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opening extract from

The Mum Mystery

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Most of what I'm about to tell you would never have happened if Nevada Moriarty hadn't moved into our street, so I guess I should start with the day I first found out she was here. It was a Wednesday afternoon in mid-November – the same Wednesday that my big brother, Matthew, decided to play truant from school. (Matthew is sixteen – four years older than me – and it isn't like him to skip school. For one thing he's always too worried about his next lot of exams to want to miss too many lessons, and for another he knows he'll really get it from our dad if he gets caught.)

I would never have known that my brother had skipped school if it wasn't for Holly. Holly is not only my best friend (and has been since we were little), she's Matthew's greatest admirer. She's fancied him for ages, even though he's never had any time for her. Holly's interest in my brother includes memorizing his

entire school timetable, so she knows what days he has PE. His class were doing cross-country running every Wednesday afternoon that term, which meant that if you happened to be looking out of one of the upstairs classroom windows at the right time, you could spot him and his classmates jogging three times round the grassy perimeter of the playing fields.

'He's not there and neither is Jake,' Holly informed me as we stood at the bench by the window in the science lab, trying to turn different solids into liquids with the help of a Bunsen burner. She had taken off her protective goggles in order to see out of the window better, and now our science teacher noticed and started yelling at her to put them back on again.

Jake is my brother's best friend, and if both of them were missing then I guessed they must be playing truant together. They'd certainly both been at school earlier, because I'd seen them in the school canteen at lunchtime.

Before I could respond, our deputy head, Miss Dumont, came into the room to speak to our teacher. Nobody likes Miss Dumont because she's very strict and she speaks in a dead snooty voice and she doesn't ever joke with us like most of our other teachers do.

'I wonder what *she* wants,' I murmured.

'Maybe she's found out about Matthew bunking off and she's come to ask you if you know where he is,' Holly said.

But it turned out that our deputy head was there for a totally different reason. She had come to announce that a new girl, whose name was Nevada, would be starting in our class the following day.

A few people started to giggle and the name *Nevada* got repeated all around the room, accompanied by sniggers.

Miss Dumont glared at us and added sternly, 'I expect you *all* to make her feel welcome. Is that clear?'

Then she called out my name – my full first name, which I really don't appreciate being called in public. 'Esmerelda Harvey, I believe you and Nevada live in the same street, so I want you to make a special effort to look after her while she gets to know everybody.'

Everyone stared at me then, including Holly. Billy Sanderson, who is always trying to wind me up, grinned at me from across the room, and I reckoned he might be planning on calling me Esmerelda all the time from now on.

'You never said you had new neighbours,' Holly whispered when Miss Dumont had gone and our science teacher had told us to start

clearing up because it was nearly the end of the period.

'I didn't know we did,' I whispered back as I unplugged our Bunsen burner from the gas tap. I was puzzled, because generally I tend to know about most of the things that are going on in our street.

'Well, wait and see what she's like before you get too friendly with her,' Holly warned me.

I nodded. 'Holly, listen,' I said. 'I'm wondering if Matthew's skipping school because he's so upset about Jennifer dumping him.' (Jennifer had been my brother's girlfriend for the last three months, and when she'd told him that she wanted to end things a few days earlier, Matthew had been devastated.)

'I don't see why. Matthew's well rid of her, if you ask me!'

'Yeah, well I don't think *he* sees it that way,' I told her. 'He's pretty cut up about it.'

'That's because he's sensitive,' she replied matter-of-factly. 'So am I, so I know how he feels. Jennifer wasn't sensitive, you see, which is why they weren't at all suited.'

'Well, I still think we should try and find a way of getting them back together,' I said firmly. 'Matty's really miserable without her.' My brother had been shut up in his room playing depressing music ever since Jennifer had

dumped him, and every mealtime he'd just picked at his food and hardly eaten a thing.

'No way,' Holly said. 'I already told you. Jennifer isn't right for him.'

'You're only saying that because *you* fancy him,' I protested.

'No I'm not!'

I sighed impatiently, because I've never been able to understand this stupid crush my friend has on my brother. 'I don't know why you fancy him anyway, Holly. He's always swearing and farting and stuff – and he's got a really spotty back.' I could have added that since she was the same age as me she didn't stand a chance anyhow, but I didn't want to be that cruel.

Holly shook her head as if she didn't believe me. 'You're just trying to put me off. I mean, why are you so keen to get Jennifer to take him back if he's that gross?'

'Jennifer's not my best friend,' I pointed out. '*You* are.'

'I don't care. I'm still not helping you get them back together,' Holly said stubbornly.

'I guess I'll just have to do something about it on my own then, won't I?' I told her.

'I don't see why. I mean, Matthew hasn't *asked* for your help, has he?'

'*So?*' I answered impatiently.

Holly knows as well as I do that nobody in my family has ever actually *asked* for my help. And she also knows that I've never let that stop me before.

When I got home from school my brother was already there, and for once he wasn't in his room playing miserable music. He was in the kitchen with Jake. They had the door closed and they were talking inside in low voices, so I crept up close and put one ear against the door to listen. (You'd think my brother would know by now that it isn't safe to speak about secret things when I'm anywhere nearby – but he never seems to learn.)

'Come on, Matt, it'll be a laugh,' Jake was saying.

'Not if we get caught,' Matthew replied.

'We won't get caught. No one'll see us. Look, you can't back out now – not when we've just bought the stuff.' Jake paused for a moment before adding, 'Anyway, I reckon this'll really take your mind off Jennifer.'

'I'm *over* Jennifer,' Matthew said sharply, but I thought I heard his voice tremble a bit. 'Look, if we do this, we've got to make sure nobody knows it's us. You know what my dad's like. If he thinks I've—'

At that moment my foot accidentally pushed

the door, making it creak, so I had no choice but to walk into the room.

My brother glared at me. 'What do *you* want?'

'I know you and Jake skipped school this afternoon,' I told him. 'You're going to get into trouble if Dad finds out.'

'Yeah, well he won't find out, will he? Not unless some nosy interfering little person tells him.'

'I am *not* nosy and interfering!' I retorted indignantly.

'Yeah, *right*.'

I ignored that and demanded, 'So where were you?'

But he tapped his nose and turned away and I knew I wasn't going to get any more information out of him.

We were the only ones in the house. Dad never usually gets back from work until at least seven o'clock. He's a police detective and he sometimes has to work even later than that. We don't have a mum, and Dad's girlfriend didn't seem to be here either.

'Where's Lizzie?' I asked.

Wednesday is Lizzie's half-day and she'd said she'd be here when I got home from school this afternoon. She was cooking for us tonight, which is always a bit of a hit-and-miss

affair. (Lasagne and chilli con carne were the only two dishes she knew how to cook when she first met us, and since then her efforts to try out new recipes haven't always gone according to plan.)

Matthew handed me a note Lizzie had left on the table. It said she had gone to show her flat to someone who might want to rent it from her.

'Oh great!' I said enthusiastically. 'Maybe Lizzie'll get her flat rented out today and then she'll be able to come and live with us straight away!' (Lizzie and Dad had been together for a whole year now and she had recently agreed to move in with us.)

Matty looked sour-faced as he replied, 'Don't expect Lizzie to definitely move in, Esmie. It's a well-known fact that women are totally unreliable.'

'Lizzie isn't unreliable!' I burst out indignantly. I thought Lizzie was wonderful, and ever since Dad had met her, I'd thought she'd make the perfect stepmum.

'Well just don't count on her moving in for good,' my brother grunted.

'Hey, ease off, Matt,' Jake said, seeing how upset I was looking.

'Well, Esmie should face the truth. I mean,

why do *you* think she wants to rent out her flat rather than sell it?' he asked me.

I just looked at him dumbly, feeling my lower lip trembling.

'Because she wants to have somewhere to move back to, if she gets fed up with living with *us*,' he finished bitterly.

I stared at my brother, tears welling up in my eyes.

'Ignore him, Esmie,' Jake said, giving Matthew a sharp nudge in the ribs. 'He's just got it in for the opposite sex at the moment, because of Jennifer. Isn't that right, mate?'

Matthew just shrugged. He wasn't even looking guilty, which he usually does if he manages to make me cry.

Suddenly I felt really angry.

'Did Dad *say* you could have Jake round after school?' I snapped. 'Cos you know you're not allowed to hang out with your mates until you've done your homework.'

'Get lost, Esmie,' Matthew muttered.

'No – Esmie's got a point,' Jake said quickly. 'We'd better leave now, in case your dad comes home early or something. We don't want him having one of his hairy fits and grounding you.' He grinned. 'God, your dad is *sooo* strict.'

'Tell me about it,' Matthew said grumpily. 'I wish my dad was more like yours.' (Jake's dad

is really cool and prides himself on being more of a friend to Jake than anything else. But when Matty once suggested to Dad that the two of *them* might get on better if Dad acted more like a mate to *him*, Dad had just laughed. 'You've got enough mates, Matthew – you don't need another. What you *need* is a parent – and I'm only sorry you haven't got more of those.' That was Dad's way of saying he was sorry that we didn't have a mother as well as a father – our mum died when I was born, so he's had to bring us up pretty much on his own.)

'So are you coming or what?' Jake said, heading for the door.

'I'll come round to yours as soon as Lizzie gets back,' Matthew replied. He's not allowed to leave me in the house by myself and he only ever does it if he can bribe me not to tell Dad.

'*Then* we'll go and do it, right?' Jake said.

Matthew nodded. 'Right.'

'Go and do *what*?' I asked.

But Matty just tapped his nose and wouldn't tell me a thing.

2

As soon as Lizzie arrived home at a quarter to six, Matthew announced that he was going out.

Lizzie immediately looked uncertain about whether or not that was OK. 'What about your homework?' she asked him. 'You can't have finished it yet, can you?' (Now that Matty's in the senior part of the school he always gets loads of homework and it always takes him at least until dinner-time to get it done.)

'I'll finish it later,' Matty said.

'Well . . .' Lizzie looked like she was floundering. She's pretty confident about standing in for Dad where I'm concerned, but when it's something involving Matty, I've noticed she's always a lot less certain.

'See you!' Matty said abruptly, and he was through the front door before Lizzie could say anything else.

I had more important things on my mind

however. 'Did that person want to rent out your flat, Lizzie?' I asked her eagerly.

She shook her head. 'But there's someone else coming to have a look at it tomorrow.'

'Oh good,' I said, beaming at her.

By the time Dad arrived home, Lizzie had made a shepherd's pie (her first one ever) and she was so thrilled by the fact that it wasn't burnt on the top that she had forgotten all about my brother. It was only when Dad asked me to go and tell Matthew that dinner was ready that we remembered he wasn't in.

We held back dinner for a while and finally, after Dad had left two grumpy messages on my brother's mobile, we sat down at the kitchen table without him.

'I hope he's all right,' Lizzie said as she served out the food. 'You know, he really hasn't been himself since Jennifer broke up with him.'

That's when we heard the front door open.

'MATTHEW!' Dad yelled, and when my brother didn't appear, he got up from the table and went out to the hall.

I quickly followed him, pretending not to hear Lizzie telling me to stay put.

Matty was on his way up the stairs, still wearing his outdoor jacket.

'Where do you think you're going?' Dad barked at him.

My brother stopped in his tracks and turned round. I should probably mention now that I want to be a detective when I grow up (though I haven't decided yet whether I want to be a *police* detective like Dad, or a *private* detective like Sherlock Holmes) and that I like to practise my detecting skills whenever possible. And since detectives can often get clues from a person's appearance after they've committed a crime, I was now studying my brother's hair, face and clothes very carefully. There didn't seem to be anything unusual about him, apart from the fact that he had a very guilty look on his face – but that might have just been because he knew he was late home for dinner.

'I thought I'd just go and have a quick shower,' Matty muttered.

'You'll come and eat with us right now!' Dad snapped.

'Matty, it's shepherd's pie and it's really nice,' I put in cheerily.

'Esmie, go and sit down,' Dad said.

I did as I was told and Dad followed me, so we were both sitting down again at the table by the time Matty entered the kitchen. He had taken off his outdoor jacket and it was only now that we saw he was limping slightly.

'Are you all right, Matthew?' Lizzie asked in a concerned voice.

'Yeah,' he grunted, sitting down very gingerly and wincing as he made contact with the seat.

'Matthew, what's wrong with you?' Dad said impatiently.

'Nothing. I fell over and got a graze, that's all.'

Lizzie had served out some shepherd's pie on to my brother's plate and he picked up his fork and began to pick at it.

'So where did you and Jake go?' I asked curiously.

'Nowhere,' my brother replied, giving me a *back off* sort of look.

'Actually, Matthew, I was just going to ask the same thing,' Dad said sternly.

'We were just hanging out, that's all.'

'And what about your homework? Lizzie says you left the house at six o'clock.'

'Yeah . . . sorry . . .' Matty looked agitated, and put down his fork with the food still on it. (Hercule, our black and white kitten, came padding across the kitchen at that point, and positioned himself under my brother's chair, clearly having high hopes for the quality of tonight's leftovers.)

And that's when I decided to help my brother out. Don't ask me why.

'Guess what?' I said, before Dad could do any more interrogating. 'There's a new girl starting in my class tomorrow and Miss Dumont says she lives in our street. But we haven't had any new neighbours move into our street recently, have we, Dad?'

Dad looked at me. 'Mrs Lewis was telling me that Frank and Ruth across the road have got their nieces moving in with them – two girls the same ages as you and Matty apparently.'

'Really?' I immediately felt excited.

'Yes. Of course, Mrs Lewis isn't very happy about it.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'She says she thinks there are enough children in this street as it is.' (Mrs Lewis is our next-door neighbour. She's very old and very cranky and it's a family joke that she'd be perfect as the child-eating witch in *Hansel and Gretel*.)

'Charming,' Lizzie said, smiling.

'I know. I reckon she still hasn't forgiven Frank and Ruth for the geranium incident.' (Last summer Mr Stevens – that's Frank – had complained to Mrs Lewis that her cat, Pixie, had been peeing on his geraniums. Needless to say, Mrs Lewis had been furious. 'Who does he

think he is, to talk like that about my Pixie?' she had ranted. '*All* geraniums smell like cat wee – and that's what I told him.')

'Nevada must be *their* niece then,' I said. 'Holly and I think she might be American or something because of her name.'

Just then the phone started ringing and Matthew pushed back his chair. (He had left loads of messages on Jennifer's phone since she'd dumped him, and every time our phone rang he always looked full of hope that it would be her.)

'Stay there,' Dad told him, getting up. 'If it's for you, you can ring back after dinner.'

'If it's Jennifer, Matty had better speak to her straight away, Dad,' I pointed out. 'Otherwise she might think he's deliberately playing it cool.'

'Yes, well that might not be such a bad thing,' Dad replied as he left the room.

'Gee – thanks, Dad!' my brother exploded.

Lizzie quickly put her hand on his forearm. 'Matty, all your dad means is that maybe you *should* play it a bit cooler with Jennifer.'

'Yeah, well maybe I can't afford to, OK?' Matty retorted, and his eyes started to fill with tears. 'Maybe she just doesn't like me that much!'

'Sweetheart, if that's true then you're better

off without her,' Lizzie said, giving his arm a squeeze. 'Believe me, there are lots of other girls out there who'd love to have you as a boyfriend.'

Matthew sniffed and didn't say anything.

I kept quiet, kind of mesmerized, because seeing Lizzie acting all soft and motherly like that was really nice. Then Dad came back into the room and Lizzie moved her hand away from Matty's arm. (She's a bit self-conscious about showing her feelings for us in front of Dad, I've noticed.)

'That was Jake's mother,' Dad said, frowning at my brother. 'She says the two of you skipped school today. She says a friend of hers saw you in a paint shop in town. Is that true?'

My detective's ears pricked up at that. Could this have something to do with the secret thing that Matty and Jake had been plotting earlier?

Matty looked nervous. 'We were just hanging out, Dad. We weren't doing anything wrong.'

'Oh, so playing truant from school isn't wrong then?'

'We only missed PE.'

'That's not the point. The point is, when you tell me you're in school, that's where I expect you to be.'

'I know, Dad. I'm sorry.' Matthew pushed

his plate away, looking miserable. 'Can I leave the table please?' His food was completely uneaten.

Dad nodded. 'Go and do your homework. I'll come and speak to you later.'

And as Matthew limped out of the kitchen, I noticed that the seat of his jeans was torn slightly and that there was something on the material that looked suspiciously like blood.