Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Drop

Written by

Katie Everson

Published by

Walker Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

KATIE EVERSON wanted to be an acrobat, but that's not what happened. She grew up in Milton Keynes and has lived in London and Sydney, but is now back where it all began, the pull of home tugging her full circle. After side-lining acrobatics, she became a bookseller and realized all she wanted to do was make books. When characters began to talk among themselves in her head, she knew it was time to put finger to keyboard and write.

When Katie is not writing or being a professional design nerd in the publishing industry, she can be found enjoying big ol' family dinners with her parents, four older siblings and a multitude of nieces and nephews.

Follow Katie on Twitter **@ksleverson** and visit her at **www.katieeverson.co.uk**

DROP

KATIE EVERSON



WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated, as they may result in injury.

First published in Great Britain 2015 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2015 Katie Everson
Cover illustration © 2015 Levente Szabó

The right of Katie Everson to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Bembo

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-5627-4

www.walker.co.uk

For Juliet

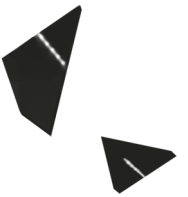
PROLOGUE

I've got no soul. I had one once but, like losing your virginity, losing your soul is easy to do. *Oops!* There it goes. Like misplacing your keys. An annoying but unremarkable event. I remember the moment, the smell of sweat. I can picture the cubicle door with its lipstick graffiti hearts and eyeliner drawings. I can feel my bare legs sticking to the stained floor, tacky from spilled beer and *godknowswhat*.

Losing your soul is easy to do. One too many vodkas. One too many pills.

Or maybe it happens over a series of moments. A bad choice. A dream. A kiss.

Like getting laid for the first time, it's never how you picture it.



PART 1









CHAPTER 1

Right now I'm having a schiz-out. I feel like a giant slice of death that's been reheated in the microwave. It's OK. I'm used to it. But, fuck, I miss feeling human. How did it get this way? When did it start? Christ, I don't even know. How's it going to end?

I'm so cold all the time. I find comfort in hidden places. The places no one knows I go. Like when brushing my teeth rhythmically. Balancing on the long side of the bath. Counting. One, two, brush, step. *Stalk the knife-edge.* It's no more than a sole's width. With perfectly pointed toes and stretched calves, my left leg extended in front, absolutely no arch, I tap the surface lightly with my big toe. A slow-motion can-can dentistry dance. Turn, walk, tap for four minutes exactly. Repeat as necessary. I own the bath, brush, beam. In that moment, I feel a little warmer.

I smoke. That helps. Speeding up death makes me feel more alive. Good health is just the slowest way to die. Smoke heats my lungs up. Makes me notice them. I think of my lungs as great oak trees and cigarettes as the obnoxious kid

with a stick, flailing wildly in the branches, sending birds shooting out in every direction. *Hmmm-haaaa*, breathe in, breathe out. Dying feels good.

I like it when the delicate particles of dead ember reject the ashtray and go fluttering, flying up like tiny ghosts of dead butterflies. Beautiful. Yeah, I like to provoke my lungs, get them to fight back. People work the same way. BOOM! Like a firecracker, you can set people off so easily.

Oh yes. And a bit of white powder, a couple of pills, whatever. I do that now and then.



CHAPTER 2

I wasn't always like this. I know what you're thinking: druggie, junkie, wreckhead, trashbag. But I'm not sticking needles in my arm or sleeping on the streets, or stealing to feed the habit. I'm not one of *those*. I'm just a normal sort of girl really, a bit shy, a bit sad, and there are little things that make me feel better for a while.

A year ago I moved to London with my dad. My mum came too, but you wouldn't know it. She's never at home. In fact, she's the whole reason we moved here. Her career, her promotion, her success, *her* life. I'd say I'm the least successful of her projects. Everything she does is a project to be managed, and evaluated. Ask her, "On a scale of one to ten, how satisfied are you with your daughter?" and she'll say "one – not very," I'm sure. But hey, she gets *nul points* from me for parenting skills. OK, maybe that's harsh but I just wish she'd chill out. And if she did maybe she would be around more.

I've moved house loads of times before, but this is different. This new place will become old, will become home.

Mum isn't chasing any more; she caught the butterfly. This is it, her dream job. The man-hours, late nights in the office paid off; the payrise and title are hers: Science Correspondent for London's biggest newspaper. Sometimes she even gets on the news. It sounds kind of flash, but I piece together my idea of Mum's lifestyle from the news and what I overhear when she gets home, usually around one a.m. She writes some seriously weird shit. "Evidence for dark matter in high-energy gamma rays", "Is graphene really a wonder-material?", "Trees over 100 metres tall cannot grow leaves", "Swiss cheese plants experience stress". She's up and out the door again by seven a.m. Kisses her coffee cup goodbye more than me or Dad in the mornings. So it's like *Happy Days* around my house. Absentee mum: check. No Weetabix: check. Happy-fucking-days.

Moving day is a rare day off for Mum. Day off from work, that is, not from being an uptight cow.

"Carla! What *are* you doing? Can you please show some initiative and put the boxes marked 'office' in the *office*?"

"There's no room in the *office*."

"Then make room," she snarls. *Ugh*.

I start to unpack colour-coded lever-arch files rammed with papers. PRESS RELEASES, STRATEGIES, JOURNALS, ATLAS, CERN, ENVIRONMENT, PHYSICS. So dull. ENVIRONMENT decides to tsunami over the desk.

Mum shakes her head. Exhales. Sighs.

I prickle, but silently slide the papers back into place.

She gets the bulgy fire eyes. "Not there! That goes in the filing cabinet," she huffs, pulling a yellow file labelled

DEVELOPMENT from my hands, clenching her teeth so her cheekbones protrude and her temples contract.

"Oh … OK, sorry, I didn't know." It feels like she's always angry. She finally has what she's always wanted, but it's still not enough. Even in high-flying careerville, her paradise island, she still carries her suitcase of misery.

Mum puts down a pile of books. "Sorry, Carla. I don't mean to take it out on you. Moving house, new job. It's all a bit stressful."

Dad appears in the doorway. "Tea, girls?"

"If you put '*G* and' in front of it. Can you put a wedge of lime in, and put the glass in the freezer for ten minutes first? I hate a warm glass," Mum says. "Please, love? Thanks." Her iPhone dings. Dad is tall and stately, with small, round, bluish-grey eyes resting on high, plump cheeks, pearls in an oyster. Kind eyes. His eyebrows momentarily arch and he resembles a scared owl. But it's OK; the scared-owl look is Dad's general expression for discontent, upset, frustration … even for the times he finds his own lame jokes amusing.

Mum hangs up her call.

"Kate, love, I haven't got to the kitchen boxes yet," Dad says. "Just got tea bags in my pocket. Caffeine contingency."

He's a practical man.

"Rob, I need a proper drink. Could you please just do this one thing for me? I'm exhausted."

"Sorry, love. The gin is under an avalanche of crap and I'm not digging for it." His eyebrows peak mid-forehead.

"I'll get it myself." She launches through the office door, towards the kitchen. I hear the shuffle of boxes, a clatter of

china, the screech of packing tape, then the clink of glass against glass. She returns to the doorway, the bottle of Gordon's a green glass pendulum swinging from her right hand, her face brick-red with stress. She throws a glance at Dad as if to say, "There, was that so hard?" Dad looks blank, avoiding the conflict. She returns to the kitchen. Dad's so calm. Aside from those gravity-defying eyebrows, that is. He can be stern, and I'm sure he gets angry, but he has compromise down to a *T*, including letting Mum get on with *it*. *It* being her irrational outbursts and general anger-management issues. Maybe he thinks that sparing me a prolonged parental argument is for the best. Five-minute huff? Hour-long shouting match? Weigh it up. Mostly he's a calming influence on Mum.

He follows her to the kitchen. "Why not put your feet up for half an hour? Carla and I will unpack the office," he says. "I just set the telly up. That dancing programme will be on soon."

He's the master of diplomacy. People say opposites attract. In the case of Kate and Rob Carroll, that's true. Mum is overtly outraged all the time. I would say Dad is "inraged". Quietly brewing his anger, then letting it out in late-night hushed tones when they think I'm asleep. They've always been like this. She shouts and pouts, Dad discusses and compromises. Maybe not everyone's idea of love but it seems to work for them.

He loves me though, my dad. I know he does. My earliest memory is of him and me. I'm watching the little winged seeds tumble from the sycamore tree in the front garden of the house-eight-houses-ago – we lived there until I was ten.

Twirling like ballerinas, the seeds dance to the ground.

Below the tree is a wild strawberry patch. The strawberries taste sour, but I don't mind. I shovel a handful into my mouth and my face bunches up as if I've bitten right into a lemon. The tips of my fingers are stained pink with juices. My daddy is high in the tree, trimming branches. I bet he can see all the way to Grandma's house from up there.

He shakes the branches and lots of tiny pairs of wings come dancing down. So pretty. *Butterflies, lots of little butterflies,* I think to myself. He climbs down and cups my face in his hands, like he really, really loves me. His skin is calloused and rough from working hard, but I don't mind. He unhooks a sycamore seed from my hair. He smells like camping trips.

"Hey, angel, do you know what we're doing today?" I shake my head excitedly. This means we're doing something fun. Daddy smiles and the skin around his eyes crinkles up. He looks funny with the sun lighting up all those little cracks and creases. Birds have been marching on his face. "We're going ice skating. I'm going to teach you. That'll be fun, won't it?"

I love my dad.

I love that memory.

I guess I'm kind of nervous about being in the Big Smoke. Our new house, complete with sash windows and ornate door knocker, may be slap bang in the middle of a neat, leafy street, but if you walk down the road, past the park, you're in another world.

From our new pad you can walk ten minutes in one

direction and get the best eggs Benedict of your life and drink unpronounceable teas from vintage cups and saucers in a quirky cafe with a ceiling full of chandeliers; or browse independent shops that seem like gift shops in some upper-class theme park called Poshland. You can buy candles and antique furniture and weird art and be, like, totally chic or whatever. *Or* walk ten minutes in the opposite direction and possibly be stabbed forty times in the neck. I had *literally* seen it on TV the week before we moved. "Following news of the fatal stabbing of a teenager in Peckham, the thirteenth knife-related death in South London this year, *Newsnight* asks: Is London knife crime out of control?"

But machetes, daggers, samurai swords and blunt-but-deadly bread knives aside, there are things I feel *much* more apprehensive about:

1. being invisible at my new school
2. being so very vanilla that I have nothing to recommend myself to others, which means 1. is practically a write-off
3. by some miracle, attracting friends into orbit around my person, but spectacularly failing to keep them there.

I've never really bothered with mates and social standings before. There was always an expiry date on them, with Mum on contract; a year here, six months there. We might as well have been Travellers, or living on army bases. My world was constantly changing. But now? Now I'm putting down roots and have all of London and the whole of sixth form to cram my entire filmic aspirations into: friends,

popularity, grades, the *good life* as defined by a lifetime of watching John Hughes films and *Clueless* on repeat.

I'm freaking Molly Ringwald in *Pretty in Pink* and it's my time to shine.



CHAPTER 3

Just as a mirror reflects only what's in front of it, what you get out of life depends on what you put in. Before leaving home on my first day at Thorncroft School, I stand in front of the mirror. I see my bed's reflection, the corner of my desk and a pale wash of sky framed by the sash window. I don't see myself. I am the invisible girl. But I'm tired of being unseen. I'm going to change, to fit in for once and be popular. I'm going to be somebody. I just hope that no one sees through me.

I'm psyching myself up on the way to school, breathing deeply, then blowing out all the air and hopefully my nerves with it. I traverse tree-lined streets past rows of yellow-brick houses with immaculate white-painted window surrounds and small but perfectly manicured front gardens, then I cross the park. In daylight it's a picture-perfect green haven and, if you find the right spot far from the road noise where the trees are tall enough to block the skyline, you feel you're anywhere but in a city. At night it's a completely different story, with shadows stalking you and the trees whispering. I follow the curve of the river and hit Sandringham Avenue,

darting past dog shit and bus stops, under a dodgy railway bridge sheltering drunks, cider cans and used condoms, until shops appear. There's Ali's Foodstore, the doctors', pharmacy, off-licence and chippy. Thorncroft School, biggest of all the buildings, sits head of the table, yellow brick with window frames painted in a jarring cobalt-blue gloss.

I collect my timetable from the school office. Mrs Vernon, the receptionist, directs me to the form room. Inevitably I get lost in the maze of corridors and end up in the sports hall before a Year 11 girl takes me to A2.

My stomach feels weird and fluttery, like a deflating balloon. The first day at a new school is always the worst, as if some law makes it illegal for new kids to slip into the system unnoticed. *Oh God, oh God, oh God. Please don't notice me.* It's the same every time I move schools. But this time, it's permanent, real-life-staying-put-till-end-of-sixth-form-finishing-your-exams-time-to-make-friends-stationary schooling. The blood drains from my face. My innards turn inside out. Carla Carroll: late, shy and licensed to hurl.

I knock on the form-room door. Through the glass – you know that glass with wire mesh like graph paper? – I see a man in brown loafers crouching on the wipe-clean vinyl floor. Shards of glass and spilled water glint under the energy-saving fluorescent lights. He tilts his head towards the knock, which was evidently not inaudible, as I'd hoped. I wish I was somewhere else – anywhere – a beach, the park, at home, under that tree with my dad twirling butterflies down to me.

The door opens. My chest wheezes involuntarily as the

balloon empties. Thirty pairs of eyes fix on me. *Shit.*

Mr Brown Shoes waves me into the room. "Come in, er, Carla, is it?" he asks. I manage an affirmative grunt. "Welcome. Take a seat. We've got a slight spillage to attend to and then we'll get cracking with proper introductions."

I want to die. Instead I mumble, "OK, um, yeah," and sit down at the table with the fewest people, by the window.

My eyes flit around the room, unable to focus. Everyone is looking at me, all perched on metal-framed stools with seats of moulded off-white acrylic the colour of an overcast sky. I try to ignore the visual dissection I'm receiving. *Newbie. Geek. Ugly. Rabbit. In. Headlights.*

I focus on Mr Brown Shoes. He's swarthy, taller than average, but not a skyscraper, more a multi-storey car park; olive-skinned with cocoa-dark hair tousled into thick, messy curls. Fittingly flamboyant for a secondary school art teacher. Kimonos and earrings and you're looking at local college teacher/failed artist, but unkempt locks, that's fine. There's something perfect about him. I don't mean like *that*. There's just something calming about him, magnetic, pleasing. He seems balanced.

He glides over to where I'm sitting. He's wearing a forgettable sky-blue shirt and jeans, but has a brilliant scent that conjures vivid images of Marrakesh – pulsing sun, bustle, life and spices.

"I'm Mr Havelock. Head of Year 12. These inattentive monkeys are your new form group," he says.

"Hey, Ted, we're not monkeys! I'm a tiger, mate." A boy jumps off a stool and claws with his hands. *"Raaaaaa!"* He launches at me. I panic. I push him and he backs off. "Easy,

tiger!" The boy cocks an eyebrow. "Already trying to rip my clothes off. I like that."

The whole class laughs. I die inside.

Mr Havelock glares at the boy, his cheeks flooded with red. "Back to your seat, you cocky fool."

"Only trying to make the new girl feel comfortable, Mr H. You know, calm her nerves, make her laugh."

I glance at my attacker. He's unbelievably handsome. Easily the most beautiful boy I've ever seen. Eyes like coffee beans, long dark lashes flicking against milky skin. High cheekbones and a smooth jaw like lathe-turned wood, sculpted to perfection. He's wearing skinny jeans, their low-slung waistline exposing his boxers. A spike protrudes from his left earlobe and a ring circles his bottom lip. All is forgiven…

Still, I wish I was anywhere but here, away from these glaring eyes.

"Does she look like she's laughing?" Mr Havelock smiles, tight-lipped. "Get on with your work, Mr Masterson."

"You all right, Carla?" he asks.

Yeah, apart from wanting to curl up and hide in the ventilation system for the rest of the day, I'm great.

"Mmmm," I mumble. My brain calculates the quickest exit route. Options include:

1. window on left
2. form-room door
3. fire escape at back of room
4. spontaneously combust.

Unfortunately, it isn't over. Six hours of classes remain: double Biology, Chemistry, English Lit, Psychology and Art: my AS-level subjects.

I'm good at school. I've got my head around Dadaism and I can describe cognitive dissonance. I'm not a total geek or anything, I get stuff wrong and I find coursework a pain in the arse like anyone else. I just try to do my best. Usually that means getting into the top achievers, upper sets, fast-track classes.

I guess I can be hard on myself sometimes. *It's-not good-enough-don't-you-want-to-achieve-something?* rings in my head for days if I don't put the effort in.

I try to keep to myself, silently clock-watch my way to three fifteen. But despite the nerves, I *need* someone to take an interest in me, say something vaguely friendly. I suppose unless I emanate some signs of life I'm bound to be ignored. *Hello, I'm here, I'm new, I'm nervous. Somebody speak to me. I'm not weird, honest.* Regrettably, the words just swim in circles around my head.

Art is the last lesson before lunch, back in my form room, A2, my timetable tells me. I sit in the same seat as at the start of this hideous day. I swear, everyone thinks I'm mute. Or a mutant. Or both. I challenge myself to string at least *one* sentence together by the end of the lesson.

We're studying sculpture, which I'm excited about. Art's a subject I actually enjoy. Ideas bubble inside me, bursting to get out. Whether drawing, painting, writing or, I hope, after this course, sculpting, I seem to do it well. Art's an outlet, a way of expressing myself. I sound like a hippy. Whatever.

Most of the class have already started their sculptures. The girl to my right has designed a brooch in the shape of two birds facing each other, fiery-looking, enamelled in orange. The guy to my left is making a horse from old cogs and washers.

Pointless and hideous. I like the brooch. I hate the horse. I already know what I'm going to make. My favourite insect, animal, living creature: a butterfly. They're so beautiful.

I draw a few sketches and make a list of materials and equipment.

The girl with the brooch design taps my sketchbook.

"That's lovely." She smiles warmly. "I wish I could draw like that."

"Thanks. It's an *Ornithoptera alexandrae* – Queen Alexandra's Birdwing. Their wings are like patchwork." Finally. Someone has made contact with me, the alien. I come in peace!

"I'm Lauren," the girl says.

"Carla."

Lauren has jet-black hair pulled back into a knotty blob and green eyes that shine, unaided by make-up. She pulls out a tin of Vaseline and coats her lips. I notice she doesn't wear rings, or any jewellery, not even studs in her ears. She's unintimidating, safe. My shyness subsides and I gear up to compliment her brooch, but stop, distracted by a low hum of voices from the next table. I twirl my pencil like a baton between my fingers.

"Yeah, mate," the beautiful boy says, "that's what I'm talking about! It was a massive night. We didn't get home till eight a.m."

"Ha ha! You must have been dead for, like, a week after that."

"Slinky was totally on form."

I turn my head to get a better look at them.

"You should have seen the VJ set-up! It was huge. The

screen was almost on the ceiling, sitting on scaffold."

Mr Havelock must have caught me staring, because he darts over to the boys.

"Finn! Do you mind? I'm trying to teach a class." His face darkens. *Finn, his name is Finn.*

"Sorry, Ted. Won't happen again." Finn looks genuinely sorry. Then he smiles widely.

"Come on. You're seventeen. Act it." Havelock's look of irritation fades. "Get on with your work."

I wonder what Finn and the other boy were talking about. Sounds pretty cool, whatever it was.

Lunchtime arrives. At least I've strung together one sentence. I'm not a total outcast, a mute mutant; a lonely, newbie freak. Success!

I swear, even with a whole scout troop on an orienteering trip to help me, I'd have difficulty finding my way around this place. It's like the bloody Bermuda Triangle for new students. I might never escape. Searching for the sixth-form common room takes half my lunch break.

Eventually I find it. There's a kitchen in one corner; a couple of guys perch on the worktop, playing with their phones. The walls are lined with hard, low blue chairs, inhumane hybrids – half seat, half torture device. They look poised to snap closed like a Venus flytrap if you sit on them. There are two long tables in the middle of the room, with safer, if not more comfortable, benches.

I see Lauren and a friend at a table, eating lunch. She waves me over and I gratefully accept. No one wants to be a loner at lunchtime.

"Hey," I say and sit in the space opposite her, next to the other girl.

"This is Sienna," Lauren says, "our resident spelunking enthusiast."

Sienna has a thick copper fringe, cut severely just above her eyes, and skin like porcelain.

"Spelunking?" I ask.

"She likes to crawl about in dingy caves."

"I want to be a speleologist." Sienna looks at me through a curtain of hair. "Study cave systems. In Austria there's a giant cave filled with ice sculptures made when the snow above thawed, drained into the cave and refroze. It's amazing."

"It sounds, um, cold. Cool, I mean." I can't get the right words out.

"Sienna spends so much time in the dark, she's lost the genes for skin pigmentation. That's why she's so white!"

"I'm Irish!" Sienna turns to me. "So where are you from?" There's a question.

"All over the place. More recently, Nottingham. But I've lived in Bath, Cardiff, Cheltenham…"

"Are you in witness protection or something?"

"My family just moves around a lot."

"I bet you have to say that."

I shrug. But then I realize I have a real chance to make friends here and I'm screwing it up.

"We're fugitives. On the run. My dad stole Simon Cowell's helicopter for a joke. Took it for a joyride."

Lauren raises an eyebrow and takes a bite of cheese sandwich. I fiddle with the frayed straps of my bag, then take out

a chicken roll wrapped in foil. Dad made it from last night's leftovers. I munch away.

Sienna laughs. "It all makes sense now."

Lauren finishes her sandwich and starts on an apple.

I whip out my timetable, hoping my new acquaintances will be in the same lessons. "I know you take Art, Lauren, but do either of you take these other classes?" I ask, spreading the crumpled piece of A4 on the table.

"Let's see." Lauren studies the paper. "I take Biology."

Sienna perks up. "Me too, and Chemistry. You've basically found the Science geeks."

"What am I in for?"

"With us? A thrill ride of cellular organization, anaerobic respiration, inherited variation and the occasional trip to the cinema."

Lauren ignores Sienna. "Miss Tillsman, the Biology teacher, is all right. A bit loopy. She has a serious mascara goop problem. Always in the right eye. It can be hard to concentrate with that thing just sitting there like a baby slug."

"We mark the goop on a scale of one to five," Sienna says. "One: Minor goop; Two: Goopus Maximus; Three: Goopasaurus Rex; Four: 'Is it a bird, is it a plane?'; Five: 'That thing is so huge, how can she even see us? It looks like the bloody Death Star.'"

"It freaks me out. I'm so OCD I just want to stick my finger right in there and scratch it out." Lauren shudders.

"That's disgusting," Sienna says.

"Look forward to it," I say.

The common-room door flies open. A group of guys and girls walks in. They sit on the other table, their feet on

the benches. Finn tosses a helmet in his hands.

"So, enlighten me," I say to Lauren. "Who are they?"

"That's Finn Masterson. Nice guy. The local fittie. Slight problem with authority. Greg White, hockey captain. Georgia Presco with the mess of curls and scary red talons. She's a model in her spare time. Goes out with Greg. Her parents won eight million on the Lotto last year! She didn't fancy going to a posh school and leaving Greg, so she's still here."

"And that's Violet Brody with the shiny shampoo-ad hair that's been known to blind people if it catches the light," Sienna says, pointing to a girl who looks like she's stepped right out of an American Apparel commercial. She embodies cool. Tall, sleek, chic, shining eyes… And cheekbones. I mean, I know everyone has them, but hers are set some magic way that makes her face a perfect shape.

"They say her hair's woven from a unicorn's mane," Sienna chips in, leaning closer, "and sprayed with real diamonds."

Lauren rolls her eyes. "She's basically the queen bee. The guys fall over themselves to impress her."

"Didn't Jay Fletcher write her that song in Year 10? And sing it at the talent show?" Sienna asks.

"Ohmygod, that was classic."

"How did it go again?"

Lauren straightens up and strums air guitar, closing her eyes to exaggerate the emotion:

"Violet, you're so beautiful,

A man could get violent,

With passion, not fists, I'm not like that.

If I couldn't have you,

I'd take a vow of silence.

Oh, Violet, be mine,

We can shine together for ever in the twilight."

Sienna descends into hysterics. "And the whole crowd started chanting, 'Take the vow of silence!'"

"She's popular, then?"

Lauren shrugs. "I guess. So, that's Fat Mike, self-explanatory." She continues the lesson, Cool Kids 101. "The tall one's James 'Slinky' Tyler. He smokes a lot of weed."

"Why do they call him Slinky?"

"Because he's always looking round corners. Like a Slinky goes down steps. Paranoid on account of the fact he smokes so much. Plus he's really tall. And that's Isaac, Finn's older brother. He's in year 13. The strong, silent type. They're impossibly cool. If you like that sort of thing."

The curly-haired girl accidentally drops her folder on the floor. Finn hops off the table and retrieves it. She thanks him.

"I'm going to the shop. Anyone want anything?" Finn asks the room. There's a chorus of mumbled negatives.

"You'll be late for class," Isaac tells his brother.

"Yes, I will," Finn replies.

I've been to enough schools to know that when you start, you pick a group and you stay there. I never really bothered to stray from my social sub-group, the Brainy Plain Girls, two-thirds of the way down the pecking order. Of course, the categories differ depending on location and there's some overlap, but it normally goes something like this:

Beautiful People

Impossibly Cool Hipsters

Sports Freaks
Geek Chic
Emos
Brainy Plain Girls
IT Crowd
Oral Hygiene Deficients.

I feel like this new school, my final-ever school, is in some ways a last-ditch attempt to climb that ladder.

There's nothing wrong with mid-range social standing, not at all, but, I guess, I'd really like to have my time in the sun.

Finn, Isaac, Violet, Georgia, Greg: they're all magnetic, *alive* with this *energy*. There's a charisma about them that I long to have. I want to be in on their secrets and jokes; to tell a story and have them rapt, tipping back their heads, roaring with laughter; for them to link arms with me in the corridor and think, *Wow, that Carla is really* someone.

It's time for change. It's time to twirl around in that phone box and exit as all-singing, all-dancing Super Carla.

Is hanging around with the Brainy Plain Girls going to get me where I want to be? Probably not… But I need the friends. And they *are* nice… Maybe I'm not worthy of the top spot anyway. One of the Beautiful People? It's just a fantasy; a deluded, last-third-of-the-ladder fantasy. This is where I'm meant to be, and I ought to be thankful I've made human contact at all.

The bell rings. I shove my timetable and the half-eaten chicken roll into my bag.

"Come on," says Sienna. "I'll show you to the Chemistry lab."