



Praise for debut novel *Solitaire*:
'The Catcher in the Rye for the Digital Age'
The Times

RADIO SILENCE

Listen to your own voice.

ALICE OSEMAN

RADIO SILENCE

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School sucks.

Why oh why is there work? I don't— I don't get it.

Mm.

Look at me. Look at my face.

Does it look like I care about school?

No.

'lonely boy goes to a rave', Teen Suicide

UNIVERSE CITY: Ep. 1 – dark blue

UniverseCity 109,982 views

In Distress. Stuck in Universe City. Send Help.

Scroll down for transcript >>>

Hello.

I hope somebody is listening.

I'm sending out this call via radio signal – long out-dated, I know, but perhaps one of

the few methods of communication the City has forgotten to monitor – in a dark and

desperate cry for help.

Things in Universe City are not what they seem.

I cannot tell you who I am. Please call me ... please just call me Radio.
Radio

Silence. I am, after all, only a voice on a radio, and there may not be anyone listening.

I wonder – if nobody is listening to my voice, am I making any sound at all?

[...]

FUTURES

“Can you hear that?” said Carys Last, halting in front of me so suddenly that I almost crashed into her. We both stood on the train platform. We were fifteen and we were friends.

“What?” I said, because I couldn't hear anything except the music I was listening to through one earphone. I think it might have been Animal Collective.

Carys laughed, which didn't happen very often. “You're playing your

music too loud,” she said, hooking a finger around the earphone’s wire and pulling it away from me. “Listen.”

We stood still and listened and I remember every single thing I heard in that moment. I heard the rumbling of the train we’d just got off leaving the station, heading farther into town. I heard the ticket gate guard explaining to an old man that the high-speed train to St Pancras was cancelled today due to the snow. I heard the distant screech of traffic, the wind above our heads, the flush of the station toilet and “*The train now arriving at – Platform One – is the – 8.02 – to – Ramsgate,*” snow being shovelled and a fire engine and Carys’s voice and ...

Burning.

We turned round and stared at the town beyond, snowy and dead. We could normally see our school from here, but today there was a cloud of smoke in the way.

“How did we not see the smoke while we were on the train?” Carys asked.

“I was asleep,” I said.

“I wasn’t.”

“You weren’t paying attention.”

“Well, I guess the school burned down,” she said, and walked away to sit

on the station bench. “Seven-year-old Carys’s wish came true.”

I stared for a moment more, and then went to join her.

“D’you think it was those pranksters?” I said, referring to the anonymous bloggers who had been pranking our school for the past month with increasing ferocity.

Carys shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter, does it? The end result is the same.”

“It does matter.” It was at that moment that it all started to sink in. “It’s—it looks really serious. We’re going to have to change schools. It looks like the whole of C block and D block are ... just ... gone.” I crumpled my skirt in my hands. “My locker was in D block. My GCSE sketchbook was in there. I spent days on some of that stuff.”

“Oh, shit.”

I shivered. “Why would they do this? They’ve destroyed so much hard work. They’ve messed up so many people’s GCSEs and A levels, things that seriously affect people’s futures. They’ve literally ruined people’s lives.”

Carys seemed to think about it, and then opened her mouth to reply, but ended up closing it again, and not saying anything.

1. SUMMER TERM (a)

I WAS CLEVER

“We care about our students’ happiness and we *care* about their success,” said our head teacher, Dr Afolayan, in front of 400 parents and sixth formers on my Year 12 summer term parents evening. I was seventeen and head girl, and I was sitting backstage because it was my turn to speak on stage in two minutes. I hadn’t planned a speech and I wasn’t nervous. I was very pleased with myself.

“We consider it our *duty* to give our young people access to the greatest opportunities on offer in the world today.”

I’d managed to become head girl last year because my campaign poster was a picture of me with a double chin. Also, I’d used the word ‘meme’ in my election speech. This expressed the idea that I didn’t give a shit about the election, even though the opposite was true, and it made people want to vote for me. You can’t say I don’t know my audience.

Despite this, I wasn’t quite sure what I was going to talk about in my parents evening speech. Afolayan was saying everything I’d scribbled down on the club-night flyer I found in my blazer pocket five minutes ago.

“Our Oxbridge programme has been particularly successful this year—”

I crumpled up the flyer and dropped it on the floor. Improvisation it was.

I’d improvised speeches before so it wasn’t a big deal, and nobody could

ever tell they were improvised anyway; nobody ever even *wondered* whether they were. I had a reputation for being organised, always doing homework, having consistently high grades and having Cambridge University ambitions. My teachers loved me and my peers envied me. I was clever.

I was the top student in my year.

I was going to Cambridge, and I was going to get a good job and earn lots of money, and I was going to be happy.

“And I think,” said Dr Afolayan, “that the teaching staff deserve a round of applause as well for all the hard work they’ve put in this year.”

The audience clapped, but I saw a few students roll their eyes.

“And now I’d like to introduce our head girl, Frances Janvier.”

She pronounced my surname wrong. I could see Daniel Jun, the head boy, watching me from the opposite side of the stage. Daniel hated me because we were both ruthless study machines.

“Frances has been a consistent high achiever since she joined us a few years ago, and it’s my absolute honour to have her representing everything we stand for here at the Academy. She’ll be talking to you today about her experience as an Academy sixth former this year, and her own plans for the future.”

I stood up and walked on stage and I smiled and I felt fine because I was born for this.

THE NARRATOR

“You’re not going to improvise again, are you, Frances?” asked Mum, fifteen minutes previously. “Last time you ended your speech by giving everyone a thumbs-up.”

She’d been standing with me in the corridor outside the stage entrance.

My mum always loved parents evening, mostly because she loves the brief, confused stares people make when she introduces herself as my mother. These occur because I’m mixed-race and she’s white, and for some reason most people think I’m Spanish because I did Spanish GCSE last year with a private tutor.

She also loved listening to teachers telling her over and over again what an excellent person I was.

I waved the club flyer at her. “Excuse me. I’m extremely prepared.”

Mum plucked it out of my hand and scanned it. “There are literally three bullet points on this. One of them says ‘mention the Internet’.”

“That’s all I need. I’m well-practised in the art of bullshitting.”

“Oh, I know you are.” Mum handed me back the flyer and leaned against the wall. “We could just do without another incident where you spend three

minutes talking about *Game of Thrones*.”

“You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“No.”

I shrugged. “I’ve got all the main points covered. I’m clever, I’m going to university, blah blah blah grades success happiness. I’m fine.”

Sometimes I felt like that was all I ever talked about. Being clever was, after all, my primary source of self-esteem. I’m a very sad person, in all senses of the word, but at least I was going to get into university.

Mum raised an eyebrow at me. “You’re making me nervous.”

I tried to stop thinking about it and instead thought about my evening plans.

That evening I was going to get home and I was going to make a coffee and have a slice of cake and then I was going to go upstairs and sit on my bed and listen to the latest episode of *Universe City*. *Universe City* was a YouTube podcast show about a suit-wearing student detective looking for a way to escape a sci-fi, monster-infested university. Nobody knew who made the podcast, but it was the voice of the narrator that got me addicted to the show – it has a kind of softness. It makes you want to fall asleep. In the least weird way possible, it’s a bit like someone stroking your hair.

That was what I was going to do when I got home.

“You sure you’re going to be okay?” Mum asked, looking down at me.

She always asked me that before I had to do public speaking, which was frequently.

“I’m going to be okay.”

She untwisted my blazer collar and tapped my silver head girl badge with one finger.

She asked me, “Remind me why you wanted to be head girl?”

And I said, “Because I’m great at it,” but I was thinking, *because universities love it.*

DYING, BUT IN A GOOD WAY

I said my piece and got off stage and checked my phone, because I hadn’t checked it all afternoon. And that’s when I saw it. I saw the Twitter message that was about to change my life, possibly forever.

I made a startled coughing noise, sank into a plastic chair, and grabbed Head Boy Daniel Jun’s arm so hard that he hissed, “Ow! What?”

“Something monumental has happened to me on Twitter.”

Daniel, who had seemed vaguely interested until I said the word

‘Twitter’, frowned and wrenched his arm back. He wrinkled his nose and looked away like I’d done something extremely embarrassing.

The main thing that you need to know about Daniel Jun is that he

probably would have killed himself if he thought it'd get him better grades.

To most people, we were exactly the same person. We were both smart and we were both going for Cambridge and that was all anybody saw: two shining gods of academia flying high above the school building.

The difference between us was that I found our 'rivalry' absolutely hilarious, whereas Daniel acted as if we were engaged in a war of who could be the biggest nerd.

Anyway.

Two monumental things had happened, actually. The first was this:

@UniverseCity is now following you

And the second was a direct message addressed to 'Toulouse', my online alias:

Direct Messages > **with Radio**

hi toulouse! this might sound really weird but i've seen some of the Universe City fan art you've posted and i love them so much

i wondered whether you'd be interested in working with the show to create visuals for the Universe City episodes?

i've been trying to find someone with the right style for the show and i really love yours.

Universe City is non-profit so i can't exactly pay you so i totally understand if

you want to say no, but you seem like you really love

the show and i wondered if you'd be interested. you'd get full credit obviously. i

honestly wish i could pay you but i don't have any money

(i'm a student). yeah. let me know if you're interested at all. if not, i still love

your drawings. like, a lot. ok.

radio x

"Go on then," said Daniel, with an eye-roll. "What's happened?"

"Something monumental," I whispered.

"Yes, I got that."

It struck me suddenly that there was absolutely no way I could tell anybody about this. They probably didn't even know what *Universe City* was and fan art was a weird hobby anyway and they might think that I was secretly drawing porn or something and they'd all hunt down my Tumblr and read all my personal posts on there and everything would be awful.

School Brainiac and Head Girl Frances Janvier Exposed as Fandom Freak.

I cleared my throat. "Erm ... you wouldn't be interested. Don't worry."

"Fine then." Daniel shook his head and turned away.

Universe City. Had chosen. Me. To be. Their artist.

I felt like dying, but in a good way.

“Frances?” said a very quiet voice. “Are you okay?”

I looked up to find myself face to face with Aled Last, Daniel’s best friend.

Aled Last always looked a little like a child who’d lost their mum in a supermarket. This was possibly something to do with how young he looked, how round his eyes were, and how his hair was soft like baby hair. He never seemed to be comfortable in any of the clothes that he wore.

He didn’t go to our school – he went to an all-boys’ grammar school on the other side of town, and though he was only three months older than me, he was in the school year above. Most people knew who he was because of Daniel. I knew who he was because he lived opposite me and I used to be friends with his twin sister and we took the same train to school, even though we sat in different carriages and didn’t talk to each other.

Aled Last was standing next to Daniel, gazing down at where I was still sitting, hyperventilating, in the chair. He cringed a little and followed up with, “Er, sorry, erm, I mean, you just looked like you were about to be sick or something.”

I attempted to say a sentence without bursting into hysterical laughter.

“I am fine,” I said, but I was grinning and probably looked like I was about to murder someone. “Why are you here? Daniel Support?”

According to rumour, Aled and Daniel had been inseparable their whole lives, despite the fact that Daniel was an uppity, opinionated dickhead and Aled spoke maybe fifty words per day.

“Er, no,” he said, his voice almost too quiet to hear, as usual. He looked terrified. “Dr Afolayan wanted me to give a speech. About university.”

I stared at him. “But you don’t even go to our school.”

“Er, no.”

“So what’s up with that?”

“It was Mr Shannon’s idea.” Mr Shannon was the head teacher of Aled’s school. “Something about camaraderie between our schools. One of my friends was supposed to be doing this actually ... he was head boy last year ... but he’s busy so ... he asked if I’d do it ... yeah.”

Aled’s voice got gradually quieter as he was speaking, almost like he didn’t think I was listening to him, despite the fact that I was looking right at him.

“And you said yes?” I said.

“Yes.”

“*Why?* ”

Aled just laughed.

He was visibly quaking.

“Because he’s a turnip,” said Daniel, folding his arms.

“Yes,” Aled murmured, but he was smiling.

“You don’t have to do it,” I said. “I could just tell them you’re sick and everything will be fine.”

“I sort of have to do it,” he said.

“You don’t really have to do anything you don’t want to,” I said, but I knew that wasn’t true, and so did Aled, because he just laughed at me and shook his head.

We didn’t say anything else.

Afolayan was on stage again. “And now I’d like to welcome Aled Last, one of the boys’ school’s *wonderful* Year 13s, who will be setting off to one of the UK’s most prestigious universities in September. Well, if his A levels go to plan, anyway!”

All the parents laughed at this. Daniel and Aled and I did not.

Afolayan and the parents started to clap as Aled walked on to the stage.

He approached the microphone. I’d done it a thousand times and I always got that little stomach flip beforehand, but watching Aled do it then was somehow three billion times worse.

I hadn’t really spoken to Aled properly before. He caught the same train to school as me, but he sat in a different carriage. I knew next to nothing

about him.

“Er, hi, yeah,” he said. His voice sounded like he’d just stopped crying.

“I didn’t realise he was this shy,” I whispered at Daniel, but Daniel didn’t say anything.

“So, last year I, er, had an interview ...”

Daniel and I watched him struggle through his speech. Daniel, a practised public speaker like myself, occasionally shook his head. At one point he said, “He should have said no, for fuck’s sake.” I didn’t really like watching so I sat back in the chair for the second half of it and read the Twitter message fifty times over. I tried to switch my mind off and focus on *Universe City* and the messages. Radio had liked my art. Stupid little sketches of the characters, weird line drawings, 3am doodles in my 99p sketchbook instead of finishing my history essay. Nothing like this had happened to me, ever.

When Aled walked off stage and joined us again I said, “Well done, that was really good!” even though we both knew I was lying again.

He met my eyes. His had dark blue circles under them. Maybe he was a night owl like me.

“Thanks,” he said, and then he walked away, and I thought that’d probably be the last time I ever saw him.

DO WHAT YOU WANT

Mum barely had time to say “nice speech” once I met her at our car, before I was telling her all about *Universe City*. I once tried to get Mum into *Universe City* by forcing her to listen to the first five episodes on our way to a Cornwall holiday, but Mum’s conclusion was, “I don’t really get it. Is it supposed to be funny or scary? Wait, is Radio Silence a girl or a boy or neither? Why do they never go to their university lectures?” I thought that was fair enough. At least she still watched *Glee* with me.

“Are you sure this isn’t some sort of giant scam?” said Mum with a frown as we drove away from the Academy. I lifted my feet up on to the seat. “It sounds a bit like they’re trying to steal your art if they’re not even going to pay you.”

“It was their official Twitter. They’re verified,” I said, but this didn’t quite have the same effect on Mum as it did on me. “They liked my art so much that they’re actually asking me to join their team!”

Mum said nothing. She raised her eyebrows.

“Please be happy for me,” I said, rolling my head towards her.

“It’s really good! It’s brilliant! I just don’t want people to steal your sketches. You love that stuff.”

“I don’t think it’s stealing! They’d give me all the credit.”

“Have you signed a contract?”

“*Mum!*” I groaned exasperatedly. There wasn’t much point trying to explain this to her. “It doesn’t matter, I’m gonna have to say no anyway.”

“Wait, what? What d’you mean?”

I shrugged. “I’m just not gonna have time. I’ll be in Year 13 in a few months, like, I’ve got so much work *all the time*, and Cambridge interview prep on top of that ... there’s no way I’d have time to draw something for every single weekly episode.”

Mum frowned. “I don’t understand. I thought you were really excited about this.”

“I *am*, like, it’s so amazing that they messaged me and thought my art was good, but ... I have to be realistic—”

“You know, opportunities like this don’t come around very often,” Mum said. “And you clearly want to do it.”

“Well, yeah, but ... I get so much homework every day, and coursework and revision will only get more intense—”

“I think you should do it.” Mum stared straight ahead and spun the steering wheel. “I think you work yourself too hard for school anyway and you should take an opportunity for once and do what you want.”

And what I wanted to do was this:

Direct Messages > **with Radio**

Hey!! Wow ... thank you so much, I can't believe you liked my art! I'd be absolutely honoured to get involved!

My email is touloser@gmail.com if it's easier to talk there. Can't wait to hear more about what you're thinking in terms of design!

Honestly, Universe City is my favourite series of all time. I can't thank you enough for thinking of me!!

Hope I don't sound too much like a crazy fan haha! xx

I ALWAYS WISHED I HAD A HOBBY

I had work to do when I got home. I almost always had work to do when I got home. I almost always *did* work when I got home because whenever I wasn't doing schoolwork I felt like I was wasting my time. I know this is kind of sad, and I always wished I had a hobby like football or playing the piano or ice-skating, but the fact of the matter was that the only thing I was good at was passing exams. Which was fine. I wasn't ungrateful. It'd be worse if it were the other way around.

That day, the day I got a Twitter message from the creator of *Universe City*, I didn't do any work when I got home.

I collapsed on to my bed and turned my laptop on and went straight on to my Tumblr, where I posted all of my art. I scrolled down the page. What exactly had the Creator seen in these? They were all crap. Doodles I did to

turn my brain off, so I could fall asleep and forget about history essays and art coursework and head girl speeches for five minutes.

I switched over to Twitter to see if the Creator had replied, but they hadn't. I checked my email to see if they'd emailed me, but they hadn't.

I loved *Universe City*.

Maybe that was my hobby. Drawing *Universe City*.

It didn't feel like a hobby. It felt like a dirty secret.

And my drawings were all pointless anyway. It wasn't like I could sell them. It wasn't like I could share them with my friends. It wasn't like they'd get me into Cambridge.

I continued scrolling down the page, back months and months and into last year and the year before, scrolling through time. I'd drawn everything.

I'd drawn the characters – the narrator Radio Silence, and Radio's various sidekicks. I'd drawn the setting – the dark and dusty sci-fi university,

Universe City. I'd drawn the villains and the weapons and the monsters,

Radio's lunar bike and Radio's suits, I'd drawn the Dark Blue Building and the Lonely Road and even February Friday. I'd drawn everything, really.

Why did I do this?

Why am I like this?

It was the only thing I enjoyed, really. The only thing I had apart from

my grades.

No – wait. That would be really sad. And weird.

It just helped me sleep.

Maybe.

I don't know.

I shut my laptop and went downstairs to get some food and tried to stop thinking about it.

A NORMAL TEENAGE GIRL

“Right then,” I said, as the car drew up outside Wetherspoon's at 9pm several days later. “I'm off to drink the alcohols, do lots of the drugs and have lots of the sex.”

“Oh,” Mum said, with her half-smile. “Well, then. My daughter's gone wild.”

“Actually this is my one hundred per cent real personality.” I opened the car door and skipped out on to the pavement with a cry of, “Don't worry about me dying!”

“Don't miss the last train!”

It was the last day of school before study leave and I was supposed to be going to this club in town, Johnny Richard's, with my friends. It was the first time I'd ever been to a club and I was essentially terrified, but I was on

the verge of being so uninvolved with our friendship group that if I hadn't gone, I thought they might stop considering me a 'main friend', and things would get too awkward for me to deal with on a daily basis. I couldn't imagine what awaited me besides drunk guys in pastel-coloured shirts, and Maya and Raine trying to make me awkwardly dance to Skrillex.

Mum drove away.

I crossed the street and peered through the door into Spoons. I could see my friends sitting in the far corner, drinking and laughing. They were all lovely people, but they made me nervous. They weren't mean to me or anything, they just saw me in a very particular way – School Frances, head girl, boring, nerdy, study machine. It's not like they were completely wrong, I guess.

I went to the bar and asked for a double vodka and lemonade. The bartender didn't ask for ID, even though I had a fake one just in case, which was surprising because most of the time I look approximately thirteen years old.

Then I walked towards my friends, barging through the packs of lads and pre-drinkers – more things that make me nervous.

Honestly, I need to stop being scared of being a normal teenage girl.

“What? Blowjobs?” Lorraine Sengupta, known to all as Raine, was sitting

next to me. “Not even worth it, mate. Boys are weak. They don’t even want to kiss you afterwards.”

Maya, the loudest person of the group and therefore the leader, had her elbows on the table and three empty glasses in front of her. “Oh, come *on*, they’re not all gonna be like that.”

“But a lot of them are, so I literally can’t be arsed. Not even worth the effort, tbh.”

Raine literally said the letters ‘tbh’. She didn’t seem to do it ironically and I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

This conversation was so irrelevant to my life that I had been pretending to text for the past ten minutes.

Radio hadn’t yet replied to my Twitter message or emailed me. It had been four days.

“Nah, I don’t believe in couples falling asleep in each other’s arms,” said Raine. They were talking about something else now. “I think it’s a mass-media lie.”

“Oh, hey, Daniel!”

Maya’s voice drew my attention away from my phone. Daniel Jun and Aled Last were walking past our table. Daniel was wearing a plain grey T-shirt and plain blue jeans. I’d never seen him wear anything patterned in the

year I'd known him. Aled looked just as plain, like Daniel had picked out his clothes.

Daniel glanced down and saw us and momentarily caught my eye before replying to Maya, "Hi, you all right?"

They struck up a conversation. Aled was silent, standing behind Daniel, and was hunched over, as if he were trying to make himself less visible. I caught his eye too, but he quickly looked away.

Raine leaned towards me while Daniel and the others were talking.

"Who's that white boy?" she murmured.

"Aled Last? He goes to the boys' school."

"Oh, Carys Last's twin brother?"

"Yeah."

"Weren't you friends with her back in the day?"

"Er ..."

I tried to figure out what to say.

"Sort of," I said. "We chatted on the train. Sometimes."

Raine was probably the person I talked to the most out of the group. She didn't tease me for being a massive nerd like everyone else did. If I'd acted more like myself, I think we'd have been pretty good friends, since we had a similar sense of humour. But she could pull off being cool and weird

because she wasn't head girl, and she had the right side of her hair shaved so no one was very surprised when she did something unusual.

Raine nodded. "Fair enough."

I watched as Aled took a sip of the drink he was holding and looked shiftily round the pub. He appeared to be deeply uncomfortable.

"Frances, are you ready for Johnny R's?" one of my friends was leaning over the table and looking at me with a shark-like grin.

As I said, my friends weren't horrible to me, but they did treat me like I'd had next to no major life experiences and was generally a massive study nerd.

Which was true, so fair enough.

"Er, yeah, I guess so," I said.

A pair of guys walked up to Aled and started talking to him. They were both tall and had an air of power about them, and I realised then that it was because the guy on the right – olive-skinned and a checked shirt – had been head boy for most of last year at the boys' school, and the guy on the left – stocky physique and an undercut – used to be the boys' school rugby captain. I'd seen them both give presentations when I attended a sixth-form open day at their school.

Aled smiled at them both – I hoped Aled had other friends apart from

Daniel. I tried to catch threads of their conversation: Aled said, “Yeah, Dan managed to persuade me this time!” and the head boy said, “Don’t feel like you have to stick around for Johnny’s if you don’t want to. I think we’re going home before then,” and he looked at the rugby captain who nodded in agreement and said, “Yeah, let us know if you need a lift, mate! I’ve got my car,” and to be honest I wished I could do the same, just go home when I wanted to, but I couldn’t, because I’m too scared to do what I want.

“It’s pretty grim,” said another of my friends, dragging my attention away.

“I feel bad!” said another. “Frances is so innocent! I feel like we’re corrupting you by dragging you to clubs and making you drink.”

“She deserves a night off studying though!”

“I want to see drunk Frances.”

“D’you think you’ll be a crier?”

“No, I think she’ll be a funny drunk. I think she’s got some secret personality we don’t know about.”

I didn’t know what to say.

Raine nudged me. “Don’t worry. If any disgusting guys come up to you, I’ll just accidentally spill my drink on them.”

Someone laughed. “She actually will. She’s done it before.”

I laughed too and wished I had the guts to say something funny, but I didn't because I wasn't a funny person when I was around them. I was just boring.

I downed what was left of my drink and looked around and wondered where Daniel and Aled had gone.

I felt a bit weird because Raine had brought up Carys and I always felt weird when people brought up Carys because I didn't like thinking about her.

Carys Last ran away from home when she was in Year 11 and I was in Year 10. Nobody knew why and nobody cared because she didn't have many friends. She didn't have any friends, really. Apart from me.

DIFFERENT CARRIAGES

I met Carys Last on the train to school when we were fifteen.

It was 7.14am and I was sitting in her seat.

She glanced down at me like a librarian looking down at someone over a tall desk. Her hair was platinum blonde and she had a full fringe so thick and long that you couldn't quite see her eyes. The sun silhouetted her like she was a heavenly apparition.

“Oh,” she said. “All right, my little train-compadre? You're sitting in my seat.”

That might sound like she was trying to be mean, but she genuinely wasn't.

It was weird. Like, we'd both seen each other loads of times. We both sat at the village station every morning, plus Aled, and were the last people to leave the train every evening. We'd done this since I started secondary school. But we'd never spoken. That's what people are like, I suppose.

Her voice was different to how I'd imagined. She had one of those posh London *Made in Chelsea* accents, but it was more charming than irritating, and she spoke slowly and softly as if she were slightly high. It's also worth noting that I was significantly smaller than her at this point. She looked like a majestic elf and I looked like a gremlin.

And I suddenly realised it was true. I was sitting in her seat. I had no idea why. I normally sat in an entirely different carriage.

"Oh, God, sorry, I'll move ..."

"What? Oh, no, I didn't mean *move*, wow, sorry. I must have sounded really rude." She sat down in the seat opposite me.

Carys Last didn't seem to smile, or feel the need to smile uncomfortably like I was doing. I was extremely impressed by this.

Aled wasn't with her. This didn't strike me as odd at the time. After this incident, I noticed that they sat in different carriages. That didn't strike me

as odd either. I didn't know him, so I didn't care.

"Don't you normally sit in the back carriage?" she asked me in the tone of a middle-aged businessman.

"Erm, yeah."

She raised her eyebrows at me.

"You live in the village, don't you?" she said.

"Yeah."

"Opposite me?"

"I think so."

Carys nodded. She kept an unnaturally straight face, which was weird because everyone I knew always tried so hard to smile at you all the time. Her composure made her look significantly older than she was and admirably classy.

She rested her hands on the table and I noticed that they had tiny burn scars all over them.

"I like your jumper," she said.

I was wearing a jumper that had a computer with a sad face on it underneath my school blazer.

I looked down because I'd forgotten what I was wearing. It was early January and it was freezing, which was why I was wearing an extra jumper

over my school jumper. This particular jumper was one of the many items of clothing that I bought but never wore around my friends because I thought they'd laugh at me. My personal fashion choices remained at home.

"D-do you?" I stammered, wondering if I'd misheard.

Carys chuckled. "Yes?"

"Thanks," I said, shaking my head slightly. I looked down at my hands, and then out the window. The train moved suddenly and we set off out of the village station.

"So why'd you sit in this carriage today?" she said.

I looked at her again, properly this time. Until this point she'd only ever been a girl with dyed blonde hair who sat at the other end of the village train station every morning. But now we were talking and here she was – she was wearing makeup even though she was still in lower school so it was against the Code of Conduct, she was large and soft and somehow powerful, how did she manage to be this nice but not smile at all? She looked like she could probably murder someone if she had to; she looked like she always knew exactly what she was doing. Somehow I knew this wouldn't be the only time we would ever talk. God, I didn't have a *clue* what was going to happen.

"I don't know," I said.

SOMEBODY IS LISTENING

Another hour passed before it was the acceptable time to move to Johnny R's, and I was trying to stay calm and trying not to Facebook message my mum and tell her to come pick me up because that would be lame. I knew I was lame, but no one else was supposed to know that.

We all stood up to head over to Johnny R's. I was feeling a bit light-headed and like I wasn't really controlling my legs, but I still heard Raine say, "This is nice," and point at my top, which was just a very plain chiffon shirt that I picked out because it looked like something Maya would wear. I almost completely forgot about Aled, but then as we were walking down the street, my phone started to ring. I took it out of my pocket and looked at the screen. Daniel Jun was calling me.

Daniel Jun had my number only because, being head boy and girl, we ran a lot of school events together. He'd never called me, and only texted me four or five times with mundane school-event-related things such as 'are you setting up the cake stand or am I' and 'you collect tickets at the door and I'll direct people in from the school gate'. This, added to the fact that Daniel disliked me, meant that I had no idea why he was calling me.

But I was drunk. So I answered the phone.

F: Hello?

Daniel: (muffled voices and loud dubstep)

F: Hello? Daniel?

D: Hello? (laughter) shut up shut up— *hello?*

F: Daniel? Why are you calling me?

D: (laughter) (more dubstep)

F: Daniel?

D: (hangs up)

I looked at my phone.

“Okay,” I said, out loud, but nobody heard me.

A group of lads barged past me, and my foot slid off the kerb and I was walking in the road. I didn’t want to be here. I needed to be doing work, revising essay questions, writing up some maths notes, rereading my message from Radio, drawing some sketch ideas for the videos – I had a mountain of stuff to do and being here was, to be honest, a complete waste of my time.

My phone rang again.

F: Daniel, I swear to god—

Aled: Frances? Is this Frances?

F: Aled?

A: Franceeeeeees! (dubstep)