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# **How I Lost You**

Written by Jenny Blackhurst

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# HOW I LOST YOU

JENNY BLACKHURST

headline

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*Letter to the parole board from Susan Webster  
– inmate #397609  
23 January 2013*

*To the honourable members of the board,*

*My name is Susan Webster. Nearly four years ago, on 23 July 2009, I killed my three-month-old baby boy. It has taken me this long to be able to say those words and accept that they are true, yet writing them still brings me unimaginable pain and grief.*

*During my time on remand and the subsequent two years eight months at Oakdale I have researched just about everything that exists about puerperal psychosis, the form of post-natal depression I suffered from after Dylan was born. Reading about it helps me understand and realise that I wasn't in control of my actions on that awful day. I also know now that my memories of those twelve amazing weeks with Dylan have been romanticised in my mind, created by denial of the terrible anger I felt towards him. I know this because that's what the doctors say. Harder to accept than the knowledge that I killed my little boy is the thought that my sacred memories – all I*

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*have left of my beautiful son – are the product of my own warped mind. In my darker moments I find myself wishing that I could remember the hatred, the indifference towards the life I'd created. Maybe then I would have a moment's peace, some respite from the guilt and pain that clouds my every waking moment. I hate myself for feeling that way; my memories, real or imagined, are the only things that help me to cling to the person I used to be. The person I thought I was, at least. A wife, a mother, a little disorganised maybe, a terrible cook for sure, but never in my most hideous nightmares a murderer.*

*Whilst I have accepted what I did, I do not expect forgiveness. I know I will never be able to forgive myself. All I ask is that my remorse be taken into consideration during my parole hearing, so that I can try and rebuild my life, do some good in the world and begin to atone for the evil in my past.*

*Yours respectfully,  
Susan Webster*

# 1

*24 April 2013*

It's still there.

No matter how many times I leave the room and try to go about my normal life, every time I go into the kitchen, there it is.

It arrived this morning, hidden underneath the brightly coloured junk mail and ominous-looking bills. I dread receiving the post as it is. Sunday is my favourite day of the week.

No post on Sundays. Except today isn't Sunday. And today there is post.

I can only guess that my hatred of all things enveloped is down to the sheer volume of bills I receive every day. I've only been here four weeks and it seems every utilities company in the country is trying to bill me for something. Each and every 'To the Occupier' letter I receive reminds me of something I've forgotten to set up a direct debit for, depressing me about how disorganised I am, and how far my meagre funds need to stretch.

What arrived in the post today isn't a bill, though. I know

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that by the handwritten envelope. It isn't a letter from a friend or pen pal. It's postcard size, and brown. The writing is small and cursive; it looks like it belongs to a woman but I can't be sure. None of these things are the reason it's still on my kitchen countertop, unopened.

I could just put it straight in the bin. I could wait until Cassie comes over and ask her to open it, like a student getting their mum to peek at their A-level results. Walking over to the envelope again, I see the words written on the front and my heart begins to race.

Susan Webster, 3 Oak Cottages, Ludlow, Shropshire.

But Susan Webster is dead now. I should know; I killed her four weeks ago.

No one in the world is supposed to know where I am, who I am. That was the idea of changing my name by deed poll. Even my parole officer calls me Emma. Sometimes I still forget to answer. My name, my new name, is Emma Cartwright. You won't know me by that, though. Four years ago I was still Susan Webster. I can picture you now, you're screwing up your nose a bit; maybe you recognise the name from somewhere, can't quite place it? Your eyes might flick up and to the left as you try to remember. If you live in the north, you might mutter something like 'Oh yeah, wasn't that the woman who killed her son? Such a shame.' More likely if you live in the rest of the country you won't remember me at all. The news broke at the same time as a major celebrity was caught dealing drugs. My son and I were only found on the inside pages of the nationals.

I'm going to do it. Hands trembling, I tear open the envelope, taking care not to rip what's inside. As the small piece of card falls into my hands, I wonder for a second if I should be wearing gloves, if it's some kind of threat and the police

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will need it as evidence. It might sound strange to an ordinary person, worrying that my post might be filled with death threats. Believe me, it's a situation I would never have imagined myself in either.

It's too late to worry about forensics now. Anyway, it isn't a letter; it's a photograph. A young boy smiles widely at the camera, a warm, genuine, beautiful smile. My fear turns to confusion. *Who is he?* I don't know any children that age; he's around two or three, maybe. I have a niece but no nephew, and the few mums and babies I'd met at baby groups before . . . well, just before . . . have stayed away, probably blocking out what happened as though Dylan and I had never existed.

Why has this been sent to me? Scanning my memory for children I know, I throw it on to the worktop. It turns in mid-air, landing face down on the counter, and it's at that moment that my whole world narrows to the size of the 4x6-inch photograph in front of me. Written on the back, in the same neat handwriting, are just three words:

Dylan – January 2013.



## 2

'It's a prank,' Cassie announces, throwing the photograph back on to my kitchen counter. *That's it?* Twenty minutes of waiting while she stared in silence and all I get is *prank*? I take a deep breath.

'I know that, Cass, but who? Who but you knows I'm here? Is it a threat? Or does someone actually want me to think Dylan is still alive?'

She looks away, and I know who she thinks has done this.

'Mark,' I declare. 'You think it's Mark.'

Cassie grits her teeth at the mention of his name and fights not to say anything. Not easy for her. Her sharp chin juts out and I think she is literally biting her tongue. My best friend hates my ex-husband. She dislikes most men, but I think Mark tops the list. I know for a fact he wouldn't have liked her either, even though they have never even met.

I suppose I should explain about Cassie. She's the best friend I've ever had, the kind of friend I've always wanted, but we haven't known each other our whole lives. We didn't meet as shy schoolgirls on the first day of school and we weren't college roommates. When I met Cassie it was against a background of wailing voices and steel doors slamming

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shut behind me. She was sitting on the top bunk, her bleached blonde hair piled in a heap on the top of her head and her thin black eyebrows narrowed. She threw herself off the bed and landed like a cat next to me – I found out afterwards she'd broken her ankle the first time she'd tried it. Loose ivy-green prison slacks hung from her protruding hip bones and her vest top could have come from the children's section, pulled up to show milky-white midriff. She looked like she could be knocked over by a strong wind, and yet she had the strongest physical presence I've ever known.

'Top's mine but I'm not a bed pisser like some here so you don't have to worry. Don't touch my stuff.'

I met Cassie on what was the loneliest day of my life. I didn't know it then, I wouldn't know it until much later on, but she saved it, saved me.

We met because she's a criminal. A murderer, like me. Cassie though, unlike me, remembers every second of her crime. She revels in the details, tells the story like Girl Guides tell horror stories around the campfire. She gets fed up of me telling her that her indifference is a 'defence mechanism against the memory of her crime'. She called me Freud for a week after I first suggested it, refusing to use my name until I promised to stop psychoanalysing her. It's the closest she's ever got to admitting I might actually be right.

'OK . . .' I'm willing to indulge her for a while. 'Let's assume it's Mark. How does he know where I am? And why would he want to make me think our son is still alive?'

Cassie rolls her blue eyes skyward in impatience. 'He works in IT . . . right?'

'Right.' I nod a confirmation. 'He's not a hacker.'

She just shrugs, as I get up to make yet another cup of tea. When my hands aren't busy, they're shaking.

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‘And the why? Why would my ex-husband-turned-computer-hacker send me a picture of a boy who we all know can’t possibly be my dead son?’

‘Maybe because he’s an asshole? Or because he wants to add yet another layer of guilt to the emotional shitload you already carry? Or to mess with your head? Maybe “January 2013” isn’t supposed to mean that the boy *is* Dylan, just that this is what he’d look like if you hadn’t . . . well, if he wasn’t, you know . . .’

‘I know.’

‘Do you still have your pictures of Dylan? In the album your dad gave you?’

‘Somewhere,’ I reply absently. I’m not getting those out. ‘I don’t think this would have been Mark.’

Mark was devastated by the loss of our son – any man would have been – but he tried his best to stand by me. He even visited me at Oakdale twice. Both times he was shaking like a shitting dog and could barely look at me, but it was good to know that he was trying to forgive me. Then the visits stopped, just like that. I received a letter a few weeks later informing me of the divorce proceedings, with just a handwritten note from Mark: *I’m sorry*. That was when Cassie crafted a dartboard from my pictures of him and took to throwing soggy paper towels at it to cheer me up. We weren’t allowed darts in Oakdale. We weren’t allowed sharpened pencils in Oakdale.

‘So it’s just a prank.’ I’m trying to convince myself. ‘Not a threat. Except the word “prank” suggests something’s funny, which this is *not*.’

‘Hoax, then, or, what do they call it, the fraud squad? A swindle.’ This is what Cassie’s like when she decides she’s right about something. Her long blue gel nails strum a pattern on the table, her need for a cigarette clear. Those nails represent, for me, the complete transformation she’s been through

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since leaving Oakdale. When I met her, it was bitten-to-the-quick nails covered in month-old chipped paint that tapped out their impatient pattern. Those are long gone, along with the short denim skirts and navel-skimming tank tops. These days her clothes cover her flesh and her nails are never chipped.

'Hoax, yeah, of course,' I reply absently. 'It's got to be a hoax. Definitely not a threat.'

I get rid of Cassie as fast as I can by pretending I've got errands to run. She knows I'm lying but takes the hint without question and kisses me, leaving a bright pink lip print on my cheek and an inconspicuous wet paper towel in the sink.

Turning the envelope over in my hands for the hundredth time, I notice something that sends a shiver down my arms. There's no postmark stamped on the envelope. It must have been on my mat before the post even arrived. Whoever did this was at my house, stood at my door and silently hand-delivered the photograph while I was in my kitchen. The thought makes me feel physically sick and I cover my mouth with my hand. *It's not a threat.* It makes no sense as a threat. If it's a threat, it's a rubbish one. There's no actual threat even implied. Except the subtle warning that someone knows my name. Someone knows who I am. What I did. Someone who was standing at my door.

I can't be strong any longer. The fight has melted out of me and I sink to my knees on the cold kitchen floor and begin to sob.

### 3

*Jack: 23 September 1987*

*A foot connected with the boy's face, a heel slammed into his ribs. He curled tighter into a ball, let out a grunt, but not – Jack observed with grudging respect – tears. When they saw the blood, Riley stepped forward, but Jack grabbed his arm – it was too soon. Another minute or so, a couple more bruises, maybe a broken rib. From his position twenty feet away, leaning against the crap-coloured demountable huts, the beating almost looked choreographed, mesmerising. When he heard the crack, like a twig snapping, and the grunts stopped, he stood upright, wiped off the arm of his jumper and motioned for Riley to follow him towards the fun.*

*'Get the fuck off him.'*

*All three of the boys stopped, although one kept his foot on the fifteen-year-old's broken wrist – as if he was going anywhere otherwise.*

*'Fuck's it got to do with you two?' Boy one – Jack hadn't a clue who they were – made a gesture like he was headbutting an imaginary goat in front of him. Fucking moron.*

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*'What's he done?'*

*'Grassed on Harris.' Boy two, the one with his foot on his victim's wrist, ground it into the floor. 'Didn't you, Shakespeare?'*

*'Wasn't me,' the pile of blood and clothes murmured from the floor.*

*'Who was it then?' demanded boy three – Harris, by the looks of it. He was the biggest of the three but from what Jack had seen he'd done the least amount of harm. Maybe he didn't like to get his clothes dirty. Made sense.*

*'Dunno. Not me.'*

*'Lying little snake.' Boy two made to start kicking again. In seconds, Jack was at his side, grabbing his claret-coloured blazer and shoving him away.*

*'I told you to get the fuck off him. He didn't grass your mate up. He's telling the truth, it wasn't him.'*

*'Oh yeah – how'd you know?'*

*'I know everything, you moron. You want to know who grassed you up, go and see Mike Peterson.'*

*Harris narrowed his eyes, and so did Riley at Jack's side. 'You sure?'*

*'I'm sure. And one more thing.' He gestured at the boy on the floor. 'He's with me now. You got any problems with him, you come and see me. If I ever catch you touching him again, I'll have your legs broken – all of you. See where your rugby career goes then, Harris, you fucking meathead.'*

*He held his breath, kept his jaw still. Harris turned back to his thugs and motioned with his head for them to leave. All three of them walked away as though they'd done nothing more than finish a game of football.*

*'You all right?' Riley pulled the boy to a crouch, kept his head forward and down. His shoulder-length brown hair was slick with a combination of grease, sweat and blood. He tried to turn his head to face Jack standing above him, then cringed and focused on the floor again.*

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*'Why d'you tell them that?' The words were barely discernible through lips that were already beginning to swell. 'Peterson . . . didn't do it. I did.'*

*'I stopped them kicking the shit out of you, didn't I? Do you want me to call them back? Tell them I made a mistake?' He turned to face the direction the boys had retreated, knew they were well gone. 'Harris! Oi, Harris!'*

*'No, I'm sorry, didn't mean it.'* The boy winced from the pain.

*'Jesus, you're a mess. Come on, I'll get you back to mine – my mum and dad are never in and Lucy will be able to fix you up.'*

*'Who's Lucy?'*

*'The housekeeper. I kicked off when they said she was coming to live with us 'cos I knew they were getting her to keep an eye on me but she's actually all right – she's only like eighteen and got massive knockers, and she makes wicked toasties. I'm Jack, this is Matt. Why did they call you Shakespeare? Is that your nickname?'*

*The boy tried to scowl through the blood. 'No. I hate it. I got a hundred per cent in an English test and Miss Bramall called me a little Shakespeare. Now that's what everyone calls me. I'm—'*

*'I like it,' Jack interrupted. 'Makes you sound smart, and I like smart people. I can call you Billy for short if you like, like our little joke. We are mates now, aren't we?'*

*'Why do you want to be mates with me? I'm not like you and your lot.'*

*'Oh yeah? And what are my lot like?'*

*'Rich. And well . . . good-looking and stuff.'*

*Jack looked at Matt and they both started to laugh. 'You queer, Shakespeare? Fancy my mates, do you?'*

*'No! I didn't mean like that. I just . . .'*

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*Jack snorted. Jesus, was this guy really that square? He was going to have his uses, though.*

*'Come on, let's go and get you cleaned up.'*