

CHAPTER ONE



The Stranger

BANG, BANG, BANG!

Somebody was trying to smash the scullery door down.

Hannah sat cross-legged on her bedroom floor, hunched over a piece of paper, her pen racing across the page. Even inside the farmhouse her breath came out in white trails, and the cold sneaked its way right through her woolly hat and three jumpers.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

Her right hand didn't leave the page as she glanced at her watch. Five to two. But it couldn't be Lottie. She never knocked. She just walked right in and yelled up the stairs.

One of the others could get it for once. She had to finish this by two o'clock.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

"Will someone answer that blasted door!" shouted her dad from the farm office.

There! Finished at last. Hannah wrote "THE END" in large capital letters. This play would win the competition, she just knew it.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

“Hannah!” called Dad.

“Oh, OK.” Hannah slid her mother’s copy of *Putting On a Play* under her bed and scrambled to her feet. She must remember to put that back in Mum’s bookcase later.

“If it’s for me, tell them I’m not in,” Dad called as she passed his office door. “And get the others ready. There’s a pig wants bringing up from the Anthill Field.”

Hannah ran down the splintered back stairs, script in hand, ducking the cobwebs that hung from the crumbling ceiling. Her little brother Sam was already at the door, fumbling with the latch.

“It’s stuck again,” he said.

“I’ll get it, Sammy,” said Hannah. Sam moved aside. His laces were undone and his shoes were on the wrong feet.

BANG, BANG, BANG!

As Hannah wrestled with the battered latch, her eight-year-old sister Jo came through from the kitchen, a flat cap pulled down over her curls. A ginger guinea pig nestled into her left arm, nibbling a cabbage leaf.

“Who’s come?” she asked.

The latch shot up. Sam glued himself to Hannah’s side as she opened the door. Jo hovered by the stairs.

Looming in the doorway, stamping his feet against the cold, was a stocky man with a red face and a puffed-out chest. He looked like an irate turkey. His shiny dark hair was greased down on his head and

he grasped a clipboard with his thick red fingers.

He stared at the children. “Flipping heck,” he muttered. His breath hung in the air.

What’s wrong with him? thought Hannah. She looked round but there was nothing, only the three of them in their holey jumpers and torn jeans. Had he never seen farm clothes before?

Click, clack, click, clack.

They all turned. At the top of the steep staircase, in a white minidress and red stilettos several sizes too big for her, stood ten-year-old Martha, one hand on her hip and her chin in the air.

“Martha,” said Hannah, “you’ll die of pneumonia. Go and get changed. And take Mum’s shoes off. Dad’ll go ballistic.”

“Oh, shut up,” said Martha. “You’re just jealous cos I look like a model.”

The man raised his eyebrows. Martha tottered down the stairs and pushed past Jo to get a good look at him.

“I’m looking for –” The man glanced at the clipboard. “Clayhill Farm.”

They said nothing.

“Is this Clayhill Farm?” he asked, louder now. “There’s no sign.”

“The sign blew down,” said Sam.

Hannah noticed a very new, very big, very shiny black BMW parked in the farmyard. At least, the top half was shiny. The bottom half was plastered in mud, like every vehicle that came up the farm track.

“In the records, it says it’s a working farm,” he said.

“It is,” said Hannah. Was he really thick or something? And who was he anyway, coming up here on a Sunday afternoon asking nosy questions?

“Really? Then what’s all this junk lying around for?” He flicked his hand around the yard. At the horse ploughs half buried in grass, the collapsed combine harvester rusting in the mud by the pigsties, the old doors, oil stoves and tangled barbed wire heaped up outside the house. “I mean, what’s with that old rust bucket?” He pointed towards the tractor shed where Dad’s vintage tractor stood. “What is it – an engine from the Age of Steam?”

“It’s Daddy’s Field Marshall,” said Sam proudly. “It’s really old.”

“Huh. You don’t say.”

Sam turned puzzled eyes to Hannah, and Hannah felt her cheeks flushing. How dare he be rude to Sam? And how ignorant was he? Didn’t he know Field Marshalls were collectors’ items?

“Can we help you?” she asked.

“I hope so.” He consulted his clipboard again. “I’m looking for Arthur Roberts.”

“Who shall I say is calling?”

“Just get him for me, will you?”

They all spoke at the same time.

“He’s out,” said Hannah.

“He’s milking,” said Jo.

“He’s in the office,” said Sam.

“I see,” said the stranger. “Busy man.”

They nodded.

“Well, is your mum in then?”

They were silent. Hannah had already seen quite enough of this stranger and she didn’t want him to know any more about their lives than he did already. What else was written on that clipboard?

Along the lane a bell sounded. Hannah looked up. Lottie Perfect was bumping up the track on her brand-new bicycle, weaving around the puddles and potholes.

“Can I take a message?” Hannah asked. She had to get rid of him. She needed every second of her time with Lottie.

“Give your dad this,” he said. “Make sure he gets it.”

Hannah took the envelope. Printed across the top were the words “Strickland and Wormwood, Land Agents”. And then, in red capital letters, “URGENT”.

Thank goodness she hadn’t called Dad. This man must be the agent for the new landlord. Hannah pulled on her coat and stuffed the letter and her script into one of the pockets.

The agent strutted off. Lottie, waving at Hannah from her bike, almost ran into him. She swerved wildly through a puddle. The children stared open-mouthed as a great brown wave of muddy water splattered all over the man’s trousers. Sam giggled, and that made his sisters laugh too. The agent glared at them as he opened his car door, and they laughed even more.

Lottie braked at the garden gate. She jumped off her bike and yanked the gate open. “Look at the state of me,” she said. “Have you got something to wipe this mud off, Han?”

“Right, you lazy lot!” shouted Dad down the stairs. “Look sharp!”

Oh, no, thought Hannah. If she got caught up in Dad’s pig chase, she’d be gone all afternoon and they’d never get the play done.

She threw Lottie a threadbare towel from the draining board, then grabbed Jo’s arm and pulled her outside, around the corner of the house. The guinea pig scabbled across Jo’s jumper.

“Hey, careful with Carrots!”

“Jo, you have to cover for me. *Please*. I’ve got to read through the play with Lottie. We need to make sure it’s right so she can type it up. The competition closes on Tuesday – we have to send it off tomorrow.”

“Oooh, I’ve got to read my play with Perfect Lottie,” said Martha in a high-pitched singsong voice. “As if you’d win a prize with your stupid play.”

Hannah swung round. “Martha, get lost. It’s none of your business.”

“Like I care anyway,” said Martha. She stuck out her tongue at Hannah and teetered back inside.

Hannah turned to Jo. “Just tell him you don’t know where I am. Please, Jo. I’ve *got* to do this play – if we win, it actually goes on the radio and it might be my chance to be an actress!”

Dad’s heavy tread sounded from the stairs.

“I won’t tell,” said Jo. She placed Carrots in his hutch, sat on the scullery step and tugged on her muddy wellingtons. “Come on, Sam. Let’s get your boots on.”

Hannah skulked around the corner. Dad strode out into the yard with Sam trotting beside him. Jo followed them. And, finally, Martha emerged.

“Martha, please don’t tell him! I’ll give you anything!”

Martha shot her a contemptuous glance. “Like you’ve got anything I’d want.”

She kicked off the red stilettos and rammed her feet into an old pair of Jo’s boots. They were so much too small for her that she had to walk on tiptoe in them.

She staggered into the farmyard. “Dad, wait up!”

Dad was a good ten metres ahead of her and walking twice as fast. Hannah was spared. But not for long.