"AN INSTANT CLASSIC" EOIN COLFER

PHIL EARLE

NORTHERN SOUL



ONE GIRL

ZERO CHANCE

"*Northern Soul* is a beautiful ode to first love … Hilarious and touching. An instant classic – the teenage experience captured in words" ***EOIN COLFER***

"Delightfully, toe-curlingly cringe for any teen who's ever felt useless around their crush. Hilarious and heart-warming" ***HOLLY BOURNE***

"I absolutely loved it. It's so sweet, funny, relatable, well paced and original" ***SARAH CROSSAN***

"Warm, witty and wise; full of humour, heart and soul. It takes me right back to being a 14-year-old boy, with all the wonder and the horror of those years. Truthful and essential reading!" ***SF SAID***

"I've read pretty well every word Phil Earle has written, but this might just be my favourite of his books. So funny, so charming, so true. This is what it feels like to be a 14-year-old boy in love for the first time" ***ANTHONY McGOWAN***

"Charmingly awkward, angsty and very funny. *Northern Soul* will strike a chord with all of us who have embarrassed ourselves for love" ***JENNY PEARSON***

"A brilliantly funny and achingly real story that perfectly captures the life of a teenage boy in all of its awkward, cringy glory. I absolutely loved it!" ***SIMON JAMES GREEN***

“A joyous read!” ***LISA THOMPSON***

“Funny, sharp and full of the hilarious horrors of teenage life. No one can tell a story quite like Phil Earle” ***KATYA BALEN***

“I absolutely loved *Northern Soul* – snort-out-loud funny, heartfelt and mortifying in equal measure … It wears its heart on its sleeve, and the sleeve has ketchup stains on it” ***ROSS MONTGOMERY***

“Phil Earle’s hilarious first-love story is for everyone who’s ever dared to fall head over heels. Its note-perfect portrayal of discovering romance is guaranteed to make you laugh, cringe and cheer” ***KEITH GRAY***

“Let the brilliant Phil Earle take you on a trip inside the head of a teenage boy in this enlightening, original and oh-so-cringe tale of unrequited love … Prepare to squirm for Marv, cheer for Marv, and – most of all – enjoy a good laugh with Marv” ***LESLEY PARR***

“Told with such heart and humour, this is Phil at his best” ***ABI ELPHINSTONE***

“Awkward, tender and full of soul. A spin-the-bottle merry-go-round of a story” ***STEVEN CAMDEN***

“A tale of young love, dating disasters and the ghost of Otis Redding eating kebabs, this was excruciating and hilarious – and I never want to be a teenager again” ***ALASTAIR CHISHOLM***

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For my dear old marra, James Gooder –
Now you one are we …

Whilst some of the story that follows is made up, some of it, I'm afraid, is not.

Some of it happened to me … I'll let you guess which bits. Be kind …

CHAPTER 1

Before Carly Stonehouse, there were no girls.

Hang on, that's not true.

I do this kind of thing, you see. I make these big, daft statements without thinking. I mean, girls *existed*. Of course they did. I just didn't notice them.

For the first fourteen years of my life, I had other things on my mind. There was football. And mates. Well, there was Jimmy anyway, and he was the only mate I needed. Either he was in goal or I was.

We'd go to the cinema sometimes. And there was football, did I mention that? Life was simple. Happy.

Then Carly arrived and … well, bang. That was it. Game over.

I should have noticed Carly when she moved in on our street. I mean, the removal van was a giveaway, but what interest was that to me? A sofa and a microwave couldn't compare with slotting a penalty past Jimmy in the front yard. He was a goal up when the van drove past.

I didn't lay eyes on Carly till she walked into class a few days later. It was morning registration and, to be honest, I probably wasn't looking my best.

"This is Carly," Miss Atkinson said. "She's new to the area." Her words seemed to echo in my ears. For some reason, those boring eight words felt like a poem.

I swear the second Carly appeared I didn't just feel like a rug had been pulled from under my feet. The rug had been set on fire. With me still standing on it.

I started sweating. I stopped thinking about my fantasy-league football team. And there seemed to be music playing from hidden speakers somewhere in the classroom. But nobody else could hear it. Just me.

It wasn't gentle music. It wasn't someone picking softly on an acoustic guitar. It was a

fanfare. A choir belting out the greatest love song ever written at the top of their lungs.

"You all right, Marv?" Jimmy asked from beside me.

I replied, but I don't know what I said. I think I might have dribbled. I can't be sure.

"You look like you've dislocated your jaw," Jimmy said, grinning as he dug me in the ribs.

I jabbed him back. Jimmy raised his arm as if he was holding an imaginary handbag in the air.

"Oooooh," he said sarcastically.

I was in trouble. I couldn't stop looking at Carly, but I couldn't have told you why. My heart felt odd. It wasn't hammering, but it wasn't beating like it normally did. I swear it wasn't just living in my chest any more. I felt it in my head, my legs, my fingers – they throbbed.

Was I already out of my depth only a minute after laying eyes on her?

What do you think?

I've no idea what the rest of the day's lessons were about. Our science teacher could have told

us how to turn belly-button fluff into gold and my ears wouldn't have pricked up.

My mind and my eyes were elsewhere. I know that sounds weird, but I wasn't letching over Carly or staring without blinking. Well, maybe I was a bit, cos Jimmy noticed I was being odd.

"What is up with you?" Jimmy asked when we were halfway home.

"Nothing," I said. "What do you mean?"

"You haven't talked crap since school finished. Not even a fart has passed your lips. So what's up?"

"I told you, nothing," I repeated. "Just thinking about fantasy league. About the fact you're top and I'm not."

"Rubbish!" Jimmy replied. "I've been kicking your arse all season and you've still been talking crap."

I didn't know what to say, how to reply without lying. I mean, Jimmy and I didn't talk about girls. Why would we? But what if he'd worked them out already? What if Jimmy had a girlfriend and I didn't even know?

My head was starting to spin. I didn't know which way was up.

The only thing that saved me was that we reached the end of Jimmy's road.

"You coming back for a bit of *FIFA*?" he asked.

"Can't," I replied. "Homework." It was a crap answer as he knew we didn't have any.

"Oh, right," Jimmy said, frowning. "Speak later then."

"See ya," I replied, already lost in my head.

The walk home on my own should have done me good, given me a chance to clear my thoughts. But then I saw someone walking ahead on the other side of the road. The worst and best person it could have been – Carly.

I kept my distance, but my thoughts were so loud I was scared she'd be able to hear them. The other scary thing was that Carly seemed to be going my way. I turned right after her, then two more lefts and a final right, until we were standing on my street.

It was then that she spotted me, her face twisting into a look of confusion.

"You're in my form, aren't you?" Carly said. Her accent was northern too, but not from round here. Barnsley maybe. God, it sounded exotic.

"You aren't following me, are you?" she asked.

She didn't mean it in a serious way … I think. I swear there was a hint of a smile on her face, but it freaked me out anyway. My face flushed, my brain disconnected from my mouth and I seemed to lose all use of my limbs.

I said something. I don't know what. Her nose crinkled with confusion, and it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen in my life. I had to respond fast, with something witty – no, something hilarious or, at the very least, memorable. I heard my brain whir into action, searching the files for the right thing to say.

It took too long. Way too long.

Carly took a step backwards.

I panicked. I'm not going to lie. I panicked, and my brain stopped dead on the file that was open at that second. I felt my arm reach out and point. I swear blind I wasn't telling it to. Then my mouth opened. Again, I have no memory of telling it to do so.

"Home," I grunted as I pointed at our tatty terraced house. Not witty, hilarious or memorable. I couldn't have said anything duller. Or weirder. Until I spoke again.

Two words this time, instead of one. Twice the chance to impress her … or twice the chance to confirm I was a total arse.

"Marv's home," I said.

What was I thinking? Why was I talking in the third person? Only losers with huge egos did that. I didn't have one of those, but after hearing myself say it, I was DEFINITELY a loser.

"Oh, really?" Carly smiled. It was a sad smile – the kind you'd give to a three-legged donkey rather than the future father of your fifteen beautiful children. "So we're … neighbours," she went on.

And that was it. Carly turned and walked off.

I did not. My legs still weren't working, which was annoying, because it meant when she turned one last time, I was still staring at her. Like I was the man of her nightmares rather than her dreams.

I was out of my depth. I had to make Carly notice me. No, I'd done that already and then some. I had to make her *like* me. And that was going to be tricky. I reckoned I just might need a little bit of help.