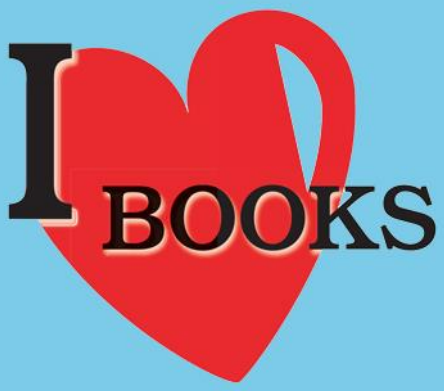


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Opening extract from

Hamish and the Neverpeople

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You Nitwit!

Oh, dear.

What HAVE you done?

You picked up this book and started reading, didn't you?

You've read three sentences already.

And now you've read four!

Oh, that is unfortunate.

You should stop right now because you need to be made of tough stuff to handle what's coming.

I'm serious. Just stop right now.

Because are you ready to learn about something that will change your life forever?

Are you ready to find out one of the biggest secrets in the world?

Something so big and so secret that this is literally the only book on the planet that knows about it?

Even if it means putting yourself . . . in danger?

Because out there, somewhere in the world, plans

are being made.

Huge plans, so evil and so dastardly that you'd be better off putting this book down immediately and doing whatever it is you normally do with your time. Licking kittens. Putting socks on your ears. Stinking up the place.

Oh, it doesn't matter who you are or what your name is. It doesn't matter how tough you think you are. You need to be prepared!

Once, a tough kid with the tough name of Belch Sting read this book. Do you know what happened to Belch Sting straight after? His feet fell off. They had to use the wheels from an old office chair to replace his feet, and now he just trundles around, looking sad. You should have seen him trying to walk upstairs at night. His parents had to install a ski lift.

After him, a girl called Runt Sneer had a go. It might even have been this very copy of the book. Well, it blew her mind. I mean literally. A small wisp of smoke puffed from both ears and now all she can talk about is shoelaces.

Is that really what you want to happen to you?

I didn't think so. I'll give you one last chance.

You should stop reading RIGHT NOW if you don't want to know that the people of Earth are in big,

big trouble.

Like – huge trouble.

Oh, come on – where's your imagination? *Double* what you're thinking.

Because the person making those evil and dastardly plans I was talking about? The one who is stalking around, coming up with dreadful ideas? The one who might well be outside your house right this very second? Well, that person has plans for an apocalypse so big you might as well call it a MEGAPOCALYPSE.

And if you keep reading . . . well, that person will know that you are just like Hamish Ellerby, of 13 Lovelock Close, Starkley.

That person will know that, like Hamish, you are brave enough to keep going even when the threats pile up.

That makes you dangerous.

So now you have a decision to make.

Turn the page, and start to discover the secrets, even if that means your feet might fall off.

Or close this book and run away screaming while you can.

1

Buzzing!

The small town of Starkley was buzzing.

The TV vans were arriving. They had huge satellite dishes on top, and people with clipboards inside. They snaked into town, past the big, boring, beige Starkley sign, and parked up outside Winterbourne School.

The town had been on TV once or twice before, of course.

It had been on *Britain's Most Boring Towns.*

It had been on *100 Places You'll Probably Never Go.*

And, thanks to the efforts of Hamish Ellerby and his friends just a couple of weeks earlier, it had even been on *Whoa! This Random Little Place Actually Saved the World!*

But today was different. Now Starkley was being invaded by television cameras because the Prime Minister was coming.

When he'd announced it, the Prime Minister hadn't even really seemed sure where Starkley was.

'We shall be filming an episode of *Question Me Silly* in . . .

er . . . Starkley,' he'd said on TV one night. 'Which is . . . a place. With people who live in that place. And all manner of other things, I imagine, such as a local shop, most probably, and a bench of some sort.'

No one had been surprised that the Prime Minister knew so little about Starkley. Until it had hit the headlines recently, even people who lived in Starkley sometimes weren't exactly sure where Starkley was. They just knew it was where they kept all their stuff. Nowadays, though, they were actually rather proud of it.

You see, just a few months ago, Starkley had been at the centre of a potential worldwide disaster! Evil beasts called the WorldStoppers had invaded the town along with their awful friends the Terribles. They'd found a way of making the whole world 'Pause' and had stolen grown-ups, made people grumpy and generally tried to cause as much havoc as possibly in the hope of taking over the world. But, luckily for the world, Hamish and his friends had been immune to the Pause and created an uprising to stop the monsters from taking over. So, little old boring Starkley that no one had ever really noticed before suddenly became a lot more interesting. And Hamish and the Pause Defence Force (the PDF) had become local celebrities.

Now, as Hamish walked through the town square filled with sunflowers, he could see that everybody was just hanging around, hoping to be filmed.

Mr Slackjaw had polished all the beautiful mopeds lined up in a row outside Slackjaw's Motors.

Hamish's friend Robin had spent the morning making sure his football was fully inflated because he'd hate to be immortalised on television holding an under-inflated ball.

Astrid Carruthers had blow-dried her dog, so that it now looked three times its original size.

'Afternoon, Hamish!' said Mr Longblather, his teacher, smiling a broad smile, just in case a camera might be there to catch it. He'd waxed his moustache and ironed his tie.

'Oh! Hello, Hamish!' said Grenville Bile, who for the first time this year had combed his hair and was doing his best to sound super polite, even though he still had one finger jammed up a nostril as usual. 'I do hope you are enjoying this weather what we're having!'

Everyone was very keen for Starkley to make a good impression. Someone had even Blu-tacked a new sign to the town clock that read:



Madame Cous Cous had spent the whole morning polishing the outside of Madame Cous Cous's International World of Treats. She'd arranged a whole new window display: Sweets of the Ocean. But all she'd really done was spread fish paste over some gobstoppers, which everyone agreed was actually pretty disgusting.

'It's supposed to look like frogspawn!' she yelled at everyone who passed, waving her stick around wildly. 'It's supposed to look *glamorous*!'

'Hamish!' said Dr Fussbundler, the dentist, walking out of the shop with his daily armful of Dundee Drizzle Balls. 'You must be excited! All this fuss – and all because of you!'

It was true. The Prime Minister had thought it would be a good idea to meet Hamish Ellerby – the otherwise unremarkable ten-year-old boy who'd managed to save the world.

The letter had been very posh...

Dear Hamish Ellerby,
It is I, the Prime Minister.
You can tell from my fancy
handwriting that I'm very important.
I would like to thank you and your
friends on behalf of the whole country
for saving us from the
WorldStoppers and so on, etc.,
etc.
I intend to come to Starkley to
film an episode of Question Me
Silly and I would like to get you
on the programme!

Hamish's older brother Jimmy said he knew exactly why the Prime Minister wanted Hamish on the show. He said it was because Hamish would make the Prime Minister look good. Otherwise, why had he never bothered to come to Starkley before? Jimmy was fifteen and said he knew 'everything about politics and that actually'.

As Hamish walked on, he saw his friend Buster up ahead, serving ice creams from his ice-cream van with his mum. But, before he could get there, a pair of cherry-red army boots suddenly dangled into view from a tree in front of him, and a girl dropped from the branches.

'ALWAYS BE PREPARED!' shouted Alice, leaping into a karate pose.

Alice Shepherd was Hamish's best friend. She'd had a blue streak in her hair when they'd first met and she'd enlisted him to join the PDF. Now she'd changed it to a sort of bright turquose.

Turkwoyse.

Torkoyz.

A sort of aquamarine colour.

Alice was always telling Hamish he had to be prepared these days. She said she always was.

'Prepared for what?' Hamish would ask.

'Prepared for *anything*!' she'd reply, her eyes darting nervously around.

Alice said she felt on edge. Like she knew adventure was just around the corner. She didn't understand how Hamish had just sort of got on with life when the last adventure had ended.

Alice got a nut and pickle baguette out of her bag and took a bite.

'So have you thought any more about my idea?' she said, poking him in the arm as they walked.

'What idea?' said Hamish, innocently, though he knew exactly what she meant.

'The **LONDON** idea!' said Alice. 'Come on, Hamish, you know you want to. We speak to a strange woman who mentions your missing dad, then a mysterious bird appears with a note in its beak, and on that note is an address . . . Surely you want to go there and find out what's going on?'

Truth was, Hamish did. I mean, think about it. One minute he'd been standing there, in Starkley town centre, just the other day, and the next he'd been approached by the strange woman. And, as if that wasn't weird enough, moments later a small blackbird landed, holding a folded

piece of card on which was written . . .



I mean – who wouldn't want to go there and find out more?

But Hamish had responsibilities.

'Problem is, Alice, I've got my Saturday job at Slackjaw's Motors now,' he said. He liked working there. Mr Slackjaw was always telling him interesting facts. Did you know that when Henry Ford sold his very first Ford car, he told people, 'You can have *any* colour you like, so long as it's black!'? Hamish liked that. Although, since he'd told his mum, she'd started using the same trick.

'You can have anything you like for dinner,' she'd say, 'so long as it's sausage and mash!'

'Plus,' continued Hamish, 'Grenville is teaching me to wrestle on Tuesdays. And there's always so much to do at home. And then there's school, and—'

Alice bopped him on the head with her baguette.

'**ALWAYS BE PREPARED!**' she yelled. 'And you're running out of excuses, Hamish Ellerby.

Personally, I think it's because you're scared.'

'I'm not scared!' said Hamish, rubbing his head, and finding a pickle there.

'You are,' said Alice. 'You're scared of what you might find out. You're scared of going to London because of what you might find out about your dad.'

And do you know what?

As she walked away, Hamish knew Alice was absolutely right.

Hamish hadn't seen his dad in six months now. Not since Boxing Day, when he'd popped out to buy ice cream and crisps in his sleek black Vauxhall Vectra and never returned. Hamish had always thought a Vauxhall Vectra was quite a boring sort of car. The type that just blended in. These days, it was the only car he ever really looked out for.

This was the one great sadness in Hamish's life. His dad was brilliant. He was really tall and amazing at Boggle. When he'd disappeared, everyone had said how unlike him it was. Hamish had been worried his dad had just got bored of family life and left. But the mysterious woman who'd turned up in Starkley after the battle with the Terribles had told Hamish a few things about his dad.

That he was a hero.

That he was battling evil.

That he had knowledge others were after. That they were scared of him because he was the only one who could stop them.

And that he was helping 'the Neverpeople'.

Hamish didn't know who they were. What a strange name 'Neverpeople' was. And why was it up to his dad to help them? Hamish had always thought he was a salesman, not a top-secret spy or something . . . But the woman didn't tell Hamish what he really wanted to know: when – or if – his dad was coming back.

And then the blackbird had arrived, holding the address.

Somewhere deep inside, Hamish suspected his only chance of seeing his dad again was to follow that clue and go to No. 1 Arcadian Lane.

But, with life only just back to normal, did he really want to risk it all again? And was he brave enough? Did he really want to find out the truth? Because Hamish knew that sometimes the truth is scary.

In any case, there wasn't time to think about this now.

Everyone said, 'Ooh!' as a fleet of six long black cars drove into Starkley.

The Prime Minister was here.