

## CHAPTER ONE



### **You Can't Always Get What You Want**

“Let’s go,” said Hannah, grabbing a couple of empty bags from her bedroom floor. “It’ll be dark soon.”

It was the last day of the Christmas holidays, and Hannah’s best friend, Lottie, had come to help tidy up their Secret Hen House Theatre. It was in a bit of a mess after the performance of their latest play, *Murder at the Manor*. And Lottie hated mess.

As the girls walked through the hall, they saw Hannah’s ten-year-old sister, Jo, and her eight-year-old brother, Sam, sitting cross-legged outside the door of the downstairs office. The farm office where Dad actually did his paperwork was upstairs, but it was such a mess that he had another office downstairs for visitors.

Jo frowned at Hannah and put her finger to her lips. She and Sam each held notebooks with “Bean Spy Club” written on the cover. Jo and Sam were the sole members of the Great and Mighty Society of Bean.

Who was in the office? Hannah and Lottie crept over and listened. Hannah recognised the voice of

Harry Mullins, their landlord's agent.

"As I pointed out at our last meeting," the agent was saying, "the farm just isn't profitable."

Hannah's stomach tightened. How could the farm not be making money when Dad worked so hard every day?

"That's all changing," Dad said. "I've taken on a lot of extra work on other farms. Relief milking, fencing, feeding—"

"So I hear," said the agent. "But your accounts still show you're making a loss. So unless you can prove you're making a healthy profit pretty soon, then—"

Jo's cocker spaniel, Rags, raced into the hall, ears flapping, tail wagging. She threw herself at Jo and licked her face, letting out a loud volley of barks. Hannah heard a chair scraping back in the office. The Beans scabbled to their feet and ran upstairs, followed by an excited Rags. Lottie and Hannah scuttled across the hall and through the kitchen. They put their wellies on and walked into the farmyard, where Jo's enormous pet sheep, Jasper, was waiting. On his back sat a large duck called Lucy. Jasper and Lucy had been best friends since Lucy's mother had hatched her eggs in the pigsty where Jasper slept.

Jasper sniffed Hannah's coat. She rummaged in her pockets but found only a penknife, a moth-eaten pair of gloves and a length of baler twine.

"Sorry, Jasper, I don't have any treats."

The back door of the farmhouse rattled open, and Jo and Sam appeared, both wearing flat caps, muddy

coats and wellies. Jasper trotted up to Jo and nuzzled her pocket. She pulled out a handful of sheep nuts and he gobbled them up.

"What were they saying before we arrived?" Hannah asked.

Jo flicked through her notebook and squinted at a page of very messy handwriting.

"The agent was saying the buildings are in a terrible state. And he said this was a friendly reminder that the landlord can give Dad six months' notice to quit at any time."

"And Dad said that's exactly the problem," Sam said. "He said how can they expect him to spend money getting the place repaired when we can be thrown out at a moment's notice?"

"Nasty man," said Jo. "But we've got a plan for him, haven't we, Mung Bean?"

Sam grinned, and they ran across the yard towards the agent's shiny black BMW. Jasper trotted behind them, with Lucy swaying on his back.

Lottie turned to Hannah. "Is that true? The landlord can give you six months' notice to leave the farm?"

"Yes," said Hannah flatly. "He doesn't even have to give a reason."

"That's awful! Why didn't you tell me?"

Hannah shrugged. It was too scary to think about, let alone talk about. The farm was Dad's whole life. His father had farmed it before him, and Sam and Jo were going to farm it after him. But in the past few years it had felt like they were fighting non-stop just

to stay in their home.

The back door opened again, and Hannah turned to see her twelve-year-old sister, Martha, standing on the step, in a white lacy crop top, white jeans and white trainers. Looking in disgust at the sea of mud, she called, “What’s for tea, Hannah?”

“Beans on toast, I guess. Or I think there’s some soup in the cupboard.”

“Ugh. Why can’t we ever have nice food?”

“Why don’t *you* make dinner sometimes,” Lottie said, “instead of expecting Hannah to do everything?”

Martha shot Lottie a poisonous look. “Fine, I will. Whatever I make, it will be better than her cooking.”

She turned back into the house and almost bumped into the land agent coming out. He had a shiny red face and wore a shiny black suit.

Jasper and the Beans moved away from the BMW and came to stand beside Hannah and Lottie. Jo and Sam had suspiciously innocent looks on their faces.

“Should we set the new bull on him?” whispered Jo as the agent unlocked his car.

“Better not,” Hannah said. “We don’t want a murder charge.” The new bull was worryingly lively.

Dad walked into the yard in muddy wellingtons and waterproofs. He looked tired and stressed.

“What did the agent say?” Hannah asked, looking with loathing at Mr Mullins, who was rummaging in the boot of his car.

Dad grunted. “Oh, the usual nonsense.”

Hannah gave Lottie a despairing glance. She knew

she wouldn’t get any more out of Dad, however much she pestered him.

Mr Mullins shut the boot and shot a contemptuous look around the yard. Hannah could tell he was seeing a completely different version of it from the one she loved. He wasn’t seeing the golden lichen on the roof of the old cowsheds, or the majestic oak trees, or the glowing holly berries in the hedge. He wasn’t listening to the blackbird singing from the chimney pot, or the sparrows chattering in the ivy. He only saw the broken gates, the dilapidated tractor shed, and the outdated farm machinery rusting in the mud.

He walked to the driver’s door, grasped the handle, and then immediately whipped his hand away with a cry of disgust. He stared at his palm. It was covered in cow dung.

“What the—”

Hannah heard a yelp of laughter, and turned to see the Beans stifling giggles. The agent glared at them and then at Dad.

“Have your kids been vandalising my car?”

Dad pulled an oily rag from his pocket and offered it to him. The agent looked at it in disbelief. He gingerly opened the car door with his finger and thumb, and took out a pack of wet wipes.

“You shouldn’t use those,” said Jo as he cleaned his hands. “They’re very bad for the environment.”

Hannah noticed Martha tiptoeing across the yard, trying and failing to keep her white shoes clean.

“Why don’t you wear wellies like everyone else?”

Hannah asked.

“Because I’m not a loser like the rest of you,” Martha said. “Is there some actual usable basil in the kitchen? I just opened the disgusting filthy jar on the spice rack, and the stuff inside is basically dust. And then I looked at the date and it’s been expired for *fourteen years*. Why does no one in this family ever throw anything away?”

Hannah knew that jar of basil. It had been sitting in the kitchen her entire life. Even though the spices were older than she was, she couldn’t bear to throw them away, because her mum had bought them.

“Why do you want basil?” she asked.

“Because you can’t make a decent bolognese without basil, obviously.”

“Get this blasted sheep away, will you!” called the agent.

Hannah turned. Jasper had wandered over to Mr Mullins and was sniffing his trousers.

“Here, Jasper!” called Jo.

Jasper nibbled the hem of the agent’s jacket.

“Will you get the sheep away!” Mr Mullins barked.

“Naughty boy,” said Jo, walking towards Jasper with another handful of sheep nuts. She moved backwards, and Jasper followed the food.

“What are you doing about that deserted milking parlour?” the agent said to Dad. “I can send someone in to demolish it for you.”

“You can’t get rid of the milking parlour,” said Sam, to Hannah’s surprise. Sam didn’t normally

speak to people unless he knew them very well.

“When me and Jo are in charge,” Sam said, “we’re going to have a herd of milking cows again. Maybe Friesians like Dad used to have, but we’re considering Jerseys or Ayrshires. They don’t yield as much, but they have lovely temperaments and the milk’s very good quality.”

“I wouldn’t make too many plans for this place if I were you,” Mr Mullins said, getting into his car. “If you want my advice, you’d be better off planning another career. One where you can actually make some money.”

“He doesn’t want your advice,” said Dad. “He wants to farm this place.”

The agent gave him a look. “Well, you can’t always get what you want,” he said.

He shut the driver’s door, opened the window and dropped the crumpled wipes at Sam’s feet. “Pop those in the bin for me, son,” he said. “There’s a good boy.”