



# Into the Fall

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** From debut author Tamara L. Miller comes a suspenseful psychological thriller tracking the mysteries of a seemingly mundane life as they come to light in the vast, unforgiving Canadian wilderness.

For better or for worse, Sarah Anderson has it all: a thriving career, a nice home in Ottawa, two young kids...and a marriage coming apart at the seams.

Then her husband, Matthew, vanishes without a trace during a family vacation up north.

Sarah and her children are nearly lost among the slumbering lakes, treacherous cliffs, and brooding forests of the Canadian Shield.

A glacier-scraped realm of ancient beauty and terror, it's a world away from the safety of the suburbs.

And a big storm is brewing.

A kind rural lawman comes to their aid and takes an interest in the case.

The trail goes cold, however, launching Sarah into a yearlong odyssey to find her husband.

On the way, she must reconnect with her estranged sister and duck the suspicions of a slick city police officer.

But that's nothing compared to unearthing the dark secrets buried deep in the granite of her marriage--and in herself.

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# Page 1

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It was cold the night Matthew disappeared. Sarah sat up into a frost-filled morning. Her eyes refused to open, so she tucked her nose beneath the lip of her sleeping bag and tried to ignore the invading chill. Her body, though, had other ideas, led by a bladder that hammered against her sleepiness. She moaned at the thought of tromping through the wet woods to the toilet at the campsite.

“Matthew,” she croaked. Her hand reached out beside her. An empty sleeping bag deflated under her touch. Months later, she will say she woke that morning to find her husband missing, but at her most vulnerable—when fear and loneliness creep in on sleepless nights—she’ll admit in those few moments, she knew Matthew was already lost to her.

Charlie and Bella were mummied in their kid-size sleeping bags, heads poking out like gophers. Sarah felt a kernel of unease at the sight of Matthew’s empty bag but shoved it beneath poor sleep and restless dreams. She pushed herself to her hands and knees with a sigh as she rustled around the tent floor, looking for clothes. The taste of last night’s s’mores and warm beer lingered on her tongue. She grabbed a fleece and pulled it on over the stretched-out long johns she wore as pajamas before tiptoeing around the kids.

Outside, Sarah straightened and listened to the pop of joints, stiff after the previous day’s paddle in the canoe. Even in her sleep-deprived state, she could not deny the beauty of this place. The campsite sat on a narrow strip of land stretching into the lake like an accusatory finger.

Mottled granite slabs under her feet sloped toward a half moon of beach, grainy with centuries of silt and glacier droppings, before fading into Nagadon Lake. Across the water, rock shoals stood against reddening maples and bonsai-like jack pines, displayed like a living Group of Seven painting. There were few other campers this late in the season, and cottagers stayed indoors on days like this, preferring hearth fires and board games to unpredictable skies.

There were no signs of Matthew's loping gate or head of thick hair on the campsite.

Sarah called out, just in case.

"Matthew?" The final syllable reverberated against wood and water. She felt an emptiness in the echo: Matthew's constant buzzing silenced by the solidity of rock and root. He could be off for a swim or a paddle, she told herself, glancing at the overcast sky. She grabbed toilet paper from the tent vestibule and took a step toward the latrine path.

The path led to the open-air pit toilet, beyond which lay only forest. The background thrum of the water muffled as soon as Sarah slipped among the trees. She brushed away a tangle of spider silk from her face. Sarah was a city girl, more used to the hum of rubber wheels on concrete and the base pulse of humanity; she knew what to expect from the creatures that walked asphalt paths. She found this world—the woods, the lake, the creatures that scuttled beneath dead leaves—capricious and uncontrollable. Gnarled trees and spiny bushes felt alive and watchful. She was reactive in this environment, obsessed by basic needs—food, water, shelter—and fearful that Mother Nature would betray her. The forest had its own pulse, pumping through moss-wrapped trees and deep-rooted ground cover. Sarah might not have known what it was, but she knew to respect it. She quickly used the latrine before scampering back to the campsite.

The first time Matthew had suggested camping, Sarah had been quietly aghast.

Outside the restaurant window, Christmas lights twinkled against the puddled streets of a mild December evening. She'd never camped before. It's 2007, she thought. Why would anyone voluntarily leave the comforts of central heating and down pillows to sleep on the ground?

They sat at the corner table of an Indian restaurant, rich in curry smells and lingering shadows. They were still new then, feeling each other's edges and deciding what to trust.

Knowing her job in theater made her a sucker for great writing, he paraphrased Ralph Waldo Emerson, trying to convince her. "You'll love Bella. She's a mutable cloud which is always and never the same."

"Bella?" Sarah raised an eyebrow. Would a third party be joining them?

Matthew placed his hand over hers across the table, lightly running his thumb over her knuckles. "It's what I call the Mirabelle River. We've spent too much time together to stand on formalities. The river is spectacular. She runs along the Ottawa Valley, fed by an endless number of lakes. You can spend days on her shores exploring outlets and tributaries and never see another soul. You'll see; you'll be as charmed with her as I am."

"You seem pretty enamored of a river," Sarah said. She mutely took stock of what she knew about this man: computer geek, nature enthusiast, relentless charmer. They had only been dating for a couple of months. She enjoyed their time together, knew she could fall for him, but how well did she really know this man? What would she be getting herself into if she disappeared into the woods with him? Her face must have betrayed her reservations.

"I'm not crazy, I promise," Matthew said, laughing. "It'll be fine. It's just a special place for me, that's all. I want to share it with you. I've never taken anyone else up

there, actually. It's a first for me." A shyness overtook his broad smile. "Kind of like introducing you to family."

Sarah felt like an awkward teenager who had just been asked out by the football captain.

Is this love, she'd wondered, or smarm?

A few months after that December night, Sarah found herself out on the *Mirabelle*, and it had not failed to charm—and terrify. She felt more like Homer Simpson than Ralph Waldo Emerson: oafish and out of her depth. She loved the lush quiet as her paddle slipped into opaque water, but she also felt ridiculous when the canoe tipped on a small set of rapids, sending her plunging into the current and scrambling for purchase on a muddy bank. For every charming group of river otters playing on a granite slab, there were voracious mosquitoes using her arm as a makeshift buffet. There was grace and absurdity and no end of dirt in her food. It could be breathtaking as well. On that first night, the river slipped into evening attire, cloaking itself in dozens of fireflies beneath the pinpricks of countless stars. She couldn't tell where the sky ended or began, as if the *Mirabelle* had swallowed the world.

Over time, Sarah perfected her technique for using the outdoor latrine and for all aspects of camping. This 2016 version of Sarah took perverse pride in her ability to start a fire, cook halfway decent noodles on a faltering camp stove, and steer the canoe with only minimal scarring to her paddle. While she would never completely embrace the great outdoors, she could give weekends over to Matthew's passions. It's what you did in a relationship.

Sarah scanned the waterline for the telltale shape of her husband, but only a light wind rippled the lake's surface. An athlete in university and a sometimes weekend warrior, Matthew was still sleek and muscled well into his thirties. This lake was a playground for him, riddled with little coves and bays well within his swimming

range.

“Mama?”

A sleepy child’s voice drifted from the tent. She quickly abandoned the search for Matthew. “Coming.”

“Mama, I need to pee.”

Charlie. Her little peanut. At four, he was what Matthew would call, not unkindly, a mama’s boy, and Sarah luxuriated in being the center of his world. Bella, on the other hand—they had named her after the river—was their eight-year-old wandering spirit who had emerged from the womb grasping at everything the world had to offer. The girl trailed after her father from adventure to adventure, already making steps toward her independence.

Sarah poked her head into the tent and was greeted by the sight of Charlie, his stuffed dragon, Norbert, in hand and both legs stuffed into one pant leg, struggling to walk toward the door. Bella was curled into a tight ball in her sleeping bag with her head resting on the large stuffed dog she had insisted on bringing, over Sarah’s objection. It was now coated in frog ooze, camp smoke, and crushed insects, but Bella seemed not to notice.

“Mama, I think my pants aren’t working.”

“You put them on wrong, doofus,” Bella said.

“Be nice, Bella.” Sarah stifled her own laugh. Charlie stared up at Sarah, more pleased by his sister’s attention than hurt by the insult.

Breakfast was a struggle. Matthew had strung the food bag up the night before to

protect it from bears, throwing a line over a high branch a few dozen feet into the woods. Sarah had to trudge over uneven terrain to retrieve it, stumbling over roots and dodging branches, fearful of stepping on a small rodent or, worse, a wasp's nest.

"Shit," she said when a sharp branch caught her shin. Sarah heaved the heavy canvas bag back to the firepit and dropped it on the ground. She pulled out an old propane stove, setting it up on a knee-high camp table composed of two tree stumps and a strategically placed log, and turned her attention to the food bag.

"Pancakes!" Charlie shouted. "Pancakes, pancakes, pancakes!" He danced around the firepit.

"No pancakes this morning, Charlie." Sarah struggled to open the hard plastic latch on the food bag.

"I want pancakes! Pleeeaaaasse, Mama."

"Where's Daddy?" Bella demanded.

"No, Charlie. It's oatmeal this morning," Sarah said. She yanked out their collection of breakfast food: some tacky bagels, instant oatmeal packages, and hot chocolate powder. A waft of stale peanuts and overcooked pasta burped out of the bag, churning Sarah's stomach.

"Mom," Bella said, her voice drilling.

"Please, please, please!" Charlie spun around Sarah as she wrestled with the stove.

Sarah hooked up the little propane canister and tried to get the flame going. Her fingers were awkward with cold. The stove refused to catch; the smell of propane hit her like a slap.

“No. No pancakes today, Charlie.” The wind gathered just enough strength to snuff out the paltry flame from the lighter. “Come on, come on, you stupid lighter.”

“Daddy would make pancakes,” Bella said, punctuating herself with a toe kick of the spent ash in the firepit.

“Well, Daddy’s not fucking here, is he?” Sarah said it under her breath, but not quiet enough. She froze.

“Mama, you said a bad word,” Charlie said. Bella smirked, taking in this new lesson in parental failure.

“I know, baby. I’m sorry.” Sarah sat down heavily on a damp log and felt the moisture seep through her pants. “Mommy lost her temper, that’s all. Daddy’s just gone for a swim. How about I make us some hot chocolate while we wait for him?”

Sarah busied herself again with the stove, feeling an irksome rush of gratitude when it finally lit. She poured hot chocolate powder into dented tin mugs, the wind tossing sprays of the powder into the air. When Sarah was angry or upset with him, Charlie had a habit of making himself small and watching her with doe eyes. She hoped he didn’t notice the quiver in her hand or see her eyes close against the lake as she waited for the water to boil.

Sarah sat on a log in front of an anemic fire. A bowl of instant oatmeal perched on her lap as she wrapped her hands around a mug of too-sweet hot chocolate. The sky was fully overcast now; black, bulbous clouds had crept in like creatures on a hunt. At the far end of the lake, sheets of rain darkened the horizon as if blinds had been pulled down.

The warm liquid did little to dispel the creeping chill, nor did the two layers of clothing and the wool hat Sarah had shoved on her head. The wind painted striations



across the iron-colored water as waves echoed against themselves into small whitecaps. Sarah faced the lake and kept a roving eye on the surface. It had been over an hour since she first dragged herself from the tent. Each little ripple of movement caught her attention and reverberated in her shoulder muscles. Matthew should have been back by now. His solo forays never lasted this long. And he had planned to take the kids fishing this morning. The uneasiness she had shoved away earlier oozed its way back, slithering over nerves.

Charlie and Bella hunted for frogs along the shallow beach edge. Windswept waves bubbled up the beach, making it hard to spot any creatures. Charlie scanned the shoreline, while Bella refused to look at Sarah, instead offering only grunts or nods in response to any questions. Like father, like daughter, Sarah thought, in response to her daughter's sullen mood. Sarah looked out to the lake and bottled curse words up in her head.

"The canoe," Sarah said, jumping up. Charlie looked up; Bella kept her back turned. Distracted by the kids and making breakfast, Sarah had forgotten to check if Matthew had taken the canoe out.

The land spit on which they were camped offered two shorelines. The tent faced out on a small strip of sandy beach. The other side of the point—hidden by a narrow line of trees—offered a steeper drop into the water, perfect for catching small bass that nibbled on the rock algae, beside a half moon of rough-sand beach. They always turtled the boat overnight, turning it upside down on the shore to keep out the weather. Last night's forecast had been thundershowers, so Matthew thought it best to move the canoe to the more protected side of the point.

A well-trodden path joined the two sides. Sarah followed it, quickening her pace and chastising herself for failing to look earlier. If Matthew was paddling instead of swimming, maybe he'd lost track of time again.

At the opposite bay, it took seconds for Sarah to confirm that the canoe was gone. The bay was small and well protected, but she walked around nonetheless, gathering some of the gear left out by the kids the day before. She picked up fishing rods and a can of bug spray and settled the strap of a damp tackle box over her shoulder.

“It’s a wonder we don’t leave half our crap behind every time,” she said to herself, bending down to gather one of the kids’ abandoned life jackets. As she turned to head back up the path, a flash of yellow—Matthew’s expensive kayaking life jacket—caught her eye beneath the deep green of a balsam fir, the tree’s needled branches reaching over as if to hide its prize. Sarah had spent extra money for the more streamlined version, and still, Matthew left it lying around.

Sarah snatched the life jacket from the tree as she passed. Irritation built to a burn in her belly. She was halfway back to the tent when the thought struck. If Matthew was out on the lake in the canoe with a storm pending, why was his life jacket looped around her wrist?

## Page 2

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Sarah heard a motor. The engine's muted roar stood out against the drone of wind and waves. A boat. The first they'd heard or seen all morning. She ran to the shoreline, nearly tumbling into the water as the uneven granite snatched at her feet. An expensive pleasure craft with an oversize outboard motor and pudgy swivel chairs was in the bay. A broad red stripe ran along the side with River Runner emblazoned in candy-red paint on the white hull. The quartet on board were young—maybe in their early twenties—joyriding around the lake in daddy's boat despite the weather.

Sarah waved them down. The boat inched closer in response, and the driver looked back at his companions before jumping into the shallows to wade toward her. Water inched just past his thighs while one hand rested on the boat. He wore a backward yellow baseball cap and a black wet suit. The others wore listless expressions and layers of clothing; the trip out on the lake had clearly not been their idea. The driver's possessive swagger made Sarah edgy, as did his youth. All four boaters eyed her with suspicious boredom.

"When did you last see him?" the driver asked after Sarah had explained the situation.

"I'm not sure," Sarah said. Under the young man's gaze, she felt like an old fool. She looked down to hide her embarrassment. "I crawled into the tent early last night, just after dark, left Matthew by the fire. I'd guess it was around seven thirty or eight. Like I said, just after dark. I wasn't paying attention to the time." God, they're young, she thought.

"And you didn't hear him when he came into the tent?" the driver said.

“No. He’s a night owl, doesn’t usually come to bed until pretty late, so I was dead asleep.”

The last thing she remembered from the night before was listening to the kids’ snores—Bella’s deep and rhythmic, Charlie’s furtive, with tiny snorts on the in breath.

“Are you sure he came into the tent at all?” said a young woman with fiery-red hair, her eyebrow cocked. Sarah brushed her own loose sandy-brown strands behind her ear.

“I—” Guilt wrapped around Sarah like an itchy sweater and trapped her words. “I’m a heavy sleeper. So, you’re sure you haven’t seen a red canoe anywhere on the lake?” she said to deflect the judgmental look from the redhead as much as to confirm the answer. “Maybe in one of the bays?”

The boaters shook their heads.

“Sorry,” the driver said. He glanced at his friends. “We’ve been up and down the lake this morning and haven’t seen any canoes on the water. I haven’t been paying much attention to anything other than the waves, though, so he may have popped into one of the bays on the far side of the lake. Want us to look?”

The redhead’s hand flew to an outthrust hip, and a warning hissed out from her rouged lips. “Zach,” she said.

“That’d be great,” Sarah said at the same time.

“Mommy.” A tug at Sarah’s pant leg. Sarah looked around to see Charlie at her side. Bella sat apart from them, perched on a slab of granite with her back to the lake.

“He’s probably just fallen asleep while fishing in a bay somewhere,” Sarah said, ignoring her son. It was plausible. Some of the bays could be sheltered from the wind. “Silly, I know, but he does this. Lies back against a pack and takes a nap.” Sarah let slip a single breath of a laugh to hide the lie and squeezed Charlie’s hand, a signal to stay quiet. The redhead’s annoyance needed to be overpowered.

“Okay, ya. Sure,” said the driver. Sarah could tell he regretted making the offer, a feeling reinforced no doubt by the redhead’s exaggerated eye roll.

“I really appreciate it.” Sarah aimed an ingratiating smile at them. “It’s so hard to find kind people these days. Ones willing to look out for others in the wilderness. Say thank you to these nice people, Charlie.” Sarah twisted her words into a blade, using her child to secure their cooperation. “They’re going to help find Daddy. He’s lost track of time again, I’m sure.” Sarah looked directly at the redhead and smiled, a final backhanded slap.

“Thank you,” Charlie said, eyes downcast.

The boaters’ return a short time later was cursory. They stayed outside the small bay this time. The driver yelled, water and wind carrying his voice, “No canoe! Sorry.”

The words hit Sarah as if the lake had risen to a tsunami, almost knocking her backward. The anxiety she’d been keeping back rushed forward; her husband was gone, and the canoe was no longer on the campsite.

Just before the roar of the departing motorboat, Sarah heard the unmistakable trill of female laughter on the wind. It hit her like a sucker punch, burying itself in her gut and fanning a spark of anger she had been trying to smother all morning.

The driver glanced back once—only once—as the boat faded against the waves, leaving Sarah with nothing but Bella’s question: “Now what, Mom?”

## Page 3

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After the quartet of twentysomethings had disappeared around the point, the reality of Sarah's situation came into horrifying focus, shadows appearing through murky light: Matthew and the canoe were gone, and she was trapped in the wilderness with no means of getting her family out. She cursed into the wind and frantically thought through her paltry options. Conditions were worsening on the lake, the wind building into a howl, and their little beach was being swallowed by waves. Sarah ushered the kids into the tent while she prowled the shoreline on faint hope.

It was not a day to be out. No boater would have willingly ventured out in these conditions. Sarah had just resigned herself to the fact that they would have to spend another night in the woods when she saw a boat. At first, she was sure it was wishful imaginings. She waved maniacally, nonetheless. Her heart stopped when the driver acknowledged her by turning the boat, letting waves break against the bow. Sarah watched in wonder as an older man deftly maneuvered the craft into the bay.

She waded hip deep into the water, yelling, though the driver's expression told her he couldn't hear her above the wind and motor. Still, she yelled. The kids had come out of the tent and stood like statues on the shore as wind whipped the trees behind them.

"My husband," Sarah yelled above the fading engine. "I can't find my husband. We—" She gestured to the kids standing on the shore. "We need help."

"I got youse," the man said without hesitation.

Once settled in the boat and underway, Sarah told her story while they motored across the lake as fast as the waves would allow. Her words vaulted over each other. It sounded like a movie plot: a man lost, his family stranded. A story was unfolding,

one Sarah only partially understood from within its depths.

Twenty minutes later, they were standing in the man's cottage. Inside the honey-colored log cabin, a picture window offered an open view of the lake, framed by dented wood planks and family-worn spaces. The view would have been serene in nicer weather, but today it carried malevolence like a cudgel. Sarah stood at the window and watched the leaves whip into the waiting water of Nagadon Lake.

"Your husband a paddler?" the man asked.

Sarah turned to look at him. He stood in the cottage's open kitchen, simple pine cupboards behind him and empty mugs dangling from his hands while a battered kettle sputtered on the stove. The air smelled of Pine-Sol and stale bacon. Out the picture window, Charlie and Bella sat on an old tire swing while the lake lurked behind them, mercifully contained. Farther out, thunderclouds charged across the sky.

Sarah couldn't catch the meaning of the question. She tried to focus on the man's face—kind eyes under a bush of silver gray hair. What was his name? It mattered. She needed to remember the man who had plucked her and the kids off the campsite. Gabe. Gabe Doran. That was it. He looked at her, eyebrows raised and shoulders poised for an answer. She knew her answer was important, but her tongue couldn't shape the words.

She looked instead at the off-white wall behind him, blank except for a faded Red Cross Water Safety poster bleached by sun and time. A mismatch of washed-out red oblong circles and rounded triangles. She stared at the ripped corner, the unreadable pen scratches along the margin, the bold white writing quoting safety statistics. Across the top in black letters: O N AVERAGE , 57 KIDS DROWN EVERY YEAR IN C ANADA .

"Husbands?" she said, on a rushed breath.

“I’m sorry. Say again?” Gabe asked.

“How many husbands drown?” Sarah gestured to the poster and let tears cloud her vision, blurring the colors into a single splotch of red at the center of the paper.

“I’ll get the tea ... give you a moment,” said Gabe.

A short time later, Sarah stood in the kitchen, cradling the handset of an old-fashioned corded phone. She took a breath and dialed. “I think my husband’s lost,” Sarah said to a voice at the end of the line, uttering the words aloud for the first time before giving the woman her name and a skeletal summary of the morning.

Sarah knew where she had left her husband. Behind her closed eyes, she saw his face, the fire far behind but casting enough of a glow to illuminate the cauliflower curl of his ear, his lips wrapped around the oh of a surprise. She heard the thrum of waves on shore.

“How old is your husband?” the operator asked.

Ta-thump, ta-thump, ta-thump. Sarah’s pulse pounded against her ears.

“Hello? Are you there? Can you hear me?” the woman’s voice warbled as if she and Sarah were both under water, calling out through opaque light.

“Ma’am?” the voice said. “I need you to take a few deep breaths. Can you do that? It’s going to be okay. Just breathe.”

Out the window, the lake roiled like a sleeping beast.

Sarah turned her back to the water, desperate to escape its clutches. She pulled in a gulp of air, and her jackhammering pulse softened.



“That’s it. Another deep breath for me. Good. Help is coming, but I need you to give me some information. Can you do that?”

A strangled “Yes” escaped Sarah’s lips.

“Great. Now, can I get your name?”

“Sarah. Sarah Anderson.”

“Good. That’s good, Sarah. Now, how old is Matthew?”

“Thirty-seven. He’s thirty-seven,” Sarah said, perversely pleased that she was able to answer a question.

“Okay, now, does Matthew have any medical concerns? Anything at all you can think of?”

“No. He’s healthy. Active. Always swimming or running or God knows what.”

“You’re doing great, Sarah. Just to confirm, as far as you know, he’s alone? He didn’t go paddling with anyone else?”

“No, it was just us.” A silly question, Sarah thought. “I already told you, we’re on a family canoe trip. We camped on Nagadon Lake. Just the four of us. We were on one of the numbered sites.”

“And how long do you estimate Matthew has been gone?”

The question thudded against Sarah.

“I don’t know,” she said, fear and irritation pushing words forward. “I woke up this

morning around eight and both Matthew and the canoe were gone. I thought he went for a paddle by himself—he does that sometimes—but he didn’t come back. He’s never gone off this long before, and the weather. It’s bad. I don’t know where he is. I don’t know what time he left. I don’t know ...”

Emotions ricocheted through Sarah—worry, frustration, fear—they surged and spiraled, as if trapped in a bottle on a rough sea. Each emotion pummeled, leaving her breathless. She collapsed against the wall and slid to the floor, wrapping and unwrapping the stretched-out telephone cord around her wrist as she landed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the lake, waiting.

“Okay, Sarah, I’m almost through with my questions. Just a couple more. You can do this.”

Sarah drew herself back up, bent her entire will toward the voice on the phone. She could do what needed to be done. Her husband was missing. She would fix things. The way she always did. This could not be happening to her. She would make it right. She drew in a tight breath and wiped her hands on the thighs of her pants.

“It sounds like you’ve been to the area before,” the woman said. “How much wilderness experience does Matthew have?”

“He’s been out here lots, with me and on his own. He grew up camping. He’s been coming to this area since he moved to Ontario. He introduced me to this place. It’s his place, not mine.” Sarah willed her voice to steady.

“Okay, good. He knows what he’s doing out there. That’s a good thing.”

The woman was placating her. Sarah didn’t mind. She lapped up the crumbs of comfort, like a dog lurking beneath the table. “Ya. Ya, he knows his way around the woods. Orienteering, survival skills. He’s done all of that.”

“Okay, last question, Sarah. All this information will help us tailor how and where we look for Matthew. It’s all helpful.”

Sarah allowed herself the slight upturn of a half smile. “What supplies did Matthew have with him?”

Sarah went cold. Words caught in her throat. She saw the campsite in her mind.

Matthew’s fleece jacket poking out from under his sleeping bag, his tuque shoved into the side pocket inside the tent, the food bag still hanging in the tree when she woke up.

“Nothing,” Sarah said, barely above a whisper. “He has nothing.”

It took them twice as long to motor back to the campsite. Sarah and the kids needed to grab a few things before meeting with the police at the county dock. Conditions were miserable out on the lake. The wind worked hard at blowing the boat off course, so Gabe faced into it, letting water break against the bow. It was only midday, but heavy clouds leached daylight out of the sky. They needed to get moving so a search could get started before dark.

Sarah felt only resentment and anger from the lake and woods, as if they were calling up a storm to rid themselves of humanity once and for all.

“Why were you out in this?” Sarah said to Gabe, embarrassed that she hadn’t thought to ask earlier.

Gabe looked thoughtful, considering the question before he spoke. “I’m not really sure, actually,” he said, his voice loud enough to fight against the gale, but with an undertone of warmth as if he were holding a cherished memory. “I almost didn’t. A gust of wind nearly threw me in the water as I was readying the boat. And the lake

looked murderous. I thought about crawling back into bed, truth be told. But it's been hard to be up here since my wife, Jess, passed a couple of years ago. The cottage was her happy place. It ain't the same without her curled up on that ugly green couch, a cup of tea in her hand and a book on her lap."

Grief drifted over Gabe's face, though he fought to contain it, and a sad smile slipped onto his lips.

"Maybe it was the universe telling me something. Although, I like to think it was Jess, watching out for folks on the lake the way she always did."

"Grab only what you can carry," Sarah told the kids as they climbed up the slab of granite toward the tent.

"It don't matter," Gabe said with a nod, joining her onshore. "It ain't too far to the dock. It's just across the lake around that point. We can shuttle back if ya need."

The kids emerged from the tent, each with a small bundle of clothes and clutching stuffed animals. Sarah shoved everything into a small daypack, as if her feelings could also be stuffed in the bottom. After a peek in the tent and a once-over of the campsite, Gabe stood near the water, holding a line to the boat.

"We can't leave Daddy," Bella said. Her feet ground into a small patch of dirt between the rocks.

"We have to get help, Bella. We can't find Daddy on our own."

"No. I'm not going."

Sarah looked at Gabe, trying to dismiss Bella's tantrum, but it wasn't going to be that easy. The child had staying power, and her little round face was contorted, not with

rage but with pain and an unspeakable confusion.

“Look, Bella,” Sarah said, crouching down to meet Bella’s eyes. “We’ve left Daddy’s clothes, the tent, and sleeping bags. We’ll leave all the food and water in case he’s hungry when he comes back.”

Sarah handed the backpack to Gabe. Bella didn’t look placated.

“We’re leaving his cell phone. It’s turned off, so the battery lasts longer. He’ll be comfortable and be able to call us.” Sarah didn’t think the phone had service here. But it was only a small lie, and it may comfort Bella in the hours to come.

“Then I’m staying too!” Bella punctuated the words by plunking cross legged on a slab of stone. Gabe watched, a sliver of a smile on his lips.

“We have to go, Bella. This is not a discussion. I know you’re worried about Daddy. I am too. The police have said this is what we need to do right now to get him home safely. Staying here won’t help Daddy. We need to help the police. Do you understand?”

Tears broke over the girl’s cheeks. She slashed at them with open palms. Without a word, Bella stomped toward the waiting boat. She glared at Sarah, irises and pupils merged.

Charlie followed behind his sister, letting Gabe lift him up over the gunwales.

When it was Sarah’s turn to climb into the boat, Gabe offered her a firm hand. “They’ll be all right,” he said, out of the kids’ earshot. “Just shaken, is all. Kids are tough; they have a way of making it through.”

Sarah was grateful for the platitudes and burrowed herself in the notion that there

could be an okay after this, that Matthew would be found, that they would return home, and all of this would be reduced to an amusing anecdote at dinner parties.

As Gabe pulled away from the shore, Sarah watched the campsite recede. Three spruce sentinels lorded over the bay, holding court, as if in judgment of Sarah and her family. She turned her back to them. Charlie leaned over and rested his head on Sarah's lap, his small hand rhythmically running along her forearm, a nervous habit he'd had most of his life. Sarah laid a hand on his head, and he closed his eyes.

Bella sat as far away from Sarah as she could, staring ahead, her body unbending as the boat jumped over waves. Of her two children, Sarah worried most about her stalwart child. That unyielding will was formidable, but it could still break, and when it did, Sarah knew it might shatter. Though Matthew had mocked her for it, Sarah had once said that life was better when you acted like a sapling in the wind, twisting and bending when needed, so that the roots stay strong and whole. She wasn't sure anyone in her family believed her, least of all Bella.

Sarah squinted into the wind as the boat approached the same dock they'd put in from only yesterday. Had it only been the day before? It felt like their arrival were another lifetime ago. Two uniformed officers—one male and one female—waited for her when the boat pulled up. They wore identical uniforms and safety vests emblazoned with POLICE across their chests. A grizzled older man with a scruffy beard and a bright yellow vest accompanied them. The grim-faced trio walked toward the boat.

"Mrs. Anderson?" the female officer said.

Sarah stepped onto the dock. The woman was tall and broad shouldered, and her skin wore the effects of time in the sun, tanned with just a hint of crow's-feet around the eyes.

"Yes."

“Mrs. Anderson, I’m Chantal Dubé.” Sarah shook the woman’s hand—it was warm and dry against Sarah’s cold one.

“This is Officer Rob Boychuk,” Dubé said, her voice tinged with a French Canadian accent. “He’s leading the search.”

The second officer took Sarah’s hand with a perfunctory “Ma’am.” Boychuk had a kind face, and Sarah noticed the striking pale blue of his eyes. He wore a uniform cap and the beginnings of middle age around his waist.

Boychuk held her eyes in his, and Sarah wanted to believe the compassion and warmth she read in them. There are moments when a choice must be made: trust a stranger and follow where they lead or stand firm against an unseeable current. Sarah followed. What more could she do?

“Call me Sarah,” she said. She turned to help the kids step out of the boat as the third person joined the officers. He looked like he had stepped out of the last century. His uncombed gray hair formed a makeshift halo around his head, and his heavily lined face had seen many hard seasons in the outdoors. Sarah lifted Charlie up with one foot on the dock, the other on the boat.

“And this is Paul Nowak,” Dubé said. “Paul manages the search and rescue volunteers in this region.”

Search and rescue. The words cut into Sarah, stopping her cold. Charlie dangled in the void between the boat and solid ground, Sarah’s hands under his armpits.

“Mommy,” he squealed, his legs kicking empty air. “It hurts!” She quickly set him down on the dock and felt the officers’ questioning eyes.

“I know it’s a lot, Sarah,” Dubé said. “It’s hard to take it all in. In these cases, our

best chance at success is if we move fast. We've dealt with a lot of lost people in this area, and we want to do everything we can to bring Matthew home safe."

"Ya, okay. Thank you," Sarah said. She sunk into the certainty that she was no longer alone.

Gabe moved a little way along the dock and was joined by Boychuk. Sarah couldn't make out their church murmurs, but their glances made her feel like a snared animal in the moment before it realizes it's caught in a trap. She walked over and extended a hand to Gabe, defying the pity in their eyes. Instead of a handshake, Gabe wrapped her in a strong hug. She let him. "I don't know how to thank you," she said into his shoulder.

"It'll be all right," he said. "These guys got you now. They know what they're doing."

Sarah released her grip and wiped her nose with her sleeve. Gabe climbed back into his boat without looking back. She watched until he disappeared around a spit of land, and all that was left was the lake, black under a lead sky.

Rob Boychuk listened to the bones of Sarah Anderson's story. He bent and molded them in his mind, trying to make them fit a pattern he knew all too well after twenty years with the Ontario Provincial Police. He pictured the comings and goings of the Anderson family, the campsite, the canoe bobbing against the ferocity of the waves. Still, something didn't sit right about her story. A piece was missing, though he recognized he didn't yet have enough information to judge. It nudged at him, nonetheless.

Sarah said her husband was a weekend woodsman, happier in the woods than warm and dry in their Ottawa home. That may be true. There were thousands of city dwellers who came to this part of the world willing and able to tackle the rigors in the



woods. Maybe Matthew Anderson was one of them. But Gabe Doran had, unwittingly, carved a piece out of Sarah's story. He'd been to the Andersons' campsite, saw the gear lying about in the tent, heard Sarah tell her children his clothes were there for him. One thing Boychuk knew with absolute certainty: no experienced woodsman would venture away from camp without taking gear with him, particularly on a rainy morning in September. Warm clothes, a flashlight, a whistle—they'd be second nature to someone who spent time paddling these waters. Why would her husband have gotten into the canoe without them?

Nameless searchers, like bees in a hive, came and went through the open door of the camper van that served as a command center. Sarah sat with Officers Dubé and Boychuk, and Paul Novak, crammed around a small foldout table. Sarah had never set foot in a camper before, and this one was making her claustrophobic.

"Paul has mobilized volunteer ground searchers," said Dubé. "And the command post is ready to go. What we're looking for now is a starting point. Do you have any idea where Matthew may have gone?"

Sarah was mute. Another question she couldn't answer. Three pairs of eyes watched her expectantly.

"No. I'm sorry. I don't know where he went. He didn't even tell me he was going."

Sarah caught the look Dubé gave Boychuk. He'd been quiet, letting his colleague take the lead on questions. But something about Sarah's answer stirred him. He breathed in and looked past Sarah, as if polishing his words. When he spoke, his voice was soft but solid, like the clang of a distant bell.

"Sarah, you mentioned that Matthew often came to the area," he said as his eyes roamed the map laid out on the table. "Is there anything he's mentioned in the past? A special swim spot? A fishing bay? Anything, even in passing?"

Sarah cradled a mug of coffee someone must have given her, though she had no memory of taking it. She stood and stepped toward the camper's open door. Bella and Charlie sat at a tarp-covered picnic table with one of the volunteer searchers, their heads bowed over mugs of hot chocolate and a stranger asking them questions.

"A miss is as good as a mile here, Sarah," Boychuk said. "It might seem like nothing, but put it out there, and we may be able to make a meal out of it."

Searchers beavered away, setting up tarps and checking backpacks. Sarah caught the metallic scent of the lake, like wet cast iron. She heard the angry trill of a nearby squirrel and Charlie's high-pitched giggle at a sleight-of-hand trick with a quarter. The sounds clashed against each other, causing vertigo. Sarah closed her eyes to steady herself and saw it in her mind—crystalline water against a royal blue sky.

"The rapids," she said. Her eyes still closed; the image emerged like an air bubble through syrup. "He liked to play in the small rapids near here. There's a portage there, where the Mirabelle River feeds the lake, for canoes to get around the rapids and into the lake."

"I know the place." Novak seized on the information. "Everyone knows that spot. It's usually hopping on a hot summer day. Had to pull more than a couple of fools off them rocks when they get stuck on the wrong side of the rapids." He jumped up and strode out to a group of searchers huddled under a tarp.

"That's good, Sarah. It's a place to start," Officer Boychuk said, setting a hand on her shoulder. "I'm just going to confer with my colleagues so we can get things in motion, then we'll get you settled."

In the distance, there was a low rumble. The storm, which had been waiting on the edges of the sky, had lost patience.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

The questions had been going on for over an hour, thrown at Sarah like scalding water balloons: Do you know what type of shoes he had on? Was he wearing sandals, hiking boots, running shoes? What color was his clothing? When exactly did you notice he was missing? Each question felt like another body blow, leaving her exhausted and clueless.

Sarah and the kids stewed in the camper van—sheltered from the storm but locked in with their own sour smell. A small electric heater buzzed near the ceiling, further thickening the air with sound as rain pelted against fogged-up windows. The kids sat quietly beside Sarah, drawing on printer paper, while a battle raged in Sarah's mind: grab them and drive away as fast as the back roads would allow or stay put and face the barrage.

“What does it matter?” Sarah snapped at the young officer who had been assigned to gather more information. His smooth face betrayed youth and inexperience, though he held his back straight to hide it. She hadn't even heard his last question.

The officer held her gaze, his expression devoid of any reaction. The kids looked up; Bella oozed silent recrimination beside her, though neither child uttered a sound. Sarah had a flash of herself shaking the disapproving look off Bella's face. She pulled in a breath, willing air to squeeze into every crevice of her body and smother the scream on the edge of her lips.

“Sorry,” Sarah said on her exhale. “It's just—I don't know,” she said. “I don't know anything.” Bella turned back to the paper in front of her.

“I know it's a lot, ma'am,” the officer said, “but every detail matters.”

“So I keep hearing.”

“It’s amazing how small things can mean so much when we’re looking for someone in the wilderness. Shoe size, what they ate for breakfast, whether they were in a good mood or bad. It all becomes important. I worked a scene once where the color of someone’s bathrobe meant the difference between life or death.”

“Is Daddy dead?” Charlie looked up from his drawing.

“Daddy’s never in a good mood,” Bella said at the same time.

“No, honey. Of course Daddy’s not dead.” Sarah rested a hand on Charlie’s shoulder.

She looked to the officer to confirm.

“What do you mean, Bella?” The officer turned to the girl, oblivious to the entreaty in Sarah’s gaze.

“Nothing,” she said, as she crossed her arms in front of her and sat back.

The officer spoke to Bella but looked at Sarah. “It’s okay to tell me anything, Bella. No one’s going to get in any trouble. All we want to do is find your dad.”

Sarah turned to Bella, keeping her face blank, though inside, pity and irritation tussled when she looked at her daughter. She offered Bella a reassuring smile, but the girl kept her eyes on the table. When the silence stretched, Sarah stepped into it.

“Nothing that unusual. Matthew’s been busy with work and life, that’s all. We both have. He works in IT, and I’m the cofounder and manager of a small theater company.” Sarah moved a tentative hand to Bella’s knee beneath the table and felt the small leg flinch. “You know how it is. Deadlines, the after-school rush—it all

piles up, doesn't it? Patience is sometimes hard to find. It's been a little stressful lately. Matthew's had a couple of big projects, and the theater's been gearing up for the new season, but nothing out of the ordinary. He always has a few projects running." Sarah hoped to reassure Bella but met only her daughter's frown.

Sarah studied the young officer. What was he? Twenty-five? How would he understand how it is?

"Has he been stressed lately? Any unusual behavior? Mood changes? Suicidal thoughts?"

"What?" Sarah said. "God no. Nothing like that."

The young man in front of her would have no idea yet. How kids take every ounce of affection and patience you once had to spare; how juggling the demands of home and work is a balancing act, resulting in more of a strategic blunder than a coup de grace. She wouldn't tell him about her suspicions or the secrets that a family keeps. He wouldn't understand how the pressure built into periods of discontent.

"He's been fine," Sarah said. "He was taking care of himself, limiting his hours at work. This trip was his idea. He was excited about it. Wasn't he, guys? He's been like a kid in a candy shop. Talking a mile a minute about the glories of the Mirabelle. In fact, he's been more back to his usual self than I'd seen him in months." Now that she'd said it out loud, Sarah recognized a truth in her words she hadn't previously acknowledged. The last few weeks, a shadow seemed to have lifted off Matthew: he'd laughed more, kidded with her and the kids, and sparked a charm into the heart of their family she'd not seen in years.

If Sarah were being honest with herself, the last few weeks had been a return of the Matthew she'd married before kids and responsibilities had weighed him down. Matthew had been impulsive and sometimes reckless, like an overgrown kid. She was

drawn to his playful side. She remembered a long-ago weekend getaway to wine country in southern Ontario, staying at a romantic bed-and-breakfast, sipping chardonnays and Rieslings and roaming the beachfronts and main streets in small towns along Lake Ontario. After a sun-drenched afternoon, they'd come across a train bridge that crossed a little river in Prince Edward County. They could have followed the road, but Matthew insisted trains no longer passed this way. They ambled across, posing for photos and laughing at their daring. The next day, Sarah was mortified to see a freight train rumble across the very same bridge. Had it been the day before, they would have had to jump into the river to avoid a collision. "So wicked!" Matthew exclaimed with a massive grin. In that moment, Sarah had felt that she and Matthew were destined; no harm would come to them as long as they were together.

The officer kept his gaze on Sarah, as if expecting her to say more.

"Are you going to find Daddy?" Charlie asked, head still bowed over the paper, though his hand was still.

"We're going to do everything we can to find him, buddy." The officer's lip jerked up in a makeshift smile. "It's only been a few hours. Most people who get lost in the wild are found in a day. Usually a little frightened, but just fine."

"What if you don't find him in a day?" Bella asked. "Then what?"

"Well, then we look harder. We'll call in more people to help us. Search and Rescue soldiers from Trenton. Might even get some search dogs to help. But we're still a long ways away from that right now. And there are some great people coming to help look for your daddy. They've found lots of lost campers before."

"But what if they can't find him?" Bella said.

A gust of noise swallowed her question. The RV door flew open, followed by rain

and cold air that blew the kids' drawings to the ground. A figure stood in the gloom beyond the door frame.

"Preliminary search has found something." The world seemed to spin around Sarah, as if an invisible hand were twirling the trailer itself.

Sarah stepped out of the camper van to join Dubé, Boychuk, and Novak among the volunteers. Though only 4:00 p.m., it felt like dusk. The storm had unleashed. Raindrops smashed against the ground. A circle of people stood beneath the meager protection of a large elm and neon-orange tarp. Icy rivulets ran beneath Sarah's rain jacket.

The search leaders, faces shadowed by hoods, huddled while information was being relayed. "There's a red canoe at the trailhead to the rapids," one of them said. "Team lead says it's a Langford. It looks like someone hauled it up on shore, but no sign of anyone nearby." Sarah couldn't tell which one of them was speaking.

The cloaked faces turned toward Sarah. Seeing them against the dark woods, Sarah imagined the Dark Riders from Lord of the Rings .

"Your canoe's red, isn't it, Sarah?" Dubé asked. Sarah nodded. "Do you know if it's a Langford?" Beneath the words, Sarah heard the ungodly screech of the wraiths in her mind. She nodded again.

"Okay." Novak burst into the middle of the circle. "We have a likely last known position. Let's get a search grid mapped out. We're going to assume, for the moment, that the subject is on foot." He turned to the members of his search team. "There're natural choke points at the lake and river, so let's map out what that looks like for the grid."

Heads nodded. "Jaro, any tracks out there?" Novak asked one of the hooded figures.

“We’re still looking,” a searcher said, “but the rain is making it hard to find anything. The trail’s a small stream right now. No obvious signs so far, but we’ve only done a hasty search. Grid might find more.”

“Let’s get going then,” Novak said. He and the others strode toward a line of waiting vehicles.

“Sarah.” Boychuk was at Sarah’s side. “Why don’t you head back to the camper? Wait with the kids. No sense catching a cold on top of all this.”

“No. I can’t wait around anymore. I need to help find Matthew. He does this all the time. Goes off in his own little world.” Sarah’s voice was hoarse and unrecognizable to her.

“I know it’s hard, Sarah. But we do find it best for family members to be nearby and reachable.”

“I’m not wasting any more time just sitting in there. I can’t let all these people go out in this”—she pointed her forehead to the sky—“while I do nothing myself.” The fifteen or so bodies gathered around were donning their gear and doing their best to ignore the brewing situation.

“I understand how hard it is, believe me,” Boychuk said as he took a step closer to her. “But I can’t let you go. We need you to be here, telling us everything you can about Matthew’s habits, his mindset. Any detail could be relevant.”

“I’ve already told you everything I know. I don’t know where he went.”

“Sarah—”

“You already know everything I do. I’m going. Please.” She turned to walk away.



Officer Dubé, who had been lurking behind Sarah, blocked her path.

“You may not know what direction he headed off in, but you know your husband better than anyone here. We need you to—” Boychuk continued.

Sarah shuffled sideways to step around Dubé.

A hand touched Sarah’s arm. At least two inches taller than Sarah, Dubé said with a clear, though controlled, edge, “If you head out there, there is a real risk that you could get lost yourself, and then we’re looking for two people. That is not happening. We need all our resources focused on the search for Matthew. Do you understand me, Sarah?”

Sarah’s heart battered at her chest, a separate creature testing the cage that contained it. She moved again to step around Dubé, but the woman held her ground.

“You need to listen to Officer Boychuk. There is no universe in which I am going to let you walk into the woods right now, Sarah.”

Dubé held Sarah’s stare, the officer’s eyes betraying a practiced understanding of the despair and violence brewing. The creature in Sarah’s chest rattled the bars of its cage, the reverberations tightening muscles in Sarah’s shoulders, her arms, her fists.

Dubé glanced down at Sarah’s hands. “I wouldn’t, Sarah. It won’t end well,” she said softly.

Sarah snatched her arm away and retreated to the camper.

It was almost evening before Sarah heard anything else. Over the course of the afternoon, a shortwave radio in the camper squawked, giving cryptic and useless updates. Twilight had tried to linger, but dense cloud cover quickly devoured it.

The young officer sat in the camper's passenger seat while Sarah and the kids crowded at the little table. Bella and Charlie watched a Harry Potter movie on Sarah's phone, the tinny theme music adding to the dankness.

Three times a searcher had appeared at the door to ask Sarah a question, the relevance of which she could never decipher.

"Did your husband have a limp?" No.

"Do you know anyone who lives in the Patricia Bay area?" No.

"Was your husband a competent swimmer?" Yes.

Finally, just as the gloom outside shifted to full dark, Boychuk reappeared. Charlie had fallen asleep against Bella, who had not said a single word since the exchange with the young officer earlier in the afternoon.

Boychuk climbed into the RV and gently closed the door behind him. He pulled the cap off his head, revealing matted salt-and-pepper hair punctuated by a persistent cowlick that made him appear younger than the lines on his face would allow. He held the cap in front and bowed his head. His hands, tanned a deeper shade than his face, were crisscrossed with lines; wrinkles and scars blended into a map of his experiences.

"Sarah, we haven't found anything yet," he said. The movie stopped playing. "I don't want you to get discouraged, though. This whole process is a bit like juggling sand. It's tricky, so we have to adapt to what's in front of us, and right now, the weather is making it particularly difficult. Visibility is bad. Rain and low clouds haven't let us get a bird in the air. And it's going to be full dark soon." Boychuk let the information sink in.

“Do you know if Matthew’s taken any wilderness survival training?” The question was innocent and relevant, but numbness spread through Sarah’s limbs; her toes felt like chipped ice. She shook her head.

“We’ll keep searching for another hour or so, but we’re going to have to hit pause overnight. We’re getting into some tricky areas, low swampland, rocky shorelines, and in this weather, it’s just not safe to continue searching after dark. If we get anything else tonight, we’ll let you know, but otherwise, we’ll pick it up again at first light.”

“That’ll be a day.” Charlie’s small voice, not so asleep after all.

“Sorry, son. What did you say?” Boychuk turned to the boy.

“If you don’t find Daddy tonight, tomorrow will be a day. And he said”—Charlie pointed to the young officer who had joined the group—“people are found in a day. If you stop looking, how can you find Daddy in a day?”

Boychuk shot an annoyed look at the officer, who had the decency to blush. He knelt beside Charlie. “Son, I know we don’t look like much, but my friends and I are good at our jobs. We’ve had a lot of experience and a lot of training to find people who’ve lost their way in the woods. And from what your mom tells me, your dad is a great camper. He knows the outdoors.” Boychuk looked up at Sarah, who nodded. “I know it seems scary now, but I promise you, we are doing everything we can to get your daddy home safe and sound.”

Boychuk told Sarah arrangements had been made at a hotel in Patricia Bay for her and the kids. The town was thirty miles up the highway, at the head of the Mirabelle River, and was the main point of service for the valley. The town’s population of a little over ten thousand exploded in the summer months when cottage owners and guests at the seasonal hotels swarmed the area. Like preying insects, they took over

the town, greedily consuming everything from water toys at the local gear store to the last morsel of rocky road at the Dairy Freez.

At this time of year, though, the town was quiet and the hotels were cheap. Sarah had protested at first, insisting she should stay, help look, but Boychuk persuaded her that what she needed was sleep.

“Best to get some rest. Tomorrow’s another day.” He gave her arm a little squeeze and nodded at Dubé, who had offered to retrieve Sarah and Matthew’s minivan, though Sarah could tell it was not an optional suggestion. The vehicle would be combed over by the police for any clues as to Matthew’s whereabouts and deposited at the hotel. Sarah handed over Matthew’s keys to Dubé, who disappeared with one of the volunteers.

“Let’s get you guys to the hotel,” Boychuk said, gathering Sarah’s lone bag.

“Okay,” Sarah said. She followed him as if her actions were no longer her own but those of the woman she was supposed to be. “Can you watch the kids for a couple minutes? I just need to use the washroom.”

The dock was shared by a small campground, and a restroom lay beyond a copse of trees. Sarah made her way to the low cinder-block structure housing the toilets and showers. As she walked around to the women’s side of the building, she stopped dead.

A white-and-red motorboat with River Runner etched along the side of the bow sat on a trailer under pale streetlight at the front of the building. There was no doubt it was the boat from earlier that morning: the one belonging to the group of twentysomethings who had left Sarah stranded with the kids.

Unbidden, fury flooded Sarah’s nerve endings, laying waste to the rational

connection between impulses and restraint. She rewatched herself, as if the events that had unfolded were a movie and she controlled the speed of the playback: a lone woman with two small children on the shore while the boat pulled away. She heard the red-haired woman's casual laughter drifting over the water, smelled the wet pine around her, felt the wind-whipped hair at her face.

Sarah doubled over as if a fist had just slammed into her gut. One hand rested on her knee, the other pressed against the cold cinder-block wall beside her. A cauterizing breath caught in her lungs. She watched herself march across the gravel parking lot. A hand retrieved her keys, still in her pocket, and held the largest key between her ring and index finger, the way she'd been taught at a self-defense class years ago. She felt the hard edges of the metal dig into her flesh, watched herself drag the largest key across the side of the boat, gouging the red paint. She heard the scrape of metal on fiberglass, saw the raised coating bunch and peel under the pressure. Her arm repeated the action in the opposite direction, deepening the gouge, until the original color of the hull bled into the crisp red of the stripe.

Stepping back to look at the slash, a pinprick of satisfaction blossomed in Sarah's core. It spread like a vine, stitching and soothing her anger.

The car slid onto the highway, an asphalt ribbon that disappeared beyond the reach of the headlights. The only sound was the hum of tires on wet pavement and the slap of windshield wipers. Sarah sat in the back seat, Bella and Charlie on either side of her.

Speckled lights appeared in the blackness out the window as the car passed homes set back along the highway. Spools of lives spilled into a void. Not for the first time, Sarah was curious about the people who lived on those islands of light. How did they survive out here? What were their days like?

Charlie's head fell gently against Sarah's arm. She glanced down at him—her peanut—his face relaxed in sleep. Bella was harder to read. Always. Even in sleep,

where she curled into a tight ball beneath the covers, shielded from the world as if beneath a carapace. Her face was turned to the side window, and Sarah stroked her honey-brown hair, just barely resting her fingers on her scalp. Bella didn't turn around, but neither did she move away. Sarah was astonished by her ability to love someone who resented her so much.

She hadn't told the police the whole truth. There was no point mentioning Matthew's absences of late, the tiny frustrations that crept into the day-to-day of a marriage, the temptations that might lurk in the arms of someone else, someone new. Sarah knew there were cracks, but cracks could be mended. Better she hold her tongue, keep everything simple. The search was what mattered now.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

Sarah was almost driven back by the stench of cheap beer and crushed cigarettes as she gazed down at the Wendigo Pub's sandwich board that invited guests to seat themselves. Instinct, and few alternatives other than this hotel bar, pushed her forward. Food for the kids was the focus right now, and she couldn't let herself fail; if she failed, she would fall and never get up. She waited a minute, to let her eyes adjust to the shadows of the room, and dove in.

A dozen customers sat in small groups or nursed solitary thoughts. The place had seen better days. An infantry of dusty bottles sat vigil behind the bar, while round tables, banged up by years of plates and pints, littered the room. Oldies rock music streamed from unseen speakers. Sarah found it hard to process the ordinariness of the scene.

The young man behind the bar had tattoos under rolled-up sleeves. Sarah briefly wondered about the hieroglyphic life story unfolding across his flesh as he glided around the room delivering food and drink and a noncommittal smile. He was back behind the counter as she approached the bar and asked him for a menu, which he skidded to a sticky stop in front of her. Words warbled on the plasticized page. Worries about Bella and Charlie—alone in the room upstairs, a screen serving as an electronic babysitter—jittered in her head.

“What's good?” she finally asked the bartender.

“Not much but the burgers are tolerable. Cook can't mess up a burger too much,” he said with a wink.

Still, the words on the page refused to come together. “I can't decide. Which one's

easiest?”

“I don’t know about easy, but the Wendigo’s my favorite. It’s got cheddar and bacon. Can’t go wrong with fat and salt.”

“Sounds good. Three of those, please. One with salad instead of fries. And can you wrap them up? To take upstairs?”

“Sure thing.” The bartender opened a door to the kitchen, which Sarah hadn’t noticed before, and called, “Three Wendigos, Jimmy, one with greens, and put ’em in a blanket.”

Sarah dropped onto a barstool to wait. She rested her head on her hands and pressed chilled fingertips into her aching eyes. It had been almost twelve hours since she had stepped out of the tent into some other woman’s life. She wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and wake up somewhere else. Instead, she watched the bartender pull glasses from a tucked-away dishwasher. He gave them a practiced swipe before stacking them like translucent Jenga blocks on a counter beneath the bar.

“You look like you’ve had a day,” he said.

“You can say that.”

“Up for the weekend?”

“I was.”

“Not a great display under this weather, I imagine.”

Sarah could see he wasn’t going to stop asking questions, and she was in no mood to share her story.



“What does wendigo mean, anyway? I keep seeing that word,” she said, hoping to distract the conversation. Her question lingered on a silence that slithered through the room, one she might have dismissed as a random hush over a chattering crowd but for the bartender’s stutter in drying the glass in his hand. A quirk of a smile passed his eyes.

“Ah, now there’s a question.” He went back to wiping the glass. “It’s actually what brought me here.”

“To the bar?”

“Naw,” he said, and pulled in a breath that announced he had an audience. “To Patricia Bay. I’m a grad student, working on a master’s in sociology. I’ve spent summers up here ever since I was a kid. My folks have a cottage on Old Coach Road, along Bark Lake. I’m hanging around up here through the fall to do some research and have a quiet place to write.”

The background hum in the room returned to normal. Sarah felt foolish. Fatigue and the strain of the day were obviously taking their toll. The bartender interpreted her silence as an invitation.

“I study myth and language. My thesis is on Indigenous mythology and how it’s been incorporated into colonial history. The wendigo is a well-known myth around here, part of Algonquin lore. Some say it’s real, some say it’s a ghost story. I say it’s a great thesis topic.”

Despite the warm chatter of the room, a chill nestled on Sarah’s shoulders. Unable to stop herself, she asked, “What do you mean?”

“It’s a creepy legend, actually.” The bartender set his elbows on the bar top to lean toward Sarah. “They say the wendigo is a forest-dwelling spirit with the body of an

oversize emaciated man and the skull of a stag. It's not good or evil, though it does have a rather gruesome habit of hunting people. They say no matter how much it eats, it's never satisfied, and so it's always hunting. But the most fascinating bit of the legend is that the wendigo's victims are cursed to become wendigo themselves, doomed to hunt the forests claiming more victims."

The bartender nudged closer and lowered his voice. His eyes scanned the room as he spoke.

"Some of the old-timers"—he nodded toward a small group in the far corner of the room—"say they've seen it themselves. There was a time when most of the people around here worked in the woods. Timber was big, and most of the locals worked for one company or another, either cutting or stripping trees to send downriver. Men lived out there for weeks at a time, and there were always stories. Indigenous myths, Irish yarns, Polish ghost stories. Everyone had a story passed down from their elders or brought with them from the old country. The woods around here are thick with myths and stories."

Sarah's spine quivered with the uneasy feeling of being watched. She turned on her stool and saw a handful of people, all drinking and chatting, caught up in their own lives. And yet she couldn't shake the feeling.

"Ol' Joseph over there, he's a regular."

Sarah turned back to the bartender, whose voice became husky.

"He was one of the last lumber barons, at least in his own mind. Worked these forests right up until a decade or so ago, when the last of the mills finally pulled up shop. He'll happily tell you he's seen a wendigo, in the flesh."

"Ain't no claim, boy. I seen it all right."

“Joseph, man! You have ears like a hawk.”

Sarah turned on her stool to see a man stooped over from age and hard labor. His straggly hair and weathered skin looked like they’d been dipped in birch resin. The hand resting on the bar top carried ragged scars. He offered a gruff nod.

“Give me a Molson.” The man took an uninvited stool near Sarah. “Every bit of it’s true.” He took a slug from the bottle placed in front of him.

“I was up the old Jones Road, near the Devine concession. That was before I sold my stake to Walker’s. Must have been sixty-three or sixty-four.” The old man’s voice carried a faint Irish lilt and scratches of hard living. “Was out there looking to shore up some extra meat for the winter. Thom’s grocer was still buying game meat back then, so I would freeze half the catch for me and bring the rest to Thom. He paid a good price since he sold some of it to some fancy market in Toronto. I’d just set up camp and was tucking into a little Irish stew, when I heard a baby crying.”

The bartender interrupted by tipping his hand to his mouth with a mock bottle.

“Now, don’t you be judging me none, you little snip. I been logging these woods long before your da was so much as a tickle in your granda’s loins. I heard a child, no doubt. I thought there may have been others nearby, maybe a family camping deeper in the woods, and was grateful. Man likes a bit of company with his stew. Thought I might share a nip or two. When I went looking, that’s when I seen it in a clearing. Clear as day, I saw it. Tall as them trees, and I could see through where its stomach shoulda been. It was wendigo, all right, making a God-curdling sound like a babe crying. I won’t forget that sight for as long as he lets me walk this earth.”

The bartender went back to wiping down the bar. Sarah sat, frozen. Images tumbled around in her head, coming into focus then fading beneath the next like a twisted slideshow: Charlie and Bella standing by the water, Matthew in the firelight, the

whitecaps snarling across the lake, the woods closing in.

“I think,” the bartender said, “it was too much liquor and creepy-looking trees. I’ve spent enough nights in the wild to know the games your mind can play. The wendigo’s just a story to scare kids and stop them from wandering away in the forest.”

Joseph huffed and flicked a hand at them as he shuffled away, his beer firmly gripped in the other hand.

“I will tell you this,” the bartender said, cocking an eyebrow toward Sarah. “There’s still enough superstition around here that you won’t find a lake or a street named wendigo. Too many believers to risk it. Hey, you okay?” His expression told Sarah she must look the way she felt—like her insides had been twisted by an invisible hand.

“Order’s up!” a voice said. Sarah jumped to her feet.

“Ah, that’ll be your burgers,” said the bartender, and he walked through the kitchen door.

Sarah stood in the center of the hotel room.

Artsy nature photographs on the walls did nothing to draw the eye away from the well-trodden dirt-brown carpet in the hotel room. The disinfectant smell was only partially masked by the fake-lavender bathroom soap and abandoned take-out food congealing in the clamshell containers.

Sarah tucked the kids into bed and turned out all the lights. She left on the muted TV like a night-light. Exhausted and comforted by the ordinariness of the bedtime routine, Charlie had fallen asleep quickly beside Bella. His small body seemed to

vanish beneath the large burgundy flowers printed on the blanket.

Bella lingered. “Mom, I can’t sleep,” she said into the dancing shadows. In the muted light, Sarah could just make out the outline of her daughter beyond Charlie’s sleeping form.

“Come here, little bit.”

Sarah saw a rare glimpse of her little girl as Bella shuffled across the floor and crawled onto the bed beside her. She tentatively wrapped an arm around Bella, who relented by letting her body slacken. The two of them stared at the soundless images on the TV screen. After a time, Bella rolled onto her side, turning her back to Sarah.

“It’s my fault,” Bella said.

The words opened a gash in both of them.

“Oh, honey, it’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault. It’s okay. We’ll be okay. It’ll be okay,” Sarah said, as the girl sobbed against Sarah’s chest.

Bella, her beautiful, difficult, and independent child, had just shared her fears with her mother, and Sarah silently vowed to do everything she could to protect her children from pain, though a part of her knew it was a parent’s empty promise. It was impossible to protect children from the random wantonness of the world.

After Bella had fallen asleep, Sarah sat cross legged on the hotel bed with Bella snoring beside her and Charlie on the opposite bed. Undulating light from the muted TV screen warped the striped wallpaper. In Sarah’s hand, an artist’s pixilated rendering of the wendigo—its teeth bared and eyes staring at its hapless viewer—filled the iPhone screen. The creature had the shape of a man, but its rib bones poked through decayed flesh and the too-long arms ended in red-spattered

talons. Sarah rose from the bed, making it to the toilet just in time. She vomited, dregs slopping like milk from an expired carton. The sight of undigested beef on the white porcelain brought about another round, until her body shivered with emptiness. Sarah sat back on the cold bathroom tiles, her quiet sobs echoing off the tiles.

“Matthew,” she whispered. “What have you done?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

Sarah opened her eyes to a blade of light jabbing between the hotel room curtains. Bella lay diagonally across the bed, with her knees tucked into the small of Sarah's back. For a moment, Sarah forgot where she was. She covered her eyes against the nudge of daylight, seconds dripping away before memory took hold.

She had fallen into a facsimile of sleep just before dawn, when hungry sparrows started nattering out the window. The kids' steady breathing was an agonizing reminder that she was going to have to steer them through another day. Bella may have been old enough to understand, but her preteen anxiety came through as sarcastic backhand swipes, which Sarah found alternately hurtful and infuriating. Sarah worried she would crack into irreparable pieces, like glass shattered on concrete. Charlie, on the other hand, was a different nut. Empathetic and warm, he absorbed others' feelings into his pores. She sometimes wondered if he'd disappear under the weight of it.

The accusing orange numbers on the clock read three minutes after seven. Officer Boychuk had said the search would resume at first light. Sarah needed to get moving, but she lay pinioned to the lumpy mattress doing battle with memories from the days before: Matthew in the firelight, the murderous sky over Nagadon Lake, the wendigo. Each landed like heavy stones on her chest.

"What time is it?" Bella asked, her sleepy voice still unwieldy.

"A little after seven. Still early. You can sleep a little more if you want."

"Can't sleep."

“Try, a little bit. I won’t let you miss anything.”

Sarah looked from Bella to Charlie, splayed diagonally across the other bed with Norbert, the stuffed dragon, tucked under his chin, his sandy hair plastered against the white pillow, and tendrils of crusted drool on the side of his mouth.

They needed Matthew. And they trusted her to find him. But she couldn’t.

Sarah pulled herself to the bathroom. She ran the shower for several minutes, coaxing the outdated plumbing to life until the water was on the right side of scalding. She pulled the flimsy shower curtain behind her. The ring of water held her, the idea of leaving its embrace unthinkable. For that moment, the world did not exist outside the streams that tumbled across her body. To step out of the water was to plunge back into the reality of the last day and expose raw nerves to confusion and dread.

Sarah replayed the last conversation she’d had with Matthew—could replay it only from within the thrum of the water—and watched the scene as if from a distance, a spectator to the coming storm.

The small fire had kept back a rolling night that waited patiently at the edges. Sarah saw Matthew, his face faintly illuminated by the orange glow, twisted as if reflected in a fun-house mirror.

“Kids down?” he asked as she joined him.

Sarah settled beside him on the log. Her hand ran along the well-worn heartwood, still radiating captured warmth from the day’s sun. “I think so, but Bella will probably wake up a million more times to find that spider. I don’t have the heart to tell her there are probably a dozen more in there with her.”

He chuckled, the way he always did when it was about the kids, resonating with



affection and pride. Sarah looked up to the sky. The stars had come. There was a crispness to them, as if the cooler fall air had cut their edges. How not to feel insignificant in the face of a star-filled sky? For a time, small pops from the fire and the soft lapping of the water on the shore were the only sounds. Not even the breeze let out its whisper through the trees.

“It’s quiet.” Her voice was above a murmur. “Uhhh.”

How many times had they sat like this? Comfortably silent, each tending their own thoughts.

“It’s funny,” Matt said, breaking the reverie. “I can’t imagine them all grown up. Can’t think of Bella as anything other than a little girl with skinned knees. And Charlie? Well, that would be like trying to imagine a bowl of ice cream turning into an ostrich. There might be some vaguely similar shapes, but the essential beings are too fundamentally different.”

They both laughed at the image; Sarah’s turned into a yawn. The day had found her. Her head felt heavy, and though she was dressed for the temperature, fatigue chilled her. The only thing keeping her from crawling into the tent was the thought of the final trek to the latrine. A sigh escaped.

“Tired?”

“Ya. I’m getting too old for this canoeing thing.”

“You should get some sleep. I’m going to stay up a little longer.” Matt poked at the hot embers with a thick stick. “I’ll kill the fire and turtle the canoe before I come to bed.”

Matt was energized by time in the woods. He was always more himself here than

anywhere, his movements blended with the woods and water.

“Okay, last trek. Good night,” Sarah said as she headed for latrine trail.

She had just stepped beyond the ring of firelight when Matthew called her softly. She turned back. He looked into the darkness, clearly not able to see Sarah’s exact whereabouts, but he knew she was there. His expression contained too much to be readable. She saw Charlie in the furrow of his brow and Bella in the sorrowful smirk.

“What if we don’t get there?” he said.

“Where?”

He said nothing for a full minute. He was so still, Sarah assumed he had lost himself in thought.

“To the end, when the kids are grown and we’re old and alone? What if it turns out to be too much?” he said.

Sarah pretended not to have heard and walked away along the forest trail.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

2007

A sleet-filled wind buffeted the world outside. The front street resembled a snow globe shaken by an angry child. Though early March, winter was digging in its heels for a long stay. Sarah nested on the couch, a book and big bowl of popcorn warring for space on her lap. The TV was on, mainly for company, its glow adding to undulations of light in the room. She stared into the cold darkness out the window as talking heads discussed some celebrity's hair color. Ice pellets skipped against the glass, their rat-a-tat adding to Sarah's conviction that it was not a night to be out.

Beneath the drone, a ping caught her attention, like the tap of a fingernail against a full wineglass. She pulled her well-worn sweater tighter around her body and stepped to the window, as if knotted wool could disperse the foulness of the weather. The window mirrored a distorted image of her face, edged with the chaos of a storm. Sarah shivered and turned back toward the room.

The tapping resumed, this time with urgency. Sarah switched off the light and leaned in.

A figure raised its hand. She jumped back. Warily, she looked again.

"Matt?"

She rushed out her apartment door and down the stairs to the building's foyer, throwing the door open to the night.

He stood on her stoop, his red face grimacing against the wind as he stomped heavy

snow off his boots. A blast of wind trailed behind him, carrying the stinging smell of cold. Ice liquefied off his coat and hatless head as he stepped into the foyer.

“What were you doing out there?” Sarah brushed dregs of slush out of his hair, hearing them fall with a quiet splat on the tiles. “There’s a buzzer, you know.” Matt submitted to her ministrations with a shy grin.

Their “still keeping it casual” relationship was like a stream that rose and fell with the rains. The attraction was overwhelming, but Sarah was in no rush. She made time when it suited her and was unconcerned when Matt was busy or traveling. They fit when they were together and yet flowed apart easily. Sarah enjoyed being with Matt but still couldn’t sketch a future with this man. It was a game: she held back, waiting to see if he was indeed interested or just killing time with her.

Without a word, Matt leaned in, wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face in the crook of her neck. This is a moment, Sarah thought, whether for good or bad, only time would tell.

“Hey, what’s going on?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said, and stepped back. “I didn’t want to disturb you. I just—I wanted to see you.”

A coil in Sarah’s mind—one she hadn’t realized she carried—unwound. She reached for his hand and led him up the stairs into her apartment.

Matt’s coat hung on the front doorknob. Occasional drips ran along the arms, forming an inkblot-shaped puddle on the floor. The smell of peppermint tea and wet wool filled the apartment.

“What are you reading?” Matt said, as he picked up the book Sarah had left on the

couch.

“David Adams Richards. You ever read his stuff?” she said while she rooted in the kitchen for something edible to serve.

“Naw. Any good?”

“Well, he’s a little darker than your typical beach read, but I like the ambiguity.”

Sarah came back into the room with a plate of what she was sure were very stale oatmeal cookies and a certainty that Matthew was not at all interested in talking literature.

“I need to go away for a little while,” he said when Sarah joined him on the couch. She willed her expression to stay quiet.

“It’s a family thing—well, not exactly a family thing, but sort of.” Matt looked at her now, an unreadable question on his face.

“Are you going to tell me more?” she asked.

They were at the point in their relationship where family was more than an acquaintance, but still not familiar. To date, Matt had given her the CliffsNotes version of his life: originally from Vancouver, parents dead. It was a loss they shared, both orphaned in the world. He had left Vancouver not long after his mother passed. Without her, there was nothing keeping him there, and the cost of living was exorbitant. Sarah knew no other details. She read fresh wounds in his silence about his family.

“He’s more an old friend than family, but we were like brothers ... once,” Matt said. He ran a hand through his damp hair as he spoke, gripping the roots with each pass.

“He’s going through a tough time right now and hasn’t got anyone else. He needs someone. He—I can’t leave him stranded.”

Matt told Sarah about Kwan. Best friends through childhood and well into their midtwenties. It had been a joke in high school, Matt said: wherever Kwan went, there was Matt, and vice versa. Sarah felt the warmth in his voice as he described this man with whom he shared a past. She reached over and took his hand in hers.

“His wife has been sick for a long time now, and—” Matt’s voice stalled, trapped in a memory. “She passed away two days ago.” Loss filled the apartment, took a breath, expanded itself into the spaces of the room. “It’s just him and his two kids now. They’re still so young. He’s reeling. Needs some help to get through this next bit. Funeral arrangements, paperwork. He called last night to tell me about Lian.” Matt’s voice fell to a whisper with her name.

Matt offered to go to BC to help for a few weeks until Kwan could get everything worked out on a more permanent basis.

“Should be three weeks. Maybe four, tops,” Matt said, and squeezed Sarah’s hand. “I hate to leave you right now. You and I are still pretty casual, but I’ve liked where this has been going. I’d like to explore it further.”

“Of course.” It was Sarah’s turn to lean in. “I’m so sorry, Matt.” She wrapped him in her arms and felt his wet hair against her chin. They stayed like that, ringed in each other’s arms, each keeping their own thoughts. Sarah’s veered toward the vagaries of life, and how our everything could so easily be reduced to nothing.

“It seems like you and Kwan were close. You must have been close to his wife as well.” She kept his hand in hers as she pulled away.

“I was. Long time ago, now.”

“Was? Are you no longer close?”

“We grew apart some years ago. It got ... complicated.”

“How so?” Though she wouldn’t say it out loud, the edges of Matt’s story were blurry.

Why had she never heard of Kwan if they were like brothers? Curiosity and the uncertainty of her place drove Sarah to bring them into sharper focus.

“His wife, Lian. She was, well, sort of, my girlfriend.” Matt released Sarah’s hand to reach for a cookie. He held it between his thumb and index finger, turning it slowly as he spoke. “Through university. We broke up after we graduated.”

“Ouch.”

Matt took a bite of a cookie, his face twitching involuntarily. He looked at her over his nose and, with a rueful smile, said, “When exactly did you buy these cookies?”

They laughed. In the face of loss and the incomprehensible, they laughed, and the tether that had been holding Sarah back broke.

“It’s strange,” Matt said, laughter spent. “You think you’ll have all this time to make things right. To be the person you want to be. And along comes fate with different ideas. I guess part of me always thought there’d be a way to reconcile.” He rested his elbows heavily on his knees while Sarah stroked his back, willing her touch to say all the things her voice could not.

“I know I have no right to ask this of you, Sarah.” Matt’s words were thick and sticky, the syllables trapped in the back of his throat. “Will you wait for me?”

They made love, wrapped in the thickness of loss, listening to a storm ravage the outside world. Sarah drifted off to sleep with the salty taste of Matt's tears still on her tongue.

Sarah woke the next day into a crisp morning light and a fog lingering in her head. She closed her eyes against the brightness and reached out into her empty bed. Her hand lingered in the hollow. Images from the night before drifted through her mind, his hands on her wrists as he moved his mouth across her body, the helplessness that drove him as he entered her, and, finally, the warmth of a body beside her on a cold winter night. Beneath all that, she clasped the vulnerability Matt had shared with her, just enough to let her in.

The living-room window offered a glimpse of a crystalized world. The front street, awash in white, looked like the top of a wedding cake. Icicles turned tree branches into gleaming archways. Though beautiful, a barrenness lurked in the brightness: not even a squirrel track seemed to disturb the gloss.

A full pot of fresh coffee and a single croissant waited on the kitchen counter. Sarah smiled at the tasty cliché and sat at her small table to enjoy her bounty. The croissant, still warm from the bakery around the corner, melted in her mouth, the buttery pastry like an indulgence and a balm to her disappointment at waking up alone.

Grease still on her lips and coffee steaming in her cup, Sarah moved to the small desk in her bedroom and turned on her computer. She opened her email and stared at the list of names and subject lines that demanded her attention. Hitting New Message, she typed in Matt's email address.

Yes , she typed in the message, no subject line, no signature. A declaration, simple and unencumbered, she would tie her future to his, whichever way it led her.

Later, as she slipped on clunky boots and an oversize wool coat to contend with the



waiting cold, a stray thought found its way to Sarah: How had Matt managed to slip out to the bakery without leaving a single trace in the snow? She held the puzzle for a moment, scarf in hand, before letting it trickle away like melting ice.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

September 2016

Sarah and the kids returned to the command post around ten o'clock that morning. Thunderstorms had not rematerialized, so it was safe for the searchers to be out. The sky still refused to relent—though its bite had weakened—as mist gravitated to downpour and back again.

Memory was a misplaced faith; we believed in our pasts only as far as we remembered them. In the back of an unmarked police car, Sarah thought back to the memories that had poured forward the previous evening.

The first time Matthew had vanished suddenly from her life, even though it was temporary, was after he had told the story about his friend Kwan. Watching from the car as forest and lakes whooshed by, she reimagined that night and saw the street buried in a killing snow and a man who could slip away without breaking through the icy crust.

Sarah stepped out of the car and into a scene from a movie: volunteers scurried around like a swarm of newly hatched blackflies. Officer Dubé, clearly tired but focused, greeted Sarah. She was perfect for the role, Sarah thought, as the officer spewed updates about search grids and probabilities. Behind her, volunteers piled into waiting vehicles, getting ready to bushwhack their way inch by inch through dense undergrowth. There were forty-five volunteers now. Forty-five bodies, all looking for one.

The rest of the day was spent with the kids back in the trailer. Each time the door opened, Sarah's body stretched tighter, a notched bowstring held taut by an unseen

archer. She thought about calling work, checking in, but what could she say? I may need a few extra days. I've lost my husband. No. Better to use what little energy she had to resettle the kids, whose expectant heads popped up with each rush of air from the door.

At lunchtime, they poked at dried sandwiches and clutched cans of sickly sweet pop. "Charlie, eat up, buddy." Sarah pushed the sandwich closer to him.

Picture of misery. Sarah hadn't really understood that aphorism until this moment: her exhausted children trapped in a stifling box, where every hushed voice and whiff of air carried disappointment. It was almost enough. Enough for her to seek out Boychuk and tell him everything. Tell him about Matthew's absences, his recent moments of short temper and the epic fight that had led to this weekend away. Almost.

Mumbling vague words about fresh air to the concerned eyes watching her, Sarah wrenched open the door of the trailer and stumble-walked to the dock. Moisture hung in the cool air, though no rain fell. Sarah looked out at the lake. She felt like she had aged overnight, with dark circles under her eyes and hollowed-out cheeks greeting her in the mirror that morning. And yet her bones still held her upright.

"We don't think he's in there," Boychuk said as he came up from behind. His chin pointed at the lake. "We're pretty sure he's on foot, but the heavy rain is making it hard to track. We're making some assumptions that he probably headed for the rapids near where we found the canoe."

Boychuk's tedious efficiency ground away at Sarah's makeshift shell. "What does that mean?" she said.

"It means your husband has likely gone into the woods, and if he wants to be found, there's a chance we'll find him."

Sarah reeled on Boychuk. Anger, always coursing under her skin lately, burst out. “What the hell are you talking about? Why wouldn’t he want to be found?”

Silence stretched in the liquid air. Boychuk held Sarah’s challenge.

“I know it’s hard to hear, Sarah, but we don’t know enough to close any doors. No one saw him leave, and we have no idea what Matthew’s state of mind was when he got into the canoe. We wouldn’t be doing our jobs if we didn’t at least consider the possibility he doesn’t want to be found. It doesn’t happen often, and from everything you’ve told us, I don’t think it’s the case here. But it’s not unheard of. Some people simply choose to disappear.”

Boychuk placed a gentle hand on Sarah’s shoulder. She stood taller under the weight and curbed an impulse to shrug his hand off. Despair and anger clawed for her attention: despair won. She released a breath, let her shoulders collapse in the wake.

“We’ve doubled the number of volunteers and have a helicopter on standby for when the clouds lift enough. If we can get something in the air, we can cover more ground. I don’t want you to give up, Sarah. Not yet. You need to stay strong.” Sarah could only nod at the empty clichés.

“Okay,” she said.

Boychuk explained more technical details. Sarah caught none of it. The officer used terms like probability of containment and possibility of success . The only thing she took away from the monologue was that the chances of finding Matthew were diminishing.

Two days, Boychuk had mentioned the day before. Most people were found within forty-eight hours. It was now twelve hours to that arbitrary cut off. How much time before words like recovery overtook rescue . Boychuk didn’t need to explain what

that meant.

Sarah and the kids headed back to the hotel toward twilight. The searchers would continue for another hour or so, but their hope was thinning; the excited morning buzz had fallen to a murmur. Returning volunteers avoided making eye contact with Sarah and looked away when they caught a glimpse of the kids.

Sarah sat in the passenger seat of an SUV, Boychuk at the wheel. Woods and rock flew by out the window; she kept her eyes on the ribbon of blacktop. She felt shriveled, like a dead leaf at the end of autumn.

“Hope is a good thing, Sarah. It’ll light the darkest night,” Boychuk said. “I’ve seen people with a lot less experience than Matthew make it back.” Sarah leaned into the folksy drawl of his voice. Though not tall, there was a solidity to Boychuk, as if everything extraneous had been carved away, leaving only the solid rock and roots at his core. He spoke only when needed, yet his presence was undeniable.

“How often?” Sarah asked. Her dry lips cracked with the effort. His silence was all the answer needed.

“Is there anyone you can call?” Boychuk said. “Family or a friend? Family members can be our best friends, but best friends can be family. You shouldn’t be going through this alone, Sarah.”

“My parents are dead.” Sarah turned to look at Boychuk, a pathetic challenge in her gaze.

His chin dropped a little and his shoulders flattened on a long exhale.

“My sister,” she said in a murmur. “I have a sister.”

Stepping out of the shower later, Sarah threw on the same clothes she'd been wearing for the last three days. The smell of sweat and stale camp smoke turned her stomach. She tore off the T-shirt and wrapped herself in a clean towel. Clutter filled the room: muddy shoes kicked off at the door, empty chip bags and pop cans scattered across the small desk. Her eyes landed on the kids, both asleep in the same bed. Had they eaten today? What had they done? Had they driven back with her and Boychuk? She couldn't remember. They must have, but she didn't remember.

Eventually, Sarah crawled across the floor to the small nightstand between the beds. She picked up her phone, yanked it from the charging cord. It felt heavy and unwieldy in her hand. It had been almost two years since Sarah had last called her sister. And it had been thirty-six hours since she'd woken up in the tent without Matthew.

Muscle memory allowed her to dial the numbers she knew in her heart but could not have spoken out loud. She heard the dull warble of the phone ringing.

Once, twice ... it rang five times before she heard the click.

"Hello?" Sarah heard the familiar voice but couldn't speak. "Hello," it said again. "Anyone there?"

"Don't hang up."

"Sarah?"

"Ya, it's me."

"What's wrong?" Izzy's question was like a whip, quick and sure.

"It's Matt, Izzy. He's missing. I need help."

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

A loud phone splintered the quiet of the police station waiting room. Sarah looked at the empty desk where moments before a duty officer had pretended to look busy. When she and the kids had arrived a little after eight o'clock in the morning, the smooth-cheeked desk officer had given her bad coffee and an apologetic smile and asked her to have a seat while she waited for Boychuk. It was now almost nine.

Beside her, Charlie and Bella sat on hard plastic chairs, their heads touching over an iPad. A second ring of the phone pounded against Sarah's forehead. By the third ring, she stood, ready to leap over the desk and yank the phone from its cradle. The officer returned to intercept the call.

Sarah went back to her seat. The request to come to the detachment contained no explanation, no information. Just a polite demand. Stress and lack of sleep perched like twin beasts on her shoulders. After an hour in the no-man's-land of the station waiting room, Sarah felt like she was blindfolded and left to balance without a reference point.

The kids had protested loudly when she woke them. "I want to wait here," Bella said, pulling the final word to a pitch that reverberated in Sarah's head long after it had stopped. Sarah, her hands shaking, reeled around to face her daughter; the tenuous threads that had been holding her together were snapping. She held the collapse at bay, but just barely.

"I know, Bella, but you can't stay here by yourself. Please get dressed." Clipped words disintegrated her mother-soft form. Sarah saw the struggle in Bella's eyes; the accounting of consequences as she weighed the cost of a rude retort. Mother and daughter stared each other down, playing out an intense microcosm of their

relationship.

“Can we get hot chocolate with breakfast?” Charlie said from the bathroom, toothpaste spittle dripping from his mouth to stitch the room’s fault line. Sarah had held her daughter’s gaze for a second longer before turning to her son.

Hot chocolates long gone, the three of them still waited in the windowless front room of the station. Sarah wondered what other traumas had played out in this room: How many families had experienced the worst moment of their lives? A local country music station buzzed from a desk radio; twangy singers complained of lost marriages, lost jobs, or drinking too much. Sarah thought of an old joke: What do you get if you play a country song backward? You get your house back, your job back, your car back ... your husband back. She stood again and paced the tiny room. Every few steps, she alternated between focusing on her impatience and her nausea, each distracting her from the other.

Sarah was standing in the middle room when sunshine exploded from the front doors. She held her hand up against the glare, as if flesh and blood could hold back the light.

“Sarah?” A familiar voice surfaced.

An hourglass of color stepped out from the glare. Before Sarah could make sense of the vision in front of her, she felt a hug wrap around her shoulders, pinning her arms to her sides.

“Oh God, Sarah! I can’t believe this is happening to you.”

“Izzy?” Sarah croaked before dissolving into her sister’s arms. “How did you—”

“Find you? It wasn’t hard. Seems to be only one motel open in this town. Bit of a dreary place at this time of year, isn’t it? Guy at the front desk sent me here.”



Sarah closed her eyes as waves of relief crushed her. “You came.”

“Of course I came,” Izzy said, with a self-assurance Sarah had known from girlhood. “I’ll always come.”

Izzy stepped back, holding Sarah at arm’s length. “Goodness! You look a wreck.” She handed Sarah a handkerchief from her purse. The piece of cloth, like Izzy, was steeped in color. “Ah, perfect,” she said, turning to the young desk officer coming toward them. “Would you mind getting my sister a glass of water? Please.”

Izzy had a way of making people act, even when they weren’t sure they wanted to.

“Thanks,” Sarah said with a snort, as she took the handkerchief from her sister. She buried her face in the cloth and took in the citrus-accented smell of her sister’s perfume. It was a scent Izzy had specially made in a small perfumery in Paris and was as unique to her as her fingerprint. It hadn’t changed in the two years the sisters had been apart.

Izzy, long limbs and tempestuous red curls tucked into designer labels, wore curve-hugging jeans beneath a long red coat. A black-and-white tartan scarf draped her neck. As always, Sarah felt like a clumsy disaster beside her effortlessly elegant sister.

The sisters were a yin and yang combination from the day Sarah came into the world two years behind Izzy. Sarah was the yin—soft and yielding as water—with her own quiet strength and a tranquil way of moving through life. Izzy was the yang—fierce and forceful as wildfire—taking air out of any room she strode through and leaving a wake of energy and expectations. It had not escaped Sarah that a similar lifelong dynamic was also playing itself out in her own children.

“Bella!” Izzy turned to the kids, giving Sarah time to compose herself. “Sweetie, get

over here.”

Bella jumped off her seat and scurried over. “Hi, Auntie Izzy,” she said, a rivalry between delight and reticence in her face.

“Let me look at you, my girl. Look how tall you’ve gotten. Who said you could do that?” Izzy squatted down and grabbed Bella’s face in her hands. “Oh my goodness, I could just swallow you whole!” She wrapped Bella in a crushing hug.

Though she hadn’t been with the kids in person for a couple of years, Izzy regularly spoke with Bella over FaceTime. The two shared a special relationship, and Sarah marveled at her sister’s ability to keep a conversation going through a screen. Bella always took great pains to announce to the house when she “had a call” with Auntie Izzy, making it clear no one was to disturb her. As the hurdles in Sarah’s own relationship with Izzy became harder to manage, she didn’t have the heart to break the bond between aunt and niece. Izzy took on her role as aunt with enthusiasm and earnestness, and Sarah found reassurance in knowing someone else in the world loved her children so intensely.

“And Charlie. Not such a little peanut anymore, are ya?” Izzy said, her tone serious but with a wink thrown in. Charlie watched her, as if appraising the woman whom he knew but of whom he had no memories of his own. He looked at Bella, who had an arm draped around Izzy’s neck. The girl nodded once. Charlie ambled toward them and plunked his head on Izzy’s shoulder, arms still at his side. Izzy drew them into her protective orbit; three heads huddled in a conspiracy.

When Izzy stood, she kept a hand on each of the kids. “It looks like you have things to do, sis,” she said and rolled her eyes over their surroundings. “Why don’t the kids and I get out of here? We can catch up later.”

Charlie looked to his mother; his brows furrowed into a question.

“That’s a great idea,” Sarah said with a forced smile. “I have to talk to Officer Boychuk for a bit. You guys head back to the motel, and I’ll meet you there when I’m done. I can’t imagine I’ll be too long.” Sarah handed over the key.

Rob Boychuk knew a few tricks. You didn’t police over a thousand miles of roads, sixteen thousand people, and the wildlands that ran in between without learning a thing or two. As he watched Sarah Anderson on the other side of the waiting room’s one-way glass, he found himself in a dance between sympathy and cynicism. Sarah paced, sat, stood again, and absentmindedly touched her hair. A few minutes later, she started again, trailing anxiety in an endless loop.

Though he wasn’t yet sure what to make of Sarah, something about her story had slipped under his skin. His wife called it his cop-sense and knew to give him space when a case wedged itself in his brain. Every case had a knife edge—victim or offender. Sarah Anderson could be either, of course. Or both.

Matthew Anderson’s case should have been simple. There were a few lost-camper incidents every year—weekend adventurers turned around in the woods or hikers unprepared for a change in weather. Most turned out to be minor. By all accounts, Matthew was a woodsman; he had some inkling of what to expect out there. At least a trace of him should have shown up by now. But they had nothing.

It seemed even after all his years on the force, there could still be surprises. Rarely had a camper disappeared without leaving some sort of trail. As he watched Sarah pace, another case came to Boychuk’s mind. It was over fifteen years ago now. Boychuk was new to Patricia Bay then, recently arrived from the academy with a new bride and a young man’s thirst for the wilderness. The Lussier family had been camping close to Algonquin Provincial Park, on a small tributary of the Madawaska River. It was a gorgeous clear night when their little boy, Josh, disappeared. Ten years old. The case alone would have been enough to haunt him, but the aftermath scarred Boychuk.

A full search had been organized, but there was no trace of Josh. Rumors started to circulate—he'd been abducted by a passing traveler, his parents had killed him, even alien abduction—none supported by the paltry evidence they'd managed to find. Eventually, they'd been forced to admit failure, which translated into a cold case. The Lussiers, though, wouldn't give up. The parents, James and Maddy, moved to the area afterward, determined to either find their boy or be near where he vanished. But grief hit them instead. It was like that, grief. Dormant, but always ravenous, waking in its own time to steal away moments of contentment. Two years after Josh disappeared, Boychuk responded to a call at the house the Lussiers had rented just outside town. Their bodies hung from a rafter; a note left on the kitchen table explained they could no longer live in a world where Josh may or may not be.

Hints of Doritos and Skittles hit Sarah as she stepped into the hotel room. The kids and Izzy had spent the afternoon in the ambitiously named Aquatic Center attached to the hotel, running between the pool and the hot tub until they were dizzy. Izzy let them be kids in a way they hadn't been since waking up in the tent three days ago. Afterward, she'd stuffed them full of junk food as they watched pirated Disney movies on her laptop. By the time Sarah joined them in the early evening, the kids were too full for dinner and exhausted. They fell into a sugar-crash sleep as Izzy and Sarah shared cold pizza and a bottle of cheap red wine across the room's only table. Though unspoken, they hit a temporary pause on the rift that had kept the sisters apart for the last two years.

"So," Izzy said after the kids had gone to bed and Sarah had spooled out the story beginning with the camping trip. "What was today about?"

"I really don't know."

Boychuk had collected Sarah from the waiting room shortly after Izzy left with the kids. His first words were an apology for making her wait, though they rang like the beginning of a form letter. She followed him through an open door leading into the

bowels of the building and a small squared-off room with a battered table and conference chairs. The walls had been white once but were so scuffed that the original color remained a suggestion; the air hung with the smell of bad coffee and body odor. It was not a room designed for comfort.

Sarah pulled out a chair and started at the screech of metal across the linoleum. She sat and wrapped her coat tighter around her. After some perfunctory politeness about how she and the kids were doing, Boychuk launched into the reason for the visit.

“Sarah, I hate to be the bearer of crappy news here, but we can’t seem to catch a break on this one. This is day four, and still no trace of Matthew. The weather’s been a bugger. Rain has left the trails soup, but even then, we can usually find a trace. This one has us stumped.”

Sarah kept her eyes on the wall behind Boychuk.

“In a case like this, we’ll keep looking, but I don’t want to lie to you. The likelihood of success diminishes with each passing day. Do you understand what that means?” he asked.

Sarah shook her head.

“Search and rescue will make a few more passes, and the ground search will go back over already searched ground.”

“But you found the canoe. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“It did. It gave us a starting point for the search, but it’s a well-traveled spot, even at this time of year, with lots of traffic, none of it necessarily Matthew. His fingerprints are all over the canoe, but that’s to be expected. We’ve made some assumptions, but at this point, we have to start thinking our assumptions may be off.”

“So, what happens now?” Sarah said, her voice breaking.

“Two things. Though we have nothing to suggest he may have gone into the water, we’re going to dredge the lake to be certain. It’s just to make absolutely sure, Sarah. I’m not expecting we’ll find him there.” Boychuk took a breath, as if distancing himself from what he had to say next.

Sarah imagined Matthew sinking into the bottomless cold, the waves covering his face. She heard his struggling breath as he fought to keep himself at the surface, saw the panic in his eyes as realization dawned that the water had betrayed him.

“The SAR team may need to consider recovery work,” Boychuk said.

He laid the words out gently, but they clawed at Sarah’s skin. Recovery. The room blurred, creating a watercolor background behind Boychuk.

“Sarah?” Boychuk’s voice came to her like a fading echo. “Let me get you some water.”

She heard the screech of metal against linoleum and felt the rush of air as the door opened, bringing with it the stench of disinfectant that had dogged her since she set foot in the building. Sarah drew a scalding breath of it.

Boychuk returned with a tepid glass of water. Sarah gulped at it, then sent him back for a second glass before sharper edges came back into her vision. She fixed her eyes on the floor and concentrated on keeping her breathing slow and even.

“At this point, I’m just trying to prepare you, Sarah. The search will start to broaden geographically, but the investigation will also broaden. We’ll have to look into some more possibilities.”

Sarah looked up.

“I know it’s not easy to hear, but it’s standard procedure. We have to consider that this wasn’t an accident.”

“But why? How could that possibly be? He disappeared from a canoe trip, not from the middle of Toronto. There aren’t any canoe-jackers roaming the woods. Have bears formed a cartel I’m not aware of?” The sarcasm was unwarranted but not misplaced.

“A missing persons investigation broadens the search and the suspicion, Sarah. It means everyone in Matthew’s life has the potential to be a suspect. We’ll have to ask some more questions.”

“But I have nothing more to say! I’ve already answered your questions. What more could you possibly ask me?” Sarah felt her pulse surge against her temples.

“Look, Sarah. I want to help you. I really do.” There was sympathy in Boychuk’s tone but something more in his eyes. Cautiousness. “I know this is hard. Why don’t we start with a few easy questions. Get them out of the way. I can pass that information along to Missing Persons, and maybe they won’t need anything else from you.”

What choice did she have? Sarah nodded.

Would Matthew have gone back home without you? No. Was he happy at work? Yes. Did he have money problems? No. Do you know of any disagreements he’s had with anyone? No. Is there anyone who might want to hurt him? Someone from his past, maybe? No.

For most of the day, Boychuk held Sarah in a ring of challenge and recollection. Each

question seemed innocent, but she couldn't help but feel there was a pattern, a rationale, to the randomness. She'd answered, all the while trying to see between the words.

"He asked so many questions," Sarah said to Izzy as she poured more red wine into a plastic cup. They had moved to the hotel hallway floor, cold pizza and a half-drunk bottle of wine between them, just outside the room where the kids slept. "That's all they ever seem to do. Ask endless questions. He asked about my marriage, Matthew's relationship with the kids, whether he had been close with his parents, did I know his colleagues. It went on for hours. Half of them, I didn't even have any answers for. And I'm not even sure he even needed the answers."

"What do you mean?"

As Sarah spoke, she pulled at a lock of hair, pinching it near the scalp and pulling the length of it. Her knuckles whitened with each pull.

"I have no idea. I'm probably being crazy. I mean, Boychuk would ask a bunch of questions, scribble down some notes and then step out to 'check on something.' After what seemed like forever, he'd come back in with more questions.

"I kept getting this feeling he already knew all the answers. Like it was all some test. It felt creepy, like every answer triggered some invisible thread in a web. I don't know. I don't know, maybe I've watched too many of those stupid crime dramas. The scene where the cop is looking to trip up a suspect."

Izzy's mouth was pinched, as if biting back a question lurking behind her lips.

"It's been four days, Izzy, countless search hours, and they still haven't found him. In fact, they've found fuck all." Sarah's voice rose. "They have an idea—they think—of where he may have been but no idea where he went, no clue what's happened to him



or, as far as I can tell, any idea how to find him. They don't even know if he's alive, Izzy." She was pacing now, flailing arms punctuating her shout-whispered words.

Sarah didn't remember standing. She was startled to find herself breathless, her hands holding her phone in front of her like a weapon. Izzy sat against the wall with one leg tucked beneath her, the other dangling across her knee, a detached gaze, one Sarah knew too well, on her face. She'd seen that look since they were kids. Reserved for when they had their biggest fights, when Izzy felt a need to demonstrate cool mastery over her emotions. Despite the fierce, predatory face she showed the world, Izzy guarded her emotions jealously.

In the silence that followed, Sarah heard the ticking of an electric radiator and the hum of passing traffic. She was besieged by the stench of grease and cheap wine, as if a putrid creature slithered beside them. Sarah stared down at her sister.

Izzy stood slowly, took a slow, deep sip from her cup, leaving a wine stain on her lips. "It's going to be okay, Sarah," she said. "We'll find the bastard ... and then we'll kill him for putting you through this."

A beat of silence passed. And then Sarah laughed.

"Oh Jesus, Izzy," she said through helpless cackles. "How did I get here?"

"Well, I don't know for sure, but I'd say marrying a man who thinks sleeping on the ground under bug-coated pieces of nylon is fun was your first mistake."

The sisters were off, powerless against the surge of laughter feeding on the strain of the day. The laughter felt like being scrubbed by a steel brush: it tore away the coating of tension until Sarah was raw and exposed, a speck on the floor of a cheap motel in the middle of nowhere.

Asking questions was an art more than a science, and Boychuk considered himself a passably good artist. He knew how to mix emotions in the same way a painter blended colors to get a truer picture. He had let Sarah Anderson's colors blend for a few hours and knew it was time to tease out a little more of the portrait.

"So, who decided on Nagadon Lake? You or Matthew?" Boychuk asked.

"Matthew. He always picked the routes. Camping is really his thing. I just tag along and keep the kids out of trouble."

Sarah leaned back in the chair. She reached across her body to rub at an ache beneath her shoulder blades. Boychuk knew the spot. It was an ache that could slither across to the neck and threaten to become a headache.

"And so you don't organize anything? Not the packing, not the route, not the safety gear?"

"I rely on Matthew for all of that. I just paddle where he tells me to."

"Right, you mentioned that. Makes sense."

Sarah breathed deep. Boychuk leaned in, doing his best Columbo imitation, genial and folksy.

"Remind me again, Sarah. Did Matthew have a wet suit?"

"He did. A good one."

"Did he not bring it with him on the trip?"

"Yes ... I mean, no. He didn't. Not this trip." It was subtle, but Boychuk just managed

to hear it in Sarah's voice. An edge of anger being reeled back.

"How are you so sure? If Matthew did all the packing?"

"I—He must have mentioned it. I can't really remember. It's not a detail that sticks in the brain."

"Isn't that a bit strange? Most swimmers I know take a wet suit with them for a lake swim, especially in the fall."

"Maybe he forgot it. I really don't know."

"Right."

Finally, Boychuk thought, as he studied her face. Sarah's eyes had hardened, and her lips strained against themselves.

He had initially expected Sarah's emotions would be more pliable. Certainly, she'd seemed fragile enough that a few questions should have brought her to just the right shade. But he'd kept her here for hours longer than he planned before he saw the flare of red. It could still turn out to be nothing: fatigue or frustration or even the typical baggage that dogged every marriage. But Boychuk had shaken things up, and the colors had run.

After the wine bottle had been drained to its last dregs, the sisters tiptoed back into the room. The kids were asleep, curled beside each other on the far bed as if adrift together in an endless sea. Izzy crawled beneath the scratchy polyester blanket beside Sarah. It had been years since they'd shared a bed, but muscle memories returned, taking away the foreign edges of the moment and leading Sarah into a comfortable familiarity. She lay in the dark, unable to sleep, as night crept forward.

“You’re going to get through this, Sarah,” Izzy said. “You’ve always been the strongest person in our family. Whatever happens, you’re going to get through it.” She reached for Sarah’s hand. Izzy’s touch was warm beneath the paltry covers.

A small sob escaped Sarah, quiet and contained.

“Remember Angie MacNeil? I mean, if you could survive that bitch, you can survive anything,” Izzy said.

“Oh God, that was years ago.” Sarah said.

Angie MacNeil had been beautiful, popular, and cruel. Angie had taken an inexplicable dislike to Sarah, and bullying ensued—name-calling, sniggering, adolescent humiliations thrown like water balloons in the halls. Izzy had tried to get Sarah to tell their parents, but Sarah was convinced it would just make things worse.

“I wonder what happened to her. She disappeared in your sophomore year, didn’t she?” Izzy said.

“I heard she changed schools.”

“Did you ever find out why?”

Sarah stayed silent, but even after all this time, Izzy could always tell when Sarah was hiding something.

“Sarah? What happened?” Izzy nudged her with an elbow, then sat up and flicked on the bedside table light. “Spill.”

Sarah kept her face unyielding and her secrets wrapped tight despite her sister’s mock-stern glare. “She—I heard she ran into a few problems, that’s all.”

Rumors had started circulating about Angie. Drips here and there—social arsenic in the stew of teenage angst.

“I may have said a thing or two about her that got out,” Sarah told her sister.

None of it could be verified, of course. But it was enough to fuel the rumor mill. Did Angie really sleep with Daisy Schneider while she was dating Steve Isaacs, the soccer team captain? Was Angie selling pot and uppers out of her locker after school? Never anything concrete, but enough to get people wondering, talking, and sidestepping Angie in the halls. The specifics were left up to adolescent imagination. When the principal’s impromptu locker search had turned up a baggie in Angie’s locker, no one was surprised.

“It was time she got a taste of her own medicine,” Sarah said.

“Well color me surprised! I had no idea you had that in you?” Izzy said, a look of genuine admiration crossing her face.

“I don’t like bullies.”

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A feeling like dripping water plunked Izzy's shoulder. Drip, drip, drip. She traveled reluctantly toward the sensation. Her mind lingered in the void between awareness and sleep. Eyes still closed, she sluggishly reminded herself of where she was, how she got here, and why—in this moment—water should make her uneasy.

“Auntie Izzy.” A whisper drifted to her ear. “Auntie Izzy.” It was a finger, not water, nudging her shoulder. Izzy opened her eyes, let her vision adjust to the light peeking through neglected brown curtains. Who picks dirt-brown curtains? Sarah, still asleep beside her, snorted. Bella stood in front of her. “I had an accident,” the child said.

Puzzle pieces juddered in Izzy's mind. Accident? What accident? What kind of accident does an eight-year-old have? Was Bella hurt? Izzy sat up quickly. Pieces tumbled into place: a dark stain ran down the front of Bella's pajamas.

“Oh, I get it,” Izzy said, careful to keep the relief out of her voice. “It's okay, kiddo. We got this.” She rolled off the bed and moved gingerly around the room, trying not to wake Sarah or Charlie. The empty bottle of wine and remnants of last night's pizza still sat on the table, leaving a familiar smell of far too many mornings after. She stretched out the stiffness from yesterday's long drive and hunted around for clothes. “Go grab some clean clothes and we'll sneak out for a little adventure,” she said and winked at Bella, who responded with a sliver of a smile.

After getting Sarah's call two nights ago, Izzy had thrown some things into a suitcase and flown out the door. She had been almost to her car before she'd thought better of heading into the dead of night to some wilderness town in the middle of nowhere. Best to leave in the morning when daylight would make more sense of the world.

Izzy lived on the edge of Cabbagetown in Toronto. Hers was the middle house in a block-long stretch of gentrified Victorian row homes with sculpted gardens and lots of entitlement. The area was home to the city's professionals and artists. It was tailor made for the director of a small yet prominent art gallery. Vibrant, trendy, and awash in city clatter, just like Izzy.

After groping around in her hastily packed suitcase, Izzy pulled on a pair of yoga pants and an oversize sweatshirt before slipping into the bathroom with Bella. Her niece—usually all brashness and bravado—stood in the middle of the overly white bathroom looking small and alone. Izzy slipped down to her knees to help her change and then wrapped her arms around her small body, feeling it shiver in her embrace. Tears moistened the nape of Izzy's neck as the child released fear and shame that had nothing to do with wetting the bed.

"I hear ya, sweetheart," Izzy said. "It's going to be okay." What could you say that wasn't false comfort or rote platitudes? Bella's hero had vanished. The world would never be the same, no matter what the outcome.

The morning was brisk with a hint of woodsmoke perfuming the air as Izzy, hand in hand with Bella, stepped out the front door of the hotel. Clear light crisped the edges of the surrounding hills and trees. Izzy was not a country girl. Even the suburbs gave her vertigo, so the blast of small-town Canada was disorientating.

Most of Patricia Bay, including the hotel, squeezed around a two-lane highway that cut through the town like a rock seam through granite. A handful of local businesses stretched out from the highway's intersection with Main Street, giving way quickly to brick homes and clapboard bungalows. The street in front of the hotel was quiet this early, peopled only by a man ambling by with a small terrier in tow, the dog stopping every few paces to sniff. Izzy remembered seeing a coffee shop up the road and hoped it opened early. She took Bella's warm hand in hers and gave it a little squeeze.

“Right then. Breakfast!” Izzy said. Bella nodded and returned the squeeze.

As soon as they started walking, Izzy cursed her fashion-over-form yoga pants for failing to keep out the chill. She picked up her pace, making sure her steps were in time to Bella’s, and distracted herself with thoughts of Sarah. At thirty-seven, Izzy had already been married—and divorced—twice, with kids not even a passing thought. And while she hadn’t enjoyed the divorces, she couldn’t say she missed being married, nor did she feel lonely. But she also knew exactly where both of her ex-husbands were, even if she wasn’t interested in seeing them again.

Sarah was different. Once she had decided to marry, she was committed. She’d been seeing Matthew for only a few months when Sarah called to announce their engagement. Izzy was suspicious but recognized a familiar pattern: Sarah loved being in love and was happy to convince herself it was so. Her chameleon sister absorbed or shed tastes with each new relationship: Tom and the ridiculously sterile apartment they shared, Kato and tae kwon do retreats, Marcel and veganism. Each new man stripped away another little piece of her sister.

Izzy was intuitive enough to recognize Sarah’s behavior with men may be a legacy of the loss of their parents. The accident had been brutal: a head-on collision on a rainy highway. Their mother was killed instantly, but Dad lingered for a few days. The doctor said it could be helpful for patients to hear their loved ones’ voices, so the sisters took turns reading from *Moby-Dick*, each secretly believing the words would pull him back.

Dad opened his eyes once—just once—and it still pained Izzy that she hadn’t been there. She stepped out to make some phone calls while Sarah read. Just as Ishmael saw the white whale for the first time, Dad had opened his eyes. Only for a moment, and only for Sarah.

Sarah swore there was no awareness there, no light in his eyes. But for Izzy, it was



another loss. He had died before they reached the end of Melville's tome, and the girls had wordlessly agreed to bury the book with their father. All of which led Izzy to show up for her sister's wedding feeling untethered and alone and desperate to maintain her relationship with Sarah.

Izzy came back to the here and now with a slap of wind curling in from the surrounding woods. The coffee shop was farther than she'd thought. Izzy's legs tingled by the time they spotted the converted clapboard house with a red-letter sign across the front that read T H E B A Y K E R Y . They stepped into a waft of freshly brewed coffee and sweet dough and an overload of country charm, complete with a rocking chair in the corner. Bella, unusually quiet beside her, shivered.

"What'll it be?" an older woman behind a carved-wood counter asked. Her gray-rooted hair sported a bottle auburn. She smiled as Izzy reached the counter. Well-earned lines creased the outer corners of her eyes and quotation marks wrapped her pale lips.

"Coffee, please. And a hot chocolate for my friend here," Izzy said, lifting Bella onto a counter stool. Bella ogled a pile of multicolored doughnuts under a bell jar.

"You want one?" Izzy whispered in her niece's ear. Bella nodded.

"Two of those, as well," Izzy said, pointing to vanilla creams dripping with rainbow sprinkles.

Local coffee shops were part of Izzy's daily routine, wherever she was. She told herself it was a way to keep grounded as she traveled through bourgeois art communities, but it was the familiarity she liked about them. She was grateful now for the comfort to be found in vinyl stools and the smell of yesterday's grease.

"Another coffee and hot chocolate, too, please. And a half dozen of those doughnuts.

All to go.”

“Sure thing, hon. Looks like you could use a little warm-me-up.”

The waitress slid the doughnuts and wax paper cups filled to the brim onto the counter. “Auntie Izzy, I need to pee,” Bella said.

“Little girls’ room is through that door back there,” the waitress said.

Izzy stood as well, but Bella said she could go alone and headed off before Izzy could respond.

“You up here for a little getaway?” the woman asked over her shoulder as she filled the takeaway box.

“Not exactly,” Izzy said. “More of a family thing. My niece and I woke up early, so we decided to bring back breakfast.”

“Ah, lovely.” Izzy thought she detected a twinge of an Ottawa Valley accent with its elongated a’s. “Best steer clear of Nagadon Lake, though. OPP are up there making a mess of things. Looking for some camper who’s gone missing.”

“Oh?” There was only a hint of a question in Izzy’s voice, but it was enough.

“Ya, happens every now and again around here. I’ll get you something for those cups.” The woman nested the drinks into a foldout tray; her knuckles were swollen with arthritis, but her hands moved deftly from muscle memory. “Usually it’s a weekend-adventurer type who bites off more than they can chew. OPP find them in a day or two. If they don’t, it’s usually bad news for the poor bugger. This time of year, with the storm that went through, he’s either dead or gone. His wife and kids are staying at the place up the road too. Poor things. I can’t imagine. We’re organizing a

community drive for them, if you care to donate?”

“Thanks,” Izzy said. She grabbed the coffee tray and box of doughnuts and turned to the door. Bella stood in the middle of the small restaurant, her face crumpled, arms locked straight into fisted hands.

“My daddy’s coming home!” she screamed. “You don’t know anything. You’re stupid. I hate you, I hate you, I hate ...”

“Oh, honey. I’m so—” the woman tried, but the damage was done. Izzy shoved the box of doughnuts under her arm and chased Bella out the door into the waiting cold.

Walking back, Izzy had no idea what to say to Bella. She muttered cold comforts—“It’ll be okay; that woman doesn’t know anything”—but Izzy knew they were meaningless. When Bella took her hand, Izzy let silence speak. Her thoughts drifted to the one event that had led to this horrible moment: Sarah’s wedding. Everything from that day to this was a direct path to catastrophe. Izzy was just the only one to see it.

Even Izzy had to admit, Sarah had looked radiant and happy in their mother’s old wedding dress. The intricate beadwork and inlaid stitching, old fashioned on the hanger, sculpted Sarah like the seams of a Grecian statue. The sisters had spent the night before the wedding at a hotel—a final night together before Sarah stepped into her own family. They woke to a gushing hairdresser armed with hairspray and curlers. Sarah’s light-brown hair was done up in a half-layered twist and a waterfall of unbound tresses. Her sister was a bride, and Izzy swallowed everything that entailed.

“Oh, Sarah,” Izzy said when Sarah stood from the hairdressing chair. “Mom and Dad would be so proud.”

“Stop, stop, stop.” Sarah waved her hands in front of her face. “You’re going to make me cry and ruin my makeup, and I can’t sit in that chair anymore.”

Izzy wrapped her arms around her sister, clinging to the last moments of their family.

Sarah broke away. “Now, let’s get me married.”

Izzy nodded, lips pressed together in a schoolmarm frieze to halt the threatening tears. “Wait, a finishing touch first,” she said, and ducked into the suite’s bedroom to retrieve her purse. “You’ve got the something old with Mom’s dress, the something new with those fabulous shoes, the something blue with the forget-me-nots in your bouquet, but you still need something borrowed .”

Izzy pulled a small box from her purse. “I think Mom would have wanted you to wear these today.” She handed Sarah a pair of white jade earrings. Each of the girls had kept something from their mother, and in Izzy’s case, it had been the earrings their great-grandmother had bought on her honeymoon in Italy. The teardrop-shaped stones were edged in silver, with intricate etchings across the cloudy surface of the jade.

“Oh, Izzy. They’re perfect.”

“Here. Let me.” Izzy stepped to her sister’s side and gently pulled on her earlobe. The tender flesh gave way to the earring’s clasp.

“I can’t believe my baby sister is getting married,” Izzy said as she gave the earring a little tug to make sure it would hold through the events to come. She moved to the other side of Sarah, holding the earlobe between her fingers. “It’s not too late, you know.” Her voice was just above a whisper. “This is happening so fast. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“You don’t need to worry about me, sis,” Sarah said, still grinning. “This is what I want. I love Matt and I’m getting married.” The last syllable came out on a childish squeal.

“You hardly know him, Sarah. You’ve been dating, what, seven months? What do you even know about him? He has no family, you’ve never met any of his friends, and what about those times when he just disappeared, no explanation, no call? Bam. Out of your life. It’s weird, Sarah. I mean, you haven’t even lived together yet. How is that even possible in this day and age?”

Sarah held her smile too long. “I know. It’s old fashioned. It’s not that we didn’t want to, it’s just he travels so much for work, it wasn’t practical to find a place. His place was just a hotel with a kitchenette that the company had set him up in. We spend all our time at my place anyway, it would have hardly been worth the trouble finding him a place. And then, it became kind of fun. The idea of learning about each other’s habits as newlyweds.”

Izzy finished with the earring. “Sarah, it’s crazy.” It came out more sharply than Izzy intended. “It’s wonderfully romantic but pretty naive, don’t you think?”

Sarah stiffened, which both sisters knew carried a history and was intended to rebuke.

“Look, I’m sorry to be so blunt. It’s not like I haven’t mentioned it before now. It’s just—” Izzy took a deep breath, calming her words. “This is the last chance. Are you sure, Sarah?” She looked directly into her sister’s hazel eyes, a color she shared with their mother.

“It’s all right, honey.” Sarah clasped Izzy’s hands in both of hers. “I’ll be all right, Izzy. I know what I’m doing. Besides”—she’d winked—“the universe has spoken, and you know I can’t resist that.” All Izzy could do was nod her head and accept.

Sarah and Charlie were awake when Izzy and Bella walked back into the room. A children's show with manic puppets was turned low on the television, while Sarah was on the phone across the room. Her long silences and wounded expression told Izzy all she needed to know about the conversation.

Izzy settled the kids to their makeshift breakfast, noting to herself that tomorrow she'd start worrying about nutrition and too much sugar. She sat at the small table, holding the still-warm cup of coffee with both hands, drawing what she could from its fading heat. She watched Sarah absorb blow after blow from the speaker on the other end of the phone. It was clear from her body language not much had changed.

Izzy felt a rush of anger like a rogue wave across an empty sea. It rolled dully through her, looking for a shore to smash against. She looked from the kids to Sarah and back. Finally, her ire landed with force on the only available target: Matthew. Matthew and his willful disregard for his family, for failing to do everything he could to save her sister from pain, for selfishly abandoning them in the middle of nowhere.

Another memory from Sarah's wedding boiled up.

The I do s were over, the wedding cake cut, the older folks had called it a night, and Izzy was waiting for a glass of white wine at the bar in the dimly lit ballroom of the Lord Elgin Hotel. Tables had been pushed to the sides of the room, revealing beech-colored parquet flooring. The strains of Etta James's "At Last" bled into Lou Bega's "Mambo No. 5" as music tumbled against the walls of the room, filling empty space with a bass pulse.

"Another beer, please." Matt's voice caught Izzy's attention. Drink in hand, he propped his elbows on the bar, a goofy smile on his face as he watched Sarah shimmy in her wedding dress. After a few seconds of ungainly steps back and forth, Sarah kicked off her shoes to shouts of encouragement from the dancers around her. In her bare feet, she spun, her dress lifting slightly, while friends flapped around her like

leaves caught in a whirlwind.

Matt laughed; the sound scratched at Izzy's ears. Her own glass of wine arrived, and she grabbed it and crossed the few steps toward him. "Salute! To your health." She raised her glass and eyed him.

"Izzy! I didn't see you there." He turned his head slightly, not taking his eyes off Sarah. "And yours," he said, raising his drink. He swayed against the bar.

Matt watched his new bride, oblivious to Izzy's stare. "She's something, isn't she?"

"She is. And she's all I have left in the world."

He turned to face his new sister-in-law, an attempt at earnestness on his face warped by one drink too many. His head wobbled. Izzy caught the smell of sweat beneath his spicy aftershave and the fainter waft of beer on his breath.

"I know," he said, "and now you have me too." A question lifted his eyebrow.

Izzy swayed. "Yup," she said, emphasizing the p, letting it draw out and send a little spittle flying. Secrets slipped out more easily in shared drunkenness. "But I don't trust you." She let the words hover between them.

Matt mocked a shocked expression. "Look, I know you don't like me, Izzy. God knows you've made that clear. But you have nothing to worry about. I love Sarah."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. But, Matt, I don't know you. Sarah barely knows you. And let's face it, you haven't been Mr. Reliable."

"She told you?"

“Of course she told me. She tells me everything.” Izzy kept her body slack and looked out to the dance floor. Sarah had disappeared behind a rush of bodies and taffeta. “And I gotta tell you, I don’t take kindly to someone running out on my sister. You can give her all the mumbo jumbo you want about old friends and wilderness adventures, but I know bullshit when I hear it.”

“I’ll admit it, I haven’t always been there for Sarah. There were ... complications at the beginning. But I’m all in now.”

“What exactly does complications mean, Matt? This is my sister, not an IT project.”

“It’s all in the past now. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“Really?”

Matt raised three fingers beside his shoulder in a mock salute. “Scout’s honor.”

“‘Cause you need to know if you ever hurt her,” Izzy continued as if he hadn’t spoken, “I will come for you and you will suffer.” She faced him and poked his chest hard, her words a little slurred but with enough ferocity to emphasize her bravado. “She is my baby sister, Matt. She deserves the best, and I’m not sure you’re it.” The words landed, couched in a history Izzy knew Matt could never understand.

“Matt, come on. It’s my favorite song.” Sarah appeared at Matt’s shoulder, floating on a grin. The strains of “Truly Madly Deeply” by Savage Garden filled the room. “Don’t let my sister scare you, honey! She’s only mean when she’s drunk,” Sarah said as she wrapped an arm around both her sister and her husband.

Izzy let her gaze linger on Matt before she turned to Sarah. “I can’t believe my baby sister got married,” she shouted, hugging Sarah fiercely. “Go dance, you crazy newlyweds.” She teetered slightly on her heels. Sarah blew Izzy a kiss and dragged



Matt away, pulling him onto the crowded dance floor.

“Hey, Matt!” Izzy asked, just before he was swallowed by the crowd. “Were you ever a Boy Scout?”

“Hell no!” he’d said over his shoulder.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

On paper, Sarah Anderson was exactly what Boychuk would have expected from a woman caught in the worst moment of her life. Volatile, terrified, easily frustrated. She seemed so typical, in fact, he didn't understand why he had decided to call Joan Phelps, a local psychologist, to consult on the case.

"Something's off, Jo. I can't put my finger on it," he said over the phone after Joan had reviewed the case file.

"Oh God, don't give me some cliché like 'you feel it in your bones.' This isn't CSI." Joan tapped at the keys on a laptop as she spoke from her office. "Off how?"

"I don't know. It checks all the boxes as another would-be adventurer misjudging the conditions. But there's something about the wife I can't put my finger on."

"Now you're just repeating yourself, Rob. Be more specific." Boychuk leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. The station was in the middle of Main Street, with the library on the right and a beat-up tourist office on the left. The buildings were close here and the people closer; you survived the hard wildness of this place by building trust.

"There's something she's not telling me, Jo. I don't think she knows what happened, and I can't say for sure she had anything to do with her husband's disappearance, but something isn't adding up, and I think Sarah Anderson may have the answers. I just need a second opinion on this one, that's all."

"Fine. But tell me what I'm looking for."

“It’s a—a simmer.”

“A what?”

“A simmer. On the surface, Sarah seems like any other wife and mother. Trying to balance it all. Typical marital tensions for sure, but nothing drastic, at least not that I can get out of her. But there’s a boiling under her skin, Jo. I think she’s working hard to keep it in check. I just need a second set of eyes, that’s all.”

“Okay. Set it up for tomorrow. But you’re buying the coffee.”

Sarah had spent two weeks in Patricia Bay with Izzy and the kids. Two weeks waiting for word of Matthew. Everywhere they went—the grocery store, the drug store, the town restaurants—they were the target of local pity with raised eyebrows and hushed voices. There were deep kindnesses she could never repay. The hotel refused to charge them for the rooms; the Bakery plied them with coffee and pastries when they walked through the door; and there was a barrage of drop-offs from townspeople: clothes for the kids, baked goods, prayer cards. All of it was appreciated and humiliating. Sarah loved and hated them for it.

She was the woman who lost her husband: an object of gossip and constant “there but for the grace of God go I” stares. If they thought God had spared them, Sarah wondered, did that mean her family was the sacrifice? She couldn’t get away from them, nor her snide thoughts. It was time to go home and leave whatever searching remained to be done to others.

Before they could escape this little pity party of a town, Sarah needed to meet Boychuk at the station. Izzy and the kids were gathering the scattered remnants of their vigil, stuffing donated clothes and secondhand toys into hastily purchased duffle bags. Their belongings had migrated around the small room, seeking out hidden spaces under beds and behind the dresser. The camping gear was shoved into the car,

but what remained of their Patricia Bay lives was tossed around like debris at a roadside accident. The thought of pulling all the pieces together made Sarah nauseous; she threw her few belongings onto one of the beds without looking at them and asked Izzy to throw them away.

Izzy questioned Sarah with a sharp look. “I’m serious, Izzy,” Sarah said, “toss it all. I don’t want any of it. I’ve got clothes at home.”

“How about I ask at the desk where I can find a donation box?” Izzy said.

An irritation moved through Sarah, as if her blood were alive, moving independently of the thrusts from her beating heart. She’d grown accustomed to this surge—it came with every gentle hand on her arm or sympathetic tut-tut.

“Fine. Whatever. I have to meet Boychuk,” Sarah said before closing the door on her sister. She felt like a moody teenager. Fuck it, she thought as she walked down the hall, petulance drifting in her wake.

Izzy stared at the closed door as if wood and metal could give answers to the questions tumbling around her head. She didn’t know how someone was supposed to react to the situation Sarah found herself in. How do you process an unknowable loss? Grief was a mutable feast, she supposed, filled with every horrid flavor that the human mind could conceive. Who could even say where the line of normal ended? Certainly, anger was a reasonable response. And Sarah seemed angry, a lot.

And yet Izzy had seen Sarah negotiate loss and grief before. She’d seen pain and hurt, and a raging sadness cast a shadow on her little sister that seemed endless when their parents died. But this ... this muffled rage? This was different. There was something more to the story, and Izzy needed to read it. Her sister’s future depended on it.

Sarah’s blood had calmed by the time she reached the station, but she knew it was

only resting, waiting for the next jolt of sympathy to bring it back to life. Boychuk led her to a back room immediately.

“Please have a seat, Sarah. How are the kids?” Boychuk said.

Sarah had been in this room a half dozen times already. She had studied every peel in the paint and whorl in the ceiling as words tumbled out of one officer or the other, none of them able to tell her anything she didn’t already know. The room’s most distinguishing features were a horizontal mirror on one wall and a long-forgotten cat calendar by the door counting off the days of December 2001.

“They’re fine. Thanks,” Sarah said. They’d been through this dance. Sarah knew he meant well, but she didn’t feel like two-stepping with him today. She wanted this to be over. She wanted to go home.

“Can I get you anything? Coffee? Glass of water?” There was a change in Boychuk’s tone; it was subtle, like a whiff of something you can’t quite place. The pity had abated. Gone were the hushed words and lingering looks.

“No. Thanks.”

“I’m going to grab a coffee myself. I’ll bring you some water, just in case you change your mind,” Boychuk said.

Though they’d been through this routine a half dozen times in the last couple of weeks, Sarah detected an awkwardness in Boychuk’s normal professional sympathy. Her eyes lobbed questions as he turned to leave the room.

Boychuk came back a couple of minutes later, a bottle of water in one hand and a woman beside him. The other hand was empty. No intended cup of coffee.

“Sarah,” he said, “this is Joan Phelps. She’s here to help you through the next steps.” He looked uncomfortable, as if he were discussing Sarah’s menstrual cycle.

“What steps?” Sarah said.

“Hi, Sarah. Please call me Jo. I’m a psychologist. I consult for the police.”

“Psychologist?”

Jo brought a chair around to Sarah’s side of the table and sat facing her, forcing Sarah to turn her chair to keep both the psychologist and Boychuk in her sight. She sat at a distance, but close enough for Sarah to notice gray streaks in her dark hair and light makeup on her cheeks and lips. She was dressed in a long indigo sweaterdress over black leggings, like an artist or kindergarten teacher. Sarah disliked the woman.

“The police sometimes request my services in missing persons cases to help family members. But I want to be absolutely clear, Sarah: whether I stay or not is up to you.” Her tone was warm, devoid of the dripping condolences that had become typical in this town. “If you don’t want me here, you can be completely honest. Don’t feel you need to stand on politeness.”

Sarah looked from the woman to Boychuk, still hovering by the open door. His impassive face gave no clues. “It’s okay, I guess,” Sarah said, though she kept her eyes on Boychuk.

Boychuk moved swiftly to close the door and settle in his usual spot across the table from Sarah. Jo angled her chair, forming a triangle with Sarah at the highest point. It felt like a net was closing in.

“Sarah, the teams have finished dredging the lake and searching the area around Nagadon Lake and the Mirabelle River down from the rapids,” Boychuk said, his

voice clinical and pointed. He was ripping the dressing off a festering wound, one that would never heal. “There was no trace of Matthew passing on foot from where the canoe was found, so we undertook a radial search from the last known point extending to the maximum point of containment without success.” Boychuk expelled the technical terms.

“What Rob means,” Jo said as she passed Boychuk a questioning look, “is there is no evidence of Matthew in the forest and no sign of him in the water.”

Boychuk took a breath, slowing his words. “We’ve done everything we can for now, Sarah. I know this is devastating for you and the kids. We’re all out of options. The search and rescue will move to a passive search. This means we’ll keep the file open and we’ll follow any leads that come up, but ... well, active search measures are being suspended. Sarah, it’s presumed Matthew drowned.”

Sarah’s eyes followed a crack that slithered the full length of the far wall. She wondered what might have caused it. Had the building shifted? Did it go through the paint to the drywall? Did they even know it was there?

“I know this is hard news, Sarah,” Boychuk said. “There’s nothing else we can do right now. Matthew’s case will go to Missing Persons, but there is a strong possibility he drowned. The case file will be accessible across the country and available to agencies in every province. I’m sorry, Sarah, but we’re at a standstill.”

Sarah’s eyes traced the crack, stopping just above Boychuk’s head. “I don’t understand,” she said. “I thought you said you’d be able to find a body if he drowned. You told me you’d be able to find him.” Her stare challenged him to deny it, but there was little fight in her anymore. She needed to end this.

“I’m sorry if I gave you that impression, Sarah,” Boychuk said, no defensiveness in his tone, only a well-honed sadness. “It’s rare, but it’s a big lake. It’s not always

possible to cover every inch. And if he went into the river, there are times when a body doesn't surface. Sometimes it gets snagged in deadfall under the water, sometimes a current can wedge it against rocks."

Beneath Boychuk's voice, Sarah heard rushing water, felt it snake over her body until it reached her face, covering her nose and mouth, robbing her of breath. She had no more voice.

"Sarah?" the psychologist said.

Sarah looked up. Jo's face filled the center of her vision, like an old-fashioned sepia-tone picture. She remembered Matthew on past camping trips, his body smooth and slick against rust-hued water. She imagined his face turning toward her on the shore, heard the pull of life-giving breath as it powered his next stroke.

Jo knelt in front of her, and Sarah could feel the woman's hands on her knees. Filling her lungs and clearing her mind, Sarah was racked by one irrefutable belief: her husband had not died by the water's hands. "I need to go home," she said, though she didn't care if they had heard her. "He didn't drown."

"I know it feels impossible to wrap your head around right now. That's normal, Sarah. It will take time."

"You're wrong," Sarah said, as if talking to recalcitrant children. "Matthew did not drown. Not in that river, not in that lake. You don't know my husband. The water would never have pulled him under." Sarah stood.

The shallow furrow on Boychuk's brow and steady gaze from the psychologist told Sarah all she needed to know.

"Sarah, if what you're telling us is true, this now moves to another level of



investigation,” Jo said. “Missing Persons will take it over. They will undertake a full investigation that will pick apart Matthew’s life. I’m not going to sugarcoat it, Sarah. They’ll comb through everything and everyone in Matthew’s life, including you, your family, your friends. It’ll be a bit like swallowing the disease to get to the cure. They’ll search your home, talk to everyone who knows Matthew. They’ll have endless questions, and—”

“Sarah, I know it’s difficult to hear, and I’m truly sorry for what you and your family have had to endure,” Boychuk said. “But I have to ask. Why are you so sure he didn’t drown?”

Sarah resented the kindness and suspicion in their eyes. They were acting like the town residents, cloying and considerate. She was sick to death of their pity, their fabricated sympathy, their superficial condolences. Walking through the constant gauntlet of faux sadness in this misfortunate little town was the problem. She needed to get out. Away from them. Away from here.

“I understand what you’re telling me, Rob,” Sarah said, using his given name for the first time and feeling calmer than she’d felt since waking up in the tent. “It’s Occam’s razor.” The muscles in her face relaxed, and her shoulders slipped down her back.

The officer and psychologist looked at each other.

They don’t get it, Sarah thought. She would need to lead them. “Occam’s razor. In the face of the unexplained, the simplest answer is the most likely.” The remembered lines from an undergraduate philosophy course dropped confidently from her lips. “But I’m telling you, my husband did not drown. I don’t know what happened to him, but there is no way the Mirabelle took him. She wouldn’t do that. You need to keep looking.”

“Sarah,” Jo said, “denial is normal. It’s our mind’s first reaction to the

incomprehensible. But you need to prepare yourself for a life without Matthew. I'd like to work with you to find some support at home. Officer Boychuk tells me your sister is with you, but I'd like to set you up with a colleague of mine in Ottawa. Her name is—"

"I appreciate the offer, Joan, but I want to go home now," Sarah said. "Matthew and I have a counselor. We'll make sure to see her when he's back."

Boychuk and the psychologist rose from their chairs, blocking Sarah's path to the door. "I know I sound crazy," Sarah said. She almost took pity on their bewilderment. "But I know my husband. I am absolutely certain Matthew could not have drowned. Not by that river or that lake. He loved them too much. And they loved him. It wouldn't be ... fair. You need to keep looking."

"It's the eyes," Joan said, sitting in Boychuk's cramped office, sipping the promised cup of coffee. Boychuk wanted to hear her unvarnished thoughts, before professional language subdued her opinion in a formal report. He preferred her early gut reaction. "Always look to the eyes, my friend. For all her timid outward demeanor, Sarah Anderson tracked everything in that room."

Joan referred to Sarah as a social savant, able to seamlessly merge into the expectations of those around her. "Don't bother looking it up. The term doesn't exist. It's just my shorthand for a person who gives the viewer what they want to see and hear," Joan said. "I don't know about that simmer you mentioned, but she seems like a chameleon to me. I get the feeling she'll be exactly what you need her to be to suit her purposes."

Boychuk had dealt with more missing persons cases and grieving family members than he could count. Yet none had been as hard for him to read as Sarah Anderson. Maybe this was the reason why. If she was playing a part, he could deal with that. What mattered wasn't the part she was playing but her reasons for playing it. Those

he found hard to decipher.

“I think you’re intimidated,” Joan said.

“What do you mean?” Boychuk crossed his arms. Joan had a way of dropping uncomfortable truth bombs.

“You don’t know what to make of her because it’s obvious she isn’t missing a thing even though she puts on a pretty good doe-eyed show.”

Boychuk raised an eyebrow.

“Rob, that woman is in control. If she seems flustered, it’s because she wants you to think she’s flustered. If she seems focused, it’s because she wants you to see that. Did you notice her follow your every move? I think she already knew what she was going to hear when she walked in here today.”

Joan explained how Sarah’s body language had changed subtly when Rob walked into the room. Initially relaxed, she’d stooped slightly and dropped her head in his presence, as if slipping on a costume.

“It’s a good act, I’ll give her that. I can’t tell you whether she’s being truthful with you, but what I can tell you is you know exactly what she wants you to know.”

Boychuk took in Joan’s words, rolling the idea around a bit before he asked, “Do you think she’s capable of harming someone? And if she did do something to her husband, why fight the drowning theory?”

It was an unfair question, and Boychuk knew it. What psychologist would draw a conclusion from such little interaction with a client? Joan refused to answer directly, but she did offer him some generalized theories. “Denial is one way to explain her

behavior. The mind's unwillingness to accept a soul-crushing reality."

Boychuk leaned back in his chair. "Too easy," he said.

"Look, I know you cops all think it's possible to tell when someone's lying, but we psychologists are more subtle than that. The mind can do amazing things, make you see red when it's blue. She may be lying or hiding something. Who knows? Or maybe she wants to believe so badly that lies seem like truth to her. I mean, that was some overly complex argumentation, aggressive eye contact. All intended to shut down questions.

"Is she telling you the whole truth? I don't think so. Does it matter to this case? That I won't speculate on. I'll tell you this, though. Sarah Anderson shows some magical thinking and thought distortions. She seems to be under the impression a death-defying bargain has been struck between her husband and a river. I'd hate to think how she would react if a bargain were ever broken with that woman."

A week after the last interview with Sarah Anderson, a manila envelope landed on Boychuk's desk. Inside was a printout of an academic article entitled "The Powerful Role of Magical Thinking in Dealing with Grief." Boychuk flipped through the article that detailed a small and inconclusive study out of England where subjects displayed magical beliefs in the face of complex situations—a grandmother who knit a scarf every day for twelve years because she believed it would keep her grandson safe, a man who believed a daily visit from a stray cat was preventing his cancer from coming back. None of these patients suffered from bipolar disorder or mental health issues; rather, they'd fashioned complicated bargains with some unseen force to achieve their ends. One sentence in the article was highlighted in neon yellow: "Magical beliefs and superstitious behaviors allow people to reduce the tension created by uncertainty and help fill the void of the unknown." Two words scrawled in Jo's handwriting at the top of the page made Boychuk snicker: Just saying!

Sarah was exhausted by the time she climbed into her car for the drive home. Sitting in the driver's seat for the first time in weeks, she caught the faint scent of sweetgrass from Matthew's deodorant. She caressed the steering wheel, feeling the resin, smooth as a worry stone. She remembered Matthew's ritual: adjusting everything that could be adjusted before starting the car—the seat, the steering wheel, the mirrors. She ran her hands across all of these, claiming them.

“Can we go already?” Bella said, her voice a surgical slice.

So much sadness in a simple question. Bella sat in the back seat, her eyes locked on an open book in her lap. Charlie climbed in beside her and settled Norbert on his lap. Izzy was in her own car. The plan was to convoy to Ottawa, each leading the other out of the wilderness.

The first half hour of the drive cut through dense Canadian Shield landscape. Sarah sped past pristine lakes, intricate rock formations, and endless forest and hated all of it. The trees closed in around the road, striving to cut them off from home. Sarah pressed down on the accelerator, willing the car to outrun the hunted feeling.

“You're speeding, Mom!” Charlie said.

Sarah glanced in the rearview mirror to see his disapproving face.

“You're right. Thanks for catching that, buddy. I'll slow down a little.” She aimed her words at the little furrow, hoping the worry that dogged her son would subside when they got back to the comfort of home.

“Hey, where's Auntie Izzy?” Bella said.

“Just behind us,” Sarah said.

“No, she isn’t, Mom,” Bella elongated the o’s, imbuing them with all the sarcasm her eight years would allow.

“What do you mean?”

In the rearview mirror, only an asphalt road surrounded by rocks and trees was reflected. The absence raised discomfort in Sarah’s shoulders. She started checking the mirror every few seconds, willing the woods and rocks to release her sister.

Since the sisters had been reunited in Patricia Bay, Sarah felt a part of herself return, even through the chaos and grief of Matthew’s disappearance. The wedge that had driven her and Izzy apart seemed smaller, almost inconsequential, in the face of everything. It hadn’t been a single moment, after all, that led to the estrangement; rather, it was old arguments that expanded into open space.

They’d initially stayed close after Sarah’s wedding. They talked every day, celebrating the big and little events in each other’s lives. When Sarah was pregnant with Bella, Izzy showed up at the door with a self-care basket, complete with coupons for massages and dinners at trendy restaurants. She took to “aunting” with unabashed gusto, finding joy and humor even in the mundane stories that Sarah shared.

Life, though, had a way of rolling over relationships. Sarah’s day-to-day was consumed with kids and work, especially after Charlie was born. She started to feel stifled by Izzy’s questions and attention. Little by little, Sarah came to see a pattern of mistrust in Izzy’s need to know the minutia of her life, especially when it came to Matthew. An old scab in their relationship became visible.

“How can you not know the name of the hotel where Matt is staying?” Izzy asked on the phone one night.

“I never know. He’s in Saskatoon. I think,” Sarah said as she wandered around the

living room picking up discarded socks, abandoned toys, and what she was sure was a scoop of oatmeal from yesterday's breakfast.

"Don't you think it's weird that he never tells you where he's staying?"

"Oh God, not this again, Iz. I'm too tired to have this same argument." Sarah had called to unload some of her exhaustion. She didn't want to hear more about Matthew's inadequacies according to Izzy.

"It's hardly an argument."

"Look, I know you worry, Iz, but this is normal. We're busy, and thanks to the modern invention of texting, I don't actually need to know where Matt is to reach him."

"Well, that's just naive."

There was a pause while Sarah gauged how to respond to yet another of Izzy's implications that Sarah was still a child. She had a career, a family, a home—clearly she could take care of herself.

"Fuck, Izzy. Are you ever supportive of me?"

"What are you talking about? I'm nothing but supportive."

"Really? 'Cause last time I checked you second-guess me at every turn."

"Sarah, you're being ridiculous. You're just tired."

Maybe it was exhaustion. Or perhaps her own insecurities. Or even an age-old sibling dynamic that neither would have truly been able to escape. Whatever it was, Sarah

felt a shift in that moment, a resentment that had been building for longer than she knew but was powerless to escape. “At least I can hold a marriage together,” she said—a single pellet, poisoning the well of their relationship.

“What did you just say?”

Sarah could have called it back, apologized, and moved on—she knew that Izzy’s last marriage hadn’t survived the loss of a pregnancy—but sometimes our choices do not reflect what we imagined they would be.

“You heard me,” Sarah said.

The sisters talked periodically after that, but a piece was missing. Eventually, stilted phone calls were replaced with birthday and Christmas cards as each waited on the other to apologize. Sarah had mourned the loss, but not more than she’d nursed the grudge.

“Hellooo, earth to Mom.” Bella’s mocking brought Sarah back to the car. “Now you’re going too slow.”

Sarah looked again in the rearview mirror to see Izzy’s little red Mazda, like a spot of blood against the surrounding forest. She hit the gas pedal and resolved to pay any speeding ticket she might get.



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It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon by the time Sarah and the kids pulled into the driveway of their two-story stucco house in Ottawa. Sarah was mildly surprised to find the house standing just as she'd left it, curtained windows like half-opened eyes watching the street. The neighborhood, a network of curvy streets splattered with large oaks and recently planted saplings, was coveted for its good schools and large backyards and equally despised for its stereotypical version of suburbia.

The arrival home felt chaotic: the kids ran around the house touching everything in sight while Sarah set about unpacking the car. Before long, sleeping bags, discarded camp pots, and dirty clothes created an obstacle course in the entrance floor. Sarah wandered through the rooms, peering into each one as if playing a one-sided game of hide-and-seek. She had expected to find only emptiness and the pang of loss, but the house surprised her. Matthew had so often been at the office or traveling, his absence was familiar at home.

"You hungry?" Izzy asked as she strode through the front door with a load of groceries and a telltale bag from the liquor store.

"Not especially, but the kids should eat." Sarah had driven the three hours straight through, with only a short pee break at the side of the road. The kids had had snacks in the car, but neither Sarah nor Izzy had eaten since breakfast.

"Chinese?" the sisters said in unison. A family tradition—as teens, Sarah and Izzy ordered Chinese food whenever their parents were out for the evening. Over steaming cartons of lemon chicken and deep-fried wontons dunked in Day-Glo sweet-and-sour sauce, they caught up on each other's lives: school, boys, and best friends being the most common topics. The greasy food loosened their tongues as they supported each

other through teenage angst or the crush of the day.

“I’ll call.” Izzy pulled her phone from the back pocket of her jeans. “Moo shu or ribs?” she asked. Sarah offered an arched eyebrow, a wordless response crafted in thirty-five years of sisterhood.

“Moo shu it is,” Izzy said. “Charlie! Bella! It’s moo shu time. Who can say that fast five times?”

“Moo shu, moo shu, moo shu ...,” the kids squealed as they came barreling into the kitchen.

For just a second, everything felt normal.

When the food arrived, the smell of citrus and stale oil brought on a nostalgia for both sisters. Over dinner, they regaled the kids with stories of lost boyfriends, a colossal fight over LEGOs that led to their mother finding pieces in the houseplants, and a strange encounter with a three-legged neighborhood cat that left them all breathless with laughter.

“Tell more,” Charlie said when storytelling stamina waned.

“No more tonight. It’s bedtime for you two.”

“Ahhhhh.” The kids echoed each other as they headed up the stairs, but the lack of any firm protest from either made it clear they were indeed tired.

Charlie was already half-asleep by the time Sarah smoothed down his ruffled curls and kissed his head. “Good night, sweetheart,” she whispered.

“Mom,” Bella said as Sarah was gathering discarded clothes off the floor of her room.

“Can you tuck me in?”

It seemed like years since Bella had asked to be tucked into bed, and the unexpected request settled into Sarah the way good chocolate melted on the tongue. Her daughter was so much, and yet nothing, like her. They had the same hair color and similar builds, even matching facial expressions, yet Bella’s character—shoot first and clean up the mess later—was like ancient ruins carved into her genes, and Sarah lacked the key to her language.

“Sure, kiddo.” Sarah sat on the side of the bed and held a tired smile on her face. “How are you doing? I know this has been difficult.”

“I’m fine.”

“Ya? Okay, well, just so you know, it’s okay not to be fine.” Bella looked away from her mother toward the wall.

“All right, then. All done,” Sarah said as she finished tucking the blanket against Bella’s sides the way she did when Bella was little. Sarah stood to leave. “Good night, honey. Love you.”

“Mom, I have to tell you something,” Bella said, her head downcast and voice just above a whisper.

The kettle was wailing when Sarah returned to the kitchen after putting the kids to bed. Izzy, in a furor of activity, had put away the leftovers and was wiping down the kitchen table. “Tea?” she asked. Without waiting for a reply, Izzy pulled down two mugs and dropped in tea bags. The scent of peppermint and jasmine filled the kitchen.

Sarah felt like she was moving through a dense fog, dragging herself across unknown

terrain but desperate to move forward. She cradled the secret Bella had just told her, unsure whether to bury it or release it into the world. She knew Bella was struggling with Matthew's absence, but the child carried so much more.

While Sarah had unnecessarily resmoothed the blanket across the bed, Bella told her mother: the night Matthew disappeared, she'd left the tent after Sarah was asleep and found Matthew by the canoe. She'd jumped out at him as a joke and he'd gotten angry with her because he fell down and pretended to be asleep. The poor girl believed that's why Matthew had gone away. Sarah reassured Bella that it had nothing to do with his disappearance. He would never leave his family just because he lost his temper, she'd said to Bella. But was that really true?

There had been anger in their marriage for some time now. Though Sarah couldn't pinpoint a moment or a date, things hadn't been the same between them since Charlie was born. While she didn't believe for a minute that he'd walked away from his family into the Ontario wilderness, Sarah did wonder if his anger was driving him away from the family, toward a different life, a different woman.

Sarah rose. She kissed Bella on the head, lingering to take in the earthy little-girl smell of her beneath the sweet coconut of her shampoo.

"I tried to tell you, Mom," Bella said in a sleepy whisper.

"What did you try to tell me, honey?"

"About Daddy." Bella's voice was a gentle slur, her mind already chasing dreams.

Sarah knew she should tell the police about Bella's story, but really, what did it change? Matthew was still gone. She'd already told them their marriage was far from perfect. Bella's encounter with Matthew wouldn't tell them anything they didn't already know. He had been with them the night before he disappeared. Sharing

Bella's secret with the police would only subject the girl to more scrutiny and make her wonder if she was the cause of her daddy's disappearance. No child deserved that.

As she made her way downstairs, Sarah cast her mind back to that night. She remembered melting into the sleeping bag as exhaustion had taken over. She closed her eyes. Did she feel her daughter's hand as she crawled out of the tent or hear the sound of her voice? Nothing came. She stopped halfway down the stairs, willed herself to wander through memories. Images flitted like a slideshow in fast forward: Matthew by the fire, the funky smell in the tent, the bite of cold as she stripped off her outerwear before crawling into the sleeping bag. Did she sense that Bella had left the tent? What kind of mother sleeps through that? She felt her eyes pinch together as she searched desperately. The images scrolled mercilessly, making it hard to catch details, like a child's spinning top. Suddenly, everything stopped, and in her mind's eye, Sarah saw only one image: the wendigo she'd googled on the first night in the hotel, its teeth dripping blood and claws reaching out greedily.

As she reached the kitchen, Sarah sunk under the weight of it all, sliding to the floor, grasping the mug Izzy handed her. Izzy joined her, their backs against the cupboards, legs splayed out in front of them. Twilight clung to the wall across from them. They sat without speaking, sipping tea, but Sarah knew from experience, Izzy was holding something back: one finger thrummed the mug in her hand, jangling the plastic bangles on her wrist, while the other hand carefully smoothed invisible wrinkles on her T-shirt. Sarah decided, in that instant, she would carry the burden of Bella's secret alone.

"What?" Sarah asked Izzy, more sharply than she liked.

"Nothing. It can wait."

"Spill it. You're practically vibrating, so you might as well tell me."

“It’s just, I think you’ll want to get some papers organized sooner rather than later.”

“What would I possibly need with papers?”

“Look, we don’t know what’s happened to Matthew. You say he’s coming back. The police think he drowned. One thing is clear, he’s not here now. And there is life to sort out in his absence.”

For most of her adult life, Sarah had paid little attention to the formal documentation of living. Financial statements, registration certificates, insurance papers—she had willingly let them fall to Matthew. Izzy, however, ran her own business and was driven to build a financial portfolio from the time she was fifteen. She saw independence in understanding money.

“Fine,” Sarah said. “What do I need to know?”

“Well, how about we start with where exactly all the documents are? Mortgage papers, bank statements? Any of those ringing a bell?”

“They must be in the study somewhere. There’s a couple of filing cabinets in there.”

Sarah flicked her hand in the direction of the small room just off the kitchen. It had been an uninsulated sunroom when they first moved into the house, but they had renovated it themselves until it grew into a cozy little nook with large windows and space to work. Matthew had set himself up in there with a battered secondhand desk and overflowing filing cabinets. Sarah rarely visited. Though it resided in her house, it was foreign territory.

“Let’s have a look, shall we?” Izzy strode into the room, laying waste to the crafted balance.

Organized mayhem. That was really the only way to describe the jumble of papers and files in Matthew's study. Izzy felt a twinge of despair when she pulled out the first drawer; there were files but no discernible filing system. A manual for a blender was sandwiched between the kids' birth certificates and a file filled with take-out menus. Izzy plunged her hand in.

An hour later, when Sarah stepped back into the room with more tea and a box of animal crackers, Izzy stood in the middle of the room with an empty drawer and three neat piles on the desk in front of her.

"Ooh, where did you find those?" Izzy grabbed for a cookie and dunked an elephant into her tea.

"You'd be surprised what's still around these days. And what's coming back," Sarah said.

"I know. I heard they were remaking Risky Business . Or was it Top Gun . Either way, Tom Cruise was still gonna be in it."

"Gotta say. I think he can pull it off," Sarah said, mimicking the iconic dance from the original movie. They both laughed at the idea of a fifty-something-year-old heartthrob gyrating in his underwear.

"Wish my marriage would come back," Sarah said on dying laughter. She leafed through the piles of paper, clearly uninterested in the contents.

"Not the sitcom you imagined life to be, then?" Izzy said.

"Not even close."

Izzy was ashamed by the sense of satisfaction she felt. She'd questioned Sarah's

marriage from the very beginning and always felt Matthew was responsible for the distance that had grown between her and Sarah.

“I think he was planning on leaving me, Iz.”

Izzy’s satisfaction dissolved into Sarah’s matter-of-fact words. She went toward Sarah, who took an instinctive step back.

“Sarah, I—”

“Look, before you lecture me, or fling out save-the-day answers, I’ll admit it. I have no real proof. It’s just a ... I don’t know ... a feeling. It’s crazy. I know it’s crazy. I couldn’t even tell the police.”

Izzy let her arms drop to her sides. “Why not? Wouldn’t that make a difference in their investigation?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. I can’t tell them. How can I admit that my marriage was falling apart? And what am I supposed to tell them anyway? Ya, we hadn’t been talking for months. Marriages go through that, don’t they? Maybe his mind had started to wander. Not exactly a smoking gun of marital betrayal. And then he suggested the canoe trip. Out of the blue. He wanted to go to Nagadon Lake.” Sarah’s voice rose as she spoke, like a roller coaster jugging up the first incline. “Nagadon was our special place. Matthew would never have suggested it if he was planning on leaving me. Would he?”

Izzy was not about to attempt an answer to that question.

“Sarah, you need to let the investigators know.”

“I don’t need to do anything. Right now, all I need to do is make things as normal as



possible for the kids. And hinting that their father was about to break up the family isn't going to do that." Sarah paced as she spoke, skirting the piles on the ground.

"You have to tell them, Sarah. Remember what the officers kept telling you, every little thing matters. I'm sure they'll understand. It won't be the first time they've heard a story like yours."

"A story like mine? What do you mean?" Sarah stopped her pacing and targeted Izzy with a dark stare. Izzy stood firm under her sister's gaze, refusing to back down.

"I didn't mean anything by—"

"Of course you didn't. You never do."

Izzy felt the sarcastic slap. She drew her shoulders back, raised her chin, and pushed into the blast. "Sarah, what do you really think happened to Matthew?"

Sarah stared straight ahead. In the muted light, her sister's face reminded Izzy of a porcelain doll—pale with a flush of scarlet at her cheeks. Izzy knew that look. There was something more there, sitting on the cusp of Sarah's lips. She waited.

"Sarah?" Izzy moved into Sarah's sight line, trying to read the unsaid in her eyes.

"I need to check on the kids." Sarah jumped up and strode out of the room, leaving Izzy to flail in a void.

When Sarah returned to the study, she surveyed the brown manila folders lining the floor. Izzy had combed through every cabinet, her fingers like elegant pale spiders pulling on strands of their lives. Sarah caught muttered words that sounded important but held little meaning for her: deed , mortgage , insurance . They told a story of a life, but one from which Sarah was disconnected.

“So, these are the essentials,” Izzy said, referring to squat towers of paper. “Sorting through these will keep a roof over your heads and the lights on.”

Sarah bent over and picked up a file that had bank statements scrawled on the inner lip. “I know it looks like a lot, Sarah, but it’s just making sure you have the essentials. With Matthew gone, you’ll need to take care of the mortgage payments, make sure the heat stays on, the phone bill gets—”

“Until he comes back,” Sarah said flatly.

“Sorry?”

“You mean I need to do these things until Matthew comes back.”

“Sarah.”

“Not you, too, Izzy.”

“Sarah, I—”

“Don’t say it. I don’t want to hear it.” Sarah stood and paced, stepping on files. “The police think they know what happened, but they have no idea, so they’re taking the easy way out. They’re saying he’s dead or drowned because they need an easy answer. And I get it. I don’t blame them. They need to dot the i’s or close the file or whatever the hell they call it.” Sarah’s voice remained quiet, but the edges were vicious and cutting. “But I won’t take it from you, Izzy. It can’t be in this house. Or around my kids. And all this shit—” Sarah kicked at a pile. The fluttering pages sent a shudder of satisfaction along her spine. She drew back for another kick. Again and again, the pages exploded into corners, mingling and merging into a paper blizzard.

Sarah was dimly aware of Izzy’s voice begging her to stop. Okay, okay, she thought

she heard, but it was swamped by the sound of crumpling paper under her feet and the sharp taps of paper edges on harder surfaces about the room.

Spent, Sarah dropped into the chair and looked at Izzy, who stood wide eyed and open mouthed in the black-on-white sea. “Are you done? Feel better?” Izzy said.

“Yes, yes I do.” Sarah lifted a piece of paper off her mug and took a slug of cold tea.

“I’m going to bed,” Izzy said, crumpling pages underfoot as she walked out of the room.

Sarah sat in the quiet for a while; the only sound was a loose piece of paper flapping against a floor vent. When she squatted down to gather the pages, a flash of crimson caught her eye from beneath the desk. Sarah crawled across the floor, dug a hand into a heap of papers, and pulled out a small stack of bank statements. While Sarah was content for Matthew to manage their family’s money, she knew just enough to recognize that they did not hold any accounts or investments in that bank.

She sat cross legged on the floor and leafed through the pages; each one showed the same thing: two deposits a month and not a single withdrawal. The last deposit was more than a month ago, bringing the account balance up to a little over \$60,000. She flipped down to the last page, dated five years prior. Further rustling in the tangle of papers led to a manila folder labeled CIBC Account .

For five years, Matthew had been squirreling money away every single month. When she’d suggested a family vacation or landscaping for the backyard, he’d told her they couldn’t possibly afford it. And she believed him. What reason was there for him to lie?

Sarah tucked the pages back in and was about to close the file when something stopped her. Neatly printed at the top of the page: G.E. Trust . She rubbed her eyes.

Obviously, she had misread. She scanned the paper edge to edge, taking in the columns and headers. Though they rarely spoke of financial matters, Matthew kept her aware of any investments involving her or the kids. He'd never mentioned a trust. Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. Sure enough. Rather than Matthew's name and address, the account was in the name of the G.E. Trust and the address was a PO box.

The sky was lightening as Sarah placed the last file onto its pile. It had taken all night to comb through every piece of paper. She found no other files of interest, no other references to a trust or other peculiar investments.

A faint nausea from earlier in the evening had grown into an uncomfortable churn. Who was the recipient of the trust, and what was their relationship to Matthew? Speculation swallowed Sarah's questions, each theory more outlandish and insubstantial than the last: Matthew was hiding money for someone, Matthew was dodging taxes, Matthew had illegal income. But the loudest question, the one that wouldn't be silenced: Why did Matthew need forgiveness? As hard as her mind tried to work its way down other paths, she could not step off the one that carved its way into the heart of her marriage. Betrayal. Matthew was seeing another woman. It was a gut punch that doubled Sarah over as saliva and bile flooded her mouth. She fought against the will of her body and lurched to the study window, throwing it open to the night. She gulped at the cold air in long, deep breaths that she held against her heart until the creature that clawed at her belly was wrestled back into the darkness.

Sarah's head throbbed. She rummaged through the desk in search of aspirin. She pulled out drawer after drawer as frustration reverberated through her body until it exploded into a yank on the final drawer. A plastic catch snapped. The drawer bounced off its tracks and landed with a heavy thud on the hardwood while Sarah's hand still held the handle. The contents skittered across the floor, knocking against the piles of paper as if they were bumpers in a pinball machine. Sarah backed away from the desk. A pen cap drove into the soft flesh at the arch of her foot. "Fuck!"

She let go of the drawer's handle and waited for the pain to subside. When it had cooled to a simmer, she squatted down and grasped each side of the drawer. Her fingers brushed the bottom. Instead of the rough scratch of particleboard she had expected, she felt the smooth slide of paper.

The remaining drawer contents scattered across the floor as Sarah turned it over to get a better look. She saw a plain brown envelope taped to the bottom. The cliché made her laugh.

That's when Izzy found her: sitting on the floor, deep circles under her eyes as hysteria-tinged laughter seeped out.

"Sarah? What happened? I heard you yell."

Sarah explained her night's findings. "It doesn't make sense, Izzy. Why would Matthew do this?"

"Well, he's not exactly hiding it. The bank statements aren't stashed behind the wall. And let's face it, you never pay attention to these things. Maybe it's just part of a tax structure. Matthew's a contractor, isn't he?"

"Yes. But sixty grand? We could have used that money. The roof needs reshingling, and we've been talking about finding a bigger place for years. He said we didn't have enough for a down payment yet. Even I know sixty thousand would have covered it. And this was certainly hidden." Sarah held up the envelope, holding it out to Izzy like an accusation.

"Well, let's open it up and see what we've got."

The sisters dug spots on the floor among piles of paper, the brown envelope between them. Izzy picked it up and looked to Sarah for approval. Sarah nodded. Izzy's finger

slipped into a small opening under the folded edge and ripped. She tipped the envelope over and gently shook it. A small object slid into her open left palm. Sarah inched closer, scooting across the floor like a toddler. In the crux of Izzy's hand was a small bronze-colored key.

"It looks like a padlock key," Izzy said, bringing her nose closer. "No markings, though."

"What the hell is it for?"

2007

Sarah slipped outside the back door into the cool spring evening and flipped open her phone. Black-on-gray digital print glared back at her: Thursday, May 10 . No calls. No messages.

Nothing. Just a date mocking her. She would have laughed if she hadn't felt so pathetic. It had been two weeks since she had last heard from Matt.

When he'd shown up at her apartment in a sleet-storm nearly three months earlier, Sarah promised to wait for him while Matt went out west to help his friend, Kwan, after the death of his wife. Until a couple of weeks ago, they'd melted into coupledness with everything that entailed: shared daily lives and a dinner date every night. Now Matt wasn't answering his phone or her messages.

Sarah walked back into the building, inhaling stage dust and preshow frenzy, an hour before curtain opened. The theater company—her theater company—was staging its first production: a modern version of Euripides's *Medea* . It was a stretch to call the warehouse space, draped in thick black velour and promises, a theater. A strip mall in a suburban industrial park was well outside traditional theater circles. But there was buzz. And parking. And in theater, that could just be enough.

Sarah had lobbied hard to open their season with the Greek tragedy. Felix, her cofounder and the company's reluctant, though brilliant, stage manager, felt a play about a murderous mother was too depressing as a starter, but Sarah believed audiences wanted a darker story.

Sarah and Felix had met during their first year at university, where they bonded over a love of Tony Kushner plays and late-night nachos. Both had tried, and failed, to join the university's theater group, so they downed their disappointment in too much sambuca and advertised in the school paper for "new and notable actors." Thus, the name and soul of their company—Notable Actors—was born.

They never imagined their fringe troop would be on the cusp of becoming legitimate. Two years of relentless networking, begging, and rehearsals were all coming together for opening night. Advance ticket sales had boomed. Sarah and Felix were betting everything on tonight's production, and it would make or break their careers. It was her theater's coming-out party, and Sarah was preoccupied with why Matt hadn't returned her messages.

"Twenty minutes to curtain," a voice announced. Sarah closed her eyes and pulled in a breath. She held it until her lungs burned, releasing it into the cacophony coming from both sides of the stage curtain. The audience was building. Angry with herself—and with Matt—Sarah tossed her phone onto the makeshift backstage desk and made her way to the washroom to change.

She had, of course, invited Matt to opening night. Over dinners in cozy restaurants or pints in boisterous pubs, he had been a sounding board for staging and music ideas. He'd seemed interested in the play and in her. But in the last ten days, the only communication from him had been a short email: Had to get away for a while. Be in touch soon. Her subsequent emails and phone messages had been left unanswered.

A rap on the bathroom door startled her.

"Sarah. You in there?" Felix said.

"Ya, just getting dressed."



“Okay, let’s get this show on the road then.”

Sarah slipped into her only black dress. With its simple cut, she knew it hugged her in all the right places. She stepped into the dim backstage area to see Felix jittering with nerves.

“Come on. Time to get your game face on,” he said. Felix wore an impeccably tailored dark gray designer suit with a label Sarah could never remember over a crisp white shirt. He referred to the look as “power and substance.” His dark hair was cropped, and his clean-shaven face was highlighted with a dab of rouge at his lips and cheeks.

“Felix, you look amazing.”

“I know.” He winked at her and spun to show off his good side. “But you need a little help. We can’t have you looking washed out and miserable. We have just enough time to get you to Sue for some makeup magic before curtain.”

“I’m fine. I don’t need to bother with all that.” Sarah ran her hand through her mess of auburn curls. She’d dyed her hair the week before on a whim and still startled herself when she passed a mirror.

“Oh, honey, if I am going to look this good, there is no way I can let you look that bad.” Felix pointed his finger accusingly from her head to her feet. Though the words seemed harsh, Sarah knew it was his way of heaping her with affection.

“Sarah, I love you and I mean this in all earnestness: no man is worth this hot little mess. Wherever he is, whatever game he’s playing, you’re too good for it. Give him time. I know men, and that one will come crawling back, then you can decide if he’s worth it.”

Sarah gave a forlorn look in reply. Felix took her hand and led her into the night.

Sarah didn't see Matt until two days later, when he showed up at her door late on a Saturday afternoon. After several days of springlike weather, the temperature was hovering around freezing. She imagined Matt surfing in on the final wave of winter like an oversize Jack Frost.

"Hey there, beautiful, how about some dinner?" A chill slipped into her apartment behind him.

"I can't. I'm busy," she said, though her sweatpants and ratty old T-shirt told a different story.

"Come on. Pretty please. I know you could go for some butter chicken right now."

"No thanks. Maybe send me an email."

Sarah blocked his approach into the living room.

"Okay, I'm a little lost. What's going on?" Matt said, his arms up in surrender and a befuddled look on his face that almost made her laugh.

"Medea opened to fantastic reviews the day before yesterday."

"Oh my God, Sarah, I completely forgot. I'm so sorry." Matt stepped back as if dodging a punch.

"Really? 'Cause I know I sent you about a dozen emails over the last couple of weeks, so I'm pretty sure that's crap." The last word came off her tongue like a spear.

"I was off the grid—"

“Bullshit.”

“I still haven’t caught up with all my emails.” Matt stepped toward her. She moved back, straight armed, head turned away. It was infantile, she knew, but she thought of the “cooties” game she played as a kid.

“It’s 2007, Matt. No one is off the grid.”

“It’s easier than you think. In my case, I ran a river.” The chuckle in his voice was like lemon juice on her tongue.

Silence seemed her best response. She could feel his explanation scratch at her porcelain anger. Though he worked in IT, Matt resisted the digital world in his personal life. He proudly called himself a Luddite.

“I know it may sound like a line, but I literally disappeared into the woods. It was last minute, and I know I should have told you. I’m sorry, I didn’t think I’d be gone so long.” He moved around her to sit on the couch. Waning sunlight from the window caught dust motes in the space around his head. Matt explained that he had spontaneously set out on a trip on the Mirabelle River. He had a couple of weeks between contracts, so he decided to try a solo kayak trip. Take some time to get his head sorted.

“After Kwan and Lian and everything that happened there,” he said, “I just needed some time, without distractions. Just me and the river, you know.”

Sarah chanced a glance at him; Matthew jumped through the opening.

“It was only supposed to be a few days, maybe a week. I’ve done the same trip dozens of times and figured I knew the route well enough to manage higher spring waters. You should see it this early, Sarah. It’s like the river’s slipping off a veil. Life

coming back after the death grip of winter. I saw snowshoe hare already speckled back to brown. And so many deer grazing along the shores. It was like the river was calling them back.”

Sarah heard a longing in his voice she would never understand.

“What I didn’t count on,” he said, “was how much I would have to portage. The water was higher than I’d ever seen it, and the ice jams made it even worse in some sections.” The story came out of him as if he had pulled on a thread that was now unraveling on its own. He had planned a sixty-mile route, which would have normally taken him five to seven days, but he didn’t finish until day eleven.

Sarah listened, not yet willing to show the story was cracking through her exterior. She sat at the other end of the couch, staring ahead as his words spooled out.

“I should have found a way to call you, to check in, but when I was out there, Sarah, all I could think about was getting downriver and making sure I had enough food. I was rationing the last two days and supplementing with some lucky catches in the river. Let me tell you: Catfish? Not that great a meal.” As he spoke, twilight filled the apartment and his voice dropped to match. “I thought a lot about life. About us.”

A fault line cracked open in her chest.

“And?” she said. Sarah reached over to turn on a floor lamp beside the couch, illuminating the space around them. She looked directly at Matt.

“I’m in, Sarah. I’m ready for more. And I think you are too.”

She let him hang in the air as she took in the last few months with Matt, his canoe trip story, the success of Medea and what that meant for her future.

“I’ve got a condition,” she said, her eyes unflinching while a sliver of a smile spread her lips. “Next time, you take me.”

Matt’s laughter filled the apartment before he crushed her in a hug. She felt the heat of him against her pulse. She wondered if she hadn’t just stepped onto the celluloid of some cheesy romantic comedy, especially when he whispered “I love you, Sarah Dix.”

At the restaurant that evening, they talked over jasmine-scented rice and creamy butter chicken until the staff stood by awkwardly, waiting for them to notice. After dinner, they stepped into a crisp night and let their armor fall away into a new level of intimacy, revealing themselves through childhood stories and embarrassing secrets like fumbling teenagers as they wandered quiet streets. Matt spoke of his family, his dreams for the future, laying out a path that had twisted but was straightening as he approached thirty. It all tumbled out of him, a torrent of stories about his past and his dreams for the future, with her. He talked about the difficult relationship he had had with his mother, the pain of her loss—and how hard it was without siblings. He sang the praises of Vancouver: the mountains, the ocean, and the serenity to be found in the places in between. Sarah opened up about her loneliness since her parents’ death and how she clung to her sister. She regaled him with stories of her university days—preferring dress rehearsals to study halls—and her failed relationships. It was almost dawn when they finally found their way to her place, chilled and spent.

Sarah felt the drag of exhaustion; even the few stairs to her apartment were a slog. She dropped her boots and fell face first onto the couch with her coat still on. In the back of her mind, she recognized it was Sunday, the knowledge like a distant church bell. She closed her eyes, felt the weight of sleep, almost tasted it, heavy and saccharine at the back of her tongue. But a stubborn thought tethered her to consciousness.

Sarah. She thought she heard her name. Sarah.

She jolted. Sweat poured off her under her wool coat. She looked around, noting a gold slip of dawn at the window. Reaching for her phone, she stabbed at the first of only two numbers programmed on speed dial.

“What the hell?” Sarah heard Izzy’s groggy voice. “Whoever you are, do you have any idea what time it is? On a Sunday? Someone better be dead.”

“It’s me. Don’t hang up,” Sarah said in a rush. “It’s real.”

“Sarah? It’s six in the bloody morning. Tell me this couldn’t wait until at least coffee o’clock.”

“It can’t. I think I may have found him, Izzy. I think Matt’s the one.”

Sarah could hear Izzy wrestling with the covers. Involuntary grunts skidded down the phone line.

“Jesus, you sound serious. Not that it couldn’t have waited for a respectable hour. This is the IT guy you’ve been seeing?”

“Ya, that’s him. Matt. I know it’s early, and I’m sorry. But I had to tell you. I wouldn’t have been able to sleep until I did.”

“Sleep? What have you been doing all night?” Izzy’s voice dripped with implications.

“We didn’t have sex, you perv.” Sarah laughed. “Well, at least we didn’t last night. I mean, we’ve been having sex for months. Last night, we just talked; that was all. We spent the whole night walking and talking. Can you believe it? We just talked. And we merged, Izzy. I mean, really, like we were one. I know it sounds cheesy, but I can’t explain it any better than that.”

They spoke for a few minutes more, both agreeing to chat later. After coffee.

Sarah sat up to shuck off her coat, letting it drop to the floor, before tipping over onto the couch. Finally able to let sleep take her, she drifted off to the thought of family and how nothing was truly real until she'd shared it with Izzy.

Two months later, Sarah found herself placing a foot into a flat-bottom canoe that bucked with even the slightest movement of her body. Matt held the boat steady from the dock as she shimmied into position on the bench seat at the front. The boat pitched slightly when he stepped off the dock into the rear of the boat, and Sarah's hands dove for the gunnels. His assured movements kept them upright, though, and Sarah let her body ease into the surroundings.

Smooth water mirrored the early-morning sky. Though still cool, there was a promise of warmth as sunshine soaked into soil and granite. Soon, trilling birds and the splash of Matt's paddle were the only sounds.

And yet, for all its beauty, Sarah was intimidated. The water was like a bottomless stain. She looked back over her shoulder to the unbroken line of trees on the shore—the path they had followed to the water no longer visible. Everything she knew seemed to have been swallowed by forest.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

September 2016

Sarah, with Izzy's help, combed every inch of Matthew's study looking for an explanation. None came. When the kids, still sleep crusted, shuffled in looking for breakfast, Sarah let Izzy distract them with sugary cereal and television.

"In the morning?" Bella said. "We're never allowed to watch TV before school."

"Auntie's rules!" Izzy said. The kids ran around the kitchen chanting the phrase in delight before settling on the couch.

Sarah felt a warped kaleidoscope of emotions pass through her body. She exchanged a look with Izzy that was understandable only through shared blood and childhoods.

"You have to tell the police, Sarah."

"Why?"

"I don't see there's an option. Boychuk must have said it a hundred times: let him know if we find anything out of the ordinary. This qualifies."

Sarah sat down on the only chair in the room. A single piece of paper—pulled from the mystery envelope—rested on her lap: the rental contract for a storage facility in a small town a few hours' drive away. She dropped her elbows to her knees while her fingers twisted her wedding ring.

"But what if it's nothing?" she finally said. "It's probably just a bunch of junk. We



can ask Matthew about it when he comes home.”

“Sarah.” The layers of sadness in Izzy’s tone darkened the room.

“There’s nothing more to say.”

“Sarah, you have to be reasonable—”

Sarah left the study for the first time since the evening before and made her way to the bedroom. She ignored Izzy calling her name. She climbed the stairs, dimly aware of what she was about to do. She dressed, throwing on a pair of faded jeans and Matthew’s tattered UBC sweatshirt, the sweet musky smell of his deodorant still trapped in the fabric.

Izzy stood at the bottom of the stairs when Sarah came back down. “Breakfast?” she asked.

“Can you take the kids to school?” Sarah said, an afterthought.

“Sure, but where are you going?”

“I need to see what’s in there.” Sarah strode past her sister and out the front door.

“Where? The storage locker? Sarah? Where are you going? Sarah?” Sarah heard her sister’s questions, but her mind didn’t have space to formulate a reply.

It was easy to find the location through the app on her phone. Bowmanville. A straight shot up Highway 401. The address and unit number were written in the top corner of the contract. Matthew’s signature, along with the date, March 18, 2007, was on the bottom. Almost ten years ago.

Over the three-and-a-half-hour drive, Sarah chased theories about what to expect and sipped at the idea of betrayal. Matthew was keeping secrets. Her mind ping-ponged between possibilities—from the delightful to the diabolical. A surprise new car for the family? An extravagance, like a speedboat, for himself? A meth lab? A murder scene? All of it seemed possible and improbable.

The storage facility sat on a side road parallel to Highway 401, the oversize SELF STORAGE sign visible to the streaming line of cars. Sarah had passed it countless times on trips to Toronto without ever noticing it. The sky was a uniform gray when she arrived. In the distance, the concrete towers of a nuclear power plant loomed apocalyptically. The buildings were a gauntlet of identical doors, each with their own story to tell. Sarah stared at the number 35 in mustard yellow. She noted fresh paint, cinder blocks in good repair, and a new roof. It was nothing like what she imagined from a secret storage unit, one that held the potential to upend her family. Illegal activities and items are prohibited on the premises at all times was printed on the back of the contract, though the phrase offered no answers or comfort. Sarah debated walking away. Pretending she'd never found the key and leaving the contents to wither into obscurity.

“What’s in there, Matthew? What didn’t you want me to know?” The key slipped in easily. The click of the padlock was heartbreakingly satisfying.

Until that moment, Sarah had hoped it was a mistake. That the envelope was the remnant of another time. Grief can do that: transport you to a moment where hope is stronger than reality. Vertigo crashed over her. The bitter coffee she'd guzzled in the car sloshed in her stomach. From this point on, everything she thought she knew about her husband would be altered. No matter what was in the locker, her understanding of the world shifted when the lock pins tumbled into place. Denial gave way. She was left empty and utterly alone.

Sarah yanked up the metal door before reason convinced her otherwise. It took her

eyes a few seconds to adjust to the shadowed light; when they did, she thought it was empty. A feeling akin to relief lowered her shoulders.

“What the hell, Matthew?” she said, almost on a laugh.

Sarah moved deeper into the locker. She guessed it to be about ten by ten feet and about eight in height. The door took up almost two-thirds of one wall, allowing daylight to flood the middle of the space. She heard her footsteps echo on concrete. She almost turned to leave, almost chalked up the strange discovery to a forgotten past, when a flash of silver caught her eye. Sarah moved as if approaching a caged wild creature. Her steps brought her toe to toe with a battered two-drawer metal cabinet in the back corner.

The top drawer was empty, but the bottom one held a handful of files. She pulled them from the drawer and laid the stack on the top of the cabinet. The first contained clipped articles, the topics seemingly random. Most were from a variety of local BC papers, years apart, the type of news items glanced at on your way to something juicier. Sarah leafed through them, more confused than interested—the disappearance of a young man with few details, a pie-eating contest, and a local veterinarian who birthed a foal through a snowstorm rounded the collection.

The second file gave her pause.

A stack of papers was bundled together with a black clip, starting with a birth certificate for a baby boy named Jonathan Evans. Sarah lifted the document to get a better look. The paper was thick and creamy, with leaf watermarks embedded beneath the words. The names of the baby and the parents meant nothing to Sarah. She was about to set it down when something familiar grabbed her attention. June 14, 1979. Jonathan Evans, whoever he was, had the same birth date as Matthew.

She rifled through the rest of the documents, not taking each in fully. All were in the

same name and told the story of a stranger's life. High school and university degrees, a social insurance card, credit cards, bank cards, a printed page of usernames and passwords. The final document—a faded student card from the University of British Columbia—she picked up with trembling hands. There, beside the name Jonathan Evans, was her husband's picture.

The card fell from her hand, landing with a dry clap on the floor. She stumbled out of the locker into a fine drizzle, the sky finally making good on its threat. She felt mist cling to her face, like oil against her skin. She reached into her pocket, pulled out her phone, and hit the preprogrammed number. A familiar voice filled her ears. You've reached Matt Anderson. I can't get to the phone right now. Please leave a message, and I'll get back to you shortly.

“Matthew? Where are you? What the fuck is going on? Do you hear me?” Her screams echoed against aluminum and concrete.

Sarah sank into a squat beside a locker door facing number 35, the phone drooping in her hand. Questions crashed against her skull, building into a futile rage. She rocked her body against the pounding in her head, seeking comfort in rote motion. There must be some mistake? I must not have seen the photo properly. Though she knew. Of course she knew. She remained crouched, safe on the ground, unable to disentangle herself from the nightmare.

She didn't know how long she sat there before standing, though the discomfort in her knees offered a suggestion. She shook her legs, bringing back sensation to her feet. The towers of the power plant appeared to have moved closer, like the legs of a silent, stalking beast whose head reached above the clouds. She stared up at them, daring them to crush her. Her right hand spun the wedding ring on her finger until the skin underneath prickled.

“Sarah?” The familiar voice came from behind her. Sarah wasn't surprised, though

perhaps she should have been. “Izzy called me. She said you had found something.”

She turned to the kind eyes of Rob Boychuk. He kept his distance, his hand extended in front of him as if offering her a line back. She could lie. Say it had all been a mistake. But what would be the point? Her sister had already opened the door. Now Sarah had to manage the madness that would follow.

2007

Sarah stepped into the liquid-like warmth of late-September sunshine. She couldn't stop smiling. Her body cast an elongated shadow that stretched to the edge of the sidewalk and dropped off the curb. Her shadow-self rested its hands on its stomach.

A squeal of brakes grabbed her attention as the faithful number 73 bus lumbered to a stop, sloshing up some leftover puddle from an earlier rainfall and erasing her shadow. A waft of diesel and wet pavement caught Sarah's stomach by surprise.

On the bus, smells crowded around her as she negotiated through bodies: a sickly vanilla perfume, the remnants of failed deodorant, onions on someone's breath. She dove forward when a seat opened near the rear door with its promise of fresh air. An older woman already sat primly on the double bench, her deep-lined face like overfolded paper. Sarah smiled at her and earned a friendly nod in reply. Sarah's hand moved again to her stomach as she thought about the conversation to come. In her mind's eye, Matt waited at the corner table in the small Thai restaurant where he had proposed. The family-run place was only slightly more than a hole-in-the-wall with dim lighting and cheap tourist posters, but the delicate mango salad and coconut-infused panang chicken made up for the decor.

"He's a lucky man," the woman beside Sarah said.

"Sorry?" Sarah opened her eyes, bemused after being lost in her imaginings.

"Whoever you're humming about. He must be a lucky guy."

“Was I humming? Oh my God, I hadn’t noticed. I’m so sorry.” Sarah felt her cheeks redden.

“Oh, no need to apologize, dear. It’s nice to see a happy young person these days. Seems most of you spend your time complaining about everything. It baffles me. Try making it to my age, then tell me if it’s so rough.” The woman had an Irish lilt to her voice and a gravelly laugh that retained its musicality. Sarah laughed along.

The bus slowed to a stop in front of a playground where a group of children darted around a play structure like sparrows flocking in a bush. Both women watched.

“That’s why I’m humming,” Sarah said, almost to herself.

“What’s that, dear?”

Sarah patted her belly. “That’s why I’m humming.” She cocked her chin toward the playground.

“Ah, that’s wonderful, dear,” the woman said after a beat. A crinkled hand squeezed Sarah’s, both resting against Sarah’s belly. “Does your young man know yet?”

Sarah smiled dreamily. “Not yet. I’m on my way to tell him now. We’re meeting at our favorite restaurant.”

“Oh, lovely, that is. Have you been trying for a while?”

The question, though obtrusive, seemed natural to Sarah. Secrets of womanhood shared from generation to generation—in kitchens and farmsteads—brought into the modern world on a city bus.

“Not at all. We just got married, actually. Last month. It’s a complete surprise, but I

can't wait to tell him."

The woman patted Sarah's hand. Sarah straightened.

"Ah, child. In my experience, it's rarely news that men take well unexpectedly."

"Not Matt." Sarah pulled her hand out from under the weathered palm. "He's going to be as excited as I am."

"I'm sure you're right, dear. Just an old woman's memories." She placed the rejected hand back in her own lap. "Well, this is my stop."

Sarah stepped into the aisle, and the woman slid out of the seat.

"Lovely meeting you, dear. Congratulations to you and your young man."

Sarah nodded, and though politeness dictated a smile, she withheld it. She watched the crooked body descend the bus stairs and step onto the sidewalk. She sat back down and kept her eyes focused ahead as the bus pulled away.

Though Sarah tried to dismiss them, the old woman's words planted themselves like weeds nourished by her doubts. What if Matt didn't want kids? They'd never discussed it, not seriously. And she was taking birth control. Worry nagged at her as she waited on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. After-work crowds filled the trendy neighborhood. Chattering couples left trails of laughter as they passed. It wasn't the timing they expected, but she knew Matt would be excited. He wants children. He must. Sarah paced. There was so much they hadn't explored in their rush to get married.

A giggle caught Sarah's attention. Across the street, a couple strolled down the sidewalk; between them, a little girl squealed with delight as they swung her forward,



her feet hanging in the air for a couple of seconds before she settled back to earth. All three grinned with abandon. Sarah believed in signs. She believed that the universe could speak in gestures and small graces.

When she saw Matt cross paths with the happy family, she faced down the unsaid in their relationship. He looked good. Tapered black jeans and a gray fitted T-shirt snuggled against his muscled frame. His clothes, she knew, were chosen with care to look casual, and she fell for it every time. At the sight of him, her memory of the kindly old woman's face morphed into that of a hag, the encounter easily dismissed as a humorous story. When Matt reached her, she gave him a lingering kiss.

"Well, that's a greeting," he said.

"Just happy to see my husband." She took his hand in hers, weaving their fingers together.

They stepped into the restaurant, and Sarah bathed herself in luscious smells. By the time they were seated, the old woman was forgotten, like a fleeting dream whose power waned the further you moved away from sleep. They settled into a corner table, and Matt talked about his day, the deadlines and the dreariness of it. Sarah assumed a listening position, though her mind drifted over thoughts of the child. Their child.

"Should we get a bottle of wine?" Matt asked.

Sarah pondered how to answer. "Best not."

Matt looked up from his menu, cocked an eyebrow. "Tired?"

"Something like that." She glanced at a passing waiter, unable to look at Matt as the words started. "I'm pregnant." She turned to face him on the final consonant. What

she saw would stay with her for the rest of her life.

For just a blink, she thought she saw disappointment on his face, but it was hard to read in the soft lighting of the restaurant. It was a moment, an unreliable beat of a heart, so fleeting she wondered if she'd imagined it: a trick of the light, a reflection of the table candle in his eyes. And yet the memory would echo into her future.

On the pull of her next breath, it was gone, and Sarah saw her husband's face again, friendly and relaxed but unreadable.

"Really?"

Sarah nodded, hesitant to trust her eyes.

"Already? I mean, it's only been—I mean, how did it happen?"

"Well, the sperm fertilizes the egg, and then—"

"Ha ha. You know what I mean."

"I'm as surprised as you. Sometimes the buggers just get through all the walls."

An undecipherable silence fell. Sarah's muscles, vibrating earlier, went taut. Her heart rabbited against her ribs. Matt stayed quiet. His eyes danced around, his senses trying to slot new information into reality. She scrutinized his body: a rise in the shoulders, a minute tilt of the head, a shimmy across the chest from a foot bobbing under the table. None of it translatable.

"Huh" was what finally came out before his expression changed at last. A tentative smile crept out as the waiter arrived to take their drink order.

“We’re having a baby,” Matt said, still looking at Sarah. “I’ll have a glass of your best red wine, and she’ll have a ... mango lassi?”

Sarah could only nod.

“Sorry, sir.” The waiter shook his head with practiced patience. “We only have one house red, sir.” Matt and Sarah laughed as the waiter shuffled away, visibly annoyed to not be in on the joke.

After their sauce-streaked plates had been taken away, Sarah felt a satiation that went beyond food. They talked about children and parents and all the mistakes they would never make. A wine stain traced the inner edge of Matt’s lips. Sarah watched it, hypnotized as it appeared and disappeared while he told tales of his past and their future. They nursed strong cups of a fragrant chai while the specter of the unsaid seeped away with the steam.

As had become their habit, Matt paid the check while Sarah slipped into the washroom before meeting him outside. Walking away, Sarah didn’t see what other diners might have glimpsed: a young man, elbows on the table, the weight of his head dropped into his steepled hands. Though his eyes were veiled, he looked for all the world like a picture of defeat and despair.

October 2016

Rob Boychuk stood in the waiting room of the Patricia Bay detachment, appraising the young man who had just asked to see the “head officer of the looking-for-people team.” Boychuk guessed he might be in his late teens or early twenties, but estimating age seemed to be a skill that diminished as he grew older. They all looked like children to him these days. The boy sat on the waiting-room chair, phone in one hand, legs splayed as his thumb flicked through images on the screen. His free hand rested on his knee, tapping out an indecipherable beat. The impetuosity of youth, thought Boychuk, or a guilty conscience? Even after all this time on the job, it still wasn’t always easy to tell.

“Shall we have a seat in my office?” Boychuk said, after introducing himself. “Whatever,” the boy said, looking to the front door of the detachment as if there were a better offer outside.

“Won’t take long, I promise—sorry, what did you say your name was again?”

“Zach. Zach Ellis.”

“Come on back, Zach.”

Boychuk led the young man to his desk and asked him to have a seat. He thought about taking him to the interview room, but the kid was squirrely enough. His office had big windows with a clear view of the parking lot. Better to let Zach Ellis see the outside world.

“So, you told the desk officer that you had some information about the search for Matthew Anderson?”

“Is that the guy’s name? I hadn’t heard about it until my mom texted me. She saw it on the cottagers’ Facebook page or something. Something about a guy going missing on our lake. She knew I was up here over the weekend it happened and thought I should come talk to you.”

Zach looked around the room as he spoke, avoiding Boychuk’s eyes and finally settling his gaze out the window.

Boychuk nodded but held his tongue. It had been a little over three weeks since Matthew Anderson’s disappearance, one week since they’d discovered the storage unit with a filing cabinet of documents in the name of Jonathan Evans.

“I didn’t see the guy or anything. But there was a woman, all freaked out. She was with a couple of kids. She asked me to take a look for her husband. Said he’d taken off in their canoe or something. Thought he might have fallen asleep. Seemed a little weird to me.”

“And did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Look for him.”

“Ya, I took a spin around the lake. Didn’t see anyone. It was kinda stupid for us to even be out there. The wind was kicking up, and I really had to concentrate on steering the boat into the wind. Almost thought we’d flip over.”

“We?”

“I had some friends at the cottage with me.”

“Did anyone see him or anything out of the ordinary?”

“Naw. We took a quick look around and got the hell out of there.”

“Did you go back for the woman?”

Zach looked at his feet. Boychuk could see the faint blush on his face.

“We let her know we hadn’t seen anything, but with a storm coming up, I wanted off that lake. Plus, my friends were hassling me about being cold and everything. I figured her husband would eventually come back. I mean, who would take off and leave his wife and kids at a campsite? Right?”

Boychuk resisted the urge to scold the boy. The shame was already readable in his body. “So what happened when you got off the lake?”

“We packed up and left. The weather forecast was shitty. And my dad wanted us to pull the boat out, which we didn’t want to be doing in a full-blown storm.”

Zach squirmed in his seat, his eyes darting around the room. Something else had happened.

“Son, I promise, you’re not in any trouble here. We’re just looking for information that will help us find Mr. Anderson.”

Zach met Boychuk’s eyes for the first time. Boychuk could see he was deciding whether to trust a cop.

“I fucked up with the boat.”

“Fucked up how, son?”

Zach sighed. “I was feeling pretty crappy from the night before, so when we got back, I downed a shot. A little hair of the dog, you know? And I smoked a joint. I didn’t think I was messed up, but I must have done something wrong pulling the boat out of the water, ’cause when I got it back to the city, my dad found a huge scrape up the side. No idea how it happened. But Dad was pissed.”

“And you drove right home after pulling the boat out?”

“Ya. Well, wait, I didn’t drive. I’m not that stupid. I was too buzzed to drive, so my friend Bruno drove us home. He was freaked out, though, trying to drive with the boat attached. Wound up stopping at the campground store so he could get an energy drink. Said it would help him focus. Then he turned down a back road around the lake instead of the left turn onto the highway I told him to take. We had to go, like, five miles before he found a spot he was comfortable turning around in. What a shit show of a weekend.”

“You mean the old logging road around the lake?”

“Ya, that’s the one. Nearly clipped some abandoned car when he tried to go by it. I swear, it’s like the more he wanted to avoid something, the more he steered toward it. I was pretty sure he didn’t hit it, though, but maybe that’s what scraped up the boat.”

“Where was the car?”

“I don’t know. Maybe about three or four miles up the road. We turned around not long after passing it.”

“And did you see anything on the road? Another car? A person?”

“No. Nothing.”

“How did you know the car was abandoned?”

“Well, I kinda assumed. There aren’t any cottages up that way. Plus it looked like it’d been there awhile. Ya know. Leaves and dust all over it. It was tucked into the trees a bit too. Clearly hadn’t moved in a long time.”

“Did you happen to catch the make or model?”

“Well, seeing as Bruno nearly hit the damn thing, it was hard to miss. It was one of the older Honda Civics. I think it was red, but hard to tell under all that dust.”

“Okay, thanks, Zach. I’ll show you out. I’ll get you to leave your name and contact details with the desk clerk before you leave.”

Back at his desk, Boychuck typed up the meager details Zach Ellis had shared into the file. It must have been Sarah Anderson that Zach talked to on the lake. Yet she hadn’t mentioned it. Boychuk tucked the information away, not yet sure whether the encounter or the abandoned car on the old logging road had any relevance. One thing he’d learned over his policing career was that relevance could shift.

The Anderson case had grown beyond anything he’d imagined it could be, thanks to the discovery of the storage locker. The documents they’d found inside were still being authenticated, but no matter what, they had a bearing on this case. And because of that, any detail outside the norm mattered. Maybe the car meant nothing, but it added a layer worth exploring.



*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

Sarah Anderson walked into another police station, this one in the heart of Ottawa. There were similarities to the detachment in Patricia Bay: stark walls hung with faded safety posters, bulletin boards coated in outdated announcements, and a low administrative hum. The similarities were comforting and frightening. She felt trapped in a moment, like some twisted version of the movie *Groundhog Day* : Matthew was neither here nor gone, so they lived in a perpetual repeat of his absence.

Two weeks ago, she'd stood in a misty rain being told that the documents she'd found in a storage facility would be seized by the police as part of the investigation. She watched as Boychuk sealed off the unit with yellow police tape, muttering words like evidence and suspicious to which she only half listened. She understood enough to know that the focus of the investigation had shifted.

Yesterday, she'd been asked to come in to talk to the lead investigator. Sarah followed a young female officer into the bowels of the building, through a maze of halls and doorways, past quiet conversations and efficient movements, and into a large room that looked like a university-dorm kitchen. Sarah paused on the threshold of the room. She thought about the last few weeks and everything she'd said and not said in the face of questions about Matthew and her marriage. Before stepping into the room for another barrage, she swallowed down the cocktail of shame and trepidation that had been a constant companion and buried them deep within herself so she could go to battle again here.

Sunshine fell from high horizontal windows onto a facsimile of a cozy room penned in by off-white cinder-block walls. A couch and two upholstered chairs were grouped around a rectangular coffee table. Against the wall farthest from the door, coffee brewed on an L-shaped kitchen counter, the smell of dark roast not quite masking

industrial cleanser. Three small round sets of tables and chairs filled out the room.

Rob Boychuk, wearing dark jeans and a golf shirt, stood up from one of the couches when Sarah walked in. Seeing him out of uniform was disorienting. Sarah searched the room for clues to better situate herself in the unfolding story. Her eyes landed on a tall ginger-haired man in the chair across from Boychuk. He wore a blue tailored suit and buttoned up his jacket as he stood. By the expressions on their faces, Sarah guessed she had walked into a conversation. An open banker's box sat on the coffee table between them.

"Hi, Sarah." Boychuk moved toward the door, offered his hand.

She took his hand warily. Her eyes followed the other man.

"This is Detective Sam Ritter," Boychuk said. "He's with the Ottawa Police. Missing Persons Unit."

Sarah looked back to Boychuk, a question on her lips.

"Why don't we sit down? There's a lot to go over," Boychuk said.

Sarah accepted a cup of tea and settled into one of the chairs around the coffee table. Ritter had closed the banker's box as she was removing her coat, though it still sat on the table, a purposeful showpiece.

"How are you?" Boychuk asked, genuine concern in his voice. "How are the kids?"

"We're okay. Hanging in. The kids have started back at school, but I'm still off work. Can't seem to focus on anything."

"That's pretty normal," Boychuk said. "This is tough on all of you, I'm sure. Is your

sister still with you?” The question was matter of fact, but Sarah detected a deeper curiosity.

“She is. She’s moved in for a little while to help with the kids until Matthew comes home.” Sarah caught the glance between the two men. “Do you want to explain to me why I’m here?” she said.

Boychuk gave a nod and looked to Ritter.

“Sarah, Rob called me in based on the information found in the storage locker. As I believe you already know, the contents in the locker and the abnormalities in this case make it a missing persons investigation under my jurisdiction. I’ve been getting up to speed on the case, and we’ve been processing the documents here in Ottawa. Now, I understand you were the one who found the storage unit. Can you explain how you located it?”

“I found a key under Matthew’s desk. I hadn’t known about the place until then.”

“Did you look through the contents at all?” Ritter said, his gaze direct.

“A little, but not much. I couldn’t make sense of it all when I found it.” Sarah hadn’t gone back into the storage locker after Boychuk found her. He said he would process the scene. She knew that Matthew had rented a storage locker and that the documents inside were all under the name of Jonathan Evans. “You know all this already. Why are we going over this again?”

Another look passed between the officers.

“What the hell is this all about, Rob? You haven’t told me anything about those documents or why Matthew had that storage locker?”

Boychuk took a breath, held it for a second, and answered on the exhale. “There’s no easy way to say this, but Jonathan Evans is Matthew.” Boychuk’s words dropped like a stone into a deep lake.

Sarah knew her face betrayed her, even as she fought to hide her emotions from these men. For the last two weeks, she’d indulged the idea she was living a surreal coincidence. The fantasy in her mind—that there was a reasonable explanation for the documents—lay comfortably beside the sharp pieces of reality. Sarah recognized how silly and infantile her hopes had been. She looked from one man to the other, not able to see beyond the ripples of her sinking illusion, and felt hopelessness spread across her features. She closed her eyes against Ritter’s stone expression. “I gathered that,” she said, her voice weaker than she wanted, “but I still don’t understand what’s going on?”

“It seems your husband has been lying to you, Mrs. Anderson,” Ritter said. “And, from the looks of it, for a very long time.”

A funny thing happened to rational thought through tragedy. To cope, the mind followed strange paths carved by grief and wishful thinking. As long as no one voiced it, the relationship between Matthew and Jonathan Evans, like Schrodinger’s cat, was both alive and dead to Sarah. Though she knew what Ritter said to be true, hearing the words from a stranger’s mouth felt like a slap. Sarah brought her hand to her cheek and felt the heat against her fingers.

Ritter proceeded to bring down Sarah’s carefully crafted world. Matthew had rented the locker more than ten years ago. They had searched it but hadn’t found anything more relevant than a handful of files. They were still validating some of the documents. Their working theory was that Matthew had run away from his previous life.

“I can’t help but wonder if Matthew ... I mean Jonathan ... was thinking about leaving

again and whether someone stopped him?" Ritter said.

Sarah sat back on the chair and crossed her arms. Anger surged in her. She directed it squarely at Ritter and his casually tossed out, baseless theories. "That's just ridiculous. Even if Jonathan Evans is Matthew, it's a massive leap to assume my husband was about to leave his family. I have to say, it also takes a particularly twisted imagination to imply that I knew and wanted to harm him."

"I'll grant you that. That's what a cop does, though, isn't it? Indulges the twisted imaginings of our darker natures," Ritter said, as if he were talking about the plot of a book he'd been reading. "I extrapolate theories and test them. For example, maybe you stumbled on Matthew's future plans? Or maybe he used the camping trip to tell you he was leaving? Maybe you were hurt, angry, and lashed out?"

Sarah glared at the child who passed himself off as a detective. She took in his smug face and the overlooked lapel stain on his otherwise neat suit. What did he know about family and marriage? About the thousands of little compromises that were swallowed and cheeks that were turned? He couldn't possibly understand how hard she worked to keep her family together. How exhausting it all was. Shame hurled itself against Sarah's thoughts, dragging with it the things she didn't want these men to know. She looked away from Ritter, avoiding the judgment in his gaze.

"Matthew would never leave the kids," she said with finality.

"Why just the kids, Sarah?" Ritter asked.

"What?"

"Why did you say he would never leave the kids? What about his job? And you?"

"I don't know. You just insinuated my husband was plotting to leave his family, and

you're arguing the semantics of my word choice?"

Boychuk intervened. "I think it was a poor choice of question on my colleague's part. He was trying to ask, clumsily, if you could think of any reason why Matthew would be trying to run away?"

"We've gone over all of this a dozen times, Rob." Sarah enjoyed tossing contempt into his first name. "Matthew and I have had our problems, sure, but as I told you back in Patricia Bay, no more than most couples. We've been married for nine years, and we have two kids. You try to find a couple who don't have the occasional hurdle to deal with."

Boychuk slid the lid off the banker's box. "Sarah, there were some pictures in the filing cabinet I'd like you to take a look at. Do you recognize anyone in them?" He pulled out a small handful of photos and placed them in front of her on the table.

Sarah leaned over and spread the pictures out with the tips of her index and middle fingers. Matthew appeared in each one, younger, carrying the lankiness of youth, one that had morphed as life tugged and pulled his body into different shapes. She guessed him to be in his early twenties. His hair was longer, almost covering his eyes with disheveled curls. She smiled sadly at the familiar careless charm. Her finger traced the outline of his celluloid face in the only close-up, taken near a harbor, with schooner masts and steel-gray high-rise buildings in the background.

She felt her mind slip; an image of Matthew by the fire as she'd stood outside the ring of light, watching. She saw the similarities with the boy in the photo—same jawline, same unkempt hair. Her eyes drank greedily of the young Matthew, hungering for a taste of a time before careers, before kids, when it was only the two of them. Mommy. A whisper of a voice overlay the image in her mind. Sarah shoved guilt and fear into her core, deeper than she knew was possible.

She stared so intently at the youthful version of Matthew that she didn't register the child in the photos at first. Like her husband, the child aged through the pictures, appearing as a swaddled baby in Matthew's arms in one, asleep on his bare chest in another, sitting astride a backpack baby carrier in the next. Whoever the child was, it was clear she meant something to Matthew.

"Who is she?" Sarah asked without taking her eyes off the photos.

"Her name is Grace Evans," Ritter said.

"Sarah." Boychuk's tone was delicate. "We are still confirming, but we think she's Matthew's daughter."

Sarah looked up abruptly. Grace. Not the specter of infidelity she had thought was haunting her marriage, but one that was equally shattering. Her mind scrolled through all the suspicious moments in the last few months, letting the pieces fall into place.

Though the words should have shocked her, should have made her feel like the world was unraveling, there was no surprise. The bank statements for the trust in Matthew's study and the photos told it all. The pictures were moments in time that a parent would tuck away for safekeeping, to revisit once the child had grown and set off on their own path. They were mementos and vain attempts to trap a version of happiness.

Sarah looked at both officers watching her carefully—one with concern, the other with unbridled suspicion.

"We believe your husband's real name is Jonathan Evans, born June fourteen, 1979, in Vancouver, BC, to Gwen and Charles Evans," Ritter said. "Siblings Charlotte Yung, née Evans, and Nathaniel Evans. Predeceased by his father. His mother currently lives in Vancouver, BC. His first wife, Faith Marks, lives on Vancouver Island with their twelve-year-old daughter, Grace Evans."

Sarah's body seized. The air in her lungs went stagnant. Twelve. The child was older than Bella. Her mind screamed at her to take a breath, but her body refused to comply. Finally, she drew in a breath and locked eyes with Boychuk.

"Sarah, Jonathan Evans went missing in April of 2007," Boychuk said. "A thorough search of the storage locker found the same set of prints on the documents and around the storage locker. Those prints belong to Jonathan Evans."

A cavernous silence followed. Thoughts darted through Sarah's head. She tried to catch one, but they moved through her mind like quicksilver. This is a mistake. Matthew wouldn't just leave a child. Questions slipped through her fingers. How many others have sat in this space? Facing this type of news? A stream of sunlight from the window found its way into her eyes, distracting her. Did they all sit here and feel a cold creep across their chests?

"Why?" Her voice was hoarse. "How?"

"We followed the document trail, all leading back to BC. Ritter checked with Vancouver Police. He shared the prints we'd found, and they connected them to a cold case," Boychuk said softly.

"I have to say, it was an ingenious move," Ritter said, his tone dripping contempt. "He used a student ID card from an actual university student. Not sure how he got his hands on it, but it served him well. The real Matthew Anderson says he's never met Jonathan Evans, though they do look a little alike. He claims he lost the card while he was a freshman and just got a new one. Apparently, security and privacy weren't issues back in 1998. Our working theory is that Matthew-slash-Jonathan used the student card to get a driver's license and health card from the province. Probably claimed his wallet had been stolen or something. Once he had two pieces of ID, the world was open to him. He could order a copy of a birth certificate, open a bank account, hell, even get a passport."



Sarah latched onto straggling thoughts: There must be some mix-up. This couldn't be possible. The man she knew wouldn't do that. Would never have left a child. She pictured Matthew and Bella, partners in crime, pitching the tent for a backyard campout, their laughter rising through the night air to the bedroom window. She imagined the same scene, Bella alone and forlorn. No. Matthew would never do that.

"You don't know," Sarah said, unconvincing even to her ears.

"You're right, Sarah. We don't know anything definitive yet. Vancouver is pulling the file to send to us, and we'd like to undertake a DNA analysis to confirm," Boychuk said. "But where there's smoke ... In my opinion, the person who made those prints is the same one who rented the locker."

"Look, I know you don't want to hear it," Ritter broke in, "but it's looking pretty obvious to me. Your husband's a runner." Ritter dug through his notes and read as if he were pitching a plot for a crime series. "Jonathan Evans was an IT administrator with New Horizons Tech Support in Vancouver. He lived in Surrey with his wife, Faith, and their two-year-old daughter, Grace. On the morning of Friday, May eleven, 2007, Evans left for work as usual. That was the last time his family saw him."

Every revelation out of the man's mouth felt like a boot against Sarah's ribs. She leaned over, trying to keep her breath even.

Ritter went on to explain the Vancouver Police had launched a missing persons investigation for Evans but turned up nothing. He had left with his wallet, though none of his credit or bank cards were used. He hadn't owned a cell phone. There were no signs of foul play nor evidence anyone wanted to do him harm. The police assumed he had just walked away and wasn't interested in being found, and they didn't have the resources to track him further. The first sign of him in nine years popped up when Ritter sent the prints to Vancouver.

“I started a deeper dive on Evans. Local police had a few reasons why they thought he chose to disappear.” Ritter pulled out pages from a small file he was holding. Sarah felt her muscles clench.

“Evans had a bank account in his name only, one his wife at the time hadn’t known about.” The bank statements Sarah had found in Matthew’s study clapped against the cheap particleboard table. “Sound familiar?”

Ritter dropped a copy of the photo page from Matthew’s recently updated passport. “Evans had updated his passport a few weeks before vanishing. Almost as if he was readying to go somewhere. Another coincidence?” Sarah remembered Matthew’s complaints about all the paperwork. She ground her nails into her palm, felt the blood thicken her fingers as they clasped into fists.

“The Vancouver Police tracked down a few witnesses—gal at his local coffee shop, the bus driver—all of whom saw Evans and said he was alive and well, thought he looked sad.” Ritter kept silent, though he slid a narrowed glance Sarah’s way, which she rebuffed with a restrained spasm of her upper lip.

“And his friends at the time reported he’d been distant for several months,” Ritter continued when it was clear Sarah had nothing to add. “Almost as if he was pulling away for some reason.” A memory stirred. A reconnection with an estranged friend. Kwan. Why had she not heard his name before that night?

“None of it was conclusive, of course,” Ritter said with arrogant finality, “but it was enough to satisfy the Vancouver investigator. The case stayed open, but no one pursued it aggressively. The general feel was that the guy had taken off and wasn’t looking to be found.”

Sarah jolted to standing, though she had no idea why nor where she planned to go. Her head swam with everything Ritter had said. She looked down at the banker’s box,

the photos and documents still splayed out on the coffee table. The little girl's pale-hazel eyes looked up at her next to the more familiar ones of her husband.

"Here's the thing, Sarah," Ritter said as he leaned back and crossed a foot over his knee. "I say no animal really changes its spots. Ya know what I mean? I think Matthew was planning on running again. But something threw him off this time. It's weird, don't you think? A man disappears and yet leaves no real trace. Last time, they had enough to at least speculate on his whereabouts. This time? Nothing. Like it's been hidden."

Sarah's arm moved of its own accord, reached out and swept the coffee table bare. The box landed with a satisfying thud while Ritter's papers scattered across the floor. Sarah stepped away, breathing hard, shocked by her own actions.

Without a word, Boychuk bent over to pick up the papers. Ritter hadn't moved. He watched Sarah and made a show of reading her reactions with a curt nod. An almost-smirk glinted on his lips.

After more than an hour in traffic, Boychuk was finally able to see the lights of the Canadian Tire Centre on the edge of the city. His truck crawled along, pinned in between hockey fans making their way to the arena and after-work commuters. Vehicles jockeyed for road space on the long ribbon of the expressway, known as the Queensway, that bisected the city of Ottawa.

Each brake light in front of him reverberated against his temple and reminded him why he disliked cities. He could have waited until morning and avoided game-day traffic altogether. But he was eager to get home. Something about being in a city never felt right, like pulling on a sweater that didn't fit. When he finally made it past the arena exit and onto the open highway, he sighed out an expletive and pushed the gas pedal. The truck responded confidently. He glanced at the receding glut of headlights in the rearview mirror and felt a knot loosen between his shoulder blades.

“Why do people put themselves through that?” he said to himself. “Ya’ll can get a better view of the game on TV, anyway.” Even as he said it, he was aware how curmudgeonly it sounded. Jesus, I’m getting old.

Boychuk wasn’t sure what had compelled him to come to Ottawa. Technically, the guts of the case were no longer his, though he stayed on as part of the investigative team. Matthew Anderson was an Ottawa resident, and the storage locker was located within the Whitby detachment boundary lines, so Ottawa took the lead. There were still linkages to Patricia Bay, but for the moment, his role had played out. The whole business was in Ritter’s hands now.

If he were being honest, Boychuk would admit he didn’t much like Sam Ritter. He’d come across the type before—young, ambitious, too willing to see the bad in people and make a dramatic case for themselves. Boychuk still thought it was possible Matthew Anderson had simply lost his way in the woods. He wouldn’t be the first and certainly not the last. But even he had to admit, circumstantial evidence was piling up, and detectives like Ritter would try to make a meal out of circumstantial.

Boychuk’s suspicions were confirmed the moment he had arrived at the Ottawa station that morning. “What’s this? Aren’t any interview rooms available?” he asked Ritter. The Ottawa detective was helping himself to a cup of coffee when Boychuk walked in.

“There are.”

“So why are we meeting Sarah Anderson in a lunchroom?”

“I’m trying something new.”

“Which is?”

“I want to see if I can throw her off. Make her think we don’t suspect her.”

“Suspect her of what?”

“Oh, come off it Boychuk. You can’t be that naive. Guy disappears. Wife is the only one around. Something’s off.”

“You ever spend any time in the wild, Detective Ritter? Those woods aren’t a city park. They’ll crush you and spit you out without blinking.”

“Look. Boychuk, I don’t need to be Johnny Hayseed to figure this one out.”

Boychuk scoffed at the backhanded insult, though he suspected the knee-jerk self-assurance came more from lack of confidence than anything else. Ritter was a jackass but he wasn’t an idiot. If he were being smart, Boychuk would just let it go. He was two years away from retirement. There was nothing to be gained by seeing this case through. And he probably would have if the specter of Josh Lussier hadn’t haunted him most of his career. They may never find Matthew Anderson, but Boychuk wouldn’t let it rest until he was satisfied he’d done everything possible.

After the pages Sarah scattered had been gathered, Ritter had launched into an interrogation. Did Sarah know about the other family? How had she not known Matthew’s parents were still alive? How could he have hidden his past from her for ten years? Did she understand her marriage was now null and void and she was no longer considered Matthew’s beneficiary? Boychuk wasn’t sure if that last claim was true or not. He had never come across a case like this before. Though there had been the occasional suspicious disappearance or homicide in Patricia Bay, none of those cases had rivaled this.

Sarah stayed calm throughout the rest of the interview, as if another woman had crawled beneath her skin after the outburst. With each question, Boychuk noticed her

spine straighten one iota more until she was perched on the edge of the couch. Her eyes, trained on Ritter, following his movements. Her facial muscles barely twitched, hard as lacquered wood beneath Ritter's scrutiny.

Finally, after a couple of hours of fruitless attacks, Ritter asked her if she would be willing to provide a sample of Matthew's DNA and her own.

"Why do you need mine?" she asked.

"Just to rule you out. If what you're saying is true, it'll make things easier for you," Ritter said.

Sarah looked over to Boychuk. "Rob?"

Boychuk felt her gaze. "It's pretty standard, Sarah. I wouldn't worry about it too much." He was lying. There was nothing standard about this case. Ritter was digging for bones in an empty yard, but he was going to make a show of doing it. On the surface, Boychuk couldn't understand why Sarah's DNA was needed. But his involvement here was at Ritter's discretion.

To confirm what they already suspected, they would take a swab from Jonathan Evans's biological sister to compare with Matthew Anderson's DNA. Taking Sarah's DNA was more of a scare tactic than anything else. Ritter was trying to rattle her and see how she responded.

Eventually, a uniformed officer took a swab from Sarah's cheek and then followed her home to collect a sample from Matthew's toothbrush.

"That was a little harsh," Boychuk said after Sarah had left the room.

"Ya, well, you won't think so if it turns out she killed him." Ritter was carefully

packing up the banker's box.

“You're more likely to catch flies with honey than with vinegar, Ritter. The lady's been through enough. If she did something to her husband, she's not going to be able to hide it. But if she didn't, she doesn't need to be destroyed any more than she already has been.”

“Be nice? Is that what passes for police work in hillbilly country, Boychuk?” Ritter stood to his full height, a couple of inches taller than Boychuk.

“No, that's what passes for common decency, asshole,” Boychuk had said over his shoulder as he'd left the room.

The sun had just dipped below the horizon when Boychuk passed the town of Renfrew, about an hour out of Ottawa. No man's time, his mother had called it. When light was suspended by dark and bad spirits slipped into the world. Boychuk let everything he'd heard that afternoon settle in his mind, tracing the weaving path of Sarah's and Ritter's stories. Undoubtedly, the clumsy detective would root around for a while, do some emotional damage, and try to make something stick. But to succeed, he'd have to stumble around in Boychuk's backyard. And the wild had a way of keeping its secrets.

In the end, Boychuk concluded that Ritter really was an asshole. No question. But that didn't make him wrong. Boychuk couldn't deny there was merit in the suspicions. Did Sarah know about Matthew's past, and if so, had she acted on it?

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Strains of an up-tempo Disney song drifted from the living room. Sarah nursed a cup of jasmine tea in the kitchen as she listened to Izzy regale her with the day's events. While Sarah was at the police station stewing beneath Detective Ritter's gaze, Izzy had spent the day with the kids shopping for Halloween costumes and pumpkins.

"The store was like a Plasticine planet," Izzy said, "crawling with kids all hopped up on primary colors. I tried to race a pickup truck just to find a parking spot. And then, to my horror, Charlie walks up to the driver of the truck, who could have been an extra on the Sons of Anarchy , in the freakin' Hot Wheels aisle. The kid was clutching a plastic Hulk mask as a backup. Charlie glowered at this guy, who was easily three times his height, and, I swear to God, says to him, 'You stole my auntie Izzy's parking spot.'"

Both women tumbled into suffocating laughter. "I was dumbfounded and a little afraid. I kid you not, the image of tiny Charlie dressing down a Hells Angel will be burned in my brain for life. And the guy actually looked sheepish," Izzy said when breath allowed.

To Izzy's relief, she continued, the man had taken it in stride and apologized. Charlie nodded his approval and turned his attention back to the wall of miniature cars.

"Man, I had no idea how tough it could be shopping with kids," Izzy said. "If you're not shooing them away from some impulse purchase, you're trying to stop them from taking on a biker. I'm exhausted."

Sarah had come home just before dinner, putting off Izzy's questions with a look. Over plates of bland chicken fingers and sliced tomatoes, the kids showed off their



purchases: ninja and Hulk costumes littered the table, along with Hot Wheels and Beanie Babies. Izzy shrugged in response to Sarah's raised eyebrow.

With dinner done, the weight of the day settled on them both.

"Well," Sarah said, knowing she needed to fill the space with everything she'd learned in the last few hours. But bringing Izzy into it meant making it real, and how could it be real?

"Well," Izzy said.

Sarah knew she had to tell Izzy—had to bring life to Ritter's story by voicing it herself—but her thoughts were shapeless and scattered. As she sat down on the wobbly kitchen chair, the room seemed to warp around her like a reflection in a fun-house mirror. The feeling was disorienting and somehow welcome, as if she'd passed behind the looking glass to where Ritter's reality intersected with her own. She looked around her kitchen, eyes landing on the little comforts of home: a wooden bowl overflowing with fruit, Bella's hoodie draped over a chair, a handprint painting of a turkey stuck to the fridge. Sarah bolstered herself with the honey-sweet scent of the tea and began.

She poured out everything she'd learned about Matthew's past—his other family, his previous disappearance, his secret daughter. Each revelation made her shiver, as if the words were talons against a blackboard. Sarah futilely wrapped herself tighter in the battered sweater she'd thrown on, knowing that the cold invading her was of her own making. Detective Ritter's accusations spewed out of Sarah while Izzy listened, mouth open in incredulity. "He even asked me if Matthew or anyone we knew had a red Honda Civic. Didn't even explain that question. Just stared at me. I mean, what the hell?"

When there was nothing more to tell, Izzy stood. Her eyes scanned the room. She

strode to the cabinet above the fridge, and Sarah heard the welcome scrape of heavy glass on wood.

“We need something stronger than tea,” Izzy said. She set down an unopened bottle of scotch beside the chipped teapot. Three monkeys on the label glared out at the teapot with disdain. Izzy dumped the tea from their cups in the sink and splashed a generous inch of scotch in each. The smell of pine and woodsmoke quashed the jasmine. Sarah downed hers in one gulp and poured another before the burn in her throat had subsided.

“They think I did something to him, Iz,” Sarah said.

“That’s insane. What do they think? You overpowered him and then dragged your hundred-and-eighty-pound husband to some hidden spot in the wilderness with your kids in tow? Have they seen you?”

“I know it sounds nuts, but that officer, Ritter. He was sure I knew something about Matthew’s other family, that I knew about the girl. He kept insinuating I felt threatened or hurt. That I wanted revenge.”

“And did you?” Izzy asked. Her voice was a chuckle, as if she already knew the answer to a ludicrous question.

“No. Of course not.” Sarah looked beyond Izzy, unable to trust herself to look into her sister’s eyes. There was a fraction of a moment then, one that could have easily been a catching of breath, where Sarah considered releasing the unsaid, the bits of the story that she kept locked within herself. Instead, she swallowed the words along with the burn of her shame and remained silent.

“So, his theory,” Izzy said, cutting in before the moment could stretch into something more, “is that you found out about a secret family, and you plotted revenge rather

than confront the lying SOB. This Ritter thinks you hid all this from your so-called husband and arranged for a family canoe trip, so you could, what? Kill your wannabe woodsman, get stranded with your kids, spend two weeks living in a hotel with traumatized children and—”

“Why don’t you like him, Iz?” Sarah couldn’t look at her sister. She swirled her cup and watched amber liquid drip syrupy legs down the porcelain.

“What?”

“Matthew. You’ve never liked him. You told me you thought he was arrogant when you first met him.” The burn from the scotch spread, igniting a prickle in Sarah’s toes and an irritation at the back of her mind.

“I like him fine, Sarah.”

“No. You don’t. You even tried to talk me out of marrying him. Remember? Ever since Matthew, you’ve drawn away from us, from me. You’ve been pretty much absent from my life these last few years.”

“That’s not true; I call every few weeks.”

“For Bella. You call for Bella. If it weren’t for that, I doubt we’d ever hear from you. I’m not stupid, Izzy. Obviously, I know you better than you think I do. You don’t like Matthew.”

“Look, Sarah, you’re tired, you’re scared—I get it. But you’re seeing things that aren’t there. And I’m sure a few shots of booze ain’t helping.” Izzy capped the bottle of scotch.

Sarah fell silent, too drained to argue. The scotch was having an effect, muddying her

mind and body. She knew there had been tension between Matthew and Izzy from the beginning but had tucked it behind insecurities and the daily trivialities of life. The wall between the sisters had grown. And Sarah had decided to leave it alone. Until today.

Izzy stood at the sink. She closed her eyes and let the truth rattle around in her head. She had always had doubts about Matthew. Over time, they spread and expanded into distrust. No matter how hard Izzy tried to live around it, she couldn't forgive Sarah for marrying Matthew.

When they first started dating, Sarah's gushing descriptions were like reading a teenager's diary.

"There's just something about him," Sarah had told Izzy when the sisters were together at Christmas. Sarah had been dating Matthew casually for a couple of months and had traveled to Toronto to be with her sister. The two spent a quiet, though comfortable, day eating too much chocolate and pretending the holidays didn't rekindle the pain of their parents' absence. "He's smart and funny and so sexy."

Izzy rolled her eyes at the cliché.

"I know what you're thinking, Izzy. Believe me. Honeymoon phase. New relationship. Yada, yada. You could be right, but I don't remember feeling like this with any other guy I've dated. When we're together, we just click."

"Isn't that what you said about the last one?"

Sarah had prattled on so much over the holidays that Izzy decided she needed to meet Mr. Charming for herself. She drove to Ottawa on a frigid weekend in late January. Most of the city was in hibernation, leaving only ice crystals and a killing cold on the

streets. Izzy's first night, the sisters holed up in Sarah's apartment. They shared gossip and a bottle of wine while nestled under a blanket on the couch. Icy pellets tapped at the window; the low hum of jazz barricaded them against the desolation in the sound.

They talked until they were too tired or too drunk to go to bed.

"You know who he reminds me of, Izzy? That dog we used to visit when we were kids." They had turned off most of the lights, and Sarah's voice was slow and dreamy. "The one that always bounded at us across the yard. What was its name? Do you remember? All the energy and those playful and still-sad eyes." To Izzy, the memory of the big black Labrador rang like a warning.

Izzy and Sarah had seen the dog every day on the way to school. They never knew its real name, but Sarah called it Midnight, after its sleek coat. One morning, they passed Midnight, but the dog kept its snout buried in snow. Izzy noticed a fur mitten clamped in the dog's mouth. She dropped to her knees, hoping to get his attention before Sarah.

"Here, Midnight," Izzy said, and stretched out a mittened hand.

Midnight dropped his prize. A quiver of movement caught Izzy's eye. The sharp, metallic smell of blood assaulted her nose. A rabbit lay on its side, one unseeing eye gazing to the sky, the hind leg twitching feebly. A watery-red pool stained the snow.

Izzy grabbed Sarah's hand and pulled her away. "Hey, it's my turn to pet him!" Sarah said.

"We're going to be late," Izzy had said as she dragged her sister into a run.

"I knew something was off from the beginning," Izzy said, the memory of the rabbit

coming back to her in Sarah's kitchen, her niece and nephew in the other room. Her voice was hoarse under the weight of scotch. Unable to look at Sarah, she watched a plastic drugstore skeleton dance in the wind outside the kitchen window.

"Izzy, what do you mean?"

It had been so long ago, and memories were such fickle things.

Matt had joined Sarah and Izzy for a skate on the frozen Rideau Canal on that long-ago weekend. The three of them followed a ribbon of ice into the heart of the city. They returned to Sarah's apartment, cheeks flushed with cold and easy laughter. Sarah went to the kitchen to make Irish coffees while Izzy changed in the bathroom. She peeled off sweat-dampened clothes and wrapped herself in the Grover-blue housecoat Sarah kept on the back of the bathroom door. Her hand was on the doorknob when she heard Matt's voice—curt and aggressive—through the papery walls.

Izzy froze, her hand still on the doorknob. She tried to make out Matt's words. The steam radiator clanged behind her as if someone were beating on the pipes. Matthew's voice rose, careening off uneven floors and warped walls: "Stop getting all pissy with me. There's nothing I can do. Do you want me to quit? I don't think either of us wants that."

Matt fell silent, but Izzy heard tension in the creak of floors. "It's only a couple more weeks," he said. "I'll be back in Vancouver after that." He slid into a hushed bark. "Jesus! Really?" Izzy flinched at another bang from the radiator, shaking loose a held breath. "Look, I promise. I'll be back before you know it. She'll hardly have missed me."

Matt went quiet. Izzy couldn't hear another voice. "Listen, I have to go," he said. "I'll call you later."

Izzy stepped out of the bathroom just as Matt pulled open the bedroom door. Her eyes found his, and she saw anger darken the hazel to brown. It was gone before she had a chance to take her next step, replaced with an apologetic smile.

“That sounded intense,” Izzy said.

“Ya, sorry about that. My boss.” Matt shrugged. “She can be difficult.” He held Izzy’s eyes.

“Sure,” Izzy said, not knowing what else to say. It was a moment, that was all: witnessed and dismissible beneath the vastly more interesting events of daily life. And yet a fissure of doubt formed in Izzy. The words could have been a work conversation, but the tone was off. It was deeper, more ... private.

When Sarah walked Matt to the front door later that night, Izzy jumped into the shower.

The hot water quieted the lingering chill and unease from the evening.

“Well, what did you think of him?” Sarah’s voice came through on a waft of cold air as she stepped into the bathroom.

“Sarah! I’m in the shower. At least close the door.”

“Ya, but you always take ridiculously long showers, and I can’t wait.”

Izzy peeked from behind the curtain. Sarah leaned against the sink, arms crossed, anticipation on her face.

“He seems okay. A little arrogant.”

“Okay? That’s what you say about a blind date with your neighbor’s nephew.”

“I didn’t even really get a chance to talk to him, what with freezing my ass off and all.”

“Bullshit, Iz,” Sarah said under a strained laugh. “Spill.”

Izzy killed the water and yanked open the shower curtain, unabashed in her nudity. Sarah handed her a towel with a familiarity that comes from a lifetime of knowing each other.

“I don’t know, Sarah.” Izzy arranged the towel around her chest and squeezed water from her hair.

Sarah said nothing but held demanding eyes on Izzy—though whether demanding the truth or a lie, Izzy couldn’t tell. What was to be gained by telling Sarah her suspicion? This “one” would probably dissipate like all the others. Izzy sat on the side of the tub, wrapped in warm steam and her sister’s friendship. She was reluctant to let go of either. Which version of happiness mattered—one where she says nothing and Sarah maintains the dream of true love, or one where she opens her sister’s eyes to possible mistruths in the face of an unknowable future? She never expected that Sarah would marry and have children with this man. So, she’d kept her mouth shut.

“Look, it was just my issue,” Izzy said in a different home, at a different time, trying to shake loose the memory of that long-ago winter night. “I didn’t like the way he looked at you sometimes, particularly in the beginning. What can I say? You were all I had left. No one would have been good enough for you.” The offhand line fell flat even to Izzy’s ears, and Sarah’s expression made it clear she wasn’t convinced.

Life had a way of repeating itself, Izzy thought. Here she was, a different time, a different place, yet she faced the exact same choice: tell the truth and hurt her sister,



or bury the lies to maintain a facade of happiness. In her head, she mocked a professorial voice pointing out the archetypal conflict between duty and love. It was almost funny. The last time, she'd chosen poorly. Maybe it was time to switch it up. Izzy looked away from the window and watched pain break over Sarah's face as she shared the details of that long-ago overheard conversation.

"When? When did this happen?" Sarah asked, a picture forming in her mind as Izzy's thread was added to the tapestry. How had Izzy not told her in all this time?

"I can't remember. It was when I came up for a weekend when you first got together. It must have been late January or early February."

"The theater's debut was the May after that."

"What does that matter?"

"Don't you get it? He was talking to her. To his wife. Faith."

Sarah fought for breath as if a rogue wave had just thrown her into the swell. The crafted layers of her life slid away, smashing her history into shards. Her final defense—Matthew had been living in Ottawa when this Jonathan person was last seen in Vancouver—ground away beneath Izzy's account.

Matthew had disappeared for a brief time soon after that winter-weekend visit. He returned newly committed to a relationship. Sarah might not have put the picture together but for the series of linked moments: Matthew's absence from her first professional show in May, Jonathan Evans walking away from his family that same month, Sarah taking him in her arms under the weight of his apologies. And now, Izzy's overheard phone call just a couple of months before all of it. Matthew had left his wife and daughter for Sarah. The picture emerged in Sarah's mind like photographs in a darkroom. Expose, develop, stop. The details slotted into the

narrative the police had spun about Matthew's past.

There are lies that can be forgiven in a marriage—a white lie to bolster a lover's confidence or hide a minor mistake—and there are lies that tear at the very fabric of a couple's identity. Matthew's lie eclipsed even the latter. Everything Sarah thought she knew about her husband, about her family, about her life, exploded, as if she'd been carrying a land mine near her heart all this time. Sarah thought back to early in her marriage, the thrill and pride of calling Matthew her husband, of knowing that she had a partner and a home. All of it was a lie. Not only had Matthew never been hers, he didn't even carry the name that he shared with her. Everything Sarah believed herself to be—a wife, a mother—was rotten at its very core.

Izzy watched her sister sit tall in the face of the long-hidden memory. Regret poured over her, whether for not telling Sarah then or telling her now, she didn't know. Sarah's eyes stayed on the floor as Izzy babbled about the unreliability of memory and not to read too much into her recollection.

"Enough," Sarah said, looking up as she pulled herself to standing.

Since they'd returned to Ottawa, Sarah had curled into herself. She shared facts and theories with Izzy, but her deeper thoughts she guarded jealously. Given their previous estrangement, Izzy hadn't expected to fall entirely back to where they'd left off, but she was bemused by the depth of Sarah's withdrawal. It seemed like Sarah couldn't look at Izzy, as if she were hiding something every time the subject of Matthew came up. So what Izzy saw in Sarah's eyes then was as unexpected as it was incomprehensible. In the depths of it all, Izzy read nothing but a cold anger, one that could burn down the world.

April 2016

“Come on, Bella. The light’s about to change. Let’s get across,” Sarah said as she grabbed her daughter’s unmitten hand. Bella looked up from a web of rivulets on the sidewalk, her face resolute. The weather had been unusually mild for early March, creating an obstacle course of slush mountains and snowmelt puddles. This week, Bella had decided scientist-explorer was her life’s ambition, which meant stopping at every tree hollow and snowbank between school and home.

Charlie slept in the stroller, head lolled back and face to the sky. It was too late in the day for a nap, but coaxing both kids through the temptations of soft snow and warm temperatures would have been too much. Sarah knew what lay ahead. Charlie would stay up too late tonight, and then they’d face the same situation tomorrow as another late night ceded ground to an afternoon nap.

Sarah was immune to the relief found in a spring thaw. Work had been nonstop as they prepared for the opening night of their latest production, and on top of that, the arguments with Matt had been getting worse. Her weeks were punctuated with recriminations: he was late coming home, she forgot to call about the furnace cleaning, he hadn’t done dishes like she’d asked, she always left hair in the tub. The kindling for any fight was mundane, but the flames rose higher with each new spark.

When Sarah reached the other curb, sodden snow pulled at the stroller wheels. “Come on,” she said in a deep growl. She took little runs at the dirt-gray pile only to gain an inch or two. “You stupid thing!”

Charlie shook awake. “Out!” he said. “I want out!”

Bella surveyed her mother's struggles from the top of a nearby snowbank, like the queen of small things.

"Bella, let's go," Sarah said in a bark. She hoisted the stroller, stepped through slush, and felt ice water seep into her boots. She ran an undignified gauntlet the last two blocks toward home: Charlie screamed to get out of the stroller while Bella dragged her feet in retaliation for her mother's harshness.

The final ring of the house phone reverberated off the walls as Sarah shoved open the front door. The kids tumbled in front of her, tossing off muddy boots and wet snowsuits. How did two small children leave behind a pile twice their size? Sarah ignored the mess. She settled the kids with a snack and headed upstairs to her bedroom.

A mound of the morning's rejected work outfits lay on the bed. Sarah added the slacks and blouse she had eventually chosen to the pile and slipped into sweatpants and an old T-shirt. It took effort not to crawl into bed.

She made her way to the kitchen to look for feasible dinner options, settling on the working mother's refuge: ramen noodles and sliced vegetables as a nod to healthy eating. Chalk another failure up for today. The water had just started boiling when she remembered the missed call. Matt's message was frustratingly familiar. Sorry, late again tonight. Don't wait up.

"Of course," Sarah said to the kitchen walls.

She shoved bricks of dried noodles into the water and thought about the trail of hurts and slights that haunted the edge of any marriage: irritations and assumptions rooted into memory, carving a swath of resentment. Say the wrong thing or offer an ill-timed glance and the earth beneath your feet crumpled. Had she and Matt crossed that unseen threshold? Stepped onto a painful path that led only one way?

Certainly, they'd been here before. Before Charlie. Sarah stood in their kitchen, remembering when they had been just a family of three, and somehow less, and more, than they were now. Matt worked all the time then, too, chasing new contracts and leaking regrets about his life into the open. It's growing pains, her friends told her. The new-parenthood honeymoon is just fading. This is the real work, they said, paying for life and raising a kid. For months, she and Matt had been circling each other back then. Unacknowledged slights festered, though they both kept up the pantomime of a happy family.

The shouting match, when it came, had ripped open a wound and resulted in Charlie.

Sarah had spent the day coated in phlegm and apple juice trying to work at the kitchen table with a feverish Bella clinging to her chest. Entire emails had been typed one handed while Fred Penner music played on a loop. By the time Matt came through the door, her exasperation was uncontrollable. When he told her he'd need to work over the weekend, she said nothing, but her silent recrimination was enough. It oozed and bubbled through the room, sucking up the air between them.

"Jesus Christ, Sarah, stop being such a bitch!" Matt had finally said as they were getting ready for bed.

The fight had been larger than either of them, a contained monstrosity released and finally stretching its limbs. You're never here anymore. You're just a control freak. Jesus, that's rich coming from you. Around it went, words used as weapons to expose delicate skin and slash. Bared teeth and guttural retorts. In the end, they came together in a final battle of dominance and submission, each using known vulnerabilities to claim victory. He'd stood at her back when he entered her, and she'd hated and loved him for it. Six weeks later, she'd learned she was pregnant with Charlie.

Sarah's reminiscence of that past fight was interrupted by the sound of little feet

thumping across the hardwood floor. “Daddy’s home, Daddy’s home,” Bella sang. Sarah held her ground in the kitchen.

“Hi there,” Matt said. Sarah turned to see him standing in the kitchen doorway, with an open box of pastries from her favorite bakery. His other hand gripped a bouquet of orange grocery-store gerbera daisies. The transparent plastic wrap crinkled as he moved toward her. His head tilted down, but his eyes held her gaze under the fringe of his too-long hair.

“What are those?” Her chin flicked forward; her voice stayed flat.

“Mille-feuilles and chocolate éclairs.” The bakery’s claim to fame was decadent French pastries.

“Is that a peace offering?”

“It is. And an apology. I know I’ve been ... absent lately. And you’ve taken on a lot with the kids and work.”

“I try! I wanna try one!” Charlie and Bella said as they circled Matt. All hoping, wanting, waiting eyes trained on Sarah. “Please, Mom,” they said in unison. Sarah took in her little family: Bella, her crossed arms and thrust out hip daring Sarah to say no; Charlie and Matt, their expressions identical. Though it wouldn’t disappear, Sarah swallowed her anger yet again, letting it slip down her gullet like bile.

Matt seemed to sense the crack and pushed further. “That’s not all,” he said, as he put the box on the counter and squatted next to Charlie. His words were directed at the kids but meant for Sarah. “Daddy is taking Mommy out for dinner, and Jennifer is coming to babysit tonight. Won’t that be fun? And, if you’re really good, then she’ll let you have a pastry for dessert.”

Sarah shook her head, a smirk her act of surrender.

“Why don’t we finish making the noodles and let Mommy get ready for the restaurant, hey, guys?”

Sarah held Matt’s eyes over the strains of their family, and she let a smile slip onto her lips. “Fine,” she said. “But we get dessert too.”

The warm water from the shower left a glow on Sarah’s skin. Darker thoughts—about the end of her marriage or her failures as a mother—spun and collided before sluicing down the drain. She wiped a thick coating of soap up her leg and, with a practiced hand, ran a razor the length of her shin. She continued around her leg, pulling the razor over forgotten parts of her. Her free hand caressed the newly shorn skin. She was on the second leg, the razor poised just above her Achilles, when the bathroom door clattered open.

“Mommy, Charlie broke my Barbie!”

Sarah’s hand jerked up her calf, catching a scar midway down and ripping open still-tender flesh.

“He’s always breaking my things. I hate him.”

The scar was more than a few months old, the cut deep. Inflicted when the pedal from Bella’s bike caught Sarah’s leg as she ran beside her daughter. Bella tumbled to the pavement, playing out the irony of parenthood: the collision with Sarah had caused Bella’s crash.

“Bella, I can’t do anything right now. Can you go downstairs and talk to Daddy?”

When Sarah peeked out from behind the shower curtain, Bella was gone, though the

bathroom door was wide open. She looked down where a rivulet of pink rode a trail of water around her leg and down the drain.

Sarah put on a red dress and black-heeled boots. Beneath the veneer of wife and mom, she saw a woman in the mirror, one she remembered from a time before kids. Before Matt. She was pleased to see her.

“Not bad for thirty-five,” the reflection said.

She twirled in front of the mirror, watched the fabric undulate across her legs as it lifted slightly. She spun again, and in her mind’s eye, the dress lifted her above the daily arguments and the work deadlines, carried her past the runny noses and day care pickups, to a time when she was a wife, a lover, a partner to the man she loved. They could—they would—get back there again. She just needed to find the path. And tonight was the first step.

She was halfway down the stairs when she heard Bella and Matt deep in conversation in the foyer.

“I know you’re sad, Bella, but we can fix it. It’s not a big deal.”

“He’s always breaking my things. I hate having a little brother.”

“Daddy fix it?” Charlie came running to join them.

“Shut up, Charlie,” Bella said.

“Bella, that’s not how you talk to your broth—”

“I see, I see!”



“No, Charlie!” Bella screeched. “Daddy! He’s going to break it more.”

“Charlie, just hold on a second, buddy. I’m trying to fix Bella’s doll.”

Matt’s back was turned to the stairs. He knelt between the kids. Bella pushed at Charlie while Charlie grabbed for the doll.

“No! Daddy, don’t let him touch it.”

“I wanna see. Daddy, I wanna see!”

The contained chaos always under the surface of their home had bubbled over. “Guys, just give me a sec—”

“I see. I seeeeee.”

“Charlie, nooooo.” The anxiety was too much. Bella broke down in tears.

“Matt, what time is the reservation for?” Sarah said from her perch on the stairs.

“Hey, hey,” Matt said. “It’s okay, Bella. I fixed it. Look. See. The doll’s all better now.”

“No, I don’t want it anymore. Charlie ruined it,” Bella said through fat crocodile tears.

“Come on now. It’s as good as new.”

Matt tried to calm Bella with a hand on her back. Bella took the doll but cried harder in response.

“Matt?” Sarah stepped down the stairs, struggling to get his attention over the tumult.

“I help, I help,” Charlie said.

“Don’t touch it, Charlie.” Bella’s yell echoed off the hardwood floors.

The doorbell announced the arrival of the babysitter, adding to the crescendo in the hallway.

“Matt?” Sarah reached the bottom of the stairs. Her heels clapped the hardwood, and Matt turned to the sound.

“Jesus Christ, what the hell is it, Sarah?” Matt said as he stood and spun toward her. All sound stopped. The kids stared up at their father. Bella’s tears dried on her face.

Charlie stopped shuffling. Sarah met Matt’s eyes.

The look of despair on his face silenced any questions she may have intended.

Sarah stood before that look, took it in, and turned away. She buried that look, along with her anger, her frustrations, and her suspicion, driving it down so that it ran like hot magma far below the molten crust of her skin. Sarah’s hand brushed the cool rayon of her dress as she stepped toward the kids.

“Okay, guys, Jennifer’s here. You be good, now.” Sarah kissed each of the little heads before turning to Matt again. “We’re going to be late,” she said and reached for her coat by the door.

October 2016

Over the course of several more painful meetings with Detective Ritter, Sarah had learned all she could about the man who was her husband. The officer had dribbled out pieces of information at each meeting, and Sarah had pounced on them like a junkie finding the next hit. It had been humiliating, but she needed to know. Ritter, meanwhile, seemed to be driving toward a truth that only he knew.

“You mean you didn’t know Jonathan’s parents were alive,” Ritter said. “How is that even possible?”

Sarah couldn’t answer. She sat in a small office in the downtown station. She might have thought it was a former broom closet but for the window. She stared outside at the orange-leaved maple tree against a painfully blue late-October sky. This late in the season, much of the canopy had withered and died, but against the odds, this tree had kept most of its foliage. It saddened her to think that its efforts were in vain.

“I mean, come on,” Ritter persisted. “You expect me to believe you lived with the man for nine years and you didn’t know he had family in Vancouver? A brother? A sister in Calgary?”

“I didn’t.” How to tell him she never questioned Matthew’s story about his past? “He told me his parents were dead. Why wouldn’t I believe him?”

Sarah wove Matthew’s story—as she knew it—for Ritter. An only child, a struggling single mom, a shadow of unhappiness. He had lived in a tough but respectable neighborhood in Victoria. His mom loved him but worked constantly, so he lived a

latchkey life. She met a man when he was in high school, and there was tension from the beginning. He wasn't a bad guy, Matthew admitted; he just wasn't ready to parent someone else's son. Matthew left home at eighteen, chasing something different through university in Vancouver and working part-time jobs to pay rent. He saw his mother infrequently, returning home less and less. When she'd died the year after Matthew graduated, his stepfather disappeared from his life.

"I find that hard to believe. All this time, Matthew never let it slip he'd grown up in Vancouver, not Victoria? That his mother was alive and well, retired and helping to raise his daughter? My girlfriend can't even hide a new pair of shoes. How does a guy hide a family for nine years?" Ritter said.

"I don't know." Sarah's mouth flooded with bitter questions. Out the window, two black squirrels chased each other through the tree branches. They flitted in and out of the picture, disappearing and reappearing under the lip of the window.

"Okay, let's say that, just for a minute, I accept you're telling me the truth. What about the money, Sarah? All that cash funneled into a secret account for Grace Evans, and you don't notice?" Sarah flinched on hearing the name of Matthew's abandoned daughter. Ritter made a show of flipping through his notebook. "Your story is what? You found the bank statements the night you came back from Patricia Bay?"

"Yes," she said. "Matthew took care of all the financial stuff. I never paid much attention."

Out the window, one of the squirrels backed his quarry onto a thin branch that sagged under the weight of both animals. Sarah felt her heart thud, worried the smaller one was about to fall.

"Look, theater work doesn't exactly pay much," Sarah continued, "and most of the profits go back into the company. I make a small salary, but it mostly covers day care

costs with a little extra left over. Matthew worries about the money, pays the bills. I rely on him to tell me what's going on with our finances." She was present enough to recognize how frivolous this made her sound; she was also beyond caring.

"Look at me, Sarah." Ritter tapped a manicured hand against the table in between them.

She turned slowly and looked into his steel-gray eyes. How had she not noticed that color before? It felt like she had stepped into the pages of a mystery novel. The detective's steel-cut eyes bored into the suspect. Her mind wandered through a split-screen version of her life. Her reality—this god-awful station, this coffee-breathed detective and his ridiculous questions—gave way to an altered version where this was all part of a cheap paperback, a silly fiction she could read on the beach while the kids dug deep holes in the shifting sand.

"I don't believe you."

"I can't help that," Sarah said flatly and turned back to the window.

The smaller of the squirrels hung precariously over the void. Sarah felt an urge to cup her arms beneath its fall. Its tail flitted. Once. Twice. And then it bolted, straight at its tormentor. The branch bobbed under its steps, and in the rebound, the creature vaulted over the larger squirrel, landing safely on the trunk before scampering out of sight. Sarah chuckled. A dissonant sound, even to her ears.

"You find this funny, Sarah?" Ritter said.

"Isn't it?" she said, a meek challenge in her tone. "Nine years of marriage to a man I called Matthew Anderson, only to have him disappear into thin air, leaving me and my kids stranded in the wilderness. And then, in the search, you learn his real name is Jonathan Evans. My kids walking around with a name not his, not theirs. Everything I

knew about the man I slept beside for nine years is a complete lie.” Tension consumed the air between them. Sarah scrutinized this man in front of her, this harbinger of ruin who offhandedly laid waste to everything.

“I’d say it’s pretty hilarious,” Sarah said, not laughing. She stood, daring him to stop her, and grabbed her coat.

“You’re not going anywhere, Sarah.” Ritter stayed in his seat. He faced the chair Sarah had just vacated. “Here’s the thing. I think you did know, Sarah. I think you knew about Grace and Faith, and you were worried. You saw cracks in Matthew’s devotion to you, to your family, and you didn’t think that was fair.”

Sarah opened the door to leave.

“He was calling her. That’s how you found out.” Sarah froze. Ritter reached into the folder on the table.

“Phone records, Sarah. From Matthew’s cell phone. He called the same number twelve times over the last two months. A number with a 778 area code. That’s Vancouver Island.” Sarah turned to face Ritter. A distant ringing, like an old rotary phone, rattled in her head. “Most of the calls were pretty short. A few seconds. Like someone was leaving a message or, maybe, building the courage to speak. But then, in July and August, four calls. Each lasting a little over twenty minutes.”

Sarah shuffled back to the seat across the table from Ritter. The dull ring in the back of her head increased.

“You knew, Sarah. You knew Matthew was in touch with his other family. His first family. You knew, and you were going to stop it.”

“I didn’t.”

“He was funneling money to them; he was talking to them; it was only a matter of time before he left you for them. Isn’t that what you were thinking, Sarah? You said yourself, he’d been distant lately—”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Busy, you called it. He was lying to you, Sarah, and you couldn’t allow that. It wasn’t fair, was it?”

“No.”

“So, you went on pretending to be the devoted housewife, biding your time. But I’ve seen the anger, Sarah. I know how hard it must be to keep it in.”

The ringing in Sarah’s head overpowered Ritter’s words.

“Let it out, Sarah. It’s time to face the consequences. Give your kids some peace. Let them put this behind them.”

It was the mention of her kids that did it: the idea of them hearing Ritter’s accusations, believing them.

“If you bring my kids into this, I will fucking end you,” Sarah said in a low growl.

“Ah, there she is.” Ritter sat back in his chair, oozing satisfaction.

Sarah allowed herself a breath. She heard the thump of her pulse beat, felt her heart’s demand to be recognized. She let them quieten, gave her mind time to comprehend. When she spoke, it was a knife.

“You have nothing that supports this ridiculous theory of yours. No body, no proof,

and no clue what happened to my husband. You can spew this crap all you want, but you and I both know, it's meaningless without any actual evidence. So, either put up or shut the fuck up."

Sarah left. The door slammed behind her.

A month later, Sarah found herself sitting in a Vancouver café, waiting. She'd ventured out of her hotel just as dawn split the horizon. The hipster-chic neighborhood she was staying in backed up against the Vancouver waterfront. The air smelled like rain—a permanent fixture of November on the coast—though the pavement was dry. Still-shuttered boutiques and restaurants lined the streets, lorded over by occasional glass condo towers. After a few blocks, English Bay unfurled in front of her. Sarah joined joggers and dog walkers in their morning routines. She imagined herself as others on the street might see her, as if she were just another gawking tourist. It was a nicer picture than reality.

In the café, the smell of deep-roast coffee floated on lounge music. A weak sun backlit commuters scurrying in and out. Sarah chose a table near the front with a view of the door. Within the swelling din of customers, she played out possible scenarios of the coming conversation. All of them inadequate. What could you possibly say to your secret mother-in-law?

The letter had arrived in the mail, rerouted through two police services before arriving at her door. Gwen Evans. The name struck Sarah as fashionably old fashioned. Her letter was short but precise.

I am Jonathan Evans's mother.

I have asked the Vancouver Police whether it is possible to get in touch with you and they have kindly agreed to forward this on my behalf. They have told me little about you or your family, only that Jonathan was living in Ottawa and that another family



exists.

I know you have no reason to agree, but I would very much like to meet you. I am probably one of very few people who can understand the pain that you are going through. I do not believe my son is a bad man, not truly, but he seems incapable of not inflicting damage.

Gwen Evans offered to pay Sarah's way to Vancouver and promised no other request than a meeting. Anything else would be up to Sarah. Incapable of not inflicting damage. Those words rolled around in Sarah's head. She let them fall off her own tongue, testing the sharpness of them.

Sarah knew little about this woman. Ritter had mentioned she was a retired librarian living on the West Coast. And still alive. The other piece of information Sarah carried inside her, an unreachable thorn that would be with her always. Gwen Evans was the mother of a liar.

"Sarah?"

Sarah looked up to see a petite older lady standing beside the table. She would have guessed the woman to be somewhere in her midsixties, younger than she expected. Her clothes were tailored to her frame, and she wore a navy blue trench coat with a scarf in layers of indigo. Her gray-streaked blonde hair was short with sweeping bangs settling just above red plastic-rimmed glasses.

Remembering herself, Sarah stood. "Gwen, um, Mrs. Evans?"

The question was an afterthought, a formality. The eyes were the same, as was the slight upturn of the nose. This was Matthew's mother.

"Oh, please call me Gwen." A forlorn smile passed between the two women, one

only possible from a shared hurt.

“May I sit?”

“Of course, sorry. I’m, uh—”

“I know.”

The older woman removed her coat and took the seat across from Sarah. Around them, the café had quieted, the stream of rush-hour commuters having dwindled. A band of sunlight from the front window pierced the room, though both women rested just outside its reach.

“So,” Gwen said after a few meaningless pleasantries about the flight, the hotel, the weather. “I would imagine you have a million questions.”

“A few.”

“Fire away. It’s the least I can do.” Gwen turned gentle eyes on Sarah.

Questions twisted through Sarah’s head. She hesitated. She looked down at her cold tea, took a couple of breaths to quiet her mind. The first question was one she hadn’t expected to ask.

“Do you know where Matthew—Jonathan is?”

A shudder of the chin and flutter of the eyes spoke to Gwen’s anguish, though she held Sarah’s eyes. It was the look of a mother to a loved, complicated, and disheartening child.

“I’m sorry, Sarah. I have no idea. If I did, I would tell you in a heartbeat.”

The answer, while expected, devastated Sarah. She closed her eyes against it. Just before those words, somewhere in the tattered vestiges of hope, she had believed the answer would be here, that by unearthing Matthew's secret, like a hapless archaeologist, she would uncover mysteries of his past to explain the present.

A hand rested lightly on Sarah's. "I am so sorry, Sarah," Gwen said in a faltering voice. Was it enough? To hear the woman who raised him offer a hushed apology in a West Coast coffee shop.

"I don't understand," Sarah said.

"I know. You can't. It's not understandable."

Rendered speechless by the immensity of it all, Sarah let Gwen take the lead. She described a regular kid with a regular life in a regular suburb. Her talk wove from playdates and Sunday school to basketball tryouts and family vacations, each vignette laced with nostalgia and remorse.

"We were as June and Ward Cleaver as it was possible to be. Three kids, a house in a nice neighborhood. My husband coached soccer; I ran the school bake sales, for God's sake. Even I knew it was a little too stereotypically suburban.

"I wish I could tell you Jonathan was damaged in some way, that some trauma in his past could explain this pattern he seems to have of disappearing. The truth is, I can't explain anything about his adult life. I barely know him anymore, and the more time passes, the more I wonder if I ever truly did."

"The police told me Jonathan had siblings."

"Yes, he's the youngest. Charlotte is the oldest; she's a veterinarian in Calgary. Works with big animals, horses and cattle. Some of her stories can get a little off

putting. She and her husband have two girls.” Gwen risked a small smile. “Jian and Wren. And Nathan’s here in Vancouver. He’s a single dad. Beth, my granddaughter, has special needs, so I help out where I can.”

An alternate life swam through Sarah’s mind. One with family, cousins, and large, boisterous dinners. How to account for the lives that might have been? If one decision had been different, one action taken on another day? Gwen’s interlaced hands rested on the small table, and Sarah concentrated on the veins threading beneath her skin. There was a lifetime in those hands, stories of joy and hurt etched into flesh. Sarah’s eyes dropped to her own hands, oddly pale against the scratched mahogany of the table. Her eyes traced the largest vein as it rose and fell like a roller coaster; she followed it back through the events of her life. Images unspooled for her as if a video were playing on a slow rewind—the campsite at Nagadon Lake, Charlie gleeful on the park slide, Bella’s first day of school, Izzy standing beside her at the wedding. The movie ended with the final scene of Matthew standing at her apartment door on a frigid winter night. In this new movie, this alternate life, she closed the door.

“Can I ask? Do I ... Are there grandkids?” In the hesitancy of Gwen’s voice, Sarah saw another one of Matthew’s victims. Another mother abandoned.

“Two. A boy and a girl.”

“Oh!” On the exclamation, Gwen’s interlaced hands rose to her mouth as if in prayer.

“Mirabelle, Bella. She’s nine and every inch Matthew’s daughter. She’s spunky and a handful, but ridiculously smart. Charlie’s four. He’s the sensitive one—”

“Charlie?” Gwen closed her eyes, tears catching in her lashes. When her eyes opened, Sarah read a painful question on her face and waited for the older woman to give it voice. “May I see photos?”

Sarah pulled out her phone and scrolled to the most recent pictures. She chose one from a local petting zoo. The photo showed the kids standing proudly on either side of a Jersey cow named Bella.

“Oh my,” said Gwen in a whisper. An uncontrollable tear slid down her cheek on a blink. “He looks so much like him.”

Sarah said nothing.

“My late husband was named Charles. Everyone called him Charlie.”

The new information sliced through Sarah. Unable to draw air to speak, she kept her gaze on her hands as the two women rested in their adjoined griefs. Gwen wiped her bottom lids gingerly, careful not to smear her makeup.

“I’m sorry. It was a few years ago now, but I still find myself processing it sometimes.”

Eventually, Sarah was able to draw in just enough air. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

What else was there to say? Charles. Charlie. Sarah was afraid to ask. Serendipity had no place here. She tried to remember, had the name been her idea or Matthew’s? She pictured the list on the fridge, the one they added to periodically— Kai , Liam , Peter , after her father. When did Charlie appear? Had she liked it? Or had she come around to it? She saw the name scrawled between Samuel and Tiho . Whose handwriting? But she knew. Of course, she knew.

“How long ago did you lose him?”

“Um, let’s see. He died in July of 2012, so it’s been a little over four years now.”

Sarah didn't need to do the math. There was no doubt her son—born in October of that year—was named after Jonathan's father. How many layers of betrayal were possible in a single life?

“Oh, look at me. Wallowing in self-pity. And here I was trying to impress you,” Gwen said as a strained smile diluted the sadness in her eyes. “You came here to learn about Jonathan.”

Sarah rose through layers of sorrow and brushed at the webs of memory. With effort, she brought her mind to the woman in front of her. “Tell me everything.”

Back in her hotel later, Sarah sat in front of an untouched room service plate, her laptop open on an archive page of the Vancouver Sun website. A dated photo of Matthew was centered on the screen; underneath was a sensationalized headline: Local Man Vanishes . Sarah read.

The Vancouver Police Service is seeking the public's assistance in locating missing person Jonathan EVANS, 28 years old.

Evans was last seen leaving his home in Surrey on Friday, May 11, 2007, at approximately 7:15 a.m.

He is described as a Caucasian male with a medium build, short brown hair, and hazel eyes.

At the time of his disappearance, he was believed to be wearing a navy jacket, khaki pants and a pale blue dress shirt.

Police are concerned for his well-being.

If anyone has any information about his whereabouts, please call ...

Jonathan had left for work on a Friday morning in May. As usual. At the time, he lived in an apartment with his wife, Faith, and their three-year-old daughter, Grace. Gwen had received a call from Faith late that evening. Matthew hadn't come home yet, and she couldn't reach him. Did Gwen know where he was? Had she heard from him?

"I love my son, but I'm also not under any illusions as to who he is ... or at least was back then," Gwen had said in the coffee shop that morning, a harder edge to her voice. "Jon didn't always do consequences well. Charlie used to say he was 'slow to mature,' like Peter Pan. He'd make a choice in life and stick with it; never question it, never consider alternatives, and definitely never look back. He burned some bridges because of it. I can honestly say, though, he always believed he was doing the right thing, even if it was terribly misguided.

"Despite all that, I never expected Faith, or anyone for that matter, to call me because she couldn't find him. Their marriage had been difficult from the start. Jonathan had met Faith at university. I guess youthful intensity was too easily mistaken for love. The result was a pregnancy and a shotgun wedding the month after they graduated. Grace arrived six months later into a family that loved her but weren't mature enough to love each other through it."

Within weeks of Grace's birth, Gwen heard rumblings from Jonathan.

"Back then, we had these big family dinners every Sunday. Jonathan would drink a little too much, and we could all see he wasn't happy. It made for some awkward moments, but we didn't think too much of it. Growing pains, we thought. There were signs, we just didn't put them together in time."

"What signs?"

"Little cracks at first, I guess. More and more there seemed to be a tension between

him and Faith. But they were both so attentive to Grace. I mean, it would have been a lot for anyone. Getting married, starting a career, having a wife and baby to support.

“The rest came out later. After he disappeared. Apparently, he blamed Faith for the pregnancy. Over beers one night, Jonathan told his brother, Nate, that she had trapped him, and he couldn’t forgive her. Nate assumed it was drunk talk. Of course, we tried to support him, but Charlie felt strongly Jon owed it to Grace to ‘grow up and step up.’ That was Charlie. He had one of those cheesy motivational-poster lines ready for any occasion. It was infuriating, actually,” Gwen said with a twinge of amused melancholy.

A thoughtfulness fell over the table. The light in the coffee shop had shifted, indirect sunlight muting shadows in the room.

“We should have known.” Gwen’s voice was thick with memory. “He’d done it before.”

“Done what before?”

“Disappeared.”

It was a typical young adult story, Gwen said. Academic suspension midway through his first year of university; a young man lost and not ready to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. He worked for six months, earning as much as he could in dead-end jobs before spending the summer as a tree planter somewhere in Northern BC.

“We didn’t hear from him much while he was up at the camp,” Gwen said. “It was pretty isolated. The only communication was a satellite phone for emergencies. We’d hoped the isolation and hard work would knock some maturity into him. Then, one night toward the end of the summer, he called from a pay phone in Calgary. Charlie



answered. Jonathan said he was about to board a flight to Europe with friends. No explanation. No contact info. We tried to get more out of him, but he just said he had to run and left us worried and wondering. We barely heard from him over there, other than two or three postcards to let us know he was still alive. He was pretty much off the grid for eight months, though that was before cell phones and Facebook.”

“What happened when he came home?” Sarah seized on the idea of return.

“It’s a bit cliché to say, but he came back a changed man. I always joked he grew up so much that he got taller during that lost year. Maybe it was the tree planting and the lousy meals out of a backpack, I don’t know; he seemed to have grown into his size. He went back to school, switched to computers, focused on his studies, hung out with friends. Nothing unusual. He followed a path after that, or at least we thought. Met a girl, graduated, had a kid, found a job. True, it wasn’t in the typical order, but we thought he was happy, settled.

“I suppose we all thought he’d turn up again when he disappeared a second time. None of us could believe he would leave Grace.”

The sound of the other child’s name reverberated in Sarah’s ears; it rang like a dull hum long after the end of a loud concert, her mind tuned to the cacophony rather than the quiet.

The family was sure it was foul play, Gwen said, but the police found nothing to suggest Jonathan hadn’t just upped and walked away. And of course, he never came back. The story so eerily familiar, it crept along Sarah’s spine.

“The police told us his case had moved to a ... I can’t remember what they called it.”

“A passive search.”

“That was it. A passive search. They said they’d follow up if anything came up, but nothing did. Not until two months ago when a new detective, the old one had long since retired, came to the door. Some young guy, looked barely out of grade school. He told me some recent DNA evidence suggested Jonathan was in Ontario. And now, you.

“I can only imagine what you’re going through, Sarah. I watched Faith survive this. I know it’s hard, but she’s been amazing, raising that girl all on her own. She’s a strong woman and a great mom.”

Gwen’s words about Faith burned in Sarah’s chest. She stood abruptly. “Sorry. I need to use the washroom.”

Sarah walked to the back of the coffee shop; it felt like moving through deep water. She concentrated on each step and keeping the tears back. In the bathroom, she locked and leaned against the door as if she could keep out the thoughts that flooded her mind. She imagined another woman, another family, laying claim to her husband, to her life. Her mirrored reflection looked back at her. Soft overhead lighting cast shadows beneath her eyes. She pulled in a long, deep breath. And then another. She willed herself to push back images of the other woman and kept her mind focused on Bella and Charlie.

Back at the table, Sarah overpowered Gwen’s concern with questions about Grace. “And Grace? What became of her?” Sarah was terrified to ask, but the compulsion was unstoppable.

“She’s brilliant.” Pride flushed Gwen’s face. “She’s twelve now. A wild head of stubbornness and curls. She’s interested in ocean studies and tells me she plans to live at my house when she starts the oceanography program at UBC. She lives with her mother on Vancouver Island, but I see them whenever I can.”

For much of Gwen's story, Sarah felt as if she had been watching herself talking with a pleasant stranger about a sad story in a quiet café. This man, this Jonathan, had no connection to Sarah or her family. The moment Grace's name crossed her own lips, Sarah's illusion was pierced and her entire being—every nerve and muscle—was trained on the answer. There was an unanticipated relief then, crippling waves that threw Sarah off balance and tossed her into an interminable sea of questions.

Grace had survived the loss.

Though it was hard to hear over her relief, Sarah just caught Gwen's tentative question. "When, or if, you're ready, do you think it would be possible for me to meet your children?"

2016

Sarah sat on the front steps of her home watching the August evening drift into twilight. The setting sun muted some of the heat, but humidity slid into her lungs with each breath. The streetscape was a still life, as if the outside was a child's model of the real world. It was an enchanting night, and Sarah resented it.

How had things gone so wrong? It was supposed to be a week of family fun: museums, water parks, country drives to cute little towns for riverside lunches. Matthew had agreed to the time off, and she thought he was on board with her plans. Instead, they'd spent the week arguing.

Sitting on the steps, Sarah felt energy leach out of her, drawn out by the humidity and the endlessness of what her life had become. Kids, work, Matt, bills, demands, recrimination. She wondered if she sat there long enough whether she would eventually be drained of everything—blood, tissue, bone—all evaporating into the night air. It was a strangely comforting thought, the idea of disappearing into a void. Everything you carried stayed in a physical space, while you became ethereal, a part of the wind and the trees and the road.

Sarah didn't know who the other woman was, and she didn't really care to know. The long nights at work, the evasiveness about his whereabouts, the short temper with her and the kids. It all added up. Matthew was seeing another woman. Sarah didn't need a smoking gun, though it came just the same.

"Who's Grace?" Sarah had asked Matthew when the name popped up as a contact on his cell phone. Sarah had been waiting in the car while Matthew stepped out to pick

up Charlie from a birthday party. Her own phone was buried in her bag, so she'd grabbed his to call their local pizza place, thinking she would order so they could pick up dinner on the way home. The phone screen had been left unlocked.

"Who?" Matthew's voice was calm, but his stiffened shoulders and subsequent babble told otherwise. "Grace? I don't know any Grace. Pretty old-fashioned name, isn't it? Think maybe my mother had a friend named Grace."

Sarah just turned to the window as they drove away while Charlie prattled about the party from the back seat. She'd needed to decide if she had even been angry.

The kids' excited voices drew her thoughts back to the here and now, away from the other woman. "I wanna show Mommy! I wanna show!" Charlie yelled as he came around the house with his hands clasped together in front of him. Bella trailed behind with a self-satisfied look.

"Okay, show her," Bella said.

Charlie slowly opened his palms, a whisper of anticipation in his breathing. Sarah looked down at the emptiness in his upturned hand.

"What is it?" she asked. Both kids immediately looked around.

"Charlie, you dropped it!" Bella's accusations rang against the pavement.

"Nuh-uh. I got it."

"What did you catch, honey?"

"Flyfires," Charlie said, his voice quivering with excitement.

“Fireflies, dummy,” Bella said. Despite the layers of pain from her dissolving marriage, Sarah couldn’t help but smile at the magic of discovering fireflies on a warm summer evening.

“Tell you what, I’ll get a couple of jars, and we can walk down to the pond for a firefly hunt.” The kids cheered.

In the house, the chill of air-conditioning was delicious against her moist skin. Sarah ran a hand along her forearm and watched goose bumps rise.

She listened for sounds of Matthew. Had it not been for the faint click of a keyboard, she would have thought the house was empty. She slipped off her sandals and stepped barefoot toward the kitchen. Step, click, click, step, click, step. The rhythm was off, which seemed a funny expression of their relationship as of late. She moved deeper into the house, afraid of wakening another fight that could disturb the quiet of a summer evening hunting fireflies.

A squeak of the floorboard underfoot brought her to a halt. The keyboard clicks stopped. Sarah held her breath, waited. A click, followed by two more in quick succession. Sarah felt like Bilbo Baggins from Lord of the Rings , stealing through Smaug’s lair in the Lonely Mountain, searching for ... mason jars. Abandoning stealth, she walked purposely through the kitchen into Matthew’s study.

“What are you doing?” she asked from the study’s threshold.

Matt had been so engrossed in the screen he hadn’t heard her steps. His body swiveled in its chair, though his hand kept hold on the computer mouse. His recovery was quick. “Just finances,” he said. “Updating the accounts.” Click.

The monitor slid to the screen saver, a photo from the previous fall while on a hike in nearby Gatineau Park. The four of them—she, Matt, Bella, and Charlie—had spent

the afternoon ambling along leaf-strewn trails. They had stopped by the ruins of an abandoned mill, a legacy from generations before, when the area was mined by settlers. The crumbling foundation walls straddled a small set of rapids, with an encroaching forest reclaiming its own with emerald green mosses and young saplings. The photo showed the kids peeking through a crumbled space in one of the walls, ringed by a blurred background of reds and oranges from the changing leaves. Sarah remembered that day, and her anger softened.

She glanced around the room and spotted the mason jars lined up like watchmen on the windowsill, each filled with office bric-a-brac—paper clips, pencils, elastics. “I need to borrow a couple of these,” she said as she moved into the room. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Matthew flinch in annoyance, but she chose to ignore it. “The kids and I are heading down to the pond for a firefly hunt.” And then as a peace offering: “Wanna join us?”

Silence hung between them as Sarah emptied the jars onto the desk, leaving behind misshapen piles of black clips and used batteries. She turned to face her husband.

“Charlie calls them flyfires, which I kind of like better,” she said.

Matt’s eyes were trained on the discarded piles, and from his expression, Sarah braced herself for the complaint. Instead, he half smiled and said, “Ya, okay. I’ll come.”

Sarah handed him the jars and headed to the kitchen for a drink of water. Out the window, the sun had dipped to that balanced moment when night and day shared the spaces of the world. Suspicion dogged her thoughts; its presence annoyed her.

Sarah would not have called herself superstitious, but she did believe there were signs: moments where if you chose to listen, you could hear the universe whispering toward an expectation. Unlike many who believed in compassionate design, Sarah

knew cold, hard will was required to heed the mutterings. She bundled her suspicion and anger, pushed it away until it sputtered like a flicker of a dying candle.

“Ready?” Matt asked from behind her, a jar in each hand and a childlike expression on his face. “It’s probably dark enough now. They should be easy to spot.”

“Ya, all right. Let’s go.”

They walked down the front stairs side by side, a rhythm in their shared strides. The kids ran around on the front lawn hunting for “flyfires”; Bella had taken on the word as well, and Sarah savored the unexpected harmony in her family.

“Hey, here’s a thought,” Matt said as they followed the sidewalk toward the pond. “What do you think of a late-season canoe trip?”

The suggestion carried a weight that each recognized but neither mentioned. The kids chased hapless squirrels across lawns and around listless trees.

“I know you have that run-through at the theater next weekend,” he said, “but we can try for the weekend after. We could get a site on Nagadon Lake. The water’ll probably stay warm well into September, and it’ll be quiet. Most of the cottagers will have cleared off.”

“We can’t. Bella has Justine’s birthday party that weekend. We’ve already accepted the invitation, so she can’t just not show up. And you know how Felix always wants a debrief the weekend after opening nights. He’ll want me to be part of that.”

“Come on. The kids would love it. We haven’t been in so long. I’m sure the theater can get by without you for one weekend. We can bring fishing rods, see if we can get the kids to catch our dinner.” Matt’s elbow tapped her arm gingerly.



Sarah knew her knee-jerk response had slapped away the olive branch in his suggestion.

She wanted him to work for her.

“We can go the weekend after the birthday party then. How about that? I’ll take care of all the packing. I don’t mind,” he said.

“And there’s school. It starts up next week.”

“Nagadon’s only a couple of hours away. If we leave a little early on Friday, we can be on the site before dark.”

“I don’t know, Matt.”

“Come on, Sarah. It’ll be fun. And it’ll be good for us. You won’t have to do a thing, I promise. It’ll be like luxury camping. Glamping. I’ll be Sherpa, cook, tent pitcher, fire starter. All you’ll need is your clothes and a good book.”

Sarah felt her resolve slacken in the ping-pong of their discussion.

“Won’t it be too cold?”

“It might be a little chilly at night, but we can bring the down sleeping bags and build a big fire. Don’t you remember how gorgeous it can be in September? There’s usually only a handful of boaters. And the leaves! Remember when we went for our first anniversary? That had to have been late September. Ya, remember? We delayed the trip because you had that summer festival. The leaves were just turning, and we had that amazingly warm day.”

His final strike rang a death knell to her opposition.

“I remember you standing on those rocks the day we decided to circumnavigate the whole lake. God, it was so hot, remember, but the sight of those leaves reflected on that super-calm water in the little bay was so worth it. And you, all young and nubile.” His voice hushed. “Leaving your clothes on the rock and diving straight into that golden water, buck naked. It was one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen.”

Sarah closed her eyes, letting the memory of that shared experience glide between them.

He had her then. She could keep her eyes closed. Look the other way. Will the universe to give her the sign she wanted.

“Hey, guys.” Matthew whooped. “Who wants to go camping?”

“I do, I do!” the kids said in unison, their voices indistinguishable.

“I do!” Sarah added her own voice.

The week of fighting, the unknown woman, the thin thread of her marriage—all drifted to the further reaches of her mind, settling beneath layers of must-dos and could-have-beens. She could bury them. Let them be pulled down, submerge the pesky details that marred the happy picture of her family. Or at least that’s what she told herself.

“Now, let’s go find us some flyfires,” Sarah said.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

Rob Boychuk tapped the End Call button and slipped his cell phone back into his pocket. He stood on the front step of the Patricia Bay RCMP detachment, watching two robins bob at the pale-green lawn in search of spring worms. A Herman Melville line from *Moby-Dick* played on repeat in his head, like a scratched CD track: There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke . He'd been trying to work his way through the novel for months, reading a page here and there. Not because it wasn't readable, but because it struck Boychuk as a book you lived with for a while. Or maybe Melville's tome resonated because Matthew Anderson's disappearance had become Boychuk's white whale.

The case nagged at him. It lolled in his mind—similar to the sensation of having forgotten something, like the car keys or the stove left on—only there was no resolution, no way to double-check. He was astute enough to suspect that his pending retirement could be fueling the fixation. Staring down the barrel of ending a twenty-year career gave incentive for self-reflection. It was no coincidence that Josh Lussier and his family kept coming to mind these days. Boychuk arrived in Patricia Bay on a failure. He had no intention of leaving it the same way.

It had been over six months since Matthew Anderson's disappearance. In that time, Boychuk had considered a litany of theories about what might have happened even though the case was, technically, not his anymore. To satisfy his itch, he checked in occasionally with Sam Ritter. He still didn't like the Ottawa detective, but he had to admit, the kid was thorough. When Ritter called to let Boychuk know the file was moving to a cold-case drawer, Boychuk suggested he be the one to tell Sarah Anderson.

“No objection here,” Ritter said over the phone. “I got nothing new to tell her. Every lead I had is dead. It’s obvious to me she’s hiding something about her husband, but I’ve got no idea what happened to him. I didn’t find anything to connect the wife, so either Anderson did a runner and hid his tracks incredibly well or she’s the best damn actress I’ve ever seen. If she did do something to her husband, she must have been way smarter than he was about it.”

“What does your gut tell you happened?” Boychuk had his own suspicions but wasn’t keen to rehash them with Ritter.

“Look, I know what you think, Boychuk. The guy was a lot of things, but I don’t think he was stupid. No way he drowned in that water. He took the canoe for a reason. I mean, how does he drown and then pull the canoe and paddle onto shore?”

“Jesus, Ritter. You ever spend time in the woods? There are a million different ways Mother Nature can kill a man.”

“Ya, but he made it to the shoreline. His prints were the last ones on the paddle. Even your guys told me they thought he made it across the lake. I’m telling you, either she did something to him or the guy walked away from it all, including his escape plan. Maybe he thought she was on to him and didn’t want to risk going to the storage locker to gather up evidence of his old life? Maybe he felt guilty? My guess: he’ll turn up somewhere in a few years, either as a corpse or whenever he gets bored with wherever the hell he is now.”

“You didn’t see her, Ritter. Sarah Anderson was a mess. No way she planned to kill her husband in the wilderness and then act her way through the trauma.”

“That’s what we all thought at first, but you were in those interviews here in Ottawa, Boychuk. We might not have found evidence she did anything, but my gut tells me she knows more than she’s saying. I just can’t prove it. You’re a good cop, Rob, tell

me there isn't something about this case that doesn't sit right with you."

Boychuk said nothing.

"She's involved some way, Boychuk. Don't let your dick tell you otherwise."

Two days later, Boychuk found himself in Ottawa. The cherry red front door of the Andersons' home stood out against faded brown brick. It was a city house, with a tiny lawn and a café-style table on the front porch. The last time Boychuk saw Sarah Anderson, the air smelled of rotting leaves and summer's end; now, there was new growth on the big elm in front of the house and scraggly tulips in the front garden. Spring was taking hold and promise could be found in that.

Boychuk stood on the small porch, holding a faded blue baseball cap in his hand. Thick wood muffled the sound of his knock, but he knew these houses absorbed thuds and reverberated them through heavy timbers. He surveyed the front street while he waited—an old police habit—so his back was to the door when it opened.

When he turned around, he saw a much different Sarah Anderson from the one he remembered. The Sarah he'd met in Patricia Bay—with stained camping clothes, unwashed hair, and pain etched into her face—was like a leaf in a breeze, barely able to hold herself up. The Sarah in front of him now was as rigid as an elm. She wore jeans, a white T-shirt, and a smile that, while friendly, stopped short of a welcome.

"Hi, Rob. Come on in," she said, stepping back.

The heels of his shoes landed heavily on the wood floors in the foyer, the sound crisp against the quiet space. A portent of doom, he thought, and brushed it away in case it was readable on his face.

"Hi, Sarah. Nice to see you again." The pleantry coated the unpleasant reason for

his visit. Sarah ushered him in with an offer of coffee and fresh banana bread.

“Rob! What brings you all this way?” Izzy Stokes stood up from the living-room couch and extended a hand to him. She, too, was dressed casually, but he could see their personality differences in their clothing choices. Izzy’s jeans were intentionally ripped, and she wore a mustard yellow T-shirt. Her manner was friendlier than Sarah’s, but the measured tones and stealthy glances between the sisters screamed caution.

“Couldn’t resist the pull of banana bread,” he said with an ironic smile.

They stood awkwardly in the living room for a few seconds, a deliberateness in the pause. He saw something familiar in the women’s silence, one he’d used before with witnesses or suspects—hold them for a few moments in an uncomfortable quiet to unsettle their story.

“I didn’t expect to see you here, Ms. Stokes,” Boychuk said. The last he’d heard, Izzy Stokes lived in Toronto, where she ran an art gallery. “Are you up visiting?”

“Oh, please call me Izzy. I’m an Ottawan now, actually. I moved here when Sarah started back to work in January. Bought a small condo down near the stadium. I still have my place in Toronto, so it’s easy to commute when I’m needed there. But I’m closer to Sarah and the kids this way. Makes it easier to help out. Especially on days like today.” The tilt of Izzy’s head and hardening of her voice on the last sentence were a warning to Boychuk.

“I see.”

“It’s pretty much Auntie Izzy’s shuttle and babysitting services,” Izzy said, a return to her friendlier tone. “We offer full service, including regular ice cream stops.” She mocked a bow.

“Well,” said Sarah. “No sense standing around here all day. Have a seat, Rob.”

The sisters left the couch to Boychuk as they each settled into overstuffed leather chairs. After some back-and-forth about the weather and his drive and inquiries about the kids, Sarah held his eyes and said, “So, what does bring you here, Rob?”

Boychuk noticed a defiance in Sarah’s gaze, one he’d glimpsed in previous interactions with her.

“I wanted to update you on the case in person.”

Sarah’s eyebrow quirked up. “I thought Detective Ritter had taken over things,” Sarah said.

“He has, but I’ve been staying involved on the margins. He and I both thought it would be good for me to bring you up to date.”

“This sounds ominous,” Izzy said.

Boychuk wondered whether there was something more in the glances the women kept exchanging. He decided to put them at ease. “I don’t think you’ll be too surprised,” he said. “Officially, there isn’t anything new.”

Their faces were impassive, but Boychuk noted that Izzy watched her sister.

“Detective Ritter’s a young guy. Ambitious and determined,” he continued. “He chased down everything, even those things I would have left by the roadside. He was thorough and meticulous.” He paused to allow his words to settle. The women remained expressionless.

“I know he gave you a rough ride, Sarah. And I can imagine it didn’t feel right or fair

at the time, but please know he brought the same stubbornness to everything he looked into.”

Sarah nodded, slowly.

“My mom used to say there ain’t no point sugarcoating bad medicine,” Boychuk said now in Sarah Anderson’s living room. “Taking into account the documents from the storage locker and everything we learned from the Vancouver PD, the final report will say there is suspicion that Matthew was planning on leaving his current family to return to his previous one. We can’t be sure, but the evidence points to a man looking to run. Ritter’s leads have gone cold. At this point, all they’ve managed to do is rule out where Matthew isn’t, but that hasn’t brought them any closer to knowing where he is . The report will be inconclusive on whether it was an accident, foul play, or whether he walked away of his own free will.”

“What do you think, Rob?” Izzy asked.

Boychuk hesitated. How much to tell them about his own suspicions, the ones not shared by Ritter? In the end, he let one thing guide his decision: If it were him, would he want to know?

“I think Matthew lost his way. Mother Nature can be cruel when we let her. I think she bit hard.”

“Good.” Sarah’s statement salted the earth with its finality.

“What aren’t you telling us, Rob?” Izzy said. Boychuk was discomforted by the woman’s perceptiveness.

“It might be nothing.”



Both women looked at him expectantly. In for a penny, he thought.

“I know Ritter’s already mentioned the car we found,” he said, the words seeping out like air from a pricked balloon. “It was abandoned on an old logging road about two miles through the woods from Nagadon Lake. It seems unrelated. But I can’t shake it. There was no reason for anyone to be on that road. It hasn’t been used in years, and there’s no access point to the lake from there. It’s also on the opposite side from where we found the canoe. My guys only checked it out at first because Ritter insisted that we check every lead.”

The Honda Civic, first pointed out to him by Zach Ellis, had been there for some time, shoved into a small turnout with the battery unhooked and a set of keys tucked under the wheel well in a small magnetic box. It was a beater, the kind found sometimes on rural properties, ungainly sentinels too broken to move on their own and not worth the money to get them towed. The plates were real but stolen and years out of date. No owner could be traced. It was probably nothing, but still, the car’s presence sat like a sliver under Boychuk’s skin.

Ritter had been enthusiastic about the car at first—had even grilled Sarah about it during one of the interviews. He lost interest when it became clear the location was well outside the range of a reasonable walk from where the canoe had been found. There also wasn’t a stitch of evidence linking the car to Matthew Anderson. Fingerprints coated the car—some clean, some smeared beyond recognition—but none from any of the people involved in the case. Ritter didn’t think it was worth requesting DNA testing, so the car and its contents were impounded in police lockup.

“It was suspicious,” Boychuk said, “but there was no evidence it had anything to do with Matthew or anyone who knew him. Do you happen to know anyone who owns, or owned, a red Honda Civic? It was one of the older hatchback models.”

Sarah looked at him, her face expressionless, but her eyes betrayed frustration. “As I

already told Detective Ritter, repeatedly, not that I can think of,” she said.

Boychuk nodded apologetically. “Likely a coincidence, then,” he said. The only trouble was that Boychuk didn’t put much faith in coincidences. He’d seen too much to dismiss them so easily.

On his own time over the last few months, Boychuk had been scouring the edges of Nagadon Lake, bushwhacking to get to the hard-to-reach shores. It was rough terrain, but an experienced orienteer could find their way. There was a small network of well-used animal trails and even a few faint paths from the old logging days carved along the forest floor, echoes of past lives that traveled these woods. In the hours he’d spent up there, Boychuk had identified three or four paths that could have led from the lakeshore to the logging road.

The bigger question was how Matthew had even planned to reach the car. Nagadon Lake was popular for its vistas, including the high cliffs lining the eastern edges of the lake. Trekking through the woods along those edges would have been foolhardy in broad daylight and downright stupid at night. If Matthew Anderson had tried to flee from his family by hiking the ridges of Nagadon Lake, there was no doubt in Boychuk’s mind, the man was dead.

Izzy jumped up to the beckon of a timer alarm in the kitchen. Boychuk’s mind returned from the shores of Nagadon Lake.

“Sorry, banana bread’s ready.” Izzy left the room, the stutter in her steps the only hint at her reaction to the information.

Sarah didn’t move. She stared unflinchingly at Boychuk and said, “You think he’s dead.” Boychuk looked down into his empty mug. He’d done it many times before in his career. Sat in the comfortable spaces of someone’s home and brought grief. He remembered every one of them: the overdose in the toilet at a bar, the drunk teen who

climbed behind the wheel, the girl riding her bike to school who didn't see the car turning. They were among dozens in his time as a police officer, and every one of them stayed with him in some way. And yet he knew he would never hesitate to tell the truth in each one of the homes he destroyed. In the end, the truth was all these families had left.

"I honestly don't know," he said, even though it wasn't in line with the official story in the police file. "The car is an unanswered question, and I don't like unanswered questions. If Matthew was trying to get to it, I can't figure out how. Whether he walked the shore or swam the lake, his chances of surviving would have been slim. Those woods are unforgiving, and there would have been far too many risks for the odds to be with him."

"And the swim would have been even riskier without a proper wet suit," Sarah said, though she was no longer looking at Boychuk.

"It would. Did he have the wet suit with him, do you know?"

Sarah nodded, though she was clearly lost in her own thoughts. "He brought it. He always brought it." Her words were barely above a whisper. So faint, Boychuk couldn't be sure he heard them.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Sarah looked at him, as if released from a dream, or a nightmare. "Oh, nothing. Just thinking."

Boychuk let his silence act as invitation for more. But Sarah only looked at him expectantly, hands on her lap, shoulders back.

When she offered nothing further, Boychuk explained Matthew's file was being

moved to a cold-case unit. Officers would continue to follow any leads that materialized, but for now, the case was at a dead end. “I’m sorry, Sarah. I know it’s hard.”

There was nothing more for him to say. Death had come, and his words meant nothing in the face of it.

Sarah sat straight-backed in the chair. Her gaze turned out the window. Shadowed light undulated across her face as a cloud passed in front of the sun. She pulled in a long breath and let it creep back out. Izzy, who had returned while Boychuk was explaining his theory, leaned against the doorway between the kitchen and living room, a plate of banana bread in her hands.

Sarah’s reaction was not what Boychuk had expected. Though he was glad he didn’t have to deal with a hysterical widow, this new edge made him uneasy. After years with the police force, he recognized the cold, hard blade of retribution when he saw it.

“Can we offer you some banana bread before you go, Rob?” Sarah said, in a voice laced with Martha Stewart–like formality. Izzy disappeared into the kitchen.

“No. Thanks.”

“Well, then, if there’s nothing else.”

Izzy returned with a chunk of the bread wrapped in paper towel. Both women walked Boychuk to the door. Sarah thanked him for his diligence and his kindness, though it sounded like she was reading from a Hallmark card. In response to his suggestion, Izzy assured him she would keep an eye on her sister.

“Rob,” Sarah said as he stepped out the door. “You’re not telling us anything we

didn't already suspect. The kids and I will make it through this."

She touched his arm—a final gesture of acknowledgment and dismissal—before closing the door. He stood like a lost schoolboy on the front porch, the banana bread cooling in his hands.

As his truck veered toward the split at Highway 7, a sharp memory came to Boychuk. He was nine or ten at his grandfather's cabin on a rainy afternoon. His cousin had found them first: a stack of old comic books with Detective Comics emblazoned on the covers in white lettering on a small royal blue box. The top comic showed Batman and Robin—muscles bulging and frowns brooding—fighting off bad guys in off-white armor. In the foreground, sitting aloof, was an amber-skinned Cleopatra, watching with cool detachment. The look on her face was the same look Boychuk saw on Sarah Anderson this afternoon, a calm certainty while chaos reigned in the background.

"Jesus," he said, "you're letting Ritter get to you."

Boychuk's training had always told him to trust the evidence. He was a small-town cop, more used to drunk campers and "stay in school" visits than multilayered murder plots. Maybe the routine of police work and Ritter's contagious suspicions were getting under his skin, filling in the spaces left by unanswered questions. Boychuk shook his head, feeling like a kid for the second time that afternoon. He turned on the radio.

The sun bent low on the horizon as the truck took a left turn onto Highway 60 toward Eganville. A rough calculation told him he'd be home by six, just in time to help set the table for dinner. Myra always made a pot roast on Sunday, the smell luring their three teenage boys from their rooms before hockey practice or girlfriends pulled them out into the world. They were getting older, all of them. It wouldn't be long before the boys would be off, leaving Boychuk with the uneasy question of who he was

without his police uniform, without his dad duties. For now, though, his family waited, as always, a balm for the sadness and death he saw in his job. There was relief in that, and some survivor's guilt.

"This is Pure Country 94 FM with Keith Urban and 'Tonight I Wanna Cry,'" a radio announcer's voice said over a soft piano. Boychuk reached over and turned the volume up, letting the music take over his thoughts. A low piano chord held the rhythm, while a practiced hand danced across the higher keys, teasing out a sad, slow melody joined by a male voice with a country lilt. Boychuk's ear immediately tuned to the sadness of the vocals, of another lost relationship. The notes reverberated through the truck, jostling free a memory.

He thought back to an early interview with Sarah, back in Patricia Bay, when a failed search and rescue had been morphing into some new grief. Holed up in the detachment interview room with cold coffee and a lingering desperation, Boychuk was testing paths, hoping that one would lead to Matthew.

"Remind me again, Sarah. Did Matthew have a wet suit?"

"Yes ... I mean, he has one but didn't bring it. Not this trip."

"Isn't that a bit strange? Most swimmers I know take a wet suit with them for a lake swim, especially in the fall."

"Maybe he forgot it. I really don't know. I know he didn't have it with him."

The story had changed. Sarah had just sat in her living room and told him—her voice shaky and thoughts someplace else—that Matthew had brought the wet suit with him. That he always did. Perhaps it was faulty recollections or the inevitable morph of memories as time crystallized over an event. But it was true: If Matthew Anderson had indeed brought his wet suit with him that weekend, why hadn't they found it with

the rest of his belongings at the campsite?

After Boychuk left, Sarah opened a link to the National Centre for Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains on her computer. The screen blazed with page after page of broken lives and lost hopes. Each missing person reduced to a small photo and brief description, a postage stamp version of a life. Trevor, 6ft, 170 lbs, last seen waiting for a bus in downtown London. T  r  se, age 24, brown hair, green eyes, disappeared after leaving a family dinner in Moose Jaw. And there, on the bottom of the main page: Matthew, born 1979, medium build, last known location the shores of Nagadon Lake . People, each and every one of them, no longer moving through the known world, living instead in an amorphous land of the lost.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

The kids tore toward the beat-up wooden play structure; Bella made a beeline to the swings, while Charlie circled the structure and waved back to Izzy before climbing a ladder to the slide. Izzy smiled at the sight of her niece and nephew—all gangly limbs and excited shouts—lost in play. It was a warm early June day, and the park was busy with parents and kids taking in late-afternoon sunshine before putting the weekend to bed.

Izzy had picked the kids up from playdates, and the stop at the park was a small detour on the way home. She texted Sarah to let her know, reasoning her sister could use a little time to herself after everything Rob Boychuk had just told them. A secret family, a mystery bank account, and now to hear her husband is likely dead. It was a lot to process. The more Matthew's story unwound, the more it seemed like Sarah was trapped in the pages of an airport paperback. What's next, Izzy thought, mob bosses and murder?

"Watch me, Auntie Izzy! Watch me!" Bella called out, before stepping off a platform to hang from monkey bars. Izzy's heart ached for the new world the kids would grow up in; their lives split by the before and after of their father's disappearance.

It had been eight months since the canoe trip. For the first little while, the kids had asked about Matthew daily. Where was Daddy? When was he coming home? Can we go see him? Over time, the questions diluted in a sea of homework, gymnastics classes, and regular routine. Still, they carried a quiet sadness in them; Izzy wondered how deep it went and how it would affect their futures.

"The slide," Bella yelled.



“Me first. Me first,” Charlie shouted.

Well, at least they had each other, Izzy thought ruefully.

Though she would never admit it to Sarah, Izzy hadn’t been completely shocked when the truth about Matthew came out. Certainly, none of it clashed with her impression of her brother-in-law. She had never been able to shake the idea that Matthew was someone other than the man he presented to the world. She could never have imagined the extent of his lies and cowardice, but in some ways, it felt like a missing piece had finally been forced into place.

Izzy made her way to a small bench within sight of the playground, joining a flock of parents hovering along the edges. She smiled at them but kept her distance. She was a stand-in parent at best and not really at home with the talk of good piano teachers and cures for eczema. Sarah seemed to be doing okay now, so Izzy would leave that stuff to her; but no matter what, she was always going to be there for her sister, even if Sarah didn’t know it.

After her first meeting with Matthew on that long-ago winter night, Izzy had kept an eye on him. She’d returned to Toronto and followed up her suspicions with an internet search and discreet inquiries. Matthew Anderson had no social media presence—not even a Facebook or Myspace account—though that was hardly surprising in 2007. His name did appear in a few Google search results, but Izzy had no way of confirming whether the name matched the man she’d met. She even went so far as to call the University of British Columbia to confirm he’d graduated from there, and Matthew Anderson had indeed been a student there. And yet something still didn’t sit right with her about the Matt Anderson she’d met. She never dreamed he was not using his actual name. Over the years, there seemed little basis to her suspicions. But she continued to watch, even though her overt distrust had repeatedly offended Sarah and built a wall between the sisters. In the end, she decided to watch from a distance. Until Sarah had called to tell her Matthew was missing.

Izzy's decision to move to Ottawa in January had been spontaneous, but she didn't regret it. "So, before you argue or protest, you should know, it's done," she had told Sarah just before Christmas. "I take possession next month."

"What are you talking about, Izzy?"

Izzy hadn't shared her plans, knowing Sarah would only try to stop her. "I'm moving to Ottawa."

"Izzy, you can't. You have a life in Toronto. You have the gallery, your career, your friends."

"And I will continue to have all of that. I'm keeping the condo. I may rent it out as a vacation property when I don't need it, but it'll be there for me when I want it. I'll commute to Toronto once or twice a month, make sure the gallery is still standing, attend some lavish fundraising function, hold the hands of a few artists, but you need consistent help, Sarah, and I can't give that to you from Toronto."

"I can't let you do this."

"You're not letting me do anything, baby sister. You're not the boss of me. You don't have any say in this. It's my decision, and it's done."

Sarah's silence was telling. The old Sarah would have tried to talk Izzy out of it, in her quiet but serious way. This newer version of her sister—lost in a stranger-than-fiction drama—had nodded her assent, her expression unreadable.

Izzy leaned against the bench and tilted her face toward the sky, eyes closed. Her muscles relaxed under the warmth of the sun; all that money on massages and spa treatments when all she needed was a sunny day and a west-facing bench. She chuckled at the thought just as a shadow blocked the sun. Izzy opened her eyes to see

a short woman with black curls and a polite smile standing in front of her. Her movements were clipped, like one of the birds darting around the park.

“Excuse me. Your daughter is crying,” the woman said.

Izzy looked beyond her to where Charlie and Bella had been digging in the sand with a now-discarded shovel and bucket. Both were gone.

“What do you mean?” Izzy said.

“Over there.” The woman pointed to the edge of the play area. “I think she got into a fight or something. She started crying and ran toward the trees.”

Izzy stood and marched toward Bella with a mumbled thanks to the stranger. In the last eight months, Izzy had not seen Bella cry. Not when she’d fallen off her bike or when, helplessly overtired, she’d screamed at her mother for not letting her stay up to watch a movie.

“Hey, Bella, what’s up?” Izzy kept a calm exterior and sunk to crossed legs on the grass.

Charlie, the familiar expression of worry on his face, sat at Bella’s other side.

Bella was sobbing—a full-on, staccato-breathed, runny-nosed kind of sob. Speech was clearly beyond her. Izzy had no idea what to do or what to say. She rubbed Bella’s back and whispered to her.

“Shhhh, just breathe. Deep breath in, deep breath out. That’s it. Just breathe.”

Charlie rested a tentative hand on Bella’s ankle.

“Charlie, do you know what happened?”

“She—she—she ... she bumped that boy, over there. On the slide. He was at the bottom, and Bella was super fast. And he didn’t move. So she bumped him. And he fell over.”

Izzy looked around the playground to a blond-headed boy wiping away spent tears with his father kneeling in front of him. The dad caught Izzy’s eye and offered the universal nod that she’d come to understand as all good between parents.

“Look, Bella. It’s fine. He’s fine. That little guy is with his dad. He’s not even crying anymore.”

“I hurt him. Now bad things are going to happen.”

“No, no, he’s fine! Nothing bad is going to happen.”

“I hurt Daddy,” Bella sobbed into her hands. “That’s why he’s gone.”

Izzy sat back on the bench, absorbing what Bella had just told her. Through tears, Bella told Izzy that Matthew had gotten angry with her for sneaking out of the tent. The girl blamed herself for his disappearance. Though Izzy knew it was the truth as Bella saw it, she didn’t know how to slot the information into the broader context. Whatever happened, she knew Matthew would not have left his family in the wilderness because his little girl angered him. There was more to the story. Izzy was puzzling it out when Sarah stepped through the gap in the chain-link fence, a sweater tied loosely around her waist and a small nylon cooler bag over her shoulder. She waved with both hands when she caught sight of Izzy.

“Well, fancy meeting you here,” Sarah said as she sidled up to the bench and surveyed the play structures. She gave a lackluster wave to some of the parents she

knew across the way.

“Mommy, Mommy.” Charlie came running. “We’re building a big sandcastle. Come see.”

“In a minute, baby.” Sarah kneeled to eye level with her son. “I’m going to chat with Auntie Izzy for just a sec, and then I’ll come see. Okay?”

Charlie ran back to his creation, and Sarah spun to face Izzy seated on the bench. “Can I offer you a beverage?” She reached into her bag and pulled out two beers, extending them with a flourish of her arms; beads of sweat rolled along the necks of the bottles.

Izzy took one and downed half the bottle, while Sarah went to look at the sandcastle. How was she going to tell Sarah what Bella had just told her?

Izzy watched her sister, so different from the woman who came out of the forest near Patricia Bay eight months ago. That Sarah was shrunken, unseen weights bending her toward the ground and dulling her movements. This woman, the one who laughed as Charlie dumped a bucket of sand on her toes, moved outside the limits of gravity, her limbs buoyant and graceful. Maybe this was a return to the Sarah of before, but Izzy was no longer familiar with that sister.

Izzy let her mind crawl through the crevices of Bella’s story, wondering whether she could look the other way. The child had woken up in the middle of the night to find Matthew leaving the tent. She went looking for him and found him by the canoe. She ran to him, but he must have been startled in the middle of doing something, because he fell over and got angry with her. What was he doing out there in the middle of the night? According to Bella, he’d hugged her and sent her back to bed. In the morning, he’d been gone.

“Watch, I’ll get arrested for having open liquor,” Sarah said as she flopped onto the bench beside Izzy. The beer bottles between them sweated into the cracked wood. Sarah propped both elbows on the bench back and hummed “Sweet Dreams” by the Eurythmics under her breath.

Izzy looked at her sister. Sarah’s lithe body was relaxed, and a half smile rested on her face as she watched the activity all around them. It was a moment of contentment—a cold beer on a warm day, the sounds of laughter, a gentle breeze. What right did Izzy have to destroy this? To decide on Sarah’s behalf? Ah, but there’s the rub, thought Izzy. She didn’t have the right either way—whether to share what she knew or keep the secret. Either or both were wrong. What could she do? She opened her mouth and let potential poison seep from her lips.

Izzy shared what Bella had told her, along with her speculation that Matthew had been injured in some way, though she didn’t venture an opinion on what might have incapacitated him. It was absurd, she knew, but no more so than a disappearance into thin air. Sarah listened, head back. Afterward, Izzy stared into her empty bottle, swirling it around and then peering in as if answers could be found inside.

“It’s a funny thing,” Sarah finally said. “The wilderness is probably the purest expression of beauty there is in the world. There’s no right, no wrong, no good, no bad. The wild deals in life and death just as easily as we breathe. It’s primal and true. We can walk within it, even fool ourselves into believing we’ve tamed it, but disrespect it and it will swallow us.”

Izzy looked up from the bottle. She’d never heard her sister talk in aphorisms and existential drivel. Sarah’s expression was calm, her tone matter of fact, but her words sounded like the narration of a nature documentary, impartial and above.

“Take the river, for example,” Sarah continued. “Sure, it’s needed. I mean, water’s a necessity for survival, right? It’s used for drinking, for fishing, it’s a transportation

route. The river has everything we need to survive. But wrong her and she can be vicious.” Sarah’s voice was razor sharp on the last sentence.

Izzy shivered and read a previously unseen truth in her sister’s face. It seemed so clear. How had Izzy missed it? Images of Sarah from their childhood flickered through her mind—the high school bully, Sarah’s thirst for fairness. Her steadfast belief that the universe demanded a counterbalance and would respond. Good offset bad; right aligned wrong; the universe made it so.

“Sarah, what happened?” Izzy said in a whisper.

September 2016

The canoe trip was still two weeks away, but Bella and Charlie were buzzing. The night before, they'd gone to the backyard despite the cool September air, flashlights in hand, to hunt for night crawlers on the dew-dampened lawn. Sarah heard their giggles through the open kitchen window. This is enough, isn't it, she thought, listening to the soft murmur of her family, and yearned to believe it.

As hard as she tried to put Grace behind her, the name that had popped up on Matt's phone wormed its way back into Sarah's awareness. When she gave herself time to imagine, Sarah pictured someone younger, thinner, less burdened by the baggage of kids and a nine-year marriage. In those moments, her mind did a passable job at dodging and weaving, like a demented Ms. Pac-Man avoiding the ghosts of infidelity as she barreled through the maze. It was working passably well, until she'd stumbled on an email the day before.

She'd rushed out of work in the usual late tailspin, a half-written email to the theater's top benefactors still on her laptop. The art world was fed by the kindness of patrons, and she had already had the incoming message for several days. She needed to finish her response. Today.

Once home, she thanked her luck that the kids were actually playing quietly in the living room for a change. She put a frozen lasagna in the oven and opened her laptop. The screen remained stubbornly black. Belatedly, Sarah remembered the flashing message that had appeared on her screen just before she powered down at work; a warning that her battery was on life support.



“Shit,” she said under her breath, picturing the charging cable left on her office desk. Sarah sighed, thinking of the consequences of not responding to the email tonight. She toyed with the idea of loading up the kids and heading back to the office to grab the power cord, but that seemed overkill. Matt was at the gym, and his computer lay a few feet away. She’d rarely touched it, but she was sure she could log on to her work email and finish the last few lines.

She stepped into Matt’s study. The room had a permanent chill from old windows and poor insulation. She didn’t bother turning on the lights. It would only take a couple of minutes; light from the windows was enough.

Sarah’s thoughts fell into a free fall as soon as the screen awoke. An email program was open on the computer; she was poised to close it when a name caught her attention. Grace. It sat at the top of a list of emails, black against a white background, and still in bold. The email hadn’t been opened yet. Sarah’s hand shook as she reached for the mouse. Click. A short message sprang onto the screen, like a slap.

Dear Matt,

I understand that you want to see me more often. I’m not sure I’m ready for that. I have a life. I have a happy life and I don’t know whether more of you would make it better.

Please understand, I need time. You owe me that.

Grace

p.s. I’m already saving for my future so the money isn’t necessary, but I appreciate the gesture.

Every word on the page was English, but none of it had any meaning to Sarah.

Questions exploded in her head, too quick for her to grab hold of one. Money. What money? How much had he given this woman? Why is he doing this? Who is she? Where did he meet her? But the final question—dripping with accusation—clawed at the gossamer trust she had weaved into her marriage: What is he up to? Sarah reread the email several times hunting for clues, but it was maddeningly silent.

“Mooom, we’re hungry.” Bella’s voice, a complaint and a demand. “When’s dinner?”

Sarah right-clicked the mouse. Her eyes scrolled her options: Delete, Junk, File. Her finger lifted off the mouse on the only obvious choice to her: Mark as Unread. In her mind, she watched the letters disappear as if consumed by a prism, the contents fractured into incompressible bits of light.

That evening, the email teetered in Sarah’s mind for a few hours until she stopped thinking about it. She said nothing to Matthew. Household discards—Charlie’s lost tooth, the laundry, a half-eaten apple left to dry between the couch cushions—settled over top like archaeological sediment. The email existed in a no-man’s-land of real and unreal, buried beneath the more important droppings of family life.

Grace, however, would not stay buried.

The next morning, Sarah searched for an umbrella before heading out to work while Matt and the kids negotiated breakfast in the kitchen.

“I completely get Sebastian’s parents give him Lucky Charms for breakfast every day, but in this house, it’s peanut butter toast. Now eat up,” Matt said in response to Charlie’s complaints.

“Has anyone seen an umbrella? Any umbrella would do,” Sarah said.

“Have you checked the closet?”

“First place I looked. Dammit!” Sarah accidentally knocked a pile of junk off the hall table, sending Goldfish crackers skittering across the floor. She knelt to pick them up when the memory of the email came into focus, refusing to stay buried as the detritus of life was swept away. For a second, Sarah wondered whether she’d only dreamed about the email. Still crouched on the floor, bright-orange cracker crumbs in one hand, she heard Matt’s voice, and she knew. It would never stay buried.

“Look, Bella, I know you had your heart set on signing up for hockey this year, but we’ll have to see. It’s a really expensive sport. I’m just not sure we can swing it this year. We have to save for your future, you know.” Sarah heard the wink in his voice. “Maybe you can start next year?”

The phrase tore through Sarah’s mind, carving a valley that drew all thoughts toward it.

Save for your future. Whose future did Matt mean? Certainly not Bella’s. Not when he was sending money to a mistress who said she wanted nothing to do with him.

“Your umbrella, madame.” A purple umbrella with pink polka dots appeared in front of her eyes.

Sarah spun to see Matt looking down on her, a triumphant smile on his face. “That’s Bella’s,” she said.

“Yes, well, beggars can’t be choosers, I’m afraid.” Matt chuckled and turned back to the kitchen.

Sarah felt as if the floor had disappeared. The coffee and yogurt in her stomach sprang up, burning her throat. She swallowed and stood, leaning onto the cold plastic of the childish umbrella in her hand. The email’s presence burbled up from the depths of Sarah’s consciousness, like molten rock breaking through the crust.

“You’re going to be late,” Matt said as Sarah stepped out the door without looking behind her.

Though she tried to push thoughts of the email aside at work, it was futile. She felt like she was a Peanuts character walking through a world of grown-ups whose mangled and distorted voices were nonsensical to her ear. Walking home after work, Sarah’s nerves quivered with every step. She barely heard the conversation at dinner and welcomed the distraction of Charlie and Bella’s prattling arguments. The kids talked animatedly about the canoe trip, with Bella leading much of the conversation.

“Now, Charlie,” Bella said in her best imitation of an adult voice, “you’ve never been canoe camping before, so you’ll have to do everything I say. No arguments.” Charlie nodded; his face scrunched in concentration.

Matt winked at Sarah, inviting her to share in his amusement, but all she managed was a sliver of a return smile. His eyebrows raised a silent question that she ignored.

“Right, dessert?” Sarah said to a clamor of “ice cream, ice cream” from the kids. “I have an idea. Why doesn’t Daddy take you to Canadian Tire to get those headlamps you were talking about, while I clean up? And maybe, if you’re good, you can stop at Dairy Queen after?”

“Yaahhh!”

Sarah thought she saw a brief look of annoyance cross Matt’s face, but it vanished before she could be sure. “Ice cream it is?” he said while getting up from the table. “Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll take care of the dishes. You guys go.”

Charlie came to give her a hug. “It’s okay, Mommy. We’ll bring you a slurpy cone.”

Sarah hugged her son, unexpectedly relieved by his kindness.

After hastily cleaning the kitchen, Sarah went straight to Matt's study and flicked on his computer. The screen blazed to life. She input the password and then sat in front of the Windows-blue screen, unsure how to begin. Sarah had a complicated relationship with computers; she appreciated their utility, but their special language stymied her. Through past mistakes, she had learned how to find deleted emails, so she started there. Most of the names on the email chains meant nothing to her, but then, why should they? She knew nothing about Matt's work. A contract IT professional, he worked for several different organizations, sometimes at the same time. The names and subject lines all seemed normal, though she doubted she would notice anything abnormal if she saw it. She bounced around in Matt's electronic life, feeling desperate and foolish.

She was about to abandon the search when the name surfaced in Matt's inbox once again: Grace . She clicked.

Matt: Here is my email address. Grace.

The email had arrived on May 25, almost four months ago. Sarah's body shut down, as if the pixels entered her bloodstream and severed her mind-body connection. She forgot how to draw breath and felt her face burn hot in warning. With effort, she willed her lungs to draw and expand with air. And then again. Until muscles and nerves were able to respond once more.

Sarah glanced at the clock. She guessed she had twenty, maybe twenty-five, minutes before Matt and the kids walked through the door. She rifled further through Matt's emails, looking for Grace's trail. But there were no other traces of her. Even the email she'd seen the day before had vanished. He was hiding his tracks.

Sarah closed any windows she'd opened on the computer and replaced the chair

under the desk. She scrutinized the desk, making sure her presence would not be noticed, and left the study.

She squinted under the sudden bright light in the kitchen. Her mind whirled thoughts around like a blender, grinding away at the image Sarah had of her husband. He was lying to her. Denying their children. Pretending that he was a devoted husband and father while feathering a nest with another woman. Sarah's mind traveled the paths of her next steps, each one seeming worse than the last. Confront Matt? Tear apart her family? Find this woman, this Grace? Tell her to leave her husband alone? Her head thudded with each unpalatable option.

Her feet led her to the basement. The space was cool. Sarah tucked her hands into the sleeves of her sweater. He could have left in May or last month or last week. Questions bounced around her head: Was he having an affair? Was it a threat to the life she had built with Matt? Was it over? Or was there more to come? One by one, each gave way to the most important one: Why was he hurting their family?

A fluorescent bulb flickered above Sarah's head. Light struggled to reach the stone-gray walls of the basement. A familiar anger rumbled through Sarah's body like an aftershock; it ran across her tongue, tasting of apple cider vinegar, and filled her ears as it moved down her throat, tightening her airway, making her feel like she was breathing through a straw. It thumped against her chest, anchoring itself as a sharp nausea in her stomach, before tumbling outward across her limbs.

The tent and sleeping bags were neatly laid out on the cement floor. Other items were scattered around, forming a constellation of camping needs: flashlights, a standing lantern, an old pot set, bug spray. In the center of it all, two large backpacks stood at the ready, their lids open like gaping mouths. She had no idea what brought her down here. A voice in her mind chastised her. What do you think you're doing? What are you looking for down here?

“Stupid. Stupid. Stupid,” Sarah said through gritted teeth.

As if from a distance, Sarah watched herself raise her leg and kick the empty backpack in front of her. A satisfying thump echoed against the stone walls. She raised her leg again. Her hands drew up in front of her chest in fists this time, giving her balance and purchase as her leg swung at the target. Again and again her leg fell onto the bag. Her hamstring screamed. Sweat pooled at the small of her back. Her breath gasped on the edge of a sob.

“Bastard!” Sarah screamed with each blow, until her voice gave out and she fell to her hands and knees. The now misshapen backpack lay on its side. “If you’re going to leave me for her, then just leave.”

As quickly as it had arrived, the fury leaked away, leaving Sarah spent and alone. She pushed herself up on a breath and noticed a flash of red at the lip of the backpack. Matt’s habit had always been to lay all the gear out first and then pack. Sarah looked around and saw everything laid out or still sitting on shelves. She was surprised he had already packed something.

She squatted and tugged on a red neoprene dry bag that had been shoved into the bottom of the pack. Sarah grabbed at it with both hands and pulled. The bag popped out on a sigh of air, tossing Sarah backward. When she sat up, the bag lay in her lap. She unclipped the latch and dumped the contents onto the floor. Matt’s wet suit. The sight of it rekindled Sarah’s slackened anger. The wet suit had been an extravagant purchase years before when Matt had been between contracts and Sarah was on maternity leave. She had been worrying about how they were going to make the mortgage payment when Matt had waltzed in with an expensive triathlon suit that had felt like a slur on their fragile life.

Sarah snatched up a screwdriver from a nearby shelf and brought the head down on the rubberized material of the wet suit. She felt the metal point slip through, leaving a

satisfying slash in the fabric. The tightly woven neoprene closed together as the screwdriver pulled out. Sarah stabbed at the material again, the metal point gliding through like a paddle in smooth waters. She raised her arm again.

Only exhaustion stopped her assault. Matt's wet suit lay prostrate at her feet, emblazoned with dozens of punctures. There was some satisfaction in the sight, enough to settle her anger into the pit of her belly. Sarah kicked the wet suit one last time before leaving the basement, sending it shuddering against the far wall. She stepped on the dry bag as she made her way to the stairs. Back to her family. Her final thoughts as she ascended: He's still here; there's still time to reclaim what's mine. She imagined each step up bringing her closer to her home, her family, and the life she claimed as her own.

"Daddy let me have a big one!" Charlie said as he waltzed through the door. Sarah was sitting on the living-room couch, an unread book on her lap.

"What? He didn't! Don't tell me you ate it all?" Sarah said.

Charlie grinned, the answer in the milky crust ringing his mouth and across the back of his hands.

"Guess you better go hop in the bath then."

"Look what Dad got us!" Bella said. She turned over a plastic bag with the candy-red Canadian Tire logo and spilled the headlamps, a number of chocolate bars, and a box containing a miniature chess set onto the couch. "See look, it's a game. Well, it's lots of games. Daddy says we can play checkers and chess and snakes and ladders and—what was the other one, Daddy? The one you said you'd teach me?"

"Backgammon."



“Ya, backgammon! Daddy’s going to teach me how to play.”

“That’s awesome. Maybe he can teach me too,” Sarah said.

“Okay, but I’m first. Right, Daddy?”

“Right, Bella.” Matt nodded in mock seriousness.

“Up in the bath with you, too, Bella. Go start the water. I’ll be up in a minute.” Sarah said.

“Okaay.” Bella sulked up the stairs, casting annoyed glances at Sarah as she climbed.

Sarah watched her daughter, amazed with the boundless energy that seemed to inhabit both her children. Bone-weary fatigue descended over her as she battled every instinct to decimate her husband with what she’d found on his computer.

“You all right?” Matt asked.

“Just fine,” Sarah said, before disappearing up the stairs to help the kids into the bath.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

Sarah stood at the end of the dock. The lake was ringed by the blushes of reds and yellows typical for late September. Within days, the trees would unleash their full color. Smooth water mirrored the scene. She breathed in the iron tinge of the lake, the dew-wetted earth, and held it in her lungs. This was like a new beginning, she thought. A return to where we began. A clunk against the dock pulled her attention away.

“Come on, Mom. Let’s go!” Bella said.

Sarah looked down. Matt, with the kids already settled on board, had maneuvered the canoe at her feet. “Your chariot, madame,” he said in a faux French accent. She stepped down into the boat and stabilized it before sinking her weight onto the empty bow seat. Multihued backpacks and loose gear were crammed into most available space. The kids perched in the middle of the boat on the spines of packs like eager gargoyles, pint-size paddles at the ready. Sarah held the edge of the dock, felt the sun-warmed wood against her fingers, and pushed off toward a familiar untethering as the boat drifted away from land.

The forecast for the weekend was mixed: chilly nights, some daytime sun, and showers Saturday night to Sunday morning. They had debated canceling, but in the end, momentum won out and they found themselves pushing into the broad shoulders of Nagadon Lake. A chill lingered in the late-morning air. Sarah dragged her hands along the surface, and the water caressed her fingers.

The promise of the lake and the woods obscured the doubts Sarah nursed about her marriage. Since finding out about Grace, she sat on a fulcrum between confronting Matt and feigning ignorance. In the end, the children’s laughter convinced her to stay

quiet. It won't ever be perfect, she thought as her paddle carved a line through the water, but there can be moments of happiness. Maybe that's enough. On the water with her husband—where their story had begun—she could snuff out embers of doubt.

Bella bounced on her makeshift seat as she twisted and pointed at each little ripple or imagined creature. The boat rocked in the wake of her squirming, but Matt kept it stable.

“Watch carefully for any snorffblatts, guys,” Matt said.

“What's a snorffblatt?” Bella asked.

“You've never heard of a snorffblatt?”

“What is it?” The kids said in unison.

“Well, a snorffblatt is the magicalet of magical creatures. You can only find them in these woods. They are pretty tricky to find, so to see one, you need to be sneaky. They like to change all the time. They can be brown or pink or neon green. They can be fuzzy or scaly or even feathered. The two things they can't change, though, are their size and shape. They have long, spindly legs, like Big Bird, and round, squat bodies, like a clementine orange.”

“I wanna find one!” Charlie said.

“A snorffblatt usually finds you,” Matt said, his voice lowered into a conspiracy, “but a friend of mine told me, if you look really hard, you can see the trace of them.”

The kids asked endless questions about the snorffblatt's habits and the likelihood of catching one, and Matt had equally endless replies. The conversation only ended

when Charlie announced he had to pee.

“What? Already, buddy? It’s only been twenty minutes. Can you hold it a bit?”

“Okay,” Charlie said and looked down at his feet.

Five more minutes of Charlie’s jitters vibrating the boat made it clear waiting was not an option.

“Okay, okay,” Matt said, fighting a touch of annoyance as he steered the canoe toward shore. They found an empty campsite, and Matt jumped out of the boat. “Okay, bud, hop out,” he said. Charlie clambered over the gunnels to join his father on shore but hung back as Matt headed up the trail into the woods.

“Come on, Charlie.” Charlie shook his head. “Charlie, the privy is at the back of the campsite. You can’t pee near the water.”

The boy shook his head while his eyes cast suspicion toward the woods. “But—but, what about the snorffblatts?”

Bella barked a laugh. “Don’t be a chicken, Charlie.”

“It’s fine, Charlie,” Matt said, impatience growing.

Charlie shook his head as Bella called out chicken repeatedly. Finally, Sarah broke in. “Charlie, how big do you think the snorffblatts are?”

Charlie stood on his tiptoes with an arm stretched above his head. “Like Big Bird,” he said, consternation burrowed into his brows.

“Oh, honey, no. Snorffblatts are the size of a chipmunk. If anything, you need to be

careful not to step on one.” Charlie’s face relaxed. He took Matt’s hand and headed up the trail, watching his feet with every step as they disappeared into the forest.

Bella stayed with Sarah in the canoe. A light breeze pushed the boat out until the line, securely tied to a tree on shore, twitched them back. There was a strange comfort floating on water that Sarah could never reconcile, feeling weightlessness while knowing the water could crush the life out of you.

Bella talked about school and snorffblatts and whether Sarah thought they could catch a whole fish for dinner. Sarah just listened, throwing out an occasional uh-huh to keep the mellifluousness going.

Charlie came back along the small trail a few minutes later, lighter on his feet and alone. “Where’s Daddy?”

Charlie shrugged.

“What do you mean, Charlie? He can’t have left you. Is he still at the latrine?”

“I don’t know.”

Charlie tried to crawl back into the canoe, but Sarah stopped him. “Wait for Daddy,” she said.

Time passed. The wind tickled the trees. Sarah felt a weight settle into her bones. She took a deep breath and was surprised by the shudder that escaped her lips.

Sarah called Matt, but nothing stirred in response. Her voice echoed off the water. Her chest burbled, making it hard to stay seated in the canoe. Her eye twitched as she stared into the trees, willing them to reveal her husband. Charlie picked up a stick and drew lines through the wet sand.

Bella started to climb out, and Sarah grabbed the gunnels and ordered her to stay put.

“But, I want to draw too,” Bella said in a whine that scratched across Sarah’s nerves.

Sarah stepped a foot out of the canoe into the shallow water at the shoreline. She felt trickles of cold seep into her shoes as an unnamed fear crawled over her skin.

“Bella, watch Charlie. I’m going to—”

“What are you doing, Sarah?” She heard Matt before he emerged from the woods a few feet off the trail. “Don’t tell me you need to pee now too?”

Sarah climbed out on the shore, too embarrassed to admit she had been panicked by his absence. But the look he gave her was enough; he knew she was anxious, and the judgment was equal parts withering and infuriating.

Sarah marched up the trail to the latrine, ignoring Charlie’s reminders not to step on a snorffblatt. Once out of sight, she stopped and listened. The kids’ chatter was replaced by the warble of birdsong and the scurry of animals rustling in the low brush. These faint noises, devoid of urgency or demand, were almost sensual. Sarah imagined them drawing her away—like the siren’s call: away from her children, away from her propped-up marriage.

A staccato burst startled her thoughts. A flock of Canada geese passed overhead in a lopsided V. The birds honked a haphazard rhythm, dipping low before disappearing over the trees. Sarah saw contradictions in the birds—graceful and clumsy, comical and mean. She watched until the sound of them vanished.

Sarah returned to her family and noticed for the first time the red dry bag shoved in the front-end V of the boat, right at Charlie’s knees. If the wet suit was still stuffed inside, had Matt noticed the slits of her fury? She felt an embarrassed flush in her

cheeks but tamped it down.

Matt gave her a questioning look, which she ignored. Her reality may be fragile, but it would not be tainted. Not here. Not now.

“Did you see a snorffblatt, Mom?” Bella asked.

“No, honey, I didn’t. Maybe at our next stop?”

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am*

Matt knelt just outside the tent door, under the shelter of the tarp. The fire had been doused, and he felt the deep pull of sleep. He loved the exhaustion that came with outdoor living, when a camping mat could feel like a feather bed. Sarah slept with her back to him and her head buried in the sleeping bag. Bella and Charlie were at the end, a tangle of arms and legs interwoven with extra blankets. A small flashlight in Matt's hand cast pallid light as he struggled to quietly remove his shoes and jacket.

The slight rat-a-tat of a gentle rain against the tent walls harmonized with the zwip of the pull along the zipper's teeth and the rustle of nylon as he crawled into the tent. It had been a long, busy day, and it was late, but he was always reluctant to let sleep put an end to these precious times. Sarah, the kids, the woods, the lake. This truly was his happy place.

He paused to listen to the comforting sounds of his family, but his thoughts inevitably turned to the one who was missing. Grace. After years of regret and shame, he'd finally manned up and reached out to her. Thanks to social media, she wasn't hard to find. His former wife, Faith, had remarried, but Grace still carried his name. That mattered to him. They'd only exchanged short emails and a few phone calls, but he wanted more when she was ready. He told her he knew what he did was wrong, that there was no excuse. He'd also asked her to keep their contact secret, for now, just until he was able to tell his family about his past and her. He knew it would be difficult and would take time, but he had enough patience and determination for all of them. He relished the idea of introducing Bella and Charlie to Grace. Of sharing everything with Sarah. He didn't want to live with any more secrets. Matt kissed Sarah's head lightly and settled in beside her.

"Daddy?"



“Charlie, what are you doing awake?”

“I forgot Norbert.” His stuffed dragon.

“Where is he, buddy?”

“On the beach.”

From his droopy voice, it was clear Charlie would be asleep in minutes. “Please,” Charlie said.

“Okay, buddy, I’ll grab him. Be right back.” Matt reluctantly crawled out of his cozy bag, grabbed his flashlight, and stepped out of the vestibule and into the night.

The darkness was complete. Matt felt, rather than saw, the nearby lake. Nagadon was stirring tonight. He imagined the lake running into the rivers of the Ottawa Valley before tumbling into the Saint Lawrence. Slowly, shapes came into focus through the darkness: the water’s knifelike edge, the smooth orb of a boulder at the shoreline, the tower of trees behind him. When the contours were enough to move through, Matt took his first step away and toward the end.

The light drizzle held the promise of full rain not far behind. Matt was already shivering by the time he reached the bay. He regretted not slipping his rain jacket back on. He searched the beach with his flashlight: life jackets, tackle box, a sun hat. No stuffed dragon.

The canoe lay turtled by the water on the sand, paddles tucked beneath. Matt picked up the kids’ forgotten life jackets and continued the search. He went to his hands and knees to look under the canoe. There it was. Just out of reach. He stretched his arm, extended his fingers, brushed the plush side. He reached farther, his face touching the sand. Got it. He started to stand. He didn’t hear Bella until she was right beside him.

“Boo!”

“What the hell?” Matt spun around. His left foot landed hard on a baseball-size rock. He tried to recover, twisted his body to the right but overcorrected and lost his balance.

There are moments that are relived, where we wonder what might have happened had one little thing gone differently: if we’d looked down to see the nail before we stepped on it, made sure the bike was locked up before it was stolen. If Matt had only twisted the other way or if Bella had arrived ten seconds later, so much would have been different.

Matt’s tailbone hit the ground hard, tossing his upper body backward. His head thudded against the canoe.

He hadn’t realized he’d blacked out until he heard a voice. “Wake up, silly.”

Matt opened his eyes. All was black. Something was poking at his stomach. That voice.

“Bella?”

Where was he? What happened? Slowly, his surroundings came back to him. He sat up and felt anger over a rising headache. His hands were empty. The flashlight, trained on Bella, rested a few feet away. She knelt next to him with Norbert in her lap.

Matt snapped at her and regretted it instantly. She started to cry. God, his head really hurt. How was he going to get her back to sleep if she started wailing?

“Okay. It’s okay. Don’t cry, Bella. You scared me, that’s all.”

Matt wrapped his arms around his daughter to calm her. He tried to remember what he had been doing. Charlie's stuffy. Where was it? He looked around and saw it in Bella's hand. How did it get there? He couldn't remember.

Bella calmed down. He sent her back to the tent with Charlie's dragon, watched her headlamp bob back up the path until it disappeared in the tent.

Matt grabbed the flashlight and stood. The world spun. He was afraid he would be sick. He leaned over and waited for the nausea to slacken. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into his warm sleeping bag. He was about to follow Bella up the path when his light caught movement on the water.

One of the kid's life jackets was drifting out on a breeze, already about fifty feet out. It must have flown from his hand when he fell. It was moving fast. Should he swim out? Forget about it and hope all would be well tomorrow? A wind gust hit, and the rain started to fall in earnest. His bones seemed to shiver. He knew they couldn't get back in the boat tomorrow morning without life jackets for both kids.

With effort, he tipped the canoe back on its keel. Each movement raised a pounding pulse in his head. He was about to step into the water when he saw it: the dry bag with his wet suit inside stuffed into the little triangle at the tip of the boat. He thought he'd left it at home. Small mercies, he thought as he squeezed into the neoprene.

The boat slipped soundlessly into the water as Nagadon Lake wrapped itself around Matt's calves, creating the illusion of warmth against the frigid air. He climbed in and shoved against the shallow lake bottom with his paddle. He looked back once—only once—but the shore had already been engulfed by darkness; all that remained was the shadow of trees where the onyx black of the forest gave way to a charcoal sky.

Matt maneuvered the canoe out of the bay. It didn't seem like a far paddle, but the wind kept pushing the life jacket just out of his grasp; once he was out of the

sheltered bay, a tailwind caught the boat. It was harder to steer single-handed as the boat tilted sideways and his head throbbed. He fought to keep the canoe on course. Finally, he was within reach of the life jacket. He stretched his arm out. Felt the nylon against his fingertips. Stretched his torso. The boat leaned precariously under his weight. He extended farther.

A wind gust caught the side, sending the canoe farther off balance. It capsized. Matt plunged headfirst into the water.

He noticed the silence first. Complete and engulfing. He struggled to understand what had happened. He knew he was in trouble but couldn't seem to tell his body what to do. Swim, he screamed in his head. Just swim. Finally, his arms and legs thrashed the water. He prayed that they were taking him toward air.

Matt surfaced beside the canoe. While the boat had dumped him, it had remained upright. The relief he felt was quickly replaced with terror. Even if he could crawl back into the canoe, he had no sense of where he was on the lake. No idea how to make his way back to the campsite. Panic and cold seized his aching head and throttled every thought as it materialized.

"Breathe," he said into the night. "In, out. In, out."

He could do this. He understood the technique. Had even practiced it. And he had time.

The wet suit would keep him warm. He just wished his head didn't hurt so much.

Matt positioned himself along the center of the boat. Tipping it slightly, he used his hand to bail out as much of the water as possible. When he'd gotten as much out as he could, he moved a few feet down so one hand rested on the yoke, across the middle of the boat, and the other on the thwart. And then he kicked. He kicked

against the water with everything he had and more. Willing his body to rise just enough so he could drop his shoulder into the boat. His first two attempts nearly swamped the canoe again, but finally on his third try, he felt his shoulder wedge itself against the bottom. He kept kicking, squirming his body until his legs were out of the water and he lay like a frightened pill bug on the bottom of the boat.

He had no idea how long he lay there, his legs drooping over the gunnels, catching his breath. Finally, he inched himself to sitting. The flashlight was gone, likely at the bottom of the lake. Somehow, the paddle had remained on board. He held it against his chest. His eyes adjusted enough to make out the edges of the boat and the water just beyond.

Matt realized two things at once: staying put was not an option, and he had no idea which way to go. The moon was behind thick banks of clouds, the rain obscured even the little he could see, and he was fast approaching a bone-weary cold. He shifted to the middle of the boat, lifted the paddle, and sank it into the water, hoping that the direction he was headed would save him.

He lost sense of time and place. All that mattered was pushing the paddle into the water and pulling against the weight. His head screamed, his muscles moved as if trapped in molasses, his eyes fought to maintain focus against the darkness. Finally, he made out the undulating shape of shoreline. Without any real markers, he was unable to gauge the distance, but he understood enough to point the front toward the promise of land.

He heard the scrape of the boat on sand before he recognized the canoe had reached shore. Matt tried to step out and fell into shallow water. He lay there, exhausted and angry and frightened all at the same time. No longer focused on paddling, he became terribly aware of the cold. The wind whispered around his head in a constant refrain.

He must have blacked out again. When he came to, dawn threatened the skyline,

enough that he could just make out the ridges of the tree line against a slate sky. Fighting the hammering in his head, he stood and took in his surroundings. He was beached on a sandspit from which a well-marked path led into the forest. He knew this place. A foreboding relief washed over him.

He knew where he was, knew how to get back, but felt overwhelmed by the effort it would require.

Ignoring his head and the cold, Matt returned to the canoe. The paddle was nowhere to be found. He searched the boat, the beach; he waded into the water. Nothing. He could have sworn he had used it moments ago. And yet. His memories of the last few hours seemed to be fading as if they were ink on a wet page. He remembered crawling back into the canoe after tipping but couldn't think how he had arrived at this spot.

The campsite wasn't far. Maybe a mile across the lake. An easy swim for him on a good day. This, however, was not a good day. His head ached fiercely, and though his eyes had adjusted somewhat, it was still dark. Matt had always prided himself on being a decisive person. He made it part of his persona, willed himself not to get trapped by small details or the enormity of a challenge. He knew what he had to do.

The water called him now. He stood on the shore and peered into the inky black. The air smelled of wet earth with hints of rusted iron from the lake. The drumbeat of rain on his wet suit drew him forward into the patter.

Matt plunged. The tapping of rain disappeared, replaced by the thrum of pumping blood and warped slashes underwater. His body fell into familiar movements—head tilt, breathe, extend arm, slice back, and kick—propelling him forward. The initial faux warmth of the lake gave way to a seeping chill as tendrils of cold leached away body heat. Matt concentrated on his movements, refusing to let the cold have dominion over his mind. After a few dozen strokes, a silence descended, blocking the

demands of his body and untethering his mind. There was a distance to go yet, he knew, but his body could endure, and there was no choice anymore.

Thoughts of Sarah and the kids drifted to deeper recesses; he locked away the curve of Bella's nose, the tinkle of Charlie's giggle, and the soft gray of Grace's eyes in a safe place so he could endure. Before he pushed them down, he wondered, for just a moment, whether he had kept his secrets too long and whether there would be a price to pay.

June 2017

“Sarah, what happened?” Izzy said.

Beer in hand on a warm spring day in the park, Izzy had just asked the question that Sarah had been dreading for months. It wasn't the question in the absolute that scared Sarah but what it unearthed about the night Matthew disappeared. Sarah didn't blame Izzy, or Bella for that matter. She always knew it was a truth that wouldn't stay buried forever. Secrets, Sarah thought, can be gluttonous beasts. They settle into your core and feed on experiences. Matthew's secrets had gnawed around the edges of two families, marring every perfect day. So many secrets, Sarah knew they would shape the world for Bella and Charlie. And yet, the worst secrets were the ones that couldn't be revealed. Those secrets needed to be swallowed and buried far beneath the light of seeing.

Sarah felt again the smooth plastic of the screwdriver handle in her hand, the hard steel of the tip, and the oddly fluid motion of stabbing the point through the neoprene wet suit. She remembered being startled by the lack of resistance as the cold point of metal slit into the thick rubber. Then, there was the satisfaction in marring the material, the feeling of recompense for the slights and small lies that were mounting to an undefinable wrong.

Aboveground, in the sunshine, there was no small amount of shame with those thoughts. Everyday sounds of the park—the squeals of kids, the chatter of parents, the clipped whistle of a cardinal—filled the space behind them while Sarah told Izzy about the destroyed wet suit and its disappearance. The pieces fit, telling a story but not solving the mystery.



“Why didn’t you tell any of this to the police?” Izzy said.

“I was angry. I didn’t do it on purpose,” Sarah said. “It was just a moment. One of those moments where you slip into another skin. Like you’re somewhere else, watching yourself lose control and come back when the explosion’s over.

“There was nothing to tell. I don’t know if Matthew used the wet suit. It’s not at home and it wasn’t with our camping gear, but I also didn’t see it that weekend. I saw the bag it had been in. Not the wet suit itself. It might have nothing to do with any of this. Maybe Matthew found it ruined and chucked it. Decided not to tell me. And really, why does it matter? It won’t bring him back. He’s gone, Izzy. I have the kids to think about now.”

“Sarah, if he went into the water with a damaged wet suit, it may be a factor.”

Though it required every motherly instinct she had, Sarah held her tongue about Bella having shared the secret with her months before. Matthew falling and pretending to be asleep. It was in the past. It wouldn’t change things. It would only bring Bella into a circus from which Sarah had been trying to protect her. She would be questioned by the police, her memory poked and prodded. In the end, all that would be gained was an unprovable suggestion that Bella had contributed to her father’s disappearance or, worse, if Boychuk was to be believed, his death. No, Sarah had barely survived it herself; she would never subject her daughter to that scrutiny and insinuation.

“It’s just a wet suit, Iz. It couldn’t have saved him.” Sarah repeated the phrase. She’d said it so many times to herself that it had burrowed a crater in her memory, so deep and profound that it started to seem like truth.

“That doesn’t make sense, Sarah. What about Bella’s story?”

“You’re missing the main point, Izzy.” Sarah’s voice dropped into an angry whisper.

“Why in God’s name would Matthew have taken the canoe across the lake, beached it, and then gone into the water? None of it makes sense. We can’t know anything for sure, and I can’t ... I won’t let Bella live with even the suggestion that she may have contributed to her dad’s disappearance. If I tell the police, then there is a chance Bella might see it that way too. That can’t happen, Iz.”

“So, you’d rather they believe he ran away?”

“Well, if he was running away, then he deserved what he got. Don’t you think?”

Izzy didn’t rise to the challenge in Sarah’s question. “You don’t believe he ran,” she said. “Even I know Matthew would never have done that to you and the kids.”

“I don’t know what to believe. The car Boychuk found was enough to keep the police wondering. If it keeps them away from Bella, away from my family, then that’s good enough for me, even if it had nothing to do with Matthew.”

There were layers of understanding that would forever be out of Sarah’s grasp. She thought about each little decision, nuance, and discovery that led inescapably to the night on Nagadon Lake. Each moment clicked into place like LEGO bricks, creating a monstrosity that would cleave her family. She knew there was no denying it, no fighting against it. The details might clarify, but the outcome would forever be the same. The universe had spoken.

Sarah, Matthew, and the kids had arrived at the campsite on Nagadon Lake around midafternoon. The autumn sun still had some strength, so it was warm enough to play in the water after the short morning paddle. The water was colder than Sarah expected, though it was refreshing. After a swim, Matthew took the kids and the fishing rods back to the canoe.

“Mom can cook it! Right, Mom?” Bella said as she climbed into the front of the boat,

her body quivering with excitement.

“Sure,” Sarah said. Secretly, she hoped she wouldn’t have to gut and clean a fish.

Charlie stood on the shore. Bella’s giddiness pulled him along, but the furrow in his brow gave away his reluctance to actually catch a fish. Charlie hardened his lips and shook his head.

“It’s all right, Charlie,” Sarah said before she scooped him up and brought him over to the canoe. She leaned her lips to his ear. “Don’t tell Bella. If it’s too little, it gets put back in the lake. We only eat the big ones who are ready to be eaten.” His body slackened.

Sarah waded a couple of steps into the water and deposited Charlie in the middle of the canoe. A flash of sun-dappled red at the bow caught her eye. The dry bag remained shoved into the front. Sarah replayed the conversation she’d had that morning with Matthew, as they were packing the car. They were standing with the doors open.

“You have the down sleeping bags?” she asked Matthew. “It’s supposed to be chilly at night. May even rain.”

“Got ’em,” Matthew said.

“What about your wet suit? You may want it if you’re going for a long swim?” It was a test. A way to determine whether Matthew had seen the evidence of her wrath.

“Naw, I left it. I don’t think there’ll be time for a long swim. Plus, it’s family time, right?”

Sarah shook loose from the memory. As she looked up from the boat, a spark of

anger flared at the indirect reminder of his betrayal, but as she had done so many times in the last few months, she turned away from it. She buried it along with the business trips and late work nights and Grace. Let it smother beneath the fable of her happy family as Matthew, Bella, and Charlie had waved at her from the canoe.

Matthew's casual dismissal of the wet suit came back to Sarah as her sister grilled her on a pleasant late-spring evening in the park. There was time now for regret. For a pain beyond imagining. But there was a promise to keep. One that Sarah knew she would keep to the end of her days. Not to Matthew. No, her promise was to her beautiful, willful, innocent child who had no idea what she may have unleashed on that cold September weekend. What did the damaged, and now missing, wet suit—the one Matthew said he hadn't even brought—matter against the immensity of her daughter's future.

Sarah had held Bella in her arms nine months ago and heard her little voice relay Matthew's fall on the shore of Nagadon Lake. While she didn't know exactly what had happened to Matthew after that, she could protect her daughter. Sarah felt almost guilty, relishing her daughter's need for her in the midst of their unfolding tragedy.

"It's my fault. I lost Daddy," Bella had said.

Sarah tried to comfort her daughter. She smoothed her hair and echoed platitudes into the night. Told her it wasn't Bella's fault.

"But I scared him, Mommy. And he went away." The words came out on a wail.

Sarah had heard grief, pain, and so much unrelenting guilt in her daughter's voice. She knew, just knew, she couldn't let Bella carry that. So, she lied.

She lied to Bella, she lied to the police, and she lied to Izzy. A lie by omission but a lie nonetheless. She buried the secret beneath a mother's love, beneath Matthew's

secrets, beneath Ritter's suspicion of Sarah. She would carry that secret all the way to the end, until she was no longer part of this earth.

Sarah sat next to Izzy on the park bench and felt recrimination like a blade. There was so much she still wanted to tell Izzy but knew she never would. The secret would lie between them, always keeping them a step apart from each other. And Sarah would live with that. Bella's happiness mattered so much more.

Tears came then, slipping between her closed lids, their salty warmth scalding her cheeks.

Sarah heard birdsong again. The clipped call of a northern cardinal.

"It's okay, Mama," Charlie said as he climbed onto her lap. She opened her eyes to the little furrow on his brow and his deep hazel eyes, so much like Matthew's.

"Thanks, buddy," she said as she wrapped her arms around him. She felt the thump of her heartbeat against her chest. "Do you hear the cardinal?" she asked.

"I see him, Mama! Look!" Charlie pointed to an elm tree on the edge of the playground, where the bright red plumage stood out against green leaves. "Where's the mama bird?" They both scanned the park, looking for the bird's less colorful mate.

"I don't know, baby. Maybe this one's on his own?" Sarah said, her eyes pleading with Izzy.

Izzy reached over and tousled Charlie's hair. The velvety curls under her fingers were like an invitation. She leaned over and kissed his head, which smelled of sunshine and sand and the promise of happiness. She tried to hold Sarah's eye, but her sister looked toward the playground.

“Ready to go?” Izzy said, a question so much bigger than the immediate moment.

Everything she’d learned this afternoon from Boychuk and Bella and Sarah would rattle around in Izzy’s head, she knew. She would question the details, but only to herself. She saw grace in what Sarah had said, what she was trying to do, and more than a little self-preservation. They’d lost so much already. There was nothing to be gained by opening still-fresh wounds just to hunt an unattainable truth. As Sarah had said, it would not change anything. There was no bad guy in this story, no smoking gun. Sometimes the butterfly effect went with you, sometimes against.

Bella came running up, breathless and windblown from the swing. She grabbed Izzy’s hand. Izzy looked around at these people who were part of her life and took in the absence at the center. She met Sarah’s eyes. There was more. A lifetime of secret sharing had trained Izzy to know when her sister had more of the story to tell. But she also saw an entreaty she’d never seen before, a silent request for complicity. Izzy couldn’t—wouldn’t—ever know the whole truth, but she understood her sister’s silent plea to protect Bella and Charlie. She stood and reached out her hand to Sarah.

“I am,” Sarah said, and took her sister’s outstretched hand.

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August 2017

The water was dangerously low. Still sweltering near the end of summer, with no rain in the forecast. Rob Boychuk squatted on the crumbly mud bank of Nagadon Lake, dipping a handkerchief into the milk-coffee-brown water. The sun was still strong, even in the late afternoon. He sat on a nearby boulder and placed the wet cloth on the back of his neck, enjoying the cool trickle down his back. He grabbed a water bottle from his pack and chugged two-thirds before taking a breath.

“Find anything yet?” Ritter had asked Boychuk last month.

The two officers had developed a begrudging camaraderie following the Anderson case.

Boychuk still thought Ritter was too ambitious and full of himself, but he was a solid investigator. Ritter, meanwhile, had told Boychuk he thought the provincial officer was “a country bumpkin with mad intuition.” It was a friendship, of sorts, and they checked in with each other every now and again, even offering opinions on more recent cases.

“Nothing yet. Starting to feel like I’ve created my own wild-goose chase.”

Boychuk had been hiking in and around the trails at Nagadon Lake since the beginning of the summer, using weekends to scout locations. With his oldest boy out of the house and the younger two busy with school and hockey, family demands were few for him. He’d announced his retirement date as well, moving him officially into the lame-duck phase of his career. He had two months before formal retirement, but

the reality was he was no longer needed at the station, or at home for that matter. There was time for an obsession.

He was convinced Matthew Anderson had not left the area. When Ritter had asked, all Boychuk could tell him was that it was a “country bumpkin’s feeling.” He wouldn’t admit to his pending retirement, wouldn’t share the inexplicable desire at his core to close this last case so that he didn’t bookend his career with failures.

“I’m telling you, Anderson’s in the wind,” Ritter had said. “That place has been scrubbed, and now rescrubbed by you. He got out, or she buried him way down deep. We just can’t see how.”

While Boychuk couldn’t deny those possibilities, he knew that it was never that simple in the wild. The laws of nature worked differently; cause and effect could be direct, but small mistakes could have circuitous routes to grave consequences out here. He couldn’t shake the feeling that the water and woods weren’t prepared to relinquish Matthew Anderson just yet.

The trail he followed today was barely a trail, more of an indentation through the forest used by deer and bears to make their way to the water. It might have once been a hiking trail or logging path, but years of disuse had turned it into an impression. Boychuk had only found it thanks to an old map from the late 1950s at the town archives. He’d bushwhacked his way to the lake, though even he was skeptical of finding anything at this point.

It was a surprise, then, to find a small clearing with a half-moon rough-sand beach nestled against the forest. It was small, but Boychuk had spent too much time scouring the Andersons’ campsite last year not to notice the similarities: a rock face to the north and three towering blue spruces holding court over the beach. By his calculations, this half-reclaimed clearing was less than a mile along the shoreline from the last place where Matthew Anderson was seen alive.



Boychuk stood on the beach with his back to the water and tilted his head up to take in the full grandeur of the three spruces that stretched above the tree line.

“What do you think, boys? This the place?”

As if in answer, a breeze shook the trees just enough so that loose debris dropped to the beach. Boychuk lowered his head to avoid getting anything in his eyes, and that’s when he saw it: a sort-of path that squeezed itself between the rock face and the forest. On the Andersons’ campsite, a similar path had led from the half-moon beach up through the trees to the tent site and firepit. Boychuk took a chance.

He was about five hundred feet along the overgrown path when he saw it—a heap of clearly manmade black material. It did not belong to the wilderness. Boychuk approached slowly, careful not to disturb the surrounding area too much. He crouched down and felt the material. Neoprene. He pulled on it. It released easily from the accumulated forest flotsam around it. Boychuk stood with a man-size wet suit in his hand and a whole lot more questions.

It didn’t take him long to locate Matthew Anderson, or at least what remained of him. The body lay in the fetal position common to wilderness tragedies. Victims, no longer able to continue, can sometimes lie down, almost burrowing themselves in the foliage, looking for warmth or comfort. They can nestle themselves in so thoroughly that searchers have been known to walk right over them without noticing.

The body was badly decomposed and would have to be identified through forensic analysis, but Boychuk knew as well as he knew anything: Matthew Anderson had lain down here and died. Though he could hazard only a few guesses, it was unlikely he would ever know how or why Anderson had made his way to this spot or what happened in his final hours. Another lost hiker or murder victim? There would be an investigation, but he doubted it would come to any firm conclusions.

Though the sun beat down relentlessly, Boychuk stood and removed his hat. He stood over Matthew Anderson, closed his eyes, and thought of all the paths taken in life, the choices that invariably lead us forward. What choices had led Matthew to this lonely spot to die less than a mile away from his family? Were they rooted in his distant past and the choice he made all those years ago to leave another family? Were they more immediate and mundane, like a rash decision to take an early-morning paddle? Boychuk thought of Sarah Anderson and her firm resolve to carry on. In the end, that's all anybody can really do. And though the search had taken much of his free time over the last year, Boychuk knew he, too, would carry on.

A line came to him then as if whispered in his ear. Not so surprising given his obsession with Matthew Anderson and his newfound camaraderie with Captain Ahab. He had recently heard it uttered by a character in a movie about the doomed 1840 whaling ship, the Essex , which had been the inspiration for Herman Melville's Moby-Dick .

“The devil loves unspoken secrets. Especially those that fester in a man's soul,” he said, adding his voice to the rustle of leaves and the lap of water on the shore.

September 2016

The cold was incessant now. Though Matthew had tried to hold it at bay earlier, his lagging energy gave it a space to crawl through, and it was taking up residence. His fingers were numb, and he knew color had drained from his face, his lips a telltale shade of eggplant. A mantra played on repeat in his mind: Up, breathe, kick, repeat.

There was nothing to do now but push through, past the cold, past the screaming from his lungs, past the ache in his shoulder. Any other option would be drowning.

I'll warm up once I get into some dry clothes and start moving. It can't be far now.

The predawn horizon had broken to a bloodred sky. Is that it? Hard to see the shoreline. The contours here seem right. There's a break in the tree line over there. That should be the campsite.

His strokes were slow, weighed down by his headache and the demands of cold water.

His rhythm stuttered and jilted, like a rag doll on the waves. He missed a breath; his legs struggled to kick regularly, offering only counterbalance to the pull of his arms. Exhaustion was crumbling the wall he had built in his mind, and thoughts of Sarah and the kids skittered through the openings.

The cold was at his throat now, squeezing against his windpipe. For the first time since he entered the water, Matthew questioned whether this was beyond him.

Damn!

The thought was flung away as his shin slammed against a rock. With a terrifying certainty, he knew he would not have been able to swim any farther. Though no sound came out, a chuckle filled his head at the irony of being afraid to drown.

Matthew dragged his numb legs across the muddy bank. Staggering, he immediately noticed something was terribly wrong. Water streamed out of his wet suit—far more than he'd ever noticed before—and sloshed at his feet. In the first sips of dawn, he dropped to a nearby boulder and understood. Bleach-white skin flared through small slashes in the wet suit.

“What the—” His body shivered; the words were a clenched shudder. His beaten and cold-stunned mind couldn't process what he was seeing.

The sun was coming up finally. He hadn't remembered noticing the sky lighten, only it had. The light remained shadowy under fat gray clouds.

I'm going to freeze if I sit here. God, I'm shivering.

He breathed in scents of pine and wet earth.

You can do this. Just need to get up. Get moving; get in the tent. Warm up.

At some point in his swim, the rain had stopped, though Matthew only noticed the absence when it started again. Rain splattered against his wet suit, the sound ricocheting off his aching head. His body felt none of it. He propelled himself into the surrounding woods. The sun was fully up now, though still beneath thick clouds.

Matthew walked, no longer anchored in time. Minutes, seconds, hours were all the same. How long had he been walking? Shouldn't the tent be here? Where was the

path? It didn't matter. There was an objective, but he couldn't remember what it was.

It'd help if this goddamned rain would stop.

It hadn't let up all morning. His body stopped. A faint echo in his mind told him to keep moving.

"I just need to rest," he said. Get my strength back. Maybe just sit here a bit, against this rock. Get out of the wind. The logic was irrefutable.

I don't understand. I should have reached it by now. It should be right here.

Though he no longer remembered what he was heading toward.

Jesus, it's cold. How long have I been here? I must have drifted off. Need to get moving. I'll just rest a few more minutes.

Finally, there's the sun, it's coming out of the clouds. About time. That should warm me up. I can feel it against my skin.

God, it's hot now. Too hot. Need to get this wet suit off. I'm burning up. Won't make it in this heat.

Matthew saw a shape ringed in shimmering heat come out of the trees. It walked toward him, with an enormous, emaciated body and a grotesque face, yet there was something welcoming and familiar in the shadow's gait. A remembrance stirred in his mind, an Indigenous legend of a creature that hunted in these forests. On the wind, he heard a child's laughter—bright and clear.

"Charlie, is that you? What are you doing here? Where's Mom?" Where'd he go? He must be here.

“Charlie? Where are you, buddy? Come here.”

He’s not here, is he? It was too much. What I tried to do. Too much. It wasn’t supposed to be this cold in September. I’ll just rest. Close my eyes. It’s getting better now. The shivering’s gone. I’ll get going soon. I’ll just rest a bit more—

The last sound he heard, off in the distance, beyond the arc of his fading consciousness, was the distant trill of a cardinal.

August 2017

Nagadon Lake lay in front of Sarah like a stain. The surface of the water was unmoving under a hot midday sun and summer-blue sky. The forest stood, just as it always had, a sentinel to the comings and goings on the lake. A pleasant breeze ruffled the treetops while a chorus of bullfrogs echoed from nearby lily pads. The scene had similar features but was unrecognizable from the image permanently affixed in Sarah's mind. She stood on the dock, exactly as she had almost a year ago, waiting for Matthew.

Sarah had arrived early. The boat carrying Matthew's remains wasn't due to arrive for another hour. She wanted time alone here. To rage? To make peace? To mourn? She really wasn't sure. She only knew that she and the lake needed to confront each other so that she could move on from this place.

When she arrived, it appalled her to see the bay so warm and welcoming. She got out of the car to the trill of sparrows and the faint buzz of a passing insect. It was fucking idyllic, and she hated it. It felt like an insult to Matthew's memory, to the pain her family had endured. How dare the lake and forest look inviting and peaceful? It was a beast that had taken so much from her, putting on a show of false promise to lure others.

She had no idea how long she'd been standing at the end of the dock, squinting into sunshine and cursing the soul of this place. She watched dragonflies flit across the surface and fish dart around the dock posts. Her skin felt the caress of the sun. The smell of warmed wood, water, grass, and dirt reached her. She felt the warmth burn into the heart of her, her muscles tensed against the assault. A scream lodged in her

gut, crafted of secrets and lies and loss. It pushed up, elbowing against bone and muscle, until finally Sarah released it into the summer sunshine. She screamed until her throat burned, until her joints ached, until bile had been expunged from her core and echoed against water and wood, and she fell to her knees in surrender.

As the echo of her scream died, Sarah heard a new sound emerge, one that should not be there. A rat-a-tat, like the fall of rain on leaves. She looked to the clear sky, but the sound continued; it expanded as if a rain cloud had emerged over the forest and moved across the lake, the dock, the hard-packed ground around her. Sarah closed her eyes, unable to reconcile the sounds with the heat she felt on her skin. Still on her knees, she willed the hallucination to quieten. It didn't. She heard the fall of a hard rain, exactly like the one that fell the night they lost Matthew.

The rain intensified, and in the distance, Sarah heard the boom of thunder as she opened her eyes to a calm, flat lake. She covered her eyes with her hands as if in supplication, and that's when she heard it: beneath the crash of water, a voice. Faint and distant, traveling on a nonexistent wind. Neither male nor female, the sound stretched and warped so that she couldn't even be sure if she was hearing words. But then, Sarah thought as a wild laugh escaped her lips, why would she be entitled to speak to her hallucination?

Footsteps on the dock brought a crashing end to the storm cacophony. The relief Sarah felt kept her on her knees, though she knew she should stand and greet what was to come.

Boychuk called her name, softly. He thought he heard her laughing, but she was facing away from him, so the sound was swallowed by the lake. Calling again felt inappropriate. He waited.

Finally, she stood slowly and with care, as if the air was working against her. When she turned toward him, her face was rigid. She waved a hand but remained silent. He



approached, cautiously, unsure of what to expect.

“Rob,” she said as he drew closer. She made the effort to shake his hand. “How are you?”

“Good to see you, Sarah.” There was no reason for her to be here. The Ontario Forensic Pathology Service would recover the body and confirm identity with DNA. Some people, though, wanted to be here. Call it closure or confirmation; Boychuk didn’t really worry about the particulars. It was a need, and he could respect that.

Sarah turned back to face the lake. Boychuk stood beside her. He kept his silence. The sound of the leaves, the birds, the gentle lap of water seemed like a fitting funeral dirge. The lake shimmered as sunlight reflected on imperceptible folds on the surface. Though it didn’t look like it in the stillness, the water was always moving, changing, flowing to someplace else. People were a little bit the same, Boychuk thought, time marching us forward and toward something else, whether we wanted to or not.

“Rob, do you believe that nature has karma?”

“In what way?” He’d heard the word before, but usually chalked it up to city folks reading too many self-help books.

“That the universe has balance. Something good will even out something bad.”

“I don’t know that the universe cares enough about us. Way I see it, we’re nothing more than fleas on the back of a bear when it comes to the universe. Nature don’t care about right or wrong. There’s no cosmic retribution. Good people make mistakes; bad people do good. It’s randomness and chance in my mind. Call it the universe, call it the hand of God, call it dust sprites, it’s all the same. Life does what it does, and there isn’t always a reason.”

“What happened, then?” Sarah said, her voice tentative, as if she were compelled to ask against her will.

Boychuk had wasted a few sleepless nights trying to answer that very question.

“I can spin you a yarn that might make you feel better, but the truth of the matter is, we’ll probably never know for sure. They’ll run an autopsy, but he was out there long enough and exposed.” Boychuk couldn’t bring himself to tell her that animals and insects had gotten to the body, leaving little but bones behind. “I imagine he got turned around; maybe he was hurt somehow, compromised. The autopsy might provide details, but it won’t tell the whole story.”

“Why didn’t they find him? He was so close.” The question was a murmur beneath the emotions Sarah’s voice carried.

“It can happen,” Boychuk said, knowing the explanation was devoid of comfort. “The search centered around the canoe on the other side of the lake. We sent searchers around the campsite, but they didn’t cover as much ground. There wasn’t much reason to think Matthew had left the campsite on foot.”

Sarah forced back a sob.

“What if he’d bumped his head?”

Being a cop meant spending time with people at the worst moments of their lives, when an accident, a mistake, or criminality brought them to their lowest point. Each person reacted differently, driven by thousands of experiences that came before, as unique to them as a fingerprint. Boychuk had shepherded hundreds of people through such moments in his career, and not once had one of them asked a question randomly.

He turned to Sarah then, his eyes asking the question as gently as possible so as not to

spook her by saying it out loud.

Whispers. It was whispers Sarah had heard in her hallucination of rain on a cloudless, sunny day. She understood now, in the face of everything, on the shores of Nagadon Lake. The wilderness would never welcome her back. This was never a safe place. It had grace and beauty and an undeniable energy that could rejuvenate the soul—or save a marriage—but there were no bargains to be struck. The lake hadn't broken its promise to her. There had never been one. The water flowed because it must, and it owed Sarah and her family nothing. The woods were savage, dark, and deep. And they kept their secrets.

Sarah had heard about Boychuk's pending retirement. Some time ago, he'd called to tell her his cases were being transferred to a colleague and that he had been moved to paperwork status. She'd congratulated him, but she detected a rueful acceptance. Sarah looked at him now, at his calm, forgiving eyes. She took a deep breath and began.

"I didn't know," she said after she had told Boychuk about the damaged wet suit, Bella's encounter with Matthew, and Sarah's suspicion—realized too late—that he'd hit his head. She was out of words but knew there was more to tell. One final secret that needed to be released. "Bella woke me when she came back to the tent. I was barely awake; it was like I was in a dream. She shook me, said 'Daddy fell.' I didn't think anything of it at the time. Bella, she's amazing, but she's a lot of work. She needs a lot. Do you know she didn't sleep through the night until she was six years old? Six years of interrupted sleep and plodding to her room half-awake to utter comforting platitudes into a darkened room. Most nights, I just drifted off beside her.

"It really didn't register for me at the time. Tripping, slipping, falling—it's standard practice in the outdoors. And I was so tired. I chalked it up to Bella being Bella, stirring things up, needing attention and stimuli because that's who she is. I ignored her and I fell back to sleep.

“In the morning, it was gone. Even through all the questions and exhaustion and searching, it didn’t come back. It was like it had vanished from my mind along with Matthew. It wasn’t until Bella told me her story, said that Matthew had fallen and pretended to be asleep, that I put it all together. He must have been hurt somehow, maybe even blacked out. But it was too late by then. I was scared. Scared what it would mean that I hadn’t said anything until then. And then, there was the wet suit. Mostly, though, I was worried for Bella. If she’d had any notion that her goofing around had harmed Matthew, she’d be devastated. I had to protect her.”

What Sarah couldn’t possibly describe to the man beside her now—this stranger who shared her family’s loss—was the blistering shame that had dogged her since she sat beside Bella, listening to her little girl’s account of that night. Sarah looked back on the long list of parenting mistakes in her life, all of which faded beneath the colossal failure of dismissing her inquisitive, difficult, and rambunctious child to fatal consequences. She may never know what exactly happened to Matthew or whether she could have indeed saved him, but what she would carry for the rest of her life was the pure, unadulterated knowledge that her dismissal of her child eviscerated any chance that the outcome might have been different.

Boychuk heard the motor seconds before the OPP recovery boat rounded the point. Even from a distance, they could see the body bag lying on a stretcher across the back. Sarah shuddered when it came into view, her voice spent after everything she’d just told him. He glanced at her. She looked smaller somehow, as if releasing the story had removed a part of her.

The Lussier family came to mind then. One loss erasing three lives. He hadn’t been able to do anything for them, had been a rookie, unable to comprehend the vast wounds that life could leave open. He closed his eyes and listened. Tuned his ears to the wind through the leaves and the water. There was no reason here. Only nature. And it would reclaim its lost sons and daughters regardless of what he did with the information in front of him.

He could do nothing for the Lussier family, but he could do something now. He turned his back to the lake. There were no words he could utter that would make any of this better, no actions he could take that would rewind what had happened here, no charges he could lay that would speak to justice. He put a hand on Sarah's shoulder.

“Come on. Let's get you back to your family.”

2021

From the top of a large oak tree, a raven looked down at the two sisters; all three stood silent with their own thoughts as they looked up and down a sunbaked dirt road. The overcast sky suggested rain, but a warm August breeze offered comfort.

The oldest sister wore long sun-bleached hair in a loose ponytail and cutoff shorts. She'd just turned eighteen and was seeing the world through new eyes as she prepared for her first year of university. The younger sister had short dirty-brown hair and a determined look in her eyes as she stared down the beginnings of adolescence. She emulated her older sister's movements, like a spunky shadow.

The eldest turned her gaze to the trees. As if in greeting, a puff of wind shook the branches, shuddering the leaves. The raven cawed out before taking to the sky and leaving the two girls with their goodbyes.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Bella said.

"Yup, it's exactly where Dad said he left it. And Officer Boychuk gave me the exact coordinates from the police records," Grace said.

"Doesn't look like much."

"I don't think it's supposed to."

The sisters had left Ottawa that morning, taking the two-hour drive leisurely, chatting about clothes and boys and unknown futures. Each felt a somberness in the occasion,

but neither could dampen their excitement at being with each other.

They'd missed the old logging road on their first pass and stopped for ice cream in Patricia Bay before doubling back. Bella still had a little crust of white in the corner of her mouth and the taste of vanilla on her tongue.

"There. That must be it," Grace said, pointing to the side of the road where a small indent pushed into the surrounding undergrowth. "It's overgrown, but there's still a half moon of gravel under the grass."

The letter to Grace had arrived, like a ghost, a month after they'd received word about Matthew's death. It happened sometimes on the island. Mail was slow at the best of times, but sometimes a piece would fall behind. There was no digital sorting machine on the part of the island where Grace lived, only the old hands of the postmaster who did the best he could. But sometimes things, like people, got temporarily lost.

Matthew had written a couple of weeks before the camping trip on Nagadon Lake with Sarah and the kids. He felt he owed it to Grace, he wrote, to explain why he'd left her and Faith and why he was a different man now. There wasn't anything in there that they'd not learned through the police investigation, except for the car.

Matthew had traveled away from his first home, his first family, in a beat-up secondhand Honda Civic. Once he arrived in Ontario, he abandoned it on an old logging road in a little patch of paradise . It was a safeguard at first, he'd written, a way to escape again if he ever needed it. But I don't need it anymore. I'm not escaping ever again. You don't deserve the father I was, but I hope to become the father you do.

Grace had shared the letter with the police. It had removed the thorn of the little red Honda from the story but hadn't offered a clue to how Matthew died; it only explained where he'd been. They had thanked her and placed a copy in Matthew's

file. The original was tucked into a keepsake box that lived in Grace's desk drawer along with an eagle feather, her medal for finishing the Westcoast Sook 10K race, and her grandmother's wedding ring.

Not long after Boychuk discovered Matthew's resting place, Sarah reached out to Faith and Grace. The kids, Bella and Charlie, wanted to meet their sister, she'd said. Grace was reluctant at first, but after a short visit to Ottawa to meet them, she fell hopelessly in love with her siblings. And vice versa. Call it kismet or DNA—it didn't matter. She was linked to them, and they to her, by blood, by love, and yes, even by trauma.

She'd finally told Bella, all of thirteen years old, about the car a couple of weeks ago, and together, the sisters decided to visit the spot, even though they knew the Honda had long been towed away. It was the place where Matthew Anderson and Jonathan Evans existed simultaneously; where Bella and Grace could both lay claim to the man who was their father.

The road cut through a thick forest of oaks, maples, and aspens, all reaching for the closest point to the sun. Beneath, in the shady undergrowth, pale-green ferns filled the empty spaces between the trees.

"What do we do now?" Bella said.

"I don't think we need to do anything."

They took a final look around and walked back to the car.

"It is kinda pretty, though, isn't it," Bella said as she opened the car door.

"Ya, it is."

Far overhead, as if touching the clouds, the raven circled.