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Opening extract from

Hannah in the Spotlight
Book One

Written by

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Chapter One

It's impossible to get any peace in my house.

Either Zach and Bobby are chasing each other (or Maisie) around the house, or they're playing football on the landing and using my bedroom door as the goal. Or else it's Maisie taking over the sitting room with all her dolls and teddies, or Emma crawling along and wrecking Maisie's game. And then Maisie crying and having to be comforted, and Emma either laughing or else joining in and crying too.

I share a room with Maisie, so I can't even escape up there for a bit of quiet, because she's sure to come in and out getting more teddies, or wanting me to play with her. I have been BEGGING Mum to change things around so I can have my own bedroom, but so far the most she has said is 'we'll see'. Which is better than an outright 'no', but not by much.

I said it to Mum. I said, 'It's impossible to get any peace in this house.'

Well, you would swear I had just made the best joke in the history of the earth. She practically fell off her chair laughing.

'What's so funny?' I demanded.

When she finally stopped laughing enough to answer me, all she would say was, 'I've been saying the same thing for years.'

Which wasn't much help to me.

So there I was, the poor unfortunate eldest child, with four younger siblings causing endless chaos, and one unsympathetic mother who could only laugh at me. The summer holidays were stretching out before me, long and empty and very, very noisy.

I really wished I was going to drama camp with Isabel, a girl in my class. She'd been telling me all about it and it sounded amazing. The kids were going to write their own show and then at the end of the two weeks they'd put it on for their parents. Lucky Isabel – it sounded like so much fun. I would have loved every minute.

I didn't even ask Mum if I could go because it wouldn't have been fair. The camp was so far away – at least half an hour's drive. I couldn't ask Mum to load all the kids into the car and drive me there every morning, and then do the same again to collect me. Anyway, I'd feel a bit like I was abandoning her. Dad works long hours, and since Emma came along Mum has been relying on me a lot to help out. Even though Zach's only three years younger than me he's a bit of a daydreamer – he's got his head in the clouds most of the time. If you ask him to help with something he will, but I just do stuff without being asked. My brothers think I'm bossy, but actually I'm just pretty organised.

What I needed was a project. Not a school project, obviously. I'm not that crazy. The best thing about the summer is having a very long break from schoolwork of any kind. But I'm the sort of person who always likes to be doing something. I like to have a plan to focus on and to feel like I'm achieving something. I just needed to work out what that something should be.

The day before, I'd spent most of the afternoon playing teddies with Maisie. If I didn't find something to do quickly, I'd be sucked into another game. It wouldn't be so bad if I could call for Ruby, but she was at ballet camp that morning.

As if she knew what I was thinking, Mum said, 'Why don't you call for Ruby?'

'I can't, she's got ballet camp,' I reminded her. 'She's not going to be home until lunchtime.'

'Oh, that's a pity.'

I knew what was coming next. I just knew it.

'Why don't you call for the girl next door then?' Mum went on. 'She seemed really friendly.'

I'm not sure how Mum had worked THAT one out. The day before, we'd seen some new people moving in next door – a mum and a girl about my age. Mum kept saying she should go over and introduce herself, but something kept getting in the way, so all she had managed to do was say 'hello' as she rushed to pick Maisie up after she fell off her bike. They were unpacking lots of bags from their car at the time, and looked pretty busy themselves, so I don't really know how Mum could have somehow decided that the girl was really friendly. She might be lovely, sure. She might also be boring, or weird, or mean. It was a bit hard to tell from one 'hi'. But trust Mum to think that just because we lived next door to each other we were bound to end up as best buddies.

'She said hello, that's all. And only after you'd said it to her first.'

'Well, I thought she seemed nice,' Mum said. 'Anyway, why don't you call for her and find out?'

'I don't know, Mum. It's not like I'm Maisie's age where you can just go and play with anyone.' It was an important point, I thought. At twelve, you're a bit more discerning about who you hang around with.

'Come on, Hannah, it's the nice thing to do. She probably doesn't know anyone here yet. Why don't you see if she wants to go rollerblading?'

I could see Mum wasn't going to let the subject drop. And now that she'd played the 'nice thing to do' card I was stuck. 'Oh, all right then! But can you come and call me after half an hour? Then I have an excuse to leave if I've had enough.'

Mum laughed. 'No problem. I'll be sure to pop out in between feeding Emma and hanging out my third load of washing.'

'Hey, it's the least you can do after making me go off with a complete stranger,' I told her.

'You know what they say, Hannah. A stranger is a friend you haven't yet met!'

A stranger is a friend you haven't yet met? Yeah, right! Only the other day she was warning me about not talking to strangers, and never getting into a car with someone you don't know, even if they say they just want you to show them something on a map, and never going off with someone even if they ask you to help them find their lost cat.

Although, to be fair, the girl next door didn't exactly look like the kind of stranger who would bundle you into a car and kidnap you. But you never know.

I went to the cupboard under the stairs to look for my rollerblades. Not an easy job, considering it's the place where all seven members of my family dump everything that doesn't have a home. (Well, I

guess Emma doesn't, but that's because she's only eight months old. There's still stuff belonging to her in there, or things that used to belong to Maisie and that Mum is waiting for Emma to grow into.) Sometimes when we're having people over Mum runs around the house with a laundry basket and picks up all the clutter and shoves the whole lot under the stairs to deal with later. I've lost many pieces of valuable artwork that way; Mum just says that it's my own fault for leaving it lying around.

I opened the door very carefully, because you really never know what's going to land on top of you. Luckily I spotted my rollerblades right away, tucked under Zach's old tricycle and a pile of newspapers Dad claimed he was going to get around to reading at the weekend. I hauled them out, managing not to dislodge the entire mound of things around it. It took me another few minutes to find my helmet and knee and elbow pads, which Mum won't let me skate without, even though I pretty much never fall over.

'Hannah, are you coming to play teddies?' Maisie demanded. She was standing behind me, and as I turned all I could see was the top of her hair above her armful of stuffed toys.

'Not right now,' I told her.

'Oh, please, Hannah?' A blue rabbit fell out of the pile, revealing a sad little face.

I felt bad, but I needed some twelve-year-old company, even if it was the stranger next door. 'Sorry, Maisie. I'm going out rollerblading. Maybe later, OK?'

I picked up the rollerblades and headed for the door, ignoring Maisie's protests. 'Bye, Mum!' I called.

Once I was outside though, I suddenly found myself feeling a bit shy. If you knew me you'd realise this is unusual. I'm sort of a leader in my little group of friends. I think it comes from being the oldest of a big family. You just have to be ready to take charge if you want anything to get done. So I'm not usually shy, but suddenly the idea of walking up to the house next door and introducing myself to these strangers seemed a bit daunting. I decide to go for a bit of a skate first, just to get into the right frame of mind.

I sat down on the footpath to put my rollerblades on. A gang of kids were playing football on the green, and some younger kids were cycling around on bikes and tricycles. Woodland Green is a pretty nice place to live, I have to admit. It's nice to have lots of kids around and a place to hang out where our parents aren't freaking out about us getting knocked down or something. Just a pity for me that the only girl my age is Ruby and her schedule is so busy we don't get as much hang-out time as we'd like. Well, there's also Tracey, but I don't count her. Tracey is the meanest girl I have ever met in my life. Her favourite thing to do is laugh at other people. She makes an actual hobby out of it. Unfortunately for me, she lives just two doors down from me, on the other side of the rented house. Just my luck that the nearest one of my classmates has to be meanie beanie Tracey.

I set off skating around the green, dodging out of the way of the little kids. It would be so nice to have someone new to hang out with. And having her right next door – what could be better? It would be somewhere to escape to when I'd had enough of my crazy family. I deliberately skated over and back in front of my own house and next door's. I was kind of hoping the new girl would see me, and she'd just come out herself, saving me the trouble of having to go and knock and introduce myself to her mum and all that.

'All OK there, Hannah?' It was Mum calling from the front door, Emma balanced on her hip.

'Yes. Fine,' I shouted back, hoping she'd just go away.

‘Isn’t there anyone home?’ she roared.

‘I don’t know! I’m just going to see,’ I hissed back, glancing around to see if anyone was watching.

Luckily shouts from inside our house told Mum that there was a fight that needed to be broken up, and she rushed off. I decided I’d really better just get it over and done with before she came out again. Building up speed, I went up the path once more, then whizzed around and back down, not slowing down as I turned the corner into next door’s driveway. Suddenly their house was rushing up to meet me. I put out my hands to stop myself from crashing into their front door. At that exact second the door started to open and I fell headlong into their hallway.