



Dagmar Bach:

ZIMT UND WEG

CINNAMON LEAPS

1st Volume of the Cinnamon Trilogy

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Prologue

The last thing I could remember was standing in the ladies' changing room at the swimming pool and trying to untangle my wet hair with a wide-toothed comb.

Then came the scent of cinnamon swirls and suddenly I was here, in this room, which might have been an office or a waiting room at first glance – a room I had never seen before in my life.

I had landed up here completely unprepared.□

And without the slightest clue as to why.

Why me of all people.

□I started counting in my mind – and I got to five.□

Because at six I was me again, standing in the changing room with the comb in my hand and a sinking feeling in my tummy.

It had happened again.□

For the third time in the past two weeks.

For the eleventh time in the past three months.

And for the approximately twenty-eighth time since my twelfth birthday.

And I had no idea when it would happen again...□

My name is Victoria King. I'm nearly fifteen years old, in year nine at St Anna's Private School – and I have the rather irritating habit of vanishing from one second to the next and popping up

again in very different places. Just like that, without warning. And usually precisely when I'm least ready for it.

My best friend Pauline has plenty of theories on the phenomenon, compiled in one of her inevitable lists (she wants to be a scientist one day):

1) I don't vanish – I fall asleep for a second and dream.

Might be possible but certainly isn't true. Because I'm always wide awake every time it happens.

2) I don't vanish or fall asleep – I daydream.

I categorically reject this theory. I'm not so dumb I wouldn't realize it. Apart from that I only daydream when I'm at swimming practice. And mostly about the boy I've got a tiny bit of a crush on...

3) I don't vanish – I have short blackouts or hallucinations.

I've banned Pauline from pursuing this theory any further because if she was right it would mean I presumably had a severe illness or something. Which I don't, of course, I'm perfectly fit. My grandma always says I'm as tough as grandpa's old boots, and he inherited them from *his* grandfather. And he was a buddy of old Kaiser Wilhelm, I think.

4) I don't vanish – I invented the story off the top of my head to get attention.

This theory is also invalid, because Pauline only put it on her list to annoy me when we had a row. We made up straight away and of course she believes me – she's my best friend.

5) I do actually vanish. And I slip into another body in a different place.

Pauline came up with this theory after I told her I'd seen a newspaper in one of these places (in this case the breakfast room of a posh hotel) and it had the same date on it as the day I vanished at home. Ever since then she has insisted I must be landing in parallel worlds when I'm gone. In different worlds that are the mirror image of ours, in other words, just under different conditions. And ever since then she's always had this triumphant smile on her face when I tell her about a leap, and she rambles on about some kind of physics stuff (using words like *theory of relativity* and *quantum mechanics* – no idea what she means).

I don't know if she's right. All I know is that this vanishing, leaping – whatever it is – has recently plunged me into the greatest chaos you can possibly imagine.

But perhaps I'd better tell the story from the beginning.

It all began at Mimi's wedding...

1.

'And Mimi really wouldn't tell you what surprise she's got in store for us?' I nagged Mum for about the twentieth time that day, as she sat in the bathtub and piled up a towering foam hairstyle worthy of Marge Simpson.

'No, she didn't. Otherwise it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?' she said, adding a foam beard.

'I hate surprises,' I murmured, and it's true. No kidding. I'd always rather know what's coming. Even at Christmas I like to know in advance what presents I'm getting, because I find it really hard to summon up spontaneous enthusiasm for something I actually think is terrible. It's a real challenge every year with my grandparents' presents. What would you do, for example, if you got a nose-hair trimmer from your grandma? Or the third birds-and-bees book in a row?

Mum's not as judgemental as I am, though. Unlike me, she's very open to everything new.

'Mimi means well and it's bound to be fun. It's great that she's

thought of something for us!’

Mimi is an old school friend of my mother’s. She was a die-hard single lady for years, never missed a party and always came running to cry on Mum’s shoulder when things didn’t work out with the latest guy she’d met at the latest party. Until she fell head over heels in love with Konrad a while ago. From then on, it was full steam ahead. It only took her four months to get him to marry her. Neither Mum nor I think there’s anything wrong with that, unlike Mimi’s parents, who are appalled at it all happening so quickly. Well, it is a bit dodgy perhaps that Konrad’s a passionate hunter – that alone would rule him out for me, no matter how great a guy he was otherwise. But that’s up to Mimi.

In any case, Mimi and Konrad’s wedding was set for that afternoon, and Mum and I were invited, of course – Mum’s always invited whenever someone in our small town gets married. And due to a lack of male plus-ones (Mum’s been single forever), she often takes me along to weddings.

‘Sweetie, go and get me the red one with the dots. Or should I wear the green one with the sash? I just can’t decide! Who knows who we’ll run into today! What if my dream man is suddenly standing there and I’m wearing the wrong dress?’ she moaned, almost making the bathtub overflow with all her wriggling and jiggling.

Over the past hour, I had presented half the contents of her wardrobe to her as she went through her beauty regime in the bathroom. (Unlike her, I didn't need help with styling or choosing an outfit. I only own one smart dress because I prefer to wear jeans and brightly coloured hoodies. And my chin-length hair falls whichever way it likes. I don't have a hairstyle. Only hair.)

In Mum's case, choosing an outfit can sometimes take forever because she can't make up her mind. What she needed right then was a nudge in the right direction, as usual.

'Wear the blue one. The matching hat is the coolest of all of them.'

That's really true. Mum is one of the few women I know who wears hats. And they don't look at all ridiculous on her, they look just right. She almost only ever wears knee-length dresses and she has a matching hat for every one – she likes getting dressed up, especially for occasions like that day's wedding. And then she looks like a real English lady, although she vehemently denies Princess Kate is her top role model when it comes to fashion and styling. But she could still easily pass for her sister – on good days, her younger sister.

Mum doesn't just have the look, she really is a fan through and through of everything remotely related to England: stories of the royals, greasy fish 'n' chips, driving on the left, five o'clock tea

and even lemon curd – the full Monty, if you know what I mean. And thanks to that passion, she turned our house into a real English bed & breakfast a few years ago, and lemon curd is to us what Nutella is for other Germans.

She used to have the right man to go along with her obsession as well – my dad is a genuine Englishman, looks like Hugh Grant from a distance and still has a really cute accent when he speaks German, even though he’s been living here for years. The two of them split up when I was a little kid, though, and I still don’t understand why to this day. But as soon as we get onto the subject of my dad, Mum starts to get sensitive and changes the subject, even though it’s all so long ago.

‘Careful, Vicky!’

Too late. Mum had already catapulted herself out of the bathtub, almost drenching the entire bathroom. I leapt back to protect the little blue hat, which would make her look at least as classy as Princess Kate at Baby Charlotte’s christening.

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to do you a little bit of make-up this time?’ she asked, wrapping herself in an enormous towel.

Not again. ‘Quite sure. I’m not having my youthful pores blocked unnecessarily. The big fat spot I sometimes get on my forehead is

more than enough already.'

'But maybe I can do your hair for a—'

'Mum!'

□ '...or maybe your nails?'

□ 'MUM!!!'

□ 'Alright, alright,' she mumbled as she dried herself off. □

Mum is always nagging me to make myself look a bit more girly, but it never gets her anywhere. I feel perfectly fine the way I am.

That's why I try to change the subject every time she starts.

'Let's hope it's not as boring as Gitte and Henning's wedding,' I said, thinking with horror of that worst of all receptions, at which we were practically counting down the minutes until we could go home.

'As long as they don't put us on a table with their old aunties, that won't happen,' said Mum, and she tipped out the content of her bathroom cabinet drawer in search of her hairpins. Oh yes, the aunties. They'd managed to spend a whole evening talking about digestion problems and incontinence (that's the illness when you don't notice when you need a wee).

Mum had found what she was looking for.

‘Let’s not expect the worst, it only brings bad luck,’ she said vigorously as she ran a wide-toothed comb through her hair.

‘When Mimi and Konrad exchange their rings today, then –’ She screeched in horror. ‘Oh God, the rings!’

‘Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten them,’ I said, but actually I knew the answer already. Mum can be a bit absent-minded at times.

‘Oh my goodness, how could I have forgotten? Go, go, go, get dressed right now, we have to drive round to Raimund’s before the ceremony!’

Raimund Graf is our local jeweller, and Mimi had asked Mum weeks ago to pick up the wedding rings from him and bring them to the church.

‘Is his shop open on Saturday afternoons?’ I asked.

‘It must be!’ Like a whirlwind, Mum dashed past me into her room, only to emerge fully dressed five minutes later and stand waiting in the open front doorway.

‘Are you coming at last?’

The drive to Raimund’s shop took Mum half as long as it would for someone who’d kept to the traffic rules. But it was an

emergency, no doubt about that, and Mum would tell any police officer the story of Mimi and the rings so convincingly that she'd presumably get away with it. Nobody stopped us though, luckily, and not five minutes later, we were outside the jeweller's shop.

Where, unfortunately, the security shutters were down over the doors and windows. The shop was shut.

'How annoying,' Mum murmured. Then she grabbed me by the arm and dragged me along. 'Come on, Raimund only lives round the corner, he'll just have to open up for us.'

Everyone knows practically everyone in our town – and usually also where they live. And although that's not always such a great thing if you ask me, on that day it was definitely a blessing.

Mum dragged me a few doors down to a small block of flats. One of the mailboxes – which meant one of the flats – belonged to a certain *R. Graf*.

Bingo.

Mum pressed the small black doorbell five times in a row.

'Don't you think once is enough?' I asked. My Mum often goes a bit over the top, and sometimes I have my work cut out holding her back. Which doesn't always go well.

She looked up at the windows, suspecting Raimund behind them, and shook her head.

‘Apparently not.’ She rang the bell a few more times. And narrowed her eyes. ‘That curtain just moved, didn’t it?’

I walked back towards the road to get a better view. The curtain behind the top left window really did wobble slightly.

‘Just you wait, I’ll get you,’ murmured Mum, and then she took a few steps around the front garden and bent down. Only to fire a handful of pebbles at Raimund’s window the next moment. It bordered on a miracle that the glass didn’t break, because the tiny missiles made so much noise that the pensioners on the ground floor immediately closed their shutters with a bang. They probably thought they’d been caught in a spontaneous hailstorm.

Mum didn’t care about that though. ‘I can see you, Raimund, open the door right now!’ she blared up at him. And just as she was getting ready to throw the next load of stones, the window opened at last and Raimund glared down at us. Just for a change, he wasn’t wearing his usual square brown suit but a white ribbed vest, which didn’t match his otherwise serious image as a jeweller one bit.

‘Have you gone off your rocker, Meg?’ he snapped at Mum.

‘I’ve forgotten Mimi’s rings! You have to come back to the shop

for a minute.'

'And that's why you're smashing my windows? You've got to be kidding!'

'I'll bring you a slice of wedding cake to say thanks.'

'It's my afternoon off and I want to watch the football in peace. And anyway, I don't like cake!'

'Alright then, no cake. Come round to our place for breakfast tomorrow instead.'

'Breakfast, goodness me! I'm not driving all the way to your place just to have my breakfast. You'll have to come up with something better than that.'

Mum thought for a moment. 'The next time your aunt comes to visit she can stay at our bed & breakfast. Then you won't have to deal with her.'

Raimund, who was just about to close the window, paused mid-slam. He seemed to be genuinely considering Mum's offer.

'How long?' he called down.

□ 'What do you mean?' asked Mum. □

'How long can she stay with you?'

A triumphant smile spread across Mum's face. She'd got him. 'A week, maybe?'

Raimund scratched his plump moustache, which went better and better with his saggy vest the longer I looked.

Then he mumbled something incomprehensible and closed the window. Mum and I exchanged uncertain glances, but when the front door opened not a minute later and Raimund emerged in a vest, purple jogging pants and flip-flops, jingling a big bunch of keys, Mum was so relieved that she launched herself into a hug.

Which made Raimund blush bright red.

'I'm only doing it because of the old bag, get it? You'll regret it when you meet her,' he muttered, flip-flopping in the direction of his shop.

'You could be right,' said Mum, who was skipping along next to him like a joyful six-year-old, 'but not today. You're saving my life right now.'

Raimund murmured something else and tried his best to look angry. But I was certain he actually smiled a little underneath his moustache when we finally got to his shop and he handed Mum the little package containing the rings.

It's impossible to be mad at Mum.

And when she pressed a kiss to his cheek in gratitude, he even blushed again.

'Thank goodness that turned out well!' Mum sighed with relief once we'd got to the church in time for the wedding and passed on the rings to the best man and the maid of honour.

'From now on we can relax. It's going to be absolutely great today, I can tell. If anyone knows how to celebrate, it's Mimi. Let's just spoil ourselves and enjoy the day.'

When we took our seats with the other guests shortly afterwards, we were lucky enough not to know that the day would be anything but enjoyable. Otherwise, we might have come up with an idea for getting out of the whole mess.

2.

As I said, I hate surprises, and I was to find out how right I was directly after the marriage ceremony. The right moment for Mum and me to leave would have been when Mimi took us aside outside the reception venue and whispered that she wanted to use her own wedding to sow the seeds for a new marriage, by means of a

targeted throw of her bouquet.

We were much too polite to leave then, of course. Which we later bitterly regretted.

□ ‘We could say our dog’s got acute gastro-enteritis,’ hissed Mum, sitting next to me at the table and clutching the stem of her wine glass. We didn’t even have a dog, so it was highly unlikely to have gastro-whatever it was. What we did have was an urgent need to get out of there as quickly as possible.

‘But we probably wouldn’t even make it to the cloakroom.’ Mum sighed, and I joined in.

She was right. There was no escape.

Ever since that afternoon, the two of us had been trapped in a nightmare that seemed to have no end, and I veritably prayed that something would finally happen to deliver us from our suffering. But when you need a real emergency for once in your life, there’s never one in sight.

Which is odd because something is always going wrong at our house, especially when Mum and I aren’t there. The phone tends to ring about half an hour after we’ve left the house. My grandparents, who also live with us, have a talent for mishaps. Either the heating pipe’s burst or my grandmother’s lost her key or

my grumpy grandfather has lost his temper over my grandmother or the burst pipe. There's always some disaster.

But that evening – nothing. □

Not a catastrophe for miles. How annoying.

Part of Mimi's surprise, you see, was to provide the perfect partners for Mum and me at the wedding reception. She had spent hours and hours perfecting the guest list and the seating plan, creating what she considered three ideally composed singles tables, all of which were of course slightly isolated. Not too close to the bride and groom, the dance floor or the music, so that none of us caught a whiff of any fun and we all had to talk to each other all evening – while also waiting the longest for our food.

The first singles table consisted of four senior citizens, two gents and two ladies who apparently had no objections to Mimi's plans, chattering away cheerfully all afternoon. On closer inspection I did notice that they were all talking at the same time, apparently all to themselves, but that didn't seem to bother them. Presumably that was actually more pleasant than having to deal with the others at the table.

At the next table sat our mayor Laslo Müllerbeck-Albarese with three women from Mimi's office, all of them single and all of them

extremely attractive. Whenever I looked over at them they were either laughing out loud or opening a new bottle of wine or both at once, which made me rather envious. Not because of the wine, of course, but because there appeared to be people having a really nice evening, despite the bride's manipulations. The three girls spent all their time giggling and the mayor has Italian roots, which makes him a cheerful soul to begin with. (Nobody ever uses his real name because everyone in our town agrees that such a silly name doesn't suit such an attractive man. So he's just called *the mayor*.) And just like the three ladies, he seemed to be in the best of moods despite Mimi's matchmaking attempt.

Unlike us. Mum and I were seated at a table with a certain Albert and his son Albert junior. (Mimi – a fan of English history like my Mum – must have thought it would be particularly funny to fix us up with a father-and-son team, especially matching me, Victoria, with someone called Albert. Victoria and Albert, like the old English queen and her husband. Pardon me for not laughing.)

Albert and Albert, however, were more than enthusiastic about Mimi's matchmaking technique – to put it mildly. Apparently Mum and I were a total hit for the two of them, the people they'd been waiting for all their lives, meaning they didn't leave our sides from the moment they met us.

Albert senior was a man of around fifty, with very little hair left but plenty of bad jokes to make up for it. And he was obviously very much into my Mum. He left nothing untried to wrap her around his fat little finger that day. He stuck to her like a half-sucked sweet and kept patting her arm when he found something he said particularly funny (and he found himself funny pretty much all the time). When he noticed Mum didn't seem to be taking the bait he even sunk so low as to show her his brass money clip, inherited from his great-great uncle (or from a bank adviser, I wasn't quite sure).

We'd already heard his entire life story over the first cup of coffee: he was a divorced building contractor, he liked pretty brunettes in blue, knee-length dresses with matching hats, and his hobby, like Konrad's, was hunting. (That put an end to it for me, at the very latest. For Mum it was over long before, when she heard that his son had the same name as him. She immediately assumed it was the only name he could spell correctly.)

Like father, like son – Albert junior was simply awful, even though he didn't talk quite as much. To make up for it he smelled bad, a mixture of unwashed armpits and fried onions. He also picked his nose when he thought we weren't looking, and then wiped his pickings somewhere absent-mindedly, so that we had to be very

careful where we put our hands.

Oh God, did I feel sick.

And right at that moment, the dessert was served. I'd been so looking forward to it because at least that course wouldn't contain meat. I didn't know whether I'd ever eat another bite, since Albert senior had told us every detail of how the venison for the main course was expertly eviscerated after the hunt. Which prompted Mum to murmur to herself over and over 'I can't eat Bambi!' and the two of us to eat only the pasta and cranberry sauce on our plates.

For dessert, the waitress plonked a huge tray of apple strudel on the table, accompanied by one of those delicate china jugs of thin custard. But before I could even raise a hand to serve myself, Albert senior had grabbed the tray.

'Wait, my beauties, let Albert do the honours!'

And Albert did the honours. Unfortunately he did them with such aplomb that half the custard spilled out and – what else? – landed on me. And my dress. And my chest.

'Oh my goodness, what's happened here?' Of course Clarissa Cloppenburg had to pass our table at that exact moment.

Sure, knowing my luck that had to happen. If I had to make a fool of myself, then at least with an audience.

Clarissa is the mother of a girl from my class, Claire, who is about the most annoying creature you can possibly imagine at our school – snobby, superficial, a bottle-blonde with much too much make-up. The Cloppenburgs have a reputation as the Kardashians of our town – famous, filthy rich and often a bit embarrassing. They live in a huge house on the edge of the golf course, and everyone who thinks they're better than the rest of us wants to be their friend.

Why, I can't say for the life of me, because in my opinion they're nothing but arrogant, humourless snobs.

'Meg, you look delightful as always!' Clarissa planted air kisses near Mum's cheeks and began chattering away at her while I took a napkin and attempted to wipe the worst stains off my dress. And off my chest.

Clarissa interrupted her torrent of words to point at a table at the other end of the room.

'Look, doesn't our Claire look delightful as usual this evening?' And as if Claire had sensed we were talking about her, she turned around in her seat and beamed a malicious grin in my direction, just as I had discovered custard in my hair and was surreptitiously rubbing at a strand.

‘And her boyfriend is such a nice young man. They make such a delightful couple, don’t you think?’

I really don’t care, you stupid witch. And if I hear the word delightful one more time you’ll be the next one wiping custard out of her face. I’m sure that would be just as delightful.

There was no stopping her, even though neither Mum nor I answered her. ‘You are coming to our little birthday party, aren’t you?’

‘Of course, just like every year. We couldn’t possibly miss it.’ Mum put on a brave smile and took a large sip from her wine glass. And another one. Until it was empty.

‘And remember – your invitations are both valid for two.’ Clarissa winked at the Alberts, who responded with instant stupid grins. That was all we needed. I’d rather stay at home than meet those two idiots voluntarily.

‘I’ll just go and freshen up,’ I muttered as I fled from our nightmare table. *Sorry, Mum, but Clarissa and the two Alberts and custard in my hair is just a bit too much for me right now.*

How I wished my best friend Pauline was there! She’d manage to make me laugh even in such an awful situation, and she’d give that dumb Albert junior a real talking to. Unfortunately, it was her

grandma's seventieth birthday so she couldn't come with me to the wedding, meaning I was all on my own. I felt absolutely miserable as I set out for the washrooms.

It really did take ages to get myself halfway cleaned up. And of course the delightful Claire came in at the very moment when I was trying to remove the wet patches on my dress by dancing around under the hairdryer like it was a limbo pole. Which must have looked pretty stupid.

'Oh, have you spilled your food again like a toddler? Or are you hiding from your new admirer?' giggled Claire, casting approving glances at her reflection and mocking ones at me by turn. That was quite a trick.

'The food didn't agree with me,' I murmured. Admittedly, that wasn't particularly inspired, but I had run out of youthful spontaneity as the day went on. I felt as crumbly as Grandma's terrible home-made biscuits.

In the meantime, Claire produced an amazingly large lipstick from her amazingly small handbag and began to paint her lips in slow motion, bright red.

'That's what you get for eating meat. I must say, it's been a tough day for me, being a vegetarian – the meal was a real cheek!'

Oh, and the day's been so much better for me, has it? Stupid cow.

'You didn't have to eat the meat.'

'I didn't. I only had the vegetable soup and a slice of strawberry tart this afternoon at the reception,' she said and pressed her lips together.

Oh boy. I couldn't help saying a little something.

'The soup was made of beef stock. And the jelly on the strawberry tarts was made of gelatine. You know, that slimy stuff made of pigs' bones.'

'Don't lie!' she hissed at me, throwing her lipstick back in her bag.

'Why should I?' I flopped down on the wobbly stool usually occupied by the toilet attendant. Life wasn't treating me too well that day, and for a brief moment I considered simply staying right where I was until the calamitous day was all over.

Claire obviously didn't have my problems.

'I have to get back. My date's waiting for me.' She stressed the word *date* in such an affected way that I felt like throwing the soap dish meant for tips at her head.

And with one last mean grin on her bright red lips, she floated

elegantly out of the door on her high heels.

Delightful.

I wasted a few more minutes by washing my hands thoroughly and patting my hair into shape, which hardly helped at all. And after a while I felt guilty for leaving Mum alone so long with the fumbler and the stinker, so I had to make my way back, for better or for worse.

But before I could squeeze past the other tables (was I imagining it or were people giving me pitying looks?), Mimi had crept up unnoticed and grabbed me by the shoulders from behind.

‘Sweetie, you’re just in time for me to throw my bouquet,’ she said, and shoved me through the crowd onto the dance floor. Mum was already standing there with a tired smile on her face, the two Alberts not far away with their eyes aglow.

It was actually getting worse and worse. Of course, I soon spotted Claire in the midst of it all, giving me a superior grin as she demonstratively grabbed her date’s hand, the boy standing motionless beside her.

Now I recognized him. It was the new boy from the class above us, Konstantin something, who half the girls at our school had had a crush on since he’d moved here last year. The other half are more

into his best friend Nikolas. He's half-Greek with brown button eyes, which make him look as cute and harmless as a teddy bear – although I hear appearances are deceptive.

Pauline and I didn't fit into the scheme at all, when it came to crushes. Neither of us even vaguely liked either of those two boys. Pauline didn't fall in love on principle, and I was of the opinion that there was someone even better than them. (His name's David. The one from my daydreams. He is part of Konstantin's clique but he's way cooler than him and Nikolas put together.)

The fact that Konstantin was actually out with Claire – and at a wedding, to boot – would disqualify him for every normal girl until he left school, at least. Because Claire is – well, she's just *Claire*.

To be honest, though, the way he was looking at that moment suggested he wasn't all that bright. Claire was chattering on and on without pausing for breath, giggling and tossing her hair back over her shoulders. She was in full flirting mode but all Konstantin did was raise one corner of his mouth slightly, nod and otherwise show no emotion. Perhaps he just had rotten teeth and didn't want to smile – I don't know any boys at our school who are immune to Claire and her finely honed flirting skills. Yes, that had to be it. With dental problems that bad, even a posh dark suit or admittedly good looks were no use. I mean, just because he's tall and athletic

and has an even, expressive face with thick, chestnut-coloured hair that flops over his eyes like that, there's no need to be arrogant.

The band played a quick fanfare, bringing me back down to earth, unfortunately. Mimi had grabbed the microphone and was absolutely in her element.

'Here we go, everyone, we've come to one of the highlights of the evening – time to throw the bouquet! All the single ladies, come and join me!'

At that moment I admired my mum once again. Even by that point she hadn't lost her royal composure, still looking gorgeous no matter how awful the day had been. Even her hat was still perfectly poised. No wonder Albert senior was practically drooling again.

It was still an absolute mystery to me why on earth my dad had left her when I was little. And it would presumably stay that way, because the subject is taboo for Dad, Mum and even my grandparents.

There was only a handful of other girls on the dance floor with us. Two of them were over seventy and three under ten, making it all the more humiliating for Mum and me than it might seem. Funnily enough there was no sign of the three babes from the mayor's table. They'd probably all taken off together and were enjoying a

private party elsewhere.

‘I’m not going to catch it,’ Mum murmured in my direction, clasping her hands demonstratively behind her back. I could understand her all too well – I certainly didn’t want the stupid bouquet either. All I wanted was to go home.

‘When she turns around to throw the damn thing over her shoulder, we’ll make a run for it, OK?’ she hissed, investing the last of her energy in an attempted smile.

‘But Mum, Mimi would never forgive us!’

‘And I’ll never forgive her for what she’s put us through here.’

That was true enough.

So what do you think, what could be more embarrassing and stupid for dear old Vicky at that second, than actually catching the bouquet?

Right.

Having the bouquet crash-land on my head.

Which of course gave the entire wedding party a big fat laugh at my expense. I really couldn’t sink any lower that day.

‘And now it’s time to dance!’ yelled Mimi, and while everyone

around me whooped and dashed onto the dance floor, all I wanted was for the earth to swallow me up and never, ever spit me out again.

3.

I'll spare you the gruesome details. Dancing is a wonderful thing, at least according to Mum, something everyone ought to learn. It's a useful skill for many social occasions, apparently, just as much part of general knowledge as quadratic equations. (I'm certainly better at dancing than at equations. So my maths teacher probably wouldn't back Mum up on that point.) Not every piece of dancing equipment, though – says Mum – is equally suitable (she means dancing partners), and sometimes you simply don't go together.

Let's put it like this: neither Albert junior and I nor Albert senior and Mum went even slightly together in any way. I felt like I was dancing a waltz with a bicycle. But Mum and I mastered this new torture with as much dignity as the situation allowed.

I was also trying my best to ignore Claire, who was standing at the edge of the dance floor, eyeing my every step with a snooty look on her face. But whenever I looked over I got the feeling she'd like to dance herself. Cavity-ridden Konstantin, though, didn't show

the slightest sign of asking her for a dance, and it was only then that I saw why: he had a big fat bandage around his foot and a crutch under each elbow.

Ha! Served her right, because Claire was no doubt an excellent dancer. Probably *delightful*.

After five songs, the band finally took a break and Mum and I had a chance to tear ourselves away from the two stooges – at the end of our tether, soaked in sweat, Mum with a damp hand print on her dress and me with totally trampled toes.

And then we finally did what any sensible person would have done long earlier.

We sent the Alberts to the bar to get us something to drink – and in the meantime made a dash for it through the kitchen and the out of the delivery entrance.

And then we ran as fast as we could.

‘Please never make me go to a wedding with you ever again!’ I panted as we slowed down at last, three blocks away. My feet were killing me even though I wasn’t wearing heels, unlike Mum. But she’d run even faster in her pumps than I had.

‘There was no way of knowing it would turn out like that.’ She

slowed down, straightening a few crumples in her dress.

‘And Claire, that stupid cow. Now she’s got even more ammunition against me. I feel sick even thinking about the Cloppenburgs’ stupid party next month.’

OK, OK, it wasn’t a stupid party. There was no need to pretend it was. Claire and her parents’ parties are actually huge jamborees with absolute legendary status in our town, I have to admit. The three Cloppenburgs – father, mother and Claire – all share a birthday on the same day, which of course they celebrate every year in an utterly exaggerated manner. (The in my opinion justified question of whether Claire really was born by mere coincidence on the same date or a planned caesarean helped her on the way elicits horrified reactions from Claire’s mother to this day. How could anyone even think of such a thing? Of course it was a spontaneous birth, an absolute coincidence!!! Right, sure...)

Apart from that, the party had a different theme every year. This time it was *The Roaring Twenties – Let’s Party Like Gatsby*, which Mum was totally into, even though it wasn’t really related to England. She just loves getting dressed up and spending hours perfecting her outfit. I hate it. And I already hate the party.

‘I want to be the delightful one for a change. Not the one with custard in her hair and everywhere else.’ I didn’t want to sound

quite that whiney but at that moment I could hardly pull myself together any more.

‘You *are* delightful. Much more delightful than Claire!’ Mum stopped mid-stride and gave me a spontaneous hug.

‘So why was I stuck with that disgusting nose-picker all evening instead of a really cool boy?’

Like David, for example.

‘That boy Claire was with wasn’t all that cool either,’ said Mum. ‘I bet he only brought the crutches along so he didn’t have to dance with her.’

‘Maybe. And he’s got rotten teeth too,’ I murmured, my voice trembling suspiciously.

We had almost reached our town common, a small park-like square with a statue of the town founder in pride of place: Sigismund the Handsome (although no one can prove he was really called that). Sadly, the depiction of good old Sigismund wasn’t quite ideal – or at least I hoped for his sake that he’d been a bit better looking in real life. Due to his unfortunate profile, my Auntie Polly always said he looked like a mixture of Ozzy Osborne and Taylor Swift. Sigismund the Handsome had originally been holding a sword, but someone seemed to have

decided that didn't suit our town too well and had removed the weapon overnight. Ever since then, Sigismund has had something different in his hand whenever I walk past him. On that day it was a broken umbrella.

Mum took my hands. 'OK, you're right. It can't go on like this.' She looked me in the eye. 'We'll just have to do something to make sure it doesn't happen to us again.'

'Do something?' I asked with a sniff.

'Exactly. We're two strong women and we deserve better than those two doofuses.' She smiled. 'You know what? The two of us are going to solemnly swear that we'll have the perfect partners for the Cloppenburgs' party. You and me.' She put one hand on her heart and the other on her hat. 'Come on, repeat after me! We solemnly swear –'

'But it's so soon!' I interrupted.

'It's five weeks away, that should be do-able. Come on, Vicky, join in.' She cleared her throat. 'We solemnly swear that we will have the perfect partners for the Cloppenburgs' party,' she solemnly swore.

I blinked back my rising tears but murmured the vow along with her. Even though I didn't feel the least bit like it.

‘It’ll never work.’ I’m a sceptic by nature. Have I mentioned that yet?

But Mum remained her optimistic self.

‘Whyever not? And if it doesn’t work we can always ask the Alberts to come with us. Just kidding!’ she added as I really did almost burst into tears. I’m not usually a weepy person but everything was too much for me that day.

My mother’s hug really did me good at that moment, though, and then we strolled home arm in arm through the mild spring night.

Instead of going to bed straight away we had a cup of tea, even though it was almost two in the morning. We wanted to drink to our vow and tea is always the right thing at any time of day or night – according to Mum. And we also enjoyed the brief moment of silence in our kitchen, something as rare as a white Christmas. The next morning my grandparents would be sitting there again, plus our bed & breakfast guests, currently slumbering away on the floor above us, and that would be the end of our peace and quiet.

It’s a myth by the way that you can’t sleep when you drink a cup of tea late at night. I can sleep like a baby even after five cups of tea, so it’s not down to the caffeine at least. Although I have been known to wake up an hour later with an urgent need to empty my

bladder.

And that was why I noticed the smell of cinnamon that night just as I was in the bathroom, that hour later, in the middle of the night, half asleep with a full bladder.

‘On no, please no...’ But before I could let out a heartfelt curse, the roses on the shower curtain blurred and I had to shut my eyes tight for a moment because I felt rather odd.

When I opened them two seconds later I was lying on my back.

And it was pitch black all around me.

4.

My heart was beating like a drum, like every time something like that happened. And it had been happening since I turned twelve – about once or twice a month at irregular intervals.

As I mentioned earlier, Pauline called these incidents *parallel world leaps*, although I had no idea whether there’s an actual name for what happened to me. Or if there was anyone else who’d experienced the same as me. I couldn’t ask anyone, it was too crazy. From one second to the next I was in a different place, or possibly in a different body. As if I’d swapped brains with

someone else. Or was it my soul?

Who knew who I'd been so far – I'd been in so many different places during my leaps over the past three years that Pauline and I couldn't make out any pattern behind it. I'd been in a park-like garden, for example, in a fancy kitchen, on a ski slope (mid-schuss – I almost died of fright), on a bus or the other day in a posh clothes shop. Just like that. And I never had the slightest idea of why it happened to me of all people.

The only person who knew about it was Pauline. I hadn't even let Mum in on my secret, even though I usually told her everything. The thing was, I'd kind of missed the opportunity back when it all started because I thought for a while I was going crazy or something. But then it kept happening over and over, and in the end it had almost become part of normal life over the years. I couldn't very well tell my family now – they'd have put me straight into a loony bin, probably.

Unlike me, Pauline was really into the whole thing. She thought it was super-exciting and she wished she could leap herself. She was always complaining that I had so little to tell her when it happened again. But I needed the couple of seconds that a leap lasted to get my bearings and see where I was. There was no time for anything else.

Once Pauline had even tried to come with me, but that went totally pear-shaped. I managed to tell her in time that I smelled cinnamon swirls, whereupon she launched herself at me and clung to me like a baby koala. But it didn't work, of course – I leapt alone and I was back again a few seconds later. She was convinced, though, that something had happened to my body in the meantime – it had gone stiff as a board for a moment. Neither of us had an explanation for that.

It was around that time that she'd invented our logbook, a file on my computer where I was supposed to write even the tiniest detail of what I experienced during my leaps. And every time she looked at my notes afterwards she had that same yearning look on her face, revealing just how much she wished she could go through it all herself.

It was all way too exciting for me – I'd have gladly changed places and let her leap in my place, if that had been an option.

Unfortunately I never knew when it would happen next and where I would end up. The only clue is that I smell freshly baked cinnamon swirls a few seconds before each leap. There was no way to stop it once it had started – I tried all sorts of things. But neither yoga nor painkillers nor any kind of homeopathic globules help; there's nothing I can do. The scent comes out of nowhere –

zing – and then I get dizzy for a moment and the next instant I'm somewhere else.

Like just then.

Still lying on my back, I stared into the darkness and cautiously felt the surface beneath my hands. Velvety soft cotton, downy feathers. Phew. I was in luck again, it was night time, just like at home. And wherever I was – or rather whoever I was – I was lying in bed and had probably been sleeping peacefully up to that moment.

The radio alarm clock on the bedside table said 3:13. Yes, it was exactly the same time as at home. But the place where I was was absolutely unfamiliar.

My eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness as dusky moonlight fell through two floor-length windows on the other side of the room. The way it looked from where I was, the room must be huge because I couldn't even make out the ceiling above me.

Normally during my parallel world leaps I kept still (if you can call bombing down a black ski slope staying still) and waited – the leaps never lasted longer than ten or fifteen seconds at most, before the smell of cinnamon swirls returned and I was back home again (or wherever I'd just been). But that night I was interested in where

exactly I'd ended up. Perhaps that would give me a clue to who I was at that moment. I'd had to promise Pauline to at least try and find something out. (In fact, Pauline had threatened to tell David I liked him if I didn't finally start doing a bit of investigating. Emotional blackmail, if you ask me.)

The coast seemed to be clear so I rolled onto my side through the lovely soft bedclothes and felt for the bedside lamp.

Stupidly enough, I must have got tangled up with the cable in the dark, because just as I found the on-switch the monstrous lamp tipped over and fell on the floor with an ear-splitting crash. And of course with my luck, it shattered into a thousand pieces. (At home, I had a plastic lamp shaped like an English telephone box. It probably wasn't as classy but it was certainly more robust. But no doubt the person who lived here wasn't as clumsy as me...)

I instantly heard sounds and moving in the house, and was overcome with fear. In all the time, I had always managed to remain undiscovered or at least stay inconspicuous in the background, and the thought of someone catching me in that bed that night almost made me freeze with shock. And apart from that, the leap was lasting an unnaturally long time. It must have been more than a minute! Panic came welling up.

But before I could do anything about it the bedroom door flew

open, the bright ceiling lamp went on – and I saw someone I never would have expected in a hundred years.

Before I could open my mouth to speak, though, the cinnamon swirls smell returned.

And one second later I was back home in our bathroom.

Logbook entry, Saturday, 30 April, 3:39 am

Time of leap: 3:13 am

Estimated length of leap:

() under 5 seconds

() under 10 seconds

() under 15 seconds

(X) at least a minute!!!

Starting place: our bathroom

Landing place: a bedroom, lying in bed (room huge, bed cosy)

Cinnamon swirls factor (scale 1 – 10) 6

Special features: 1. The longest leap so far by a long way (I hope it was a one-off!) 2. My dad came into the room after I broke the bedside

lamp. MY DAD!!! _____

New findings: □ none. I still don't know where I was and who I was. □ But it really was my dad.
