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Five-star reader review

‘**I LOVED** this book!’

Five-star reader review

‘**I couldn’t put this down** – such an important book!’

Five-star reader review

For all the women I love.

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**GIRL,
ULTRA-
PROCESSED**

AMARA SAGE

faber

december thirty-first

It is six minutes to midnight, and nobody here's kissing me when the clock strikes.

(Questioning if I would want them to though.)

I'm surrounded by a bunch of legal adults who still call their mum *mummy*, which is unsurprising, considering this is a party in Poppy's halls. She's at the University of Bristol, staying in accommodation literally called Manor Hall.

'I don't believe anyone who says they prefer giving gifts rather than receiving them, do you?' I blink at her flatmate, Bella, who sits on the table, looking down at me. Her foot's on the edge of my chair, digging into my leg.

On the other side of the table Poppy's chatting to a boy. I watch his hand keep landing on her bare thigh, her sculpted quad muscle tensing each time.

Bella smiles at me expectantly, so I say, 'Same,' though neither of us is particularly invested in the conversation.

Bella's fine. Sure, she's a class-appropriating posh girl who boasts she's into grime because she has two of Stormzy's chart songs on her Spotify rotation, but she's nice enough. She's someone Poppy would've rolled her eyes at if she'd shown up at our humble parish school toting her Burberry backpack, but not now though. I notice her copying Bella's mannerisms all the time. She's reinventing. Mum called it something like keeping her gown friends separate from her town friends.

This party is the first time I've seen Poppy outside of work since November, and I don't think she's seen Freya since even earlier. August, September? Then again, neither have I. Which is sad, because at the end of sixth form the three of us were inseparable, and we assumed we still would be not even six months later.

'What do you study again?' Bella asks, picking at something stuck behind her acrylics.

'Social Anthropology. At UWE,' I add, before she can ask. She already knows I'm at the University of the West of England but will never miss out on an opportunity to tell me that it's *still* a good uni despite the rankings.

'Oh, yeah. You're such a good fit for there.'

I pull a tight smile, free-pouring vodka into the mug patterned with hand-painted poppies I bought Pop two birthdays ago.

She cheered me with it when I told her I'd declined my offer at Manchester, even though it was my first choice. I knew I would the minute I submitted the application though, that I wouldn't have the courage to go. When I told Mum, she insisted I was

sure of my decision, but I saw all the tension she swore was pre-results-day nerves relax once she knew I wouldn't be moving three hours away. They pretended they were, but no one was surprised, really. Not only was I never going to leave Bristol because I love my city, but Poppy was staying. And even though she's far from perfect, she's safe and she's been my person for the last ten years. No introductions, no icebreakers necessary.

Plus, the thought of spending months apart from my niece, my mini me, Rue, was not an option. Even the thought of moving to a new place in Bristol has me torn up because it'll put an end to our after-school hangs. His ex, Clara, works two jobs and doesn't have a good relationship with her own family, so between us, me, Mum, and Otis handle school pickups, and every weekend is a sleepover. There isn't space for Rue to have her own room at ours, and officially she sleeps on the pull-out in Otis's room, but sometimes I wake up to find she's crept in with me. There's no way I'd be able to spend whole terms without her.

I clear my throat. 'You're studying Business with Pop, right?'

Bella nods. 'Where's your other friend? The redhead. I like her. Pretty sure she hates me though. But she likes *all* my stuff, I love it, big fan energy.'

I hold my tongue firm to the roof of my mouth. The unironic conceitedness is crazy. 'You mean Freya?' I say slowly, pouring mixer into my mug. 'Her family come down from up north for her parents' annual party, she'll be here later, hopefully.'

'Cute. I think it's so adorable that Poppy still has her friends from primary school hanging about.'

I twist the lemonade lid tight. Something about the way she said that makes me think those are Poppy's words, regurgitated. Me and Freya, her little limpet friends. I keep my voice measured, not about to let Bella know she's getting under my skin. We definitely had this conversation the first time we met.

I correct her. 'Me and Poppy have been friends since then, yeah. Since we were eight actually—'

'A whole decade, *cute*. You guys should exchange Pandora bracelets or something.'

'—but we didn't meet Freya 'til year nine, when she switched to our school.' Bella uncharacteristically asks me why she moved and I just shrug. I'm not about to tell her Freya was, well, not exactly *bullied* at her old school, but she didn't have any friends. 'Her parents wanted her to go to the same school her cousin went to – this boy Jack, in our year.' I swallow, just saying his name making my heart race. For so long, I've avoided talking about him in case something gave it away we were together, that saying his name feels like swearing. Bella's nodding but looking into the crowd, losing interest. My eyes flick over to Poppy, fake laughing at something the boy's said. 'Anyway, I chose Art for GCSE, Poppy chose Drama, which is where she got close with Freya. They'd spend so much time rehearsing, we sort of became a three. Though we don't get to see each other as much anymore.'

Bella's not listening, distracted by someone asking for a bottle opener. 'I'll get it.' She jumps up, happy to oblige.

Now sitting alone, I get out my phone and find myself scrolling way back in my photos to when me, Poppy, and Freya

first became friends. Selfies from those lunchtimes we'd spend in empty classrooms where I'd watch them run lines, script in hand so I could prompt them whenever they'd forget, channelling my inner Greta Gerwig. If they got through a whole scene without flubbing, it would always be Poppy who'd suggest celebrating with a slice of the canteen's tray bake. Dense sponge drizzled with white icing and hundreds and thousands. Always Poppy who would throw half of hers in the bin though, while me and Freya licked the rainbow sprinkles off our fingers.

I zoom in on Freya in a photo of the three of us, her golden retriever energy evident even in pictures, her chin doubled, caught mid-laugh. Looking at fourteen-year-old Freya – the way she was when I met her, the only other girl in our year built like me – calms some of the nerves I have about seeing her after so long. She'll still be the same Frey. Even though she's thin now and has a proper adult job at a bank, and a boyfriend to obsess over. I need to remember she probably still snorts when she laughs and has a pillow with Harry Styles's face on it.

But with no sign of her yet, and not even Bella to begrudgingly keep me company anymore, big regrets for coming here hit me. At first, I'd said no, but changed my mind when Mum announced she'd be away for SlimIt's New Year New You campaign, and Otis said Harrison had booked them a fancy dinner. A party at Manor Hall seemed like the better option than ringing in the New Year alone with Netflix and leftover Christmas chocolate. Plus, the makeup I got gifted this year was begging to be experimented with.

Getting ready earlier, my brush hovered over midnight blues and hazy purples, imagining the swathe of sky I could paint across my lids complete with gemstone stars. But in the end, I stuck with a blend of soft browns that don't stand out too much.

'Sorry, can I just get by?' A girl behind me presses up against my chair, trying to squeeze between me and a group of people dancing.

'Yeah, sorry. Sorry.' My chair was already tucked in as far as it could go, but I crush my body against the edge of the table.

My boobs topple the dregs of a beer can over and I take a deep breath, about to cringe to death as I mop it up.

Everyday embarrassments like this are why I stopped leaving the house, but I'm proud of myself for making the effort tonight. It's the first step to making sure this term isn't a repeat of the last one. Insecurity's had me hiding at home, ashamed of my size, attending lectures through a webcam. I needed tonight to remind me of everything I'm missing out on.

I glance at Poppy, running the pendant of her necklace along its chain as she listens intently to something the boy's saying.

I hate to say it, but I want what she's got: to be in a place of my own with a whole party's worth of new friends, to unselfconsciously wear a crop top. And to talk to a boy who isn't afraid to let people know he thinks I'm pretty.

Poppy's the vision board.

Across the littered table, the boy veers towards her, his eyes on her silicone E cups. 'So, how much does a pair of them set you back then?' he says.

Instinctively, I skirt over to them and take her hands, pulling her up. ‘Come to the toilet with me.’

‘Oh my God, *thank you*,’ Poppy says out of the side of her mouth, flatly telling him that she has to talk to her friend. She squeezes my hand as she shoulders us towards the door, weaving us through the long kitchen crammed with people dancing and drinking. I take a breath to ask if she’s OK, but she shoots me a look and changes the subject. ‘I’m fine. Freya’s not coming now, by the way. She just text saying her mum doesn’t feel safe to drive on the one rosé she had two hours ago. Lol.’ I hate it when she says lol out loud. ‘And she’s too skint to pay the Uber surge prices for New Year’s.’

‘Oh,’ I say, kind of sad, kind of relieved.

I need to text Freya back. I’ll do it tomorrow when I’m sober, and more often after that. She doesn’t deserve to be ignored.

‘I’m glad you’re here though, babe, I’ve *missed* you, you never come out anymore—’

‘Hey, where are you going?’ Bella throws a cork at Poppy’s shoulder as we pass. She shows us the time displayed on her phone screen. ‘You’re gonna miss midnight.’

‘Oh, it’s already? We need a photo, Saff. Our last pic of 2024. Will you take a picture of us?’ Poppy thrusts her phone towards Bella.

Before she can answer, I say, ‘I’ll take a selfie.’

‘But you won’t see my outfit.’

‘You will, look.’ I angle my arm so the camera’s almost got a bird’s-eye view, though I’m massively in the forefront and it’s

just my head and shoulders. You can still see Poppy in full length, standing behind me in her crop top and denim skirt. My camera flashes, and I turn to her triumphantly. ‘See—’

‘Now take one of me and Bella. Way further back though.’ She waves me away and I nod, watching them as they suck in their already flat stomachs.

I stare at their cheeks pressed together, their arms around each other, and feel lonely. I’ve only made acquaintances at uni so far, people I can ask to copy lecture notes off, how to add printer credits. There isn’t a closeness, a unique You-and-Me-ness like Poppy has with Bella. Because I haven’t let anyone get close enough for that.

At uni everyone struts around campus so sure of who they’re supposed to be, how to dress, what to say, what they want to do with their lives. And yet the person I am right now feels transitionary, not the me I want them to meet. Like, I’m still in my Very Hungry Caterpillar phase, yet to emerge from my cocoon, socially confident, snatched, with job prospects and colour-analysis-matched ASOS wings. Not like Poppy, a born butterfly, with her size eight wardrobe of ‘light summer’ outfits, 82 per cent grade average, and dreams to open her own gym.

I didn’t think us going to separate unis would be such a big deal. But every night as I fall asleep under the ceiling I stuck glow-in-the-dark stars on when I was seven, I worry that it is.

When I accepted my place at UWE, I knew it meant staying home with Mum and Otis, staying still. I just didn’t factor in that Poppy would keep going. And watching her live her best life all

over Instagram from the comfort of my sofa has made home start to feel like a place I *should've* outgrown. But I don't go anywhere, do anything, because my bigger body feels like it doesn't belong out in the world.

It doesn't stop me wanting to live the experiences people move to melting pot cities like Bristol for though. Like doing my own food shop from the international markets on St Marks Road, or getting the number of a boy I meet amongst the crowded pub benches on King Street. Only I want to be doing all of that as the new me. Which starts tomorrow.

Poppy's clicking her fingers. 'Hello? Babe, what have you taken? Did you hear me, can you do one more?' She switches up her pose and I oblige. 'Thanks,' she says, taking back her phone.

Bella drags us over to where people are gathered to watch the fireworks being projected on to the back wall of the kitchen, and immediately, we split up.

I scan the faces of Poppy's friends, dappled with light from the projector. I say friends, but apart from Bella and a couple of people she's mentioned from the floor below, I'm guessing a lot of these relationships don't go much further than drunken introductions made during freshers. Strong male majority. She's always had this kind of magnetism with boys, even before her mum paid for her boob job for her eighteenth-birthday present. Her ability to get boys to fawn, to be nice to me to please her, was what protected me from getting bullied any worse than I did at school. It's probably the reason I still put up with her shit, because I guess I feel indebted to that.

And even if it makes me feel like I'm playing the part of an extra in my own life, billed simply as The Fat Friend, being a guest star on The Poppy Show is always a fun time. She's a loveable brat, unpredictable and hilarious. It's only recently that being in the shadow of her spotlight has been getting old.

'You OK?' Poppy calls to me over the top of some heads. 'How'd we get separated?'

'I don't know.'

'Hey, what's your New Year's resolution?' she asks.

'I don't think I have one,' I lie.

'I've just found mine,' Poppy says, pointing to a boy in the crowd, his afro in a bun.

Makes zero sense, but OK? Go off.

Everyone chants backwards from ten into the New Year along with the countdown lighting the back wall. Faces gazing, beaming at each other, basking in a togetherness I just don't quite feel a part of.

'... Six. Five. Four.' My eyes meet with a boy across the gathering. He stares at my mouth, lined and lipsticked with MAC's Velvet Teddy, my Cupid's bow a perfectly kissable capital M. My belly swoops with hot hope. Is this a boy who appreciates the artistry of makeup? Who likes the bounce of my 3B curls? For once will my face card not be declined? But then his eyes are travelling down my body. Lingering on my stomach. 'Three. Two. One.' His gaze rips away from me and he screams, 'Happy New Year!' into the face of the boy to his right, the rejection subtle but firm. *Not you.*

They go in for that diagonal hug boys do, clapping backs. I look for Poppy and see she's kissing the boy with his afro in a bun, resolution complete. The rest of us clasp arms, brush cheeks, come together with only a grazing intimacy.

'Happy New Year,' I say into the ear of some girl from the ground-floor who came to the party with her heated rollers still in.

'Yeah, happy New Year, Sophie.'

'It's Saffron,' I mumble, people around me beginning to sway, clanging out 'Auld Lang Syne'.

As I stare at the fireworks I acknowledge that my New Year's resolution is the same as it was last year, and every year before that as far back as I can remember making them. I want to lose weight, but it's about so much more than that too. I want to go on holidays, throw myself a birthday party, wear a bodycon dress.

I want to be thin. I want to be happy.

Poppy's still kissing the boy with the afro, a string of saliva spindling between their lips as they pause to giggle at each other. I glance down at my phone as it pings with a message.

Mum

HNY hon, this is going to be your year, I just know it!! Xx

This *is* going to be my year. I will be happy. I make a note on my phone of how I'm going to make that happen.

1. GO ON A DIET