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written by

Narinder Dhami

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PROLOGUE

Hannah realised that this was her chance. If only she was brave enough to take it…

Keeping out of sight in the shadows at the top of the stairs, she peered down into the hall. Her dad had just stormed out of the kitchen, yelling at the top of his voice.

'The answer is NO, Louise!' he shouted. Then he'd left the house, banging the front door behind him. A moment later, Hannah had heard her mum come out of the kitchen, go into the study and slam that door shut too.

Hannah's heart was beating like crazy. Her mum

and dad hardly ever argued, but this was different. This was *huge*. And Hannah knew exactly what they were arguing about because just a moment or two before, she'd had her ear pressed to the kitchen door, listening. She'd only run upstairs in a panic when she'd thought she was about to be discovered.

Hannah tiptoed down the stairs. She knew she shouldn't be doing this, but she couldn't help herself. And if her dad ever found out… Hannah gulped. She didn't want to think about *that*.

It took Hannah only a few moments to discover that the Christmas card she was looking for, the one that had caused the argument, wasn't displayed with the others in the Fleetwoods' large living room. She stood there uncertainly for a moment, next to the Christmas tree decorated with silver and blue baubles. What had her dad done with the card? Hannah wondered. Maybe he'd taken it with him.

But then she had an idea.

On edge, her heart in her mouth, Hannah glided silently past the study door and into the kitchen. She flipped up the lid of the bin and there, pushed down almost out of sight under used teabags and damp, crumpled squares of kitchen towel, she found what she was looking for. A Christmas card with a picture

of a white cat draped in red tinsel on the front. The card was torn into small pieces.

Hannah's hands trembled uncontrollably as she fitted the card back together like a jigsaw. Her mind was racing. Now that she had this information, what was she going to do with it? Could she *really* find the courage to betray her family like this?

Or maybe it wasn't really a betrayal at all, Hannah thought. Maybe this was finally a chance to take control of her life…




CHAPTER ONE

'Here comes the birthday girl!'

I had just reached the bottom of the stairs when the kitchen door was suddenly flung open from inside, and I almost jumped out of my skin. My mum and dad stood there in the doorway, grinning all over their faces.

'Happy birthday!' they yelled, blowing party whistles in my direction. They were more excited than I was. Behind them I could see that the kitchen had been decorated with balloons and streamers and a banner had been hung across the conservatory doors. *Happy birthday, Hannah!*

‘Thanks,’ I yawned. I had still been half-asleep when I stumbled downstairs, but I was waking up fast. I’ll warn you now, my mum and dad are *always* over the top. But that’s kind of fun for birthdays and Christmas. It’s not quite so much fun at other times.

‘My little girl is twelve today!’ Dad announced. He escorted me ceremoniously over to the kitchen table and sat me down in front of a large pile of presents wrapped in gold paper with pink silk ribbons and bows. ‘I feel so old.’

‘You *are* old, Dad,’ I replied with a grin. ‘Can I open my presents now?’

Mum and Dad gathered round me, excited as little kids, as I unwrapped the first parcel.

‘Come on, Hannah,’ Dad said impatiently, as I neatly removed the tape, bit by bit, and opened up each end. ‘Just rip the paper off!’

‘Oh, she’s always been the same, hasn’t she?’ Mum sighed. ‘Remember when she was little, it used to take her all of Christmas Day to open her presents.’ She sniffed and bit her lip. ‘I can’t believe where all the years have gone…’

‘Mum!’ I groaned. ‘Don’t start crying on my birthday, *please*.’

I opened up the square parcel. I thought I knew

what it was, and I was dead excited. I'd wanted the slim, glossy, pink mobile phone I'd seen in a magazine for *ages*.

It was the same phone, but it wasn't pink. It was an upgrade of the model I'd asked for, but it was metallic grey. I stared down at it, deliberately allowing my long brown hair to fall over my face to hide my disappointment.

'I know you wanted the pink one, honey,' Mum rushed to explain, 'but your dad checked them out, and he thought this one was better value. It has more features for the money.'

That figures. Dad always knows best.

'I love it.' I shook back my hair and smiled. I'm used to hiding what I'm really feeling. I do it all the time.

Don't take this the wrong way, I love my mum and dad to bits. But it's easier to go along with my dad all the time, like Mum does, rather than make a stand.

Or maybe I'm just a coward.

'And now this one!' Dad took the next present from the pile and handed it to me with a flourish. I could see instantly from its size and shape that it was a DVD. I'd asked for several football ones,

including *Arsenal's Glory, Glory Years* and *The History of the FIFA World Cup*. I wouldn't have been too disappointed with Keira Knightley's latest film either.

Carefully I took the wrapping paper apart, ignoring Dad's loud sighs of mock-impatience. Then I blinked several times when I saw what was inside.

It was a DVD all right, but like the phone, it wasn't what I was expecting. There was a photo of me on the cover, and I was wearing my team's football strip. The picture had been taken from the sidelines at one of our games. A few weeks ago I'd joined Springhill Stars Under-Thirteens Girls' team, and we wear purple kit. It was unfortunate that my face in the photo was bright red, which didn't look at all stylish combined with my purple shirt as I went charging across the pitch. I was gritting my teeth and grimacing, my hair was a mess and flying all over the place. It was possibly the worst, most unflattering photo of anyone ever taken anywhere in the civilised world.

Things did not improve when I saw the title of the DVD.

'*Hannah Fleetwood, Future Captain of the England Women's Football Team*,' I read aloud.

Mum and Dad were roaring with laughter and patting themselves on the back, looking totally smug.

'Isn't it great, Hannah?' Mum said, almost bursting with pride. 'It was all your dad's idea.'

'I'll bet,' I said weakly.

Dad grabbed the DVD from me and ran over to the TV on the dresser.

'You'll love this, Hannie,' he said, slotting the disk into the machine. 'I know you're starting that intensive football training course today, but if you watch this every week, it'll help your game no end.'

I thought I could guess what was coming next, and, sadly, I was right. A picture of me running with the ball flashed up on the TV screen. I could tell that it had been filmed when we played St Barton Under-Thirteens just after I'd first joined the team a few weeks ago. We'd lost 2-1.

Dad turned the volume up. I winced as his voice came from the TV, loud and clear.

'Come *on*, Hannah! You have to use your brain in football, not just your feet – *think* about your next pass. See the whole picture, don't just try and get rid of the ball as fast as possible!'

Dad and Mum come to all my matches. Mum films me at every game, while Dad stands on the

touchline, shouting instructions at me. They did it for four years when I was playing for Lightwater Girls, and they carried on doing exactly the same thing when I moved to Springhill Stars. Now they've made a DVD. *Great.*

I stared at the TV. I remembered this bit of the game perfectly, and I didn't need a film to remind me. Flustered by Dad yelling, I panicked and lost my head and the ball at the same time. There were loud groans on the DVD soundtrack from my parents, and loud groans in the kitchen too.

The next clip was from our match against Seventrees, when I gave away a penalty and we lost 3-2. I cringed as I saw myself tackle the opposition's striker clumsily just inside the box. She collapsed dramatically in a heap, clutching her leg.

'*Hannah*!' Dad shouted from the touchline. Mum had actually taken the camera off me for once, and instead had filmed Dad dancing up and down in frustration like Rumpelstiltskin in an Arsenal shirt while the other parents looked on in amazement. 'What have I *told* you about making a tackle? Timing is *vital*! Never take your eye off the ball!'

'We've included lots of stuff from this season,' Dad explained proudly. 'Not just from your new

team, but from when you were playing for Lightwater too—'

I couldn't stand it any longer.

'Thanks, Dad, that's brilliant.' I forced a grateful smile as I grabbed the remote control and stopped the DVD. 'I'll watch the whole thing later.'

Gloomily I wondered just how *many* of my mistakes Dad had decided to include in the film. *Would there be any of the good bits?* Because, although you might not think so, I am, actually, not a bad player at all. I got into the Springhill Stars first team, no problem, even though I was the new kid on the block.

'Good idea,' Dad agreed. 'You should probably watch it every day. Maybe show it to your new team too.'

I gulped. *No way*. I'd become a Spurs supporter first.

'You obviously all need some extra coaching,' Dad went on. 'It's really disappointing that you've got no chance of making the play-offs.' He frowned. 'I should have checked the team out a bit more before we signed you up. Apparently they finished mid-table last year too. Maybe we'll think about a move for next season—'

'Dad!' I muttered sulkily, 'I'm not moving teams *again*!' I'd had to leave Lightwater Under-Thirteens and all my mates behind because a few months ago we'd moved house, right over to the other side of town, to be nearer to my new school. 'And anyway, the team *did* get to the semi-final of the County Cup.'

I longed to defend our fantastic coach, Freya Reynolds, whom we all idolised, but I knew from experience that there was no point. Dad had made his mind up, and that was that.

'Yes, but remember what I always say.' Dad stared hard at me, his brown eyes serious, and I sighed under my breath.

'*Winners don't come second*,' I mumbled. I had heard this several million times ever since I started playing football years ago.

'Or third or fourth.' Dad nodded with satisfaction. 'No one remembers the semi-finalists in a cup competition, only the winners.'

I didn't reply. I guess that Dad's right, in a way. But *everyone* can't be a winner every time, can they?

'That's what our coach always said when I had my trial at Chelsea,' Dad went on. 'Winning is everything.'

I tried to look interested, but it was difficult. Like I said, I've heard this millions of times before. Dad had a trial at Chelsea when he was a teenager years ago, and no one is allowed to forget it. He decided not to become a professional footballer in the end, and he went to university to study engineering instead. He started his own business and now he and Mum run it together and it's really successful. But Dad still works out and keeps himself fit, and he thinks he knows as much about football as a professional does.

I opened my other presents and I got everything I'd asked for, like new jeans and a black denim jacket and a whole heap of make-up, as well as some lovely gifts that I wasn't expecting. But somehow, after seeing that DVD, a little of the magic had gone out of my day.

'Right, time for your birthday breakfast, darling,' Mum said when I had opened the last little box and found silver earrings with a pair of tiny football boots hanging off each one.

'Oh, Mum, *no-o-o-*!' I wailed. My mum's breakfasts are legendary throughout the land. She has a waffle-maker, a French-toast maker, a hi-tech chrome juicer which looks like an instrument of torture and every

other type of breakfast gadget you can think of. 'I don't want much. I'm going to be running around a football pitch in an hour or two.'

Freya Reynolds had nominated me and five other girls from our team to attend an intensive training course for the first week of the Easter holidays. It was being held at the ground of our local professional club, Melfield United, and I was *so* looking forward to it. For one thing, Mum and Dad would not be there, capturing all my mistakes on film and yelling at me. I could just enjoy my football, for once.

On the other hand, I was a little nervous of spending so much time with the other five girls from my team. I didn't know them very well, really. Although three of them went to the same secondary school as me, Greenwood High School, I wasn't in any of the same classes. Freya was really keen for us to all get to know each other better, though – she'd kept going on about how important it was to build up a bond with our team-mates, especially as me and one of the other girls, Katy, were complete newbies. Freya had got us all to swap mobile numbers last week, and she'd urged us to spend as much time as possible together and to observe

each other's play closely during the course.

'What time are Chloe and Danni coming over for your birthday sleepover tonight?' Mum asked, slipping her *World's Best Mum* apron over her curly blonde hair.

She'd already got the waffle-maker out of the cupboard and was now collecting bacon and eggs from the fridge. I honestly don't know why I bother saying anything because no one takes the slightest bit of notice of me around here.

'About five,' I replied.

Chloe and Danni were my best friends at school, and they were coming for pizza and DVDs that evening. I knew there was *one* DVD we *definitely* wouldn't be watching. *Hannah Fleetwood, Future Captain of the England Women's Football Team…*

Actually, thinking about it, Chloe and Danni were the *only* friends I had at school. I hadn't said anything to Mum and Dad, but it had taken me a long, long time to get settled in at Greenwood. For the first six months we'd still been living in our old house, and it was a long journey across town to get to Greenwood so I hadn't really joined in any after-school activities. Also, Greenwood was *really* big compared to my primary school, and there were

so many pupils and teachers. Even now, after eight months in year 7, I swear that there are still times when I get lost among the endless corridors.

I hadn't wanted to go to Greenwood at all. I'd wanted to go to the secondary school all my year 6 friends were going to. Dad had said no, though, because he thought Greenwood was better. Don't ask me how he managed to get me a place at Greenwood, though – it's a very popular school, and we weren't even living in the right area of Melfield at the time. But that's my dad for you. He's a fixer. He always gets what he wants.

'Which of your team-mates are going on the course with you this week, Hannie?' Dad asked, joining me at the table.

'Well, there's Grace Kennedy and Georgie Taylor and—'

'Grace?' Dad frowned.

'She's the slim blonde girl who plays up front, isn't she?' Mum chimed in. 'The one who looks like a model?'

'Yep, that's Grace,' I replied.

'How many goals has she scored this season, then?' Dad asked.

I shrugged. 'About twenty-five, I think.'

'Really.' Dad frowned. 'That's a lot more than you, Hannah. You've only scored eight.'

'Dad!' I rolled my eyes. 'Grace is our star striker. I'm a midfielder. Of *course* she's going to score more goals than me.'

Dad shook his finger at me. 'I'll have you know, young lady, that Cristiano Ronaldo scored over forty goals in all competitions during the 2007–08 season.'

I was silent. I was absolutely sure that Cristiano Ronaldo didn't have *any* of his family standing on the touchline yelling at him during every match.

'Georgie's your goalie, isn't she?' Dad asked. 'The tall girl with the attitude?'

I grinned and nodded. That was a pretty accurate summing-up of Georgie. Although Grace was officially our captain, Georgie often screamed at us from the goalmouth. To be honest, I was actually a little bit scared of her.

'She's not bad,' Dad said grudgingly. 'She's pretty fearless, which is good in a goalie. But being foolhardy is a different matter.'

I knew what he meant. Georgie had given away a penalty only last week when she'd shoulder charged the other team's striker. She'd then argued furiously with the ref and got sent off.

‘Then there’s Jasmin Sharma, Katy Nowak and Lauren Bell,’ I said. ‘Lauren and Jasmin play in midfield with me, and Katy’s our centre-back.’

‘Yes, Katy’s a very good player,’ Dad said approvingly. ‘Quick and clever and solid in defence. She’s scored a few goals this season with her head too.’

‘Yes.’ I felt rather jealous. Katy Nowak *was* a good player, but I wished that Dad would say things like that about *me* more often.

‘So you’ve got five training days this week, Monday to Friday, and then the girls who attended the course are playing a match on Saturday morning,’ Dad said. ‘Is that right?’

‘Mm,’ I mumbled, picking up my new earrings and studying them intently. I knew what was coming.

‘Are you *sure* parents aren’t allowed to attend any of the sessions?’ asked Dad. ‘Just to watch?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I said, not looking at him. The training sessions *were* closed to spectators, so I wasn’t *really* lying. But we’d already been told that parents would be allowed to come to the Saturday-morning game, if they liked. I wouldn’t admit that, though, unless Dad asked me directly.

I hated to hear the disappointment in his voice. But,

just for once, I wanted to be left alone to enjoy playing without someone constantly screaming at me.

I was saved by the bell. The doorbell, actually.

'Ah, this must be the postman.' Dad jumped to his feet. 'I'm sure he's staggering under the weight of lots of birthday cards for the future captain of the England women's team!'

He dashed off down the hall towards the front door.

'It's a shame we can't come and see you play,' Mum said casually, breaking eggs into the sizzling oil.

'Yes.' I wondered if Mum was suspicious, but she didn't say anything more.

The kitchen door opened and my half-sister, Olivia, walked in, followed by Dad.

'It wasn't the postman,' Dad said, rather obviously. 'It was Olivia.'

'Hi,' Olivia said languidly, flapping her fingers in a half-hearted wave at me and Mum. She glanced at the cards and presents on the table and did a rather elaborate double-take. 'Oh God, Hannah, is it your birthday? Sorry, I'd forgotten.'

'Yeah, right,' I said under my breath.

There was *no way* Olivia didn't know it was my birthday because her mum, Carol, Dad's first wife,

had popped round yesterday with a present for me. But Olivia simply can't bear anyone else to be the centre of attention, except her.

Olivia and I have never got on. We don't even look alike – honestly, you'd never *believe* we have the same dad. Olivia's quite petite with black hair and very dark eyes, and I'm taller and have brown hair and green eyes. She's three years older than me, and I know she thinks I'm seriously strange just because I love playing football. Well, that's fine with me because I think she's an airhead who adores making a complete drama out of anything and everything. I like make-up and clothes and shopping and stuff just as much as Olivia does, but when she's around, somehow I just seem to start behaving more like a tomboy. Probably because I know it winds Olivia up, ha ha. She used to come and stay with us regularly when she was younger, but now that we've moved and live much closer to her and her mum, Olivia just pops in whenever she feels like it.

'So Mum and I had, like, *another* row this morning.' Olivia draped herself over one of the kitchen chairs and rested her black knee-length boots on the edge of the round table. I saw Mum wince, but she didn't say anything. Neither did Dad.

That's *another* thing that annoys me. Dad hardly ever criticises Olivia. But he's always going on at me, not just about football but about *everything*.

Dad sighed. 'What is it this time, sweetie?'

'Oh, she treats me like a child, Dad!' Olivia said impatiently. 'I'm, like, *no*, Mum, I've done my homework and you don't need to check my books, thank you very much. But she won't *leave* it. She's just not chilled like you, Dad.'

'Dad's really strict about me doing *my* homework on time,' I muttered.

Olivia ignored me.

'It's getting worse, Dad,' she said plaintively. 'We're arguing all the time now. So this morning I just said, well, I've had enough of this, yeah?'

She smiled up at Dad, fluttering her eyelashes (they were fake, I noted).

'And so I told Mum I wanted to come and live here, with you.'