

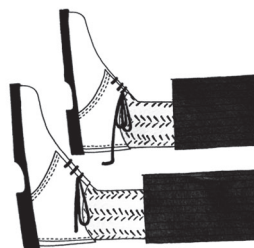
FLOORED



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WHEN SEVEN LIVES COLLIDE

A NOVEL



SARA BARNARD | HOLLY BOURNE | TANYA BYRNE | NON PRATT
MELINDA SALISBURY | LISA WILLIAMSON | ELEANOR WOOD

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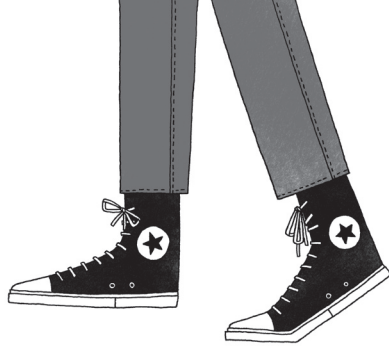
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*We dedicate this book to each other.
So glad we got in the lift together.*

YEAR ONE



DAWSON

I realize I'm staring at the arse of the guy in front of me roughly seven seconds before he does, but that's all the time I need for several thoughts to run through my mind.

First, I think *nice arse*.

Second, I mentally shout at myself for objectifying this guy based solely on his bum. After everything I've been through, I should know better than to reduce someone to their appearance. I should be more concerned about how intelligent he is, or whether he does stuff for charity, or how he treats animals . . . and all I'm thinking about is how good his jeans look. And they really do—

STOP IT, YOU PERV.

Third, I wonder if I can blame hormones, or would that be a cop out? Is this what happens once you start kissing people? One (slightly – OK, very – drunken) kiss and a bit of a fumble (over trousers) with Olly Pritchard, and the Pandora's Box of Perving is open for business, so now all I can think about is sex. Although Celestia Carey did say boys think about sex once every seven seconds. Wait, that can't be true. Every seven seconds? That's like, five hundred times an hour. No way. No one could think about sex that much. I'll google it later . . .

Fourth – is this really the time to be eyeing someone up? I'm not here to look at bums; I'm here to see my mum.

There. That killed it. The lid is back on the box.

Fifth – what if someone in the cafeteria hears my thoughts and knows I’m the kind of guy who stares at strangers’ arses and has to think about his mum to stop himself? What if someone is listening right now?

I look around as surreptitiously as I can to see if anyone is looking at me in disgust. No more than usual, ha ha.

Once again I find myself looking at the arse. I wonder if he’s . . .

The seven seconds are up, and all sex thoughts die a million deaths as the owner of the arse turns around and clocks me. He’s older than me. Much older – maybe twenty-five. I didn’t think he was that old from behind. His arse didn’t look like an old arse.

He looks at me, eyebrows raised, and my skin heats. I see the moment he dismisses me, and then I see *it* – the recognition – as if a light has switched on inside his mind, and he does a double take.

Shit.

‘Have we met?’ he asks. There is a string of spit between his teeth and it makes me feel sick. ‘Wait. Are you . . . ?’

I’m gone before I can hear how that question ends, bolting out of the queue and cutting between the tables. I trip over someone’s bag, and my shin smashes into a chair, but I don’t stop, ignoring the angry voices behind me and slamming through the doors into the corridor.

Outside is buzzing, and I weave through crowds of people – adults in suits, techs in Converse and shorts. Where is the bloody exit? I need to be outside. Weirdly, there’s a load of people my age around, all wide-eyed and staring, and I duck my head and try to move past them. Don’t look at me. Don’t see me.

I turn down the corridor towards the lifts, stopping abruptly

when I see how many people are waiting. Someone slams into the back of me, and I grunt.

‘Sorry,’ a girl says when I turn around.

‘No worries,’ I say. She has a blue stripe in her hair, like a weird punk skunk. Why just one stripe? It looks ridiculous.

‘Are you going to the induction?’

‘What?’ I can’t stop staring at the stripe. It’s *really* blue. I wonder if it was a dare. Or an accident.

‘The induction. Health and safety. It’s on the ninth floor.’ Skunk Girl sounds annoyed, so I stop staring at her hair and meet her eyes.

‘Erm. No. Sorry.’

‘Oh. It’s just . . . I thought I recognized you from the briefing earlier.’

‘Nope. Not me. I’m not being inducted.’ They’re interns, I realize. Work-experience kids. One of them will be assigned to Mum, and she’ll spend two weeks shouting at them because they’ll be on their phones all day and not get her coffee right. It happens every year. Someone gets put on Mum’s show, and she’ll get angry about it and phone me to rant about how it’s because she’s a woman, and a mother, and if she was Stewart McConnell she wouldn’t have to have an intern, she’d get a proper assistant. And then I’ll do my famous Angry Alicia Sharman impression in the *Dedman* green room and everyone will laugh.

Except I won’t. Because there isn’t a *Dedman* green room this year. Or ever again.

‘Dawson Sharman!’ the girl says, and I tune back in. ‘That’s why I recognize you!’

‘What?’

‘You’re Dawson Sharman. From *Dedman High*.’

Shit.

‘No,’ I say, too fast. ‘I get that all the time. I mean, I don’t see it, personally. But, you know . . .’ I smile as though I’m embarrassed. I mean, I *am* embarrassed. But not in the way I want her to think.

‘Right. Sorry. I just . . . Yeah. I suppose it would be a bit weird if you were him, just wandering around the UKB randomly.’

‘Yeah. Ha,’ I say. ‘No, I’m here for . . . I work here. As a runner.’

‘Oh. Right.’ She looks me up and down again. ‘Right,’ she says again. ‘So, do you know where the health and safety induction is?’

‘No. Sorry.’ I shrug.

The lift pings, and we both turn to it, joining the informal queue to get in as people pour out.

I spot Stewart at the same time he spots me.

Shi-i-i-t.

‘Dawson!’ he booms down the corridor, causing everyone within a five-mile radius to turn to me.

The girl behind me gasps, and I freeze.

‘What are you doing here? Your mum said you were going to a taster day at your new school.’

‘Erm . . .’

‘Must be weird, eh, at a school for norms after all this time. Still, it’ll be good to build some character. Think of it as method acting, that’s what I’d do. Just get through the year and maybe you can apply again. Have you thought about one of the Manchester acting schools? Not too far from here, and they might be less picky than a London school.’

‘OK, so . . .’

‘Anyway, I won’t keep you. Your mum was in her office, last I saw. She didn’t seem in a great mood though, so have a care.’

‘Sure.’

Stewart frowns, as if noticing for the first time that I'm not in a great mood either. 'Your drink is leaking.' He nods at my hand.

I look down and realize I'm still holding the carton of coconut water I was queuing for in the cafeteria. I've stolen it, and while he's been talking, I've been squeezing it, and it's leaking all over the floor. It's not a huge loss, I tell myself. I don't even like coconut water. Celestia says it tastes like spunk, but I wouldn't know. Neither would she, to be honest.

Stewart strides away, and I watch him go, wishing I had the power to kill people with my eyes. I take a small step away from the coconut-water puddle. I should find a bin—

'You lied.'

I spin around, startled; I'd forgotten Skunk Girl was there. It feels like every single person who'd been waiting for the lift has stayed, listening to Stewart, and staring at me. Some of them have their phones out. Probably snapchatting, instagramming. There will be photos all over the Internet of me, people tweeting each other the conversation, looking me up on IMDb and Wikipedia to find out what I'm doing next, a hint of why I'm here. Maybe an audition . . .

Yeah, no.

I, Dawson Sharman – former actor and BAFTA Rising Star-nominated child prodigy – am, at the grand old age of sixteen, a has-been. I am over. All my future holds now is the possibility of an appearance on some telly show where I'm stuck in a jungle, or a house, or on an island with a bunch of other Z-listers, and my only chance of a comeback is if I get off with one of them. My destiny lies in *Where Are They Now?* listicles. Ones with *Before and After* pictures. Dawson, aged fourteen, with his amazing bone structure, those piercing green eyes – versus Dawson today, blob fish after a fist fight. What happened to the face that launched a thousand *Dedman* fan edits and head-castings?

Dawson Sharman as Harry Potter. Dawson Sharman as Luvian Fen. Dawson Sharman as Rhys Gold. I used to spend a lot of time online. I know what they said about me.

I know what they say now too. Turns out people don't stop tagging you, even when they're calling you ugly.

I am part of the reason that website created the phrase 'Nevilled Down'.

Ten Actors Who Anti-Longbottomed and Actually Nevilled Down
Number Eight: Dawson Sharman

Former star of *Dedman High*, the most popular children's show to come out of the UK since *Tracy Beaker*, Dawson Sharman was cast aged thirteen as Mason Wright, the bad boy son of the headmaster of a boarding school for troubled teens, who finds out on his thirteenth birthday that he's a vampire. For two years, Sharman dominated online polls for Hottest UK Teen Male, and was the focus of the #PrinceSharming Internet campaign, an online plea for him to attend a young fan's school prom as her date. Earlier this year, however, the show was cancelled at the beginning of its fourth season, with rumours abounding that the reason was a rapidly diminishing fan base due to what insiders termed Sharman's 'unfortunate brush with puberty'.

What they didn't add was that 'Sharman will probably never work again. Unless he can find theatre parts and then spend the rest of his life pretending it's his true calling, because it's more "authentic" and "there's nothing like performing to a live audience, with no second takes", and all the other stuff actors too ugly for television say.'

There was a huge backlash to the article because I was still

fifteen when it was published. They took it down in the end. But before they did, I read the comments, and a lot of people said it was ‘a shame about me’. And other less polite things.

It was good training for my first day at normal school, let me tell you. And let me also tell you, there is no way I am going back there. I lasted an hour. It was enough. There has to be something else I can do. Somewhere else I can go. I cannot spend the next two years being called ‘Count Fagula’ by feral kids who think culture is drinking half a litre of cider and then trying to finger someone called Chelsea ‘up the park’. I don’t even know if ‘up the park’ is a location, or slang for ‘vagina’.

Skunk Girl is still looking at me, and for a moment I want to tell her she looks stupid.

I want *her* to feel ugly too.

‘Can you blame me?’ I say finally.

She says nothing; in fact, none of them say anything. So I walk past them all and smash my finger into the ‘call’ button, even though it’s already lit. The doors open immediately, and I get into the lift.



KAITLYN

The woman on the reception desk knew. I know she knew. She handed me my lanyard and made me sign a sheet, and then she said the thing that made me sure she knew: ‘Would you like someone to walk you to the first induction?’

Subtle, right? Most people wouldn’t even read any meaning into it. I wouldn’t have once. Not even six weeks ago. But now I notice these things.

I wonder how she knew. It’s probably written right there on the list of names. Kaitlyn Thomas, fifteen, work experience – *the blind one*.

Anyway, screw that. I looked right at her – yes I did; I looked *right at her* – and said, ‘No, thank you.’

And then I turned and walked away, all confident like, my head ever so slightly tilted, as if it’d help me see around the blurry spot in the centre of my vision. I’ve done it for years, way before diagnosis, way before the word ‘blind’, when I thought everyone saw the world like I did, before Stargardt disease and my mother sitting on my bed crying and everything going to shit.

I realize about halfway down the hall that I’m not actually sure where I’m meant to go, but I carry on confidently anyway until I turn a corner and stop. I lean against the wall and open the induction folder I got in the post last week. The induction

folder is jazzy, all exclamation marks and laminate shine, like the people who made it couldn't imagine anyone reading it who wasn't SO EXCITED about doing work experience at the UKB. The whole thing screams, YOU'RE SO LUCKY TO BE HERE! CONGRATULATIONS!

Please. Even if I wanted to work in TV or read the news or something, I wouldn't be cartwheeling across the car park to be here. This is work experience for fifteen-year-olds, for God's sake. I'll be making tea for two weeks and sitting in a boring meeting or two and maybe getting to gawk at a celebrity in a lift or something. Lucky, lucky me.

And I *don't* want to be here. I had my work-experience placement all worked out. I was going to help out at my Aunt Nina's hair and beauty salon. She owns the place, so I would have been able to learn stuff about running a business as well as cutting hair. I wanted to be a beautician then. That was my plan. And I was really excited about it all.

But now I'm losing my sight, and that means, apparently, I can't be a hairdresser or a beautician. That means my school cancelled that placement and moved me on to the UKB programme instead, without even asking me first. They acted like it was this great thing they'd done, like I'd be really pleased. Grateful, even. 'How many teens your age get this kind of opportunity, Kaitlyn?' they said.

Like I was too stupid to realize that they'd only done it to tick a box. Sending their only disabled student to a work-experience placement at the UKB is the kind of thing they can dine off for years. Never mind that I've never cared about anything like this, never wanted to be some kind of media high-flyer, that I've been in all the middle sets for years and feeling fine about it. I've never planned to go to university or whatever. I was just plodding along quite happily, practising

manicures and learning about eyelash tinting.

Anyway. So here I am. The blind one. The box-ticker. Even though I can see just about fine right now, and I don't need someone's arm or one of those white sticks or anything. Not yet anyway.

Last night, I put a blue stripe in my hair. It looks great. It's like an *electric* blue, and I did it myself, over the bathroom sink, using one of those Schwarzkopf dyes my best friend Avani gave me at Christmas, and it's the best thing I ever did. Mum almost fainted, but there was nothing she could do. It's my head, and my hair, and my life. And now *that's* what people will think of when they think of me; I'm the girl with the blue stripe in her hair.

I flip through my induction folder until I get to the YOUR FIRST DAY! page and scan the timetable. I'm meant to go to the ninth floor for some kind of health and safety induction. *Great*. Inspiring. Health and sodding safety. A horrible thought occurs to me: what if they try to incorporate my sight problems into this induction? What if they tell everyone I'm blind, and so everyone should make sure I don't walk into doors, or something? Oh God. Oh God. Everyone will look at me, like, *That's the girl who's here because she's blind – poor cow*.

Will I have to explain that I'm not blind, actually, and confuse them all? I'll say, 'Well, not yet,' and everything will be awkward because they won't really want to know, and I won't really want to tell them.

People hear 'blind', and they think of darkness. They close their eyes and think that's what it's like. You're meant to say 'visually impaired', really, because it's more accurate, but no one does, and most people don't have a reason to care why the difference matters.

I quite like 'visually impaired'. It's melodic. There's a question mark hanging over it that doesn't exist in the cut-off that is 'blind'.

If I ever have to introduce myself to someone and explain the whole Stargardt thing – and I know I’ll have to, one day – I’m going to say that. ‘I’m visually impaired,’ I’ll say. Or, ‘I have a visual impairment.’ Maybe one day I’ll be OK enough with this whole thing to say this without my voice breaking or shaking or doing any one of those things that betray me.

But not today. Please, not today.

I sigh, closing the folder and tucking it under my arm. I hazard a guess as to where the lifts are based on the number of suited men walking confidently in that direction. There’s a crowd gathering, waiting in front of three closed lift doors, and out of the side of my eye I’m looking for a space to stand in, and—

Shit! I’ve walked right into someone. Not even just a little nudge either. I’ve fully slammed into him.

‘Sorry,’ I say, oh so casually. Simple mistake. It’s not like I’m going blind, ha ha ha.

‘No worries,’ he says.

He looks familiar. Maybe he’s famous. Or a bit famous. He’s not good-looking enough to be actually famous. More likely he’s on the same placement as me, so I ask if he’s going to the induction, but he just looks confused.

‘Nope. Not me. I’m not being inducted,’ he says, and something about the way he says this drops the penny.

‘Dawson Sharman!’ I blurt out. He is famous! Sort of. *Was* famous. ‘That’s why I recognize you!’

Avani and I loved *Dedman High* back in the day. I used to have a poster of Dawson Sharman on my bedroom wall. And now here he is, standing in front of me! He’s pudgier than he was back then, of course. Everyone knows the Dawson-got-ugly story. But still. I can feel the old stirrings of fangirl within me.

But then he tells me that he’s not Dawson Sharman, that he

just looks like him, that he gets this all the time, and he looks embarrassed and awkward, and I instantly feel really bad. Of course I'm wrong. Imagine me thinking I can recognize someone – me, with my traitorous eyes. This poor guy, being mistaken for the he-got-ugly Dawson Sharman!

'Right,' I say, aiming for breezy. 'Sorry, I just . . .' Make a joke, Kaitlyn! 'Yeah. I suppose it would be a bit weird if you were him, just wandering around the UKB randomly.' Eh, that'll do.

Not-Dawson tells me that he works here as a runner, and he doesn't seem that bothered about the mistaken-identity thing, so I relax. I steal a head-to-foot glance over him – blurred, but good enough – and he really does look like Dawson Sharman. But then what do I know?

A lift pings, and I turn towards the noise, blinking as the people around us surge towards it. Sometimes I get wobbles with my sight; suddenly the whole world blurs. My stomach lurches – *this is what it will be like all the time one day* – and I'm just wondering whether I should go and sit down for a minute when I register that a man with TV-white teeth is coming towards me, beaming. No, not towards me, towards Not-Dawson.

'Dawson!' he booms.

Dawson! Not Not-Dawson. Dawson! I can't help myself – a melodramatic gasp escapes my lips. That sneaky liar!

The man with the teeth is saying words, but I'm too stunned to listen properly. I catch snippets like 'school for norms' (*norms!* Charming!) and 'method acting'. This guy probably loves the sound of his voice as much as he does his shiny white teeth, because he carries on talking even as Dawson just stands there looking mortified. He's trying to cover it with cool, but I can tell. He wants to sink through the floor right now.

No sympathy from me though. When Teeth Man strides

off, I turn to him. ‘You lied,’ I say.

Dawson looks at me, his expression a little dazed. I can feel from the energy around us that everyone’s looking at him, and I hear the telltale click from someone’s phone. Twitter is about to light up. *Good.*

‘Can you blame me?’ he asks.

I try to remind myself that he doesn’t know. Why should he? How could he possibly understand that the days when I can recognize someone’s face are numbered? That the warmth of recognition, that flash of comfort that comes with your mind going, ‘Yes, hello, I know you!’ is a gift? A gift he waved in front of me, then threw away.

I don’t say anything. I think about my aunt’s cosy, cheerful salon and how she’d promised me a box of nail-polish samples. The smell of wet, freshly snipped hair.

Dawson moves past me and presses the button for the lift in front of us. The doors open straight away and he walks in, keeping his back to me. I briefly consider slamming into him again, just because. I feel all raged – too raged to go to a health and safety induction and pretend like I give a damn about any of this placement bullshit.

Everything is going blurry again. Oh shit! Am I *crying*? I can’t bloody see anything.

‘Are you coming in, or what?’ Dawson says, but not unkindly.

His voice is like a lifebuoy thrown into the dark, so I grab it. I let it pull me out of the blur and into the lift.