

PROLOGUE

Monday 22 August

I can hear Dad's footsteps as he paces the living room floor. Mum is crying. The sound is making my insides twist into a knot. I managed to block it out for a while by listening to some music, but now the battery on my phone is dead. A part of me wants to scream. Or hurl. Or lie down and fall asleep and wake up in the past. But I can't let myself think like that. I have to be strong. I can't be a burden. I can't be another thing to cry about.

Emma is slouching on my unmade sofa bed, using my pencil case as a chew toy and happily drooling all over my sheets. I envy her. She has no clue what her two-year-old eyes just witnessed. I wish I was a toddler and oblivious to everything that is happening – oblivious to how our world is falling apart in the most horrendous, unimaginable way possible.

The sky over Canary Wharf is quietly overcast. It's as if the heavens know they should look sad. As if they are overseeing a funeral. Clouds envelop the skyscrapers of London's swanky financial district. The glass, the

concrete, the steel – the sharp, clean lines – are softened by the fog. From my bedroom I can see the building where Mum works – or used to work. Usually, the light in the windows makes the area look like a forest of brightly lit Christmas trees. Now the skyscrapers look more like skeletons of the ghosts of Christmas past.

Mum's crying is dying down, the heavy sobs slowing into whimpers and then fading to nothing. Suddenly, I find myself wishing that she wouldn't stop. The events of the past weeks have taught me that the one thing worse than the sound of someone sobbing their eyes out is silence. Of everything that could get under your skin – the screaming, the crying, all the futile begging for mercy – it's the piercing sound of nothing that makes me feel as if I'm losing my mind. Because when everything goes silent, the voices in your head grow louder. The questions are deafening: Why are they here? What do they want? Are we – am I – going to die?

Until this evening, I had hope; I believed that something could be done. Things wouldn't always be this way. But now ... I don't know ... I'm already beginning to forget how things used to be. I'm beginning to forget that things used to be any different at all.

The electricity has been out for hours. Dark shadows twitch in the candlelight, looking like dead souls trying desperately to fight their way back to life.

No one has any answers to the questions that the silence arouses. No one knows why. No one knows what will

happen. The only thing I know for sure is this: There is nothing I can do except wait for my turn.

They took my brother. My brother is gone. So is Matilda. I think I might be next.

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A week earlier

I'd just finished a small bowl of cereal – the chocolate kind that I was only allowed as a treat at the weekend. Afterwards, Mum asked me to go and wake Andrew, my chronically tired older brother who would sleep for months if no one intervened. When I burst into his bedroom he growled at me like a hibernating bear being disturbed in the middle of winter. I picked up his dirty socks from the floor and threw them at his head. He dragged himself, half-asleep, into the kitchen.

The electricity was on – it was becoming a less frequent occurrence – so I went to my room, closed the door and opened my laptop. I couldn't wait to see if Matilda was online. Or Anita – although I knew she probably wouldn't be. She hadn't been for a while, but I would not allow myself to imagine the worst.

All of a sudden, Mum began shouting.

'I can't believe you did that! How could you? You weren't supposed to finish all of it!'

I crept along the hallway to the kitchen.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Andrew looked up at Mum,

bewilderment in his sleepy eyes. An empty cereal bowl was on the table in front of him.

‘There’s no more now,’ Mum continued, her voice screechy and hysterical. ‘There’s no more bloody cereal.’

Dad came rushing past from the bathroom, leaving a trail of newspaper sheets behind him as his week-old copy of the Guardian gradually fell apart.

Andrew stayed silent and ran his fingers awkwardly through his ash-blond hair while Mum kept on howling at him. His usually sleek, side-swept fringe was sticking up in the air like a horn protruding from his head. Finally, a wave of recognition flickered across Andrew’s face. For a brief moment I could see he was frightened. He had realised what he had done. But just as swiftly, the corners of his mouth turned down, his sea-green eyes did their roll of indignation and his expression turned hard and sulky.

Mum started crying then. So did Emma, who was sitting in her highchair, playing with spoons. The dummy fell out of her mouth.

I covered my ears. There is nothing like the sound of babies crying. It’s like having a screwdriver thrust into your brain; the high-pitched noise is at a frequency only dogs should be able to hear.

‘What’s happened?’ Dad shouted over the clamour, still doing up his trousers.

‘The box,’ Mum sobbed. She pointed at the packet of chocolate cereal. ‘The whole thing is empty.’

The little that was left of Dad’s paper dropped to the floor.

The muscles in his neck, which had looked as if they might burst out from under his skin at any moment, slackened, and his clamped lips parted in relief.

I knew what he was thinking. Sure, this was bad. But it could have been something so much worse.

Dad wrapped his arms around Mum and stroked her hair. 'It will be all right, Di,' he said, giving Andrew an apologetic hint of a smile over his shoulder.

Andrew wouldn't look at him.

'We'll figure something out.'

Without meeting anyone's eyes, Andrew got up and went back to his room. I noted that he didn't slam the door as he usually did when he'd been told off by one of our parents.

I knew I should have been angry at Andrew, but I just felt sorry for him. He didn't mean anything by it. He had just momentarily forgotten. I had read online that it was practically scientifically proven that the male of the species was not in full control of his brain. Especially sixteen-year-old boys. Lately, the reason Andrew acted stupidly seemed to be down to the one thing that took up all the space in his head: girls. So it wasn't his fault. I left the kitchen and headed back to my room.

Once she had calmed down, Mum invited herself in and sat at the foot of the bed.

'God, Amy, you shouldn't have had to see that,' she said, blushing through her foundation. 'I'm so sorry. I hope you know that at times such as these, it's okay to feel a little crazy, especially given the circumstances.' She hesitated. 'You can have a cry if you want to.'

'Mum!' I snapped. 'I'm fourteen, not four.'

She narrowed her lips, forming a hurtful pout. 'So? Crying at any age is allowed. It's not healthy to be so closed about everything that's happening.'

'I'm not going to cry.' *Or at least not in front of anyone*, I thought, but kept that to myself.

She sighed in that universal Mum-knows-best-why-can't-you-just-do-as-I-say way that always drove me mad. 'Let's just talk then. How are you feeling?'

I didn't have time for this. I needed to get on the computer before the electricity cut out again. And I certainly wasn't in the mood for one of her amateur psychoanalysis sessions. But I knew from experience the only way to get her out of my room was to 'share'.

'I'm a bit upset actually,' I said, hunching my shoulders for effect. I swear she wriggled as if she'd just won the lottery or something.

'Okay, go on,' she said, obviously trying hard not to sound too happy about it.

'I sent Matilda an email this morning about a pair of shoes I found online that I thought she might like.'

She was nodding far too enthusiastically, like the dog in that annoying car insurance advert.

'The S key on my laptop has been a bit dodgy ever since Emma and the apple-juice spillage incident ...'

'Go on.'

I didn't realise until after I'd pressed send that the subject of the email wasn't the innocent fashion tip I'd meant, but an

inappropriate proposition. It said: “hoes with your name on them”.’

I knew that emotional turmoil caused by a keyboard wasn't what Mum was after. I knew I should have told her about my recurring nightmare about drowning in a big, black sea of muddy water; about how I woke up in the night, drenched in sweat, feeling as if the darkness was a big black pillow that someone – I didn't know who – was using to suffocate me. But somehow I couldn't put those things into words.

Mum was very understanding about my plight. She told me about a time she'd sent her boss at the bank a text which, thanks to the autocorrect function on her phone, said, 'Will get cracking on the raccoon as soon as I'm finished with the thong I'm working on.' She'd meant to say she would get cracking on the report as soon as she'd finished with the thing she was working on – although a place that made thongs from the skins of dead raccoons would have made so much more sense to me than Mum's 'Department of Symmetrical Hedging and Collateralised Debt Obligations'.

I thought I'd managed to sidetrack Mum regarding the issue of 'feelings' when she got up off my bed and headed towards the door. I'd already done a victory lap in my head when she stopped and turned around.

'Oh, Amy.' She was standing in the doorway. 'You're just like your father! The two of you always keep things all bottled up.'

I felt my chest deflate. I just wanted to go on the computer and check whether Matilda was online. I couldn't understand why she wasn't. Where else could she be? I hoped she hadn't

done a permanent vanishing act from the internet like Anita seemed to have done.

'I have an idea,' Mum said.

I wanted to shout, 'Whatever it takes to get this awkward conversation over with,' but instead I nodded, pretending not to know that whatever she was about to suggest would be embarrassing.

'Remember that lovely notebook you got from Aunt Rosa on your birthday?'

'Umm, yes.'

'I think you should start keeping a diary.'

'A diary?'

'Yes, a diary.' Mum frowned. 'It's like what you kids call a blog, but you write it down with an instrument called a pen on a primitive version of the iPad called paper.'

'Ha, ha – very funny.'

I tried to remember where I'd put the thing. The notebook was pink with a heart-shaped lock on it. I hadn't even taken it out of the box. It seemed it wasn't only Mum who still thought I was four years old.

'I think writing down your story might be good for you. Especially during this ...' She broke off as she searched for the right word. 'During this experience,' she concluded. 'At least it will give you something to do.'

Although the idea of keeping a diary seemed as much fun as having every single spot on my forehead squeezed by a first-year beauty student armed with a pair of pliers, I agreed to it. Anything to get Mum out of my room.

That evening, when the electricity was out, which meant our router was out, which meant the internet was out, I tried to write an entry. I sat and stared at a blank page for half an hour. Nothing happened. Despite everything that was going on, I had nothing to say.

It wasn't until a week later that I tried again. Maybe it was the awfulness of our situation – when we thought things couldn't get much worse, they always did. Or maybe it was something else – a small seed of hope that had nestled itself somewhere deep inside my head or my soul or whatever. But suddenly the words just started trickling out.

Tuesday 23 August

Mum and Dad are fighting again. They think I can't hear them. They're supposed to be smart people, but sometimes they are just so stupid. You'd think that every rational being with half a brain would realise that screaming penetrates easily through hollow wood-laminated doors. Especially the two beings who used to order Andrew to turn down his 'God-awful screech of music' ten times a day. Noise travels both ways, people!

'We have to do something,' I can hear Dad say.

'Don't start, Dan,' Mum snaps at him.

'But we have to.'

'Don't you think I would if I could?' Mum is raising her voice now.

'There must be something—'

'There isn't anything we can do.'

'Don't say that, Di. You can't let yourself give up like that. That's what they want. That's what they're counting on.'

Now there's an unintelligible shouting match.

I'm trying to ignore them. Grief makes people angry. So does guilt.

I'm trying to stay strong. I guess that's my duty given that they have enough to deal with. Given that they have just lost their son.

I fear Mum is right. It's difficult to imagine we stand a chance. But I do see where Dad is coming from. He

hasn't said it, but I know what he is thinking. I know he's thinking about what Mandira said. Mum doesn't want to hear it. She's just lost a child. She doesn't want to lose another one. But things don't have to be over. There is still one thing we can do.