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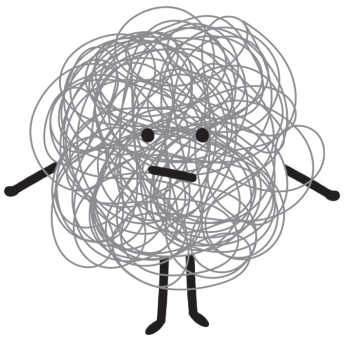
CATH HOWE:

ELLA on the OUTSIDE

x

Not MY Fault

CATH HOWE



HOW to be ME

nosy crow

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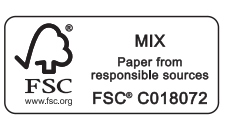
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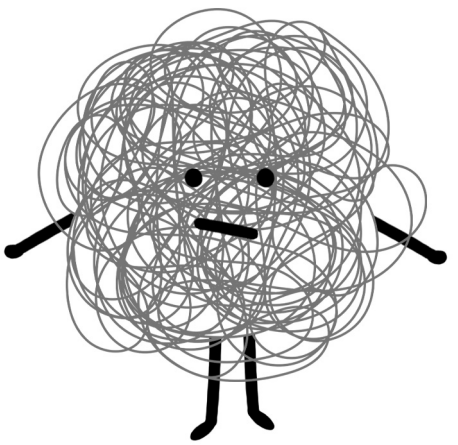
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For Adrian

C. H.

xxx

x



Chapter 1
Hiding

"Lucas!" Dad's voice rose among the chatting and the tinkling glasses. "Lucas, where are you? Sneaking away, I bet."

I froze in the window seat.

"Come on, my man, we're all waiting for you!"

He would find me; it was only a matter of time. I should never have hidden here. I should have slipped out when they were all cheering. I wriggled in the silky shirt and waistcoat, my stomach churning. There was no escape.

Sure enough, the gold curtain swished back.

"Gotcha!" There was my dad all excited in his evening suit. "Look who I found!" he laughed. "Distinction in Grade Six. Isn't that right, Lucas? Gotta brag about it. Come on." His grinning face was flushed from the champagne.

A hundred people stood sparkling and smiling at me underneath the gold lights of the chandeliers. Dad's engagement party. They had just finished toasting the happy couple and watching the cutting of the Cinderella coach cake. "Just give us a few bars of something," Dad called.

I shrank back against the window.

"Don't embarrass me," Dad hissed. "The piano's waiting." He grabbed my arm and I half

fell out of the window seat. "Play something. Anything." He gestured over at the gleaming grand piano on its stage.

Everyone was quiet, waiting.

I shook my head.

"What?" Dad said. "I'm not asking you to do a whole Chopin for us. Just a few bars. For goodness' sake!"

He let go of my arm.

"No," I said, and balled my hands into fists. "There's too many people."

"What?"

Talking broke out. A woman laughed. Glasses began clinking.

"Please…" I said.

Dad stepped back with a terrible, furious face.

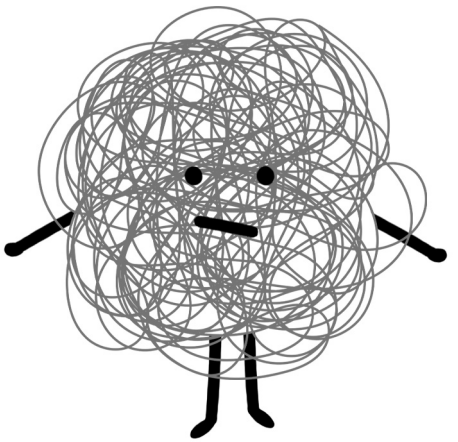
He swore under his breath. Then he looked away over his shoulder towards where Vanessa stood, smiling in her pink sparkly dress.

"I'm going to bed," I said, and dived into a gap in the crowd. Then I was running away from him, away from all of them: out of the ballroom, down the corridor, slamming my bedroom door. I couldn't stop shaking. I rubbed away the tears, blew my nose and sat down. Music started up

again, thumping through the walls. By now they would be dancing. Vanessa had said she wanted to dance and the band had come specially from a famous jazz club.

My cats were curled up on my bed. I scooped Mowgli up and held him close to my chest. Sometimes he just knew to go very still, lying hot against me.

I got ready for bed. It's much easier to sleep when you have a soft cat to hold, even if there is lots of noise.



Chapter 2
The Mouse

The next day, Saturday, I was upstairs in the ballroom. My cats went wild when I trailed party poppers and burst balloons for them to catch. Mowgli is the dark brown sleek one and Tiger the ginger-striped. Around us the cleaners cleared away all the serving trays and the banners and decorations.

"Lukie! Come down!" I heard Dad call.

I hadn't seen him since yesterday; he often cycled round the park with his friend Steve on Saturday mornings, when he wasn't away on business.

"Back in a minute," I told Mowgli and Tiger.

In the playroom Dad was crouched at the table-tennis table, ready to serve, in his black cycling shirt with all its logos. "Come on, I'm going out again in half an hour. And, boy, do I need a shower."

I slipped into position and grabbed my bat.

"So … great party. We're all a bit wrecked."

He didn't look cross with me about last night; he just looked … busy. "So, Lukie Loo … exciting times." He grinned.

I thought of the speech he had made: everyone laughing, clapping at his jokes, all the excited

people and the cutting of the huge meringue and cream cake. Dad was going to marry Vanessa and a hundred people had come round to say well done. And I had ruined it. But Dad was still smiling. "Vanessa's going to be your new mum, Lukie. You could at least look a bit more excited about it."

A new mum. I felt a sick jolt inside me. Mum died three years ago. She had been a warm, kind presence. Meeting me from school, staying beside me whenever I was ill. That couldn't be Vanessa. Vanessa was only interested in chatting and giggling and girls' nights out. Vanessa's job was making jackets for dogs!

Dad was examining his paddle. "Well, holidays for some!" he called, all cheery. "Have you made lots of plans?" He whacked the ball.

I hit it back. "Um."

"You're mumbling," he called.

"Sorry."

We played.

Bok … bok … bok.

My head ached. I had kept being woken in the night by the music and voices.

Now Dad leaped and dived after the ball. "Are

you meeting up with your friends?"

"Jasper is in the Seychelles. Marcus is on a boat," I said.

Dad's face changed. "Oh, grim. Both away for the whole summer? Mmm. I don't want you drooping around the place. Piano. Grade Seven. Lots to do for that, I'm sure."

"Miss Connor doesn't do lessons in the holidays," I said.

My piano teacher was so old I wondered if, maybe, she just went to sleep for the holidays. But then in my last lesson of the term she'd shocked me, slamming shut the piano lid and making me turn towards her on the stool. "For goodness' sake, have a bit of fun, Lucas," she'd said.

Dad frowned. "Well, you must have some school projects or something? Your posture's all wrong. Bend your knees."

I whooshed the air, missed and scrambled to collect the ball. I served again but the ball flew off the side of the bat and disappeared into the playroom curtains, so I went burrowing to find it.

"Well," Dad said, "the French chap said he's happy to keep you on next term. Keep beavering away at that. I sent you that vocab app."

I thought of my French tutor Christophe, who smelled like old fireplaces, with his sad droopy moustache. "He doesn't like me," I blurted out. "He looks out of the window."

Dad was staring out of the window too, flexing his shoulder. "Buck up. You don't know that," he said.

Another rally: *bok … bok … bok … bok … bok*… I missed again.

I waited for him to tell me off about last night. I pictured his angry red face in front of all those people. I swiped … missed.

"Let's have a break," he said.

I sipped from a glass of water.

Dad threw himself into a chair.

The smile faded. He started making that face, that *I'm going to fix it* face. He's very good at fixing things, like his bike.

"Anyway, anyway, Lucas, here's another thing: you never speak up for yourself. You don't put your hand up in class. Don't mix."

This wasn't about last night. Dad was talking about school, about everything.

"Your form tutor chap…"

"Mr Joseph," I said quietly.

"That's the one." Dad wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "He says you're generally far too much of a mouse."

I flushed. Was "mouse" the actual word Mr Joseph had said? He must have been watching me, writing things. Maybe asking the other teachers about me too.

Dad sucked from his sports bottle. It hissed as he took long pulls at it. "Mr Joseph said he never gets a peep out of you. And your little scene last night – well, it's obvious. Now it's the holidays we need to sort you out."

I drummed on the chair.

"Don't drum."

I forced my fingers to be still.

Dad's eyes gleamed. "You need something to take you out of yourself." He walloped my knee. "Leave it with me."

x

An hour later Dad popped his head round the door of my bedroom. "Sorted," he said. "I've enrolled you in a drama club."

"What?" I stared at him.

"A drama club. Four weeks. Local thing. You can walk there every afternoon. Starts Monday. Keep you busy."

Why hadn't Dad asked me? Why did he never ask me?

"Things to do, people to see," he said. "Am I sweaty or what? Glad that's all sorted." And he was gone.

A drama club. Horrific!