

Chapter three

Mrs Kingston flung open the door of the classroom.

‘Your new students are here, Mr Spillane,’ she announced.

Mr Spillane was sitting at the top of the classroom. He looked serious, but not too cross.

‘Welcome to secondary school,’ he said. ‘As it’s the first day, you can just sit wherever you like.’

Great.

He’d said the worst words in the world.

The words I had been dreading.

Now everyone in the class would think that I had no friends.



Friends at the other end of the school weren't much use to me now.

Suddenly I heard a familiar voice.

'Megan, over here!'

I quickly turned around and saw a girl called Jane, who had been in my class at primary school. She was sitting in one of the very front seats. She smiled at me, and patted the chair next to her.

'This seat is free,' she said.

I gulped. This was exactly like when I'd started sixth class, back when Alice was living in Dublin. A whole year had passed, but things were still the same. Jane was still such a loser that she didn't even mind being a loser. I think she actually *liked* being a loser. And if I sat beside her, everyone would think I was a loser too.

So I pretended not to hear her, and walked the other way.

I know that was really mean of me.

I know I should have felt sorry for Jane.

But I couldn't.

I was too busy feeling sorry for myself.

I looked around desperately. I didn't know any of the other girls in the room. There were a few boys I knew from primary school, but they were all together in a big huddle. One of them looked up and smiled at me. I smiled back, but I knew he wouldn't want me hanging around with him.

I found an empty seat in the middle of the room and sat down. More people came into the classroom. Some looked at me for a second, and then they walked on, as if they'd just decided I wasn't worth sitting next to. Maybe I shouldn't have let Mum clip up my hair. Maybe it looked stupid. I wished I'd asked Alice what she thought. I wished I didn't have to be on my own.

Then, when almost all of the seats were taken, a friendly-looking girl came along.

'Can I sit here?' she asked.

I was afraid to answer – afraid that she was talking to someone else. Then, when no one answered, I tried not to sound too happy.

‘Sure,’ I said.

‘I’m Kellie,’ she said as she put her bag on to the desk.

I found myself smiling at her. Maybe this wasn’t so hard after all.

‘I’m—’, I started to say, when there was a shout from the other side of the room.

‘Kellie. We’re over here. Come and sit with us. We’ve saved you a place.’

Kellie looked embarrassed.

‘Do you mind?’ she asked.

Of course I minded.

But what could I say?

I have no other friends?

Please sit down here?

Don’t leave me alone?

How sad would that sound?

So I smiled and said, ‘That’s OK,’ like I didn’t care one way or the other. Then Kellie picked up her bag and went to sit with her friends.

It looked like everyone had arrived, and the only empty seat was the one next to mine. Mr Spillane was talking to the principal, and everyone else except for me was chatting. At the front of the room, I could see that even Jane had found a friend, a serious-looking girl, just like herself.

I took out my homework diary and pretended to be really interested in reading the study tips on the front page. Then I heard footsteps. I looked up to see a totally cool boy. He was tall and thin, and his long, dark hair had a streak of purple down one side. He was wearing a school jumper and trousers, but his shirt was open at the neck, and he wasn’t wearing a tie.

‘That seat free?’ he said, pointing to the very free seat next to me.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

He sat down, and I got the funny feeling that everyone was staring at him, and at me. Just then the principal left the room, and Mr Spillane asked us all to be quiet.

‘You should all have received a copy of the dress code, and I see that most of you have taken it on board.’

Then he pointed to the boy next to me.

‘You, young man, what’s your name?’

‘Marcus,’ he muttered.

‘Well, Marcus, it seems that your copy of the school dress code must have got lost in the post. Shirts are to be correctly closed, ties are required at all times, and purple hair simply isn’t allowed. Come and see me after class, please.’

‘OK,’ said Marcus.

I felt sorry for him. Imagine getting into trouble on your very first day.

Then Marcus turned to me and whispered, ‘He

has *got* to be kidding. I'm expected to take clothes advice from someone wearing a jumper with dolphins on it?'

I giggled, but stopped when I realised that Mr Spillane was staring at me.

I might not have any friends, but at least with Marcus around I had a feeling that our class was going to be interesting.

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It felt like a very long morning. We got long lectures about keeping our books in order, and about all kinds of school rules. We were shown our lockers and where to put our coats and our sports bags. We were shown the toilets, the lunch rooms, the principal's office and the lost-property room. After a while it started to remind me of the forest in France where Alice and I had got lost last summer; there were so many corridors, and each one looked the same as all the

others. I was sure I'd get lost and never be found again.

At last it was twelve o'clock, and we were allowed to go home.

It had been the longest three hours of my life.

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I waited at the school gate for my friends. Grace arrived first, with two other girls.

'Hi, Megan. This is Rebecca and this is Hannah,' she said. 'Rebecca is in my riding school, and Hannah is her friend. They're both in my class.'

I couldn't help feeling jealous. I had hoped Grace would understand how I felt about being in a class on my own, but already she had two friends. It was looking like I was going to be the only loner in the entire year.

Just then Alice and Louise arrived.

'How did you get on?' asked Alice. 'Have you

made any friends yet? Who did you sit beside?’

At least I didn’t have to say that I’d sat on my own.

‘I sat with a boy called Marcus,’ I said casually.

‘Marcus? Not Marcus Wall?’ asked Louise in a shocked voice.

I shrugged.

‘Don’t know his second name.’

‘Is he skinny, and has he got long hair with purple bits in it?’ she continued.

I nodded.

‘That’s him.’

‘And you weren’t afraid?’

I looked at her in surprise.

‘Why should I be afraid?’ I asked.

‘Marcus lives on my road,’ she said. ‘He’s *always* in trouble. He’s really bad.’

I gulped. Marcus hadn’t seemed very scary when he was sitting next to me in class, but now I was starting to wonder if I’d missed something.

Then I noticed something strange. Because of Marcus, everyone had forgotten about me. No one need know that I had no real friends. As long as Marcus was around, maybe no one would guess that I was a loner.