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Opening extract from
Dear Charlie

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Chapter 1: 'One to Another'

(The Charlatans, Summer 1996)

Dear Charlie,

I'm sorry it's taken me seven weeks to write this. Honestly, I still don't know why I am. It's not like you will ever get to read it. It's not like you will ever know how I am feeling. I can't change anything, certainly not the past couple of months. And no matter how hard I try, I can't forget. I'll never be able to forget.

The strange thing is, I can't stop thinking about the small things, like what I had for breakfast that morning, what music I listened to on the radio while I ate, why I chose blue jeans over black cords. But that's just it. These thoughts fill my head all day, but when I open my mouth to share them, I can't. I just can't.

My therapist says if I can't talk about it then maybe writing in a journal will help me. Like I'm the one who needs help in this family. Yes, I am seeing a therapist. That's how bad things have got around here.

I don't even know where to start. Everything's changed. Mum flits between total denial and hysterics, almost on a daily basis. One minute she acts like she really believes you're just upstairs doing your homework or listening to

music, and the next minute it's a complete emotional breakdown all over again. She relives your death every day. My therapist says this is normal, but I'm beginning to question whether there really is a criterion for measuring normality in this kind of a situation.

Dad remains a total enigma as usual, occasionally ranting and pointing fingers. But most of the time he doesn't say anything, for days sometimes. I don't know what is happening in his head, but then again we never did. We do seem to have one thing in common – we both haven't cried, not one tear. I don't see the point. Tears won't reverse your actions, or bring you back. Tears won't let me forget, even if that was possible.

You don't have to look far for Dad now. He's either sitting in front of the TV or has locked himself in the garage, but I don't blame him. I don't go outside much myself. We're famous now, just like you always wanted. Our pictures are always in the newspapers, even our house. They keep using the same photo of you. It's your yearbook picture from last year, the one where you let your hair grow out for it. Mum was so mad at you. She said you didn't look like yourself, which is funny now because obviously we didn't know you at all.

Your room is the same as you left it. Or at least, we think so. The police conducted a search of your bedroom not long after. Mum tried to put the pieces back together. She's always trying. I wasn't much help. I hadn't been in your room in weeks, maybe even months. Either you stopped inviting me in, or I stopped asking to come in. Honestly, I don't remember.

A pair of your shoes is still sitting by the door, next to mine. I see them every time I walk past the door, which I

do more often now. I like to look out the window and see the photographers waiting for us beyond the garden. I hide behind the lace curtain, but they probably know I'm there. Occasionally I'll see neighbours walk by, but they usually cross the street to avoid passing our house. Perhaps they think it's a disease that they might catch – a contagious need for death and disorder. Maybe they think I have it too. Maybe I do.

I can't fathom a bigger emotional mess for someone to have left behind. I wonder if you knew that this would happen. I wonder if you thought about anything at all before you walked into that assembly hall at 8.22am on the last day of school.

Pembroke Academy is still closed. I read in the newspaper on Tuesday that the assembly hall will be torn down and replaced with a memorial garden. The remainder of the school will re-open to students by Christmas. But I won't be there to watch the thick yellow tape be cut by the new headmaster.

They hired a woman this time, and I bet she's not as strict as Mr Healey. I still remember that time you pulled the fire alarms in the building and set off the sprinkler system. It went down as the best prank in history - in the 1994 yearbook anyway. You were suspended for five days around the time that I had the flu. I always thought that you did it only so you could spend those five days with me, playing 'Doom' on Dad's PC and prank calling strangers from the phonebook – Mr Dungworth, Mrs Shufflebottom. My sides ache just thinking about that. I never laughed so hard. I never did thank you for that.

Thinking about it, I don't remember a time that you ever got sick. You were always the strong one in the family. You

worked weekends in the Spar when Dad got laid off, you stood up to him when he got drunk and shouted at Mum, and you put a plaster on my cuts and gave me a slap on the back whenever I came home with a bleeding knee. I don't know who's going to be the strong one now.

Whenever I think about the future, I get a pain in my chest that won't go away. It sucks the breath out of my lungs and makes me feel like I'm drowning in a big swimming pool where no one can see me. So, most of the time I try not to think about the future – that's what Dr Albreck told me to do. She said, 'Focus on the now, Sam. The future can wait,' which actually contradicts what my guidance advisor used to tell us in the university prep classes. Regardless, I'm going to try it Dr Albreck's way. But that doesn't mean that I agree with going to therapy.

What else is new? The new headmaster is called Sheila Forbes. I only know that because I opened a letter that she sent to Mum and Dad. In it she said, 'It would be in the best interest of the students and their families that your son Samuel Macmillan not return to Pembroke Academy. Although we are sensitive to your loss, we feel it best to move forward with a fresh start and not be reminded of the past.'

I didn't realise that my existence was a reminder of the past. I don't even care. I laughed when I first read it, as if my absence from the halls could erase what happened. Nothing will erase what happened. When students return to Pembroke, they might not see the blood on the walls but it's still there and always will be. They're idiots for thinking that they can forget. I don't need to be there to remind them, there are enough shadows to darken the halls of that school regardless of whether I am there or not.

It's a shame too, because I was really getting good at

making friends. I even got an invite to Jackson's party last weekend, well technically Geoff did but I was going to go with him. It was cancelled, of course. And, I was planning on asking Sarah Reynolds to go to the cinema with me to see 'Mission Impossible', although I doubt she would have said yes. She's a year older and was supposed to be going to Edinburgh University in September, but I don't know if she'll go now. Plus she probably would have wanted to watch 'Flipper' or something.

You missed my birthday. You and I were meant to see the sequel to 'The Crow'. You were obsessed with the first one. It's in the cinema right now, but I don't think I'll ever be able to watch it. Not now, not ever. Why would you make plans with me if you never intended to keep them?

I saw Sarah Reynolds at the funeral – we had just one for all those who died that day. She was wearing a dark navy dress with shoes that made her look taller than she is. Her face was red and blotchy, like the others. I wanted to wave, but I didn't think she would want to see me. I read in the newspaper the following day that over five hundred people showed up for the funeral. I didn't even know we had five hundred people in this small town. I wish I could have stood with them but I watched from a distance. I rested my bike beside a large oak tree and watched from behind it.

I shouldn't have been there, I was asked not to go. But I had to see whether they would acknowledge your death too. I wanted to know if your yearbook photo would be blown up to the size of a movie poster and placed on a black iron easel beside the others. But it wasn't. They honoured every student and teacher who died, but not you. Instead, we cremated your body two days after. I don't know if a cremation is classed as a funeral service but if it was you would have liked it – short

and straight to the point. No funny anecdotes about you or depressing poems about angels and heaven. I wish I could tell you that five hundred people came, but the only people who attended were Mum and I. Not even your best friend Adam came. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for a lot of things. Maybe if I had been a better little brother then I would be watching television with you downstairs right now rather than holed up in my bedroom with the curtains closed, hunched over a journal that a therapist told me to buy.

Mrs Bell and that kid from your chemistry class are still in the intensive care unit at the hospital. They're both expected to live, if they ever wake up. You single-handedly wiped out the rugby team. I don't think I'll miss many of them, especially not Gregory Dunn. Their glass showcase will be empty this year. No trophies, medals or team photos will fill the space. Maybe it will finally be awarded to the Music Club or the Writers in Workshop group. Maybe some of the others will finally get their chance to shine at Pembroke Academy. Is that why you did it?

I read that you walked right by the art department, without even looking in. People speculated that you didn't think anyone was in there, but I know why you did it. Anyone who really knew you would know why you skipped that wing. But that's the tragedy in this whole mess. No one really knew you. Not even me, it seems. You always said that the art teacher Mr Allans was the only one in that whole building who acknowledged you. And I think walking on by was your final gift to him.

They released the music teacher last week after his leg surgery was successful. The gym teacher didn't make it. He died in the first week. The redhead girl that you fancied in Year Three was the last to pass away. She died on the 16th of

July from ‘prolonged complications’. Her parents published a full-page obituary the next week. Mum wanted to write something for you in the newspaper, but Dad wouldn’t let her. He said no newspaper would print it.

I feel suffocated by the silence around me. The brutal stillness occupies every room in the house, and I can only imagine that outside is worse. Charlie, I’m dying. I can’t breathe and there’s no one that I can talk to. The only people who want to listen are a blurred mass of social workers, grief counsellors and journalists. And those who I reach out to are not there anymore. You are not here anymore. You made choices - selfish choices - that I hate you for. But then there are times that I don’t hate you. There are times where I keep pounding my forehead until it bruises and aches, just to stop myself from exploding within.

My therapist says I am ‘bottling up emotions which is dangerous.’ Perhaps she is afraid that I will follow in your footsteps. I don’t think anyone will be able to. You changed history. You made a name for yourself. You will always be remembered - well done. If this is what you wanted, you got it. You’re immortalised, while the rest of us are stripped clean of any future we may have had. I hate you so much!

I don’t hate you.

I don’t know how I feel.

After I’m finished, I’m going to hide this. Maybe I should put my journal in your room. No one will touch it in there, especially not Dad. He’s so angry at you right now, but I think that will change over time. At least, I hope so. This family will deal with hatred, remorse and bitter negativity every day of our lives. We don’t need it from Dad too. He blames Mum. He blames me. He blames videogames, music and social pressures put on young people today. He even blames

the school and their apparent lack of vigilance and security measures. He blames lax gun regulations that apparently make it easy for an eighteen-year-old to get access to an unlicensed handgun. The one person he does not blame is himself. He believes he's innocent in all of this. That's why I have to hide the journal. I don't want anyone to read this, and know what I'm thinking. I don't want Dad to know that I miss you. God, I miss you so much Charlie. How am I going to get through this?