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Opening extract from

It's a 50/50 Thing

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'He'll be with you in a minute, take a seat.'

The school secretary, blonde and plump, points to some plastic chairs facing each other on either side of a closed door. A sign on it says, 'Mr D. Davey, Assistant Head Teacher'. I sit down on the middle one and she gives me a plastic smile to match the chairs and clicks back to her office on her high heels.

I shift my weight and feel the chair leg wobble, and move to the one opposite. The minute stretches into five, then ten. My nervousness has dissipated and I'm getting bored. I've read the notice board with its lists of appointments for work experience but the names and placements don't mean a thing to me and there's nothing else to look at in this tucked-away corner of the school.

From a distance I can hear voices droning French verbs and somewhere a guitar is being played, badly, the same chord over and over again. A babble of voices rises

suddenly, a teacher yells and the noise falls to a murmur. Familiar sounds, though quieter than my last school. I glance at the clock. I'd be in Science now. With Ella.

Tears prick my eyes and I blink furiously and stare at the school prospectus I've been given. I know it by heart already; it had been sent to me at home.

Home. No such place now. A new start, that's what Mum said. Home used to be a happy, busy place in the centre of things, Mum and Dad, me and Izzy, lots of people in and out all day long: my mates, neighbours, friends of Mum and Dad's, people involved in the skate-park . . .

'Like blinking Clapham Junction,' Dad used to say.

More like the end of the line now. The back of beyond. Just Mum, Izzy and me. No one else.

I wonder how Izzy's getting on.

There's the sound of footsteps and I sit up but it's a female teacher, past her prime, straggly greying hair, flowing skirt, all beads and bangles, you know the type. She's got someone in tow.

'Sit there, you,' she barks, 'and don't move.'

A tall, long-limbed boy with scruffy dark hair sprawls on to the chair I've vacated, the one with the wobbly leg. There's an ominous crack and the boy and the chair end up on the floor. The woman looks outraged, as if he's done it on purpose.

'Get up!' she snaps. 'Now you're for it. You wait till Mr Davey sees what you've done.'

The boy unfolds himself from the floor and stands up slowly, dusting himself down. His trousers are low-slung and baggy under his school shirt. 'Wasn't my fault,' he says casually. The woman raps on the door, rigid with rage. I could have told her there was no one in. If she'd asked.

'What's going on?' Behind us a man appears, tall and clean-shaven, dressed in an open-neck shirt and light trousers. Next to the woman he looks cool and calm and not-to-be-messed-with.

'Mr Davey, I will not have this boy in my Year 10 class any more. He's insolent, he's disruptive and he won't listen to a word I say . . .' Her face is red with indignation and her chest heaves as she spews out a catalogue of complaints. The boy stands by silently, an expression of faint amusement on his face, and I can see that even D. Davey himself is finding it hard to stifle a yawn. 'And now look what he's done!' She indicates the broken chair in triumph, a shattered symbol of all his transgressions, and Mr Davey raises his eyebrows, impressed despite himself.

'Destroying school property, Jermaine? That's a new one, even for you. An exclusion offence on its own.'

The boy shrugs. He doesn't care, you can tell. But I do.

'It was broken already.'

Three surprised pairs of eyes turn their attention to me. I feel my colour rising but I keep on anyway. It's not fair, his getting the blame for something he couldn't help. I hate miscarriages of justice.

'The leg was wobbling when I sat on it.'

'Did you do it?' The teacher turns her spleen on me.

'No! I moved so *I* didn't end up on the floor.'

The boy smiles lazily. 'Yeah, it's dead dangerous that. I could have broken my neck.'

'No such luck,' mutters Mr Davey. 'Who are you, by the way?'

'Kathryn O'Connor. I'm new.'

'Kathryn,' says Mr Davey thoughtfully. I can see his mind ticking over and I know he's been fully briefed. 'Welcome to Stanford Technology College. STC for short. It's OK, Mrs Walker, I'll deal with Jermaine.'

Mrs Walker looks me up and down with dislike then gives Jermaine one last sweeping glance of venom and stalks off down the corridor, back still taut with anger. Jermaine's upper lip curls in contempt. It's very attractive but Mr Davey doesn't think so.

'Sit down and wipe that smirk off your face. I'll deal with you in a minute. Kathryn, into my office please.'

Jermaine makes a sardonic sound in his throat, but his face is impassive. I pick up my bag and go to

step over his outstretched legs and I notice suddenly that his shoe is worn down on the left toe. My eyes move up to his face with renewed interest and he pulls back his legs and says, 'Sorry.' When he smiles, his eyes crinkle appealingly.

In the office Mr Davey indicates a chair and rummages through his filing cabinet. He pulls out a folder. 'Here we are, Kathryn O'Connor.' I can see a piece of paper with the letterhead of my old school on it and I wonder what they've written about me. He starts filling in a form. 'What do you want to be known as?'

'Sorry?' Does he think I'm going under an assumed name? On reflection, that might be a good idea.

'Do you like to be called Kathryn? Kathy? Kate?'

He makes it sound as if I can choose. New name, new identity. I hear myself saying,

'Kally. I'd like to be known as Kally.'

'Kally with a K?' I nod. He crosses out my Christian name and prints 'KALLY' in capital letters.

Why did I say that? That's not what he meant at all. When Izzy was little she couldn't manage Kathryn and she used to call me Kally, but I hadn't been called that for years. Too late, it was done now and I couldn't go back without making myself look a complete idiot. I run through the rest of the form with him then he sits back and looks at me, tapping his teeth with his pen.

'I know things have been hard for you, Kally, but nobody except for the Head and myself is aware of what's happened. And that's the way it'll stay. In the meantime if you need to talk you know where to find me. My door is always open.'

Hardly.

'In a manner of speaking, that is.' He'd read my thoughts. My mouth twitches and he winks at me. He's nice. He gets up to open the door. 'You'll settle in well, I'm sure. We're a friendly lot.'

Outside, the boy is sitting with his legs up on the chair opposite. Mr Davey sweeps past, knocking them to the ground. 'Most of us are, anyway,' he amends. 'Come with me and I'll show you to your classroom. Don't move an inch, Jermaine.'

'Great hair,' the boy says to me. I smile back then hurry to keep pace with Mr Davey.

'Watch him,' says the teacher shortly. 'He's trouble.' I follow him down the corridor, through reception and up the stairs, passing lots of classrooms on the way. I glance through the windows but it's all a bit of a blur, though the general impression I get is that it's all fairly quiet with no one causing a riot. No one except Jermaine obviously.

We stop outside a classroom and Mr Davey raps on the door. Inside it's silent, they're writing furiously, but

twenty-odd pairs of eyes look up to inspect me with interest as I follow him in. The teacher is marking a pile of books. She's young and pretty.

'Nice and quiet in here, Miss Johnson!'

'They're doing a test.' She smiles at us both.

'Kally O'Connor, new girl.'

I'm being scrutinized from head to toe by the whole class. They notice my hair first, everyone does, you can't miss it, it's thick, red and wiry with a mind of its own, though it's on its best behaviour today because I've yanked it back into a ponytail for school.

Eyes move to my face next. How do you describe your own face? Blue eyes inherited from both parents but with Dad's dark lashes, thank goodness, Mum's pale, transparent skin, my own chiselled nose with annoying freckles on it and a small chin that Dad calls determined.

Called.

They're all staring. I can sense them eyeing up my figure now. I bet they can read my thoughts. I feel like I've been splayed against a screen and X-rayed. Stay cool.

A boy at the back nudges the one beside him and despite myself I can feel my heart beating faster and my colour rising, one of the disadvantages of having the fair skin that goes with red hair, and suddenly I have a blind moment of panic when I think I'm going to turn and run, straight out of the classroom and as far away from

this strange new school as I can.

Then the teacher smiles and says, 'Hello, Kally, pleased to meet you,' and a girl near the front says, 'She can sit here, Miss,' and I sling my bag on her table and sink gratefully into the chair next to her. 'French test,' she mouths and starts scribbling again, her hand under her fringe keeping stray wisps of hair out of her eyes.

'Five minutes to go,' says Miss Johnson and everyone gets back to their work. My heart slows down to normal pace and I look around. It's a big, airy room with displays of work on the wall and posters advertising French life. The tables are set out in rows, two to each table, and along one wall is a row of computers. It's tidy and workmanlike and safe. I feel myself relaxing.

When the bell goes, Miss Johnson collects the papers, then comes over to talk to me.

'Have you done French before, Kally?'

I nod. 'Since Year 7.'

'Good. I'm just in the process of setting for next year. You might like to take this test home tonight and give it a go. It'll help me assess which group to put you in.'

I take the paper and put it in my bag. A voice says, 'That's not fair, Miss. She could get her mum or dad to help her. We had to do it in class like an exam.' It's the boy who was sitting at the back, the one who nudged his sidekick. He's got a shaved head and his eyes are small

and close together. He looks like a pig and I decide instantly that I hate him.

I'm not the only one apparently. The girl next to me says, 'Shut it, Darren. What's it to you?'

Miss Johnson intervenes. 'It's not the only method of assessment and Megan's right, it's nothing to do with you, Darren. Now, Kally, you'll need an exercise book and this is the textbook we use . . .'

By the time she's finished explaining everything my head's reeling and I wonder how I'm going to find my way to my next lesson, but outside the classroom Megan's waiting for me. I appraise her suspiciously. Is she one of those sad kids without a friend who's hoping to latch on to the new girl?

She doesn't look sad. She looks cool. She's got long hair that spills down her back in a blonde waterfall. Lucky thing. Mine would never do that, even if I straightened it to within an inch of its life; it's got a fiery, wiry, spirally mind of its own.

She's also tall and slim and her skirt is hitched up to show off her long, tanned legs.

I should hate her, but I don't. I like the look of her, despite the fact she's gorgeous, because she obviously does not, unlike nearly every other girl in the class, slavishly follow The Must Have, This Season, So Hot Style Secrets from the pages of the latest fashion magazine. Like my

hair, she looks as if she has a mind of her own.

'Ready? We've got English next. Whingy Walker.'

My heart sinks. 'Mrs Walker? I've met her already.'

Megan wrinkles her nose. 'She's a dag.'

I follow Megan along the corridor and decide to take a risk.

'Megan?'

'What?'

'Do you know what a dag is?'

She turns to look at me and says, 'No, what is it?'

'It's the horrible, woolly, dirty bit that hangs off a sheep's bottom.'

She pauses. I hold my breath.

'How do you know that?'

'I watch *Neighbours*.'

Does she think I'm a know-all? Does she think I'm weird? She sniffs.

'Well, you learn something new every day.' Then she grins. 'Like I say, she's a dag.'

We both burst out laughing and when we get to English late and Mrs Walker glares at me and says, 'NOT a good beginning, you're late,' and Megan mouths 'Dag' at me over her shoulder, I don't worry about being new and being on public display any more, I'm just trying my best not to laugh.