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Opening extract from

Sister, Missing

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Published by

Simon & Schuster Children's Books

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Madison should have been on her way back across the beach towards me by now. Maybe she'd got confused and wandered off in the wrong direction. I scanned the horizon. The beach was fairly crowded but there was still plenty of space between the groupings on the sand and I had a clear view for at least two hundred yards in both directions.

"Mo!" I called.

Several nearby families looked around. Ignoring them, I yelled again. "MO!" *Where was she?* It wasn't like her to muck about.

My shout echoed away into silence. My guts squeezed into a knot. *Don't panic,* I said to myself. *It's only been a few seconds. She's got to be here somewhere.*

Still scanning the beach I grabbed my phone and called her number. But Madison's mobile was switched off. I groaned out loud. Why hadn't I checked it was on when she'd walked away? I picked up my straw bag and headed towards the stall. I kept glancing over my shoulder but there was nothing behind me except our towels on the ground. If Madison came back she'd see them and wait for me. My eyes strained across the sand and along the promenade skipping over each figure, looking for those chestnut braids. She couldn't have just vanished.

I reached the ice cream stall. The vendor was chatting to two elderly ladies as he held a cone under his ice cream machine.

"Excuse me," I interrupted. "The little girl you served just now, did you see where she went?"

The man frowned. I could feel the elderly ladies looking at me.

"Little girl?" the man said slowly.

"Yes," I said. "She's eight and a half with brown eyes and long brown hair in plaits. She… she ordered two Twisters and gave you a £20 note like about two minutes ago. Less."

The man nodded. "I remember."

I glanced round again. A soft breeze was playing across the beach. The sky was a clear blue. Children's laughter filled the air. Madison must be here somewhere, maybe just around the corner.

"So did you see where she went?" I turned back to the man.

He shrugged.

One of the two elderly women he was serving cleared her throat. "Perhaps she's in the Ladies," she said, pointing round the side of the stall.

Nodding, I rushed past them. The Ladies loo was clearly marked just along the promenade wall. I darted inside but all the stalls were empty, their doors hanging open. A woman was putting on lipstick at the mirror.

"Did a little girl just come in here?" I asked.

The woman shook her head. I rushed outside and glanced back across the beach. Our towels were still lying where I'd left them. No sign of Madison.

Fighting back my rising panic, I stopped and took a deep breath. *Think. Where could she have gone?* I turned right around, looking in every direction, trying to spot the familiar silhouette of my little sister. But there was no sign of her.

Heart pounding, I grabbed the arm of a mother walking by, her baby in a sling.

"My sister's missing," I said. "She's eight-and-a-half."

"Oh." The woman's eyes widened. She raised her hand protectively over her baby's head, as if to shield her from the news. "I'm… er… that's terrible. What happened?"

"She went to buy an ice cream and she hasn't come back." As I spoke, my eyes scanned the beach again, desperately hoping I'd catch a glimpse of Madison in her denim shorts and blue t-shirt.

"When?" the woman asked.

"Not long. A few minutes ago," I said.

The woman's face relaxed. "She's probably just gone in the wrong direction. Got lost, not paying attention to where she was—"

"No." I shook my head. "Madison isn't like that."

The woman with the baby took a step away from me. Her expression registered sympathy but distance. She didn't want to get involved. "I'm sure your sister will turn up," she said. "Have you tried the Ladies?"

"Yes." The word snapped out of me. I spun around, searching the beach again. "D'you know if there's a life guard here?"

The woman shook her head. "Not on this stretch, sorry." She walked off. I looked along the path after her and my breath caught in my throat.

Two Twisters, still in their wrappers, were lying on the tarmac, melting. Were those the ice lollies Madison had just bought?

I took a step towards them. I gasped. Just beyond the Twisters lay Madison's pocket doll, Tammy. She was face down on the ground, her shoes missing and one of her plaits untwisting in the sunshine.

And that's when I knew.

Madison hadn't wandered off, or gone in the wrong direction by mistake. Something really, really bad had happened.