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Opening extract from

Without looking back

Written by

Tabitha Suzuma

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Without Looking Back

Tabitha Suzuma

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Prologue

As Louis moved out of the way of the thin stream of people and paused beside the ticket machines to let an old woman by, a poster on the station wall caught his eye. It was a small poster, no bigger than a sheet of A4, and it read: MISSING – HAVE YOU SEEN THESE CHILDREN? in thick black letters. It showed three photographs – a girl and two boys. The girl had long fair hair, a fringe that fell in her eyes and an angelic smile. The first boy had green eyes and shaggy blond hair that came down behind his ears to the nape of his neck, and was squinting at the camera. The second boy wore a blue baseball cap, chunky brown glasses and a lopsided grin. And beneath the photos, in small black print, he read:

Emilie (8 years old), Louis (12) and Maxime Whittaker (14) went missing on 8th June from Paris, France. They are believed to have been abducted by their father, Edward James Whittaker, and taken to the UK. The children's mother has applied for the return of the children to France under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Emilie has a small scar on her chin, likes to suck her middle two fingers, and is known as Millie. Louis has a chipped front tooth and a mole under his left eye; he is sometimes nicknamed Loulou, and is a talented dancer. Maxime is dyslexic, has a small birthmark on the back of his neck, and goes by the name Max.

ANYONE WITH INFORMATION SHOULD CONTACT:
Préfecture de Police, Commissariat Central, Avenue Henri, 75016 Paris, France.
24-hr helpline: +44(0)1 55 43 97 17

A woman pushed past him, muttering angrily to herself. There was a painful thumping sound coming from his chest and he felt as if an invisible hand was closing around his throat. Louis stood rooted to the spot in front of the photo of himself, his brother and his sister, and stared at it in horror.

Chapter One

The scuffed trainer hit the wall with a thud, bounced back onto the bed and lay on its side atop the duvet, inches away from his face. 'Turn it off!'

Louis rolled over and groaned into the pillow. He reached out an arm, swinging his hand optimistically towards the edge of his desk. He made contact with a pile of DVDs, a tall glass and finally his alarm clock. The DVDs and the glass went crashing down onto the carpet; the alarm clock stopped. In his bed on the other side of the room, Max yawned loudly and pulled the covers over his head.

Eyes still closed, Louis raised himself to a sitting position, his feet feeling the carpet for sharp DVD cases. There were none. Only a damp patch from the overturned glass. He got to his feet, felt his way round to the

end of the bed and groped for the door. Morning light was streaming through the curtains and the smell of coffee and the strains of the radio drifted up from downstairs. Louis opened his left eye a crack – enough to guide himself across the landing and into the bathroom. He splashed cold water onto his face and started to yawn, gazing out of the window for a moment, watching a plane trace its way across a pale morning sky. It was the beginning of June. Summer was finally here and the long holidays began in just under a month. With a sigh of satisfaction, Louis returned to the bedroom, picking his jeans up off the floor as he went.

Twenty minutes later, Max was elbowing him out of the way for the last croissant and Millie was spreading an unreasonably large amount of Nutella onto her toast, glancing sideways at Max to check he hadn't noticed.

Max drained his coffee cup and grabbed his school bag from the sideboard. 'Right, I'm out of the door in exactly' – he checked his watch – 'three minutes.'

'Uh-oh, uh-oh!' Millie swung her legs wildly, slurping her hot chocolate.

Max moved towards the kitchen door. 'Two minutes and fifty seconds,' he said, his eyes still on his watch.

'Maman forgot to leave me money for art club again!' Millie exclaimed angrily, going out into the hall to look

on the letter table where their mother normally left their snacks and any other bits and bobs for school.

'Two minutes and thirty seconds!'

'Max, Max, she didn't leave me any money—!' Millie looked close to tears.

'All right, all right, calm down,' Louis said. 'I've got five euros – is that enough?'

'Did you have to speak to the judge then?' Pierre asked him breathlessly as they scuffled for the football in the muddy corner of the playground.

Louis got it off him and kicked it hard over to Luc, who scored an easy goal.

'Yeah, but it was OK. I didn't have to stand up in court or anything. The judge just took us into a little room with a video camera. She spoke to each of us in turn.'

'And did you all say the same thing?'

'Of course. We all said we wanted to be able to see Papa whenever we felt like it. Not just one weekend a month. We said that once Papa got his new flat, we wanted to be able to go and stay with him during the school holidays when Maman's working instead of going to summer camp.'

'And what did the judge say?'

'Nothing. She just asked the questions.'

'So, do you get to miss any more school?' Pierre wanted to know.

Louis made a bold attempt at getting the ball off Michel, then fell back. 'No, that's it, unfortunately. The court case is finished.'

When Louis got home after his two-hour dance class, he was starving. Max was boiling pasta again because Maman had forgotten to order any ready meals in her weekly Internet shop at Carrefour. She had another big project at work and was taking clients out to dinner tonight so she wouldn't be back before ten. Millie was doing her homework at the kitchen table amidst pieces of grated cheese, trying to wheedle the answers out of Max. Louis flopped onto the nearest chair and licked his finger and pressed it against the cheese gratings.

'You don't have to just sit there – you could at least lay the table,' Max said grumpily from the cooker.

The idea of getting back to his feet so soon after sitting down did not appeal. 'Can't Millie?'

Max turned and gave Louis an angry look. Then he grabbed the cutlery from the drawer and began laying the table with a lot of clatter, slapping the plates down as if he wanted to break them.

Louis got to his feet. 'It was just a question. I didn't say I wouldn't do it!'

'Bit late now.' Max started dishing up angrily. 'Millie, clear your stuff away.'

Millie scooped up her school books and dumped them on the floor, narrowly missing Trésor's paws. Max sat down, still scowling.

'I got full marks in my spelling test today,' Millie announced proudly, winding some overcooked spaghetti around her fork.

Louis narrowed his eyes at her. 'Liar—'

'I did, I did, I'll show you! The teacher gave me a big gold star.'

'Yeah, yeah, OK, Millie, we believe you,' Max said.

'I want to call Papa. I want to tell him.' Millie pouted.

'You can tell him tomorrow,' Max said.

Millie's eyes brightened. 'Is tomorrow our weekend with him already?'

'Yes,' Louis said.

'Yippee!' Millie crowed.

Seated at the dining-room table, his head propped up on his hand, Louis tried to refocus his eyes on the page of print. Upstairs, Millie was already in bed. From the kitchen next door came the steady hum of the television.

It sounded like *Les Experts*. Louis yawned hard. Max rarely did any homework, which was why he was being threatened with having to stay down a year again. Before Papa had moved out, they had all sat around the table together every evening to do homework, Papa testing Millie on her times tables, Louis on his history dates, Max on his spelling. Max was dyslexic and, ever since Papa had left, seemed to have given up on homework altogether. Only last week he had been talking about leaving school and getting a job once he turned sixteen. That had prompted a row with Maman which had lasted well into the night . . .

The sound of the front door made him start. He tipped forward and narrowly missed banging his head on the table. It was Maman – he could smell her perfume and hear the sound of her heels on the parquet floor.

'*Bonsoir, mon Loulou* . . .' She came in, clutching an umbrella and her briefcase, raindrops speckling the padded shoulders of her dark-blue suit, and kissed him, red wine on her breath. 'What a day! My feet are killing me. Haven't you finished your homework yet?'

He blinked at her blearily. 'History exam tomorrow. Can you test me?'

'Not now, darling. I've got to sit down and I'm dying for a coffee. Where's Max?'

'In the kitchen.'

'Has he done his homework?'

'Dunno.'

'What time did Millie go to bed?'

'Nine-ish.'

'Oh, that's much too late! Maaax . . . ?' Her heels clicked down the hallway and into the kitchen.

Louis looked up from his book and stared into space, listening to the rise and fall of the voices from the kitchen. Maman sounded angry, but she was trying to keep her voice down. Max sounded monosyllabic. Discussing homework, or lack of it, no doubt. Maman's job as a broker in one of France's leading trading firms meant she was rarely around to supervise homework. The clock on the mantelpiece read quarter to eleven. Louis closed his eyes again. The thought of crawling into a warm bed was irresistible. Perhaps there would be time to learn that last paragraph at breakfast tomorrow.

Max burst into the bedroom, blinding Louis with the overhead light, kicking off his jeans while grumbling to himself about never being allowed to see the end of *Les Experts*. Louis pulled the duvet over his head to escape from the glare and waited until Max had returned from

the bathroom and got into bed before re-emerging. The glow of the streetlamps seeped its way through a gap in the heavy curtains, creating a thin orange shaft on the carpet. Max tossed and turned in his bed, trying to find a comfortable position, yawning loudly. Silence descended.

Louis rolled over onto his side and gazed at his brother's inert figure on the other side of the room. The sound of his breathing had deepened and it would be only minutes before he began to snore.

'Max?'

'Mm?'

'If Papa wins the court case, does that mean we'll be able to start seeing him as much as we want to?' Louis asked.

'No, only every weekend,' Max replied.

'But Papa said he was going to try and get joint custody,' Louis protested. 'I thought that meant three days here with Maman and three days with Papa, with a changeover day in between.'

'That'll never happen,' Max said.

'*Why?*'

'Because . . .' Max heaved a weary sigh. 'Papa told me judges rarely agree to an equal split. They think it's too disruptive to the kids to change house mid-week. The

most Papa can hope for is to have us every weekend instead of three days a month.'

'And if Maman wins?'

Another sigh. 'Louis, you know what will happen. Papa talked us through it all again last time we went to stay.'

'But I've forgotten—'

'If Maman wins, then Papa only gets supervised visits, one day a month.'

'But I still don't understand why—'

'Because Maman has told the judge that Papa is mentally unstable.'

'But she doesn't really believe that?'

'No, she doesn't really believe that. But he lost his job because he just stopped going to work after the divorce, remember? He didn't get out of bed for weeks. And she still hates him because he fell in love with that woman . . .'

Louis closed his eyes. 'Yeah . . .'

There was a long silence. 'Anyway' – Max said suddenly – 'even if she does win, I don't care. In a year and a half I'll be sixteen and I'll be able to choose who I live with. Papa said I could go and live with him then and quit school and get a job if I wanted.'

'Don't go,' Louis whispered.

'I'll still be able to come back and see you and stuff.'

Silence.

'Maybe Papa *will* win,' Max said.

There was no time to even open his history book the following morning. Louis had forgotten to set the alarm and was woken by Maman in her bed-hairdo, shouting at them to pack their weekend bags. At breakfast, Max tried it on with the 'I-really-feel-ill-today' routine and Millie cried because she couldn't find her doll. Trying to apply her lipstick using her reflection in the door of the microwave, Maman told Max that if he hadn't bothered to study for his test today he only had himself to blame, then told Millie that she was too old to cry about a doll.

'Is Papa going to pick us up from school?' Millie asked tearfully.

'Yes.' Maman closed her lipstick with a snap and started on her hair. 'Remember to go straight to the gate after class. And if he's late, just wait for him. You know what he's like.'

'Papa said he would take us to EuroDisney again this weekend!' Millie suddenly remembered.

'That's enough Nutella, Millie.'

'He did say that, didn't he, Max?' Millie persisted.

'Probably,' Max replied, spraying croissant crumbs across the table.

'Yippee!'

'Don't come home on Sunday night saying you've still got homework,' Maman warned.

In the back of the Mercedes, Max wangled the front seat even though it was Louis' turn, and Millie was reunited with her doll amidst whoops of delight. Maman tapped her long, petal-shaped fingernails on the steering wheel in frustration as rivulets ran down the windscreen in front of a sea of red lights. 'My first meeting's at nine. This traffic is a joke!' Suddenly, she glanced at Max and yanked out his earphones. 'I told you not to take that iPod to school.'

'But I want to have my music with me at Papa's!' Max protested.

'Put it away in your rucksack then.'

Max did as he was told, grumbling under his breath.

'Put your books away and take out a blank sheet of paper.'

Louis turned his head slowly to exchange wide-eyed looks with Pierre. There was a shocked silence from the class, followed by general shufflings and mumblings of discontent as textbooks were swapped for blank paper.

Head propped up on his hand in resignation, Pierre was staring sullenly down at the sheet on his desk. He hadn't revised, Louis could tell. As Mr Armand began to write the questions on the board, Louis edged his sheet of paper towards the divide between the two desks and Pierre shot him a grin of thanks.

'Do you want to come over to my house tomorrow to play Tomb Raider?' Pierre asked him later in the playground. They were leaning against the wrought-iron gate and wondering whether they could be bothered to start up one last game of football before the bell rang.

'No – it's our weekend at Papa's,' Louis said.

'Oh.' Pierre pulled some mints out of his pocket, dug one out with his bottom teeth, then held out the stick to Louis. 'Monday after school then?'

'Sure, and I can ring you tomorrow and you can tell me what level you've managed to get up to,' Louis said. 'Papa lets us use the phone for as long as we want at his place.'

'Cool,' Pierre replied.

'Papa, Papa!' Millie dropped her school bag and went hurtling out of the gates. Papa held out his arms and swung her right up above his head. Her hair fanned out behind her; she squealed with delight, then wound her

arms about his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist. Papa stumbled forward, Millie still clinging to him like a limpet, and pulled Max towards him. Max grinned and took off his baseball cap and pulled it down over his father's head.

'Look at you!' Papa was saying in English, tilting his head back to see out from under the peak of the cap. 'Max, I can't believe how much you've grown! You're taller than me now! And how's my Louis?'

'I'm good, Papa,' Louis replied, stepping forward to kiss his father. It felt strange to be speaking English again and the words felt uncomfortable in his mouth.

On the train that took them to Papa's flat just outside Paris, Millie chatted nonstop about her good marks at school, her new friend Estelle, and how hard she'd been practising for her piano exam. She swung her legs as she talked, hitting the bottom of the seat with an irritating thump, her eyes dancing with excitement. She spoke in English, but substituted French words whenever necessary, speaking what Papa laughingly referred to as *Franglais*. Papa had always spoken English to them, right from when they were small and he used to stay at home to look after them while Maman went to work – he always said that growing up bilingual was one of the most useful gifts a parent could give a child. But ever

since Papa moved out over a year ago, they had been speaking English less and less, and what once was easy had begun to feel like an effort. Whenever Millie broke into French, Papa repeated what she had said in English, as if trying to put the English words back into her mind.

Max started talking about the latest match of his favourite football team, and a film he'd been to see last week at the *Odéon*. Louis suddenly realized that Papa looked tired. He had more lines on his face than Louis remembered, and although he was smiling and nodding at Max with enthusiasm, he looked distant. Then Papa caught Louis' eye and winked.

'How's my dancing boy?'

Louis smiled. 'Good. I've got another competition next weekend in Rouen, on a proper stage and everything. Madame Dubois is going to take me. Luc and Aurélie are coming too. Maman can't make it, so will you come?'

'Of course! Have you managed to nail the triple turn yet?'

'Yes, and my ballet's got pretty good now. Madame Dubois has been really pushing it because she says it's the basis of all forms of dance.'

Max made a snorting noise. Louis glared at him. 'It's not funny! Ballet's really hard – you have to be so strong. It's a sport just like football.'

'Madame Dubois told Maman that Louis is better than all the girls in his class,' Millie pitched in. 'She says he's a natural at ballet.'

'Are you not too intimidated by the girls?' Papa asked Louis with a smile.

'No, they're all right. Anyway, I'm not the only boy in the class – Luc does it too.'

They walked through the quiet streets of Rueil in the late-afternoon sunshine, Papa carrying Millie's rucksack over his shoulder. When they reached his flat on the third floor of an old stone house that stood on the corner of Rue de Rivoir, Millie went charging down the narrow hallway to the kitchen and Papa set her rucksack down by the door. The flat still looked exactly the same as when Papa had first moved in over a year ago. It still had that slightly musty, closed-away smell and, apart from a portable TV, a laptop and a hastily erected clothes rail, contained none of Papa's belongings at all.

In the kitchen, Millie mixed chocolate powder into cold milk, Max switched on the telly and rocked back on one of the kitchen chairs with his trainers up on the table, and Louis helped Papa unpack the three shopping bags on the sideboard. A baguette and a carton of orange juice, a lettuce, some tomatoes, and two frozen pizzas. Louis was surprised. That wasn't nearly enough food to

last them all weekend. Max ate like a horse and Millie lived on biscuits. And Louis knew for a fact that Papa's fridge would be completely empty and the dustbin crammed full of ready-meal packets.

'Are you taking us away somewhere for the weekend, Papa?'

Papa looked startled for a moment. Then he cleared his throat, raised his eyebrows and said, 'Yes, yes – how did you guess?'

Millie put down her spoon, splashing chocolate milk onto the table. 'EuroDisney?' she breathed, her eyes wide.

'No, darling, not EuroDisney, not this time.'

Millie's face fell.

'But somewhere else. Somewhere – different.'

'Where?' Millie demanded. Max's gaze shifted from the television screen. Even he suddenly seemed interested.

'Um – well – I'm not going to tell you,' Papa said. 'It's going to be a surprise.'

Millie clapped her hands together. 'I love surprises! When, Papa? Today? Are we going to stay there overnight? Will there be a swimming pool?'

'We're going to leave tomorrow,' Papa said, turning on the oven and unwrapping the pizzas. 'Early. Very

early. So I want us to have dinner now and then go to bed. We're going to skip *goûter* and have pizza and salad instead. Then we're going to hit the sack at eight.'

'Are you joking?' Max's eyes widened in outrage. 'I can't go to sleep at eight!'

'What sack?' Millie wanted to know. 'Why do we have to hit a sack?'

'It's an expression,' Louis told her. 'It means go to bed.'

'Go to bed?' Millie squawked. 'Papa, you always let me stay up till Max and Louis go to bed!'

'It's still light at eight o'clock, Papa,' Louis protested.

Their father held up his hands. 'Everyone calm down,' he said, his voice uncharacteristically loud. 'We're all going to bed at eight. Everyone. Even me. It's not up for discussion. We have to get up very, very early tomorrow morning for this surprise visit. And none of you will enjoy it if you haven't had enough sleep.' He dropped his hands and put the pizzas in the oven. He suddenly looked exhausted.

There was silence. Max's eyes swivelled back to the television screen. 'It'd better be worth it,' he muttered.

'It *will* be worth it, Max, I promise.'

'Why do we have to leave so early?' Millie wanted to know.

But Papa just went over to the sink to wash the vegetables and after a while they realized he wasn't going to reply.

After dinner, Max went into the living room to lie on the carpet and play with his PS3 – the PS3 that Papa had bought him last month but Maman wouldn't allow him to keep at home. Millie went into the boxroom to unpack her overnight rucksack and Louis followed her, lying down on her bed and switching on Max's GameBoy. Millie was just hanging up one of her dresses when Papa appeared in the doorway and said quite sharply, 'Don't unpack now, Millie. We'll need all our things with us for the trip and we won't have time to pack again in the morning.'

'Really?' Millie sounded surprised. 'Do we need *everything*?'

But Papa had already gone back to the kitchen. Millie obediently took her dress off the hanger again and put it back in her rucksack. She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked down at Louis. 'Do you think he'll let me unpack my nightie at least?'

Louis glanced reluctantly up from the GameBoy. 'Yes, but don't do it now – take it out at bedtime.'

'I thought bedtime was now.'

Louis glanced out of the window at the evening sun in disbelief. 'Maybe he was just joking . . .' He was doubtful though. Papa looked both tired and on edge. He had held himself back from snapping at Millie earlier, Louis could tell . . . Suddenly, a thought like cold water washed through Louis' brain. It frightened him so much he thought he was going to be sick. He sat up on Millie's bed.

'What?' Millie looked at him, faintly startled. When he didn't reply, she said to him, 'What's the matter, Louis? Your face has gone all pale.'

'Nothing,' Louis said, dropping the GameBoy and getting up off the bed. 'I just need the loo, that's all.'

Apparently satisfied, Millie went back to combing the hair of her new Barbie doll, the one that Papa had bought her last time they'd been to visit. Louis carefully closed the bedroom door behind him and walked quickly down the corridor towards the kitchen. Halfway there, he stopped. The kitchen door was closed, which was unusual. Muted strains of expiring aliens came from the open living-room door. Louis approached the kitchen on tiptoe.

'No, Annette, I haven't told them yet,' Papa was saying in French. 'We only got back home an hour ago. I want to let them settle in first!'

Silence. Louis leaned cautiously against the kitchen door and pressed his ear to it.

'No, that's *not* what this weekend is about! This weekend is about having fun with my kids, damn it!'

Another long silence. Louis could imagine his mother speaking at the other end of the phone, her angry voice like rapid fire.

'We've already discussed this, and I thought we agreed that I would be the one to tell them!' Papa almost shouted.

Another silence.

'Then just give me a chance, will you? They've only been here for an hour! Thanks to you, this is the last weekend I'll have with them. Will you let me break the news to them gently at least?'

Papa said something else, but it was drowned out by the pounding of Louis' heart. He stepped back from the door, fighting for breath.

By the time he heard the receiver slam down, Louis' palms were damp and he could feel a cold sweat breaking out across his back. He took a deep breath and forced his hand up to turn the door handle, wishing his arm hadn't started to shake.

Papa was still sitting at the kitchen table, the phone was back in its cradle and he was massaging his forehead

with his fingers, his face red and creased. Louis closed the kitchen door and leaned against it; Papa looked up. 'Loulou, d'you think you could give me a hand with—' And then he broke off. 'What's the matter?' He started to get up.

Louis slowly began to shake his head, and felt his eyes filling with tears.

'Louis . . .' Papa froze, almost comical in his half-standing, half-sitting position. 'Louis – oh, Christ, you were listening?'

He nodded, holding his breath in an attempt to ward off the tears.

'Louis . . .' his father said again, moving out from behind the table and coming towards him. 'Don't – don't— Listen, I don't want the others to know yet.'

Blinking back tears, Louis cupped his hands over his nose and mouth as Papa came forward to grip him tightly by the shoulders. 'Louis, listen – listen to me. Nothing's been decided yet. Maman may still change her mind. I'm going to appeal against the decision. I'm going to fight this – I'm going to fight this, I promise you.' He gave Louis a small shake. His eyes looked desperate, imploring.

'Please, Louis, I really want to wait a bit before I tell the others. I want to enjoy some of this weekend with

you without having it hanging over all of us. Don't cry, my darling. It's going to be all right – I promise you it's going to be all right.' His fingers dug into Louis' shoulder blades.

Louis pressed his hands to his face and sniffed hard.

'That's it,' Papa said desperately. 'Come over to the sink and wash your face.'

Louis splashed cold water onto his face while Papa hovered nearby. As he was drying himself with a damp tea towel, he heard the kitchen door open behind him.

'Millie!' Papa exclaimed with false cheer. 'Have you found your Barbie set? Let's go and see what hairstyle you've given her.'

There was a pause, during which Louis rubbed his face hard with the tea towel, carefully keeping his back to the door.

'Wait, Papa,' Millie was saying as Papa presumably tried to usher her out of the kitchen. 'What's the matter with Louis?'

'Nothing!' Papa exclaimed too loudly. 'He just got a—some . . . some soap in his eyes while he was helping me with the washing-up. It's fine, it's all rinsed out now. Where's Max?'

'In the *salon*.'

'Let's go and see if he wants to play a game, shall we?'

'What game?' Millie asked, distracted, and their voices disappeared down the hall.

Louis lowered the tea towel and inhaled slowly, gripping the edge of the sink. He could hear Millie trying to persuade Max into a game of Cluedo. Waves of adrenaline still coursed through his body and it was an effort not to start crying again, but he knew that he mustn't. If he gave the game away now, Millie would sob all night and Max would shut himself in his room and play loud music for the rest of the weekend. But the news took his breath away. He couldn't believe that Maman had won the court case and they were only going to be allowed supervised visits with Papa at some 'family centre' from now on. He couldn't believe that this was the last time they would be coming to Papa's flat, the last time they would be going on a trip together. Maman had said that the supervised visits would only be until Papa had got his life back together again, but the doctor had told Papa he might have to be on anti-depressants for the rest of his life. How would they ever be able to talk to Papa with some stranger sitting in the corner of the room and listening in? It would all be an act, it would all be artificial – they would have to edit everything they said and soon Papa would become a stranger and they probably wouldn't even be able to remember how to

speak English any more . . . Suddenly, Louis hated his mother. She kept saying that it was for their own good, that she hadn't trusted Papa since the time he had taken an overdose of sleeping pills and collapsed while they were staying at his flat, but Louis didn't really buy it. She knew how much better he was now. He hadn't fallen apart in front of them for ages. She was still angry with him for falling in love with that woman from work. She just wanted revenge.

'Louis, come and play, pleeease!' It was Millie, calling from the living room. Grabbing a piece of kitchen towel from the roll, Louis blew his nose fiercely, rubbed his eyes a final time and then, taking a calming breath, walked slowly along to the living room.

'I'm Miss Scarlet, Max is Colonel Mustard, Papa's Reverend Green, so who do you want to be?'

They were all seated on the floor around the Cluedo board, waiting for him. Louis knelt down to join them. 'Professor Plum, of course,' he said, forcing a smile.

Half an hour later, when Max discovered that the murder had been committed by Mrs Peacock, with the lead pipe, in the conservatory, Papa said, 'All right, folks. Let's start getting ready for bed.'

'I'm not in the slightest bit tired!' Max exclaimed. 'Oh, come on, let me finish my game!'

'I already said it wasn't negotiable, Max,' Papa said sharply. 'I want everyone to have showered and brushed their teeth in exactly twenty minutes. I'm going to finish the washing-up,' and he left.

On her hands and knees, Millie was carefully putting the pieces away, humming to herself, unbothered by the ridiculously early night and just happy she was getting to go to bed at the same time as everyone else. Max threw himself onto the sofa and switched on his PS3.

'Papa's going to get annoyed,' Louis said.

Max didn't move.

'Max!'

He glanced up, his face angry. 'This is totally unreasonable of him,' he complained. 'What difference does it make if we go to bed this early? We won't be able to sleep anyway.'

'We can try.'

Millie jumped up. 'Bags I get the bathroom first then,' she said, running out.

Max narrowed his eyes at Louis. 'Why are you taking his side all of a sudden? What's wrong with you anyway?'

'Nothing.' Louis looked quickly down at the carpet and began collecting up the Cluedo pieces that Millie had left behind.

'What's wrong with you?' Max said again.

Louis looked up hotly. 'Nothing!'

'Liar. You've been crying. I can tell. Your eyes were all red when you came in.'

'Oh, shut up,' Louis muttered hurriedly, busying himself with the Cluedo box.

'Fine, don't tell me then.' Max turned back to his PS3.

It was another hour before they finally all got to bed, and even then Max was still grumbling and playing his GameBoy underneath the covers. From the box room next door, they could hear the rise and fall of Papa's voice as he read Millie a bedtime story, and the evening sunlight slanted through the half-closed shutters. Then Papa came in and sat down on the end of Louis' bed.

'Boys, are you packed?'

'Yes.' Max sounded fed up, as if he was tiring of this whole surprise thing already.

'Yes,' Louis said.

'Are you sure? Even your toothbrushes? Have you checked the bathroom?'

'You're beginning to sound like Maman!' Max protested, still playing his GameBoy. 'We're only going away for the weekend.'

'I don't want you to leave anything behind,' Papa said. 'Have you put out your clothes for tomorrow? I'm

going to wake you at the last minute, so we'll only have quarter of an hour to leave the house.' He got up, went over to Max's bed and tried to prise the GameBoy from his hands. Max hung on grimly, still fighting with the buttons, saying, 'One more second, one more second, I've nearly killed him!'

'Max . . .' Papa began in a low, warning voice.

'OK, OK!'

Papa bent down to kiss him. Max grumbled and complained that there was no way in hell he was going to be able to fall asleep. Then Papa came over to Louis' bed.

'Night-night, Louis.'

As Papa bent over him, Louis reached up round his father's neck and pulled him close. He breathed in his warm, slightly sweaty smell. He never wanted to let go.

'It'll be all right, Loulou,' Papa whispered in his ear. 'It'll be all right. I promise.'