



CHAPTER ONE



I wasn't sure how, but I'd survived! Five whole weeks of school, and if I could just get through two more days, I'd have made it to half term.

GO ME!

I air-fived myself.

Which was a mistake, as to my classmates it looked like I'd given our headmaster one single, random clap for absolutely zero reason. I looked behind me, my best confused face on, trying to pretend I was working out where the noise came from.

Freedom was SO NEAR. Then it would be goodbye to St Augustine's for ever! Well, the middle school anyway. And hello, St Augustine's *Senior* School!

Where people wouldn't know me as the girl who turned up for her first day all on her own, in the middle of a term, wearing the wrong uniform.

Where they wouldn't know me as the girl who accidentally

sent my music teacher an audio note of me sleep-talking instead of our homework.

Where they wouldn't yell **'BREAKING NEWS NELLY'** whenever I stuck my hand up. (Why did it have to be me who had tripped playing netball and smashed a TV camera during the live report on our new sports hall opening?!)

Senior school wasn't just a new start. It was a chance to be a whole new me.

A whole new normal Nelly.

Ahhhh, yes! New, normal, Nelly. It already sounded brilliant.

I closed my eyes and breathed in, excited for what could lie ahead. I had ninety-eight days to work on my big relaunch and my best mates Clara and Jas had promised to help me do whatever it took.

'Year 6, did you all take that in?' Mr Chen, our headmaster, pushed his glasses up his nose and peered round our form room. 'Because I saw the grand total of . . . not one of you take down any notes.' A groan went up as we fished out our homework planners. I rolled my eyes at Jas, who grinned back. But when I swivelled the other way to do the same for Clara, she looked like she did when her home chemistry experiment set fire to her lounge curtains.

'So, to recap.' Mr Chen wiped his nose with a hanky. Our suspicion was he used the same one. Every single day. 'The first day back after half term won't be lessons as normal.' Uh-oh. *Please* don't let it be another bring-your-parents-to-class

day. I still hadn't lived down the time when Dad came in riding a unicycle. 'Instead, Year Six will be heading over the road to meet St Augustine's current Year Seven. And Year Eleven too, who will be your senior prefects.' Ouch. That sounded scary. 'You'll take it in turns to do a short ...' Mr Chen hunted for Jas in the audience. 'And by *short* I mean three minutes ONLY ...' He glared right at her. He didn't trust Jas after she'd won an award for one of her films and her acceptance speech in assembly had run over first bell. '... presentation.'

Wait. WHAT? My image of Jas on stage evaporated. And a vision of a panicking, sweaty, not-knowing-what-to-say me took its place. Was Mr Chen really expecting us to stand and talk in front of the seniors?! No wonder Clara looked like she was in physical pain. Talking in public was her worst nightmare.

The room was spinning. I clutched my chair.

'Your presentation should be a fascinating look at what you get up to this half term.' Actual GULP. How was I going to spin 'helping Dad with the supermarket shop' and 'doing experimental grooming on our dog Clive' (Clara had sent me 'Hairy Styles', a YouTube channel that showed 'how to groom any dog to channel Harry Styles') into three fascinating minutes. **HOW?!**

Mr Chen, pass me your multi-used hanky – I think I'm going to be sick.

'This is about Years Seven and Eleven getting to know you – the *real* you.' But that was the problem! The real me was



a disaster! I needed them to get to know the BETTER me! 'So they can help you transition into senior life. You'll need to bring ten photos to present on the big screen, and we want the pictures to tell a story. We're not looking for anything flashy.'

'Just as well,' I hissed to Clara, who nose-snorted. I *hoped* it was laughter, but it could be because she hadn't breathed for a full minute. As much as Jas loved attention, Clara went mute if there were more than three other people in a room. She was the smartest person I knew – and one hundred per cent the shyest.

'Eleanor.' Uh-oh. Mr Chen stepped in my direction. 'If you've got so much to say about Introduction Day, how about you share it with the rest of the class?'

Mr Chen was a MONSTER.

'I was just saying . . . that, err . . .' I looked round the desks, everyone staring back with relief it wasn't them being picked on. 'That, err, I'm really looking forward to hearing all the presentations.' Lie. Lie. Lie. 'And that it's going to be, err, great to have a, erm . . . fresh start.'

I emphasized the last two words, so Jas and Clara would pick up on what I meant. My plan to become a shiny new version of myself over the summer.

'Yes.' Mr Chen tutted. 'I can quite see why you'd want to put Breaking News Nelly behind you.' Wait?! What! Mr Chen knew people called me that?!

I was actually deceased.

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I still hadn't finished feeling mortified by the end of the afternoon as I sat in our assembly hall cheering Marli Dean as she walked up on stage for the fourth time. It was the student awards we did every year before summer half term and my hands were already hurting from doing one single ninety-minute-long clap. Still, breaking my fingers was better than lessons. The awards were meant to celebrate 'student community' and 'The best St Augustine's students have to offer!' and Marli cleaned up every year. It would have been annoying if she wasn't actually really nice.

As she picked up the Students' Student of the Year award and said something about us all being *her* student of the year, I read through the list of what she'd already won. Wow. How could one person be so good at everything from cheerleading through to first aid? It all came so naturally to her. We might go to the same school, but we couldn't be more different. Marli breezed through life. Me? I kept tripping over the start line. Even our families were opposite. Marli's mum was a lawyer for some of the biggest popstars in the world. My dad ran Living on the Hedge, a one-man hedge-cutting business. Despite our house being tiny, he'd managed to fit four hedges on our front lawn that he'd cut into the shape of his favourite band, The Beatles. Our garden was now rated '2314th Most Popular Local Attraction' on HolidayAdvisor. And it wasn't like our house was normal before – the previous owners had painted it bright pink. That isn't a shade of house. Candyfloss, puppy tummies, yes. But not houses!



I shuffled on my plastic chair, the seat sticking to the backs of my legs like old Sellotape. My mind drifted back to wondering how I could survive this stupid senior presentation.

How could I fix half term so that I could get photos of good stuff? Not like the ones of my grandparents' new dance routine currently filling my camera roll.

How could I make the next week so unbelievably epic it would dazzle an entire new school?

Hmm. Tomorrow was the annual Year 6 trip to 'Potato World! The West Midlands' One and Only Potato Museum' which I had a feeling wasn't going to be the strongest start unless my new schoolmates were going to be dazzled by a picture of me next to the world's longest chip.

Maybe I could persuade Dad to take us somewhere new? Imagine if we could sneak into the grand opening of Adventure World X-treme? They'd been building the new theme park for years and every single ticket had been snapped up till Christmas.

Or I could try and talk Dad into letting me dye my hair a radical new colour? Although knowing my luck, it would go wrong and I'd end up looking like a walking pea.

Still, I had to dream. If I could pull off becoming a whole new Nelly, we might even get our first-ever invite to one of Marli and her cousin Finn's legendary parties?! People still talked about the one where a machine printed selfies on to ice cream.

But why was Clara tapping my foot?
And why was Marli looking at me as she slid back into her seat?

In fact, why was *everyone* looking at me?

And why could I hear my name?!

I gulped. And stopped thinking about my face on a Cornetto.

‘ELEANOR YOUNG.’

Yup. My name. Well, sort of. I was actually christened Nelly, but no teachers ever believed me so they called me ‘Eleanor’ anyway. Even my name didn’t like being normal.

‘ELEANOR.’

My stomach knotted. Had I actually won something?! For the first time since I started here three years ago?

I stood up, smiling nervously as people clapped.

What could it be?

I *had* tried hard with netball this year. And played bass recorder in Mrs Wilson’s Tom Jones Fest (I didn’t actually play bass recorder, but Mrs Wilson said it was so low no one would notice if I missed any/all of the notes). And I hadn’t had any days off (apart from that one time when I went to A&E with Dad after he’d been practising the ‘sawing someone in half’ magic trick and broke his own finger).

I squeezed along my row, bum-shuffling past everyone’s knees, and looked up at the stage.

Finn, the head of year, smiled his perfect movie-star smile, and flicked his scruffy brown hair that only he seemed to get

away with. 'Here she is.' Wow. Finn knew who I was? 'The inaugural winner . . .' I wasn't sure what inaugural meant, so glanced round to Clara.

'*First*,' she mouthed. '*First winner*.' My best friend was quicker than Google.

Somehow I made it up the steps without tripping, and as I stood at the side of the stage, a thought hit me. What if right here, right now, was the start of the new non-embarrassing me?! Finn held out a certificate. *C'mon, me!* This was my moment. Don't panic. Enjoy it! 'Eleanor Young . . .' I pulled my shoulders back, and with a confident walk strode out ' . . . Winner of the Most LOL Person Ever'.

I stopped dead. The what?!

I looked down at the hundreds of students, clapping and cheering . . . and laughing. In the wings Mrs Wilson was flapping her hands.

'Not *person*, Finn. *Moment*,' she hiss-shouted, tapping the list on her clipboard.

Finn smiled sweetly. 'Of course.' He waved the certificate and winked at me – was I meant to be finding this funny too? Because this didn't feel funny. Or even OK.

And as I stood on stage, posing for a photo, everyone shouting 'Breaking News Nelly!' I knew that if I wanted life to be different in senior school, I had to do something big. And do it fast.