

SH!T BAG

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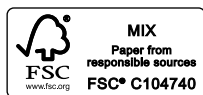
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Dedication: to follow

CHAPTER 1

‘They’re calling me Shit Bag!’

My words hang in the sterile hospital air like a privacy curtain speckled with an ominous brown stain.

I wait for Suriya’s rage. Morven’s rebuke. Neither come.

‘The boys are calling me *Shit Bag!*’ I repeat. ‘Look!’ I turn my iPad screen to face them like I’m revealing their Miss Universe scorecards, as they stand before me all dolled up for our end-of-year ball.

This time Morven shakes her head slowly, and the realisation that they knew already makes me gag.

Morven leaps into action and passes me the papier mâché puke receptacle.

I dry-retch into it. ‘Gu-uhh!’

Suriya has bolted for the door, as far from the potential splatter range as possible – not hugely surprising considering she’s wearing a white evening dress.

‘Gu-uhh!’ The physio warned me about coughing and sneezing. She didn’t mention retching in the list of pastimes that’ll feel like someone’s clawing-at-my-belly-with-a-garden-fork. ‘Gu-ugh!’ Thank God I’m restricted to clear fluids. If I do finally squeeze something from my shrivelled stomach it’ll only be green bile. Though, green bile and white chiffon . . .

‘Shall I get a nurse?’ Morven says, patting my shoulder.

I shake my head. And accept her tissue to wipe the drool from my mouth and nose. I wouldn’t put it past Morven to use the hem of her mum’s Lanvin dress to mop my brow. Yes, Lanvin. Really.

‘You sure?’ Morven says, furrowing her professionally contoured forehead.

I nod and lie back knackered against my pillows.

The girls do a slow-dance shuffle round my single hospital room. Suriya relocates to the plastic upholstered recliner in the corner. Morven hovers midway between the bed and the door, apparently unconvinced I’m well enough *not* to alert a nurse.

Wishing I was just high on their perfume fumes, I close my eyes and say, ‘Who started it?’ I crack open an eyelid.

Morven winces and bites at her high-glossed bottom lip. Now the garden fork’s at my lungs.

Suriya stretches out red-tipped, dark fingers along each

armrest, like a cat about to rip up the sofa with her claws, and says, 'Lockie started it . . .'

'Shut up!' I hug my grey papier mâché chunder bowl.

'Told you she wouldn't believe us,' Suriya says.

They exchange this look.

'Fu . . . c . . . k . . .!' I exhale like it's my last breath. I can't believe this. 'How do you know Lockie started it?'

'I heard him,' Suriya says.

'When?'

'Technically, Meathead spread it though,' Morven adds helpfully.

'I'm aware . . .'

 I hold up my iPad and point sarcastically at exhibit A.

Morven buttons her lips.

'When and how,' I say to Suriya, 'did *Lockie* start calling me Shit Bag?' My voice breaks.

'Oh, Freya, don't cry,' Morven says, patting my pyjama sleeve.

'I'm not . . . crying . . .'

Suriya curls her lip when I use my sleeve cuff to wipe my runny nose.

Yes, I'm disgusting.

But then she runs her mouth. 'Maccy D's on Princes Street after my ballet exam Wednesday.' She adds, 'I wanted a McFlurry, and Lockie, Meathead and Shawsie were in the queue in front of me.'

‘And what?’ I snap. ‘Lockie just called me Shit Bag?’

Ignoring my interruption, she continues. ‘They didn’t see me because I was stuck behind tourists. And you know what tourists are like, they’re so slow – and I thought I’d ask Lockie if he wanted to come visit you tonight before the ball. So I queue-jumped. But before I could say anything, I heard what they were saying—’

‘Tell her *exactly*,’ Morven says. ‘Word for word.’

‘I’m trying!’

I hold my breath.

‘So Meathead said, “Lucky escape, mate. Imagine shagging her while she’s got the bag. Talk about boner killer.” And Lockie laughed. Well, he bit his bottom lip, which is the same thing with him. Then Shawsie said, “She always treated you like shite anyway. That’s karma for you.”’

Morven explodes. ‘*Freya* treated *Lockie* like shite? You didn’t tell me he said that!’

Suriya jiggles her head, bouncing her dark, blow-dried waves. ‘And Lockie agreed – well, he made that inhaling gasp sound that means he agrees.’

Suriya’s description of my monosyllabic long-term on-and-off ex is like a fist in my gut. I slump lower, using my bowl as a shield.

‘Anyway, the tourists noticed I’d queue-jumped so I had to move back, but then I heard Lockie say, “Shit Bag.” And when I looked round, Meathead smacked him on the

shoulder and shouted, “Shit Bag, that’s it!” And they all burst out laughing. Meathead kept saying Shit Bag over and over like it was comedy glitter. There’s no way you can get back with Lockie after this!’ Suriya stabs the air between us with a blood-red nail. ‘This *has* to be the end.’

Morven folds her bare freckled arms, looking like an unamused yet stylish Merida. ‘You should’ve said something, Suriya!’

Suriya, on the other hand, resembles a bored Jasmine. ‘What could I possibly say to stop Meathead spreading *that* round the entire school?’

‘The entire school – gu–uhh!’

‘Suriya!’ Morven hisses. She waits till I finish my dry-retch fest then adds, ‘Honestly, Freya, it’s not that bad. It’s the end of term. By the time we’re back in September everyone’ll be talking about their summer holidays. No one will remember this . . .’ She waves her hand to encompass my body, and swiftly changes the subject. ‘Are your mum and dad coming in tonight?’

Dumbly, I nod. But they’re not. They knew the girls were coming to see me so they’re having a night off. ‘You should probably get going,’ I say, dragging my mouth into a smile.

Suriya pouts and boofs her hair as she stands. ‘Don’t worry, Frey-Frey, we’ve got your back. I’m gonna give Lockie a piece of my mind!’

‘You do that,’ I say, and wake my iPad again to stare at Meathead’s star post from two days ago – *likes* tallying 378 – of a dancing paper-bag meme with a steaming poo curling out of the top like it’s a shitty hairpiece atop the bag’s head. Some joker – not Meathead because he’s not up to this level of artistry – has Photoshopped my face on the side of the bag and, in bold print below, my new name: SHIT BAG.