

FRESH  
ERSH

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

**M**y first week at uni was like a kids' birthday party gone mad: dressing up, weird games, food fights – but with the helpful addition of lots of booze . . . It's nice to know that nothing has changed!

In *FRESHERS*, Tom Ellen and Lucy Ivison have written an unmissable account of this defining rite of passage, in all its crazy glory. Our protagonists discover friends for life, embarrass themselves and figure out who they want to be – and who they really are. As well as being hilarious, *FRESHERS* is full of wisdom, offering heartfelt insights about respect, friendship . . . and even love.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Cunningham', with a stylized, flowing script.

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM**

Publisher

Chicken House

# 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**

The image features the text 'PART 1' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are arranged in two lines: 'PART' on top and '1' below it. Each letter has a horizontal cutout in its center, revealing a grayscale, textured pattern that resembles a close-up of a fabric or a natural surface. The text is set against a plain white background and casts soft, gray shadows to its right and slightly downwards, giving it a three-dimensional appearance.







# 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.'

‘A bit, actually, yeah.’ He nodded. ‘But Wi-Fi that silently kills you in your sleep.’

‘Right. Shit.’

The klaxon went off, and he shrugged off his bathrobe while I gave him my poncho. The barman started lining up more blue shots on a tray as Beth came over with Barney. Or maybe it wasn’t Barney. Was it Tom? Tom also had red hair. It could be Tom.

‘Beth! Barney!’ Arthur yelled.

‘Just seeing if you guys needed a hand,’ said Barney-Not-Tom, cheerfully. He was short and skinny with a strong Dorset accent and tons of orangey freckles. Beth was almost a foot taller and had a sort of strict, ‘head girl’ vibe about her that was being nicely accentuated by the Harry Potter robe she was wearing.

‘One, two, three, four, five . . .’ Arthur clamped the shots one-by-one between Barney’s fingers.

‘I’d rather have a gin and tonic than another of those shots, to be honest,’ Beth said, sharply. ‘They’re like drinking Listerine.’

‘No worries,’ said Arthur. ‘One G&T coming up. We’ll bring it over with the rest of them.’

‘Thanks.’

Arthur leant in to me as they walked back to the table. ‘You wanna watch that Barney, by the way.’

‘Why?’

‘He’s a labeller. I saw him putting a Post-It note on his Nutella. We had a labeller on the corridor last year. Total



nutjob. Got kicked out in the second term for shooting a squirrel with a BB gun. He was a chemist, too.'

'Barney's doing Geography, isn't he?' I'd only managed to remember that because me, him and Arthur were the only ones *not* doing Chemistry on our corridor.

Arthur finished his pint and slapped the plastic glass back down on the bar. 'Yeah, well, it's all the same *Big Bang Theory* ballpark, isn't it? Except that Geography is basically just colouring-in. What are you doing again?'

'English. You're Philosophy, right?'

'Yes, mate.' He ran a hand across his patchy black stubble. 'I'm wrestling with the big-boy questions: what is the nature of truth? How can we find meaning in a godless universe? *How* hot is that girl chatting to the DJ?' I looked at the girl in question, who was indeed hot. He picked up the tray, which was now dangerously overloaded with drinks: 'Shall we get back, then?'

My pocket started buzzing again. Number twelve. I pulled my phone out. 'I'll be there in one sec, sorry man, just need to quickly get this.'

I slipped out of the main door and the cold hit me hard. I pressed the phone to my ear. 'Hey.'

'Hey.' Her voice sounded wrinkled and far away. The way it'd sounded pretty much all summer.

'Look, I'm sorry I didn't pick up, it's just—'

'I know,' she said. 'I know you're busy.'

'I'm not *busy*, it's just . . . It's the first night. Obviously everyone's out.'

'I know.'

Silence.

'So, maybe I'd better go back in.'

'OK. Have you met anyone nice?'

'My corridor are all right. They've pretty much just talked about chemistry so far, but they seem nice. And this one bloke Arthur seems cool. He's a second year, though.'

'That sounds good. Cool. I . . . I just wanted to check everything was OK. It felt like we didn't really sort stuff out properly this morning before you went. I didn't want you to leave when it was weird between us.'

I sighed. 'It's been weird between us all summer.'

More silence. That was the first time either of us had actually admitted that out loud. For some reason it felt easier to say knowing she was 200 miles away.

She still wasn't speaking, so I kept going; the booze and the pocket buzzing and the 200 miles making me spill stuff that had been locked up firmly in my head until now. 'And, I mean, the thing is, it's not gonna get any less weird now that I'm here, is it?'

'What do you mean?' she said, quietly.

'I mean, I'm here and you're there. We won't see each other that much.'

'Yeah, but you said, at Reece's party, remember, you said we could make it work.'

'I know, but . . . if this is us making it work, then maybe it won't work.'

I heard her inhale sharply, but I carried on. 'Like, I'm

supposed to be working at other stuff, too, y'know? Meeting people. Making friends. But instead I'm standing out here talking to you. Do you really want me to spend the whole three years on the phone to you?'

'You're being a dick, Luke,' she muttered.

I was a bit. But I was also *right*.

'Look, I'm sorry. It's stupid to speak now,' I sighed. 'I'm a bit pissed. I'm wearing a bathrobe. I'll call you tomorrow.' I wasn't quite sure why I'd added the bathrobe information.

'I don't want to talk about this tomorrow,' she said, her voice getting lumpy with tears. 'I want to talk about it now.'

'Well, I don't.'

'If you've got something to say, then just say it. Have you met someone else?'

This actually made me laugh out loud. 'Of course I haven't fucking met someone else, Abbey! I'm out here talking to you! How *can* I meet someone else?'

'Do you *want* to meet someone else, though?'

'I *want* to go back inside.'

I hung up before she could respond. But my pocket was buzzing again as soon as I stepped back in.

## PHOEBE

'You were terrified of seeing him, but now he's gone you're gutted.'

I groaned. 'I know. He's ignored our subliminal instructions. What a bastard. We just planned the whole scene out and he hasn't even bothered to turn up.'

Negin nodded. 'The same thing happens when I argue with my mother. I rehearse this whole speech in my head and go downstairs and start it and then she interrupts and I'm like, Mum, stop' – she held her hand up – 'you are ruining my epic comeback.'

I had been daydreaming my Luke Taylor meet-cute all summer. It was part of my uni prep. I had also discussed it with Flora in detail. The only part of it I had actually managed to execute was buying an oversized scarf, which I took off in the car on the way here when my mum said it was twenty degrees and I would look strange and potentially terminally ill.

We bought another drink and found a spot on the edge of the dance floor. There was a girl up on stage with rainbow-dyed, bowl-cut hair, chatting to the DJ. I'd watched her arrive earlier, through my window. She was still wearing the same tracksuit bottoms and crop top, but now she also had a gold crown that was sort of hanging jauntily to one side, like she was in some kind of fashion shoot.

'How is that girl a fresher?' I said. 'Seems like she knows everyone.'

'I saw her earlier and she was writing in marker pen on this boy's stomach.' Negin didn't seem to have an opinion about this, just delivered the information matter-of-factly.

'What, like her phone number?'

'No, I think it was a line from a song or something.' Negin rolled her eyes. 'Deep.'

'I saw her arrive this afternoon. She didn't have any stuff at

all. Nothing. She just walked into her halls carrying a *colander*. Like, she is so cool, all she needs for the next three years is multi-coloured hair and a *colander*.'

'Like she fell from space.' Negin nodded.

'Exactly. She just sauntered in with the belly and the colander. She hasn't even got changed. I genuinely think those are the only clothes she has.' How do you even *become* a person who is brave enough to get a rainbow bowl cut and wear boys' trackies on a night out? What does your life preceding that point even look like?

We kept staring at Bowl-Cut as the DJ gave her his headphones and she started waving her hands out to the crowd.

We found the rest of our corridor and all started dancing together. You could tell we were all from the same halls because of the luminous glitter the Scouse girl, Liberty, had enthusiastically doused on us before we came out. Negin was dancing in her reserved way and the really shy girl, Becky, was hardly dancing at all. Every time the klaxon sounded she looked panicked. Liberty oscillated around the group, hugging us all and breaking out into random and unexpected stripper moves every so often.

The klaxon sounded again and Connor, the boy in the room next to me, jumped into the middle of the circle, took his T-shirt off, and started swinging it round his head like a lasso. None of us was in danger of forgetting his name, as he had 'Kiss me I'm Connor' written right across his forehead. His boom was so loud that you could hear his 'First night of Freshers!' war cry reverberate around the room.

The exaggerated lasso-swinging was making everyone jostle and my Yoda ears fell on the floor. I bent down to get them, and stood up face-to-face with Luke Taylor. He had come out of nowhere, just as I had forgotten about him for one second.

‘Hey.’ I tried to smile demurely.

‘Hey,’ he shouted over the music. The klaxon went off and he handed me his bathrobe. ‘It’s . . .’

There was this moment where I didn’t know what he meant. And then I did and it was like a stone had appeared in my stomach.

‘Phoebe,’ I said.

‘Yeah, of course.’ He smiled. ‘Phoebe. I’m Luke.’

I could feel my face getting red and tight. ‘Hey.’

Negin was trying not to seem obvious and was sort of half dancing next to me, her back slightly turned the other way. Her being there made it worse. I wanted to replay the night from the beginning and not have blabbed on about him like some desperate idiot.

I handed him the Yoda ears and he put them on.

‘So random we’re both here,’ I shouted brightly.

‘Yeah, I kind of . . .’ He felt in his pocket for his phone and then glanced down at it. ‘Sorry, I . . .’ He didn’t finish the sentence, just looked across the room and started to shuffle away. He didn’t even say goodbye. If I’d seen someone from school, even if I didn’t really know them, I would have made an effort. We were 200 miles away from home. We had known each other to look at since we were eleven. It was like he actively

didn't want to be associated with me. Like he didn't want anyone here to even know that we were connected. I took a deep breath and turned to Negin.

'So . . . that was him, then?' she said, cupping her fingers around my ear so I could hear her over the music. I bit my lip and nodded.

She shrugged. 'He's not all that.'

'It was a big school,' I said. 'So not everyone knew each other.' I felt ridiculous. Like some psychotic weirdo. We *had* only directly spoken, like, five times in seven years, but I thought he knew my name at least. I felt like someone had let the air out of me. I made a conscious effort to pull myself together and smiled at Negin really widely. 'I feel like such a loser.'

She shook her head. 'My aunt still calls me Leila. That's my sister's name.'

'D Block squaaaaaaad!' Liberty shimmied over and hugged us both and made us smile for a selfie. We cuddled together and she took it.

'I'm gonna go to the loo,' I mouthed. I pushed through the dance floor to the toilets. I took some deep breaths and caught myself in the mirror. I was bright red and had glitter smeared all over my face.

I suddenly felt a bit tearful; the Luke thing had caught me off guard, made me feel small and exposed. Everything had been going really well and then I had ruined it all by banging on and on like Luke was some *thing*. I took a deep breath. It was only midnight. I sat on the toilet and got my phone out and

there was Luke Taylor. Smiling up at me from a pre-drinks picture he had been tagged in. Friends already with a whole group of new people, looking self-assured, even in a Bon Jovi T-shirt and Superman cape. I shoved my phone into my bag. Maybe I was just drunk. I washed my face and managed to smear glitter into my hair.

I walked out of the toilet and back on to the dance floor, but Negin wasn't where I had left her. I scanned the room. I couldn't see a single person I knew. Not Connor, not Liberty, not Becky, not any of them. I danced on my own for a second and then made my way back to the bar. I scrutinized the room again and again. I was going to have to go back to the corridor.

But then I saw Josh, our second-year contact person, waving at me from across the bar. He was tall and kind of stacked and had a shaved head, like he was in the marines or something. I walked across. He was on the edge of the dance floor with some boys, playing table football. He had been so nice earlier: spent twenty minutes showing my mum where the outlet shopping centre was on the map, and labelled each of our doors with stickers with our name on and a picture. Mine was a panda, which was weirdly appropriate as my behaviour was sort of suggesting I deserved to become extinct.

'I've kind of lost everyone.' I glanced around the room to prove it.

'Don't worry.' He grinned. 'You can totally hang out with us. I'm your second-year rep. It's basically my duty to make sure you have fun. These are my housemates, Will and Pete.'



Will was classically good looking. Tall, with boarding-school floppy hair and the kind of smile that only comes from knowing you're attractive. He leant over and kissed me on the cheek to say hello. Pete was smaller and less chatty and had somehow ended up wearing so many clothes he was almost drowning in them.

Some hip hop song came on that they all liked and we started dancing. Me and Will started doing that thing where you look at each other and then look away. With every song that played, we moved a bit nearer. He was smiling at me, almost shyly, and I could sense Pete and Josh tactfully shift away. Me and Will were dancing closer and closer, and then we were getting with each other. He was a good kisser, but I couldn't really get into it because I kept wondering if the people from my corridor were somehow watching. Or if Luke Taylor was watching. Not that anyone, least of all him, would exactly care. The whole night had already descended into a bit of a meat market, anyway. And even kissing a good kisser gets a bit awkward when you don't really know the first thing about them, and you're wearing a dressing gown.

'I better try and find my friend,' I said, finally. 'She might be on her own.'

The whole night felt a bit out of control. Like I needed to sort myself out and concentrate on making friends – not being rejected by Luke Taylor, getting lost and kissing randoms. I still couldn't see Negin anywhere, so I walked out of the main doors and into a hall area with vending machines. There was a darkened room labelled 'COMPUTER LAB'. At first I couldn't

work out what the noise coming from inside was.

I creaked open the door. Gradually my eyes got accustomed to the dark, and I matched the low, gentle sound with the shape in the corner. Facing the window and shuddering every so often. Someone crying.

Luke Taylor crying.