Tempting Fake

Tracey Morait

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For Elaine and Chris

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Goalden Girl Series:
Goalden Girl
Goalden Sky

One
Cherry

It starts with one simple word: 'Hello.'

My name is Cherry and this is my story.

They were sending me to boarding-school. Helton Manor was on the shores of Coniston Water in the picturesque, breath-taking Lake District. The lake was always calm, even in bad weather, disturbed occasionally by the odd boat and one of the pleasure cruisers skimming along, and in the water, you could see a mirror image of the beautiful, green-rolling hills as the sun sparkled on the surface like stars. On the other hand, for all its extravagance, the elaborate furniture, plush red carpets and expensive paintings, the school was less impressive. Mum gave me the hard sell on it, insisting it was one of the best and most exclusive establishments in the country and had a reputation equal to Roedean and Cheltenham Ladies' College.

'I've never heard of either of them,' I told her furiously. 'Why do I have to go to a bloody boarding-school? Why can't I stay where I am?'

'Mind your language, potty mouth.' Mum sighed. 'Your dad thinks Helton Manor will give you a better chance of getting good qualifications and going to university. His mother went there and he's eager to carry on the family tradition. It'll be hard work for you sitting your final GCSE exams in a new school, but you're bright and I'm sure you'll manage. You'll be starting the new school year and there'll probably be other new girls in the same boat.'

I found out much later she wasn't really happy sending me away to school at all. If she'd said something, I might have had the chance to win her round, change her mind. Not for one moment was I fooled by Greg's concern for my schooling.

'He's not my dad, he's my bleedin' stepdad,' I corrected her sharply, 'and he's not thinking of my education, he's itching to get me out from under his feet.'

Greg was the only son of Lady Milborne and became Lord Milborne on the death of his dad. His first wife had committed suicide – no surprise – and he had a son of his own, Jeremy, away at university. Mum had met Greg at Milborne Hall, where she'd been appointed housekeeper and luckily, the job came with a small cottage. We'd been unable to get our own place because of the long housing waiting-list, so for years we'd had to share my grandparents' small bungalow, the four of us living on top of one another in cramped and crowded conditions. Mum had lost her cleaning job at the local library and one of the library assistants suggested she check out the ads in *The Lady* magazine for live-in work. It was the happiest I'd seen her in ages and my school was a short bus ride away.

It was all good in the beginning and Mum was an instant hit at the Hall, which had been built in the 1800s and had its own, beautifully-kept grounds on the outskirts of our town, old on the outside and dated on the inside, all wood panels, chandeliers and flash furniture. The cottage was cosy and my room lovely. My classmates were dead jealous and that skank Lacey Connor, thinking she was the toughest girl in the school, tried to bully me, saying Greg Milborne must've fancied Mum to give her the job. According to Connor, he had a reputation in the town for sleeping around.

'Don't judge other people by your own dirty standards, Connor!' I advised, pushing her head down the toilet and earning us both a visit to the headmaster's office for interrogation and subsequent detention. Despite me and my two best mates, Precious and Suze, not being part of the hard crowd, we took no shit from Lacey Connor. She gave us a wide berth after that, and she and her gang of trolls left me alone. I told no one about the wedding, except Precious and Suze, and that was weeks later.

Fortunately, it was a quiet wedding; a few select guests were invited and no announcement put in the paper. Nor was I required to be a bridesmaid, going to school while they tied the knot. Greg's mother was also absent, turning her snotty nose up at the idea of Mum becoming the next Lady Milborne.

Although he had Jeremy, Greg was no lover of kids. It was obvious from the beginning that I was a nuisance, an added responsibility to cast off, and he was adamant it was expected for the stepdaughter of a lord to be sent away to school. He had sent his seven-year-old son to Harrow and now it was my turn.

A younger edition of Greg, Jeremy Milborne came home from university to play the role of best man. Both men were tall and blond and had the same arrogant air and affected, upper class accent. Jeremy threw his rucksack on the floor and collapsed on the sofa.

'Is this her, Pops?' he said to Greg, surveying Mum critically. She went uncomfortably red. 'Not bad compared to the dogs you've dated in the past.' He turned to me, licking his lips and winking. 'The daughter's not bad, either.'

Urgh, what a creep!

I wondered how much of what Lacey Connor had said was true; it probably was of Jeremy Milborne. Both men were conscious of this leggy, fully-developed sixteen-year-old girl, showing off her slim legs in a short school skirt and a blouse not fastened to the top, the general school trend. I caught them both checking me out occasionally and that was the reason why I began to go round in baggy jeans and sweatshirts. Thankfully, two days later, Jeremy buggered off back to uni and I was safe.

Maybe boarding-school was a good idea if it got me away from Greg and his lecherous son. It'd be a waste of breath telling Mum she was marrying a perv and a paedo, she wouldn't believe me and anyway, she was besotted. He was promising her the world and it was the least she deserved. I couldn't deny her that by standing in the way of her making a better life. She was welcome to it. For all its comfort and opulence, Milborne Hall was a depressing place. I got the impression that if anyone at the Hall was unhappy Mum was marrying Greg, they were unwilling to say anything and hurt her feelings. Did they think she was too good for Greg? I certainly did.

Servants weren't a thing at the Hall, they were staff, and everyone was on first-name terms: no one called Greg 'Sir' or 'Your Lordship', he was Greg and Mum was Cheryl. Tulip, originally from Swansea in Wales and an art student at the local university, distinctive by her short dark hair, ring in her nose and

tattoos on her arm, lived and worked part-time at the Hall to help pay for her course and had been assigned to wait on me. Whatever I needed, I called her, and in the few weeks I'd been at Milborne we became really close.

I loathed the Helton Manor uniform: the green tartan skirt, mauve blazer and hat, dark green sweater, white blouse and mauve tie. Greg had bought it from an exclusive school outfitters in London, no expense spared.

'It's really smart!' he commented during the fashion show I gave him and Mum, smirking slightly at my size 36C boobs that caused the buttons of the school blouse to gape a bit. I blushed, alarmed by the heaving of my chest and the thrill of his gaze. Greg was a sod, but he was a bloody sexy sod, tall, athletic, fit, a bit younger than Mum at thirty-six (she was thirty-nine). Imagining him and Mum doing it disgusted me; all the same, I struggled to get that image out of my mind.

I took no chances, avoiding him at every opportunity, locking my bedroom door at night and ensuring we weren't alone in the same room. Boarding-school guaranteed a safe distance between us. I loved my mum and was also annoyed at her for taking the job, for meeting him, and for him separating us.

On the Saturday I left for Helton Manor, a mild September morning, I hugged Tulip goodbye and we promised to ring one another regularly for a catch-up. My case was stashed in the boot of Greg's Mercedes, my trunk having already gone ahead by special courier, and I climbed into the back seat; he was driving me and Mum up to Cumbria. Having only seen photos of the school in the prospectus and on the website virtual tour, Mum was keen to inspect the place in person. I was dressed in the uniform, the stupid school hat and blazer on the seat next to me. Greg was in the driver's seat, waiting for Mum to finish faffing around in the kitchen, giving him the opportunity to gawp at me in the rear view mirror. Embarrassed by this unwelcome attention, I decided to get my own back by teasing him. I was wearing long black socks to my thighs and I crossed my right leg over my left, rubbing my hand over the top of my sock and letting my fingers roam up my skirt. He panted heavily, forcing himself to calm down at the sound of the passenger door opening and Mum getting in. He coughed and

turned away. Grinning, my hand left my thigh and went to my hair to push it casually behind my ear.

'Forgot the sandwiches,' Mum said, handing me the lunchbox. 'It's your favourite, love, ham and cheese.'

'Cheers, Mum.'

Greg glanced at me again in the mirror and once Mum's back was turned I winked at him, and he hastily switched on the engine.

We had a break at the services on the M6 for lunch. Mum had prepared enough sandwiches to feed the five thousand; Greg preferred to order burger and fries from Burger King. Mum nipped to the toilet and I stayed in the car to log on to Pictapost and message Precious and Suze.

That morning, I'd posted a pic posing provocatively in my new uniform, jazzing it up by opening the blouse to my cleavage and revealing part of my lacy white bra, rolling over the waist of my skirt to shorten it enough to reveal the legs of my white knickers. My tie was wrapped round my neck, resembling a noose, giving the impression I was being sent to the gallows, and my hat sat at a jaunty angle. I had over nine hundred 'friends' and the post got over two hundred Likes, mainly from men sending love heart emojis and kisses, telling me how beautiful I was. The direct messages they sent me were blocked without hesitation. No-marks, saddos and catfishers swamped Pictapost and I enjoyed having power over them, drawing them in and letting them down. It was more Pictapost being the 'in' app than the attention and everyone, me and my mates included, used it. The direct messaging was free, cheaper than texting and better than Whatsapp.

Precious and Suze were missing me already and I was missing them. The last day at my old school had been full of emotion, tears, hugs, presents, promises to stay in touch and good lucks from teachers and pupils. I spent that evening in floods and nothing Mum said or did was of any consolation. Precious and Suze sent messages full of cry emojis and hopes I got sent away from Helton Manor. The problem was, if that happened, I'd end up back at Milborne Hall.

I tapped my message, thinking I ought to have tried harder to stand my ground against being sent away and insist I move back to Gran and Granddad's; they weren't Greg's greatest fans, either. At least I'd be able to visit Mum and go to my old school. I did have an uncle, Mum's older brother Andy; unfortunately, he lived in Germany. I also had a dad lurking somewhere on the planet and had heard nothing from him since he'd walked out on us fourteen years ago. I asked Mum what his name was and she'd said, 'Don't mention That Man to me!' and that's what I called him: That Man.

Not that standing my ground was an option, Greg said I had to go to boarding-school and that was that. Unless I got booted out, and if that happened I'd pack my bags and move back to Gran and Granddad's.

For the rest of the journey, I ignored Mum and Greg and read through my mates' wild ideas of how to get kicked out, adding a few of my own to lighten the mood. Murdering Miss Panesar, the headmistress, was one, albeit rather extreme. Setting fire to the gym was another over-the-top suggestion, whereas smoking in my room was a bit tame and besides, I loathed the smell of fags. Smuggling booze into class was a possibility and so was the danger of ending up in hospital getting my stomach pumped if I drank too much of it. Determined not to be put off, I geared up to get a reputation to be a nuisance and a troublemaker and surely they'd get tired of me and send me packing?

We arrived at our destination early in the evening, driving through the small, pretty town of Helton from where the school got its name. The shops and the solitary pub, The Jolly Miller, were built out of grey stone; a cross in the centre of the square had a poppy wreath resting against it and people were going in and coming out of an open Tesco Express. The school was situated on the edge of the town, past the train station. Its clock tower came into view above the trees surrounding it, the clock showing nearly ten-past seven. We were welcomed by large iron gates, our way blocked by a barrier and a security guard checking the car registration, my school ID badge and ticking my name off a sheet of paper on a clipboard. The barrier was raised and we soon reached the car park where eight cars were parked, presumably belonging to the teaching staff. I scowled at the building, built

from similar grey stone to the shops in the town, wishing I was elsewhere.

Greg pulled up outside the big red doors. He and Mum got out of the car and I stayed in my seat, gripping my phone, a million things passing through my brain: if they tried to get me out, I'd scream, convince Mum that Greg had been looking at me in a funny way, she'd tell him it was over and we'd catch the train home, away from Helton Manor, away from Greg. They'd get a divorce and I'd be free of him forever.

The back passenger door opened. Greg said, 'Come on, Cherry,' and I meekly unbuckled my seatbelt. He opened the boot to take out my case.

Mum was approached by a young, smartly-dressed woman, her blonde hair tied in a ponytail, wearing a tight-fitting grey skirt, beige blouse and black stiletto shoes. She was in her early twenties and offered her hand to Greg, who seemed reluctant to let go. Politely and firmly, she released his grip.

'I'm Joely, Miss Panesar's secretary.' She turned to me and smiled. 'Cheralyn Hill?' I winced and nodded. I detested people using my full name. 'Welcome to Helton Manor. We're glad to have you. Miss Panesar is waiting to meet you and I'll take you to her office shortly. Rowan is the building next to this one, where you will be boarding.'

Five minutes later, we reached a smaller, more modern red-bricked building. Inside, the walls were painted white, giving it a more inviting and cheerful appearance.

'Joely,' I said shyly, 'do you mind calling me Cherry? OW!' Mum nudged me warningly.

Joely laughed. 'Cherry it is; however, you'll find Miss Panesar and the teaching staff will call you by your full name. Now, some information: the juniors sleep in six bed dorms over in Willow, that's the building next to this one. You older girls have study bedrooms here in Rowan, four to a room. Next year, in Year Twelve, you'll move to Oak Sixth Form House, where you'll share two to a room. You'll get a proper tour of the school and grounds tomorrow and we provide maps! Your roommates will buddy you for the first month and help you settle in. Your trunk has arrived and you can unpack later. Shall we take the lift? You're on the second floor.'

During the lift ride, Mum said, 'Where are the other girls?' She squeezed my hand tightly. The place was eerily quiet.

'Supper finished ten minutes ago and most of them will be in the common-room relaxing,' replied Joely. 'A few have gone home to visit their families for the weekend.'

The prospect of going home every weekend appealed to me until I realised forlornly there'd be a cost to the train and coach tickets. The chances of Greg coming up every week struggling through Friday night traffic to pick me up were zero, and what if he came alone?

'Weekends are fairly free and easy here,' went on Joely, breaking into my thoughts, 'and there's plenty to do; walks, the cinema, games, dancing, the odd party, going into Helton – there's a very popular coffee shop the girls frequent called the Country Kitchen. I'll also give you a list of clubs to join. Everyone has to be back in school by six for supper and no girl is allowed out of the grounds in the evenings, unless accompanied by a prefect or member of staff for a specific reason – ah, this is you, Cherry.'

At the sight of the white door and the brass number 5 fixed to it, my stomach turned somersaults and Mum's ham and cheese sandwiches were in mortal danger of shooting up all over the floor. Joely knocked first. No answer. She opened the door to an empty, quite cosy room, where the bookshelves were cluttered full of textbooks and novels. Stuffed toys and fancy cushions littered three of the beds, one under the window and the others by the walls. Each bed had a side set of four white drawers next to it. My trunk was resting on the tidiest bed and Greg dumped my case next to it. I admired the magenta duvet and magenta pillowcases, and the window had a magenta blind pulled down halfway, overlooking the car park and grounds beyond.

'Suki, Rahma and Tasha are your roommates, Cherry,' said Joely. 'They're probably in the common-room watching a film on Netflix. You'll meet them later.' Her mobile phone buzzed. 'Ah, it's a text from Miss Panesar. Come on, we have to go back to the school building to her office.'

On the inside, the main school building was how we remembered it on the virtual tour and reminded me of Milborne Hall. The high white ceiling in the hallway had two large chandeliers, real crystal, probably; the fees they charged a term

were astronomical enough for them to afford such decorations. The wall lights, already switched on in spite of the large windows letting in the daylight, had brass fittings and ornamental glass shades.

Miss Panesar's office was an impressive room on the ground floor, dominated by a large mahogany desk and lamp, paintings on the walls and thick, white, rose-patterned curtains on the window. I recognised her from her photo in the prospectus: tall, slim, brown eyes and brown hair greying at the temples. She was a bit older than Mum, probably in her forties, and dressed in a tracksuit.

'Hello!' she said enthusiastically. 'Forgive the informality; I'm off to the gym for a game of squash shortly.' We shook hands. 'Welcome to Helton Manor, Cheralyn. I hope you'll be very happy here. Please,' she indicated the armchairs, 'take a seat and I'll go over a few things...'

I paid no attention, allowing my mind to wander and imagining being a million miles away. At last, the interview was over and I was escorted back to Rowan House by Joely to unpack and meet the other girls.

'Your parents can help you get your things organised, Cherry,' she said. I liked her. She was nice and saw how uneasy I was being away from home. She put her hand lightly on my arm. 'Otherwise, you may find it's best to say goodbye now. It's up to you. Everyone here, including me, was new at first. On my first day, I found it easier in the long run to get the goodbyes over sooner rather than later, rip off the plaster. I can guarantee it's the best remedy and your homesickness will pass faster than you think.'

I decided to rip off the plaster. The longer I left it, the harder it would be and Greg was nagging at Mum.

'We have to get going, Cher.'

Yeah, bye, Greg, I'll miss you. Not.

Stepping out into the drive, I said in a wavering voice, 'You get off, Mum. I'll be fine, honest.'

I acted more confident than I actually was. Three whole months stuck in this dump! What a rotten swine Greg was!

'Come here, you.' Mum collected me in a big hug and the tears coursed down my cheeks. She kissed me and cupped my face in her hands, trying hard to hold on to her own composure. 'Now listen, if you're not happy…'

'Come on, Cher,' called Greg impatiently from the driver's seat. 'I need to fill the car with petrol and get home by midnight.'

Mum kissed me again.

"Bye, love,' she whispered, and I waved until the car was completely out of sight.

Two
Adam

It starts with one simple word: 'Hello.'

My name is Adam and this is my story.

I'd fallen in love. Her name was Cherry, also known as @cherryhillpie on Pictapost, and she was gorgeous. Whenever my mood got spoilt – and that happened a lot – I ogled at the last picture she'd posted, my favourite, in her school uniform, her blouse unbuttoned, showing a nice bit of cleavage and the tie around her neck. My mouth watered; how I'd love to get my hands on her! She was sixteen, older than me by a few months; nevertheless, I knew how to show her a good time!

I sighed, lying back on the grass and staring at the sky dreamily, resting the phone on my chest. Sadly, she was out of reach. She was moving up to the north of the UK to a school in the Lake District and I was at a school down south in a place called Suffolk, located on the edge of the small village of West Somerholt, a million miles away from my home in New Jersey. I loathed England, West Somerholt and The Priory School. I was there because my dad, a captain in the US Air Force, had been stationed nearby at RAF Garforth for five years and my English mom was intent on me having a good education at a top British school. Her dad had been a teacher at The Priory years ago and it was therefore her choice, having no confidence in the local school where most of the other kids from the base went. I'd been at The Priory for two semesters (terms they called them here). Mom said I had to learn British English to fit in. I was a weekly boarder, going back to the base at weekends. Dad said it was best for me to board to help me to learn to live independently and to keep me in line. I'd been thrown out of high school in New Jersey for fighting. The Priory's regimented rules suited him and it was a passable alternative to the military school in the US he'd rather have sent me to. Fortunately,

Mom was less eager than I was for me to suffer the fate of marching and parades before breakfast.

Being the solitary American at the school, I had no pals and the others called me The Colonial, not by my real name, Adam Fisher. I hated them singling me out; was it racism, culturism, maybe, if that was a thing? I had no idea. I was equal to my fellow students; the problem for me was they were sons of lords, sirs and dukes, and those from overseas, India, Africa and Europe, sons of princes and barons. Like most Americans, I traced my ancestry to Ireland, a descendant of Irish farmers from the potato famine, joining many others to sail across the Atlantic and seek a better life.

The tap of a foot against my thigh ruined my delicious daydream where I was enjoying the company of the luscious Cherry. Mr Jenson, the sports teacher, was standing over me in his black tracksuit, frowning.

'Found you, Fisher!' he growled. 'Why did you leave the pavilion? Come on, everyone's waiting. You're in.'

I blinked. 'In what?'

'In to bat, you muppet! Singh's been bowled out for thirty.'

Grunting irritably, I dragged my weary bones off the grass. Cricket! Of all the cockamamie sports in the whole wide world, it was cricket! Rugby was another one and if I dared call their football game 'soccer' they almost had a fit. It was actually rugby and soccer semester, but the September weather was warm enough to get a few cricket games in. The authorities were intent on taking advantage of late fixtures that had been postponed during the summer for whatever reason, and here I was, a fish out of water, dressed in these dumb cricket whites.

I picked up the flat bat thing from the grass and plodded behind Jenson past the fielders, all standing and gawping at me irritably, arms folded. At the crease, Petrov was in front of his wicket, swinging his bat and nattering to the wicket-keeper from the opposing house. Seeing us approach, they nudged one another and Petrov said, 'Oh, it's you! We were laying odds you'd flown back to America!'

If there was one thing that irritated Dad it was the number of Russian kids The Priory had, sons of rich oligarchs. Daniil Petrov was very popular and I envied his good looks: the black hair and astonishing dark brown, almost black eyes that narrowed in a

sinister kind of way, flawless pale skin and his constant smug, almost shady manner. He was easy to detest and the feeling was very mutual.

'Come on, Fisher, get a move on, and take your place at the crease!' snapped Jenson.

'Why do I have to play this stupid game, sir?' I grumbled back at him. 'We don't have cricket in the States.'

'It's enough for me you can bat.' My talent at handling a cricket bat had turned out to be equally a surprise to me than it had to everyone else; I hadn't played baseball that much back home. On the other hand, my fielding skills weren't highly commended. I was no all-rounder. 'You're almost good enough for the Second Eleven, if you sorted that temperament of yours.'

Grumbling, I stood in front of the wicket, grasped the bat handle, and waited. Further down the field, the bowler was rubbing the ball down his trouser leg and creating a red streak, another weird ritual of this game. He ran towards me, tossing the ball in his right hand; it bounced just short of me and I walloped it. It flew towards the pavilion and Jenson put both hands in the air to indicate the six runs. Claps of appreciation rang in the air and I waved my bat at them in thanks.

Twenty minutes later, I'd achieved twenty more runs. Jenson removed the bails from the wicket to mark the end of the match.

'Stumps! Stanthorpe House wins by fifty-three runs.'

Our opponents, Gregory House, gave the customary three cheers and on the way back to the pavilion, Jenson said, 'Well played, everyone. You've all given me fair consideration for the team selections next month; you, too, Fisher.'

'The Colonial, sir?' said a boy called Freddie Carlton-Greene. 'Fours and sixes are fair enough, 'cept he's no fielder and…'

'Neither are you, Carlton-Greene,' interrupted Jenson pleasantly. 'Kindly leave the team selection to me.'

I had little chance of being chosen for the team, anyway, and Jenson was right: Carlton-Greene was physically unfit for team sports, getting by in cricket on singles and twos and rarely selected for rugby. He was often bowled out early and was nearly always assigned to wicket-keeper in the field.

Once showered and changed, I wandered into tea and an hour's prep, boarding-school speak for homework, supervised and held in

a study room. Either a prefect or teacher kept guard, whoever drew the short straw. Cell phones (mobiles the British called them) were forbidden in prep and class, which by no means prevented any of us sneaking them in, of course. The standard of work here was different to what I was used to back home, especially in Math ('Maths, not Math!' the teacher often snapped at me), and it was a slow process catching up. Not that anyone had actually labelled me backward; it was more a case of being 'not quite suited' to the British way of education. This school's morals and its crop of hostile students was why I needed my phone, to touch base with my buddies in the States using the free Pictapost messaging.

I'd shared Cherry's latest picture and the reception was what I expected.

Hot!' @deano commented. I'd met Dean at school in New Jersey and he was a nice guy, keeping his promise to connect on Pictapost. I chuckled. Cherry wasn't Dean's type: he was gay.

'Gorgeous chick!' said @scott_dude. 'I'd take her to heaven and back!'

He was my best pal and in the same boat, being the son of an army captain. His dad was stationed in Germany now and he attended an American base school there. We'd been in a New Jersey elementary school together and parting had been difficult. We'd vowed to be friends forever and we'd meant it. I'd have done anything for Scott and vice versa. Cherry's pics and his messages kept me going in my solitary life in this peculiar British world.

Other dudes on Pictapost posted love hearts and red rose emojis on Cherry's profile. I was aware they'd friended her and were hoping she'd return the favour. None of my business; I had no claim over her and spoke to other girls on my list. They tagged me in their pics and I rewarded them by Liking. Cherry was the one giving me the hots, though, and I showed all of her posts to Scott and Dean. I hadn't messaged her. Scott had and she hadn't engaged. What if she rebuffed me and messaged other guys?

I hadn't realised, after finishing my Geography prep and waiting for the others to finish theirs, I'd moaned aloud at Cherry's uniform pic. All heads turned to me.

'Fisher?' Miss Emerson said. I looked up from my phone and watched her rise from her chair. *Oh, shit*. Hurriedly, I put the cell in my pocket and stood up.

'Ma'am?

She was a young woman of around thirty, plain and unattractive, not slim, nor fashionably dressed in a long yellow, rose-patterned top, black leggings and flat lace-ups. The boys called her Dumpling behind her back.

'I keep telling you not to call me "ma'am", Fisher. I'm not the Queen.'

Sniggers.

'Sorry, ma'am – Miss Emerson.'

She held out her hand. Tutting, I pulled the cell out of my pocket and gave it up.

'Thank you. The rules regarding phones during school hours are perfectly clear. You'll get it back at the end of prep.'

Thank God the screen had locked and she couldn't see Cherry's picture in all its glory. I sat down again, my cheeks burning, trying to ignore the haughty looks from the others. Most of them were on Pictapost and up to now I'd succeeded in dodging them. We had nothing in common and the last thing I wanted was for them to find Cherry's profile on my list.

Freddie Carlton-Greene turned and waved his phone at me. Emerson marched up to his desk and snatched it from him, causing the class to collapse into fits of laughter. Prep over, the others rushed out to their respective houses, leaving Carlton-Greene and me to stay behind to collect our phones, listen to a lecture and be awarded an hour's detention to be taken the next day.

Emerson finished telling us what she thought of us and added, 'Shut the door on your way out.'

We left the room in silence until, safely out of earshot, Carlton-Greene spat, 'That woman's a right bitch!'

'Yes.'

Petrov and Imran Aziz, Carlton-Greene's cronies, had hung back and were waiting by the statue of the school's founder, Sir Hugh Stonebridge. Petrov was puffing at a vape, an illegal custom at the school to flout the rules against the ban on smoking. Petrov took no notice of rules and had been told he'd be permanently excluded if he was caught smoking again. 'Vapes don't count,' he insisted. His dad was a billionaire and owned a London soccer club. Petrov figured that gave him the right to do what he liked.

He frowned at Carlton-Greene and me approaching. Aziz nodded to me and said nothing. The son of a Pakinstani diplomat, he was a decent dude and often said hi. Nor was he scared of putting the Russian in his place.

'The Colonial agrees,' Carlton-Greene said, 'Emerson is a bitch.'

'She always has been,' said Aziz.

Petrov gave me a long stare, took a final puff on his vape before tucking it in his jacket pocket and we walked towards Stanthorpe House in silence, me bringing up the rear and not realising Carlton-Greene was strolling behind me. I took out my phone for one final glimpse at Cherry, startled by Carlton-Greene grabbing it and crowing, 'Hey! Come and see the tasty bit of skirt the Colonial's following on Pictapost!'