

Prologue

It seemed a day like any other. Beth Harding got up at six o'clock and stared out of the window. Another grey London day. Would spring never come? She made a mug of tea and went to check her emails before work. Living alone meant she could do as she pleased in the mornings.

Today there was an email from someone called 'lostgirl'. She nearly deleted it, then previewed it and choked on a mouthful of tea.

Hi, Mum

I'm all right. I know you've been worrying but I had to get my head together.

Give my love to Gran.

Jo

PS In case you think this is a joke, I still remember my dog, Libby.

Beth read it again, printed it out and carried the piece of paper into the kitchen with her, pressing it against her cheek as if that would bring her closer to the daughter who had run away from home at the tender age of sixteen. She'd heard nothing from Jo since.

Three whole years of worrying!

Tears welled in her eyes and everything around her turned into a blur. Suddenly she was sobbing, a harsh ragged sound that seemed to echo through the flat.

By the time she'd calmed down a little, the message she'd printed out was bubbled and blotched with her tears.

Her daughter was alive! Alive!

Until this moment Beth hadn't even known that, though she'd hoped. You had to

hope. Three years ago Jo had gone out one day and not returned. She'd taken a few of her possessions, but left most of them behind. The police investigations had got nowhere and none of Jo's friends had seen or heard from her since.

Beth's marriage had broken up the year before Jo vanished, but Shane had joined her in night watches for their daughter, searching places where down and outs congregated, visiting hostels. They had both been desperate for anything that might give them a clue, anything at all. They'd even forgotten their differences and grown to be almost friends again.

Shane now lived in Canada, was married to a much younger woman and had two young children. Beth was still on her own and at forty-three she had no intention of risking another relationship.

As she made another mug of tea, she murmured her daughter's name like a mantra. 'Jo, Jo.' More tears welled in her eyes, leaving cool trails down her cheeks. It was wonderful news but painful. She didn't doubt that the email was genuine because of the dog's name. Jo had loved that dog, been desolate when Libby died.

Beth hadn't realised how passionate teenage rebellion could be, because she'd never been free to rebel, had always had to be sensible. Maybe she should have gone a bit easier on Jo after the divorce. Or maybe not. She could live with an untidy home, but not a dirty one. And though she could also live with Jo being sexually active from an early age, however much she disapproved, she didn't want a series of randy young guys bedding down in her flat. She'd freaked out the first time she bumped into a strange man in the corridor. She and Jo had had the first of their bad quarrels over that.

She sighed. What use was there in agonising over the past? It was another country. She wasn't sure who had said that, but it fitted her situation.

Although she knew the email off by heart, she read it again anyway. The message was

painfully short. There was no clue as to where her daughter was, or if she was ever coming back again.

She'd thought it would be enough simply to know Jo was alive, but it wasn't. She ached to see her only child again, be with her.

After a quick check of the time, she rang Shane. He'd not received an email from their daughter, but he sobbed at the other end of the line when she told him Jo was still alive.

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Two years later

Normally the six-storey building was deserted when the cleaning team came in, but Beth was surprised to see lights at one end of the top floor even though it was ten o'clock at night. She waited in the basement car park, only getting out of her car when the two other cleaners arrived, because she always felt nervous if she had to be out alone late at night.

One of them greeted her with a friendly grin. 'Hi, boss! Coming to keep an eye on us, are you?'

Beth smiled back. 'Pam couldn't make it tonight and all my relief staff are busy.' She occasionally filled in when someone called in sick. It kept her in touch with her staff and she knew they respected her for not being afraid to get her hands dirty. 'Which floors shall I take?'

'Pam always did the top two.'

They walked in together, setting more lights blazing.

On the sixth floor, Beth checked the large, cluttered room in the small corner suite belonging to the IT company Aldeb, since this was where she'd seen lights. It had even more computers and pieces of equipment crammed in than last time she'd been here. The two young owners, Al and Debbie, were hunched over their computers to one side. A guy in a suit was sitting in the corner, drumming his fingers on the desk and looking bored.

The woman turned to smile at Beth. 'Sorry. We've got a glitch in the new program and we're still trying to sort it out. Can you clean round us? We don't mind the noise and it won't hurt to leave a few metres of floor untouched for one night.'

'No worries. I'm doing the top two floors, so I can start on the fifth and come up here last.' Just as she was about to tackle their part of the sixth floor, she heard a yell of triumph from the corner and turned to smile at the joyful faces.

The woman beckoned to her. 'We think we've fixed it but we need to test it out. Would you mind helping us? It'll only take a few minutes.'

'I'm no expert on computers.'

'We don't need your expertise; we need your face.' She chuckled at Beth's puzzlement. 'This program turns older faces back to children's, or vice versa—and it can be about 80% accurate, as far as we can work out, unless someone's had plastic surgery, of course.' She brandished a camera. 'If we take a photo of you and turn it into you as a child, you'll know whether it's a good likeness, won't you?'

'Yes, of course.' Beth had intended to refuse because she was exhausted, but was intrigued by the idea. 'Oh, OK. But we usually go out to our cars together for security reasons and the others won't want to hang around after their shift is over. Could one of you walk me out to my car afterwards?'

The man in the corner spoke, 'I'll do that.'

She studied him. Tall and looked a capable sort. Yes, she'd feel safe with him.

'Thanks.'

They photographed her and asked her a couple of questions about herself as a child.

'I had blond hair, a little lighter than now, and I was scrawny.'

As they fiddled around with the computer, the man sitting by the window continued to watch. He was good-looking in a quiet way, wearing a smart business suit with his tie

loosened. The other two were dressed extremely casually, and the younger man had dreadlocks tied in a bunch at the back of his head.

Beth was suddenly conscious that it was the end of a long hard day. What a time to have a photo taken! She must look a real mess. Then she shrugged. As if that mattered!

But when she sneaked a look at her reflection in the big glass windows, she realised she looked haggard as well as untidy. And for the first time in ages, that did matter, for some reason.

Edward watched the woman lean against a cupboard and study the two programmers. She was gaunt, looked weary and her clothes were crumpled beneath the cleaning company overall. He'd not have given her a second glance if it hadn't been for her eyes: big, brown and surprisingly beautiful in a face that was bleached bone white with exhaustion.

He was tired too. Managing his celebrity cousin wasn't the easiest job on earth, though it did pay well and—just as important to him—led him into some interesting experiences. This wasn't one of them. He'd been marking time here all evening while Al and Debbie fiddled around with their computers.

He'd read the newspaper from cover to cover, done the crossword, grimaced at the foul taste of coffee from the machine in the corridor and settled for chilled water from the dispenser. He didn't want to get on his mobile phone and chat to anyone, or even go on the Internet. Given a choice, he'd be sound asleep in bed by now and was hoping these two would get the problem sorted out soon.

If their software didn't have potential for a new segment for Pete's show, he'd have gone home hours ago and left them to it, but it did. And once his cousin got word of something promising, he didn't let go. Trouble was, Pete sometimes went overboard

over unsuitable ideas, so Edward always checked them out and made sure his cousin didn't rush into things he'd regret. This more cautious approach had saved the show from a couple of major problems in the past year or two.

He moved his body again, trying in vain to get comfortable in a typing chair designed for a midget, and ran his fingers through his hair, deciding it was too long and needed trimming.

Then Al and Debbie got the woman's photo up on the screen and he forgot his discomfort, leaning forward to watch what happened.

Beth looked at her image in dismay. She looked far worse than she'd expected. Well, anyone would be tired if they'd been working since five o'clock that morning, first doing the early shift at the office, then filling in for people this evening. The current 'flu virus had hit the cleaning company badly.

She watched what was happening, not really believing they could get close to what she'd looked like as a child.

'Here, sit down. You look tired out.'

She looked up in surprise as the man from the corner rolled a chair towards her.

'Thanks. It's been a long day.'

'I don't think Debbie and Al will be long.'

Then the program started to change her face and they both turned to watch. Amazed, she saw herself morph into a teenager.

When the lines of pixels had stopped rippling and changing, Debbie turned round.

'Well? Does it look like you at about fifteen?'

'Yes.'

'How like you?' Al prompted.

‘Very. I wore my hair long, though, tied back.’

They adjusted the image. ‘How’s that?’

‘Amazing.’

‘Give me a percentage.’

‘Ninety per cent at least.’

Al punched the air with one fist and turned back to the keyboard.

‘You’re sure of that?’ the man in the suit asked.

She was surprised by the intensity of his gaze. ‘Of course I am. I should know my own face.’

Gradually the image changed again, this time turning her into a child.

‘Hair?’ Debbie asked.

‘Short, just below my ears, parted on the right.’ She watched them adjust that, then sucked in her breath in astonishment. This could have been one of the old family photos. She realised all three of them were looking at her enquiringly, waiting for her reaction, and made an effort to gather her wandering thoughts.

‘Well?’ Al prompted.

‘I can’t believe it. That’s so like me as a child. How do you do it?’

The young woman ignored that question. ‘How close is it this time?’

‘Ninety per cent again.’

Debbie beamed at her. ‘We daren’t claim that, of course, because it doesn’t always happen. But sometimes it can be amazingly accurate, as long as we don’t try to make the images too detailed. It’s a fine line to tread.’

‘Do you want to see what you’ll be like when you’re sixty?’ Al asked.

Beth shuddered. ‘No, thanks.’

Debbie chuckled and dug Al in the ribs. ‘Not many women would want to see that,

you dope.'

'What do you use a program like this for?'

The man in the suit cut across what Al had been going to say. 'That's confidential information, I'm afraid.'

The younger man rolled his eyes at her.

'Well, your program works brilliantly.' She glanced once more at the screen, shaking her head in disbelief.

'How old were you then?'

'About six.' She closed her eyes for a moment as memories flooded back. Not a good year, that. Her little brother had vanished while on holiday, kidnapped or murdered, or else he'd simply wandered away and fallen into the sea. Her mother had been distraught.

Afterwards Beth had been passed from one relative to another for months while the police searched desperately for little Greg and her father nursed her mother through a breakdown.

But there had been no further sign of the child, no ransom notes, no body, nothing. It was as if the boy had simply vanished off the face of the earth a week before his third birthday.

The family had never settled down again. Her father and mother had started arguing a lot. She'd known, even though they tried to keep their voices low. You couldn't mistake that tone of voice. In the end, her father had left and hadn't come back. He had a new family now, living in the north of England. She saw him sometimes, but they weren't close. She was much closer to her mother, had had to be because without her support, her mother might have collapsed again.

Beth pushed the painful memories away and forced her tired, aching body upright.

No way was she going down into that dark basement car park on her own. She looked at the man in the suit. 'Well, if that's all you need me for, I'll go home to bed.'

'Have you much more to do to the program?' he asked the two at the computers.

'Two or three hours of fiddling, probably.'

'Then I'll come back tomorrow. Give me a ring when you're ready to roll again. I'll need to see a few more successful regressions before we take it any further.' He turned to Beth. 'I'll walk you to your car. Here, let me carry that.'

'I can manage.'

He ignored her and took the cleaning equipment out of her hands. Clearly, the masterful type, but with beautiful manners.

As they stood waiting for the lift, he said, 'We haven't been introduced. I'm Edward Newbury.'

'Same surname as the Talk Show host,' she said without thinking. Pete Newbury had hit the headlines several times lately

'He's my cousin, actually. Do you watch his show?'

'Not often. In Focus was on a bit early in the evening for me last season. I'm usually busy at that time of day.'

'And you're . . . ?'

'Beth Harding.' She didn't give him any further information about herself. What was the point? They'd probably never meet again.

'Have you worked here long?'

'I've been with SherBright Cleaning Services for a few years now,' she said carefully. She never told strangers much about herself, if she could help it.

'Good employer?'

'Most people think so.'

The lift stopped at the basement car park and she shivered involuntarily. Of course, he noticed.

‘Can you not find a job that doesn’t involve night work?’

‘I’m just filling in for someone who’s sick. Normally I—um, work in the office. Our cleaners always go in and out of buildings in groups at night. Company policy. What do you do for a living?’

‘I’m my cousin’s manager.’

She might have asked him more about what that involved but they’d reached her car.

She zapped the locks, watched him put her equipment into the rear and got in.

‘Thanks for coming with me to the car. I appreciate that.’

‘No problem. You can’t be too careful these days.’

She saw in the rear mirror that he stood watching her drive away. She wondered what it was like to manage a celebrity, and what they wanted the computer program for, then yawned and dismissed Edward Newbury from her mind. She’d probably never see him again. Pity. He was rather attractive. But she wasn’t on the hunt for a man, didn’t have the time or the inclination these days.

When she got back to her flat, Beth hesitated then went into the third bedroom, a place she usually avoided. It’d been five years since her daughter had run away but Beth had kept all Jo’s things—just as her mother had kept little Greg’s things, still had them tucked away somewhere.

Seeing that picture of herself as a child had stirred up a hornet’s nest of old memories. No one had seen or heard of her little brother since the day he vanished. There had been no closure and that mattered more than people realised.

She still had photos of Greg somewhere and could remember playing with him as a

child, but he didn't feel like part of her family any longer. He was just a legend, a ghost at every feast, especially if her mother was present, though for the past few years her mother had been a lot better, thank goodness.

With a sigh, Beth picked up one of the last photos of her daughter, one which resembled her own teenage self on the geeks' computer. It was ironic that Jo too had vanished. Was she destined to lose everyone she loved? Beth wondered.

But Jo was alive, at least. She had that to comfort her and her daughter now sent emails every month or so, always from an Internet café, never giving any clue as to where she was or what she was doing. Still alive, Mum. Or: Things going well, got a new job.

Beth sent equally brief replies, not sure what she dared say, terrified of upsetting her daughter by asking to meet.

Surely the messages were genuine? She had to believe that. They were painfully sparse dribbles of information but better than nothing.

Would she ever see Jo again?

She stared round the dusty, unused bedroom. She really ought to clear it out, refurnish it perhaps, but you couldn't help hoping. And since no one else ever stayed here, it didn't matter what the room was like.

Oh, she was being silly tonight. Why revisit old pains? She had better things to do with her time. Like sleep.

An eighteen-hour day was no good for anyone. Whatever the emergency, she wasn't doing any extra shifts tomorrow.

She went into her own bedroom, intending to take a shower, but was so tired she simply fell on the bed for a moment's rest. As she reached up to release her long hair from its tail, she closed her eyes.

At three o'clock in the morning she woke shivering, switched off the light, climbed under the covers and went back to sleep again.

In his comfortable flat in Hampstead Edward Newbury was woken in the middle of the night. He cursed the phone, letting it ring out. He needed to sleep, dammit.

But the noise started again, almost immediately. Two rings then it stopped. Two more rings, then it stopped again. He groaned but when it rang a third time he picked it up. This was a special signal between himself and Pete, used only when one or the other of them was in trouble.

Or more accurately, when Pete was in trouble.

'What's the matter now?' Edward growled.

'Just had a quarrel with Fran. The bitch has locked me out and all my keys are inside the flat. Is your spare bedroom free?'

'Yes. Come on over.'

'I'll get the concierge to phone for a taxi.'

'Couldn't he let you into the flat?'

'I'd as soon walk through the fires of hell as face that bitch again tonight. Oh—you haven't got company there, have you?'

'No.' Edward hadn't had company of the female sort for a while, had been working too hard. Or perhaps he was getting more picky as he grew older. Though forty wasn't old and he kept himself fit. But he wasn't out to re-marry and had always needed more than a willing female body to turn him on.

'You'll have to come down and pay for the taxi, Ed. I haven't got my wallet.'

It was the second time this month Pete had woken him. And actually, Edward didn't blame Fran for getting angry at him. Since his TV show had started getting top ratings,

his cousin had turned into a bit of a prima donna, wanting others to dance to his whims.

Edward made his way to the kitchen for a drink of water and went to stand on the balcony. It was a mild night and at this hour the nearby buildings were mainly dark, so you could actually see the stars.

Just over ten minutes later headlights played along the dark street below and a taxi stopped in the visitors' parking area. He went down to pay for the ride.

After the taxi drove off, Pete wove his way unsteadily across the car park beside him.

Drunk again. That explained why Fran had locked him out.

When his cousin began to talk loudly in the foyer, Edward grabbed his arm and gave it a shake. 'Shut up, you fool. Other people are sleeping.'

Pete laid a mocking finger on his lips and pretended to tiptoe. Once inside the flat he leaned against the wall and grinned. 'Good old Edward. Always there to rescue me. Got any cognac to drown my sorrows with?'

'No. Go to bed and sleep it off. You've work to do tomorrow.'

'What time is it?'

'Two o'clock in the morning and I'm sleepy, even if you aren't.'

'Y'know, you've turned into a party pooper lately.'

'It's called growing up. And if you want to keep earning good money, you should do less partying and more sleeping. Here.' He pulled Pete along the corridor and opened the door of the spare bedroom. 'Be my guest. Do you need any pyjamas?'

Pete snickered. 'I'm hot enough without.' Then he frowned and peered at himself in the mirror. 'Hmm. Perhaps you're right. Sleep it is. I'll need to get up at six o'clock, so I can go home and change. Wake me then, will you?'

Edward walked across and set the bedside alarm for six, knowing he'd still have to come and drag Pete out of bed, by which time he'd be wide awake himself.

‘And if Fran doesn’t let me back in, I’ll break the bloody door down. That’ll teach her.’

‘That’d be stupid. Get the concierge to use his master key.’

‘It’s my door. I can do what I want with it.’

Even before he left the room, Edward heard deep breathing. His cousin had always had the capacity to fall asleep within seconds of putting his head on the pillow. He only wished he shared the same gift. It was half an hour before the glowing numerals on the bedside clock began to blur.

He woke to the sound of the alarm beeping in the next bedroom and went to drag his cousin out of bed then put on some coffee.

By the time it was ready, Pete had dressed and joined him. He poured a cup of black coffee and took a long gulp, hot as it was. ‘Thanks.’

‘Considering how drunk you were when you arrived here, you look amazingly fresh and alert.’

‘Yeah. I never get that morning after stuff.’

He gave Pete money for the taxi and breathed a sigh of relief when he had the place to himself again. It was still too early to go into the office, so after clearing up the kitchen, he went down to the excellent basement gym that went with these prestigious apartments.

He doubted Fran would have kept Pete locked out for more than a few minutes last night. She knew which side her bread was buttered on.

And Pete knew that too. So what sort of statement was he making to her by spending the night elsewhere? The games those two played lately did Edward’s head in.

He got on the treadmill and started his exercise programme. Other people were working out but to his relief, no one wanted to chat.