

FRESH ERSH

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*For Cassie Cooper, Louise Geoghegan,
Nell Booker and Vicky Clarfelt –
I'll keep your secrets if you keep mine – L.I.*

For Carolina – T.E.

Also by Tom Ellen and Lucy Ivison

Lobsters

Never Evers

**PART
1/T**

The image features the text 'PART 1/T' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are arranged in two lines: 'PART' on top and '1/T' below it. The bottom portion of each letter is filled with a grayscale texture of sand dunes. Soft, gray shadows are cast to the right and slightly downwards from each letter, giving the text a three-dimensional appearance as if it were resting on a surface.



CHAPTER 1

PHOEBE

Luke Taylor was right there and I did not feel prepared.

I kept dancing but the sight of him had kind of electrified my insides. The boy he was with passed him a pint of something green; Luke took a sip and grimaced. The klaxon went off and everyone started shrieking.

‘Jutland College, make some noise!’ the DJ yelled. ‘And don’t forget to introduce yourself when you swap clothes!’

A girl bopping next to me gave me a big smile and said something I had absolutely zero chance of hearing. I nodded and shouted ‘Phoebe’ as loudly as I could before taking the Yoda ears she handed to me and giving her my mirrored waistcoat. The song changed and she started dancing like she was at a rave.

I needed to compose myself. And share the hysteria. I needed to call Flora. I dodged my way off the dance floor but got stuck in front of a T-shirt with a picture of Princess Diana

on it that said 'Queen of Hearts'. A head emerged from it – that girl Negin from my corridor. The one in the room opposite me.

'Hey.' I smiled really widely.

She said something, but the music was too loud.

'A really weird thing just happened to me,' I yelled.

She pressed her finger in her ear and leant towards me.

'Sorry?'

'I just saw someone—'

She kept shaking her head. In a weird moment of madness I grabbed her hand and started to weave us between people. We stumbled out into the bar area and I realized I was still gripping on to her hand, which was a bit bonkers, as we had only met a few hours ago. But now it felt like I couldn't just randomly let it go. I led her into the toilets and inside a cubicle.

'Are you OK? Are you going to be sick?' She sounded mildly concerned, but mostly grossed out. 'I'm not really a hair-holding person.'

'No, I'm fine. I'm just—'

'Sorry, it's just I actually hate puke.'

'I thought you were doing medicine?'

She frowned. 'You don't have to *love* puke to study medicine.'

'Sorry, obviously, yeah.' I went to sit on the toilet but it had no lid. 'I'm not gonna puke, anyway.' I was bobbing up and down on the spot, peeling my shoes from the sticky floor. 'It's not a *physical* problem.'

Negin's eyebrows disappeared slowly into her fringe. 'You are having an *emotional* problem.'

It was actually ridiculous. I snorted, which must have made

me seem mental. 'Sorry, I snort sometimes. I can't control it. Anyway, yes, it's an urgent emotional problem.' I took a deep breath. 'Basically, a boy that I went to school with . . . *is here*.' I whispered the 'is here' bit, and pointed at the floor.

The eyebrows dropped back down again. 'That *does* sound emotional.' There was a hint of a smile at the side of her mouth.

I didn't know how to explain it. I couldn't think of a way to describe the last seven years of nothingness accurately. I tried again: 'OK, this boy I have wanted – to different levels – for, like, my entire existence, is here.' I was waving my hands about insanely.

'Oh.' Clearly, Negin had no idea how to respond to my declaration. 'Did you not know he was coming to York?'

'No, I totally did.'

'Right . . .'

'I'm not explaining it well because I'm drunk.'

'O-kay.' She nodded solemnly. She was actually pulling the same face as Princess Diana.

'I just feel like I need time to prepare myself for seeing him, you know? Like I need to regroup and get my game face on.'

Negin didn't sound that convinced. 'I would hug you,' she said, 'but I'm not really a hugger.'

She wasn't a hugger. She wasn't a hair-holder. What *was* she? I really needed Flora. Flora could hug and hair-hold at the same time, as expertly demonstrated on my seventeenth birthday. Ugh – I needed to stop rose-tinting my old friends and focus on my potential new ones. It was Flora who gave me

those tequila shots in the first place now I thought about it.

‘Do you want to go and talk to him?’ Negin said.

‘NO! Oh my god. No.’

She looked at the door again and took a deep breath. ‘OK. So, what *do* you want to do? We have been in this cubicle for like . . . a while. I mean, I’m not that into the crazy first-night-of-Freshers’ thing, but, I was hoping for more than . . .’

We both stared down the bowl of the toilet.

‘What the fuck? Are you lot dead in there?’ a girl shouted from outside.

‘Not dead.’ I shouted back. ‘We’re just . . . one second.’

Negin tucked her hair behind her ears. ‘My brother told me this story about how a girl he knew went to uni and the day she got there, she tripped up putting her duvet cover on, hit her head and knocked herself unconscious. And because her door was shut, no one knew she had even arrived. They found her, like, six days later.’

‘What . . . dead?’

‘Well, she hadn’t just been trapped in her duvet for six days.’

Negin smiled awkwardly and I burst out laughing.

‘I’m sorry, that is the most awful thing I have ever heard.’

She shook her head. ‘It’s probably not even true. My brother probably just made it up to freak me out even more about going away.’ It made me feel better to hear that someone else was nervous, too. She opened her bag and got out a tin of Vaseline. She had a black bob with no hair out of place, almost like a Lego person. Apart from the faded Princess Di T-shirt, she looked neat. Black jeans, Converse, no make-up. Like if a

newsreader fronted an indie band.

‘Either way,’ I said, ‘I’m never shutting my door again. Or changing my duvet.’

Negin carefully dabbed Vaseline on her lip. ‘Don’t worry, we can just check on each other every night. You know, just in case the other person is dead.’

‘Yay,’ I said. ‘Death pact.’

What was *wrong* with me? I hate the word ‘yay’. ‘Yay’ is the worst. It’s so cheerleader-enthusiastic. It’s not something I even say. The stress of Luke Taylor was making me nuts.

The girl outside banged on the door again. ‘If you’re not dead, then maybe let some other people piss, yeah?’

‘OK,’ Negin shouted, and then turned back to me. ‘All right. Are you ready to go out there and face . . .’

‘Luke,’ I said. ‘I don’t think I’ll ever be ready to face Luke Taylor. I feel like if you saw him you would understand.’

I got my phone out and searched for a picture of him. ‘See?’

Negin looked down at the photo. It was from two weeks ago. Luke Taylor holding up his L-plates after passing his driving test. He was wearing a white T-shirt and his hair had been bleached really, really blond by the sun. It almost looked dyed because there were dark roots coming through. He looked a bit sheepish, like someone had made him pose for it. I pressed the phone into her hands and she dutifully leant in to look closer. She didn’t say anything.

‘That’s him,’ I hissed.

She nodded. ‘I got that.’

I waited for her to speak. She must have realized she was

supposed to say something else. 'He looks . . . like a standard hot boy.'

My seven-year loyalty to him bristled. 'His hair looks better longer.'

'Where is he?' she asked.

'At the driving test place, I guess.'

'No,' she sighed. 'Where is he *now*?'

'Oh. On the side bit next to the dance floor.'

'OK, well, we'll walk past and if he sees you, just casually say hello.' Negin sounded confident so I went with it.

'OK.'

We opened the cubicle door and the girl outside huffed and barged straight in past us. We washed our hands, even though neither of us had actually been to the toilet. I tried to arrange my tutu, sweatbands and Yoda ears. Negin offered me some of her Vaseline.

'I wish I looked a bit less . . . random,' I said.

'It's a clothes swap party,' she said. 'You'd look *weirder* if you were wearing a matching outfit.'

'Yeah, you're right.'

I took a deep breath and we walked out. But Luke Taylor had vanished.

LUKE

I was doing my best to focus on what Arthur was saying, but the buzzing in my pocket kept distracting me.

If I'd counted right – and I was pretty sure I had – this buzz was the eleventh buzz since we'd got down to the bar. The

eleventh. A sudden rush of anger cut through me. Did she really expect me to spend the first night of Freshers' stood outside talking to her? Wasn't the whole point of this week to talk to *new* people?

The buzzing stopped as Arthur pushed a luminous blue shot and a pint of lager along the bar to me. He was wearing a bright-red bathrobe over a sleeveless denim jacket, his sweaty black hair just about tucked into a yellow swimming cap. I had on my mum's 2007 Bon Jovi tour T-shirt under a massive, multi-coloured Mexican poncho. We both looked absolutely ridiculous. But then, so did everybody else. Even the barman was wearing a kimono.

I realized Arthur's mouth was moving again, so I leant in and tried to concentrate.

'I was supposed to be off-campus this year,' he was shouting over the music. 'Me and some mates had a house sorted and everything. Even put the deposit down.'

'So, what happened?' I yelled back.

'It got fucking *condemned*. Like, literally, two weeks ago. Asbestos. So that's why I've ended up back in B Block next door to you.' He did his shot and winced. 'Still, could be worse. Most second years don't get to do Freshers' Week again, do they?'

I nodded and drank my shot. It tasted like vodka-flavoured toothpaste. 'What is asbestos?' I shouted.

Arthur necked half his pint in one go. 'It's this sort of invisible presence that lives inside your house.'

'A bit like Wi-Fi.'