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1 DECEMBER

31 days to go . . .

Car yard

12:00 am

I couldn't move, couldn't speak, almost couldn't breathe. Winter's final words echoed through the black, suffocating space we were locked in, like a haunting message from the grave.

I held her slumped body next to mine. Her wild hair fell over my knees and onto the floor of the container. I tried to say her name, but all that came out was a croaking sound.

She'd saved my life so many times, and I had completely failed her. The one time she'd needed *me* I had ignored her calls until it was too late. She was gone. The beautiful raven-haired stranger who'd saved me from drowning in an oil tank was now dead.

If I'd been there for her—calmed her down and talked sense into her—she would never have confronted Sligo. She would have waited until it

was safe. If I had answered just one of her calls, she wouldn't be lying cold and silent in my arms. She would still be alive.

A numbing sensation took over me as I rocked back and forth with her body in my arms.

'Cal!'

Griff was elbowing me in the ribs—his hands were still bound behind his back.

'Cal, let go of her!'

I shook him off. He was the last person I wanted to talk to right now, but he kept persisting.

'Let her go!' he shouted, shoving me with his shoulder.

I swung my arm out and pushed him away. 'I don't want to let her go!' I shouted back at him, tears now stinging my eyes. 'I won't let her go!'

'You have to, Cal.'

'I don't have to do anything! Winter was my friend! She was—'

'She's breathing, Cal,' Griff spoke over me as he steadied himself. 'I swear. That's all I'm trying to tell you. Listen.'

I ignored him. I didn't want to hear his voice right now.

'Winter's *breathing*,' he said, urgently kneeling closer to her. 'Listen to me! Here, help me sit her up.'

His words finally penetrated the blackness of my thoughts.

'She's breathing?' I repeated. As I spoke, I felt Winter stir.

I loosened my hold on her and a second later her body convulsed into life. She started struggling, groaning, trying to pull away from me.

'Winter!' I gripped her shoulders, crazy with relief. 'Winter? Are you OK?' I asked, trying hopelessly to keep my voice steady. 'It's me! Cal!' I added, half laughing, half crying.

'Let me go!' she screeched, squirming with panic. 'Get your hands off me!'

'It's me!' I said again. 'You're OK, you're with me!'

'Huh?' she said, sounding dazed, as I helped her sit up. 'What's happened? Where am I? Cal, is that you?'

'Yes, I'm here!' I squeezed both of her hands, and tried to move her towards some light that was seeping in through a rusty crack in the container.

'Where have you been?' she murmured.

'I'm *so* sorry I didn't call you back,' I said, my guilt gushing out. 'I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you rang. I just—' I stopped, not knowing how to explain myself. 'I can't believe this; I thought you were dead a second ago!'

'Give her some air, Cal,' suggested Griff. He was awkwardly trying to rub Winter's arm to

help warm her up. 'She doesn't need to hear your apologies right now.'

'Who's that?' asked Winter, squinting into the darkness of the container.

'You're in here with me and Griff Kirby,' I explained.

'You and *Griff*?' she said slowly, bewildered and fearful. 'What are you talking about? *Why?* Where are we?'

'We're all in the same boat,' said Griff. 'Or should I say *container*?'

'Container? Cal, what is he talking about?'

Winter tried to get up, but toppled right over.

'They must have drugged you,' said Griff, helping her straighten up, 'and you're still feeling the effects of it. I saw them dragging you into the black Subaru. You yelled out to me, remember?' he reminded her, as I worked on unwrapping the tape around his wrists. 'You told me to go and get Cal.'

'Yeah,' she murmured. 'From the beach.'

'That's right,' I said. 'You told Griff he'd find me at the beach.'

'And I did find him,' added Griff, 'but by the time we got back to the spot where you'd been shoved into the Subaru, all that was left behind were your things, scattered all over the road.'

Winter began groping around in the darkness.

'We're in the car yard,' I explained. 'Griff and I came looking for you, but Zombie Two and Bruno caught us. Next thing we knew, they'd locked us in this container. You were already in here.'

'We're in a *shipping* container?'

'Yep,' said Griff. 'On the back of a truck.'

'Are they going to take us somewhere? How will we get out?'

They were questions we couldn't answer. Winter continued fumbling her way around the walls. She was nothing but a faint, wobbly silhouette in the darkness.

Next, she started banging, like she was testing the walls for a weak spot or a potential opening. Before long, Griff—whose hands were finally free—joined her.

'Help!' Griff shouted as he thumped on the walls. 'Let us out!'

The metal shuddered, sending reverberations around us.

'Help!' they both called out, repeatedly, each cry more desperate than the last. 'Help!'

It was getting louder and louder—Griff and Winter weren't letting up. Now they were both throwing themselves at the walls, like they were desperately trying to crack the container open. The noise was throbbing like a giant gong in my head.

I covered my ears—I couldn't take it any longer.

'Stop!' I screeched over the top of them. 'Stop it! Banging on the walls isn't going to get us out of here! Would you both just calm down and think about this? There's nobody out there, and anybody that *could* be out there wants us to stay trapped in here! You're wasting your time!'

Winter and Griff slumped onto the metal floor. Silence returned to the container.

I stared into the blackness, hopelessly wondering how we were going to get out.

1:05 am

Finally, Winter broke the silence. 'Cal, when I didn't hear back from you I just lost it. I wanted to talk to you so bad. I had the biggest news, ever, and no-one to share it with.'

My stomach twisted with guilt.

'It was like everything inside me was boiling over,' she continued, sounding increasingly agitated, 'and I couldn't cool down. At first I was so relieved to have found the truth, but then fury took over! I always *knew* he killed my parents! I always knew it wasn't just an accident, and finally I'd found the proof. That lying murderer!' she screamed, kicking her boot into the wall.

'Hey,' I said softly, trying to calm her down again.

'My head was telling me the time wasn't right—it was telling me it would be stupid to confront him. But my heart couldn't wait. I knew he'd forged my dad's signature on the will, and I had the evidence to prove it. I'd also found our car in his car yard—more proof of foul play.'

I shuddered at the thought of her facing up to Sligo. 'And you found a drawing or something?' I asked, trying to recall what she'd said in her voicemail messages earlier.

'Remember when we first went searching together, I told you I was looking for a little something extra on the upholstery in the back?'

'Yeah,' I said, 'you mean the drawing of a bird or something?'

'A swallow. When I was about nine, I got into a tonne of trouble after a long drive up the coast . . . I was bored and drew a small bird on the back seat of the car. As soon as I spotted our gold BMW in the yard, I crawled into the wreck and located the drawing, scrawled onto the seat fabric, just where I'd left it. It was faded, but it was there. That was our car, all right.'

A sliver of moonlight fell through a crack and across Winter's face as she held her wrist up to look at her bird tattoo. No wonder it meant so much to her.

Her hand abruptly fell back to her lap with

a slapping sound. 'So next I checked the brake lines,' she said. 'Those brake lines weren't worn down like the police reported—they'd been cut. Clean cuts—the sort made by sharp pliers. That car crash was no accident. It had nothing to do with the weather. It was—'

'—*murder*,' I whispered.

'Somehow, after the crash, he must have swapped vehicles, replacing my parents' car with another one of the same make and model that *did* have worn brakes. So the police accident report didn't lie—it just described some other wreck.'

'He must have broken into the secure police car yard to do that,' I said. 'Or paid someone to do it for him.'

'Sligo has his tentacles everywhere,' she said. 'He's proven he's capable of anything. Like I was saying, I charged over to his house and into his study, in a fit of fury. He was sitting behind his desk, drinking from some fancy, gold-rimmed, glass tumbler. I started yelling at him, accusing him of forgery and sabotage. He denied it, of course. He brushed me off and told me to get out and stop being a drama queen.'

'You should have gone straight to the police,' I said.

'I realise that now. It's probably the dumbest

thing I've ever done. He wasn't taking me seriously, so I showed him the proof I had—photos I'd taken on my mobile phone—' Winter stopped talking abruptly. '*My phone!*' she screeched. 'Do you have it?'

'Battery's dead,' Griff answered quickly. 'I just checked it a second ago . . . I can't believe I don't have *my* phone on me.'

'*My* phone!' I shouted, practically throwing my bag off my back and fumbling over the ground for it.

As soon as I picked it up I tried to switch it on, but it too was dead. I'd forgotten to hang it up after hearing Winter's voicemail messages, so the battery had completely drained.

'No good?' asked Winter, hopefully.

'Nup.'

Griff swore.

Frustrated, I shoved everything back into my bag.

'So how did Sligo react to the photos?' I asked Winter.

'He looked at them, just to humour me at first, but once he realised what I had found, his pompous grin disappeared. He puffed up like a great big toad, purple with rage. He crushed the glass tumbler he was clutching, with his *bare fist*. I was so scared, I thought I was dead. He came at

me with his eyes bulging and fists throbbing and I snatched my phone away from him and backed off, thinking he was about to grab me and wring my neck!'

Winter paused and let out an exhausted breath.

'Then he changed,' she continued. 'As quickly as he'd blown up, he calmed down. He started laughing like he suddenly thought it was hilarious. He said I was as smart as he was—maybe even smarter—and that I should channel my talent and become a partner in his business. He promised to give me the money owing to me as long as I kept my mouth shut, and as long as I sat beside him at his New Year's Eve ball like a perfect princess. He also said he was on the verge of making a whole lot more money.'

'A whole lot more?' I asked, instantly panicking about him unravelling the DMO before us.

'He said he "had to" reach the Ormond Singularity before the end of December,' she explained, confirming my fears. 'By that time I'd realised how much danger I was in, but I was all alone. No-one knew where I was. I didn't have backup.'

Her words hit me hard.

'I decided to play along, pretending that I was seriously considering his offer. I walked around as if I was deep in thought while he threw the

shards of broken glass from his desk in the bin and poured himself another drink. He offered me a juice, and I nervously sipped on it as I paced the room.'

'Did he say anything else about the Ormond Singularity?'

'The Ormond Singularity?' Griff was muttering to himself, clearly confused.

'Sligo kept raving on about how he needed to crack it so that he could display the Ormond Jewel around my neck at the ball and make his name as a great medievalist and antiquarian. I could be his "equal partner". He said the entire world would be at *our* feet. I was pretending to be impressed but the whole time I was planning how to get out. I excused myself to go to the bathroom, then I bolted. I was on my way to the police station when I started to feel really weird—all weak and floppy. Every sound around me was fading and my vision was going blurry. I sat down on some steps, thinking it must have been the heat. Then I remembered the fruit juice—Sligo had put something in it! Next thing I know, Bruno's dragging me off the street into the car. I kicked as hard as I could, but I couldn't stop him!'

'That's when I saw you,' said Griff.

'Sligo made a final phone call to your mobile,' I said. 'He didn't realise I'd picked it up from the

road. He said enough for me to guess you'd been taken to the car yard. When we got here and I saw the container, I was pretty sure you'd be in it. Then Bruno and Zombie Two sprung us—'

'And locked us in here with you,' Griff finished for me, feeling around the container again. 'We're all up to speed now, so how about we focus on getting out of here?'

Griff's suggestion was met with stifling silence. Clearly, none of us had any good ideas.

Outside the container and beyond the deserted car yard, the sounds of distant traffic hummed almost inaudibly.

Griff spoke again. 'We're better off trying to escape now, while we at least know where we are. If this truck moves us, we could end up stacked like bricks in concrete on a container ship in the middle of the ocean. We'd die there, for sure.'

'I'm scared,' whispered Winter.

1:29 am

I stood up and started pacing the length of the dark space of the container. If only there was something I could do. If only I could find some way to connect with the outside world. With Boges or—

'The distress beacon!' I shouted.

'The what?' said Griff.

'The micro distress beacon Boges gave you!'

Winter shouted, excitedly. She jumped to her feet and awkwardly hugged me.

'I have a distress beacon stowed in my shoe,' I explained to Griff. 'My mate Boges gave it to me, for use in an emergency!'

'And you've only just thought of it now?' he said in frustrated disbelief.

'I'd almost forgotten all about it, but *who cares*? It means we're getting out of here!'

I sat back down and wrenched my shoe off. 'Once he realises we're missing, he'll check the tracking program to see if we've activated the beacon. Then he can follow the signal to this container.'

'But what about the police?' asked Winter. 'They're watching him. What if they follow him here?'

'Boges will be vigilant. He knows how important our freedom is. But let's not worry about that right now, I have to get this beacon activated.'

With shaking fingers, I pulled up the inner sole from my sneaker and started to rip away the tape. I located the beacon and pressed the tiny switch.

It didn't make a sound, but I had to believe it was working.

If Boges didn't activate his tracking system

before this container was picked up and shipped out, I didn't like to think what might happen to us. Griff was right—we needed to get out before they moved us.

Now we had to play the waiting game.

9:01 am

'Who's that?' hissed Winter, grabbing my arm suddenly.

I froze and listened carefully. I could hear footsteps and the murmur of a voice approaching.

'Do you think it's Boges?' Griff whispered.

'Shh,' I said, straining to hear whether the voice outside was familiar or not.

As it became louder, I recognised who it was.

It wasn't Boges.

It was Zombie Two.

'In the container,' he said, loud enough for the three of us to hear. 'We both come back tomorrow morning to remove.'

We all shuddered as his voice moved away again. Eventually we heard a car driving off and hoped that meant Zombie Two had left again.

'Your friend had better get here before *they* do,' warned Griff.

8:15 pm

The day blended into the night as the three of us

huddled for hours and hours, anxiously waiting in the darkness of the container. All of us would jump at the slightest sound, hoping it was Boges, coming to our rescue, while fearing it was Bruno, Zombie Two or Sligo, back again to *remove* us.

But no-one had come.

Eventually, Winter and Griff fell silent and I could hear Winter's steady breathing beside me. The air inside the container was getting thicker and thicker.

I couldn't fall asleep—I was tormented with horrible thoughts. What if Boges didn't think to check up on his tracking program? What if the three of us were left here to die—from thirst and starvation—without anyone but the people who put us here ever knowing? What did Sligo plan on doing with us tomorrow morning? I didn't want to stick around and find out.

The way I'd felt when I'd held Winter in my arms earlier, thinking she was dead, wouldn't leave my mind either. I needed the chance to make a lot up to her. She'd been through so much and she'd been so brave. And now, just when she had the evidence she needed to get Sligo right out of her life forever and claim what was rightfully hers, she was trapped.

Guilty. I felt so guilty.

Because of me, Boges had been picked up and

questioned by the police. For all I knew, they could have arrested him by now. Because of me, his future was uncertain. On top of that, I'd only just realised that I'd forgotten his birthday.