

'I could smell my skin burn'

A freak accident left Sophie Lee with life-changing scars. She tells new that in some ways they've changed her life for the better

Sophie Lee, 28, has been on a journey of soul-searching and learning to rebuild as an "even better, more resilient and stronger version" of herself after her chest and face caught fire during a terrifying freak accident on stage. The traumatising experience caused permanent changes to her physical appearance and had a profound impact on her entire outlook on life.

It has taken a long time for Sophie – who is now a motivational speaker and has released a book, which includes a foreword by fellow burns survivor Katie Piper – to feel comfortable in her skin as she tells us exclusively about hitting rock bottom and the healing powers of resilience...

Dancing across the stage to the sounds of Camila Cabello, I took a swig of paraffin, then got set for my fire breathing finale. As the lyrics hit the crescendo, I blasted the liquid out of my mouth and on to the waiting flames, hearing an intake of breath from the crowd.

After five years of training and practise, my fire breathing routine was well-rehearsed, but suddenly I realised something felt very wrong. Instead of shooting away from me, the flames were engulfing my body, clinging to droplets of paraffin on my cheek, chin and chest. As I frantically hit at the flames to put them out, I could smell my skin and hair burning.

A LIFE CHANGED FOREVER

I was on fire for just 30 seconds, but it changed my life forever. Staggering off the stage, all I heard was white noise, then paramedics arrived and rushed me to hospital. By this time my throat had started to tighten and I was struggling to breathe.

My memory of the next few hours is blurred, but in the burns unit I recall seeing bits of my skin and hair fall away from my body, on to the bed. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I finally fell asleep and my parents were soon by my side.

I could barely see or speak, and, when I finally saw myself in the mirror, I just cried. My face looked red and swollen

and my hair was singed. I didn't feel like me – I felt hopeless and sick.

That month – April 2018 – nurses spent hours every day cleaning my wounds. They'd dress my burns with huge bandages, then wheel me back to my bed, where I would stay. My mental health became increasingly fragile and I felt little hope for the future.

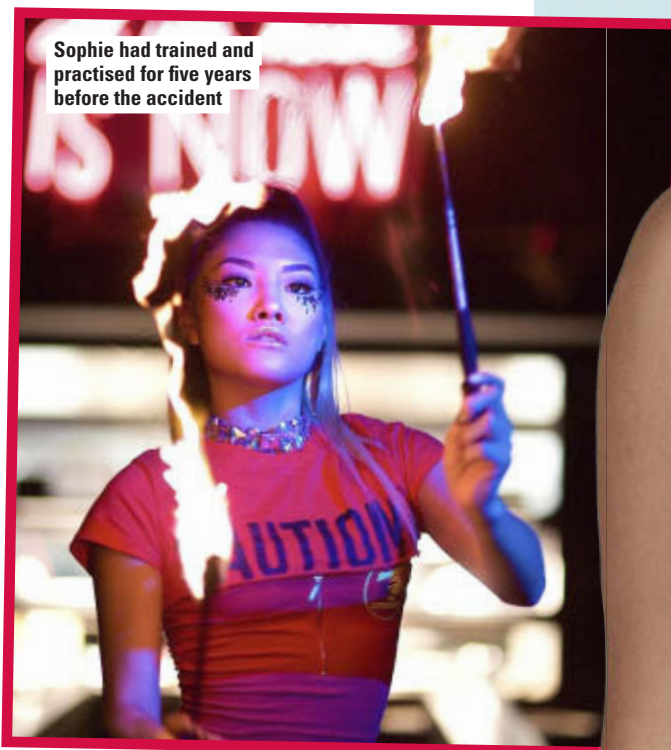
It was like going back to being a baby. As I was wheeled to have a bath, I thought the last time this happened I was two or three. It was demoralising. When I was eventually discharged, a month after my accident, I left hospital with my chin bandaged up and my chest dressed. I felt so self-conscious and wanted the ground to swallow me up, because I desperately didn't want to be different.

At school, I'd been bullied because of my Chinese heritage and I'd masked my internal scars by performing. Now I felt like the new life I'd built had been stripped away, and at 22 I no longer had my identity. I didn't look like me.

Things went downhill in June, when my scars started to get lumpy and bigger, before turning bright red and raw. To my despair a surgeon diagnosed me with keloid scars, a type of tumour that grows in areas of trauma. While they are benign, they would most likely be with me for life.

I was offered intralesional cryosurgery, a new treatment where they inject liquid nitrogen into the tumour to freeze it off. They hadn't done it

Sophie had trained and practised for five years before the accident



on such a large facial tumour before and I was terrified about what lay ahead.

Desperate for distraction before the surgery, I threw myself into the nightlife scene I was used to. But each time I came out of that party bubble, I fell back to reality with a bump.

A MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

The surgery was set for the end of March 2019, almost a year after my accident. When I came round after the four-hour op, I felt as though I couldn't breathe. I had heavy, blood-soaked bandages wrapped around my neck and I couldn't believe the pain I was in. But I was glad it was done.

As the tumour drained over the next few days, my bandages had to be changed every couple of hours. Recovery after that was slow, so I moved in with my parents for a while and gradually I became stronger.

The tumour began to dry out and one day a huge scab fell off my face. But it wasn't over. Doctors said the tumour needed more treatment. This time the lumps were treated with steroid injections, which was nothing compared to the surgery. Then they told me I'd need chemo injections to stop it growing back. The treatment made me



Keloid scars are a type of tumour that grows in areas of trauma



Surgery was lengthy and painful

nauseous and I felt so tired all the time. It was a huge relief when I was told at the end of last year that the injections could stop.

Six years on, I realise it's the mental scars of a physical trauma that really stick with you. The physical side is in the surgeon's hands. Picking yourself back up and finding self-belief is the hard part.

I suffered with a lot of depression and anxiety and at one point I was suicidal. I felt like no one is ever going to love me. In hindsight I realise I was suffering with post traumatic stress. I was offered a counsellor in hospital, but it didn't work for me. I needed to know how I was going to pick up the pieces myself.

If anything, going to that dark place and then dragging myself out of it is what rehabilitated me. And in time I learnt to love myself again.

Katie Piper contacted me when I was in hospital and when I recovered, I got involved with her charity. She's written the foreword for my book, *In My Skin*. It's a real pinch-me moment. She's always been an icon to me and I'm in awe of how she carried on after her attack. She's so down to earth, so real. We need more of that.

Not everyone is so supportive. After my accident, the trolling was crazy. One Halloween, someone said, "Are you going to be Freddy Krueger this year?" Now I give talks in schools because I want kids to think twice about bullying someone over their appearance.

My experience has taught me patience, empathy and the real value of life. Now I want to help other young girls realise being yourself is your greatest power. If you try to be like everyone else, you lose yourself.

Be wild. Be weird. Be yourself. It's the most beautiful thing about you.

ALI GRAVES & ANNA BAILEY

In My Skin: Learning To Love Your Perfectly Imperfect Life by Sophie Lee is out in hardback now (£16.99, SPCK Publishing). For confidential support, call Samaritans on 116 123 or see samaritans.org



Have a story to tell? Email us at truelife@reachplc.com

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Sophie Lee, Katie Piper, Ellie Goldstein and Livi Deane