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# Prologue

Everyone wants to hear a story about an underdog, don't they? A kid with a stammer getting a recording contract; an ex-con winning the lottery. The public's sympathy might always lie with the underdog rather than the deserving winner, but, even so, I won't try to deceive you. I'm not an underdog. Far from it.

Our English teacher, who preferred dreary Jane Eyre to the more interesting Holden Caulfield, told us that the best narrators are trustworthy and easy to empathize with. Luckily for you, reader, he and I never saw eye to eye on that concept. As a narrator, Jane Eyre I'm not. In fact, rather than trying to win you over, I'm immediately going to alienate you, and here's why.

I have everything. If this were fiction, I couldn't be the heroine, because with no obstacles for me to overcome there would be no plot. I'd be underused as a secondary character; the cheerleader who briefly makes life miserable for the rightful heroine. I wouldn't even get to die at the end. I'd instead become comically overweight, be (deservedly) cheated on by my footballer boyfriend or fail my exams. But my life, needless to say, isn't fiction.

The first thing you should know is that I'm seventeen. See, you're already alienated. You think I've got the best years of my life ahead of me; that none of my problems

could possibly be worth reading about. You know what? You're probably right.

I'm blonde, of course. Blondes evoke less sympathy and have shorter shelf lives than brunettes. If you don't believe me, think about it. It was Jo March we cared about, not vain little Amy; Elizabeth Bennet, not sensible Jane; Laura Ingalls, not pious Mary. I have long hair, which I can straighten or leave to dry curly, and my eyes are blue and abnormally large. They are widely considered to be my best feature; in fact they leave such an impression that I have to go light on the mascara, and eyeliner wouldn't make me popular with other girls *at all*. I'm extremely petite – and I don't expect to grow any more – and effortlessly thin. My teeth are straight, without the train-track hell from which some kids my age have yet to emerge. I have a great dress sense, and everything suits me; so much so that shopping doesn't interest me. Well, not very much.

Have I lost you to a fit of envy? I imagine not. Looks are one thing, and brains are another entirely. People are usually forgiving of one or the other. But, aside from my physical attributes, you should know that I'm clever. Exceptionally so. This isn't ghostwritten, let's make that clear.

I'm also popular, partly because I'm good at sport. This is important: I'm not sure why, but I'm glad I struck lucky because PE is actually a form of organized bullying. At my school everyone has to take part in Sports Day every summer, even if they're fat, or unpopular, or uncoordinated. There isn't a corresponding event in Physics where you get booed if you can't do kinematic equations, but that's only

one reason why being a geek doesn't pay.

I attend boarding school, and home life seems some distance away from my existence at Temperley High. School is an ecosystem all of its own, where outside rules just aren't relevant. As a Sixth Former I have my own room, which is a relief as my girlfriends – there are six of us, and we're called the Stars, for obvious reasons – often bore me rigid. The dormitories the younger students share are supposed to help homesick people settle in: some kids cry about being away from home, which is a strange reaction. It may not be Malory Towers, but it's not a workhouse either. You can get away with murder if you know how to play it, and I do.

You won't be surprised to hear that boys love me, and as my school is mixed there are plenty of them around. Boys have noticed me for a while now, and continue to do so whether I invite their attention or not. And don't start thinking I could have any boy except the one I *really want* or anything lame like that, because there are no exceptions.

You've met someone like me before. If you're at school, I'm making your life hell. If you have a job, I've got the promotion you deserved. If you have a boyfriend, he's wishing you looked like me. You may hate me, but surely you know by now that life isn't fair. I can't help being perfect any more than you can help being, well, flawed.

Can you trust me? Maybe not. And can you empathize with me? I doubt it. But, even so, have I lost you to a story about an underprivileged child who becomes a concert pianist? Of course not. People love stories about the

underdog, and, despite everything I've said, you still think that's what I am. Poor little rich girl, you think, as if I'm hiding deep-rooted insecurities or the scars of a difficult childhood. Perhaps I'm about to tell a story of growth and redemption in which I lose my good looks and channel my inner beauty to become a better person. Every story needs a character arc, after all. Is mine going to be painful? That'll show me, you think.

Don't count on it.

# Chapter One

## Caitlin Clarke

By the time it was clear to me that, in high school at least, popularity and notoriety were one and the same, I was powerless to reverse the effects of either.

The cards and gifts by my bedside, the anxious visitors and my buzzing cell phone made it clear that I wouldn't be returning to anonymity any time soon. It was too late by then anyhow: on the night I should have beaten Stella Hamilton to become Head Girl of Temperley High, I was having jagged glass splinters removed from my face (they tell me I was under for that bit but I *swear* I felt it) and learning, as the blessed anaesthetic wore off, that not all my classmates had been as lucky as I had.

*Lucky* was such an overused word that I felt like screaming whenever I heard it. I was lucky to be alive. I was lucky to have fallen onto smoking rubble rather than the concrete paving seventy feet below. I was lucky I only had three broken bones. I was lucky I wouldn't be permanently scarred.

I wasn't ungrateful; of course I understood what I'd escaped. But sometimes, as I lay in that creaky, uncomfortable bed, having my blood taken three times a day and waiting for my leg to knit itself back together,

being left behind didn't seem so lucky after all.

Not that I knew any of this when I started Temperley High halfway through Junior Year (or Lower Sixth, as they would call it). Back then I had no idea girls like Stella Hamilton even existed. Campion Hall, my prep school in Manhattan, was pretty normal – a school where we didn't wear a full face of make-up every day of the week; where we didn't select our classes based on the number of boys in the group; where we didn't choose the shortest skirt we could find for Gym (from Baby Gap, if necessary) and wear it doggedly throughout the year, even in the snow. And although my memories of Campion might be slightly idealized in the wake of events that followed, I'm sure we didn't backstab each other in the variety of ways I witnessed, and sometimes participated in, at Temperley High. We couldn't have, because Campion students tended to survive beyond graduation.

'Your mother and I have some news,' announced my dad one November evening. 'We're moving to England.'

'Who is?' I asked, looking around the dinner table. 'All of us?'

I already knew that he and my mom were having problems (the fights, which I usually tried to ignore, had reached fever pitch in recent months), but I wanted to hear him say it.

He looked wary. 'No. Your mother and Charlie will be staying here.'

‘Are you getting a divorce?’ I blurted out.

My little brother Charlie looked at me, startled, and I could have kicked myself, even though it wasn’t my fault. I hadn’t raised the subject in front of him, or caused the marriage to fail.

Dad nodded as he explained, in words that I understood but Charlie couldn’t, that divorce was imminent, but they still loved *us* and respected *each other* a great deal. Mom was looking daggers at him and I wasn’t convinced by the mutual respect part.

We were eating chicken – a soggy take-out that Mom always picked up on the housekeeper’s night off – and I chewed a piece of meat until it was elastic, because the motion prevented me from crying. I gave Charlie a supportive smile that wobbled, patting his cheek before turning my attention back to my parents.

‘Why do I have to move?’ Dad was a litigator and was losing me in the finer points of their proposed separation. Not that I didn’t care, but it made sense that I was most interested in my own fate. ‘Why can’t I stay here?’

He sighed. ‘You’re the reason I’ve decided to make this move, Caity. I’m not entirely happy with the education you’re getting—’

‘Why not?’ I said, knowing I sounded defensive. ‘I get straight As! I’m the class librarian! I make honour roll every week! How can you not be happy?’

‘I know all that,’ he said. ‘And we’re very proud of you. We just feel –’ I looked at Mom for support, but she

shrugged helplessly – ‘that you’re becoming introverted.’

My dad was English, so it stood to reason that he believed a British high school education was the best in the world. He went to some big private (except he called it *public*) school where the Prefects beat him and made him build fires for them and he was convinced it was all character-building and nurturing. But it was still hard to believe he wasn’t satisfied when I had the highest GPA at one of the best schools in the county.

‘What’s wrong with me?’ I persisted.

I hated sounding pathetic, but I could never figure out how to please him. Most fathers would have been happy with a daughter who got perfect grades, went to church and only socialized with boys he had pre-approved.

Mom finally stepped in. ‘Nothing’s wrong with you, Caity.’

She sounded upset, as if my dad had deviated from a prepared statement, and she broke off for a second to bite a stubby fingernail, as she always did when she was anxious.

‘Your dad just feels – we feel – that Campion isn’t giving you the edge that great Colleges like Yale will be looking for.’

I turned back to Dad. ‘So where are you sending me? Your old school?’

He shook his head in horror. ‘Good lord, no! That’s no place for a girl. I’ve found a boarding school close to London that I think will suit you. There’s a great

emphasis on music, sport, drama, art – lots to get involved in.'

'Boarding school?' I whispered.

He nodded smoothly. Mind games, I decided: trying to make me think it wasn't a big deal. It was hopeless to argue with a lawyer and it made sense that Mom was always compliant. He was just too smart.

'You know I work long hours. This way you'll be around friends all the time rather than on your own with your head in a book.'

'But I'm no good at art or music or drama,' I said. 'And I never get picked for any sports teams. That's why I like school – because I can concentrate on studying.'

My artistic attempts were less accomplished than Charlie's and I couldn't imagine anything more terrifying than performing on stage. Even reading book reports in class brought me out in hives.

'I know you like studying,' he said patiently. 'And of course that's important. It's just that there's more to life. I don't want you to look back on your high school years and regret not going to a football game, or your prom, or doing a school play.'

It wasn't in my nature to argue back, and it would be pointless anyway. From listening in on his telephone calls (I had a phone in my room and sometimes there was nothing on cable but reruns), I knew he'd been discussing working abroad for some time. He'd made up his mind well before making me his excuse, whatever he wanted to pretend.

\*

I excused myself and trudged upstairs. Our house in Carnegie Hill ran across three floors and my room even had its own walk-in closet and dressing room. I felt uneasy about these things, especially since our housekeeper Rosa had told me about her studio apartment in Woodside where her three little children shared a bed, but at least I knew how fortunate I was.

In my bathroom I carefully washed my face and stared into the mirror. I knew what he really thought: that I was boring. My school blouse was buttoned to the neck and my skirt ended below the knee. I wore thick tights and ballet flats. I only wore mascara on special occasions and my eyebrows were bushy. Hell, even my underwear was boring. I'd never had a boyfriend and my weekends were spent looking after Charlie or studying with classmates for extra credit. I'd never assessed my life so harshly before, but, although it embarrassed me, it was secure, predictable and governed by boundaries and rules that I understood. Was that so wrong?

Saying goodbye to my friends and the home I'd lived in all my life was bad enough, but everything paled in comparison with leaving Charlie. He was more than my baby brother; I flat-out adored him. Mom's research at Columbia kept her from home on evenings and weekends, and since we'd grown too old for babysitters I'd been the one to take him to school and put him to bed, arrange his play dates and organize his reading

chart. I took as much pride in his development as if he were my own baby, and sometimes I liked to pretend that he was.

I loved his curly black hair and serious eyes; the gap where he'd lost a baby tooth falling off the jungle gym; the Band-Aids that peeled off his knees. How could I leave him to the kids who threw his lunch out of the bus window and made fun of his Spongebob socks? The thought of him growing up without me was agonizing even without worrying who would take my place. No one else knew our secret handshake; the cartoons we watched in bed; the prayer we said to keep the vampires away (at least I told him it was to keep them away). I cried for Charlie every day, and that was before I'd even seen Temperley High.

Mom figured less in my grief, perhaps because she was an easy scapegoat and being mad at her made my misery easier to bear. Besides, I saw even less of her than I did of Dad.

We left between Christmas and New Year, a dead time when Charlie had lost interest in his presents and was starting to whine about going back to school. Miserable to the core, I turned away from Mom at the departure gate. She looked tired and her dark hair was starting to go grey at the temples. Even though I hated myself for it, I wished she would try harder to look nice. Apart from her fuzzy hair, she was hardly ever out of a lab coat – or a lab, period. It wasn't surprising that Dad had stopped noticing her.

I clung to Charlie, kissing the top of his head and telling him not to forget me. He stared up at me, bewildered.

‘Please, Caity,’ Mom begged as I released him. ‘Don’t blame me for this.’

She held my hand tightly and I knew without looking that she was crying. I steeled myself against it, because losing my brother was bad enough without thinking about her too. I shrugged and picked up my hand luggage, wishing she’d stand up to Dad. Maybe then he wouldn’t have spent the last seventeen years, and probably longer, having affairs with every woman he met. Despite a PhD and tenure at Columbia, she put up with him as if she deserved to be treated like crap. I was *not* going to end up the same.

‘Charlie needs me,’ I burst out, even though he could hear. ‘Who’s going to take care of him?’

Mom spoke quietly. ‘Caity, I know you’re devoted to him, but I think it will be good for you to be around kids your own age without so many responsibilities.’

‘But you don’t even know him. Do you know what he likes to eat after school, or his favourite Saturday morning movie? Do you know that he won’t sleep without the Nemo toy I got him for his birthday?’ I was crying now. ‘Do you even notice anything that doesn’t fit under a microscope?’

I bit my lip too late. Dad was already ushering me away, but not before Mom’s face crumpled with hurt. The last thing I saw was Charlie struggling against her

as he tried to run after me. I could still hear him wailing on the other side of Security, and, although it was wrong, I felt almost glad.

I resisted visiting my new school, ignoring Dad as he tried to read me quotes from the website. *I'm sure it's fine*, is all I remember saying before I resumed crying for the rest of that freezing English New Year in an echoing Belgravia house. I ran up an enormous phone bill to my friends back home, happy in the knowledge that Dad would be furious when he saw it, but despite the dutiful chorus of 'We miss you!' at the end of every call, I knew my departure had made little difference to the gang. After two years at Campion, I had to admit that Dad was right: exemplary grades didn't make a lasting impact, and soon no one would even remember me.

On the last day of my vacation I forced myself to take a cab to the King's Road and trail around in the rain, carrying a stack of British fashion magazines so I could at least try to fit in. Dad let me use his Amex for essentials and I brandished it defiantly, letting a personal shopper choose me smart, tailored clothes that *InStyle* promised would make me look like a *Sloane* (even if I wasn't entirely clear on what that meant).

Campion was almost one hundred years old, but Temperley High was on a different scale of ancient. The thick trees that surrounded the campus made it totally

invisible from the outside world, and we drove down a long, dark drive which widened to show a stone-fronted mansion house with pillars at the door. There was a fountain in the courtyard decorated with hideous lions and fish, and everything was completely ordered and symmetrical. The trees, plants, paths – even the wisteria that grew around the school windows – nothing was a millimetre out of place. It was so immaculate that I thought we'd come to an English castle instead of a functioning school.

'Oh God,' I whispered in terror, gripping the car seat.

Dad seemed choked up with pride. 'Beautiful, isn't it?' he beamed. 'Do you think you can be happy here?'

Ignoring this incredibly stupid question I looked upwards, as if for a sign that I would be okay. A wooden clock tower topped the building, and my glance caught the slight figure of a girl leaning far out of its window and watching us. She had a cigarette in her hand, and her long blonde hair cascaded down, catching the wind and fluttering. The sunset made it flame, lighting up her face.

Suddenly she was gone, so quickly that I couldn't be sure I'd seen her at all.

'The clock's stopped,' Dad commented, following my gaze. 'Twenty to twelve. You'd think they'd fix it, with the amount of money that must go into the upkeep of this place.'

This sort of irrelevant remark was typical of him. I watched the window in case the girl reappeared, but

nothing of her lingered except a plume of smoke way up above and a faintly reverberating laugh.

Dad started making excuses as soon as he could, barely staying long enough to unload my cases before he raced off to enjoy his new freedom. He waved out of the window as he disappeared while I stood numbly, my hands clenched so tightly in my pockets that one of them tore through the silk lining.

My housemistress Mrs Denbigh met me inside the white-marbled entrance hall. She didn't seem very strict, and at least the room she showed me to in Woodlands, the Sixth Form girls' boarding house, wasn't as austere as I'd imagined. I unpacked my familiar belongings, hiding my favourite plush rabbit under a pillow and arranging my framed photograph of Charlie next to the narrow bed. I fought back the urge to cry as I kissed the glass.

'Goodnight, baby,' I whispered as bravely as I could.

Although I tried my best to sleep, alternately reciting the Periodic Table and emptying my mind, I lay awake until dawn, staring into the dark and wondering what was going to happen to me. If I'd known, I might have climbed out of the window and swum back to New York.

## Chapter Two

### Stella Hamilton

Welcome to my kingdom.

It's the first day of the spring term and I'm in the cafeteria at breakfast, working hard to ignore my best friend Katrina. We agree on most things, and her collection of Cartier watches is unparalleled, but right now she's in danger of boring me into a stupor. I'm half-aware that she's telling me about her Christmas holiday and half-hypnotized by the Minnie Mouse bow in her shiny brown hair.

'And Amber was being a *nightmare*.'

Amber is her stepmother. She's only five years older than Katrina, so you'd think they'd have lots in common, but friendship hasn't blossomed and the upshot of Katrina's story is that she cut off Amber's hair extensions during a misunderstanding over the remote control on Christmas afternoon.

'I mean, I left it a bit uneven, but I did her a favour – acrylic is *such* a fire hazard.'

Now her dad has banned her from the Great Missenden estate until she apologizes, forcing her to spend future holidays in Monte Carlo with her estranged biological mother.

I'm finding it hard to care. Her mother shares

many characteristics with mine, notably that she's never shown any signs of wanting children and treats Katrina as a costly encumbrance who must be intermittently tolerated. But Katrina feels the rejection more keenly than I do.

'Then I thought, I don't have to go to Monte Carlo, do I? I can come and stay with you.'

I snap back to attention. There's nothing I hate more than people depending on me, which is only one of the reasons why this is out of the question.

'Of course you can,' I say warmly. 'But is it a good idea to leave Amber with your dad all year round? Don't you want to keep an eye on her? See what's really going on with her anti-gravity yoga instructor?'

She scowls and I relax. Her father is at least sixty and I know how much she worries about her trust fund. I can't imagine her having to work – actually *work*, I mean, because hosting lunches for animal charities doesn't count – for her Manolos, and I doubt she can either.

I'm pleased to be part of (I might say *ruler of*) such an exclusive set of girls, because it prevents others getting close enough to hear what we're talking about. I've listened to enough male conversations to know that most boys are halfwits – even the popular ones. Especially the popular ones, actually. Huddled together, darting glances at the girls around them – I used to be intimidated by this until, by virtue of having a popular boyfriend, I was allowed to join one of their confabs

and discovered that their principal conversation topics, which each lasted more than twenty minutes, were their favourite sandwich fillings (cheese and ham, the *timeless classic*, was the eventual victor) and the size of Steven Gerrard's football boots (it's a debate they can't settle). And these were the coolest boys in school.

Girls are different – more self-aware, more crippled by self-loathing – but even so, the Stars can be inane. Each of them contributes something crucial and unique, but sometimes I have to remind myself that as a unit we are very much more than the sum of our parts.

I inherited our cafeteria table from my older sister Siena, who coincidentally was leader of a six-strong clique called the Starlets. They carved a six-point star into the table along with each Starlet's initial, so all we had to do was update it with our own names. This ensures that no one sits with us in error and we avoid the stress of rushing to reserve the best spot. My point faces the window so I can see my reflection: that way, if the Stars are being unacceptably tiresome, I'm still guaranteed a pleasant dining companion.

'Happy New Year, girls!'

I groan inwardly as Ruby clacks over in new Jimmy Choos and a very tight Marchesa jumpsuit. On her breakfast tray is an apple – which she won't eat – and a black coffee. She's especially beloved amongst the younger students (it's prudent to cultivate across-the-board popularity) and it takes her a while to reach our

table because she stops to greet each little girl who calls out to her. I push away my cereal and force a smile as she draws up a chair and starts talking breathlessly, complimenting Katrina on her cape-back minidress before turning her attention to me.

‘Stella, can I borrow your *Hamlet* essay for some inspiration? You know I wouldn’t ask, but Jamie is *so sweet* and I can’t *possibly* tell him my excuse for not doing it. You can borrow the Zinnia in return.’

I roll my eyes at Katrina, who smirks. Sometimes I get sick of having to bail these people out, but Ruby got the new Zinnia bag for Christmas, and, as much as it pains me to say it, I didn’t, so I dig around in my (mass-produced, last season) bag and hand her the essay. Such is school.

‘What is your excuse, out of interest?’ I ask, taking a liberal approach to the word *interest*.

Ruby flips her hair over her shoulder before replying. It’s long and dark red – really beautiful – and the motion reveals the sparkly star earrings we all wear as a nod to our group identity. Sometimes I think this is a bit juvenile, but mostly I like wearing something that sets us apart. Not that other people couldn’t wear stars if they wanted to – we’ve never trademarked it – but cheapening our symbol wouldn’t be advisable.

She leans forward to build up the suspense and glances around to see who’s listening. ‘I was with Blake,’ she hisses.

Blake is our PE teacher, although last term I found out that his real name is Glen. Even though we're Sixth Formers we have to take Games twice a week and Ruby is really reaping the benefits of the exercise.

Involvement with a hot teacher would usually garner respect from one's peers, but Blake isn't a real teacher: he's an exchange student from Australia and he's only nineteen. It's typical of Ruby to look for kudos in this way and get it so wrong. Blake's attractive, if you like the meathead look, but he's also easily led, and beneath his Speedos he's really not worth spending time with. He and Ruby go well together, come to think of it.

Katrina gives me a smile that Ruby doesn't notice. 'Which base?' she asks.

Ruby giggles. 'Only third. What do you take me for, Katrina?'

I don't comment on this information. She's had weeks to write that essay, so the twenty minutes she spent being groped by Blake behind a bin full of hockey sticks is entirely irrelevant. She's always looking for approval, but she should know by now that the cupboard holding the athletics equipment will never be the place to find it.

Katrina, having lost interest in Ruby's sex life, is checking her BlackBerry. 'You're trending, Ruby,' she says. 'Your bag is famous already.'

I look around the room to see several camera phones pointing our way. This is a commonplace occurrence,

especially after a holiday when everyone's outfits are newsworthy, but Ruby should never be the focal point.

'What else is trending?' I ask before she becomes intolerable.

My online presence is particularly crucial this year as I'll be competing in the Head Girl election in July. I'll certainly win, because no other student has more influence, power or sway, but in the interim it's important to keep abreast of Twitter gossip so I can judge whether someone close to me is feeding information or whether it's being fabricated in a cynical bid by less-popular students to gain followers. Although I'd never do anything as vulgar as post news about myself, it's notable that nobody trends as often as I do.

'The Asprey earrings you wore at Winterval,' says Katrina. 'Did they really cost a million pounds?'

Winterval, the Christmas dance, is one of our key events and always generates stories that last well into the New Year.

'Thereabouts,' I say, looking over her shoulder. 'What's that about you?'

Katrina scowls. 'People are still complaining about my punch, which is really unfair. I did explain that I'm very much a novice mixologist, but tagging it as *nativity anthrax* is totally libellous.'

'I know,' I say comfortingly. 'But maybe some people found the yard glasses a step too far.'

\*

Edward and Quentin are throwing a football over everyone's heads. No one asks them to stop because it wouldn't be respectful: Edward is captain of the football team – the Stripes – and clever too, and everyone likes him. He's my ex-boyfriend (and his brother Jack dated my sister Siena), and although he no longer interests me that way I can still see the appeal of his messy black hair and impish, don't-blame-me expression. Although the Stars are exclusively female, Edward likes to think of himself as our seventh member and usually we're happy enough to have him around. In fact, it helps to have a male voice in the mix, because some girls can be bitchy when left to themselves.

He's laughing loudly and as he glances at me I see Ally, the Fifth Form rebound he settled for last term, trying to move into his eye line whilst scowling in my direction. I glare back half-heartedly. She should realize she was hardly a substitute for me, even in the short-term, and the comfort eating she's evidently been doing over the festive period hasn't helped her chances of rekindling anything.

Edward imitates my glare, crossing his arms and stamping his foot, and I laugh despite myself. We've known each other since we were little, the downside of which is that he's more like a brother than anything else. He used to imitate me in the same way when I was an eight-year-old hogging the swing, but sometimes

his childishness is reassuring in its familiarity.

I look away from him as my phone rings. It's my baby sister Syrena, and I contemplate her face on the display – a blurry close-up she took of herself wearing tinsel and a Santa hat – until it stops. I remind myself to call her back later. She's at day school at home in London, as she won't be old enough to start Temperley High until September, so at least she's in safe hands.

We're joined at this point by the others – Lila, Penny and Mary-Ann – who have all been out riding. Lila and Penny are complaining loudly about the non-availability of Zinnia bags, which annoys me intensely. I hate Ruby to feel indispensable, because that's the last thing she is.

Mary-Ann is still wearing riding clothes, and she has straw in her hair and a streak of mud (or something worse) across her cheek. She often walks around with her blouse creased and labels sticking out, and even when I tell her she can hardly be bothered to correct it. It's lucky she has me to help her or she'd never know how much these things matter. And I'm happy to assist, because, as I sometimes remind Katrina, Mary-Ann's fierce intellect gives the Stars a gravitas with which even the most classic diamond timepiece can't compete.

I have a horse too, Pip (Siena named him), but I don't ride him because of the adverse effects of riding on the thighs. I used to ride every day, even though my mother Seraphina was forever telling me it would ruin

my figure, but last year I witnessed keen horsewoman Priscilla Craven completely change shape as she trained for the inter-school gymkhana: she was like a weeble by the end. Now I bribe one of the stable boys to ride Pip and muck him out, and I groom him when time allows. I take a lot of Pilates and can only hope that no lasting damage has been done.

Katrina is terrified of horses, and she's embarrassed about the reason (I'd never tell anyone it's because of a really weird horror film she saw as a child), so Pip often provides a great excuse to get away from her. Now, though, I'm dying to bitch about Ruby, so I kick Katrina hard under the table and smile as she jumps in pain.

'Come on,' I say patiently as I wait for her to stop staring at Penny's toast. 'I need fresh air, and you know we don't eat complex carbs during months containing the letter *r*.'

'Later,' I add as we leave, not making eye contact with anyone.

The Zinnia has unexpectedly elevated Ruby in the pecking order, rendering Katrina sufficiently insecure about her own place to waste no time in critiquing her.

'*I was with Blake,*' she mimics. 'God, she's so gullible. As if he cares about her!' Her voice is an indignant squeak.

I take a drag. We've been smoking since we were thirteen, when she smuggled a pack of Gauloises into

school in her hot water bottle cover, together with a previous stepmother's Diazepam. It made for an interesting, indistinct term. As Sixth Formers we're allowed to smoke, although it's not encouraged. I wouldn't like any of the teachers to see me, but this space between two sheds, behind the cafeteria bins, seems safe enough.

'Did you see Edward staring at you?' Katrina continues. 'I suppose you heard that he kissed Penny at New Year. She won't stop going on about it.'

Edward's feelings for Katrina can most generously be categorized as tepid, but she's a romantic and calls him *a modern-day Heathcliff*. I might point out that she's unacquainted with the source material and seems to envisage Heathcliff as a sort of stand-offish Justin Bieber. Edward only shows romantic interest in her when he's drunk, but this makes her more determined. She might be quick to criticize Penny, but whenever he's single she thinks it's finally her turn.

She's still talking. 'It makes me wonder what you *do* to have all these boys falling at your feet when you aren't even nice to them. I wish you'd teach me.'

I tell her, as I always do, that it's simply a case of being the one who cares less. I don't know why she finds that so hard to grasp. We spray ourselves with Allure, and I borrow her breath freshener, and then we head to English.