

#justsaying

by

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Novel. Contemporary teen drama

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#JUSTSAYING

It was only a prank.

A childish act of revenge. Nothing more than a stupid throwaway comment I posted on a social networking website. I didn't mean to cause so much trouble. Or harm. The situation, it just... spiralled out of control.

Sixty-nine characters (including spaces), that's all it took to ruin the lives of so many...
...and cause the death of one.

If only they'd taken note of the hashtag at the end of my sentence.

#justsaying

It told the whole world that my post was nothing more than a casual remark, and definitely not a proven fact. Just something I blurted out to the social media universe in the heat of the moment. If only they'd opened their eyes, if only they'd stopped to think, if only they'd stepped back and realised I was JUST SAYING...

...then nobody would have taken the post so seriously.

And Aimee Taylor would still be alive...

#REGRET

Oh, God, I am hurting, I am bloated with regret, I am the proverbial emotional wreck. I am sorry, so very sorry. More sorry than you think. More sorry than anybody thinks. My dizzy head is packed to the rafters with a zillion thoughts, all jabbering and squawking, each one out-shrieking its rabid neighbour, a hectic zoo of black noise. And the pain, it comes in waves, stormy and ferocious, crashing and smashing against my fragile beach, relentless, unremitting, eating away at my splintered soul.

I doubt I will ever bathe in the rich and zesty pool of happiness again. Not after this.

Insert long-trailing sigh of regret here.

Look, just for the record, I am not a bad person. I'm telling you the truth, I am the proud owner of a good heart. Of course, this very fact doesn't stop everybody currently hating my guts. ☹

#FML

Oh, how could I have been so stupid? The point is, I made a massive mistake, I know that now. But let's face it, I'm only human. Or am I a monster? I'm no longer sure what I am. What I did was vile and bitchy. No, no, worse than bitchy. A truly unforgivable act, callous and cold-hearted, fuelled by a raging inferno of odious spite I didn't even know I had in me.

Fine, I deserve it. Guilty as charged. If I was outside looking in, I'd hate me as well.

Anyway... it was Aimee's mother who made the shocking (no, actually, make that totally gut-wrenching) discovery that morning. It must have been horrible for the poor woman. I'm guessing it played out something like this...

#DISCOVERY

Aimee Taylor's mother posted a family of impatient knocks upon the parent side of her teenage daughter's bedroom door. 'Aimee!' she hollered through the wooden barrier. 'Just because you're off school at the moment, it doesn't mean you can doss in bed all day.'

Mrs Taylor waited for a response. Any response. A grunt, an mmm, a keep your hair on, anything. None of the usual suspects made an appearance. Instead, she was met by the cold, stark nothingness of silence. More knocks followed, harder this time, those of the cross and irritated variety.

'Aimee! Ignoring my words won't make me go away.'

Again, zero response.

That's it, no more Mrs Nice Mother. She barged into Aimee's domain and marched over to the motionless human shape which resided beneath its duvet cocoon. 'Get out of that bed right now! You can help me with the housework.'

Met by further defiance from her daughter, Mrs Taylor tore the duvet free of the bed. Aimee lay in silence, eyes closed, body inactive, out for the count. Typical lazy teenager.

It was time for the employment of rough nudges. 'Aimee.' Followed by a series of sharp prods. 'Aimee!' Prod, nudge, prod. 'I'm not going to tell you again, young lady.' More nudging, more prodding. 'Don't you dare pretend you're asleep. I've had quite enough of—'

Her sudden pause heavied the air, the ice-cold, foreboding halt owed to the bottle of pills taking pride of place on the bedside cabinet. The very same bottle of pills Mrs Taylor had been prescribed by her doctor for her current bout of insomnia. What the hell was her medication doing in her daughter's bedroom? Then oh, God, fearing the worst, but hoping her grave prediction was so very wrong, she grabbed the bottle and gave it a shake.

Almost empty.

Argh, wearing the contorted face of bulge-eyed horror, Mrs Taylor snatched the girl by both shoulders, shake, shake, shake! ‘You stupid girl! How many pills have you taken?’ Upon each rigorous shudder, Aimee’s head flopped forwards and backwards like that of the proverbial rag doll. ‘Aimee, can you hear me? How many have you swallowed?’

Reaching the point of irrepressible hysterics, the mother switched to and fro between shaking her daughter’s limp frame and tapping her pallid cheeks, struggling to free the cataleptic teen from the bottomless abyss of pitch-black unconsciousness.

Still, there came no response.

‘Speak to me! Please! Oh, God, no!’

The hurried, heavy footsteps of a man signalled the arrival of Aimee’s father into the room. ‘What the hell’s going on?’

‘Call an ambulance!’

‘Why, what’s happened?’

‘Just do it! Now!’

As Aimee’s father thundered down the stairs on a mission to locate his elusive mobile phone, the sobbing, whimpering, snivelling Mrs Taylor cradled her daughter within a cage of arms and refused to let go. This parent was adamant, if the Grim Reaper turned up right now to collect the soul of her only child, he’d have a bloody good fight on his hands.

However, little did she know, it was far too late to save Aimee Taylor.

Death had already been and gone.

#NOW (The present day)

I've finally been granted my wish. I'm famous. Sort of. And popular.

Actually, no, not popular. Notoriety on an inflated scale doesn't always come hand in hand with mass adoration, as I've now discovered... the hard way. In the fame game sense, I'm currently more known and recognised than infamous and celebrated. You see, I recently played the starring role in a news story. A big news story. In fact, totally humungous, featured all over the internet, in newspapers, on the radio, on national TV, the works. This is why I'm famous. Sort of. But not in a good way. No, my sole claim to fame doubles up as the worst blunder of my life. Like, totally ever.

Insert facepalm here.

No, actually, make that a double facepalm.

Oh, yes, it's true. I (the just-turned-sixteen-year-old schoolgirl known as Mallory Finch) have screwed up everything. In the crippling wake of Hurricane Mallory, way too many people around me have been left emotionally gasping and flapping like landed fish. This is the very reason why I now find myself with a rucksack hooked over my shoulder, creeping out of the front door of my parents' house at idiot o'clock, roughly translated as either 3.00AM in the absolute dead of night or 3.00AM in the very genesis of morning, delete as appropriate.

Under cover of the shadowy gloom of this moonless night (or morning), I sneak out of the front garden and along the pavement towards a red car parked a short distance down the street. The driver, Ian Jenkins, is all set to take me to the remote and faraway destination of Anywherebuthereville.

Yes, you've guessed it. I'm running away from home.

Hah, this plan is mad, so mad. I hardly know the guy, yet here I am, sneaking away with him like some kind of desperate lovesick freak. Ah, but before you go thinking I'm a slutty skank or something, there's no romance or seediness involved. There wouldn't be. Ian is in his early thirties. By schoolgirl standards, this guy is bordering on ancient. And besides, my recent online posting of a spiteful untruth concerning a fellow pupil and somebody much older got me into this mess in the first place. Allowing history to repeat itself is not part of my immediate agenda.

In my heart, I don't want to run away. This is my home. It's where I belong. But recent events have left me with no choice. Disappearing without a trace is the only viable solution. With the idiot called Mallory Finch out of the picture, all the poor souls who have fallen victim to the crushing aftershock of my terrible, terrible lie will be free to heal their wounds and steer their fractured lives back on track again.

Then oh...

...I suddenly stop dead in my tracks. Something is holding me back. No, no, no, aborting my plan can't happen. I won't allow it. I close my eyes as tight as I can manage in a desperate attempt to relegate all guilt, fears and doubts concerning exactly what I'm leaving behind (my family, my home, my whole way of life) to the darkest recess of my mind. This is a difficult situation. My toughest decision ever. I must be strong. I must keep moving forward.

I. Must. Keep. Moving. Forward.

And then I'm on the move again, practically tip-toeing down the street, careful not to invite the threat of unwanted eyes behind twitching curtains. Nobody must see me leave. Nobody must know until after the event. Nobody.

At last, after what seems like a zillion years of soundless trekking, I reach my waiting method of escape. I open the passenger door, but pause once more, the annoying voice of reason attempting to quash my plans.

Ian picks up on my sudden hesitation. ‘Mallory, are you sure you want to do this? If you’ve changed your mind, you can always turn around and go home. Nobody will ever know.’

‘No,’ I respond, resolute, determined, climbing inside the vehicle and landing my rucksack in the footwell. In my mind, I tell myself, ‘Get lost, voice of reason, there is no going back now.’ And as I buckle up, I look at Ian and say, ‘We stick to the plan.’

Ian tips a nod. He sparks up the engine and puts the car into gear, gently pulling away so as not to wake the sleeping.

‘Ian, will you promise me one thing?’

He throws me a curious glance. ‘Sure.’

‘Promise me you won’t bring up what happened. What I did.’ I shudder at the thought of my recent sin. ‘This is a clean slate for me. A fresh new start. Please tell me you understand.’

He thinks about it, then replies, ‘I understand. And yes. I promise.’

My smile has gratitude written all over it.

As the vehicle gradually gathers pace, I peer over my shoulder, offering the street where I’ve lived my entire life one final farewell glance. Oh, God, this is so heartbreaking. I am truly remorseful for all the trouble I’ve caused. But even so, I doubt anybody in this town will be sorry to see me disappear into the night, into the unknown, into the deepest, darkest abyss of oblivion.

‘Good riddance to bad rubbish,’ that’s what they’ll all chant tomorrow morning, even my parents, yes, my own flesh and blood regarding the mysterious disappearance of Mallory Finch, public enemy number one.

#goodbyeforever

#THEN (Before the lie)

Before I was famous... sort of... before certain events prompted an idiot like me to even consider posting such a vicious comment online... facepalm alert... and before the damning media reports about the remark in question and its devastating aftershock had been force-fed to the hungry masses, my appointed role in the great scheme of things was fuzzy-grey background girl. That is, just another blurred face in a very large crowd, blending unseen and unloved into the blandest of backdrops, a colourless individual far removed from any true standing or significance, and definitely unworthy of the precious gift of popularity.

Prior to the incident (my terrible, terrible lie), nobody took any notice of fuzzy-grey background girls. Why? Simple. Not interesting enough. Not one single fuzzy-grey background girl in the long history of female background fuzziness had ever been big news.

Well, at least not until the day that changed everything. Forever.

Ah, but the day in question hadn't happened yet, leaving me blissfully ignorant amid my current fuzzy-grey background girl status.

'Hey, Malls, are you going to Aimee Taylor's party tonight?'

The question had fallen out of the permanently grinning mouth of Veronica Braithwaite, the thoroughly deserving winner of this year's Most Scatty Schoolfriend of Mallory Finch award. Of course, Veronica knew nothing about both her nomination and subsequent win of the coveted yet totally fictitious prize. The glittering annual red carpet ceremony existed exclusively in my head.

Just like me, Veronica had walked this earth for fifteen, almost sixteen years, although the Braithwaite girl appeared to harbour a mental age of circa twelve or thirteen. Upbringing, I guessed. No doubt all down to a long list of bad decisions made by the girl's parents. Especially their debut mutual decision made fifteen, almost sixteen years ago, i.e. what to call

their newborn child. Surely they'd known, by giving their brand spanking new bundle of joy the unusual (and well past its best-before date) moniker of Veronica, they'd end up fifteen, almost sixteen years later with an equally unusual daughter. Then again, who was I to cast aspersions? My own upbringing hadn't exactly been a major success story. I'd ended up a total nobody. Therefore, my own parents were just as bad.

#epicparentsfail

Thinking about it, this was probably why we got along. We were both hopeless misfits within the complex society of modern youth, brought together not by personal choice but by the morbid reality that nobody else in the school expressed any genuine desire to hang around with us, at least not on a permanent basis. I hardly considered Veronica a close friend, for we didn't share the required inseparable bestie bond, but she was the nearest I had these days to a good mate.

Actually, thinking about it for a second time, I did have a minor scattering of casual acquaintances connected to me on various social networking websites, but Veronica was currently my only proper realworld friend. Huh, it was weird how said acquaintances didn't mind virtually associating with me online, populating my posts now and then with corresponding comments alongside members of the emoji family, but then chose to keep their distance in reality. Why? Was I totally obnoxious in true life? Was I boring? Or worse still, did I smell?

'This party, wow, it's all set to be totally mental,' Veronica chirped in her usual over-excited way, picking up the second trophy of the day of Most Annoyingly Gushing Schoolfriend of Mallory Finch. 'Aimee will have the whole house to herself. Her parents are jetting off for the weekend to their villa in Spain. How mad is that?'

'I haven't been invited,' I found it mega-embarrassing to admit, averting my dejected eyes from Veronica's newly formed frown.

‘That’s weird,’ uttered the wearer of said newly formed frown. ‘I got my invite yesterday.’

‘I guess Aimee hasn’t got round to asking me yet.’

The winner of the awards in the categories of Most Scatty Schoolfriend of Mallory Finch and Most Annoyingly Gushing Schoolfriend of Mallory Finch tossed across a nod. ‘Yeah, I guess so. Aimee’s the most popular girl in the whole school. It’s bound to take ages to go round and give all her friends the green light.’

Hah, yeah, right. We lived in an age where the manual paper invitations of a bygone age had long since been given their marching orders, replaced instead by wondrous modern instant communication tools such as messaging apps, email and social media. If Aimee planned to give me the thumbs-up, she’d have made contact by now.

‘The truth is, Veronica, I don’t think Aimee has any intention of inviting me.’

Argh, I had no idea why I’d been so open and honest to a mere mate. Maybe it was some kind of desperate cry for help. Uh oh, it was official. I was turning into a pathetic saddo.

‘Why not?’ Veronica asked.

‘I’m not important enough. I’m a fuzzy-grey background girl.’

‘What’s with all this fuzzy-grey backing girl stuff?’

‘Background girl,’ I made a firm point of correcting. ‘My job is to be fuzzy and grey and blend into the background, not bag the golden ticket to a wild party.’

I also saw Veronica Braithwaite as a fuzzy-grey background girl, but she only seemed to serve her role on a part-time basis. The rest of the time, she earned her right to certain not so fuzzy-grey privileges by constantly gushing about Aimee, bigging her up, telling the world how truly wonderful she was. Huh, no wonder she’d bagged the Most Annoyingly Gushing Schoolfriend of Mallory Finch award every year since the very beginning of time.

It was no surprise that we didn’t share the same viewpoints on how to get ahead in life. In Veronica’s eyes, gushing, creeping and blatant bumhole licking were the only workable

methods of climbing the tall and slippery ladder of social acceptance. I, on the other hand, had no plans to join the brown tongue brigade. Hmm, maybe this was why I was one of the school's official nobodies, teetering lonely and disregarded upon the cold, deserted bottom rung. Ah, but surely there were other methods of reaching the dizzy heights of mass respect and admiration. Whatever happened to talent, hard work and determination? Huh, no doubt all three traits were long since dead and buried.

The shrill of the school bell signalled the end of the lunchtime break. The two of us fell into a dutiful line as a snail's pace exodus of pupils ambled despondent and zombie-like across the school yard towards the main building.

'Why are you always so hard on yourself?' asked Veronica, unable to get her head around my downcast attitude.

'Call it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nobody seems to like me, so I guess that's why I don't think much of myself either.'

'Oh, Malls, don't be silly. Lots of people like you.'

'No, they don't. Not in the same way they like Aimee Taylor.'

'What is your problem with that girl? You two used to be such good mates.'

'We were more than mates. Aimee was my total bestie.'

Just for a moment, a mere split-second, blink and I'd have missed it, a wistful smile appeared on my face as I remembered the good times all those years ago; vivid recollections of birds chirping for the love of summer while two young children giggled with glee, one named Mallory, one named Aimee, charging through grassy meadows dotted with floral vibrancy. However, my warm sense of honey-glazed nostalgia was short-lived. I soon fell back down to earth with a virtual dull thud, all courtesy of a sudden invasion of crippling despondency.

‘We were inseparable,’ I murmured, staring into space. ‘But not anymore. We haven’t been friends for a long time.’

The two of us entered our designated classroom and claimed a free desk.

Veronica said, ‘Maybe you should stop worrying about what people think of you and start working out what it is you want out of life.’

I rolled my eyes, hammy actor mode, all exaggerated and theatrical. ‘Veronica, I know exactly what I want. The priceless commodity I desire more than anything else in the entire universe.’

‘What, chocolate?’

‘No.’

‘The latest smartphone?’

‘Not even close.’

Miss Braithwaite shrugged, clearly out of ideas. ‘If not chocolate or a new mobile, then what?’

‘Popularity.’

Veronica giggled. ‘If being famous is what you’re after, all you need to do is sign up for a place on one of those TV reality shows.’

No doubt it was Veronica’s attempt at lifting the tone, but in my world, this type of mockery deserved to carry a harsh sentence of life imprisonment. With no chance of parole.

‘Me? On a trashy reality show? Like, as if.’

‘Why not?’

‘What do you think I am, some kind of brainless fame-chaser? There is absolutely no way I’d ever stoop so low. I despise all those talentless wannabes who yearn to be famous for... well... just being famous. You know the type. Annoying airheads with boobs that miraculously inflate to double their size overnight whose sole goal in life is to marry a

Premiership footballer.’ I felt myself cringe at the very prospect of such a meaningless existence. ‘Read my lips, Veronica. That. Is. So. Not. Me.’

‘Are you saying you don’t want to win a TV talent show and become a chart-topping singer?’ came Veronica’s next query.

‘No.’

‘Or a dancer?’

‘Not a chance.’

‘Or a girl with a performing dog?’

I lobbed across a perplexed double take. ‘I haven’t even got a dog.’

‘Yeah, but if you had a dog –’

‘Don’t even bother finishing that line. The answer’s a definite no.’

‘So what do you actually mean by popularity?’

I didn’t need time to think about it. I knew exactly what I required in my empty life. ‘I want to be accepted as a useful and worthwhile member of society. Somebody seen, somebody heard, somebody taken seriously, somebody liked... and somebody loved.’

#ifonly

‘In other words, I want to be...’ I wrestled for the most apt word. And then I found it. ‘...noticed.’

Veronica smirked. ‘Oh, that’s easy. Strip naked and run across the school sports field during the boys’ rugby lesson. You’re sure to get yourself noticed then.’

‘Oh, please be serious.’

‘I am being serious.’

Knowing Veronica, she probably was.

It was then when the love of my life sauntered into the classroom. Nathan Edwards. Well fit. Buff body. Totally drop dead of the gorgeous variety. Mmm, my eyes feasted upon his

boyish good looks, his dark eyes, his gel-shaped brown hair and ooh, yes, a killer smile to die for. Every girl in the school wanted to go out with him. And every boy in the school hated the fact that every girl in the school wanted to go out with him. This guy was popular with a capital P. And he was mine. All mine.

Hmm, well, okay, slight exaggeration. Actually, massive lie alert. We weren't a couple. We never had been. Not in reality. No, the wild and reckless romance between the two of us raged purely in the deepest depths of my frustrated imagination, and so thus held neither weight nor authenticity in the real world.

Just for the record, this was not a dumb schoolgirl crush. I was way too mature to allow infantile infatuation to take the helm. No, this was love. Real love. I'd even go so far as to say it was true love. Oh, how I wished Nathan felt exactly the same way about me. But he didn't. And why would he? More to the point, how could he? As yet, the guy barely even knew I existed.

'If I was popular,' I declared to my accomplice, pointing towards the handsome lad who had now made a pitstop at the front tables to chat to a couple of his mates, 'he'd stroll on over and take me in his manly arms.'

#wishfulthinking

Veronica snorted the loudest of as ifs. 'Who, Nathan Edwards? Hah, in your dreams.'

'You may scoff, Veronica, but popularity brings all the best opportunities. Take Aimee Taylor for example. She's nowhere near the prettiest girl in the school. But that doesn't stop all the boys rallying around her like she's some kind of heavenly goddess.'

'You've really got a hang-up about that girl, haven't you?'

Too right, I thought to myself. I harboured the biggest hang-up about Aimee Taylor known to mankind. Actually, make that womankind. Or rather schoolgirlkind. Ah, but admitting the problem was not an option I wished to pursue.

‘Social acceptance is an important part of growing up,’ I made a point of stating. ‘It determines who we are, who we become and how we turn out in life.’

Veronica clasped her chin in mock deliberation. ‘So you’re saying, if you were popular, Nathan would definitely want to snog you. Am I right?’

‘Yes. And not just snog me. He’d want to be my boyfriend and everything.’

A sceptical Veronica didn’t buy it. ‘Surely he’d have to be interested in you as a person, regardless of any popularity. You know, chemistry and stuff. Has he ever shown any signs of fancying you?’

‘Yes. Sort of.’

‘What do you mean sort of?’

‘Last week, he opened a door for me.’ Even before I’d uttered the final word of this particular sentence, I knew it would rocket to the very top of the Most Stupid Lines Ever chart.

‘Wow, a door, eh?’ teased my friend, fat grin included. ‘It must be love.’

‘All relationships have to start somewhere.’ Stupid line number two. Oh, where the hell was I digging up these dickhead statements?

‘If you’re that confident in your beliefs, Malls, ask him out.’

‘No way.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I can’t.’

‘There’s no such word as can’t.’

‘Oh, shut up, yes, there is. That’s just a dumb line parents come out with to try and act clever, but instead look like total dwerks.’

‘Yeah, whatever. But you still haven’t told me why you can’t ask Nathan out?’

Hmm. Veronica was becoming highly irritating.

I took a deep breath, then explained, 'I'm an official nobody. Therefore, I don't have the right credentials. Only popular girls can date popular boys. It's one of the main unwritten rules of pupilkind.'

'Aren't rules made to be broken?'

'I suppose, yes. But you know me, I lack any form of confidence. Can you really picture me having the bottle to pop the question?'

Veronica spotted Nathan approaching. 'In that case, I'll do you a favour and ask him out on your behalf.'

'Oh, no, you won't.'

'Oh, yes, I will.'

'No!'

Just as the handsome boy in question was about to float past our desk, Veronica stopped him and said, 'Hey, Nathan. My friend here wants to know if –'

Lightning fast, I smothered Veronica's mouth with the palm of my hand and spouted out my own edited/censored version of the remainder of the question. '– if you're going to Aimee Taylor's party tonight.'

'Yeah, course,' Nathan replied. 'You going, Veronica?'

The recipient of the gorgeous boy's query unpeeled my hand from her mouth. 'Wouldn't miss it for the world.'

Nathan then looked straight at me. Yes. Me! 'What about you? Mallory, isn't it?'

#OMG

Breaking news. Hold the front page. Nathan was making conversation. With me. Ooh, I opened my mouth to cast a suitable reply, but shock, horror, no legitimate sounds emerged, save for a somewhat frail and feeble croak. Disaster!

'Yeah, Mallory will be there,' cut in Veronica, thankfully.

The boy of my dreams then continued his journey to a desk at the rear of the classroom.

‘He spoke to me,’ I wheezed, overwhelmed with delight. ‘He actually spoke to me.’

Veronica smirked. ‘Yeah. At least six words. That boy has got it bad.’

Okay, so the Braithwaite girl was jesting. Or at least I hoped she was. But she’d also hit the proverbial nail right on the head. Out of his mouth, six tiny words. Uttered in a matter of seconds. Nowhere near enough airtime or verbiage to establish the raw foundations of a loving relationship.

‘You’re right,’ I murmured to my mate, elbows upon desk, disenchanting chin supported by both hands. ‘I’ve had longer conversations with strangers at bus stops.’

Insert unhurried exhale of despair here.

Oh, how I wished I held the power to get noticed. To become a fully paid-up member of the school’s it-crowd, that’s all it would take for events to play out a whole lot differently. I had it all worked out. Without a doubt, if I was cool and popular and trendy and totally worshipped, Nathan Edwards would come a’running straight into my waiting open arms. We’d get along, we’d kiss, we’d hit it off, we’d kiss again, we’d become an item, boyfriend and girlfriend, the king and queen of the whole school and beyond.

Ah, but alas, I was nowhere near the mountain-high level of prominence required to become the aforementioned cool and popular and trendy and totally worshipped. Therefore, my raging ambition to date the fittest boy who had ever existed in the history of everything was nothing more than a sugary reverie born out of sheer blinkered delusion. I had to face facts. I was nobody special, an invisible human being, a worthless entity, undeserving of any true attention; cold, hungry and all alone at the base of that long, long, long, long ladder.

In other words, a fuzzy-grey background girl. ☹

#NOW

I sit in silence, staring out through the windscreen of Ian's car. An indigo blanket of stars gracefully steps aside to allow a lighter sheet of grey-blue to take to the stage. As if by magic, off-white clouds begin to appear. And on the distant horizon, a pale orange sun peers shyly over a dense thicket of trees. Ah, the eternal daily theatre of a breaking morning sky. I'd enjoy this stunning performance of Mother Nature if I didn't feel like crap inside.

My body is numb, save for a dull, niggling ache in my gut. This is so bizarre, so surreal, like it isn't me, like it's all happening to somebody else, like I'm reading a novel or watching a drama unfold on TV. Oh, God, I can't believe I've left everything behind. But I have. This is real. I've given it all up. It's all gone. I'm... empty. Is this how every despised loser feels when they run away? Will I always feel this way? Will I always carry this weighty burden?

I glance at the clock on the dashboard. 6.02AM. We've been travelling now for three hours. It seems longer. I'm bored of this monotonous motorway, an endless grey expanse of concrete and tarmac, flanked on both sides by scurrying smudges of green. Are we there yet? No, we are most certainly not.

'Why did you do it?' Ian asks out of the blue, his first spoken words since we made our escape from a slumbering street a trio of hours beforehand. 'Why post that particular comment online?'

Oh, here we go. I blow out a jaded sigh, unwilling to play the role of consenting interviewee. 'I thought we'd agreed not to mention anything about what happened.'

'Yes, I know, but...' And that's where he chooses to park his mouth.

His curious hiatus prompts me to cast intrigued eyes. 'But what?'

'Just wondering why you felt the need to involve him.'

My response is not formed of words. I simply offer an impassive shrug of the shoulders.

‘Had he done something to hurt you?’ comes his next question.

‘He didn’t have anything to do with it.’

‘Then why include him in the comment?’

‘Can you turn on the radio please?’ I request, abrupt and curt, eager to terminate this unwelcome inquisition.

And now it’s his turn to blow out a sigh. ‘All I’m asking is –’

‘Stop it! I’m fed up with having to justify myself.’

‘Yes, but if you –’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ My simmering glare says it all. Time to give up.

Surrendering, Ian fires up the car stereo. A radio DJ, way too boisterous for this ungodly hour, introduces the brand new track from the very latest flavour of the month boy band.

Manufactured music pours into the vehicle. For a while, nothing is said. Until –

‘Mallory, you still haven’t told me where we’re actually heading. I can’t just follow your vague directions all day without knowing our final destination. It’s ridiculous.’

‘I’m not telling you. Not yet anyway. I can’t risk it. I mean, what if we stop off somewhere and you call somebody, letting them know where to find me?’

‘You’ve got to believe me, I won’t do that. I told you, I’m on your side.’

His sincere face does a pretty good job of backing up his claim. However, I offer zero response. Instead, behind a wall of silence, I face forward, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Then comes Ian’s last-ditch attempt at extracting information. ‘At least give me a clue.’

I enter a brief phase of deliberation, after which I reply, ‘Let’s just say, we’re going to the last place I was truly happy in my life.’