

JANUARY (THIS YEAR)

How it all ended and how it all began. . .

I'm freaked out.

How come?

Maybe it's the fact that the woman opposite us looks like a human lollipop, all skinny body and big face.

Maybe it's because the lollipop lady's face has more make-up on it than all the girls on the make-up counters in Debenhams put together.

Maybe it's because I'm sitting on the uncomfiest "comfy" sofa ever.

Maybe it's because I'm so nervous I could barf.

Maybe it's because I'm about to be stared at by several million people.

Yep, *that's* why I'm freaked out.

(Mum seems to know and squeezes my hand.)

"In. . . Five! Four! Three! Two! *One!*" says a young guy in front of us, large headset covering his ears, hugging his clipboard to his chest.

A switch flicks somewhere inside the lollipop lady and she casts aside her notes and blank expression and positively beams at the camera.

“Welcome back to *Rise & Shine* – the programme that’ll brighten up your wintry morning!” she twinkles. “And now we have an update on a story which *gripped* the nation last year. And to tell us all about it is the one and only Queenie Rae Brown, who is here today – along with her adorable daughter Florence!”

Small problem with that intro, Mrs Lollipop. “Adorable” makes me sound like I’m a puppy and my name is *not* Florence.

I sneak a quick sideways peek at Mum, but I think she’s secretly freaked out too. Otherwise she’d’ve jumped right in and let the lollipop lady – and the several million viewers – know that I’m just plain Flo.

Still, this is the first time she’s been on telly since . . . well, *everything*, so she’s allowed to be nervous, I guess.

“Thanks for coming in to talk to us, Queenie! Especially on today of all days – when *this* year’s *Big Dreams* competition launches! How does that make you feel, after what happened to *you*?”

Ouch.

The lollipop lady may have an iridescent coral-pink smile stuck on her face, but it's like she's slapped Mum with her words. Nice start. *Not*. . .

I glance at Mum and silently *will* her to come back all cool and collected.

As if I needed to worry.

She looks . . . *magnificent*.

Her trademark dark beehive is piled high, with a red flower pinned into it. She's wearing a tight, short-sleeved red-and-white gingham shirt, which shows off the trailing roses tattoo on her left arm perfectly. She's swapped her usual jeans-with-turn-ups for cropped black trousers. And her red suede wedges with the ankle straps – they're my favourites.

"It's certainly been a crazy year in lots of ways, Sasha," Mum answers confidently, with a wide, scarlet-lipped smile. "But, yes, *Big Dreams* has certainly had an amazing impact on my life. Well, *all* our lives, eh, Flo?"

Mum looks at me with her beautiful brownish-green eyes, perfect swoops of black eyeliner framing them. Those eyes, the dimples when she smiles or laughs, the tattoos, her whole vintage fifties style, the *voice* . . . no wonder everyone – and

I mean EVERYONE – thought she was going to be a worldwide, million-selling megastar.

“Mmm,” I squeak and nod.

“Really?” says the lollipop lady, whose actual name I’d forgotten in my panic, till Mum said it just now. “But Queenie, yours was hardly a fairy tale with a happy ending, was it?!”

Sasha’s attempts at funny banter sound a bit cutting to me. I give Mum’s hand a tiny squeeze, one that I hope the camera can’t pick up. Though I don’t care what any of the millions of viewers think, really. Except, of course, a few viewers in particular, like Freddie and Zee and everyone in Marigold Parade. I know they’ll be watching and sending good vibes.

Mum gives my hand an imperceptible squeeze back, with an added tickle of her little finger in my palm, secret code style.

Instantly, I know what she’s trying to tell me. Oh yes, Sasha the lollipop lady might think she’s been oh so witty there, but me and Mum know the truth. We both know that our year of *Big Dreams* was wonderful and weird, exciting and lonely, amazing and awful, all at once.

And actually there were times when it was a *lot* like a fairy story. That’s it; if Sasha asks me how

I felt about the last year, I'd say it was like the tale of Cinderella for sure, only slightly mixed up and mashed up and *kind* of in reverse.

"The thing is, Sasha," I hear Mum say, "I'm a big believer in happy endings coming in all shapes and sizes, and I think I have one now. Even if it's not the one I expected!"

Yes! I think proudly, lost in admiration for my gorgeous mother. There were times in the last twelve months when I was really angry with her and even wildly *worried* about her, but here she is . . . more together than she's ever been.

"Yes, well, that's *one* way of looking at it!" laughs the lollipop lady, pretending to be warm and friendly, but pretty much mocking Mum at the same time.

I'm quietly fuming – and suddenly certain that my fearsome gran Olive will be watching and growling right now – when I realize that Sasha the Sarcastic has turned her attention to *me*.

"So over to you, Florence," she smarms. "I'm guessing you're a typical teenager, right?"

I want to come back at her with some assured, snippy remark like "What exactly is *that* supposed to mean?" But with the spotlight fixed on me, whatever

sliver of confidence I have oozes away like melted caramel.

After all, it's not just the millions of strangers and the lovely residents of Marigold Parade who'll be watching, I suddenly, heart-stoppingly, realize. It could be Polly and Heidi and the others too. And yeah, by "others", I'm sort of thinking about Marley. . .

"Uh-huh," I hear myself mumbling to Sasha and her mask of make-up.

"It's just that I'm imagining you and your friends doing typical teen things, Florence," she continues, "like sitting around a computer together, sniggering over funny clips on YouTube."

I have an instant mental image of me and Freddie and Zee giggling at dogs nodding along to their owners playing guitar, or babies falling asleep face first in their lunch.

But so what? What's Sneery Sasha getting at?

"Well, I just wanted to ask you, Florence, what did you make of the world watching *that* clip of your mum on YouTube?" says Sasha. "I'm talking, of course, about the video that's had – let's see – eight million, seven hundred and ninety-eight thousand hits at the last count?"

Without waiting for an answer, she swivels her gaze away from me and over to a monitor. Her perfectly manicured hand waves towards it, indicating that me and Mum are meant to look at it too.

My heart lurches as soon as the image pops up of Mum in silhouette, her hand on the microphone, and we hear the roar of the expectant crowd.

Oh, *I* get it.

Sasha wants me to comment on The Moment. The Moment that my already-famous-by-this-time mum became even *more* famous, for all the wrong reasons.

The moment Mum's big dream went pop.

The moment that I realized this talent show had changed all our lives for ever – just not in the way me or Mum ever expected.

“The final of last year's *Big Dreams* contest,” I hear Sasha say as the crowd onscreen hushes and the lights rise on Queenie. “When your mum's dreams tragically ended.”

Yeah, so some things ended, I fume to myself, my eyes glued to the oh-so-familiar image on the monitor.

But if you really want to know, Sarky Sasha, some things – some absolutely *brilliant* things – also began. . .