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Opening extract from

First Term at L'Etoile

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New Beginnings



Molly and Maria Fitzfoster could barely breathe for nervous excitement as they clutched each other on the back seat of their dad's old Bentley. As the car bounced along the enormous, sweeping drive, they craned their necks out of the window trying to catch a glimpse of their new school. The September sun streaming through the rows of poplar trees completely blinded them.

'Oh, Eddie, are we nearly there yet?' a very exasperated Maria asked their dad's driver. 'We can't see a thing back here!'

'I know, Miss Maria,' Eddie responded. 'The sun is in the wrong spot and making driving a little bit tricky.

I don't think it can be too much further though.'

'Don't worry, Eddie – Maria just hates not being in control. It's not as if we're going to be late or anything. She factored in enough extra journey time to cater for *anything*,' Molly gently mocked her sister.

Maria checked her watch and threw her sister a sarcastic smile.



You see, Maria was extremely well organised. Molly on the other hand was totally the opposite, but more about the twins later . . .



After hitting a few potholes and dodging some wild rabbits, Eddie veered right as the driveway turned sharply, leaving the sun trailing behind and a crystal-clear view ahead. Molly thought to herself that if the sun had been a theatre spotlight, someone had just hollered 'Curtain up!' There stood the school, in all its splendour, nestled against the backdrop of a luscious hillside.

Both girls gasped. The chalk-white building rose majestically out of the green countryside. L'Etoile was everything they had dreamed of – or at least everything *Molly* had dreamed of. Maria, in all honesty, would have preferred to attend a more academic school,

but she knew that she would flourish anywhere, and rather than be separated from Molly, with her dreams of stage and screen, she had gone along with her sister's choice.



After all, Story-seeker, you can make more of any situation, when you have a little bit of genius!

'Wow!' exclaimed Molly. 'Mum was right. Quick, Eddie – don't worry about parking, just drop us. We'll work the rest out for ourselves.'

'Now who's *Little Miss Impatient*?' retorted Maria, with a glint in her eye.

The ever-obliging Eddie, as the girls had heard their father call his faithful driver, did as he was instructed and pulled up alongside the grand double-fronted entrance. Fortunately for Eddie and the girls, they had arrived so early that there weren't too many other families around checking their girls in. Almost before the car had come to a stop, Molly and Maria had leapt out and were staring up at the towering black front door. They were transfixed by the enormous gold star door-knocker glistening in the sunlight. It had the words 'Reach for the Stars' inscribed round the edge.

Maria watched that dreamy look she had come to

know and love spread across Molly's face as she read the inscription.

The gold star knocker seemed to be throwing off its own beam of light, warming and mesmerising everything in its path – and the twins were no exception.

'L'E-twa-le . . .' came a frightfully posh and clipped voice through the dark entrance. 'L . . . apostrophe . . . E-T-O-I-L-E.'

As the voice spelled the name of the school, a tall, painfully thin but nonetheless striking figure emerged from the shadows. Suddenly the warmth from the gold star had been eclipsed by a lady with a face caked in make-up, and Molly didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

'Young ladies – or "L'Etoilettes" as you shall now be known. Welcome to L'Etoile, School for the Performing Arts, where only the most gifted of students are accepted. Which of you can tell me what "L'Etoile" means?'

Molly gulped and shot Maria a glance. It was the *as-the-oldest-sister-by-seven-minutes-and-forty-seven-seconds-you're-in-charge* look.

"L'Etoile" quite simply means "the star" in French,' Maria said, without even the slightest hint of doubt in her voice.



Oh, to have that confidence, Story-seeker.

A smile crossed the lady's face. 'Correct, L'Etoilette. And may I have the pleasure of learning your name so I know more about the little star in the making I am addressing?'

'My name is Maria Fitzfoster – and this is my sister, Molly. What's yours?' asked Maria, semi-innocently.

'But of course you are,' the lady replied knowingly, her smile turning into a sickly grin. 'The Fitzfoster Diamond Dynasty twins. How are your dear parents, Brian and Linda? It goes without saying that we know each other well – mixing in the same circles as we do.' She looked both girls up and down, with some approval, it appeared.

'Molly and Maria, I am your new headmistress, Madame Ruby, and you are to think of me as your queen, your mentor and most of all, your inspiration and aspiration. Everything you achieve here at the school, my L'Etoilettes, will set you on the path to superstardom. I, and only I, can make your dreams come true, so let this be the start of something fabulous for us all . . .'

And with that she swooshed round on her stiletto heels and disappeared into the shadows.

'Well!' exclaimed Molly.

'It's OK, Molly,' Maria said, sensing that her sister was still reeling from the make-up.

'My goodness, Maria – did you see her face? How much make-up can one face take?'

'I know – she's a walking blusher brush – but an important one!' said Maria and both girls exploded into a fit of giggles.

Thud . . . thud . . . crash . . . bang . . . wallop!

'What on earth . . .?'

The twins swung round to see the ever-obliging Eddie struggling to drag their matching, designer luggage from the car boot, and immediately ran over to give him a hand. By now more and more cars were beginning to pull up and the chatter and general noise of fearful children and clucking parents swirled about.

Staff members had started to emerge from the main house, equipped with clip-boards stuffed with lists; new student attendance lists; dormitory share lists; dietary requirement lists. In the thirty or so minutes since the Fitzfoster twins had arrived, chaos had engulfed L'Etoile.

Unsure of who they were supposed to register with, Molly decided she'd had enough of headmistresses for one afternoon and opted for the prettiest teacher on

the drive – who happened to be the very lovely Miss Helen Hart.

Miss Hart had been teaching at L'Etoile for seven years. She and her family had always had very close links with the school and her father, a man with green fingers, managed its grounds and lovely gardens. Now in her mid-thirties, Helen Hart was a woman of amazing musical talent and had chosen to use her accomplishments to inspire the next generation of potential superstars. When Helen was younger, she'd narrowly missed out on her dream of becoming a world-famous singer/songwriter, having sacrificed her career to look after someone who was ill.

It is from that fact alone, Story-seeker, that you can tell the kind, selfless character of the lovely Miss Hart.

This was her first year as deputy headmistress at L'Etoile – a position she was determined would really make a difference to the students.

'Come on, Maria!' Molly grabbed her sister by the arm and, together, they hurtled towards Miss Hart who was trying to give dorm directions to three chattering girls, who were all asking questions at once.

'One at a time ladies, please . . .' she had a soft lyrical

voice. 'It's important that you take this in as there are two houses at L'Etoile and you need to follow instructions for where to go.'

'Autumn Costello – you are in Monroe House. Follow the yellow flags down past the lake to the West Wing and take this certificate confirming registration to your new housemistress, Mrs Sophie Bell. She'll take it from there.'

'Thank you, Miss Hart,' said Autumn, pretty much courtseying as she backed away towards her parents.

'Actually, Autumn . . .' Miss Hart called after her as she looked down her list. 'Would you mind taking Betsy Harris with you to Monroe – you'll be able to keep each other company. Betsy's majoring in piano too so you'll have plenty to talk about.'

'Absolutely,' said Autumn, trotting back to collect Betsy. 'Hello Betsy – soooo good to meet you. Let's get there early and see if we can share a room, shall we? Come on.' And off they skipped, following the yellow flag road to Monroe.

When Miss Hart had called Autumn back to meet her new companion, the twins had been struck by how young and petrified Betsy had looked. 'She must be quite some pianist!' whispered Maria to Molly, none too quietly. 'She looks about seven!'

'For goodness sake, Maria – when are you going to learn never to judge a book by its cover? Don't you remember that timid little nanny Daddy hired to look after us last summer? You said the same thing about her and look where that got us. She soon found her strength, didn't she?' Molly reminded her sister.

Maria rolled her eyes. Molly always looked for the best in everyone and everything. For twin sisters they really were like chalk and cheese. It's not that Maria was mean, she was just a bit more suspicious of everyone and everything. But that's exactly what balanced the two sisters. Molly's soft, faithful side tempered Maria's cynical outlook – and they loved each other dearly.

The twins hardly noticed the time whizzing by. All around them was a mass of teachers, girls and parents pointing in different directions and talking over each other, not to mention the piles of luggage strewn everywhere. If just one of those bags ended up where it was supposed to be by the end of the day it would be a miracle!

'Now, who's next? asked Miss Hart, looking at the twins.

'Maria and Molly Fitzfoster,' they answered in unison. 'I'm Molly,' said the blonde, 'and I'm Maria,' said the brunette.

Miss Hart stared in earnest at the two faces in front of her, assessing the differences. It was quite amazing. They had the same faces but with completely different colouring. Molly had blue eyes, long blonde wavy hair and an olive hue to her complexion, while Maria had green eyes, long dark wavy hair and a pale, china-doll complexion.

'My goodness, so alike, yet so very different. Would we class you as identical or non-identical twins?' she asked, intrigued.

'That's always been a bit of a conundrum.' Maria took the lead. 'Officially, we're identical twins, but physically now we don't look much alike.'

'Dad calls us Snow White and Rose Red because we remind him of that fairy tale,' Molly piped up. It was so typical of her to get all romantic at a time like this, thought Maria.

'Well, here at L'Etoile, you are all individuals,' continued Miss Hart. 'You've come to this school to be yourselves and find yourselves and you are both very welcome – as starlets in the making. Now let's see which houses you're in . . .' She flipped through the lists on her bulging clipboard.

The twins gulped and shot each other a look of panic. Houses . . . plural . . . not one house together?

Even with all this talk about individuality and finding themselves, neither was ready to be without the other just yet!

'Ah yes, here we are . . . Molly, you're in Garland House.' Molly's eyes started to prickle with tears. 'And Maria, let's see now . . . won't that be nice for you both – you're in Garland House too.'

The relief! Maria flung her arm around her sister's shoulder and grabbed the two registration certificates Miss Hart was holding out for them.

'Garland House is a separate building behind the main school towards the theatre. It's a grand white building with pillars at the entrance. Follow the blue flags along the path. Your new housemistress, Miss Mary Coates, will meet you in the entrance hall and show you to your room. Good luck, girls, and be sure to work hard.'

Molly and Maria nodded, again in unison, and bounded over to the ever-obliging Eddie, twittering about Garland House. 'Come on, Eddie! I'm desperate to see our new room and to meet the other girls!'

Eddie lolloped after them dragging two huge suitcases while the girls pranced in front trailing their coats, certificates and school bags.

'Watch out, Molly!' shrieked Maria, leaping on her

sister just in time, knocking them both backwards over a low hedge onto the lawn.

At that very moment, an enormous, sleek, black car came careering round the turning circle and screeched to a halt halfway across the lavender-lined footpath the twins had been walking along.

There was a stunned silence as everyone who was still on the gravel watched as the car doors were flung open and three rather hideous but extremely famous faces stepped out (and one rather pudgy face who no one recognised). Molly and Maria were still catching their breath and Eddie scrabbling for strewn clothing when they heard an American accent say, 'Oh for heaven's sake, Blue, darling, I told you not to drive yourself any more . . . that's why we have chauffeurs. You never were much good at knowing when to stop.' There was a muffled gasp as the very beautiful Mrs Serafina Marciano stood straightening her very expensive haute-couture suit.

'Lucinda honey, ignore your mommy,' a baritone American voice drawled back. 'Go find out where we need to drop your stuff so I can get outta here. I've got a meeting with Universal Pictures in London Town in an hour and I'm already running crazy late.'

'Pop, Mommy, I already know which house we're

in. Mommy requested Garland House when she spoke with Madame Ruby in the summer. It's where all the big stars graduate from.' Then Lucinda turned to her mother and said in the snobbiest tone she could muster, 'We should sooo have come in the private Garland entrance to avoid the *others*.'

'Darling, remember what I told you. It's all about making an entrance. What you do with that entrance is up to you.' And Mrs Marciano replaced her Hollywood-dark sunglasses back on the immaculately powdered bridge of her cosmetically altered little nose.



And there begins the nightmare, Story-seeker, with the arrival of Lucinda Marciano, daughter to Hollywood's very own royalty, Blue and Serafina Marciano.



Every single person recognised them from numerous Hollywood blockbuster movies and red-carpet events, which Blue directed and Serafina starred in. Most recently they'd filmed a documentary from their home in Los Angeles called *At Home With The Marcianos*, where the whole world had got to know the family – including the young Lucinda in all her horrendous glory.

Even the Fitzfosters had tuned in to watch it. Molly had been shocked to see how unhappy and obnoxious Lucinda Marciano had appeared on the show. It was evident that she had everything she could possibly wish for, just like the Fitzfosters, yet Molly and Maria weren't spoiled and mean like Lucinda. Their mum had explained that it was unfair to blame Lucinda. She said the fault lay with the lack of time and effort that the Marcianos invested in their daughter. She was an only child so had no brothers or sisters to turn to and her parents evidently had little or no time in their busy schedules to guide and discipline her. Mrs Fitzfoster went on to explain how Molly and Maria had always had each other to lean on and that she and their father made sure they knew the value of having everything and nothing in equal measure.

Maria, having dusted herself down, was fuming at the Marcianos' blatant disregard for the rest of the human race and was marching up to Lucinda, one arm gesticulating in anger as she got ready to tell her exactly what she thought about her *big entrance*. But before she had time to even open her mouth, Lucinda promptly threw her coat over Maria's outstretched arm.

'Oh thank goodness. There are staff!' Lucinda snapped. 'Take that to my room, will you?' And she turned her back on Maria, whose jaw had hit the floor in shock.



(And it is not very often that our Maria is speechless, Story-seeker.)



Maria silently counted to ten, threw the coat on the ground and strode back to Molly and Eddie, her eyes wide with fury as she plotted exactly what to do with her anger. She vowed to dedicate herself to upholding the student balance and to never let Lucinda – or Lucifette as she would now be known – tip the scales of the entire school in her favour. Maybe the way she behaved wasn't all her fault but, even so, Maria wasn't going to let her get away with that sort of performance.



'Who's in charge around here?' stormed Blue Marciano, glaring at every single member of staff in turn.

Helen Hart suddenly realised that in her new capacity as Deputy Head, she out-ranked everyone else on the gravel.

'Mr Marciano . . .' she ventured. 'Welcome to L'Etoile, School for . . .' but she was rudely interrupted.

'FOR STARS . . .' There it was again, the clipped voice from the shadows that had greeted the twins when they'd arrived.

'Dearest Mr Marciano, Mrs Marciano . . . I am Madame Ruby, Headmistress – we spoke on the phone in June.' She held out an immaculately manicured hand for Blue to shake (or kiss!). 'Please, do follow me. You are, of course, our most esteemed guests and I would like to escort you and your lovely daughter personally to Garland House. We have held our very best room for Lucinda and her L'Etoile companion.'

With that all eyes swivelled to the fourth person to emerge from the car – the one nobody had recognised. Madame Ruby beckoned to her, but could hardly hide her surprise as the slightly plump, awkward girl approached.

'And you are?' she enquired in an intimidating tone.

'S . . . S . . . S . . . Sally Sudbury, Madame,' the girl stammered.

'Sally Sidekick more like,' whispered Maria to Eddie and Molly, who grinned in agreement.

For the audience on the driveway, the whole scene

was as ridiculous as it was spectacular and heads bobbed from one direction of conversation to the other, as though they were watching a mixed doubles final at Wimbledon.

'Welcome, Miss Sudbury, to our school of excellence.'

Sally shrank at the mention of the word 'excellence'. She'd never been particularly excellent at anything. Sally was the daughter of Maggie Sudbury, the Marcianos' housekeeper. Maggie had come to work for the family as a struggling, single mother, with baby Sally, who the family were kind enough to accommodate as part of her domestic arrangement. As the years went by, Sally had become a sort of playmate for Lucinda. Now she was burdened with the role of 'companion' and had spent her entire life in Lucinda's shadow. Blinded by the privileged life that she thought Sally was experiencing alongside Lucinda, Maggie was unable to see the damage that this was doing.

'Erm, thank you, Madame . . .' she mumbled. But no sooner had she finished speaking than Lucinda yanked her by the arm.

'Move it, Sally – since when did this become about you? You've got my unpacking to do!'

And with that, the whole Marciano clan, plus

poor Sally, were marched off through the main L'Etoile entrance by Madame Ruby, brushing past the gold star knocker as they went, obviously getting a private tour before being shown to the 'best' Garland accommodation.

Only Maria, who had regained her calm, broke the stunned silence. 'Come on, Molly . . . let's check out our room – I'm sure it's just as fabulous. Who does that little Lucifette think she is? She'll keep – she'd best hope we don't run into each other too often!'



But you know, and I know, Story-seeker, that that would be just too easy!



