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opening extract from

Red Tears

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you're such a good friend,
Emily Bowyer

'You mustn't worry so much,' I say. 'It's not as bad as you think.'

'Isn't it? What about when they find out I didn't do my Eng Lit assignment?' Lizzie pulls at her hair.

'Don't do that. You'll make your hair fall out.'

'And what about when they find out I'm still seeing Adam?'

'Oh Lizzie, didn't you tell them?'

She pulls a face. 'I'm not like you, Em. I can't talk to my parents. You're lucky, your parents are really cool.'

That's only because I don't have a boyfriend, I think. And I don't push my luck with my parents like Lizzie does.

'So what should I do?'

I put a hand on her arm. 'Look, it's going to be fine. Really. We don't have Eng Lit until Tuesday. I'll help you do it. They won't ever know.'

'And what about Adam?'

'I thought you didn't like him much anyway.'

'That was last week. He's been really sweet to me lately.'

'Liz, your parents are bound to find out at some point. Why don't you just invite him round and tell him to be on his best behaviour? Then your parents can see what a good judge of character you are.'

She grins. 'I love that idea. I can just see the look on Mum's face. Not sure Adam will like it, though.'

'Well, you'll just have to talk him round,' I say, starting to feel irritated. 'If he's serious about you, he'll just have to grit his teeth and make nice with your parents.'

She hugs me. 'You're such a good friend, Emily Bowyer. What would I do without you?'

'You'd be fine,' I say.

'I wouldn't. I'd fall apart without you to tell me what to do.'

'You'd have to think for *yourself*,' I say in mock horror.

'I *know*! Can you imagine how long that would take?'

I laugh. 'Well, at least your brain has had a nice six-week rest before the –'

'*Nightmare year*,' we say in unison.

'I'll make a bet with you,' says Lizzie. 'I bet you a Baileys Mini that the very first teacher we have today mentions GCSEs.'

'Oh, surely not,' I protest. 'We've only just come back. They wouldn't be that cruel.'

'This is school, Em,' says Lizzie. 'They train in cruel camps to teach here.'

As it turns out, she's right. First lesson is French.

'Now,' says Miss Collins, brushing the hair out of her eyes. I don't know why she doesn't tie it back; it gets on my nerves. 'As you are aware, this is possibly the most

important year of your young lives.' Lizzie raises her eyebrows at me.

'*She didn't say it,*' I mouth at her.

'We only have two terms before your GCSEs,' says Miss Collins.

'*You owe me,*' Lizzie mouths back.

'And because of that, I do not expect you to be carrying on your own conversations whilst I am talking,' says Miss Collins to Lizzie – who flashes a grin at me and straightens her face so she can look apologetic to Miss Collins.

I stifle a giggle and Marianne frowns at me. I don't care. She's too stuck up for her own good. She sits across from Lizzie and spends most of the time chewing gum and playing with her hair. I pretend to like her because Lizzie likes her, but really she gets up my nose.

Every single teacher that day mentions GCSEs, with the exception of Mr Hicks, our History teacher, who simply writes 'GCSE' on the board. 'I think you get the point,' he says.

I sure do.

By the end of the first week back, I am finding it hard to remember what holidays are like. We have so much homework it's unbelievable. 'How do they expect us to get through all of this?' Lizzie says, staring at the pile of folders and books on her desk. 'Do they think we don't have social lives?'

'I know,' I say. 'It's going to take me the whole weekend to get through it.'

'Oh, don't be daft, Em,' says Lizzie. 'You'll sail through it, you know you will. You always do. I wish I could just *do* stuff, like you. You hardly have to think about it.'

'What do you mean?'

Lizzie grins at me. 'Oh, come on. You don't have to work as hard as most people. You're just lucky like that. Must be that mega-brain in there.' She taps the side of her head.

'Mega-brain?' I say slowly. I sort of know what she means, but she's got it all wrong. I *do* have to work. It just doesn't always take me as long to figure out what I've got to do as other people. But the donkey work takes as long. She's laughing, so maybe it was just a joke. I laugh too. 'Yeah, mega-brain, that's me. Genius level. I don't even know what I'm doing at this school really. I should be at university by now.'

'Yeah, doing at least three degrees at once.'

'Are you kidding? I could be doing a right angle,' I joke.

Lizzie looks blank. 'Huh?'

'Ninety degrees,' I prompt. Comprehension flits over her face.

'Oh yeah, right.' She smiles, but I sense she's annoyed she didn't get the joke straightaway. Have I made her feel stupid? Or was it just a really lame joke? Trying to be too clever.

'Are you coming over this weekend?' I say as we walk out of the school gates.

Lizzie pulls a face. 'Sorry, can't. I'm going swimming with Marianne on Saturday, and Mum says we've got to

have a family meal on Sunday. Don't know why, we never talk to each other.'

'Oh.' I wait for her to invite me swimming too, but she doesn't. 'See you Monday, then.'

'Yeah.' She smiles and waves before getting into her mum's car. 'See you.'

Is she punishing me for making her feel stupid? I shouldn't have made that joke about right angles; she probably thinks I was showing off.

She has been seeing a lot of Marianne over the holidays.

Oh, shut *up*, Emily! You're just being paranoid!

I walk to the bus stop, feeling the straps of my bag digging into my shoulder. I had forgotten what it's like to carry a ton of books around. When I reach the stop, I put my bag on the ground with relief. There's a new girl there today. I know most of the girls in my year, but I haven't seen this one before. She must be in Year Eleven, though, because she's carrying the same textbooks as me. I smile and sit down on the bench. She smiles back. We don't say anything.

On Monday, Lizzie suddenly runs up to me. 'Em, you've got to help me!'

'What's the matter?'

'That essay! The one that's due in tomorrow – the Eng Lit one.'

'Lizzie, don't tell me you still haven't done it!'

'You said you'd help me.'

'Well, yes, but I haven't seen you all weekend, so how could I?'

Lizzie looks hurt. 'Don't be like that, Em; it's not my fault I was busy.'

But it's your fault you went swimming with Marianne and not with me, I think, and banish the thought immediately. What a nasty thing to think. Stop being spiteful, Emily.

'What do you want me to do?' I ask.

'Come round tonight. Pleeeease! I don't even know what to write about.'

'But you've read the book, haven't you?'

She looks guilty. I am horrified. 'You haven't even read the book! Lizzie, what were you thinking? How can you possibly write an essay on a book you haven't read!'

Lizzie scrapes her foot on the tarmac. 'I was hoping . . .'

She wants me to write it for her. But that's cheating. Isn't it?

'Look,' she says desperately. 'You know there's no one else I can ask. And you don't have to write it for me, you just have to explain it to me and then I can write it myself. Honest.' She bats her eyelashes at me, and I laugh uneasily.

'Oh, all right.' I know this is a bad idea, but what can I say? She's my best friend. And she's right, there isn't anyone else she can ask. 'I'll be round at seven, OK?'

'Make it six and come for dinner,' Lizzie says promptly. 'Then you can talk to my parents and I don't have to.'

When the bell goes at the end of the day I wish more than ever that I'd said no to Lizzie. I have two home-

works due in tomorrow, one for Thursday and one from the weekend that I haven't finished yet. When am I going to do them?

'See you later,' says Lizzie, skipping off. I watch her get into the car enviously. I wish my mum would come and pick me up instead of my having to get the bus. But she doesn't get in from work until after me.

The new girl isn't at the bus stop today. The bus is crowded, though, and I manage to sit on a piece of chewing gum which sticks to my skirt. Mum will kill me. I try to ignore the group of stupid boys who are comparing the latest computer games, and the group of girls who are bitching about someone they say is their friend. 'I mean, she's really sweet and everything, but she's just so – *pure*. Don't you think?'

I gaze out of the window and wonder if anyone talks about me that way. Sweet and everything, just so – what? Stupid? Annoying? Bad at jokes? I pinch myself on the leg in irritation. For God's sake, stop thinking about the stupid, stupid joke. It didn't mean anything. Lizzie's probably forgotten all about it by now. Can't you even get a grip on your own paranoia?

I let myself into the kitchen and make a cup of tea. Then I carry it upstairs to my room. My room – untidy, but I know where everything is. Blue carpet, slightly worn in the patch by my bed. Turquoise bedspread, three years old now but I still like the colour. Purple beaded lampshade from some stall in the market. White chest of drawers, slightly off-white wardrobe. Desk, covered in pencils, paperclips, scraps of paper and pen-pots.

I have three pen-pots, but I don't know why. I never put any pens in them.

I clear a space for my tea and drag my bag across the carpet. What shall I do first? Which homework will take the least time? Maths, probably. At least you don't have to do any thinking in Maths – you just work your way steadily through the questions.

I make a start on the Maths. About half an hour later, I hear Mum come in with Anthony. 'Emily?' she calls up.

'Yeah, I'm home,' I call back.

'Do you want a cup of tea?'

'No thanks.' I stare at the still-full cup of tea on my desk. 'I've already had one.' Why did I make a cup of tea anyway? I don't even *like* tea that much. I made it automatically, like my mum does. Are you feeling tired? Have a cup of tea. Bad day at school? Cup of tea, that's what you need. Fallen over and broken your leg? I know just what'll sort that out . . .

I glance at the clock and give a start. Five o'clock already. Where did the time go? I have to go out in half an hour!

Two pairs of feet thump up the stairs and Mum sticks her head round the door. 'Hiya. Everything all right?'

'Yeah,' I say. 'Mountains of work, though, don't know how I'm going to get it all done.'

'Well, you've got the whole evening.'

'I'm going round to Lizzie's for six.'

She frowns. 'What time will you be back?'

'Not sure – we're going to do our homework to-

gether.' Well, that's half true. We're going to do her homework anyway.

'Oh, I see.' She pauses for a moment. 'Does that mean you won't be here for dinner?'

'Yeah – sorry.'

'I don't mind, Emily, but I would appreciate a little more notice. We're having steak and chips, and now I'll have one steak left over.'

'Give it to Anthony. He's a growing boy, he needs the protein.'

'What's that?' My brother comes running into the room. 'Was that about me?'

'Yes, I said you need feeding up because you're too skinny,' I tell him.

Anthony's face falls. 'Am I? I'm not, am I, Mum?'

'No, of course you're not, silly.' She hugs him. 'Emily was making a joke, that's all.'

Bad Joke Emily, that's me. A bad joke for every occasion.

Anthony goes back to his room and Mum frowns at me. 'Try not to put him down.'

'I'm not!'

'He's got enough on his plate at the moment, what with starting a new school . . .' She looks behind her, then comes in and shuts the door. 'Does he seem different to you?'

'Different? What sort of different?'

She shakes her head. 'Oh, I don't know. He's been a bit quiet since the beginning of term, don't you think?'

'Er.' I haven't noticed.

'I mean, normally he'd be coming home and telling me everything that happened during the day. He hasn't done that at all. When I ask, he just says, "Oh, it was OK," and then clams up.'

I glance at the clock. Ten past five. My homework time is ebbing away. 'Maybe he's just growing up, Mum. He can't be that enthusiastic little boy for ever.'

She pulls a face. 'Maybe. I guess he won't always want to tell me everything that's going on in his life. I expected that he'd be bubbling over about the new school, though. Didn't you?'

'Well, perhaps he doesn't like it. Secondary school is a big step, Mum. He's probably just feeling a bit overwhelmed. He'll settle in soon.'

She sits on my bed. 'Do you think you could ask him how it's going? He'd tell you things he wouldn't tell me.'

I glance at the clock again. How long is this going to take? I only have nineteen minutes left to finish the Maths and do the Science – plus the English from the weekend. 'Er,' I say, but she interrupts me.

'You know how he looks up to you. And you've been through it recently. Not like me – he probably thinks I'm too old to understand.'

'Mum, don't you think you're getting a bit too worked up over nothing?' I say desperately. Hasn't she said all she needs to say?

She straightens out the creases in my duvet. 'I'm sure you're right. I worry too much, don't I?' She smiles at me suddenly. 'At least I don't have to worry about you. It's such a comfort, knowing you just get on with

things. I'm really proud of you for the way you handle your work. Maybe I compare Anthony to you without realising – and that's wrong. He's a different person.'

'Yeah.' I glance at the clock again. Eighteen minutes.

She stands up. 'He'll talk to me when he's ready, won't he?'

'I'm sure he will.'

'It's a big change, like you said. From two hundred kids in the school to two hundred in his year. And not many of his friends went with him.'

'No.' I'm in one of those strange conversations where I only have to say 'yes' and 'no' alternately. For God's sake, Mum, *go away*. I only have seventeen and a half minutes and you need to get out of my room so I can get back to work.

'Anyway, we'll all be extra supportive, won't we? So that he feels he can talk to us at any time.'

'Yeah. Sure.'

Mum sighs. I grab the chance.

'Mum, I've really got to get on with this.'

She shakes her head. 'Of course, sorry. I've been rambling, I know. You're just so good at listening! I'll come and pick you up from Lizzie's at nine-thirty, OK?'

'Great, thanks.'

She finally leaves my room. I have seventeen minutes.

No way.