

*Weeds are flowers too,  
once you get to know them.*

A.A. Milne

## CHAPTER 1

‘Press B,’ I instructed Vi, hovering behind her in the lift as the squeaky doors eased closed. ‘B for basement.’

‘Sure?’ Her voice shook as her finger paused over the button.

‘Absolutely,’ I said.

In this deserted army base the basement was the only place we hadn’t explored.

Our teammates Connor and Milly turned to each other. He nodded reluctantly. Clearly, he wished he’d come up with the idea himself. The second Vi and I met him, it was obvious he enjoyed being in charge and didn’t like taking orders.

We’d found the hidden lift, which, along with the basement, hadn’t been marked on the map for some reason. I figured the basement must be a secret

underground bunker. It *had* to be where the nuclear warheads were. We had to be on the right track.

If we didn't shut them down . . . I didn't want to think about what would happen. This mission couldn't go wrong. We'd been at it for what felt like hours. I was tired and thirsty and could have killed for a can of lemonade—but adrenaline pumped through me, keeping me alert.

*Focus, Amber. Focus.* OK. I had this. I could only do my best, right? Right.

Would this lead to success, or was this a trap? I prayed that the code sequence we'd found earlier would get us into the bunker. It *had* to work, or in a few hours half of Europe would be obliterated.

'When the lift stops, look for concealed entrances to the bunker,' Connor declared.

'OK, chief.' I smiled at Vi, who grinned back. 'You got it!' I wasn't planning on obeying Connor and we both knew it.

As we descended the five levels underground, Vi's eyes widened nervously so I flashed her my reassuring *this-will-be-fine* best friend smile, even though my brain squawked the opposite. We'd spent ages following dead leads upstairs—we could be too late. My stomach felt crammed full of butterflies flapping their wings in overdrive.

Finally, the lift settled with a clunk. Vi instinctively reached for my hand and I squeezed hers.

The doors had opened onto a wide, empty tunnel. A drab sight: rough, exposed grey stone walls and fluorescent strip lights running along the ceiling. Along the top of the walls were thick, cracked plastic pipes. Rank and very gloomy.

'What does *that* mean?' Vi asked, nudging me as we stepped out, her eyes flicking up to a section of striped yellow and black tape marked 'caution' lining the tunnel's archway, flapping loose. 'Isn't that usually a warning?' Her voice was shaking. Though part of me wanted to immediately evacuate the building, it was my job to keep Vi calm, which weirdly enough always calmed me down too. A win-win.

'It's alright, Vi. Don't worry.' I told her.

It was noisy this deep underground. Were we close to an engine room? It sounded as if there was rushing water nearby. The strip lights flickered. I didn't know if they were faulty, or if, by activating the secret lift, we'd tripped a motion sensor.

*Better not be a bad sign.*

Vi squinted. 'Now what?'

'We need to get into the bunker,' I replied, looking around.

'Exactly what I thought!' said Connor, and to my

surprise he and Milly dropped behind us. Vi and I spent the next twenty seconds trying not to smirk at each other, which turned out to be a pretty effective anti-anxiety technique.

Although the tunnel was long, our destination was clear: a huge metal door at the far end. It looked like the only place to try. Everything we'd done so far had brought us in this direction. I had no intention of failing now. Not after all the effort we'd made. But *something* wasn't right. I just couldn't put my finger on what.

'Five minutes to lockdown,' an automated voice tonelessly announced. I flinched. Despite telling myself to stay calm, my heart was hammering. I wiped my clammy hands down my trousers.

'Is that lockdown *before* the missiles go off and we're all dead, or lockdown meaning we'll be locked in?' Vi wailed.

I had no idea and wasn't intending on hanging around to find out. We had to succeed in our mission—we had no other choice.

'Stay cool, Vi!' I said, loud and firm, making myself heard over the clanging pipes. 'We're nearly there. We can do this!'

We sprinted towards the bunker door about a hundred metres in front of us. Vi tore past me, of

course; her sprinting skills are amazing. I followed, my trainers slapping against the concrete. I heard Connor and Milly behind me, panting for breath.

I caught up with Vi and we leaned, gasping, against the smooth metal door.

'Look, this keypad *has* to open the bunker,' Vi said, pointing to a metal numbered grid next to the door. 'And we already have the code!'

I scanned the keypad. That seemed too simple, or maybe we were *supposed* to think it was too simple.

I reached out, my fingers over the keypad.

'Want me to try it?'

'Yes!' the others said, coming up behind me.

'What's the code again?' Vi asked, looking calmer now.

'Two yellow, seven green, and four blue,' Milly recited.

I quickly entered the code. *BLEEP!* And . . . nothing. I peered at the flashing keypad, resisting the urge to slam my hand against the bunker door in frustration.

'So . . . what now?' Connor asked, his eyebrows raised.

'Wait.' I shook my head. 'Let me think.'

He frowned. 'There isn't time to think!' he yelled. '*Move*. I'll handle this.' He shoved me to one side, not

noticing Vi's grimace, and hammered at the keypad.

I craned my head to see what Connor's fingers were doing. Too late, he'd already entered some random sequence. His face fell when the lights blinked red. The monotone voice announced: 'Four minutes till lockdown.'

As Connor stepped back, Milly elbowed him, and they proceeded to flip through the brief we'd been given—checking we hadn't overlooked anything, I guess.

No time for cramming now, I thought, my brain spinning faster than Mum's tumble dryer. *What if the keypad is rigged? What if we don't get out? Maybe we took a wrong turn and were supposed to go in a different direction. Could there be another entrance? Did we miss a clue?*

Vi manoeuvred herself in front of the keypad. 'Here, I'll try!' she said, punching the first number in again.

The bleeping keypad indicated another unsuccessful attempt. Three tries now. How many strikes did we have left?

'Less than four minutes!' Vi yelped. 'Maybe we should go back upstairs. That desk behind the door? Did you check the drawers? I can't remember . . . I can't remember if I opened the last one!'

'Violet. Stop. Panicking,' I said, through gritted

teeth. My friend was smart, but easily flustered. She'd been like this since we were little. Impulsive, leaping into things without thinking them through. I preferred to stand back and consider all the options before taking any action. Maybe it was an only child thing.

I needed to block Vi out for a while, if we were ever going to get out of here.

*Focus.*

There was a small hole in the door. I squatted and put my eye against it but couldn't see anything. *Isn't that where a door handle would usually be?*

Putting my palms against the cool metal, I peered closely at the door itself. Could a handle have been removed? What if a handle was needed to open it? The code might be correct after all.

*Think, Amber. Think!* What was I seeing, or *not* seeing? We'd tried the colour and number combos. Fail.

I cleared my throat. 'Right.'

*Sometimes . . . going backwards is the only way to move forward.*

'We're never going to get out!' Milly wailed, and I could practically see the sweat on her forehead.

'We've messed it all up!' cried Vi.

'People, arguing is pointless!' I said, raising my voice. *Oops!* That *was* loud. Even Vi looked surprised.

‘I mean . . . We need to work together, and fast,’ I said more calmly. ‘Connor, try variations of the code we know, and be methodical about—’

‘*Methodeee*-what?’

‘Enter *one* digit at a time, starting with the number one and go through in order, up to nine. Vi and Milly, could you search the tunnel? I think someone might have removed the door handle. Maybe it’s hidden somewhere? Unless it’s fallen through the other side, but if so . . . then . . . we’re stuffed. I’ll retrace our steps, alright?’

I sprinted to the lift and turned to see Vi halfway behind me, feeling the pipes along the walls, while Milly searched around the door on her hands and knees.

‘Three minutes to lockdown.’

I ran into the lift as soon as the doors opened. Glanced up. No loose roof panels to conceal anything. I jabbed the buttons. Couldn’t believe I was heading up again, wasting precious time. What had we missed?

The neon sign above the door flickered *ALERT*—strobe-like, in red letters. In the doorway, I stared at cracked paintings on the walls outside the lift. Ransacked filing cabinets stood with open drawers. I looked back at the neon sign. Red. Red meant . . .

*danger.*

*Think, Amber!*

It had to be something obvious. Something staring me in the face. I backed into the corridor and stared up at the sign again.

*Was that a flash of something?* I dragged over a chair and stood on it. Yes, something was glinting below the sign. I reached up and felt along the wall until my fingers touched something smooth. Under the flashing sign, and easy to miss, was a length of metal.

*Yes!* I snatched the door handle.

‘Two minutes till lockdown!’

I couldn’t stab the lift buttons fast enough. The second the doors opened, I screeched, ‘Hey!’ but my throat was so dry, my voice barely squeaked.

‘HEY!’ I shouted again, surprising myself with the volume. I didn’t usually shout. ‘I’ve found the handle!’

I sprinted along the corridor. Halfway down, I grabbed Vi, pulling at her sleeve and we ran and ran, breathing hard, arms pumping, towards the bunker door.

‘Did you hear me?!’ I screeched to the others. The corridor seemed to stretch for miles.

Milly stood next to the keypad, but Connor was



blocking my view of the door.

‘Connor!’ I threw the handle to him. He dived forward, catching it.

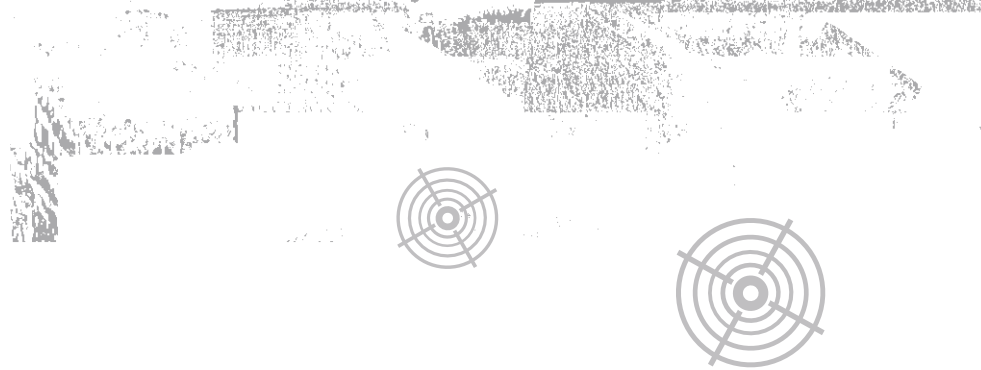
Milly bashed the code into the keypad and at the same time Connor slotted the handle into the hole. The robotic voice started repeating: ‘Lockdown! Lockdown in three, two . . .’

Connor leaned on the handle, pressing his weight against it, and the door flew open. Milly and Connor dashed through.

*It worked!*

My ears were full of the beeping alarm.

Vi and I hurtled through the door too, just as the lights in the corridor snapped off and everything went black.



## CHAPTER 2

After the darkness of the corridor, the light that hit us was blindingly white. I squinted, holding one hand over my eyes.

‘Amber, we did it.’ Vi let out a deep breath and squeezed my arm. ‘*We made it.*’

‘You mean we *won’t* be blown to smithereens today?’ I joked, catching my breath. We’d entered a large white room. ‘Escape Zone’ posters plastered the walls.

As Connor and Milly high-fived each other by the door, I noticed a woman in the corner, standing next to a couple of purple armchairs. She finished speaking into a walkie-talkie and flapped a clipboard at us.

‘Nice work, Team C,’ she said.

Vi and I exchanged a smile. Inside, I was