

Prologue

November

I stayed with David after everyone had disappeared. It didn't seem right to call them friends now – sitting in the living room and looking around the empty house that was littered with bottles and plastic cups and vomit, it was obvious that they were just revellers who were only there to celebrate when it was all fun and easy. I wanted to say 'I told you so' to David, tell him yet again that you had to be careful, but even after the events of that night I was still wary of David's criticism. Fun police, he'd called me earlier. And maybe I was.

Until, of course, the real police had shown up.

I sighed and reached out to rub David's back. I wondered if I should stop – it seemed like a really girly gesture – but David didn't say anything. He just sat there, shoulders hunched, unusually silent.

'Maybe you should go call your parents,' I said.

David looked up and nodded. 'Do you think it will make the news?' he asked.

I shrugged. 'I don't ... don't know.'

'I'll call them just in case,' he said, rising.

He returned a few minutes later, a look of shame on his face.

'They're on their way,' he said, tossing his phone onto the couch.

'Are they mad?' I asked, regretting the words as soon as they came out.

'What do you think?' he growled, his eyes flicking up at me. 'Come on, let's sit outside. I need some air.'

'I'll be right out,' I told him, as I looked around the room. 'Let me tidy up a little more.'

I threw some more things in the garbage bags lined up against the outside back wall,

then followed David back up to the front entrance of the house, where I joined him on the cane furniture and waited. Waited for news from the hospital; for trouble to come knocking; for his parents, who would probably say that this was the last straw in his long line of bad behaviour.

David's voice cut through the silence.

'You should say it,' he said. 'Tell me I was wrong to invite everyone on my Facebook list.'

I scoffed, but said nothing. That wasn't the only issue, I wanted to say. There was no security, no order, no one keeping watch. Just a bunch of dumb, hammered teenagers. But there didn't seem to be much point in saying any of that now.

Still, not everything that had happened had been David's fault. Nothing about this party seemed different to any of the other parties we'd been to as seniors at Holy Family High School. Sure, there were a few extra people in the mix, but the basic ingredients were the same: smuggled booze and clueless kids high on hormones, their parents' cash and the quest for high-school popularity.

But something must have been different this time; none of the other parties had ended this way before. Maybe it was the excessively hot November weather; maybe we should have paid more attention in that first-aid lesson; maybe it was that end-of-year fever that had everyone thinking a little more recklessly.

It was hard to think through the sirens still echoing in my ears, even though the ambulance had long gone. Moments later, David drifted off, and eventually so did the moon, a large beam of light shrinking into the bay before me as the hours passed. But my eyes wouldn't close.

But I was glad of that – if they did close, I'd see it all again. The police notebooks being flipped open, my classmates' faces contorted with shock, the limp body strapped to the

stretcher. Still, zombie-like, almost shrunken. Even with the minor signs of life that flickered on the monitor as the paramedics shut the ambulance doors, I knew there was no guarantee.

Uncertain, different, damaged. Just like the promise of our youth, now irreversibly changed due to a night whose sinister warning had been brewing steadily beneath the surface of our teenage dreams.

Charlie

Nine months earlier

Charlie Scanlon Three. Terms. Left.

Pete Brady likes this.

The car that's been tailing me for the last hundred metres slows down further, and I go from mild concern to panic. As a petite seventeen-year-old on a deserted suburban road at 6:30 a.m. in the morning, I was the perfect candidate for a sexual predator. Great. I'm going to disappear and there will be no clues or witnesses. I'll become another unsolved mystery.

I curse myself for starting the day so early. Then again, I didn't have much option. Mornings at home were super awkward now that my mum and my stepfather, Stan, were trying for a baby. The kinds of noises that came from their room ... Let's just say I'd rather listen to static.

I sneak a very subtle look through the camera in my phone and freak out when I can't see through the tinted windows. There's probably more than one of them; my chances of escape are reducing by the second. I take a deep breath and quicken my pace, imagining the headlines: 'High schooler found strangled in bushland', 'Student raped on walk to school', 'Parents shoulder blame for move that cost daughter's life'. Well, maybe not that last one, but if I do die today, at least Mum and Stan will live out their days in sorrow, knowing it was their selfishness that brought death closer to my door.

Then the door opens, and I stop, steadying myself for a fight. I'm like an atheist Joan of Arc going into battle – except I'm too afraid to turn around. A hand reaches over my face, and I react, elbowing the belly and stomping on a foot.

I've run maybe six metres when the voice belonging to the 'ouch' registers, and I turn around.

‘Mum,’ I say, slapping a hand to my forehead. ‘You scared the crap out of me!’

‘Wow,’ she says, clutching her stomach. ‘You’re strong.’

I shake my head. ‘What are you doing?’ I ask. ‘And whose car is that?’

‘Surprise!’ she yells, throwing her hands into the air. ‘It’s yours!’

‘What? I don’t even have a licence.’

‘Yet – but you’ll get one.’

‘I won’t need one in Melbourne,’ I point out.

‘You’ll need one here,’ she says, folding her arms.

‘I don’t plan on returning,’ I retort, folding my own. ‘And now I want to walk.’

She looks defeated.

I sigh. ‘Mum, we’ve been over this. I’m going to walk to school early from now on.

You know why, I know why, Stan knows why. We don’t need to go over it again. What we do need to go over is what exactly you were thinking when you decided to put on Ugg boots in this heatwave. And, more importantly, why you came out of the house in them. It’s tacky.’

‘My toes were cold,’ she replies with a shrug. ‘Come on, get in the car.’

I stay where I am, arms still folded, while she picks up my school bag.

‘No,’ I say, shaking my head. ‘You’ve ruined my morning. I thought you were a stalker.’

My mother puts my bag in the backseat and looks at me sternly. ‘I think you need to stop watching crime shows. They’re really distorting your sense of reality.’

I scoff. ‘Still doesn’t explain why you were driving like a creep.’

‘I got a phone call from Ellen. She started dating a new guy a month ago, and now he won’t return her calls. I was trying to make sense of the situation, hence the slow driving.’

‘Mum, those no talking while driving rules we had in Melbourne apply in Sydney too, you know,’ I point out. ‘Except the cops are probably meaner and the fine is probably bigger.’

Just like how everything else is worse here.'

'Not this again, Charlie,' she says, exasperated. 'Get in the car. And I don't want to say it again.'

When her 'Dr Reynolds' voice comes out, I know it's time for me to listen.

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Ten minutes later, we're sitting in the car in a McDonald's parking lot, eating sausage and egg McMuffins, hash browns and hotcakes. The car stinks of grease. I wind down the windows.

'You didn't have to bring the car to me, you know,' I say. 'I would have understood if you needed to stay at home with Stan, to ...'

'To, you know?' she replies, a smirk on her face. 'This is our tradition, Chi. Not everything has to change now that we've moved.'

'The big things have,' I mumble.

'And therefore the small things don't matter, right?' she asks. 'That's where you're wrong, Charlie. The small things always matter.'

I roll my eyes as she packs all the scraps in a paper bag and turns on the car. We pull out of the parking lot.

'Why a car?' I ask. 'Is Stan trying to buy my love?'

'Not really,' she says. 'You liked him until we decided to move here.'

'That's true,' I admit. 'As far as step-fathers went, he was pretty good.'

'Maybe it's the school?' she asks. 'He said he wants you to fit in.'

'I fit in at a public school,' I tell her. 'Not among entitled rich brats.'

'The education is good there,' she says, giving me a look. 'Plus he went there, and he's always wanted his kids to go there too.'

'I'm not his kid, Mum.'

She shakes her head. 'Don't break his heart, darl.'

I roll my eyes, but I know she's right, I should try to be nicer to Stan.

'I'd have loved a car at your age,' she says after a minute. 'One with a big red bow. This one had a red bow but I had to take it off before I drove it to you.'

'Again, you didn't need to bring it to me. And now it's christened in grease.'

'And, again, this is our tradition. I always give you a gift on your first day of the school year.'

'What happened to slogan shirts and novels?' I ask.

'My rich husband, apparently.'

She drops me off near school, kissing my cheek and promising to let me walk as much as I want for the rest of the year. I'm almost at the school gate when she winds down the window and yells out to me: 'Am I ever going to be forgiven?'

'I wouldn't hold my breath,' I yell back. And then I smile and wave her off, knowing I can never really hate her as much as I try to.

Mum's the only adult who gets me. She should be, I guess, considering she's a psychologist who's writing her PhD thesis on the struggles of and influences on the modern adolescent in Australia. I'm her favourite case study, which means she'll probably fail, because sometimes I'm seventeen going on thirty-seven.

So it sucks that we've been on such a sour note for a while now, but, hey, I didn't want to move. And the biggest betrayal of your life is not meant to come from your mother.

I had tried everything to convince her that the move from Melbourne would be a big mistake, but Stan really wanted to be back in his home town, and she was *in love*. My aunty Ellen, who considers herself nobody unless she has somebody, was extremely encouraging of the relationship and all that came with it. Even Mum's thesis, which she's doing at Melbourne Uni, was no hurdle, because her supervisor agreed to let her continue long-

distance provided they had fortnightly meetings via Skype. As for work, she'd had her own practice for almost thirteen years, and had made quite a name for herself as a media commentator, so opening up a place in Sydney was not going to be a challenge.

And even if it were, Stan would fix it. He'd make sure that she wouldn't want for anything.

Stan. The man that changed everything. All my life, it was just me and Mum. She'd fallen pregnant with me when she was seventeen and, even though my birth father had skipped out on her, and everyone she knew (herself included) had been telling her not to go through with it, she'd decided to keep me. She always says that her life has been on the uphill since she heard my first cry.

But when I was thirteen, she introduced me to Stan. I didn't mind him at first. He was nice, hard-working, and knew I was Mum's number-one priority and didn't try to change that. They got married when I was fifteen, and she's been super happy ever since.

And me? Well, I stopped being super happy when I had to leave my friends, my school and everything I'd known since I was a kid. Now I'm stuck doing year 12 at some prestigious private school, which I hated the minute I saw it. But it had its perks – it always ranked highly in the HSC, and I needed to use that to my advantage. I was going to move back to Melbourne straight after school finished, and I needed good grades to apply to Monash University.

So my goals this year are to focus on my studies, and learn to survive without my mother. By the time I go back to Melbourne, she might have a baby in her arms, and she can play happy families with Stan. There'd be no room for a sulking teenager in the family portrait. And, in the meantime, I plan to hate on anything and everything for as long as I possibly can. This new school year included.