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Precious Thing

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PRECIOUS THING

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Officially, I don't think of you any more. I am one hundred per cent focused on the future. When anyone asks how I'm doing – and they do regularly – I'm fond of using the terminology of war – it adds drama don't you think? *I am conquering my demons; I am battling the dark thoughts that have been twisting inside me.* Sometimes, if the situation lends itself to it, I'll lean forward, fix them with a steely look and say with as much reverence as I can muster: *I am a survivor, I will beat the past.* In return I get a sympathetic nod, a concerned smile. I can almost hear the *whissh* of relief blowing through them. I can see the checklist of worries being ticked off in their minds. *She's making progress.*

In reality I'm doing nothing of the sort. I can't empty my head of you in the way I would spring-clean a cupboard. People don't seem to understand that no matter what has

happened between us we will always have each other encoded in our DNA. I don't want to move on, quite the opposite. I want to go back to the very beginning. To the time when you made me smile a smile that reached all the way to my eyes and tingled in my head; when we laughed about the little things that only we found funny, when we traded the knowing winks, the in-jokes, as if they were our own personal currency. To the time when we were always together because it was the only way we made sense.

I feel your absence like an ache in the pit of my stomach, a hunger that is never satisfied. Even when I close my eyes I can't escape you. I see you everywhere. Yesterday, the late-afternoon sun slanted through the window and fell into the room. I closed my eyes to bask in the warmth of it. I imagined I was sitting under a vast, endless sky, staring out to sea. I focused on the horizon, the reds and yellows and greens of the fishing boats moving on the swell of the waves; the blue of the ocean dancing under the sun. For the briefest moment my mind stilled and emptied. I breathed deep. I was set free from my thoughts. Then I glimpsed you, jumping over the waves, dark hair in ringlets from the water, laughing as a breaker pulled you under. I ran down to the water to see you, straight in. Only when you emerged

the hair and face weren't yours.

These are the cruel tricks my mind plays.

I can't rest until I reach you. Oh, what I'd give to see you one last time, to have you look me in the eye and know, without a flicker of doubt, that I have only ever loved you, that everything I have done was driven by a fierce desire to protect you.

I don't blame you for thinking otherwise. I blame the people who've poisoned you with their lies. But listen to your heart. Trust your instincts. Think of the beautiful, precious thing that we have shared. Know that something so pure could never be bad.

That's why I'm writing to you. So you'll understand. I don't know how it will reach you, but I'll find a way. No one knows about the letter; its content doesn't fit with my 'moving on' narrative. So if you do read it, let it be our secret. Just imagine me close to you, whispering it in your ear – our story, in my words. And maybe at the end we will work out how we lost each other and how we can find each other once more.

Chapter 1

My story starts on a Monday morning in January because it's the obvious place to begin. I used to think, *Oh, that was the day when everything changed*, but of course it's never that simple. The seeds of what happened then were planted years before.

In my box of memories from January the twenty-first 2007 these are the things you'll see: a single sunflower in a garden, the waves; the huge yawning jaws of them thrashing under ripe clouds. And the violet of the sky, the way it looked electric, like it had been plugged into a vast source of negative energy.

But the mind plays tricks. So does the memory. What we see is not necessarily how things are. I do believe, though, that the sky and the waves were as I have described them. But the sunflower, in winter? I can see it as clearly now as I can see my hand in front of me. But it doesn't mean it was there. Maybe I see it because the flower has always reminded me of you, of us. Of the beginning of the

end.

It was a one-way conversation, the kind that often marked the start of my working day. Robbie, my news editor, barking his orders down the phone. ‘Some woman has disappeared in Brighton, police are holding a press conference. I’ll e-mail you the rest,’ he said before hanging up. That was as much as I knew.

I left London in the freezing rain and by the time I reached the outskirts of Brighton the snow had begun to fall, giant fuzzy felts of it on my windscreen. In the city a film of slush coated the roads. I drove up Southover Street, weaving in and out of the rows of squashed terraces to John Street and the police station, a boxy construction in white and beige with dirty brown windows, not far from the sea.

I was late so I pulled up on the kerb – a parking ticket always preferable to a bollocking from the news desk for missing a story. A blast of icy air hit me as I got out and reminded me why I hated Robbie. The flimsy mac, the heels, the skirt, the air-stewardess chic. It was my attempt to appease him after being told to *make more of an effort*. Not that the viewers gave a damn if I wore the same coat three days in a row, but he did.

Outside the police station the TV vans were lined up,

satellites pointing to the sky and humming. Our own with its National News Network logo, a mangle of Ns, was next to the Global Broadcasting Corp truck. Through the half-open door I caught a glimpse of the monitor feeding pictures from inside the press conference. Relief: no sound yet, no one had started talking. I reached for my BlackBerry to read Robbie's e-mail and fill in the blanks of the story, winging it as usual, when Eddie the engineer emerged from the sat van, barely recognisable in the bulk of his North Face jacket.

'They've just given us a two-minute warning. Should have worn your running shoes, Rachel.'

The smell hits you first in police stations. It's the stench of lives unravelling, of drink- and drug-fuelled chaos, of people crossing the line. It's the same in hospitals and old people's homes, the way it clings to you. The one in Brighton was no different. I could feel it catch my throat as soon as I went through the automatic doors.

There was a man in front of me at reception in a grey shell suit that was a shade or two darker than his skin. Gunmetal next to putty. His dark hair shone with grease and he was chewing fingernails that were thick with dirt.

'What the fuck you looking at eh?' he snarled. 'You got nothing better to do?'

‘Pipe down, Wayne,’ said the woman on reception. Her name badge said she was Lesley. She had big gold ovals hanging from her ears, stretching her ear lobes, dark circles round her eyes.

I flashed my press card.

‘They’re just about to start, darling. Fill this in.’ She tapped the visitors’ book with her right hand so I could see that she wore gold rings on three fingers, excluding her thumb and pinkie. One said MUM, as if she needed to be reminded, and the other spelled out LOVE.

‘You,’ she pointed a finger at shell-suit man, ‘you sit down and someone will see you in a minute. You, come with me, I need to buzz you through.’

We walked through a double door into a long corridor to the conference room. Inside was the usual smattering of local newspaper journalists, huddled together in their cheap suits, a wall of chatter surrounding them, cameras set up ready to go live the moment the police started talking. A clutch of microphones was propped on the table and sitting behind it were four people: two police officers, the press officer Hilary Benson, and a young woman. Jake Roberts was there too. But I didn’t see him until later. I wouldn’t see any of this until later. Instead, as soon as Lesley opened the doors, my eyes locked on to a poster, about two foot by two

foot, hanging next to the table. It was a photograph of a woman. A photograph of you.

Those blue eyes of yours, they sucked me in, deep deep down where it was cold and dark. My lungs inflated, my whole body screamed for air. I was drowning, Clara, and all the time I could hear the sloshing and swirling of water in my ears and the muffled sounds of the media circus gearing up for a performance. No one saw what happened to me in that moment, no one noticed that I had been sucked from the outside of the story right down into its murky depths. No one could have guessed that the story was part of me.

I felt like I had hit the bottom. Everything stopped.

Then I heard a voice louder than the rest, reaching above the chatter. And finally I came back to the surface, greedy for air.

‘We’re just about ready to start folks,’ the voice said. It was DCI Gunn, announcing the start of the press conference like he was about to introduce an act in a show.

‘Thanks for coming’, DCI Gunn said in his West Country twang. I noticed he was looking straight down the barrel of the camera lenses. ‘We want your help in finding the young woman you can see here.’ He nodded to the poster of you. That smile, so beguiling. ‘Her name is Clara O’Connor. She’s

twenty-eight years of age and her disappearance is completely out of character.’

I should explain that DCI Gunn and I had what you would call a professional relationship. He was a contact I had cultivated three years before when I first landed the job of crime correspondent at National News Network. We’d have lunches, drinks-on-me and after a while the information began to flow. Tip-offs on stories on his patch, a few leaks here and there. And an unspoken pact: he’d make me look good if I returned the favour. It’s the kind of cosy relationship journalists rely on and this was the moment ours began to unravel. He had never met you and yet suddenly he was an expert on your character. I felt the blood rush to my head, my teeth sunk deep into my lips.

‘She was reported missing by her friend and flatmate Amber Corrigan. Amber was staying at a friend’s on Friday night but had planned to meet Clara the next day for lunch.’ He paused, looked over at the girl sitting two people down from him at the table. I had heard you mention her before but this was the first time I had seen her – she was a tiny, fragile little thing. The seat almost swallowed her up. I thought if she took a step outside she’d be blown away by the gathering storm. But she was pretty, and TV cameramen and photographers love a pretty girl crying. Your story

would get more coverage that way.

DCI Gunn cleared his throat, 'Clara was supposed to spend an evening with friends last Friday, January the eighteenth in Brighton city centre. They had arranged to meet but she was late and from what we can gather she only turned up briefly. She was seen leaving Cantina Latina on Marine Drive around eleven thirty p.m. and told her friends she was going back to her flat. Unfortunately she has not been seen since.' He paused and looked around the room for effect. I tried to grab the information he was giving and process it in my head. It was like trying to catch water in my hands.

Looking back it's hard to explain my behaviour that day, Clara. In truth I still don't understand it myself. I can still hear the voice in my head that screamed at me to stand up and shout as loud as I could that this account of Friday night was all wrong. I wanted to holler to DCI Gunn that I was your friend, your oldest friend, and if anyone knew you it was me. I wanted to reach out and press pause, to bring everything to a standstill for a moment and allow myself to think. Every muscle in my body was straining, willing me to do something, say something. But nothing. I was anchored to the spot, pinned down by a force greater than me. I had no voice, my body was paralysed. So I just sat watching

events run away from me until it was too late to catch up with them.

‘I’m grateful that Amber Corrigan has come today,’ said DCI Gunn. ‘You can appreciate that this is a very traumatic time for her, but she wanted to do everything she could to help us in our search for Clara.’

My eyes turned to focus on Amber. She was your flatmate but I doubted she knew you very well. And yet here she was, face mottled, eyes emotional, red. Later, I would wish I could cry like her but my tears would be slow to come.

‘I just want to say to Clara . . .’ She paused and gulped. Her voice was quiet but she enunciated every syllable of each word, like she’d practised her lines. ‘Clara, if you’re listening, please get in touch, we’re worried sick. I know this isn’t like you and we’re all scared something awful has happened.’ She began to sob and used the back of her hand to rub away the tears that fell down her cheeks. The sound of the cameras zooming was inaudible but I heard it all the same. ‘Please, Clara, let us know where you are.’

I wished she had said something more original, something more fitting of you.

DCI Gunn stepped in, ‘I’d like to thank Amber for

coming along today and I'd ask that you all give her some privacy.' Everyone nodded in agreement, knowing that the first thing they'd do would be approach her for an exclusive.

He talked about how they had already begun to contact your friends and colleagues (would I be the last because I was under W in the address book?). About you being a promising artist, which made me raise my eyebrows a little.

Then finally he asked: 'Does anyone have any questions?'

My head was full of questions, each one screaming and shouting and taunting me. But still I had no voice and the ground around me was crumbling away. If I moved I would surely have slipped into the dark hole that was forming beneath me. So I sat there, rigid, as others raised their hands and their questions floated in the air above my head.

I wonder now if there was something else at play that day; if I realised even on a subconscious level that DCI Gunn couldn't help me. If somehow I already knew that I had all the answers, I just needed to search for them.