

Blood Letters

I gripped the letter with trembling, icy fingers.

There was only one word penned on its snowy face: *Cassandra*. My name, written skillfully in blood.

I closed my eyes hard, willing the letter in my hand to be something else: a postcard from my sister, the electricity bill, an eviction notice—anything else. But when I opened my eyes, there it remained. My heartbeat resonated in my ears. My ragged breathing quickened—I had to stop the heaving of my chest before it climbed into the scream I felt building in my throat. Slowly, I turned the envelope and stared at the V shaped seal on the back. *What if I don't open it?* But I knew all too well what would happen. The light above me flickered out, as if to remind me of the consequences.

My cellphone screamed and buzzed from the counter, sending a jolt of energy through me. Mouth dry and heart convulsing, I reached for the phone, gulping hard before I picked it up.

“Hello?” My voice sounded foreign.

“Cassie?”

My heart melted. “Jordan! Hi. H-how is London?” I struggled to sound normal.

“Wet,” she laughed. London may have been damp, but her voice came through like a warm blanket. “But absolutely amazing. We took a trip into the countryside yesterday. The place is gorgeous; nothing like the city.” I could hear her beautiful smile. “What about you? You sound a little weird, Sis. You ok?”

I stared at the envelope, feeling its chill creep back through my arm, and considered telling her.

No one had believed that I was receiving letters from a mystery killer, and when they stopped coming last year, she was the only one who didn't call me crazy. I knew she thought it, though.

"I was just reading a mystery. The phone startled me."

Her laugh twinkled on the other line. "Oh, you and your novels."

"So, why are you calling?" I asked, eager to change the topic. "Is England not diverting enough?"

"What, I can't be away for a week without missing my sister?"

I laughed, but it came out strangled and unnatural.

"I had some spare time. Felt like I should call you. Nothing new or unusual happening?"

I forced my eyes to stay fixed on the wall, the paper in my hand feeling heavier and heavier.

"No, not really. They're discussing a promotion at work."

"I know you'll get it!" she gushed. "You work harder than anyone."

"I'd like to think so..."

"Cass, you're the best person I know," she replied. "I practically raised you. I know you'll get it."

"Thanks, Jordan." I tried to force a smile, but my lips barely managed a twitch.

"Well, listen, hon, I gotta run. We've got a museum tour in an hour and I've got to take a shower before we head out."

"Alright." My stomach heaved. I wanted to scream at her to come home, to save me from this nightmare, to wake me up, but all that came out was a shaky goodbye. I hung up the phone and blinked back the tears that welled up behind my eyes. I knew what would happen next.

Walking slowly to my room, I held the the letter gently, like ancient parchment that might crumble at the slightest vibration. I placed it softly on my bed and dropped to kneel on the ground. I could hardly think, my mind telling me to run, hide, anything but sit quietly and accept this.

Almost reverently, I reached under my bed, up between the slats and the mattress, and removed a folded manila envelope. My fingers shook as I forced it flat. I glanced once more at the envelope on the bed, my scarlet name burning against the white paper. My eyes went dry and I began blinking sporadically, and I reached inside the package. Pinching the stack of papers within, I slowly drew them from their sheath. The sound of their rustling pages leaked back the memory of what they contained, the death and fear documented in there. Now it was happening again.

I spread the pages on the floor before me. The ivory letters were each paperclipped to a selection of newspaper articles.

I picked up a small pile to my left, the paper trembling as my body resisted bringing those horrors back to life in my mind. I detached the articles and compared them to the corresponding letters. A headline jumped from its face, "Freak Accident, Twelve Dead." My eyes flicked to the letter, *Twelve...twelve is a good number*. I knew his writing so well; I could almost put a voice to it. Another one: "Gas Explosion, Cause Unknown." *Nothing like a good explosion to shake things up*. His casual tone made my stomach roil. I shuddered and picked up the next bunch of papers.

"Plane Goes Down, No Survivors." *I love flying, don't you? So exhilarating. So safe.*

“Unstoppable Fire Destroys Neighborhood.” I’ve always hated the suburbs. Sometime I wish I could just take a match to them.

“Bridge Collapse, Dozens of Lives Lost.” Did you know I wanted to be an engineer? I used to be so fascinated with bridges.

“Girl Gone Missing.” I’m feeling rather lonely...

“Missing Girl’s Body Found.” I’ve changed my mind, she was getting on my nerves. Though, I’ll always have you for company.

I dropped the last collection and turned again to the letter on my bed. It was a game, a sickening game, with no rules and only one winner. It was an endless cycle of torment with no known motive. He never said why, he never said how, and he never revealed himself.

I thought I had been numbed to the fear and helplessness, but the terror that now seized my heart was even stronger than the previous episodes.

When I had realized what was happening, I tried to tell people. I showed Jordan the letters and news clippings. She had looked at me with such worry.

“Hon, there’s no writing on here,” she’d said, holding up the latest letter.

“But it’s right there, written in blood!” Tears had stained my face and distorted my voice as I desperately tried to convince her. But she couldn’t see.

The first letters had me terrified. I started thinking maybe I was crazy, but the news confirmed I wasn’t. Once I started seeing his words reflected in the papers, I couldn’t bare to know. In streets, I would tear newspapers from the vendors and throw them away, ripping the headline pages. After more letters I thought I could stop him.

He wrote about a bridge and I tore out of my house, not even thinking to take the car. I sprinted down the streets to any bridge I knew of. Nothing happened. Someone stopped me and called the police. Once I saw the news of the collapsed bridge I broke down. Jordan suggested I see a psychiatrist. My boss ordered me to take time off. I didn't leave the house for weeks.

Finally, he'd stopped sending them. After a year, I had finally begun to feel normal. I was back to work, people stopped staring at me through town. It had been nice.

Anger flared. "You won't do this to me again."

I snatched the letter from the bed and tore it open.

Hello Cassandra.

My heart stopped. With only two words he had gripped me in his awful, icy power.

I'm sorry it's been so long, I hope you'll forgive me. You haven't been missing our little endeavors, have you? I expect you've kept yourself busy in my absence; you're not one to be idle.

I really have missed you. But I've been working on something. You see, I got rather bored of our little game, especially when you gave up. I was very disappointed in you. I expected you to have a greater sense of adventure than that. No, no you're right, it did get repetitious. But don't worry, I have spent this year wisely.

I have devised a plan, one quite different from the ones before. This time, I'm going to let you have a bigger role. Rather than watching on the sidelines, I want you to participate. Join me! You really don't know how fun this is.

A shiver ran down my spine.

And, just to get you excited, I've plotted a little trail for you to follow. It's no fun simply telling you what I have planned. Plus, everyone loves surprises.

"I hate surprises, and you know it," I muttered furiously.

I'll start things off easy. Check the kitchen vent.

Yours,

-A.R.

The vent. I sat, stupefied. *In the house...* I tried not to choke, struggling to take in what had happened and what was going to happen. He had been in my house. The once reassuring safeness of home suddenly fled. My body went cold. I wondered what would happen if I just sat there, if I didn't follow his trail. *That's not an option, Cassie,* I scolded myself. *People will get hurt, and their pain will be your fault.*

No. I wouldn't let anyone suffer because I failed to act. Not again. I leapt to my feet and ran to the kitchen, skidding around the fridge and slamming into it. The lone magnet toppled from its blank surface and clattered to the floor. I fumbled to pick it up and crack it back on the fridge before I clambered onto the counter and leveled myself with the vent mounted on the wall. Digging my fingernails in behind the edges, I pulled it free and stared inside. There, coated in a thin layer of dust, was a letter with my scarlet name on the front. I dropped to the floor and tore it open.

Unlike the other letters, there was a date neatly printed on the top. The letter had been written exactly one year previous, on March 21st.

So you'd like to join me? I'm glad. As I'm sure you've figured out, I placed this letter here instead of sending it to you a year ago. Right now, I'm just starting to plan this grand scheme. I

can't give you too many details, but I assure you it involves a great deal of TNT and Acme products!

Well, I've got a lot to plan. Memories to make. Pictures to take.

“Pictures to take.” The next clue. My gaze shot to the wall of frames opposite.

In a craze, I ran from the kitchen and leapt over the sofa to the wall, tearing the pictures off. I smashed the glass and rummaged through the loose photos and cardboard, scanning the debris for that ivory envelope. I ignored the pain that shot through my hands as the shards bit into my skin. Smears of blood started to rub off on the pictures. I snatched one that was still intact, a picture of me and my sister on our trip to Manhattan, and ripped the back off. There it was. My bloody fingerprints dotted the paper as I pulled out the note.

June 17th

Cassandra!

I really like that picture. You are so photogenic. Manhattan, huh? A lot of accidents happen there. I had family living there once.

It took awhile for me to get back to you, sorry. I had to think of something utterly spectacular, something new. I tried a few things. I went through a phase, trying to perfect the art of Waterboarding. Wasn't as gratifying. Took me a while, but then... the light went on upstairs.

“Light...upstairs.” Without thinking I grabbed the broom from the kitchen and bolted for the stairs. Taking them two at a time, I reached the landing and swung the broom over my head, smashing the hall light. Glass showered down on me, and I sheltered my face until it had all fallen, then I desperately searched the wreckage.

No note.

I moved on, dashing from room to room, shattering every light fixture I could find. I stumbled into my bedroom and destroyed the glass globe protecting the lights. Through the sharp and heavy shards, I saw the graceful tumble of paper flit in front of my face. The letter. My stomach convulsed as I looked around. My bedroom. He'd been in my bedroom. Clenching my mouth against the bile rising in my throat, I tore open the letter.

September 28th

Isn't hunting for clues fun? Like solving a mystery! You'll die when you read about my master plan.

I scrunched my eyebrows. His clues were getting harder.

"You'll die when you read...Solving a mystery." I bit my lip, then hurried across the hall to my father's old study.

When he and my mother died, I started reading. It distracted me from the pain. My favorites quickly became the mysteries. I crossed over to the Agatha Christie selection, and pulled out the most read one.

Sleeping Murder. I flipped through the pages, smearing the side with blood. It opened easily to the page where the letter was nestled. I pulled it out, and something caught my eye. One line had been underlined in red. "Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young."

Fear caused my hands to fumble and the book slipped from my fingers to the floor. The open pages bent against the floor, quickly forgotten. I opened the letter.

December 23rd

You have excellent taste in books. I am more partial to "And Then There Were None," but that's just me. We should get together sometime and discuss fine literature in the park. I do enjoy

picnics in the springtime. I would suggest bringing a jacket. That navy pea-coat looks especially good on you.

Sprinting into the hall, my slippers crunched down on the broken glass. It slid beneath me as I dove for the stairs, throwing me off balance so I barely made the landing. I whirled around the banister to race down the hall, flinging open the coat closet. I jerked the blue coat from its hanger and searched the pockets. *How many more?* I begged the universe, feeling the energy drain from me as I slowly slid down the opposite wall.

February 14th

I think it's cute how you always walk with your hands in your pockets—very endearing. It reminds me so much of someone I used to know.

Valentine's day. Don't you just love it? I hope you enjoyed those chocolates I left you. I think the heart boxes are a little tacky, but the ones they do at See's are too good to be ruined by presentation. You didn't think they were a gift from your sister, did you?

I tried not to gag as the memory of soothing chocolates was poisoned.

“That’s it?” I asked aloud. I read the note again, looking for my next clue. But there was nothing.

I stared at the wall, my body overwhelmed and weary. What was his plan? Why this trail that led to nothing? I got to my feet and wandered into the living room, surveying the chaos this man had created through me. Sinking into a chair by the counter, I dropped the letters. Staring at the cuts and drying blood on my hands, I marveled once more at the power he had over me, how easily he played with my mind—I was his puppet, nothing more.

My chest grew tight as tears began to run. I would never be free.

I pressed my face into my hands and cried. The house felt haunted, my sobs echoing through it like a lost soul. As the salty tears stung the fresh cuts, I sucked in against the pain, glancing up through blurry eyes. My heart shuddered to a stop.

The magnet on the fridge had been centered to hold a perfect sheet of ghostly white paper, stained with bloody words. I rose, walking stiffly to the fridge, every step slower than the last.

March 21st

Take care of those hands, Cassie, I'm going to need them.

Also, I was thinking...What's London like this time of year?