

Pictures Or It Didn't Happen

Also by Sophie Hannah

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The Telling Error
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Pictures Or It Didn't Happen

Sophie Hannah



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1

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For Chris Gribble, who knows
why – at least as much as I do.

1

'I don't believe this, Mum!' Freya wails at me.
'Please say you're joking!'

I am not joking. She must be able to see that from my face.

No, no, no.

It can't be true. I can't have screwed up so badly.

Except I have. I've forgotten the music for Freya's audition. *No, no, no, no, no . . .*

I didn't exactly forget it. Not completely. I remembered to put it in the car. Then I was so stupid that I can't actually believe it. I left it there. *I left it in the bloody car.* Now, when I urgently need it to be safely inside my bag, it's in the Grand Arcade car park.

I'm an idiot. Worse than an idiot. I am every bad thing.

A harsh, skin-chilling wind whips around my head. My hair hits my face like lashes from a cold whip. Cambridge is always either much warmer than everywhere else or much colder. Today, it's like a Russian winter.

‘What are we going to do?’ Freya demands. Her eyes are wide with panic. I know what she’s hoping for: any answer that isn’t ‘There’s nothing we can do. It’s too late.’

She’s been practising her song for weeks – recording herself, then listening to each recording, making notes on how to improve her vocal performance.

Freya is nine. She’s known since the age of five that she wants to be a singer. This will be the first time she puts her voice to the test. I’m terrified of how crushed she’ll be if she fails. ‘I *cannot* mess this up, Mum,’ she’s been saying every five minutes since she woke up this morning. ‘I *have* to get in. They *have* to say yes.’

Now, thanks to me, she’s going to miss her chance to try. I’ve failed on her behalf. She can’t audition without her music, which her brainless mother has left in the bloody, fucking car. It was the only thing that mattered, the one crucial thing I had to do . . .

My teeth are chattering from the cold. At the same time, my neck is too hot beneath my poncho. I wonder if I’m about to faint.

‘Mum!’ Freya’s voice pulls me back. ‘What are we going to *do*?’

Think, Chloe. Quickly. You have to solve this problem, and the seconds are ticking by . . .

It's like a Maths problem from one of Freya's homework sheets. I look at my watch. We're about ten minutes away from where the auditions are happening. It would take us ten minutes to walk back to the car park – ten minutes in the opposite direction. Freya's audition is in twelve minutes.

'We'll have to run back to the car and get the music!' she says, blinking hard, trying not to cry. 'Come on! Don't just stand there!'

'There's no time, Freya. Unless we suddenly both learn to fly, we won't make it. We'll miss your slot.' My heart thumps in my mouth. I tell myself that this isn't a life-or-death crisis. But it feels like one.

I look at my watch again, desperately hoping time will have started to race backwards. It hasn't.

'We can't go back, okay?' I say, struggling to stay calm.

'We *have* to!'

'We *can't*! We only have twelve minutes! It's not long enough. You read the letter: anyone who misses their allotted time – tough luck, they're out.'

People are staring at us as we stand on Bridge Street shouting at each other. 'Freya, listen. I know this feels like a disaster, but—'

'It is a disaster! How can I sing without my music?'

'You'll have to manage. Look, we'll pick another song – one that whoever's playing the piano will definitely know. It's not ideal, but—'

'Like what?' Freya demands. 'What song?'

'I don't know! "Happy Birthday To You", or—'

'No way.' My daughter's face hardens. I feel like the worst kind of traitor. 'Do you even *know* how embarrassing that would be, Mum? "Happy Birthday"? No! I can't *believe* you left the music in the car! *Why* did I trust you? Give me your keys!' She holds out her hand. 'Without you slowing me down, I can run back to the car and still get to the audition by half past.'

'No way! You absolutely could not. And anyway—'

'Give me the car keys, Mum!'

'Freya, there's no way I'm letting you run through Cambridge on your own—'

'Give *me* the car keys,' a man's voice says firmly, cutting through my frantic babbling. 'I'll go.'

I turn to face him. He's tall and thin, with floppy, straight, dark brown hair and brown eyes, but I don't notice any of that at first. I'm too busy staring at his bike.

If only I had a bike right now . . . But no, that

still wouldn't work. I couldn't leave Freya alone in the centre of Cambridge. If she were just a few years older . . . but she isn't. She's nine.

'Obviously, I kind of overheard,' says the dark-haired man. 'As did all of Cambridge, and indeed most of England.' He smiles to let me know he's teasing me in a friendly way. 'Where have you parked, and where are you headed? I'll get the music there in time or die trying.' He makes an over-the-top comic 'death-throes' face at Freya, who looks up at me hopefully.

'Never trust a stranger,' the man tells her solemnly. 'Apart from when you've got an important audition – right, young lady?'

'Right,' Freya agrees, and I'm startled by the passion in her voice.

There is a group of about ten people standing nearby staring at us – watching the drama unfold, wondering if I'll say yes or no. Why do they care? It's not a marriage proposal, for God's sake.

My head fills with a muddled jumble of words: *only chance . . . bike . . . fast . . . yes, that'll work . . . he seems nice . . . could be anyone . . . might steal car.*

Instead of giving him my keys, I could ask to borrow his bike. I'd have to ask him to wait with Freya, though, and I can't do that. I'd sooner risk my Volvo than my child.

As if he can read my mind, the man says, 'I'll be quicker than you. I'm a cycling superstar, the Lance Armstrong of Cambridge. Actually, these days I'm probably faster. Since he gave up drugs, poor old Lance can barely wheel his bike as far as the post office without sweating and wheezing.'

I can't help smiling at his absurd joke. Offhand, I can't remember when anyone – friend, relative or stranger – has tried so hard to make me laugh and, at the same time, solve a problem for me.

He holds out his hand for my car keys.

I give them to him. A voice in my head whispers, 'Most people wouldn't do this,' but the whisper isn't loud enough to stop me.

Sod it. He's our only hope of getting Freya's sheet music to the audition on time. Whatever happens – even if this stranger steals my battered old Volvo and I never see him or it again – Freya will know that I did everything I could. That I took a risk to help her.

'Nice one, Mum,' she breathes. Her smile tells me I've made the right choice. Not perhaps the most sensible choice, but the right one.

'Grand Arcade car park, level 2,' I say too fast. My words trip over themselves. Even with a bike on our side, we can't afford to waste a second. 'Silver Volvo S60, MM02 OXY. On the

back seat there's some sheet music for a song, "The Ash Grove".'

'And I'm bringing it to . . .?'

'Brooking Hall, next to—'

'I know it.' He mounts his bike, winks at Freya and cycles away at speed. Dangerously fast. Maybe he wasn't kidding when he said he'd die trying. I watch him disappear, his black overcoat flying out behind him like a cape – the kind a superhero might wear.

'Come on, Mum!' Freya grabs my arm and starts to drag me along the street. Before too long, annoyed by my slowness, she drops my sleeve and marches on ahead.

I hurry to catch up with her, stunned by what I've just done. I've given my car keys to a man I don't know at all. What kind of crazy fool am I? I didn't even ask his name, didn't get his mobile phone number . . . What will Lorna say when I tell her?

I know exactly what she'll say. She might be my oldest and most loyal friend, but she also enjoys insulting me when she thinks I deserve it.

'This is typical of you, Chloe,' she'll sigh. 'You're so dumb! Why would a total stranger put himself out to help you? You deserve to have your car nicked.'

‘Darling, don’t get your hopes up, okay?’ I pant at Freya, out of breath from walking too fast. ‘He might not get there in time. He might not turn up at all.’

‘Yes, he will,’ she insists. ‘Stop being so negative!’

We arrive at the hall with one minute to spare. A woman with greasy skin and a hole in her tights snaps in my face, ‘I’m sorry, we’re running late.’ She’s carrying a brown clipboard under her arm. There are chunks missing out of its side, as if it’s been nibbled by an animal.

Running late. I let the words sink in. Of course: we’re not allowed to be late, but they – the people with all the power – can keep us hanging around as long as they like.

No need for all my panic. No need to hand over my car keys to a total stranger.

‘Sit over there,’ Clipboard Woman barks at me, pointing to a row of chairs that other people are already sitting in. She doesn’t even look at Freya. ‘We’ll call your name when we’re ready for you. I’m SORRY, we’re running late . . .’ she snarls at the mother and son who have just walked in behind us. They both flinch. Is there any need for her to bellow at people?

Still. Thank God for this delay. The man with the bike is not here yet.

Of course he isn't, fool. He'll be halfway to London by now – cruising along the motorway in your Volvo, laughing his head off at your stupidity.

'This is ridiculous,' a tired-looking bald man says to the girl sitting next to him. I assume she's his daughter. She has serious braces on her teeth. They look painful. 'You were supposed to be in a half hour ago. I'm not spending the whole day sat here.'

I look at my watch. Eleven thirty-two. Freya's audition was meant to start two minutes ago. I also don't want to wait for ever. On the other hand, I would like to get my car keys back.

If he were planning to bring them back, he'd be here by now . . .

I hear singing in the distance. Then louder, closer. Not a child's voice, though – a man's, coming from behind me. I know the song painfully well: 'The Ash Grove'. Freya's audition song, the one she's been practising for so long.

'Down yonder green valley where
streamlets meander,
When twilight is fading, I pensively
rove . . .'

I spin round. It's him. *Thank you, Lord.* He's singing at me, with a wide grin on his face.

It's a bit embarrassing in front of all these people.

I want to text Lorna to report that a handsome stranger is singing to me in public. I know what she'd text back: 'Pictures or it didn't happen.' She always demands proof of everything – photographic proof, ideally.

Freya gets to the point. 'Did you get my music?' she asks.

The dark-haired man matches her solemn face with his own as he hands over the sheets of paper. 'Job done, Your Highness. I pensively roved, I got your music. I even locked the car, so no need to worry about local vagrants hosting a party in it. That happened to my friend Keiran a couple of weeks ago. He came back to find empty cider bottles and burger wrappers all over the back seat of his hundred-grand BMW. He was not amused. So . . . what are you auditioning *for*?' our rescuer asks Freya. 'I hope it's going to make you a superstar, whatever it is.'

'Thank you *so* much,' I say, finding my voice at last. I must stop staring at him like someone who has seen a strange vision. I still can't quite believe he did this huge favour for us, with no other motive. He honestly wanted to help. Is anybody really so kind and selfless?

'She's auditioning to be one of the chorus in *Joseph and His Dreamcoat*,' I say. 'But that's only thanks to your help. If it weren't for you, we'd be trudging home in tears right now, so . . . thank you. I can't tell you how grateful I am.'

I'm in danger of crying. How silly. Anyone would think no one had ever been kind to me before. I blink frantically.

'You're welcome, ma'am.'

Ma'am?

Right. That's the worst fake American accent I've ever heard. And . . . oh, my God, now he's saluting me.

'*Joseph and His Dreamcoat?*' he says, frowning. 'Last I heard, it was called *Joseph and His Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. Have they dropped the Amazing Technicolour part?'

'No,' I tell him. 'I just couldn't be bothered to say it.'

'What a rebel you are. While you're at it, there are probably some words in the musical itself that could do with a trim. I saw it when I was a teenager – at the Palace Theatre in Manchester, my home town. I still remember the words of the song about Pharaoh: "No one had rights or a vote but the king./In fact you might say he was *fairly right-wing*." Awful, just awful!'

He sounds very jolly about it, as if awfulness is one of his favourite things.

‘The tunes are brilliant,’ says Freya. ‘It’s a musical. The music’s more important than the words.’

‘I’m not sure I’d agree, Your Highness. When the words are *that* bad . . . Still, only one thing really matters, and that’s launching your career as one of the great divas of our time. Am I right?’

‘Um . . .’ Freya looks at me, unsure what to say.

‘And why aim to be in the chorus?’ our new friend goes on. ‘You should be going for the main part.’

‘The main part’s Joseph,’ says Freya, sounding a little impatient. ‘I’m a girl.’

‘Well, girl or not, I think you’d make a great Joseph. Or a great Technicolour Dreamcoat – one or the other. And don’t dare to tell me you’re not a coat! Enough of this modesty!’

Freya laughs and blushes. I laugh too. I can’t help it.

‘Okay, ladies, well . . . I’d better be on my way. Knock ‘em dead. Here are your car keys. Oh, hold on . . .’

Instead of my keys, he pulls an iPhone out of his pocket. It’s ringing. His ringtone is ‘The

Real Slim Shady' by Eminem, which surprises me. He's wearing a smart grey suit, with red bicycle clips around the bottoms of his trousers. Not a man who looks as if he'd be into rap music.

He glances at his phone, then puts it to his ear. 'Tom Rigby,' he says.

Tom Rigby. Tom Rigby. I'm glad I know his name, though I'm not sure why. He's a stranger. In a minute he's going to walk out of here and I'll never see him again.

He's talking about his work. It makes no sense to me. Something about chips and a database. I don't think he means the kind of chips you put salt and vinegar on.

He keeps saying a name: Camiga, or Camigo. Perhaps it's a company name. It sounds like the kind of thing a large, serious company might call itself. Very different from my own tiny business, Dangles – but then I work alone, make earrings and earn hardly any money.

When he's finished talking, Tom Rigby stuffs his phone back into his pocket and pulls out my car keys. His hand touches mine as he passes them to me. 'There you go,' he says. 'Right, I've got to scoot. Best of luck, Freya.'

He must have heard me saying her name when we were shouting on Bridge Street. His

tone has changed from teasing to plain and direct. Obviously he has finished joking around and wants to get on with the rest of his day.

Which is fair enough.

'Thank you again!' I call after him as he walks away.