

## A sister worth waiting for

Sarah put the final touches to her mousy hair with its strands of grey she'd done nothing to conceal and looked at the effect in the mirror. Not bad, she thought, donning her glasses and picking up the coat she'd bought at the nearly new shop the day before. It was a bit long but it would do.

Her hands were shaking. She'd been on edge ever since Kate had rung her last week, "I've found her!" she'd exclaimed and Sarah had felt sick and elated at the same time.

Kate was the social worker assigned to her case and she'd just traced the sister who Sarah, for most of her thirty-five years hadn't known existed. Only on the death of her beloved mum – her adoptive mother – had she discovered about her natural family.

The joy she'd experienced on learning that she had a sister two years younger than herself was slightly dampened by Kate.

"There's no guarantee you'll even like each other," she counseled. "A lot of sisters have nothing in common and in your case..." She let the words hang in the air.

Sarah had thought long and hard before she rang Nicola. "I believe we're sisters..." Emotion deepened her voice. She swallowed hard.

The other woman's voice was guarded but she invited Sarah to come to her home the following Tuesday.

Nicola had been up since the crack of dawn. The house was vacuumed and polished from top to bottom, even though Eva had been in to clean the day before.

Nicola's beautiful auburn hair gleamed. Her husband had teased her mercilessly as she tried on and discarded several outfits, eventually settling on a silk two-piece.

Glancing at herself in the bedroom mirror, she smiled at her reflection. She was proud of the body which had borne two children, now both at the best school in town. Nicola had worked hard at wiping away the traces of her lowly birth. She wasn't sure she wanted to share her success with an unknown sister.

Nicola sighed. Not for the first time she cursed her mother for being so careless in her youth. Not one as she had previously thought but two unplanned babies.

Fortunately – or unfortunately – her mother had married her father eventually, but presumably too late to recover their first daughter from her adoptive parents.

What was this Sarah like? Nicola was nervous. Supposing she was terrible?

She hadn't been able to judge much by her voice on the phone and that snotty social worker had been remarkably evasive. She assumed Sarah would be jealous that Nicola had known their parents and she had not.

Looking around the immaculate sitting room with its plasma TV and well stocked drinks cabinet, Nicola realised there were no family photos.

Well, there were. Of Richard and the two boys. None of her parents or his for that matter. They came from a different world altogether – a world of penny-pinching and getting drunk in the pub and the odd black eye for his wife.

They had left that world behind, thank goodness. Richard had done well in his catering business. It had been tough in the beginning and Nicola had worked

alongside him. Peeling vegetables, scrubbing down the long wooden table he worked at. But it had all paid off.

Now she enjoyed her leisure and put it to good use with self-improving courses in French, flower arranging and petit point.

She lifted the corner of the ruched net curtains and her heart sank as she watched the woman who was coming up her path in a shapeless coat, glasses and greying hair. Well, she certainly looks her age, she thought and smiled. No competition there then.

As soon as she saw the house she knew what sort of woman would open the door to her and she wasn't far wrong.

As she stood face to face with the sister fate had deprived her of, she smiled nervously. "Nicola?"

There were no emotional hugs, tears, whoops of delight, just a cool nod and a crisp: "Come in, won't you?"

Sarah had the impression that Nicola had no desire for any of her neighbours to see this new-found sister.

Nicola offered Sara coffee in the breakfast room. She'd set out her best china but now lifted down two mugs from their hooks underneath the wall cupboard.

She caught Sarah's glance and smiled awkwardly. "No need to stand on ceremony," she said.

Sarah fidgeted with her handbag, bought especially for the occasion from the same place as her coat.

Nicola's irritation was obvious.

"What did you expect from this meeting?" Sarah asked. She wasn't sure if the question was for herself or this other woman.

Nicola answered cautiously. "I don't know – to be honest I've never felt the lack of a sister in my life."

She saw Sarah wince. "When I heard from that social worker that you'd been adopted, I assumed you'd been better off where you were."

The emphasis on the past tense was not lost on Sarah.

"Our parents left a lot to be desired, you know. I got all this –" Nicola made an all embracing gesture "– by sheer hard work, you know. No fat cheques from doting parents."

Her face was flushed. She sat down and looked at her watch. She had no intention now of flaunting her perfect house with its two reception, kitchen/breakfast and utility rooms, plus four bedrooms, two with en suite bathrooms. This woman looked as though she might be in need of a place to stay. There was no question of that!

Sarah sighed in disappointment. In spite of Kate's warnings, she'd had such high expectations. But Nicola's clipped tone and barbed comments crushed her hopes. She knew she was unacceptable as she was and felt a deep sadness. She too glanced at her watch. "I'd better make a move or I'll be late for work."

"Of course." Nicola looked relieved.

"Do you have a photo of our parents?" Sarah was itching to get away. Nicola found a couple of dog-eared snapshots.

“You can keep them,” she said ungraciously as Sarah stared down into the faces of those who had given her life and then given her away and felt her throat constrict.

“Thank you.” There seemed to be nothing more to say. “Goodbye.” She held out her hand, stranger to stranger.

Nicola watched as Sarah strode down the path. There was something about her walk that rang a sort of bell...

She shrugged and closed the door. Thank heavens that was over. She fervently hoped Sarah wouldn't be back.

Sarah rounded the corner and almost fell into the limousine waiting for her. Kate had been right about Nicola. Sarah pulled off the wig and ran her fingers through her gleaming auburn hair.

“Where to, Madam?” the chauffeur inquired.

“The studios please, Tom.” Sarah kicked off the shoes which pinched her toes. Kate had been right to insist on discretion. Sarah wanted to be accepted for herself – not because of who she was. She didn't need hangers-on, there were far too many of those in the business.

That evening Nicola watched the drama serial that had captured the country's imagination. Enviously she watched the auburn-haired star Sarah Bracknel slip into the arms of her sexy co-star. Now that woman, she thought, would be a sister worth waiting for... and curiously there was something eerily familiar about her.

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