

Just another missing persons poster –  
until he realized the face on it was his own . . .

# Without Looking Back



Tabitha Suzuma

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## Prologue

As Louis moved out of the way of the thin stream of people and paused beside the ticket machines to let an old woman by, a poster on the station wall caught his eye. It was a small poster, no bigger than a sheet of A4, and it read: **MISSING – HAVE YOU SEEN THESE CHILDREN?** in thick black letters. It showed three photographs – a girl and two boys. The girl had long fair hair, a fringe that fell in her eyes and an angelic smile. The first boy had green eyes and shaggy blond hair that came down behind his ears to the nape of his neck, and was squinting at the camera. The second boy wore a blue baseball cap, chunky brown glasses and a lopsided grin. And beneath the photos, in small black print, he read:

**Emilie (8 years old), Louis (12) and Maxime Whittaker (14) went missing on 8th June from Paris, France. They are believed to have been abducted by their father, Edward James Whittaker, and taken to the UK. The children's mother has applied for the return of the children to France under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Emilie has a small scar on her chin, likes to suck her middle two fingers, and is known as Millie. Louis has a chipped front tooth and a mole under his left eye; he is sometimes nicknamed Loulou, and is a talented dancer. Maxime is dyslexic, has a small birthmark on the back of his neck, and goes by the name Max.**

**ANYONE WITH INFORMATION SHOULD CONTACT:**

**Préfecture de Police, Commissariat Central, Avenue Henri, 75016 Paris, France.**

**24-hr helpline: +44(0)1 55 43 97 17**

A woman pushed past him, muttering angrily to herself. There was a painful thumping sound coming from his chest and he felt as if an invisible hand was closing around his throat. Louis stood rooted to the spot in front of the photo of himself, his brother and his sister, and stared at it in horror.

## Chapter One

The scuffed trainer hit the wall with a thud, bounced back onto the bed and lay on its side atop the duvet, inches away from his face. 'Turn it off!'

Louis rolled over and groaned into the pillow. He reached out an arm, swinging his hand optimistically towards the edge of his desk. He made contact with a pile of DVDs, a tall glass and finally his alarm clock. The DVDs and the glass went crashing down onto the carpet; the alarm clock stopped. In his bed on the other side of the room, Max yawned loudly and pulled the covers over his head.

Eyes still closed, Louis raised himself to a sitting position, his feet feeling the carpet for sharp DVD cases. There were none. Only a damp patch from the overturned glass. He got to his feet, felt his way round to the

end of the bed and groped for the door. Morning light was streaming through the curtains and the smell of coffee and the strains of the radio drifted up from downstairs. Louis opened his left eye a crack – enough to guide himself across the landing and into the bathroom. He splashed cold water onto his face and started to yawn, gazing out of the window for a moment, watching a plane trace its way across a pale morning sky. It was the beginning of June. Summer was finally here and the long holidays began in just under a month. With a sigh of satisfaction, Louis returned to the bedroom, picking his jeans up off the floor as he went.

Twenty minutes later, Max was elbowing him out of the way for the last croissant and Millie was spreading an unreasonably large amount of Nutella onto her toast, glancing sideways at Max to check he hadn't noticed.

Max drained his coffee cup and grabbed his school bag from the sideboard. 'Right, I'm out of the door in exactly' – he checked his watch – 'three minutes.'

'Uh-oh, uh-oh!' Millie swung her legs wildly, slurping her hot chocolate.

Max moved towards the kitchen door. 'Two minutes and fifty seconds,' he said, his eyes still on his watch.

'Maman forgot to leave me money for art club again!' Millie exclaimed angrily, going out into the hall to look



on the letter table where their mother normally left their snacks and any other bits and bobs for school.

‘Two minutes and thirty seconds!’

‘Max, Max, she didn’t leave me any money—!’ Millie looked close to tears.

‘All right, all right, calm down,’ Louis said. ‘I’ve got five euros – is that enough?’

‘Did you have to speak to the judge then?’ Pierre asked him breathlessly as they scuffled for the football in the muddy corner of the playground.

Louis got it off him and kicked it hard over to Luc, who scored an easy goal.

‘Yeah, but it was OK. I didn’t have to stand up in court or anything. The judge just took us into a little room with a video camera. She spoke to each of us in turn.’

‘And did you all say the same thing?’

‘Of course. We all said we wanted to be able to see Papa whenever we felt like it. Not just one weekend a month. We said that once Papa got his new flat, we wanted to be able to go and stay with him during the school holidays when Maman’s working instead of going to summer camp.’

‘And what did the judge say?’

‘Nothing. She just asked the questions.’

‘So, do you get to miss any more school?’ Pierre wanted to know.

Louis made a bold attempt at getting the ball off Michel, then fell back. ‘No, that’s it, unfortunately. The court case is finished.’

When Louis got home after his two-hour dance class, he was starving. Max was boiling pasta again because Maman had forgotten to order any ready meals in her weekly Internet shop at Carrefour. She had another big project at work and was taking clients out to dinner tonight so she wouldn’t be back before ten. Millie was doing her homework at the kitchen table amidst pieces of grated cheese, trying to wheedle the answers out of Max. Louis flopped onto the nearest chair and licked his finger and pressed it against the cheese gratings.

‘You don’t have to just sit there – you could at least lay the table,’ Max said grumpily from the cooker.

The idea of getting back to his feet so soon after sitting down did not appeal. ‘Can’t Millie?’

Max turned and gave Louis an angry look. Then he grabbed the cutlery from the drawer and began laying the table with a lot of clatter, slapping the plates down as if he wanted to break them.

Louis got to his feet. 'It was just a question. I didn't say I wouldn't do it!'

'Bit late now.' Max started dishing up angrily. 'Millie, clear your stuff away.'

Millie scooped up her school books and dumped them on the floor, narrowly missing Trésor's paws. Max sat down, still scowling.

'I got full marks in my spelling test today,' Millie announced proudly, winding some overcooked spaghetti around her fork.

Louis narrowed his eyes at her. 'Liar—'

'I did, I did, I'll show you! The teacher gave me a big gold star.'

'Yeah, yeah, OK, Millie, we believe you,' Max said.

'I want to call Papa. I want to tell him.' Millie pouted.

'You can tell him tomorrow,' Max said.

Millie's eyes brightened. 'Is tomorrow our weekend with him already?'

'Yes,' Louis said.

'Yippee!' Millie crowed.

Seated at the dining-room table, his head propped up on his hand, Louis tried to refocus his eyes on the page of print. Upstairs, Millie was already in bed. From the kitchen next door came the steady hum of the television.

It sounded like *Les Experts*. Louis yawned hard. Max rarely did any homework, which was why he was being threatened with having to stay down a year again. Before Papa had moved out, they had all sat around the table together every evening to do homework, Papa testing Millie on her times tables, Louis on his history dates, Max on his spelling. Max was dyslexic and, ever since Papa had left, seemed to have given up on homework altogether. Only last week he had been talking about leaving school and getting a job once he turned sixteen. That had prompted a row with Maman which had lasted well into the night . . .

The sound of the front door made him start. He tipped forward and narrowly missed banging his head on the table. It was Maman – he could smell her perfume and hear the sound of her heels on the parquet floor.

*‘Bonsoir, mon Loulou . . .’* She came in, clutching an umbrella and her briefcase, raindrops speckling the padded shoulders of her dark-blue suit, and kissed him, red wine on her breath. ‘What a day! My feet are killing me. Haven’t you finished your homework yet?’

He blinked at her blearily. ‘History exam tomorrow. Can you test me?’

‘Not now, darling. I’ve got to sit down and I’m dying for a coffee. Where’s Max?’

'In the kitchen.'

'Has he done his homework?'

'Dunno.'

'What time did Millie go to bed?'

'Nine-ish.'

'Oh, that's much too late! Maaax . . . ?' Her heels clicked down the hallway and into the kitchen.

Louis looked up from his book and stared into space, listening to the rise and fall of the voices from the kitchen. Maman sounded angry, but she was trying to keep her voice down. Max sounded monosyllabic. Discussing homework, or lack of it, no doubt. Maman's job as a broker in one of France's leading trading firms meant she was rarely around to supervise homework. The clock on the mantelpiece read quarter to eleven. Louis closed his eyes again. The thought of crawling into a warm bed was irresistible. Perhaps there would be time to learn that last paragraph at breakfast tomorrow.

Max burst into the bedroom, blinding Louis with the overhead light, kicking off his jeans while grumbling to himself about never being allowed to see the end of *Les Experts*. Louis pulled the duvet over his head to escape from the glare and waited until Max had returned from

the bathroom and got into bed before re-emerging. The glow of the streetlamps seeped its way through a gap in the heavy curtains, creating a thin orange shaft on the carpet. Max tossed and turned in his bed, trying to find a comfortable position, yawning loudly. Silence descended.

Louis rolled over onto his side and gazed at his brother's inert figure on the other side of the room. The sound of his breathing had deepened and it would be only minutes before he began to snore.

'Max?'

'Mm?'

'If Papa wins the court case, does that mean we'll be able to start seeing him as much as we want to?' Louis asked.

'No, only every weekend,' Max replied.

'But Papa said he was going to try and get joint custody,' Louis protested. 'I thought that meant three days here with Maman and three days with Papa, with a changeover day in between.'

'That'll never happen,' Max said.

'Why?'

'Because . . .' Max heaved a weary sigh. 'Papa told me judges rarely agree to an equal split. They think it's too disruptive to the kids to change house mid-week. The

most Papa can hope for is to have us every weekend instead of three days a month.'

'And if Maman wins?'

Another sigh. 'Louis, you know what will happen. Papa talked us through it all again last time we went to stay.'

'But I've forgotten—'

'If Maman wins, then Papa only gets supervised visits, one day a month.'

'But I still don't understand why—'

'Because Maman has told the judge that Papa is mentally unstable.'

'But she doesn't really believe that?'

'No, she doesn't really believe that. But he lost his job because he just stopped going to work after the divorce, remember? He didn't get out of bed for weeks. And she still hates him because he fell in love with that woman . . .'

Louis closed his eyes. 'Yeah . . .'

There was a long silence. 'Anyway' – Max said suddenly – 'even if she does win, I don't care. In a year and a half I'll be sixteen and I'll be able to choose who I live with. Papa said I could go and live with him then and quit school and get a job if I wanted.'

'Don't go,' Louis whispered.

'I'll still be able to come back and see you and stuff.'

Silence.

'Maybe Papa *will* win,' Max said.

There was no time to even open his history book the following morning. Louis had forgotten to set the alarm and was woken by Maman in her bed-hairdo, shouting at them to pack their weekend bags. At breakfast, Max tried it on with the 'I-really-feel-ill-today' routine and Millie cried because she couldn't find her doll. Trying to apply her lipstick using her reflection in the door of the microwave, Maman told Max that if he hadn't bothered to study for his test today he only had himself to blame, then told Millie that she was too old to cry about a doll.

'Is Papa going to pick us up from school?' Millie asked tearfully.

'Yes.' Maman closed her lipstick with a snap and started on her hair. 'Remember to go straight to the gate after class. And if he's late, just wait for him. You know what he's like.'

'Papa said he would take us to EuroDisney again this weekend!' Millie suddenly remembered.

'That's enough Nutella, Millie.'

'He did say that, didn't he, Max?' Millie persisted.



‘Probably,’ Max replied, spraying croissant crumbs across the table.

‘Yippee!’

‘Don’t come home on Sunday night saying you’ve still got homework,’ Maman warned.

In the back of the Mercedes, Max wangled the front seat even though it was Louis’ turn, and Millie was reunited with her doll amidst whoops of delight. Maman tapped her long, petal-shaped fingernails on the steering wheel in frustration as rivulets ran down the windscreen in front of a sea of red lights. ‘My first meeting’s at nine. This traffic is a joke!’ Suddenly, she glanced at Max and yanked out his earphones. ‘I told you not to take that iPod to school.’

‘But I want to have my music with me at Papa’s!’ Max protested.

‘Put it away in your rucksack then.’

Max did as he was told, grumbling under his breath.

‘Put your books away and take out a blank sheet of paper.’

Louis turned his head slowly to exchange wide-eyed looks with Pierre. There was a shocked silence from the class, followed by general shufflings and mumblings of discontent as textbooks were swapped for blank paper.