

# Chapter 1

The university website had promised lawns and trees and a pretty medieval church.

Up ahead was a concrete tower block, its pitted surface painted in primary colours to resemble lurid Lego bricks. Narrow rectangular windows lay flat against the cliff face of the building in six horizontal lines, dull and dark in the late September sunshine.

Trundling her scruffy suitcase behind her, Sophie grimaced. What an idiot. Why hadn't she visited first?

The school had laid on visits to Oxford and Cambridge, but she wasn't in that league, been too focused on A level assessments to sort long road trips.

Students were pushing by, earnestly talking, and Sophie shortened Charlotte's lead. Bringing a large brown labradoodle along wasn't ideal but kennels were expensive. 'I bet our room's in that tower block,' she said, addressing Charlotte.

Charlotte ignored her, weaving happily around a heap of cigarette ends on the grubby path; she had few expectations so was rarely disappointed.

Sophie squared her shoulders. Be more like Charlotte. Go with the flow.

The squat building beyond the entrance had sharp edges and a flat roof. A mottled, plastic panel had fallen off a wall, partly blocking the pavement.

'It's no good. This really sucks. Let's go home.'

Charlotte promptly pulled on her lead towards reception.

Sophie sighed, imagining dragging her to the road, getting a taxi to the station and when they arrived back, Aunty Wendy's disappointed face... No, Charlotte was right. Pathetic to drop out before they'd even walked in.

But the lecture-sized room with municipal flooring and yellow walls was jam-packed with new undergraduates and their families, queuing to register on the first day of the Autumn

term, and Sophie paused, nerves swirling. This many people usually triggered undisciplined Charlotte bouncing; her fluorescent jacket might as well have been emblazoned *I AM NOT A SERVICE DOG*.

Charlotte leaned against Sophie's knees, sensing her anxiety. Sophie knew she had to relax. Or Charlotte wouldn't. She drew a deep breath. 'Okay, let's go.'

They joined the queue for A to E surnames and Charlotte immediately caused a stir, but she posed, enjoying being petted by impressed strangers. Genuine service dogs, focused on their work, weren't supposed to be petted, but Charlotte was calm and looked the part. So far, so good.

As she waited, Sophie closed her mouth and breathed through her nose, fending off pungent teenage aftershave and celebrity-branded perfumes, the scents intensified by the unseasonal, humid weather and the stuffy room. No air con ... she should have worn a thin dress, not jeans and an over-sized shirt. She hauled off her black cardigan and tied it about her waist.

A tall, dark-haired boy in a different queue was staring at his phone. Hugo Harrington? Couldn't be him. Wouldn't be seen dead in a place like this.

Her mobile bleeped in her bag. Isha, her BFF, had sent predictable pictures of her Oxford college. Hushed, immaculate lawns and dreamy spires.

*Can we visit next weekend?* xxx Sophie texted.

Isha replied immediately. *Term hasn't started yet. Come weekend after. Send Charlotte pictures!!* xxx.

*Will do* xxx.

Isha understood about Charlotte. Six years ago, when Sophie's parents had died in a car accident, she'd grieved in private but confided in Isha, and, four years later, when Aunty Wendy had given her a puppy, Sophie had confided again, explaining the unexpected surge of maternal love and how Charlotte helped fill the parent-size void. And Charlotte was still an anchor in a lonely sea, would always trump getting a degree, socialising, *anything*—

'Name?' The woman behind the front desk glanced up from her computer screen. She had short, spiky hair and shrewd eyes.

'Sophie Arundel.'

The woman frowned, eyeing Charlotte. 'You're not on the special needs list.'

'Oh, I filled out the form.' She hadn't, hoped she could wing it.

Unforgiving, overhead strip lighting revealed lines of annoyance around the woman's pursed mouth as she scanned the screen and typed, the faint clicks from the keyboard sounding rapid and professional.

Sophie swallowed.

'I hate to ask,' said the woman, 'but would you mind sending it again?'

Sophie hid her relief, adjusting her bag strap, securely slung across her chest. 'Of course.'

'I'll put you on the waiting list for a ground-floor flat. I'm afraid you've been allocated a fourth-floor room.'

Right. The Lego Tribute. 'No worries.'

The woman handed her an envelope, her eyes still scanning her screen. 'Your room key.'

'Thank you.' Sophie stuffed it in her bag and hurried away, struggling to wheel the suitcase through the crowd. 'Don't worry,' she whispered to Charlotte. 'Before they realise the form's still missing, I'll think of something.'

The boy who looked like Hugo was in front of her, strolling towards the exit. Six foot three and gangly in his pale knee-length shorts and red T-shirt, he had a navy hoodie casually tied around his neck. He turned as the door opened, and she saw his profile. Strong jawline, broad shoulders, annoying air of easy confidence. It was definitely him.

To get his attention, she touched his arm.

He stared at her as if she'd beamed down from a spaceship, his thick black eyebrows surprised. 'Sophie?'

She pulled Charlotte close; Hugo might not appreciate joyful doggie bouncing. 'I didn't realise you were coming here.'

He examined an envelope he was holding. His room key. 'Missed the grades for Oxford.'

Puzzling. He'd always aced exams. In the last school debate, he'd argued climate change didn't exist — without notes, just to show off. They'd never been friends. But he was a familiar face in a squash of strangers and Charlotte was earnestly leaning into his legs. Odd. She didn't usually do her full-on love-lean to people she'd just met.

Hugo's T-shirt proclaimed *San Diego Surfing Co. California* in bold, black letters, interwoven through a faded, dark ring. He could have bought that anywhere but, being Hugo, he'd have visited. She pointed. 'Souvenir?'

'Yes, my sister lives there.' He pushed his unruly hair from his forehead. Cut neatly around his ears and nape, but his fringe was way too long. 'Going to the tower block?'

She nodded. 'You've no luggage?'

'In the car. I'll get it later.'

Hugo and his mates all had cars, courtesy of Mummy and Daddy. New, sporty, pricey. Why couldn't one of *her* friends have turned up, not posh boy Hugo?

Outside, students were handing out Mexican beer, promoting some new brand.

'We had to bin the sombreros,' said a tanned, cheerful girl, handing Hugo a plastic cup. 'Cultural appropriation and all that.'

Sophie reluctantly declined the beer. Both her hands were fully occupied trundling the suitcase and holding Charlotte's extendable lead.

'It's good to be sensitive,' said Hugo, as they followed a path around the reception building, 'but where does it end? Banning people from selling Scotch whisky in kilts?'

She shrugged. Today was stressful enough. She wasn't up for an earnest discussion.

They turned a corner. Boxed in by blunt, angular buildings was a stone medieval church with gothic, stained-glass windows. It was like the chapel at school, but the steeple was larger and taller.

The church on the website ... the other buildings had been airbrushed out. Unbelievable.

'That's unusual,' said Hugo.

'Sad.' The lone survivor of a concrete massacre.

'Over there.' Hugo was pointing at something above an arched window at the near side of the chapel.

Half concealed by a buttress was a carving, attached like a gargoyle, but it wasn't a devil or grotesque figure. Two young faces looked in opposite directions, the back of their heads touching. The identical faces could have been male or female.

Sophie walked closer, stood on tip toe and touched it. The lines of the carving were confident and flowing, executed with real skill. For a moment, the church shimmered, there but not there, like a mirage. Feeling dizzy, she took a slow breath and the air tasted fresher, like a rain-swept draught into a dusty room. Summer smells ... grass and pollen.

'Are you okay?' Hugo was regarding her with concern.

'I'm fine, shouldn't have skipped breakfast.' Curious. At school, he'd rarely deigned to speak to her.

They walked past the church and downhill, through a maze of square, two-storey buildings, the path levelling off as they drew nearer the tower block. No one seemed suspicious about Charlotte. Sophie had googled *Invisible Illnesses*, memorised a convincing lie, but few people would be crass enough to interrogate a stranger about a disability. English reticence plus political correctness. Result.

'Must be somewhere to practise cricket,' said Hugo. 'A pitch...'

‘You think?’ A cricket pitch here was as likely as a magic garden. But his doomed quest didn’t affect her. She’d always been baffled by the appeal of cricket, with matches lasting whole days. Could have played at school; the mixed team had been quite good, but she’d been happy with kickboxing and javelin.

She paused wheeling the suitcase to brush an annoying strand of hair from her face. ‘The sports complex looked cool on the website.’ Maybe she could do kickboxing? Javelin was impractical, required a field.

‘They’ll have cricket nets. Better than nothing.’ Hugo opened a door at the base of the tower block and went in. Above the doorframe, *STUDENTS’ UNION AND ACCOMMODATION* was signed in red, bulky letters.

Sophie followed with a skittish Charlotte. Beyond a convenience shop was a huge hall that took up most of the ground floor. Despite its size, it was as crowded and stifling as reception.

Charlotte pulled back towards the exit. She loved her day trips, exploring wind-swept beaches or the quiet gardens of stately homes; this hectic space was downright scary. Sophie gave her a reassuring pat. ‘Honestly, you’ll like it once we’ve settled in.’ Charlotte sat, put out her front legs and held them ramrod stiff. So began a well-rehearsed battle of wills. There could only be one winner and — after two treats — Charlotte consented to walk to heel, attracting respectful and admiring glances.

‘Wow, he’s a big dog.’ A podgy boy with ginger hair patted Charlotte’s head.

She should have bought a harness signed *I AM A GIRL*.

He handed her a leaflet. Behind him was a poster of a caged, brown and white beagle with haunted eyes.

‘They’re doing testing *here*?’

‘Not yet, but they’ve been granted funding. You’re welcome to join our protest. Noon tomorrow, outside the science labs.’

‘I’ll be there.’ Sophie walked away, putting the pamphlet in her bag. ‘When we get to our room,’ she told Charlotte, ‘we’ll call Aunty Wendy.’ Sophie’s aunt had Parkinson’s disease and checking on her was a daily routine.

A boy wearing a cap walked by and Charlotte shrank against Sophie’s legs in a very un-guide-dog way. Charlotte didn’t like hats, because she couldn’t see the person’s face. Sophie leaned against a partition wall and hugged her.

As she straightened, Sophie’s head nudged a small sepia photo, sending it wonky. She adjusted the dusty gilt frame and read the caption. *Little Shorten, 1910*. Two young girls

wearing white pinafore dresses and solemn expressions were sitting on a bench by a village green. The fine hairs on the back of Sophie's neck stood up and her skin prickled. Someone was curious. Watching, assessing.

She turned around. Busy, noisy — nothing weird.

The younger girl in the picture was about four, her round face gazing defiantly at the camera. 'The university's main entrance is on Shorten Road,' she told Charlotte. 'Little Shorten won't be far. You'll love all that green space.'

Without warning, Charlotte bolted, the crowd parting like a knife slash as she moved at alarming speed. Holding the lead, Sophie hurtled after her but couldn't hurtle *and* keep her footing. She lost the lead and careered into grimy, vinyl flooring.

## Chapter 2

For a moment Sophie lay winded, but galvanised by panic, she hauled herself up and sprinted.

At the far end of the hall were two lifts. One was plain, grey metal, matching the building's brutalist architecture, the other was painted gold. Hugo was waiting nonchalantly in front of the gold lift, his eyes on his phone. Charlotte was right beside his feet, almost touching his black trainers, oddly still, as if sitting for a portrait.

Sophie reached Charlotte, took her lead and paused to catch her breath.

On the gold lift doors were maths symbols for infinity and Pi, and two she didn't recognise. And there were pictures, simple and child-like, drawn in the same dark, swirly strokes: a mansion in the countryside, a man rocking a cot, a girl gripping an enormous sword and a cottage on fire. Framing the door was a classical-looking mural, depicting graceful urns and stylised leaves, and at the top was an old-fashioned round dial, showing only three floors — decorative not functional. By the dial were leaping stags with craggy antlers and noble expressions.

Sophie put her palm against the drawing of the country house. The paint wasn't textured as she'd expected, but smooth and cold, like stone. Odd jumble of images ... must have been done for some art project. She shivered and pulled on her cardigan. Finally, air-conditioning. But it was far too cold.

Hugo put on his hoodie and zipped it closed, his eyes hardly moving from his phone.

A high ching noise like a bicycle bell rang out and the gold doors shuddered open, rattling as they slid completely back. Charlotte strained to get in, making pitiful strangling noises, smelling a dropped sandwich or forbidden burger.

Sophie checked out the grey, laminate floor, efficiently illuminated by a boxy light on the ceiling. Fine. No trash.

She let Charlotte scabble over the threshold and followed her. Hugo came in, glancing from his phone just long enough to press the button for the sixth floor. Sophie pressed for the fourth, glad they were on different levels. She'd meet like-minded people at the protest, hopefully make friends.

The doors slid shut and Sophie frowned at her reflection in a mirror. The white shirt skirting her thighs was streaked with grey dust from the students' union floor. And her face was smeared with grime. She found a tissue in her bag and hastily wiped it off.

Charlotte pricked up her ears.

The lift was moving but there was no sound that Sophie could hear, not even a vibration hum. She took out the leaflet. *Animal Testing Is Torture*. Underneath the headline were distressing photos. She was already Online Petition Girl but here she could do proper activism. She folded the paper in half to hide the pictures. Seeing them was too difficult. She found a lot of stuff too difficult. Veggie for half her life but had never managed to go vegan.

A loud clang, and the doors on the far side jerkily opened, making a grinding sound, metal on metal, like they needed oiling.

She stuffed the leaflet in her bag and half-turned, reaching for the handle of her suitcase behind her. But it wasn't there. It was in the hall, forgotten when she'd dashed to catch Charlotte. Sophie swore under her breath and stepped forward to press the button for the ground floor.

And gaped. What was beyond the lift couldn't be real. She blinked. But the scene in front of her didn't change.

Charlotte was wagging her tail, trying to leap out. Sophie pulled her closer and with her free hand grabbed a curved handrail, keen to hold onto something solid. If this was a window, it was a long way down.

'Top of the range and the stupid thing's died.' Hugo pocketed his phone and looked up. 'Impressive 3D projection. And nice birdsong.'

Right by the threshold was the sturdy trunk of an oak tree. Beyond it, under an intense, blue sky, was a sunlit country road, bordered by a tall bay hedge.

'The IT facility here is world class,' said Hugo. 'The different perspectives are flawless.'

Of course. 'Probably been done for Freshers' Week.' The coming days promised non-stop excitement: big name music acts, live comedy and awesome parties.



Sophie took her hand from the rail. Explained why they'd gold-sprayed the lift — happy party colour and wacky art. She turned to the side wall to press for the ground floor but the black metal facing on the control panel was glossy walnut, the digital floor display had gone, and there were only two buttons — for closing and opening the doors. They were also made of wood, protruding and chunky. She gasped, disorientated.

Hugo was turning slowly around. 'This makes no sense...'

A dainty chandelier was hanging from the ceiling. Droplet-shaped crystals, artfully arranged in tiers, floated amidst three silver branches that curved upward, cradling tented bulbs. These gave out an unusually bright white light, eerily illuminating the lift walls — no longer innocuously grey but a swirl of different wood grains, from ebony to light birch.

Sophie pushed down a whisper of fear. The drab, austere ceiling was now a round mirror, framed with raised gold petals, reminiscent of a flower or the rays of the sun. Her reflected upturned face was anxious and slightly rippled. Had she been knocked out when she'd fallen? She didn't remember banging her head. She traced a curved groove on the wall with her forefinger. More likely she was asleep on the train.

Hugo pressed to close the doors. Nothing. He pressed again with more force. Nothing.

The lift was bigger than before; enough room to sleep, with space to spare. Beneath the translucent flooring was a purple, ragged cobweb, as wide as the lift, rhythmically glowing, pulsing like a heart. Sophie bent and gingerly touched the floor. It was slightly springy, like a piece of eel she'd tasted years ago by mistake. The memory still made her shudder. She snatched her hand away. Her fingertip was numb, as if she'd held it under icy water.

'The fancy light's working, so it's not a power outage.' Hugo frowned. 'Did you notice an out-of-order sign?'

'No, but if the doors were painted recently, it could have dripped, jammed the doors?'

He shook his head. 'Whatever the problem, there should be a way to contact the lift people. Perhaps the help button's on a separate panel?'

They both searched. There was no other panel.

Hugo drove his hand through his hair. 'I don't understand. Basic health and safety.'

Sophie pushed the clunky button to close the doors; it felt spongy, broken. Alarm was now souring her throat. 'We should climb through the top, like they do in films.' Even as she said this, the prospect of carrying Charlotte between them seemed too dangerous. Impractical. 'You could do that, by yourself.'

Hugo was tall enough to inspect the ceiling, including a circular brass plate that secured the chandelier. ‘Might be an access door underneath this glass. Have you anything sharp in your bag?’

Keeping a firm hold on Charlotte’s lead with one hand, Sophie extracted her phone and put it carefully on the floor, grabbed a bottle of water, then tipped out pens, mini umbrella, a bag for Charlotte, room key envelope, pocket mirror, comb and something foul. ‘Ugh.’

‘What is *that*?’

Sophie peered at the mouldy gunge. ‘An apple. I bought it on the train.’

‘Strange.’

‘Random dream stuff.’ Sophie pushed the apple out with her boot, a few putrid bits wedging in the door tracks.

She opened the room key envelope, hampered by her numb finger. A thin, electronic card dropped out. ‘Useless.’

Hugo took car keys from his pocket. ‘I might get the glass off with these.’

‘But mirror glass is mega sharp...’ A fatally injured Hugo would be a seriously sick dream.

‘We should phone the fire brigade.’ His hand went to his pocket and he sighed. ‘*You* need to.’

She picked up her phone. Had she accidentally turned it off? She pressed the on button. ‘It’s dead, like it’s run out of charge.’

Hugo swore and checked his watch. ‘Eleven twenty. About ten minutes since we walked in.’

With a dead phone, she could only guess the time. She’d never worn a watch.

‘Won’t last long between three.’ Hugo glanced at the water bottle, his face pensive.

She repacked the bag with one hand, trying to keep her nose away from the rotting apple smell. She’d wake soon.

Charlotte was still straining against the lead towards what appeared to be a gnarled tree trunk and sun-dappled leaves.

Hugo sat on the floor against the interior wall by the open doors. ‘Never liked lifts ... I’m dreaming.’ He hugged his knees and frowned. ‘Or that beer was spiked?’ He didn’t expect an answer. ‘But if this is a drugs trip, it’ll wear off.’

So, he did drugs. Russian roulette with criminal substances instead of bullets. Life was risky enough. Her parents’ faces swam into her head and she focused on Charlotte restlessly turning in a circle. ‘I don’t know how long drug trips last, but it won’t be long before

Charlotte needs to, you know...’ Sophie pressed the clunky button again. It felt solid but empty, like a façade or stage prop. ‘Maybe it wants us to go out?’

‘Who’s *it*?’ Hugo squinted at the sun or what looked like the sun.

‘The lift, if it’s magic.’ She didn’t really think that. No such thing as magic, only mysteries science hadn’t solved yet. ‘If we walk along the road and come back, the doors might close, and it’ll go to the tower block.’

‘Or when we get out, we’ll be stuck, wherever.’

‘Or that.’ Sophie sucked her numb finger. This felt real but had to be a dream. Or nightmare. Stuck in a lift with Hugo Harrington. Dreams could be so ... random.

Charlotte turned and fixed Sophie with a preoccupied stare. She squatted and peed, ensuring her paws were clear before perkily straightening up. The amber pool steamed and expanded, and Hugo scrambled to his feet.

Survival shows about drinking urine... ‘If we had another bottle,’ said Sophie, ‘we could have scooped it.’

‘What?’

‘Aren’t you supposed to drink urine, once you run out of water?’

‘Yes.’ Hugo wrinkled his nose.

Sophie stepped sideways to avoid warm pee and Hugo cautiously put his left arm out of the lift.