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Missing You

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CHAPTER 1

My name is Jessica Mastriani.

You might have heard of me. It's fine with me if you haven't, though. In fact, I kind of prefer it that way.

The reason you might have heard of me is that I'm the one the press kept calling "Lightning Girl," because I got struck by lightning a few years ago and developed this so-called psychic power to find missing people in my dreams.

It was this very big deal at the time. At least in Indiana, which is where I'm from. There was even a TV show about me, based on my life. It wasn't EXACTLY based on my life. I mean, they made a lot of stuff up. Like about me going to Quantico to train as an FBI agent. That never happened. Oh, and they killed off my dad on the show, too. In real life, he's actually alive and well.

But I didn't mind (though my dad wasn't too happy about it) because they still had to pay me. For the right

to use my name and my story and all of that. It ended up being quite a lot of money, even though the show is only on cable, not even one of the main networks.

My parents take the checks I get every month and invest them for me. I haven't even had to touch the capital yet. I just spend a little bit of the interest now and then, like when I run short on cash for food or the rent or whatever. Which isn't that often lately, because I've got a summer job, and all. Not the world's greatest job or anything. But at least it's not with the FBI, like on the TV show about me.

I did work for the FBI for a while. There was this special division, headed by this guy, Cyrus Krantz. I worked for them for almost a year.

See, it wasn't supposed to go the way it did. My life, I mean. First there was the whole getting struck by lightning thing. That so wasn't in the plans. Not that anyone—anyone sane, anyway—would CHOOSE to get struck by lightning and get psychic powers, because, trust me on this, it completely sucks. I mean, I guess it's all right for the people I helped.

But it was no bed of roses for me, believe me.

Then there was the war. Like the lightning, it just came from out of nowhere. And like the lightning, it changed everything. Not just the fact that suddenly, everyone on our street back in Indiana had an American

flag in their front yard, and we were all glued to CNN 24/7. For me, a lot more changed than just that. I mean, I hadn't even finished high school yet, and still, Uncle Sam was all, "I WANT YOU."

And the thing was, they needed me. *Really* needed me. Innocent people were dying. What was I going to do, say no?

Although the truth is, I tried to say no at first. Until my brother Douglas—the one I'd always thought would be the most against my going—was the one who went, "Jess. What are you doing? You *have* to go."

So I went.

At first they said I could work from home. Which was good, because I really needed to finish twelfth grade, and all.

But there were people they needed to find, fast. What was I supposed to do? It was a *war.*

I know to most people, the war was, like, somewhere way over there. Your average American, I bet they didn't even THINK about it, except, you know, when they turned on the news at night and saw people getting blown up and stuff. "This many U.S. Marines were killed today," they'd say on the news. The next day, people heard, "We found this many terrorists hiding in a cave in the hills of Afghanistan."

Well, it wasn't like that for me. I didn't get to see the

war on the news. Instead, I saw it live. Because I was there. I was there because I was the one telling them which of those caves to look in for those people they needed to find so badly.

I tried to do it from home at first, and then later, from Washington.

But a lot of times, when I'd tell them where to go look, they'd go there and then they'd come back and be all, "There's no one there."

But I knew they were wrong. Because I was never wrong. Or I guess I should say my *power* never was.

So finally I was like, "Look, just send me there, and I'll SHOW you."

Some of the people I found, you heard about on the news. Other people I found, they kept secret. Some of the people I found, we couldn't get to, on account of where they were hiding, deep in the mountains. Some of the people I found, they decided just to keep tabs on, and wait it out. Some of the people I found ended up dead.

But I found them. I found them all.

And then the nightmares came. And I couldn't sleep anymore.

Which meant I couldn't find anyone anymore. Because I couldn't dream.

Posttraumatic stress syndrome. Or PTSS. That's

what they called it, anyway. They tried everything they could think of to help me. Drugs. Therapy. A week by a big fancy pool in Dubai. None of it worked. I still couldn't sleep.

So, in the end, they sent me home, thinking maybe I'd get better there, once everything was back to normal again.

The problem with that was, when I got home everything wasn't back to normal. Everything was different.

I guess that's not fair. I guess what it was, was that *I* was different. Not everyone else. I mean, you see stuff like that—kids screaming at you not to take their father, things blowing up . . . *people* blowing up—and you're only seventeen years old, or whatever—hey, even if you're forty—it makes it hard just to come back home a year later, and, like . . . do what? Go to the mall? Get a pedicure? Watch *SpongeBob SquarePants*?

Please.

But I couldn't go back to doing what I'd been doing, either. I mean, for the FBI. I couldn't find *myself*, let alone anyone else. Because I wasn't "Lightning Girl" anymore.

What I was, I was discovering slowly, was something I hadn't been for a long time:

I was normal.

As normal as a girl like me CAN be, anyway. I mean,

I CHOOSE to wear my hair almost as short as some of the marines I worked with.

And I will admit to having a certain affection for hogs. The motorcycle kind. Not the roll-around-in-mud kind.

And I will admit, my idea of a fun day has never been to yak on the phone or instant message my friends, then go see a fun romantic comedy. For one thing, I only have one, maybe two friends. And for another, I like movies where things blow up.

Or at least I used to. Until things around me *actually* started blowing up on a more or less regular basis. Now I like to see movies about cartoon aliens that come to live with little girls in Hawaii, or fish that are lost. That sort of thing.

Other than those few, minor details, though, I'm normal as apple pie. It took a long time, but I did it. Seriously. I have what, by any standards, could be called a normal life. I live in a normal apartment, with a normal roommate. Well, okay, Ruth, my best friend since forever, isn't exactly normal. But she's normal enough. We do normal things, like shop for groceries together, and order in Chinese food, and watch the dumb TV shows she likes so much.

And okay, Ruth tries to get me to go out all the time, like to concerts in the park, or whatever. And me, I'd

rather stay home and practice my flute. So maybe that's not so normal.

But hey, she got me my summer job. And it's a pretty normal summer job, in that it pays hardly anything. Isn't that what a normal nineteen-year-old pretty much expects? A summer job that pays hardly anything?

So that's normal. Fortunately, with my pension from the FBI—yeah, I was on salary. I wasn't an agent, or anything. But they had to pay me. Are you kidding? Like I was going to work for them for free?—and the interest from my investments from the TV show, plus what Mom and Dad send from home, I get by fine.

Plus, you know, it's not like I'm out here on my own. Ruth and I split everything, the cost of groceries, the rent—which is pretty high, even though we only have a one bedroom, which we also split. Still, it's in Hell's Kitchen, which, in case you didn't know, is in New York City, the most expensive place to live in the world—everything, down the middle.

Anyway, the job . . . I guess it's cool. It helps kids, which, in a weird way, is what I was doing when I first started out with the whole lightning thing, and all (before I started ruining kids' lives, instead of saving them, by helping to arrest their dads). Ruth got a job at this not-for-profit group. She heard about it off the Summer Employment board at school. She ended up

going to Columbia, after being admitted to every single school she applied to.

A lot of people—like Ruth's parents, and her twin brother, Skip, who went to Indiana University, and who is here in New York for the summer, working as an intern at a company down on Wall Street—think Ruth could get a better, more highly paid summer job, considering she goes to Columbia, which is an Ivy League school, and all.

But Ruth's all, "I'm making a difference," which is cool, because she is. What she does is organize musicians and actors and stuff to go around to inner-city day-care centers and camps, and they help the kids put on plays or musicals or whatever, because the city doesn't have enough money to hire actual, certified teachers for this.

At first I thought this was stupid—Ruth's summer job, I mean. What can putting on a play during day camp do for some kid whose mom is a crackhead?

Then one day Ruth forgot her wallet at home and needed me to bring it to her. So I did, even though this put a major cramp in my practicing.

But it ended up being worth it. Because I saw right away that I was wrong. Putting on a play at camp can make a huge difference to a kid, even a kid with serious problems at home (not like having a dad in a U.S.

detention center, but like having a junkie grandma, or whatever). It's pretty cool to see a kid who's never seen a play before suddenly ACTING in one. Or—which is the part where I come in—a kid who's never played a musical instrument suddenly PLAYING one.

And it's cool for me, too, since I get to do what I love doing best, which is play my flute. I mean, I suppose I could have gotten a summer job doing this in an orchestra. But have you ever hung out with people in an orchestra? I'm not talking about kids who are in orchestra at school. I'm talking about actual, paid classical musicians.

Yeah. Well, since I started going to Juilliard last year, I have.

And believe me, it is MUCH more fun to do what I'm doing, which is teach kids who've never seen a flute before how to play one. This rules. Because their eyes get so big when I rip through something really fast, like "Flight of the Bumblebee" or some Tchaikovsky, and then I tell them I can teach them how to do it, too, if they just practice.

And they're all, "No way, I could never do that." And I'm all, "No, seriously. You CAN." And then I show them.

That part kills me every time.

Skip says Ruth should have gotten an internship at some advertising company, and that these kids are never

going to amount to anything no matter how much art we throw at them. He doesn't say that kind of thing to me, but that's only because he wants to get into my pants. The company he's interning for is paying his rent for the summer (which is why he is crashing on our couch: to save his rent stipend for something he really wants, which, knowing him, is probably something completely asinine, like a Porsche). He's here right now, as a matter of fact, sacked out on our couch (or, should I say, his *bed*), watching *Jeopardy!* with my brother Mike, who's also interning in New York for the summer, and also crashing at our place. (He gets the floor. Skip called dibs on the couch first.)

Mike—who ended up at Indiana University, as well, after having deferred admission to Harvard, due to being in love with a girl who later dumped him for a guy she met doing summer stock in the Michigan dunes. We are no longer allowed to mention the name Claire Lippman in our house—is in New York for a summer job that involves a think tank and computers and tracking cyber-terrorists. Sort of like what I was doing during the war, only he gets to do it from a cubicle on the Columbia campus instead of a tent in a sandy desert.

Sometimes Mike talks about his job to us. We all wish he wouldn't.