

THE
Valentines

FAME - IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

LOVE

☆ = ME = ☆

NOT

HOLLY
SMALE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *GEEK GIRL*



You're not going to like me.

I'm not *nice*, I'm not *relatable*, you'll find it difficult to *empathise* with the snarky daughter of Hollywood royalty yada yada, and frankly you can bore right off.

It is not a girl's job to be *liked*.

I'm not your mentor or your confidante. I didn't ask to be an inspiration or an aspiration; to make you feel *seen* and cosy inside. If you want saccharine sweetness and a tenuous grasp on the English language, go see my little sister Hope. Looking for a beautiful pushover? Check out my other sister Faith. Maverick charm from the brains of a moron? My brother Max has it in spades.

But me: Mercy Valentine? I don't need your validation and I don't want it, so keep moving.

I am not your hero.

★



‘They’re called *iceberg* houses,’ Dior breathes as she leads me down winding marble stairs. ‘Daddy says they’re all the rage in South Ken, so we just *had* to have one.’

She flicks her blonde hair and beams at me.

Already irritated – and I’ve been at this party six minutes – I pick the painful scab on my knuckle.

‘I *think*,’ my friend adds thoughtfully, popping the end of a highlighted strand in her mouth, ‘it’s because you mostly find icebergs in rich places, like the Arctic, and they cost *lots* of money to visit? So, it’s, like, the *most* expensive type of house?’

Dior, in case you haven’t worked it out yet, is an idiot.

‘You’re an idiot,’ I tell her as she leads me round the corner into a heaving, screaming corridor and past a full-size gym, complete with real palm trees and a floor-to-ceiling climbing wall. ‘It’s because they’re bigger in the basement than they are on top. Like *icebergs*.’

Maybe it’s all the bleach she gets put in her hair every six weeks.

Maybe she should stop chewing on it.

‘Oh duh!’ Dior laughs loudly at her stupidity, as



only the daughter of a billionaire tech start-up who will never need a job can. ‘Am I not just the *silliest*? But look!’

She gestures proudly at a half-million-pound packed wine cellar to our right – locked, obviously – and then swishes past a darkened mini cinema (Make-out Room), a spa (Nap Area), a large exotic indoor garden, and – oh for the love of—

‘Dior, is that a flaming *bowling alley*?’

‘Sure is.’ She nods proudly as we go down another level and it stretches out in full neon to our left. ‘Mummy *really* likes to bowl now and then, so we thought – why not make our own? Then we don’t have to rent icky shoes.’

Yup: I am in the house of a family who built an entire subterranean Megabowl instead of just *purchasing bowling footwear*. That’s the problem with new-money families: you can’t buy class, common sense isn’t genetic and wealth is totally wasted on the wealthy.

‘Bowling is for losers,’ I tell her calmly. ‘Congratulations.’

Mercy.

Dior’s face falls momentarily – punctured – then she spots someone behind me and perks up again.

‘*OhmyGodohmyGodohmyGODDDDD!*’ The shriek is piercing and uncomfortable, like chewing on a ball of cotton wool. ‘Cee! Ceeeeee, you came! What do you think? Isn’t it just the *best* birthday party? Aren’t I *the luckiest?*’

I cringe as Amethyst – sorry, *Mee* – wraps her skinny tanned arms round my neck.

‘Don’t touch me,’ I say, extricating myself.

‘Sorry, Cee.’ Amethyst is the glossy daughter of a supermodel and an international surgeon: her nose has already been edited, her lips are scheduled next. ‘I’m just so, *so* excited. Eighteen today! *Eighteen! A legit adult!* And such a *good* idea to have the party here, Vee! Dee’s house is just *so* much cooler than mine.’

‘Vee’ – Nova – progeny of a celeb musician and an oh my God I can’t be bothered to even finish this sentence – grabs her arm and shakes it fondly. ‘You’re worth it, gorgeous bestie.’

‘No, *you’re the gorgeous one,*’ Amethyst trills.

‘*You are.*’

‘No, *you are.*’

‘You’re both minging trolls,’ I conclude flatly, taking a drink from a random passing boy. ‘And I’ll have that.’



Yup. Cee, Mee, Vee, Dee: together we're like a freaking vocal warm-up for *The Sound of Music*.

With distaste, I smooth down my waist-length dark red wig and stare around the basement. It's carnage. Palm trees are being scaled, shoes thrown, songs bellowed, some dimwit has pulled a T-shirt up over his head and drawn a face on his belly.

Girls are fluttering, boys are peacocking.

'Why, *hello* there,' a shiny orange guy with black hair twinkles, sliding a bronzed hand around my waist. 'My name is Dylan Harris, TV Star from Netflix. How do you—'

'I will rip your arm off at the shoulder,' I say without looking at him. 'I will rip it off, I will sharpen it with my teeth, then I will shove it into your mouth so hard your ears fall off.'

'O-kay,' he says slowly, backing away.

What does a girl have to do around here to be left alone?

Then why come to a party in the first place?

'Cee, are you coming?' Dior squeaks into my face, wiggling her bottom like she's constipated. 'There's a special *dancefloor*; it's glass and it lights up when you stand on it!'

‘Ohmygoshohmygosh,’ Amethyst exhales. ‘Dancing is, like, *compulsory* on your birthday!’

‘Totally,’ Vee nods, pulling us all towards a crowded room filled with shimmering turquoise light, as shockingly bad music bursts into the air. ‘Oh my gosh, Daddy wrote this song for my sweet sixteenth!’

And I just nearly dry-gagged up my dinner.

The girls grab hands in a circle and attempt to grab mine too. I shake them off and stick my hands in my pockets.

‘I just wish,’ Dee says, with an elaborately sad face, ‘that Tee was here to celebrate with us.’

‘Me too,’ Vee pouts. ‘To Tee!’

‘To Tee!’ Mee cheers as they clap hands together.

The three Birdbrains twirl off across the room like dropped pennies and I scowl at the crowd. Beautiful faces are lit with the kind of happiness that comes from being unable to conceive of a time when they won’t be perfect, when their lives won’t be perfect, when everything around them won’t be the epitome of flawless, priceless perfection.

All I want to do is rip my eyes out and shove them up my nostrils just for something else to focus on.

Look at the floor.

Blinking, I stare at my feet. Beneath them, the solid-glass floor is turquoise and flickering because – I narrow my eyes – underneath it is . . . *water?* This moronic family have put a *swimming pool* under a transparent dancefloor. Which means—

Yes! Do it. Do it. Do it.

Obviously I'm doing it. With nobody looking, I make my way to the edge of the room.

Do it!

Subtly, I slide my hands over the marble walls until I feel a little lever tucked away behind yet another fairy-lit imported palm tree. Pausing, I pick at the scab on my hand while I watch the crowds for a few minutes: full of joy and so very, very dry.

For the first time tonight, I smile.

NOW, Mercy!

'I'm *doing* it,' I say out loud.

And I pull the lever.