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For Alan, for everything

EMERALD

Throwback Thursday

Is that it?

I manage not to say this out loud but McKenzie stands there, sucking her teeth, like she's reading my mind. 'Before you go, Emerald, there is one more thing.'

The way she presses her lips together it's obvious she's moved on from A level Economics. 'Yes, Miss.'

'I was wondering whether anything more might have come back to you?' There's a dramatic pause here, during which I do a sort of squint, as though I don't know what she's talking about. 'From the unfortunate incident after Inter-house athletics last week?' she continues.

I'm suddenly too hot. I quickly shake my head. 'No, Miss.'

'Even the smallest new detail would help,' she says, leaning back against the desk now, almost sitting. 'While I can't bear to think a Hollyfield girl deliberately locked another pupil into the changing rooms, stealing her clothes while she showered —' She stops now and does a little shudder — why on earth would Ignatia Darcy stage something so ... embarrassing?'

My eyes aren't even closed and it's like I'm back there again, peering in the tiny window at poor, frizzy-haired Iggy, shivering outside the shower cubicle, soaked to the skull and wearing nothing

but a pair of sumo-wrestler style knickers fashioned from a roll of blue hand-drying paper.

Iggy is probably the only girl in the Fifth Form that's even close to being overweight. And not like, 'OMG, my thigh-gap is tiny!' crap. She is almost properly fat. I hate that this is significant, but at our school it is. She's also pretty much friendless. I haven't even told Kitty this but when I took Iggy to her dorm afterwards, she told me how she only started comfort eating after her little sister died of meningitis three years ago. Died! I had no idea. I was gripped as she described the aching loneliness she feels at our school. Days went by, she said, without her talking to anyone but our teachers. She said her viola keeps all her secrets because she's got no one else to tell. As we sat together on her tiny bed I wanted to let her know that I too feel lonely. Of course I said nothing, but I did hold her clammy hand in mine for a bit, which thinking about it, was probably kind of weird.

It's like McKenzie senses me drifting. She moves closer. 'You chose kindness in coming to me that afternoon, Emerald. I'm well aware that others close to you chose to turn a blind eye, at best.'

It wasn't a question but her badly pencilled brows seem to arc in wait. Oh God, someone hand her a shovel. I don't know where to look. Truth is, I had no idea Bryony was behind the whole 'incident' when I reported it. The fact that Bryony knows it was me who rescued Iggy and then got McKenzie involved is making my life hard enough already.

I scan the room and my eyes land on the large, industrial clock above her desk. It's almost five past four. My phone vibrates inside my bag and I'm suddenly desperate to check Instagram to see if Rupert has liked my new post. It's just another photo from Glastonbury last weekend but it had forty-two likes by lunch.

More buzzing. C'mon, c'mon. I've got to get out of here. Besides, Mum will be here any minute.

A sharp gust from McKenzie's nostrils makes my arm hairs stand on end. When I look up, her bespectacled eyes squint kindly back at me.

'You were a deserving winner of the Citizenship Award this year, Emerald, but remember, courage is a muscle. We strengthen it with use.'

That's easy for her to say.

'We'll get to the bottom of all of this soon, I'm sure,' she says, smiling at me now. She leans in closer. I don't think I'm imagining it. Yes, the space between us is definitely getting smaller and there's a significant risk that our Head is about to do something drastic, like hug me.

I quickly hoist my bag on to my shoulder. 'Better go.'

'Right oh,' she says, inching back. 'Well, see you at Speech Day tomorrow.'

'Yes, Miss,' I cut in. 'Bye!'

I'm so desperate to get out into the air I tumble straight into a vomit of Third Form girls pouring out from their last class of the day. I lean against a pillar and search for my phone as they swarm around their lockers like flies. I stare at my shoes, unable to shake the image of Iggy's devastated face as I held her heavy hand in mine.

A familiar, high cackle rips through the chatter. I look up to catch Bryony and Kitty squad-strutting across the library lawn. The usual hangers-on trail behind, relishing the general radiance in their wake. They're all backlit by the hazy sunshine and it's as though the world has suddenly gone slow mo. I'm not the only one to notice. The Third Former beside me digs her friend in the ribs. 'Friendship goals!' she squeals, pointing at them.

Kitty is out front, expertly distressed topknot and endless tanned limbs gliding along in off-duty model mode. Seriously, my best friend would make a Kardashian look basic. Bryony is pretty too, but she's short and has to work that bit harder.

'Votes flying in already,' Bryony says to Kitty, waving her phone in front of her face. 'Even she's got to admit this is properly funny.'

Kitty grabs the phone and smiles. The girls behind begin to laugh over her shoulder until the smaller of the Spanish twins spots me and her face falls. Kitty looks up from the screen and waves, shoving the phone into Bryony's stomach. It's another few seconds before Bryony stops typing and whips her head in my direction. I watch her try to slide it back into her blazer pocket as she walks, but her hand keeps missing the slot.

'There you are,' says Kit, loosening my tie before offering me some gum. Bryony is less relaxed. 'In McFrenzie's office, again?'

'Yeah, another sermon on A level choices. Lucky me,' I reply, attempting to chew casually.

Bryony eyes me suspiciously.

'Votes for what?' I ask and the twins behind bite their cheeks. When Kit finally grabs the phone and slides it into my palm the most unflattering photo EVER literally leaps up at me. I almost drop it. I struggle to focus on the split-screen image of me with the taller of the Spanish twins wearing the same yellow Ted Baker dress at the Fifth Form Ball. WHO WORE IT BEST? scribbled in pink text between our two pictures. But it's not just the awful dress or the fact that my competition looks like a skinnier Selena Gomez. Bryony has purposely used a horrible shot of me fixing my knickers through my dress. I look like I'm scratching my bum!

Fifty-nine likes!

Twenty-eight minutes ago.

Bryonibbgal same dress same night. You know the drill.

#tbt #WhoWoreItBest #whowins

What! How could she? I'm shaking my head when the phone buzzes in my hand as someone else votes **@bryonibbgal** with loads of Spanish flag emojis. Bryony snatches it back.

'It was a joke, babe,' says Kitty, taking my hand.

Am I supposed to laugh?

'C'mon, Em. It's funny,' Kitty adds, giving me a playful dig on the arm. I try to smile but really it's all I can do not to push her hand away.

'No point throwing shade at Kit,' Bryony jumps in. 'I posted it. And trust me, there were others WAY more unflattering.'

My mouth is open but there's no sound. Like an airlock at the back of my throat with a faint ticking I'm hoping only I can hear. Bryony is still eyeballing me. Naked Iggy was another joke I didn't get, apparently. And this is what I get for keeping quiet? I can't believe I just lied to McKenzie to save her ass. I can't look at her. I can't look at any of them.

As though sensing I'm about to break, Kit slinks her arm in mine and drags me down the steps towards the car park.

'Can someone explain why we're being dragged back to school tomorrow for Speech Day and a bloody tug of war? Such a waste of time! Don't see why summer can't start after our last exam,' says Kitty to a general buzz of agreement. We're at the main archway when her schoolbag plummets to the ground with a heavy thud. She spins around on her heel to me. 'Um, where's your mum, Em? It's like ...' She checks her phone. 'Quarter past four?'

The knot of tension in my gut twists even tighter. Seriously, Mum! Not today, please! 'Um, I might have forgotten to remind her it was her turn to pick up,' I say, rolling my eyes while

swallowing a thousand shards of broken glass. 'I'm such a ditz lately.'

Bryony casts a knowing side-eye at Kitty. What's she doing in the car park anyway? Parents don't pick up boarders until after Speech Day tomorrow. I guess she's just relishing her power a little longer.

Just then, in the distance by the tennis courts, I spot Iggy shuffling along backwards, hauling her wares like a homeless bag lady. I realise I'm staring when she glances at me and smiles. I look away quickly but it's too late.

Bryony follows my eyes. 'Oh look, Em, it's your friend,' she whispers loudly, before making the sound of a reversing truck out of the side of her mouth. 'Wide load! Beep, beep, beeeep.'

Everybody laughs. I want to run across the courtyard, seize Iggy's shoulders, look into her eyes and say sorry. I want to shout it out. I need everyone in the school to hear it.

I open my mouth wide, but still there is no sound.

Kitty takes out her phone with a huge dramatic sigh. 'I suppose I'll have to call Mum.'

Nineteen hours later

I reach for the open door of Dad's car. I think about slamming it, but I don't. Instead the door clunks shut beside me, heavy and final. I slip down the large leather seat and turn my face to watch Mum and Dad through the passenger window. Nick, the counsellor, is standing directly between them, framed by the clinic entrance. He's around the same age as Dad, with a look that says he's pretty pleased with himself. Crisp, pink shirt belted into oatmeal chinos; that kind of guy.

I can tell Nick's whole preppy-thing is making Dad itch. He's folding and unfolding his arms when suddenly Mum takes a step back, leaving Nick closer to Dad and making their little triangle more isosceles than equilateral. I guess our little family is pretty much this shape too: the shortest distance between me and Dad, and Mum increasingly at arm's length from both of us.

I can hardly believe that just twenty-four hours ago my beef with Bryony seemed like such a big deal. Before I got in from school yesterday afternoon I don't think I knew what a real problem was.

Kitty's mum eventually pulled up at the archway, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel as we piled in. Can't blame her for being hacked off. Our lift-share arrangement hasn't exactly worked out for her lately.

As we left the Hollyfield gates behind us, I had no idea it was to be for the last time this year. It certainly wasn't how I'd pictured my last day of Fifth Form. Usually I would have felt way worse about Mum not turning up, but I was so distracted trying the home number and desperately attempting to get enough signal on our country lanes to untag myself from the hideous photo. When we eventually pulled into our drive I wanted to weep with relief at being closer to Wi-Fi!

'See you in the morning,' I said, clambering out of the car, barely looking up.

'FaceTime later, yeah?' Kitty hollered as I opened the boot-room door.

I didn't answer but I waved them off with my best everything-is-fine smile.

As if I didn't already know something was up, music was playing loudly inside the house. I couldn't tell where it was coming from. I called out for Mum but my shouts were dampened by the noise of Kitty's car pulling away on the gravel outside. I traipsed into the hallway, through the breakfast room and into the kitchen, praying my rising dread was all just madness inside my head.

'Mum?' I cried, but there was still no answer. I sprinted up the stairs and heard the faint sound of running water, which got louder as I reached her bedroom. Yep, her bedroom, not theirs. Mum and Dad no longer sleep together.

I peered over the far side of her large, unmade bed as Fleetwood Mac blared out from a speaker in the corner.

'Mum?!' I was still yelling it as I entered her en suite bathroom, where a tap gushed violently into the sink. I reached to turn it off and my legs buckled under the sudden silence. I tried to process the pill packets and empty foil trays scattered all over the floor: Diazepam, Lorazepam, Xanax, Zolpidem – all of which had become familiar to me from the discarded packets twinkling up from the bottom of empty bathroom bins. I tumbled down the narrow hallway, swatting my hands against the walls on either side for support. Then I fell through her dressing-room door.

There she was, on the floor, motionless, just a faint gurgling coming from her open, bluish lips. The smell hit me like a spade and I collapsed beside her face, which was lying in a perfect pool of vomit. I rummaged for her pulse and began trying to resuscitate her, clearing her mouth the way we'd been taught to on that grotesque doll in lifesaving class.

No matter how bad Mum's been lately, I never expected to have to do that.

One – elephant – two – elephant – three ...

I was beyond twenty before she began to cough. That's when I allowed myself to breathe.

I immediately called Dad. After that I just sat there griping her hand, regretting every single horrible thing I'd said to her over the last week. When I began to free the stray, wet hairs that had stuck to her face, she squeezed my hand back and my insides caved. I stared at her, curled up, folded into herself and looking smaller than a mother should be. For a moment I thought about snuggling into her like a little girl, but I felt her hands and legs were cold so I grabbed an old blanket from the closet and tucked it in all round her, neatly pressing in the edges like she was one of Grandma's puff pastry pies. Then I lay on the carpet and trembled alongside her.

The paramedics worked quickly. Dad's PA, Magda, arrived at the same time as the ambulance and Dad wasn't too far behind. Mum spent last night at the University Hospital and was delivered straight here to rehab this morning.

Nick calls it an intervention.

Dad jumps in to the car beside me. 'Christ, that man talks,' he says, slinging his seat belt on. He lays his hand on my right knee and steadies his breath, but he doesn't take his eyes off Mum. I glare at her through the window and slowly raise my fingers to the glass to wave. She does the same and our eyes lock.

The engine roars into life and the car begins to roll away. I too try to get my breath to steady but my heart is jumping around inside my ribs. I try to copy Dad's calm but everything inside me is out of sync. I can't believe this is real. I can't believe we're leaving Mum in a place like this. I want Dad to speed away so I don't have to watch, but mostly I want to open the car door and pull her back inside.

Dad starts to reverse down the clinic's long drive. I have no choice but to stare as Nick leads Mum back inside the large Regency building which, with its wisteria-laden verandah, looks very like our own home not far away on the other side of Bath. Weirdly this similarity makes leaving more awful. Mum doesn't turn around, which helps, but my guts shoot deep down inside me like a lift suddenly summoned to the ground floor. I watch her and Nick getting slowly smaller until the bright July sun hits the wind-screen and swallows them up whole.

We're racing through the Somerset countryside towards the airport now and it's like Dad can only drive in fifth gear. I sit up and try to peer over the dense hedgerows, but they're too high and we're going too fast. The throbbing inside my head isn't helped by the overpowering smell of new car. I open the window and gulp in some air.

'Shall we listen to some music?' he asks. His words sound light and new. I try to let them lift me but can only nod as Ed Sheeran begins to pour from the speakers around us. On the rare occasion that Dad listens to music he rarely strays from Thin Lizzy or a bit of old-school U2, so this is strange. I'm also totally sick of this song.

‘Is this the radio?’

He takes off his sunglasses. ‘It’s ... a new playlist,’ he says, his face softening. I’m not sure my face can hide its surprise. ‘Y’all right there, Scout?’

Dad’s always called me this.

‘Everything’s going to be OK, love,’ he says now, looking at me with that dad face. Dad’s kind of handsome, or so Kitty says, though I hate her mentioning it. ‘You were great in there with Nick. And, Em,’ he says, putting his hand back on my knee, ‘I want you to know how much I appreciate your ...’ I watch him feel around his mouth for the right word, ‘cooperation ... on everything. The past twenty-four hours have been horrendous for you, I know that, but Mum’s in the best place now.’

I taste the desperate pleas loading themselves on to my tongue and consider how they might sound out loud. I want to beg him not to pack me off to Grandma’s. I want to tell him how much I don’t want to be in Ireland on my own for the next eight weeks. I want to beg him not to steal my chance of a real summer. But of course I can’t.

‘It was like it wasn’t really her,’ I say after a while.

‘She’s medicated, honey. That’s all.’

‘D’you think it’ll work?’

He exhales slowly and I watch him try to smile. ‘Foxford Park is the best treatment centre there is,’ he says, without answering my question.

I want to go home. I want to curl into a ball on my own bed but I can’t even do that. Dad’s court case starts on Monday, miles up the motorway in London, and he’s clearly decided I can’t fend for myself at home so my

summer exile will start in Portstrand later today. We drive under the dark dome of a railway bridge. I want to hide here in the darkness, never to reappear.

Dad clears his throat. 'Look, I know it's hard, but let's try to be positive.'

'Uh huh.'

'Nick said rock bottom is the best opportunity for a lasting recovery. And remember, Em, these are Mum's issues, not yours.'

Dad's mouth seems to have been hijacked. He's never talked about Mum's issues before so even this tiny chink of truth feels awkward but he smiles his toothy grin, which makes it hard not to at least attempt a smile back. 'I'm really sorry you've had to miss your last day.'

I know it's not cool to admit it but I actually like Speech Day. Plus I wanted to be part of all of the end-of-term goodbyes, but honestly, with everything that's been going on with Bryony lately, it's strangely OK to be missing out. The one upside to the whole awfulness is not having to put on my game-face for a day.

I sense Dad turn to face me again. 'Hey, what is it?'

I want to shout EVERYTHING! But I look at his tired eyes and say nothing. I never do. Acres of golden fields whizz by outside my window. 'I'm fine, Dad.' I lie.

He takes his foot off the accelerator and looks over. 'Em?' But he knows me too well.

I open my mouth, genuinely unsure of what's coming. 'Won't it be weird? Me staying with Grandma, after -' I don't finish the sentence; I'm not sure I know how. I've never talked to him about what happened with Mum and

me in Grandma's house that Christmas. When I try to remember, it's only ever flashes and the pieces don't join up. What I do know is that until then we spent every Christmas there with her but we haven't been back to Dublin since. Grandma still phones and stuff, but it's not the same.

Dad doesn't say anything and I immediately feel guilty. He leans over and turns the music down. 'You and Grandma always got on a bomb.'

'But it's been like forever.'

'Five years isn't forever,' he says. I sit straighter as he reaches out to turn the music back up. Our hands brush in the no-man's-land of the enormous dashboard and we both pull back. 'Anyway –' he flashes a quick smile – 'Grandma's excited to see you.' He feeds tiny morsels of the steering wheel between his fists without looking at me.

I can't think of anything to say back so I busy myself unplugging my phone from the charging dock. I ran out of battery at the hospital last night and spent the whole time flicking through crap magazines while trying to sleep on Dad's shoulder. I was way too wired with anxiety and Diet Coke to pass out but Dad found a pack of cards in the family room and we spent hours playing Old Maid and Gin Rummy. It was all quite Victorian.

Just two texts; both from Kitty wondering where I am. There are the constant WhatsApps from Bryony about Kitty's party too, but these are to me and eighty-nine of our closest friends. It's so strange to think Mum nearly died and nobody even knows. I'm not sure I can face telling Kitty about this yet, let alone the fact that I'm about to drop off the face of the earth for the next eight weeks.

Feeling reckless, I decide to text Ru. I've spent six months fancying the way-out-of-my-league Rupert Heath, and after weeks of shameless stalking I managed to get with him twice, the last time being at the Fifth Form Ball (the annual cross-pollination of what McKenzie calls 'our nice Hollyfield Girls and the fine Cliffborough Boys' – *ick!*).

Wanna chat later? Xxx

Thoughts of the ball only lead to a horrible flashback to the knicker-picking image. Please God don't let Ru have seen the photo before I untagged myself.

I reread my text and remove two of the kisses.

Ed Sheeran belts out another ballad as we hit the motorway and Dad sings along, bopping his head out of time. While I definitely can't pretend this is normal behaviour, it's impossible not to love him for trying. Nothing back from Ru. I consider replying to Kitty but how do I even begin to explain everything in a text? Can't call though. Not with Dad in the car. With a glance at the clock, Dad turns off the music and switches on the news, which is all about the migrant crisis. The reporter clears his throat and adds that the body of the missing schoolgirl was pulled from the Thames Estuary this morning. His reporter voice rambles on but all I can think about is what would happen if I were to be washed up by the sea. My head fizzles wondering how they would describe me and I can't decide what would be worse: drowning or the world's press photographing me without my editorial control.

Bloody hell, I performed CPR on my mother last

night. Why am I even thinking about a stupid photo? My head hurts. At least I think it's my head. Wish I had a word for this horrible weariness; that feeling like I want to slip under but also like I'm too jittery to even close my eyes.

Dad screeches into the airport car park. He whips his seat belt off and grabs his files from the back seat. 'Dublin here we come!' he announces, sarcasm only thinly disguised. Hopping on a plane is the last thing he needs now.

I lean forward and my damp T-shirt peels off the leather seat. 'Thanks ... you know, for coming with me.'

'After the night we've had, love, I'm hardly packing you off as an unaccompanied minor.'

'Dad, I'm sixteen!'

He laughs. 'It was a joke,' he says with a wink. 'Still, it'll be nice to see the mother.'

I quickly dab on some lip gloss and reach for the car door once more.