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THE  
MERCURY  
IN ME

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*For Mum, Dad and Aaron*





**I**T'S 10 A.M. ON A WEDNESDAY AND I AM CLUTCHING a sheep's heart. Welcome to A level Biology: Birds Hill School edition. Starring myself, Maya Pratik, currently doing what teachers like to call "presenting to the class". Also known as making us do the work for them.

The teacher in question is Miss Carpenter, who is perched nervously next to Clive, the fake skeleton.

'The heart is a complex organ,' I say, placing it onto the steel tray.

A faint *ewww*, which I thought we should have outgrown after GCSE, runs through the class.

'Miss, why does Maya always present?' says Candice Riley. Then, under her breath, she mutters, 'She's such a suck-up.'

'I want to study Medicine, Candice,' I say. Then I mutter, 'At least I know what I want to do with my li—'

I stop suddenly. That last thought should have stayed in my head.

I can basically hear the intake of breath from the class. They know I was about to say something derogatory to Candice. A crime so punishable that even without saying the rest of my sentence I might as well be put to death.

Stony silence from Candice. I try to avoid eye contact and continue on with my mission to make a bunch of Year 12s engage with atriums and ventricles.

It's a doomed mission, to say the least.

Halfway through explaining how the heart beats, a chorus of buzzing goes off through the room. Everyone's phone has vibrated at once in a dreaded symphony.

Instantly there is chaos, as everyone takes out their phones. Miss Carpenter tries and fails to get everyone to stop looking but honestly, Clive would do a better job than her.

I dig out my phone. My own, living-and-breathing, actual heart drops.

@BirdsHillHotOrNot has tagged you in a photo

Then swiftly followed by:

Lucie: OMG Maya I am going to kill her by ripping out her perfectly bleached hair

Lucie threatens to commit grievous bodily harm to Candice on a daily basis, but there is something about the timing of these two notifications that causes me to feel a deep sense of fear.

It's a photo that Candice must have snapped this morning at registration. Snapped and kept hold of like the grade-A psychopath she is.

The 'Hot or Not' image is split into four sections. It has a picture of me, standing up and peering down at my desk. My eyes are half-closed, my brown skin is dull and my grey M&S suit that my mum bought me is puckering in strange places. It is, without doubt, an incredibly unattractive photo of me. Next to me is Lucie, arms raised, angry faced, as if summoning a demon. Lucie is not much for the dress code. The only part of the sixth-form dress code she adheres to is "clothes must be black, grey, navy or white". Except she ignores the possibilities of the last three colours. In her demonic pose, today's outfit consists of: a calf-length, black velvet dress and a black faux fur coat.

The caption reads:

Not: Doctor Prick and Witchy Bitch captured this morning in their natural habitat of being weird freaks. Maya P is channelling Ms-Gupta-at-school-reception energy with this outfit, while Lucie P is knock-off-goth, as per usual.

This is Birds Hill Hot or Not, where you can keep up to date with Birds Hill School's latest news, gossip and, of course, what is hot or not today.

Great – we’ve made it onto Candice’s shit-talking gossip page again. And she’s posted right in the middle of my presentation, just so the timing undermines me even more than that awful photo she’s put up.

‘Maya, please lead by example by putting your phone away and continuing to tell us about deoxygenated and oxygenated blood flows,’ says Miss Carpenter, in the sternest voice she can muster.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I remember what Mum tells me – *don’t cause a scene*. I’m not used to this many eyes on me. I’m literally standing in front of the class, doing the dissection in front of everyone.

I turn back to the heart and start slicing with a scalpel, while explaining about blood flow and the muscular structure of the heart.

My mind is elsewhere though – I keep zoning back to that photo, recurring in my mind’s eye like a stain I can’t ignore.

This is not the time to lose focus. I slip while making my cut, and then have to make another cut into the thick tissue. My scalpel gets stuck and as I wedge it out, a piece of flesh flicks out and straight onto the person that is sitting in front of me.

That person is Candice Riley.

Oh shit. If I got a defamatory Insta post just for trying to shut her up, who knows what I’m going to get for accidentally tossing a piece of internal organ at her.

Maybe she won’t notice.

‘Did you just toss heart flesh at me?’



She noticed.

As if in slow motion, Candice rises, emerging like a praying mantis about to strike. She wipes slowly and pointedly at her face.

I stammer out sounds and turn to Miss Carpenter, who seems a bit dazed. Surprise, surprise, she is no help.

‘Moving on,’ I say, deciding to ignore Candice, who is still standing. ‘The ventricles pump blood up and out of these blood vessels here.’

‘Did you hear what I said?’ says Candice, getting up from her desk and walking over to me. She snaps on a blue surgical glove. I look up at her – what is she playing at? What does she need a glove for?

I lose my flow a bit. I don’t need this distraction; I need this dissection to go well so I can talk about it in my medical school interviews.

‘So, the vena cava is the big vein that runs in here—’ I continue.

‘I said, did you throw gross heart flesh at me?’ says Candice again, reaching out for the heart.

I snatch it away. The class gasps. My heart is pounding behind my ribcage.

‘Girls, girls, sit down,’ says Miss Carpenter weakly from her chair.

‘It was an accident,’ I say. ‘If you could sit down, I can finish the demonstration?’

Candice leans towards me and hisses in my ear. ‘You are going to pay for this later.’

She struts back to her seat and sits down, arms crossed, glaring at me.



After class, Miss Carpenter dashed straight out for a meeting. I start to put away the equipment, nervously glancing around. Candice and her crew were the first out of the room, but my flight or fight response is still heavily triggered.

I am not wrong to be alarmed. I see a blonde head turning the corner, back into the classroom, sending another spike of cortisol through me. Iris and Hayley, Candice's perpetual henchwomen, are close behind her.

Candice is the definition of beauty. Her thick, glossy, blonde hair is parted down the middle, deadly straight; her make-up is natural and neutral, breaking the rules without being glaringly obvious. She has a perfectly heart-shaped face, nature's twisted way of making up for her lack of actual heart.

And now that everyone has left, the queen bee is making a beeline for me. With two members of her hive next to her in formation.

Good thing I cleared away the sharp objects. The heart is still left out in front of me though.

'Look at you, doing the cleaning up. You just love the teachers,' she says.

I turn to the door. My bag is at my side. However, as if reading my mind, Candice's crew blocks my path.

Once again, Candice pings on a glove. This is odd. I feel my hand tighten around my bag, as if it could offer me protection.

‘Get your phone out, Iris,’ Candice says.

She picks up the heart, wrinkling her nose at it.

‘I can’t believe you like this stuff,’ she says. ‘It’s so gross.’

I’m half paying attention, half looking at Iris, who has her phone out and is recording what’s going on. I have no idea what to do. If I cover my face, I’ll look weak in whatever she puts up. Also, I’m the only person with a dress sense copied out of the school rules. You could tell it’s me in a video just from the fact that my clothes may as well have “major nerd” branded across them.

Candice turns to me.

‘But you’re used to this Maya, right? With your mum being a nurse? You’re probably used to the stench of blood and guts and vomit and shit. Maybe that’s why you always have that faint scent on you.’ She sniffs at me distastefully.

I stay silent. Silence is the only weapon against her. All your words will be used against you in the court of Birds Hill School, where Candice is judge, jury and executioner.

‘I can’t believe you threw heart flesh at me,’ she says, stepping closer to me. ‘And you do not speak to me like that, Maya. We know what happens when people get on my bad side, don’t we? Don’t want to end up like Lucie.’

I gulp. At least Lucie would know what to do now. She wouldn’t take any shit from Candice.

Candice is now too close for comfort. I can see into her blue

eyes, an uncomfortable eye contact that I want to break away from but can't. I can feel my armpits dampen, my hands become clammy, my heart racing. She's just a girl, I remind myself, the nausea building up.

She leans towards me. 'If you're going to throw a heart at me, well, I'm just going to have to return the favour.'

Then she takes the heart and wipes it down the side of my face. I can feel it, cool and disgustingly moist. It makes my stomach churn. I visualise the bacteria and oils of my seventeen-year-old face mingling with the heart. I can feel my eyes starting to sting.

She drops the heart back on the table. *Thump*. I wince, imagining the delicate structures inside jostling with the impact.

'Now you can tell the medical schools that you've got up close and personal with a heart. Might make you look *even* better, as if being an A-plus suck-up isn't enough,' she says. She turns and nods at Iris, who I had forgotten is recording the whole thing.

No doubt this will be all around the school by tomorrow.

I run to the sink and scrub my face furiously.