

PRAISE FOR SAD GIRL HOURS

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For my wife (!!)

And for anyone who's ever wished for spring.

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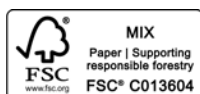
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SAD GIRL HOURS

ANNA ZOE QUIRKE

LITTLE TIGER

LONDON

CHAPTER ONE

NELL

Some parties you go to because you're a Party Person™. Other parties you go to because your best friend insists that you can't possibly *actually* want to spend (fake) New Year's Eve at home, surrounded by candles (I've curated the perfect collection: cinnamon apple, warm vanilla and a peppy new purchase called 'Angel's Kiss') and writing poetry. (FYI: a smooch from an angel would apparently smell of freshly laundered cotton sheets with a subtle note of lavender.)

"Nell," Jenna said, "I love you but if you don't come with me tonight then I'm going to turn you in to the accommodation staff, and you'll spend your night in the prison in the basement."

"Since when is there a prison in the basement of the halls?"

"Since you rocked up with a criminal quantity of candles and they decided they'd better build one

to put you in before you burned this place to the ground.”

“*Excuse me,*” I protested. “I’m always very careful with my candles. If I was going to set something on fire, then it’d be on purpose. And I’m not in a particularly arsony mood this evening.”

Apparently, this was not a convincing argument for being left home alone. Hence why I now find myself in the Student Union, dressed in my finest, witchiest dress with sleeves that Stevie Nicks herself would envy, dancing my lil butt off with Jenna at the pre-New Year’s Eve party they’re throwing so that we can all celebrate together before we head home for the holidays.

Jenna grins at me, her face changing from pink to green to blue as the lights cascade down and bathe us all in their flashing colours, as if to say, *This is fun, right? I told you it’d be fun!*, and I don’t even try to be obnoxious and pretend that it isn’t.

I return her grin and grab her hand, spinning myself into her and relying on her musical-theatre-student instinct not to drop me as I fall back into a dip. This initiates an elaborate improvised dance routine for the rest of the song (an upbeat pop number I’ve never heard before in my life but am not *not* enjoying).

We’re giggling slightly hysterically as the song draws to a close to be replaced by the unmistakable sound of the first bars of ‘I Wanna Dance with

Somebody’ (accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of people going positively *feral* at the sound of the first bars of ‘I Wanna Dance with Somebody’).

“What a TUNE!” Jenna adds to the delighted furore, spinning round in a circle under my arm. Mid-spin, though, she lets out a mini screech. “Oh my god, Nell, look – it’s Saffron, the girl I was telling you about!”

I follow her gaze. Usually in a crowd like this, it would be hard to tell which of the dancing people she was talking about, but not in this instance. In the corner of the room, standing on one of the corner benches while she dances and belts out the lyrics along with Whitney Houston at the top of her lungs, is a girl wearing an outfit made of so many gold sequins that she’s functioning as a human mirrorball, her pale skin drenched in shifting technicolour.

I follow Jenna as we weave through the crowd, watching the girl as I go. Her long, slightly curly blond hair is messy – she keeps pushing it up as she dances – and she’s moving to the music like her body itself can read the sheet music, her willowy limbs responding to each note with grace but also just unabashed *joy*. And she’s passing that joy on to her friends too, going round the group and singing and dancing with each person. She’s not just literally golden, there’s something else about her that shimmers too.

“JENNA!”

She spots us heading over and takes a running leap at Jenna, flinging her arms round her like she's being reunited with her favourite person on the planet. Now don't get me wrong – Jenna's great. She's been my best friend ever since we both formed a weird-kid trauma bond in the creative-writing group (poetry for me, playwriting for her) in our local city when we were fifteen. But I suspect that this girl makes everybody feel like they're her favourite person when she's around them.

Jenna and Saffron pull apart and I get to test this theory.

"Saff, this is Nell." Jenna gestures towards me with her head. "My ride-or-die bitch. Nell, this is Saffron, my designated dance partner."

I smile in Saffron's direction. "Yes, I heard all about the hair-holding, water-acquiring you did in Freshers' Week. Jenna makes a great first impression, right?"

Saffron shakes her hair back, beaming at me like I'm just the person she wanted to see, confirming my suspicions. "I wouldn't have had it any other way. That's how I make all my friends. I'm always on the lookout for people on the verge of vomming so I can swoop in and save the day."

"Ah, yes, you're like the Sir Lancelot of Upchuck," I say, feeling my arms move to mime knighting her on each shoulder before my slightly tipsy brain has registered that's maybe a really

weird thing to do to someone you just met.

Saffron just bows her head and laughs, though, her eyes warm and glittery as they look back into mine. “I really am. It’s so nice to formally meet you, Nell. Jenna’s been saying we should hang out since October. Oh, and you should both come meet my friends!”

She grabs our hands and pulls us back into her corner. When we get there, she lets go of us so that she can gesture to the two people standing there. A stray thought flickers in me that I’m disappointed not to be touching her any more.

“GUYS.” Her voice is raised so they can hear her over the music. “This is Jenna, who you know about, and this is Nell, my new friend!”

She’s exchanged approximately fifty words with me, but apparently we’re friends now. Not that I’m complaining.

She introduces us in turn to Viviana (“Vivvie, please, darlings,” she corrects in a soft Yorkshire accent), a tall, slender Latina girl with the most striking cheekbones I’ve ever seen, who’s wearing a dress made out of triangles of emerald-green silk and woven gold rope. Saffron proudly informs us that Vivvie made it herself, saying, “Isn’t she just crazy talented?” to which Jenna and I swiftly agree.

Then she turns to the boy who’s been standing and waiting patiently. “And this is Casper, the only man I’ve ever loved.”

I smirk to myself, remembering what Jenna said about suspecting Saffron was queer, and our subsequent social-media stalk confirming that she's a lesbian. She has a TikTok with a not inconsiderable following where she posts a fun mixture of general lifestyle stuff, sustainable fashion content, as well as videos explaining astrophysics concepts in accessible terms. (Even I could understand what she was saying almost all of the time, despite spending most of my high-school science classes staring out of the window/writing terrible angsty poetry.)

"Casp and I are in the Athletics Club together," Saffron continues. "He's a sweetheart."

Casper smiles at me and then at Jenna, his cheeks round and tinged pink contrasting with his very rumpled, very blond hair. "Casper Fortescue-Thomas, at your service!"

I'm not surprised that he and Saffron met in Athletics Club: he's clearly a golden retriever trapped in the body of a man – boy needs his walkies.

Jenna plays her role of the designated social-butterfly person in our friendship and chats to them, allowing me to fulfil *my* role of designated perpetually-slightly-overstimulated, mysterious neurodivergent friend and gaze around the room, taking it all in. I sway my body lightly from side to side with the music. I turn back to the group and catch Saffron's eye. She smiles at me, before beginning to – I think unconsciously – mirror my shoulder dancing. She

jerks her head back towards the dance floor and asks, “D’you wanna go dance?”

I nod before I’ve even fully registered the question. She hands her drink to Casper and tugs me to the floor, Jenna wagging her eyebrows at me when I look back over my shoulder.

We join the throng of slightly sweaty students in the centre of the room, rainbow light cascading down the walls. The floor pulses with the music, and Saffron and I are soon singing and bopping along.

Saffron’s skin is soft, like ... that excellent kind of silky moss in a sunny forest glade *soft*, something I notice every time she takes my hand to dance or to spin us round in giddy circles. She has this radiant smile on her face the whole time, her hair’s flying all over the place and I feel the benefit of her warmth, but I also feel ... I don’t know.

Like I’m not doing something quite right.

My mind flits back to Saffron’s TikTok page and how her bio proudly proclaimed her as ‘that funky space lesbian’.

There are lots of things I know for sure about myself. Like how I think there’s nothing cooler than transforming a blank page into something beautiful using just my words. How I love all things cosy. How my main fashion inspirations are whatever was going on with Darcy’s fit in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* movie when he’s walking across the field,

and ‘the lady who lives on the edge of the forest that all the local children think is a witch’.

How I know my brain works differently to a lot of people’s, always seeking out fun sensory input and trying to get rid of the less fun stuff. I was diagnosed as autistic three years ago after I had what my dads and I like to refer to as my ‘spicy brain time’. (Read: a mild to moderate mental breakdown that resulted in me going to therapy and crunching my spicy brain rocks (anti-anxiety meds) every evening before bed.)

But when I vaguely acknowledge that I’m enjoying dancing with Saffron more than I probably would be if I was dancing with a boy, things feel both known and unknown. I know I’m not straight but what exactly I am outside of that, I don’t know. And I know I don’t *have* to know, but I *want* to. My words never usually fail me. I can wax lyrical about nature, about vast lakes of shining cerulean and the towering mountains watching over them until the Wordsworths come home, but somehow I can’t find the words for whatever is going on amid the wilderness of my heart. When I think about crushes, about dating ... everything feels foggy.

The night plods on, midnight drawing ever closer. Jenna, Casper and Vivvie join our dancing, and we improv several group numbers that would put the cast of *Glee* to shame (in our heads anyway/as deserved). The DJ announces that there’s only

a few minutes to go until the countdown and we ‘get our New Year on’. The next song slips into play and I can stop concentrating on processing the DJ’s words over all the other noise and be present in the room again.

Jenna leans over to whisper-shout about how this DJ is cheesy but still infinitely better than when her grandpa decided to take over the aux at her eighteenth birthday and accidentally put ‘No Diggity’ on loop seventeen (and a half) times until Jenna pulled the plug (on the speakers, not her grandpa).

I laugh and agree, but then my brow furrows. Saffron is slipping through the crowd, weaving a glittering path away from us and out of the doors.

I don’t pause to think. “I’ll be back!” I yell towards Jenna, who nods, shimmying to face Vivvie and Casper instead, while I head off, following Saffron’s trail.

CHAPTER TWO

NELL

I emerge out of the doors and breathe in the refreshing chill of the North of England December air, trying to ignore the way my ribcage feels like it's contracting painfully against the cold.

My gaze fixes on the figure standing out in the empty quad, in the cool glow of the floodlights. I'm about to walk up to her and make some inane remark about the temperature (I'm freezing my tits off out here without a coat, and I presume she's similarly suffering), but her head turns slightly and makes me pause.

She's looking up at the night sky— No, she's looking up *into* the night sky, like she's waiting for an answer to a silently asked question. Gone is the easy smile on her face, replaced instead by the expression of someone worn out by something – or maybe many things. I feel as though I'm intruding, like I've caught her in an intimate moment.

I briefly wonder whether I should retreat back inside, as she continues staring up at the stars with glassy eyes.

A particularly loud cheer from the party makes me discount that thought, however. Midnight is within touching distance, and I can't leave her alone to start the New Year (even this pretend one) feeling whatever it is that's making her look like she's sinking downwards. I'm certainly well acquainted myself with feeling so low that the sky feels even further away than usual.

I march purposefully up to her, pretending that I've only just come out of the building.

"Oh, Saffron, hey," I say, aiming for 'oh so casual and cool'. Masking I can do (at severe cost to my mental health), but I'm no actress.

Saffron doesn't notice, though. She's much too busy acting herself – a transformed vision of bright eyes and mouth perfectly upturned like she's delighted to see me.

"Nell!" she says brightly. "What are you doing out here?"

"I could ask the same of you," I say, taking care to ensure that my tone is curious and not accusatory.

"Oh, you know." She shrugs easily. "I just fancied some fresh air and a bit of sky time." She nods up at the black above as if 'sky time' is a trademarked activity.

"I get that," I say, because I sort of do. "Sometimes

a bit of space is nice.”

“Exactly what I’m always saying. Although,” she adds in a conspiratorial tone, “I’m usually trying to convince people that astrophysics is cool and not in fact a *deeply* nerdy thing to devote your precious time and brain space to.”

“Why can’t it be both?” I say, cocking an eyebrow.

“You know, that’s an excellent point.” Saffron laughs. “No one’s ever suggested that before. Thank you, Nell.”

How does she make everyone feel so goddamn *special* all the time? She’s like some kind of shapeshifting fae, but instead of causing chaos, she just boosts people’s self-esteem before bouncing back to the woods.

A thought pops up in the forefront of my brain: *Does anyone make her feel special too?*

“So, what’s the deal then,” I start – I want to hear her talk about herself – “with you and space? I’ve seen your TikToks. You’re clearly bonkers for the cosmos.”

“*Bonkers for the cosmos*,” she repeats, laughing a little. “Also, I can’t believe you’ve seen my TikToks. That’s embarrassing.”

She pulls a face like she doesn’t a) willingly put these videos online for people to see, and b) that she doesn’t know she comes across as perfectly articulate and passionate. Not to mention that she looks incredible in every single one, even adding little

notes about where her clothes are from – all second-hand, thrifted or home-made, of course, because, as well as being intelligent and beautiful, she also cares about the freaking planet.

“Come on,” I say aloud. “They’re all amazing – it’s not embarrassing. And you put them out there. I just innocently stumbled across them ... when Jenna showed me your page.”

“Of course she did.” Saffron shakes her head. “And I know I do, and I do want people to see my stuff and learn cool things about what’s out there.” She nods her head skywards again and I feel small – *tiny* even – in a really cool way. “I want to be seen but I don’t want to be *perceived*.”

My laugh is visible, condensing in a cloud in the cold air. “Valid. And weirdly poetic.”

“Ah, yes,” she says with a teasing lilt. “I almost forgot we have a poet in our midst. Jenna’s been telling me all about her amazing poet friend.”

“Oh, Roger? Yeah, his sonnets are out of this world.” I glance at her sideways, half a smile working up my face. “Little space pun for you.”

Her golden waves bob around gracefully as she shakes her head at me. “Thank you. And no, not this mysterious Roger fellow, though I’m sure he’s also excellent. *You*. She’s told me all about you and how you’re going to take over the world one haiku at a time. She’s been in proper wingwoman mode.”

My trusty right eyebrow quirks up.

“Oh,” she says quickly, realising the implication.
“For us to be friends, I mean. Not like that.”

It’s the first time she’s made me feel not so special.

But she seems to realise this as I do. “Not that I wouldn’t date you.”

I keep looking at her, slightly bemused, slightly obsessed with her.

“I mean, I wouldn’t,” she rambles, “but not because of you. You seem great. I just don’t date. Anyone. Not any more. Not even beautiful poets.”

“Right,” I say. “I didn’t ask, but good to know.”

My smile has an impish edge to it to reassure her that I’m not offended, even though I’m now maddeningly curious as to *why* she doesn’t date *any more* and also how she can have the audacity to tell me I’m beautiful as she’s rejecting me. Although is it a rejection if I literally didn’t ask? I don’t even know if I *would* date her. I don’t know her. I’d like to, but I don’t.

That reminds me...

“You never answered my question, by the way.”

The vague hint of tension gathered around her eyes (green, I notice) fades at the change of subject. “What question? Oh,” she says as she remembers. “What makes me *bonkers for the cosmos*?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t know,” she says breezily. “What makes you bonkers for poetry?”

I fold my arms across my chest. Partly to make a

point, partly because it's so *cold*. "You first."

"I don't know..." Her voice trails off as she looks up, up, *up*. "I guess I just... I like—"

I never find out what it is she likes, however, as a riotous boom of noise emits from inside the building and the countdown begins.

"TEN, NINE, EIGHT..."

I shrug at Saffron. "The pretend New Year looms. What'd you reckon? Want to do this all again for another year?"

Something flickers in those eyes, and even though she says, "I don't see why not. I reckon we ought to give it a go anyway —" even as she puts on a smile that could put an end to the Mona Lisa debate (no, she's not smiling: *this* is a smile) — I know some part of her is lying.

"FOUR, THREE, TWO..."

Under the watchful silver eye of the moon, the clock strikes midnight ("ONE!"), and although it won't be real for another couple of weeks, I do still feel suspended in the future, just for a second.

Bejewelled sparks scatter into the air above the building and cheers erupt within, along with a chorus of, "Happy New Year!"

"It never feels real, does it?" I say. "You know, even when it actually *is*. Nothing really changes and yet somehow it always feels as though we're entering a brand-new age, a new epoch dawning."

"No," Saffron says. "It doesn't." She takes a step

closer to me, rubbing her arms. She's still smiling, despite the looming threat of pneumonia. "Happy sort of New Year, Nell. It's been lovely entering this epoch with you."

"Happy – sort of – New Year. It's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance and traverse space and time with you," I say.

"My favourite activity." Saffron continues to glimmer.

There's quiet between us for a moment. Both space and time feel as if they're pressing around us along with the velvet black of night. It *has* been lovely being wrapped up in all of this with her. And so...

"Let's do this again sometime," I say.

Saffron's head tilts to the side. "What, traverse space and time?"

"Well, preferably, yes. But no, I meant hang out. You know, with Jenna – and Casper and Vivvie too, if they like."

"Sure. That'd be nice." She looks at me, her expression reflecting her words, and I find myself staring back, letting the sentiment of *more of whatever this has been* echo out between us.

The quiet and the anticipation of all this newness (and the way she keeps looking at me like she finds me as fascinating as I do her) crackle around us and I wonder.

That's the end of the sentence. I just wonder.

"WHERE THE FUCK HAVE YOU BEEN?"

The quiet is brought to an abrupt end by the arrival of Jenna in the quad. She jogs over, Casper and Vivvie not far behind, and thrusts an arm over my shoulder.

I shrug. "Here."

Jenna casts a discerning eye between the two of us, before offering me a laden half nod that I know means, *I don't think anything massively exciting/scandalous has occurred but I'm going to require more information imminently anyway.*

"It's gone midnight, by the way," she says, grabbing my face and planting a firm kiss on my forehead. "Happy Not-New Year."

"Oh, is that what all the shouting was about?" Saffron says with a soft smile.

"Yeah, we just thought someone had been murdered," I add. "But that would explain it."

Jenna raises an eyebrow. "And the fireworks?"

Saffron doesn't pause. "The victim wasn't well liked."

Casper and Vivvie reach us as I let out a snort to rival Babe himself, and Saffron turns her energy up another notch to greet them. "Hey, guys! Sorry I missed the countdown!"

"What've you been up to?" Vivvie says, giving Saffron the same look Jenna gave me.

"Just the usual," I volunteer. "Looking at the stars, entering epochs, misattributing cheers to the aftermath of a grisly, violent crime."

Saffron lets out a laugh, and Vivvie looks between us before settling her gaze on me. “You’re a bit weird, aren’t you?” she says, zero malice in her words or tone. “I love that for you.”

“Oh, she’s absolutely crackers, yes,” Jenna says proudly, giving my shoulder a brief squeeze.

“All the best people are,” Casper says.

“Well,” Saffron announces, snaking an arm round Casper’s waist and hugging him to her side, “should we head home now?”

I look to Jenna. “Yes, we’ve boogied, we’ve seen the New Year in, we’ve successfully marked the pretend constructed shift in our constructed calendar.”

“All right, misery guts.” Jenna tosses smiles to Casper and Vivvie and hugs Saffron goodbye. Saffron stands on her tiptoes to squeeze her even tighter. “You can’t pretend you didn’t enjoy it, though. I saw you having the time of your life. I have eyes.”

“Many congratulations,” I say, “although there’s no need to rub it in for those poor sea urchins.”

Jenna’s nose wrinkles. “What?”

“They don’t have eyes,” Casper supplies helpfully.

“Thank you.” I like this boy already.

Casper gives me a dutiful nod and we say our goodbyes, scattered with promises to meet up again when we get back after the holidays, before heading off to our different halls of residence.

Jenna loops her arm through mine as we walk and rambles on about how fun the evening was, how

cute Casper is (interesting...), how cool Vivvie seems and how *amazing* Saffron is. “Right?”

I make all the appropriate noises, glancing at their three retreating backs. Saffron’s in the middle, clearly talking animatedly, her body cloaked in constellations, the moonlight reflecting off every last one of her gold sequins.

The lines between what’s real and what’s pretend blur in my head, and I catch myself wishing that the New Year brings everyone exactly what they need.