

I Have

Secrets

Penny  
Joelson

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**For Michael and Zoe**

*I tense up as soon* as I hear the doorbell. I know it's him. I know it's Dan. Sarah's still upstairs getting ready, and I hope she comes down soon. I don't want him coming in here.

Mom calls up to Sarah, and I hear Sarah say she'll be down in a minute. "We've been keeping her busy, I'm afraid," Mom tells Dan, "so she hasn't had much time to get ready!"

"I know she wouldn't have it any other way," says Dan. "She's a gem—and you too. What you do for these kids."

I listen to them chatting away and Mom laughing at Dan's jokes. Everyone loves Dan. Then Mom says she has to get back to the kitchen—she's left things on the stove and she's sure Sarah won't be long.

It's quiet for a moment. I hear the distant clattering of pans in the kitchen. Then I hear Dan's voice, coming closer as he speaks.

"What show are you watching? Ah...*Pointless!*"

I can hear him breathing. Then he whispers, "A little like your life, isn't it, Jemma?"

He's standing behind me now, but I can't see him because my wheelchair is facing the TV. I try to focus on the game show questions and forget he's there, but he gives a long, dramatic sigh.

"Don't know how you can stand it." His voice is low, not loud enough to be overheard. "Watching television must be the most excitement you get." He only speaks like this when no one else is around. He used to ignore me completely, but not anymore.

He moves so he is in front of me, blocking my view of the TV. Grimacing, he leans forward. I get a gulping feeling, a tightness in my throat.

"If I were you," he whispers, "I'd kill myself."

My heart thuds as he rubs his head, feigning thoughtfulness. "Oh, yeah... You can't, can you? Listen," he continues, "if you ever want a little help, I could—"

We both hear footsteps on the stairs. Dan backs away. His face transforms from ugly sneer to fake grin, his features softening as if they have been remolded.

"I'd have done better than that couple!" he says, laughing and pointing to the TV screen. "We should go on this show, shouldn't we, Sarah?"

I get a waft of Sarah's perfume, which is quickly overtaken by the smell of onions frying in the kitchen. "I'm useless at trivia," she says, laughing as she comes into view. "I bet Jemma could do it, though, if she had the chance."

I don't know about that, although I do sometimes get the right answers. It's possible I'd be better than Sarah. She's an awesome aide, but she's not too smart when it comes to general knowledge—or boyfriends.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her kiss Dan softly on the lips.

My own mouth suddenly feels dry.

The couple playing *Pointless* have been eliminated. They look very disappointed. Dan and Sarah only have eyes for each other. "Ready?" Dan smiles at Sarah. "You look stunning, babe."

She nods and turns to me. Her eyes are sparkly, her cheeks flushed. "Bye, Jem. See you in the morning."

"See you, Jemma," says Dan. He winks at me.

## 2

*“Sorry to leave you so long, dear!”*

Mom bustles into the room, and I’m relieved to hear her warm, soft voice. She switches off the TV and pushes my wheelchair into the kitchen, to my place at the end of the table.

I hear the car in the drive. Dad’s back from taking Finn to his swimming lesson and picking up Olivia from ballet. Soon the kitchen is noisy and cheerful, as usual, and I push Dan out of my mind.

Olivia is boasting to Mom about how good her dancing was, and I watch as she shows Mom the new steps while Mom tries to get her to sit down at the table. She’s nine and has only been here a year. We’re all fostered. I’ve been here since I was two and so has Finn, who’s nearly six. I’ve heard Mom say Olivia was “hard to place.” Maybe that goes for Finn and me too, though Olivia’s problems are different from ours. Finn is autistic, and right now, he is lining all his beans up neatly on the plate with his fingers. He’s obsessed with straight lines.

Olivia is a whirlwind—sometimes a tornado—and she’s loud. Finn and I don’t speak, so life is very different and much noisier since she came.

“Sit down, Olivia!” Dad says in his “firm but kind” voice, and Olivia finally does. At least she doesn’t start one of her tantrums.

Mom serves Dad’s lasagna, then starts feeding me my mushed-up version. Dan’s words creep back into my head while I’m eating, and I try to shut them out.

*“If I were you, I’d kill myself. Listen, if you ever want a little help, I could—”*

I can’t believe he said it—as if my life is worth nothing!

Olivia is wolfing down her food like she’s never eaten before. She’s skinny, but she has a huge appetite. Finn isn’t eating. He’s still lining up his beans, concentrating as if his life depends on it.

“Come on, Finn,” Dad coaxes. “Time to eat them now.”

But Finn clearly doesn’t think his line is straight enough.

“Finn, my love,” says Mom gently, “why don’t you start with the lasagna?”

I don’t think Finn is listening to Mom, but I think he’s happy now with his line of beans. In any event, he forks a small amount of lasagna into his mouth.

Mom spoons some more into mine.

“I saw Paula earlier,” she tells Dad. “She looks dreadful, the poor woman.”



“Still no news?” Dad asks. Mom shakes her head.

“News about what?” Olivia demands.

Paula lives down the street, and her son, Ryan, was murdered last month. He was nineteen, and he was stabbed to death, and no one knows who did it. Everyone’s talking about it, though—it’s even been on the radio.

Dad quickly changes the subject.

“Finn’s swimming like a fish now,” he tells Mom. “He’s come along so fast.”

“And I was really good at ballet!” Olivia says, never wanting to be left out.

“I’m sure you were,” says Dad.

“How was school?” Mom asks Olivia. She shrugs.

Olivia never wants to talk about school. It’s like it’s some big secret for her.

I have no secrets of my own. I’ve never done anything without someone knowing about it. I’m sixteen years old, and I have severe cerebral palsy. I am quadriplegic, which means I can’t control my arms or legs—or anything else. I can’t eat by myself. I can’t go to the bathroom without help. I can’t move without someone lifting me with a hoist or pushing me in a wheelchair. I also can’t speak.

I’ve been this way all my life. I can see, though, and I can hear. Sometimes people forget that; they don’t realize that I have a functioning brain. Sometimes people talk about me as if I’m not even there. I hate that.

And sometimes people tell me their secrets. I think it's because it's really hard to hold a one-way conversation. If they are alone with me, they want to talk to pass the time and they end up telling me stuff. They know I won't tell anyone else, so they think telling me is safe. The perfect listener.

Sarah told me her secret. She's cheating on Dan. She's still seeing Richard, her old boyfriend, because he's so sweet and she can't stand to hurt him by breaking up with him. Neither of them knows the other exists. I'm always worried when Sarah has a boyfriend, although I enjoy the way she gossips to me about them. She has this dream of a fairy-tale wedding—she's even shown me pictures of her ideal wedding dress online. I know I should want her to be happy, and I do. It's just that I'd miss her so much if she went off to get married. She's the best aide I've had.

More than that, I don't want her to marry someone who isn't good enough for her. And I definitely don't want her marrying Dan.

# 3

*Sarah's in a great mood* when she's back on duty the next morning, though I can tell she has a hangover and is trying to hide it. She's drinking a lot of coffee. She clearly had a good night out with Dan and is singing a track by our favorite band, Glowlight.

She's wheeling me from my bedroom to the kitchen when I hear the clunk of mail landing on the mat. Sarah stops to pick it up and puts the small pile of letters on the kitchen table.

"Oh, look—one for you, Jemma," she comments. As she pushes me into my place, I see that the top letter, though addressed to Mom and Dad, has my name on it too—*Parents/Guardians of Jemma Shaw*. I rarely get mail. I wonder what it could be.

Mom picks up the pile and glances down. Then she quickly moves my letter to the bottom and puts them all on the kitchen counter. Sarah doesn't seem to notice.

Now I am even more curious. Why doesn't Mom want to open it?

After breakfast, Sarah goes to get Olivia ready, and Dad gets up to leave for work. Mom follows him out into the hallway to kiss him goodbye. Their voices are muffled, but I can pick out Mom's words. She says, "There's been another letter. I haven't read it yet, but I think we'll have to tell her."

I strain to hear Dad's reply. "Yes—she is family. Jemma has a right to know."

Family? What are they talking about? If only I could ask. It sounds like they're planning to tell me. I just have to hope that they do.

Dad's gone and Sarah's in the kitchen with me, easing my arms gently into my coat, ready for school. I'm conscious that my letter is still there, at the bottom of the pile on the counter.

Olivia's moaning that she can't find her reading book.

Mom sighs. "When did you last have it, Olivia?"

Olivia shrugs. "Dunno."

"Take a look in your bedroom," Mom tells her.

Olivia heads off slowly toward the stairs.

"Sarah, can you go with her?" Mom asks. "I don't see her book down here."

"Sure," says Sarah. "You're ready, Jemma. That's one down at least!" She hurries off after Olivia.

"Where's Finn's water bottle?" Mom mutters to herself. "I'm sure I washed it yesterday. I bet you know where I put it, Jemma."

As it happens, I do know. I saw it fall off the dish rack and down behind the trash can.

The doorbell rings, and Mom wheels me toward the door. We never know if my minibus or Finn's cab will come first. Today, it's the cab that takes Finn to his special school.

Mom sighs and pushes a spare green water bottle into Finn's bag, which is not going to please Finn, because he always has the blue one. She helps him with his coat and gives his hair a quick comb. He wriggles away as fast as he can and out the front door with his taxi escort, Jo.

"Reading book found," Sarah says, coming down the stairs.

"I hope you said thank you, Olivia," says Mom, though she knows full well that Olivia hasn't.

"It wasn't me who lost it, Lorraine!" Olivia protests. "Why do you always blame me? It's not my fault!"

She stamps her feet, and I'm relieved when the doorbell rings again so I can leave before Olivia starts screaming.

But all I think about as the bus proceeds down the street is the letter. I try to figure out what Mom and Dad were talking about. Family? Mom has an aunt and Dad has a brother, but we don't see much of them because they live a long way from here. Were they talking about their family? Or could it be *mine*—like my birth mom, the one who gave birth to me and then dumped me? Could she have finally decided she wants to see me?

I hope it's not her. I don't want to see her—not ever! She probably only wants to get a look at me and stare. I hope Mom and Dad tell her to get lost.

As soon as Dad is back in the evening, I start waiting for them to talk to me—but they don't say anything. I couldn't even see my letter in the kitchen at dinnertime. The whole pile was gone. Have they changed their minds, or are they waiting for Finn and Olivia to be in bed so they can talk about it? I'm not exactly looking forward to a conversation about my birth mom, but waiting for it is even worse.

Dad does the dishes while Mom and Sarah put Finn and Olivia to bed. It seems like it takes forever, even though I know it is probably just the normal amount of time. But then, finally, when it's nearly my bedtime and I'm watching TV on my own, Mom and Dad both come in. Mom pauses the TV, and Dad turns me around to face the sofa and sits down, looking serious.

He has the letter in his hand. I get a surge of relief mixed with panic.

“We've got something to tell you, Jemma,” he says gently. “Something important.”

My heart is beating so fast. Suddenly I don't want to hear—I don't want to know.

“We've gotten a letter,” Dad continues, “from Social Services.” He pauses, as if unsure how to continue.

Mom sits down beside him. “Jemma, I know this is going

to be a bit of a shock, and I will explain why we haven't told you before..."

I wait.

Dad reaches out and touches my hand. "You've got a sister, Jemma."

*What?*

*A sister?*

Mom sighs and smiles. "Her name's Jodi."

I try to take it in. The shock is making me breathless. A *sister*. I was so sure it was my birth mom wanting to see me. A sister is something completely different.

"The thing is," Mom continues, "we knew she wasn't told about you. So we thought it might be upsetting for you to know about her. But she found your name mentioned in some papers, and... I'm sorry, Jemma. It's been hard to know what to do."

They knew! All this time Mom and Dad have known that I have a sister. So many feelings are swirling around inside me. The thought of them not telling me makes me angry—but Mom's right. It would have been hard knowing about my sister if she was never going to know about me. I am still in shock, but I'm curious too.

A sister. My sister. I start to wonder what she's like—how old she is...

"The papers Jodi found were her adoption papers," Mom continues. "You and Jodi were split up when you were put into

foster care. Your birth mom couldn't cope. She had a lot of problems. She was very young and on her own."

I've sometimes imagined it—my mom giving me up. I could even picture her face, horrified at her own baby, unable to deal with what I was. But there were two of us, two children. That idea had never entered my head. And she couldn't look after my sister either. Does my sister have a disability too? I'm not sure what to make of this—but I know it changes things. It changes everything.

"Jodi's been asking if she can contact you," says Dad, drawing me out of my thoughts.

I get a surge of excitement that quickly sinks when I think what they would have had to tell Jodi—that I can't exactly contact her back.

"She's been persistent, but we weren't sure if it was a good idea," says Mom. "It's so hard when you can't tell us how you feel about it... But we've told her about you, and we've said she can write to you. I hope it's what you want, Jemma. I really do."

My sister! I'm still finding it hard to believe that I have one. I wonder how much she's been told about me. Will she really want to know me once she finds out what I'm like? I am thrilled, though. I can't wait to know more about her. She's going to write to me! My sister is going to write to me!



# 4

*“I still can’t believe you’ve* got a sister and no one told you!” Sarah exclaims, as she picks up a book to read to me in bed. “I knew nothing, Jemma. Your mom and dad never even mentioned her.”

I definitely believe her—if Mom and Dad had told Sarah about Jodi, she would have let something slip. She’d never keep something like that from me.

“Me and my sister, Kate,” says Sarah, “we don’t always get along, but I can’t imagine growing up and not knowing her. I bet you can’t wait for a letter from Jodi!”

Sarah keeps mentioning Jodi over the next couple of days. It’s as if she’s as excited as I am. I wish I could tell her how nervous it makes me. What if Jodi doesn’t write?

At least it means Sarah’s not talking about Dan so much. I can almost start to pretend he doesn’t exist. In fact, today Sarah isn’t talking at all—she’s concentrating as she battles to get my rebellious arms into the sleeves of a sweater. My muscle

spasms are worse than usual because I haven't been sleeping well. Thinking about my sister has kept me awake. "Tonight's the night," she whispers. I wonder what she means. She's not seeing Dan again, is she? She's seeing so much of him that I'm sometimes scared she's going to run off with him! But of course, she'd never do that.

"I'm breaking up with Richard," she says. "It has to be done. I'm not being fair to him." She runs a brush quickly but gently through my tangled hair. "I can't keep putting it off. I know he'll be heartbroken, though—he's such a softy."

At last Sarah is doing the right thing. It's no good going out with someone just because you feel sorry for them. Now she just needs to dump Dan too! I wish she had more sense when it comes to men. She's had a few boyfriends since she's been here, and they've all been hopeless. Like Jason, who was always borrowing money from her and never paying it back, and a guy named Mario who was only interested in football and a total bore. Next was wimpy Richard. And then Dan came along.

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Sarah's in her room getting ready to go out when the doorbell rings. She's meeting Richard downtown, so I know it's not him. I'm in the living room, but the door's open and for once I'm at an angle where I can see into the hall. Dad opens the front door. I hear Dan's voice greeting him.

What's *he* doing here? Sarah is definitely not expecting him.

Dad invites Dan in. I hear the front door shut, then watch them as they talk about the weather. When Dan sees Sarah all dressed up, what's he going to think? He'll get suspicious for sure. I strain to listen, but now Olivia has started one of her tantrums. She's lying on the floor somewhere behind me, kicking and screaming like a two-year-old except twice as loud.

I hear Dad call upstairs, "Sarah! Dan's here!"

He's assumed Sarah is going out with Dan tonight! At least he's warned her. It would be awful if she came down and just found Dan in the hall. I have no idea what she's going to do.

Thankfully, Dan doesn't come into the living room. I think Olivia's screaming is keeping him at a distance. Mom comes to see what's up with her, saying a quick hello to Dan as she passes. She turns my wheelchair around, which is annoying because I'd rather watch what's happening in the hall than look at Olivia, who is lying on the floor at the far end of the room, pointing and screaming. Now I can see what's upset her. One of her ballet shoes is trapped on the candelabra light fixture, near the ceiling. Finn must have thrown it up there. He's got good aim.

Mom calms Olivia and says Dad will get it down. Finn is nowhere to be seen. Mom turns me to face the TV and switches it on. Then she pulls Olivia up gently, hugging her, and holds her hand to lead her out. I hear them going upstairs.

I'm conscious that Dan is still in the hall. Sarah calls to say she'll be down in a few minutes. Then I hear Dan sigh. He walks into the room and goes straight to the TV and picks up the remote, flicking through channels. He's acting as if I'm not even here. I wish I could say, "Hey! I was watching that!" even though I wasn't really.

He settles on the news. I don't want the news. On the screen I can see a casket being carried into a church. A reporter is speaking. It's only when I hear him say the name Ryan Blake that I start paying attention.

Ryan—from down the street. It was his funeral today. I want to know what the police have found out. Mom and Dad think Ryan might have been into drugs. "Police are still seeking witnesses," the reporter continues, "and his parents are pleading for anyone who knows anything to come forward." Dan suddenly turns toward me.

"You don't know anything, do you, Jem?" he sniggers.

I can't stand it when he calls me "Jem," as if he's part of the family or something.

"Here's a secret for you," he continues, "and I know you won't tell anyone." He winks. There's a pause. He presses his face close to mine, so close I can feel his hot breath on my cheeks. "They're never gonna catch me!" he whispers, squinting his eyes and then nodding at the screen. He stands back, smiling, as if he's gloating. "There's something for you to chew on, *freak!*"

Sarah's feet patter on the stairs.

Dan quickly changes the channel to a game show. *Catch him? What did he mean?* It's an attempt to irritate me—it must be...

"Hiya, babe," he says.

"What are you doing here?" Sarah asks. I see her flapping her arms a little, like Finn does. I can tell she's panicking, but she's also gazing longingly into Dan's eyes. She won't cancel on Richard to go out with Dan, will she? She needs to break up with *both* of them. I wish she could hear what I'm telling her in my head.

"You left a glove in my car," he tells her. "I just found it today. I was passing by, so I thought I'd drop it off. Don't want you getting chilly fingers!"

"Oh, thanks! I was wondering where it was," she replies. "But I've got to get going. I'm headed out with Emma and Rihanna. We're going to the movies."

"Out again?" he says.

"Yes, I switched my next night off. It's Emma's birthday," Sarah says quickly. Sarah seems to have her excuse ready—but I guess this is what she's told Mom. "We're having a girls' night out. Becks is coming too. We're seeing that movie you said was for lovestruck teenage girls."

"No way!"

"Yeah, really." Sarah laughs for a little too long. "And I've gotta go or I'll be late."

“No worries, I’ll give you a lift,” says Dan.

“No, Dan. I’m fine,” Sarah assures him.

“It’s no prob,” says Dan.

“Oh... All right,” she replies.

An uneasy feeling grips my chest. I don’t want her to go with him. What he said to me... He had to be joking. Dan’s horrible, but he wouldn’t actually kill someone. Would he? And why did he turn up here this evening? It doesn’t feel right. Maybe she’s done something to make him suspicious. Was he trying to catch her at it?

Sarah says goodbye to me and touches my hand gently. Her hand is hot. She knows this is a mess, and she briefly meets my eyes with a look that says she knows I know this too. She turns to the door.

“Bye, Jemma,” Dan says, winking again. I see his sneering face in my head when he called me *freak* and remember what else he said. I don’t trust him one little bit.

They go, and I hear the front door bang shut.

Dad comes in and stares up at the ballet shoe on the light fixture, muttering, “You’ve got to be joking,” under his breath.



*Mom gets me ready for* bed, but I'm barely listening as she chats away about needing to get me some new clothes. What did Dan mean?

If only Mom could see inside my head to the thoughts spinning around. But I know on the outside I must look exactly the same as I always do. Nothing shows. No one knows.

He must have been joking. If he was involved, wouldn't we have heard something? Wouldn't he be a suspect? Even so, I wish I could tell someone. Just so they know what he's like. Just in case.

If he was confessing, he knew he was telling the one person who would keep his secret safe. Maybe he thinks I don't even understand what he says. I just want to know for sure. Because if Dan is a murderer, and he finds out Sarah is cheating on him...

I can't sleep at all, waiting to know that Sarah is back home. My room is downstairs, but at the back of the house, and I listen for the sound of the front door. Finally I hear her

come in, but I'm facing away from my bedside clock so I can't see the time. Maybe she'll come in to turn me—I have to be turned in the night so I don't get sore from being in one position. Yes. I can hear her footsteps.

She's breathing quite fast, and her hands aren't as gentle as usual. She catches my eye in the dimmed light and sees that I'm awake. I will her to tell me what happened. Sometimes Sarah seems to read my mind. That's one of the things I love about her.

"That wasn't the best evening of my life," she whispers.

I wait eagerly for more. She sits down on the edge of the bed.

"I can't believe Dan turned up! That glove thing was just an excuse, don't you think? He's getting so serious. He said he couldn't bear to be apart from me." She laughs. "I sat in his car with my fingers crossed that he wouldn't think something was wrong. Then he wanted to actually come into the theater with me, but luckily it was really hard to park so he couldn't."

She runs her hand through her hair. Only Sarah would get herself into this situation.

"I was scared he might hang around so I texted Richard from the lobby to say I'd be late and waited ten minutes before I even dared walk to the bar! You've gotta laugh, Jem."

Sarah is not taking this seriously at all. At least it sounds like Dan didn't catch her.

"When I got there," she continues, "Richard looked so pleased to see me. I just couldn't do it to him."



My heart sinks. Sarah is fidgeting and looks excited about something. Has she changed her mind and decided she wants to be with Richard after all?

“Jem, he got tickets for us to see Glowlight next month! It’ll be amazing!” She gives me a sheepish look. “Is it really bad if I keep going out with him until then?”

Glowlight! Well, it’s not great to use him for his tickets, but it is Glowlight. Maybe I’d do the same... No, this is wrong. Sarah needs to break up with Richard!

“Perhaps we could just go to the concert as friends,” she continues. “But I don’t think Richard would like that. I know Dan wouldn’t.”

She sighs and smooths my comforter down. “I’m such a coward, Jem.”

I don’t know what I’d do if I were Sarah—though I’d like to think I wouldn’t get myself into such a mess in the first place.