SARAH HAGGER-HOLT

USBORNE

NOTHING EVER HAPPENS HERE

FREE SAMPLER

Until the spotlight hits my family...

The Beginning

This is Littlehaven. Nothing ever happens here.

No one famous was born here. Or lived here. Or even died here.

The high street has the same shops as every other high street in every other town.

Even when you walk and walk right to the edge of Littlehaven, there aren't rolling hills or mysterious woods, there are just flat fields, going on and on into the distance.

The most famous thing that happened here was hundreds of years ago. Someone, I can't remember who, invented a machine that halved the time you could harvest wheat, or something. We went to see it on a trip in primary school. All metal spikes and crushing wheels.

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Until the spotlight hits my family…

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SARAH HAGGER-HOLT

In memory of my dad, who instilled in me
a love of language, story-telling and
classic Broadway musicals.

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Chapter One

On my bedside table, the clock flashes 03.03. I'm awake. I don't know what's woken me up, but now that I'm awake, I'm hungry.

Mum always moans about the amount I eat: another jar of peanut butter scraped clean, another packet of Weetabix gone, another loaf of bread with only the crusts left at the bottom of the bag.

"I don't know where you put it all," she says. "Leave something for the rest of us, Izzy."

But Dad says, "Give her a break, Kath, she's just growing, aren't you, Izzy? Everyone's got to grow." And he crouches down to pretend he's smaller than me and that I'm a giant towering above him.

Sometimes, I like it. Sometimes, it's just embarrassing.

I lie there for a bit, thinking perhaps I'll go back to

sleep 03.04. 03.05. No, definitely hungry.

I pull on my pink dressing gown and quietly head downstairs, thinking there might be some Rice Krispies left. Past Megan's room. Past Jamie's, with its tatty *Thomas the Tank Engine* poster still hanging on the door. Past Mum and Dad's.

I'm halfway down the stairs before I hear something. It's a kind of snuffling sound and a gasping sound and a hiccupping sound. It's so odd that I stop where I am to listen more closely.

Then I realize, it's someone crying. Not just a little bit. It's the sort of crying that stops you breathing properly, that leaves you all snotty and headachy and swollen-eyed.

There's light coming from under the living-room door. I can hear Mum's voice murmuring softly, but not what she's saying.

The crying continues.

It's Dad.

Of course I've seen Dad cry before. He sniffs all the way through *The Wizard of Oz* and *Marley and Me*, welling up long before the dog dies. But nothing like this.

My stomach turns in on itself. I'm not hungry any more.

I head back to my room and curl up tight under my

duvet, thinking of something, anything, to try and get the sound of Dad crying out of my head; my twelve times table, the names of all the children in *The Sound of Music* in order, what I'm going to wear tomorrow on the first day of the summer holidays, the numbers on the clock blinking past: 03.07. 03.08.

Chapter Two

"Jamie, come on, how long does it take to choose between Cornflakes and Rice Krispies? Pass the box over." Jamie's in rapt concentration, staring at the cereal boxes in front of him.

"I'm doing the puzzle. There are only two words left to find."

"Pass them over. Come on. It's nearly time to go. I don't want to be late on the first day of term," I snap, pouring juice with one hand and trying to force my new black shoes on with the other. "Grace'll be here in a minute."

"Isabel, leave your little brother alone," says Mum. She looks me up and down. "Where's your tie?"

"In my pocket," I say with my mouth full of cereal,

rolling out the green-and-blue striped St Mary's tie to show her. "I don't want to put it on till I've eaten my breakfast, so it doesn't get milky."

Megan clatters down the stairs, skirt rolled up, black make-up visible round her eyes. "Where's my portfolio? Which of you has taken it? It's massive, it can't just have disappeared."

It's always such a shock when the holidays are over. It's as if in the last seven weeks off school, we've forgotten how to do the simplest things: get up, eat breakfast, put on our clothes and get out of the house. Instead, we're falling over each other in the tiny kitchen.

Dad's already gone. He works in a small architects' firm in Ipswich, planning people's loft conversions and extensions. People get out of Littlehaven as fast as they can in the mornings. He's usually off early to beat the traffic.

The doorbell. It's Grace. I shovel cornflakes into my mouth. I'm ready to go.

I used to hate school, well, not hate it, but not feel like I belonged there. I could do the work, I never failed anything, was never called in for a "little talk" with one of the teachers. But I was…lost, empty. Like a black-and-white outline of a person. Grace changed all that. Grace coloured me in.

This morning Grace whirls into our kitchen at top speed, and almost collides with Mum. But Mum doesn't mind, she just laughs. People never seem to get cross with Grace. There's something about being around her that means you can't stay serious for too long.

So all Mum says is, "Whoa, slow down. You must be excited about the first day back."

"Sorry, Mrs P!" says Grace, using one of the nicknames only she uses for my parents – Mr and Mrs P, instead of Mr and Mrs Palmer. I try and avoid calling Grace's mum anything. I'm not sure I even know her first name and coming up with a nickname wouldn't feel right. In my head she's always just "Grace's mum".

"Hey, Jamie." Grace stops, looks over his shoulder and points at the back of the cereal box. "Look in that corner, you'll find 'crocodile'. And now, Izzy…" She grabs me, twirls me round, and gives me two huge theatrical air kisses – *mwah*, *mwah* – and strikes a pose. "Let's go and meet our fate. Wish us luck."

"Bye, Izzy," says Mum, stopping to smooth down my blazer and kiss me on the cheek. She looks very serious for a second, her eyes tired and sad, but she quickly snaps back to normal. "Have a good day, my grown-up girl. Have a good year."

"Oh, god," says Grace, as the door slams behind us. "Yesterday was a nightmare. I mean it. My mum made me go to church *all* day. Like, hours and hours. It was a special welcome service for the new pastor, and I thought it was never, ever going to end. And then there was a lunch, that was okay, I suppose, but I couldn't even message you because my phone was out of battery."

I think Grace's church is great, even though I've only been once. In the spring, Mum and Dad went away to a hotel for their wedding anniversary and I went to stay at Grace's for the night. In the morning, we went to church with her mum. It wasn't what I thought church was like. It was in this warehouse on the edge of Ipswich. It looked so plain from the outside, but inside was full of colour and music.

The man at the front went on and on, but I didn't really listen to what he was saying – I was too busy looking round. It was like going to the theatre or watching a musical, but with all of us in the chorus. There were women in their stiff, coloured dresses, the band playing, the choir singing, and everybody dancing and swaying, some even shaking and crying. But I think Grace was a bit embarrassed by it, and she never asked me again.

I haven't got much news for her in return. It's not like

we haven't been in and out of each other's houses all summer, and messaging most of the rest of the time. But with Grace, you never have to worry about not having enough to say. She simply goes on talking.

When we're almost at the gates, she stops and clutches my arm. "This year's going to be a good one for both of us, isn't it? I feel it, I feel it in my bones." She high-fives me, and I high-five her back, and we run laughing up to the gates, where everyone is jostling and shouting and ready for the year to begin. "And what's more," she whispers right into my ear as we go in, "this year is going to be the year that Sam Kenner notices me."

I don't doubt it. Not at all. Grace knows how to get noticed.

It's good being back and being in Year Eight. The Year Sevens in their too-big blazers and too-long skirts look bewildered. But we know what we're doing.

That was us last September, Grace and me. A whole year ago. Sitting in alphabetical order in that first assembly: Grace Okafor, Isabel Palmer. And after that we were barely apart.

All of a sudden, I stumble forwards, almost tripping over. Grace grabs my arm just in time before I hit the ground. Someone has shoved right into me as they run

past, knocking me off balance. I look up to see Lucas Pearce and a couple of his mates a little way ahead, laughing and messing around.

"Hey, Lucas," shouts Grace after him. "Mind where you're going!"

"Mind where you're going!" mimics Lucas in a squeaky voice that sounds nothing like Grace's, but still makes Amir and Charlie laugh like they've heard a really funny joke. "Not my fault Izzy's got such big feet that I nearly fell over them."

I look down. "Don't worry," I whisper to Grace. "It doesn't matter."

Lucas laughs. "You got nothing to say for yourself, Izzy, or do you just let Little Miss Big Mouth do all the talking for both of you?" The boys run off, pushing and grabbing each other's bags.

"That's one person I haven't missed over the holidays," mutters Grace. "I hope he keeps out of our way for the rest of this term."

"Hello, Grace. Hello, Isabel. Good summer holidays? Pleased to be back?" says a cheerful voice behind us. It's Mr Thomas, my favourite teacher. He runs Drama Club and I'm hoping we've got him for English again this year too.

"Yes, thanks, Mr Thomas," we chorus.

Grace takes a deep breath, ready to describe her holidays in full and glorious detail, but Mr Thomas cuts in first. "I suggest you two have a look at the Drama-Club board when you get in," he says. "You might find something there to interest you." He smiles. "Unless you've got lazy over the summer…because this could mean hard work."

Chapter Three

"*Guys and Dolls*?" says Grace with a shrug. "Well, *I've* never heard of it."

Unlike me, Grace hasn't grown up with Dad's obsession with old musicals: *Guys and Dolls*, *Singing in the Rain*, *West Side Story*. Films so old they were made when Nana was a little girl. Films full of drama and music, like a doorway into another world.

Mr Thomas was right. There *was* something to interest us on the notice board:

Presenting…
St Mary's one and only Years 7 – 8 Christmas Production
GUYS AND DOLLS
Singing, dancing, acting, crewing, designing.

Auditions: Tuesday 10th September, 3.30 p.m.
in the drama studio.
No experience needed. All welcome.

Joining Drama Club was the first thing Grace and I did together. She told me it would be fun, a laugh. I wasn't sure that I believed her, but I went along anyway. The problem was, I didn't like standing up in front of people. I didn't like getting noticed or being put on the spot. Even when I knew the answer in class, I wouldn't put up my hand because I didn't want everyone to look at me. I could see Grace would make an amazing actor with her loud, careless laugh and her desire to be centre of attention. I'd be much happier hiding at the back, handing out the programmes or doing the lights. Drama Club didn't sound like a laugh, it sounded like a panic attack waiting to happen.

But, week by week, in Mr Thomas's drama studio, with the black drapes and big mirrors and West End posters on the wall, I found that I stopped worrying about people looking at me. Because they weren't looking at shy, boring old Isabel Palmer. I didn't have to be that person any more. I could be whoever I wanted. I still didn't put my hand up in class, but I could step on a stage and be

somebody else – then it didn't matter who was watching.

Last summer term, Grace dragged me along to try out for the end-of-year production – and somehow we both got parts in the chorus. Just a handful of lines between us, but that didn't matter. Just being up onstage was the best feeling ever.

Once the last performance was over, we all cried and hugged and wondered how we'd live without each other over the summer. Then Mr Thomas made us sit in a circle and gave us each two pieces of paper. On one we had to write our best memory of Drama Club to read out to the group: the time when Mr Thomas was pretending to be overwhelmed by our performance and fell backwards off his chair; the time when we all went to Ipswich to see *To Kill a Mockingbird*; the time when we tried out different accents, but no one could work out what most of them were supposed to be.

At the top of the other piece of paper, we each wrote our name. We passed these around the circle and we each had to write a message for the person whose name was on the bit of paper, fold it over so no one else could see, and pass it on.

I shoved my paper in my bag and waited till I got home before unfolding it. I lay on my bed and read each

comment slowly and carefully. I read where Mr Thomas had written, *There are great things ahead for you. Believe in yourself*. I read where Grace had written, *SUPERSTAR. BEST FRIENDS FOR EVER*, and drawn a pink heart decorated with tiny stars. And I tucked that piece of paper under the corner of my mattress. I didn't need to read it again: I knew it was there whenever I needed it.

As we walk down the road, after our first day in Year Eight, I scroll through the results for *Guys and Dolls* on my phone. "Okay, here we go… American musical…first staged in 1950…"

"What? That's like a hundred years ago," interrupts Grace.

"Ssh, listen, the film won awards… I'm pretty sure we've got it on an old DVD at home. Do you want to come back and watch it now, and we can pick the best parts to go for? Your mum can't say no, it's the first day, there's no homework yet."

"Yes, that would be brilliant. Would your mum mind?"

"Course not, she says you practically live round our house anyway. Come on."

I unlock the front door and shout out a hello. Then

Grace and I race into the living room, sweep all the DVDs off the shelf by the TV and quickly sort through them. *Guys and Dolls* isn't there.

"Maybe your mum or dad know where it is, let's go and ask them," suggests Grace.

We go through to the kitchen. There's just Megan, on her phone. No sign of anyone else.

"Where's Dad?" I ask her.

"Doctor's," she says without looking up.

"Again? Where's Mum?"

"Office," and she's back to her phone.

Megan must have had a good first day in sixth form to be actually talking to me. Or maybe it's because Grace's here and everyone likes Grace. I decide not to push my luck by asking any more, though.

The office is a grand name for the tiny box room where Mum designs websites on her computer, keeps her files and does her accounts. Every surface overflows with paper – sketches, invoices, leaflets; it even makes my room look super-neat by comparison. Mum's typing, with the phone crooked on her shoulder. She's a freelance web designer. It sounds like it would be a pretty cool job, but she says it's mostly fiddly coding and difficult phone calls with clients where she explains why their site won't work the way they

want it to.

"Hi, girls. Good first day?" She flicks the phone onto speaker mode and motions for us to come in. As the on-hold music plays, Grace and I do a silly little dance and Mum laughs. "Hmm, I see it *was* a good day. Are you staying for tea, Grace? I'm afraid it's only pizza."

"Yes, please, Mrs P."

"Actually, Mum, we're looking for *Guys and Dolls* on DVD, do you know where it is? It's the school production and auditions are next week. We want to get ready right now," I say all in a rush. "There's not much time to practise."

"We haven't watched that for years." She looks thoughtful. "If it's not on the living-room shelf, then it's in a bag on top of my wardrobe, with all the stuff that's on its way to the charity shop. You can go and look, but don't make too much of a mess, okay? And, Grace, don't forget to text your mum and see if it's all right for you to stay, I know she'll be expecting you back."

At that moment, the music stops and a tinny little voice comes out of the speaker, saying, "Hello, Mrs Palmer, sorry to have kept you waiting…" Mum grabs the phone, and we make our exit to continue our DVD hunt in Mum and Dad's room.

"I love it how your mum just lets you get on with things, your dad too. They're so laid-back. Not like my mum." Grace sighs dramatically, sitting on the bed to tap out a message home.

"That's not true," I say. "Mum's always nagging me about homework."

"Yeah, but *all* parents do that. I mean, with my mum, she always has to be so *involved* in everything. Wanting to know exactly what I'm doing, giving me advice all the time, asking questions about every little thing that happens at school."

This makes me laugh, because that description sounds as much like Grace herself as it is like her mum.

I'd never say it out loud, but sometimes I wish my mum was more like Grace's. It's not that Mum doesn't care about what we're up to, Megan, Jamie and me. It's just she's not someone who says much. Maybe she simply expects us to know about what she's thinking or feeling, without her needing to say it. Or maybe it's different with Grace and her mum because it's only the two of them, no little brothers or big sisters to get in the way.

"It's not funny." Grace pouts. "I hope it'll be okay to have my tea here. Mum's probably made some special fancy meal or something but I'd rather just have pizza in

front of the TV with you."

I don't say anything. I love Grace's mum's meals, with the mountains of fluffy rice and rich sauces, and home-made cake for pudding. And I love the way she seems to enjoy watching you eat almost as much as eating herself, pressing extra helpings on you before you even finish the first mouthful, explaining what spices have gone in and where each recipe has come from. I can't imagine *her* complaining about my enormous appetite.

Grace reaches up on tiptoes to the top of the wardrobe and grabs hold of a carrier bag. DVDs, books and some old clothes of Jamie's cascade to the floor. I can't believe Mum is planning to clear some of these out. There are films here that I used to watch over and over again: *Mary Poppins*, *Aladdin*, even *Frozen*… I suppose they *are* a bit childish now, but Jamie might still like them. Just looking at the covers makes me think of rainy Saturday afternoons, snuggled up with Dad, Mum and Megan, singing along. That feels like a long time ago, doing stuff together as a family. I manage to sneak out a few favourites, but we still can't find *Guys and Dolls*.

"Are you sure your mum said everything was on the *top* of the wardrobe? Maybe she meant to look at the back of the wardrobe as well?" asks Grace, as she repacks the bag

and carefully balances it just where she found it. "We should check."

"Well, I don't know…" I start to say, but Grace's already opened the wardrobe door and is rummaging around at the bottom. She pulls out a canvas bag that has been shoved right to the back.

"Look, maybe it'll be in here?" she says hopefully. She unzips it to reveal a couple of dresses, along with a skirt and top, underwear and a pair of pink high-heeled shoes. We both stare at them, and then Grace shakes out one of the dresses, holding it up against herself and feeling the silky material between her fingers. I have never seen my mum wear any of these. I can only remember one or two occasions I've seen her in a dress at all. Jeans and trainers, yes, sometimes a suit when she goes to meet a client, but never a dress. Mum's quite small too. I'm almost as tall as she is. These clothes would be much too big for her.

Finally, Grace breaks the silence. "I'm not being funny, Izzy, but did your mum used to be massive?"

I don't know why, but just looking at these clothes makes me feel weird. Like reading someone's diary or overhearing a private conversation. They feel secret. And I want them back in the bag, out of sight in the wardrobe. I want not to have found them in the first place.

I shrug, and quickly start packing them away. I can see Grace is itching to try on the shoes – also much larger than Mum's – but just as she reaches for them, her phone beeps. It's her mum saying she can stay to eat. While she's replying, I shove the shoes in the top of the bag, zip it up tightly and push it back where we found it.

I hear footsteps coming up the stairs, and feel suddenly guilty, like I've done something wrong. There's an uneasy, creeping feeling in my stomach.

Mum sticks her head round the door, brandishing a DVD. "Honestly, you two, you can't see what's in front of your noses," she says. "I had a quick look and it was right there on the shelf with all the others. Still, at least you've kept things neat in here. Come on, no need to look so startled, pizza's ready. Let's eat."

I slam the door behind us and quickly run down the stairs.

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