The Aftertone

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It all began with the ring of a crimson telephone.

I wandered through the aisles of an old store, hoping to find something in decent condition. I passed the cheerful shopkeeper over and over, smiling at him each time. My eyes flew past an old fashioned, red telephone. I stopped in my tracks. I gazed at it, my heart full of admiration. I stepped away from the telephone, looking at it one last time before I left, but then… RING! RING RING! RINGGGGG! I froze. I took a look at the telephone, trying to convince myself that it wasn't the thing ringing. But it was vibrating. My hands shook. Without really thinking, I grabbed the phone.

"H-hel-hello?" I asked, my voice clearly quivering.

"Hello Valerie Vance. Wasn't expecting you to pick up," A deep mechanical voice responded.

"Who are you?"

"That's not important," the voice answered. "I need to tell you something that's worthy of your attention."

"What?"

"You know how your friend has been acting up?"

I paused. Yes, my best friend had been acting up, but how did this voice know? Me being me, I grabbed the phone, continued listening and responding to the voice.

"Ok… She has been acting differently," I responded, with a hint of hesitation.

"Well, this may sound random, but she and the shopkeeper of this store aren't who they seem. You need to unmask their identities before the winter solstice."

"And, what if I don't?" I asked, full of uncertainty.

"That isn't important. Actually… You d-don't wa-nt t-to knowwww" The voice broke up, and the call dropped with those final words.

CRASH! I glanced down and saw an array of red and white ceramic covering the ground. I took a look at my hand, it was empty. I fled the store confused and in a haze. Ignoring the shopkeeper's cries, I ran into my car and drove away without looking back.

Could I trust the random voice in the telephone?

Who were they?

What do they mean my best friend and the shopkeeper aren't who they seem? How could they know

this?

Do I trust them?

Their words do add up to what's been currently happening...

Everything they said does add up...

Still, do I trust them?

It adds up...

It really, really does make sense…

So… I trust them?

Let's just see, because the clues and hints fit.

So, who is my best friend?

What did the shopkeeper have to do with all of this?

Was my best friend a doppelganger?

***W**as she a completely different person than the one I had known my whole life? **H**as she just changed?*

***O**r was it much, much darker than that?*

"No, no, no. No," I mumbled to myself while entering my house. "Don't think like that."

That night I was unable to sleep. All I could think about was that voice. Then it came to me. I was being threatened. The phone voice gave me a mission, without details, without leads, and without clarification on what would happen if I didn't meet the deadline. All I got was a hint, and an ominous 'You don't want to know'. That's *definitely* a threat. I leapt out of my bed and checked my phone for the date of the winter solstice.

"Three days..." I mumbled under my breath. "They gave me *three days* to solve a mystery without any leads!"

Wasting no time, I headed for my office. As a private detective, I have my own office at home. I was well known for solving mysteries others had given up on. I wasn't afraid of anything really, but I had serious time management issues. I sat on my chair and began searching for my friend's crime history. I know she hasn't committed any crimes, but she might've changed her legal name. I scrounged for hours, my eyes drooping, yet I found nothing.

"Ughhh, nothing," I muttered under my breath. I flopped onto my bed, defeated. I hadn't found anything.

I closed my eyes, trying to sleep, knowing it wouldn't come. The downside of being a good detective is not being able to switch off, and the constant paranoia of who to trust and who to not blurs the lines between reality and lies. Now, it's too close to home...

Sunlight cut through the curtains, blinding me. I hadn't gotten any sleep. My eyes ached, and my ears rang with the eerie ring of the telephone. I needed to see her. To look into her light eyes, trying to find the glitch in the matrix. Who is she, really?

Ten minutes later, I was walking to our usual cafe. Through the window, I could see Chloe was sitting in our spot, her hands tapping the table anxiously. I reached for the doorknob but I paused. Surely the voice was just joking? An aimless prank?? Chloe sure looked the same. Same green eyes, messy blonde waves and a wrinkled sweater. I open the door, but a familiar chill follows me inside. Chloe caught my eye and flashed a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Morning Val," she greeted me. "You good? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm fine as I can be. Too many open cases," I told her as I flopped into the chair in front of her.

"Right... Cases..." Chloe repeated. The gentle, rhythmic tapping stopped. She leaned forward. "You know, Val, sometimes looking too closely can get a person hurt. Especially when it doesn't involve them."

The waitress handed us our drinks, a kind, bright smile on her face. I grabbed mine. Chloe had ordered me a hot chocolate, knowing I detest coffee. Chloe stirred her flat white back and forth, spoon hitting the sides. As I watched her stir the coffee, I noticed a ring on her finger. It was cold, harsh silver and had distinct engravings on the band. Looked familiar… Just like the one the shopkeeper at the vintage store had...

I was suspicious. Are they related? Are they in some secret agency? What were the chances Chloe and the shopkeeper had the exact same ring? Probably *really* high, but me being me, I threw some bait out. "Speaking of cases, I took a look at our old photos the other day. Remember the massive bonfire we threw on my twelfth birthday? The one at the beach where the sky went a bright orange?"

She didn't miss a beat. Chloe laughed, a soft melodic sound, nothing, NOTHING close to her real laugh. "OH YEAH!! I'd forgotten about that!! Didn't we stay out until midnight toasting marshmallows?"

My heart skipped a beat. My twelfth birthday was a small movie night at my house. We had never gone to the beach, we never had a bonfire. A cold sweat broke out on my neck. This girl sitting in front of me, with my best friend's exact green eyes and wavy blonde hair wasn't my best friend at all. She was a completely different person.

I sipped my hot chocolate, hiding my fear with a mask of calm. If she knew I was a detective, she would be searching for any sign of panic. I couldn't hand it to her on a silver platter.

“Yea, marshmallows. All burnt to a crisp, cause that's the only way to eat them!”

Chloe smiled, a bright one, able to fool anyone who wasn’t paying attention. I kept my composure, paid for the drinks and left. I walked out acting all calm, but the moment I hit the pavement, my mind raced. I couldn’t cross any legal lines, as that would backfire on me, but baiting for information was always an option.

Not even an hour later, I was at the vintage store again. The bell rang as I entered, and the shopkeeper looked up and his eyes narrowed as I approached him.

"Back so soon?" he asked. His voice carried a raspy, mechanical tone that sent a shiver down my spine. It was eerily familiar, but I couldn't place where I had heard it.

“I am,” I replied, putting on my friendly customer face. “My friend Chloe loved the antique silver ring she bought here recently. Her birthday is coming up, and I was hoping to find a matching necklace or brooch with similar engravings.”

The shopkeeper froze. He stared at me for a long, silent moment, and the atmosphere thickened.

“I’m afraid that ring was a unique piece, Miss Vance. Not for general sale.”

My heart did a flip. I had never told him my name.

I forced my face to be still, not wanting a drop of emotion to show. My eyes locked onto the silver band on his finger, identical to the one fake Chloe was wearing.

“I don’t recall introducing myself.” My voice hardened into the one I use when interrogating suspects. “How do you know my name?”

The shopkeeper didn’t appear angry at my change of tone, but a tight, knowing smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He leaned closer, and the raspy tone in his voice grew more distinct. He was the guy from the phone call.

“You’re the guy from the phone call, aren’t you? I know the Chloe at the cafe wasn’t the real one, and you’ve done something to her,” I told him, my suspicions confirmed with every passing second.

“You’re a brilliant detective, Valerie, but you’re missing the biggest clue. It’s right in front of your face.”

Right on cue, the heavy red velvet curtains of the shop parted, and the real Chloe stepped out. She was wearing her genuine smile and holding a thick manilla folder. “You did it! You passed!” Chloe exclaimed, joy brightened her face.

“Huh? What do you mean, passed??”

“Oh, Val. The girl at the cafe was my cousin, Maya. She and I look identical from afar, but I knew you

would figure out she wasn't me..."

"Chloe," I sighed. "Seriously. *What* is all this?"

"The Junior Detective Academy scholarship," she explained, and handed me the folder. "The entry deadline is the Winter Solstice. The entry requirement was a recorded case file proving you could solve an active case under pressure. We needed to give you a real challenge, because we couldn't just ask you to apply. I know you wouldn't if I asked."

I stared at the heavy manilla folder in Chloe's hands, then my eyes drifted to the shattered red and white ceramic pieces scattered across the floorboards. Chloe was beaming, eyes bright, waiting for my response or for me to laugh at her cleverness. My heart was still thumping wildly, the reminder of what they had put me through for a *scholarship*. The worry, the pain, and the sheer panic I had felt moments ago wasn't a game to me. It was completely real.

A cold, unsettling realization crawled up my spine as I peered back at Chloe's overly cheery smile. If my best friend and a random shopkeeper could execute a lie this flawless, manipulate my emotions, stage an entire active case, how could I trust them again? What else in my life was staged? Who else was watching my *every* move?

"Thanks," I said, and forced a tight smile that didn't reach my eyes. I reached out for the folder and tucked it under my arm. I walked towards the bright exit door without looking back, without another word. They left me with nothing but a mountain of doubt, a broken friendship, scholarship papers and paranoia. In other words, I left with far less than what I had when I first walked in. As I strode off into the evening, I couldn't shake the feeling that the footsteps behind me weren't just people leaving the shop, but the beginning of the next test.