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March 20, 2019

Into the Cold

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

Into the Cold

By Isabelle Mongeau

Maddie Price receives a call that her younger sister, Sarah, has been missing for three days. She drops everything to find Sarah, the sister whom she raised and protected during their tumultuous childhood. The case takes Maddie from her Manhattan life to Quebec City, Canada, the cultural roots of their family, and Sarah's last known location. Maddie must overcome feelings of inadequacy as she reexamines her relationship with her mother and sister, as well as the frustration and danger that accompany the two Québécois investigators who don't value her input. Inspector Luc Dubois struggles to navigate the case as the guilt over past trauma resurfaces after so many years. The two clash: Maddie pushing to be more involved, and Luc grapples with maintaining control over the case. Sarah learns to become independent to stay alive despite starvation and isolation.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	10
Chapter 3.....	17
Chapter 4.....	28
Chapter 5.....	34
Chapter 6.....	45
Chapter 7.....	48
Chapter 8.....	58
Chapter 9.....	69
Chapter 10.....	78
Chapter 11.....	81
Chapter 12.....	89
Thesis Summary.....	91

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

-Robert Frost

Day One

Saturday, February 4th

Chapter 1

Maddie

The best way to test a woman's sanity is deciphering texts from her mother. Maddie gawks at her phone and pushes open the glass door labeled, "Operations Office." She feels cool wind at her heels and hears the flutter of paper across the floor.

Maddie glances up and registers the familiar, heavy desks plopped around the room between miniature reproductions of the sculptures upstairs. She spots a few of her colleagues' dipped heads, focused on organizing school trips or educational events. They remain tucked into their work, nestled amongst paneled partitions their office dug out from the museum's basement. And the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art has a big basement. Maddie sees her desk in the back right corner, a visible table surrounded by a garden of stacked books, brochures, and prints. When she first became a coordinator for the museum, she rolled away her dividers despite looks from her coworkers. She passes the receptionist, Debra, a middle-aged woman with untouched, grey hair, glasses, and smooth cheeks.

"Where are you going, Maddie?" Debra says. Maddie slows her stride and grins.

"Oh, hi Debra."

"Why are you here?"

"I missed your beautiful face."

"I have a husband I love very much, just so you know." Debra stands. "Though, I know I'm hard to resist."

"I brought you a present." Maddie plants her purse on the lip of the reception desk that protects the computer.

"On your first day off in almost a year? I'll take it tomorrow. Seriously, you're young. Don't you have a life?"

“A school group coming in on Monday has several Special Ed students and I’m thinking of creating a different tour for them. I wanted to do some research on art as therapy.”

“Can’t you do that at home?”

“What does this say?” Maddie smiles and places her phone on the surface. Debra squints down at the jumbled letters.

“It’s hard to tell with all those cracks on the screen. When are you going to get that fixed?”

“When organizing school trips and bartending covers more than just the rent.”

Debra eyes her and shakes her head. “So, what am I looking at?”

“A text from my mom. Ten bucks for whoever guesses it right? Or at least, close to right.”

Maddie examines the text with Debra.

Vall em. In te hipitsl

Debra eases back into her swivel chair and shakes her head once more. Maddie can tell she wants to ask if it’s a drunk text again, but the question dies between the two of them. Maddie knows her mother’s inebriated language like an old friend, and this text seems like small talk with a stranger.

“Vall em?” Maddie asks.

“Call me?”

“I think you’re right. But the second half?”

“Honey, I have no idea.” Debra rolls her chair up to her computer and the glare displays blue squares on her glasses. She clicks the mouse and rests her chin on her palm. “Did Sarah get the same text?”

“Not sure, I haven’t talked to her in…” Maddie glances away from Debra. She can’t remember the last time she spoke to Sarah, despite her sister attending college just a little over an hour away in New Brunswick, New Jersey. They were supposed to get dinner last week, but Maddie cancelled hours before when her manager at the bar offered her a Friday night shift and her rent was due in a few days. Maddie gives an uneasy laugh. “She’s a freshman. She’s probably too busy to talk to me, now.”

“I remember my oldest told me she didn’t need to talk to me as much once she was in college. That was around the time she stopped eating.” Debra sighs. “They need us more than they think.”

Maddie’s phone lights up with another message but she stares at her hands. She really should call Sarah. Debra leans over the counter and peers at the text. She stiffens.

“Maddie.”

“Mm?”

“You better call your mother.”

“What?” Maddie looks to Debra, who nudges the phone closer to her. Maddie reads the text.

In hospital.

Maddie dials and grabs her purse. She rushes out the door into the frigid, dry air and hails a cab instead of entering the subway. In the car, she watches the numbers roll higher on the meter, but the sound of her mother’s slurred voice on the other end of the line forces her to ignore it.

“Sweetie…”

“Mom? Is everything okay? I’m coming to the hospital right now.”

“Oh, sweetie.”

She gets to Mount Sinai Hospital, only a mile up the grid, in what seems like an eternity later. She hardly pays attention to the wings of the hospital. She only repeats the room number in her mind so as to not leave any blank space in her thoughts. She can't have it filled with the fear that her mother had her stomach pumped again. If she just repeats the room number, then the digits can't slip through her mind and evaporate in the air around her.

Maddie sprints to the room in a haze. She reaches its threshold and stumbles into the room marked, "Recovery." Her mother's petite frame barely takes up half the bed, her thin shoulders reclining against the mattress. Maddie notices an IV, and another drip plunged into her mother's arm, no doubt a painkiller. She observes her mother's meticulously applied makeup, her blow-dried blonde hair. Only her mother could look beautiful in a place for the sick. Florescent lights beat down on them, and Maddie feels a headache brewing in the front of her brain.

"Mom," she breathes. "Are you hurt?"

"Don't be silly." Her mother yanks down her pastel Johnny to reveal two large, new breasts swelling up from the bandage. Maddie's mouth falls open.

"Look!"

"You're kidding." She drops her purse in the doorway.

"Do you like them?"

"What did you do?" she says. "W-why?"

Her mother cups her new friends. "Sometime after Christmas I noticed that one was bigger than the other—"

"That's because they were real."

"So, I decided to get that one done, but then I thought, why not just get both done?" She laughs high and shrill like a bell. "Wow, the stuff they give you nowadays is great."

“Maybe we should lower your dosage.” Maddie reaches for her purse but her gaze remains fixated on the Frankenstein breasts, and the deep, red lines encircling them. Unnatural. *Is this a joke?* “Mom—”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you to call me ‘Victoria’ in public? I can’t have this adorable nurse who checks my chart know I’m old enough to be your mother.”

“Yeah, getting a boob job is what sassy, cute 20-year-olds do.”

“It’s just a name, Madeline.”

Maddie would argue it further but Victoria’s insecurity isn’t a monster she’s willing to feed, or face, at the moment. It might lead to another surgery. Maddie trudges over to the empty chair on her mother’s right.

“Did you really have to text me like that with no explanation, Victoria?”

“Don’t you love my dramatic flare?” Her mother pats the space on the bed next to her, so Maddie changes directions. When she sits, her mother’s bright blue eyes scan over her. Victoria frowns. Maddie glances down at her wrinkled blue blouse and black slacks.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, though she already knows the answer.

“Why don’t you look more...oh, I don’t know, alluring?” Her mother sighs. “It’s no mystery why you’re 25 years old and single.”

“Lots of people my age are single—”

“I loved that last boyfriend of yours.” Victoria places a small arm on Maddie’s forearm.

“What happened with him?”

“We broke up.”

“But he was such a nice man.” Her mother makes a face.

The hairs on the back of Maddie’s neck stand up. She doesn’t want to get into it now. Or ever. She hears her phone buzz in her purse.

“How’s your prey?” Maddie asks and digs inside her bag, feeling the blister of her mother’s glare. She teases out her phone and registers the caller I.D. *Bridget*. She slides the answer button, but Victoria slaps the device out of her hand.

“Hey—”

“Henry, *his name*, which I would appreciate you calling him by, is on a business trip right now, if you must know. Why can’t you be nice? Sarah is.”

“Sarah’s only polite to him because she can’t say no to you yet.” Maddie watches the call end and crosses her arms. “Speaking of, does she know about this? Have you told her?”

“I haven’t talked to her in a bit—oh, she’ll be so shocked!”

“I’m going to spare her the heart attack I went through.” Maddie picks up her phone again and shoots a text to her sister. Her eyes scroll through their previous conversations: three texts from Sarah, asking to get dinner together on different dates, and Maddie always replying with a, can’t. Working tonight.

She swallows hard.

“Maybe I can show up to one of those competitions, or whatever, and really surprise her,” Victoria says.

Maddie bites her lip. Victoria has not graced those frozen bleachers with her presence in the last six years. Maddie couldn’t bear to let her little sister hover in the doorway of her parents’ dark bedroom, as she herself used to, calling her mother’s name and hearing no response from the breathing lump under the quilts. So, Maddie went to all of them.

“I have another present for you,” Victoria perks up. Her gaze lands on something behind Maddie’s shoulder. “Look.”

She glances at the doorway to see a man with a thin face and dark grey-blue eyes. Maddie's stomach cramps up with disgust. A foul, pungent taste fills her mouth, like after opening a Ziploc bag and getting a whiff of last week's raw chicken. Henry. Her mother's prey.

Maddie glowers at Victoria, who watches him sweep up to her bedside. He kisses her, and Maddie hears a moan. She gags. After a few moments, Henry pulls away and Victoria giggles.

"Oh, you." Her mother beams up at him. "Sit in that chair, I saved it for you."

He settles into the chair and smiles at Maddie.

"How are you?"

"I thought you were on a business trip," Maddie says and stands.

"Just got off a flight an hour ago, and I missed my favorite women."

"Did you talk her into this?"

"Actually, it was my idea." Victoria pouts.

"Well, he certainly didn't talk you out of it."

"I'm happy with anything that makes her happy." Henry reaches for Victoria's hand and kisses it. She chortles and Maddie turns away.

"Yeah, I'm sure that's the only reason why." Maddie's phone vibrates in the blankets, again. She sifts through the fabric, her mom wiggling under the blankets at her touch. She uncovers the device. Bridget calling, again.

"Mm." She answers the call. "Hello?"

"Maddie?" Bridget's voice seems an octave higher than Maddie last remembered. Bridget, the pale, freckled face teenager at parents' drop-off day. Always anxious, always hovering. Maddie watches her mother swat at Henry's tickling hands and decides the call acts as the perfect excuse.

"Hey, I'm going to take this in private." Maddie says to them and slips into the hallway. She holds the phone up to her ear. "What's up?"

“Something’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Maddie leans against the wall. “Where’s Sarah?”

“I...I haven’t seen her. In a bit, actually.”

“Since when?” Maybe Sarah spent the night elsewhere and Bridget is too naive to realize.

If that’s the case, Maddie doesn’t want to know about it.

“Three days.”

Three days? Her mind goes blank.

“What?”

“I texted and called her but she hasn’t answered anything.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’ve tried everything to talk to her.” Bridget’s voice jumps higher. “I swear it. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I thought she would be fine by herself. I just haven’t seen her since—I just haven’t seen her at all. No one has.” Her voice swallows up in sobs and the sound of it makes Maddie’s chest heave.

She gulps down some antiseptic air and peaks at her mother in the hospital bed, laughing at a joke Henry made. Victoria catches her gaze and her mother’s joy splinters. Maddie notices an emptiness in her mother’s eye. Lonely.

Nervous thoughts crawl into Maddie’s brain like spiders. *Did she...run away?* However serious or silly, it will destroy Victoria. Maddie hustles down the hall. She needs space—she needs time to think. Everything seems off balance, as if the hand of God has grabbed the world by its tilted axis, yanked it to a new angle, and she’s left scrambling for new footing. A nurse trots past her and says something, but she doesn’t hear it.

“What if she’s dead?” Bridget squeaks.

“She’s not,” Maddie says. Her heart pounds hard in her throat. “She could just be taking a few days off, you know, she’s been under a lot of pressure trying to balance freshmen year and her ice skating.”

She squeezes her eyes shut. An image of Sarah floods her mind. Her sister steps in front of a bus and no one reaches out to grab her. No one sees. No one cares.

“We made plans for Thursday morning, though,” Bridget says.

“She could’ve forgotten.” Maddie pushes down the instinctual feeling that something has gone wrong. “Have you told the campus police?”

“No.”

“Dammit, Bridget.” *Why did she wait so long?*

“I’m so sorry,” Bridget says, “I don’t know what to do. I’ve never had someone disappear on me—”

“She hasn’t disappeared,” Maddie says. She rubs her temple. She has to be logical, levelheaded. “I’m sure she’s fine. I know you’re worried but we’ll figure this out together, okay?”

“Okay.” Bridget gulps.

Maddie’s mind picks up, an engine springing to life and humming with mechanical rhythm. She softens her tone.

“I’ll call Sarah’s skating coach to see if he knows anything. In the meantime, you contact the campus police, okay?”

“I can do that,” Bridget says.

“Good,” Maddie says. “Call me after you’ve done it and we’ll go from there.”

“I hope she’s okay.”

“I’ll be on the next bus to New Jersey.”

Maddie hangs up.

Chapter 2

Luc

Luc drums his fingers against the brochure sitting on his desk. His partner, Remi, dropped it in front of him—*Montreal won't know what hit them*—before he stepped out of the precinct earlier that day. It detailed a “Recruiting Event – Open House” for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Luc pushes it away, then gazes around the quiet room, over desks paired together, back-to-back, which fill the small space. Chief Girard’s office is situated at the far end of the precinct, with a conference room and interrogation room on the other. The occasional murmur rustles through the air. The Montreal office must be three times the size of their little Quebec City Police Station. As an Inspector, he could have access to so many more resources. He palms the brochure and draws it closer to him.

Luc’s stare raises to the empty desk in front of him. He wonders why Remi left early. Maybe he slipped away to see his girlfriend of the week. And yet of equal possibility, he could’ve visited his mother, bringing her a bouquet of lilacs, as he always does. The other chairs around him emptied throughout the day, each officer having discovered an excuse to avoid the dullness of paperwork.

Quebec City has been quiet for years. The residents applaud the police department for their hard work, but the precinct knows they haven’t changed much. Sometimes crime drops. Or the city is too quiet, as Luc believes. The type of lurking silence that follows the scatter of small predators from an area when a bigger threat enters to prowl in the dark.

Officer Kin Miki, the first Japanese-Canadian uniform the department has seen in years, approaches Luc’s desk. From the corner of his eye, he sees the Chief’s door swing open. Miki folds her arms and when she reaches him, bounces on her heels. He looks up.

“Everything okay?”

“*Ouais*, um.” She shifts her weight. “We received a call for a domestic disturbance and there isn’t an officer in the area, so someone has to go. Now.”

“Okay.” Luc surveys the precinct, absent of all other uniforms, the officers who handle this type of situation. “I see.”

“I’ve never gone on a call alone before.” She uncrosses her arms and studies the empty desks around them. Anxiety dances across her face and Luc remembers, only a few years before, his hands shook at the first call he took alone.

“You’re never going to feel ready. You just have to go,” he says. “You can do it.”

Chief Girard meanders across the room. Luc grabs the Montreal papers and shoves them into a drawer, ignoring the look from Miki. The Chief’s protruding belly, from years behind a desk and a diet of cheese and wine, appears above his papers.

“What’s going on?” The Chief adjusts his thin-framed glasses.

“We have a domestic disturbance and we need someone at the scene immediately,” Miki says.

“Are you taking this?”

“Sir. I, well...”

Luc notices a struggle below her expression. The debate between attending to a scene she feels ill equipped for, or, showing stress. He underwent the same skirmish in his mind years before, grasping the handle of a door and feeling the uncertainty flicker through him, even if only for a second. But Luc knows he’s not a female officer whose self-doubt, if discovered, could be weaponized into communal doubt.

“Miki, you’re all set?” Chief Girard asks. “You should get to the scene now.”

The Chief stares at her with a blank look. Luc rolls back his chair.

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

“I can come.” Luc stands. Her face washes with relief, and he feels a splinter of guilt for acting as her crutch. “If you want. It’s up to you.”

“That would be great,” she says.

“You don’t have a case to work on, Inspector?” The Chief watches him.

“I have a break right now and I’ll just act as a monitor. Officer Miki will be in control of the situation.”

Officer Miki parks the cruiser in front of a three-story walk up. She leads Luc into the building, knocking on the first apartment to the right of the stairs. They peel off their tuques and gloves while they wait for a response. He hovers behind, and only gives her a nod when a female voice shouts to enter.

They walk into a cramped room, a worn couch on their right, and a dated, yellow kitchen on their left. A broad man with chest hair curling out of a T-shirt presses against the counter. A plate of untouched food rests in front of him, a knife and fork next to it. He glowers at them, then at a woman with mousy brown hair and red-rimmed eyes. A bruise forms on her forehead. She stands in front of a side table by the couch. A broken lamp, and several shattered dishes lay around them. Luc catches her gaze, and she pushes in the table’s drawer.

“I’m Officer Kin Miki, and this is Inspector Luc Dubois, who’s accompanying me today. Is everything okay in here?” Miki asks.

“We’re fine.” The man crosses his arms.

“We were called to the scene by—”

“By the woman upstairs, huh? She likes to get involved in things she shouldn’t.” He grits his teeth and glares at Miki. “And I never said you could come in.”

Luc folds his arms.

“Well, your partner requested it, so we have to get involved.” Miki pulls out a little notebook. “Ma’am, are you okay?”

The woman opens her mouth, but the man cuts in.

“She’s fine.”

“I asked her, not you.” Miki steps towards the woman, but maintains her eye contact with the man. “If you want to answer her questions, I’m going to have to ask you to step outside with Inspector Dubois.”

Luc nods at Miki and gestures towards the door. She’s handling it well.

“This is my house,” the man says.

“Yes, sir, and—”

“Are you telling me what to do in my own house?”

The woman wipes her eyes. “Antoine, don’t—”

“Shut up!” He pushes off the counter. “Shut up, okay?”

“Why don’t we all calm down?” Miki looks to Luc, her hand drifting towards her gun. He shakes his head and approaches Antoine

“Don’t talk to me like that.” The woman says to Antoine. “You always do this. I’m sick of what you’ve brought into our house.”

Luc swears he sees her begin to gesture at the side table, but instead she stumbles forward. Miki stops her.

“Watch out for the glass,” she says.

“Officer Miki is right. Let’s just all take a deep breath,” Luc says. The man straightens his back and circles around the glass. Luc steps in front of him.

“How?” the woman cries, her legs trembling.

Miki holds her up, her voice strained. “We should—”

“Don’t pin this on me, Charlotte.” Antoine bumps into Luc, who steps back. Glass crunches under his boot. Luc doesn’t react, just stares at the man as the blue veins in his forehead tug up against his red skin. His hand hovers towards the gun on his hip.

“I’m going to have to remove you if you don’t calm down,” he says.

He pokes a finger at Luc’s chest. “You—”

“Sir,” Miki falters, gripping Charlotte as she sobs, and Luc glances at her. Her eyes flicker between the glass on the floor, the knife on the counter, and the couple. “You need—”

“I don’t need to do anything.” Antoine’s face pushes up to an inch away from Luc’s. He feels a prickle of adrenaline across his scalp, but it recedes. “Get out of my way—”

“I can’t believe what you did!” Charlotte screams.

“You little bitch.” He lunges toward her, but Luc grabs Antoine. He spins him around, and pushes him against the wall. Charlotte yelps. Miki guides her to the couch and whispers to her. The man heaves under Luc’s grasp, chest puffing, eyes twitchy. He wriggles. “Give her to me. Give her to me, now!”

“I’m calling this in.” Miki grips her radio attached by her shoulder and shoots off a series of commands. Luc gives her a nod, *you did well*, and finds himself grateful he came. Any rookie would’ve needed help with this.

After several minutes, two more uniforms enter the apartment, and Luc transfers Antoine to them. He heads to Miki on the couch, her arm around Charlotte, and stands adjacent to them.

“Miss, we can have him removed, if you don’t feel safe,” Miki says.

“No.” Charlotte drops her head in her hands. “I mean, I don’t know.”

“We can take him to the station, right now. If you want him gone, he can be,” Luc offers.

Charlotte shakes her head. He takes a breath and they wait while the two officers sit Antoine down outside in the hall. Once they leave the room, Luc tries again.

“Has he hurt you before?”

“It’s complicated.” She lifts her head and brushes the tears from her cheeks.

“I understand—”

“No, you don’t. I know how you people view me. And that’s not how it is.”

Luc opens his mouth but pauses at Miki’s expression. She seems to understand what Charlotte means. What’s he missing?

“You people?” he asked.

Miki looks away and her face colors. But he has to know what Charlotte meant.

“You think you can come in here and solve everything. Well, you can’t.”

She’s too scared to start the process, Luc realizes. But we can help. We can make it easier. He starts again.

“Miss...you don’t have to do anything right now if that’s what you want. But we have resources, if you want him to leave you alone. We can help with getting a restraining order.”

“Of course, because a restraining order fixes everything.” Charlotte scoffs. “Leave me alone, okay? You don’t understand. I just can’t go on. I don’t want to.”

Her last words strike him so deep, it electrocutes his bones, vibrates his teeth. *I just can’t go on. I don’t want to.* His breath catches, and he feels the images rise from some dark cavern in his memory. Weren’t those *her* words? *Her* tone? He tries to blink away the white expanse before his mind’s eye. It swallows up the couch, Miki, and Charlotte. He plummets into the snow. He feels the cold of that night piercing him again. He feels the burning, numbness in his toes.

“Inspector?” he hears Miki’s voice. He takes a step back, and the couch and women appear behind the white veil. He shakes his head, but the veil remains.

“Miss, we can—”

“You take him away and he’ll still be here.”

“He won’t—”

“He’s always here.” Charlotte wails and grips her hair. “He’ll always be here.”

The hair on the back of his neck bristles. *Why is she giving up? I can help.* His nails dig into his hand, leaving half-moons in his palm.

“Why don’t you want to try?” he snaps. “You can fight this, Aida.”

They gape at him and their looks burn through the white.

“Aida?” Charlotte says.

Officer Miki stands. “Inspector?”

He feels the snow, and all the things it buries, finally shrink from his vision. He stands in the living room, again, the two women staring. He curls his toes to remind himself that they, at least, survived the cold.

“You might want to check that table’s drawer,” he mutters and staggers out of the apartment.

Chapter 3

Maddie

Maddie slides the phone back into her pocket. *I have to tell Mom.* She shuffles back towards her mother's room, wishing the hallway would stretch out infinitely before her. She focuses on formulating the sentence, hoping the reiteration will make it easier to say. *Mom, Sarah's missing. Mom, Sarah's missing.* The words crescendo with each repetition, with each footstep. *Mom, Sarah's missing.* She reaches the door and lingers. Henry drapes an arm around Victoria's shoulder, and she beams up at him. Maddie watches him for a minute, deciding if this conversation should include him. It shouldn't. Yet, Victoria will need someone, and she won't turn to Maddie.

"Mom," she says. Her voice comes out hoarse. She stops, her feet on the verge of a gaping cavern, toes curling over its edge. Her heart plummets into the dark below. If she speaks the words aloud, the rest of her will follow.

"Didn't I say to call me 'Victoria'?" She sighs and Henry smirks. "Is Sarah okay? You look like a kicked puppy."

"Sarah's roommate, Bridget, doesn't know where she is." Her voice breaks.

"Wh-what?" Victoria blinks.

Henry pales and leans forward. "What are you saying?"

"She hasn't come back to her room for days and no one knows where she is." Maddie's vision blurs with tears. "Mom, Sarah's missing."

"No, she's not." Victoria's hands fidget. Henry reaches for her, but she pulls away. "She's not."

"How do you know this?" he asks, his voice coming out strangled and angry.

"Where is she?" her mother tenses. "Where could she be?"

"Mom, I don't know—"

“Where the hell is she?” she screams. “She can’t just be gone!”

“I don’t—”

Victoria rips off her IV and blood speckles Henry’s shirt. He springs to his feet. She stumbles out of bed. Maddie reaches for her mother, but Victoria smashes facedown onto the tiled floor. Her screams stab through the room.

“Get someone!” Maddie shrieks and Henry rushes out the door. She grasps Victoria’s shoulders and rolls her over. Her mother screeches and clutches one breast as it deflates. Maddie gawks at her lopsided chest, lumpy beneath the bandage.

Victoria sobs in her lap. Maddie wipes at her mother’s tears, and tries to sooth her. Nurses bustle in with Henry. They pull Victoria onto the bed, leaving Maddie empty. They tell Victoria to calm down and inject something in her arm. Maddie stands, numb.

“What’s that?”

“Her implant burst and it’s draining right now. She needs something—”

“She doesn’t deal well with medication.”

“She’s experiencing acute pain right now.”

Maddie watches her mother’s red face contort then relax, her screams reducing to whimpers. She clenches her jaw.

“I know.”

Maddie paces the room. Victoria sinks so far into the pillows they may just swallow her. Henry strokes her hand, but her eyes watch the air particles in front of her vision. The doctor rests the clipboard in a slot at the foot of the bed. She adjusts her coat.

“We need to look at that implant immediately,” she says. “It needs to be assessed before replacement surgery. We’re concerned about toxins.”

Victoria’s gaze remains on her feet. Henry nods, thanking her.

“If you’re experiencing a lot of pain, we can talk about management. There is stronger medication available, if you so choose.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Maddie says.

“Maybe it’s needed.” Henry pats her mother’s hand.

“She—”

“I can do what I want, Madeline.” Victoria’s gaze slides from her feet to Maddie’s face, not focusing on one feature. Maddie turns to the doctor.

“Is there any particular protocol for this type of thing?”

“The sheer possibility of the implant bursting—”

“Well, it happened,” Victoria snaps. “And we can’t always go based on statistics, can we? You didn’t think this would happen? Well, neither did I—but here we are. Lying in bed with one breast and a missing daughter.”

Maddie offers a sympathetic look to the doctor, who purses her lips. Henry thanks her and she departs. Maddie approaches the bed and sits at its foot. Victoria draws her legs closer to her chest. Henry rubs her back, but she jerks away. Maddie clears her throat.

“Why don’t—”

“What is your problem, Madeline?” Her mother’s question falls like the blade in a guillotine, everything quieted with its slice. Maddie stares at the ice blue in her mother’s eyes, in her own eyes. They are focused now. Sharpened. “Am I not allowed to be upset by my own daughter’s disappearance?”

Henry coughs. “Victoria, please. I don’t think—”

“I didn’t say that,” Maddie says. She feels Henry’s eyes on her, intense and unblinking. Heat spreads up her cheeks. She steels over her nerves and attempts to summon that mechanical

energy brought on by her adrenaline. Henry examines his hands, giving her some relief. “We’re all upset.”

“Hard to tell.” Victoria picks at lint on the blanket and flicks it off. Maddie watches the white fluff float down to the tiles.

“There is a lot going on. And someone still has to be calm to make decisions,” she says. “We haven’t talked about when to call the police.”

“I’ll do it.”

Maddie looks to her mother. For a split second, she wants to hand over the responsibility of finding Sarah and keeping their family intact. Yet, she knows her mother would try, then she would buckle. And Sarah is too important to risk.

“It’s okay. I’ll handle it.”

“You and your self-righteous attitude.” Victoria waves her off. “Your father was difficult, and you, Madeline, you are just like him. Worse, even.”

Maddie clenches her jaw and she listens to the blood pump in her ears. She clammers to her feet.

“I’m going to talk to Joshua first, okay? See what he thinks.”

“Joshua?” Henry asks.

“Maddie’s little therapist friend. Sure, go ahead. I’ll be the last to know, just like everything else. Too bad Joshua has a boyfriend, otherwise you two could be the perfect little family with Sarah, right?” Victoria glares at her with an unfathomable fury, so great Maddie doesn’t know how she compacts it into her small body.

“Sarah’s skating coach,” Maddie says to Henry and swings her purse over her shoulder. “I’m just trying to figure things out.”

“Go make your calls.” Victoria glances at the ceiling, blinking water from her eyes. Maddie swallows and heads into the hallway. She digs her phone out of her purse and pulls up Sarah’s contact. *Maybe she’ll respond to me, this time.* The phone goes to voicemail.

Maddie clears her throat. “Hey, it’s me, again. Just wondering where you are and what you’re doing.” She forces a laugh. “Anyway, please call me back.”

She ends the call and the phone shakes in her hands. She stares at their previous conversations, in which she didn’t give her sister the time of day. Maddie feels a wave of nausea. She didn’t even reply with full sentences. She waits for the feelings to subdue, then sends a text to her father’s number.

I need your help. It’s Sarah.

As she watches the text shoot off, she tries to delete it. She taps her screen, but the message sends anyway. She runs a hand through her hair. *Why did you do that?*

She focuses on her next step.

Okay, one last call, then the police. It’s better to overreact than to call too late. She doesn’t linger on what “too late” entails. She pulls up Joshua’s contact and stares at the photo. A selfie of her, Sarah, and Joshua, all huddled together and smiling. Her eyes linger on Joshua. He sees Sarah every weekend to train, he would know if something were wrong. She dials.

The sound of his enthusiastic voicemail releases a flood in her. Tears spring to her eyes. Even though it’s just a message, she hears what his concerned reaction would be, pictures his familiar face.

She wipes her wet cheeks. Over the years, all the hours spent huddled at the chilly rink unfolded into hot chocolates, then dinners together and later, the phone calls. The embarrassing but desperate phone calls when Maddie classes ran late, or the grocery store took much longer than she thought, and she couldn’t pick up Sarah from Joshua’s lessons until hours after. Their mother

was not upright enough to do so either. So, his familiar face became her best friend. Maddie rolls through their text conversations. Joshua constantly texted her to hang out, and she always responded the same way she did with her sister. *Busy*. Does she know where he is now? Does she have a clue where her sister could be?

Her chest heaves. Over the past year, how could she never make time for the two closest people in her life? Maddie grips the phone and chucks it down the hall. It clatters against the tiles and slides to a stop. She takes a breath, gazing around at the empty corridor, and retrieves it. The screen has an additional crack. *I'm going to call. This time, I'm going to do enough*. She Googles the number and calls the New Brunswick Police station. An administrator answers.

“Hi, my name is Maddie Price and uh—I’d like to,” She paces the hall. “I’d like to report a missing girl. Sarah Price—she’s my baby sister.”

“Okay. We’d like to get as many details from you now so we can send out an Amber Alert immediately.”

Maddie blinks. “She’s 18. Does that...?”

“Oh, in that case, I’m going to ask you some questions first and we can transfer you to a detective after that.”

Maddie nods. She examines her palm, clenching and unclenching her fingers. It seems like a stranger’s hand. She must be in a stranger’s body, with a stranger’s problems. Her sister couldn’t disappear—that happens to other people. People she sees on the news. Not her. Not her family. They’re supposed to be normal, boring.

“First, we need to know if there is anything that might indicate that your sister’s disappearance was not voluntary, such as blood at her place of residency,” the woman says.

“No, at least I don’t think so.”

“Does she have any illnesses that need medication and would lead to serious injury or death if she does not have access to her prescriptions?”

“Um.” Her throat tightens. “No.”

“Does she have Alzheimer’s? Or is she at all mentally impaired?”

“No.”

“Has she disappeared before?”

“No...”

“Has she ever been the subject of past threats or violence?”

Maddie stops pacing. “No. Of course not!”

“Ma’am, its just protocol.”

“Why...why are you even asking?” She rubs her forehead. The hallway seems to blur in front of her. “What is this?”

“These are standard questions we have to ask.”

“Alright.” Maddie nods, but her queasiness returns. It doesn’t sit well with her. “Now what do we do?”

“We have a missing person’s report that needs to be filled out. They’re basic questions, such as physical description and what she was last wearing. The form is on our website, and you answer the questions and send it to us. Once the form is taken care of, the investigation can really start.”

“Okay. And then a detective will call me once that’s done?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Maddie thanks the woman and they hang up. She slows her patrolling, feeling a little stung. A form. That’s what she needs to do. *Seems so...practical.* She looks up the form as she heads

towards her mother's room. She pauses at the door when the document loads. She zooms in on some of the questions and her mind freezes.

"Everything okay?" Her mother watches her.

"We have to fill out this missing person's report." She zooms in on another question. "I don't think we can answer these questions. The-the type of clothes she wore three days ago? Her usual route in the morning? Unless you know what these are."

Her mother shakes her head and fiddles with her IV. Henry brushes away her hand. She sighs and tries to cross her arms, before remembering her chest. "Well, since we haven't seen her in two months, who has?"

"One ticket to Rutgers," Maddie says. "Please."

The skinny man behind the window slides a ticket towards her and she hands over the money. She picks her way across the slick, wet floors to a bench and sits down.

She digs out her phone from her purse and pulls up a PDF of the missing person report. She squints at the questions through her cracked screen. Name, Height and Weight, Gender, Race, Current Hair Color. Easy. Any prosthetics or cosmetic implants? Maddie laughs. The form says she doesn't need to answer every question, but if she can with the help of Bridget, why not give the most amount of information to the police? By going in person, Maddie can gather the most accurate information, as well. Read the body language, see how Sarah has been living.

She glances up at the people who bustle in front of her. They have no idea that she holds the most important form she ever will complete in her hand. *Didn't John Donne say that no man is an island?*

Her phone buzzes. A text from Dad.

I think you have the wrong number again. You've texted me before. Please stop.

When one's father dies, they recycle his cell phone number in less than one month. She knows this. She discovered it several days after his funeral. She knows the text is wrong, but just because she's learned to live without him, doesn't mean she wants to. Although her dad collapsed on their living room floor five years ago, it still feels surreal. His heart attack was only a few months after the divorce. Weak heart.

She flips the phone facedown on the bench. Her stomach grumbles. She picks through her purse and discovers a crushed chocolate chip granola bar. It's probably a year or two old, and when she takes a bite, it tastes like it. She focuses on the PDF again. Identifying marks, such as birthmarks, moles, tattoos and scars. No birthmarks, moles, or tattoos. But Sarah has that little scar at the top of her forehead, by her hairline.

It was a September morning when Sarah fell. She was the chubby, peanut butter smeared faced, kindergartener, her pink backpack bouncing up and down on her back as she ran ahead of pre-teen Maddie. Back when twelve-year-old Maddie thought she was too cool to be seen walking to school with her younger, runny-nose, tow-headed little sister.

Sarah smacked facedown onto the pavement. The cement cut her lip, and rubbed off half her eyebrow. She didn't cry, she didn't move. Her light up sneakers flashed. Maddie rushed forward, panic roaring in her, and grabbed Sarah. Her sister just blinked. Maddie told her, *big girls are tough*. Sarah nodded and swallowed her tears.

Maddie gathered up her baby sister, the heaviness of the child in her arms, the smell of peanut butter in her nose, and carried her rest of the way to school. She felt the warmth of her sister's body against hers. Sarah's hot blood dripped all the way down the front of Maddie's white collared shirt. She didn't want to let her go when a teacher saw them and sprinted over.

The chocolate chips from the bar melt into brown, sticky spots in Maddie's palm. She wipes away the burning tears. She's suddenly grateful for the crowded privacy of the city. Her phone lights up with a message from her manager from the bar.

Where are you?

Her mind freezes. She was supposed to be at the bar for an early set up today. And Maddie makes almost all her money for the week, sometimes the coming week, in a few hours on the Saturday night shift. With New York City's high cost of living and with her ex having moved out about a year ago, there's no time to get sick, no time to have a bad day. She didn't show up, and with no explanation. She could be fired. Her eyes wander to some of the receipts in her purse—items bought with money she shouldn't have spent. Money she could make up tonight.

She dials her manager's number. She explains her family situation, apologizing for the last minute cancel. He extends his own condolences, though she knows she probably won't be offered another Saturday shift for a while after this. They hang up and she sits still and rigid for several moments. She pulls up Sarah's contact, again. Maybe it is time to show her sister she needs an urgent response. Worried about you. Call me when you see this please!

She checks the text from Bridget about the campus police. They registered the case and will follow up with her teachers. Besides that, no new information.

She hears the call up for her bus. 4:10pm. She heads over to the door leading to the loading area and stands last in line for the bus. She unlocks her phone and shoots a text to Bridget. I'll be there by 6pm.

Maddie shuffles forward with the line. She hears a gaggle of laughter. Her heart skips and her eyes dart over her shoulder. Teenage girls cluster behind her, all wearing sweats and headbands, all with a black bag swung across their chests. Some snap gum, some listen to music, others talk and giggle in groups. An athletic team. Sarah wore the same headbands when they

traveled to competitions together. It's rimmed with grippy plastic—the only kind that keeps white wisps of hair out of her vision. Maddie watches the group until they clear out and onto a bus.

She settles into her seat. She knows Sarah as the girl who fell and scarred her forehead. The girl who always shrugs with one shoulder when she lies, and who thinks churches are beautiful but would never say it. Her sister. Yet to the world, she fades into the blur and whirlwind of everyone else. She becomes another girl snapping gum, another teenager on her phone. She could look like half the girls in her class. Did Sarah fall through the cracks in college with no one to look out for her? Did Maddie send her baby sister out into the cutthroat world before she was ready to defend herself?

And thus it goes, Sarah quietly vanishes into the cold and another student replaces her. Maybe no man is an island, but every college girl is. The bus pulls away from the station.

Chapter 4

Luc

Luc swings open his apartment door. An exposed brick wall runs along the entire right side, with a small fireplace peaking out at the far end in the living area. Bookcases crammed with paperbacks line the opposing wall. A tiny kitchen lies to his left. Luc sheds his ski jacket, hat, and gloves, and hangs them up to dry. His gaze fixates on the snow-scape paintings nailed to the walls or propped up in bookshelves. The sight of them usually comforts him.

He drifts into the living room and stands before the paintings on the bookcases. He stares at the expansive white. He reaches out towards a picture of untouched snow, with a purple and blue forest in the background. His fingers brush against the globs of dried paint that make up the trees. He hears their branches moan as the wind sweeps through them. They creak her name. *Aida*.

He drags the painting off the shelf and holds it. The images from that night play like pictures on a film reel. He painted and painted, but they never left his head. They project just as clear now as they did over ten years ago. The memories rush back and he feels transported to his teenage self.

His lanky arms and legs ached with the effort of pumping his cross-country skis through the wet snow. *Swish, swish*. That night, he followed her sunken footsteps before they disappeared forever. He took a wrong turn. When he eventually found her, with her knees drawn up to her chest and her back leaning against the snowy tree bark, she had crystalized into the frost around her. He couldn't tell if she froze into the forest and became a part of it, or if the forest had grown around an eternal Her, like an ancient, living spirit. *Let me stay*, she begged. *Please, I just want to sleep*.

He hauled her up onto her feet. *We have to get you out of here*. She clung to him, shaking, and pleading. *Let me go, why can't you just let me sleep?* He remembers taking off his gloves and wedging them onto her icy hands. He fumbled with his skis until finally, he unstrapped himself

and they trudged through the white expanse together, his arms slung around her. His thighs burned with the effort of the knee-high snow, until he caught sight of a road in the distance. Then, she crumpled to the ground. *I can't go on. I don't want to.*

It's right there, he urged her. They were so close. He lifted her with feeble arms and staggered a couple of yards until his legs gave out. They lay in the snow together, and his eyes began to droop. He watched the road grow dim. He just wanted to sleep.

He knew he couldn't. So Luc hugged Aida. *I'll be right back.* She watched him. *Don't leave me.* But he stumbled to his feet, *I have to try.* The trek to the road took longer than he thought, and the land stretched out before him, never ending.

His fingers trace the white brushstrokes, the other hand gripping the frame with pale knuckles. When Luc finally spilled onto the road, he had forgotten why he was there. When the authorities found him, he couldn't articulate his thoughts, the words slurred, his teeth vibrated. And when they located Aida, her eyes stared out, into the cold.

Luc's chest heaves, and he pitches the painting onto the floor. The frame cracks, but the canvas remains. A hand lands on his shoulder and he jerks away. He turns around to see his partner, Remi.

"Are you okay, man?" his deep voice sounds. Luc surveys his round face, dark hair and eyes. His partner still wears his red ski jacket. Luc scans his apartment and spots Remi's tuque and gloves resting on the kitchen counter.

"How...how are you here?" A clammy sweat seeps across Luc's forehead.

"I knocked and called after you but there was no answer. Miki told Chief about what happened. When I heard you called her 'Aida,' well—I got over here as quickly as I could."

Luc nods. He bends down to retrieve the painting and Remi picks up the broken frame. Neither of them says a word while Remi throws out the pieces in the kitchen, and Luc wipes his

face. He places the canvas on top of a pile of books and notices another small oil painting wedged between two covers. His favorite one. A low sun spills creamy rays onto the snow between the dark tree trunks. On the far left, a small, frozen brook cuts through the snow. Beyond that, a tiny, elbow shaped cabin nestles between the trees. His family's cabin, located about an hour outside of Quebec City. He steps away from the bookshelf and drops on the couch.

He hears Remi open the fridge and the clink of glass. The caps snap off and clatter onto the counter. Luc stares at his fireplace, while his partner brings over two beer bottles. He hands one to Luc and they both take a sip.

“Want to talk?” Remi sits. Luc gulps down all of his beer. His partner laughs. “Yeah, thought so.”

“Everything okay with your mom?” Luc sets the empty bottle down on the coffee table before them. “You were gone for awhile.”

“Didn't go there.” Remi leans back against the couch. “My friend, Eric Boucher—you know him. The one that runs the museum.”

Luc nods. Musée National des Beaux-arts du Québec rests in *Vieux Quebec*—Old Quebec. The original building, once a prison, was converted into a museum in the 70s because they didn't have enough prisoners to fill half the cells. They still don't. The museum lies right next to an ice-skating rink the length of a football field, with a view of the St. Lawrence River. The rink forms on top of the Plains of Abraham, the site of the fifteen-minute battle that turned over all of Quebec from the French to the British.

Though the skating proves popular with the tourists, it's a sour, bitter sight for most Quebecers, who still wear their French heritage like medals on an army uniform. They engrave it into every aspect of their lives, even inscribing it on their license plates—*Je me souviens*, ‘I remember.’ From the food, to the language, to the fleur-de-lis on the Quebec flag, *they remember*

their French roots. History may be written by the victors, but it's always felt, and mourned over, by the losers.

Luc climbs to his feet and retrieves two more beers. He opens them and passes one to Remi before settling back onto the couch.

“Eric Boucher.” He clicks his tongue. “Doesn't he wear inserts in his shoes to look taller?”

“*Ouais.*” Remi laughs, and Luc joins him. “The poor bastard.”

“So, what'd he need?”

“He said that one of the wires by the back doors was tripped in the section that's under restoration. Nothing was stolen, but he wanted an unofficial sweep before he reopens the exhibit. You know, just some trained eyes, to see if I could pick up anything.”

“Did you?”

“*Non.* Eric thinks it's this new guard, who tripped it coming back after hours. He might've forgotten his wallet, something like that.” His partner finishes his beer in a gulp and gets to his feet. “Okay, now I actually do have to go see my mom. After though, we can go to the pub and actually drink good beer. Or whiskey.”

“Wish I could, but I'm going in early tomorrow morning. I'll probably have to do extra paperwork on why I left the scene when I did,” Luc says.

“Yeah, you've never gone into work hung over.”

“Hey, we left those years behind us.”

“Speaking of, did you look at that brochure about Montreal?”

“I think you should go for it.”

“And what about you?” Remi raises his brows.

“I'm not sure yet.” Luc shifts on the couch. He knows that every day, Remi itches to get out of the city, go to Montreal, and play in the big leagues. He wants to let go of the little precinct

that occupies their days, the menial, petty crimes, which fill their hours. He doesn't welcome the lack of crime the way Luc does.

For Luc, more crime means more victims, many of whom go without fair compensation. His first year on the force, he would stay awake at night, arms crossed behind his head, and stare at the faces of those harmed people on his bedroom ceiling. Each unsolved case just piled on top of the frozen girl, with those pale, green eyes. *I'm sorry but you'll get used to it with time*, their chief told him. *Everyone does*. Maybe he didn't want to get used to it, he thought. Maybe he believed it disrespectful to forget that each murder, rape, and abuse has a receiving end, and that end is always a person whose life has been shattered. He thought he understood this fully, but as the woman today—Charlotte—reminded him, he didn't. He only knows that the closing of a case file doesn't always pick up the broken shards of a person. Above all, Remi doesn't feel tethered to the woods just an hour outside of Quebec City, the way Luc does. He takes another sip of beer and rests the cold bottle on his thigh.

“Think about it,” Remi says. “You'd be really great in Montreal. That catch you made with the drawer table? Miki found a bag of white powder in there.”

Luc watches his partner amble to the kitchen to slip on his tuque and gloves. He swirls the beer in the bottle, watching the brown liquid circle the glass. He's never told Remi what he remembers the most about that night in the snow. He's never told Remi much, but somehow the man still came over when the white expanse reappeared after so many years. He owes his partner a better explanation.

“You know, I remember lying in the hospital bed,” Luc says, loud enough that his voice finds Remi in the kitchen. He hears the rustling of fabric pause. “After they discovered us, me and Aida.” Remi reappears by the couch, but Luc doesn't look at him. “I overheard the doctor and the coroner talking. They thought I was still unconscious, but I heard what the coroner said.”

“What was that?”

“If I had just...found her sooner.” Luc tastes his beer. “He said a half hour earlier, and she might have lived.”

They remain in the quiet for a moment, then Remi clears his throat.

“You were only sixteen.”

“Yeah, and so was she. But I’m the one who gets to sit here today and drink a beer.”

Chapter 5

Maddie

The door whooshes open and an avalanche of frozen air rushes into the bus. The bitter wind nips at Maddie's face. She blinks and glances down at her phone. A missed call from Joshua. Her heart stops. She must have fallen asleep on the bus ride. She snatches it up and calls back, but no answer.

She deflates, reality striking her again, and drops the phone into her purse. The other passengers, mostly students, file out. She exits the bus to the front entrance of the campus. The students disperse before her, creating separate tracks in the unplowed sidewalks. Maddie pulls up a campus map on her phone and drudges forward. Her boots drag through the heavy snow, and the cold leaks in by her toes. She reaches a multistory brick building, with a plaque indicating the name of Sarah and Bridget's dorm.

A few minutes later, Bridget opens the door. Maddie brushes past her into the lobby and shakes out her limbs. The snow flicks to the ground while the rest soaks through her sleeves and shoulders. She stomps her feet to regain some feeling.

"Thanks. Where's your room?" She rubs her palms together and huffs hot breath on them.

When they reach the third floor, the hallway is empty, but voices squeal from behind a door. For the lack of students, the stench makes up for it. The stink of cheap perfume, sweat, and wet, industrial carpet washes over Maddie. She cringes. When she walked down these halls in August, she held her sister's black and pink polka dot bedding and maneuvered between weepy mothers, stoic fathers, and antsy siblings. The air smelled cleaner then.

They reach a room and Bridget unlocks the door. Maddie shuffles inside. Despite the milky walls plastered with posters on both sides, the made bed on the left contrasts the one on the right in sloppy disarray, with a polka dot comforter hanging off the side, the pink pillows squished up against the wall.

“I see Sarah still hasn’t learned to keep a clean room.” She peels off her boots.

“Yes, my, uh, parents would kill me if I ever had a messy room so-so I guess I’m just used to it...” Bridget trails off when Maddie approaches the desk at the foot of Sarah’s bed. Pens, typed up essays, and hand written notes lay strewn across its surface. Maddie sits down in the swivel chair and opens the top drawer of the desk.

“Her laptop is here?”

If Sarah ran off somewhere, she would’ve taken her laptop, right? It’s the same laptop Maddie had in high school that she passed down to Sarah. Something helpful could be on it. She hauls the piece of junk to the surface.

She groans when PASSWORD _____ pops up on the screen. She types in skating123. Nothing. She types in Ruffles, the name of their first dog. It accepts the password and Maddie smiles. The screen loads to Sarah’s desktop. “Isn’t there an app she has? Find my Phone or something...”

“Oh, yeah.” Bridget approaches and takes over the mouse pad. “It’s right here.”

Teenagers are always glued to their cellphones. *If they can find the phone, they can find Sarah, right?* The situation could be labeled as an overreaction, from both her mother and Maddie. Then, this whole nightmare would end. Simple. She types in Sarah’s number.

Unable to locate.

She stares at the words on the screen. She tries again.

Unable to locate.

Again.

Unable to locate.

Her eyes sting from the pixelated light in front of her. Her mouth goes dry, her tongue thick in her head. She clicks the Try Again button once more.

Unable to locate.

“Maddie, it can’t find her phone—”

She faces Bridget and jabs a finger towards the laptop.

“Do you know what this means?”

“I-I don’t know. Maybe it…” She stares at her feet.

“It means—” she stops herself when Bridget’s expression collapses and her eyes water. Maddie swallows hard. *It could mean anything. Her phone is turned off—a rare occasion—or it died, or that the phone is somewhere with no service. The bottom of a river, an alley, in a landfill? Places you could dump a body.* She rubs her face. Victoria’s melodrama infects her into thinking of the most severe possibility—also the least likely possibility.

“I’m sorry,” Maddie sighs. “She probably just lost it. It’s no one’s fault.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Bridget wipes her flushed, pink cheeks. “We should talk to Rachel. She’s Sarah and my friend. I told her to come over after dinner.”

Maddie nods. *Think rationally, logically. Now is not the time to fall apart.* She pulls her hair back in a ponytail. *What’s the next step, again?*

“What exactly did the Campus Police say?” she asks.

“They didn’t say much but, here…” Bridget retrieves a packet from her desk and hands it to Maddie. “I wrote notes.”

She takes the stack of papers and reads. Teachers haven’t seen her in class, she hasn’t been to student health, hasn’t sent any emails explaining her whereabouts. Maddie’s eyes drift to the last note, scribbled in the corner.

The more time that’s passed, the less evidence there will be.

The paper trembles in her hands. She stares at the shaking words. Their message sinks in and she feels herself plummet farther down that dark cavern, lost in uncertainty. She puts the notes

down and gazes around the desk. She lands on a framed photo of the two of them. In the picture, Maddie wraps an arm around Sarah's shoulder, who beams up at the camera with braces on her teeth. The flash of the camera glints against a silver bracelet drooped around Maddie's wrist. Sarah wears a matching one.

Four years ago, after Sarah came in second place at a competition that everyone thought she would win, Maddie took her into the small Vermont town nearby in search of chocolate. They stumbled upon an old-fashioned general store where Sarah fell in love with a silver chain bracelet, that had a pendent of a simple, crescent moon. She pleaded so much that Maddie bought it for her. Sarah insisted Maddie get the corresponding sun bracelet. Maddie takes a breath and finds herself floating over to Sarah's bed.

"Everything okay?" She hears Bridget ask, but her voice comes from far away.

Maddie reaches out to the pink sheets she and Sarah bought at Target together and clenches a bundle of the fabric in her fist. They went in mid-August, of course, during which Maddie fought off a mother for the last Twin Extra Long sheets and comforter. She couldn't let her sister sleep on the wrong linens.

She tugs the top sheet up to the head of bed and tucks the corners under the mattress. She pulls the comforter over it and smooths down the wrinkles. She spreads out ripples with the ease of a practiced hand, like a mother changing her child's diaper. She clutches the pillows and fluffs them up before resting the two against the wall. Without any thought, she buries her face in a pillow and inhales. The whole bed—the sheets, the comforter, the pillow—it smells like Sarah. Not only her everyday peach perfume. *Her*. She breathes in a tinge of a musky smell. Something masculine. The trance breaks and suddenly nothing about the bed comforts her. She jerks back and steps away.

Someone pounds against the door and Bridget jumps to the handle. A girl with bright blonde hair and dark roots stands in the threshold, her hip thrust out, eyes pasted to a phone in her hand.

Maddie approaches and sticks out a hand. “Hi, I’m—”

The girl saunters into the room and the aroma of a sweet, cheap, celebrity fragrance line clouds up in Maddie’s face. Her twinge of frustration comes out as a cough. She tries again. “Hi, I’m Maddie. Sarah’s sister.”

“I can tell.” The girl looks Maddie up and down.

“This is Rachel,” Bridget says.

“Hey babe, got your text about the sister.” The girl hops onto Sarah’s bed.

The sister? The phrase sticks in Maddie’s mind. *The sister?* Who is *she*? She can’t be one of Sarah’s friends. Maddie watches the girl stretch out on the covers like an entitled housecat lounging on a patch of sun-soaked carpet. Rachel finally puts down her phone and Maddie marches to the computer.

“There’s this missing person’s report that I need you two to help me fill out.” She searches for the form online. Her eyes scan the screen. “But first, I have to ask. Has she contacted either of you in three days? Did she run away?”

“I called and texted a couple of times.” Bridget twists her hands. “She hasn’t responded. And I can’t say if she ran away.”

“I don’t think she did.” Rachel slides off the bed.

Maddie nods and stares at the form. She fills out the questions she knows, aware that she’s using her sister’s own laptop to report her disappearance. Name, Height and Weight, Gender, Race, Current Hair Color. She feels her shoulders drop. They can do this. Things will be okay. She scans the other questions and feels Bridget drift towards her while Rachel remains in her spot. She asks

about other locations on campus where Sarah could stay—they haven't seen her at dining halls or the gym. What she wore—they don't remember. Her routine with classes—Sarah's schedule is on the computer. Maddie's fingers pause on the keys.

"Isn't every freshman assigned a faculty member for guidance? How can I talk to her advisor?" *Why hasn't he contacted me first?*

"You can talk to her advisor, but I doubt Sarah has any connection to him." Rachel glides over to them. "They get assigned like 200 students, so I don't even think he knows Sarah's name."

"Are you serious? A teenager can go missing and they would have no idea?"

"It's college. We're technically allowed to do whatever we want." Bridget says.

How? Maddie faces the two girls. They seem so protected, so naive, and yet they feel so sure of themselves. How could they possibly know what's best? But Maddie sees herself in them seven years ago, and at that time, she thought she knew everything, too. Now, she has no idea what path to take. Maybe that's what maturity is—knowing that she knows nothing. If she wants to find Sarah, she needs to face the reality that Sarah probably thinks the same way these girls do. She must think she's mature now because she can legally vote and buy a pack of cigarettes.

"What about places off campus?" Maddie asks. "Is there a boy that Sarah might be staying with?"

"I-I'm not sure, actually." Bridget glances at Rachel. She looks away.

It seems every question she asks just sprouts three more in its response. And the school doesn't seem to have any more information than she does. What if Sarah has been too afraid to tell her something? What if she doesn't trust Maddie the way she used to? *What if she never did?*

Rachel clears her throat and Maddie jumps. The girl points to the form.

"The question about the identifying marks?"

"Yeah—I already put in the scar on her forehead."

“No, um...Sarah has a tattoo.”

“What?” Something punches Maddie’s stomach. “Are you serious?”

Rachel tugs on a strand of dyed hair and looks anywhere but Maddie.

“Well...Sarah and I both got tattoos a couple months ago,” she says.

“When did this happen?”

“Before Christmas.”

Maddie slumps back into her chair. So, Sarah snapped open her wings, and after a few months of flying from the nest, she tattoos them? She allowed a stranger to scrape at her skin with a needle, penetrating it, and marring her for life? And, *before Christmas*? Her sister came home with a tattoo over break. *How did I not notice?*

“It’s on the inside of her wrist—I think the right one.”

Maddie’s mind conjures up, to the best of her ability, when she saw Sarah over winter break. Yet, the awkward Christmas dinner between Victoria, Henry, and them pollutes the memory. Sarah sat across the table from Maddie, who caught her gaze and playfully rolled her eyes when they saw their mother flirting with her boyfriend. Sarah looked away and tugged the sleeve of her red sweater over her wrist. At the time, Maddie assumed her sister’s gesture to be a nervous tick, not an attempt to hide the new tattoo even from Maddie. She understands keeping it from Victoria, but why her? *Doesn’t she know I wouldn’t have said anything?*

“It’s a crescent moon. It’s really small.” Rachel’s voice shatters the image in Maddie’s head. She halts.

“A what?” she asks.

“A simple crescent moon.” Rachel looks to her. “That’s all she wanted.”

Maddie glimpses the photograph again. She fixates on their bracelets, something that Sarah loved so much, she tattooed it on her body. Maddie reaches for her own wrist and finds it bare. She can't remember the last time she wore the bracelet. Her vision blurs.

She coughs and changes the answer box. When they've finished the form, they input it in a web portal and watch the document whisk away into the digital nothing. Gone. Maddie watches the blank screen for a minute before pulling herself back into the world.

"Okay, so you guys should keep calling and texting Sarah—and contact anyone who might know where she is. Try to get across the message that we've sent a report and if she doesn't reply by tomorrow morning, we're going to the police station." At the mention of "police," Bridget pales and Rachel drops her gaze to her feet. Maddie starts again. "If she's just been fooling around the past couple of days..."

"Then, she'll respond once we talk about going to the police," Rachel offers.

"Exactly. And if she doesn't reply, we're still going to the police. I'll be back first thing in the morning, and we can all go together. What do you think, Bridget?"

The girl's eyes wander around the room. She snuffles and tears slip down her face. Rachel wraps an arm around her waist and rests her head on Bridget's shoulder. Her attitude seems to have slipped away and Maddie feels taken aback by her compassion. She reminds herself that there must be sides to these girls she has yet to discover.

"Hey, it's okay," Rachel says. "We've already sent the report in, anyway."

"I don't want to go." Bridget sniffs.

"I know," Maddie says. She finds her own legs shaking. The idea of going to the police in person makes this entire nightmare seem like a cruel reality.

"We're doing the right thing," Rachel says but it sounds more like a question.

“We are,” Maddie says. Though she arrived at the dorm just under an hour ago, she feels more grounded. She grasps the situation better and she knows with whom Sarah has spent the past couple months. And they got the form done. She also feels grateful that Sarah’s friends will come with her to police station. She doesn’t want to admit that she needs someone, anyone. Their presence will force her to not fall apart. She checks her watch.

“I hate to do this but I should go. I would stay but I need to check on my mother and figure out what to do with work.” The girls mutter sympathy but Maddie knows they put on a face, as well. Bridget locks eyes with her and her forehead wrinkles.

“I feel sick about this.”

“Everything will be okay.” But the cliché falls tired on their ears.

Maddie knocks on the doorframe of her mother’s hospital room. Victoria’s body barely takes up half the bed, and she drowns in a large bandage strapped over her chest. Her face appears ages older with little makeup under the harsh lights. Henry sits with his ankles crossed in a chair on her mother’s right, staring down at a video on his phone. *Is now seriously the time for YouTube?* The two of them look up at the sound. Maddie enters.

“How was Brittany?”

“Bridget.”

“Oh.” Victoria struggles to sit up straight. Maddie catches Henry’s curious gaze and it destabilizes her. She wants to talk to her mother—*not him*. “Did you find out anything new?”

“Can we...” She tilts her head. “Can we get some privacy?”

“We’re fine.” Victoria inches a hand over towards Henry, who clasps it.

“Mom—”

“I need the support.”

Maddie feels nauseated at the thought of cracking open her life and letting anyone, especially Henry, see the disarray while she grasps onto the hope that Sarah is okay. Until then, however, her mother needs Henry. Or she thinks she does.

“Update me about you first,” Maddie says.

“Surgery is tomorrow, but they want to monitor me.” Victoria clears her throat. Her voice trails off and Maddie sees Henry squeeze her hand. Victoria frowns down at her lap and doesn’t move until the tears clear. She opens her mouth and Maddie anticipates her mother telling her to leave the room for a minute. She feels the instinctive dig of her nails into her hand. Her mother never cries in front of her. “The emergency psychiatrist stopped by.”

“What?”

“Don’t overreact. Just...she asked me a lot of questions. And I think I gave the wrong answers.” Her mother’s voice shrivels. “Maybe I should go see someone.”

“It’s something to think about,” Henry says and Maddie nods. Maybe her mother does need to see someone. Maybe it doesn’t matter. All Maddie knows is that she urges to charge forward and fix what’s been broken. She’ll think about the effects later.

“I just want Sarah to be safe.” Victoria stares down at her hands.

“I know.” Maddie shifts from one foot to the other. “I met with the girls and we filled out a missing person’s report. We’re going to the police station tomorrow morning if we haven’t heard back from Sarah.”

Her sentence turns up into a question and she tries to catch her mother’s eye. *Just tell me what I’m doing is okay. Just look at me*, she begs. Maddie could give her a reassuring glance, or maybe receive one herself. They could feel scared together. Cling to one another the way Rachel and Bridget did, two reeds bending in a hurricane. Together. But her mother won’t meet her eye. She won’t even acknowledge Maddie’s presence.

“If you think you should go, go. I just want Sarah to be safe,” Victoria repeats, belligerent, and Henry rubs her back.

“Mom, I...I need your help.”

“I just want my child back. That’s all I want.”

“You have one right here, too.” She inches forward and offers a hand to her mother. But Victoria says nothing and reaches for Henry. Maddie stops and drops her arm. *Of course. I’m so stupid.* She blinks away tears. *Why would I think Mom wanted to hold me?*

Maddie gathers her purse and walks out.

Chapter 6

Sarah

Sarah yells, again, from her fetal position on the floor. Her raw throat aches with the effort but no sound comes out. Not anymore. She cried for hours when she first came to. Yet, the sound had only been swallowed up in the dark, never returning back to her. Even when she still had her voice, it could not escape.

She gulps, hoping the little spit from her dry mouth would soothe the pain. Grogginess still floats around her like a fog. No matter how much she yells or shakes her head, it won't evaporate. She screams for help one last time, before she sinks into defeat. No sound, no response. Not one sliver of light pierces the pitch black that surrounds her. She may as well be floating in an abyss. She only knows the marrow-deep cold, the musky smell of the room. And the zip tie handcuffs that pinch her skin and force her wrists together in front of her.

Sarah traces the cement floor with two fingers. How long has she been here? She hasn't tried standing yet. Ever since her mind emerged from a cloudy state, her head heavy, she remained curled up on the floor. Tender spots form on her hip and ribs. Her eyes sting from crying. She rolls onto her back and stretches out her legs to relieve the soreness. They hit a wall.

Occasionally, she thinks she can hear the patter of footsteps on the other side—but it might be her pounding heart. Or maybe she just wants to hear something.

This can't be happening. Why did she get caught up in this? She needs to get out. Thinking back to who got her—they—they? There was definitely more than one. Right? Yes, multiple. It was multiple men. She grips her head and groans. Her mind swamps with fatigue and hunger. Hunger. It gnaws in her belly, and fear presses down on her chest. Panic prickles her scalp—

Focus on what you know, don't worry about what you don't. Maddie's voice cuts into her thoughts. She could hear the words in her sister's snappy tone. *Okay. So, what do I know?*

She lifts her swimming head, and struggles to sit up, relying on her core to do the lifting. She twists herself around and slides back against the wall behind her. Her hands trace the rough, crumbling surface. Feels like plaster. She takes a deep breath. If someone put her in here, eventually he'll have to get her out. *I have to stand up if I want to escape. That's the first step.*

She presses her fists by one of her sides and breathes again. She heaves herself up lopsidedly, knuckles pushing into the ground until she stands on her feet. The world spins. She leans against the wall. It must be two days, maybe three since she's been here. She wouldn't feel this weak without food and water after just one. She waits until her stomach settles. She closes her eyes as it's too strange to have them open and only see dark. It's like they stopped working.

She staggers forward and her arms reach out as one. After several steps, her hands touch a smooth, cold metal. Her fingers trace the surface to search for a door handle. She feels around for several moments longer, her hands stretching high and low. Nothing, absolutely, nothing.

Tears leap to her lids. *No, don't. Don't cry again.* She pushes her panic down. *You can't break down because Maddie isn't here. Only I am.*

Alone.

Sarah slams her fist against the metal and hears the dull thud. Her heart pounds, *thump, thump. Thump thump* to the rhythm of footsteps. She yells and the door swings open. Her hands touch air, her breath leaves. A bright light blinds her and her eyes adjust. A phone flashlight illuminates the underside of a stubbly chin, inches from her face. Two glinting eyes stare at her.

Sarah yelps. A warm hand grabs her wrist and jerks her closer. The flesh around her zip ties rub against the force. She urges the shaking of her body to stop. She urges her voice to speak.

His jaw cracks into a smile. The warm hand lets go of her wrist and grips a wad of hair from her scalp. He yanks her forward and his whisper brushes against her ear.

“Hello, Sarah.”

Day Two

Sunday, February 5th

Chapter 7

Maddie

Maddie, Bridget, and Rachel stand in front of the looming brick police station. Maddie didn't sleep the whole night. After having received no response from Sarah or from an officer, Maddie met the girls on campus and they walked to the station, less than a mile away. She looks to the two girls beside her, anxious and unsettled. She tugs on her scarf.

“Ready?”

They enter the building. Inside the waiting area, she tells the girls to sit down on the chairs that line the back wall. She approaches the front desk and stumbles through a quick explanation of her sister's disappearance and the form. As she talks, the administrator types into her computer.

“Oh, yes. We received it.”

Maddie's eye twitches. “Okay...why didn't anyone call?”

“I apologize for that, it must've been a mistake in the system. We'll have someone out to talk to you in a moment.”

“Her friends haven't seen her for days.” Maddie gestures towards the girls. “This is urgent.”

“Yes, ma'am. A detective is on his way.”

“On his...” She clenches her fists. “Okay.” She nods, numb, and joins the girls. The station's bleakness percolates to her bones, like a soaking blanket that hugs her shoulders—but she refuses to sit down. She can't have them forgetting she's here, waiting. After a minute or so, a large man with grey hair, soft eyes, and thick eyebrows comes into the waiting area.

“Ms. Price? I'm Detective Hall.” They shake hands. “I heard you're looking for your sister? I really am sorry for the delay. We switched to an electronic system recently and things can get mixed up.”

“Thank you.” Maddie readjusts her purse strap on her shoulder. He seems genuinely concerned. He introduces himself to the girls.

“As you have already done the report, we can start interviews with all of you. That will help us paint a picture of Sarah’s days leading up to her disappearance,” he says.

Her shoulders relax and she feels her jaw unclick. *Someone who can help.* The detective’s calm, procedural voice shatters her stiffness and throws her a line. She welcomes it, hands outstretched and eager for the rope.

They follow him down the hall and into a spacious room full of officers at desks. She never imagined police officers working in cubicles—just on the streets, with guns and radios. Yet here, they sift through paperwork. He leads them to a cluttered desk, with files stacked everywhere and a pair of reading glasses placed on top of one of them.

“I just need to grab a few things before we start interviews. You can have a moment, if you’d like.” He instructs two other officers to bring over chairs. He settles in his own and the girls sit when he gestures. Bridget and Rachel fidget. Maddie tries to meet their eyes, give them a reassuring glance, but Bridget’s gaze jumps around while Rachel’s stays glued to the floor.

Maddie bends forward, rests her elbows on her thighs, and rubs her face. She can’t shake the odd mixture of fatigue and adrenaline. The fiery desire to charge forward and help, to protect, tied with the lurking ache to lie down and pass the burden onto stronger shoulders. She realizes her knee bounces, and she steadies it with her hand.

Detective Hall files some papers in the desk drawer. “First, I just want to clarify that because she’s less than twenty-one years of age, the FBI does classify this situation as a juvenile missing person’s case. So, that means it can’t be terminated under the assumption that she just went off on her own.”

Bridget and Rachel share a glance.

“Is everything alright?” Maddie leans into them. They shift in their seats. “What’s going on?”

Bridget flinches and Rachel crosses her arms. Maddie wants to jump up and shake them. But the more she pushes, the more they pull away. Detective Hall clears his throat and Maddie decides to let it go, for now. He picks up a notepad and turns to her.

“Ms. Price, I’m going to interview the girls about the last time they saw Sarah. Anything can help.”

“Should I give you a statement too?”

“That won’t be necessary. We want the most current information as of right now. I’ll let you know if you can help us in a bit, though.”

A lanky officer comes over to retrieve the girls. Maddie adjusts the purse strap on her shoulder and grips the leather. She climbs to her feet.

“But-but, I—”

“There are some pamphlets I can give you.” Detective Hall places a heavy, warm hand on her shoulder. “I’d also suggest reaching out to loved ones for support—”

“I don’t want support, I want to help.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing to do right now. I need to go speak with the girls. Will you be okay waiting here?”

Maddie opens her mouth but nothing comes out.

“Will you be okay?” he asks again, his grey eyes watching her.

“I—”

Her phone rings and she nearly drops her bag. She plops it down on her chair and fumbles through her purse to retrieve it. A lump forms in her throat.

“I’ll send someone over to talk with you about going forward while I interview the girls.” She hears Detective Hall say but doesn’t reply. The caller I.D. reads *Joshua*, Sarah’s coach. She picks up right away.

“Hello?”

“Maddie.” His voice sounds modulated, controlled. “I need to tell you something about Sarah.” She sits down hard in the plastic chair and watches the detective and girls walk away. Joshua clears his throat. “I got a text from Sarah about a week ago.”

“Is she okay?” Her voice breaks. *Please say she’s with you. Please say she just got overwhelmed and wanted to stay with you.* At least then Maddie would know she’s safe. Soon enough, she could pull her little sister into a hug and feel the weight and warmth of Sarah in her arms. “What did it say?”

“She said she was entering a skating competition last minute. She wanted to see if she could push herself—I don’t know, do a routine without months of practice, I think.” Joshua’s voice wavers. “She asked me to come see her perform because she was dedicating it to me.”

“That’s...that’s so sweet.” The lump forms in Maddie’s throat. She coughs.

“Maddie.” His voice hardens. “Her performance was this past Friday, but she never showed. I’ve texted and called her to make sure she was okay but she’s gone dark. I asked other competitors, other coaches, the judges, everyone. No one has seen her since she entered the competition last week.”

Maddie head drops in her hands. “Joshua, I’m at the New Brunswick police station right now. We don’t know where—”

“The competition was in Quebec City.”

The air in the room sucks out like a vacuum. Did she hear him right? Quebec City...in Canada? Maddie jumps onto swaying feet and grabs the chair for support. She scans the room, her tone low.

“What the hell did you just say?”

“I’m sorry we’ve been playing telephone tag. I tried to tell you as soon as possible.” Joshua breathes deep and the other end of the line crackles. “She told me she and a couple friends came up here last weekend, and that she was planning to stay longer to participate in the competition on Friday. I’m still up here because I’m trying to find her.”

Maddie swallows but the lump remains stuck in her throat, as if someone dunked newspaper in water and pushed it halfway down her esophagus. Her mind digests Joshua’s news.

“Are you saying my sister went missing in a different country?”

“I informed the Quebec Police Station yesterday afternoon.”

“I-I need to tell someone.” Maddie’s grasp on the chair tightens. “The police...they’re looking in the wrong damn country!”

“Maddie, listen,” Joshua’s voice cuts back in, but she can hardly comprehend. “The Chief told me that more than half of the missing persons cases he’s seen in his time on the force have been solved in under two days. And like 90% are solved within a week. We’ll be okay. I’m sure we will be.”

“What about the other 10%, Joshua? What happens to them?”

“Maddie-Maddie, breathe. They gave me the number of the inspector assigned to the case. I’m going to give it to you, okay?”

Joshua’s voice tugs her out of her spiral. She nods, gulping. She types up the number in her phone while he recites it. Maddie skims the room again, desperate to catch the eye of any passing officer.

“I need to tell the detective,” she says.

“You do that. I’m meeting with the Quebec inspector first thing tomorrow morning, okay?”

“Okay.” Her breathing slows. “Joshua, where do you think she is? Where could she have gone?”

“I don’t know.”

She looks down at her worn boots. The snow has melted off them and left a slick, wet ring around her feet.

“Are you okay with staying in Quebec for a bit longer?” she asks.

“Absolutely,” he says.

The flush in her face drains. She’s not the only adult in Sarah’s life that can help, that cares about her sister in the way she does. She shouldn’t have expected any less. Joshua doesn’t have to throw her a line. He stands next to her.

“Besides,” Joshua says. “I’ve seen some hunky lumberjack-looking guys that we just don’t get in the States.”

“Yeah?” Maddie says through an outburst of sudden laughter. His humor sparks some in her, alleviating some of the worry and guilt. She spots Detective Hall returning to the main office room, with Bridget and Rachel by his sides.

“Joshua, I love you, but I have to go.” She swings her purse over her shoulder.

“Okay, I love you. And Maddie?” he says. “We’ll find her. Together.”

“Together,” she repeats and they hang up. Maddie soaks in every squirm from Bridget. She thinks of every averted gaze from Rachel since they walked through the door. Maddie thought she and Bridget felt the same loss, that they were both scared. A confluence of anger and sadness and mistrust billows and she realizes she now has an outlet, in the form of two college girls. She approaches the three of them.

“Detective Hall?”

“Yes?” He locks eyes with her, startled.

“Did the girls tell you about Canada?”

“Quebec City, yes. The girls informed me that the three of them went up there for the long weekend and into Wednesday of last week. Sarah stayed for a competition that took place two days ago, on Friday.”

Maddie stops. Her adrenaline simmers out and nothing fills its place. Of course Sarah’s friends would’ve told Detective Hall. They want to help. So why couldn’t she get this simple information out of them? She fumbles for words.

“I-I have the number of Sarah’s ice-skating coach, who’s up there now,” she says. “He contacted the Quebec department the other day.”

Detective Hall’s grey eyes take her. He motions to a passing uniform, who stops. Detective Hall gestures to Bridget and Rachel.

“Will you please excuse us for just a moment? I’d like to talk to Ms. Price.”

The girls nod and Detective Hall and Maddie make their way over to his desk. She slumps herself back in the chair and watches him rifle through a file.

“Do you want to write down the coach’s number?” he asks.

“His name is Joshua. Joshua Bello.” She takes the sticky note and pen he stretches out before her, and scribbles on it. She hands it back. “Why were the girls up there?”

“They told me that the city has a winter Carnival with events and concerts for a couple of weeks and they wanted to go. They wanted to sightsee until Sarah started preparing for the competition.”

Maddie’s brows furrow. It sounds right, but too clean, in a way. She banishes the thought from her mind, but not before Detective Hall reads her expression.

“I think it was just someplace different,” he says. “And of course, the drinking age is eighteen.”

Ah, bingo. It clicks in place. She knows for all of Sarah’s hard work in skating and academics, she’s on her own for the first time. A good kid—but still a college kid.

“I’m going to call the Chief that I know works for that department and discuss the procedure going forward. I’ll also send my report, information, and the recordings of the interviews themselves to their station.”

“Thank you.” Her gaze drops to her hands. She hears him make a call, but his voice shrinks into a faraway tunnel. She traces the lines across her palms. She wants to urge herself to hear what he has to say, but all she can think about is the beginning of Sarah’s winter break.

Maddie was supposed to pick up Sarah when her final exams ended. But her manager called her to work another shift, and she felt a spark of excitement at the thought of the early December crowd pressed against her counter. The cash tips left by receipts, under bar napkins, and how the rent was two weeks late. So, Sarah took a bus to their mother’s house. When they finally saw each other, Sarah threw her arms open to Maddie, a grin huge on her face. Did Maddie miss something? What secrets could have been teased out, the solidarity and protection of just the two of them in the warm car? Detective Hall says something.

“Sorry?” she looks up.

“Are you okay?” he asks. His phone rests in the receiver. She nods. He picks up a pen from his desk. “I just wanted to fill you in on a few things. Normally when a U.S. citizen goes missing in a foreign country, we contact the US Embassy and the local crime division will handle it. Sometimes, they request the aid of the FBI, usually for forensic technology.”

“The FBI?”

“The Canadian system is similar to our own, so the FBI most likely won’t help with this case unless the local authorities think it necessary.”

“What would make it necessary?”

He looks away. “Hopefully it won’t come to that point.”

“Hopefully?”

He nods and searches his drawers again. He pulls out a packet. “You might find this helpful. It has information regarding what you can do for yourself in this...time. The department’s recommended psychologist’s number is in there, as well.”

Maddie takes the packet. In large printed letters at the top, it reads:

My loved one has been declared missing. What do I do?

Step 1: Remember to take care of yourself.

“I don’t care about a psychologist.” She drops the papers in her lap. Detective Hall gives her another sympathetic gaze. She knows he’s trying to help but she doesn’t want sympathy. She wants results.

“Ms. Price, I understand this is a hard time—”

“Do you? Because I don’t care about, ‘Step 1: Breathe.’ I care about finding Sarah.”

“Which is my job.”

“She’s my sister. It’s my job to protect her.”

“The hardest thing to do is wait. Unfortunately, that’s all you can do right now.”

“I need to help.” She grips her purse handle.

“It’s understandable that you want to take on Sarah’s case. You’re willing to risk yourself for her and it’s admirable, but it’s not safe. This is where we step in.”

“I see.” Maddie looks down to the packet. She can’t just pick Sarah up in her arms and carry her the rest of the way to school.

“I can’t image what you’re feeling right now but I’m here if you have any further questions. Now, I’m going to ask the girls some more details about the last time they saw Sarah.” He gathers up some papers on his desk and leaves.

In the quiet of her thoughts, she reads over the packet—all steps on how to breathe right, sleep right, reach out to friends and family, etc. She drops the packet on his desk, and a file next to it labeled “High Risk – Sarah Price” catches her eye. She surveys the precinct and teases out the pile of papers. She reads a section titled, “Definition of Term – High Risk Missing Person,” which details the requirements for the classification of a “High Risk Case.” Evidence that her disappearance was not voluntary, under 18 years of age, any illnesses that need medication and would lead to serious injury or death, Alzheimer’s, mentally impaired—the questions she answered when she first called.

By each listed item, someone had marked an X, with “not HR case” scribbled at the bottom of the page, next to, “history of disappearing.”

What? That’s not true. No, Sarah has never run away before. The paper crinkles in her hand. Where are they getting this from? And how can Sarah not be “High Risk?” *How could anyone’s child not be “High Risk?”*

She pushes the paper back onto the desk. She rubs her clammy palms against her jeans and blinks away tears. She opens her phone and stares at the inspector’s number. *Maybe he’ll listen to me. I’ll make sure he does.*

She dials.

Chapter 8

Luc

Luc turns his rumbling truck towards a spot in the staff parking lot and jams the break down. Remi stands in the middle of the space, holding two cups of coffee in gloved hands. He grins. Luc honks the horn and rolls down his window, a wall of frigid air crystalizing his hair still wet from the shower and making his ears ring. He sticks out his head.

“Get out of the way, bastard.”

Remi laughs and steps forward. Luc settles back into his seat, chuckling, and creeps the car forward. His partner jumps to the side. Once Luc parks it, his partner leans on the hood and sets down a coffee. Luc steps out into the brittle, dry cold.

This morning, his weather app read -23 C, little chance of snow. Not much different than the past few months. This season, the clear winter brings air that presses against the skin like a sharp blade. The snowfall, which usually smothers the city in familiar, gentle waves, has left Luc and the residents anticipating its arrival. To outsiders, the normal copious amounts of snow must appear harsh, and to outsiders, this winter’s little snow must seem a relief. Yet for Luc, nothing feels harsher than an open sky and a small, distant sun. The snow grows with Quebecers, lives with them, melts and dies away with them—an old, life long friend. Luc slams the door.

“Trying to kill me?” Remi sips his coffee, then pulls back. “Still hot.”

“What are you doing here so early?”

“Bringing you coffee, of course.” His partner hands Luc a cup. He takes it and they walk along the side of the long, tan building toward the entrance of the station. “And Chief called me and said come in right away. He wants you too, and I told him you were already on your way by now.”

“What’s it for?” They enter the lobby and turn right down a hallway, which opens up to the cramped, rectangular room with desks and whiteboards. White light sifts into the room through the large windows that extend across the back wall.

“No idea.”

Through his glass office door, Luc sees the Chief lean against the front of his desk in conversation with a short man in a suit. The man’s back faces the precinct, but from the entrance, Luc notices his head of carrot colored hair. Remi nudges him.

“But when was the last time he acted like this?”

“Two years? Whenever our last murder case was.” Luc keeps an eye on the man in the office. Chief Girard’s body language seems rigid, stiff—and not as authoritative as he is with his officers.

“Three years,” Remi corrects. “Might explain why he was being so vague on the phone.”

It strikes Luc that the air of respect always orbiting around Chief Girard has suddenly shifted to the redheaded man in his office in the form of head nods and attentive looks.

They walk the length of the room and drop the coffees off at their desks. The two men approach a group of uniforms that hover near the office door and pretend not to eavesdrop on the conversation inside. Officer Miki splits from the small crowd and approaches them.

“Is the Suit why he called you in?” she wonders, and her eyes settle on Luc. He can tell from her expression that she wants to ask about the situation yesterday, but he averts his gaze. The other uniforms watch them. Remi brightens at the opportunity to hold the room’s attention.

“Of course. You see—”

“We’ll find out soon,” Luc nods towards Chief Girard, who motions for them to enter.

“*Bonne chance*,” Miki says.

“You don’t need luck with talent like this.” Remi claps Luc on the back.

“Yeah, and I have enough talent for the two of us.” Luc opens the door.

“Bastard,” Remi chuckles.

They enter the office. The short man has a pale face with a smattering of freckles to match his hair. His deep brown eyes glisten with...*is that excitement?* Chief Girard motions with his hands and starts in English.

“Inspectors, this is—”

“Special Agent Conrad,” the man—an American—interrupts and leans forward to shake Remi’s hands.

“Inspector Fortier,” Remi says back.

“Inspector Dubois,” Luc echoes when it’s his turn. From his breast pocket, Special Agent Conrad retrieves an FBI badge smugly—*that’s what it is, smugness*. A flicker of annoyance skips across the Chief’s face, but he recovers quickly. Luc looks to his partner to confirm what he just witnessed, but Remi displays his professional smile for Conrad. Maybe Luc imagined it. The Chief continues.

“Special Agent Conrad will be working as—”

“I’m a legal attaché between your division and the U.S. Embassy, on behalf of the FBI.” He smiles. Chief Girard shifts on his feet. The man doesn’t notice. “My job becomes necessary when cases of yours involve American citizens.”

Luc starts. “*Merci, monsieur. Je crois que—*”

“Whoa, slow down. Can’t understand that.” Special Agent Conrad says.

“You don’t speak any French as the legal attaché for Quebec?” Luc says in English.

Chief Girard clears his throat. Luc glances between the Chief and Remi. Though his expression is weary, the Chief forces the political smile he usually offers to the residents of Quebec, treating each one like his preferred, yet sometimes exhausting, nephew or niece. Remi

flashes his white teeth, the professional grin unfolding a little more naturally on him. Luc can't blame his partner, it's what needs to be done in order to move into the big leagues. Luc forces a smile.

"But I understand we're the only ones on this continent who do—I know it must be...foreign to you." Luc sees the Chief relax.

"All I know is, you're gonna need a lot of help with this case, officer," Conrad says.

"Inspector," Luc corrects. He cringes. He can never seem to play the political game the way Remi and the Chief can.

The Chief starts. "Dubois—"

"My apologies, Inspector Dubois. You look...young." Conrad laughs.

"I've been on the force for almost a decade."

"Must be that one-murder-per-year that keeps you looking so fresh."

"Okay, let's get back to the case. That's what matters. Chief?" Remi asks. "Special Agent Conrad said an American?" The Chief nods and swipes two files off his desk. He hands them to Luc and Remi. Before Luc has a chance to open the manila envelope, Chief Girard spits out a hasty brief.

"An American skating coach came to me the other day with a concern about one of his athletes. Sarah Price is a college freshman that visited Quebec City with her friends last week, arriving on Friday, January 27th."

Conrad seems to take the hint this time and loiters in his spot.

"Her friends left on Wednesday, February 1st, while she stayed for a skating competition on Friday, February 3rd. Bello and Price did not make any contact between the 1st and the 3rd. When he went to the competition on Friday, he didn't see her. In fact, no one that we know of has seen her.

“Now, I just spoke to a Detective Hall, from the New Brunswick Police in New Jersey. Her sister filed a missing person’s report yesterday. Campus police say she hasn’t been to class, her meal card hasn’t been used, and her student ID has not been used to enter any buildings.”

Luc digests the information, and flips open the file. His breath halts in his chest. A photograph of Sarah Price is clipped to the other papers inside. The Chief explains that they haven’t been able to find any physical evidence that she left the country, according to their border control teams. But his words float away, and Luc only sees the girl. The white-blond hair, the petite frame, the heart-shaped face, her smile—everything. A frozen face warmed over, cheeks full of color. His stomach drops and leaves him hollow. *Aida*, he thinks. *It’s Aida*.

Luc blinks. He curls his toes to make sure they’re there. He stares at the photo. The eyes. While Aida had those pale, almost milky, green eyes, Sarah Price’s eyes blaze an icy blue.

“Until we discover otherwise, we believe Sarah has gone missing in Quebec City,” Chief Girard finishes.

“Your precinct has jurisdiction on this case, but at your request, the FBI can provide forensic aid and agents,” Conrad says.

“Would the FBI ever have full jurisdiction?” Remi asks.

“In the case of terrorism or kidnapping.”

“As Inspector Remi Fortier holds seniority,” Chief gestures to Remi. “He shall be Lead Inspector. Understood?”

Remi nods and Luc confirms. He would feel a pang of jealousy, after all, Remi has only been at the station one year longer than he has. But Remi’s calm, professional look falls apart and he struggles to hide his giddy expression, a giant of a man acting like a schoolboy.

“Unofficially, another thing,” the Chief says, this time in French. Conrad shifts on his feet. Chief Girard ignores it. “Detective Hall did warn me that the family is relatively absent, except for

the older sister. So right now, we're really the only people on this girl's side. Treat this case as such."

Luc's gaze falls to the photograph. His thumb strokes her face.

"Inspector Fortier, I expect full cooperation with the American bureau," Girard says in English. "And until we know what the family's wishes are, please wait on our relations to the public. If they would like press conferences and advertisement, we will give it to them, but if they would like the case to be less of a media frenzy, we'll respect that, as well. *Oui?*"

"*Oui*, Chief."

"And the first step in waiting for their cue is discretion within the precinct. The fewer people who know, the lower the chances of an unwanted leak to the press. I gave your information to Detective Hall and Joshua Bello, if they want to contact you or vice versa. I also gave it to Special Agent Conrad here, if you need to ask for assistance."

"*Merci*, Chief. And thank you, Special Agent," Remi shakes their hands respectively. Luc follows.

"I'll see you out?" the Chief asks Conrad. He nods and all four men exit the office. The crowd of officers disperses, and Chief Girard leads the man down the hall. The second they disappear out of sight, officers swarm around them.

"What did he say to you?" someone asks.

Remi holds his hands up in defense. "Sorry, boys, can't share. Chief's orders."

The group groans and Luc and Remi walk past them. Luc shakes his head.

"You're gonna milk this, aren't you?"

"More like, don't want to screw it up. Cases like this can make or break a man's career."

“Or a person’s life.” Luc isn’t about to also remind him that the FBI could still swoop in at any moment and take over. Or their Canadian counterpart—RCMP, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. As they sit at their desks, Miki hustles up to them.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“We really can’t say,” Luc says.

“Remi said ‘sorry, boys.’”

“Yeah, and?” Remi opens his file.

“I’m not one of the *boys*. So, I can know.”

Luc laughs and Remi studies her for a minute, stumped. He rubs the back of his neck.

“I didn’t mean to disregard—”

“I just want to know what’s going on.” She looks to Luc again, and he drops his gaze to the unopened file in front of him.

“Okay, well there’s a missing American. Eighteen-year-old girl,” Remi says.

“Oh, God, the press is going to eat this up.”

“Chief doesn’t want the information leaked to the public yet. It’ll be a frenzy.”

“Got it.” Miki gives the two of them one last glance, and scurries away.

“Remember your first few months?” Remi begins to read the file.

“You flirting with the Inspector on my first day and then getting months of traffic duty—that’s what I remember.”

“Don’t forget that your hands shook when you poured the sugar in my coffee.” Remi laughs. Luc crumbles up a blank piece of paper and throws it at him. The paper bounces off his head and falls to the floor. “Hey!”

Luc chuckles and opens the file. Her photograph disturbs him every time he sees it. He unclips it from the other papers and drops it into his desk drawer. He starts on the family section.

Father: Samuel Tremblay (Deceased). Mother: Ms. Victoria Price (55). Divorced, five years ago
Sister: Madeline Price (25). Born in—

He feels something hit his face and bounce onto his desk. It's the paper. Luc takes the ball and tosses it from one hand to the other. Remi's phone rings and he answers.

"It's the sister," Remi mouths to Luc.

Luc gives him a thumbs up and returns to reading. He listens to Remi's call with one ear, and after a few minutes, Remi's smooth, deep voice stops talking altogether. Luc looks up at his friend. Remi's face burns a bright red. He just listens, downcast like a puppy scolded for not being housebroken. Luc smirks. Remi catches Luc's eye and shakes his head. Luc remembers Girard's words about an absent family, but from his partner's expression, she must be tearing him to pieces. Luc gestures.

"Here, let me."

Remi mutters something and hands the phone over. Luc puts it up to his ear and hears the babble of a strong, husky, female voice.

"*Bonjour, Madame. Parlez-vous francais?*" he asks. Just for good measure, and to slow her down. For a moment, silence. Then, in a slower, more modulated tone, she speaks.

"*Un petit peu.*"

"*En anglais?*"

"*Oui, merci.*"

His mind switches over to English. "My name is Inspector Luc Dubois and I'm one of the inspectors on Sarah's case."

"Oh-oh. I'm Maddie Price."

"I just briefly read your sister's file. We are going to do everything we can to find her. I want to assure you that Quebec City is a very safe city and—"

“Would you classify her life as low risk? This case as not urgent? Because she’s high risk to me and needs to be found right away.”

“Uh...” Luc pauses. He never hears this type of language from a family member or the victim. “Every case is high risk to us.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Okay, thank you.” He hears her clear her throat. “One question, though. Doesn’t every day decrease your chances of finding her?”

“Statistically yes, but—”

“What if no one remembers her three days later? Don’t you think it’ll be harder—”

“But not impossible.” Luc says.

“Does your department encounter many missing person’s cases? I just don’t know how this all works.”

“Our law enforcement system is very similar to the American one.” He can see why Remi became flustered. Luc’s suddenly grateful that this is just a phone call and not a face-to-face meeting.

“Oh, thank God. And, you’ve seen this before.”

As an inspector, he hasn’t had a missing person’s case. He wants to keep her calm, but he curses himself as he realizes he can’t lie.

“This is personally a new type of case to me. However, that will not affect our ability to find her.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just-just feeling...”

“Overwhelmed? And like you’re not doing enough? Questioning everything you’ve done?” He remembers how his worst fears surged up into his heart, his rational mind trying to fight them,

and ultimately losing when the reality matched his greatest nightmare. And that was only for a few hours, not days like it must be for her.

“Yes, actually.”

He allows the silence to unfold, hearing Ms. Price collect herself. After a minute or two, he speaks. “Ms. Price, we’ll find out what’s happened to her.”

“What did you mean when you said a ‘new type of case’?” Her flat voice delivers the question as pointed. She picked her way through his bureaucratic response. He clears his throat.

“It’s um...what I meant by that was—”

“Is this your first missing person’s case?” She slips into a shrill tone.

He meets his partner’s eye. *Help me*, he mouths.

“No way,” Remi pushes his chair further away. “I had my turn, now it’s yours.”

“That would be correct,” Luc says.

Ms. Price devolves into a string of curses and half coherent sentences, her voice growing louder and louder on the phone.

“Ms. Price—”

“‘Stay calm’ they all say, but do they know? They’re the ones who don’t think this is worth being ‘High Risk!’ Everything is at risk! And then they put on—”

“I’m sure—”

“Sure? How can you be sure if you haven’t done this before?”

He knows she makes a fair point but his blood pounds in his ears.

“I promise—”

“Promises and online forms won’t bring my sister home.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I said you’re right.” He stares at the drawer that holds Sarah’s photo.

“Then, what are you going to do?”

“Everything I possibly can. My partner and I are going over the files right now and we’re going to set up a video conference with Detective Hall to make sure the flow of information between precincts is constant and accurate.”

“Oh...I’m sorry, it’s just that Sarah’s MIA and my mother’s in surgery. I really am sorry, this is just a stressful time. Can I call you back?”

He realizes he’s been reduced to an ear that can listen. Out of the corner of his eye, Luc sees the Chief approaching their desks.

“Yes, of course. Call anytime.” They end the call.

“I didn’t know I was getting a job interview this morning!” Remi throws up his hands.

“She’s probably just stressed and wants her sister safe.”

“Where’s the trust in us, eh?”

“I don’t think they trust the police in America—Chief?” The Chief comes up to Remi’s desk and drums his fingers.

“At the end of the day, I want you two in my office. There are some things we need to discuss.”

Chapter 9

Maddie

She stares down at her phone, her fingers whitening around the edges. So, her sister's case lies on inexperienced shoulders? *This can't be good.* A sudden rush of warmth flushes Maddie and her mind feels fuzzy and empty, like someone stuffed it with cotton. She spots Detective Hall walking with the girls. He reaches her side in a moment and touches her elbow with his hand. She leans more into him than she intended.

“Are you okay, Ms. Price?”

“Mm?”

“You...you look pale.”

“I'm just feeling too far away from everything, right now.”

“Why don't you sit down?” Hall gestures at the chair. “I can speak to the Chief and confirm the jurisdiction of the case will be in Quebec if that's what you'd like to learn.”

“Yes, thank you. Girls?” She turns to Bridge and Rachel. “How are you doing?”

They look worn out, like they just ran marathons.

“We have a break room. I can have an officer take you to it. I hear they have some muffins there.” Detective Hall looks at the nervous girls, who remain silent.

She thanks him and they follow a uniform to a small room with a kitchenette, white tables, and folding chairs. Maddie has the girls sit and brings them water in waxy paper cups from a water fountain. She plants herself next to them and drops her face in her hands. She breathes deeply until the prickle of tears, the heat of frustration and fear, dissipate.

If she were to scrape away all the other feelings, Maddie could concentrate on something that tugs in her gut. A low, rumbling pulling, like a slow train stretching away from the station. She lifts her head and watches the room around her, entertaining a ridiculous thought. She wants

to be in the center of the action. She texts Joshua about flying up and he calls her. She twists away from the girls and picks it up.

“Hey,” she says. “What do you think about what I texted?”

“I say let’s wait for a green light. Right now, we’re jumping to conclusions.”

To her, it’s more than a conclusion. She can’t shake the feeling—an instinct, like a mother who knows her baby is sick before she places a hand on the child’s forehead. Joshua’s voice brings her back.

“I’ve also been thinking about the past couple of days and something sticks out to me.”

“What is it?” Maddie hears the girls fidget in their chairs.

“When I showed up at the rink before the competition, I noticed another kid looking around for Sarah. I thought maybe he was another contestant, but then when I watched the competition, he wasn’t in it. He seemed a few years older than her, too.”

“You sure you’ve never seen him before?” Maddie catches Bridget’s gaze.

“Maybe it was her man.”

Her man? A man? It makes her skin crawl. *Isn’t she too young to be talking to ‘men’? Shouldn’t she be talking to boys?*

“What, like someone she met up there?”

“More like a boyfriend. Maybe she brought him with her.”

She crinkles her forehead. “No, she would tell me.”

“Sweetie, you’d be the last person she’d tell if she had a boyfriend.” Joshua breaks into a chuckle.

“Why’s that?”

“You would probably kill the poor guy. Mama grizzly.”

Her shoulders slump. The tattoo and now this? *Am I really not approachable anymore?* They used to tell each other everything, what happened to that?

“Hell, I would be scared to introduce you to any of my boyfriends. You have a glare that could incinerate a man.”

“Alright,” she says. She watches Rachel get up and refill her cup. “I’ll text or call you if anything changes.”

They hang up. Rachel lingers by the water and Bridget fidgets more now. *The smell in Sarah’s bed.* If Sarah has a boyfriend down here, Bridget’s definitely met him before, especially being the roommate. If Sarah met a boy up in Canada, then Bridget would’ve been there for that too. Maddie tilts her head.

“Does Sarah have a boyfriend?”

“I have no idea. I don’t think she interacts with boys that much.” Rachel gulps down her water. “I mean, she’s got that virginal Disney Princess look going for her with the blue eyes and white hair. Guess I fell for it, too.”

Maddie disregards the comment and focuses on Bridget, who picks at a hangnail.

“Bridget?”

“Okay, yes. I think she does.”

“Did you say something to the detective? She could’ve run off with him.” Maddie clambers to her feet. Bridget pushes back her chair, eyes widening, but Maddie can’t quell her self-loathing. *Why are they hiding this from me? When did caring about someone become wrong? When did I become the bad guy?* Tears sting her eyes and she rubs them away. “Did he come with you guys to Quebec?”

“No!” she squeaks. “I-I mean. I don’t know anything. I just found out myself. All I know is that his name is Tom. Everyone calls him Tommy.”

“That does sound familiar,” Rachel adds.

“Tom what?”

“I don’t know his last name. And I mentioned there was a boy to the detective but I don’t know that much.”

“When did you find out about the boyfriend?” Maddie sighs.

“Really recently—I’m not sure when.”

She pulls over her sweater, trying to push away the thought of a man’s body on top of her little sister’s. She wants to gag. *I guess I fell for the look, too.* Detective Hall knocks on the door and Bridget looks relieved. Rachel joins her and rubs a hand on her back.

“How is everyone doing in here?” No one replies. Detective Hall glances between the three of them. “So, we’ll most likely be doing logistical work from now on. Cleaning up and helping with the transfer.”

“Transfer?” Maddie asks.

“The Quebec station is officially handling the case, as of right now, Ms. Price.”

Bingo. Green light. Maddie slips her sweater back on, and nods. Hall watches her.

“You’re all welcomed to stay, but it’s okay if you want to leave. Ms. Price, we were going to schedule an official interview—just protocol, but we can always do that at another time.” His eyes soften. “When you’re feeling a bit better.”

“I should probably check on my mother. Her surgery was this morning.”

“I hate to say this, but...I have econ homework that’s due tomorrow,” Rachel says.

Maddie nods. They agree to leave for now, and they collect their things. Maddie thanks Detective Hall and she, Bridget, and Rachel exit the station. They walk the half-mile to the Rutgers campus, a heavy silence swamping them. In the frigid air, Maddie squeezes the girls into a hug.

“Thanks for everything,” she breathes. “I do appreciate it, even if I don’t show it very well.”

“Maddie,” Bridget says. “I’m sorry.”

“I know—”

“No.” The girl grabs her hand. “I really am, truly sorry.”

Her words fall deeply, like fat raindrops smattering against pavement. Not like her other apologies—the automatic, empty ones that skitter around and fill the spaces between her other words. Genuine.

“You’ve helped more than you think.”

Bridget nods. Maddie watches the girls enter the campus and she turns to the bus station. She’ll go to her mother, but she has another stop first.

Maddie jams the key into the lock and shoulders her apartment door open.

The grey paint curls off from the door and flutters to the floor like swirling snowflakes. She runs her hands over the wall to snap on the lights. A honey glow rushes through the apartment and illuminates the kitchen-living room. On her left is an L shaped, sandy countertop with mix-matched appliances. A squishy couch she acquired from her mother’s attic pushes up against the right wall of the room. Art and literary magazines are spread across the coffee table.

When the superintendent dropped the keys into her hands the day she moved in, he said he didn’t care about her changing the walls as long as they were white when she gave the keys back. When she got the apartment to herself, Maddie attempted to paint a faux window above the couch, which matches the frame of her real one. Over the course of a month last year, she painted an impressionistic vista of Central Park. With it finished, the space was officially her apartment. Her home. And she needed to come home.

She calls both the bar and the Met to explain the situation. Her manager at the bar gives a gruff response, but Debra only shovels her with empathy she doesn't feel she deserves.

"This must be so difficult—"

"Debra, please. Please, stop."

"Okay, but you call if you need anything."

Maddie thanks her and hangs up. She plants her purse on the kitchen counter and heads down the hallway to her bedroom. She flips on the lights to reveal a room large enough for an unmade full bed against the back right corner and a small, scratched up bureau, with worn down edges on the opposing wall. Stacks of paperback and hardcover books line the back wall—the room being too small to fit in a bookcase. Her piles have only grown in the past year, since her ex moved out and no one else has been here to always comment on how much she reads in her limited spare time.

She crouches down at the foot of her bed and pulls a duffle bag out from underneath it. Detective Hall did say the case has moved to Quebec. She stands and grabs a few sweaters and her favorite jeans from the chest of drawers. She tucks them into the duffle. She surveys the room, looking for what seems, at this moment, the most important item.

On the top of the bureau, she pushes aside a costume necklace and reaches for her silver chain bracelet with the engraved, sun pendent. She remembers how Sarah beamed down at the bracelets in the gift bag as they left the store. *Sometimes, silver is good*, she said. Maddie slips it on.

She stares at the bureau. She opens the top drawer and rummages around until her fingers clasp over a smooth metal. She pulls out a small pocketknife, with a black handle and a sleek gold plated blade, the one her father gave her on her eighteen birthday, two years before he died. It was

the same pocketknife his father had given him. When he passed it on to her, he said, *for when you need to fight dirty.*

She runs her thumb along the blunt end and the metal catches in the light.

Sometimes, gold is better.

Maddie finds her mother half-awake in the recovery room. A fresh bandage swaddles Victoria's entire torso. Her face is stripped altogether of makeup. Her mother can't pretend, anymore. Maddie can see how lost Victoria seems, and yet, how unempowered her mother feels to take charge. Maddie places her duffle down by the door.

"How are you doing?" she asks.

"They removed both implants to be safe." Victoria blinks.

"But, how are you doing?"

"Honestly," Victoria sighs. "I don't know if I'll get them replaced."

"It's fine if you don't."

"Why did I do this? Why do I always do this? Everything's falling apart."

"It's okay—"

"No—you don't get it. I just wanted implants."

"I know." Maddie situates herself in the empty chair. She trances a finger over a seam in the fabric. "Where's Henry?"

"He's out getting real food for me."

Maddie nods. If he doesn't come back before she leaves, she'll text him an update. She'll ask him to help. She normally wouldn't want to let Henry further into their lives, but Victoria needs someone to look after her. Maddie just wanted a mother, but she always wants that. She always expects that, and every time, Victoria acts the same. Maddie crosses her arms and tells

herself to accept it. She knows that Henry cares about her mother. She feels a tinge of embarrassment over the desperation she showed in front of him last time.

“I’m kind of droopy,” her mother says.

“Do you want water?”

“It’s the drugs. It’ll wear off.” She bobs her head. “Maddie?”

“Yes?” Maddie rubs her face with a hand.

“Madeline. Look at me.”

Maddie snaps her head up. Her mother never talks in a grave tone. She leans forward and drops a hand on the bed next to Victoria, who shifts to stare at Maddie with icy precision. Her skin looks leathery under the lights, and suddenly, Maddie realizes her mother won’t live forever. In that moment, she truly understands her mother won’t just die, but she’ll be gone. And Maddie will have no one with whom to hold such a delicate, and yet consistent, relationship. She always viewed her mother as an addendum to her and Sarah’s relationship, despite wanting more from Victoria. But when their mother dies, there will be no one around whom she and Sarah can congregate. No one around whom they can orbit like the sun. Victoria coughs.

“If you find her...”

“When I find her,” Maddie corrects.

“Tell her I love her. And just—just don’t let her go.”

Maddie manages an okay. She drops her head on the bed by Victoria’s arm and feels the scratchy blanket against her forehead. She shutters a breath and heat spreads across her chest. *Pull yourself together, pull yourself together*—but the journey in front of her seems unfathomable.

Maddie feels the light touch of Victoria’s hand on her head. Her mother strokes her hair and water dams at Maddie’s lids. She wants to free them, to let her tears drip onto the mattress. But in front of Victoria, she can’t.

“You always were the strong one,” her mother murmurs. “And you don’t get it from me, that’s for sure.”

Maddie shakes her head but doesn’t lift it. Victoria only talks like this when she’s so drunk she can’t spell her own name. But this time, her sober voice doesn’t whine with self-pity. It seems knowing, maybe even, admiring. Yet, it only makes Maddie feel sick with sorrow. She says nothing and feels her mother brush her hair with a soft touch. For the first time, she feels thankful for Victoria’s delicacy. After a few minutes, her hand relaxes and rests in place. Maddie breathes and clears her throat.

“I don’t think I can do this.”

She raises her head and meets her mother’s slack face, her soft snores. She stands, collects her things, and heads for the door. She’ll tell Henry, and he can fill in Victoria later, when she’s off drugs. Maddie pauses at the threshold of the door and glances back. Victoria stirs and blinks bleary eyes. Maddie watches the pale, taut face and she knows. If she doesn’t bring Sarah home, she may lose more than just her sister.

“You’ve got a duffle bag,” Victoria says.

“Yes.”

“You’re going to get her, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Make yourself impossible to ignore.” Victoria and Maddie lock gazes.

“I’ve never had a problem with that, Mom.”

“You got that from me.”

“I know.” Maddie smiles and hauls up her duffle bag. “I’ll be in Quebec City.”

Chapter 10

Luc

When the station has mostly emptied out, Luc nods towards Chief Girard's door. It's time. Remi agrees, and the two of them approach his office and enter. Once inside, the Chief asks Luc to close the door. The Chief presses his fists against his dark stained wood to raise himself out of his chair.

“Although we're waiting for the family's cue, I would like this to be kept off the media radar.” He places his glasses on the desk.

“But the public can provide tips if we put the case information out there,” Luc says before he registers his quiet partner. “What about NCMPUR?”

National Centre for Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains—NCMPUR—is the public online database that allows any precinct to upload missing persons case details in order to share information between divisions. It allows anyone to submit a report, or provide new information.

“We can upload a file for the NCMPUR, but that would be up to Inspector Fortier. A BOLO has already been put out to other precincts and agencies. I'm talking about the media, not the public, Inspector Dubois.”

They fall into a silence. Remi coughs. “You have my word, *monsieur*.”

Luc furrows his brow. He assumes his partner is trying to follow orders and make everyone happy. Yet, Luc's stomach churns.

“But, Chief—”

Chief Girard waves him off and directs his attention to Remi. “Thank you for your cooperation, Inspector Fortier. You're dismissed.”

Remi's gaze bounces between Luc and the Chief. After a few moments, he departs, but Luc remains. When the door closes, Chief speaks again.

“The second a case explodes onto the media, you know how it can get with the onslaught of tips that come in. Normally, we have a secure location where we can set a perimeter and talk to neighbors, and a tip can overcome dead ends. But we don’t even know where to start—”

“Even more reason to go public.”

“Inspector, the lack of location, evidence, and eye witnesses, leaves the investigation too unfocused. If we start big, we’ll spend all our time running around. And ninety-nine out of a hundred tips are useless, and in fact, waste our resources. So, do I have your word, Inspector Dubois?”

“What about the one tip?”

“The attention will attract the wrong kinds of people. The desperate ones, the creeps, the stalkers. And the media itself will prey on this family’s trauma. It’s all about the number of viewers each channel can get.”

“Sir—”

“They’ve become useless like us because of the low crime rate the past couple of years. They need something to do, too. They’re hungry. And I don’t want this case to become a circus.” His eyes narrow in on Luc. “The Winter Carnival brings in the largest amount of tourism this city sees all year. And do you know what makes the Carnival so appealing?”

Luc doesn’t look at him. He knows the question is rhetorical.

“It’s safe. And Americans are our largest tourist group. Do you know what would happen if the press gets hold that an American disappeared during the Winter Carnival? The tourism revenue would just...” The Chief whistles low into a plummet. “Tourism that keeps this city afloat—have you seen how many decrepit buildings lie just outside the metropolitan area? We’re barely hanging on as it is.”

“I just don’t know.”

“Inspector, the processing programs on your computer are almost nine years old and that’s nine years too old for any major case that comes across your desk. We’re the Titanic with not enough lifeboats and we’re just waiting to hit an iceberg.”

Luc says nothing, unable to acknowledge that Chief Girard is right.

“Do you understand now?”

“*Oui, monsieur.*” Luc matches Chief Girard’s eye.

“*Bien.*” The Chief sits down. Luc swallows the anger boiling in his throat. It was easy for Luc to miss, or ignore, the politics with petty crimes. Yet, when a girl’s life rests on the line, it becomes harder not to question it. He turns to go, but hears the Chief speak again. “And Inspector Dubois?”

“*Oui?*”

“You and Inspector Fortier’s work has never gone unnoticed. I’m sure you heard the rumors about the transfer. It’s true that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is looking for new candidates by my recommendation. If this case goes smoothly, I will have an even greater reason to place you two on top of the pile.”

Luc clenches his jaw as his hand pauses on the door handle. He forces himself to relax. He may stunt his own career, but he can’t sabotage his friend’s. He looks back at the Chief.

“Don’t worry, *monsieur*. We’ll find her quickly.”

“And quietly.”

Chapter 11

Maddie

The first and only other time Maddie went to Quebec, she went by car because of a death in the family. This time, Maddie arrives at the airport for her sister's life. She de-planes a little before 9pm.

Leaving the terminal, the occasional French garble by passing families around her stirs something in the recesses of her mind. Snippets of her father muttering in French under his breath reemerge. The muddled memories of the occasional visits from her 4-foot-10 grandmother when Maddie was a child, the woman whose death instigated her first trip to Quebec. She remembers her grandmother would plant herself in a chair and zip sentences out towards Maddie's father like lightening striking across the room. She spoke only four English words to Maddie in her heavily accented, smoky voice—*Get me my medicine*—which meant, get her some whiskey. Her father would later tell Maddie that she speaks with the same fire and speed as his mother.

She shuffles heavy feet through the terminal and towards Baggage Claim/Passenger Pick up. The feeling one gets after a severe fight encompasses her—breathless, worn out, and worn through. The soulless lights bear down on her. In the Passenger Pick up area, Joshua, a tall, dark man, sticks out like a sore thumb among the shorter, squatter residents.

“Maddie!”

She rushes up to him and jumps into his arms, burying her face in his chest and smelling cologne and vanilla. A grin breaks out onto her face, and she realizes how good it feels from the inside out. She welcomes it. The past couple of days, the grief, fear, and frustration swarmed her like vultures, using her and then picking at the leftovers. But in this moment, she doesn't have to organize anything, struggle against someone, remind herself to observe—and question—

everything. She can just be Maddie. She doesn't have to always be the missing girl's older sister. Her smile twitches. She pulls away from Joshua to get a better look at him.

"How are you, honey?" he asks. "God, you look awful."

She laughs. "I promise it's the lighting in this place."

They make their way to her carousel in Baggage Claim. He goes to pick up her duffel as it comes around the corner on the conveyer belt, but she hauls it off and over her shoulder before he has the chance. She feels him watch her face and knows he's wondering when her facade will crack. She smiles harder, her cheeks almost in pain. He wraps an arm around her. His lean, figure skating, muscles press up against her.

He stands at six feet, with dark skin he inherited from his Ethiopian mother. She raised him on her own after his father caught Joshua twirling on the pond in the backyard of their small Minnesota house. His father had pushed him into the snow, calling Joshua a "fairy," and walked away. After that, his mother only encouraged what he loved. He became a rising star, an Olympic Hopeful. Then, he blew out his knee at twenty. He became a coach—he couldn't see himself doing anything else—Sarah's coach. And one of Maddie's closest friends. *Kindred spirits*, as Joshua would call them, *since we're always disappointing one parent or the other* and they would laugh. Joshua rubs Maddie's arm and she realizes her face has fallen. She forces a smile.

"We have an appointment with the police station. 7:30am," Joshua says. "So, we're all set."

"Okay." She drops her duffel onto the ground.

"They're talking to us first thing in the morning."

"I know."

“You’ve done the report and we’ve given them all the information we have so far. There’s really nothing more we can do tonight.” Joshua watches her, then checks his watch. “It’s barely 9pm—why don’t we go get a drink? No use staring at the hotel walls.”

“You know what?” She lifts the bag over her shoulder. “That’d be nice.”

“Oh, I went on a bus tour. The city is gorgeous—I need to tell you about it.”

Joshua drives his rental car towards the city, six miles away. The city lies on a large, cliff bank of the St. Lawrence River. He informs Maddie that “Quebec,” a Native American word, translates to “where the river narrows,” as the river is about a mile wide at its thinnest. He’s been staying at a small “cute, cottage-y hotel”, as he describes it, in Old Quebec. The car dips off the highway to the base of the city. The car lurches up the steep avenue towards the top of the hill. Stop and heave. Red light. Lunge again. Maddie grips her churning stomach. She ate a grey chicken sandwich at the airport that she now regrets.

“Can we stop soon?” She turns down the heat on the passenger side. “Let’s just go to the nearest place.”

Joshua turns down the closest side avenue and squeezes the car into a parking spot, with a snow bank rising three feet from the street curb. A few yards down from them, a wooded bar sign bangs against the building. Ice coats the name, but neon letters in the front window indicates *Ouvert, Bienvenue*.

“Good?” Joshua asks.

Maddie nods. She gathers herself up and opens the car door. A blast of icy air hits her, then wears off as they enter the bar, stomping snow off their boots on the welcome mat. Her toes still tingle from the cold. A smoky, brick room greets her, with a narrow bar stretching half the length of the right wall. On the left, two cast iron fireplaces flank the room, with empty seats circled

around them. Soft music filters through the air. A few, scattered people huddle in front of the counter, shouting something in French to another lone patron, who cackles.

She and Joshua take their seats at the bar and order two glasses of Cab. She looks around the room as a woman bumbles through the door. Several people exclaim at the sight of her and raise their glasses. The only ones who don't look up at the additional member of the congregation are two men several stools down from Maddie and Joshua. They pour over sheets of papers spread along the bar top. Two whiskeys rest in front of them, one taken neat, and the other on the rocks. The bartender places two glasses of red wine before Maddie and Joshua, and she sips. The wine tingles her tongue and warms her chest as it slides down to her belly. She feels her shoulders relax for the first time in two days. She swallows some more and her toes begin to thaw.

“Bridget said that Sarah's boyfriend's name is Tommy,” she says after clearing her throat.

“Might be that boy I saw looking around for her.” Joshua tastes some of his own drink. “I know one of the judges from the skating competition. I can call to see if anyone registered with Tom, Thomas, Tommy, all those names.”

“Good idea.” She rubs her thumb against the glass stem of her cup.

“Or, it could be a boy she met up here, and Tommy is her boyfriend in New Jersey,” Joshua says.

Maddie raises an eyebrow. “I don't know. Bridget could've been confused.”

“We can talk about it at the station tomorrow.”

She reaches for his hand and squeezes it. She gulps some more wine and orders another glass. “Do you want some more?”

“I'm okay, I'm driving.”

She opens her mouth to say something but pauses. The song filtering through the speakers switches and she recognizes the opening notes. She locks eyes with Joshua, who laughs.

“Remember that night in Albany when we accidentally got trashed and this song played?”

She grins.

“How could I forget? We had to be up at 4am for Sarah’s competition.” He smiles and covers his mouth. “I had you pull the car over to throw up on the way there.”

Maddie bursts with laughter as she remembers a visibly sallow Joshua, gripping the car handle. Sarah squeaked in the backseat, panicked, and Maddie pushed down her own bile, the two adults ignoring her until they couldn’t anymore.

“And we told Sarah we ate bad sushi the night before.” Maddie giggles.

“Wow, that was so unprofessional. I don’t think I’d had that much to drink since college.” Joshua cackles and sips his wine. “Too bad there’s no pool table here for you to dance on top of.”

“‘Tiny Dancer’ always gets me going. You know, it used to be an old routine of mine.”

“Routine?”

“Skating routine.”

He almost spits out his wine. “What? I didn’t know you skated!”

“Yeah, I went to group ice skating lessons with one of my friends. My mom stroked the check for me, her mom drove us.”

“I thought you played hockey.”

“Only after the teacher told me I was too big for skating. I picked ‘Tiny Dancer’ just to spite her.” Maddie swallows some wine and it tastes acidic in her mouth. She stares straight ahead. “She didn’t say that to my friend—or Sarah. But yeah, I didn’t fit into any of the glittery costumes. I still remember the routine though.”

“Forget about that teacher. You should do the dance.”

“What?”

“The song’s playing. Now’s your chance.”

Maddie stares at Joshua. *Is he crazy?* She watches him flag down the bartender again and ask him in French to raise the volume. His French greatly surpasses hers—after he lived in Nantes, France for two years and dated a local man, who Joshua referred to as “my petit croissant,” before returning to the U.S. Her French consists of simple sentences from her high school French class and her father’s grumblings, and even then, the language feels clumsy and thick on her tongue. She regrets not trying harder, but her father never wanted to speak it to her. He didn’t want to be buried in Quebec, either.

The man disappears to the station behind the bar. Joshua winks at Maddie and slides his half drunk glass over to her.

“If you need extra encouragement.” They hear ‘Tiny Dancer’ crescendo through the speakers and Joshua laughs. “Come on, you did it in Albany. Why not here?”

“I was five tequila shots deep in Albany!”

“If you can dance on a pool table, you can dance here.”

Maddie grabs Joshua’s wine and swigs the swirling liquid. Her chest blossoms with warmth. He gestures for the bartender to raise the sound even more, which he does. She hears people shift in their seats. Maddie eyes Joshua then pushes back her stool. It squeaks against the wood, and in a room full of seated people, she stands.

“You got this,” Joshua says. “Take off your shoes, it’ll be easier.”

Maddie tugs off her boots and tosses them at Joshua’s feet. Her socks press into the cold floor. She feels the trail of eyes on her, but her cheeks burn with heat and her thoughts slide down to her feet. Everyone watches as she strides to the center of the room. The ground spins beneath her, but the sound of Elton John sashays around her like a dance partner. She shuts her eyes, suppresses a giggle, and listens to the piano. She locates a gesture within her memory. Her arms float upward, her leg swings outward, and she dances with closed eyes.

Maddie descends into a familiar pattern, swimming along the melody, its momentum swaying her limbs, oscillating her torso. Each motion peels away the needling fear, the heavy guilt. She feels the collective gaze of the room on her, the communal breath held. But the dance returns to her the way well remembered knowledge becomes instinct. Her mother's birthday, Sarah's laugh, Joshua's smile. Her pain.

She whirls in the darkness and hears murmuring from those around her. She doesn't stop—she won't stop. She moves through their mutters, and as she does, she notes a swelling energy. A shared voice, made from individuals' whispering, that accompanies the song. She's not too big—she never was. In this moment, she's perfect. The whole room sings.

Maddie opens her eyes to the warbling faces. People lift their glasses, all except one man who doesn't join the chorus. He just watches her with glinting eyes. She dances harder, swings through the routine with larger gestures. But her eyes draw back to the man, the man who won't let her feel intact. The man who won't melt into the rest of the audience that props her up.

She falters, stepping in a puddle of melted snow. She recoils and feels the floor jerk out from under her. She slams into the ground and the room gasps. She stares at the spinning ceiling and her breath slowly returns. In moments, Joshua looms over her and grabs her arm.

“You're okay.” He pulls her up.

But she fell, and the quiver in her chest returns. Every fear and moment of guilt, every time she wasn't good enough rushes back into her stomach, her mind. Her chin trembles.

“Joshua,” she croaks.

“Let's go, I already paid.”

He yanks his jacket on while she wedges her wet feet into her boots. They collect their things, feeling the burn of everyone's gazes. The one man in the back, the one who wouldn't raise his glass, glowers down at his papers.

Joshua hustles her out, and they cram into the car. He drives away and after a few minutes, he informs her that they're entering Old Quebec. The car heads towards a large stone wall, with the road running right through a giant entryway. The landscape of the city changes from modern buildings and wide main streets, to narrow avenues and short taverns lining the sidewalks: like driving back in time. They turn off the main street and stop in front of a cottage-like townhouse.

The front foyer reminds her of an estate house. Too nice, large and traditional to be a home today, but too personal to be a hotel. Embers smolder in the large, stone fireplace in the center of the room and warmth still emanates from it. This time, Maddie lets Joshua take her bag as her hands shake too much.

They climb the stairs, find Joshua's room, and unlock the door. She's greeted by a thick red carpet, velvet drapes, and queen-sized bed. Part of her knows she should feel weird about sharing a bed. Yet, on the phone they agreed one hotel room would be cheaper, and though she may try, she doesn't care. She just wants to sleep, to leave behind the embarrassment of her fall and the failed desire to feel free. Joshua changes in the bathroom, while she retrieves sweats and a T-shirt. Once dressed, she draws her hair into a ponytail and drops into the bed. He turns off the lights and rolls onto his back, about a foot from her.

In the dark, her facade cracks. She lets tears slip down the sides of her temples and wet the pillow. A soft sob escapes her lips. Joshua's hand brushes against her open palm and he interlaces his fingers with hers. The covers tremble with her shattering cries. Joshua squeezes tighter. Maddie's feeble whimpers finally cease and she welcomes the overbearing fatigue. Her muscles unlock and loosen, and her body sinks into the mattress. She still grasps Joshua's hand. She listens to him snuffle next to her, then glides into a heavy sleep.

Chapter 12

Sarah

Her head pounds as if a firing squad marches through it. She lies on her side, her ribs bruised from the hard floor. She traces her moon tattoo with a thumb.

She thinks about him. About the way he watched her with glinting eyes. The way he said her name, as though he was able to peel back her layers of skin and protection and see the raw underneath. His laughter at her scream, the way he shoved her back into the cell. The slam of the door and the wonder—

Is this how I die? Like a caged, starved dog? She closes her eyes and waits. Will Mom hate me for leaving her? She coughs, the pain choking her. Can Maddie forgive me?

Her sister who always fought for her, who let Sarah come crawling back, licking her wounds, when she had fought her own battles and lost. Tears squeeze through her shut lids, and she moves her hands to wipe it away. Feeling the moisture on her fingers, she opens her eyes. She brushes the salt water against her cracked lips. Amidst the swamp of exhaustion and pain, she almost laughs.

Then, she hears the dull thump of footsteps. She places her hands, her wrists painted with dry blood, in front of her torso and heaves up her body. She props herself against the wall. The door whips open and the dark room floods with the white, bright light. She shields her eyes with her joined, heavy arms.

“Sarah,” The voice steps closer to her and his feet reach her side. He crouches down next to her. His large hand grabs her cheek and his fingernail digs into her skin. She wants to scream.

“I brought you something.”

She doesn't meet his eye. He lays down a water bottle and a chunk of bread on the ground beside her. Her arms shoot out to get it, but he grabs her first.

“Sarah,” His voice is almost at a hiss. She doesn’t move. He lets go of her arms and cups her face with both hands. She closes her eyes. He tugs her to him. “You must be hurting.”

She feels his lips graze against her cheek. They travel to her lips and he kisses her hard. So hard, it feels like he bites her, wants to eat her, ravage her. A quiver smolders under her skin but she clenches her jaw to keep it from rising to the surface. She feels him relax, his grip loosens.

Sarah shoves him and he tumbles onto his back. She struggles to stand, but he springs to his feet, his body heaving. She raises a leg to kick him in the midsection. She always gains extra points for her powerful spins and leaps. But he grabs her foot before it collides with him. He shoves her down and she smacks onto her back.

She wheezes, then fumbles to regain her balance. She sits up before he has a chance to climb on top. She doesn’t want to pay for food that way. He looms over her. Then, her head jerks to the side. Her face stings and she finds herself lying on the floor again with the force of his hit. He stands up fully and straightens his shoulders. Sarah wants to scream with the fire erupting from her mouth, but the shock overtakes her. The slap reverberates a feeling of familiarity across her face, like a routine.

“Try that again, and I won’t be so easy on you.”

The door slams shut.

After the world stops spinning, Sarah gathers herself up and reaches for the water. She wants to gulp the entire bottle, but she doesn’t know when more will come, so she takes small, painful sips. It’s best for her jaw anyway. She rests against the wall, tearing away tiny chunks of the stale bread. It crumbles in her hand and she licks the flakes off her palm. The handcuffs rub her skin raw, unprotected.

She should have never visited him in Quebec.

Thesis Plot Summary

Day Three
Monday, February 6th

Maddie and Joshua meet Inspector Remi Fortier and Inspector Luc Dubois at the Quebec Police Station the next morning. Maddie realizes Inspector Dubois was the man at the bar who didn't raise his glass. He leaves to investigate Centre Videotron, the rink at which Sarah's skating competition was held, and Maddie and Joshua speak to Insp. Fortier and Chief Girard. They believe the lateness of the case and unknown location of Sarah's disappearance will make evidence collecting nearly impossible, especially because of the snow. Maddie wants to help but Insp. Fortier tells her to wait. Chief Girard departs, and Insp. Fortier leaves to get a coffee Maddie requested. When he exits, Maddie grabs the car keys.

Luc arrives at the hockey arena. He discovers an online article that reports an Olympic scout approached Sarah. When he contacts the scout, she says Sarah seemed too old and disinterested in the sport. In the stadium, he speaks about Sarah to coaches of the Junior Hockey League, who are running a practice. Their player, Tommy Evans, is dating Sarah. Tommy skipped practice but will be at their game later that day. As Luc leaves the arena, Maddie and Joshua enter. They speak to the janitor about the skating competition and he takes them to the Lost-and-Found. They discover Sarah's duffle and Luc takes the bag, despite Maddie's protests. Luc mentions the article, and he realizes Maddie and Joshua did not know. Maddie staggers out of the stadium.

Maddie and Joshua argue over Sarah's ability to skate in the Olympics. Joshua questions if Maddie wants her sister to succeed more than Sarah does. Insp. Dubois overhears, leaves for the precinct, and they return to the hotel. They reconcile, and using Sarah's laptop which Maddie still has, create a list of locations Sarah and her friends visited in Quebec. Maddie sees Bridget's last text to Sarah is *I'm sorry*, but feels wrong prying into other texts. On Instagram, they find Tommy's profile, who Insp. Dubois mentioned before they left. They learn about the hockey game.

Thesis Plot Summary

In the precinct, Luc and Miki bag and tag the items in Sarah's duffle, as Remi left for a follow up with the museum. Miki believes Maddie is jealous of Sarah. They discover an untouched chocolate bar, from a specific store near Sarah's college, folded in a sticky note that addresses her as "Bunny." They find a receipt from a hat shop in Quebec, stamped the day Sarah disappeared. Luc goes to the store and runs into Charlotte, the woman from the domestic disturbance call. He tells her about the case, but she reports nothing unusual. At the precinct, Luc joins Remi in a video conference call with Detective Hall. They consolidate a timeline of events and determine on her friends' last night in Quebec, Tuesday, January 31st, the girls went to a bar, but do not remember the name. After the call and thinking about Miki's comment, Luc searches Maddie's name in their computer system and uncovers a domestic disturbance last year. Neighbors reported shouting, glass shattering, but when police arrived, Maddie stood alone in the apartment, sobbing. He notes: *Sister had a mental breakdown a year ago.*

Maddie and Joshua attend a packed hockey game and realize that Tommy is an unofficial, violent enforcer—a now illegal position dedicated to injuring opponent players. After the game, they fight through a mob of screaming girls to get to the players' tunnel. Maddie climbs over the barricade and jumps down to the restricted area. Joshua jumps and pretends he injured his leg to distract a security guard. Maddie escapes to the lockers and eavesdrops on a conversation between Tommy and the inspectors. The security guard finds her and grabs her. She struggles against him, but he slams her against a wall. She hears Joshua shouting in protest, and unable to breathe, she passes out. When she comes to, she realizes Joshua holds her. Insp. Dubois stands over the facedown guard, calling Maddie the wrong name. Insp. Fortier takes away the man. Dubois says they will call tomorrow after the Tommy interview. Maddie asks Dubois if Tommy seemed nice. He says he doesn't know.

Thesis Plot Summary

Sarah sits in the dark, waiting. He enters and she tells him she is ready to be his. He says he will take care of her, and that she'll never need Maddie ever again. Sarah can't hide her shock. He grows furious at her lies and beats her.

Day Four
Tuesday, February 7th

Maddie paces the hotel room. It's past 10am, and no word from the police. She texts Tommy from Sarah's laptop, asking again for his address. He thinks it's Sarah. Joshua wrestles away the laptop and yells at her. She leaves for Tommy's apartment. He reeks of booze, and soon realizes Maddie sent the text. He feels angry and hurt, but she questions why he never reported Sarah missing. He tells Maddie that Sarah used to "go dark" on everyone the past few months, never leaving her bed for days, or disappearing altogether, and when she would reappear, she had new clothes, stuffed animals, snacks. Maddie wonders if her sister is depressed but denies it. Insp. Fortier and Dubois arrive to collect Tommy. Tommy and Maddie argue, and he accuses Sarah of cheating, calling her a slut. Maddie punches him. Insp. Dubois arrests Maddie.

At the station, Joshua sees Maddie in handcuffs, and Luc gives him the number of the American consulate. Luc puts Maddie in the holding cell and joins Remi for Tommy's interview. Tommy tells them that the bar is "Big Mo's," owned by one of Luc's friends. He says there's something dark in Sarah—both sisters—as Maddie texted him from Sarah's contact. This alarms the inspectors, as Sarah's phone is also missing. They realize she texted from Sarah's laptop, which they didn't know she had and is an obstruction of justice. Luc leaves the interview and a uniform takes Joshua to the hotel to collect the laptop. Back in the interview, Tommy reveals he and Sarah fought, but grows furious, flips the table. Afterwards, the inspectors discuss testing him for steroids. Remi also calls Luc out for being too soft on Maddie, saying, "Not every damaged woman is Aida." Luc interrogates Maddie, bringing up the laptop and the incident in the apartment last

Thesis Plot Summary

year. She refuses to explain, but says she used to resent Sarah for having a caretaker when Maddie herself didn't. She gains control, and Luc ends the interview. Miki tells Luc they found a Jane Doe that matches Sarah's description in the Montmorency Falls, thirty minutes outside Quebec. Remi is at the scene. Maddie overhears.

Maddie follows Insp. Dubois out to his truck, climbs in, and tells him he will have to drag her out if he wants her to leave. Giving up, he drives them out to the industrial countryside. When Maddie sees the body bag, she rushes to it, and Inspector Dubois lets her go, knowing she won't listen. She gets sick at the sight of the dead girl's face. It's not Sarah. Insp. Fortier comforts her while Insp. Dubois realizes his truck won't start. Fortier tells Maddie and Insp. Dubois to take his. On the way to his partner's car, Insp. Dubois tells Maddie he wet himself the first time he saw a dead body. He also admires her unyielding nature. That afternoon, Maddie wakes from a nightmare of the dead girl, and Joshua holds her. Then, her phone rings.

At the precinct, the inspectors discover a number on Sarah's laptop that sent her sexual messages, to which she doesn't reply, but doesn't block. The contact only has the rabbit emoji for its name and comes from a burner phone. The inspectors compare the friends and Tommy's statements and realize Sarah disappeared after 1am at the bar. Her friends said Sarah left with a boy, but Tommy stays until 3am. So, who did she go home with and why did they not search for Sarah? They speculate there was an argument but cannot prove it. Luc will go to the bar tonight, as he knows Mo. Miki is driving Remi to his mother's tonight, so he gives Luc his car as the truck is still in the shop. Luc calls Maddie, and feeling guilty, tells her where he will be that night, not explicitly inviting her. After the call, Chief Girard approaches Luc about the laptop situation. Lyc says he scolded her about it, concluding: "She's won't have any more inappropriate involvement in the case."

Thesis Plot Summary

At the bar, Insp. Dubois tells Maddie that this is where Sarah was last seen. Maddie asks if they found Sarah's moon bracelet, which they haven't. She requests a local drink, deciding she'll be a better sister tomorrow, and Dubois orders her a Caribou (mulled red wine, whiskey, and maple syrup). They bond over their Quebecer fathers who loved hockey more than anything. She feels tipsy. Insp. Dubois asks Mo about security cameras, which don't work anymore. Mo saw Sarah with the boy across the room, with the black eye, which Tommy gave him. Sarah was crying that night. Before Insp. Dubois has a chance to react, Maddie approaches the three college kids by the dartboards. The boy with the black eye ignores her, so she challenges him to darts. If she wins, he must answer all her questions; he proposes that if he wins, he gets to kiss her. As they throw darts, Maddie shows a photo of Sarah, but he brushes her off. Insp. Dubois interrupts the game before Maddie has her last throw. She asks what the boy did with Sarah, but he won't say. She pulls out her knife from her purse and throws it as her third dart. It hits the bullseye. She asks again and scared, the boy tells her they went for a walk that night. They walked to his hotel, but Sarah didn't go inside. He warmed himself up in the lobby, and when he returns to the bar, she was gone.

Only one other person has hit Sarah. She remembers the time she and Maddie were young and home alone. Sarah walked into Maddie's room, who on the bed with a boy. He was showing her his Nintendo DS. Sarah exclaimed she'll tell Mom, and Maddie chased her down the hall. She tackled Sarah and said she'll hit Sarah if she tattletales, to which Sarah said, "No, you won't." Maddie slapped her and Sarah cried. Maddie held her, said she'll never do that again, and to tell her if anyone ever does. Sarah remembers last night the drum of his fists against her. She was on the losing side of *kill or be killed*. The door opens and Henry walks in with an icepack and a stuffed bunny with a pink ribbon around its neck.

The narrative switches to Henry's POV, who stands in the doorway. A year ago, he saw how Sarah struggled between her negligent mother and smothering sister. And he saved Sarah.

Thesis Plot Summary

Now, he just wants to get back to that night in the car, when he felt happy because her nails dug into his back. But after, she cried and started dating that boy. She wanted him to try harder. He bought Sarah stuffed animals he'd find later ripped up in the dumpster outside her dorm.

Henry grabs Sarah and ices her back despite her squirming. She relaxes, and with a free hand, he retrieves the syringe. The drugs will help with her pain. He tries to inject her big toe, but she kicks him in the face. When he wipes the blood from his vision, she's crawling towards the entrance. He tackles her and strangles her. She needs to listen to him. They need to get back to that night. Doesn't she know how much he loves her? He locks eyes with Sarah and his anger recedes. He peels his hands off her, locks the door, and leaves. Today, he'll succumb to her. In his apartment, he spreads out gasoline, propane, and the fertilizer, Ammonium Nitrate. He wanders to the bureau and strokes one of Sarah's sweaters. If he can get her to listen, she'll never have to worry about a weak mother or a pathetic sister. He will give her the whole world and he will be her everything and they will be happy. Maddie and the detective are interfering. They want to take Sarah from him. He approaches his ingredients and decides it's time to mix.

Day Five
Wednesday, February 8th

By the search grid, Maddie and Joshua watch the special forensic team from Montreal scourer the streets for evidence. Insp. Fortier runs the field team while Dubois leads the team combing through CCTV and interviews. A commotion breaks out, and Insp. Fortier gestures them towards the center of the grid. Someone uncovered, potentially, Sarah's grey hat, frozen in the snow, with a brownish-red stain. Maddie exclaims that it's blood, but Joshua drags her away, swearing that they don't know. He yells that she's pushing too much. She realizes how exhausted—and suddenly old—he looks and agrees to do things his way. He hands her Missing Posters he created, and they stop at a few locations from their list. At the outdoor skating rink by

Thesis Plot Summary

the Quebec museum, Joshua commands the attention of a group of people and Maddie passes out fliers. The pair learn that there has been little media attention of Sarah's case, and Maddie brings posters to the museum. Inside, they meet a receptionist and Eric Boucher, Insp. Fortier's friend. The receptionist recognizes Maddie's bracelet. From the Lost and Found bin, she takes out Sarah's crescent moon bracelet.

In the precinct, Chief tells Luc and Miki that they think they found Sarah's hat. When they look at footage in that area, they only find one, in which Sarah disappears around a corner off screen and they cannot see in what direction she turns. They get a call from an elderly woman who saw the Missing Person's posters and recognized Sarah. She says Sarah visited her new neighbor several times last week, and that the girl even helped carry in her groceries and introduced herself by name. They get the address. Miki and Luc arrive at the apartment. After no answer, the landlord unlocks the door for them. Luc and Miki enter a sparse apartment, guns drawn, and spot propane on the counter. In the living room, Luc finds a phone with a smashed screen. Miki calls him over to the threshold of the bedroom. There's a giant collage of photos above the bed. All the photos are of Sarah.

Maddie and Joshua rejoice and return to the search grid with Sarah's bracelet. They give it to Insp. Fortier, who thanks them and will call the Chief to expand the search grid. He gives them hot chocolate, and tells them to call him Remi. Maddie feels sick at the sweet drink and leaves for a walk. She looks up to the sky, and for the first time in her life, she prays. She prays Sarah will come home. Remi finds her and asks if she wants a hat to avoid hypothermia. She agrees and as they walk to his car, he says he knows Luc brought her to the bar. Luc has been breaking the rules for her, which he never does. Maddie slows down to hide her surprise. Remi approaches the vehicle and opens the door. The car explodes.

Thesis Plot Summary

In the apartment, the landlord tells them that the resident always paid rent in cash, on time. They discover the name he gave was fake. Luc and Miki organize the evidence team and get a sketch of the man from the neighbor. The Chief arrives and pulls Miki aside. Together, they approach Luc, who asks what's wrong. Miki bursts into tears. In the hospital room, Luc sits by Remi's side. Remi's entire body is wrapped in burn bandages. He remains unconscious and unrecognizable. The doctor worries about the swelling in his brain, as his head slammed into the ground from the blast. Luc remembers the night he told Remi about Aida—his first year on the force when he was 20. Remi took a plastered Luc back to his apartment. It had been Aida's birthday that day. Luc got sick over the toilet, and Remi patted his back. Luc waits all afternoon for his partner to wake up. Remi passes away. Luc gets sick in the bathroom and sobs. He then goes to the assisted living home and speaks to Remi's mother, who has dementia. He tells her that Remi died, and she does not know who that is. Luc returns home that evening and Miki calls. He declines. He gets sick one last time. Remi is not there to pat his back.

Maddie awakens in a hospital bed. She recognizes Joshua at her side. She has a dislocated shoulder and second degree burns on her arm, but her distance spared her more serious injuries. Bridget and Rachel are flying up tomorrow to see her. Joshua hasn't called her mother yet because he couldn't find her phone with Victoria's number. She doesn't want to call. Insp. Dubois arrives and Joshua leaves to grab Ginger ale. Dubois apologizes for taking on this case: it was too personal for him but won't say why. She holds his hand with her good arm. They sit like this for a minute until Joshua enters and they break apart. Before Insp. Dubois leaves, he gives her back her phone, with a new screen. He says to call him Luc, and he leaves.

Henry knocks on Victoria's bedroom door. She smiles and he holds her, though her desperation disgusts him. He remembers when he was happy with her. That was when his cravings first began; when all he wanted to do was get things for Victoria that no one else could. He's a

Thesis Plot Summary

provider. He gets people guns, drugs, anything they couldn't obtain in the States. When his father left, he delivered mail on his bike and would bring the cash to his mother. Then, she would leave. She wouldn't return when the lights turned off or the fridge emptied. He learned to wait. She'd eventually come back, pupils as big as saucers, and collapse on the couch. He was not a good enough provider then. But now, Victoria was so satiated with everything. It wasn't fun anymore. Sarah was harder to please. She pushes Henry to be a better man, to be a better provider. When he returns to Quebec, he'll take her away to the place. There, she won't ever want for anything anymore. And they will be together.

Day Six
Thursday, February 9th

On the phone, Victoria yells at Maddie, pleading for her to come home. Maddie won't until she finds Sarah. Joshua enters the room with Bridget and Rachel. Joshua and Bridget leave to get food, and Rachel reveals that Bridget and Tommy are childhood friends, who Sarah only met when he visited Bridget. Bridget loves Tommy, and Sarah did not realize. Joshua and Bridget return. Rachel confesses that Bridget and Tommy slept together on the trip and Sarah found out at the bar the night she disappeared. Bridget snaps. Of course Sarah would go missing, she's always the victim. Just another reason for everyone to worship her. There's a knock at the door.

At the station, Luc meets with the Chief and the FBI agent, Agent Conrad, and his sympathetic partner, Agent Asker. The FBI has full jurisdiction of the Sarah Price case, as they believe the bombing, a terrorist attack, is connected to it. They haven't found the tenant of the apartment. Conrad wants Luc off the case, as he heard Maddie was at multiple crime scenes. He doesn't want a lawsuit, as she was injured in the blast. Conrad and Luc argue if Sarah is still alive, Luc believing she is with no proof, and Conrad saying the statistically she isn't. The Chief speaks to Luc privately, and tells him he can work on Maddie's security detail if he calms down. He

Thesis Plot Summary

apologizes to Luc, admitting he made a mistake not to include the media, as they offer protection: a blanket of cameras. Remi wanted Luc to have the promotion, as his partner wasn't going to leave his mother. Girard tells Luc to leave Quebec. If he stays here long enough, he'll end up like the Chief. He offers help if Luc should ever need it, and Luc leaves.

In the hospital, Tommy enters, and Maddie confronts him about cheating. All the teenagers fight. Luc enters, and Joshua says the kids need to leave, and when they go to the station later, to tell the whole truth. Luc takes them back to their hotel/home and Joshua and Maddie are left alone. Joshua tries to bring up her incident last year, but she asks about the case instead. He yells that they aren't useful anymore and she needs to accept that. It's too dangerous now and he's scared for her. He misses their friendship and not the overworked Maddie this past year. He's worried about his finances and has to get back to his other athletes. He says he stayed because loves her. She tells him to go. Joshua says she can't do this alone. He gathers his things and leaves.

Luc drops off the girls. When he drives Tommy home, Tommy reveals he thinks Sarah is dead. Even if she returns alive, he doesn't want to be with the new Sarah. After the talk, Eric Boucher calls Luc and tells him to come by the museum tomorrow to speak about something in person. He gets to Maddie's room and finds her alone with a sling on, with packed bags. He enters.

Luc asks where Joshua is, and Maddie lies. He tells her the FBI now has jurisdiction over the case. She wonders what he is doing tomorrow, and he tells her about Boucher. She asks to go, needing the distraction. He agrees. He asks again about Joshua, and if she has a place to stay tonight. They drive to Luc's apartment, and Maddie flinches when she uses the car door handle. In his apartment, Maddie uses the bathroom to shower, and finds her reflection in the mirror unrecognizable. As she turns on the water, she realizes she cannot get her arm bandage wet, never mind lift up her hand to wash her hair. In the living room, she asks Luc to wash her hair in the kitchen sink. He does so and the two laugh through the embarrassment. The two eat Brie and

Thesis Plot Summary

crackers and talk about their families and art. She discovers Luc painted the pictures in his apartment, including her favorite of his family cabin. That night, Luc takes the couch, and Maddie falls asleep in his bed, thinking of him.

Sarah picks at the stuffed bunny's fur. She hears footsteps pass by her door, but he doesn't come in. She grows angry, and slams on the door to get his attention. Eric Boucher, the museum owner, opens the door, and yells in shock at Sarah. He realizes she's the missing American. As he helps her down the hall, Henry tackles them. He grabs Boucher, and Sarah stumbles away. She looks back to see Henry strangling Boucher to death. Henry glances up at her with blood shot eyes. She sprints for her life.

Day Seven
Friday, February 10th

Maddie and Luc go to the museum to meet Eric Boucher, who has not come into work. The receptionist, who Maddie knows from yesterday, allows them to leave a note. Maddie and Luc slip inside Boucher's office, and they spot an envelope addressed to Luc. Inside, Maddie touches a powdery, white substance, which she believes is bomb material. She panics and Luc reassures her its drugs, with an employee termination file. Luc recognizes the name. They depart the museum, and outside, Maddie slips on ice. Luc tries to help her up, catching her off guard, and she has a PTSD attack at his touch. She remembers her hospital visit last year as a result of her abusive ex-boyfriend. When she recovers, she realizes Luc knows, and feels he views her as just another battered woman/case. Embarrassed, she walks away.

Luc sits in his car, scolding himself, then drives around Quebec to find Maddie. He stops at the hotel and runs into Joshua, who's leaving tomorrow. They talk about what happened. Joshua tells Luc that finding Sarah will save both sisters. He returns to the police station, where The Chief tells Luc that the phone in the apartment was Sarah's phone. They found drugs in the furniture, her sweaters, and a diary filled with progressively violent fantasies about Sarah. Chief gives Luc a

Thesis Plot Summary

copy of the sketch from the neighbor. They took hair off the pillow but have no match. Luc cashes in his favor with the Chief and hands him the drugs he found at the museum for lab testing. Back in the main area, Charlotte, the woman from the hat store, spots Luc and wants to talk, but is hesitant. Luc says he knows her husband, Antoine, was fired for being caught with drugs at the museum. She says he's done much worse. Conrad interrupts, telling Luc to stop interfering, and Charlotte leaves.

Maddie arrives at the search grid to find Luc, but instead, runs into Miki. The two women talk about Maddie and Luc's argument, and Maddie recounts some of her past to Miki, who says she has experienced abuse as well. Maddie wonders if a man, especially someone in law enforcement, could feel so powerless. Miki believes Luc already has. Maddie decides to walk to Luc's apartment. As she treks through the snow, she swears she hears a tapping noise. When she looks around, there is nothing.

Sarah wakes up in a bed with her hands free. The shower is running. She struggled to stand up, feeling concussed. The bedroom door is locked. She cannot find the key, but there's a window, frozen in place. She bangs on the glass. The shower stops. She bangs harder, hoping to break the glass and jump the two stories down to freedom. Even if that freedom is death. She sees a pedestrian walking down the street in a sling. She realizes the pedestrian is Maddie. She screams for her sister. Henry grabs her. He throws her to the ground and her head cracks against the floor. She throws up. Henry tells her that if she ever does something like that again, he will kill her.

Luc arrives at his apartment to see Maddie waiting outside. Inside, the two reconcile and Maddie changes into warm clothes. While she falls asleep on the couch, Luc plans Remi's funeral. There's a knock at the door, Maddie wakes up, and Luc answers it. It's the Chief. He tells Luc privately that the drugs in the employee report match the drugs they found in the apartment, as well as the one on which the woman at the Falls overdosed. They are tracking down Antoine to

Thesis Plot Summary

bring him in for questioning. They enter the apartment and the Chief tells Maddie she should leave the City, as they found bomb supplies at the apartment and do not know if more have been set up. She doesn't want to go home, so she suggests moving to Luc's family cabin, over an hour away, in the woods. Luc protests, but the Chief agrees.

Maddie and Luc drive into the woods to the cabin. They trek through the marked trails to his cabin, which lies the farthest north of this cluster of cabins, save for one. Inside, Luc lights a fire, explaining his great-grandfather built the cabin and he restored it. He opens a bottle of whiskey and the two drink to keep warm. Luc drunkenly tells Maddie about Aida's death, how his friends came to the cabin one night, and during a fight, Aida walked out. Maddie tells him that last year her ex-boyfriend returned to her apartment one day, and she threw objects at him to get him to leave. They lie in front of the fire together and Luc tells her she's incredible. Maddie takes a last swig of whiskey, thinking of Sarah, and tells Luc he's not important right now.

Sarah rattles in the back of Henry's car, feeling sluggish, maybe drugged. She remembers the night she and Victoria fought over her mother's drinking, months before, where Victoria told Sarah she was too childish, too selfish to understand. Henry drove Sarah home that night. When he kissed her, she felt mature. When he touched her, she felt scared. When they slept together, she felt numb. When they had finished, she felt wrong. Sarah uses her last bit of strength to grab the plastic latch of the door's lock, and tug upward.

Day Eight
February, 11th

Maddie wakes up in the only bedroom of the cabin, with a pounding head. In the kitchen, Luc cooks omelets. He slept on the couch. During breakfast, he asks if anyone told her about the apartment. Remi was supposed to. She doesn't understand. He explains the photographs, Sarah's phone, the sweaters, and the diary of fantasies. She asks if Sarah dies in them, and Luc reluctantly

Thesis Plot Summary

tells her yes. Maddie sobs. She imagines a life without Sarah: a family of four now two. She stumbles out of her chair, and Luc's coat draped on its back spills onto the ground. He takes her to the bedroom to lie down. She asks him to stay. He climbs into the other side of the bed, and exhausted, Maddie falls asleep. When she wakes, a snow storm rages on outside. She wakes Luc. She believes Sarah is alive: she would *feel* it if her sister died. She kisses him, and the two sleep together. Afterwards, Luc leaves for the precinct. Maddie stays, wanting time alone. She explores the cabin, finding a snowmobile key. She cleans up the crumbled paper on the ground from Luc's jacket pocket. With little service, she calls her mother, who seems drowsy. Maddie smooths out the piece of paper. She asks where Henry is, and Victoria confesses she's only seen him once since Maddie left for Quebec. Maddie stares at the paper: the police sketch of Henry. She hangs up and tries to dial Luc, but realizes she only has Remi's number. She calls Joshua and tells him. He says Charlotte came to him today before he left for the airport. She revealed Antoine worked under a smuggler, who she overheard in their kitchen the other night about having the missing girl. He's taking the girl the farthest north one can get in the Quebec area. Joshua and Charlotte are driving to the station now. They hang up, and Maddie rips off her sling, dresses, and heads outside into the blizzard. She uncovers the snowmobiles. If she's wrong, she'll come right back to the cabin. But if she's right? She drives onto the trail towards the cabin north of Luc's.

Luc arrives at the precinct. The Chief informs Luc that Eric Boucher's body was found in a locked basement closet the museum with urine, blood, and a stuffed bunny with its face bitten off. They lifted several prints at the scene. They believe someone has been smuggling goods into Quebec using the museum's travelling exhibits, which undergo different security measures at airports. They tracked down Antoine and Agent Conrad and Asker are interrogating him. Joshua and Charlotte and tell Luc and the Chief everything. Luc grabs a copy of the sketch and interrupts the interrogation. Conrad threatens to throw him out and Antoine won't talk. Luc switches to

Thesis Plot Summary

French, telling the man what they know: and that Charlotte ratted him out. He reveals the cabin to which Henry took Sarah, the cabin by Maddie. In the main area, the Chief says they cannot get out there quickly due to the blizzard. Joshua demands someone to go and Luc says he will, it'll be faster because he knows the area. Agent Asker offers their backup team.

Sarah shovels bread into her mouth in an old, small cabin. The living room has a lit fireplace, couch, and bookcase, and the bedroom has the only window. Henry orders her into the bedroom, and she asks for a shower. She notices how shriveled up her muscles have become, how bruised her skin is. When she gets out, she dresses in the outfit he laid out from her clothes. Henry kisses her, and she keeps her eyes open. She sees a figure through the window—Maddie. She pushes Henry off her with all her strength. His eyes glare with hurt and hate. He lurches at her.

Maddie sees Henry tackle Sarah through the window. She rushes through the waist-high snow towards the front door. Frozen in place. She notices that to the side of the cabin is a caged in skating rink. She spots a half-buried window well to a basement. She shatters the old glass and leaps into the crawlspace. She clambers up to the bedroom. Henry is on top of Sarah. Maddie throws her knife and it hits his shoulder. He rolls off, screaming in pain. Maddie pushes Sarah into the living room and locks Henry inside the bedroom. She gives Sarah her snow pants, jacket and gloves, realizing she didn't bring extra clothes. Maddie notices that Sarah looks starved. She faces the door, the idea of killing Henry flashes through her mind. Sarah begs for them to leave. Maddie pulls Sarah into a hug, and her sister sobs in her arms. She will never let go. Henry rips Maddie out of the embrace and holds the knife up to her throat. He had picked the lock with the bloody knife. Sarah pleads that she'll do whatever he wants, if he lets Maddie go. He loosens his grip, lowering the knife. Maddie tackles him. The knife skitters across the floor. Maddie punches his face over and over. Henry flips on top of her and strangles her. She passes out to the sound of Sarah screaming.

Thesis Plot Summary

Sarah claws at Henry's back and biting his ear. He shoves her off. She rushes over to the knife, but it slid into the fireplace. She grapples with it, searing her hand, and drops it in the fire. She shoves on a glove and picks up the top log. She smacks Henry in the side with the burning log. His shirt catches on fire, and howling, he rips it off. It lands on the couch, which ignites. He kicks away the log and it hits the wall dividing the bedroom from the living room. Sarah tries to wake Maddie. Henry slams Sarah against the wall. She sees Maddie's hand twitch, and flames eat away at the dividing wall and couch. Sarah asks Henry why he hurts her if he loves her. He lets go. He thought they could be together. He would give her whatever she wanted. Sarah says she wants freedom. He flips over the bookcase with fury. It blocks the door. The blackened walls moan with strain. Henry leaps towards her but she slams into his midsection. A rib cracks. He wheezes and doubles over. He staggers towards her and she kicks him with all her force. He falls backwards over the burning couch. She hears his screams. She trips and Maddie drags her to the door, laying her down. They swallow ash with each breath. Maddie jerks at the bookcase, but it won't budge. Sarah can't breathe. Henry aflame emerges from behind the couch and crawls across the floor.

Luc's truck sputters and gives out. He turns the ignition, but it's dead. He changes his boots and pops on his cross-country skis from the truck bed. He skies hard through the woods. With each stroke, the weight of Aida's ghost peels off his back like water pellets flying away. He spots a huge pillar of smoke above the trees. Luc pumps faster.

Sarah sees Henry clamor across the floorboards. Sarah coughs but can't move. His body withers to the ground, igniting the floorboards around him. The ceiling groans, fire eats towards them from every side. Smoke blankets the room. Sarah croaks her sister's name, who heaves at the heavy bookcase. Maddie yanks again and crumples on top of it. She hacks up ash and touches her purple neck. She hauls herself up and jerks the bookcase across the floor. The door creaks open. Maddie collapses against the furniture and her eyelids flutter. Sarah urges to move, but her

Thesis Plot Summary

chest explodes with pain. With her last bit of strength, Sarah reaches a hand out towards her sister. Maddie seizes Sarah's fingers, her bracelet glinting orange with the reflection of the flames.

Luc sees that flames engulf the entire cabin, a sphere of fire against the snow. He trudges towards the half-open door. He takes off his jacket and holds it over his head and around his body. He runs through the fiery opening. He spots a burning body, thinking its Sarah. He reaches for Maddie, draped across the bookshelf, who only says, "Sarah." She gestures to the ski jacket next to her. An ashy face peeps out of it. He gathers Sarah up, the girl mute, and tells Maddie he will be right back. He said this to Aida that night, who pleaded him to stay. But Maddie just tells him to go. He rushes through the flames and outside. He surveys the landscape: there's nowhere to put Sarah. She makes a small noise, but its incoherent. He spreads his jacket in the snow and lays her down. A loud groan comes from the cabin. Luc pivots in time to see the ceiling cave in.

Maddie sees the back end of the cabin collapse. She tries to move, but her throat burns, her limbs ache. The flames swallow up the only opening. The bookcase catches, and the fire munches towards her. She rolls off. She hears Luc shouting her name over the roar. His hand sticks through the flames. The ceiling over her head creaks. She grabs Luc's forearm, and he yanks her through. She screams as her shirt catches. Luc tackles her into the snow, and her clothes sizzle out. The rest of the cabin falls into the fire. Maddie asks Luc to put Sarah in her arms. He does so, wrapping his jacket around both of them, and holds Maddie. Sarah wheezes and Maddie talks to her, but the girl won't respond. Maddie feels Luc shivering behind her. She's tired. She's so cold, and so tired. Her eyelids droop shut, but Luc shakes her. He asks how she got to the cabin. She opens her eyes.

Sarah, Maddie, and Luc crowd onto the snowmobile, with Luc driving. After twenty minutes, the snowmobile skids onto the road. Luc shifts and they all spill onto the ground. The three of them clutch one another, laughing. Down the hill, headlights pierce through the snow.

Epilogue
Wednesday, February 15th

As Maddie leaves the hotel room for the hospital, Victoria asks to come. For three days, her mother has silently roamed the hotel, transformed into a waif, after Sarah saw her for the first time and screamed *get the fuck out*. At night, Maddie hears Victoria getting sick and crying in the bathroom, and each morning, her mother wakes up more sober. Maddie says Sarah needs her mother, to which Victoria scoffs, “What mother?”

Maddie convinces her to come, and they walk down the hospital hallway holding hands. When they arrive at Sarah’s room, Joshua sits by Sarah’s side, who has gained some color back in her cheeks. Luc arrives, and asks if Sarah would mind answering some of the FBI’s questions. She agrees. Agent Asker and the Chief ask her a few follow up points. She confirms their suspicions about the case in a calm tone. As she speaks, Maddie notices her sister fiddles with something around her wrist. At first, she thinks it’s the moon bracelet. Maddie looks closer and sees Sarah is stroking a ratty, faded pink ribbon. Sarah notices and glances up at Maddie. Maddie wants to ask what it is, but Sarah gives her a chilling look. A smile creeps across Sarah’s face.