

SISTER,
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Jess Bright

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regulations of the country of origin.

I would like to dedicate this book to my brothers and sisters. First there was Pete, who grew up with me during the bad perm era. And then, years later, there came two extra surprises: Katie and Joanna. Our family is mad like all the others, but life would be so boring without you all. Especially after the Rugby Sevens and the Clapham Junction Platform Incident. That will make me laugh until I am an old lady!

Hello there,

Families are weird, aren't they? I mean, here you are, all lumped together under one roof, and you're just supposed to get on without falling out or getting into major trouble. It's never, EVER going to be perfect!

You can't choose your family, but in *Sister*, *Sister*, Willow would definitely like to choose hers. An extra sibling to be precise—preferably a sister—because she feels something's missing living with just her mum. However, they do say be careful what you wish for, because that's exactly what happens! A family secret is dramatically revealed and Willow discovers that she has a half-brother and sister. But it's not all happy families. There's all sorts of stuff Willow didn't bargain for. Like her half-sister, Bella, hating her on sight and the fact that Willow might have to face her biggest fear in order to help Bella conquer a life-threatening illness.

Falling out and bickering with brothers and sisters is part of life. My poor brother, Pete, had to put up with all sorts of torture when we were growing up. Luckily he still speaks to me now though (even after the concussion incident . . .) But Willow doesn't know how she's ever going to get Bella to accept her.

My experience in life and in families is you can't force anything. People will never do what you want them to do. Relax, have a cuppa and a choccy biscuit and see what happens. Things always work out in the end. And if they don't, perhaps you're lucky enough to have a best friend like Willow does who will help you to see things differently. Because sometimes, best friends are the family you can choose . . .

Love
Jess
x x x



Chapter One

Mystery letters

Willow pressed her nose up against the window of the school bus and breathed in the metallic whiff of wet glass. She wondered if there was going to be one of *those* letters waiting on the doormat when she got home after school this afternoon. Her heart sank each time she saw one. Mum would refuse to talk and stomp around the house in a worrying black mood every time one arrived. Willow wondered how such an innocuous cream envelope could harbour such a lot of untold meaning. Who was writing to her mother and making her feel weirded out? She sighed.

A voice interrupted her thoughts. ‘Hey, Class Swot, you done the homework?’ Turning her face from the steamed-up window, where she’d left a smudged imprint of her nose and forehead, Willow looked at the boy sitting next to her. The geeky black-rimmed glasses perched on his freckled nose gave him an air of a 1950s American cartoon character.

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‘Less of the swot, Java. Takes one to know one.’ Willow smiled at her friend, Jarvis. His nickname was Java—a nod to the computer language JavaScript that he so lovingly banged on about.

‘Can I read the homework?’ Stella asked from behind. ‘I love your stories.’

‘Eww, won’t you barf everywhere?’ Jarvis winced.

‘Why would I *barf* reading one of Willow’s stories?’ Stella asked Jarvis.

‘Because reading on the bus always makes *me* want to spew,’ Jarvis replied, wrinkling up his nose dramatically.

‘Oh, is this one of those twin things?’ Willow asked eagerly. Jarvis looked puzzled. ‘You know: if one of you is sick, the other one is too? Because you are twins. Supernatural weirdness stuff. *You know!*’ Willow rolled her eyes.

Jarvis’s twin, Stella, laughed and combed her immaculate blonde bob smooth with her fingers. ‘Oh yes, I forgot we were twins! How silly of me. I didn’t put on my matching coat and shoes today. Willow, quick, punch Jarvis in the face and see if I can feel it as well.’

Jarvis put up his hands to protect himself from the play punch Willow was about to deliver. ‘Not the face, not the face!’ So Willow walloped him in the arm instead, making him shout, ‘Oi!’

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Stella gripped her corresponding arm and groaned in an over-the-top manner. ‘That really hurt, Willow. I bet I’m going to have to have it in a sling for the rest of the day and not be able to write. Quick, do it again!’

Willow shook her head, laughing.

‘You have to let me read your story now to make up for it then.’

‘I need help with something else first,’ Willow said, deciding that she had to prise her worry out of her head before it got comfy in there for one more day.

‘Sure,’ Stella said. ‘Fire away.’

‘Mum’s being weird.’

‘So what’s new? Your mum is *always* weird,’ Jarvis said.

‘No, I mean a new level of weird that out does all the other weirdness that usually goes on. She’s getting letters that make her freak out.’

‘Freak out how?’ Stella asked.

‘She just has to look at the envelope on the days I have given her the post and even if she has been laughing she goes white, grabs it, and then ignores me for the rest of the time until bed.’

‘That doesn’t sound good,’ Jarvis said. ‘Do you know who they’re from?’

‘Not a clue. She never opens them in front of me. But it’s the same curly black handwriting every time.’

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‘Hmm,’ Stella said in her best Sherlock Holmes voice and raised one eyebrow at the same time, something Willow always wished she could do but just couldn’t pull off. ‘Have you tried asking her who they’re from?’

‘Yes, but she just fobbed me off saying they were for her to deal with. Someone wants her to do some work for them and she doesn’t want to, and they won’t leave her alone.’

‘That sounds plausible,’ Jarvis said.

‘Yeah, but why would they write?’ Stella wondered out loud. ‘With all the technology in the world, you would have thought they would email, ring, text.’

‘I know,’ Willow replied despondently. ‘But I sort of get it; Mum is such a technophobe. She can’t work her phone most of the time, let alone check emails. So maybe snail mail is the last resort?’

‘It sounds fairly dodgy to me,’ Jarvis said. ‘How often are they coming?’

‘So far, I have noticed one a week for the last few weeks.’

‘Have you looked at the postmark?’ Jarvis asked. ‘You know, to see where they’re coming from.’

‘No! Good idea! I wish I had. I can look next time, though it won’t tell me who they’re from.’

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‘Well, you know what you have to do then?’ Jarvis said mysteriously.

‘No, what?’ Willow replied.

‘Open one.’

‘I couldn’t do that. Mum would go mental. It would feel wrong going behind her back.’

‘But she’s not telling you the truth. Or you *think* she isn’t,’ Stella said.

Willow sighed. The twins were right. She needed to see what was in those letters. ‘I need to do it without her finding out that I’ve looked.’

‘Well, you are talking to the right man then,’ and Jarvis winked.

‘Java! What!?’ Willow and Stella cried.

‘Operation Steal a Letter!’ Jarvis said, hushing them in case anyone could hear. Not that anyone was listening to the three thirteen-year-olds hatching their underhand plan. The bus was rammed with kids heading to school and the noise that a packed bus of kids generated drowned out any of the threesome’s chit chat. ‘I have a sketchy idea in my head. Let’s reconvene after morning break and I will have had time to solidify my ideas into a proper plan of action. All will be revealed then.’

Willow couldn’t stop laughing at Jarvis’s spy talk but let him get on with working out the plan in his head. She

could almost hear his robotic brain ticking over as he sat next to her on the bus.

Meanwhile Stella was more interested in whom Willow thought the mysterious sender was. ‘It’s quite exciting really,’ Stella mused from the seat behind. ‘I mean, it could be anyone.’

‘Like who . . . ?’ Willow asked, sitting sideways so she could see Stella properly.

‘Like your real mum. You know, your mad mum, Helen, isn’t *really* your mum. She snatched you from a pram all those years ago and now a private detective has tracked you down and they are onto her. Maybe you are really related to the Royal Family or a Hollywood star?’ Willow laughed.

‘Or maybe she’s not who she says she is? Maybe you and she are in the witness protection programme and the police want to move you to another village because the guy she put away in jail is about to be released into the public and they are scared for your safety . . . ?’ Stella was off on a wild goose chase with possible letter writers. ‘Or how about your mum has been asked to do the album cover of Lost and Found’s rivals, One Man Standing? Could it be that? And they’re trying to poach her, sending her money in the post!!’

‘Hmm, we could do with some money at the mo,’

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Willow sighed. ‘I’m getting a bit sick of beans on toast.’ Life as an artist wasn’t the best-paid job. It was a bit feast and famine in the Fitzpatrick household some months.

‘Remember, guys, meet me at the oak tree bench at morning break. I will reveal my ingenious plan . . . ’

Willow and Stella rolled their eyes as they grabbed their bags. ‘Jarvis and his lame plans,’ Stella said scathingly. ‘I can’t actually believe he would come up with anything *useful*.’

‘Willow, would you stay behind after class?’ Mrs Bannister asked at the end of their English lesson.

‘Yes, Mrs Bannister.’

As the class roused themselves from the slumber of English and clattered and scraped back chairs, Willow wondered what her teacher could possibly want.

‘What have you been up to?’ Willow’s friend, Sadie asked. ‘Setting light to desks again?’

‘Or maybe she’s been writing swear words all over the walls of the girls’ loos?’ Stella joined in.

‘I think it was when you smashed up the Year Thirteen common room,’ Sadie replied, laughing. The thought of Willow doing any of those things was crazy. She was a good girl and trouble wasn’t in her vocabulary.

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Willow shrugged and slowly packed her books away in her super cool old-school orange satchel. One of the stray pencils on her desk made its way into her purposely messy topknot for safekeeping.

When the classroom was empty she walked to her teacher's desk.

'I'm looking forward to reading your homework,' Mrs Bannister said. 'Sit down, won't you?' Willow grabbed a nearby chair. 'Have you heard of *The Sunday Times* New Young Writers' Competition?' Willow shook her head. Mrs Bannister slid a photocopied newspaper page towards her on her desk. 'Take this home and have a read. I think we should enter you.'

'Oh, wow,' Willow breathed. 'Really?'

'Yes, really! It's for writers aged thirteen to sixteen and then sixteen to nineteen and so on. I think it would be good practice for you to try and write a long piece, a real project for you to get your teeth into.' Willow liked the sound of that. 'We have until the summer to get it in and it will be judged over the summer holidays. The winners are announced in the autumn. What do you think?'

Willow nodded. 'What do I have to write about?' They were in March now, so she had a while.

'Anything you like. It doesn't even have to be a story.'

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It can be anything. But they give you suggestions and ideas in the copy I gave you.' Willow picked it up. 'I thought I would give you a book to inspire you.' And she handed Willow a beaten-up paperback.

'*Little Women?*' Willow asked. 'What's it about?'

'A Family drama set in the American Civil War in the 1860s. I think it will appeal to you. Seeing as you always write so convincingly about family dramas.'

Willow blushed. She did manage to somehow shoehorn a family issue into any writing homework Mrs Bannister gave them . . .

'Thank you.'

'So what's the plan, Java?' Stella asked as soon as Willow joined them on the bench under the oak tree in the front of the school 'chill' area.

'When do you think there will be another letter landing on the do orstep?' he asked Willow, ignoring Stella's question.

'Er . . . ' Willow screwed her eyes up and had a think. 'I think either tomorrow or the day after. They are roughly a week apart.'

'Great. That means we can get on it as soon as possible!' Jarvis clapped his hands together and explained what he wanted Willow to do.

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‘But what if it isn’t tomorrow?’ Willow said worriedly when he had finished outlining his plan.

‘The plan can be put on hold until it is. It will be OK.’