

Chris  
Higgins



IT'S A  
50/50  
THING



Hodder  
Children's  
Books

A division of Hachette Children's Books



‘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.



Izzy's sitting on the front doorstep waiting for me when I get home. She's got all her Barbies out and she's operating on them. Heads, arms and legs are lined up on the granite step, waiting to be transplanted on to the assembled nude bodies. She's obsessed by all things medical. It looks as if she's just performed her first gender realignment surgery as Ken's head is repositioned on a torso which sports a monumental pair of breasts. He looks very pleased with himself.

'Izzy-Wizzy, let's get busy!' I dump my bag on the path and squat down on the step beside her. 'I'll get them dressed for you while you finish operating.' I select a particularly fetching little pink number for Ken which shows off his new shapely legs to perfection. He deserves it after what he's been through.

'Is that you, Kathryn?'

Like, who else would it be? No one knows us in this

back-of-beyond place. Which is precisely why we're living here.

'Yes, Mum.' I'm concentrating on shoving Ken's arm through a minuscule sleeve. That's it. I Velcro him speedily up the back to protect his modesty from my mother's prying eyes. I can feel her hovering behind me in the doorway. Hovering, not hoovering. She does a lot of the former and not so much of the latter nowadays. She sighs heavily when she sees the array of body parts. She sighs a lot nowadays too.

'Don't encourage her. Why can't you play with them nicely, Izzy?'

'I'm not playing, I'm performing a procedure,' mumbles Izzy who stays up watching hospital dramas when she can get away with it and knows all the jargon. She's tucked an amputated leg between her lips for safe-keeping while she struggles to stretch the socket she's trying to insert it into, so the sophistication of her vocabulary is somewhat marred by her indistinct delivery.

Still, she's ace for a six-year-old. She keeps me sane now I spend so much time with my mother. She's like a buffer between us, making sure we don't collide too often.

'How was school?'

'All right.'

'Is it like Deanswood?'

'No.'

How could it be? I knew everyone at Deanswood, I'd been there for nearly three years and had been at primary school before that with most of them. I knew all the places you could go if you wanted to snog someone or have a fag or miss a lesson, not that I did any of these things. I knew the people who were cool and the people to avoid like the plague and I had loads of mates.

*Had* loads of mates. Past tense.

'Not too bad though?'

Stop keeping on! I know what she's doing, she just wants reassurance that everything's all right, that I'm happy, that she's done the right thing moving us lock, stock and barrel away from prying eyes and caustic tongues to this remote part of the country where nobody knows us and we can start again. Well, I'm not playing her game.

'They've registered me as Kally,' I say and wait for the reaction.

'Kally!' says Izzy approvingly. 'Fab!'

'Good idea,' says Mum.

'Why?' I challenge her though I know exactly what she means. It's what I was thinking. New name, new me.

'Makes a change,' she says limply. 'A change is as good as a rest, so they say.'

Yeah, Mum, right. In that case we must be the most

rested family in Britain, the changes we've undergone in the past year.

But we're not. We're the most uptight, jittery, stressed-out threesome on the planet. No, twosome. Izzy's OK, if you don't count her obsession with body parts.

But she does keep asking when Dad's coming back.

Today though, she's got her new school to talk about. She chatters on over tea, about her fab new teacher, Miss Baker, and her fab new friend, Molly Moulton. Fab's her new word. She talks about Molly as if she's known her for years. All thoughts of her previous friends have vanished. Lucky thing. I envy her selective memory.

'Molly says I can go and play on Saturday. Can I, Mum? She's got a dog and a rabbit and her brother's got stick insects. Can we have a dog, Mum?'

'I don't know . . .'

Mum's considering the first question, I can tell by the worried frown that's appeared between her eyebrows. It's never far away nowadays. Izzy thinks she's answering the second. Her eyes brighten and she sits up straight, her voice rising an octave in excitement.

'Please, Mum. I'll look after it. I'll take it for walks and I'll feed it and bath it and it can sleep on my bed. Ple-ease!'

'No!' Mum snaps and Izzy visibly deflates.

‘Why not?’ I ask, but I know the answer already. A dog’s too visible, it bounds about and barks and attracts attention. People might notice you.

‘You couldn’t look after it, you’re at school all day.’

‘*You* could,’ I say but when I glance up at Mum I feel mean. She’s tired and thin and strained and only just about holding together enough to look after us.

‘We can’t afford a dog,’ she says. ‘Anyway, we haven’t got the room for anything else. It’s a tight enough squeeze just for the three of us.’

Mum’s right. It’s a tiny two-up, two-down cottage with flagstones on the floor and exposed black timbers that are so low I can reach up and touch them. Upstairs, Izzy and I share Mum and Dad’s double bed in a room where the roof comes down sharply on one side to a small window that looks on to the front garden which is wild and overgrown. Mum’s squashed into a boxroom behind us in my old single bed. Downstairs there’s a kitchen at the back with no cupboards, just open shelves, so everything we eat and drink is on display for everyone to see, not that anyone comes, and a small sitting room at the front with an open fire that we haven’t used yet. A tiny bathroom with toilet, washbasin and ancient cracked enamel bath that you couldn’t swing the proverbial cat in completes all the mod-cons.

Why would you want to do that? Swing a cat, I mean.

‘She’s got a point, Izzy. There’s only just room enough for us.’

Mum looks at me gratefully. I don’t usually stick up for her. It’s not that I blame her for what’s happened, it was nothing to do with her, it’s just that I hate the way she’s handled it all. It makes me feel guilty, all this running away and hiding, as if *we* did something wrong.

Izzy relapses into silence. She wouldn’t have done that before, she would have argued and cried and tossed her hair and kept on till she got her own way, but now she knows there’s no point. It was Dad she could twist around her little finger, not Mum.

I get my books out and get down to the little homework I’ve been given, the French test and ten sentences on My Hero for Whingy Walker. Ten sentences! I hate teachers being prescriptive like that. What if I wanted to write an essay? Or a whole book? She’s only saying ten sentences so she doesn’t have too much to mark.

Lazy cow.

No, I take that back. Stop being so horrible, Kally, you never used to be like this when you were Kathryn.

The French test is easy, nothing I haven’t encountered before, and certainly nothing I would need help on. What was the name of that creep who said I would cheat? Darren. Hopefully he’d be in a different set next

year. Bottom set probably. Lucky for me not all the boys at STC were like him. Now Jermaine, he was a different kettle of fish altogether.

He said he liked my hair.

I liked his too. Long and dark with a heavy fringe that he kept sweeping out of his eyes.

Dark eyes too. With thick dark lashes.

Dark Boy.

There was no one like him at my last school.

I suddenly realize I've doodled a kettle with a pile of fish heads poking out of it on the corner of my French test. I add long eyelashes to their fish eyes. Cute! I giggle aloud. Mum looks up at me in surprise. She's sitting in front of the empty fireplace sewing name tapes on Izzy's PE kit. She smiles too.

'It's going to be all right, isn't it, Kath?'

Reassurance again. When did I turn into the mum?

It's the first time she's smiled for months. I take a deep breath.

'Course it is. And it's Kally now. Remember?'

'Kally?' She nodded. 'Kally it is.'

I finish my homework, scribbling down the required ten sentences about my hero. I choose Charlie T, a skate pro who's big in the States. He's a big beast of a guy with feet like a dancer's who has the ability to make the most difficult moves look easy. I've got all his videos and I

reckon I know enough about him to write a book if I wanted. But I'm cheating. He's not really my hero.

My hero was Dad.

When I go up to bed I think Izzy's fast asleep at first but as soon as I get into bed I can feel her hot little body tense and alert beside me. She's lying on her back feigning sleep but when I say, 'Izzy?' she turns and stares at me.

'Kath?' she says and then stops.

'It's Kally again now. Remember how you used to call me that when you were little?'

She nods. Her eyes are huge and solemn in the moonlight.

'What's up?'

A tear wells up in the corner of her eye and splashes down on to the pillow. I put my arm round her and cuddle her. Her body is stiff and unyielding.

'What's wrong, Iz-Wiz?' Suddenly she bursts into tears and there's no stopping her. I hold her close to muffle her cries so Mum won't hear her. She wouldn't be able to handle this. I can feel a damp patch growing on my pyjama top and I hope it's tears, not snot. At last Izzy stops sobbing and goes into sniffing and hiccuping mode. Finally I dare to say,

'What was all that about? Is it because you want a dog?'

‘No, silly,’ she says and her voice catches on another sob. ‘Silly Kally.’

‘OK!’ Don’t get annoyed, Kally, she’s only little. Try to understand. ‘Is it your new school? I know, I feel strange too but we’ll get used to it. It’ll be all right, Iz.’ Who am I trying to convince?

‘I like school. I like Molly, I told you.’ She glares at me. Her nose is running and she catches it with her tongue. Gross.

Now my patience is wearing thin. My damp pyjama top is clinging to my skin and it’s nasty and uncomfortable and feels suspiciously like mucus. I pluck a tissue out of the box beside the bed and scrub my top then thrust another one into her hand.

‘Here! Blow your nose!’

Her tears well up again at my tone and she wails, ‘I want Dad!’

I swallow hard. Izzy’s been so good since Dad’s gone. It’s Mum and I who do the crying over Dad. In private of course and never together. You see, we know what we’ve lost; Izzy just thinks he’s away from home, working.

It was something I’d disagreed with Mum about, all this pretence. I thought she should have told Izzy what had happened. But Mum said she was too young to understand.

‘What’s age got to do with it?’ I’d yelled. ‘I’m grown

up and I don't understand!

'Neither do I,' she'd said, white-faced.

'Sshh!' I say in desperation as Izzy's howls increase. 'Mum will hear you!'

As if on cue, Mum's voice floats up the stairs, high-pitched and reedy with anxiety. 'What's going on up there? What are you two up to?'

'Izzy had a bad dream! She's OK now!' I hear the door of the sitting room closing again and I hiss at my distraught little sister, 'Shut up, Iz! You'll upset Mum!'

Obediently, Izzy turns over and buries her face in her pillow, her small body convulsing with smothered sobs. Even in her distress she knows, instinctively, Mum must be looked after. It's heartbreaking. I stroke her hair gently.

'Stop crying, Iz. He'll be back one day.'

'No, he won't.'

'Of course he will!'

She raises her face and glares at me through swollen, accusing eyes. 'He won't, Kally. You said so yourself.'

'I didn't!'

'You did!' She shudders. 'There's no room here, you said. There's just enough room for the three of us. So he can't come back, can he?'