

"A witty, fresh new voice" – LEX CROUCHER

ANNA ZOE QUIRKE



SOMETHING
to be
PROUD *of*

PRAISE FOR SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF

“A sparkling debut about friendship, solidarity and the joy and heartache of queer teenhood, from Anna Zoe Quirke, a witty, fresh new voice in YA.”

Lex Croucher, author of *Gwen and Art are Not in Love*

“Full of passion and drama, with moments to make you laugh, gasp and even punch the air with satisfaction!

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Sophie Cameron, author of *Away with Words*

*To all the loves of my life – I'm so glad we're here together.
And to everyone who threw those first bricks, and anyone
still kicking up a rumpus today.*

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LONDON

CHAPTER ONE

IMOGEN

I have long been aware that I inhabit a world that was built neither by nor for people like me. What I was not aware of, however, was that sometimes highly necessary wake-up calls come in the form of drag queens in lilac wigs brandishing silk handkerchiefs at you.

I'm not doing too fantastically. I'm at a pride festival in the city (the very last one of the summer, but the first and only one I managed to convince my friends to attend with me). Ten minutes ago, a marching band began bellowing its obnoxiously loud 'music' without any warning (rude), while pop songs still played over the speakers so loudly that I felt them vibrating through my veins. Add on the small matter of approximately three thousand people all talking and laughing and shouting within a one-mile radius and, to put it succinctly, my autistic ass couldn't handle it. I forgot how to talk,

my brain doing the equivalent of a keyboard smash at even the vaguest threat of a coherent thought, and my supposed ‘friends’ Jen and Hannah left me alone in this random coffee shop, wearing my noise-cancelling headphones that, let me tell you, are not living up to their name.

This is where Auntie Septic finds me, offers me a literal silk handkerchief embroidered with *AS* to dry my glittery tears (and regular, non-glittery snot) and says, “Honey, if friends are people who leave you alone at a time like this, then I’m going to need Beyoncé to stop texting me because I want *none of that*, thank you.”

And, not for the first time – albeit definitely the first time the thought’s invoked by someone wearing a wig large enough and doused in enough hairspray to fit the actual *cast* of *Hairspray* inside it – I realise I need to shake things up.

“Are you going to be OK, sweetcheeks?” Auntie Septic says, blinking at me through vivid pink false lashes.

I nod, still not quite able to form words, and offer up a watery smile.

“That’s the spirit.” She pats me on the head. “I’ll maybe see you out there, but if I don’t, then good luck, and never forget to be fabulous, be gay and do crime.”

I manage a laugh for the first time all day, and she blows me a final kiss before strutting back out of the café to rejoin the hordes of people outside.

I pull out my phone and examine myself in the black screen. Stray curls of the thick mess I call my hair are stuck to my clammy face, with patchwork pink blotches scattered across my skin for good measure. Hot, I know.

I pipe some white noise into my headphones to stop my head pounding while I text my dad to come and get me. I'd wanted to come to my first pride event so badly I thought I could handle the crowds, but obviously I can't. Not like this, not on my own. I draw my Bi Pride flag tightly round my shoulders and wait for my disgruntled father to text me and tell me that he's going to miss some kind of sporting endeavour on TV but he's on his way. Hopefully, the crowds will have dispersed by then and my sensory overload will have dissipated enough for me to move from this chair.

As if mocking me, a loud roar comes from outside, some performance evidently having started, and a shiver twitches its way through my torso. I don't think I'm going to forget the sheer, all-encompassing panic that I experienced out there in a hurry.

Or the feeling of my bones contracting inside me, shrivelling against the noise and smell and the act of being jostled and shunted from side to side by a crowd that seemingly had the sole goal of crushing me.

Or, for that matter, how a thundering boom cracked in the electric air, interrupting the sonorous honking of the marching band and the thumping of

the speakers, and a confetti cannon erupted over the crowd sending scratchy shards of glitter shuddering down my back.

And I definitely won't forget how, when I grabbed Hannah and Jen's arms to get their attention, it wasn't only them that followed behind me through the crowd, but also their groaned words and loud complaints about missing the parade.

Watching a parade versus stopping their friend from exploding, actually physically exploding. Apparently, it wasn't the easy choice I thought it would be. But then I don't think like everyone else; that much is clear.



"I knew you wouldn't cope."

Dad's driving me home, windscreen wipers sweeping hypnotically across the glass. I feel a pang of guilty pleasure at the fact that Jen and Hannah will currently be getting soaked, their laboriously applied make-up running down their faces... All right, fine, so maybe I don't feel *that* guilty.

Dad flicks the windscreen wipers up another notch; they start flashing back and forth in a dizzying blur. "I'm missing the test match right now."

He should really be thanking me. I find cricket the dullest of the sports (which is saying something, given that golf exists).

"Sorry," I say, "but I didn't anticipate my friends

being assholes and abandoning me mid-meltdown.”

He frowns. “Language.”

“Sorry. *Twats*.”

“IMOGEN.” He stretches his neck from side to side; I flinch as I hear the bones click. “You shouldn’t have gone.”

“Great,” I say, staring out at all the red brake lights piercing the dismal grey of the dual carriageway. “That’s super helpful, thanks, Dad.”

His eyes flick upwards. “I’m just saying, if you knew your limits, then this would never have happened. It’s not your friends’ fault you had a meltdown.”

“It’s not mine either,” I say, festering in mounting irritation. “And why shouldn’t I be able to go to Pride and have a great time?” My voice grows in both volume and pitch. “It’s not like I’m the only neurodivergent queer person who exists.”

He sighs again. “You know, at some point, you’re just going to have to accept that you’re not going to be able to do some things like normal people.”

“NEUROTYPICAL, not ‘normal’.” I fold my arms tightly across my chest. “And no, I won’t *just accept that*. Nothing would ever change if people never got angry about things. But whatever, let’s just sit in awkward silence for the rest of the way home, shall we?”

His face flickers in annoyance once more, but he stays quiet until we pull into the driveway.

“You’re welcome, by the way,” he says, turning

the engine off. “For me picking you up.”

“Thanks,” I say, my voice sounding as flat as I feel.

I head into the house, barricade myself in my room with a chair, put on some sweet, sweet tunes, change into comfier clothes and grab my blanket. What a perfect end to the summer holidays. I don’t like transitions as a rule, they tend to make my back sweaty, but I’m kind of glad school starts again next week.

I throw myself down on to my bed. I’m so sick and tired of not being able to enjoy things just because they’re only designed to be enjoyed by one specific kind of person. I reach for my phone to change the music to something angstier but my hand falters, hovering in mid-air as I get a thought.

The very first Pride was a riot. People got mad at the ways they were being treated and then they did something about it. They threw those first bricks and demanded to be seen as who they are, no more, certainly no less. Maybe it’s time for me to start harnessing my rage in a more productive way too...

Ignoring my mum’s calls to come down for tea, I eat some flapjacks from my secret snack drawer while I draw up plans in my ‘gay agenda’ notebook: first thing Monday morning I’m going straight to the headteacher’s office to make a proposal.



I march to school twenty minutes early, burst into Ms Greenacre's office without knocking and announce my idea before she's even had the chance to tell me to take my denim jacket off and replace it with my school blazer (like she has done every other single day of my high-school career).

"I would like to start an activist society in school," I say.

Ms Greenacre takes a full ten seconds to compose herself. She was our head of year before she finally got her mitts on the headteacher position at the end of last term. She was probably hoping that being head would mean she'd have to see less of me, but unfortunately for her I have zero understanding of or respect for authoritarian hierarchies.

"Right," she says at last, straightening the lapels of her tweed jacket and carefully considering each word. "I'm not saying no, Imogen, but I'll need an idea of what kind of activism this group would be engaging in first. We can't have you throwing eggs at the police or vandalising property as acts of protest if you're going to be representing the school."

She has her *I'm trying hard to placate you, but I really don't understand you as a person* face on, but I'm not backing down.

"You shouldn't have given me the egg idea. Thanks, Ms Greenacre."

She inhales slowly through her nose.

"But," I bluster on before I hurt my cause any

further for the sake of poorly timed jokes, “I’m fully prepared to put it in writing that no one will engage in violent activities while they’re in the group, if that would help? It would only apply while they were in our sessions, though,” I add. “I’ll take no responsibility if somebody decides to shank someone off school premises; that’s their business.”

“That would be a start,” Ms Greenacre says, thankfully ignoring that last part. “How many members do you have so far?”

“Erm...” I haven’t exactly spoken to anyone else yet. I only started plotting a few days ago. “It’s just me as of right now, but I’m hopeful that plenty of people will want to join.”

“Well,” she says with an annoyingly knowing expression, “I’m sure you’re aware that all school societies need a minimum of five members in addition to a faculty supporter, so why don’t we put a pin in this conversation until it’s more immediately relevant?” She closes the notebook in front of her and smiles falsely up at me.

“All right.” I attempt to smile back with gritted teeth. “But if I get those five members and a teacher on board, it can go ahead?”

“Sure,” she says, already typing something on her computer. “Put your blazer on and have a good first day back, Miss Quinn.”

“I will.”

Oh, I most certainly will (the second part, at least).

She made a fatal mistake in underestimating me. I'm far too competitive to not do everything I can to wipe that smirk right off her face.

I walk out of Ms Greenacre's office into the corridor, where students are starting to gather round their lockers. I spot Hannah's blond ponytail and Jen's brunette one swishing from side to side behind their fake-smile-clad faces in front of me and try to change direction, but ... ugh. Too late. They beckon me over.

"Hey, girl!" Jen says. "We missed you this weekend!"

I see we're brushing right past the fact that they abandoned me and couldn't even be bothered to message and see how I was. They had plenty of time to post innumerable photos on Instagram with matching *Love is Love* captions, however.

"Isn't this exciting?" Hannah says, sticking her new timetable up on the back of her locker door. "We're in Year Twelve now. It's wild – we're like fully adults at this point."

"Oh, yeah. I can hardly contain my excitement – I may just burst. And then go open a pension account."

"Right!"

Jesus Christ. And they say it's autistic people who don't understand sarcasm.

Jen rolls her eyes at me. "Imogen was just joking, Han."

“Oh, I knew that,” Hannah says breezily. “I know what she’s like. Little Immy, our favourite ‘stand-up comedian.’” She puts that last part in air quotes. “So cute!” she says, flicking me on the arm.

Gross. I don’t want to be cute. I want to be terrifying. Less baby panda, more ticked-off grizzly bear.

“Our favourite *autistic* ‘stand-up comedian.’” Jen puts a hand on my arm, and I resist the urge to a) slap it away and b) slap her. “Because sure, those two things go hand in hand.”

She murmurs that last part under her breath and my stomach twists into a knot of rage. I know exactly what she’s implying: *You’re autistic, so you can’t be funny. Or: You’re autistic: you can’t possibly understand nuance and humour at a basic level, never mind at the level you need to make a career out of it. And probably: We were embarrassed by you and your freaky brain this weekend. So now, instead of actually telling you that, we’re just going to be even more passive-aggressive towards you than usual. C’pisce?*

Well, riddle me this, Jennifer – if I don’t understand nuance, then how do I know that you’re being an ableist twat right now?

“On that note, I’m going to head off,” I say as I spin on my heel.

“Where are you going?” Hannah calls after me.

“*Away*,” I toss back over my shoulder.

Maybe Auntie Septic was right – maybe having

no friends would be better than having terrible ones who abandon me when I need them and never seem to understand why the things they say upset me. But it's a scary thought. We've been friends since primary school – sure, maybe just because it was a small school with limited options – and the idea that, if I didn't have them, there would be no one to meet in the mornings or talk to at break doesn't exactly make me want to do a happy dance. Although I suppose that would mean that more of my attention could go to the activist group. I just need to find some people who aren't dickheads to join it first.

I'm heading down the corridor away from Hannah and Jen, flicking my fingers in and out of fists to try to make myself feel less antsy, when I see him straight ahead of me. Oliver Armstrong.

I tend to fixate on small details, so there are some facts that I know about Oliver Armstrong already. His dad is White British and his mum is Japanese – if I remember correctly from a horrible ice-breaker activity in a class aeons ago. He has a dimple, just the one, etched into his right cheek, a sweep of black hair with hints of warmer browns sneaking through in the light, and his smile is the kind that's equal parts teasing and affectionate. Although, curiously, today there seems to be something slightly forced about it, something strained about the way he's holding himself. And finally, as always, he's accompanied by a group – one star in a glittering constellation of friends.

I'm definitely not part of a constellation. I'm more of a meteor, something with too much momentum, something so threatening that you instantly feel you should move away from it. (RIP dinosaurs.)

Oliver would be an excellent founding member of the activist group. In addition to his constellation of friends who may want to join too, he's also the openly gay captain of the football team – a brave feat in this school (unfortunately). Maybe he'll want to join a society that's fighting for a better world for everyone.

I march up to him and tap him on the arm.

He swivels round from chatting to his group.

“Oliver Armstrong?”

“Um ... yes?”