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Opening extract from

Missing Me

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The Announcement

School was finished for the summer holidays. I was free – and on my way to see my sister, Lauren. She had just got back to London after three months away, working in Paris with her law firm. I'd wanted to visit her while she'd been abroad– her boyfriend, Jam, went most weekends – but our mum, Annie, wouldn't let me go. She worries about me . . . about us . . .

I reached Lauren and Jam's flat. As I rang the doorbell, I gazed at my reflection in the brass door-plate. My hair was long, closely framing my eyes on either side of my face. I like it that way, though Annie is always nagging me to get it cut.

The door opened. Jam stood there. He and Lauren have been together since I was six so he's like a big brother to me.

'Hey, Mo,' he said with a huge grin. 'How are you?'

'Hi.' I smiled back. 'Good, thanks.' I kept smiling, wishing I could think of something interesting to say to him. I don't know why, because my head's full of stuff that I've seen or heard or been thinking about and I actually feel quite relaxed around Jam. It's just always so hard to get the right words out. I mean, I love writing – my biggest dream is to be a journalist – but actually talking to people can be really hard.

‘Lauren’s in the bedroom.’ Jam was still grinning from ear to ear. ‘She’ll be down in a sec.’

I wandered into the living room. There was a photo of Dad on the mantelpiece. He died when I was eight and I’m now fifteen. I used to be able to remember him clearly but now those memories are fading. I’m not sure anymore if the images I see in my mind actually happened, or whether I’ve just been told about them or imagined them from pictures. Either way, my memories are blurry, just snatches of moments like being on Dad’s boat back in America or walking to school holding his hand. When I imagine Dad’s face he’s always smiling, like in this photo. But I know that can’t be the whole truth – nobody smiles all the time.

‘Mo?’

I turned round. Lauren was standing near the door, her lower half hidden by the couch. She was smiling, but not a big grin like Jam had. More an excited smile, like there was something she couldn’t wait to tell me.

I stared at her. Something was different. Something to do with her skin. Lauren’s really pretty with bright blue eyes that light up her whole face and she’s got long dark hair like me, though hers tumbles down her back in shiny waves while mine is greasy and lank. All that was the same. I frowned. *So what was different?* Was it just that the blue of her top really brought out the colour in her eyes? No, it was much more than that – like she was glowing from the inside.

And then Lauren stepped out from behind the couch and I saw exactly why she looked different. I stared at her belly. It was high and round and big.

‘You’re *pregnant*!’ My mouth fell open.

Jam appeared in the doorway. He laughed. So did Lauren. I was still staring at her stomach. In the blue tunic she was wearing it stuck out over her slim legs. I didn’t know much about babies but Lauren looked like this one was about to pop out of her.

Still laughing, Lauren held out her arms and I went over and gave her a hug. Her belly felt taut and firm between us.

‘I’m thirty-six weeks gone,’ she said. ‘The baby’s due at the end of August.’

Thirty-six weeks? That was, like, nearly eight months . . . which meant Lauren must have been pregnant before she went to Paris . . . pregnant when she said goodbye to me four months ago. I pulled away from her.

‘Why didn’t you say anything before?’ As soon as the words blurted out of me I wished them back. It wasn’t just what I’d said, it was the whiny, angry tone.

Too heavy, Madison.

The smile on Lauren’s face faded slightly.

‘I couldn’t face telling Mum or Annie back then,’ she said.

I nodded. I could understand that. Lauren had been adopted as a toddler and brought up away from us – she has two mums and not an easy relationship with either of them. That’s one of the reasons we’re so close. I could see why Lauren hadn’t spoken to her adoptive mother or Annie about being pregnant. They could both be pretty overbearing in their own way. But why hadn’t she told me?

Lauren obviously saw the question in my eyes.

‘As I wasn’t telling the others, I didn’t want you to have to keep such a big secret,’ she said.

‘Right.’ I couldn’t take it all in. My big sister was going to have a baby. Which meant I was going to be an *aunt.* And Lauren and Jam were going to be parents. I glanced over at Jam. He was still beaming that huge smile.

‘Isn’t it amazing?’ he said, putting his arm around Lauren. Then a frown flickered over his forehead. ‘Aren’t you pleased for us, Mo?’

I gulped again. Apart from Lauren, Jam’s the only person I let call me Mo. I’d always taken for granted just how special our three-way relationship was. And now, I realised with a jolt, someone else was going to get right in the way of it.

I stood, awkwardly, chewing on my lip. Lauren was more than a sister to me. When Annie got all anxious and overprotective, Lauren was always there for me, sympathising, with Jam in the background, dependable and funny. Were they going to love this baby more than me? The answer came to me like a slap in the face. Of course they were going to love it more than me. It would be tiny and cute and . . .

‘Course I’m pleased.’ I forced a smile onto my face. ‘D’you know if it’s a boy or a girl yet?’

‘No,’ Jam said. ‘We didn’t want to know.’

Lauren reached for my hand. ‘But you’re the first person we’ve told in either of our families. And . . . and when it’s born, we want you to be godmother, Mo.’

‘Oh.’ I was holding the smile on my face like a mask, but inside I felt like crying. I was being super-selfish, I knew, but

I couldn't help it. I'd always been so special to Lauren. And now that was going to change forever. 'OK, sure. I mean I don't know if I'll be any good as a godmother, but I'll try.'

I could hear how flat and dull my voice sounded and I hated myself for not being more convincingly cheerful. Lauren was staring at me like she knew something was wrong. Knowing Lauren, she was about to ask what it was. But just in the nick of time, the doorbell rang.