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Opening extract from

# Since You've Been Gone

Written by

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# 1
# THE LIST

The list arrived after Sloane had been gone two weeks.

I wasn't at home to get it because I was at Sloane's, where I had gone yet again, hoping against hope to find her there. I had decided, as I'd driven over to her house, my iPod off and my hands gripping the steering wheel, that if she was there, I wouldn't even need an explanation. It wouldn't be necessary for her to tell me why she'd suddenly stopped answering her phone, texts, and e-mails, or why she'd vanished, along with her parents and their car. I knew it was ridiculous to think this way, like I was negotiating with some cosmic dealer who could guarantee this for me, but that didn't stop me as I got closer and closer to Randolph Farms Lane. I didn't care what

I had to promise if it meant Sloane would be there. Because if Sloane was there, everything could start making sense again.

It was not an exaggeration to say that the last two weeks had been the worst of my life. The first weekend after school had ended, I'd been dragged upstate by my parents against my wishes and despite my protests. When I'd come back to Stanwich, after far too many antique shops and art galleries, I'd called her immediately, car keys in my hand, waiting impatiently for her to answer so that she could tell me where she was, or, if she was home, that I could pick her up. But Sloane didn't answer her phone, and she didn't answer when I called back an hour later, or later that night, or before I went to bed.

The next day, I drove by her house, only to see her parents' car gone and the windows dark. She wasn't responding to texts and still wasn't answering her phone. It was going right to voice mail, but I wasn't worried, not then. Sloane would sometimes let her battery run down until the phone shut off, and she never seemed to know where her charger was. And her parents, Milly and Anderson, had a habit of forgetting to tell her their travel plans. They would whisk her off to places like Palm Beach or Nantucket, and Sloane would return a few days later, tan, with a present for me and stories to tell. I was sure that's what had happened this time.

But after three days, and still no word, I worried. After five days, I panicked. When I couldn't stand being in my house any longer, staring down at my phone, willing it to ring, I'd started

driving around town, going to all of our places, always able to imagine her there until the moment I arrived to find it Sloane-free. She wasn't stretched out in the sun on a picnic table at the Orchard, or flipping through the sale rack at Twice Upon a Time, or finishing up her pineapple slice at Captain Pizza. She was just gone.

I had no idea what to do with myself. It was rare for us not to see each other on a daily basis, and we talked or texted constantly, with nothing off-limits or too trivial, even exchanges like *I think my new skirt make me look like I'm Amish, promise to tell me if it does?* (me) and *Have you noticed it's been a while since anyone's seen the Loch Ness monster?* (her). In the two years we'd been best friends, I had shared almost all of my thoughts and experiences with her, and the sudden silence felt deafening. I didn't know what to do except to continue texting and trying to find her. I kept reaching for my phone to tell Sloane that I was having trouble handling the fact she wasn't answering her phone.

I drew in a breath and I held it as I pulled down her driveway, the way I used to when I was little and opening up my last birthday present, willing it to be the one thing I still didn't have, the only thing I wanted.

But the driveway was empty, and all the windows were dark. I pulled up in front of the house anyway, then put my car in park and killed the engine. I slumped back against the seat, fighting to keep down the lump that was rising in my throat. I

no longer knew what else to do, where else to look. But Sloane couldn't be gone. She wouldn't have left without telling me.

But then where was she?

When I felt myself on the verge of tears, I got out of the car and squinted at the house in the morning sun. The fact that it was empty, this early, was really all the evidence I needed, since I had never known Milly or Anderson to be awake before ten. Even though I knew there was probably no point to it, I crossed to the house and walked up the wide stone steps that were covered with bright green summer leaves. The leaves were thick enough that I had to kick them aside, and I knew, deep down, that it was more proof that nobody was there, and hadn't been there for a while now. But I walked toward the front door, with its brass lion's-head knocker, and knocked anyway, just like I'd done five other times that week. I waited, trying to peer in the glass on the side of the door, still with a tiny flicker of hope that in a second, any minute now, I'd hear Sloane's steps as she ran down the hall and threw open the door, yanking me into a hug, already talking a mile a minute. But the house was silent, and all I could see through the glass was the historical-status plaque just inside the door, the one that proclaimed the house "one of Stanwich's architectural treasures," the one that always seemed covered with ghosts of fingerprints.

I waited another few minutes, just in case, then turned around and lowered myself to sit on the top step, trying very hard not to have a breakdown among the leaves.

There was a piece of me that was still hoping to find this had been a very realistic nightmare, and that any minute now, I'd wake up, and Sloane would be there, on the other end of her phone like she was supposed to be, already planning out the day for us.

Sloane's house was in what was always called "backcountry," where the houses got larger and farther apart from each other, on ever-bigger pieces of land. She was ten miles away from my place, which, back when I'd been in peak running shape, had been easy for me to cross. But even though they were close, our neighborhoods couldn't have been more different. Here, there was only the occasional car driving past, and the silence seemed to underscore the fact that I was totally alone, that there was nobody home and, most likely, nobody coming back. I leaned forward, letting my hair fall around me like a curtain. If nobody was there, it at least meant I could stay awhile, and I wouldn't be asked to leave. I could probably stay there all day. I honestly didn't know what else to do with myself.

I heard the low rumble of an engine and looked up, fast, pushing my hair out of my face, feeling hope flare once more in my chest. But the car rolling slowly down the driveway wasn't Anderson's slightly dented BMW. It was a yellow pickup truck, the back piled with lawnmowers and rakes. When it pulled in front of the steps, I could see the writing, in stylized cursive, on the side. *Stanwich Landscaping*, it read. *Planting . . . gardening . . . maintenance . . . and mulch, mulch more!* Sloane loved when stores had

cheesy names or slogans. Not that she was a huge fan of puns, but she'd always said she liked to picture the owners thinking them up, and how pleased with themselves they must have been when they landed on whatever they'd chosen. I immediately made a mental note to tell Sloane about the motto, and then, a moment later, realized how stupid this was.

Three guys got out of the truck and headed for the back of it, two of them starting to lift down the equipment. They looked older, like maybe they were in college, and I stayed frozen on the steps, watching them. I knew that this was an opportunity to try and get some information, but that would involve talking to these guys. I'd been shy from birth, but the last two years had been different. With Sloane by my side, it was like I suddenly had a safety net. She was always able to take the lead if I wanted her to, and if I didn't, I knew she would be there, jumping in if I lost my nerve or got flustered. And when I was on my own, awkward or failed interactions just didn't seem to matter as much, since I knew I'd be able to spin it into a story, and we could laugh about it afterward. Without her here, though, it was becoming clear to me how terrible I now was at navigating things like this on my own.

"Hey." I jumped, realizing I was being addressed by one of the landscapers. He was looking up at me, shielding his eyes against the sun as the other two hefted down a riding mower. "You live here?"

The other two guys set the mower down, and I realized

I knew one of them; he'd been in my English class last year, making this suddenly even worse. "No," I said, and heard how scratchy my voice sounded. I had been saying only the most perfunctory things to my parents and younger brother over the last two weeks, and the only talking I'd really been doing had been into Sloane's voice mail. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I don't."

The guy who'd spoken to me raised his eyebrows, and I knew this was my cue to go. I was, at least in their minds, trespassing, and would probably get in the way of their work. All three guys were now staring at me, clearly just waiting for me to leave. But if I left Sloane's house—if I ceded it to these strangers in yellow T-shirts—where was I going to get more information? Did that mean I was just accepting the fact that she was gone?

The guy who'd spoken to me folded his arms across his chest, looking impatient, and I knew I couldn't keep sitting there. If Sloane had been with me, I would have been able to ask them. If she were here, she probably would have gotten two of their numbers already and would be angling for a turn on the riding mower, asking if she could mow her name into the grass. But if Sloane were here, none of this would be happening in the first place. My cheeks burned as I pushed myself to my feet and walked quickly down the stone steps, my flip-flops sliding once on the leaves, but I steadied myself before I wiped out and made this more humiliating than it already was. I nodded at the guys, then looked down at the driveway as I walked over to my car.

Now that I was leaving, they all moved into action, distributing equipment and arguing about who was doing what. I gripped my door handle, but didn't open it yet. Was I really just going to go? Without even trying?

"So," I said, but not loudly enough, as the guys continued to talk to each other, none of them looking over at me, two of them having an argument about whose turn it was to fertilize, while the guy from last year's English class held his baseball cap in his hands, bending the bill into a curve. "*So*," I said, but much too loudly this time, and the guys stopped talking and looked over at me again. I could feel my palms sweating, but I knew I had to keep going, that I wouldn't be able forgive myself if I just turned around and left. "I was just . . . um . . ." I let out a shaky breath. "My friend lives here, and I was trying to find her. Do you—" I suddenly saw, like I was observing the scene on TV, how ridiculous this probably was, asking the landscaping guys for information on my best friend's whereabouts. "I mean, did they hire you for this job? Her parents, I mean? Milly or Anderson Williams?" Even though I was trying not to, I could feel myself grabbing on to this possibility, turning it into something I could understand. If the Williamses had hired Stanwich Landscaping, maybe they were just on a trip somewhere, getting the yard stuff taken care of while they were gone so they wouldn't be bothered. It was just a long trip, and they had gone somewhere with no cell reception or e-mail service. That was all.

The guys looked at each other, and it didn't seem like any of these names had rung a bell. "Sorry," said the guy who'd first spoken to me. "We just get the address. We don't know about that stuff."

I nodded, feeling like I'd just depleted my last reserve of hope. Thinking about it, the fact that landscapers were here was actually a bit ominous, as I had never once seen Anderson show the slightest interest in the lawn, despite the fact that the Stanwich Historical Society was apparently always bothering him to hire someone to keep up the property.

Two of the guys had headed off around the side of the house, and the guy from my English class looked at me as he put on his baseball cap. "Hey, you're friends with Sloane Williams, right?"

"Yes," I said immediately. This was my identity at school, but I'd never minded it—and now, I'd never been so happy to be recognized that way. Maybe he knew something, or had heard something. "Sloane's actually who I'm looking for. This is her house, so . . ."

The guy nodded, then gave me an apologetic shrug. "Sorry I don't know anything," he said. "Hope you find her." He didn't ask me what my name was, and I didn't volunteer it. What would be the point?

"Thanks," I managed to say, but a moment too late, as he'd already joined the other two. I looked at the house once more, the house that somehow no longer even felt like Sloane's, and

realized that there was nothing left to do except leave.

I didn't head right home; instead I stopped in to Stanwich Coffee, on the very off chance that there would be a girl in the corner chair, her hair in a messy bun held up with a pencil, reading a British novel that used dashes instead of quotation marks. But Sloane wasn't there. And as I headed back to my car I realized that if she had been in town, it would have been unthinkable that she wouldn't have called me back. It had been two weeks; something was wrong.

Strangely, this thought buoyed me as I headed for home. When I left the house every morning, I just let my parents assume that I was meeting up with Sloane, and if they asked what my plans were, I said vague things about applying for jobs. But I knew now was the moment to tell them that I was worried; that I needed to know what had happened. After all, maybe they knew something, even though my parents weren't close with hers. The first time they'd met, Milly and Anderson had come to collect Sloane from a sleepover at my house, two hours later than they'd been supposed to show up. And after pleasantries had been exchanged and Sloane and I had said good-bye, my dad had shut the door, turned to my mother, and groaned, "That was like being stuck in a Gurney play." I hadn't known what he'd meant by this, but I could tell by his tone of voice that it hadn't been a compliment. But even though they hadn't been friends, they still might know something. Or they might be able to find something out.

I held on to this thought tighter and tighter as I got closer to my house. We lived close to one of the four commercial districts scattered throughout Stanwich. My neighborhood was pedestrian-friendly and walkable, and there was always lots of traffic, both cars and people, usually heading in the direction of the beach, a ten-minute drive from our house. Stanwich, Connecticut, was on Long Island Sound, and though there were no waves, there was still sand and beautiful views and stunning houses that had the water as their backyards.

Our house, in contrast, was an old Victorian that my parents had been fixing up ever since we'd moved in six years earlier. The floors were uneven and the ceilings were low, and the whole downstairs was divided into lots of tiny rooms—originally all specific parlors of some kind. But my parents—who had been living, with me, and later my younger brother, in tiny apartments, usually above a deli or a Thai place—couldn't believe their good fortune. They didn't think about the fact that it was pretty much falling down, that it was three stories and drafty, shockingly expensive to heat in the winter and, with central air not yet invented when the house was built, almost impossible to cool in the summer. They were ensorcelled with the place.

The house had originally been painted a bright purple, but had faded over the years to a pale lavender. It had a wide front porch, a widow's walk at the very top of the house, too many windows to make any logical sense, and a turret room that was my parents' study.

I pulled up in front of the house and saw that my brother was sitting on the porch steps, perfectly still. This was surprising in itself. Beckett was ten, and constantly in motion, climbing up vertiginous things, practicing his ninja moves, and biking through our neighborhood's streets with abandon, usually with his best friend Annabel Montpelier, the scourge of stroller-pushing mothers within a five-mile radius. "Hey," I said as I got out of the car and walked toward the steps, suddenly worried that I had missed something big in the last two weeks while I'd sleep-walked through family meals, barely paying attention to what was happening around me. But maybe Beckett had just pushed my parents a little too far, and was having a time-out. I'd find out soon enough anyway, since I needed to talk to them about Sloane. "You okay?" I asked, climbing up the three porch steps.

He looked up at me, then back down at his sneakers. "It's happening again."

"Are you sure?" I crossed the porch to the door and pulled it open. I was hoping Beckett was wrong; after all, he'd only experienced this twice before. Maybe he was misreading the signs.

Beckett followed behind me, stepping into what had originally been an entry parlor, but which we had turned into a mudroom, where we dropped jackets and scarves and keys and shoes. I walked into the house, squinting in the light that was always a little too dim. "Mom?" I called, crossing my fingers in my jean shorts pockets, hoping that Beckett had just gotten this wrong.

But as my eyes adjusted, I could see, through the open door of the kitchen, an explosion of stuff from the warehouse store one town over. Piled all over the kitchen counters were massive quantities of food and supplies in bulk—instant mac and cheese, giant boxes of cereal, gallons of milk, a nearly obscene amount of mini micro cheesy bagels. As I took it in, I realized with a sinking feeling that Beckett had been totally correct. They were starting a new play.

"Told you," Beckett said with a sigh as he joined me.

My parents were a playwriting team who worked during the school year at Stanwich College, the local university and the reason we had moved here. My mom taught playwriting in the theater department, and my dad taught critical analysis in the English department. They both spent the school year busy and stressed—especially when my mom was directing a play and my dad was dealing with his thesis students and midterms—but they relaxed when the school year ended. They might occasionally pull out an old script they'd put aside a few years earlier and tinker with it a little, but for the most part, they took these three months off. There was a pattern to our summers, so regular you could almost set your calendar to it. In June, my dad would decide that he had been too hemmed in by society and its arbitrary regulations, and declare that he was a *man*. Basically, this meant that he would grill everything we ate, even things that really shouldn't be grilled, like lasagna, and would start growing a beard that would have him looking like a mountain

man by the middle of July. My mother would take up some new hobby around the same time, declaring it her "creative outlet." One year, we all ended up with lopsided scarves when she learned to knit, and another year we weren't allowed to use any of the tables, as they'd all been taken over by jigsaw puzzles, and had to eat our grilled food off plates we held on our laps. And last year, she'd decided to grow a vegetable garden, but the only thing that seemed to flourish was the zucchini, which then attracted the deer she subsequently declared war on. But by the end of August, we were all sick of charred food, and my dad was tired of getting strange looks when he went to the post office. My dad would shave, we'd start using the stove inside, and my mother would put aside her scarves or puzzles or zucchini. It was a strange routine, but it was ours, and I was used to it.

But when they were writing, everything changed. It had happened only twice before. The summer I was eleven, they sent me to sleepaway camp—an experience that, while horrible for me, actually ended up providing them with the plot of their play. It had happened again when I was thirteen and Beckett was six. They'd gotten an idea for a new play one night, and then had basically disappeared into the dining room for the rest of the summer, buying food in bulk and emerging every few days to make sure that we were still alive. I knew that ignoring us wasn't something either of them intended to do, but they'd been a playwriting team for years before they'd had us, and it was like

they just reverted back to their old habits, where they could live to write, and nothing mattered except the play.

But I really didn't want this to be happening right now—not when I needed them. "Mom!" I called again.

My mother stepped out of the dining room and I noticed with a sinking feeling that she was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt—writing clothes—and her curly hair was up in a knot on top of her head. "Emily?" my mom asked. She looked around. "Where's your brother?"

"Um, here," Beckett said, waving at her from my side.

"Oh, good," my mother said. "We were just going to call you two. We need to have a family meeting."

"Wait," I said quickly, taking a step forward. "Mom. I needed to talk to you and Dad. It's about Sloane—"

"Family meeting!" my dad boomed from inside the kitchen. His voice was deep, very loud, and it was the reason he was always getting assigned the eight a.m. classes—he was one of the few professors in the English department who could keep the freshmen awake. "Beckett! Emily!" he stepped out of the kitchen and blinked when he saw us. "Oh. That was fast."

"Dad," I said, hoping I could somehow get in front of this. "I needed to talk to you guys."

"We need to talk to you, too," my mother said. "Your father and I were chatting last night, and we somehow got on—Scott, how did we start talking about it?"

"It was because your reading light burned out," my dad said,

taking a step closer to my mom. "And we started talking about electricity."

"Right," my mother said, nodding. "Exactly. So we started talking about Edison, then Tesla, and then Edison *and* Tesla, and—"

"We think we might have a play," my dad finished, glancing into the dining room. I saw they already had their laptops set up across the table, facing each other. "We're going to bounce around some ideas. It might be nothing."

I nodded, but I knew with a sinking feeling that it wasn't nothing. My parents had done this enough that they knew when something was worth making a bulk supermarket run. I knew the signs well; they always downplayed ideas they truly saw promise in. But when they started talking excitedly about a new play, already seeing its potential before anything was written, I knew it would fizzle out in a few days.

"So we might be working a bit," my mother said, in what was sure to be the understatement of the summer. "We bought supplies," she said, gesturing vaguely to the kitchen, where I could see the jumbo-size bags of frozen peas and microwave burritos were starting to melt. "And there's always emergency money in the conch." The conch shell had served as a prop during the Broadway production of *Bug Juice*, my parents' most successful play, and now, in addition to being where we kept household cash, served as a bookend for a listing pile of cookbooks. "Beckett's going to be at day camp during the week, so

he's all set. Annabel's going too," my mother said, maybe noticing Beckett's scowl.

"What about camping?" he asked.

"We'll still go camping," my dad said. Maybe seeing my alarmed look, he added, "Just your brother and me. The Hughes men in the wilderness."

"But . . ." Beckett looked into the dining room, his brow furrowed.

My dad waved this away. "We aren't going until July," he said. "And I'm sure this idea won't amount to much anyway."

"What about you, Em?" my mom asked, even as she drifted closer to the dining room, like she was being pulled there by gravitational force. "Do you have your summer plans worked out?"

I bit my lip. Sloane and I had made plans upon plans for this summer. We had concert tickets purchased, she had told me she had mapped out something called a "pizza crawl," and I had decided we should spend the summer seeking out Stanwich's best cupcake. Sloane had a plan for both of us to find "summer boys," but she had been vague on just how we were going to accomplish this. We'd blocked off the weekends we would drive upstate to the various flea markets she'd spent the last few months scouting, and I'd already gone through the drive-in calendar and decided which nights we needed to block off for the double features. She'd planned on making friends with someone who had a pool, and had decided this would be the summer

she'd finally beat me at mini golf (I was weirdly naturally skilled at it, and I'd discovered that Sloane got strangely competitive when there were stuffed-animal prizes involved). I wanted to learn the zombie dance from "Thriller" and she wanted to learn the dance from London Moore's new video, the one that had sparked all sorts of protests from parents' groups.

At some point, we were going to need to get jobs, of course. But we'd decided it was going to be something unchallenging that we could do together, like we had the summer before, when we'd waitressed at the Stanwich Country Club—Sloane earning more tips than anyone else, me getting a reputation for being an absolute whiz at filling the ketchup bottles at the end of the night. We'd also left lots of time unscheduled—the long stretches of hours we'd spend at the beach or walking around or just hanging out with no plan beyond maybe getting fountain Diet Cokes. It was *Sloane*—you usually didn't need more than that to have the best Wednesday of your life.

I swallowed hard as I thought about all these plans, the whole direction I'd planned for my summer to go, just vanishing. And I realized that if Sloane were here, suddenly having my parents otherwise occupied and not paying attention to things like my curfew would have meant we could have had the most epic summer ever. I could practically see that summer, the one I wanted, the one I should have been living, shimmering in front of me like a mirage before it faded and disappeared.

"Emily?" my mother prompted, and I looked back at her. She was in the same room with me, she was technically looking at me, but I knew when my parents were present and when their minds were on their play. For just a moment, I thought about trying to tell them about Sloane, trying to get them to help me figure out what had happened. But I knew that they'd say yes with the best of intentions and then forget all about it as they focused on Tesla and Edison.

"I'm . . . working on it," I finally said.

"Sounds good," my dad said, nodding. My mom smiled, like I'd given her the answer she'd wanted, even though I hadn't told them anything concrete. But it was clear they wanted this off their plates, so they could consider their children more or less sorted, and they could get to work. They were both edging toward the dining room, where their laptops glowed softly, beckoning. I sighed and started to head to the kitchen, figuring that I should get the frozen stuff into the freezer before it went bad.

"Oh, Em," my mother said, sticking her head out of the dining room. I saw my father was already sitting in his chair, opening up his laptop and stretching out his fingers. "A letter came for you."

My heart slowed and then started beating double-time. There was only one person who regularly wrote to me. And they weren't even actually letters—they were lists. "Where?"

"Microwave," my mother said. She went back into the

dining room and I bolted into the kitchen, no longer caring if all the burritos melted. I pushed aside the twelve-pack of Kleenex and saw it. It was leaning up against the microwave like it was nothing, next to a bill from the tree guy.

But it was addressed to me. And it was in Sloane's handwriting.

★★★★

## JUNE

*One Year Earlier*

"You sent me a list?" I asked. Sloane looked over at me sharply, almost dropping the sunglasses—oversize green frames—that she'd just picked up.

I held out the paper in my hands, the letter I'd seen propped up by the microwave as I headed down that morning, on my way to pick her up and drive us to the latest flea market she'd found, an hour and change outside of Stanwich. Though there hadn't been a return address—just a heart—I'd recognized Sloane's handwriting immediately, a distinctive mix of block letters and cursive. "It's what happens when you go to three different schools for third grade," she'd explained to me once. "Everyone is learning this at different stages and you never get the fundamentals." Sloane and her parents lived the kind of peripatetic existence—picking up and moving when they felt like it, or when they just wanted a new adventure—that I'd seen in