

Her True Fate

Part One

Written by Kyle Lindo

Rain followed Cameron Ellis all the way home from his father's funeral.

By the time he pulled into his apartment complex, the steady drizzle had turned into something heavier. Water streamed down his windshield faster than the wipers could clear it, and the wind had begun shaking the palm trees along the parking lot. Cameron remained behind the wheel for another minute, staring at the folded funeral program resting in his lap.

IN LOVING MEMORY OF VINCENT ELLIS

He was still processing the fact that his father was gone.

Cameron had spent most of the afternoon surrounded by people telling him how sorry they were. Some hugged him. Others offered prayers or reminded him that Vincent was finally at peace after years of declining health. Cameron thanked each of them because that seemed like the appropriate thing to do. By the end of the service, he had repeated the words so many times they barely sounded like words anymore.

He tucked the program inside his jacket and made a run for his apartment.

By the time he got inside, his clothes were soaked. He locked the door behind him, kicked off his shoes, and loosened his tie as he crossed the living room. His phone had been vibrating on and off since he left the cemetery. Family members, friends, and people he hadn't spoken to in years were checking to see if he needed anything.

He appreciated them, but he didn't have the energy to talk anymore.

Cameron placed his phone face down on the coffee table and sank onto the couch. For the first time all day, there was no one around him. No relatives exchanging stories about his father. No funeral director telling him where to stand. No one asking how he was holding up.

His eyes drifted toward the cardboard box beside the television.

His grandfather had dropped it off three days earlier, telling Cameron that Vincent wanted him to have whatever was inside. Cameron hadn't asked many questions. At the time, he was preparing for the funeral and dealing with enough emotions already. Whatever was in the box could wait.

Apparently, it had waited long enough.

Cameron slid off the couch and sat on the floor in front of the box. For a few seconds, he rested his hands on the lid without opening it.

His relationship with Vincent had never been easy to explain.

Cameron had spent the first few years of his life with Vincent, but most of his childhood belonged to his maternal grandparents. His mother, Simone Ellis, died when Cameron was still a toddler. Her death was ruled a suicide, and Vincent was the one who found her.

According to everyone else, that was where his father's life began to unravel.

Vincent never believed Simone had taken her own life. He had theories, suspicions, and countless reasons he thought the official story was wrong, but there was one thing Cameron remembered hearing more than anything else.

She was waiting for me.

Vincent always said Simone had called him the afternoon she died. She told him she needed to talk to him when he got home. Whatever it was, she wouldn't discuss it over the phone.

A few hours later, Vincent came home and found her dead.

For him, the phone call became proof that Simone had planned to be alive when he returned. For everyone else, it proved nothing. People made plans before taking their own lives.

They had conversations. They went to work. They behaved normally enough that the people who loved them sometimes never knew anything was wrong.

Vincent refused to accept that explanation.

As the years passed, his search for another answer became more consuming. He made calls, contacted police, revisited old conversations, and became increasingly suspicious of people who had been close to Simone. His mental health deteriorated along with it.

Cameron was five when everything finally came apart.

He remembered pieces of that night more clearly than he remembered the night itself. He had been asleep when the smoke alarm woke him. At first, he didn't understand the sound or why his bedroom smelled strange. Then he opened his door and saw smoke drifting through the hallway.

He called for his father.

No one answered.

Cameron remembered crying. He remembered the smoke getting thicker and the alarm refusing to stop. After that, his memories became less reliable, stitched together from things he remembered himself and details other people had filled in later.

A neighbor heard the alarm and came to the apartment. When no adult answered the door, he realized Cameron was inside and got him out before the fire spread beyond the kitchen.

Vincent had left food cooking on the stove.

He had also left the apartment.

Cameron's clearest memory was sitting in the back of an ambulance with an oxygen mask covering most of his face while firefighters moved in and out of his home. His grandparents arrived before his father did.

Vincent had left after receiving information he believed might lead to answers about Simone's death. He apparently thought he would only be gone for a short time. In his rush, he forgot about the stove and left his five-year-old son asleep inside.

The fire changed everything.

Cameron went home with his grandparents that night. Vincent's condition had already worried the family, but what happened forced everyone to acknowledge how far things had gone. He was evaluated shortly afterward and admitted to a psychiatric facility.

Cameron never lived with his father again.

That didn't mean Vincent disappeared from his life. Cameron continued visiting him as he grew up, usually on weekends. Some visits were good. His father would ask about school, remember the names of Cameron's friends, or tease him about whichever girl Cameron happened to like. On other days, medication left Vincent distant enough that Cameron wasn't completely sure his father understood everything happening around him.

Cameron had spent years hoping things might eventually become different between them. Instead, Vincent's physical health began declining as Cameron entered adulthood. Hospital stays became more frequent, their conversations became shorter, and eventually Cameron found himself preparing for a goodbye he had spent most of his life hoping wouldn't come.

He finally lifted the lid of the box.

There wasn't much inside. An old toy car. A stuffed animal Cameron hadn't seen since childhood. A few birthday cards. Near the bottom was a photograph of Vincent and Simone sitting together on a couch, with Cameron between them.

Cameron picked it up.

He couldn't have been older than two.

Vincent looked healthy. Simone was smiling at Cameron instead of the camera, one hand resting against his stomach as though she had been trying to keep him still long enough for someone to take the picture.

Cameron stared at her.

He knew his mother mostly through photographs and stories other people had told him. His grandparents described her as funny, stubborn, intelligent, and fiercely protective of the people she loved. Every story helped him imagine her, but none made him feel as though he knew her.

Sometimes he wondered how much of the woman he had grown up hearing about was real and how much had been softened by grief.

He placed the photograph beside him.

Underneath it was an envelope.

To my son, Cameron.

Cameron recognized his father's handwriting immediately.

For a moment, he considered putting it back. He had buried Vincent only a few hours earlier. Reading his final words didn't seem like something that needed to happen tonight.

Still, Cameron opened the envelope.

The letter was several pages long.

Dear Cameron,

There are things I wish I had done differently. You deserved a father who could be there for you, and I know I wasn't always that man. I hope you know that had nothing to do with how much I loved you.

There is one night I have thought about more times than I can count. You were five years old, and I left you alone because I convinced myself something couldn't wait. I was so consumed with finding answers about your mother that I forgot I had food cooking on the stove.

Cameron stopped reading.

He had never heard his father describe that night in his own words.

He continued.

When I came home, there were fire trucks outside and you were sitting in the back of an ambulance. Your grandparents had gotten there before I did.

I can still remember the way you looked at me.

I was supposed to protect you, son. Instead, I put your life in danger because I couldn't see past what was happening inside my own head.

Your grandparents took you home that night. For a long time, I was angry with them for taking my son away from me. The truth is, they didn't take you from me. My actions did.

I will never forgive myself for that night, but I want you to know how sorry I am.

Cameron lowered the letter.

He had imagined receiving that apology before. Maybe not those exact words, but something close to them. When he was younger, he thought hearing his father admit what happened might make him angry. Later, he convinced himself he didn't need to hear it at all.

Now that the apology was sitting in his hands, he didn't know what he felt.

He returned to the letter.

There are things I believed during those years that I no longer believe. There are people I accused who didn't deserve it and things I did that I wish I could take back.

But there is one thing I have never changed my mind about.

Your mother did not kill herself.

Cameron leaned back against the couch.

There it was.

Even now.

He almost stopped reading.

For most of his life, his father's belief about Simone had been inseparable from everything that came after it. The obsession. The fire. The hospital. The years Cameron spent being raised by someone else.

Part of him resented seeing it here.

Then he read the next paragraph.

You have probably heard me say a thousand times that your mother was waiting for me. I know that never meant as much to anyone else as it did to me.

The last time I spoke to her was that afternoon. She called me and asked what time I would be home. I told her around six. She said she needed to talk to me about something, but she didn't want to do it over the phone.

Before we hung up, she told me she had spoken to Daniel Mercer.

Cameron stopped.

He knew that name.

Not because anyone had ever explained who Daniel Mercer was, but because he had heard his father say it before.

Cameron read the name again.

Daniel Mercer.

He couldn't remember how old he had been or what Vincent had said about him. He only remembered the name coming up during one of his visits with his father years ago. At the time, Cameron hadn't thought much of it. Vincent had talked about a lot of people when he talked about Simone, and Cameron had learned early not to put much weight behind any of it.

He kept reading.

Daniel was a friend of ours. He knew your mother long before you were born. I spent years believing he knew what Simone wanted to tell me that night.

Maybe I was wrong about him. I was wrong about other people.

But I never stopped wondering why your mother mentioned his name during the last conversation we ever had.

Cameron read the rest of the letter, but there were no accusations and no instructions to investigate. Vincent didn't ask him to find Daniel or prove anything about Simone's death. He apologized again, told Cameron he loved him, and wrote that he hoped his son would build a life that wasn't defined by the things that had consumed his own.

That should have made it easier to put the letter away.

It didn't.

He picked up his phone and called his grandfather.

His grandfather answered after a few rings.

"Hey, son. You make it home safely?"

"Yeah. I'm home."

"Good. Your grandmother's been worried about you driving in this weather."

Cameron glanced toward the window. "Tell her I'm fine."

"I will."

Cameron looked at the letter in his hand. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do you know somebody named Daniel Mercer?"

There was a brief pause.

"Daniel Mercer?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't heard that name in years. He was friends with your mom and dad. Used to be around them all the time."

"What happened to him?"

"Nothing that I know of. After your mother died, he just stopped coming around."

Cameron looked down at the letter. "Dad mentioned him in something he left me."

His grandfather sighed.

"What?"

"Listen to me, Cameron. Your father spent a lot of years trying to find answers about your mother, and you know where that took him. Don't let yourself go down the same rabbit hole."

"I'm not. I was just asking."

"I know. Just be careful."

Cameron told his grandfather he was tired and would call him the next day.

After the call ended, he remained on the couch with the phone in one hand and his father's letter in the other.

Daniel Mercer was real. He had been close enough to Cameron's parents that his grandfather still remembered him all these years later. Then, after Simone died, he had simply stopped coming around.

There could have been a hundred reasons for that. People drifted apart after tragedy. Friendships changed. Sometimes grief made people avoid the very people who reminded them of what they had lost.

None of that was strange on its own.

What bothered Cameron was how quickly his grandfather's response had shifted once he learned Vincent had mentioned Daniel. He hadn't asked why his name was in the letter or what Vincent had said about him. He had gone straight to warning Cameron about his father.

Maybe there was nothing more to it than that. His grandfather had watched Vincent spend years chasing answers that never came. It made sense that he wouldn't want Cameron doing the same.

Cameron looked at the photograph of his parents again.

Then he returned to the letter.

Cameron had heard the story countless times. Simone called Vincent that afternoon and told him she needed to talk to him when he got home. To Vincent, that had always meant the same thing.

She was waiting for me.

None of that was new.

But there was one detail he couldn't let go of.

She had spoken to Daniel Mercer.

Part of Cameron felt that distinction shouldn't matter to him. His father had been sick. He knew that better than most. He had seen what Vincent's obsession did to him and what it eventually cost their family. Somewhere along the way, dismissing his father's suspicions had become second nature.

Tonight, for whatever reason, he couldn't do that as easily.

Cameron folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope. He picked up the photograph and looked at his mother, then at the younger version of his father sitting beside her.

Maybe there was nothing to it.

Cameron knew that was possible.

He picked up his phone anyway.

For a moment, he sat there staring at the screen. Then he opened the browser and typed the name he couldn't get out of his mind.

Daniel Mercer.

To be continued...