

A Tight Spot

By Meg Harper

'Wellie, it's Jake, right?'

All Jake could hear was his friend, Dermott Wells, grunting down the phone.

'Wellie, wake up! It's been snowing. There's no school!'

'No school?' Suddenly Wellie was awake and talking. 'You sure?'

'Yeh – just heard it on the radio. We're all going to Vicky Park, OK? Come round as soon as you can. You got a toboggan?'

'Nah, toboggans are naff. But I've got this thing that'll be wicked.'

'What's that?'

'Bit of wing from an old car. I found it down the rec the other day. Thought it'd be good if we did get any snow. It's dead shiny and smooth and we could fit a couple of us on it easy.'

'Brill! Look, I gotta go – Mum's yelling. I'll see you later, right? Hurry up.'

Jake shoved his phone in his pocket and ran down the stairs.

'Watch out!' shouted his mum as he burst through the kitchen door.

'Puddle!'

Too late. Jake had stepped in it.

His mum was stripping sopping tights off his little sister Lucy.

'Oh great, Jake!' she groaned. 'No, don't wander round – take your socks off and shove them in the dirty washing! And where's the clean stuff for Lucy?'

'What?' growled Jake, glaring at Lucy, who didn't look upset enough in his opinion.

'I shouted for you to bring dry tights and pants. Didn't you hear?'

Jake shrugged.

'Oh why do I bother?' said his mum. 'I might as well do it myself. Look, mop that up while I'm gone, will you?'

Jake peeled off his wet socks, found a cloth and the spray disinfectant and wiped up the puddle.

'Lucy, I didn't do this when I was five,' he said.

'Sorry,' she said, beaming. 'It was the snow. I was excited.'

He smiled at her grudgingly. It must be the first time she'd seen snow. It was exciting enough to make you wet your pants. He couldn't wait to get out there himself.

His mum burst back through the door, brandishing fresh clothes for Lucy.

'Jake, I hope you're not planning to go out,' she said.

'What?' His jaw dropped. 'Of course I am. I've just sorted it with Wellie and the others.'

'Well, you'd better unsort it, I'm afraid. Lucy's school is shut but work isn't and I have to go in this morning. I'm afraid I'll need you to baby sit. Dad's already gone – he started early because of the weather.'

'Mum! You can't do that! This is the first snow day we've had this winter! It might be the only one!'

'I'm sorry, love. I've got no choice. I'll pay you double rate but you'll simply have to wait till I get back before you go out. Make a snowman with Lucy or something.'

'Can't I take her with me?' begged Jake, desperate now.

'With *your* friends? You'd take a five year old out with that lot? Are you joking?'

'We'd look after her! Please Mum! I don't care about the money – I just want to go out in the snow!'

It was hopeless. Jake followed his mum round the house arguing but she wouldn't budge. He had to look after Lucy and he couldn't take her with him.

Twenty minutes later he was sitting at the table, staring at Lucy moodily while she slurped her Coco Pops. Then his phone rang.

'I can't come,' he said. 'I've gotta look after Lucy till Mum gets back at lunchtime.'

There followed a long, loud conversation during which Lucy's eyes grew bigger and bigger.

'You said swear words,' said Lucy.

'So?' said Jake. 'Don't you dare tell Mum! And go and find your wellies.'

'Why?'

Jake had got up and was unhooking Lucy's coat and hat from the back of the kitchen door.

'Because you're coming with us,' he said.

Walking up the road, despite the terrific feeling of the fresh, powdery snow crunching beneath his feet, Jake was still cross. Wellie, Bludger and Brad trudged ahead. Wellie had a huge chunk of car under his arm; Bludger was dragging a plastic sledge. They were laughing and joking, shoving snow down each other's necks, chucking the odd snowball. They looked pretty cool and hard in their hoodies and track pants. So would he – except that he had Little Red Riding Hood with stripy tights and pink wellies skipping along beside him, singing loudly and tunelessly about snow. And he daren't let go of her hand seeing as she and he were supposed to be safely at home building a snowman.

On the corner by the mini-roundabout, the neighbour with the tidy garden and the super shiny cars was clearing his drive. He glowered at the boys.

'No school then?' he said, as if this was a crime that was probably their fault.

'No – and Mummy said we were to stay home but Jake wants to go out and he's taking me with him!' said Lucy, excitedly.

Jake's grip tightened as he dragged her furiously past the neighbour. 'She said it was OK for a little while actually,' he lied.

'No, she...'

'Shut up or I won't let you go on the toboggan,' Jake hissed.

Lucy's mouth shut like a trap.

'Bye!' she said and waved sweetly at the neighbour. 'See you later.'

Jake's friends had started snowballing seriously.

'I want to,' said Lucy.

'No,' said Jake through gritted teeth. 'You have to hold my hand till we get to the park.'

Lucy's little pink cheeks got pinker. Then she snatched her hand away, scooped up a pile of snow and hurled it straight into the face of the postman who was just coming out of the next drive.

The postman spluttered, wiped the snow from his eyes and then turned on Jake. 'You little....'

'It wasn't me, it was her!' Jake protested.

'And now you're blaming your little sister! You should be ashamed of yourself. You...'

Jake didn't wait to argue. He grabbed Lucy by the wrist and pulled her along the road, shouting to the others to wait for him.

'If you're going to be this naughty all morning,' he said, 'I'll tell Mum not to give you any sweets on Saturday. And don't you dare cry!'

Lucy bit her lip and blinked back the two large tears which were hovering on her lashes. 'Then I'll tell Mummy you took me out and that you said swear words,' she said. 'So there!'

Jake had caught up with his friends. 'Honestly,' he said. 'We were never this bad when we were five!'

Fortunately, it wasn't very far to the park and Lucy behaved herself for the rest of the way. Just inside the gates, they met a group of girls from school.

'Aah, is that your little sister, Jake?' said one of them, breaking away from the group. She was small and pretty with glossy hair tied up in a pony-tail. 'Oh,

she's so cute!' she said. 'Are you taking her sledging? Aah, that's so nice of you! What's her name?'

'Lucy,' Jake grunted, his cheeks suddenly scarlet. The other girls were nudging each other and exchanging glances and Jake was only too aware of the gestures the other lads were making.

'Oh Lucy, haven't you got a lovely big brother?' said the girl

'Do you fancy him?' said Lucy. 'I think he fancies you. He's gone all red.'

It seemed to Jake as if the whole world exploded with laughter, including the girl with the pony-tail. Feeling as if his cheeks were about to burst into flame, he gave his small sister the sort of evil glare that he hoped might give her nightmares.

'Come on,' he said, bitterly trying to sound like he could take a joke. 'Time to go tobogganing!'

The park boasted several decent slopes and they were already thronged with kids. Jake was longing to scramble to the top and come hurtling down, the cold stinging his cheeks, the wind ruffling his hair. But what was he to do with Lucy? He could take her to the mound near the play park where other small children were sledging happily but Jake was scared of meeting anyone who knew their mum and, anyway, he didn't want to waste time on the nursery slopes.

'Lucy, you stay here and make a snowman,' he told her, finding a big patch of untouched snow. 'I'll be able to keep an eye on you – but don't go wandering off!'

'You said, "Time to go tobogganing",' said Lucy.

'I meant for me,' said Jake. 'You're too little to climb to the top of the hill. You wouldn't like it.'

Lucy looked mulish. 'Take me later,' she said.

For the next twenty minutes, Jake was in heaven. His aim was to get as many runs in as possible while Lucy was happy. He ran up and slid down the hill with his friends until their cheeks were ruddy with cold and exercise. It was bliss.

Then Lucy began to wail.

'Darn, what's the matter with her?' Jake demanded.

'Better go and see,' said Wellie. 'Or you'll have one of the mums coming over to find out. Come on – won't take us a minute.'

They settled the piece of car wing into the snow and perched on it, one behind the other. The sides were bent up so you could hang on, as long as you had thick gloves, but there was no steering. It was a real white knuckle ride, the fastest contraption on the hill; the plastic sled seemed as dull as a spin on the dodgems by comparison. Jake and Wellie fell off a few yards from Lucy. She was in full cry by now and they hurried over.

'What?' said Jake, impatiently. 'What do you want?'

'You said "Time for tobogganing,"' said Lucy. 'I've made a snowlady and now I want a go.'

'Well, you didn't need to cry!' said Jake. 'You should have just shouted.'

'I did,' said Lucy. 'Then I cried.'

'Well, you can go on the plastic sledge,' said Jake. 'We'll take it in turns to take you down.'

'Oh no we won't,' said Wellie. 'She's *your* sister. *You* can go on the baby sledge.'

'What?' said Jake. 'You said we should bring her!'

'Yeh – so that you could come out with us! That was all. There's Bludger and Brad – get the sledge off them now.'

Wellie started to climb the hill again, carrying his hunk of car.

'Now look what you've done,' said Jake. 'I'm stuck with the boring sledge. Why can't you make another snowman?'

Lucy's lip trembled. 'Want to go tobogganing,' she said.

'Oh come on then,' said Jake. 'You start climbing. I'll get the sledge.'

For a while Lucy was happy. Jake didn't like to take her to the top of the hill but she was content to slide down from half-way. Jake wasn't though. He was fuming. Maybe she would be OK from the top? She hadn't complained that she was scared.

'Shall we try from the top, Lucy?' he said, when they reached the bush which marked their usual start line.

Lucy clapped her hands excitedly. 'Ooh yes,' she said and promptly set off.

Jake had to smile. She looked so small and cute, trudging up the hill in her little red coat - a real trooper. He'd expected her to be whinging that she was tired by now. At the top, he sat her on the sledge in front of him and took up the rope. He felt a sudden rush of warmth. His mum had been stupid to tell them to stay in. Lucy was fine out here with him and his mates; he was being a really

good big brother. He pushed off hard – and then regretted it! Maybe that wasn't such a good idea with his little sister perched in front of him. She let out a scream fit to make your brains scramble and didn't stop till they reached the bottom. She climbed off and for a moment he thought she was going to burst into tears.

Then...

'That was great, Jake,' she said. 'Want to...oops!'

Lucy suddenly grasped her bottom.

'Lucy, you haven't...' said Jake. 'Not here....'

'No,' she said. 'But I want to....now!'

Frantically, Jake looked round the park. Were there loos here? He and his mates tended not to bother with them.

The girl with the pony-tail was passing, pulling an old wooden sledge.

'What's up?' she said. 'Is there something wrong?'

Jake hoped that his face was red enough from the cold to cover his blushes.

'She wants the toilet...' he gabbled. 'Quickly.'

The girl smiled. 'Shall I take her for you?' she said.

'Would you?' said Jake, gruffly. 'That'd be great.'

Lucy skipped off happily with the girl and Jake fanned his face. That girl was gorgeous. He had to find out her name. Right now, though, he had to get a go on the car wing.

When he reached the bottom with Bludger, the girl and Lucy were back.

'This is Pippa,' said Lucy. 'Now you know what her name is, you can ask her out.'

Bludger fell about laughing, Pippa giggled and blushed, Jake didn't know what to say.

'Errr...thanks for taking Lucy,' he said, wishing an avalanche would arrive and wipe him into oblivion.

'That's OK,' said Pippa. 'See you around.'

As soon as she had gone, Jake rounded on his little sister. 'Will you just keep your big mouth shut!' he yelled. 'Who I fancy is none of your business.'

Lucy's lip trembled again. 'I...I...only...' she began to sob.

'Well, don't!' snapped Jake. 'And don't cry either.'

But this time, there was no stopping her.

'Oh do something to shut her up, please!' moaned Bludger.

'Want to go on the shiny sledge,' sobbed Lucy.

'No,' said Jake.

'Want to,' howled Lucy.

'No,' said Jake.

'Want...'

'Oh, just let her,' said Bludger. 'It won't kill her.'

Twenty minutes later, Lucy had had four rides on the car wing and was screaming for more. Thoughts of murder had entered Jake's heart.

'Wellie, let's try the big hill,' he said.

'What, the one on the other side of the lake?'

‘Yeah.’

‘It’s very steep,’ said Wellie. ‘No one else is on it.’

‘Wimps,’ said Jake. ‘Just think how fast we could go! It’d be brill.’

Wellie scanned the slope, considering.

‘Yeah,’ he nodded. ‘Yeah, we could do it. It’ll be ace. Come on.’

They called to the others and Jake took Lucy’s hand.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked.

‘You’ll see,’ said Jake.

It took a good quarter of an hour to walk round the lake in the thick snow.

At the bottom of the hill, they hesitated. It really was very steep. But Jake’s frustration had fired him up.

‘Come on, Wellie. You and me first, right? Lucy, you stay here with Bludger, OK? We won’t be long.’

At the top, they settled themselves excitedly onto the car wing, Wellie at the front, Jake’s long thin legs stretched round him. Then, with a massive shove from Brad, they were off, hurtling across the untouched snow at a speed that made their previous rides seem like Sunday drives with Granny. The slope looked even steeper now that they were riding it. It was half-way down that Jake realised they weren’t going to be able to stop – that they were going to be swept onwards, straight out onto the frozen lake.

‘Swerve, Wellie!’ he yelled. ‘We’re going for the lake!’

‘I know, I’m trying,’ Wellie screamed back. ‘It’s no use!’

They were almost at the bottom now. The lake stretched out, stunningly beautiful, its frozen surface dressed with a layer of pristine snow. But the boys didn't care about the beauty.

'Jump!' yelled Jake as the car wing slackened speed fractionally on the tussocky lakeside. He hurled himself off the car-wing and landed, shaken, in the frost-crusting reeds that bounded the water. Wellie, however, had shot out across the ice. There was a crunch and when Jake scrambled to his feet, all he could see was the up-ended car wing sticking out of the ice like a shark fin.

'He's gone through the ice,' Bludger was yelling. 'Come on – help me!'

Bludger had already unfastened his scarf and was stepping gingerly out onto the frozen lake.

'Lie down!' yelled Jake. 'You have to spread your weight out. No, wait – there must be a life-belt! Where's Brad?'

Brad was running towards them, as fast as he could in the thick snow.

'Life-belt's wrecked,' he panted. 'Vandalised. Give me the scarf.'

'I've got one too,' said Bludger. 'Tie them together.'

'And I've got a belt,' said Jake.

Their hands shaking with fear and cold, the boys made a make-shift rope and then Brad, the tallest of them, lay down on the ice and hurled it out to Wellie who had managed to shove the car wing aside and was making desperate efforts to scramble out.

'It doesn't reach!' he shouted. 'I can't get it!'

'I'll go out further if you hold my ankles,' said Brad.

'No,' said Bludger. 'Look at those cracks in the ice!'

'I'd better run for help – if I phone, he could be frozen by the time anyone gets here,' said Jake.

'I've got these,' said Lucy.

They had completely forgotten about her. Now she was standing barefoot in the snow, holding out her stripy tights.

'My god, put your wellies on!' shouted Jake but Brad had grabbed the tights and was already tying them onto the make-shift rope.

Five minutes later, after some nightmare moments when they had all thought their rope wouldn't hold, Wellie was shivering on the bank.

'We should get an ambulance,' said Bludger.

'No,' gasped Wellie. 'Just get me home – it's only five minutes. My mum'd kill me if she ever found out.'

Bludger and Brad wrapped their arms round him and half-carried him, half-ran with him back through the park, Jake hurrying behind them with Lucy skipping excitedly beside him.

'I got no tights on,' she said, happily. 'It's cold.'

Jake glanced at his phone. Yikes, it was nearly half-past twelve.

'I'll have to go,' he said frantically. 'Mum'll be back soon.'

The others grunted. Jake wanted to carry Lucy – he was sure that would be quicker – but he had the make-shift rope and the plastic sledge too.

'Run, Lucy,' he urged. 'As fast as you can.'

Lucy ran. Her little face was scarlet with effort and she was panting hard but she didn't stop till they'd burst through their back door into the kitchen. Jake didn't need to tell her to hang up her coat. They could both hear the car in the drive. Lucy did that while he unknotted the rope and shoved the wet scarves and belt into a carrier bag. 'Get some dry tights,' he shouted.

'Hello darlings,' said Mum, breezing into the kitchen. 'Had a good morning? I'm so sorry about that but at least the snow hasn't all melted.'

Then she saw the sopping wet tights lying in a puddle on the floor and Lucy's bare legs.

'Oh no, Lucy,' said Mum. 'Not another accident! Not two in one day!'

Jake, trapped in the utility room with the carrier bag, froze. She'd been so good, she'd run so fast but he'd been pretty mean to her at times that morning.

He heard Lucy sigh.

'Yes, Mummy,' she said. 'Just a bit of an accident. I'm very sorry. It was the snow made me do it. It was very exciting.'

Jake sat down in the laundry basket and uncrossed his fingers. As small sisters went, Lucy could be an awful worse. She smiled at him and squeezed his fingers with her icy little hand.