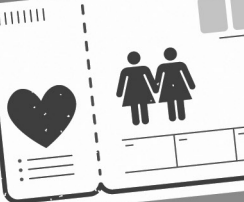


FINDING HERSELF.
FALLING IN LOVE.



GIRL



GIRL



LUCY SUTCLIFFE



SCHOLASTIC



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This book is dedicated to my Mum, my
Dad and my brother Laurie – for not only
encouraging me to think sideways, but also
back to front and upside down.



In times of sadness or distress, I have often sought comfort in the idea that the best is yet to come. To me, the “best” doesn’t have to be the glitz and the glamour of some star-studded, bright-lights premiere where I’d walk down the red carpet in a custom Vera Wang ballgown and everyone is screaming my name. The “best” can be a steaming hot cup of coffee early one November morning when it’s still dark outside and all I can see when I look up is the fluorescent amber glow of street lights against the slow rise of dawn. The best can be when I’m swimming in the sea against the current, the warm waves lapping at my face,

my heart pounding, adrenaline coursing through me, just breathing, floating, drifting. The best can be the way snow settles over a busy city; quietly, slowly, then all at once, covering the world in a bright white blanket of the same clean slate.

If you're sat here with this book in your hands and shaking your head sadly, convinced that nobody in the world cares about you, let me tell you this: they do. There are people in the world that will love and support you – no matter who you are. Even if the idea of being loved feels like it couldn't be further away from your grasp. Even if the thought of getting out of bed in the morning sometimes makes you feel sick. Even if your hands shake in public places and your voice wobbles when you speak to people you don't know. No matter your gender or sexuality – you will be loved. You are good enough. There are people in this world that are cheering you on as you round every corner and jump every hurdle, willing you forward, hoping you'll make it. You might not have met them just yet, but they're



there, I promise. You are not alone. And if you take only one thing from reading this book, let it be this: it gets better.

Luv
x





Once a year, during the summer term, our school headmaster Mr Walker would ceremoniously unlock the gates to the woodland area behind the playing field. There was a small clearing right in the middle, and Year 6 were allowed to eat there at lunchtimes.

Mr Walker was a vast, terrifying man with a booming voice and a huge belly which hung over his belt like an over-cooked muffin. A staunch Christian (it was a Church of England school), he would insist on eating his lunch with the Year 6 students to ensure they wouldn't be 'tempted by sin'. Whenever someone misbehaved in class, Mr

Walker looked them dead in the eyes and described what it was like in Hell for naughty children. I once overheard him telling my classmate Oliver that if he didn't stop talking, flames from the Eternal Fire would burn his mouth clean off. Oliver didn't speak for the rest of the day.

At lunchtimes, the woodland clearing would come alive with chatter and gossip. People would bring cards, or play ball games – one boy even used to bring up his guitar – but as soon as Mr Walker arrived, everyone would fall quiet. The Year 6 students would eat their sandwiches in silence, chewing anxiously, avoiding eye-contact.

I was sitting alone one break time, as I often did, perched by the gate under the huge willow tree, munching on my sandwiches (cheese with tomato ketchup – a winning combination for an eight-year-old). I envied the Year 6 students, with their brightly coloured lunchboxes and customized rucksacks. They seemed so effortlessly cool. I imagined sitting in the clearing with them, chatting and laughing

about the music they listened to and the TV shows they'd watched last night. I wondered what it would be like to be popular, with dozens and dozens of friends.

The boys in my year were playing football. They'd set up makeshift goalposts with their sweatshirts at each end of the field, and every now and then, someone would kick the ball and it would hit the pile of sweatshirts, sending them flying. A tirade of insults would follow. It was swelteringly hot, and everyone was irritable.

From my spot under the low-hanging branches, I watched as a rowdy debate between two boys got more and more heated.

"You didn't even try to save that one! I don't even know why you bother playing!"

"Uh, maybe because it's too hot to actually DO anything?"

"Oh, is it too hot for you? You absolute wimp. You're so *gay!*"

The school bell rang and everyone fell silent. Mr Walker emerged from the clearing with

a face like thunder, a tiny piece of ham sandwich dangling ominously from his chin. “My office, NOW,” he roared. The two boys froze.

I went to line up by the classroom door, absorbed by my thoughts. I’d never heard the word ‘gay’ before. It must be something truly horrible, judging by the way Mr Walker had reacted.

I turned to my friend Alexa and asked her if she knew.

“What, you don’t know what gay means?!” She laughed nervously. She clearly had no clue either.

A playground monitor, who had been sitting on a nearby bench immersed in a gossip magazine, looked up. “You kids don’t need to know,” she said, with a smirk.

We filed into the classroom. What *did* gay mean? Why did it make people behave so strangely? And why didn’t anyone want to tell me? I felt suddenly ashamed, as if just thinking about it was going to get me into trouble.



Later that evening, after school, I was sitting in the back garden playing with my guinea pigs when the doorbell rang.

I went to the door and peered through the peephole on my tiptoes. A boy from my school, Dom, was standing there. I was taken aback. Dom was one of the popular kids – all the girls in my class were crazy about him. So what was he doing here? I looked through the peephole again. He was wearing bright green wellies and had his arms folded. He looked very serious.

I opened the door cautiously. “Hi?”

He said nothing. We stood there awkwardly, staring at each other. After a long, long silence, he suddenly blurted out, “So, do you want to be my girlfriend?”

I laughed, out of shock more than anything. “Erm . . . no thanks.”

“Why not? Come on, you know you want to.”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

My dad popped his head around the kitchen door. “What’s going on?”

Neither Dom nor I said anything for a moment.

“You should probably go,” I said with a nervous laugh. “I’m cleaning my room, so I’m a bit busy.”

“You’re not cleaning your room, liar. I’m not leaving until you say yes.”

My dad came striding down the hallway. “I’m pretty sure she said no,” he said, glaring.

Dom glared back.

Dad shut the door firmly in Dom’s face, then turned to me with a sympathetic smile. “Don’t ever let someone make you do something you don’t want to do.”

My mind was reeling. Dom had made me feel so uncomfortable, but I still felt vaguely embarrassed, and almost apologetic, that I had turned him down. Had I hurt his feelings? Would he ever want to talk to me again? I couldn’t help feeling guilty.

I spent the next day at school trying to avoid Dom at all costs. I didn’t see him all morning and hid in the library at lunchtime, worried that I’d bump into him on the playground. But



when English class rolled around that afternoon, he plonked himself down at a table right in front of mine. I shrunk into my chair and pretended to be immersed in the book I was reading.

I felt so uncomfortable. Was he going to say something to me, or would I have to avoid him for ever? I began to question why I wasn't interested in him, when most of the other girls in my class clearly were. Come to think of it, they were *all* boy crazy. So why wasn't I? He wasn't bad looking, and he seemed to have an OK personality. Was there something wrong with me?

Suddenly I felt angry. *That could have been your only chance to fall in love, and you just blew it*, I thought to myself. I stared at the back of Dom's head, trying to figure out what it would be like to kiss him. Maybe it would be like in the movies, with a sunset behind us and a dramatic soundtrack to match. *Still gross*, I thought, shuddering.

As I fell asleep that night, I told myself that love would come again – and that next time, I would be prepared. I had read about love in *Little*

Women – it wasn't supposed to come easily, that was the whole point. Jo rejects Laurie because she prefers Professor Bhaer. All I had to do was wait for my Professor Bhaer.

After all, love is something rare; something not to be rushed.



Growing up, I was boundlessly optimistic. Just as I was sure that I would fall in love some day, I was also sure that I would find true friendship, with people that ‘got’ me. The real me.

The first encounter that I remember with bullies outside of books was when I was five.

My parents’ busy work schedules meant they didn’t have time to do the school run, so every morning, my mum dropped me off at the childminder’s house. Here, to take my mind off how much I missed them, I retreated into my imagination. I devoured book after book, immersing myself in the worlds of Enid Blyton,

Jacqueline Wilson, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling and Roald Dahl (I was an unusually quick reader!), surrounding myself with characters and places that only existed between the pages in my hands. To me, these worlds were as real as the one I lived in – they were just harder to see.

Once I'd finished a book, there wasn't much else for me to do. While my childminder was getting ready upstairs, I'd flick listlessly through the TV channels, or stare out of the window and count the cars that went by. For a while, this was my morning routine – that is, until I discovered something that changed my life.

I called it 'colour catching'.

Perched on the childminder's sofa, I would stare, unblinking, at the naked light bulb on the ceiling. As soon as I looked away, bright coloured blobs would appear in front of my eyes. Red and green splotches would float by lazily, followed by a scattering of bright pinks and yellows. It was my job to catch them using any means I could (a fishing net, a bucket, my hands), chasing them

across the room in gymnastic-style jumps from the sofa to the armchair, armchair to the table, table to the floor. I was convinced that I had magical eyes, a special power that no one else could know about.

One morning, having planned out the details of an extremely risky leap from the coffee table to the armchair, the living room door suddenly opened. A boy and a girl walked in, both a few years older than me.

“Lucy, this is James and Bethany, they’re brother and sister,” said the childminder, Christine, bustling in behind them. She looked up from her handbag and stopped. “What are you doing?”

I stood, frozen on the coffee table, knees bent, one foot up in the air, arms outstretched. Bethany sniggered loudly and raised an eyebrow.

“Weirdo,” muttered James.

Over the weeks that followed, I tried my best to befriend James and Bethany, asking them about themselves and chatting away about my favourite topics – Harry Potter, mainly:

“You’re supposed to add fluxweed to the cauldron before knotgrass – and it *has* to be picked when there’s a full moon. . .”

“ . . . but I mean, if you think about it, Snape was just trying to *protect* Harry. . .”

But despite my best efforts, they seemed entirely disinterested. James in particular took a strong dislike to me, calling me names and throwing my things across the room when Christine wasn’t looking. I already knew mean people existed, of course – my books had warned me about the White Witches and Voldemorts of the world – but meeting them in real life was a shock. I’d lived in a bubble where everyone was friendly – and James and Bethany had burst it.

It took me a long time to realize that me being myself was both the solution and the problem. James couldn’t see into my world of colour-catching, witches, and fire-breathing dragons. He didn’t understand it, so he felt threatened – and lashed out.

Primary school wasn't much better. I struggled to fit in amongst the sports fanatics and maths whizzes, choosing instead to sit in the library and read or write stories at lunchtimes. Most of my classes were just about bearable, with the exception of PE – the one lesson I despised. I was embarrassingly bad at anything involving hand-eye coordination, so being picked last for teams became almost routine. Even the teachers would sigh and shrug their shoulders as I failed to catch the umpteenth ball thrown in my direction.

The only lesson I truly enjoyed was English, with Mrs Robinson – my favourite teacher. She was kind but firm, with endless patience and a knack for boosting self-confidence in even the shyest of children. She told me I had a wonderful imagination and a talent for story writing, and she was one of the only teachers who ever made me feel like I might be good at something.

But despite Mrs Robinson's encouragement, I was becoming increasingly lonely. My best friend Rachel went to a different school so I could only

see her at weekends, my little brother Laurie was too young for my games, and my pen pal, Ashley, lived an ocean away in New York. My activities were solitary. I started cycling, riding my rickety pink bike around my street in circles, my favourite doll, Katy, propped up in the wicker basket at the front. I'd sing as I pedalled – usually classics from my favourite films. “Hooooow do you soooolve a problem like Mariaaa?” I'd bellow at the top of my lungs. Goodness knows what the neighbours must have thought.

One afternoon, some girls who lived on my street decided it would be funny to run away whenever they saw me. “She's coming!” they screamed as they rushed to hide behind a wall, laughing at me as I whooshed past. I pretended not to hear them, chatting loudly to Katy about the weather and looking pointedly in the other direction.

I thought it was strange that they didn't want to join in. I assumed it was because they had other interests, but in reality they probably just thought I was weird. I suppose I was, in a way – not many

kids my age wore wigs made out of string (more on this later!) or talked out loud to their dolls. But ‘changing to fit in’ had never once occurred to me. Perhaps it was the way I was brought up, or perhaps it was something more inherent – either way, it never crossed my mind. I was Lucy Sutcliffe, and they could take it or leave it.

My parents were my ultimate support system. Whenever I came home from school, feeling hurt by something someone had done or sad about a comment someone had made, my mum would pull me into a hug.

“Always respond with kindness, my love,” she would say with a sympathetic smile.

“Why should I? They’re horrible.”

“Because otherwise, they’ve won.”

I knew she was right.

As time went on, I became more and more engrossed in the make-believe worlds I was reading about in books and seeing on the television. I was quickly making my way through the entire children’s

section at my local library and was constantly begging the librarian to bring in more books. I lived for Anne Shirley's adventures in Avonlea. I longed to have Pippi Longstocking as a best friend. Pollyanna's everlasting optimism propelled me forwards on my loneliest days. And although I was still young, I knew that the strong female leads I was reading about were the embodiment of what it meant to be your own person. Through them I imagined a better, bigger, braver me: self-assured, loud and inspiring, unashamedly myself. Imaginary Lucy didn't care about mean people – she had more important things to do.

My most prized possession during these years was a video camera that my family had given me for my birthday. My friend Rachel and I spent countless weekends writing and filming our own silly little skits and spoofs. Here I *could* be loud. I *was* brave. We'd craft slapdash costumes out of blankets and clothes pegs, then walk through the village dressed as our characters – scullery maids, TV presenters, and, more than once, Simon Cowell

in drag – trying to keep a straight face as we made eye contact with passers-by.

We spent hours working on our scripts, sitting cooped up in my room stuffing Thorntons toffee into our faces, using a thesaurus to pick out the most obscure words we could possibly find.

“I need another word for ‘walk.’”

“What’s the sentence?”

“They walk to the shops.”

“OK, how about ambulate?” Rachel said, thumbing through the thesaurus.

“They AMBULATE to the shops?!”

“Oh no, wait, I’ve found a good one. Toddle. They can toddle to the shops.”

We fell about laughing.

Then came the bit I loved best: editing the films on Rachel’s ancient PC. I was used to storytelling the old-fashioned way, with words on a page and a pen in my hand, but telling a story visually, with film clips and sound effects, was even more exciting. My dad, who made animations for a living, showed me how it worked step by step. I loved every second

of it, and I decided right then and there that video editing was a job I would love to have some day.

I dreamt endlessly about the future, and turned my fantasies into art through short stories and screenplays, encouraged by the support from my parents, Mrs Robinson, and Rachel. I pictured myself as a top-level film editor, cutting together video clips at the speed of light. I imagined what my edit suite would be like; a state-of-the-art studio tucked away in the Hollywood Hills, with shelf after shelf jam-packed full of Oscars. I thought about my co-workers' faces when they saw what I could do; awe-struck and inspired, impressed by my talents, clapping and whooping as I loaded up more reels of film, ready for round two. I knew it was possible if I put my mind to it. My imagination was telling me to hold on, so that's exactly what I did.

Besides – why listen to the Jameses and Bethanys of the world, when you could listen to the Rachels and Mrs Robinsons?



I was five when the first Harry Potter book came out, and Hermione Granger became my hero overnight. She was everything I wanted to be – smart, logical, independent, and true to herself. I used Hermione’s quiet determination as my inspiration; I knew I could be just as powerful as her.

I read all the books myself, but insisted that my dad read them aloud to me at bedtimes, too. He never failed to make me smile, acting out certain scenes in an overly-dramatic fashion, doing all the different voices and ad-libbing here and there. He made me laugh until I was clutching at my sides,

tears rolling down my cheeks. In the mornings, he would drizzle an 'H' for Hermione in golden syrup on top of my porridge. "Calling all witches and wizards," he'd shout up the stairs. "It's breakfast time!"

On days when I was worried or scared about something, I imagined how Hermione would deal with it. I knew she would never let something as irrelevant as anxiety stop her. Whenever I had a lesson to go to that I hated or was bad at, I pretended I was Hermione Granger, top of the class, and walked in with my head held high. Hermione got me through my most difficult days.

Rachel loved Harry Potter, too. We'd write our own spinoff stories and act out our favourite scenes together, but I'd always make her play Harry or Ron, even though she had Hermione's curly brown hair. I hoped she didn't mind.

When the first Harry Potter film finally came out, I fell madly in love with Emma Watson. I covered my wardrobe doors with my favourite posters of her, tearing them out of magazines and

newspapers, begging my mum to bring home any articles she found that had interviews with Emma in them. I remember thinking to myself that she was beautiful and wishing that I could look like her. At the time, I wasn't aware that my feelings for her might be more than admiration or envy.

I begged my parents to buy me some Gryffindor robes (I've since accepted that I'm more of a Hufflepuff) and fashioned a wand out of some twigs I found in the garden. Then, after saving up my pocket money for weeks on end, I bought some curly brown twine from the local garden centre. Armed with a pair of scissors and some Sellotape, I sat on the rug in my bedroom and carefully constructed an extravagant, multi-layered Hermione wig. I walked around town with it wrapped into my ponytail, swishing it proudly. I didn't care that people laughed. I was Hermione Granger, and I could conquer the world.



A few months before I turned twelve, I made a big decision. While everyone else in my class had chosen to go to the local secondary school, I decided to go to a different one. I would know absolutely nobody, but I had very little to lose – I had been so unhappy at primary school. Little did I know at the time, it would be the best leap of faith I ever took.

Just make friends. You have to make at least one, I thought to myself as I walked through the double doors on my first day.

I was petrified. As I entered the main hall, all I could see was a mass of other Year 7s in matching navy-blue school sweatshirts, babbling excitedly.

The hall, although quite big, had a cosy feel to it. Giant, oversized curtains hung majestically over the main stage, with the school crest placed proudly above it. The smell of freshly cooked food wafted in from the canteen.

I fiddled nervously with the bottom of my sweatshirt as I walked through the crowd, looking for a place to sit. I was getting more and more anxious with each passing minute. Everyone was in groups, chatting and getting to know each other.

My heart sank and a lump rose in my throat. I stood in the corner, biting my lip, not knowing what to do.

“Hello! What’s your name?” a voice from behind me asked.

I turned around and recognized Mr Nelson, the Head of Year. He was balding, with kind eyes and a knack for making people feel instantly at ease.

“I’m Lucy. Lucy Sutcliffe,” I whispered hoarsely, not even trying to hide my building anxiety.

“Ah!” said Mr Nelson brightly. “You’re from

outside of our school's catchment area. A newbie! Let me take you to meet the other girls who also came from different schools."

He took me firmly by the arm and led me to the other side of the room, where a group of three girls were sat in a circle on the floor – a small, dark-haired girl with a bright pink bag, a pale girl with vivid orange hair, and a taller, black-haired girl with a wide smile.

"This is Sophie, Kristine and Rebecca," he said. "Kristine has come all the way from the Philippines! Sophie and Rebecca are from primary schools in Oxford, so they don't know anybody else, either. You four are the bravest ones, coming here by yourselves – but don't tell the rest of your year group that I said that." He winked, then turned away with a cheery wave.

The three girls stared at me as I sat down. "I'm Lucy," I offered up, trying to be brave, swallowing the lump in my throat and placing my rucksack on the floor beside me.

"Nice to meet you," said Kristine, offering her

hand with a huge grin. I couldn't help but smile at the formality of the gesture. She saw me smiling and laughed. "In the Philippines, we greet everyone with a nice, firm handshake. It's tradition!" She beamed, clearly amused by the incredulous looks on our faces. I shook her hand, chuckling.

"I'm Rebecca, but you can call me Becci," whispered the smaller girl sat next to Kristine.

I noticed Becci's pencil case peeking out of her bag; it was bright pink with little photos of guinea pigs printed all over it. "Nice to meet you – I love your pencil case!" I exclaimed, pointing to her bag. "I have two guinea pigs at home, they're so cute."

Becci's face lit up. "Me too!"

"I have a dog, does that count?!" said the girl with bright orange hair. "I'm Sophie by the way!"

"No, I don't think dogs count," said Kristine seriously, trying not to laugh. Then her bottom lip began to twitch into a smile and we dissolved into giggles.

I got a sudden, almost overwhelming feeling of relief. *This is way easier than I anticipated*, I thought.



I felt like an entirely different person as I walked out of the school gates that day. Being thrust into a new environment where I was suddenly supported and liked by my peers made me realize that I had no reason to be anyone but myself. I loved what it felt like to be included and involved, without fear of being mocked or laughed at. My shy, timid personality was fading away, and a better, more confident me was appearing. I raised my hand more often and spoke up in debates and discussions. Slowly but surely, a part of me that had never been able to shine before – I liked to think of it as my inner Hermione – was beginning to emerge.