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HarperCollins *Children's Books*

CHAPTER 1

We watch the war on TV most nights as it grows worse and gets closer.

Dad sits there, tutting and shaking his head, calling the prime minister names. My older sister, Alex, gets angry, disagreeing with everything Dad says about it, though I don't think she understands it much better than any of us. Then they shout.

Mam gets upset with both of them, and she has even started shooing me out of the room when it comes on. She says, 'You're only twelve, Willa. You don't need to see this stuff.'

Then Dad says, 'This is history happening right now. History girl needs to see it!'

'History girl' – ha! I won the Year Six history prize last summer, and Dad hasn't stopped going on about it. He loves stuff like that. Me, I just wrote an essay about the American president John F. Kennedy (the one who was murdered in 1963), with a cool drawing that I copied from a photo and coloured in really carefully.

When it comes to what's happening now, and World

War Three being just round the corner, I'm scared. Everyone is. Well, everyone apart from Manny Weaver, but we'll come to him soon enough.

Even if I do leave the room, it makes no difference. It's there when I open my laptop or my phone: video clips of bombs falling from planes, smoking buildings, people being dug out of rubble, angry mobs throwing things at angry soldiers, and angry people posting angry messages on Kwik-e.

I hate it, but it's pretty hard not to look. You know what I mean. You've probably seen the same sort of stuff.

I'm quite good at understanding history when it's in the past. Less so when it's happening all around me.

I don't even know why they're fighting. Water, I think. And oil, probably. God? In some places, I think it's all three. One bunch of people hating another bunch of people, everyone else taking sides, and suddenly . . . boom! There's a war. That seems to be how it works. Mam says I shouldn't be scared because the war is happening miles and miles away in other countries. But it's getting closer; everyone knows that.

My school prize, by the way, was a book called *A Little History of the World*. There are a lot of wars in it. It sits on my shelf, more or less unread. Every time I go to pick it up, I remember my name being announced in the school hall and nobody cheering.

Mam and Dad couldn't be at the prize-giving because

they had a big meeting with the SunSeasons people who are going to buy our family business and merge it with the bigger (and much nicer) park nearby. They didn't see what happened – the tumbleweed moment when I walked on to the stage and only the teachers clapped – and I haven't really told them. I haven't really told anyone because there's no one to tell. I suppose I could tell old Maudie, but seeing as she helped me so much with the essay it would only upset her. I've kept it to myself.

Meanwhile, the certificate I got is still on the mantelpiece, next to Dad's air-force medals, and the photo-and-candle shrine to baby Alexander. He was my older brother who didn't make it past eight days and is now part of history himself.

Right now, they're arguing again, Mam and Dad, and their door just slammed. It's sometimes about the war, usually about work. The business is in trouble, I know that much. Mam calls Dad 'lazy and unimaginative'; he calls her 'controlling and obsessive'. I can hear them from my room, hissing at each other like angry cats.

Alex stays in her own room, headphones on, fighting a game-war on her computer with someone she's never met. It wouldn't be so bad if she would at least talk to me, but instead she just sighs and seethes like the faulty boiler in the shower block.

Conflict? It's all around me, and I hate it.

Then, before we know it, the prime minister's on

everyone's screens saying that Britain may be forced to declare war, if our allies do. Suddenly it's all anyone is talking about.

That is when I meet Manny and find the Sideways World, and nothing is the same ever again.