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opening extract from

Girl, Missing

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1

Who am I?

Who am I?

I sat at the computer in Mum's office and stared at the essay heading. New form teachers always give you homework like that at the start of the year.

Who am I?

When I was younger it was easy. I'd just write down obvious stuff like: *I am Lauren Matthews. I have brown hair and blue eyes.*

But now we're supposed to write about what interests us. Likes and dislikes. Who we are 'inside'.

I needed a break.

I texted my friend Jam. *hw u dng w/ stpd 'who am i' thng?*

A minute later he texted back: *We are sorry to inform you that James 'Jam' Caldwell died from boredom while working on his homework earlier tonight.*

I laughed out loud. Jam always cheers me up. Some of the girls in my class tease me about him. Make out he's my boyfriend. Which is like the stupidest thing ever. Jam and I have been friends since Primary.

Who am I?

I put my head in my hands.

How can anyone work out who they are, unless they know where they come from?

And I have no idea where I come from.

I was adopted when I was three.

A minute later and Mum was calling from downstairs. 'Lauren. Tea's ready.'

I raced down, glad to get away from the essay.

I didn't get away from it for long.

'How's the homework going?' Mum asked, prodding something in a frying pan.

'Mmmn,' I mumbled.

'For goodness' sake, Lauren,' Mum sighed. 'Why can't you speak properly?'

I looked at her. Same old Mum. Short. Bony. Thin-lipped.

I look nothing like her.

I spoke very clearly and slowly. 'Who is my real mother?'

Mum froze. For a second she looked terrified. Then her face went hard like a mask. No emotion.

'I am,' she said. 'What do you mean?'

'Nothing.' I looked away, wishing I hadn't said anything.

Mum sat down, the frying pan still in her hand.

'I thought you weren't bothered about knowing,' she said.

I rolled my eyes. 'I'm not.'

Mum ladled scrambled eggs onto my plate. 'Anyway, I can't tell you. It was a closed adoption. That means neither side knows anything about the other.' She got up, replaced the frying pan on the cooker and turned back to me. Her face was all anxious now. 'Has someone said something at school?'

'No.' I bent over my eggs. Trust Mum to assume somebody else was putting ideas in my head. It would be too much for her to imagine I might have starting thinking about it for myself.

'What's for tea?' Rory pelted in from the garden, his fat cheeks red from the cold air. Rory's eight and the spit of my dad. 'My little test-tube miracle,' my mum calls him. All I can say is, a lot of unpleasant things grow in test tubes.

Rory skidded to a halt at the table, then made a face. 'Scrambled eggs stink.'

'Not as much as you,' I said.

Rory picked up his fork and prodded me with it.

'Ow. Mum, he's hitting me.'

Mum glared at us both. 'Sit, Rory.' Sometimes I wonder if she thinks he's a dog. I heard her say once to a friend, 'Boys are like puppies. All they need is affection and fresh air. Girls are much harder work.'

So why choose me – a girl – in the first place? I remembered all the times when I was little that Mum talked to me about being adopted – about how they picked me out of some catalogue. It used to make me feel special. Wanted. Now it made me feel like a mail-order dress. A dress that didn't fit but that was too much trouble to send back.

'Can Jam come round later?' I asked.

'When you've done your homework – if it isn't too late,' came Mum's predictable reply.

'These eggs look like your puke,' Rory said.

Sometimes I really, really hate him.

I emailed Jam as soon as I went back upstairs.

C u l8r?

His reply came back in seconds: *ill b thr @ 7.*

I checked the time on the corner of the screen: 6.15. I was never going to finish my essay in forty-five minutes.

Who am I?

Adopted. I typed the word into the search engine box.

I'd been thinking about it a lot recently. Last week I'd even checked out some of the adoption information websites. You'd have laughed if you'd seen me: heart thumping, palms sweating, stomach screwed up into a knot.

I mean, it's not as if there's going to be some site that says: *Lauren Matthews – click here for your adoption details.*

Anyway. D'you know what I found out?

That if I wanted to know anything about my life before I was three, I needed Mum and Dad's permission.

How unbelievable is that?

My life. My identity. My past.

But their decision.

Even if I asked, there's no way Mum would say yes. Well, you've seen how she is about the subject. Gets a face on her like a smashed plate.

It would serve her right if I went ahead and did it anyway.

I clicked on the search icon.

Adopted. Nearly a million hits.

My heart thudded. I could feel my stomach clenching again.

I sat back in my chair. Enough.

I was just wasting time. Putting off the homework. I reached over to close the search. And that's when I caught sight of it: *Missing-Children.com.* An international site for lost or missing children. I frowned. I mean, how do you lose a child and them not turn up? I can see how you might lose one for five minutes. Or even an hour. And I know sometimes children go missing 'cause some psycho's murdered them. But Mum's always saying that only happens like once or twice a year.

I clicked through to the homepage. It was a flickering mass of faces. Each face the size of a stamp; each stamp turning into a new face after a few seconds.

My jaw dropped. Did all these faces belong to missing children? I saw a search field. I hesitated. Then I tapped in my name. *Lauren.* I wasn't really thinking about what I was doing. Just messing about – seeing how many missing Laurens there were out there.

It turned out there were eight hundred and seventy-two. Jeez. The computer was flashing at me to refine my search.

Part of me wanted to stop. But I told myself not to be stupid. The flickering faces on the screen weren't adopted children like me – with no past. They were missing kids. Kids with *only* a past.

I just wanted to see who was there.

I added my birth month to the search criteria.

Lauren. March 1992.

I watched as three Laurens appeared on the screen. One was black, missing since she was two weeks old.

One was white with blonde hair – she looked about nine or ten. Yeah – she'd only been missing since 2001.

I stared at the third child.

Martha Lauren Purditt
Case type: lost, injured, missing
Date of birth: March 12 1992
Age now: 14
Birth place: Evanport, Connecticut, USA
Hair: brown *Eyes: blue*

I looked at the face above the words. A chubby, smiling little girl's face. Then at the date she'd gone missing: *September 8 1995.*

Less than two months before I was adopted.

My heart seemed to stop beating.

The birth date was a couple of days out. And I was British, not from America like the missing girl.

So it wasn't possible.

Was it?

The question seeped like a drug through my head, turning me upside down and inside out, filling me up.

Could I be her?

2

Telling Jam

I stared at the little girl on the screen, searching her face for signs that she might be me.

'Lauren, Jam's here.' Mum's shout made me jump.

My heart raced as Jam's footsteps pounded up the stairs. I reached forward and minimised the screen. I ran to the door, just as Jam got there.

'Hi Laurenzo.' Jam smiled. His dark hair was gelled back off his face and he smelled of soap. 'Finished your homework?'

'Yeah. Er . . . no, actually.' I was hardly listening. 'I need something from downstairs.'

Jam frowned, but followed me down to the living room. Mum was sitting on the sofa watching the news on TV.

'Mum, where're our photo albums?'

She stared at me. 'End of the cupboard.' She pointed to a pair of wooden doors in the corner of the room. 'Why the sudden interest?'

I raced over and started pulling out albums, flicking through the pages. 'Where're the oldest ones of me?' I said.

Silence.

I glanced up. Mum and Jam were both looking at me as if I was mad.

'What's this about, sweetheart?' Mum's voice sounded tense.

I put down the album I was holding.

'It's for this "Who am I?" essay,' I said slowly. 'It's finished, but I thought it would be nice to put in a picture of me when I was younger, alongside one of me now. I'm only hurrying cause Jam's here.'

Mum's face relaxed. 'That's a good idea,' she said. 'Though I think I told you to get everything done *before* he came round. Try the green album at the end.'

I pulled it out and opened it at the first page. There I was. Serious little face. Wispy brown bob. I showed Mum. 'When was this taken?' I asked, trying to sound casual.

'Christmas ninety-five,' she said. 'Just after we got you.'

This was the best I was going to get. 'Can I take it?'

'Sure,' Mum said. 'But make sure you bring it back.' She smiled. 'Those pictures are precious.'

I stood up. 'I'll be back in a minute.' I looked from Mum to Jam. He stared back at me suspiciously. 'I just want to scan this in.'

I raced back up to Mum's study and pulled up the *Missing-Children.com* site. I held the photo of me next to the picture on the screen of Martha Lauren Purditt. I

think I'd expected this would prove things one way or the other.

It didn't.

Martha Lauren was chubby and dimpled and laughing.

In the photo from Mum's album my face was thinner and I wasn't smiling.

And yet there were similarities: the shape of the eyes. The crease under the lips. It could be me. It all, almost, fitted.

I felt like I was on one of those funfair rides that spin you round in so many directions at once that you can't tell which way is up.

If that *was* me, I wasn't who I thought I was. I had a different name. A different nationality. Even a different birthday. None of the facts of my life were certain.

'What are you doing?' Jam was staring at me from the doorway, a puzzled expression on his face.

'Nothing.' I quickly minimised the screen.

I was being ridiculous. The whole thing was too bizarre. Jam would laugh at me if I told him – tell me to beam back up to planet Egotrip or something. And yet I wanted to show him. I wanted to know what he thought.

'Don't give me that.' Jam narrowed his eyes. 'You've been freaking out since I got here. All that crap with the photo albums. You just wanted me out of this room.'

'No I didn't, Jam.' I tried to smile. 'It was just this weird – thing . . .' I tailed off.

Jam walked over to the computer. 'What kind of weird thing?' He grinned, but the grin didn't quite reach his eyes. 'Like some weird guy asking you out? What did you say?'

'What? No. Ew. No way.' What was Jam going on about? He knew I was, like, totally uninterested in dating and boys and all that stuff.

'Then why . . . ?' Jam's eyes focused on the minimiser lozenge at the bottom of the screen. 'Why are you looking at a missing children site?'

'Promise you won't laugh?'

He nodded. I clicked on the minimiser lozenge. Martha Lauren Purditt appeared on the screen. Jam glanced from her to the photograph of me on the desk beside the computer.

He frowned. 'What?' His eyes widened. 'You don't think that's you, do you?'

I looked away, my cheeks burning. 'I don't know,' I whispered.

I looked up. Jam was clicking on a link marked: *age-progressed photograph.*

'Wait,' I cried out.

But it was too late. A new picture was on the screen, showing Martha Lauren Purditt as she might appear now. I didn't want to look at it and yet I couldn't stop myself.

It was me. But at the same time, it wasn't. The face was too long and the nose too cutesy and turned-up looking.

'Mmmn,' Jam said. 'It's hard to say, isn't it? I mean it looks a bit like you. But . . .'

My heart was beating fast. OK, so he wasn't any more certain than I had been. But at least he wasn't laughing at me.

I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

Without looking at me, Jam clicked back to the first picture and pressed the print icon.

As the printer spewed out the page, Jam held it up to show me. 'It's like a "missing" poster,' he said. 'And look – there's a phone number at the bottom here. Maybe you should call up and—'

'No. No way.' I jumped up and tore the paper out of his hand. This was all moving too fast. Jam was being too practical. Too logical about everything. 'I need time to think,' I said.

'Chill out, Lazerbrain.' Jam rolled his eyes – like he does when his mum and sisters start screaming at each other. 'I was only trying to help. Don't you want to find out if that's really you?'

'Maybe.' I shrugged. The truth was that I didn't know. I didn't know anything any more.

'I guess your mum and dad might be able to tell.' Jam put his head to one side and studied the picture.

'I'm not showing them,' I gasped.

'Yeah. S'probably not a good idea, anyway.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Well.' Jam hesitated. 'If that Martha Lauren girl is you, how d'you think it happened? I mean, back then when you were three, how did you go from being in America in September to being in London by Christmas?'

I shook my head. Trust Jam to start asking all the practical questions. I couldn't even get my head around the idea that I might be a completely different person.

'Think about it, Lazerbrain,' Jam smiled weakly. 'Children don't just vanish for no reason. You must have been taken deliberately.'

'What's that got to do with my mum and dad?' I asked.

Jam took a deep breath. 'I think you have to consider the possibility that your parents were somehow involved.'