WHAT I TOLD MY FRIENDS

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CANELOCRIME

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For those of us who learned our lessons the hard way.

And for the friends who cushioned the blow.

PART ONE

Prologue

The rain had been falling for several hours by the time her body was found. Puddles had formed around her hands and feet, and her soft fleece pyjamas were heavy and wet. Until then nobody was aware of what was hiding in the shadow of the belltower. Not a single light illuminated the courtyard, to chance upon the shape of her death. Six hundred pupils slept in the quiet of the nightly curfew just metres away, until one unlucky girl snuck out for a cigarette. Blood washed across soft-white pebbles towards her feet, and her scream woke us all.

The dead girl's name was Emily, and she was seventeen when she fell from the belltower of High Hill Manor, one short month away from adulthood. Before that she had been on track for five A levels, each predicted to achieve the highest grade. A place at Cambridge simmered in her future, to study medicine at Christ's College just as her father had before her. Her summers passed by in Provence, a crumbling cottage where wisteria grew over pretty archways, and Christmas played out at their chalet in St Moritz. She was head prefect at High Hill Manor, and not one person questioned her position in that role. She belonged in that place, and everyone knew it. Of everything about this story, that's one of the more important things to remember. Emily was undoubtedly one of them.

Still, who she was is less important than you might think in the grand scheme of things. No matter what we recall, or how we paint her memory as perfect as a Botticelli, she exists now only as an idea. We cannot root her in the present or say how her life turned out. Fate rose up to claim her on that wet and windy night. Some people might even struggle to remember her name. *Oh yes, that girl who died*, they'd say. *What was she called again?* Now she can never be anything more than she used to be. The rest of us though? We were the ones left behind. It was us who had to cope with what came next, carrying her death with us into the years and decades of our future. Her murder set a fire through our lives. Because that's what it was. She didn't jump. There was no fall. She was murdered. And afterwards we were all left wondering what part we played. How perhaps it could have been different.

Whether we were to blame.

Before

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Today the embers of that fire burn brighter. I feel their heat against my skin as I sit in the glare of a pink winter sunset. I pull up on the far side of the carpark, finding a spot between two dirty white lines. Trees shiver all around me, and there are only a few other cars here today. On busier days, whole families, friends and mothers fill these spaces, eager with their crumpled visitation slips clutched tight in their hands. I have been here on those days, watched those people, thought about what it would have been like to walk inside the thick grey walls myself. Twenty feet of solid concrete separates the inmates from the outside world. Once I even wrote a letter, asking if he wanted to see me. *Dear Simon*, I began. Then another, *Dear Mr Aides*. Wasn't quite sure how formal I should be. How should I address my ex-teacher when I haven't seen him for over twenty years? When my testimony was the reason he was jailed. But I never sent those letters. I was always too scared that he wouldn't want to see me.

Or too scared that he would.

I kill the engine, turn off the radio, but I don't get out just yet. Outside I can hear the lull of distant traffic, and crows calling from the damp trees. Rain falls gently

against the roof of my car and streaks down the windows in waxy rivulets. My service station coffee has turned cold, but I sip at it now as if it is warm. Check the time. 11:33 a.m. Condensation mists on the inside of the glass, and I watch as the light glimmers in the puddles that form on the ground.

In the time I wait I smoke two cigarettes, lighting the second from the cherry of the first. The crumpled letter rests in my hand, read so many times since I found it there on the post table three weeks ago. *Dear Chloe*, it began. *The time has finally come when I am going to be released and…* When I saw his name scrawled at the bottom, my insides cramped up like a vice. I had expected he might slip from prison without fanfare, away from my life, even though I have been counting the days since he was sentenced. Now I know he has been counting them too. I pull the letter from the envelope, my gaze slipping to the last line.

There are things we need to discuss.

And there are, but I still don't know if that's why I'm here. To talk to him? To see his face after so many years? On the passenger seat my phone rings, another unknown number. I watch it, waiting for the call to end. When it does, I see the notification – the sixth missed call today. Journalists. Like vultures picking at a carcass, everybody wants a scrap of information. A soundbite to put in their article. Well, fuck them all. I pick up the phone, delete the notifications. Then I see another message, this one from Stan. Simple enough, saying he hopes I make a good choice today. He doesn't think I should be here. I delete that one too. He's twenty years too late. That's when my choices were made.

Another fifteen minutes pass before I hear voices behind me. I watch in the rearview mirror, see the bodies

moving through the midday mist, a sole figure exiting the confines of His Majesty's Prison Belmarsh. An urgency grips me, and I rush from the car, pulling at my hair to slick it into place. Rainfall intensifies as I lift the black umbrella over my head. His gait is different to what I remember, his shoulders slouched, but I have no doubt that it's him. The way his arms hang at his side, the same soft beard that frames his face. He is still the same man who has haunted the last twenty years of my life.

I have dreamed of this day, the chance to see him again. Feared it in equal measure. Emotions when it comes to Simon Aides have always been confused. I watch, waiting for him to spot me. And when he does, he stands perfectly still, letting the rainfall soak into his clothes. His parka coat is dated, circa 2005. Time bending back on itself. With him there I am seventeen years old again. As if not a single day has passed. And then he is moving, standing before me. Within touching distance. The man whose face has never once left my mind.

'You came?' he says. 'I wasn't sure if you got the letter.'

His gaze falls to the tatty envelope in my hand. A biting cold gnaws at my fingers as I take a step closer. He's paler than I remember, his cheeks hollow. 'I got it,' I say. When he doesn't say anything more, I pull the squashed pack of cigarettes from my pocket and offer them to him.

'It's a bad habit,' he says, not taking one.

'Most habits are.'

Then with a nod he does as I expected, reaching forward to take a smoke. Time hasn't changed his hands, the same elegant look about them, manly but not in some laborious way. His cuticles are soft, the nails well shaped, as if even now he takes care of them. I watch as he rolls the chosen cigarette, straightening out the slim white stick

with his nimble, beautiful fingers. I hold the umbrella over his body to shelter him from the rain, and he glides the cigarette between his teeth. I dig in my pocket for the lighter. We are careful not to touch as he takes it.

'Why did you come?' he asks.

'You asked me to,' I say, stating the obvious. 'You wrote me a letter.'

'Yes, I did,' he says, drawing on the cigarette.

'How did you even get my address?'

'Does it matter?' he asks. I say nothing. 'But you wanted to see me?'

A chill passes over my skin as water drips down the back of my neck. And he's right, that part of me, the one stuck in my seventeen-year-old body, wants to see him. Is desperate for him. But another, quieter part of me is telling me to run. Insisting that I shouldn't be here.

Another beat before I speak again. 'I think so.' The quickening of my heart is familiar, reminds me of the first time we met. 'I wrote you letters.'

Mid inhale he stops, turning to look at me for the first time. 'I never received any.'

Quiet then, as I confess. 'I never sent them.'

He nods, sighs, as if it is to be expected. Leans against the edge of my car. 'I should have liked to receive those letters.'

'Maybe you wouldn't have.' I shrug.

'Well, I suppose it depends on what you wrote.' Disappointed, he goes back to the cigarette, and I watch as he smokes, too fast, so much life to recoup. Before he speaks again, he drops the butt to the ground and stamps it out with his toe.

'You haven't changed much,' he says, grey smoke drifting from his lips. I find myself pulling at the length

of hair that no longer exists. Tucking the blunt edge of the sharp new bob behind my ear, cut only yesterday, anything to be different from then. 'I, on the other hand, have changed quite a lot. Time inside those walls passes quite differently to time on the outside.'

'You said there were things we needed to discuss.'

'There are.'

He takes a step closer, his face no more than a movement away from mine. Still taller than me, but less than before. If anybody is watching, they will question who I am. We are already breaking the terms of his release. We are not supposed to be together, and yet he is close enough that he could kiss me. My lips tingle with the thought of it. But I step back, open the door and climb inside the car. Push the key in the ignition and wait. My muscles feel weak; the things I have kept to myself are heavier today. Lies grow over time. Demand more space. It gets harder instead of easier to carry them. I listen to the scuff of his shoes, the mechanism as he opens the passenger door. Just us then, inside the car. Still, the crows call from the trees. Rain still drums the roof.

'The girl who died,' he says, thoughtful, concerned, as if he has no right to mention it. He stares dead ahead, stoic and cold. 'No matter what she did, or what she saw, she didn't deserve to die like that.'

'Which girl?' I ask.

'I think you know.' A deep, shaky breath passes his lips. 'She was only seventeen, Chloe. Seventeen years old,' he stresses.

'We were all seventeen years old then, Simon.' His eyes drift closed. 'Only you were older than that.'

Silence falls between us. He sits motionless, a statue with no hint of life. Brushes a crease from his trousers. Twenty years in prison has granted him patience.

'Is it the truth you want?' I ask finally. 'Is that why you asked me to come here?'

'What I want is no longer important.' He reaches for the seatbelt, clicks it in place. 'I should like to know it, but there are more important things to discuss now.' When I turn to look at him, there is a sadness on his face. A space exists between us that I should have expected yet did not. 'I'm afraid there are things I need to tell you, Chloe. You're not the only one who has been keeping secrets.'

'What secrets?' I ask, but he says nothing more. Only stares straight ahead. I swallow hard, wondering what he is hiding. Then I release the handbrake and drive away, with only one destination in mind.