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Opening extract from

Time After Time

Written by

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Chapter 1

Beth has been my best friend forever.

You know what it's like when you have a very best friend. It's like she's the only one in the whole world who really, really gets you.

You know what she's thinking and she knows what you're thinking, even when no one has said a single word.

It's like she's a part of you, the better part, the part that doesn't get embarrassed over stupid stuff.

You want to spend all your time with your best friend. You want to have sleepovers every Saturday night. You wish she was always around, ready to listen to your secrets and laugh at your jokes – even when they're not the tiniest bit funny.

You wish your best friend could be your sister, so she could live in your house and you could be together every moment of every day.

My advice? Be careful what you wish for.

* * *

My dad left four years ago when I was eight. One minute we were a normal boring family and the next minute everything changed. The day after his forty-second birthday, Dad turned into a hippy and set off for Africa 'to find himself'.

Mum went totally crazy when Dad left. She stayed in bed for a whole week, crying and eating crisps. When I got home from school, there was never anything to eat, even though the whole house smelled like there had been an explosion in a crisp factory. It wasn't funny.

I wanted to help Mum, but I was only a kid – what was I supposed to do? And anyway, I was sad too. Mum was so busy feeling sorry for herself, she often forgot that I was missing dad too. We'd both lost someone.

Sometimes I sat by Mum's bed and held her hand, but it didn't make any difference. The pile of empty crisp bags and gross soggy tissues just spread further and further across the floor, while I got more and more scared. They make movies about the kind of stuff that was happening in our house – sad, black-and-white movies that don't usually have happy endings.

* * *

Then one day, after weeks and weeks, I came home from school to find all the windows in the house wide open and lively music floating out. I felt like doing a dance of joy when I heard Mum's voice calling to me. 'Hi, darling. Dinner's nearly ready. I'm just doing a little bit of craft work.'

Mum had always liked making stuff, so I felt good as I walked into the kitchen. I didn't feel quite so good when I saw the boxes of Dad's super-precious foreign DVD collection scattered around the floor. I felt sick when I saw that Mum had sliced up the DVDs and was stringing the pieces together to make some kind of weird shiny, rattly curtain.

'Isn't it beautiful?' she asked. 'I'm going to hang it in the living room when it's finished.'

'But Dad's DVDs! One day he's going to want them. What's he going to say when he comes back home and finds out that you've ...?'

'Oh, don't you worry about Dad. He's a hippy now, remember? He'd love this kind of thing. Now, would you mind bringing down his ties from his wardrobe? I've thought of a brilliant way to turn them into a tablecloth.'

My big mistake was thinking that Dad was going to come back.

* * *

My first Skype with Dad was really weird. It was so nice to see his face, I couldn't find the words to tell him how mad I was with him.

'Why did you go?' I asked, trying not to cry. 'Why did you leave us?'

The screen was all fuzzy and jumpy, but I thought I could see tears in his eyes.

'I'm so, so sorry, Mollikins,' he said. 'Your mum and I had been struggling for a bit, and ...'

'But you could have fixed whatever was wrong. You didn't have to run away. Why did you have to be such a total wimp?'

'I know it was cowardly, but I couldn't think of anything else to do.'

'Why can't you just come back home? Why can't we just pretend that none of this ever happened?'

He didn't answer my question, and I knew that was a really bad sign.

'I know I've hurt you, Molly,' he said. 'But you have to understand, none of this is your fault. I love you as much as ever, and so does Mum. That's never going to change.'

He said lots more stuff like that and after he'd gone, I lay on my bed and cried for ages. When I got up an hour later, I felt a lot better, as if the black cloud over my head was starting to float away a tiny bit. Like I said, it was very strange.

After that Dad Skyped whenever he could. We didn't cry as much, and sometimes we actually laughed. Even when he was hundreds of miles away, Dad was still funny, and he told me hilarious stories about the weird and wonderful people he met on his travels.

After a bit, I noticed that lots of kids in my class had parents who didn't live together. Beth's mum died when she was a baby, so she just had her dad to live with, and one boy I knew had never even

seen his dad. I'm not sure why, but knowing you're not the only one makes things seem better, like your life isn't as crazy as you thought it was.

As the weeks went by, things changed slowly. Life didn't exactly feel right, but it stopped feeling so weird, which is good, I guess.

* * *

When everything Dad ever owned had been chopped up or mangled or dumped, Mum slowly came to her senses and started to act normally again – or as normally as she had ever acted. For a while things were kind of OK, with the two of us just getting on with stuff.

And then Mum started to get friendly with Beth's dad, Jim, something NO ONE had seen coming.

At first Mum and Jim started to sit together when Beth and I were playing basketball matches, which was kind of nice, because seeing Mum sitting on her own always made me sad. Once or twice the four of us went for hot chocolate after the game. I liked that, because sometimes when it's just Mum and me, things can get a bit too intense. I liked the way Jim didn't talk down to Beth and me. He asked what we thought about stuff, and he listened to our answers like our opinions really mattered. And I guess it was nice for Beth too, because she's always got on really well with my mum, and they laugh at the same kind of lame jokes that are totally not funny.

They were fun evenings.

Then one Friday, Beth sent me a text. 'Dad and I are coming to your place for dinner. How cool is that?'

'Totally cool,' I replied, showing just how innocent I used to be.

* * *

The doorbell rang on the dot of seven. Beth and I hugged while Mum and Jim did this weird shuffle, like they couldn't make up their minds whether they should shake hands or do the double-cheek kissy thing grown-ups love so much. It was a bit awkward, but I blamed the fact that Jim was holding a lasagne and a bowl of salad, and my mum was carrying our best tablecloth and the flower arrangement she'd been working on for the whole afternoon.

During dinner Beth and I chatted as usual, but when the two of us had our mouths full, normal conversation almost stopped. It's never a good sign when you start to notice the clatter of cutlery on plates, and the sound of radiators clicking on and off.

'That flower arrangement is like something from the Chelsea Flower Show, Charlotte,' said Beth's dad.

Three times!

'This is the nicest lasagne I've ever eaten, Jim.'

I'm not sure how many times Mum said this – by the fifth time I'd pretty much lost the will to live.

'Isn't it adorable how your mum and my dad are hanging out so you and I can spend more time together?' said Beth when the two of us went upstairs after dinner.

'Yeah, but I wish they weren't so awkward. I thought they'd never stop going on about the flowers and the lasagne. It was like the world final of the lame compliments competition.'

'Totally – and it was hard work filling all those long silences.'

'It's like we're the grown-ups, trying to get the little ones through their first play date,' I said.

I should never have joked about Mum and Jim and dates.

That was mistake number two.

* * *

Things pretty much snowballed from there.

Mum got her hair cut short, even though Dad had always loved her long hair.

Lots of Mum's sentences started with 'Jim says ...'

She started to wear lipstick again.

Mum went over to Beth's place and made curtains for their living room.

I lost count of the times Jim showed up at our place saying, 'I just happened to be passing so ...'

I lost count of the times he just happened to be passing with a dish of lasagne in the back of his car.

I realised that I've never really liked lasagne.

There were no more awkward silences at the dinner table. Sometimes Beth and I had to fight to be heard, because all of a sudden, Mum and Jim had an awful lot to say to each other.

Beth and I tried not to make a big deal of all of this. When you pass an ambulance at the side of the road, you can lean out of your car window and stare, or you can look the other way. Beth and I went for the looking-the-other-way option.

Mistake number three.