CATH HOWE



ELLA on the OUTSIDE

nosy crow

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To all the children who have
ever felt 'on the outside'

C. H.

xxx



Chapter 1
New Girl

Dear Dad,

When I look up into the sky some days, I feel better because I know it must be the same view for you when you look up. If you saw a bird, maybe it would be flying over my house a bit later on.

But then, other days, it's worse. The sky seems so big it makes me feel as if you are a very, very long way away.

Do you think we could both always look out at the sky at the same time each day, like, maybe, seven o'clock in the morning? I think that might help. Shall we choose a time? Shall we do that, Dad?

Love, Ella

xxx

"Hellooo, puss."

I stepped across the grass towards the grey cat under the tree and held out my phone to get a picture. I clicked my tongue.

She turned her head. Perfect! The sunlight was falling on her back just right, lighting her stripes gold.

"Ella!"

Suddenly Mum was in the garden beside me, all smart in her suit. "I need you inside now, Ella!"

"But I have to take more photos," I said.

"You'll have to do them later."

"But they're for Dad!"

Mum's jaw locked. "Look, love, I've got to get to work after I drop you at school. I said I'd be in by nine o'clock. If we're not in the car in five minutes, we'll all be late."

I trailed after her, back into the kitchen. "Put this on." She held out a blue cardigan. Its little gold buttons glinted.

"That's blue. The uniform's green."

"I've ordered your uniform. It's not my fault if it hasn't come yet. Look, love, this is quite … greenish." Mum locked the back door and shut the dishwasher.

"It's not green!" I said. "And it's for an old woman! I can't wear it."

Mum slammed down our new lunchboxes, glaring now. "Ella! Jack's in his home clothes too."

I looked over at Jack at the breakfast table, cereal spilling out of his grinning mouth.

"So what? Jack doesn't care what he wears," I said. "He gets filthy and covered in paint anyway."

"For your information, that *old woman's* cardigan's mine," Mum snapped. "And it's all we've got. You've got to wear something."

"Or be a nudie," Jack suggested.

I lunged at him, but Mum stepped in front of me. "In the car, both of you, this minute."

Her voice had a sob in it. "I'm tired of this rudeness, Ella. It's time you helped. It's hard enough…"

I pulled on her ugly cardigan. Hot little pinpricks started nipping me.

I rubbed my wrist backwards and forwards along the top of the kitchen chair. Stupid first day. Stupid clothes. We should never have come here.

x

I followed the office lady down the wide echoey corridors into Willow class and stood while my

new teacher, Mr Hales, introduced me. "This is Ella, everyone. Let's all try to make her feel really welcome."

Willow class. Green and grey. Heads and faces. Eyes studying me.

I pulled my cuffs down over my red, itchy hands.

My mouth wouldn't smile at all, like a person in an old photo.

Mr Hales seemed the friendliest person here. He had spiky blond hair and a pierced eyebrow. I peeped at the place where the ring went in. "Now let's see where there's a space." He pointed to an empty seat at the front. "Why don't you sit next to Stiggy."

I sat.

The boy beside me made an evil grin. "Your jumper's the wrong colour!"



Playtime. The playground was massive. I hung upside down on the monkey bars in case Moor Lane School looked better the other way up, but it didn't. It was safer round the edge. Some people are edge people in playgrounds. Popular people go where they want and they are often in the middle, like colourful fish swimming in the

sea. I was a grey fish. An edge fish.

I watched one girl called Lydia who was surrounded by girls the whole time, linking arms with each other and whispering. She was all glossy brown hair, clips and clasps. Polished. Her laugh sounded like a song, little notes up and up. When she laughed, one of her friends would do the laugh too, as if they were saying, "Wow, Lydia, you are the best entertainment on the planet." That's how it felt. I tried joining in the laughing when they were standing near but those girls just turned and stared, goofy-eyed. "What's so funny?" said the faces. "You don't fit."

They were right. "I'm sorry," I said, and moved away.

I had always had Grace. We met when we started at Nursery. Albatrosses find their friend for life and if their friend dies, they stay on their own. Albatrosses don't have to go to school. Grace had an older sister and a cat. Her mum was at home a lot because she taught piano and looked after Grace's grandma. They had a big garden and we used to play out there all the time, because she and her sister had a summerhouse-shed thing with actual rugs and cushions and her mum let

them do anything they wanted. I couldn't have a summerhouse like Grace because Jack would have wrecked it and Mum would have made us tidy it up.

Me being on my own without Grace today hurt like bare feet outside in winter. I was in another country, where no one spoke the same language, even though they seemed to.

If a person could make a relative with a wish, maybe press a button or something like that, I would have chosen Grace as my sister. Even if I had to keep Jack, at least I'd have her as well.

I looked around the faces in Willow class, wishing Grace's face was among them – like suddenly she would be there. "I decided to come and live here. I'm actually your long-lost sister – no one told us."

Mum's awful cardigan made everything worse. It was not a bit green. Mum needed her eyes testing. *Over here, look, new girl, in the stupid cardigan!*

If only they'd let me keep my lovely new phone. I'd hardly stopped playing with the brilliant camera. I had put Grace's number in and texted her.

Hi Grace. There's no one here like you. Miss you lots. Ella

But the lady in the office told me I had to hand in my phone to her every day and collect it at the end of school.

When we had reading, everyone got moved around and I was put next to Bryony. She was weird. She kept frantically waving, but she hardly ever stayed in her seat until a grown-up helper came to sit next to her and tried to persuade her to work. She sat so close to me, nudging up nearer and nearer as if she hadn't got her own seat. And she talked all the time. I could hardly hear the teacher. Then she started stroking my pencil case. "It's furry!" she shrilled. "It could be alive…"

I ended up shoving it back in my bag.

Wasn't there anyone else on their own? Another pair person, like me? I checked the room secretly. Everyone had their special friend, that person to laugh with. Nobody smiled over at me. No one needed a new friend; I was an extra; a boring new person. They would look at me if they wanted me … and none of them were looking at me.

And then, at the back, hunched over a table, I noticed a dark-haired girl on her own. I sneaked looks at her. She looked back at me with tired eyes. Maybe she was watching me too. When we were doing art, making our own Van Gogh portraits, Mr Hales said we could sit where we liked. I clutched my bag to my chest, stood up and walked over so the girl would see me. I smiled. She stared up at me, gloomy-eyed. Then she bent, collected her bag and spread her things right across the desk as if she was saving that space for someone else.

I'd been wrong. She didn't want to know me. I stood there like a lemon until Mr Hales told me to sit next to that irritating Stiggy boy again. "Van Gogh cut off his ear," he whispered. "I'm going to draw me with only one ear." He grinned. "You could draw you with no nose."

He was just like my brother!

"Go away and fall off a cliff," I said, rubbing my wrist against the edge of the desk.

But at least that boy had talked to me.

I was rubbish at being new.

On a scrap of paper, at home time, I tried making myself a 'to-do' list the way Mum always did, just to look busy.

1. Get a green jumper NOW.
2. Get a plain black school bag.
3. Find a pencil case with NO KITTENS.
4. Shoes – brown lace-ups are a DISASTER. Maybe if some paint fell on them. All these girls have nice shoes – shiny or with flaps or studs or buckles.
5. Find a real friend who doesn't make out my pencil case is alive or suggest I cut off my nose!

x

Mum collected me. She was picking up Jack anyway.

I exploded the minute the car door swung shut. "I have to get the right uniform. I CAN'T GO BACK IN THERE IN THIS CARDIGAN!"

Mum stopped at the traffic lights. "Well, actually, I did notice…"

But Jack interrupted, yelling out, as usual. "There's a boy in my class who's got a pencil case with engines."

Mum smiled. "Has he, Jack?"

"And the pens inside have faces."

Jack was munching crisps. Why did he get crisps?

I snatched the packet. "I am trying to talk about my uniform!" I shouted.

"Ella, that was unkind. Jack's allowed to tell me about his day too!" snapped Mum. "What's got into you? You promised you'd try harder when I let you have the phone." She sighed. "Look, love, I've seen an advert for a second-hand school uniform in the shop window of the supermarket."

"Can we go there now?"

"Not this minute. We'll have tea and drop Jack at his new football training."

"But we *will* go today? I don't care what it's like; we have to buy it!"