

There's a half-hearted show of raised cans. Someone says something about running a marathon.

“OKOK, resolutions are rubbish anyway. Predictions? Any predictions for 2018?”

“According to Heisenberg,” Mel says, “all you can predict for certain is that if you make predictions, you'll be wrong.”

“I told you,” Becca says apologetically to the others.

But I’m untangling that in my head. “So we should predict that bad stuff will happen, because we’ll be wrong and then the bad stuff *can’t* happen?”

“An excellent strategy.” Mel clinks her bottle against my can, and we all spend the last seven minutes of the year frantically making a time capsule in an empty vodka bottle, filling it with terrible predictions for our future selves, scribbled on scraps of paper.

“I predict I’ll get abducted by aliens who will infect me with space syphilis.”

“I predict I’ll win the lottery but lose my ticket before I can claim the money.”

“I predict I’ll be murdered by a psycho who meant to kill someone else but got the wrong house.”

“I predict I’ll fail all my exams and get a job in my dad’s stationery firm. Wait, that’s actually going to happen, isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

“Why did no one tell me?!”

“We thought you knew.”

“I predict we’ll all lose touch and we won’t even know each other in ten years.”

“*No!*” Becca cries. Then she hiccups twice and throws an arm around Mac, who she literally met four hours ago.

“The only way to do accurate predictions is to use statistics,” Mel says. “I predict that out of the” – she does a quick head count – “sixteen of us here, within the next decade ... *six* of us will emigrate.”

“Four of us will have kids,” Becca says.

“One of us will be dead.”

“Nice, Murph.”

“Two of us will have had cancer.”

“Five of us will be single.”

“Four will be unemployed.”

“One will be a millionaire.”

“There’ll be one suicide.”

“No! Fuck that!”

“Three of us will be famous.”

“Eight will have tattoos.”

“Five will be married.”

“One and a half will be eaten by sharks. *What?* It could happen.”

“Two of us will be married *to each other!*”

“Me and Murph!” Nev yells, throwing himself on top of Big Murph, and we laugh, but already I’m picturing me and Mel growing old together in a house of our own with our hovercraft parked outside.

It’s three minutes to midnight. Exactly sixteen years ago Lucille was being handed her brand-new bundle of disappointment. I scribble, *I predict Mel will say no* on the back of her bottle label and stuff it in the time capsule as an insurance policy. Then, while everyone sings a tuneless “Happy Birthday”, I murmur in her ear, “Hey, you want to go out sometime?”

She smiles shyly. “I don’t know,” she says, as if she has doubts. “I know what you musicians are like – desperate to get your heart broken so you can write an album about it. Where does that leave me?”

“Immortalized in song?”

“Tempting.”

“How about I don’t write any songs about you and we just hang out and talk bollocks instead?”

She grins and leans closer to me.

But of course I *will* write songs about her. Hundreds. She's what songs are for.

"Ten!" someone yells.

And we all stand, as if we're expecting something to happen. We emerge from the tent to look up at the moon, as if the new year will come down from above. Below us the tail-light snakes have stopped, the city holds its breath, and we raise our voices and count down the final ten seconds of the last two thousand and seventeen years.

"Nine!"

"Eight!"

Mel buries both arms under my jumper and counts into my chest,

"Seven!"

"Six!"

as we stand between the fireworks and the stars,

"Five!"

"Four!"

and the chant rises like a drumbeat,

"Three!"

like a heartbeat,

"Two!"

like the whole city is counting down the seconds to our first kiss.

"One!"

Mel lifts her shining face towards me, and a billion clock hands pause before leaping into the unknown.

It felt like the beginning of something. Not an ordinary New Year. Bigger than that. Like everything we did was part of some mythic origin story that we'd be telling for years to come because

people would want to know exactly how the new world began.

It began with kissing Mel. It began with singing, resolutions, promises and plans as the fire died. And then watching our bleary-eyed friends stagger off down the hill at the scrake of dawn in search of breakfast. It began with the two of us casually lingering until we were alone.

It began with the nearness of her sparking all over my body like fireworks.

It began with all the kisses we'd been saving up for weeks.

It began with birdsong and light swelling shyly at the edges of the sky as we undressed each other beneath the blankets.

It began on a January morning, in a universe that was brand new.

A Note on Content

Please be aware that the following pages contain discussions of – and references to – teenage pregnancy, abortion and miscarriage.

A list of further resources is available at the back of this book.

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BELFAST, 2018

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