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the SUMMER AFTER the NIGHT BEFORE

Lisa Williamson



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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 girl's 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.

CHAPTER TWO

Rhiannon

At Liv's house, her mum, Kate, answers the door. Of all our parents, she's easily the coolest. She smokes weed and goes to music festivals and is fine with us drinking in the house. She even goes to the off-licence for us, and when we sleep over, leaves out sick bowls and pint glasses of water as standard.

'I swear,' Kate says as we troop into the hallway. 'You lot get more grown-up and gorgeous every time I see you. Ooh, and I love that dress, Miss Molly. It proper suits you.'

'Aw, thanks, Kate,' Molly says, doing a little twirl. 'Fifteen quid on Boohoo.'

'Well, I never would have guessed. You make it look designer.'

Kate's fawning over Molly is nothing unusual. For some reason, parents seem to *love* Molly. My mum's potty about her. *Why don't you wear dresses like Molly? Hasn't Molly got such lovely long hair? Isn't Molly just so polite? Molly, Molly, Molly.*

We head through the house to the back garden. Theo is lolling in the hammock and Liv and her boyfriend Sami are

squeezed together on an ancient sun-lounger giggling away in their private little coupled-up world.

Liv and Sami have been an official couple for over a year now, but I still experience this weird little jolt every time I see them cuddled up together. Like, Sami is cool, and I'm happy for Liv, but there's no denying that the dynamic is different when he's around.

I tried to explain this to Molly one time, but she just didn't get it at all.

'But they're great together,' she said.

'I didn't say they weren't.'

'So, what's the problem?'

I sighed. 'There isn't a problem. I just . . . don't you think they're a bit young to be so serious about each other?'

'Juliet was fourteen.'

'Yeah, well, Juliet was an idiot. She killed herself for some dude she'd only known for a couple of days.'

'Liv and Sami are nothing like that though. They're totally solid.'

'Yeah, for now.'

Molly frowned. 'Do you know something I don't?'

'No . . . I'm just working through scenarios in my head.'

'They seem happy, Rhi. And if they're happy, I'm happy.'

'Way to make me feel like a massive bitch, Mol.'

Molly rolled her eyes. 'You're not a bitch. You're just overthinking things. As per usual.'

Was I though? Or was I just being realistic? Because as far as I can work out, it's a pretty fine line.

'Yay! The gang's all here!' Liv cries, rolling off the lounger and trampling through the long grass to embrace us in turn.

'You'll have to excuse my girlfriend,' Sami says, following

her. 'She may have had a *little* head-start with the drinking.'

Sami doesn't drink alcohol. People assume it's for religious reasons because he's Muslim, but he's actually badly allergic. If he has even one drink, he gets stomach cramps and a rash all over his body.

'Did you bring mixers?' Liv asks. 'Because I've just used up the last of the Coke.'

'Right here,' I say, depositing two carrier bags on the patio table. 'They're not cold though. You got any ice?'

'I'll go look,' Sami says, heading inside.

'Are you getting out of that thing or what?' Liv yells to Theo who is still rocking gently back and forth in the hammock.

'Not,' he replies.

'Theo!'

'What? I'm comfy!'

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' Molly asks, a mischievous glint in her eye.

On the count of three, we run over and tip a squealing Theo out of the hammock.

'Watch the Prada sunnies!' he shrieks.

'Prada, my arse,' I say. 'These have Temu written all over them.'

'Take that back, Rhiannon Cleary!'

'Make me.'

Laughing, I take off across the garden, Theo in hot pursuit.

By the time Sami returns with a mixing bowl full of ice and two extra glasses, I have a stitch, and Theo's hair – an epic quiff that he spends an inordinate amount of time faffing with – has completely collapsed.

'Do you have any hairspray, Liv?' he asks breathlessly as he studies his reflection on his phone.

'I don't, but my mum might.'

'She'd better, otherwise this one is getting sued.'

'By this one, do you mean me?' I ask innocently.

'Too right. How am I supposed to convince Archie Howden that I'm his one true love with flat hair?'

'Isn't Archie straight?' Sami points out.

'Allegedly,' Theo replies. 'I've seen him checking me out during PE though.'

'Really?' Liv says, frowning. 'With those chicken legs?'

Theo lets out a gasp of mock outrage. 'You little bitch!'

He grabs a chunk of ice and shoves it down the back of Liv's top, making her squeal.

The next hour is spent in much the same vein – drinking, chatting, ripping the piss out of each other. We're having so much fun that I'm tempted to have another go at persuading everyone that we should ditch the party and just hang out here for the evening, but before I get the chance Molly pipes up that we should probably wind things up and head over to Luke's.

Molly

By the time we rock up at the party, I'm nicely buzzing from the vodka and cokes we drank at Liv's. After months of revision pressure, it feels good to finally let loose, albeit just for one night.

Some people get mean when they've had a few too many drinks, or lairy, or depressed, but drinking just makes me feel really happy. When I've got a bit of alcohol in my system, it's like all my troubles melt away and I'm just left with the good stuff. Like, I'm still me, but with none of the invisible

baggage that seems to weigh me down the rest of the time.

It's still early, but Luke's house is already packed. We head straight upstairs to the main bathroom. The ice-filled bathtub, which is where everyone dumps their cans and bottles, has already been ransacked.

We've brought the leftover vodka with us, but I fancy something fizzy, so I grab one of the few remaining beers.

'Yuck,' Rhiannon says as I open the bottle. 'I don't know how you drink that stuff.'

'It's refreshing,' I reply, taking a swig.

Plus, boys seem to find girls who drink beer a massive turn-on (in my experience anyway).

'What are you doing?' I ask Theo.

He's standing on the edge of the bathtub, his head sticking out of the bathroom window.

'Locating the target,' he replies. 'And there he is.'

He scrambles down from his lookout post and checks his hair in the mirror.

'Target?' Rhiannon says.

'Archie,' he replies with a wink. 'Wish me luck!'

'Luck!'

He blows us a kiss and heads for the door. It's only then that I notice that Liv and Sami are no longer with us.

'Where did they go?' I ask. 'I could have sworn they were just behind us on the stairs.'

'See, this is why I hate coming to these things,' Rhiannon mutters, plucking a can of cider out of the bathtub, frowning at it, then putting it back again. 'Everyone just fucks off the second we arrive.'

'Don't worry, we'll catch up with them later,' I say. 'Come on, let's go see who else is here.'

Drinks in hand, we head back downstairs. As we enter the living room, I spot Ben chatting with Georgie Riordan. She's clearly into him, a telltale pink rash on her chest and neck as she talks animatedly, fiddling with her hair.

Over by the fireplace, a bunch of guys I'm pretty sure I've never seen before are talking and laughing. One of them is totally my type – tall and broad-shouldered with olive skin and dark curly hair.

I turn to Rhiannon.

'Do you recognize any of those boys?' I ask.

She shakes her head.

'No, me neither. Let's go say hi.'

She stares at me in horror.

'Why?'

'Because they might be fun.'

'Can't we just hang out with each other?'

I resist the urge to point out that we've been hanging out with each other all day. Not that it hasn't been a good time, but we're at a *party* – if we wanted to spend the entire evening glued to one another's sides, not talking to anyone else, we might as well have stayed at home.

'But you're always moaning about how annoying the boys at school are,' I point out.

'And what makes you think those guys will be any different?'

'We won't know if we don't find out, will we?'

'You can if you want. I'm going to find the others.'

'Oh, Rhi, don't be like that.'

Her eyes flash with irritation. 'I'm not *being* like anything. I just don't want to spend my evening hanging out with strangers, OK? I'll see you later.'

I let her go. When Rhiannon is in one of her stubborn moods it's best to just leave her to it. It's frustrating, but I've learned from experience not to push her.

I take another sip of beer, roll back my shoulders and head on over to the group. The boy I've got my eye on clocks me straight away.

'All right?' he says, scanning me up and down as I come to a stop in front of him.

'Yeah, good, thanks,' I reply, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. 'I'm Molly.'

'Molly what?'

'Mayhew.'

'Nice to meet you, Molly Mayhew. I'm Wilf.'

'Wilf what?'

'Debrueil.'

He doesn't bother to introduce any of his friends, which I take as a pretty solid sign that wants me all to himself.

'Are you a gate crasher, Wilf Debrueil?' I ask.

He laughs. 'What makes you ask?'

'Well, you certainly don't go to St Saviours.'

'You seem very sure about that.'

'That's because I am.'

He raises an eyebrow.

'Let's just say, if you went to my school, *Wilf Debrueil*, I'd make it my business to know about it.'

A broad grin spreads across his face. 'Is that right?'

'It is.'

I hold his gaze. He laughs and looks away first.

'I'm on the same footie team as Luke,' he explains. 'Bilston Under-17s.'

'What position do you play?'

'Right wing.'

'Nice.'

'You're into football?'

'No, not particularly. I was just being polite.'

Wilf grins. 'You're funny, Molly Mayhew.'

I smile and sip my drink.

'Is that beer?' he asks.

'Uh-huh.'

'I fucking love it when girls drink beer.'

Every. Single. Time.

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. It's proper sexy.'

I shrug. 'I just like the taste.'

I take another swig, this time letting my lips linger around the neck of the bottle for a second or two longer than necessary.

Wilf leans in close.

'Do you know what I reckon, Molly Mayhew?' he says, his breath warm against my cheek.

I rise on my tiptoes so I can whisper directly into his ear.

'Tell me.'

'I reckon you might be trouble.'

I sink back into my heels and serve him my most innocent pout.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Wilf laughs.

'Oh yes you do,' he says, pointing at me with the neck of his beer bottle. 'You know *exactly* what I'm talking about.'

Ben

I didn't recognize Georgie at first. Her pale red hair is down instead of in her usual low ponytail and she's wearing make-up. Her dress is almost identical to the one Molly is wearing tonight – small and tight – only hers is baby blue and fits differently somehow. She's a lot curvier than Molly, I guess, something I hadn't really clocked until now because I've only ever really seen her in school uniform. She's teamed the dress with a pair of chunky heels that make her almost as tall as me. As she talks, she keeps tugging at her hem with her free hand.

'I've been having *the* most annoying dreams,' she says.

'Oh yeah?' I murmur, my gaze darting over her shoulder.

On the other side of the room Molly is talking to some beefy guy I don't recognize.

'Yeah,' Georgie continues. 'I keep having this one where I turn up the first exam with none of my stuff – no pen, no calculator, nothing, and then, when I finally sit down to start, the entire paper is written in some foreign language I've never seen before.'

'Sounds stressful.'

Molly is laughing at something the guy just said.

'Right?' Georgie says. 'How about you? Any weird dreams?'

'Not really.'

It's the guy's turn to laugh. He's built like a fucking tank.

'Lucky you,' Georgie says. 'I wake up feeling even more exhausted than I did before I went to sleep!'

'But aren't you predicted really good grades?'

'Well, yeah,' she admits. 'But it's not like they're in the

bag. I've still got to perform on the day. Like, I'm feeling pretty confident about most subjects, but you just never know, do you?'

'Right,' I murmur.

Molly gives the guy a playful punch on the arm. He pretends that it hurts, rubbing his arm and giving her a wounded look. In response, she throws back her head and laughs.

'Ben, are you OK?' Georgie asks.

'Yeah, course,' I bluff. 'I'm fine.'

'Are you sure? You seem kind of . . . distracted.'

'Oh, right. Sorry. I was just wondering who those guys are.'

Georgie turns to look.

'You mean the ones Molly's with?' she asks, frowning ever so slightly.

'Yeah.'

'I think I heard someone say they're on the same football team as Luke.'

'Oh, OK.'

'I'm not sure if they're Year 11s though. The one Molly is talking to has got to be older, right? He's massive.'

'He's not *that* big,' I say.

I don't intend to sound quite so defensive – it just comes out that way.

'It's certainly not *my* type,' Georgie adds quickly. 'You know, the whole gym bro look.'

'No?' I murmur, watching as the guy leans in to whisper something in Molly's ear, his hand casually resting on the small of her back.

'Uh-uh. Give me a guy with a *library* membership over a guy with a *gym* membership any day.'

I smile faintly, one eye still on Molly.

'How about you?' Georgie continues, moving in closer. 'What kind of girls are you into?'

'Well, I don't know. It all depends.'

'OK . . . On what?'

'On . . .'

My voice trails off as Mr Meathead takes Molly's hand and leads her through the open patio doors and out into the back garden. As they disappear from view, I drag my gaze back to focus on Georgie.

'You were saying?' she asks, her smile shiny, hopeful.

'Saying . . .?'

'What your type is. In girls.'

'Oh, yeah, right. Well, like I said, it depends.'

She nods encouragingly and I'm struck by how easy it would be to list her attributes one by one, to watch her bask in the glow of my compliments. And even though I wouldn't necessarily have to exaggerate or invent, I just can't bring myself to do it. It wouldn't be fair. On Georgie, on me, on anyone.

'Shit, sorry, Georgie,' I say. 'I've just remembered something I need to ask my sister.'

Her face falls. 'Right now?'

'Yeah. It's kind of important. I'll catch you later, yeah?'

I don't wait for her response, just give her an absent-minded squeeze on the shoulder before heading for the patio doors to the garden.

I scan the garden. Molly and Mr Universe are nowhere in sight.

'Ben! Hey, Ben! C'mere!'

It's Dev. He's bouncing on a kid's trampoline with our mates Saul, Jonty and Tilly (Saul's girlfriend).

I head on over and clamber through the gap in the netting to join them on the trampoline.

'Thank God you're here,' Dev says. 'I need you to back me up on this and tell these guys that *Skyrim* is overrated.'

'Sacrilege!' Jonty cries.

'It's a masterpiece, pure and simple,' Saul adds.

'Nah, tell them, Benny,' Dev begs. 'It's three against one here.'

'Two,' Tilly says. 'I have literally zero opinion on this.'

'Ben's a man of taste,' Jonty says. 'He'll agree with us.'

'Ben?' Dev says.

'Look, I enjoy *Skyrim*. Do I think it's the best game in the world? No. Do I think it's the worst? Also no. It's perfectly solid but it doesn't blow my mind.'

'It's because you haven't played it with us,' Saul says.

'Are you dissing my gaming skills?' Dev asks.

'Might be.'

'Right, that's it, you're done.'

Tilly gets out of the way just in time for Dev launch himself at Saul, the two of them tumbling to the mat.

'Fight, fight!' Jonty chants lazily as Dev and Saul roll around at our feet throwing mock punches.

'Remind me why I go out with this reprobate, again?' Tilly says.

'Sorry, no can do, Tils,' I reply.

'Damnit.'

We laugh.

I scan the garden again. Still no Molly. Could she have left with that guy? Surely not, it's still early.

'You and Georgie look cute together,' Tilly says.

'You reckon?' I mutter, my cheeks reddening.

'I do. You should go for it. You deserve someone nice.'

'Yeah?'

She smiles, nudges me with her elbow.

'You know you do. You're one of the good guys, Benny boy, and I think Georgie can see that.'

But right now, I can't bring myself to care what Georgie sees or doesn't see.

All I can think about is Molly.

Rhiannon

OK, this party officially sucks. Theo has disappeared in pursuit of Archie Howden, Liv and Sami only have eyes for each other, and Molly is in full-on flirt mode with some guy she's only just met. Even Ben is otherwise engaged – chatting to an inexplicably smitten Georgie Riordan.

I wander into the kitchen. There are plenty of faces I recognize but none I have particular interest in interacting with. I join a group of girls from my tutor group, but they're talking about some dumb reality TV show I've never watched so I don't have a whole lot to contribute and when I eventually drift away, I'm pretty sure my departure goes unnoticed.

Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm just shit at parties. Like, perhaps being good at them is something you're born with, the way some people are born with the ability to roll their tongues, and some people just aren't, and no amount of practice can change it.

It was different when I was little. Back then I loved parties. Of course, kids' parties are different; they have rules – clear start and finish times, a proper schedule to adhere to – at this

time you have jelly and ice cream, at this time you cut the cake, at this time you go home, and so on. At a kids' party, you know where you are. In comparison, teenage house parties are like the wild west.

I head upstairs to get something else to drink. I'm not actually thirsty but at least it gives me something to do.

The bathroom is empty. I fish a bottle of orange WKD out of the tub and dry it on a grubby looking hand towel.

'Are there any more of those in there?'

I glance over my shoulder. A tall, skinny boy I don't know with a mop of unruly dark hair is standing in the doorway.

'Oh, I don't know,' I say. 'Maybe.'

I move aside and watch as he reaches into the tub, swirling his hand in the icy water, eventually pulling out a blue WKD.

'This is kind of cheeky of me, but I don't suppose you fancy swapping?' he asks, wiping his wet hand on his jeans. 'The blue ones have bad connotations for me.'

'Sure,' I say with a shrug. 'I prefer the blue ones anyway.'

We exchange bottles.

'Do you have a bottle opener?' the boy asks.

I shake my head.

'Teeth is it then.'

I wince as he prises off the cap with his incisors.

'Doesn't that hurt?' I ask as he spits out the cap.

'Not really. Here, give me yours.'

I hand him the bottle. He removes the cap and hands it back.

'Cheers,' he says.

'Cheers.'

We clink bottles and each take a swig.

'Why do the blue ones have bad connotations?' I ask.

'I was just really, really sick on them one time.'

'Oh, that sucks.'

'Yeah, it wasn't pretty.'

There's an awkward pause. If I were Molly, I'd have some sort of cute quip up my sleeve, but I'm not and I don't, so I just smile tightly and take another sip of my drink.

'So . . . are you having a good night?' the boy asks.

'It's OK,' I lie. 'You?'

'Yeah, yeah, good.'

There's another excruciatingly long pause. I wrack my brains for something witty to follow up with but draw a blank, so I pick at the label on my bottle with the thumbnail instead until I remember what Molly once told me about it being a sign of sexual frustration, and immediately stop.

'That was a fib by the way,' the boy says.

I turn to look up at him.

'Sorry?'

'When I told you I was having a good night.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah, I don't know why I said it.'

'OK . . .'

'This is the part where you admit that you were fibbing too.'

'What makes you so sure that I was?'

He shrugs. 'Just a hunch.'

I don't say anything.

'So, were you?' the boy asks.

'What?'

'Fibbing.'

He looks weirdly hopeful.

'Maybe,' I reply.

He nods, apparently satisfied by my answer.

'So how do you know Luke?' he asks.

'School. You?'

'Football. He invited the whole team.'

OK, so that explains the unidentified boys in the living room.

'What school do you go to?' I ask.

The boy clears his throat. 'You might not know it, it's pretty small. Ludlow House?'

Ludlow House is a private school for boys over the other side of town. They wear these ridiculous striped blazers that make them look like barbershop singers.

'Yeah, I've heard of it,' I say. 'It's private, right?'

'Yeah. I suppose you think I'm some kind of posh twat now.'

'Of course not.'

I can't have sounded all that convincing because the boy just laughs.

'I think I might have seen some of your teammates downstairs,' I add.

'Yeah.'

'Yeah. One of them was chatting up my mate.'

'What did he look like?'

'Tall, dark hair, looks like he's on steroids.'

The boy frowns. 'Oh. You must mean Wilf.'

'You don't like him.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Your face totally changed when you realized who I was talking about.'

'I see. Very . . . astute.'

A couple of people from my year bundle into the bathroom.

They're messily drunk, oblivious to our presence as they push past and plunge their hands into the bathtub, shrieking with laughter. By silent agreement, the boy and I take our leave and head out onto the landing.

It's darker out here. Noisier.

The boy leans in, his breath hot against my ear.

'I'm Caleb, by the way,' he says. 'Cal.'

He offers up his hand. I take it.

'Rhiannon.'

Molly

'Are you cold?' Wilf asks. 'You've got goose-pimples.'

He traces a circle on my shoulder with his index finger, making me shiver.

'A bit,' I admit.

'FYI, if I was wearing a jacket, I would totally give it to you right now.'

I pretend to swoon. 'My knight in shining armour!'

Wilf performs a theatrical bow, making me laugh.

'You wanna go somewhere a bit warmer?' he asks.

'Sure.'

'What's that thing?' He points to a small wooden structure at the bottom of the garden.

'I dunno,' I say. 'A home office maybe?'

'Let's go check it out.'

He takes my hand, and we make our way across the lawn. I steal a look over my shoulder back at the house. I wonder where Rhiannon has ended up. Hopefully she's found Theo, or Liv and Sami by now. I hate the idea of her being on her

own. At the same time, it frustrates me that she doesn't make more of an effort. Sometimes I feel like she comes to these things actively *wanting* to have a bad time.

Wilf opens the door.

'After you, Molly Mayhew.'

I duck under his arm and step inside.

The space is small and cluttered and smells like it hasn't been aired out in quite some time. A wooden plaque with the words 'Alan's Man Cave' carved into it hangs on the wall. Beneath it, an assortment of tools and exercise equipment sit gathering dust. In the corner, there's a makeshift bar with a vaguely tropical theme – fake palm leaves, an inflatable flamingo and another plaque, this one declaring that 'It's happy hour somewhere!'.

Wilf dives behind the bar.

'You like rum?' he asks, producing a dusty bottle and wiping the label on his T-shirt.

'With Coke it's OK.'

'Hmmmm, I can't see any mixers. Reckon you can handle it straight?'

'I can handle anything.'

He grins. 'That's my girl.'

Apart from two rickety bar stools, the only place to sit is a tiny sofa covered with an old leopard-print throw. While Wilf sorts out our drinks, I check my phone. I'm half expecting an annoyed 'Where are you?' text from Rhiannon but there's nothing.

'Room for a little one?'

I put away my phone and shift over to make space for Wilf.

'Cheers,' he says, raising his glass.

'Cheers,' I reply, eyeballing him as I take a gulp.

The neat rum tastes hideous and I have to fight the urge to spit it out.

'You like?' Wilf asks.

'Yeah, it's actually really nice like this,' I reply.

I take another sip then put my glass on the floor. Wilf does the same and slips his arm around me. I like the way his hand feels on my shoulder. Big, manly.

'You're really fucking fit, Molly Mayhew,' he says, pulling me in closer. 'Do you know that?'

'You're not so bad yourself,' I reply.

'Well, aren't we the lucky ones, eh?'

As I giggle, he leans in to kiss me. I respond, opening my mouth so he can slip in his tongue, and let out a soft moan. After a minute or so, he pulls me onto his lap. As I straddle him, I can feel his hard-on through his jeans. Instinctively, I grind against it.

Wilf leans back and gazes up at me, wonder in his eyes.

'Fucking hell,' he says, his eyes darting from my face to my boobs and back again. 'You are something else.'

I toss my hair over my shoulder. 'I try.'

He laughs and leans back in to kiss me.

His hands, until now on my back and bum, make their way to my thighs, attempting to hitch up my dress.

'Steady on there,' I whisper between kisses.

'What's wrong?' he asks, nuzzling my neck. 'Don't you like what I'm doing?'

'No, it's not that,' I say. 'I just . . . Can we go a bit slower?'

'Sure. Whatever you want.'

He puts his hands back on my bum and the kissing resumes.

'Jesus Christ, your arse is unreal,' he says, squeezing it.

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. I can't wait to pound it.'

I blink. Did he just say what I think he just said? Before I can ask him to repeat himself, his hand is between my legs, pulling my knickers aside.

Shocked, I jump off him.

'What's up now?' he asks, the impatience in his voice clear.

'That's not taking it slow,' I say, tugging at my hem.

'Oh, come on, that Little Miss Prim act ain't fooling no one.'

'What do you mean?'

'What do I mean? You were literally grinding on my cock a second ago.'

I can feel the blood rushing to my face.

Wilf grins and holds out his arms.

'Come on, baby, you know you want it. I *felt* how much you did.'

He gives me a wolfish grin and reaches for my hand. I hesitate before taking a step backwards.

'I think I'm going to go back inside.'

Wilf's face darkens. 'You serious?'

'Yeah. I . . . I need to check in on my friend.'

He swears under his breath.

'Look, I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea,' I begin.

'The wrong idea?' he says, cutting me off. 'You were practically fellating a beer bottle within seconds of us meeting.'

I open my mouth to deny it before realizing that I can't.

Wilf lets out a hollow laugh.

'Girls like you do my head in.'

'Look, I said that I was sorry.'

'Whatever.'

My face on fire, I turn and head for the door.

'Prick-tease,' he says. 'You're not even that fit.'

Ben

'Have you seen Molly?'

Liv and Sami are sitting on the sofa in the living room, Liv's legs draped across Sami's.

'Not for ages,' Liv replies.

'Fuck.'

'Why?'

'She went out into the garden with some guy ages ago and I haven't seen her since.'

'What guy?' Sami asks, frowning.

'I don't know his name. He plays football with Luke or something.'

'Molly's a big girl,' Sami says. 'I'm sure she's fine.'

'Yeah, she can't have gone far,' Liv adds. 'She's staying at yours tonight, right?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

'Exactly. She'll be around here somewhere.'

Out of the corner of my eye I spot Georgie entering the room from the kitchen, her eyes scanning the space.

'I'm going to have another look for her outside,' I say quickly. 'If you see her, text me, OK?'

I step back out onto the patio. It's getting dark, the garden now lit by solar lights. Dev and the others have migrated from the trampoline to the lawn. I'm about to go and join them when I spot Molly emerging from an outbuilding at the bottom of the garden.

I don't need to see her face up close to know that she's upset. Her arms are folded tightly across her chest and her head is down. Just the sight of her makes my heart contract.

I jog over to intercept her, ignoring Dev and the others who beckon me over, my focus solely on Molly.

I reach her side, falling into step with her.

'Mol, are you OK?'

'I'm fine,' she replies.

'You're clearly not though. What's happened?'

'Nothing.'

Behind us, the door of the outbuilding opens and the guy steps out.

'Did he do something to you?' I ask. 'Because if he did, I'll fucking kill him . . .'

'Don't be stupid,' Molly says, grabbing my arm to stop me from going over. 'He's twice your size. And anyway, he didn't do anything.'

'Are you sure?'

She rolls her eyes. 'Of course, I'm sure.'

'Then why did you storm out of there like that?'

Molly sighs. 'He just said something sexist, OK? No big deal. He's just an idiot.'

I hesitate. I don't believe her, but at the same time I don't want to push it and risk pissing her off.

'Look, let's just go inside,' she says, tugging on my sleeve. 'Get a drink or something.'

'OK,' I reply, watching as the guy disappears around the side of the house. 'I mean, if that's what you want.'

'It is.'

In the living room, Liv and Sami are still on the sofa.

'You found her then?' Sami says.

Molly cocks her head to one side, studies me. Just like magic, all traces of upset from what did or didn't happen just outside have vanished from her face.

‘Have you been looking for me, Benjamin?’ she asks playfully, nudging me with her elbow.

My face reddens.

‘Only for a bit,’ I bluff. ‘Er, Rhiannon was wondering where you were.’

‘Shit, I should find her.’

She turns to go.

‘Didn’t you want a drink?’ I say quickly, desperate to keep her to myself for just a little bit longer.

Molly hesitates.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll text Rhiannon,’ I say. ‘Tell her that you’re with me.’

I get my phone out and pretend to compose a message.

‘Done,’ I say, sliding it in my back pocket. ‘C’mon, let’s see what we can find.’

We head into the kitchen. It’s a wreck. The counter is littered with empty bottles and plastic cups, and the tiled floor is sticky beneath our feet. Molly finds half a bottle of tequila in a cupboard, holding it above her head like a trophy.

I can’t find any clean glasses, so we have to settle for mugs. Molly’s is one of those massive Sports Direct ones. Mine has ‘World’s Number 1 Dad’ on it.

‘Do you think he is?’ Molly asks, sloshing tequila into our mugs in turn.

‘Who?’

‘Luke’s dad. Do you think he really is the world’s number one?’

‘Well, he fathered Luke so I’m gonna have to say a resounding “no”.’

Molly giggles.

‘Here, let me get a pic,’ she says, taking out her phone.

‘Say cheese,’ she commands.

I usually hate posing for photos, but unable to resist Molly’s charms, I obediently hold up the mug and plaster on the required goofy smile.

‘Do you want to be a dad one day?’ Molly asks, putting her phone away.

‘I reckon so,’ I say slowly. ‘I mean, I haven’t given it loads of thought or anything, but when I imagine the future, I suppose I do picture having a family and stuff.’

Molly nods.

‘How about you?’ I ask.

‘Do I want to be a dad?’

‘No, smart-arse,’ I say, bumping her with my hip. ‘Do you want to be a mum?’

‘Only if I’m a hundred per cent sure,’ she says, her voice suddenly firm. ‘Like if I’m wavering even a tiny bit, I won’t go through with it. It wouldn’t be fair on the kid.’

‘But is anyone ever a hundred per cent sure about anything?’ I point out.

‘When it comes to kids, they should be. I mean, this is a life they’re talking about. Seriously, they should make all would-be parents take a test, make sure they know exactly what they’re signing up for before they’re allowed to procreate.’

‘The birth rate would plummet,’ I point out.

‘That’s the whole point.’

‘I bet you’ll be a right softie,’ she adds.

‘What do you mean?’

‘When you’re a dad. I bet your kids will have you wrapped around their little fingers.’

She wiggles her pinky in front of my face. ‘That’s not a diss, by the way.’

'You sure about that?' I ask, frowning.

'Course. You'll be great.'

'But also, a total pushover?'

'Yeah, but in a nice way. Like, when they want sweets or something, they'll always come straight to you instead of their mum, and they'll be secretly pleased when you're the one who picks them up from school or tucks them in, because you'll let them ride on your shoulders and make up silly stories and stuff.'

I like the idea that Molly has thought about this.

'You'd be a good mum,' I say decisively.

She wrinkles her nose, shrugs.

'No, you would,' I insist. 'You'd be really kind and patient and do really good arts and crafts activities with them.'

Molly just smiles and shakes her head, then turns and opens the fridge.

'What does tequila go with, do you reckon?' she asks, poking through its contents.

I go over to join her. Her hair smells of Rhiannon's posh shampoo, the stuff I'm forbidden from using unless I 'have a death wish'.

'Lemonade will probably work,' I say, edging in slightly closer, enjoying the proximity of our bodies. 'Coke at a push.'

There's no lemonade *or* Coke, and we wind up having to settle for flat Dr Pepper.

'Cheers,' I say.

'Cheers,' Molly replies, raising her mug.

We sip in unison and agree that tequila and Dr Pepper is actually not half bad.

'So, how's it going with Georgie?' Molly asks, leaning against the counter, her hands wrapped around her mug. 'I saw you guys talking earlier.'

'We're just mates,' I answer hurriedly.

'That's not what Rhiannon reckons,' she says teasingly.

'Yeah, well in case you hadn't noticed, Rhiannon's full of shit half the time.'

Molly giggles. She'll never admit it, but she *loves* it when I roast my sister in front of her.

'She's just shit-stirring to make up for her love life being so fucking non-existent,' I continue, warming to my theme.

'Ben!' Molly cries in mock outrage, striking me on the arm.

'Oh c'mon, Mol, you've got to admit it's true.'

'She's just picky.'

I fold my arms across my chest and raise an eyebrow. 'Picky? Is that what we're calling it these days?'

She gives me a playful shove.

'You're a meanie, Benjamin Cleary.'

'You love it.'

She doesn't deny it, just drains what's left of her drink and sets about making another.

'Georgie *is* really nice though,' she says.

'Yeah, she's cool and everything. I just don't think I feel that way about her. Like, we get on and everything, but when I talk to her there's just no . . .'

'Spark?' Molly suggests. 'Chemistry?'

'Exactly. None of that.'

'Those feelings can grow though, don't you think?'

'Nah,' I say, looking into her eyes. 'When you know, you know.'

I attempt to hold her gaze, to have a 'moment', but she's already turned away to pour us another drink.

'Shit!' she gasps.

The tequila must have gone to her head because she's somehow managed to completely misjudge the alignment of our mugs and the bottle of Dr Pepper, sloshing most of it over the already soaking-wet counter.

'What are you like?' I say, swooping in to take over, the 'moment', if you can even call it that, well and truly gone.

With barely any Dr Pepper left, our next round is at least two-thirds tequila, the liquid in our mugs cloudy like dirty paint water.

'Jesus Christ, Mayhew,' I say, taking a sip and wincing. 'Is this all part of your dastardly plan to get me drunk?'

'Perhaps,' she says, flashing me a grin as she clumsily clinks her mug against mine. 'Why? Do you *want* me to get you drunk?'

Is she flirting with me? I can't tell. She's saying all the right things and giving me all the right little looks, but Molly's so bloody nice and friendly to everyone, it's impossible to know for sure. I make the executive decision to not overthink it, to take advantage of the fact I have her to myself for the first time in what seems like forever, and just go with the flow.

'Maybe,' I say, leaning against the counter so we're mirroring one another.

A smile spreads across Molly's face, my stomach turning a series of silent somersaults in response.

'Then we're on the same page, aren't we?' she says, before downing the contents of her mug.

She grabs the bottle of tequila by its neck.

'Let's go explore,' she says.

'Explore where?'

'Everywhere!'

She takes my hand, pulls me towards the door. I let her,

enjoying the feeling of my palm in hers. It feels right, like our hands are meant to hold one another, just like that magical night under the blankets.

The house becomes our theme park as Molly and I career from room to room, giggling like little kids. In the officially off-limits dining room at the front of the house, I find a framed photograph of Luke as a buck-toothed little kid that makes Molly laugh so hard she lets out an actual snort.

Shortly after that, Molly discovers a copy of *The Joy of Sex* on a bookshelf. She pulls it down, opening a page at random.

'Wow, check out this woman's bush!' she exclaims, thrusting it under my nose.

'Never mind her bush, what about his beard?' I say, pointing at the illustration of the bloke. 'He looks like Jesus.'

This segues into a conversation about whether Jesus ever had sex. Ordinarily I'd be self-conscious talking about sex so openly in front of Molly, but the tequila has stripped away my inhibitions, left me feeling loose and free.

On the first floor, we find ourselves in what I'm guessing must be Luke's little brother's bedroom. There's a Buzz Lightyear duvet on the bed and toys are scattered on the floor. We kneel on the carpet and play with a Hot Wheels garage, taking it in turns to crank the elevator.

'Am I too old to ask for one of these for Christmas, do you reckon?' Molly asks.

'No way.'

She releases another car and watches it whizz down the track, her eyes shining. There are mascara smudges under her eyes, but she still looks beautiful.

'Tell you what,' I say, 'how about I get it for you?'

She laughs.

'No, I'm serious. If you want it, I'll buy it.'

I mean it too, hundred per cent.

'Don't be stupid. I bet they're like seventy quid or something.'

'So?'

She sits back on her heels, tilts her head to one side.

'Why are you so nice to me, Ben?'

She seems genuinely curious.

'Because you're perfect,' I reply.

She shakes her head, looks away. 'No, I'm not.'

'You are to me.'

She raises her eyes to meet mine and looks at me, like *really* looks at me, like she's gazing right into my soul or something.

I hold my breath, terrified to do anything that might break this spell.

Then she leans forward, and before I can compute that the thing I've been dreaming about for years is *finally* about to happen, presses her lips against mine.

Rhiannon

'Rhiannon,' Cal says. 'That's Welsh, right?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Does that mean *you're* Welsh then?'

'Not really. My gran is. Or was.'

Cal raises a questioning eyebrow.

'She died just before Christmas,' I explain.

'I'm so sorry.'

'Don't be. She was pretty old. And kind of a bitch.'

Cal's eyes widen and I fear I've taken it too far. I'm about

to take it back, claim it was just a shitty joke when he says, 'for what it's worth, my granddad is a bit of a wanker too.'

'You're not just saying that to make me feel better about slagging off my dead elderly relative in front of a complete stranger, are you?' I ask.

'*Complete* stranger?' Cal says. 'Rhiannon, I thought we'd bonded!'

I can't help but laugh.

'OK, relative stranger then,' I say.

Cal narrows his eyes.

'Acquaintance?' I offer.

'I'll take acquaintance,' he says. 'For now.'

Having vacated the bathroom, we're sitting on the narrow set of stairs leading up to the attic. It's quieter here, almost private, tucked away from the chaos of the party.

'So, this grandma of yours,' Cal says, rolling his empty bottle between his palms. 'What made her such a bitch?'

'Oh, she wasn't so terrible. She was just very critical, you know? She always had all these opinions on what I wore and how I had my hair. And she didn't even hide the fact that she preferred my twin brother to me.'

'In what way?'

'OK, so this one Christmas, she gave us both money instead of a gift, and when we opened the little envelopes, it turned out she'd given me twenty quid and him forty.'

'Serious?'

'Uh-huh. And when my mum pulled her on it, assuming it was a mistake, she didn't even bother to deny it. She just made up some bullshit about Ben being more sensible with his money than me.'

'How did you fare in the will?'

'Ha. I'm too afraid to ask.'

I'm assuming that if I'd made the cut in any meaningful way, I'd have been told about it by now.

'What about your granddad,' I ask. 'What's his deal?'

'He's just very fond of the sound of his own voice, which would be OK if what was coming out of it wasn't so offensive.'

'What kind of offensive?'

'Racist, sexist, ableist, classist.' Cal ticks them off on his fingers. 'All the "ists" basically. It makes family gatherings *really* fun.'

'Sounds like it.'

We exchange grins.

'So, a twin brother, huh?' Cal says. 'What's that like?'

'It's . . . OK. I mean, it's all I've ever known so it's kind of hard to judge . . .'

'Is he here tonight?'

'Somewhere, yeah.'

'You get on then?'

'Enough. I mean, we argue and stuff, and sometimes I actually want to kill him with my bare hands, but on the whole, we're OK. How about you? Do you have brothers and sisters?'

'Nope. Just me. It's funny though, when I was younger, I was *desperate* for a twin.'

'Boy or girl?'

'Boy. A double of me in every way, which looking back is actually kind of narcissistic.'

I laugh.

'Do you need to get that?' Cal asks.

'What?'

'Your phone. It is yours that keeps vibrating, isn't it?'

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ I bluff, reluctantly fishing my phone out of the pocket of my jeans. It’s been buzzing at regular intervals for the last minute or so, but I’d hoped Cal hadn’t noticed.

I’m surprised to note the time. Cal and I have been talking for over an hour. And not the usual braindead ‘banter’ most boys like to engage in, but an actual conversation.

The messages are all from Liv.

where are you?
molly’s waaaaaaaaasted
i think she needs to go home
she’s sleeping at yours, right?

I groan inwardly. This is fucking typical. The one time I meet someone that I actually want to get to know is also the one time that Molly actually wants to leave the party early.

‘Everything OK?’ Cal asks.

I sigh. ‘My friend, the one I mentioned earlier, is really drunk.’

‘You need to check on her?’

I hesitate. I know that I should, but I’m enjoying hanging out with Cal and the last thing I want to do is put a premature stop to it.

‘I could come too,’ Cal offers, perhaps sensing my dilemma. ‘I mean, if you wanted me to.’

My heart lifts.

‘You don’t mind?’

‘Not a bit.’

‘Um, OK, then. Sure.’

Cal and I leave our cosy little spot on the stairs and make our way down to the ground floor. Somewhere along the way,

his hand finds mine. His palm is smooth and cool. I think back to the last time a boy held my hand – Harry Rose on the coach journey back from Dieppe in Year 8. I spent the whole weekend assuming that I now had a boyfriend, only to arrive back at school on Monday and have him totally blank me. Molly was outraged on my behalf, threatening to read Harry the riot act for 'leading me on', which only added to my humiliation, especially when he asked her out the following week. For the record, she said 'no', but his rejection still burned.

This feels different though.

Cal feels different.

Or maybe I'm getting ahead of myself and after tonight, I'll never hear from him again and this will all turn out to be just some weird, trippy dream.

Molly is slumped on a rattan sofa in the corner of the conservatory, her head resting on Ben's shoulder, her face obscured by a curtain of blonde hair. Liv is kneeling in front of her attempting to get her to drink from a pint glass of water, which judging by the wet patch on the front of Molly's dress, hasn't been all that successful. Sami stands nearby, his arms folded across his chest.

I drop Cal's hand and make my way over to Molly.

'What happened?' I ask, crouching down next to Liv.

'Tequila happened,' Ben replies. 'Lots and lots of tequila.'

He's drunk too. He's hiding it well, but he has that wide-eyed, glazed look he only seems to get when he's had a few too many.

'Has she been sick or anything?' I ask.

'Not yet,' Liv replies. 'I wouldn't rule it out though.'

'Great,' I mutter.

I kneel up so my face is almost level with Molly's.

'Mol?' I say. 'Can you hear me?'

She lets out a grunt in response.

I peer over my shoulder. I half-expect Cal to have scarpered, but he's hovering in the doorway where I left him, a concerned expression on his face.

'She OK?' he asks.

Before I can answer, Molly chokes out, 'I'mgonnabesick.'

Liv and I lurch backwards, clearing the area just in time.

Molly's puke hits the tiled floor with an aggressive splatter.

'Whoa, that was close!' Sami says. 'I thought you guys were goners for a second.'

'With these reflexes?' Liv replies, cracking her knuckles. 'No way.'

Molly coughs, then lets out a deep groan, her head dangling between her knees.

'You OK, hun?' Liv asks.

Molly shakes her head.

'Here, let me stick your hair in a pony.'

Liv gently removes the scrunchie from Molly's wrist and pulls her hair into a loose ponytail so that it doesn't trail in the pool of vomit. All the while, Ben rubs her back.

'Should I get a cloth or something?' Cal asks.

I toss him a grateful smile. 'That would be great. Thank you.'

'No problem.'

'Who's the boy?' Liv asks the second he's out of earshot.

My face flushes red. 'Just someone I met.'

Liv rolls her eyes. 'Well, obviously.'

'He plays football with Luke.'

'He's cute. You going to get his number?'

'I don't know. I'm going to have to take this one home

now, so . . .'

'I'll take her,' Ben says.

I glance up. He's still rubbing Molly's back.

'I can take her home,' he says. 'I'm kind of done here anyway.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah.'

'Mol? That OK with you?'

Molly raises her head. Her eyes are bloodshot and there's vomit residue around her mouth and yet she still somehow manages to look beautiful.

'Ben's offered to take you home,' I say. 'Is that cool?'

She nods a childlike nod.

'OK, good. I'll be back a bit later. Just don't throw up in my bed, yeah?'

Molly nods again.

'Don't make promises you can't keep, Mol,' Sami says sternly.

'Haha,' I say, sticking my tongue out at him.

'I can make up the camp bed in the study for her if you want?' Ben offers.

I pull a face. 'You'd do that?'

Setting up our ancient camp bed is a major pain in the arse and the main reason Molly usually just ends up just top-and-tailing with me.

'Sure,' Ben replies. 'It's no biggie.'

'OK, thanks.'

'How will you get home?' he asks.

'Theo can walk me.'

'If you can find him,' Sami says. 'He's been AWOL since we arrived.'

'Oh my god, you don't you think something's actually happened between him and Archie, do you?' I ask.

‘Well, if it has, it won’t be long before we get all the gory details,’ Liv says with a laugh.

She’s spot-on. When it comes to spilling the tea about his intimate liaisons, Theo is laughably indiscreet.

‘And if Theo doesn’t turn up, Liv and I can walk Rhi home,’ Sami says as Cal re-enters the conservatory.

‘No cloth,’ he says apologetically. ‘But I found this.’

He hands over a kitchen roll.

‘No, that’s perfect,’ I say. ‘Thank you.’

Molly peers up at him.

‘Who are you?’ she asks him in the baby girl voice she often slips into when she’s pissed.

‘I’m Cal,’ he replies.

‘Hello, Cal. I’m Molly.’

‘Hello Molly.’

I sneak a glance at Cal. It would be just my luck if after all this he wound up fancying her. Even half-cut with vomit on her chin, I’m under no illusions that most guys would go for my best friend over me.

‘Do you like RhiRhi, Cal?’ Molly slurs.

Oh my god, I am going to *kill* her.

‘RhiRhi?’ Cal repeats, his voice uncertain.

‘Because you should, you know,’ Molly continues. ‘Cos she’s the best. You hear me? She’s my best friend in the entire world and I love her so much it hurts.’

Molly starts hiccupping, which luckily puts a halt to her impromptu tribute.

We end up using the entire kitchen roll.

Molly keeps saying ‘sorry’ over and over as we clean up around her.

‘Mol, it’s fine,’ Liv says. ‘We’ve all been there.’

I haven't, I want to point out.

Together, Ben and Sami haul Molly into standing position.

'Are you going to be OK with her, Benny boy?' Sami asks, frowning.

'We'll be fine,' Ben says. 'It's not like it's far. And the fresh air will probably do her good. Right, Mol?'

'Right,' Molly says, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

'Well, look after her, yeah?' I say.

Ben wraps a protective arm around Molly's shoulder.

'You know I will.'