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Opening extract from

A Month with April-May

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Published by

Hot Key Books

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Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

First published by Penguin South Africa in 2010

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0029-2

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Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
This book is set in 11.25pt Fairfield LH Light

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

In my experience, there are two kinds of teachers in this world.

The first bunch barely make it out of bed to come to school. If they do pitch up for class, they can't teach for toffee, so they let you do exactly as you please. They don't know your name and they never show up for teacher–parent evenings. They're the best. I can deal with this lot.

The other crowd consists of people you just don't want hanging around your classroom. They give you assignments and expect you to do stuff like research. They want you to learn things. And they want you to enjoy it. They're always asking stupid questions and trying to interfere in your life. They are teachers like Mrs Ho. I should have known from the first moment I met her: it was either me or Mrs Ho. One of us was going to have to go.

One

I knew Mrs Ho was bad news on my first day at Trinity College. I don't know her name when I first meet her, but I've met the type before: uptight, pushy, at school before the first bell has stopped ringing.

I'm in the corridor between classrooms – ten minutes into my first day at my new school and I'm lost. She's yelling at me. Loudly. Like I'm deaf.

'What do you call this?' She shakes my school bag in the air. My lunch box falls out into the passage, followed by my polony rolls.

I want to tell her that it's my school bag, but I'm on my hands and knees, trying to get the stuff off the floor and away from the sniggers of three boys who are looking at my polony rolls like I'm trying to smuggle hand grenades into the school.

'Blue.' She shakes my bag. 'Not red and purple.' She points at my multicoloured satchel in disgust. 'Navy blue.

Those are the rules. Don't let me see this bag at school again.'

She tosses my bag down and is just about to stalk off when she sees my legs. From the expression on her face I think I've been amputated at the knees. Like paralympic runner Oscar Pistorius, except I don't have cool blades to help me bounce off to a gold medal and freedom.

'Stand up, girl.'

I stand up and her glare takes in my green-and-white striped socks.

'Do you think you're in the circus?'

I shake my head. Of course I don't think I'm in the circus. I'm at school.

'Take those off immediately.' She points at my socks.

She watches while I take off my shoes and socks and then put my shoes back on. I can walk around without socks all term until I get the regulation navy-blue ones. She says this and then leaves me sitting in the corridor, plotting how I can smother her to death with the polony that's fallen out of my rolls and on to the floor.

This teacher's trouble. I recognise the signs. I put her face at the top of my hit list.

I finally find my classroom and hobble inside, only to get allocated a desk at the back of the room with the class mouth-breather. Her name is Melanie and she goes out of her way to make me feel welcome. She breathes

her boiled-egg breakfast all over me and whispers how pleased she is to have a desk-mate at last. She sat alone all last year. Why am I not surprised?

My seat with Melanie at the back of the class at Trinity College will be my home for my Grade Eight year. Home? This school's more like a prison. Blood-red walls tortured by ivy creep three floors up to a clock tower looming over a quad, its round face spying on the kids below, tick-tocking away the hours of our captivity.

Fluffy says if I mess up and don't perform to my potential he's giving me back to my mother.

Fluffy is my dad. It's just the two of us. There used to be three of us before Mom and Fluffy decided last year that they couldn't stand the sight of each other and split. They couldn't split me in half so Fluffy got to keep me. I'm not sure which of them thinks they got the better deal.

Melanie is the class monitor. She gives me some textbooks and stationery and says that all the books have to be covered in brown paper and plastic. These are the rules at Trinity College.

She also tells me that our classroom teacher is a man called Mr Goosen. But everyone calls him 'Finger'. I can see why when he comes into the room and takes roll-call for the day. As he calls out each name he looks up and then points, just to make sure that the voice and the face

match the name on the clipboard. His index finger is missing in action so he points with his middle finger.

Finger comes to the end of the names and points his finger at Melanie. No, he's pulling the zap sign at me.

'April-May February.'

That's me.

My list of people who deserve to be poisoned with a side dish of salmonella is historically topped by Fluffy and Mom. Mr and Mrs February should have called it quits the day I was born, when they couldn't agree on what to call me. Fluffy thought April was the prettiest time of the year. Mom liked May. I got called a calendar.

Finger's middle finger wavers as he reads out my name for a second time. I stand up and stare that finger down. 'They call me Bella.' I nod encouragingly and hold nickies behind my back. I'm in the middle of reading *Twilight*, the first fang-bang novel by Stephenie Meyer, and I think Bella will do just fine. If I'd been a boy I would have gone for Edward.

Finger nods and lowers his finger. 'We have a new girl. Let's all clap hands and welcome April-May February to the school.'

He's obviously a slow learner.

After the class has given me a slow clap, Finger says he's got some urgent things to do and we must get on with whatever it is he's supposed to be teaching us. It's

History. We must read the first two chapters from the textbook and then discuss what we have read among ourselves. Quietly.

Melanie tells me that Finger doubles up as the History teacher. He's also the Deputy Principal and has been around since the ark was built. He's hanging in at Trinity College until he turns a century, then he'll get his pension and go and open a B & B in Clarens – a village near Bethlehem in the Free State (as opposed to Bethlehem in the Middle East).

I spend the next two hours reading *Twilight* while the rest of the class text each other. I don't have a cellphone. I think I'm the only teenager in Jozi who isn't connected. Oh, and Melanie, who says her phone fell into the swimming pool yesterday. I tell her cellphones are last month's monomania of the mediocre. I'm waiting for my new BlueBerry. Melanie sounds interested. Her father has a BlackBerry.

BlueBerry, BlackBerry, what's the diffs? Melanie says she can't see the diffs at all. Then she paints her fingernails with Tipp-Ex and scratches it off with a safety pin. It's like dandruff all over my desk.

Finger comes back when the double lesson is almost over to check that no one's bunked off. He tells us to carry on reading from the textbook for homework and to think about History and things. I reckon he belongs to the first category of useless teachers. Finger can stay.

The next lesson is English. Call me a dork, or Boring Bella or whatever makes your cellphone whistle, but English is my favourite subject. The rest of the subjects can eat sand.

Melanie tells me that our English teacher is Miss Morape, who is sweet and loves Stephenie Meyer. Instantly I know Miss Morape is going to love me too. She is going to love me and leave me and *Twilight* in peace.

I begin rethinking our new best-friend status because the woman who walks into the classroom can't possibly be Miss Morape. She is not sweet. She can't love Stephenie. She's the one on top of my hit list. It is she who banned my multicoloured school satchel and has caused my feet to sweat blisters into my school shoes. 'Ho-ho-ho,' Melanie whispers.

I cover my nose with my hand and lean in to hear Melanie tell me that the woman in front of the classroom is Mrs Ho. She's standing in for Miss Morape, who's on a course to learn how to teach and won't be coming to school for the next two weeks. Miss Morape is definitely my kind of teacher. I miss her already.

Mrs Ho has the face of one of those babushka dolls. Her eyes are like tadpoles. They flash and gleam like a fanatic as she tells us to take out our Shakespeares – we're studying *Romeo and Juliet* this term. I think not.

I carry on reading *Twilight*. I got it from the library yesterday and I can't put it down. I read until midnight last night, then Fluffy came in and said, 'Lights out, it's your first day at your new school tomorrow. If you don't get eight hours' sleep you won't be able to perform to your potential.'

I read for another hour in the bathroom, wrapped up in my duvet in the bath. The cold water faucet is faulty and water dripped on to my feet. I didn't notice. I didn't even notice when Fluffy banged on the door and said, 'Please, April. Please, stop hogging the bathroom. Stop reading that book. You're an addict.'

My name is April-May and I am addicted to Twilight.

Hello, April-May.

I tried to resist this book when it made the bestseller list, but I have succumbed like a billion other teenagers all over the world. I am an addict.

Welcome to Stephenie Meyers Anonymous, April-May.

I need help. I need to get my hands on New Moon *as soon as I'm done with* Twilight. *I need to feed my addiction.*

I read *Twilight* as the class reads *Romeo and Juliet*. Time passes and I do not notice Mrs Ho writing on the board. I do not hear her walking up and down between the desks as the schloeps write notes in their books and she reads Shakespeare.

Edward the vampire is leaning towards Bella and I'm

just aching for that icy kiss. I lift my face as I sense his cold lips approach mine. I close my eyes. 'Kiss me, Edward,' I whisper. But when I open my eyes all I see is Mrs Ho.

Cold Fact No. 1

It is illegal in some countries to call your kids stupid names. Like you can't call your kid '4Real' in New Zealand, or 'Brfxxccxxmnpccclllmmnprxvclmnckssqlbb11116' in Sweden, or even 'Prince' in the Netherlands.

Two

Fluffy's home by the time I get back from Melanie's house. He's throwing two-minute noodles into a pot.

'Two minutes,' I tell him as he stares at the clock on the kitchen wall. 'You don't need to time them. They'll float to the top when they're done.'

He glances at the clock one last time and then asks me where the heck I've been.

I tell him I've been smoking weed with the bad boys at school. Then I see his face and tell him, 'Jokes, Fluffy, jokes.'

Fluffy doesn't think I'm funny. He used to, but since Mom and him split the lounge suite and parted company he's been suffering from a serious sense-of-humour bypass.

'April, where *have* you been? I've been worried.'

Fluffy calls me April these days. Mom calls me May. When they're in the same room together (rarely) and speak to me at the same time, I feel schizoid tendencies coming on. Am I Autumn or am I Winter?

Fluffy pokes the noodles with his finger and looks even more worried when they start sinking.

I tell Fluffy I've been at the mall with Melanie, buying a new navy-blue school bag and some navy-blue socks. I nickies my fingers because I've been at the movies seeing *Twilight*, which between me and you is the last time I'll ever go to the movies with big-mouth Melanie.

She's seen *Twilight* seven times. She knows the dialogue off by heart and spoke the lines throughout the show. Loudly.

'Keep your mouth shut, Melly,' I told her.

She said she couldn't breathe.

It took all my self-control to stop myself from sinking my teeth into her neck.

Afterwards we hung out at her house. House? The place is a mansion. Two storeys with a swimming pool, a tennis court and a koi pond, all enclosed by an electric fence with an armed guard at a gatehouse.

I read Melly's copy of *Twilight* while she typed up my punishment essay on *Romeo and Juliet* with two fingers.

When she was done, I let her cover my school books in brown paper and plastic until it got dark and her mom said, 'Don't you have a home to go to?'

She looks just like Melly but she breathes through her nose.

Melly refused to let me borrow her copy of *Twilight*. She's learning it off by heart. She says she's going to know every one of the books like the back of her hand.

Fluffy looks relieved to hear I spent the afternoon with Melly and mashes the top of his head so his hair gets all fluffy, like a ball of black wool that's become so tangled that you need a thin-toothed comb to tease it apart.

Let me tell you about Fluffy. He's thirty-five years old and he's a blinking vulture. That's what some people call people in Fluffy's line of work. Fluffy drives a tow-away vehicle for Willie's Wreckers. He's the guy at the scene of the accident who jacks your car before the ambulance arrives (and then hits you with the bill before you can get buried).

Fluffy has this nifty little two-way radio, which is tapped into the police frequency. He has it on day and night. He's the guy who smiles when he hears the words 'pile-up on the freeway'. Then he's off like a rocket.

Fluffy hasn't always been a blinking vulture. Three months ago he was a bloody vampire. He sucked the blood out of the lives of innocent people and turned them into monsters. That's how Mom describes Fluffy's previous line of work. 'Journalists! Bloody vampires! What's the difference?' she says.

Mom can be cruel. As cruel as the bosses at the East Rand knock-and-drop newspaper who got bitten in the

neck by the recession and had to downsize, rationalise, tighten their belts and retrench Fluffy last year.

Driving a tow truck is a way to pay the bills, apparently. A stopgap until Fluffy can get back into journalism or publish his best-selling novel. Then we'll move to Hollywood to sell the film rights and become slumdog millionaires.

Until then we're slumming it at Chez Matchbox, a house the size of Melly's en-suite bathroom. It gives me and Fluffy an uber-cosy space to lay our heads for as long as he can keep paying the mortgage.

The best thing about Chez Matchbox is the back garden. It's big enough to swing a dog and is shaded by an old sour-sour tree (*Eugenia myrtifolia*). The berries are as pink and sour as Fluffy's face when he reads his bank statements every month.

'How was your first day at your new school?' Fluffy asks me. His whole forehead collapses into a zillion lines when he asks this. I see his gloomy forehead and I flash back to Mrs Ho at my shoulder eight hours before.

'This is not Shakespeare,' she said.

Perceptive. No idiot, is our Mrs Ho. 'This is Stephenie Meyer,' I told her.

She picked *Twilight* off my desk and held it in the air like it was a snotty tissue. 'Trash,' she said.

'*Twilight*,' I told her.

She walked to the front of the class with my *Twilight* and gave us all a fifteen-minute lecture about good literature. Good literature is: Austen, Brontë, C. S. Lewis. She started ticking off her alphabet of acceptable authors. She faltered at D, so I helped her out with Dostoyevsky. I even spelt it for her. And gave her his first name: Fyodor.

Just for that she confiscated *Twilight* for two weeks and I got a five-hundred-word punishment essay on *Romeo and Juliet*. She evidently despises Russian writers.

I tell Fluffy that my first day at my new school was good.

He shakes his head and says, 'Good, good, good.' It's so important that this school works out, he continues. I must do good this term. I must perform to my potential.

He says this at least once a day, so I find myself saying it as he says it, just like Melly in the movie.

Fluffy says there's no need for you to get lippy with me, young lady. This is serious. I can't keep you if you don't do good. 'I'll have to give you back to your mother.'

I say this for him before he gets there. He laughs and says I'm impossible. He then looks despondent again because he wants to do everything possible to keep me.

Me getting a bursary to Trinity College is a big deal for Fluffy. It's a good school. Not like the rubbish one I went to last year. If I don't do good this term I'll get skopped back to the old school and have to live with Mom in Pretoria.

Fluffy asks about my teachers. I tell him about Finger. This makes Fluffy happy. His eyes light up. Fodder for his novel (he's still only on chapter one).

I tell him that Mr Goosen's finger got bitten off by a mad dog called Neville when he was trying to stop him from savaging a pair of newborn twins in their pram. When the paramedics arrived they couldn't find Mr Goosen's finger and Neville had to be chopped in half without anaesthetic, right there on the street. They found the top of Mr Goosen's finger in a digested mess of dog food and other strange-looking goop, but it was too late to sew it back on.

Fluffy loves this story. He takes notes and asks lots of questions. I must remember to ask Melly how it really happened.

I don't tell Fluffy about Mrs Ho. Punishment essays always make him dismal. It's not a good start, April. It's not a good start at your new good school. I can almost hear him say it.

We try and eat our overcooked ten-minute noodles and Fluffy drinks a couple of non-alcoholic beers. Fluffy's never been a big boozer, but he's on the wagon these days as he can never predict when there's going to be a pile-up on the N1 to Pretoria. He's got to be sharp when it happens.

It happens just as Fluffy's scraping the noodles into an

old ice-cream tub and he flies off like a vulture to feast on the misfortune of reckless drivers.

I spend the rest of the evening pining for the last three chapters of *Twilight* – the ones I never got to read at Melly's house. I make do with *Romeo and Juliet*. Totally wet. And I know from my reading of History that in Elizabethan times most of them had lost their teeth before they were old enough to kiss.

I want to talk to Mom. I want to tell her about the first day at my new good school. I want to tell her about how Mr Goosen lost his finger in a brutal hijacking. How it was blown clean off his hand as he pushed the bad guy's gun away from his temple. But Mom and me can't connect. Fluffy says he'll only be able to buy me a cell-phone when Oxford Road collapses on to the Gautrain at rush hour.

I cover the seeping blisters on my ankles with bits of toilet paper and sticky tape and try not to think about Mom. Instead I think about Edward the vampire and Bella and toothless Romeo pining for his dead Juliet.

The bits of sticky tape come loose and my blisters chafe against my duvet. I think of Mrs Ho. I wonder where I can find an apothecary to buy some poison.