

THE SECRET SUNSHINE PROJECT

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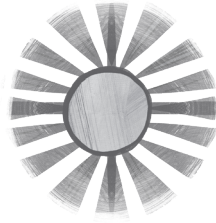
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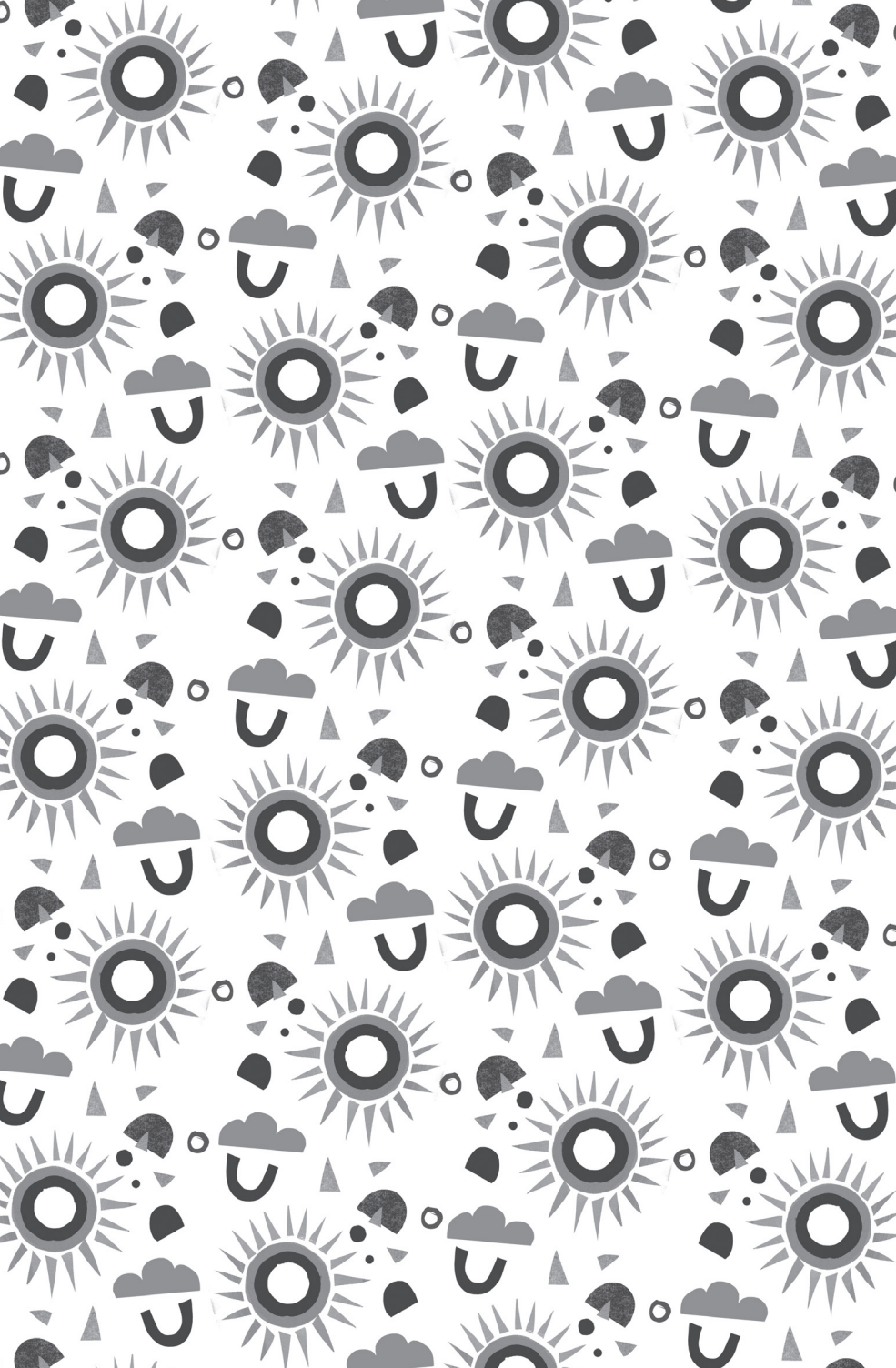
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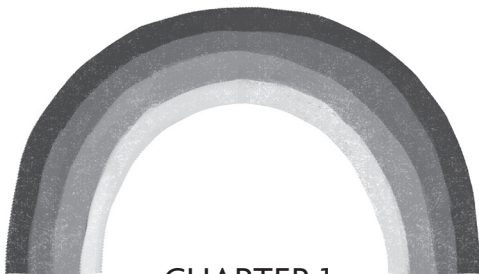
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*To Mum, Gran and Ellie, for always
bringing sunshine to my life.*





CHAPTER 1

THE COLOURS AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

So, before we get into this, there's one important thing I should tell you – I've been to the end of the rainbow. Okay, yeah, I know that sounds pretty unbelievable and you don't have any reason to trust me just yet, but it's true! Sure, according to scientists and, you know, clever people, the end of the rainbow doesn't *actually* exist. Everybody knows that, right? We've all tried searching for that magical pot of gold, but no matter how fast you run towards it, the rainbow never seems to get any closer. Apparently it's nothing more than an optical illusion, something that doesn't really exist at all.

Except it does. I know the end of the rainbow exists because I've been there myself and I didn't even have to go

that far to find it – it was just a quick trip on the Victoria line tube into central London. I don't think the scientists thought to look for it there, but it was right under their noses all along.

In fact, the end of the rainbow is all over the world, in little pockets of colour that appear for short periods of time, once a year, before they vanish again. People in the know travel to these special spots and celebrate their discovery with each other. It's a happy place. A place to feel safe and sound, and where you can somehow feel both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time.

Okay, I'm going to stop calling it the end of the rainbow and call it by its actual name now, so things don't get too confusing. This place is called Pride. I don't want to be biased, but Pride might just be my favourite place in the world (and I say that as someone who once went to Thorpe Park four times in a summer holiday). You see, Pride has a magic to it, something that you can't really explain or describe but that you need to *feel* to really understand it. Sure, that magic can't last for ever – I know that now after everything – but, even for just a moment, Pride can make people feel like they're not alone in the world.

My older sister, Riley, was one of those people. She's sixteen years old now but she knew she liked girls way before then. She didn't tell anyone, though – she kept it a secret. I'd noticed something was up – she's my big sister, and it's basically my job to notice. It wasn't like she was in a bad mood or anything; more that she just retreated into herself, like she was trying to keep something from us. If we asked what was wrong, Riley would shrug and mumble that it was nothing, or worse, she'd snap and tell us to leave her alone. But, when she was ready, she opened the door and let us inside.

'I think I like girls,' Riley blurted out over the dinner table one night. Her eyes widened as the words escaped out into the open, floating just out of reach so that they couldn't be taken back.

Mum and Dad looked surprised, but I think that was only because we'd been talking about how Mr Eddington at number seventy-two had started opening his curtains in just his underpants, and Mum was wondering how best to tell him to, you know, stop doing that.

'It's nothing to be embarrassed about, honey,' Mum said, reaching for Riley's hand, all thoughts of Mr Eddington and his underpants forgotten.

‘Nothing at all,’ Dad added, always Mum’s sidekick. ‘It doesn’t make you any different from anybody else.’

Mum mulled something over in the brief silence. I didn’t really know what I was meant to do in this situation, so I took the opportunity to nab the last roast potato from the middle of the table. I was fighting a battle with the ketchup lid (don’t frown – dipping roast potatoes in ketchup is the *only* way to eat them) when Mum turned to me.

‘Bea, will you give us a minute?’ she asked carefully. I thought that was unfair considering I hadn’t finished my dinner yet, and also because I didn’t want to be left out of the adults’ conversation. Riley wasn’t even technically an adult either!

I grumped and sulked and ended up sitting in the nook under the stairs, listening in to the hushed conversation going on without me. I didn’t really know what any of it meant. All I gathered was that Riley had a crush on a girl at school and Mum said it was a good thing that she felt comfortable enough to get it off her chest and talk to them about it. Mum’s always made it clear that we can talk to her and Dad about anything (although this wasn’t strictly true because when I confessed that it was

me who replaced the sugar with the salt, I got grounded for a week).

Once Riley had shaken the secret off, she was a lot more like herself. Nobody really talked about it for a week or so after, and to be honest, I'd forgotten all about it until Mum and Dad called us downstairs for A Talk. Those kinds of talks, where we'd find Mum and Dad at the kitchen table, were never good news. It was usually along the lines of, 'We're spring-cleaning the whole house this weekend so don't make any plans,' or something just as terrible. But this time it was different. They were sitting in the kitchen, a laptop between them, and that's when they told us about London Pride.

'We've been thinking about what you told us the other night and if there's anything we can do to make you feel comfortable,' Mum said to Riley. 'I can't believe we didn't think of it straight away – Rue talks non-stop about it every summer, and it just hit me that it's right on our doorstep. In fact, the next one is in two weeks' time!'

She picked up the laptop and spun it round so we could see what she was talking about. At the top of the screen were the words 'LONDON LGBTQ+ PRIDE'

in colourful bubble writing, and below were a ton of pictures bordered with rainbows and explosions of confetti. It was London as I'd never seen it before, brimming with colour like one of Mum's paintings.

'What is it?' I asked, my eyes feasting on the pictures.

'It's a sort of parade, I suppose, with marching and floats and music,' Dad said, his own dark eyes lighting up. I just knew he was thinking about embarrassing us with his dance moves. Even though he was somewhat uncoordinated, Dad loved to dance. It made Mum laugh. It made me and Riley groan.

Mum nodded. 'Rue and Travis go every year. They love it.' Rue was Mum's best friend from university, Travis was his husband, and I'd basically known them both for my entire life. The three of them were 'thick as thieves' according to Dad. They shared an art studio where they painted and gossiped, but Travis always said Mum and Rue did more of one than the other.

'What's LGBTQ?' I thought out loud, reading the bubble writing on the laptop screen and eyeing a picture of a woman who had decorated her wheelchair with rainbow-coloured streamers. She was waving a flag above her head and laughing.

‘Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer,’ Mum reeled off without hesitation. ‘Rue and Travis, for example – they’re gay and so they’re a part of that community. And now your sister is too.’ Mum gave Riley a squeeze and a smile. ‘So, that’s why I thought we could go.’

Riley’s mouth dropped open slightly. ‘We’re going to Pride?’ she half-whispered.

Dad grinned. ‘Yep. We figured it’d be good for you to be around other people who are a part of this community too. It looks like it’ll be a great day out for us all.’ He paused as he caught the expression on Riley’s face, which was frozen between more than one emotion. ‘That’s if you want to go ...’

Without another word, Riley shot up and wrapped her arms around Mum and Dad with a squeal. ‘Of *course* I want to go!’

And so it was settled. On a sunny weekend in July, we woke up early, put on something bright – I wore a T-shirt that said ‘My sister’s gay, get over it’ (a gift from Rue) – and jumped on the tube into central London. It was a day I’ll never forget, mostly because Riley insisted on snapping pictures of literally everything. From the moment we arrived, there were crowds of people everywhere, dressed

in every colour of the rainbow and wearing enough glitter and sparkle to cover all the pavements in the city. There were stalls selling rainbow flags and obviously there was lots of music too, with dancers and singers celebrating around every street corner. And, of course, there was the parade itself.

We managed to squeeze ourselves up against the barrier, penned in on all sides by people with smiles plastered on their faces as they craned their necks to catch glimpses of the floats and trucks sliding slowly past, with music blasting out and dancers twirling on board. On one float, a bunch of people wearing elaborate feathers that reached high above their heads blew whistles and danced in perfect unison. For a brief second, I thought I saw a kid, no older than me, in the middle of it all, his glasses perched on the end of his nose and a look of bewilderment etched on his face as he tried to keep up with the dance moves. But the feathers soon hid him from sight and I started to think it must've just been my imagination.

Each float was somehow more majestic than the last. Mum couldn't stop oohing and aahing at every wonder that passed by, and I knew she was taking mental notes for a new painting when we got home. Dad, meanwhile, was

particularly interested in a group of people wearing wigs which towered above their heads like a tiered cake. Their faces looked like Mum had painted them with one of her brushes, colour sweeping across cheekbones and eyelids in a flourish. Of course, as soon as Dad saw them dancing together, he decided this was his calling and hopped over the fence to join in with an array of moves I could only assume he was doing to purposefully embarrass me and Riley.

But it was my sister who was happiest of all. As we stood for hour after hour watching everything unfold in an eruption of cheers and celebration, Riley might've just been the happiest person in the world.

'Isn't it *great!*' she exclaimed later as we sat on the corner of a quiet street waiting for Mum and Dad to get us some water from the shop. It was that lull in a summer's day, where the sun has started to fall in the sky, bathing everything it touches in a golden light. The air was a little cooler, entwined with a lingering thrill of excitement, the possibility that another adventure was just around the corner, that the day wasn't over just yet.

'I don't want it to end,' Riley added dreamily, a vague smile warming her face.

‘I already want to do it all over again,’ I agreed. Like I said, it was even better than the thrill of Thorpe Park.

‘All these people here, they’re like me in a way. This whole place feels like . . . like home,’ Riley breathed in wonder. I looked up at my sister, my heart fluttering as I’m sure hers was too. That’s what London Pride was for my sister. It was home.

‘Colour?’ I asked, nudging her with my elbow.

You know those times when you can’t find the right words to describe a feeling? It can be right there, sitting in the pit of your stomach or pumping through your body so you feel light and dizzy, but you just can’t find the words in order to explain it to someone else? Well, Mum was always adamant that we should be able to talk about our feelings out loud.

‘Keeping them locked up inside is good for nobody,’ she’d say. So she would encourage us to think of a colour instead. It seemed a little silly at first, but then Mum showed us the swirls of paints on her palette and it actually made sense. Some colours are happier than others, or more vibrant and excited. Yellow, for example, or a light blue like the colour of a clear summer sky. Then there are the moody ones, like a dark purple that’s

almost black. If you ask me, that has to be the grumpiest colour of all.

Riley pondered the question, an even bigger smile stretching from ear to ear as she slung an arm around my shoulders. ‘All of them,’ she said. ‘I feel every single colour of the rainbow.’

That was last summer, before everything else happened and when Dad was still with us. He was ill for a little while. I knew it was serious because Mum and Dad sat us down to tell us about it together. There were a lot of tears and promises that Dad was a fighter, and if anybody could get better again it was him. And then one day, he was just gone. I didn’t understand how someone could be here one moment and then gone the next. In fact, I still don’t. I guess we just always had hope that everything would be okay in the end, a little fire burning in each of us that warmed our coldest thoughts and gave us light in the dark.

Everything since then has been sort of grey, colourless in a way. I suppose that’s why *Pride* is so special to me now – to all of us. It was our last day out together as a family, and the memory sits in my head, brimming with every colour of the rainbow. Colours we haven’t been able to capture since.

And I guess that's where our story starts. There were a lot of things that changed after Dad passed away, but one of the biggest changes of all was hiding just around the corner.