

## WOMEN'S FICTION: HANNAH'S TURTLES BY KAREN CORSI

*Summary: "Hannah's Turtles" is a story about two women who develop a friendship through an Autistic girl named Hannah. Cassie is Hannah's mother and Jen is a behavior therapist that provides home based services to Hannah and her family. Cassie's husband David is serving a 24 month sentence in a mandatory rehabilitation facility due to crimes related to his addiction to prescription pain medication. Dave loves his family and spends his rehabilitation time learning all he can about his daughter's autism and understanding the root of the inner pain he was trying to medicate. Jen is in an emotionally and mentally abusive marriage and finds herself questioning the harm it is doing to her children. Through their growing friendship they find the strength to face the issues in their lives. In a dramatic turn they also literally save the life of the precious autistic girl that brought them together. Each chapter shares the voice of both Jen and Cassie as they tell the story of their precious Hannah.*

### CHAPTER ONE: Jennifer

The smell of fresh baking dough and Italian spices encircles my head, like something out of an old cartoon, pulling me through the pizzeria door. An ear-piercing screech cuts through the wafting aromas, followed by a baby's cry. A second later a foam cup with a plastic lid comes crashing to the floor, ice and liquid flowing everywhere. Instinctively I look to where all the commotion is coming from and I see her sitting at a table near the window in the back. She shifts her toddler from one knee to the other as she tries to get her older daughter to focus on getting back to eating.

Cassie Mitchell - my potential client.

A man comes out from behind the counter wearing a shirt with the name Joe stitched neatly along the top of the left pocket. I assume he is the namesake of the pizza place where we have agreed to meet. He doesn't look the least bit put out as he reaches for the mop and pail carrying them over to the spill.

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“Sorry Joe!” the woman apologizes. “Hannah didn’t mean it. I moved her cup to the other side of her plate because Katie was trying to grab a piece of her chicken tender breading. She just didn’t want it there. I’m so sorry!”

“No worries Miss Cassie. I get it all cleaned up for Hannah!” he assures her in his thick Italian accent.

Careful not to step in his way, I take a minute before I attempt to skirt around the mess. The extra time allows me a closer look at this woman I may be working with. Despite the clear challenge of an active toddler and another child throwing a drink, she looks remarkably put together in an effortless, casual way. Fine, blonde hair is pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Wispy bangs and loose tendrils fall to frame her delicate features. She pairs a light blue, peasant-style blouse with jeans and slip on sneakers. Similar in age and style, my darker color choice of maroon blouse with black jeans rolled to just above the ankles and black ballet flats enhance our contrasts. Where her look is light and airy, mine is what people might call earthy. My chestnut hair flows long over my shoulders and despite the hairdresser’s assurance that the layers would allow for movement it just comes across as bushy. My violet-blue eyes are unique in that one quarter of my left iris is brown, a fact that I have embraced more as I have grown older. It’s the only feature that adds interest to my otherwise ordinary looks.

I reach the table and she looks up with a welcoming smile.

“Hi, I’m Jennifer O’Shea,” I introduce myself. “You must be Cassie Mitchell?”

“I am,” she responds. “Forgive me if I don’t get up, but I am finally getting them both to eat and that is a huge accomplishment! Please join us.”

“Thanks,” I say. “This must be Hannah? Hello, Hannah.”

Hannah continued to peel the breading from her chicken tenders as if she didn’t hear me.

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“Hannah, look at me,” her mother directed. Once she had eye contact she continued. “Say Hello to Ms. O’Shea.”

“Hello to Ms. O’Shea.” Hannah repeated the words like a parrot, and went back to peeling the breading from her chicken.

“You can call me Jen,” I tell them both, again not getting any response from Hannah.

“Sorry you walked in on all this. I moved Hannah’s drink to the other side of her plate so grabby little fingers couldn’t reach it,” she says as she lovingly nuzzles her baby’s neck, “And she threw it. It’s not meant to be fresh. In Hannah’s mind the cup just didn’t belong there. I’m glad the place isn’t crowded at the moment. I try to plan eating out when there aren’t many people around. Unfortunately most people don’t understand. I get stares or comments under their breath about if that was their child what they would do! Sometimes I just want to scream that she’s not being bad, she is Autistic!”

“Well I understand completely and you won’t be getting any evil eyes from me.” I reassure her with a smile.

“Food is definitely one of her issues as I am sure you can tell,” Cassie laughs slightly. I am certain she is trying to make light of what must be a daily battle. “She loves the chicken tenders from Joe’s but has to peel the breading off. I have tried to order them without breading but she won’t eat them that way. She will only eat the chicken tenders from here, but I have to stop on the way and get her fries from her favorite fast food place. I am so glad Joe here understands and lets us bring them in. “

“Anything for my friend Hannah,” Joe says as he hands Cassie a fresh cup of soda.

“Do you know how hard it is to find a place like this? You are the best Joe!” Cassie quips.

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“You be sure and tell all your friends how great we are here. It’s good for business,” Joe says in his all professional like way. But you can see in his eyes that he has a special place in his heart for this family. It should have been my first indication that they were going to be more than just clients to me as well.

“Is food a problem with this beautiful little one too?” I ask reaching out my hand to Hannah’s younger sister. “Did you say her name is Katie?”

“Yes, this is Katie and her food issues are almost as bad as Hannah’s. Hopefully that’s just a toddler thing she will grow out of before she turns into a chicken tender herself.” Cassie laughs for real this time.

“I remember when my daughter was that age. I thought she was going to eat baby cereal forever; she loved the stuff. Baby oatmeal, rice cereal, barley cereal, swirl a little applesauce in there and she was in heaven. She would have it for breakfast, lunch and dinner if it was her choice,” I said. “She still eats it every now and then, but has expanded her pallet to include other foods as well.”

“If Katie benefits from Hannah’s eating program then you are truly going to be a sanity saver for this Mom. How old is your daughter now?” Cassie asked.

“My daughter Sarah is 5 and my son Cole is 8. They are great kids but not without their own issues,” I laughed. “Does Hannah have any other brothers or sisters?”

“No, just Hannah and Katie is plenty.” Cassie replied.

“Does their Dad live with you?” I have worked with a wide variety of families so I have learned to ask.

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“Their Dad does live with us,” Cassie says hesitantly. But quickly adds, “He is going to be away for a bit though, for work, so it will just be us girls for now.”

I could tell by the catch in her voice and the quick change in her face that there was more to it than she let on. But as far as the information I need, it was plenty for me to know he would not be a part of our immediate training.

I take mental note and don't pull out my yellow legal pad just yet; I want to get a feel for the family first. Other behaviorists like to gather all the facts and information in the first meeting. I understand that, but it is not how I like to work myself. I've always been a person that feels things out and will lead with my emotions and instinct. In many cases, personal life being a classic example, it can be self-inflictingly painful. It also happens to be what makes me very good at what I do. The children and their families that I work with are people, not “cases”. I like to get to know them and have them get to know me as well. If you make a connection with a family they are going to be more willing to trust you when you ask them to do the hard stuff. In order to help these children, there is going to be plenty of the hard stuff to get through before it gets better. And it can get better! I believe this to my core or I wouldn't be in this line of work.

Home Based Service is completely different than working with children in a school or center setting. You are entering the family's home, making changes to their routine, setting up the structure and schedules that are crucial for their child's success. These changes may not come naturally to them and it's not easy to rethink all the details of daily life and adapt to their child's needs. If you make a connection it helps make it a little easier for them.

“So how is Hannah with Katie? Do they interact much?” I asked.

“For the most part Hannah does her thing and Katie plays around her. Hannah has her self-stimulatory behaviors, or “stims” that she does when she is excited or anxious. She flaps her

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hands and likes to shake her head from side to side real fast. Katie thinks this is hysterical and laughs herself silly when Hannah does it. She even tries to imitate her and I know I should probably be worried, but it's just so damn cute I end up laughing right along with them!"

I start smiling myself just thinking about it and I have truly made up my mind that I am going to like working with this family very much!

Cassie

"I guess that went pretty well ladies," Cassie says as she gets her daughters settled into the car after their lunch meeting. "I mean we didn't send her running off screaming, so all and all I would say it was a good first meeting. I think I am going to like her. What about you Hannah Girl? Are you going to like your new teacher, Jen O'Shea?" Cassie asks knowing she is not going to get any response.

In the seven years since Cassie and David had Hannah she has never had a conversation with her daughter. She has had what teachers will call successful communication, but not a real conversation. Hannah can answer questions about what she wants to wear, this or that given two choices. You can ask if she wants a hot dog or grilled cheese for lunch. She can take your hand and lead you toward something she is looking for. But as for the rest, Cassie has no idea for the most part what her own child is thinking. She doesn't know her favorite color, or what her favorite song is. Which Disney princess is her favorite? Does she really like that much ketchup on her scrambled eggs or is she trying to drown out the taste of the eggs like Cassie did when she was a kid?

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She does know that Hannah LOVES turtles! She was given a DVD for her birthday when she was 2 years old all about turtles. It showed turtles swimming in the water and explained how turtles hatch from eggs and how they grow. It told about the different types of turtles and how they make their homes/nests. Kind of an odd gift for a two year old, but it came from David's younger brother who knows pretty much nothing about little girls and it was educational. Hannah must have watched the DVD a million times. She could talk right along with the video word for word. She would recite parts of it out loud when she got excited or frustrated. Cassie and David originally even thought Hannah was advanced doing all this at 2 and 3 years old. Later, however, they were told this was called scripting and was quite common for children on The Autism Spectrum.