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**GIRL,
MISSING**

THE AWARD-WINNING BESTSELLER

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McKENZIE
**GIRL,
MISSING**

SIMON AND SCHUSTER



For my Mum, who first read me stories.
And for Joe, who read this story first.

SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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PART ONE

FINDING MARTHA





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 started 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. Lost. I typed the words 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. Lost. 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 one 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, then 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 five years.

I stared at the third child.

Martha Lauren Purditt

Case type: lost, injured, missing

Date of birth: March 12

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.*

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?