

# HOW TO FALL

by Whiti Hereaka

The rec centre's packed. It's like one big party, but Maia's determined not to enjoy herself. Coming to see Aunty Emz's derby game had been Mum's idea. They needed a break from unpacking, *apparently* – although Maia's pretty sure of the real reason: they needed a break from each other.

Supporters are dressed in team colours and costumes to back their favourite derby player. One girl holds up a sign: "Whaea Ball!" It's Aunty Emz's derby name. She has fans! The sign makes Maia proud, but she's careful not to let on.

"You couldn't go to something like this at home," Mum says, noticing the look on Maia's face.

Not so careful after all, but Maia doesn't reply. She's decided they're still not talking. Besides, the game's about to begin.

They understand the basics. Each team has four blockers and a jammer. The jammer scores points by pushing past the other team's blockers. Aunty Emz is a jammer, which is no surprise. She's always been staunch and fearless – two of the things Maia likes best about her.

The blockers live up to their name, using their hips and shoulders to stop the other team's jammer. Maia can't believe how fast they skate. Ada Love Hate – the opposition's jammer – is taken down, and Aunty Emz speeds past on the outside to take the lead. She doesn't slow down as she laps the pack a second time. Ada Love Hate is barely back on her feet before Aunty Emz puts her hands on her hips, calling off the jam and taking the points. Her fans cheer. Even Mum's on her feet. "She's on fire, eh, Maia?"

"Duh," Maia says.



The argument had kicked off in a stupid way – over nail polish. They’d been unpacking, and Maia was tired. The night before, she’d slept on the floor, badly. Actually, she hadn’t slept well ever since Mum announced they were moving. Sometimes Maia felt as if her heart was beating faster and faster. They weren’t panic attacks exactly, but it was definitely a weird, unpleasant feeling. That morning, she’d finally managed to clear a bit of space in her new room to set up her laptop, but there was no wi-fi.

“It’s not connected yet,” Mum said. “Your father was going to sort that.” Mum was about to return to the boxes in the lounge when she noticed Maia’s expression. “Look, sweetheart, once we’re sorted, it’s going to be great here – I know it.” Her mother kept burbling while Maia picked at her nail polish and zoned out. She’d been given the hard sell about the move lots of times. The main problem hadn’t changed: her parents didn’t care what Maia thought. It was a done deal.

She’d painted her nails at Ro’s slumber party. They all had. Now only ten scruffy patches remained. Maia wondered if Ro’s looked the same – or maybe she’d used remover and started again.

“Look in the box in the bathroom and find the proper stuff to take it off,” Mum said. She was no longer sympathetic. Now she was irritated.

Maia scowled. Didn’t Mum understand that it wasn’t just nail polish? That the little purple patches were the last bits of home?

“Are you listening?” Mum asked.

Maia was, but she’d had it. “I *always* have to listen to you, but you never listen to me.”

Then, of course, once she started, Maia couldn’t stop. Everything came out: It was totally unfair. Just because Cait was at high school, she got to stay back with Dad. A move during term would be disruptive. Like it wasn’t for Maia! And what if Dad *never* found a job. What if Maia and Mum were stuck in Hamilton on their own *forever*?



Mum folded her arms and leant against the door frame. “It’s hard for me too,” she said.

Maia couldn’t believe it. Her mother had the exciting new job. She was the reason they were moving. Hard for *her*? Seriously? She had no idea.

“I’ve left friends behind,” Mum added.

“Like you had any,” Maia shouted back.

It ended with both of them crying, a phone call to Dad. It was awful.

After the game, Maia and Mum find Aunty Emz. She’s sweating – and her make-up has smudged – but she’s on a total high.

“That was awesome,” Maia says quietly when they hug.

“There’s a junior team starting,” Aunty Emz says. “You could join.”

Mum just has to say something positive. “It’d be a good way to make friends.”

“I already have friends.”

“Well,” says Aunty Emz in a voice that’s far too cheery. “You can never have too many.”

“Whatever. Anyway, I can’t skate.”

Aunty Emz smiles. “That’s not a problem.”

The next day, there’s a knock at the door. Maia edges past the stacked boxes in the hall to answer it.

It’s Aunty Emz. “Hey, kid. Want to come training?”

Maia shrugs. It’s a chance to get out of the house.

They borrow gear from the rec centre. The skody kneepads and elbow pads and wrist guards gross her out, but luckily Aunty Emz has a spare helmet.

Maia tiptoes awkwardly on her stoppers over to the rink. She’s not happy. What if she hurts herself? What if people laugh?



"You've got to let go, Maia," Aunty Emz says. "You can't have fun standing still." So Maia lets go of the barrier and rolls towards her aunt. She feels so unsteady. She's going to fall backwards. Automatically, her arms start making little circles. "Bend your knees and drop your hands on them."

Maia does what she's told, and it works. She regains her balance.

"Always do that when you're out of control," Aunty Emz says.

"What if I fall?"

"Then you'll get back up. Anyway, I can teach you how to fall."

Maia's pretty sure she knows how to do that already, but Aunty Emz insists on a lesson.

"Fall to your knees first," she says, demonstrating. "Then slide your arms out in front. Don't forget to use your wrist guards – otherwise you'll get hurt."

Aunty Emz peers up from her sprawled position. She looks like a big X. "Now you try."

So Maia drops to her knees and slides her arms out in front. Now they are two big X's lying on the ground. She turns her face towards her aunt, waiting for the next instruction.

"Good. Right ... how to get back up." Aunty Emz kneels on one knee. "Push your weight through your bent leg, and the skate will stay still." She puts both hands on her bent knee and pushes herself up to standing. Maia copies exactly.

"Excellent," Aunty Emz says. "Now do it again."

They fall over and over until it doesn't seem so bad. Then Aunty Emz skates off, and Maia cautiously follows. Whenever she feels wobbly, she bends her knees and drops her hands. She pushes herself to skate faster and faster. Soon she's flying around the rink. Maia feels better than she's done in ages. It's like that trick when you press the palms of your hands into either side of a door frame. All that tension builds up in your body until you finally step away, and your arms float, weightless.



Then gravity finds her. Maia loses control on a turn and falls to her knees. She slides her wrists out, just like she's practised.

When she looks up, there's a line of faces watching: Aunty Emz's derby team. Worse, Maia sees Mum among them.

Where did she come from? Usually, if she'd messed up in front of this many people, Maia would be shamed. Now she feels triumphant. It's like she's been starved of oxygen for weeks and can finally breathe again. To cheers from the team, Maia plants her knee and pushes up.

She hopes Mum won't ruin the whole skating thing by talking about it.

*See. I knew you'd find good things about being here, sweetheart.*

Thankfully, Mum's quiet in the car. It's a comfortable silence, not like the one over the last few days.

Maia picks at her nail polish. Now there's only a few specks left. Maybe she'll call Ro when she gets home.

illustrations by Rebecca ter Borg

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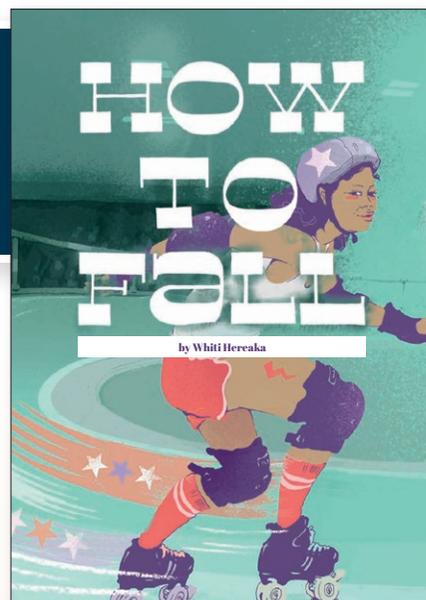
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Published 2017 by the Ministry of Education  
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.  
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ISBN 978 0 478 16950 8 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū  
Editor: Susan Paris  
Designer: Simon Waterfield  
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop  
Consulting Editors: Ross Calman and Emeli Sione



## SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4 MAY 2017

<b>Curriculum learning areas</b>	English Health and Physical Education
<b>Reading year level</b>	Year 7
<b>Keywords</b>	anger, change, family, moving, relationships, roller derby, settling in, skating, sport, stress, whānau