

GOLD MEDAL MYSTERIES



MULTI-MEDAL WINNING PARALYMPIAN

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CHAPTER 1

ON YOUR MARKS

The Tokyo National Sports Stadium was spectacular. As host to the twenty-fifth Games, it was by far the biggest sports arena that Hannah Walker had ever been to. It was so vibrant and colourful as all the flags of the world danced in the wind. Hannah could hardly hear her dad speak over the excitement of the crowd. She watched a group of school children waving the Japanese flag as they saw themselves on the big screen. In the front row, Hannah brushed bits of popcorn off of her navy jumpsuit. Her dad rolled his eyes and laughed.

‘You don’t want to get food down that! You’ve been planning that outfit all week!’

‘I’m just glad it’s not ketchup.’ Hannah rummaged through the maps and notebooks inside her satchel and looked up at her dad. ‘Do we have our flag?’

He unfurled a Union Jack from his pocket. 'Of course we do!'

'Can I hold it?' asked Hannah. 'It might get us on the big screen!'

Her dad grinned. 'We're in the front row. I'll hang it over the railing for you!'

He held out the flag in the wind and attached it at either end of the railings.

Before Hannah could thank him, the lights in the stadium went out and music blasted from the speakers. The moment had finally arrived. The final of the men's one-hundred-metre sprint.

Over her shoulder Hannah heard an American voice squeak, 'Look! The one-hundred-metre dash!' Hannah smiled. She'd never heard that name for the race. It made her feel even further from her home in London, but in a good way. Everybody in the stands went wild as the big screen lit up and the tannoy announced, '*Ladies and gentlemen! Please welcome your athletes for the men's one-hundred-metre final!*'

Hannah leaned over the barrier to catch a glimpse of the emerging sprinters. All she could see was a spotlight shining at the end of the athlete tunnel. The crowd fell silent in anticipation. Hannah's dad grinned and

whispered into her ear, 'Here they come!'

All of a sudden, a beam of light illuminated the track. A name appeared on the screen and the loudspeaker announced, '*In lane eight... Christoph Leichum of Germany!*'

Christoph emerged from the tunnel and waved to a cluster of people in Team Germany T-shirts. The spectators settled down when the next lane lit up and the announcer declared, '*In lane one... Lance Clark of the United States of America!*' There was a particularly big cheer from the American fans. Hannah watched the athletes already on the track stretching as the loudspeakers blared, '*In lane seven... Arturo Maggio of Italy!*' Maggio ran out from the tunnel and leaped into the air.

'In lane two... Jayden Francis of Jamaica!'

The big screen at the end of the stadium caught Hannah's eye. It showed a group of Jamaicans in the crowd, jumping up and down, with the flag of black-and-green triangles with yellow stripes painted on either cheek.

'In lane six—' Hannah pulled out her special competition programme from her satchel as the next name was called out – '*Nathan Henrie of Canada!*'

She flicked through the handbook to find the ‘Start-Line Star Stats’: a fact file about the athletes. As Hugh van Luben walked out to lane three to a wave of cheers from the Dutch, she landed on the box she’d been looking for: *Marks vs Tanaka – the two biggest rivals in all of sporting history*. With one gold medal each from the last two Games, this was the deciding race. The entire stadium had fallen silent as the announcer built up the tension. In the darkness, lane five was lit up in gold and Haru Tanaka’s name was plastered across the boards in the stadium.

The tannoy boomed, *‘In lane five, representing Japan . . .’* Everybody held their breath. *‘Gold medallist and world-record holder . . . HARU TANAKA!’*

The stadium erupted with a level of noise Hannah had never experienced before. As Tanaka walked out to his adoring fans, she and her dad let out a cheer. The Japanese superstar took his place behind the starting blocks and waited as the final name was called out. The only name that had a chance of beating Tanaka. Now lane four went up in lights. This time in red, white and blue. Hannah got up from her seat to catch a glimpse of the final athlete as he emerged from the tunnel.

‘In lane four . . . representing the United States of

America...’ The athlete raised his hand in the air.
‘Jesse Marks!’

After the cheers for Tanaka, Hannah didn’t think the stadium could get any louder. Yet, as the American hero walked out on to the track, the atmosphere was electric – a rush of cheers and stomping. It was impossible to tell one nation’s fans from another’s as everybody got to their feet to applaud Jesse. Hannah watched as the American peeled back one side of his headphones to listen to the noise.

Chants of ‘Jesse! Jesse!’ rang out for everybody to hear.

Jesse kept his head down and raised his arm into the air. He gave a little wave to the crowd, before arriving behind his starting block and dropping his kit into a plastic box.

With all the runners now making their final preparations, the chants for Jesse were still ringing out. Hannah beat her hand on the railings to the rhythm. ‘Jesse! Jesse!’

A smart official stood at the side of the track in grey trousers and a navy blazer. *She must be the starting official*, thought Hannah. The woman raised her hand and each of the sprinters made their way to the blocks. The Games volunteers put their fingers to their lips and

the big screens displayed QUIET PLEASE. Within seconds the crowd fell silent and Hannah's chest went tight with suspense. The official with the starting gun stood up and brought what looked like a walkie-talkie to her mouth.

'*On your marks...*' said a speaker from each of the blocks.

The athletes took their start positions and Haru stamped his foot against the wedge. The clatter echoed around the stadium.

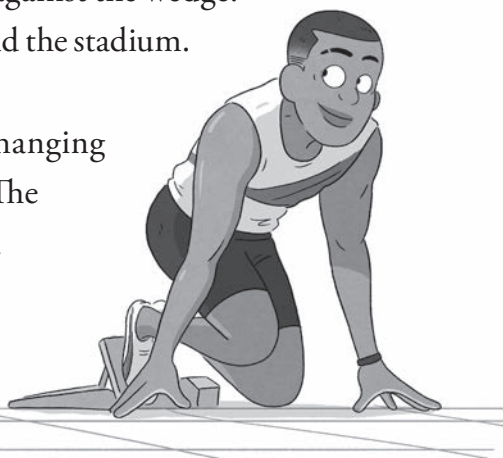
'*Set.*'

Hannah was almost hanging over the railings now. The sprinters were coiled and ready to strike.

BANG!

At the sound of the

gun, the athletes launched themselves off the blocks and into the race. The crowd screamed as the Japanese athlete pulled out a tremendous lead with his world-famous lightning-fast start. Behind him came Marks, Francis and Maggio, all in a line. Hannah gasped and it seemed like the rest of the crowd gasped with her. Jesse had stepped up a gear and was powering down the



second fifty metres. Desperate cheers from the spectators made Tanaka and Marks run even faster. Hannah saw the determination in Jesse's face as he refused to give up.

She found herself willing the American on. 'Go, Jesse!' she shouted.

The American closed the gap even further and with fifteen metres to go, the rivals were neck and neck. Hannah's dad joined her in yelling, 'Come on, Jesse!'

Hannah didn't dare blink. As Tanaka and Marks battled their way to the finish, the American appeared to have a toe in front! They stretched their necks in a last-ditch effort and dipped over the finish line. Everyone in the Tokyo National Sports Stadium looked up at the scoreboard in hope. Hannah leaped on to her chair when she saw the results. Jesse had won by two milliseconds! In a new world-record time!

'He's done it!' Hannah cried. 'He's won!'

She watched Haru crouched down on the track, gasping for air. He caught a glimpse of Jesse and shot to his feet to give him a hug. The smile on Haru's face lit up the big screen and his fans all jumped up to applaud him.

'Look!' Her dad pointed to the athletes on their lap of honour. 'They're coming this way!'

Hannah dived back into her satchel and pulled out her new compact camera.

‘This is going to be my best photo yet!’

Not far away, she heard the clicking of big professional cameras. She leaned over the barrier to see Jesse and Haru posing together for the press. Hannah brought her camera to her face and pretended to be an international photographer herself, but she couldn’t get a good shot.

‘Ah, they’re just too far away . . .’ She sighed.

Hannah heard a young voice call out behind her.

‘Hey, Jesse! Over here!’ the girl shouted in an American accent.

Before Hannah could turn around, a girl who looked about her age, with glasses and long brown plaits clambered down on to the seat next to her and waved her arms in the air. ‘Jesse!’

Hannah saw Jesse trying to follow the sound.

The girls took one look at each other, nodded and yelled as loud as they could.

‘Jesse, over here!’

Jesse spotted the girls and led Haru over.

‘They’re coming!’ Hannah beamed. ‘It worked!’

Haru gifted Hannah a smile and posed with his Japanese flag. As she snapped away on her camera, the

girl beside her pulled an American flag from her pocket and handed it to her hero.

‘Thank you . . .’ Jesse grinned. ‘What’s your name?’

Hannah felt everybody in the stand crowding around them as the girl replied, ‘Maria.’

Jesse wrapped the flag around his shoulders like a cape.

‘Thank you very much, Maria!’

Haru linked his arm through Jesse’s as they both wore their flags like superheroes.

‘Haru!’ someone shouted down from the stands. ‘Aren’t you angry with Jesse for winning?’

The two athletes laughed.

‘Of course not!’ replied Haru. ‘We’re rivals for nine seconds, and friends the rest of the time.’

‘I don’t suppose that you have time for a quick photo with my daughter, do you?’ Hannah’s dad asked, taking her camera.

Hannah wasn’t sure her beam could get any wider as both Jesse and Haru climbed up to the barrier and stood either side of her to pose. As her dad clicked, Hannah saw a woman with golden-brown curls in a long silk dress step over the row of seats.

‘Quick, Maria!’ She was gesturing to the American girl. ‘Move in!’

‘Mom . . .’ The girl sighed, shuffling into the shot. Hannah’s dad chuckled. ‘Smile, everyone!’

He and Maria’s mum clicked their cameras and then thanked the two legends. Jesse high-fived the girls and turned back to the track.

‘Thanks for the flag!’

Haru bowed to the crowd and rushed to rejoin his friend on their lap of honour. Hannah stared at her palm in awe.

‘Wow!’ She turned to her dad. ‘I’m never washing my hand ever again!’

Maria squealed, ‘Damn, I just met Jesse Marks!’

Her mum stashed her phone away and teased, ‘I know you don’t like photos, but I bet you’re glad you’ve got that picture, aren’t you?’ She turned to Hannah’s dad and smiled. ‘Thank you for letting Maria join the photo.’

‘Being together is what these Games are all about!’ He beamed. ‘And Hannah doesn’t mind – do you, Hannah?’

Hannah shook her head.

‘Well, thank you, Hannah,’ the lady said. ‘I’m Carmella, by the way.’

‘Nice to meet you.’ Hannah’s dad smiled. ‘I’m Michael Walker.’

The adults began chatting and Hannah took her seat next to the girl.

‘So you might have guessed, I’m Hannah.’

‘I’m Maria.’ The girl stuck out her hand.

Instead of shaking it, Hannah laughed.

‘Oh.’ Maria looked panicked. ‘Do you not shake hands in England?’

‘No, we do!’ said Hannah. ‘I just only have one arm.’ She showed Maria the empty right sleeve of her blouse.

‘Oh, in that case –’ Maria cheerfully swapped hands – ‘I’ll offer you this one.’

The two girls shared a grin as they shook left hands.

‘It’s very nice to meet you, Maria,’ Hannah replied.