
TWO
IS A
CROWD

First published in the UK in 2026 by Nosy Crow Ltd
Wheat Wharf, 27a Shad Thames,
London, SE1 2XZ, UK

Nosy Crow Eireann Ltd
c/o Fieldfisher Ireland LLP
45 Mespil Road,
Dublin 4, D04 W2F1, Ireland

Nosy Crow and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Nosy Crow Ltd

Text copyright © Cath Howe, 2026
Illustrations copyright © Miguel Bustos, 2026

The right of Cath Howe and Miguel Bustos to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted.

All rights reserved

ISBN: 978 1 83994 285 3

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

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of Nosy Crow Ltd.

The publisher and copyright holders prohibit the use of either text or illustrations to develop any generative machine learning artificial intelligence (AI) models or related technologies.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A. following rigorous ethical sourcing standards.

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C018072
www.fsc.org

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.nosycrow.com

To all the hot-headed Hatties
and silent Serens
C. H.





Prologue
Hattie

There's a dream I started having.

My family are all getting ready to go up in a hot air balloon. I hear creaking. The strong square basket smells of resin and comes up nearly to my head. We're the only ones taking off.

The balloon stretches flat across the field to the side of us, like a shiny bright red and yellow paint slick, like a kid's party balloon that no one has blown up yet. I feel the breeze pushing against me. "Get in, get in!" shouts a voice.

We each stand on a box and strong arms are ready to haul us aboard.

And then I realise she's *there. Standing like a ghost behind*

Mum and Dad.

And then the thought comes into my brain: if I get in and she gets in too and we take off, I will throw her out. It will happen.

And, in a terrible panicked moment, I pull back and say, No, I mustn't get in. I can't.

I close my eyes and stand rock still.

When I look again, my family have all clambered aboard. They are freeze-framed in the basket. The magnificent red and yellow stripy balloon towers fully inflated above them. A jet of gold fire spurts up.

The balloon lifts… Whoosh … another jet … lifts again…

Each time I blink it is further away … further and further.

And always that snapshot image: the basket with my family, my brothers, my mum and dad and HER in the middle.

And me down below, craning up at the balloon, watching it sail away and turn to a speck in the blue, blue sky.

Chapter 1
An Accident

I had always wanted a sister. Together, we would close the door on the world. She would be on my side. When my brothers and I argued, I imagined her standing up for me; a best friend in our house. We would talk for hours. I could tell her everything. I couldn't tell Thomas things – he just laughed. And Corrie was too old to tell.

I remember, when I was really small, setting out a teddy bears' picnic, spreading the cloth, laying a place for my sister. I was so sure she would arrive, she literally had a plate and a cup, just for her. My sister was my fierce "other". You didn't have

to explain to a sister – she knew. And she would always be on my side.

I longed for my imaginary sister night and day.

And then Seren came.

It was a Saturday afternoon in July. One of those hot lazy days. It wasn't the summer holidays yet, but it felt like school had already finished.

We were all downstairs vegging out. I'd been at football practice in the morning, and Mum and Dad were planning the supermarket shop, then laughing at a photo my brother Corrie had taken.

I was too warm to move. I sprawled on the carpet listening to music on my headphones. *Deep River flowing*… sang a low voice in my ears.

I saw Mum answer her phone. Her voice pierced through the song, high and shrill. "What… Oh, no."

I pulled an earphone out and left the other one in. Mum just sat there staring wildly at Dad.

Beside me on the floor, Thomas was reading a comic. He looked up. "Is it Granny Pat?"

"No, shush… It's about Seren," Mum mouthed. She stood and walked over to the kitchen counter. When she'd finished the call, she hung up the phone.

Dad went and put his arm round Mum. "What happened?" he whispered.

Mum had her back to us and was whispering, so I couldn't hear her well. Something about a fall, a ladder. I took the other earphone out.

"This morning. That means it's only just happened…"

"But it's Saturday."

"He often works Saturdays."

"Did Seren fall?" asked Thomas loudly.

Seren was Mum's god-daughter. When I was little, I thought that meant that somehow she actually *was* god. I wondered if she had a holy glow, and I looked for bright-yellow light shining around her body. But she just looked … ordinary.

Seren's mum had been my mum's best friend. They met at uni and they were bridesmaids at each other's weddings. When Seren was born, my mum had promised in a church to care about her all her life. Mum was like a lifetime guarantee on a new laptop.

Mum once said to me that you never think of anything actually happening when you make those promises.

"No, her grandad fell," Mum explained to Thomas.

After Seren's mum and dad died in the crash, Seren had gone to live with her grandad. Her grandad often worked weekends and I only saw her occasionally.

Corrie asked, "Did he fall a long way?"

"I don't know," Mum said. She sighed. "Poor kid."

Dad swore under his breath. "Who's with her now?"

"Jeannie is, but she has to get back. She has a hairdresser's to run. The kid can't just sit in the hospital alone." Mum bit her lips. "I'll get going."

Mum and Dad talked practical things. The car… The route to the hospital. Mum rang Jeannie back and made arrangements. "If I leave now, I can be at the hospital in less than an hour," she said, dashing around. "I'll talk to the doctors … see how bad it is. We might need to pop home to her grandad's to collect some things, then I'll bring her home with me."

I sat up, suddenly alert. Seren was coming to stay? One summer, when I was about six, Seren had stayed for the weekend. She was quiet. Not much like me. Back then, I would have given her about two out of ten for excitement. But maybe she'd changed?

Dad pursed his lips. "So Jeannie can't look after her … have her to stay?"

Mum shook her head. "Jeannie's daughter's just had a baby. She doesn't have space for more visitors."

Dad and Mum exchanged a look.

"Right," said Dad, processing. "Well, OK. You just get going, love. I'll feed this lot if you're not back. They'll help me sort out somewhere for Seren to sleep." He paused. "It'll probably only be for a few days, right?"

"Exactly." Mum kissed Dad. "Bye, all!"

The front door slammed.