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Opening extract from

Now You See Me

Written by

Emma Haughton

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PROLOGUE

I never meant to be here.

I hadn't planned to be standing by the boating lake, shivering in the October breeze, watching seven men look for traces of my lost best friend.

Nor had I told anyone I was coming. Didn't mention it to Dad. Or Martha, who was boycotting the whole thing, still refusing to believe anything bad could have happened to her son.

The truth was, I didn't even want to be here. I *had* to be. When the time came, I just couldn't stay away.

And what with the sudden cold snap, I thought I'd be alone down on the seafront. But it was half-term and news had clearly got around. By the time I arrived, a small crowd had already gathered along the yellow tape sectioning off the lake. Mainly grown-ups, but a few children too, the smallest sitting on their parents' shoulders, noses nipped pink by the wind.

As I padlocked my bike to the fence by the Marine Cafe, I spotted Tom from my tutor group across from the

crazy golf, next to a man I guessed was his father. Tom gave me a smile and waved, like we'd bumped into each other at the cinema or something. I pretended not to notice, pulling my hood close around my face and praying no one else would recognize me. The last thing I needed was anyone telling Martha I was here.

I walked up to the row of bathing huts, where I had a good view of the police divers as they wriggled into baggy black suits and heaved oxygen tanks onto their backs. With their masks on, you could barely see their faces. It made them look sinister, creepy, like something out of a horror film.

It seemed to take them for ever to get ready. All around, people shuffled and stamped, pulling scarves and coats tighter as they waited. My stomach felt raw and edgy with nerves and impatience, my cheeks red and wind-burned.

"Get on with it," muttered the man next to me. His head was covered by a striped bobble hat, the kind you see on little kids, pulled right down over his ears. The woman next to him wore a red anorak and an expectant look, like someone waiting for a show to begin.

As if this wasn't real, wasn't about someone's life. And the lives of everyone he'd left behind.

Finally all seven divers lined up at the end of the lake, spreading out to cover its full width. Each held a long pole in one hand, a torch in the other. I felt almost disappointed. I suppose I'd expected something more dramatic – big hooks, complex equipment or something, radars perhaps.

This wasn't supposed to be exciting, I reminded myself, as bit by bit, moving together, the divers descended into the murky lake. The water barely reached their knees at first, rising to their waists as they waded deeper, step by slow, careful step, shining their torches into the depths, prodding every inch of the bottom with their poles.

Around me, the crowd thickened as dog walkers and holidaymakers paused to see what was going on, and I was glad Martha wasn't here. It was boring and nerve-wracking at the same time, and something about other people's curiosity made me feel cross and spiky. This felt private somehow. None of their business.

A sudden murmur surfed the crowd. Several people pointed towards the lake as kids surged forwards for a better view. One of the divers put his hand in the air and signalled the others to stop. Adjusting his face mask, he lowered himself head first into the water.

Seconds drifted by… Nothing. I felt tense, breathless, queasy.

What if…?

Then he surfaced, one hand holding something in the air. My heart lurched as I strained to see. The police on the lakeside passed a plastic bag down the line, and the diver dropped in a solitary shoe.

"Reckon it's his?" the woman in the red anorak asked the bobble-hat man.

He shrugged. "Who knows?"

In my head, Danny pedalled across the ledge separating

the shallow from the deeper part of the lake. Like a slow-motion sequence in a film, I saw him lose his balance and fall into the water, head glancing against the side as he sank into the shadowy depths.

A shiver flowed through me, chilly as the wind. I shook the image from my mind. Turned back to watch the divers resume their slow, painstaking shuffle, my legs twitching with frustration.

Perhaps I should have asked Lianna and Maisy to come. Even Tanya or Vicky, or practically anyone else from Year Eight. At least I'd have had someone to distract me from this electric prickle in my skin, this anxious flutter in my chest.

But I knew they wouldn't have stuck it for long; all around me people were drifting away as they lost interest.

"What's going on?" asked an older woman with a dog. The bobble-hat man reeled off Danny's name and how he disappeared three weeks ago, like he was discussing an old friend. But then, thanks to the local paper, everyone round here knew what had happened.

"Do they think he drowned swimming or something?" the woman asked. She at least had the decency to look more shocked than curious.

The bobble on his hat shook. "I doubt it. It's way too shallow. They're just looking for clues."

"Unless someone dumped him there," the woman in the red anorak chipped in, her voice chirpy. "Weighed him down or something."

The older woman grimaced, and I flashed back to those times Danny and I had swum in the lake. The way the muddy water curled around your legs, cool and slippery. How you had to keep your feet tucked up high around your waist to stop them brushing against the sludge on the bottom.

I shuddered again. Martha was right. This was a mistake, I should never have come. But though my head wanted to leave, my legs refused to move. The woman and her dog moved on and through the gap she left, I spotted a man shouldering a TV camera, rotating it slowly to film the onlookers. Probably a local channel.

I pulled my hood closer and looked at my feet as the lens swung in my direction – no way did I want to appear on the regional news. When I raised my head again, the cameraman was focusing back on the lake.

"We should go," the bobble-hat man said, checking the time on his phone.

The woman in the anorak took a last lingering look at the wading men, now halfway across the third section.

"Poor kid," she sighed as she turned away.

By the time the divers reached the far wall I was almost alone, everyone else defeated by cold and boredom. Not that they'd missed much. Ranged along the walkway was a collection of rubbish. Lots of bottles and shards of glass. An old bike wheel, too small to be Danny's. A supermarket trolley.

And a rusty toy pram, dredged up from the southern side of the lake. It wasn't big, and judging by the way the diver pulled it effortlessly out of the water, it didn't weigh much.

I watched it dripping on the slipway, trying to imagine how it had ended up in there. I pictured some kid out with her parents, pushing it too close to the edge. The pram skeetering out of her grip, toppling in. Hands grasping at the water. The doll rescued perhaps, but the pram sinking without trace.

Why didn't anyone go in after it? The water barely came up to the chest of most people, even in the deeper bits. Maybe they didn't know that, I decided, or maybe they didn't think it worth the bother. You could hardly blame them. I wouldn't have gone in either, not without Danny egging me on.

Staring across the empty lake, I couldn't erase that little girl from my mind. I saw her crying, clutching the doll to her chest as her mum pulled her away. Glancing back to where dark water swallowed her pram for ever.

Something shifted and stirred inside me. A deep pain rising, like a bubble, surfacing like a gasp as I shook away the image of my mother's face. My throat closed tight and my mouth went dry. I gulped in salt air in an effort to stay standing.

I couldn't think about Mum. Not now.

I hurried back to the cafe. They hadn't found Danny, I kept telling myself. They hadn't found Danny and I should

be relieved. They hadn't found Danny – and what happened to Mum didn't change a thing.

But as I fiddled with my bike lock, fingers numb and clumsy with cold, I couldn't get rid of the sudden, certain feeling that I'd lost him too.

PART ONE



NOW

All the warning I get that my life is about to detonate is a blast of music. I recognize it from a class we did on Beethoven – "Ode to Joy", I think it's called. It fills the silent classroom, prompting thirty heads to turn and stare in my direction. It's only then I realize it's coming from nearby.

Very nearby. The bottom of my rucksack no less.

Hell. It's my phone. Alice has been messing with my ringtones again.

I ferret in my bag and cut the call just as Mr Harrington looks round from the quadratic equations he's writing on the whiteboard. Clocks my reddening face.

"While I applaud your taste in music, Miss Radcliffe," he barks, "I'd rather you didn't flaunt it in my lesson. Turn it off or I'll confiscate the damn thing."

Lianna and Josie both wink at me and grin. I roll my eyes and smile. As Mr Harrington turns back to his figures, I peer at the screen under the desk. The call was from Martha. A second later a text flashes up.

Janet Reynolds called. Have to leave urgently. Can you get Ally? Martha xx

That's all. But it's enough to ignite a hot lick of dread in my stomach.

I text back *Yes*, then switch off the phone. Drop it into my bag and turn to face the whiteboard, trying to act like nothing just happened at all.

Alice is sitting on the grass inside the school playground, the back of her blonde head bobbing up and down as she picks the heads off the daisies and gathers them into a pile. I nod to her teacher, who waves hello.

"Hannah!" Alice leaps up when she sees me, flinging her arms around my neck and swinging her feet off the ground.

"Hey, Ally," I gasp, collapsing onto the grass beside her. My heart is pounding and I'm out of breath. I've practically run the mile from my school to hers – no mean feat with a full rucksack. "Sorry I'm late."

"Look!" Alice holds up a crumpled piece of paper from her bag. A spiky-looking animal stares back at me, its head, body and long tail made up of lurid green and blue splodges of paint. Some stick right up from the paper and are clearly still wet.

"Kiss!" She shoves the picture so close to my face that I can smell the funny chalky scent of the paint.

"Nooo!" I squeal, pulling a pretend frightened face. "It might bite!"

Alice grins and stuffs the picture back into her bag. "Silly Hannah. It's only an Ally-gator." She falls back onto

the grass giggling, then sits up again quickly. "Where's Mummy?"

"I don't know. She just sent me a message asking me to come and get you."

"Humph…" Alice grabs the daisies and throws them across the lawn.

"It must be important, Ally. She'd be here if she could."

"Don't care anyway," she says with a shrug.

"You don't mean that." I roll her back onto the grass and gently tickle her ribs, sending her into squeals of panicky delight. Then stand up and hold out my hand. "Come on, Bugsy, let's get home and wait for your mum."

She raises her hand to mine, letting her weight flop backwards as I heave her to her feet. It's not easy. Alice is seven now, and getting heavier by the day.

Soon, I think, I won't be able to lift her at all.

There's no sign of Martha's car in the driveway of Dial House, so I take the key from its hiding place under the birdbath and unlock the back door. Rudman mobs us the moment we step inside, running round our legs in little circles of joy, barking and trying to lick our knees.

I dump our school bags on a chair and look for a note. Nothing. There's a stack of plates by the dishwasher, and jam and butter still out on the kitchen table. Martha really must have left in a hurry.

"Hungry?" I ask Alice.

She shakes her head, so I make up a couple of glasses of squash, grab a few biscuits for me, and take them outside to the hammock strung between the apple trees. It's the first warm day of spring, and there's a gentle buzz of insects in the air. The garden is full of birdsong and half-forgotten smells – apple blossom and fresh green grass and something darker, more earthy.

Rudman hurtles around the lawn in ecstasy at being released, then flops panting at our feet. I'm guessing he's been shut indoors all day.

Slumped together in the hammock, Alice makes me tell her stories. It's more boring than difficult. Like a lot of kids with Down's syndrome, she wants to hear the same ones over and over. So I tell her the tale of the three goats and the troll under the bridge, and as soon as I finish she begs me to start again, her little round face a perfect blank as she listens. As if she's hearing it for the very first time.

Third go round, she falls asleep. I remove her glasses, placing them on the lawn by the base of the tree. Think about doing some English revision, but I know I'll wake her if I get up. So I rest my head on the side of the hammock and let my mind settle on the question it's been circling all afternoon – why Janet Reynolds has asked to see Martha.

She must have something to tell her. Something about Danny. Something she didn't want to say over the phone.

After all this time – three and a half years now – I just know that can't be anything good.

Danny.

I try to picture his face, but all that comes is the one from the photo, the one that appeared on all the posters. I've forgotten so much of him, I think, with a sinking feeling of sadness. How he looked. His voice, bright and teasing. The way he made everything seem so easy.

I feel an ache, too, at the thought of Martha. Of what she must be going through right now.

Underneath the hammock Rudman starts yipping in his sleep, his legs twitching as he chases something in his dreams. A cat maybe. Or rabbits. Alice stirs beside me, stretching an arm out so it rests on mine. I leave it there until it feels uncomfortably heavy, then shift over to give her more room, closing my eyes again and trying to settle the swirl of my thoughts.

But my mind is as restless as Rudman's dreams and keeps dragging me back to all those places I thought I'd left behind. Danny's disappearance. The search. The endless waiting, the constant hoping.

And the last time PC Janet Reynolds called Martha and Paul. When they found the body.

The memory leaves my breath catchy and raw, in contrast to Alice's slow, regular exhale. I feel suddenly trapped, airless. I want to run away, get on a bus or a boat or a train, anything to take me far away from the bad news I know is waiting for me.

After all, what are the chances this will be another false alarm?

2
then

Daniel Geller disappeared on a Sunday afternoon in late September – a week after his thirteenth birthday. Not that I knew then that he'd gone. Not even that evening, when Dad stuck his head round my bedroom door.

"Any idea where Danny is?"

I put down my book on the slave trade. Dad looked distant and dishevelled, his eyes not quite meeting mine. He ran his hand over his hair, which seemed to have grown thicker and wilder in the year since Mum died.

I shrugged. "Isn't he at home?"

"Not according to his mother."

Dad removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes, staring absently at the homework scattered across my bedroom floor. He had that look about him again, like there was something on his mind he was struggling to find words for.

But then there was always something. Usually work.

"She's still on the phone. Can you speak to her, Hannah?" His mouth made the awkward movement that these days passed for a smile. "I'm rather in the middle of things at the moment…"

A few seconds later he was back with the handset, dropping it onto my bed like he couldn't get rid of it fast enough. Dad always avoided speaking to Martha. Never got beyond a perfunctory greeting, the briefest exchange of information.

I heard the closing click of his study door. I put down my pen and pressed the phone to my ear. It emitted a tiny, furious bark.

"Hi, Martha."

"Hannah, sweetheart, is Danny there?" Despite Rudman's yapping in the background, I could hear the worry in her voice.

"No. I thought he was with you."

"I haven't seen him since this morning. It's almost nine."

I glanced outside at the gathering darkness. In the house opposite, lights glowed in the upstairs windows.

Another volley of frantic barking in my ear. A groan from Martha. "Hang on a sec…" A muffled sound, then her voice scolding Rudman.

"Sorry, Hannah," she said, slightly breathless. "I've no idea what's got into that animal. Anyway, I'm a bit concerned. I've tried Danny's mobile half a dozen times, and he hasn't answered."

"He cycled back here with me hours ago. I assumed he went on home."

"Did he say so?"

I thought for a moment. "No, I don't think so."

"Any ideas where he might have gone?"