

1. MORNING

Andy Pierce's bed felt *fantastic*. His duvet was wrapped around his chin, his muscles felt relaxed and his warm pillow fitted snugly under his head. But the gash of sunlight leaking between the curtains was tormenting him.

The fourteen-year-old didn't have the heart to crane his head up and look at the bedside clock, but he knew he had to get up. In less than an hour he'd have his elbows propped on a desk and a tie around his neck for the waking nightmare that was Monday morning: English, French and drama. Today would be even worse than usual because Andy was going to get nailed for not doing his Macbeth homework.

He pictured the dirty look he'd get off Mr Walker as his bedroom door swung into the room.

'I called you three times already,' Andy's mum shouted, as she bounded across the carpet towards the window.

Christine Pierce looked like a sour-faced angel: dressed for work in a white polo shirt, white trousers and white canvas plimsolls.

'There's toast on the table downstairs. Stone cold now, I expect.'

The room exploded with light as Christine swished the curtains apart, then whipped away the duvet covering her eldest son.

'Mummmm,' Andy moaned, as he shielded his eyes with one hand and put the other over his privates.

'Oh, give over,' Christine grinned, giving her son a friendly slap on the ankle. 'You've got nothing down there I haven't seen a thousand times before.' Her expression turned to revulsion as she caught a whiff of the duvet hanging over her arm. 'When *exactly* did you last change these sheets?'

Andy shrugged as he rolled on to his bum and grabbed a pair of clean boxers he'd set out the night before.

'I dunno . . . Last week I think.'

'Pull the other one. Those pillowcases are yellow and I don't even want to think about the smell.'

'It's not *that* bad.'

Andy watched his mum's lips thin out as he yanked a school shirt sleeve up his arm. Thin lips meant he had to be careful: she was on the verge of going thermonuclear.

'When I get home from work this evening, I expect to see that *disgusting* bed linen washed and hanging on the rotary line out the back. And you can do your brother's while you're at it.'

'*What?*' Andy gasped. 'Why have I got to do Stuart's bed?'

Andy recoiled as his mother jammed her pointing finger under his nose. 'You claim you're old enough to stroll in from the cinema with your mates at a quarter past eleven. In my book, that makes you old enough to start taking more responsibility around this house. This isn't a hotel, and I'm your mother, not your cleaning lady.'

‘Yes, your majesty,’ Andy said sullenly.

Christine glanced at her watch and sounded more friendly as she backed away. ‘I’ve got to run. You know, it would make my life easier if I got a *little* bit more cooperation out of you.’

Andy had heard this guilt trip before and wasn’t buying it. ‘Where’s my lunch money?’ he asked, as he kicked both feet in the air and hitched black school trousers up his legs.

‘There’s bus fare on the kitchen worktop. Ham, tomato and mustard sandwich in the fridge.’

‘Can’t I get chip money?’

‘Don’t start on that one again. You know I haven’t got thirty quid a week for you and Stuart to spend on junk food.’

Andy tutted. ‘Everyone goes round the chippy. Sandwiches are totally embarrassing.’

‘Go whine to your father. His wife’s driving round in a new Focus, while I’m maxed out on three credit cards.’

This guilt trip worked better. Andy had grown to realise that his dad was a total scumbag. His mum had to put in a ton of overtime just to keep their heads above water.

‘I should be home by seven,’ Christine said, leaning forwards and kissing her son on the cheek. ‘And I’m *not* joking about changing those beds, you hear me?’

Leaving a smudge of lipstick on her son’s face, she backed out of the room and set off downstairs. The teenager was half a minute behind, threading his belt into his trousers as he walked.

Stuart was in the kitchen and irritated his big brother by being perky and neat as usual. The eleven-year-old had his hair combed, blazer and tie on and Bugs Bunny blaring out

of the portable TV. As Andy grabbed a triangle of cold toast, the two boys exchanged grunts.

'Mum's stressed out,' Stuart said sourly. 'Why you gotta keep winding her up all the time?'

Andy wasn't proud of the way he got into rows with his mum, but he didn't mean it. It just kept happening, part of being a teenager or something. Whatever his true feelings, Andy wasn't going to give his little brother the satisfaction of a straight answer.

'Why don't you mind your own?'

Stuart sucked air through his teeth. 'You're so selfish.'

'Piss off.'

'Don't *start*, you two,' Christine shouted from the hallway. She had a bag over her shoulder now and the car keys in her hand, all set to leave. 'You've got ten minutes or you'll both be late for school. Don't forget to turn the deadlock in the front door as you leave.'

Andy gave his mum a nod. 'Later Mum, have a good day at work.'

'Not much chance of that,' she answered gloomily.

Andy waited for the front door to close before scowling back at his brother. 'You're asking for a punch with that smart mouth.'

Before Stuart could think up a comeback that was nasty enough to sting but not so nasty it earned him a dead arm, a scream erupted out on the driveway.

It could only be their mum and it wasn't an *I've seen a spider* scream or the way she'd screamed at their father when they were getting divorced. It came from deep inside, like she was in a lot of pain.

The two lads bolted out of their seats at the dining table and raced down the hallway towards the front door.

A Balaclava-clad man smashed Christine's car windscreen with a mallet as Andy burst out on to the driveway. Christine writhed in the gravel, screaming and spitting. Her face and hands glistened with red paint that had been thrown in her face.

The man popped two more windows along the side of the car, but Andy fixed on his accomplice, a stocky dude looming over his mother. He wore camouflage trousers, a black Balaclava and looked ominously like he was about to stick the boot in. Andy didn't even have shoes on, but couldn't stand there while someone laid into his mum.

'You're dead,' Andy screamed as he charged forward.

He was stocky, but the teenager wasn't up to fighting a grown man. The masked dude wrapped an arm around Andy's neck and planted a gloved fist hard into his face.

'I'm not the killer here,' the dude snarled, as Andy's nose exploded in pain.

Andy toppled backwards into a hedge, before a giant boot sank into his belly, pushing him deep into the tangled branches. As Andy wiped a bloody nose on his white sleeve, the Balaclava-clad men jogged off towards a battered Citroën parked across the end of the driveway.

The little getaway car lurched as Andy experienced the most desperate feeling of his life. It wasn't just the pain in his nose, or worrying about his mum, but a feeling of total inadequacy: he'd let the thugs who'd attacked her get away and hadn't been able to stop them because he was only a kid. As Andy untangled himself from the branches and

staggered on to his feet, he could hear her moaning.

'I can't see,' Christine sobbed.

Stuart stood on the doorstep, chalk white and rigid.

'Don't just stand there, moron,' Andy yelled as he stumbled towards his mother. 'Get inside, call a bloody ambulance.'

As Stuart came to his senses and raced for the phone, Andy noticed that a hangman's noose had been spray-painted on to the garage door and a message written alongside it:

QUIT YOUR JOB AT THE ANIMAL LAB
NEXT TIME YOU DIE
BY ORDER - THE ANIMAL FREEDOM MILITIA

2. PUTTY

‘Doctors fear that the thirty-six-year-old woman may have suffered permanent damage to her eyesight. This is the latest in a string of increasingly violent attacks by the Animal Freedom Militia. Avon police say they are doing all they can to protect employees of Malarek Research, but with more than two hundred workers at the laboratory, their resources are stretched to the limit . . .’

The news item came from a screen hanging on the wall beside James Adams’ head, but he wasn’t listening. He was in the dining-room on CHERUB campus and those of his mates who weren’t away on a mission sat around their usual table: Kerry, Bruce, Callum, Connor and Shak.

It had been a couple of minutes since Bruce had gone arse over tit, spilling a tray of macaroni and 7up over a girl sitting a couple of tables across, but everyone was still winding him up about it.

James had a stack of chicken bones on the plate in front of him. His bloated tummy dug into the waistband of his jeans and he was content to sit back and let the conversation pass him by. Kerry had finished eating as well and she’d sprawled

out in her chair, slipped her feet out of her sandals and rested her ankles across James' lap.

She could have put her feet on one of the empty chairs at the next table, but she hadn't and James appreciated the affectionate gesture. It meant Kerry was in a good mood and with luck they'd be heading upstairs for snogging and homework once their food settled.

Shak sat on James' right and took a quick glance at Kerry's feet. 'Your feet're really small. Kerry. What size shoe do you take?'

'Size two.'

Shak nodded. 'I found out why women have smaller feet than men the other day.'

Kerry looked baffled. 'On average, women are smaller than men all over.'

'Who wants to know why women have smaller feet than men?' Shak asked, breaking into a grin.

The kids around the table didn't look enthusiastic.

'Is this another one of your lame jokes?' Bruce asked.

Shak grinned. 'My jokes are *quality*.'

Everyone except Shak either spluttered or shook their heads.

Callum summed up the mood. 'If you say so, dude.'

'Fine, if you don't want to hear it . . .'

Bruce tutted. 'Tell us the stupid joke, Shak. Otherwise we'll never hear the end of it. Why do women have smaller feet than men?'

Shak's grin grew until it ate up his whole face. 'So they can stand closer to the kitchen sink when they do the washing-up.'

The joke was as bad as everyone expected, but it raised a laugh because the boys were already in a jovial mood. James managed a quick grin before he turned and caught the frosty look on Kerry's face.

'Male chauvinist pigs,' Kerry snapped, as she pulled her feet off James' lap and faced him off with her hands on her hips.

'Hey, I didn't tell the joke,' James said, raising his palms defensively.

Kerry glowered. 'But you laughed.'

There was a loud crack as she slapped James across the cheek.

'Jesus, Kerry,' James said, raising his arms in front of his head to stop her getting another shot in. 'Keep things in proportion, why don't you?'

'You'd all better wipe those smirks off,' Kerry said, shooting thunderbolts at the other boys around the table. Then she zoomed in on Shak. 'You reckon sexist jokes are so funny? How would you feel if I sat here telling Paki jokes?'

There was a tense silence as Kerry grabbed her food tray and steamed off. James sheepishly rubbed the stinging red mark on his face.

Callum and Bruce creased up as soon as she was out of sight. 'Did you hear that crack!' Callum yelled.

'That was *baaaad*,' Bruce said, as he exuberantly slammed his hand against the table.

James turned sourly towards Shak. 'Thanks for winding my girlfriend up.'

'No snogging for Mr Adams tonight,' Callum grinned.

The lads all snickered at James' expense.

'I don't know what you're all looking so happy for,' James said. 'Where have all your girlfriends got to tonight . . . ? Oh, wait, I remember. None of you losers *have* girlfriends.'

'I've got Naira,' Callum said.

Bruce laughed. 'You had two snogs and she's been away on a mission for six months.'

'Still counts,' Callum said, glowering at Bruce. 'She e-mails me almost every day. Who have you ever snogged?'

'I've kissed girls.'

James laughed. 'Like who?'

'Not here,' Bruce said. 'Out on missions and stuff.'

Everyone groaned because they didn't believe him: Bruce was shy around girls.

'He snogs that little blue teddy he always sleeps with,' Shak giggled.

'Piss off,' Bruce said angrily. 'And I don't sleep with Jeremy. He fell off that shelf over my bed one time and Kyle went and told the whole world.'

'What the hell kind of name is Jeremy for a teddy?' James smirked.

'Yeah,' Connor nodded. 'You'd at least think he'd snog a teddy with a girl's name.'

Bruce exploded out of his seat and glowered at Connor. 'Wanna try repeating that in five seconds when I've punched all your teeth out?'

James backed up his chair and grinned at his mates as he stood up. 'I'll leave you four pussies to sort your squabbles. I'd better be in my room when Kerry comes knocking.'

'You reckon?' Shak said. 'That's really gonna happen when she just cracked you one.'

‘I *happen* to have an ace up my sleeve,’ James grinned. ‘Little Miss Perfect is failing algebra. She needs my massive brain to sort out her Xs and Ys.’

Connor tutted. ‘You’re totally jammy, James. You always get lucky with girls.’

James looked smug as he walked away from the table. ‘What can I say guys? Chicks can’t resist me – they’re putty in my hands.’

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James went up to his room, stepped over the dirty laundry and sat on his double bed reading the copy of *Great Expectations* his English teacher had inflicted on him. He was supposed to be two hundred and fifty pages in already, but he was mired in the low seventies and couldn’t concentrate because he expected Kerry to knock at any minute.

But he was having doubts by the time he reached page 106 and when a knock finally came, it was a triple.

‘Lauren?’ James yelled, as his sister’s long blonde hair dangled inside the door.

‘Ha-haa,’ Lauren smiled, pointing at James as she stepped into the room. ‘Your face is well red. Kerry said she gave you a good stinging.’

James slid his bookmark in and straightened himself up. ‘You saw Kerry? Is she coming over?’

‘Doubt it,’ Lauren said. ‘She’s just been up in my room getting help with her maths homework.’

‘You little traitor,’ James gasped. ‘What did you do that for? I’m way better at maths than you.’

‘She’s in a right mood with you, James. And I might not

be as good at maths as you, but I still get all As and I'm ahead of Kerry. Anyway, it serves you right for cracking a sexist joke.'

'Shak told the joke, I barely laughed.'

'Whatever,' Lauren shrugged. 'You and Kerry are such drama queens. It'll be hands all over each other again by tomorrow.'

'So, did you just come here to gloat about me getting slapped?'

Lauren grinned. 'Came to ask a favour, actually.'

'Sounds ominous.'

Lauren sat on the edge of the bed. 'You know Kirsten McVicar?'

James shook his head.

'Yes you do, James. She was at my birthday party. She's Bethany's friend, but she's a year younger. She was wearing those black tights with the green spots on?'

'Nah,' James said. 'Your mates all talk the same crap and you're always swapping clothes. Why's it matter anyway?'

'Kirsten dropped out of basic training last week. And you know Bethany's brother Jake is doing his training as well?'

James nodded. 'How's the little dude getting on?'

'Kirsten says Jake's struggling. He's only just turned ten. He's sprained his thumb and he's not exactly huge for his age, so he's having a hard time carrying his pack on long runs and stuff.'

'Pity,' James said. 'I hope Jake doesn't fail. He's a bit full of himself at times, but—'

'Pot calling kettle if ever I heard it,' Lauren interrupted. 'Anyway, me and Bethany made up a plan to give Jake a

boost. We want to take him a little pick-me-up package. You know, chocolate bars for energy, dry boots and underwear, a padded strap to make carrying his pack easier.'

James looked shocked. 'Lauren, you can't just waltz into the basic training compound. The gates are alarmed and there's barbed wire and surveillance cameras everywhere.'

'Me and Bethany have it all worked out, but we could do with someone older coming with us.'

'No, no, *no!*' James laughed. 'Don't look at me. We'll get hammered if we're caught. Jake's a nice little kid, but he'll just have to suffer through basic training, same as we all did.'

'Please, James.'

'Besides, why do you care? I mean, I can see Bethany would want to risk her neck for her little brother, but you? I've never heard you say a good word about Jake. You battered him that time he blocked your toilet up with popcorn.'

'Bethany's my best friend. I'm doing it for her.'

'Hang on,' James gasped, as his face lit up with realisation. 'You're not doing this for Jake at all. Lover boy's in training as well, isn't he? You're doing this for Rat.'

'No,' Lauren gasped. 'I mean, Rat *is* Jake's training partner. But he's *not* my boyfriend.'

'Look Lauren, I know you've got the hots for Rat, but I'm on top of everything now. All my homework is up to date and my grades aren't bad. I must have spent a thousand hours running punishment laps and scrubbing toilets since I came to CHERUB. I'm not sticking my neck out for anyone unless it's life and death.'

'I thought you might say that,' Lauren grinned. 'So I'll have to call in the favour.'

‘What favour? I don’t owe you squat.’

James felt his heart jolt as Lauren gave him her evil smirk. Her face had altered since she was a toddler, but that expression hadn’t changed a bit. It was the look she used to get right before jamming an ice-cream cornet in your face. It was the look she had when she broke the video and told their mum she saw James do it . . .

‘Remember last year, when we were in Idaho?’ Lauren said airily. ‘Remember cheating on Kerry with a girl called Becky?’

James nodded grimly.

‘I never told anyone; but, I mean, that information could slip out at *any* time and Kerry would kick your arse. So, I just want one little favour in return for eternal silence.’

‘You *what*?’ James yelled. ‘That’s not asking for a favour, that’s blackmail.’

‘I suppose you *could* call it that,’ Lauren smirked. ‘But James, you like Rat, you like Jake. Is it really such a big problem?’

‘What kind of scumbag blackmails their own brother?’ James asked indignantly.

Lauren ducked the question. ‘James, me and Bethany have everything planned out. There’s no way we’ll get caught.’

‘You know what,’ James said, trying to sound confident, ‘I’m calling your bluff. That thing with Becky happened more than a year ago and Kerry knows I’m no angel. She’ll understand.’

Lauren grinned as she headed for the door. ‘Fine, I’ll go tell Kerry about Becky now then.’

James acted casual as Lauren headed out into the corridor and turned towards Kerry’s room, but he couldn’t keep up the act and scrambled after her.

Kerry's room was less than twenty metres away and Lauren was all set to knock by the time he'd caught up.

'OK, you win,' James whispered bitterly.

Lauren smiled contentedly. 'Thought I might.'

James huffed, 'But you can't keep blackmailing me. You've got to swear on our mum's grave never to tell anyone.'

'That's fair,' Lauren nodded. Then she broke into a grin and gave her brother a hug. 'Thanks, James.'

James was too pissed off to hug Lauren back, but he did have a grudging admiration for her cheek. Then Kerry's door popped open.

'Thought I could hear you two,' Kerry said. 'What's going on out here?'

'Nothing,' James said unconvincingly.

Lauren smiled at Kerry. 'I told this idiot to come and apologise to you.'

James was relieved to see that Kerry was smiling back at him. 'Guess I overreacted,' she said.

James shrugged. 'Sorry I laughed at that joke.'

'I'll live,' Kerry said as she stepped up and kissed James on the cheek. 'Did I hear you say you were behind on *Great Expectations* earlier?'

'Page one-twelve,' James nodded.

'That's further than me,' Kerry said. 'I'm never gonna catch up, so I got the film version out of the library. You want to come in and watch it?'

'Lifesaver,' James grinned, as he stepped into Kerry's room. Then he looked back at Lauren. 'Catch up with you later, sis.'

'I'll send you a text with the details,' Lauren said. 'Don't be late.'

Kerry looked a bit confused. 'What's she up to?'

James moved in to kiss Kerry back. 'Don't worry about it,' he grinned, as he looped his arm around her back and kicked the door shut with his trainer.