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MEG CABOT



MISSING YOU

1-800-WHERE-R-YOU

Chapter Four

“You need me to WHAT?”

Rob lowered his gaze. Apparently, it was too much for him to look me in the eye. Instead, he stared at his beer bottle.

“My sister,” he repeated. “She’s missing. I need you to help me find her. You know I wouldn’t ask you, Jess, if I wasn’t really worried about her. Doug’s told me you don’t...well...do that anymore. He told me the war—well, that it really messed you up. And I totally understand that, Jess. I do.”

He looked up then, and hit me with the full force of those baby blues.

“But if there’s any way...any way at all. If you could just give me a hint about where she is...I’d really appreciate it. And I swear afterwards I’ll go away and leave you alone.”

I stared at him.

I should have known, of course. That it wasn’t ME he wanted. Not, you know, that I’d ever once entertained the idea, since opening my door to find

him standing there, that that's what he'd come for. To try to get back together, I mean.

And I will admit, it was a big relief that he wasn't here to tell me about his impending nuptials with Karen Sue Hanky, or whoever. Not that I cared what he did anymore, or who he married.

I just don't feel like I should have to know about it. But to have come all this way to ask me to find someone—when he knew perfectly well how finding people had messed me up—

Well, okay, he didn't know, really, since I'd barely spoken to him since it happened. The war, I mean. And the part I'd played in it.

Still, he had to have read it in the papers. He had some nerve, coming here, and asking me to—

Then suddenly something else hit me, and I looked at him confusedly.

“You don't have a sister,” I pointed out.

“Yes,” Rob said, evenly. “Actually, I do.”

“How could you have a sister,” I demanded, sounding angrier than I'd meant to, “and not even tell me?”

“Because I didn’t know about her myself,” Rob said, “until a few months ago.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe this. I really couldn’t. I mean, first my ex-boyfriend shows up at my door, and not even because he wants to get back together with me. Then he pulls out some kind of ghost sister. Seriously, this is the kind of thing that only happens to me. Wait’ll the TV show’s producers got a load of this. “Did your mom put her up for adoption, and not tell you, or something?”

“She’s not related to my mom,” Rob said.

“Then how can she be your sister?” What was he trying to pull? Did he think I’d lost my MIND during the war, and not just my psychic powers?

“She’s my dad’s kid,” Rob said.

And then I remembered. You know, that Rob had a dad, too. I had never met him, because he’d left Rob’s mother when Rob had been just a baby. Rob had always been reluctant to discuss his father—didn’t even go by his father’s last name, which was Snyder, but his mother’s—until the day I’d accidentally stumbled across a photo of him, and

dreamed about his whereabouts.

Which happened to be—for want of a better word—jail.

Rob had been even MORE reluctant to talk about his dad when he realized I knew where he was.

I just sat there staring at him. Because I seriously couldn't figure out what he was talking about.

“So...your dad's out of jail?”

It was Rob's turn to wince.

“No,” he said. And I realized I'd never actually said it before. You know. The J word. It had always been an unspoken acknowledgment between us, back when we'd been—whatever-we-were. “No, he's still there. But before he got sent away, after he and my mom got divorced, he met someone else—”

Understanding finally dawned.

“So she's your half-sister,” I said.

“Right.” Rob reached for a tortilla chip, scooped up a large amount of guacamole with it, put it in his mouth, and chewed. I doubted he was even tasting it. He was just eating it to be doing something with his hands, which always seemed to have needed

to be doing something, since the day I'd first met him, either messing with an engine, or folding over a paperback, or kneading a rag. "I didn't know about her until she wrote to me this spring. See, she wasn't getting along with her mother, and so she started writing to my dad, and he told her about... about me. So one night she called, and...well. It's something, to find out you have a little sister you never even knew you had."

"I can imagine," I said. Actually, I couldn't. I was just saying that to say something.

"Her name's Hannah," Rob said. "Hannah Snyder. She's a great kid. Really funny and kind of...well, feisty. Like you, a lot, actually."

I smiled wanly. "Great," I said. Because, you know, that's the image I want the guy I'm in love with to have of me. Funny and feisty, like his little sister. Yeah. Thanks for that.

Not that I'm in love with Rob. Anymore, I mean.

"Things were...well, Hannah said things weren't great for her at home," Rob said. "I mean, with her mother. She was into some things—Hannah's

mom—that she shouldn't have been into. Drugs and stuff. And men.” Rob cleared his throat, and concentrated on dipping another chip. “Men who Hannah said made her feel uncomfortable. You know, um. On account of her getting older, and them—”

“Paying unwanted attention to her?” I asked.

“Right,” Rob said. “And I didn't think that was such a hot environment for her to be growing up in. So I started looking into what it would take for me to become her legal guardian, until she turns eighteen. It wasn't as if her mother wanted her around. Since school was out, she—Hannah's mother—said it would be all right if Hannah came for a visit.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. But I wasn't really listening. A part of me was wondering how Rob could ever think he could get a court to give him guardianship of his little sister when he was on probation.

Then I realized he probably wasn't on probation anymore, for whatever it was he'd done. He'd been a juvenile back when he'd done it, and now he was over twenty-one. That was probably part of some

sealed court record somewhere, and now that he was a business and home owner—a contributing member of society—it couldn't come back to haunt him.

And I would probably never, ever, know what it was he'd done that had got him put on probation in the first place.

“So a week ago, I picked her up from her mom's place in Indianapolis,” Rob went on. “And Hannah came to stay with me. And everything was great. I mean, it was like we'd grown up together, and never been apart, you know? We both like the same stuff—cars and bikes and The Simpsons and Spiderman and Italian food and fireworks and...I mean, it was great. It was really great.”

For the first time since we'd sat down, Rob's hands stilled. They lay flat on the table as he looked at me and said, “Then day before yesterday, I woke up, and she was gone. Just...gone. Her bed hadn't been slept in. All of her stuff is still in her room. Her mom hasn't heard from her. The cops can't find a trace of her. She's just. Gone.”

“And you thought of me,” I said.

“And I thought of you,” Rob said.

“But I don’t do that anymore,” I said. “Find people, I mean.”

“I know,” Rob said. “At least, I know that’s what you tell the press. But, Jess. I mean...you used to tell the press that before. To get them off your back. When they wouldn’t let you alone, and it was upsetting Doug. And then again, later, when the government was after you to come work for them. You pretended then, too—”

“Yeah,” I interrupted him. Maybe a little too loudly, since the couple who’d just walked in looked over at us, kind of funny, like What’s up with them? I lowered my voice. “But this time it’s not pretend. I really don’t do that anymore. I can’t.”

Rob regarded me unblinkingly from across the table.

“That’s not what Doug said,” he informed me.

“Douglas?” I couldn’t believe this. “What does Douglas think he knows about it? You think my brother Douglas knows more than the thirty

thousand shrinks the Army sent me to, to try to get it back? You think Douglas is some kind of post-traumatic stress expert? Douglas works in a comic book store, Rob. I love him, but he doesn't know anything about this."

"He might know more," Rod said, looking completely unaffected by my rather impassioned speech, "about you than the shrinks the Army sent you to."

"Yeah," I snapped. "Well, you're wrong. I'm done, okay? And this time, it's for real. It's not just a put-on to get me out of the war. I'm out. I'm sorry about your sister. I wish there was something I could do. And I'm sorry if Douglas misled you. You shouldn't have come all this way. If you'd called, instead, I could have just told you over the phone."

And spared myself having to see you again, just when I'd thought I'd finally gotten over you.

"But if I'd called instead I wouldn't have been able to give you this," Rob said, and reached into his back pocket, and pulled out his wallet. I wasn't

exactly surprised when he pulled out a photo—one of those school portraits, taken on picture day—of a young girl who looked a lot like him. Except that she had braces and multi-colored hair. I mean it. She'd dyed her hair like four different colors, blue, hot pink, purple, and a sort of Bart Simpson yellow. "That's Hannah," Rob said, as I took the picture from him. "She just turned fifteen."

I looked down at Hannah, the girl who was responsible for bringing Rob back to me.

But not, of course, because that's where he wanted to be. I knew the score. He was only back because of her.

And because, according to him, he and I are still friends.

"Rob," I said. "I told you. There's nothing I can do for her. For you. I'm sorry."

"Right." Rob nodded. "You said that. Look, Jess. I don't know what you went through during the—" He caught himself before he could say the W word, and changed it to, "—year before last. When you were...overseas. I can't even pretend to be able to

imagine what it was like over there for you. From what Doug says, when you got back—”

I glanced up at him, sharply. I was going to kill Douglas. I really was. What had gone on in our house after I'd gotten back—night terrors, the doctors had called them—was my business. No one else's. Douglas had no right to go around talking about them. Do I discuss Douglas's mental state with his exes? Well, no, because he has no exes. He's still going steady with a neighbor girl, Tasha Thompkins, whom he's been seeing for almost three years now, while she's taking classes at Indiana University and traveling back and forth every weekend to see him.

But if Douglas had had an ex, I wouldn't have discussed his private anguish with her. No way. Rob must have noticed the angry flush I'm sure was suffusing my face, since he said in a gentle voice, covering my hand that held his sister's picture, “Hey. Don't blame Doug. I asked, okay? When you came back, you were so...you were—” He nodded at the small cactus sitting on the window sill, amidst

more chili pepper lights. “You were like that plant. Covered in prickles. You wouldn’t let anybody get anywhere near you—”

“How would you know?” I demanded, angrily snatching my hand away, and letting the picture drop to the middle of the table. “You were so busy with Miss-Thanks-for-Fixing-My-Carburetor, I’m surprised you even noticed.”

“Hey,” he said, looking wounded. “Take it easy. I told you she—”

“Let’s cut to the chase here, Rob,” I said, my voice shaking. Because I was so angry, I told myself. That was the only reason. “You want me to find your sister. Fine. I can’t find her. I can’t find anyone. Now you know. It’s not a lie. It’s not a stunt to get people off my back. It’s real. I’m not Lightning Girl anymore. But don’t try to snow me with fake sympathy. It’s not necessary, and it won’t work.” Clearly stung, Rob blinked at me from across the table. “My sympathy,” Rob said, “isn’t fake, Jess. I don’t know how you could say that to me, after everything we’ve been through toge—”

“Don’t even start,” I said, holding up a single hand, palm out, in the universal sign for Stop. Or Tell It to the Hand. “You only seem to remember everything we’ve been through when you want something from me. The rest of the time, you seem to forget it all conveniently enough.”

Rob opened his mouth to say something—probably to deny it—but he didn’t get the chance, since the waitress came up to the table and asked, sounding concerned, “Everything all right here, guys?”

I noticed the only other couple in the place was glancing at us surreptitiously from behind their menus. I guess our conversation HAD gotten pretty heated.

“Everything’s great,” I said, miserably. “Can we just get the check?”

“Sure,” the waitress said. “Be right back.”

The minute she was gone, Rob leaned forward and—elbows on the table, his knees brushing mine beneath it, and his fingers just inches from where mine lay by the picture of his sister—said in a low voice, “Jess, I understand that you went through

hell the year before last. I understand that you were under unbelievable pressure, and that you saw things no one your age—or any age—should have seen. I think it's incredible that you were able to come back and lead a life that bears any semblance to normalcy. I admire that you didn't crack up completely.”

Here his voice dropped even lower.

“But there is one undeniable fact that you seem to be overlooking about yourself, Jess, that apparently everyone but you can see: You came back from wherever you were broken.”

I sucked in my breath, but he went right on talking, right over me.

“You heard me,” he said. “And I'm not talking about the fact that you can't find people anymore. I'm talking about YOU. Whatever it is you saw out there—it broke you. Those people—the government—used you until they had everything they wanted from you—until you had nothing else to give—and then they cut you loose, with a thank you and smile. And you came back. But let's not

kid ourselves here: you came back broken. And you won't let anyone near enough to try to help you. I'm not talking about shrinks, either. I'm talking about the people who love you."

Again I tried to interrupt. Again, he stopped me. "And you know what?" he said. "That's fine. You've rescued so many people, you think you're above letting anyone try to rescue you? That's fine, too. Rescue yourself, then...if you can. But let's get one thing straight: You may have been able to find missing people at one time. But you were never a mind reader. So don't presume to tell me what I'm thinking and feeling, when you really have no earthly idea what's going on inside my head."

He leaned back as the waitress approached with the check.

I stared down at the photo sitting between us on the tabletop, not really seeing it, I was so blinded by anger.

That's what I told myself, anyway. That I was angry. How dare he? I mean, seriously, where did he get off? Broken? Me? I wasn't broken.

Messed up. Sure. I was messed up. Who wouldn't be after a year of basically no sleep, because every time I shut my eyes, I heard and saw things I really never wanted to hear or see again.

But not letting anyone try to help me? No. No, I had let people help me. The people who really cared about me, anyway.

I'm not broken. The part of me that used to be able to find people, maybe. But not ME.

Because if that were true—what he was saying—then the past twelve months of coldness between us—Rob and me, I mean—were...what? MY fault? No. No, that wasn't possible.

"I gotta go," I said, in a strangled voice, and stood up so fast, I knocked my chair over.

Rob looked surprised. "You're going?" he asked. And his gaze fell to the picture in my hand.

Yeah. I'd picked it up. Don't ask me why.

"I've got stuff to do," I said, starting for the door.

"I have to practice."

Rob knit his brows. "But—" Then he glanced at my face. And stood up as well. "All right, Jess.

Whatever you say. Just...look. I don't want there to be any hard feelings between us, okay? What I said—I didn't say it to hurt you.”

I nodded. “No hard feelings,” I said. “And...I'm sorry I can't help you. About your sister, I mean. I'm sorry I can't...”

Can't what? Be his girlfriend anymore? See, that's just it. He hadn't **ASKED** me to be his girlfriend. He never had.

“I'm just sorry,” I said.

Then I left the restaurant, just as fast as I could.