Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

Private

Written by

Kate Brian

Published by

Simon & Schuster

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

where beauty lives

Where I come from everything is gray. The bland, square strip malls. The water in the lake at the center of town. Even the sunlight has a murky quality. We barely get spring and we never get autumn. The leaves fall off the sickly trees early each September before they even have a chance to change, tumbling down on the shingled roofs of the standard-issue houses, each one exactly the same as the last.

If you want to see beauty in Croton, Pennsylvania, you've got to sit in your ten-by-ten bedroom in your boring split-level house and close your eyes. You have to use your imagination. Some girls see themselves walking red carpets with movie-star boyfriends while flashbulbs pop. Others, I'm sure, go the princess route, conjuring up diamonds and tiaras and knights on white horses. All I imagined my entire ninth grade year was this:

Easton Academy.

How I found myself there, in the place of my daydreams, while the rest of my classmates were entering the dank dreariness of Croton High, I still am not totally sure. Something to do with my

soccer and lacrosse skills, my grades, the stellar recommendation of outgoing Easton senior Felicia Reynolds (my brother Scott's older, cooler ex), and I think a little bit of begging on my father's part. But at this point, I didn't care. I was there, and this place was everything I had dreamed it would be.

As my dad drove our dented Subaru through the sunny streets of Easton, Connecticut, it was all I could do to keep from pressing my nose to the dog-slobbered window. The shops here had colorful cloth awnings and windows that gleamed. The streetlamps were the old-fashioned kind that were electric now, but had once been lit by a guy on a horse toting a pole and a flame. Potted plants hung from these lamps, bursting with bright red flowers, still dripping from a recent dousing with a garden hose.

Even the sidewalks were pretty: neat and lined with brick, topped by towering oak trees. Beneath the shade of these trees, a pair of girls my age chatted their way out of a boutique called Sweet Nothings, swinging clear bags stacked with neatly folded sweaters and skirts. As out of place as I felt in my worn Lee jeans and my blue T-shirt, I had never wanted to live anywhere more than I wanted to live here, in Easton. I couldn't believe that very soon I actually would. I felt something warm inside my chest. Something I had felt less and less over the last few years since my mother's accident. I recognized it dimly as hope.

Easton Academy is accessible by a small two-lane road, which winds up from town into the hills above. A small wooden sign on a short stone base marks the entrance to the school. EASTON ACADEMY ESTABLISHED 1858 it reads in faded letters. The sign is obscured by the

low branch of a birch tree, as if to convey that if you belong here, you know where you are going, and if you do not, they aren't going to great lengths to help you find your way.

My father turned the car under the iron and brick archway and I was sucked in. Hard. Here were buildings of brick and stone, topped by shingled roofs and spires, tradition and pride oozing from every dated cornerstone. Here were ancient, weathered, arched doorways, thick wooden doors on iron hinges, cobblestone walks lined by neat beds of flowers. Here were pristine playing fields of bright green grass and gleaming white lines. Everything I saw was perfect. Nothing reminded me of home.

"Reed, you're the navigator. Where do I go?" my father asked.

Easton's orientation map had become a sweaty, crumpled ball in my hand. I flattened it over my thigh as if I hadn't memorized it ten times over. "Make a right by the fountain," I told him, trying to sound much calmer than I felt. "The sophomore girls' dorm is the last one on the circle."

We drove by a matching set of convertible Mercedes. A girl with blond hair stood idly by while a man—her father? her butler?—unloaded a huge set of Louis Vuitton luggage onto the curb. My dad whistled.

"These people sure know how to live," he said, and I was instantly irritated by his awe, even though I felt it myself. He ducked his head so he could see up to the top of the clock tower, which I knew from my many hours of paging through the Easton catalog marked the ancient library.

What I wanted to say was *"Da-a-ad!"* What I said was "I know."

He would be gone soon, and if I snapped at him I would regret it later when I was alone in this strange, picture-book place. Besides, I had a feeling that girls like the one we had just seen never said things like *"Da-a-ad!"*

Outside the three imposing dorms that stood around the circle at the midpoint of the hill, families kissed and hugged and checked that everyone had everything they needed. Boys in khakis and white shirts kicked arround a soccer ball, their blazers tossed aside, their cheeks blotched and ruddy. A pair of stern-looking teachers stood near the dry stone fountain, nodding as they spoke toward each other's ears. Girls with shimmering hair compared schedules, laughing and pointing and whispering behind their hands.

I stared at the girls, wondering if by tomorrow I would know them. Wondering if any of them would be my friends. I had never had many girlfriends. Or any, actually. I was a loner by necessity—keeping people away from my house and my mother and therefore myself. Plus there was the fact that I wasn't interested in the things most girls seemed to be interested in—clothes and gossip and *Us Weekly*.

Back home I was always more comfortable around guys. Guys didn't feel the need to ask questions, to check out your room and your house and know all the intimate details of your life. So I mostly hung out with Scott and his friends, especially Adam Robinson, whom I had dated all summer and who would be a senior at Croton High this year. I guess the fact that I had broken up with him and come here, thereby *not* being the first sophomore girl ever to have

a senior boyfriend driving her to school on the first day, would be just another thing that would mystify the girls in my grade.

Of course, they were easily mystified.

I hoped it would be different here. I *knew* it would be. Look at it. How could it not be?

My dad brought the car to a stop at the curb between a gold Land Rover and a black limousine. I stared up at the ivy-covered walls of Bradwell, the sophomore dorm that would be my home for the next year. Some of the windows were already open, raining down music on the students and parents. Pink curtains hung in one room and inside a girl with jet-black curls moved back and forth, placing things, making it hers.

"Well, here we are," my dad said. There was a pause. "You sure about this, kiddo?"

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. In all the months that my parents had argued about my coming to Easton, my father was the only person in my entire family who had never expressed a moment of doubt. Even Scott, whose idea it had been for me to follow Felicia here in the first place—she had come for her junior and senior years, finishing up last spring before heading off to Dartmouth and, undoubtedly, glory—had balked when he saw the tremendous tuition. But my dad had been on board fully from day one. He had sent in my lacrosse and soccer tapes. He had spent hours on the phone with the financial aid department. And all the while he had constantly reassured me that I was going to "knock 'em dead."

I looked into my dad's eyes, exactly the same blue as my own,

and I knew he didn't doubt whether I could make it here. He doubted whether *he* could make it back home. Images of pill vials flashed in my mind. Little white and blue tablets spilled across a water ring stained night table. A bin full of empty liquor bottles and crumpled tissues. My mother, wiry and pale, grousing about her pain, about how everything bad happened to her and none of us cared, tearing me down, tearing Scott down, telling us all we were worthless just to make us feel as miserable as she did. Scott had already made his escape—he had packed up and gone off to Penn State last week. Now it would be just Dad and my mother in that tiny little house. The thought depressed me.

"I don't have to go here," I said, even though the very idea that he might agree with me made me physically ill. To see this place, feel what it was all about, and then have it all taken away within the span of five minutes would be painful enough to kill me, I was sure. "We can go home right now. Just say the word."

My dad's face softened into a smile. "Yeah, right," he said. "Like I would really do that. But I appreciate the offer."

I grinned sadly. "No problem."

"I love you, kiddo," he said. I already knew that. Getting me into this school and out of that hellhole was about the most obvious display of love any parent could have produced. He was pretty much my hero.

"Love you too, Dad."

And then he hugged me and I cried and before I knew it, we were saying good-bye.

intimidation

"Easton Academy is one of the top-ranked schools in the country. Which is, I assume, the reason you sought out a place here. But many students who matriculate in from public schools find it to be a . . . *difficult* adjustment. I trust, of course, that you will not be one of those students, am I right, Miss Brennan?"

My advisor, Ms. Naylor, had gray hair and jowls. Actual jowls. They shook when she spoke, and when she spoke it was mostly about how I never should have applied to Easton in the first place as I was completely out of my league and teetering on the brink of failure before I had even entered my first class.

At least that was what she implied.

"Right," I echoed, going for a confident smile. Ms. Naylor made an equally feeble attempt in return. I got the idea that she didn't smile much as a rule.

Her basement office was dark, the walls made of stone and lined by shelves full of dusty leather-bound books. It was lit only by two windows set high in the wall. Her round body wedged so perfectly

between the arms of her chair that it seemed she was permanently bound there. If the musky/oniony smell in the air was any indication, it was quite possible that she never actually left the room. And that whatever she last ate within its four walls was seriously rank.

"The academic programs at Easton are extremely advanced. Most of the students in your year are taking courses that would be considered senior level by your old high school's curriculum standards," Ms. Naylor continued, looking down her nose at what I assumed were my Croton High records. "You'll need to do a lot of extra work to keep up. Are you up to the task?"

"Yeah. I hope so," I said.

She looked at me like she was confused. What did she expect me to say? "No"?

"I see you're here on partial scholarship. That's good," Ms. Naylor says. "Most of our scholarship students have a certain fire in their bellies that seems to inspire them to attain their goals."

Ms. Naylor closed her folder and leaned toward me across her desk. A shaft of light from one of the windows illuminated the distinct line between the makeup on her face and the fleshy rolls of her neck.

"We expect great things out of each and every one of our students here at Easton," she said. "I hold my own advisees to particularly high standards, so I will be keeping a close eye on you, Miss Brennan. Don't let me down."

Maybe I was just being paranoid, but somehow this demand

sounded more like a threat. There was a pause. I had the feeling I was supposed to say something. So I said, "Okay."

Her eyes narrowed. "Your schedule."

She whipped out a thin sheet of paper and held it out over the little bronze nameplate on the edge of her desk, advertising her position as guidance director. As far as I could tell, all she was trying to do was guide me, crying in submission, to the nearest airport.

I took the paper and scanned it, taking in words like "Art History," "Bonus Lab," and "French 3." How in God's name had I placed into French 3?

"Thank you," I said. I was pleased to hear that my voice was not trembling in concert with my insides.

"And, the honor code."

She handed me another piece of paper, this one thicker, more substantial, than the first. At the top corner was the Easton crest and the words "Easton Academy Code of Honor for Students." Beneath that, "Tradition, Honor, Excellence."

"Read it over and sign it," Ms. Naylor said.

I did as I was told. The honor code basically stated that I would not cheat and that I would report any classmate if I suspected him or her of cheating. If I failed to meet these standards, I would be instantly expelled. No second chances at Easton Academy. But since I had never had to cheat in my life, and couldn't fathom that anyone else who had been accepted to this school would have to, I signed it quickly and handed it back. Ms. Naylor inspected my signature.

"You should get going," she said. "House meetings begin in fifteen minutes. You don't want to make a bad impression with your house mother on your first day."

"Thank you," I said again, and stood.

"Oh, and Miss Brennan?" she said. When I looked at her again, she had twisted her face into a smile. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof. "Good luck," she said.

The "you'll need it" was implied.

Feeling nostalgic for the hopefulness I had felt back in my dad's car, I grasped the cold, brass doorknob and walked out.

intrigue

My tendency to walk with my head down has had both benefits and drawbacks in the past. The major drawback was the fact that I had walked into my share of people. The benefit was that I was always finding things. Tons of coins, fallen necklaces and bracelets, secret love notes people thought they'd secured in their binders. Once I even found a wallet full of cash and when I turned it in I got a fifty-dollar reward. But I should have known that walking that way around Easton would be bad. I was halfway across the quad that backed the dorms when I heard someone shout, "Heads up!"

Which, of course, made me look when it was supposed to make me duck.

I dropped my schedule and grabbed the football out of the air about a tenth of a second before it would have sent me to the infirmary with a broken nose. My heart was in my throat.

"Nice reflexes."

There was a guy sitting directly in my path. Had the ball not almost rearranged my face, I would have tripped right over him

with my next step. He slipped the sleek cell he'd been texting on into his pocket, unfolded his long legs, and stood up, picking up my schedule along the way. His dark hair fell over his forehead in a messy yet somehow totally deliberate way, one lock landing right over one of his strikingly deep blue eyes. He wore a gray heather T-shirt that hugged a perfectly lithe frame. His features were angular, his lightly tanned skin flaw-free.

"New girl," he said, looking me up and down.

I flushed. "That obvious?"

"I know everyone that goes to this school," he said.

"Everyone?" I said. Hardly possible.

"It's a small school," he said, studying me.

Didn't feel that way to me. In fact, it felt pretty damn huge. But then, it was my first day.

"Pearson! Quit flirting and throw the ball back!"

Before I had only *felt* the guys hovering. Now "Pearson" held his hand out for the ball and I looked up at his friends, six of them, all sweating and heaving for breath about twenty yards away. Rather than handing it over, I turned, took a few steps, and punted the ball to the guy farthest from me. It fell right into his hands. One of the players—a tall, broad, blond kid who had "cocky" written all over him—threw me a lascivious glance before jogging back into the game.

"Reed Brennan. Sophomore."

My heart skipped a disturbed beat. "Pearson" was reading my schedule.

"I'll take that back now," I said, reaching for it.

He turned away from my grasp, holding the schedule up with both hands. I racked my brain trying to recall if there was anything embarrassing or overly personal on there. Did it say I was on scholarship? Did it say where I was from?

"Hmmmm. . . tough schedule. We have a smarty on our hands."

The way he said it, I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing. "Not really," I replied.

"And modest, too," he said, sliding a glance in my direction. "You're one of those girls, aren't you?"

I was flaming red by this point. "What girls?"

"Those girls who are smart but pretend they're not. Those girls who are absolutely model-level gorgeous but are always saying they're ugly," he said.

Gorgeous? *Gorgeous?* I hated compliments. Never had any idea what to do with them. Especially ones I suspected were backhanded.

"Those girls whose very existence tortures all the other self-esteem-lacking girls around her."

I snatched my schedule out of his hands and stuffed it into my back pocket.

"I guess that makes you one of those obnoxious guys who thinks he knows everything and is so full of himself that he's convinced that everyone around him wants to hear his every last unoriginal thought," I said.

He grinned. "Got me pegged."

He didn't even have the decency to *act* offended. He had that air

about him that said he knew who he was and didn't much care what I or anyone else thought of him. I envied that.

"Reed Brennan, sophomore, I'm Thomas Pearson, senior," he said, offering his hand.

No one even close to my age had ever offered to shake my hand before. I eyed him uncertainly as I slipped my hand into his. His palm was unbelievably warm and the firm assuredness of his grip sent a rush of anticipation right through me. As he stared directly into my eyes, his smile slowly widened. Did he feel it too, or did he just know somehow that *I* felt it?

His cell phone rang and he finally pulled away, sliding it out of his left pocket. Odd, I had thought he'd placed it in the other one. "I have to take this," he said, spinning the phone on his palm like a six-shooter in an old western. "Business before pleasure. And trust me, it *was* a pleasure to meet you, Reed Brennan."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"Pearson," he said into the phone.

Then he strolled off, head up, so comfortable that he may as well have owned the place. I wondered if he actually did.

housing's idea of a joke

My roommate was a talker. Her name was Constance Talbot and she apparently lacked the need for oxygen. She started talking the moment I entered our room after my encounter with Thomas Pearson and didn't come up for air once. While she blabbed, I checked out the posters of rock bands and Rodin paintings she had hung in my absence. Took in the piles of cardigans and T-shirts and low-rise cords on her bed. Wondered if her Manhattan school had kicked her out for continuously disturbing the peace.

Her favorite topic of conversation? Herself. Making me wonder if I had been idiotic to think that the girls here would be different. In those five minutes I found out that she was an only child, that she was new to Easton like me, that she had attended a private school in Manhattan and could have kept going there but felt the need to "expand her horizons," that her dog was unfortunately named Pooky, and that she had a boyfriend back on the Upper East Side even more unfortunately named Clint.

"Clint and I went to the U2 concert last summer at the Garden.

Not like anyone *wants* to go to the Garden, but where else is U2 gonna play, right? So my dad gets us backstage passes because he was promoting it, and—did I mention that my dad is a promoter?"

She had.

"And he was all like, 'The band isn't going to be back there, but you'll get to see where they get dressed and hang out.' But then we get back there and open the door and guess who's standing there? Guess!"

It was actually my turn to talk.

"Bono?" I said.

"Bono!" she exclaimed. "Right there! Like five feet away! And do you know what he said? He said, and I quote, 'Pleasure to meet you. . . .' "

Her Irish accent was really bad.

" 'You have some of the most gorgeous Irish skin I've ever seen.' He knew I was Irish! Just from looking at me!"

Apparently Bono was neither blind nor stupid. After all, Constance had the requisite thick red hair. The freckles. The green eyes. I wouldn't have been surprised if she had Erin Go Bragh tattooed across her ass.

Except that she was too wide-eyed and perky to be the tattoo type.

"So of course I asked him to pose for a picture with me and of course he did. My friend Marni took like a hundred of them—"

"Really? Do you have them?" I asked, trying to make an effort.

There was at least a five-second pause as Constance turned her back on me and dug through her pink satin jewelry box—so long

that I grew concerned. "Oh, no. I didn't bring them with me. I didn't want to, you know, show off."

Right.

"Anyway!" She was back in my face, bright smile and all, fastening a beaded necklace around her neck. "Are you ready?"

"For what?"

"For the house meeting!" she said, her abnormally large eyes bulging. "We're gonna meet our house mother!"

"Oh. Right," I said, scooting forward on my plaid comforter.

"Doesn't that sound so seventeen hundreds? We have a *house mother*," Constance said, cracking herself up. "I can't wait to meet the rest of the girls on our floor."

She looked at me expectantly. "Yeah. Me neither," I said, forcing a smile.

I followed her out the door, wishing I felt half as excited and confident as she did. Unfortunately, I had already seen the girls on our floor. Seen them chatting on their cell phones, folding their two-hundred-dollar jeans, toting their Kerastase hair products into the bathroom, and I already knew that I was in over my head. And they all seemed as if they already knew one another. They approached one another easily and talked like old friends—as if they had all lived here together their entire lives, cultivating private jokes and creating a specific style that I would never be able to match, having come to the game so late. There wasn't a single item in my closet that wouldn't make me stick out like a Podunk loser—a Wal-Mart frequent shopper.

I didn't know how to do this. I didn't know how to chat and tell secrets and be friends. No classmate of mine had been inside my house since I was eight. I didn't do birthday parties or slumber parties or anything else, and as a result no one at my old school knew anything about me. Which was just the way I wanted it. I had made that choice back when my mother had first begun her long and continuous downward spiral. To protect myself. To protect other people from her. And it had worked all this time. Not a soul outside my immediate family knew my secrets.

What I had never realized was that after seven years of antisocial behavior, I had rendered myself incompetent. Incapable of teenage normalcy. I was a sorry excuse for a girl. And no matter how much I wanted to, I was starting to wonder if there was anything I could do to change. If there was anything I could possibly do to make people *want* to get close to me. Especially these people. Less than five hours at Easton and I was already fairly certain my girlfriendless drought would continue.

them's the rules

The meeting was being held in the common room on our floor—fifth floor, Bradwell. The U-shaped hallway of our dorm terminated at each end with a door to the common room. Beyond this room were the elevators to the lobby, which meant that in order to get to your room you had to walk through the common room and take one of the two doors to your side of the building. When I had come through earlier, the well-worn couches and chairs had been placed all around the room, creating nooks for studying and one television-viewing area. Now all the seating had been arranged in a wide V, facing the TV. Dozens of girls crowded on and around the couches and chairs, chatting and laughing. The place was packed and the decibel level was staggering. A thick concoction of perfumes—and scented hair products and scented lotions—choked the air. Constance bounded right into the room and took a seat on the arm of one of the couches. The girl at the end, who now had a perfect view of Constance's ass, rolled her eyes and pulled her arm in close to herself. I hovered by the door. There seemed to be more oxygen there.

A young woman stood near the TV making notes on her clipboard. When Constance had entered, she'd looked up and smiled. Her long, smooth hair was pulled back in a plaid headband and if I bumped into her on the street I never would have pegged her for any older than seventeen. She checked her gold watch and wrinkled her nose quickly.

"Okay! It's about that time! Let's get started," she said. "Come in, come in." She waved me into the room and everyone turned around to look. With no other options in sight, I walked around to the end of the V, dropped to the floor near Constance's feet, and hoped that everyone would stop staring.

"Hello everyone, and welcome to Easton Academy. I am Ms. Ling, your house mother." She paused and laughed. "That sounds so old. Do I look old enough to be your 'mother'?" she added, throwing in a couple of air quotes, made awkward by the clipboard and pen in her hands.

A few people laughed halfheartedly. Even more rolled their eyes. Ms. Ling didn't seem to notice. She crossed her legs at the ankle and hugged the clipboard to her chest.

"A little bit about me," she said with a smile." I graduated from Easton Academy six years ago. Lived in this very dorm my freshman and sophomore years. This was back before they built the freshmen their own dorm," she added with a sly smile. She wanted us to feel like she was one of us. Or maybe *she* just wanted to feel like she was still one of us. "After I graduated, I went to Yale undergrad and Harvard grad where I received my master's degree in East Asian

studies last spring. After that, I am proud to say that Easton invited me back to be the first ever teacher of Chinese language and culture. So if any of you are interested, it's a beautiful language and there's still time to transfer into the intro class."

Silence.

Ms. Ling blinked. It seemed like she had expected a few enthusiastic volunteers and our nonexistent reaction threw her. She stood up straight and cleared her throat, checking her clipboard.

"Okay, onto the rules. I know some of you have heard these before, but bear with me," Ms. Ling said. "I have to go over everything. Them's the rules."

She flushed when, once again, no one laughed. Didn't she realize that trying too hard was about the worst thing she could do if she wanted us to think she was cool? I mean, according to her autobiography she had *been* one of us only six years ago. Did people really forget that quickly?

"First, let's talk about curfew," she said, earning a few groans which actually seemed to perk her up. We were alive!

What followed was a long litany of the rules and regs, all of which were listed in the Easton Handbook we all had back in our rooms. Of course, I had thought that some of them were just for show—to make the parents feel like they were sending us to a nice, strict, no-nonsense school—but it turned out that they were all real and that the school took them very seriously. We really did have to sign in with Ms. Ling in her room on the first floor every night before ten. After that, we weren't allowed to leave our floors without express

permission from Ms. Ling herself. There were quiet hours every night from six until nine and we were not allowed inside Bradwell between classes. Guys were only allowed inside the dorm between the hours of six and nine each night, and then they were only permitted in the common rooms (this announcement was met with a few snickers, the most obvious of which came from a sort of pig-faced girl with blond hair and big boobs who sat in the center of the V). Once she was done reading us the three-page-long list, Ms. Ling looked up and grinned.

"So that's it! If you have any questions, please feel free to come see me in my room. I have a really good feeling about this group. It's going to be a great year! I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you!"

She had to yell that last part because everyone was already on their feet and heading for the doors.