

# HOW

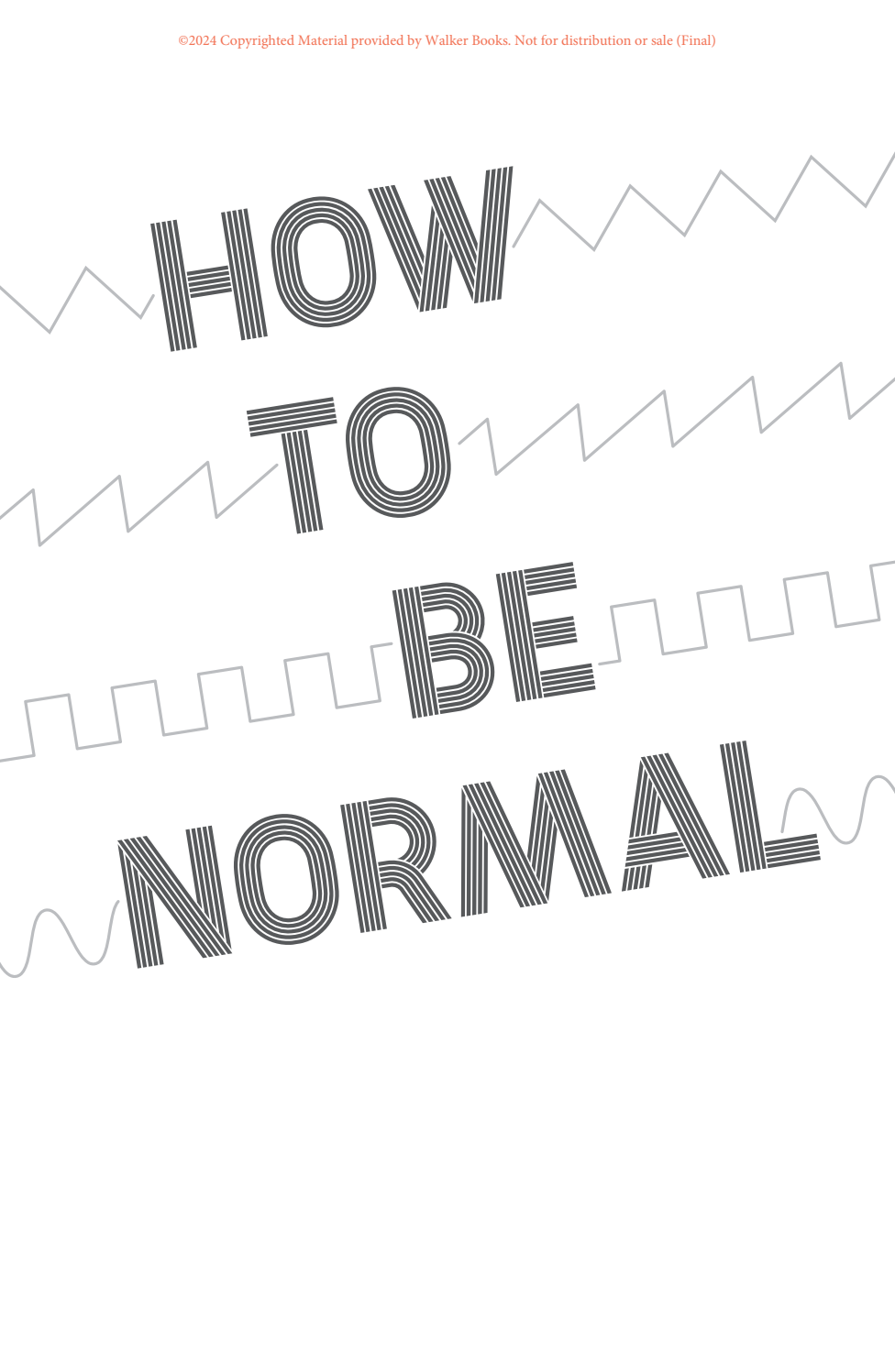
# TO

# BE



# NORMAL

ANGE CRAWFORD



# HOW TO BE NORMAL

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**To my family and all the  
other survivors.**



# FADE-IN

My house hides.

My house is ordinary. This is how it hides. If you walked past it on your way to some other near-identical house in our neighbourhood, you'd probably forget all about it. Sure, the hedges are perfect squares, but they're not asking you to admire them in all their perpendicular glory. Nor is the neatly paved path here to welcome you.

My house would rather you kept walking.

Even the sparrows avoid us most of the time, preferring the ragged branches and chipped paintwork elsewhere in our suburb. If you noticed anything about my house at all, it might be this.

It's so still here.

There are no footsteps yet. There are no whispers, no sign that anything is different. On the outside at least.



In the video, a smiling girl my age walks me step-by-step through hairstyle number seven. I grip little clusters of my hair, twisting them over and under each other until they get along. Which is no easy feat.

Hairstyle number seven is perfect: neat, inoffensive, and most important of all, boring. That last part is my secret. Society thinks the worst thing you can be is boring, but that's ridiculous. I've been different my whole life, and it's not all it's cracked up to be. Most people have normal, boring lives. I'd like to be most people.

The video girl's right. My face does look friendlier, more feminine – more like someone else entirely. I try to imagine what my new schoolmates will think when I walk by the lipstick-stained mirrors or poster-covered lockers or whatever else there is in a real high school. I hope they'll accept me as one of their own – and then they'll walk right on by.

Open body language will help. I narrow my eyes so I don't look like a scared doe. Then I roll my shoulders back. I lift my chin. Nope, that makes me look haughty. Chin only moderately raised, then.

I tiptoe towards the empty kitchen, holding my chosen posture as a bit of extra practice. The air is crisp, carrying

the citrus notes of cleaning products. It's unsettling how much this feels like any other morning.

I'm fifteen minutes ahead of schedule, but I race through the tasks of my morning routine, like that will mean my new life begins sooner. I weigh green tea leaves (exactly 2.5 grams) and place them in the teapot next to the bowl with exactly three quarters of a cup of organic muesli. Then I slip through the side door, pulling Mum's gumboots on and wandering in the garden until I find the day's newspaper. I unwrap it, throw the heavy boots off, and pad back through to the kitchen bench, smoothing the newspaper out, aligning it with the rest of Dad's breakfast.

Then I remember there's one extra task for today. I grab the whiteboard marker and scrub out the lines for Mum and me on our whereabouts board.

*ASTRID: Out. School. ETA: 4:15.*

*ELLEN: Out. Work. ETA: 4:15.*

*CLIFF: In.*

My hand hovers over Dad's name as I imagine him sinking into the stillness of the house with nothing ahead today except for repainting the mailbox. Maybe he'll linger awhile, hunched over the classifieds, trying not to think about the life he tried to build here with Mum and me, until money thwarted him, and he finally had to let us go.



We were so happy to go.

The thought makes me sad enough to steal back outside and clip a gardenia for him. I reach for one at the back, where it won't upset the aesthetics. I place it in a glass of water just far enough away from Dad's breakfast: it's imperative that no petal falls into his meal. Especially today.

I fall out of my practised posture, slouching a little, and my elbow brushes against the dish rack. It squeaks.

Oh no. I freeze, listening for a rustle, a footstep, a groan. But the hush has not shattered: Dad hasn't woken up. I breathe out and tiptoe back to my room.

I slide open my wardrobe door, breathing in the comfort of fabric softener. As I take out the traffic-cone orange uniform skirt and white button-down shirt, I'm already missing the comfy, scruffy homeschooling clothes that fill the rest of my wardrobe.

I close the door on them.

This is it, then. I've studied in this room for five whole years, sitting at this desk and staring out this window, not quite seeing the pristine shrubs beyond, but instead dreaming of those teen movies Mum and I have watched in those moments we've snatched over the years, movies with hopeful protagonists who arrive at adulthood with everything – and everyone – they need for a normal life.