

"AUTHENTIC, ENERGETIC AND FULL OF
COMPASSION AND JOY." – HOLLY BOURNE

EVERY
LITTLE
PIECE
OF MY
HEART

Non PRATT



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WALKER
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SOPHIE

Sophie woke with her phone in her hand, pain screaming down her fingers, into her wrist, loud enough to echo in her elbow.

Every morning, pain came first – feeling it, locating it, processing it. Today’s was both sharp and dull, all the muscles and joints of her left hand objecting to the mistake of falling asleep still holding her phone. But that was the worst of it. Nothing else hurt any more than it had when she’d gone to sleep.

Hope came second.

Switching hands, Sophie pulled her phone free from the charging cable snaking across her pillow to check her messages.

There were a lot. Notifications from friends who’d stayed up beyond the time she’d dropped off, emails with discount codes, and alerts for new content from channels and accounts that she’d subscribed to.

Nothing important. Nothing from Freya.

Still, Sophie kept on checking – after she’d brushed her teeth, once she’d got dressed, before feeding the cat, after feeding the cat, while feeding herself...

“No phones at the breakfast table.”

Keeping her head down so Mum couldn’t see her eye roll, Sophie flipped her phone over and picked up her spoon to prod the contents of her bowl. Her Weetabix had already dissolved into mush, the cranberries and raisins swollen with milk. Breakfast was often a struggle, but eating wasn’t

optional: Sophie needed meds. Meds needed food. Sophie needed food.

Doggedly, she spooned up the mush, eyes fixed on Friday's compartment of the pill box next to her glass of water. Mum was in constant motion in the background, emptying the dishwasher, opening the back door to let the cat out, preparing coffee for the school run.

"I'll make sure we've something nice in for breakfast tomorrow." Mum talked as she breezed across the kitchen, every step fizzing with the energy of someone who'd woken with 100% charge and wasn't permanently operating on low power mode. "What sort of thing do you fancy?"

The truthful answer was "a lie-in", but it wasn't the one Mum wanted to hear.

"I don't have anything in mind." It was all Sophie could do to finish what was in her bowl – thinking of eating anything more was beyond her.

"Hmm ... something high in protein, get that GCSE revision off to a good start..."

"Don't forget I'm going out tonight," Sophie said. The way Mum was talking made it sound like she'd forgotten.

"We'll see how you feel after school."

"I'll feel fine."

"We've talked about this, Soph—"

"And we agreed that for one day I get to live the life I'm supposed to have." Her spoon clattered on the side of her bowl as she stared across the table.

"It's just you've been doing so well this week..."

For Mum, "doing well" meant behaving well and taking

care of herself in a way that Sophie loathed. She'd eaten every breakfast without grumbling, promised to let her friends carry her school bag between lessons and stayed out of sun that she longed to be able to bask in. Every evening had been a quiet one – do very little and get very bored and go to bed at a parentally pleasing hour.

All of it so she'd be able to go out tonight.

Not that there were rewards for good behaviour. Being chronically ill meant only ever trusting what was happening *now*.

And right now, Sophie felt hopeful.

Mum wasn't going to take that away.

"You don't need to keep me sealed in a bubble. I'm not contagious."

Mum sighed, her lower lip tucking itself away: a habit Sophie had inherited to stop herself from saying something she shouldn't.

"I know, darling," Mum said eventually. "It's my daughter I'm worried about, not other people. *But*" – she stressed as Sophie took breath to object – "you're right, we agreed."

There was more to come, but then the doorbell went and, like a particularly thirsty Pavlov's dog, Mum perked up and disappeared out into the hall. Nothing in the furthest reaches of heaven or hell could stop her mother from seizing a chance to flirt with the postman.

Sophie idly flipped her phone back over.

Instagram opened on a post she'd looked at more times than was healthy since 1 January.

Freya standing by a door, looking back over her shoulder

as she pushed it open to reveal a sliver of dark beyond. Even in an outfit as unremarkable as the white shirt and black skirt she wore for work, Sophie's best friend managed to look special. The gleam of golden light on her pale blonde hair and the tilt of her chin, the confidence in her smile because she knew someone was watching.

The caption below was classic Freya: *January. Named for the god of doorways. Let's see where this one leads...*

A many-layered comment that multiplied in meaning when the teacher skipped over the name "Freya Newmarch" the first day back at school. An above-average amount of likes spiralled into hundreds, and the first flurry of compliments from the usual suspects turned into increasingly urgent demands to know where Freya was as speculation broke out in little sub-chats.

Are you OK? We're worried!

Why aren't you replying to any of the comments?!

Where u gone?

I saw her mum last night!!!

*You saw someone you *thought* was her mum.*

You calling me a liar?

Were you on the number 678 this morning? I waved but I'm not sure you saw me...

Duh. She was not on the bus.

The highlight came when someone typed the first line to "Rehab", and the rest of the comments were people writing the lyrics line for line with a few pill and needle

emojis thrown in for good measure – a bout of mild hysteria brought on by boredom and intrigue. Once the song reached its conclusion, Freya returned to her feed for an encore.

You guys are SO WEIRD. (I love it.) No rehab. No kidnapping. I moved to Manchester! Followed by a string of cry-laughing emojis.

Sophie stared into the screen.

The photo had been tagged at Rabscuttle Hall, Freya leaving through the main doors for the drama of a good Insta post – framed by heavy wood and brass panels, bathed in a warm and comforting glow before she stepped into the night.

She'd been dreading that shift. Sophie had sent a message asking how it was going, and Freya had answered with a brief: *I survived xxx*

Not knowing how to take such a short answer, Sophie had done what she always did and replied with something light and breezy – a sign that she was happy to listen if Freya wanted to talk.

Only she hadn't wanted to talk.

At all.

130 days since that photo was posted and Sophie hadn't heard a word.

Today was the last day before GCSEs began, a day of stupid awards in assembly and messing around in lessons, of signed shirts and pranks the school had strictly forbidden. Stuff she and Freya should be doing together, not a hundred miles apart.

The sound of Mum returning had Sophie popping her

phone into the pocket of her school skirt, ready to stand up and clear away what was left of her cereal.

“That man.” Mum fanned herself with the parcel she was holding. “I’d take a special delivery from him any day of the week and twice on Sundays. Make sure you thank whoever sent this.”

She held out a parcel bound in plain brown paper. Sophie’s name, Sophie’s address...

Freya’s handwriting.

WIN

Buckthorn sixth form common room was filled with break-time buzz and the rustle of crisp packets circulating round the group sprawled over the comfy chairs.

“Win! Someone looking for you!”

Win looked up from where she’d been sitting alone in the corner, Converse resting on the edge of the coffee table, phone propped on her thighs as she paused the video her friend Felix had sent.

The lad who’d called her name pointed to the door.

The someone looking for her was a girl yet to graduate from the Buckthorn green-and-white-and-gold into the heady uniform-free life of a sixth former. She crossed the room, ignoring the way she caught the attention of Sam Baker and his mates as she passed, and came to a standstill in front of Win.

“Hi. So, this is weird, but I’m Sophie.” Then she added, “Charbonneau.”

Win already knew Sophie Charbonneau as a pretty face in a crowded corridor, freckles blurring the surface of her skin, the most elegant arch at the apex of her eyebrows, and cascading flames of red hair. A girl for whom Win’s breath hitched, even as she squashed any notion of something more.

“I would say I’m Win, but we already established that.” Win raised her eyebrows, not quite sure what to expect. “And I can help you ... how?”

“So long as you’re Winnie Su?” Win nodded. Win was,

indeed, short for Winnie. “I’ve to give you this.”

Sophie swung her bag round to get something out. Win had never been close enough to notice the line of slightly darker freckles that sat along Sophie Charbonneau’s top lip or the bump on the bridge of her nose. A second later she produced a brown paper parcel from inside her bag – only she held it close a moment, giving Win one last, wary look.

“You *did* know Freya Newmarch, right?”

“I did.” This made a little more sense. Sort of. “She lived next door.”

“Well, this is from her.” And Sophie held out a parcel with the name “Winnie Su” written in smooth strokes of black pen across the front. It was a satisfying size, lighter than it looked and slightly squishy.

A beat after she’d handed it over, Sophie sat on the coffee table, leaning forward, brown eyes melting to amber in the sun filtering in from the window.

Win’s breath did the thing.

“It arrived this morning at my house,” Sophie said. “The first layer was addressed to me, but when I opened it, there was one for you inside – and a note.”

Win had already noticed the thin, grey fingerless gloves Sophie was wearing – odd for this time of year – but she made no comment as Sophie reached inside the palm of her right glove and produced a piece of paper that she then handed over.

Hey Soph, pass this along would you? There’s treasure at the end, promise. F x

Same writing as on the front of Win’s parcel.

“Treasure?” Win looked again at the parcel, then back at Sophie, who took the note and shrugged.

“In pass the parcel the biggest prize is the one in the middle, right?”

“Was that all there was? A note and another layer to unwrap?”

“Biggest prize” made it sound like there might be others, and Win preferred to have all her information up front.

Sophie pressed her lips together a second, then looked down as she tucked a finger beneath the wrist of her left glove.

“There was this too,” she said, and she hooked out a fine silver bracelet, each link so delicate that the chain moved like a trickle of water against the inside of Sophie’s wrist. “It used to belong to Freya.”

Win recognised the arrow-shaped clasp that formed the only detail on the chain. She’d once asked Freya if she could have a closer look at how it worked – that had been the only time Win had seen her take it off.

Sophie might not have noticed that Win was Freya’s neighbour, but Win had walked ten paces behind those two on enough Fridays after school to remember the way they laughed and gossiped. She’d seen Freya loop her arm in Sophie’s and rest her head on her shoulder as they walked, years of comfort in one single gesture.

“That’s a really lovely thing to send you,” she said.

“Yeah, well...” Sophie trailed off, before sitting up a little straighter, the confidence with which she’d come over returning as she looked at the parcel. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

“Not right now.” If there was a present beneath this paper as personal as that bracelet, Win didn’t want to find out what it was in front of an audience. “I’ll open it later.”

There was an air of thwarted expectation in the way Sophie looked at the parcel in Win’s hand, a pinch of her brows and tightening in her jaw.

“In that case...” Sophie pulled out a permanent marker from the front pocket of her bag – standard issue for Year 11 shirt-signing the last day before exams. Leaning over, Sophie’s hair fell forward, profile pale against the curtain of curls as she wrote her number on the paper of Freya’s parcel.

Capping the pen, she stood, saying, “If there’s treasure in the middle, I want in.”

She shouldered her bag and held up a hand, waving as she left. Everything about her, from the tilt of her chin to the way she spoke, exuded the kind of confidence that came from never having to make an effort. She expected people to do what she wanted because that’s what they always did.

Same as Freya.

April – 245 days before Freya left

The first person Win had come out to in person was her sister – 88 minutes into what must have been their fifth viewing of *Thor: Ragnarok*. They were on Win’s bed, her laptop balanced on a pile of GCSE revision guides she had no intention of opening. It was February and mocks had

finished the week before; revision for the real thing could wait. Just for a day.

“Is it wrong to have a crush on the Hulk?” Sunny had said.

“You mean Bruce Banner?” Win asked. If so: definitely wrong. Mark Ruffalo was older than their dad.

“I mean Hulk. Big, green. Kinda grumpy. Kinda sexy.”

“Well, he’s not to my taste, but you do you.”

Sunny never did anything else. She scooped up a handful of the popcorn sitting between them and then said, “So who is? To your taste, I mean.”

A question Win had spent most of her life evading with a change of conversation, or a supple little lie that slipped out before it could be stopped.

But that day, with her sister, she wanted to tell the truth.

It wasn’t easy.

“Valkyrie,” she managed. More croak than word. “Definitely more my type.”

“Yeah, she’s hot.” Except Sunny’s tone suggested the point had failed to strike.

“And Hela.” There was still a distinct shake in Win’s syllables as she said it. “Particularly when she’s not all antlered up. And, y’know, I’d take Topaz over Thor.”

Sunny was nodding, slowly, like she’d shifted from appreciating an aesthetic to understanding there was something more going on. She didn’t say anything though. On Sunny, silence meant that she was trying to listen, which meant Win had to talk.

Win cleared her throat and kept her eyes on the screen. “Are you sensing a theme?”

“Yes.” The word burst out of her and Sunny wrapped Win in a hug that lasted until the end of the film. As the credits rolled, she shuffled up straighter and added, “Just to check. That was you telling me you’re a lesbian, right?”

Win would never have guessed that three months later she’d be telling the girl who lived next door.

The day should have been perfect. In many ways it had been – Win had caught the train to Leeds, the journey there an exquisite agony of anticipation, her phone out as she and Riley sent each other a barrage of updates. Selfies from the train, the view from the window, Riley’s walk from her house into the centre of town, Win poring over the pictures, barely able to believe she was finally going to see her girlfriend in person. Her whole soul was nerves, leaving no room for any other thought or feeling that didn’t relate to Riley, until she was speed-walking through the barriers at the station and then they were together, arms wrapped round each other in delight, breathing each other in and finally relaxing in relief.

No kisses.

No hand holding.

That would come later, when they were both ready. For now, being close, hearing her, seeing her – that was enough.

The plan was to head to the cafe Riley’s sister worked at – nestled between a barber and a dentist on the same road as the gay bars that came to life long after Win would go home – then they’d catch whatever was showing at the Queer Film Festival. A holiday into Win’s future, with the girl she wanted to kiss in the present.

Like any holiday, Win became more aware of herself, of the confidence that she usually held close, the side of her that only her sister and her friends online got to see, because they were the only ones who knew how to look.

That day, with Riley, Win *glowed*.

“I can’t believe I get to do this.” Riley squeezed Win’s hand, their fingers fused together as they left the cafe.

“Me neither.”

And because she felt bold, because she felt brave, because she was feeling so utterly herself, Win lifted their hands and pressed a single kiss to Riley’s knuckles, delighting in the grin she got for it – the promise of a kiss that crept closer with every second.

As the two of them stepped onto the pavement, Win turned to look for the bus stop.

And saw her next-door neighbour.

When Win looked back at that moment – which she did, a lot – she wasn’t sure what really happened. She knew she let go of Riley’s hand. Knew that she’d had a moment of hope in which she thought she might have gone unnoticed, because that was, after all, Win’s superpower.

Except it wasn’t. She was only human and she was standing right in front of Freya Newmarch, outside a cafe called Bi Artisan Bakes, whose menu was a list of gay puns.

“Winnie!” Freya didn’t know Win well enough to realise that only her parents and teachers called her that. The searing blue of Freya’s gaze shifted to Riley in a less-than-subtle question that Win was not prepared to answer.

“Freya. Hi,” Win said. “We’re in a bit of a rush, so...”

“Of course.” Freya half-turned to the man behind, who was frowning down at his phone and muttering something about this not being the viaduct he’d been thinking of, before she gave Win a superficial, “I’ll see you around.”

Post-date, Win’s head should have been nothing but endorphin clouds and memories of kissing Riley round the back of the community centre where they’d just watched a series of shorts, the slight hint of salt from the popcorn and the warmth of another mouth on hers, lips as much smile as kiss.

But Win’s joy came tempered by worry about Freya. Most of what she knew came from neighbourly interactions – invitations to the occasional barbecue or that one time Freya’s mum invited everyone over for drinks at New Year – and a little from attending the same school, one year apart. Freya didn’t inhabit the same corners of the internet as Win, but her profiles were public and nothing Freya did went undocumented – or unnoticed. Everyone at Buckthorn knew who she’d kissed on the French trip, who her friends were and where they would be...

An existence that was the antithesis of Win’s.

That night, between a stream of wistful messages to Riley and excitable updates on the group chat, Win scrolled through Freya’s feed, filling colour into familiar outlines, building a more detailed picture of someone who used her own secrets as currency for attention, who didn’t shy away from asking public questions of things better kept private, and who (it appeared) knew every single person in the entire school one way or another.

Including Sarah Evans, who'd been seeing Win's cousin Gen since the two of them battled it out in the final of a regional debating competition, and Andy Ho, whose parents were friends with Win's.

On the day of the date, confidence had come from feeling in control and Freya had wrenched the wheel from Win's hands without even wanting to drive: the only option was to wrench it back.

Her hand was remarkably steady as she reached to knock on the door the following morning.

Freya opened it, bare limbs and feet, hair wild, eyes narrowed against the sunshine. She was pretty and slender and sleepy, like a pedigree cat woken from a nap.

"Oh. Hello again."

Win couldn't gauge anything from that.

"Hi." A breath, then, "Sorry for running off yesterday. I thought maybe we could have a chat about that."

"I mean, it's fine. You were with your friend and I was with my dad..."

Friend. A word to give Win a way out. But she was here now. She had prepared. And that word still held wriggle room that would give Freya power over a narrative that belonged to Win.

"I'd still like to talk. If you're free?"

Instinctively she slipped out of her Converse and followed Freya barefoot across cold stone tiles and into the hollowed-out belly of a house that only resembled Win's from the outside. Inside was chillier, less homey, with one enormous room doing the work of three – kitchen, dining

room and lounge all wrapped as one around the hall.

Freya padded across the kitchen to a row of artfully mismatched tins.

“What would you like?” What Win would like was to know if she could trust her. If Freya could keep Win’s secrets better than she kept her own. “We’ve got PG Tips, Earl Grey, one of these is mint, I think, or there’s coffee?”

“Mint’s fine, thanks.”

Coming out to Sunny had been terrifying – the same vertigo as standing at the edge of the highest board at the pool, staring at the blue below. But underneath the fear there had been faith that Win could make the leap, break the surface and come back up for air. Nothing like the persistent prickle of doubt crackling like static as she watched Freya fill the kettle and flick it on, fetching the mugs...

Win gripped the edge of the worktop, feeling the pressure of truth about to come out.

“I’m going to tell you something because I think I have to.” She might have been the one who’d written the lines, rehearsed them in her mind, but her voice sounded like it had come from someone else – the sound of a song playing through her headphones before she’d had chance to put them on.

Freya stopped what she was doing. Set the mugs down and turned to lean back against the sink, the span of the breakfast bar between the two of them.

“OK, I’m listening.”

“I wasn’t with a friend yesterday.” Win swallowed, held her nerve. “Riley’s my girlfriend. We were on a date.” Then,

just to be clear, “I’m gay.”

A statement Win accompanied with a very good impression of the Elmo shrug GIF because she wasn’t sure what to do with her hands.

Then she made herself look at Freya.

She wasn’t laughing, like she thought this was a joke, or recoiling like she didn’t approve. She was just nodding, looking serious and thoughtful, like she’d actually heard what Win had to say.

“That’s cool,” Freya said, lifting her eyebrows a touch before she said, “Do you still want a mint tea?”

Win did.

They talked then. A bit about yesterday – Freya asked how she knew Riley, how the date went – and Win tried to get her head around the fact that she was talking to someone other than her sister about this, veering wildly between being glad to have said something and terrified that she’d not yet said enough.

“How come you were there – in Leeds?” Win asked.

“With Dad.” Freya pushed over the punnet of raspberries she’d been picking from and Win took one as Freya carried on. “He’s in Manchester, Mum and me live here – and Leeds is halfway. It’s a good place to meet during term time when Mum thinks I’ve too much on to go all the way to Manchester.”

“I didn’t know your dad lived in Manchester,” Win said. She didn’t know much about Freya’s family life beyond how much she argued with her mum. Neither of them seemed to realise that the louder they shouted the further it carried

and that Win's window was nearly always open because of how hot Mama set the central heating.

"Why would you?" Freya said with a shrug. "It's not like I talk about it."

Win realised then that she'd assumed Freya's online life was a full measure of her real one because that was how Win measured her own. That there were parts of Freya's life she kept private was reassuring.

Time to finish what she'd come here to say.

"About that. Talking, I mean..."

She sensed Freya straighten, knew that she had switched back to a more attentive mood than the one they'd relaxed into.

"I'm not out at school and I've not told my parents yet. Although I will, soon." She picked her mug up, took a tiny sip, put it down. Knew she was delaying. "Sunny knows and I'm out online."

Freya frowned then.

"If you're out online then wouldn't your mates know?"

"My mates do know." Win's frown matched Freya's.

"But you said you weren't out at school—"

"Oh." Win laughed and shook her head. "Yeah. When I say 'mates' I mean my online crowd, not the people I go to school with."

To Win, being someone's friend meant knowing that bad days required pictures of Chris Evans and his dog, or that the best way to make someone feel part of a con they couldn't go to was to take a photo of their face on a stick to hold up in all the official photos with the actors. Friends

were people who didn't flinch at a stream of all caps in an argument and understood that *Thor: Ragnarok* could be someone's favourite film even if it didn't pass the Bechdel test. Win's friends might have been made behind the anonymity of a quippy username and a fan art avatar, but they were the people she trusted the most in the world.

The other end of a direct message was as good as sitting next to each other at school.

"So," Win said, drawing in a breath and meeting Freya's eye, "I came over because you saw me with Riley, and I feel safer telling you the truth, making it clear it's not something to talk about, than leaving it for you to guess, or ask someone else—"

"I wouldn't. I *won't*." Freya's face, so carefree in all the pictures she posted, held conviction. "I understand. This is your life; you get to choose who you tell. Not me."

SOPHIE

Last period had descended into chaos. The whole of Year 11 swarmed the grounds, ties knotted around limbs and heads, fists bristling with marker pens as students wrote all over each other – shirts, skin, whatever was on offer. The world had become a hurricane of movement and noise that left Sophie feeling besieged. Trying to write something meaningful on everyone’s shirt was a challenge for someone whose brain wasn’t willing to play along. Although at least if someone’s name dropped out of her head she could scan their shirt for an answer.

Her hand hurt though – her right this time. The compression gloves helped with her joints, but something about the angle, the need to press her pen into the material, made things worse.

Stepping back from the storm and swapping pen for phone, Sophie checked for any messages from the mysterious Winnie – *Win* – Su.

Nothing.

Not exactly a surprise. Giving Win her number had been a long shot – desperate curiosity disguised as an offer of help. Not that Win looked like someone who needed help. Sitting on her own, she’d not looked as if she needed anyone else’s approval, with that super-short fringe and a black-and-grey aesthetic that didn’t ask for attention. And the way she’d looked at Sophie... Only people who believed in themselves made eye contact like that.

“Sophie?”

“Mm?” She’d not noticed anyone was talking to her.

“You OK?” The corners of Morgan’s mouth tucked themselves away into her soft, round cheeks. The Sympathetic Look.

“I’m fine,” Sophie said, sliding her arm through her friend’s to rest her head on Morgan’s shoulder. She was one of those people who was always warm and Sophie sank into the feeling of having someone else take a little of the weight. “Just recharging a moment.”

“Same.”

They both knew it wasn’t.

Lupus was an invisible illness, which meant Sophie had the option of keeping it that way around people who didn’t look too closely. For a while, she’d not wanted to tell anyone else at school. Dealing with other people’s reactions was hard when she was still struggling to get a handle on her own. But without Freya around, Sophie had needed at least *some* support, and Morgan and Georgia had been her best options.

But best didn’t mean perfect.

“You going to be OK for the party later?”

Sophie resisted the urge to tell Morgan she sounded *exactly* like her mum.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Is there anything—”

“I said I’ll be fine.” Sophie regretted the edge in her voice. Being nice never used to be this hard, but then, she didn’t use to be in a constant state of pain and/or exhaustion. No one had warned her how much other people’s concern

could drain her, how she'd always have to accept it or risk being rude. Looking for a change of subject, she went with, "Where's Georgia got to?"

"Over there, getting signed by Ewan Moore."

Sophie followed Morgan's gaze to where Georgia – whose tiny frame and innocent little face would see her ID-ed for life – fluttered like an amorous hummingbird at a boy standing half a head taller than his friends, most of it hair.

"That's my girl," Sophie said, grinning as she reached up to tuck her hair back behind her ear.

"This is nice." Morgan touched a finger to the bracelet that rolled down from beneath her glove. "Didn't Freya use to have one like it?"

Panic lanced through Sophie's heart. This bracelet was so definitively Freya that when it had slithered out of the first layer of the parcel, silver links pooling on the kitchen table, Sophie had burst into tears. Ambushed by her emotions, she'd put it on without thinking.

"I guess she did," she said with a non-committal shrug.

"How is she?" Morgan had the same soft tone for asking about Freya as she had for asking about lupus.

"Sad to be missing out, obvs." Sophie tried a smile copy and pasted from her past. "Even sadder once she finds out that Georgia has *actually* made contact with Ewan after two years of long-distance pining."

"Better send her a photo as evidence."

"Good plan..." Sophie let go of Morgan to reach for her phone, the promise of sending Freya a photo yet another lie

inched out from the Jenga stack for Sophie to set atop an increasingly precarious tower. No one knew the truth. They *never* could. Not after five months of lies.

She'd not meant for it to get like this.

That first day, when everyone at Buckthorn learned that Freya had left, Sophie was the person they'd turned to for an answer. And she had given a tight-lipped smile and gently shaken her head like there were things she knew not to give away. Like everyone else, she'd believed that even if Freya ghosted everyone else in this town, the bonds of best friendship were strong enough to transcend the metaphorical afterlife.

She'd never thought that first impression would turn into a barefaced lie that kept on growing, making her more anxious, more miserable and more lonely.

When Georgia came buzzing over from the Ewan Moore encounter, Sophie's hug was as much to keep her from taking off as it was to congratulate her. After a few seconds, she released her friend so she could take a photo.

"Hang on a sec, let me just..." Phone in hand, Sophie switched to her camera and—

"Too tempting!" Came a voice Sophie knew all too well, as a hand flashed out and knocked the phone up out of her hand to catch it – except Ryan Krikler fumbled the catch so badly that her phone clattered straight onto the concrete.

"Ryan you absolute *shit!*" Sophie yelled, angry at how the knock had hurt – angrier about her phone.

"Oops."

Buckthorn's biggest gobshite stood there, concern dialled

down below zero as he watched Sophie crouch to collect her phone.

Anger ballooned into rage at the sight of her screen.

“You *broke* my phone.”

Ryan’s attention darted down to her phone, then back up to her face, eyes shifty beneath perma-scowl brows. “Come off it, your phone’s fine.”

“It’s chipped!”

A crowd had gathered. People always liked a bit of drama and Joe T, one of the decent ones, elbowed Ryan in the side and nodded towards Sophie.

“Just say sorry, you dick.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Whatever, lighten up. Her phone still works. No harm no foul.”

“That’s not much of an apology.” Sophie tucked her phone into her pocket, fingers brushing against her pen.

“Because I’m not fucking sorry.”

“You should be.”

“And you’re going to make me?” Ryan’s voice was steeped in sarcasm, but Sophie’s hand closed round her pen – the wonky moustache inked on one of the lads behind Ryan giving her an idea.

“Maybe if Joe could hold you still a minute...” She pulled the cap from her pen with her teeth, and as Ryan made to get away, the lads held him back.

And because it was hold still or risk getting stabbed in the eye with the point of a Sharpie, Ryan stayed where he was, teeth grinding as Sophie put her pen to his forehead; her friends, his friends – anyone close enough to be

curious – crowded round, someone letting out a strangled, “Oh, that’s class,” in contrast to Georgia’s scandalised, “Sophie!”

Ryan wasn’t worth her remorse. Not today. Not ever.

Stepping back, Sophie studied her handiwork and enjoyed the slow-burn glow of satisfaction.

“What? What have you drawn?” Ryan reached up to touch his forehead like she’d embossed it.

“A masterpiece.”

She didn’t need to take a picture of her own. Everyone else was too busy shouting Ryan’s name, getting him to turn so they could marvel at the penis she’d drawn on his head, hairy balls and all.

As he glared at her through the crowd, Sophie blew a kiss.

“Sorry yet?”

June – 206 days before Freya left

On Fridays Sophie went to Freya’s. On *sunny* Fridays, they got off the bus in town, bought something cold and went to sit on the bench outside the bakery to scope out anyone interesting. Lately “interesting” just meant fit. The Year 10 French trip had been and gone and both of them had kissed someone. Two someones in Freya’s case. Both boys: one French and pretty; one English and rough but, as Freya had put it, sexy as hell.

Sophie had kissed her first girl. Pretty. English. Just the once under the safety of a dare.

There were only two things Sophie remembered from that trip: the day she was too wiped to go to the cheese factory and spent all day huddled in her bunk bed switching between Pokémon Go and Two Dots on her phone – and the rise of excitement that tingled through her body after that kiss. A tingle of *knowing*.

None of their conquests went to Buckthorn, but ever since, both Freya and Sophie had felt an awakening of interest, as if sexy humans had only now started to exist as *options* rather than hypotheticals.

“No, no, no, maybe, no, no, mmm ... no...” Freya sighed into her can of Diet Coke and scanned the high street. “Where *is* he?”

She was looking for the boy they’d code-named the Champion Prince. They’d seen him a few times now – mostly from the bus, although apparently Freya had passed him on the high street when she was out with her mum a couple of weeks ago and he looked even better up close. When it came to taste in boys, there wasn’t much overlap between Sophie and her best friend. Freya’s crushes had that narrow, suspicious look about them, like a cartoon weasel. Boys who looked like they couldn’t be trusted.

The Champion Prince was a rare exception.

“Hey, I got the job.” Freya only had two modes: butterfly brain and hyperfocus. Today had been flit-ful.

“That’s good!” Sophie raised her can to tap it against Freya’s, but her friend’s response wasn’t enthusiastic.

“Is it?” Freya slumped back onto the bench, head tipped to the sky. Given that two days ago all she’d talked about was getting a job up at Rabscuttle Hall, Sophie was inclined to say yes. But she knew Freya better than to answer questions her friend hadn’t intended to ask.

“It’s just...” Freya sighed. “It’s another way to be trapped, you know?”

But Sophie didn’t know.

“Think of the money,” she said, trying to find something positive. “And not having to spend as much time at home with your mum.”

A smile touched Freya’s lips at that, before she noticed Sophie pressing her can to the top of her right arm to stop herself from scratching. A rash had blossomed there and heat made it worse.

Freya nodded at her arm. “I thought you’d been to the doctor about that?”

“I have. She now thinks it’s eczema.”

Freya did the Pet Lip of Pity and gave Sophie’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “At least they can treat that.”

Which was the same thing she’d said before, when they’d thought it was ringworm. Optimism wasn’t always the answer, but it was all Freya ever offered when it came to health stuff. And there’d been a lot of it that year – enough for the school to call her mum in about how many sick days she had. Not that there was anything either of them could do – it wasn’t like she was faking. Sophie might pretend to enjoy re-watching *Sam and Cat* so many times she dreamed in sarcasm, but really, she’d prefer to be at school. Which was sad.

“Ladies...” Ryan emerged from the bakery behind and hopped over the back of the bench, forcing Sophie to scoot over so he could sit between them.

Historically, Ryan Krikler was nothing more than someone who made a nuisance of himself from the back of whatever classes they had in common. Lately, though, Freya had been reacting to his piss-taking and general ass-hattery in a way that seemed to be giving him ideas.

“Doughnut?”

Ryan held out a box of them – three chocolate ring doughnuts, the fourth already stuffed in his mouth. Freya took one, but Sophie turned him down. She preferred it when the only thing Ryan offered was the opportunity to start an argument.

“Carbs? You sure?”

“Please don’t call me that.” Charbonneau was a last name that could be butchered any number of ways, each cut as ugly as the last: Chardonnay, Carbonara, Carbs... *Bonbon*. Sophie hated them all.

Sophie leaned even further away to stop Ryan knocking her with his elbows. “Why are you here?”

“Waiting for someone.”

When Ryan ate it was cartoon-sized bites that had him chewing with every muscle in his face, the scar that ran from his jaw and across his ear lobe accentuating every move.

She glanced down at her phone.

“We need to head if we want the next bus,” she said, standing up and looking at Freya, then giving Ryan

a dismissive "... guess we'll see you next week."

"You guess? We're in half the same classes, you spleen." The insult came round a mouthful of icing and half-chewed dough as he leaned round to look at the cobbled parking bay behind. "My ride's here anyway."

Sophie turned with Freya to see a black BMW pull up. Freya tensed a second as the passenger door swung open and a boy got out to push the seat forward. It was him. Freya's *objet d'amour*. Blue Champion uniform, tie off and shirt unbuttoned at the collar, sleeves rolled up to the elbow. His dark hair was brushed back from a face that was handsome in a way that looked more rebel than regal and, when he glanced towards them, the way he squinted against the sun only added to the appeal.

"Ry, you coming?" he called.

Freya whipped round to look at Ryan. "You know him?"

Ryan closed the lid on the last of his doughnuts and frowned. "What? You mean 'do I know the person who just called my name out and is waving me into the back of his car'?" Ryan smirked. "You concerned about stranger danger?"

She punched him on the arm hard enough that he winced. "I'm serious. Who is he?"

Rubbing his arm, Ryan scowled at Freya, then at the boy next to the car. "That's my cousin, Kellan."