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Opening extract from

Watcher

Written by

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Barrington Stoke

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Watcher

by

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For my husband

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Chapter 1
The E-mail

Some people just have really bad luck. Maybe they're fat, or they've got spots. Maybe they've got no friends. Worst of all, there's no one they can blame. It's just the way things are.

Not me. I'm fat. I don't have any friends. But I know exactly who to blame.

My mum.

She'd been gone for more than seven years when I found the e-mails.

I was in my dad's room, on the computer. I was trying to log on as my dad. I was bored, and I wanted to go on the Internet. There are only a few sites my dad lets me go onto by myself, and they're all really stupid.

It was easy to break into his account. His password is *Sarah*. That's my name, and it wasn't hard to work that one out. But then, instead of going onto the Internet, I looked at his e-mails. I don't know why. He never gets anything interesting.

But I looked at them anyway. And I felt sick. I just sat and stared at the computer screen.

The last e-mail he'd sent was to *Ann Young*.

I started to shake. He'd sent it last night. He'd written to my mum just last night!

But *how*? We didn't know where she was. She'd just vanished one day when I was six years old. She'd left a note that said, *Sorry, but I'm not cut out for this*. She took all of her things. She didn't even say goodbye to me. At first my dad tried to find her. Then he gave up and told me that it was just the two of us from then on.

That's when my life started to go wrong. I put on loads of weight. The stuck-up cows at school all laughed at me. I hated everyone, and they hated me. Now, seven years later, I was still fat and I still didn't have any friends.

And now my father was sending my mum e-mails!

I clicked onto the e-mail. It said:

> Ann,
> I'm not asking you to step in and be her mum. But can't you just meet up with her? Or talk to her on the phone? She deserves some answers! You're living so close now that it seems silly for the two of you never to meet.

I felt cold all over. Mum was living nearby? Since when? Then I saw that she'd answered his e-mail. I quickly opened her reply:

> Ted,
> I only told you I'm in Milton in case you ever saw me. I don't want to meet up with Sarah, or talk to her. Don't ask me again. It's for the best.

For the best? My mouth dropped open, and then anger rushed through me. My mum was living only three miles away, in the next village, and she wouldn't even talk to me!

"Sarah?" I heard someone shout. It was my dad. He was just home from work. I shut down his e-mail. When he came into the room I was playing an online game, looking innocent.

"How was school?" he asked.

"Great," I said. School is never great, but it's a lot better than it used to be. I used to get called 'fat cow' and all sorts, until I fought back a few times. Now everyone just ignores me.

"Is everything OK?" asked Dad. He took his jacket off. He looked tired. He's the manager of a big supermarket, but I don't think he likes it very much.

"Fine," I told him. I didn't look up at him. Inside, I felt like shouting. Or crying. Or both.

My own mother didn't want to see me.

A spaceship floated past on the screen, and I blasted it. It exploded into a million pieces.

****

Milton is only a few minutes away on the bus. I went there that Saturday. It was a cold, sunny day in October. I wore my dad's old coat. It's the only coat I have that fits me, but it makes me look like a whale. I told myself I didn't care. At least it was warm.

I walked slowly up and down the streets of Milton. The houses all looked the same. I wasn't sure what I was looking for. I knew there wouldn't be a sign that said, *Sarah Young, your mum lives here!* But there had to be something. Some sort of clue.

After a while I felt out of breath. I'm not used to walking so much. The tops of my legs rubbed together through my jeans, and I felt like giving up.

Then I saw it. I stopped walking, and just stared.

There was a little bungalow on the corner of a street. The front garden was messy and overgrown. And there was an old red sports car parked in front of it.

My hands felt cold. I remembered that car, I was sure I did! I remembered sitting in the back seat and feeling scared because Mum was driving so fast. I remembered being sick all over the seats once. I thought Mum'd be cross with me, but she was really nice. She wiped the sick off my face with a cool cloth and gave me a kiss.

I went over and peered in the back window. I could tell it was the same car. The back seats were all cracked, and there was grey masking tape all over the cracks. I remembered the pattern. I used to think it was like a spider web.

I looked at the house. There were curtains on the front windows. It was the middle of the day but the curtains were shut. Maybe the person inside the house didn't want to see the sunlight.

Or maybe they didn't want anyone to see them.

I touched the car. The doors were locked. I looked back at the house again, and I felt sick. My mum was in there. I just knew it.

Part of me wanted to go and bang on her door and make her talk to me.

But then I thought of her e-mail. I remembered what she'd written to Dad. She didn't want anything to do with me.

I felt like I was going to explode. I had to do something! I put my hands into my coat pockets and felt my keys. I took them out. Did I dare?

I dragged the key across the door of my mum's car. It made a long scratch in the red paint. I made another scratch, and then another.

When I was finished, I turned around and went home. My heart was pounding hard. I'd never done anything like that in my life. But she deserved it.