

Praise for *A Flash Of Neon*

“My favourite of Cameron’s books to date with a brilliantly original premise, captivating plot and characters to fall in love with. It’s also a timely and urgent reminder of the power of the imagination, the beauty of difference, and the importance of protecting everyone’s stories from those who seek to silence and erase us.”

Simon James Green, author of *Boy Like Me*



“Sophie Cameron pushes the boundaries between reality and fantasy in this warm, relatable, page-turning story, full of sparky ideas and perfectly capturing the joys and awkwardness of teenage friendships.”

Sarah Hagger-Holt, author of *The Fights That Make Us*



“I’m completely in awe of Sophie Cameron’s ability to find new, original lenses through which to view being human. This is another fun and compelling story about the joys and perils of growing up. It’s fantasy made real and relatable.”

Nicola Penfold, author of *Where the World Turns Wild*



“A seamless blend of realism and the fantastical, written with Cameron’s signature wit, heart, and care, with an eye on the big questions: how do friendships work? What’s so important about imagination? Why are bookshops so vital? And, of course: is the Loch Ness Monster actually really real?”

Sinéad O’Hart, author of *The Time Tider*



“A wonderfully inventive story about the importance of imagination and the value of very real friendship. A lovely story about how we can all imagine the reality we want and then work hard to make it real.”

Anna Zoe Quirke, author of *Something to be Proud Of*



“Beautifully written and near impossible to put down ...
a love letter to storytelling in all forms.”

Netgalley review



“Full of fun, this is a lovely, inclusive read ... a story about relationships, not making assumptions about others and overcoming fear of failure.”

Netgalley review



“A great book showcasing creativity, imagination and the love of literacy.”

Netgalley review

*For Grace – thank you for always being my first
(and fastest) reader!*

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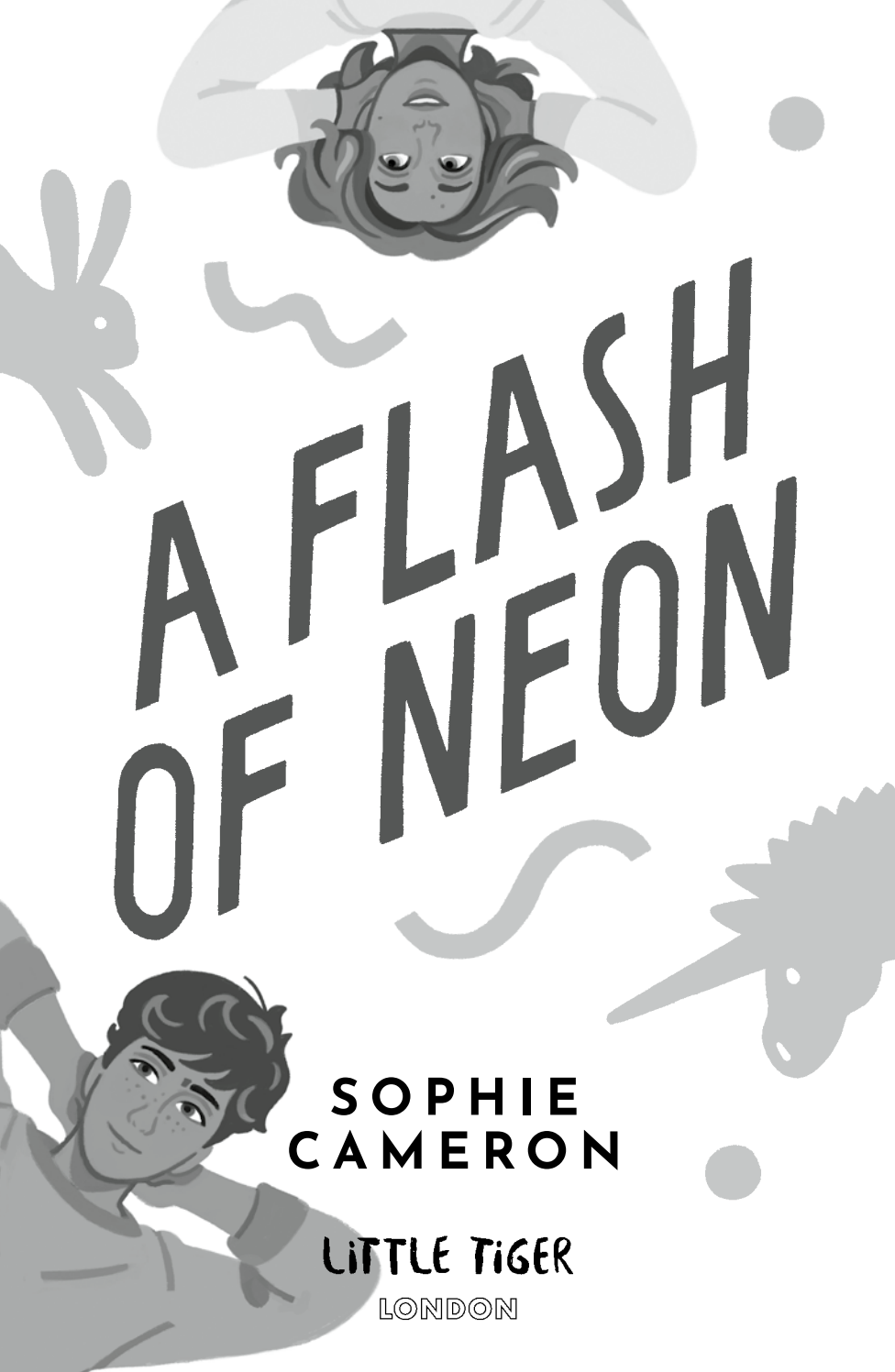
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A FLASH OF NEON

**SOPHIE
CAMERON**

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

One

Bookshops are full of stories, and not just on the pages. The customers tell them too. Sometimes, when I'm helping out in my mums' shop, I people-watch and get ideas for the novel I want to write one day. I'll see two strangers sneaking looks at each other over the cookbooks and imagine they're having their meet-cute moment while I rearrange the shelves. Someone will rush in, red-faced and out of breath, and I'll pretend they're a diamond thief who's decided to hide from the police in our children's section. I've always liked the idea of being part of some big, dramatic scene – even if it is as an unnamed face in the background – of playing a role in someone else's adventure.

But today my own big story begins.

Today is the day my best friend Neon is due to visit.

I sit behind the till and scroll through his profile on my phone while Mum sorts out a delivery of new books. Dozens of photos glide past: Neon's smiling, freckled face; his beloved dog, Cauliflower; books he's read and songs he's addicted to. The most recent posts are all from his trip to the UK. Last week, he and his mum flew from their home in New York City to London, where his uncle lives.

His page is currently full of photos of tourist spots like Buckingham Palace and Big Ben, plus photos of his uncle's cat and the squirrels in Hyde Park. (Neon loves animals – it's one of the things we have in common. I can't have a dog because one of my mums is allergic, but if I could I'd have a bichon frisé like Cauliflower.)

“Laurie?” Mum dumps a stack of hardbacks on to the counter. “How about you actually earn the money we're paying you instead of staring at your phone all day?”

I glance up from the screen. My mums' bookshop is called Every Book & Cranny, and for the past year I've been helping out here for a few hours at the weekend. As well as the people-watching opportunities, I love organising the window displays and writing recommendation cards after I've read a good book.

But today I'm too nervous to think about anything except Neon's arrival. After London, he'd planned a couple of days in Edinburgh with his mum before travelling up north on his own to see me. His train is due to arrive in Inverness about an hour from now. I try to imagine it: his dark curls bouncing as he steps on to the platform, the way he might tug on the straps of the purple backpack that he takes everywhere as he scans the station.

I still can't really picture it. Neon is like his name, loud and bright and colourful. He'd stand out a mile in my small Scottish town.

“Sorry.” I put my phone down on the counter. Mum is still glowering at me, so I spin round and tuck it behind the vase of flowers on the windowsill. “I'm back to being employee of the month now. Promise.”

My older brother Joel pokes his head out from behind

the non-fiction shelves. “Uh, excuse me. *I’m* employee of the month.”

“We’ve never picked an employee of the month, but if we did it would obviously be Gio,” Mum says, which is true – Gio is the bookshop manager, and the entire place would probably fall to pieces if he wasn’t there to run the show. “I’m counting on you two to help out while we’re away this week, though. Especially on Gio’s days off.”

Joel moves his hand up and down to gesture at his body. “Hello? I came all the way from St Andrews to do exactly that, even though I have about a million essays to write. But have I had a thank you from Mutti? One single *danke schön*? No.”

Mutti, our other mum, is an author. She has a new book coming out on Thursday, and tonight she’s flying down to London for a whole week of interviews and events. Usually she goes alone, but this time Mum is tagging along. She claims it’s to network and provide moral support, but I think she secretly wants a break to wander round galleries and drink overpriced coffee. Joel has come home from university for the week to help Gio out and make sure I don’t burn the house down, or whatever it is my parents think I’d do if I was left alone for a week.

That’s why I thought this would be the perfect time for Neon to visit. My mums are pretty relaxed, but I haven’t told them anything about our friendship. They wouldn’t understand.

“You’re a saint and a martyr, Joel.” Mum ruffles his dark brown hair. “Just don’t leave the door unlocked again and we’ll be fine.”

As Joel protests that he only did that *one* time, the bell

on the door tinkles and Mutti shuffles in wearing her favourite fuzzy red cardigan and holding a cup of coffee. ‘Mutti’ is the German word for ‘Mum’. Joel and I call her that because she’s originally from Munich, though she’s lived in Scotland for so long that she’s almost completely lost her accent.

“Morning,” she says, yawning. “Is it still morning?”

“It’s almost midday, so just.” Mum smiles but her words are clipped around the edges. “What time did you go to bed?”

“Three, I think? I fell asleep in the middle of editing.” Mutti edges on to the seat beside me and hugs me with her free arm. Her eyes light up at the stack of hardbacks on the counter. “Ooh, is that the new Ruth Ozeki? I didn’t think we’d get it in until next week.”

While she and Mum are distracted, I slip out from behind the counter with my phone, curl up in the cosy armchair in the children’s section and open Neon’s profile again. Our most recent comments to each other are below a video uploaded this morning, a short compilation of tourist spots around Edinburgh. *New favorite city*, the caption reads. (*Nah, second favorite. Nothing beats NYC.*) *Now heading north to go see Laurie!*

I replied a few minutes after it was posted: *So so SO excited!* followed by a dozen of the yellow hearts I use only for Neon. His response was a line of purple ones, the colour he saves for me. I wonder how many purple and yellow hearts have been sent between our accounts in the past six months. Probably millions. Usually my phone doesn’t go more than an hour without lighting up with a notification, apart from the seven or eight hours when the East Coast is asleep.

But since that photo there's been nothing. No new posts, no messages to me. Anyone looking at his profile could tell that's not like Neon. I bite the corner of my nail and refresh the page, as if that might make something pop up. Still nothing.

The bell on the door tinkles again. Mum looks up hopefully – we've only had a handful of customers since we opened two hours ago, and one was just looking for a bathroom. Her shoulders sink slightly when she sees who's arrived.

"Hi, girls. Laurie? Caitlin and Hannah are here."

My heart instantly drops at the sound of my friends' names. I stand up, the phone almost slipping from my hands, and hurry out from behind the shelves. Caitlin and Hannah are wearing matching denim jackets and they both have their hair up in high ponytails. They beam at me and Caitlin bounces on the balls of her feet.

"Today's the big day!" she says in a sing-song voice. "Are you excited?"

I widen my eyes to tell her to be quiet, then quickly usher her and Hannah outside, letting the door slam behind us. It's a cold Saturday morning in October, with only a few people wandering down the high street. The shop windows are thin, and Joel is nosy, so I drag Caitlin and Hannah away from the door and towards the Co-op.

"My parents don't know about Neon, remember?" I hiss.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot!" Caitlin clamps a hand to her forehead, but her smile still stretches right across her face. "I'm just excited for you! Are you nervous?"

"Yeah," I say, pushing my hair behind my ears. "I mean, a bit."

“Don’t you need to leave for the station soon?” Hannah checks the time on her phone. “His train is due in at around one thirty, right?”

I didn’t tell her or Caitlin that. They must have looked up the timetables, worked it out from the post on Neon’s account this morning. “Um, yeah, I think so. But I told Neon how to get here, what bus he needs to take...”

Caitlin looks scandalised. “Laurie, no! This is your big romantic reunion – you *have* to meet him off the train.”

My cheeks instantly go red. As I’ve told them a hundred times, there’s nothing romantic between me and Neon. “It’s not like that. He’s my friend.”

“Sure. If you say so.” Caitlin tries to wink at me, but it looks like she’s got a lash in her eye. “Don’t worry – we’ll come with you.”

“No, you don’t have to...”

“But we want to!” She crosses her arms, her expression suddenly serious. “Plus it’s safer. Isn’t that the number-one rule of meeting someone off the internet? You don’t go alone.”

“Neon isn’t exactly *off the internet*,” I say.

That’s another thing I’ve told Hannah and Caitlin multiple times – that Neon and I met in Brighton last summer, while he was on holiday and I was visiting some family friends with my mums.

“Still, better safe than sorry,” Hannah says. “I want to go to the shops anyway. I need some new mascara.”

“Let’s go, then. There’s a bus in ten minutes.” Caitlin peers past me and towards the bookshop. “Or maybe we could ask Joel for a lift?”

“No!”

The word is almost a shriek, but Caitlin's smile doesn't fade. A sickly feeling creeps into my stomach. Going to the station to pick Neon up with them is honestly the *last* thing I want to do, but I know Caitlin, and I know she's not going to back down now.

"Fine, we'll take the bus," I mutter. "I just need to get my money."

I trudge back to Every Book & Cranny, leaving Caitlin and Hannah outside – I can already sense the way they're grinning at each other behind my back. Inside the shop, Joel and Mutti are rearranging the fiction table to make room for the new arrivals while Mum is frowning at the computer by the till.

"What was all that about?" Joel asks, raising his eyebrows. "What did Caitlin mean by the big day?"

"Um, Lewis Capaldi has a new single coming out. She's a big fan." Joel thinks he's above listening to anything that makes it on to the charts, so I know that'll put an end to his questions. I lean on the counter and turn to Mum. "Is it all right if I go into town? And can I have my pay for this week now, please?"

Her face falls. "Your shift isn't over for another hour, Laurie."

Mutti waves a hand at Mum to say it's fine. "Let her go, Liv. It's quiet anyway."

"She needs to learn some responsibility!" Mum's expression turns stormy. "She won't be able to wander off whenever she likes when she has a real job."

"She's fourteen. She's got plenty of time to learn."

Mutti takes her wallet from her cardigan pocket and pulls out a couple of notes. Mum throws her hands up

and disappears into the storeroom, muttering something about “never listens” that could be about me or Mutti, or maybe both of us. I catch Joel’s eye, and he pulls a face. Our parents have been snapping at each other a lot lately. Whether we’re at home or in the shop, the atmosphere often feels like it’s about to shatter under a weight I don’t quite understand.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, trying to smooth over the tension. “I’ll stay and finish the shift. Caitlin and Hannah won’t mind.”

“No, it’s fine. Go.” Mutti hands me the money with a tight smile. “But be back at five so we can say goodbye before our flight, OK?”

I pocket the notes with a thank you, then shout bye to Mum and Joel and head outside. Caitlin and Hannah are waiting on the doorstep, both grinning widely. The nervous feeling in my stomach expands into full-blown nausea, and I mentally kick myself for ever telling them about Neon’s visit. This is one turn I did not want my story to take.

Two

The town where we live is a small, sleepy place on the banks of Loch Ness. The bus to Inverness only comes by once an hour and it's often late or early, and sometimes doesn't turn up at all. As Caitlin, Hannah and I hurry down the high street, I keep my fingers crossed that we've missed it, but unfortunately it's waiting patiently outside the fish-and-chip shop when we get to the stop.

I buy a return ticket with the money that Mutti gave me and reluctantly follow my friends upstairs. There's a parent with a toddler pretending to drive by the front window and a couple of older people dozing a few rows behind. Caitlin and Hannah sprawl out across the back seat, so I take the one in front and twist round to look at them.

"You *really* don't have to come to the train station with me. You can do your own thing and I'll meet up with you later."

"We told you, it's totally fine." Caitlin starts pulling her long dark hair into one of those messy buns that she does so well. "It's not every day your best friend comes to visit."

"American internet best friend," Hannah clarifies. "We're your real-life besties obviously."

Caitlin, Hannah and I have been friends since our first day of high school, when we all cracked up laughing at Caitlin's terrible attempt to draw a horse in Art. If our school was set up like a teen movie, they'd be the Popular Girls – they're both super pretty, and they both have older sisters who have shown them how to do their eyebrows and paint their nails. I'm not like that. My hair is dull and mousy, and my mums won't let me get it dyed until I'm sixteen. There are always spots on my cheeks and forehead, and no matter what I wear it never quite seems to fit right. Even after two years, I still can't really believe they want to be friends with me.

"Are you going to kiss him when you see him?" Hannah asks, cupping her face in her hands.

There's a kick of nerves in the bottom of my stomach. "I told you, it's not like that."

"Sure, sure." Caitlin grins. "I bet you're *dying* to kiss him again."

"You should do a slow-motion run across the station towards each other." Hannah makes a dramatic pumping motion with her arms. "It'd be so romantic."

Caitlin giggles. "Maybe he'll pick you up and carry you out, like in that film – the one with the guy in the white navy uniform, you know?"

They both start singing some cheesy ballad (Caitlin and Hannah go to musical-theatre classes together and are always bursting into song) but then a fourth-year boy who Hannah thinks is cute gets on the bus and distracts them. I mumble something about feeling sick, then turn round and stare out of the window as the bus lurches away from the pavement and down the high street.

Between the chippie and my parents' bookshop are several empty plots with To Let signs and boarded-up windows. Until last year, our little town attracted lots of tourists, but since the boats that sail down Loch Ness stopped coming here, the number of people visiting has dropped massively. Add that to the pandemic and we've lost two cafés, the newsagent, a toyshop and a jeweller. I know my mums are worried that Every Book & Cranny might be next.

But I don't want to think about that. The journey into Inverness takes twenty minutes and I spend most of them trying to come up with an excuse to stop Caitlin and Hannah from following me to the train station. When we get off the bus, I suggest that they wait in a café while I go and meet Neon.

"It might be a bit overwhelming for him, having all three of us there," I explain. "He's quite shy, so..."

Caitlin checks for traffic before striding across the road to the train station. "He doesn't sound shy. Not from what you've told us about him."

"We'll stand way back by the doors," Hannah says. "You won't even notice we're there."

"But I'm not sure he's even coming!" My eyes are starting to sting, and my voice is getting higher and higher. I come to a halt outside the station entrance. "Look, the truth is I – I haven't heard from him since he got on the train this morning. That's not like him. Maybe something happened. Some emergency."

"Like what?" Caitlin shrugs. "He's probably got no signal. It's always patchy on the train."

Hannah is starting to look uncomfortable. "How about

we...” she says, but Caitlin clicks her tongue, a sign that she’s losing patience.

“Oh, come on. We’re here now, aren’t we? Let’s *go*.”

She links her arm through mine and marches me into the station. A small crowd of people wait by the ticket barriers, checking their phones or gazing at the platforms. When I turn round to look at the departures board, praying for a delay – anything to give me a few more minutes to get Caitlin and Hannah out of here – a voice over the loudspeaker announces the arrival of the 13:34 service from Edinburgh Waverley. My stomach drops as a long train edges round the bend in the rails and approaches platform 2.

“Here we go!” Caitlin says, drumming her fingers on my arm. “The moment of truth.”

In a chorus of squeaks and wheezes, the train slowly rolls to the end of the track and comes to a stop. The doors slide open and people pour on to the platform: weary-looking parents dragging little kids and suitcases, students with backpacks and headphones in their ears, a large flock of older ladies chattering and rummaging in their handbags for their tickets. Caitlin stands on her tiptoes to try to spot Neon. After a few minutes, the torrent of travellers trickles down to a stream, but there’s no sign of a curly-haired boy with freckles and a birthmark above his eyebrow.

“I guess...” My mouth has gone dry and my hands are clammy. I take out my phone to check for notifications, though I already know there won’t be any. “I guess he’s not coming?”

“Maybe he got on the wrong train,” Caitlin says. “Why don’t you call him and ask?”

Hannah bites her lip. “Let’s just go to the shops or something. He’ll send you a message if he does turn up.”

“What do you mean *if*? Of course Neon’s going to turn up.” Caitlin looks at me. I can feel my cheeks getting redder and redder. “He *is* going to turn up, isn’t he, Laurie?”

She smiles the way a tiger might smile before it pounces on its prey. The sickly feeling spreads, travelling up my gut and into my throat. Here’s the thing: Caitlin and Hannah don’t believe Neon exists. I see the way they smirk at each other before they ask a question about him, the laughter in their voices every time they say his name. I don’t know why they came here today, but I know they never, not for a single second, expected him to actually get off the train. Maybe they wanted to find out what I would say when he didn’t, how I’d explain or excuse it. Maybe they wanted to embarrass me.

I open my mouth – whether to answer Caitlin or vomit all over the floor, I don’t know. Before I can do either, a voice shouts out across the train station.

“Laurie!”

We all spin round. There’s a boy running down the platform towards us, arms waving above his head, a purple rucksack bouncing against his back. He has curly brown hair, deep brown eyes in a freckly oval face and a birthmark shaped like France above his eyebrow. The sight of him is such a shock, I have to grip the ticket barrier for balance.

“N-Neon?” I whisper.

“Sorry! Couldn’t find my ticket.” He sounds exactly as I’d imagined with a New York accent just like in the movies. “I can’t believe I’m actually here! This is wild.”

He slips his ticket into the machine, and the barrier

opens to let him through. For a long moment, we all stare at him. He's wearing a *Star Wars* T-shirt that I always see advertised online and the pair of sustainably made trainers that I keep asking my parents for. Behind the freckles, his face is slightly pink from running.

"I didn't think—" Caitlin looks as stunned as I feel. "We didn't think – we thought you were—"

"Are you OK, Laurie?" Hannah puts her arm round me, then smiles at Neon. "I think she's actually speechless."

I can't even nod in response. This is unbelievable. And I don't mean that it's surprising or astonishing or any of the other ways that people use that word – I mean this is actually *impossible to believe*. I don't know whether I'm hallucinating, or trapped in a dream, or have been duped into appearing on one of those prank TV shows, but Neon Hart cannot be standing in front of me. He just can't. It can't be true.

Because Caitlin and Hannah were right: Neon doesn't exist.

I made him up.