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Opening extract from

Katy

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I

I'm Katy Carr. I'm the eldest.

When I was very small I was given a red car for my Christmas present. Not a little push-along car. A proper car I could climb into and pedal. I pedalled up and down the garden and all over the park and along the road to the shops with my mum. I'd shout out all the time I was pedalling, 'I'm Katy Carr, I'm Katy Carr!'

My mum knew I'd love that car. She understood that I wasn't a girly girl. She didn't give me dollies or dress me in pink. I had red dungarees and a red duffle coat and red wellie boots. I've got photos in my memory box of me in all these little scarlet outfits. The photo I like best is one of me in my car with Mum running

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along beside me. We're down at the park swings. She's wearing a T-shirt and jeans and her feet are bare. Her hair's in a ponytail and she looks like my big sister, not a proper mum.

Clover's in that photo too. She's my younger sister. She wasn't much more than a baby then, and she's slumped in one of those tiny swings, her fat little legs drooping. She looked a right little pudding, with rosy cheeks and amazing curly blonde hair. Well, she hasn't changed much.

Dad's not in the photo. He must have been the one with the camera.

I remember that day so vividly. Mum and me were having a race. I think she let me win. Then she sat me on one of the big swings and gave me a push, and I remember putting my head back and feeling wonderfully dizzy, as if I were really flying. I laughed and laughed as Mum pushed me higher and higher.

Then we all went to the van to get ice creams. I got my Whippy all down my front but Mum just laughed and called me a mucky pup.

Clover says she remembers that day too, but she doesn't really. She sometimes makes up all sorts of stories about the things Mum did, the things Mum said, but they're not real and true. Clover tells all sorts of fibs when she feels like it.

Dad doesn't get Clover the way I do. He thinks she's this sweet, gentle little girl. She just has to bat her big

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blue eyes at him and he melts. The teachers at school are like that too. She hardly ever gets into trouble, though she's actually almost as naughty as me.

Even so, I don't mind. I love Clover to bits. She's always understood that I'm the oldest so I get to be the boss. Not in a bad way. It's just that I'm the biggest. Actually, I think I'd be the biggest even if I was the youngest. I'm tall. Not just ordinary tall – really, really tall. And I'm skinny too, no matter how much I eat, so I look lankier than ever.

Izzie was crazy enough to say that I could be a fashion model one day! I just fell about laughing at the idea. Dad did too, though not in an unkind way. I don't think Izzie really meant it. I'm not the slightest bit pretty. I'm hopelessly untidy, always spilling stuff and tearing my jeans, and my hair always straggles loose if I scrape it into a ponytail. I'm also the exact opposite of graceful. In fact, I'm downright clumsy, always tripping over things. And I hate dressing up and can't stick having my photo taken. I've probably got more chance of being a brain surgeon or an astronaut than making it as a model.

Izzie was just sucking up to me. It really creeps me out when she does that. I'd sooner she nagged and moaned the way she usually does. I know that deep down she doesn't really *like* me. I don't care. I don't like *her*. I mean, why would I? She's just my stepmother.

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Izzie's *soooo* different from my mum. She's fussy and picky and downright irritating. You could never ever imagine her running races with her little kid or screaming with laughter or acting crazy. She's always immaculately made-up and looks as if she's just come back from the hairdresser's all the time. If she wears jeans they're always carefully ironed and her tennis shoes are snowy white. Why Dad chose her as his second wife I'll never know.

I actually asked him once.

'*Why* did you marry Izzie, Dad?'

Clover looked shocked and I got a bit scared that Dad would be cross or upset. But he sat us down, one either side of him on the sofa, and said gently, 'I married Izzie because I love her.'

'But not as much as you loved Mum,' I blurted.

Dad was quiet for a few seconds. Clover looked as if she might cry. We'd all loved Mum so very, very much. It was the worst thing in the world when she got ill and died. Dad's a brilliant doctor but even he couldn't save her.

'I don't love Izzie the way I loved your mum,' Dad said, very softly, because Izzie was in the kitchen and he didn't want her to hear. That's the good thing about Dad. He always tells us the absolute truth. 'I love Izzie in a different way, because she's kind and caring and she's very creative.'

I sniffed. Izzie designs fancy handbags, for goodness' sake. I don't call that especially creative.

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'And I wanted to find someone to help me look after you two girls,' Dad continued.

'We could look after ourselves – you, me and Clover,' I said. 'And now we're lumbered with drippy little Elsie as well as Izzie.'

'Stop being such a meanie, Katy,' said Dad, and then he *did* get cross.

I can't help what I think. Dad's always told us to be absolutely honest. And the plain fact is that Elsie is a total pain.

She's Izzie's daughter from her first marriage, but Elsie doesn't see her own dad. She just hangs round mine. She's nine now, this weird, whiny little girl with a fringe falling over her big brown eyes. She's the spitting image of a long-haired chihuahua, and she yaps like one too.

'I don't understand how you can be so unkind to poor little Elsie,' Dad said, over and over again.

He doesn't understand just how irritating it is, always having to have Elsie join in all our games. Clover and I tried to include her at first, we really did. We just played little-girl games then, Princesses and Pop Girls and Children's Homes, that kind of thing. I made them all up and only had to say a few words to Clover – like 'We're the flower princesses today, and I'm Princess Rose and you're Princess Lily' or 'We've just started a girl group called the Popchicks and I'm the lead singer' or 'We've been dumped in this children's home and

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we're going to play all sorts of naughty tricks' – and Clover would smile and nod and we'd start the game. Straight away she'd tell me what she was wearing as Princess Lily or start strumming as the lead guitarist of the Popchicks or begin plotting an elaborate food-fight in the children's home. Whereas Elsie would just stare at us with her mouth slightly open, totally incapable of pretending. She'd expect a real Disney princess costume or say she'd never heard of the Popchicks or whine that she didn't want to live in a children's home but wanted to stay with her mum.

We'd get a bit impatient and then she'd always go running *to* her mum. We'd watch her climb on Izzie's lap and cling like a little monkey, and Clover and I would stare at them mutely, because we couldn't ever climb on *our* mum's lap now. It didn't help us to like Elsie any better.

Of course we didn't play those pathetic tiny-girl games now. We still played a few imaginary games in private, where no one could hear or laugh at us, but they were much more elaborate pretends with grown-up content. We made up our own soap called *Victoria Square*, where we were multiple people running a pub and a market stall and having all kinds of affairs. We would sometimes be DI Katy Carr and trusty Sergeant Clover solving complex crimes, but on another day we might easily turn into black-hearted serial killers stalking our prey. We also starred in many of my own horror movies,

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contending with Blobs and Aliens and Prehistoric Monsters.

We wouldn't let Elsie join in too. We'd tried her out once or twice and she took it all too seriously and then had nightmares. So we left her out, really for her own good. She didn't understand. She was always whining to Dad and Izzie that we wouldn't let her join in.

'We're not being mean. It's just that our games are private,' I told Dad.

'You let Caroline play,' Dad said.

Caroline lives next door. She's my all-time best friend forever. Clover's her second-best friend. We've known her ever since we were babies. We don't call her Caroline. She's actually Caroline Charlotte, so she started calling herself CC in one of our detective games and the name's stuck. She spells it Cecy now and everyone calls her that, even at school.

Of course we let Cecy play. She's great at pretending. She's invented a whole new Celebrity game. Clover and I are a bit rubbish at knowing all the big celebrities because Dad hates that stuff and fusses about what we watch on television and won't let us read any of the magazines. Izzie pretends to disapprove too, but we know for a fact that when she goes to the hairdresser's (which is frequently, because her big blonde hair needs a lot of attention) she buries her nose in *Hello!* and *OK!*

Cecy tells us all the gossip and acts it out and then we play we are the celebrities and we invent crazy weddings

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and torrid affairs and give birth to babies. We always end up falling about laughing. Then Elsie sees us and thinks we're laughing at *her.*

We couldn't let her join in. She's too little to understand properly and she'd probably blab half of it to Izzie and then she'd tell Dad and we'd all get into trouble.

It used to be difficult meeting up in secret places without Elsie tagging along, but now it's easy-peasy. Both Cecy and I got mobile phones for our eleventh birthdays. Cecy got an ace smartphone. Mine is just an old-fashioned, cheap, distinctly unsmart one. I tried not to mind. I know we haven't got much money as we're such a big family now, and Dad's weird about spending a lot on our presents. He's not mean; he just thinks children shouldn't be spoilt too much, worst luck. But anyway, I can still text on my phone, so Cecy and I can secretly plan where we're going to meet. I flash the text quickly at Clover and then we sneak off.

This really winds Elsie up. She's forever trying to snatch my phone out my school bag and take a peep herself. She thinks we're texting horrid stuff about her. She's cried once or twice and that made me feel all hot and horrible. I don't like Elsie and I don't see why I should just because she's my stepsister, but it's awful when she's really upset. Perhaps Dad's right and I *am* being mean.

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Sometimes when I'm awake in the middle of the night I decide I'm going to try to be extra kind to Elsie after all. I'll make a special fuss of her and cheer her up and maybe even invent a new pretend game just for her. I know she'd love that. Then I'll feel good and Dad will be ever so pleased with me. It all seems simple. But then in the morning Elsie will start her little-puppy whimpering about nothing at all and I'll get so irritated I decide that I won't be sweet to her after all.

It's not as if I'm mean to any of the others. I'm a truly good big sister to them all. Even Dad and Izzie say so. They've had three more children. I love Dorry and Jonnie and little Phil, but I do hope there won't be any more babies now. Six children are more than enough. We have to travel in the people carrier if we're going anywhere and that's starting to be a squash. We'll need a coach if Dad and Izzie carry on procreating.

Dorry and Jonnie are six-year-old twins, but they're totally unidentical in every way. Dorry's not a girl; he's a plump little boy with sticking-out ears, very earnest and serious. Izzie and Dad are very careful not to make too much of it but they're worried that he's quite chubby. Izzie tries so hard to fill him up with apple slices and carrot sticks, when all Dorry craves are sweets and crisps and chocolate and cake. He's not supposed to have second helpings either, but he secretly eats half of Jonnie's meals too. She doesn't care. Yes, Jonnie is a girl, though she's as brave and bold as any boy, and her

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knobbly knees have always got scabs because she's forever doing tricks on her bike and falling off.

Dorry doesn't try to do tricks any more because he's useless at it. I'm trying hard to think of something he's good at, funny little chap. I wouldn't dream of teasing him but I know he does get bullied a bit at school. His real name is Dorian, which doesn't help. Izzie has a lot to answer for. Some of the kids in his class call him Doreen. Jonnie gets mad then and makes up silly names for them in return. Jonnie is really Johanna, with that odd aitch. Izzie's choice again. Typical.

Then there's baby Phil, who's only three. He's astonishingly pretty for a small boy: big blue eyes and soft fair curls and a delicate little face. He has the sweetest merry laugh. I love making him chuckle. It's so easy. I just have to play peep-bo, or suddenly stand on my head or pull a silly face, and he creases up laughing.

At least his name, Philip, is simple enough. His middle name is mad though – Pirrip. He's named after the main character in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. The boy in the book is called Pip for short, and Dad and Izzie sometimes call our Phil that too. Dad loves reading aloud. He has a picture-book session with the littlies at bedtime, and then while Izzie's tucking them up he reads to Clover and me. And Elsie too, though she gets a bit bored and fidgety

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because she's really too little. Dad reads classic novels, so you'd maybe think we'd get mega-bored and fidgety too, but he's great at reading aloud, doing all the different voices, and he skips the dull passages. He acts things out, throwing his arms about, so that he often forgets he's holding his evening glass of red wine and spills it all over his trousers.

So there we are. That's the whole family. Dad, Izzie, me, Clover, Elsie, Dorry, Jonnie and Phil. We also have our pets: Sally, our serene old lady cat who sits on your lap and purrs to cheer you up when you're feeling miserable, and little Tyler, our rescue terrier. Tyler is little but he thinks he's as big as an Alsatian. Clover and I took him to puppy-training classes when we first got him. I was determined to teach Tyler lots of tricks. I had our future act all worked out in my head. I felt we might easily win *Britain's Got Talent*. But Tyler had other ideas. He didn't want to learn any tricks at puppy training, he just wanted to play with all the other dogs. And he kept doing a wee on the floor, which was seriously embarrassing. I've had to put my plans for *Britain's Got Talent* on hold.

I might just work out some other novelty act. I hoped I might be a singer like my namesake Katy Perry, but then Clover recorded me and when I listened back I discovered I can't actually sing in tune. I wondered about being a dancer instead, very modern and gymnastic, and I tried to build up a routine with Cecy

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and Clover. Elsie wanted to join in too, and we did try letting her for a bit, but she kept getting her left and right muddled up so we had to drop her. Clover wasn't too great at it either. But Cecy is brilliant. Much better than me, actually. So maybe I'll leave the dancing option for her.

I want to do *something* special and exciting in the future. I'm quite sporty and I'm especially good at being a shooter in netball because it's so easy for me to dunk the ball in the net as I'm so tall. I'm not so hot at running though because my great lanky legs go all gangly. Maybe I'll have to wait till I'm old enough to drive a proper car and then when I get wheels I'll be a brilliant woman racing driver, ever so brave and daring.

Or maybe I'll write seven great magic books like J. K. Rowling, because I'm good at making up stories. Then I'll get very rich and I'll buy a big castle somewhere, and Cecy and all my brothers and sisters can come and live with me there. I'll have a cheery servant or two and pay them so much money they won't mind a bit doing all the chores. They'll fill and empty the dishwasher and sort the rubbish into the right recycling bins and tidy all the bedrooms – all the boring, boring, boring stuff that Izzie keeps nagging me to do.

I'll be famous at something some day, you mark my words.

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