

Six

by Sarah Penwarden

Hannah sits on her bed with the presents laid out. She has lip gloss, fluffy pink pens, notebooks, and little gold bags to put them all in. One each for Chelsea, Emi, Amber, Sophie, and Ruby. Her mother can't understand why the girls are getting stuff when it's Hannah's birthday, but Hannah wants to give them something little, just for fun.

Their group began with Chelsea on the very first day of school. Hannah hadn't wanted her mum to go. She'd stood in the classroom, trying not cry. Then she heard a voice, and there was a girl with a blonde ponytail. The girl had freckles and pale blue eyes. Her eyes weren't friendly exactly. They were more like *knowing* eyes, as if she was sizing Hannah up.

"I'm Chelsea," the girl said. "I'll show you the junior playground." Chelsea had taken Hannah's hand, and they ran outside. They became best friends. They had a joint birthday party three years in a row, with their parents looking on, smiling. Then in year 3, Emi Waterfield started school – and they became three.

Last term, when they began intermediate, Hannah got the feeling Chelsea was a bit bored with their group. There were so many new girls, so many possible friends to choose from. It was Chelsea who got to know Amber and Sophie at netball practice. And it was Chelsea who sat next to Ruby on the bus. So now there were six of them.

Hannah checks the gold bags one more time. She bounces down the stairs and into the lounge. "Mum, I'm thinking I want ginger crunch, cupcakes, and those fruit skewers – you know, the ones with marshmallows. And maybe some popcorn."



Mum looks up from her work. "Yes, love. It's all arranged. And I've got the DVD booked, and I've ordered the cake you wanted. You just need to ask Emi's mother to pick Amber up on the way."

Hannah's impatient to have things organised. She phones Emi straight away, but they get distracted talking about Hannah's PE class. Alesha twisted her ankle, and Miss Trotter was gone for half the period. "Most of the kids started playing bull rush," Hannah tells Emi, "and some got rough, so Chelsea went to find Miss Trotter, and then Afa called her teacher's pet and –"

"Chelsea's not the teacher's pet," Emi interrupts her. "People always say that. It makes me really mad!"

"I know," Hannah says, ignoring the funny feeling that rises up. It's not like she was agreeing with them. Hannah always has the slight worry that Emi likes Chelsea more than Emi likes her. Would Emi be as mad if people called Hannah teacher's pet?

She swallows hard and continues. "I forgot to ask. When you come to my party on Saturday, can your mum pick up Amber?"

"Sure," Emi says. "We'll be there at three."

"No, it's two. My party starts at two."

"But don't you remember? Everyone's going over to Chelsea's place first to meet Twinkle. Then we're coming to your party."

"Oh," Hannah says. They're going to Chelsea's? Hannah's already met the new puppy, a tiny bundle of grey fluff with raisin eyes. The others have

only seen photos. Hannah understands they want to go – but why on her birthday?

"Chelsea said you wouldn't mind," Emi adds.

Hannah's heart thumps. Her mind races with more questions. How come she doesn't know? And why isn't she invited?

"We talked about it yesterday, at break. Don't you remember?"

Emi sounds irritated, but Hannah doesn't remember. Maybe they talked when she went to the toilet. Or maybe she was at the tuck shop. Or maybe the other girls talked on purpose when Hannah wasn't there.

"Why don't you ring Chelsea?" Emi says. "Talk to her about it." Hannah hears a yawn. "See you tomorrow," and Emi hangs up.

Hannah stares at the phone for a while. Very slowly, she punches in Chelsea's number.

"Hello?"

Hannah takes a deep breath. "Hey. It's me. Emi says that everyone's going to your place on Saturday to see Twinkle. Is that right?"

"The girls are *dying* to meet Twinkle. I knew you wouldn't mind, and we'll definitely be at your place by three. Is that OK?"

It isn't OK, but Hannah doesn't know how to say this. "Sure," she says. "I guess." Her voice is very quiet, but Chelsea doesn't pick up on it. "I'll see you tomorrow," Hannah says.



Hannah puts the phone down. Her heart feels like someone's squeezing it. She walks back into the lounge and sits on the sofa, letting her hair fall over her eyes. After a while, her mother looks up. "Everything all right, love?"

Hannah tells her mum the whole story. Her mum's mad – Hannah can see it – but Hannah knows she won't say anything mean about Chelsea and the other girls. Instead, she goes back to the obvious. "But didn't you arrange for everyone to come here at two o'clock?"

Hannah keeps her head down and kicks the sofa with her feet. "I *thought* I did, but Emi and Chelsea say it's all arranged." Hannah sighs. "We can't change it now."

"Well, OK, but it's your special day. I just hope everyone understands that."

"They do," Hannah says, although she's not so sure.



The day of the party, they arrive on time at three – laughing and noisy. They give her presents and an enormous card. Hannah looks at her five lovely friends and can't stop smiling. Soon they're sitting on the sofa, watching the DVD. It feels like everyone's enjoying themselves, but they've hardly stopped talking about Twinkle: how cute he is; how lucky Chelsea is; how much they want puppies, too. Hannah looks over at Chelsea. Can she see that look in her eyes, or is Hannah imagining things?

Hannah gets up and goes into the kitchen. She opens the fridge to pull out the little bottles of drink. Then she walks over to the sliding door. It's late afternoon, and the garden's empty and quiet. There's a pile of rusty leaves gathered at the foot of the cherry tree. A sudden breeze scatters them across the lawn. Another gust of wind and the leaves are gone.

Hannah sighs. If things are changing, what can she do? Maybe it's all just in her head, anyway. She's been friends with Chelsea for six years, and they've always worked things out before.

She's going back to the others when Mum comes into the kitchen. "Everything OK, love?" she asks.

"Yes, Mum," Hannah says.

"Everything's fine."



illustrations by Bridget Monro

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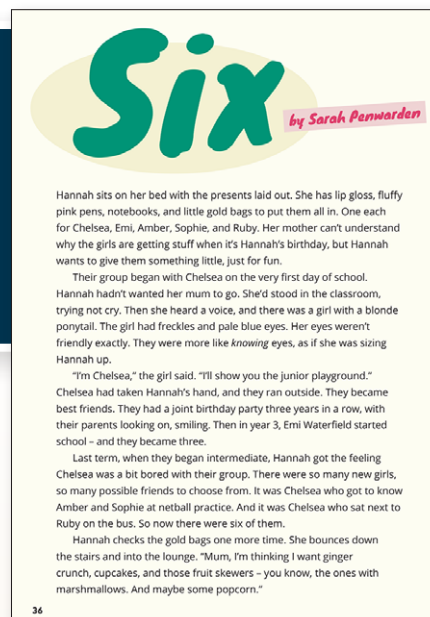
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