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the
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the
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Lisa Williamson

For Dylan

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Rhiannon

‘The complete and utter state of me!’ Molly wails.

I glance up. My best friend is peering at her reflection in the mirror that hangs on the back of my door. As she meets my eye, she holds out a slimy strand of long blonde hair and grimaces.

‘Ugh. This is going to be *such* a nightmare to get out.’

Despite her words, Molly’s eyes are sparkling.

She turns to face me.

‘How come you’re so clean?’ she demands, gesturing at my relatively unblemished uniform.

‘Lucky, I guess,’ I reply, with a shrug.

Molly pouts. ‘So unfair. There’s barely a mark on you.’

Today was our final day of Year 11, before our exams start a week on Monday. As per tradition, the afternoon concluded with an egg and flour fight on the school field. You’d perhaps assume that the less popular kids would be the targets, but the opposite was true. As one of the most lusted-after girls in the year, Molly was in the firing line from the moment the

first egg was launched, squealing in delighted protest as boys took it in turns to tear after her.

Everyone fancies Molly. She's the kind of pretty that people just can't seem to get enough of – blonde, blue-eyed and angel-faced; the sort of girl who would go down an absolute storm in the *Love Island* villa. The last time we went into town together, I lost count of the number of random boys who stopped us to ask for her Snap. Every single time she gave it to them, even the ugly ones who I knew she couldn't possibly be interested in in a billion years.

'I'll delete them later,' she said when I asked her why she didn't just tell them to piss off.

'Can't you just say "no"?'

She stared at me like I'd just suggested she rob a bank or streak naked down the street.

'Rhi, no!' she cried. 'They might feel bad.'

Molly is a chronic people-pleaser. Our mate Liv reckons it's because Molly's mum walked out last year.

'Textbook abandonment issues,' Liv likes to say in lofty tones. 'She's terrified of rejection and so engages in people-pleasing behaviour to avoid it.'

Liv wants to be a psychologist when she's older and enjoys nothing more than diagnosing everyone around her. When it comes to her theory about Molly though, I call bullshit. I've known Molly since Year 7, way before her mum left, and she was like this back then too – sharing her crisps at break, and bringing in sweets for the entire class on her birthday, and befriending every single waif and stray that crossed her path. To be clear, I'm not saying this isn't an admirable quality; I just don't get why she feels the need to jump through hoops just to keep a load of complete randos happy. I mean, why can't she just be real?

‘Do you want to shower first?’ I ask. ‘Seeing as you’re all manky.’

‘If that’s OK with you?’

‘Sure.’

I fetch her usual towel from the airing cupboard.

‘Wish me luck,’ she says with a goofy grin before disappearing into the bathroom.

I return to my bedroom and sit down on the bed. Apart from a single smear of yellow egg yolk on my shirt, I’m basically pristine. Not (like Molly assumed) because I was *lucky*, but because nobody was particularly interested in chasing me.

I know I’m not a monster, but I also know for a fact that I’m not pretty, at least not in the way that seems to matter to the idiots I go to school with. I’m not bitter about it. If anything, I’m glad. Being Molly looks exhausting a lot of the time.

I’m scrolling through my phone when there’s a knock at the door.

‘Come in.’

It’s my twin brother, Ben. He bursts in, scanning the room with eager eyes.

‘Where’s Mol?’ he asks.

‘Shower.’

‘She got a proper hammering today,’ he says with a grin.

Of all of Molly’s attackers during the egg and flour fight, Ben was the most persistent, pelting after her and only her with almost deranged glee. Then again, he has been madly in love with her since he was eleven, so this wasn’t exactly left-field behaviour.

Immediately, I spot an opportunity to have a bit of fun.

‘Yeah, she’s proper pissed off at you,’ I say gravely.

Ben’s face falls. ‘She’s not, is she? I was only messing.’

‘Well, you clearly went too far, didn’t you? She was practically in tears just now.’

The panic etched on Ben’s features is all too real. I’m so tempted to keep going, to see how far I can push him, but the shower is no longer running, which means Molly will be back any moment.

I drop my stern expression and punch him on the arm. ‘God, you’re easy to wind up.’

Ben’s face contorts, clearly torn between expressing annoyance or relief. Before he’s forced to pick between the two, the door swings open and in waltzes Molly, her pink towel wedged beneath her armpits, shoulders glistening with moisture.

‘Oh, hey, Ben.’

‘Hey, Mol,’ Ben replies, plastering on the soft, starry-eyed smile he reserves just for her.

‘Now, I’ve got a bone to pick with you,’ she says good-naturedly. ‘I had to wash my hair *three* times just now.’

‘Yeah, sorry about that,’ he says, his hand automatically reaching for the back of his neck – a classic ‘I fancy the pants off you’ move. ‘Was it a total pain to get out?’

‘Don’t sweat it,’ Molly replies, adjusting her towel. ‘It was fun.’

‘The egg and flour fight, or washing your hair three times?’

Molly rolls her eyes at me as if to say, ‘Is this guy for real?’

I shake my head and open Spotify on my phone. I scroll to our tried and tested ‘Party Prep’ playlist and stick it on shuffle.

In a couple of hours, we’ll be heading to Luke Bickerstaff’s house party. Luke is in our year and blessed with the killer combo of a massive house and negligent parents.

Unfortunately, this also makes him a bit of a twat. Not that anyone would ever dare pull him on his shitty personality; his value as Year 11's resident party host is way too high to risk causing offence and winding up on his blacklist.

I don't actually like parties all that much, at least not the sort that Luke throws – invariably sweaty, noisy and disappointing. And yet, every time one rolls around, I do this stupid thing where I build it up in my head into something it's not, something it will never, ever be. I imagine all these scenarios like something out of a film, and then I get there and remember it's just a larger than average house crammed with a load of people from school that I don't especially like, getting pissed and talking too loudly at each other.

I did float the idea of the four of us (me, Molly, Liv and our friend Theo) just hanging out here for the evening, but it was met with universal disdain.

'We can't miss the first party of the summer!' Molly cried with genuine passion when I suggested it last week.

'Yes, we can,' I said. 'We can do whatever we want.'

'I dunno, Rhi,' Theo said. 'Not that your sofa isn't comfy, and your snacks aren't top tier, but we're literally about to go into four solid weeks of exam hell and I for one intend to get absolutely smashed while I can.'

'Yeah, we've got all summer to hang out here,' Liv added.

I had to concede that she had a point. Our final exam is on the nineteenth of June, gifting us two and a half glorious months of freedom before sixth form starts in September. But still, the prospect of yet another night at Luke's house makes me feel tired just thinking about it.

I reach for my phone and turn up the volume, hoping that Chappell Roan will somehow get me in the party mood.

Meanwhile, Ben and Molly are still flirting. Or rather Ben is flirting with Molly, and Molly (in trademark Molly style) is gamely going along with it.

‘I was actually doing you a favour,’ Ben is saying.

‘A favour?’ Molly repeats.

‘Yeah. Didn’t you know? Egg is actually amazing for hair.’

‘According to who?’ Molly asks, crossing her arms across her chest. Ben’s eyes linger on her cleavage for a split second too long.

I cringe on his behalf as he drags his gaze away and digs his phone out of his back pocket.

‘OK,’ he says, reading from the screen, ‘so it reckons here that eggs are “rich in nutrients and healthy fats that keep strands sleek and shiny”.’

Molly frowns. ‘So, what are you saying? That my hair wasn’t sleek and shiny before?’

‘Of course not,’ Ben says. ‘You, Molly Mayhew, are a regular Disney Princess. But there’s always room for improvement, right?’

It’s funny, when he talks to girls who aren’t Molly, Ben’s game is not totally terrible, but the moment he’s in front of her, he morphs into the cringiest guy on earth. For her part, Molly pretends not to notice what an absolute cheeseball he becomes in her presence, skilfully condemning my dear brother to the dreaded friend zone without actually having to come out and say so out loud.

Sometimes I wish she’d put him out of his misery and just admit that she’s never ever going to fuck him so that we can all move on, but I know that she won’t.

I love Mol, I do, but one of these days she really needs to grow a backbone.

Molly

Ben keeps looking at my tits.

He's pretending that he's not, but his technique, bless him, isn't exactly subtle.

I don't mind. I know that I probably should because of feminism or whatever, but the fact is, I'm proud of my body, and I like people looking at it. Plus, this is Ben we're talking about; he's practically my brother.

Rhiannon has never said so outright, but I reckon that she'd go bananas if I ever got with him. Not that I would. I love Ben to death, but not like that. This is going to sound awful, I know, but he's just way too nice for me. Not to mention the fact that he's really not my type. Like, he's cute and everything, but he's not exactly manly, you know?

'Oh, by the way, Ben,' Rhiannon interrupts. 'Georgie Riordan was asking after you earlier.'

'Georgie?' Ben repeats, a pink rash creeping up his neck.

'Yeah. She was *very* keen to know whether you were going to be at Luke's tonight.'

'Well, of course I'm going to be there,' Ben mutters. 'Everyone will be.'

'Is Georgie into Ben?' I ask.

'Apparently,' Rhiannon replies. 'The question is though, is Ben into Georgie?'

We both turn towards Ben. He looks really pissed off. For a second, I'm worried I've put my foot in it somehow, until I realize that it's very much Rhiannon he's glaring at.

'She's OK,' he says through gritted teeth.

'Just OK?' Rhiannon asks, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. 'Don't you think she's cute?'

Ben shrugs.

‘Seriously? *I* do. Don’t you, Mol?’

‘Why don’t *you* go out with her then?’ Ben says, continuing to glare at Rhiannon.

‘Georgie’s in my Art class,’ I say. ‘She’s lovely.’

Ben smiles tightly before muttering some excuse about needing to get ready for the party.

‘Ugh, sorry about that,’ Rhiannon says, once he’s gone. ‘He is such a perv.’

‘Oh, he’s harmless.’

Rhiannon just rolls her eyes and picks up her phone, skipping through the playlist.

‘What time are we heading to Liv’s again?’ I ask, pulling a comb through my wet hair.

‘I said we’ll aim for seven,’ Rhiannon replies, not looking up from the screen. ‘Theo’s gonna meet us there, I think. We just need to pick up some mixers on the way.’

While Rhiannon showers, I lay out my dress on the bed. It’s short, white and clingy. It’s also new, the labels still attached. If a miracle occurs and I manage to get through tonight without spilling anything on it, I’m going to try to send it back to Boohoo for a refund. That way I’ll still have some money left over this month and won’t have to go grovelling to Dad when I need shampoo (the 2-in-1 stuff he buys from the supermarket is grim AF).

I plug in Rhiannon’s hair dryer and sit on the bed while I blast my hair.

I still can’t quite get over the fact that Year 11 is over. Yes, we’ve still got our exams to get through, but that doesn’t change the fact that as of today, I don’t have to sit through another Maths lesson ever again. Unless I fail, of course, and

wind up having to retake, but considering I got a solid 6 in my mocks, I'm fairly confident that a pass is in the bag.

My hair is almost dry by the time Rhiannon returns, her skin pink and scrubbed.

'I think you clogged the drain with all the shit from your hair,' she says, dumping her clothes in the laundry hamper. 'The shower kept filling up.'

'Shit, sorry,' I say. 'Should I try to unclog it?'

'Don't worry about it, my dad'll sort it later.'

Her eyes fall on my dress.

'Is that what you're wearing?' she asks.

'Uh-huh.'

She nods but doesn't offer any further feedback.

'What are you going to put on?' I ask.

Rhiannon shrugs. 'Jeans and a T-shirt probably.'

Aka Rhiannon's uniform. She never wears dresses or skirts. She reckons they don't suit her, which is pure madness because the girls got legs for days.

'You're going to wear a dress for prom, though, right?' I ask.

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean, you don't know?'

'As in, I don't know, Molly. I haven't thought about it.'

'But it's less than two months away!'

'Exactly. I've got ages to figure it out.'

I've already got my dress, and it's so perfect, I almost cried when I tried it on for the first time. It's the most amazing shade of emerald-green with a beaded bodice, super low back, and an actual train. I swear, I feel like an actual Disney Princess in it.

I've been obsessed with the idea of prom ever since I watched my big sister Charlie head off to hers three years ago. I remember sitting on the stairs as Charlie crammed her feet

into a pair of impossibly high heels, desperate with longing for a distant future where I got to do the same.

‘Do you think it would be too much if I wore a tiara to prom?’ I ask.

‘Yes,’ Rhiannon replies without hesitation.

‘What’s if it’s just a small one?’

‘The answer is still yes.’

I stick my tongue out at her and make a mental note to run the idea by Liv and Theo instead.

‘I’m thirsty,’ I say. ‘I might nip downstairs for some water. Do you want anything?’

‘I’ll have some water too. And grab some crisps while you’re at it. But not those weird lentil ones Mum keeps buying, some proper ones.’

I pull on the dressing gown I always wear when I’m here, and head downstairs.

I love Rhiannon and Ben’s house. It’s nothing special – just a 1930s semi in a road full of identical 1930s semis – but I think maybe that’s *why* I like it so much, *because* of its ordinariness. I’ve always felt happy here – safe and cosy and calm.

Rhiannon and Ben’s mum, Gemma, is in the kitchen putting away some shopping. When she sees me, she breaks into a warm smile.

‘Hiya, Mol. How you doing, sweetheart?’

‘Yeah, good thanks.’

‘Staying over tonight?’

‘Yeah. I mean, if that’s OK?’

‘Course it is. You’re always welcome here, you know that.’

‘Thank you. Is it OK if I grab some water and crisps?’

‘Go for it, I’ve just restocked.’

‘Thanks, Gemma.’

I grab two glasses from the cupboard and fill them up with water from the tap.

‘So, how are you feeling about your exams?’ Gemma asks.

‘OK, I think,’ I say, setting down both glasses on the counter. ‘My mocks all went OK, and I’m really happy with my Art coursework which is like sixty per cent of my grade.’

‘That’s great. Then again, you always have been brilliant at drawing. I still can’t get over that picture you did of Ozzie.’

Ozzie is the Cleary family’s chocolate labrador. I sketched him back in Year 9. Gemma made me sign it then insisted on having it professionally framed. It’s not actually that great (I could do so much better now), but Gemma won’t hear a word against it.

‘Are you going to do Art A level?’ she asks.

‘Yes, Art and Design.’

‘And what else?’

‘English Lit, Theatre Studies and probably Media Studies. I’d really like to do Photography, but our school doesn’t do it.’

‘Oh, that’s a shame.’

‘Yeah, it sucks. They do it at Elmers Road, but I think we’ve all decided to stay on.’

Elmers Road is the local sixth form college. The four of us – me, Rhiannon, Liv and Theo – went to look around it back last summer. I really liked it, but the others weren’t so keen.

‘You could always do a photography course on the side,’ Gemma says.

‘Yeah, perhaps.’

‘Ooh, before I forget. I’ve got something for you.’

She disappears into the dining room, returning about twenty seconds later holding a small white envelope.

‘Invitation to my and Phil’s twentieth wedding-anniversary do,’ she says, pushing it into my hands. ‘Nothing fancy, just a BBQ in the garden, but, well, people tend to get booked up over the summer, so we thought we’d get the word out now.’

I turn over the envelope in my hands. It’s addressed to the three of us – me, Dad and Charlie. The absence of Mum’s name in configuration with ours makes my body stiffen.

‘Charlotte will be back come July, won’t she?’ Gemma asks.

I shake my head. ‘She’s staying down in Bristol for the summer. She’s got a job in a hotel.’

When Charlie broke the news at Easter, I sobbed my heart out.

‘I’m sorry, Mol,’ she’d said. ‘But Bristol is good for me, and being back here just isn’t. You get that, don’t you?’

I did, but I still hated the fact she wasn’t coming home.

‘How is she getting on down there?’ Gemma asks. ‘Enjoying uni life?’

‘Yeah, she’s loving it.’

I can hear it in her voice every time we speak, which admittedly isn’t all that much because she’s always busy with her new mates, her new life, and hardly ever answers her phone these days.

‘What is it she’s studying again?’ Gemma asks.

‘Social Work.’

‘Oh, yes, I remember now. Good for her.’

I manage a smile.

‘How about your dad? Will he be free, do you reckon? It’s the second Saturday in July.’

‘I’ll check, but I should think so,’ I say.

Apart from work and the odd visit to the pub, Dad rarely goes out these days. He certainly never makes any actual plans.

‘Fab,’ Gemma says brightly. ‘It’ll be good to see him again; it’s been too long.’

She’s being polite. The last time Dad was here was Bonfire Night. Every year the Cleary family have a party – fireworks and hotdogs in the back garden. Dad got drunk on Phil’s home brew and fell asleep on the bathroom floor. Phil ended up having to take the handle off to get him out. He and Gemma were really nice about it afterwards, reassuring me that it ‘wasn’t a problem’ and that ‘these things happen’, but they can’t have been impressed (I know I wasn’t).

Dad’s been a total mess ever since Mum left this time last year. I try to be sympathetic, but it’s hard not to feel irritated by the way he continues to sulk and brood, leaving me and Charlie (well, just me now) to pick up the pieces. It’s like he’s totally forgotten that he’s not the only victim here, that she left all three of us, not just him.

People are always surprised when I admit that it was my mum who buggered off. It’s usually the dads that leave, isn’t it? In my more generous moments I like to think it was actually quite feminist of her, doing a runner like that and leaving Dad to run the house in her absence. In my less generous moments, I’m so angry with her I want to scream.

‘Let me guess, my mum was chewing your ear off about our exams,’ Rhiannon says when I return to her room.

‘We were just chatting,’ I say, tossing her a packet of crisps.

‘Have I shown you the revision timetable she made for me?’ Rhiannon asks. ‘It’s insane.’

She drags an A3-sized laminated chart out from under her bed.

‘This must have taken her ages,’ I say, tracing the neat colour-coded columns with my index finger.

‘I know. She made one for Ben too. I’m telling you, Mol, that woman has *way* too much time on her hands.’

Rhiannon is always moaning about Gemma. I tend to bite my tongue, but sometimes, when Rhiannon is being particularly vicious, all I want to do is shake her and tell her how lucky she is to have a parent who actually gives a shit.

Ben

My sister can be *such* a dick sometimes. Like, I get that me being into Molly is just one big joke to her, but did she really have to bring up Georgie in front of her? Of course, she’ll totally deny it when I try to pull her up on it later, but there was no denying the gleam in her eye as she watched me squirm. Then again, she’s always been weird about me and Mol.

I first laid eyes on Molly Mayhew at the beginning of Year 7. Rhiannon and I were in different classes for the first time ever and I was relieved to be free of her. I was so sick of her policing my every move and gleefully reporting back to Mum and Dad – *Ben got told off for talking today! Ben fell over in the playground and cried! Ben didn’t eat his broccoli at lunch!* Honestly though, I don’t think I realized just how suffocated I’d felt by Rhiannon’s constant presence until she physically wasn’t able to breathe down my neck any more.

During our second week of term, I got home from school to find a girl I’d never seen before sitting on the counter in our kitchen sucking an ice pop.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘I’m Molly. I’m in the same class as Rhiannon. You must be her twin brother.’

I don’t remember exactly how I responded, only that later, I chastised myself for not taking the opportunity to say something clever or witty or impressive. I imagine that I said some form of ‘hello’ and confirmed my identity, but I was so lovestruck, who knows what I came out with.

Here are the things I *do* remember:

The colour of Molly’s tongue (bright blue)

The heart-shaped bruise on her left shin

The sprinkle of freckles across her nose and cheeks, which I would later discover came and went with the seasons

The way the sun hit her blonde hair, making it shine like gold

The swarm of butterflies that suddenly populated my insides

And finally, Rhiannon marching into the room and shrieking at Molly to ‘just ignore him!’

(She always was totally shit at sharing.)

My phone buzzes. It’s my mate Dev wanting to know if I can bring some beers to Luke’s.

I text him back.

B: i thought your bro was sorting us out?

D: he’s not answering my msgs

B: sorry, no can do

D: what about your dad’s shit?

B: his home brew?

D: yeah

B: i value my life thanks

Dad treats his home brew like a third child.

Then I remember that Mum's just been to the supermarket.

B: i could maybe get my hands on some wine?

If I'm quick I can probably swipe a bottle or two without her realizing.

D: what are we? middle-aged?

B: fine, i won't bother then

D: don't be hasty now! wine is cool

B: thought it might be

When it comes to alcohol, Dev isn't exactly a connoisseur, despite what he likes to think.

I venture onto the landing. From the sounds of things, Rhiannon is in the shower. I'm this close to knocking on her bedroom door and picking up where I left off with Molly, when I hear the water turn off. I turn and leg it down the stairs before Rhiannon spots me and inevitably accuses me of loitering.

Mum is in the back garden pegging washing on the line. She catches sight of me and waves. I return the wave, then wait until her back is turned before opening the cupboard where she and Dad stash their wine collection. I grab two bottles of white at random – they're not chilled but they'll have to do – and shove them under my sweatshirt.

Back upstairs, I stash the wine in my wardrobe before going back out onto the landing. The bathroom is empty and clouded with steam. I turn on the extractor fan (Rhiannon always forgets). In the corner, there's a heap of dirty clothes. I lock the bathroom door behind me. Closer investigation reveals that the clothes belong to Molly. I resist the urge to touch her bra or pants (because that would be fucking creepy)

and pick up her shirt instead. It's covered with signatures, way more than I managed to collect today. I spot Georgie's name amongst them, the 'i' dotted with a love heart.

Georgie Riordan is in our year. We're in the same sets for pretty much everything and have been friendly for a while, but just lately she's been dropping hints that she's interested in getting to know me on a deeper level. Don't get me wrong, I'm flattered, but I'm just not sure I want to go there. This has nothing to do with Georgie. She's great – pretty, clever, a decent laugh – and in a parallel universe maybe we could be something, but the fact is, if I get with her, then I'll pretty much be drawing a line under a future where anything develops with Molly this summer. And after what happened at Easter, I'm not sure I'm prepared to turn my back on the possibility that it might. Not yet anyway.

It was the day after Easter Monday and Molly came over to our house all upset because she'd just found out Charlie was staying in Bristol over the summer. Molly's had a tough year, and I got the sense this was just the cherry on top of a very large, very shit cake. In an attempt to cheer her up, Rhiannon made popcorn and lined up a load of kiddie films for us to watch together – *Despicable Me* and *Toy Story 3* and *Ratatouille*.

She must have been feeling in a generous mood because instead of telling me to get lost, the way she usually does when Molly is over, she invited me to join them.

I don't really know how Molly and I ended up holding hands under the blankets, only that we did, for absolutely ages, our fingers perfectly entwined. When the final film ended, we both stayed perfectly still, palm to palm, my heart hammering like crazy. On the other side of Molly, Rhiannon had fallen asleep and was snoring softly.

‘I should probably head home,’ Molly said after what felt like forever.

She didn’t let go of my hand though and I didn’t let go of hers until Rhiannon woke up and asked us why we were both just sitting there in the dark like a pair of lemons.

I’m aware how lame this must all sound. So, we held hands, so what? Right? But it didn’t feel like just handholding. It felt like something important was happening between us, something significant, something deep, something definitely worth exploring.

When I can’t sleep at night, I go back in time to that moment and fantasize about what might have happened if Rhiannon hadn’t woken up, or, even better, if she hadn’t been there at all. It’s this that keeps me going, that gives me hope that Molly and I might actually stand a chance if my stupid twin sister just got out of our way.