

The Shade of You

Élissya Lécuyer

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English/Creative Writing) at

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

August 2021

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**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY**  
**School of Graduate Studies**

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By:           Élissya Lécuyer

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Signed by the final Examining Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Chair  
Dr. Stephen Yeager

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Terence Byrnes

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Josip Novakovich

\_\_\_\_\_ Thesis Supervisor  
Mikhail Iossel

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Stephen Yeager or Dr. Jonathan Sachs     Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

August 2021

\_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Pascale Sicotte

Dean of Faculty

## Abstract

The Shade of You

Élissya Lécuyer

*The Shade of You* brings together two strangers when Indigo, a 23-year-old woman, falls upon a journal belonging to someone she only knows as “E.F.”. Passionate about stationery, Indigo first finds herself drawn to this small notebook because of her curiosity for the object itself, filled with this stranger’s handwriting written in a light lavender ink. As Indigo flips through its pages, her admiration for the visual images of words themselves leads to her need to read them. This is when she will witness the grief of an older sibling after the death of Sophie, the journal writer’s 16-year-old sister. With an intertwining storyline comprised of E.F.’s journal entries and Indigo’s present life, the journal becomes a door for Indigo into the realities of trauma and suicide as an older sister herself. Inspired by the works of Ocean Vuong and Ruth Ozeki and their respective take on grief and time, this story and its alternating narratives will bring to the surface a parallel between living and writing trauma, and reading it.

## **Acknowledgments**

To Mikhail, my supervisor, for his invaluable feedback. My writing is undoubtedly better thanks to all the time you've put into reading my story and advising me along the way.

To all my peers in Concordia's English Department, and specifically in my Creative Writing workshops, who have provided a space in which I was comfortable to share my work. You have shown me what a positive and constructive writing environment is and have no doubt been one of the highlights of my Master's experience.

To Hayden. Although you're not here anymore, you have helped bring this story to life.

Finally, to my huge support system – my boyfriend, my friends and my family. You have shown me love and believed in my process, which is all I could hope for. We have been through so much together, and this project is partly an ode to all of you.

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## Chapter 1

Each stroke is perfection. The pen moves slowly, carefully, across the sheet of paper. The flex nib releases a large gush of ink on the down-stroke. It scratches against the paper as the strokes follow each other. Like the sound of calligraphy waves, if there were such a thing. On the upward strokes, a release of pressure, a finer line. The bright red ink's shading is just... Wow. The final result is something I could stare at for hours.

This might be why I'm single.

"You're really addicted to those calligraphy videos," Ezra says as he walks into the kitchen.

"They're so satisfying," I tell him.

"I guess, but you can't say you're not obsessed." He laughs. "If you weren't my sister, I'd judge you." He has that corner smile that always appears when he teases me.

"You know you secretly like them too, so stop lying to yourself and embrace your love of pretty writing."

"Yeah, whatever! Anyway, I have to get to work. I don't want to be late for the third time in the last week." He downs the rest of his glass and puts it in the sink.

"For the third time? Do you want them to fire you?"

"Don't look at me like that. It's chill, my boss doesn't even care because he loves me so much."

I just sigh.

"Later." He gives me a kiss on the cheek, picks up his black backpack off the living room floor and is out the door.

I get up from the dining table and place my yellow mug in the sink next to Ezra's glass. I make my way to my room, the old wood floor of the apartment cracking under my feet. I grab the book on my nightstand, which I put in my beige tote bag. I'm locking the door when I realize I forgot to bring lunch, so I rush back in, get the spaghetti leftovers from the fridge and head out for good. It's a five-minute walk to the 129 stop, and within twenty minutes, I'm walking up to Scriptum.

The old Victorian-style storefront has high windows with teal frames and elongated diamond designs on the top panes, the look remaining true to Montréal's architectural blend of old and new. I enter the store and walk across the black and white hexagonal tiles, and Peter looks up from rearranging the notebooks on the table near the cash.

"Hi, Indie!" He gives me a small smile.

"Hey, Peter, how are you?"

"Good. Francine came by again yesterday and complained that her fountain pen wasn't working. She said that maybe she'll turn to computers if we can't sell her products that work. Turns out she had no more ink in her cartridge." He shakes his head and chuckles. "You'd think she'd know better."

"Yeah, she's a character."

I smile and head to the tiny space we call the staff room. In it are two chairs and a small round table. Against one of the walls are a small fridge and a counter with a microwave, a kettle, and a sink barely big enough to fit a plate. Boxes full of inks, pens, paper, and all the other stationery goods line the other three walls, filling them almost floor-to-ceiling, making up a unique and chaotic wallpaper.

I set my things where there's space on one of the chairs, put my lunch in the fridge, and make my way back to the front of the shop. Peter is busy with a customer, helping the man choose the right colour of paper out of the few dozens that we offer. I go to the cash and realize the stack of paper bags is running low, so I go fetch some in the back of the store. As I fill the pile, the door opens, and I recognize Bernard's cheery voice without looking up.

"Why hello, lovely people," he greets upon entering.

Peter gives him a wave and a nod, his customer still next to him.

"Hello to you, Indigo," Bernard says as he heads toward me.

"Hi, Bernie, how've you been?"

"I'm doing great. So is Jazzy. She wrote back to me, told me how her classmates always ask her to say different words. They love her accent!" He laughs, more to himself.

"How's she liking it in France? She's probably loving the freedom."

"Of course, she's living the dream now! But she told me she misses her old grandpa. I'm trying to convince myself she didn't say that just to make me happy."

Bernard comes every Friday, sometimes only to say hello and see how we're doing. He's a short and sturdy man in his early sixties, with only a tiny hint of a beer-belly. He's retired and has always been a lover of fountain pens, and keeps his hobby alive by writing to his pen-pals across the world. He's everyone's favourite.

"Can we help you with anything specific today, Bernie? We just received the new 2019 limited edition LAMY 2000 if you want to try it out." I raise my eyebrows at him and smile.

"Oh, don't tempt me! I'll end up falling in love. That can't happen with a six-hundred-dollar price tag!"



I laugh because I know the feeling too well.

“Fair enough – I’ve tried not to look at it, least of all touch it.”

Finished with his customer, Peter comes over to where we’re standing.

“Hello, Peter! How are you?”

“Fine, the blue LAMY 2000 came in earlier this week if you want to see it.”

“You know me too well here – it’s getting dangerous! One of my pen-pals from the States wrote to me that she had fifty pens. Can you imagine that? I didn’t want to admit to her that I’m close to two hundred by now.”

Bernard’s cheeks get pink at the number.

I look at Peter now. He always carries at least four pens in the breast pocket of his blouse each day, and sometimes even has one in his pant pockets, just in case. Peter bursts out laughing.

“Oh, my dear Bernard. Have I never told you I have over four hundred?”

“Four hundred?” Bernard wheezes. He turns to me, and all I can do to confirm this is nod.

“Ben ciboire! And I thought I was the one with a problem here. Looks like I’ll need to buy more pens to catch up,” he says, bursting into a chuckle.

“All of a sudden, I feel much better about my collection,” I tell them.

“How many are you at now?” asks Peter.

“Thirty-four, I think.”

“That’s a very reasonable number,” Bernard reassures me.

“I hate to break it to you, Bernie, but no one needs thirty-four fountain pens.”

“Indigo, it’s not a question of need here, but of want. There’s a big difference.” His face is stern until he winks at me.

Bernard stays to chat with us, each of us taking our turn to serve other clients as they come in the shop so as not to leave Bernard alone.

“Your top three pens?” Peter asks Bernard and me.

Neither of us says anything at first.

“Well, I know for sure my LAMY 2000 is in there, along with my Sailor 1911 L,”

Bernard says.

Peter nods in approval, hand to his chin.

“It’s a tough one, but I’d say my trustee Kaweco Brass Sport,” Bernard concludes.

“Mine would probably be my TWSBI Eco, my Pilot Custom 74, and my Kaweco Skyline Sport,” I tell them.

“Huh,” Peter lets out. I can’t tell if he’s impressed or disappointed.

“Is that a good or bad “huh”?”

“A good one for the Pilot Custom 74 and the Kaweco Sport. I’m not sure about the TWSBI.”

“What do you have against TWSBI?” Bernard asks.

“They’re smooth writers, but all the cracking issues and parts breaking have made me reluctant to buy one.”

“Fair enough,” I tell him. “But I’ve never had an issue with my TWSBI pens, and I have a good amount of them, so maybe the quality control is getting better.”

“Perhaps.”

“Anyway, what are your top three?” I ask him.

He doesn’t hesitate.

“My Pelikan m800, my Platinum Century 3776, and my Sailor Pro Gear.”

“All gold nibs? How fancy of you,” Bernard says, one of his grey eyebrows raised and a smile at the corner of his lips.

Peter shrugs.

The three of us continue talking until Peter goes on his lunch break. I handle clients alone, which isn't an issue considering the fact that only one customer interrupts my conversation with Bernard.

“I'm going to take my lunch now,” I tell Peter as he comes back from his break.

“Sounds good!”

“It was nice seeing you. Don't wait two weeks this time before coming in again,” I say to Bernard.

“I happen to have a life, you know,” I hear him answer as I get to the back. I smile and shake my head as I put my spaghetti in the microwave and sit at the table. I attempt to read while eating until I get a drop of sauce on one of the pages of my book.

*Shit, Indie. Why are you such a mess?*

I shake my head at the fact that I can never keep a book in pristine condition. It nags at me for a few minutes as I scroll through my phone, resigned from opening the book again until I finish my lunch. I'm able to get in another five minutes of reading before my half-hour break is over.

We've received a shipment of hardcover journals, so Peter asks me to reorganize the wall that faces the pen counter. The afternoon passes quickly as my focus is set in rearranging the

Rhodia and Leuchtturm1917 notebooks by colour. The end result is an extremely satisfying rainbow of journals.

By 6 o'clock, I'm back home and making fried rice.

As I put a few spoonfuls into a plate, my phone starts buzzing on the counter.

"Salut chérie, how are you?" Mom says as I put the phone to my ear. "We're getting out of yoga."

"Hey, I'm just about to eat dinner," I tell her.

"I wanted to call to let you know we'll be picking you up around 9 am on Friday. Tell your brother so he knows to pack beforehand, please." I can hear the eye roll as she speaks.

"Will do."

"We're going to do groceries now, so we'll talk later. Love you."

"OK, love you too."

I set the plates on the table and walk the few steps to Ezra's room.

"What's up?" He asks as I lean against his door frame.

"Mom said to tell you we need to be ready by 9 am on Friday to go to the cottage."

"9? Seriously?"

"I didn't pick the time," I say as I raise my arms. "I'm just the messenger. Anyway, the food's ready."

"I'm just going to finish watching this ASMR video. I think I'm actually starting to find it relaxing."

"Don't you usually hate hearing people chew?"

“Yeah, but there’s something about being able to decide that I want to hear people chewing, you know? I kind of like it.”

“The fact that you can hear every sound their mouths make when eating is weird and gross.” Ezra sighs and chuckles at my comment.

“Indie, it’s not that serious, it’s just ASMR.”

“It’s true, though. It’s like you’re invading people’s privacy. You’re so up close to them – you’d never do that if you weren’t behind a screen.”

## Chapter 2

I walk to the other end of the 129 bus toward my regular spot. The last row of seats where I sit faces the front of the bus so that, from here, I can see everything that goes on. I'm on the seat furthest to the right, next to the window. I enjoy the view of Mont-Royal as the bus rolls along du Parc Avenue.

“Prochain arrêt, du Parc/des Pins,” I hear the bus' automated system announce.

There's something bright in the small space between the seat furthest to the left and the bus' structure. As I focus in on it, I realize it's a magenta Rhodia notebook. I would have recognized it anywhere; there aren't many places other than Scriptum to find notebooks of this kind in the city. I look around at the other passengers even though I know that no one has sat in my row since I've been on the bus. I find myself moving over to the seat at the other end of the row, taking the notebook and opening it to the first page. There are only two initials: E.F. I quickly flip through the pages and see hues of dark fuchsia, then about halfway through, a light lavender. This colour is what catches my eye – almost blueish, very pretty.

Before I can further inspect it, I hear my stop being called and make my way toward the bus doors, ready for another shift.

I can't explain how, but the journal seems to pulse when I look at it, even when I hold it, as if a vibration were emanating from its closed pages.

*OK, Indie, you may be going crazy.*

I get off the bus, saying ‘merci’ to the driver. I forget about the uneven sidewalk, even after having stepped on it for almost three years now, losing my balance and tripping myself like I have an annoying tendency to do.

As I walk into Scriptum, I spot Gertrude's head through the glass fountain pen counter. She's in a squatting position behind the counter, filling the overstock cabinets underneath.

"Hey, Gertrude." I go to the main desk where the cash is and pull out the folder of ink swabs.

"Hi, sweetie," Gertrude says as she makes her way toward me.

"I just saw an ink I really liked, but I doubt it's a match to any of the inks we have in store."

"Hm, what shade is it?"

"It's a lavender with hints of grey-blue. Really pretty. The shading is nice too."

"It's definitely not an Iroshizuku – they only have bright purples or blues in their collection. You could try Diamine? Oh, I love looking for inks!"

She giggles. I wish I could do the same, but I've only ever been able to laugh loudly, the you-know-you're-laughing-loudly-but-that's-just-how-you-laugh loud. Nothing can ever be mildly funny to me, it seems.

Gertrude has worked at Scriptum for almost ten years. She's only in her early forties, and because of this, everyone teases her about her "old-lady name". Instead of feeling insulted, she embraces these comments, telling us that everyone is just jealous because she's the wisest of us all.

Gertrude and I have no luck in finding what the ink is. With the three lavender-hued inks in store, I had a feeling this would be the case. Who knows how many lavender inks are out there? Then I let out a laugh because I know the best fountain pen source in all of Montréal. I walk to where Peter is likely hiding in the back-store.

“Hey, Peter, as a fountain pen encyclopedia, I need your help.”

“Sure, what for?”

“There’s this ink I really like, but I don’t know what it is. Gertrude and I already looked through the swabs and it’s not an ink we have.”

“Do you have the ink on paper?”

“Hold on,” I say as I go to get it out of my bag and bring the journal to him. “It’s the second ink used,” I tell him.

When he sees it, his brows go up.

“I found it in the bus and you know I just had to take a peek,” I say.

He nods because we both know he would have been just as curious. I open the journal to a random page about halfway through and my hands start to get clammy.

“Hmm, that’s quite a beautiful ink. Too light for me, though. No doubt about it that it’s Vinta Maskara.”

“Are you serious?” I ask him. “That didn’t even take you thirty seconds!”

Peter shrugs.

“So mascara like the makeup?”

“Yes, but with a ‘k’ instead of a ‘c’.”

I take out my phone, then type in Vinta Maskara. I go to images and there it is.

“Wow, you’re good,” I tell Peter.

He laughs.

“Try giving me more of a challenge next time,” he tells me as I bring the journal back to the staff room.



Vinta Maskara. Even the name is pretty.

I return to the front of the shop and head to the fountain pen counter to rearrange the pens that have been moved around when given to clients to try. Things are slower today, and I have the time to get through more than half of the counter without interruption.

I wonder now about the journal, and if I should take a quick look at what's written. It's not really for me to read. Then again, the person wouldn't know if I read it or not.

"Hi, could you please help me?" I hear as I jump.

The girl, maybe around eighteen, is standing in front of me. She's blond, dressed all in black, with eyes the colour of Sailor Manyo Haha ink. Next to her is another girl, probably the same age, brunette and quite tall.

"Sure, what can I do for you?"

"I think I want to get a fountain pen. I'm trying to be more Eco-friendly. And they also look really cool."

"If you're new into the hobby, I would suggest the Kaweco Sport or the LAMY Safari as a starter pen. They're both really great. I still love mine."

I hand the girl two Kaweco Sports in a fine and medium nib. One is a milk-coffee brown, and the other a bright red. I also take out a white LAMY Safari and a black one in different nib sizes.

"The Sport is nice, since it's a good pen on-the-go. It can fit in a pocket and it's really light, so your hand won't get tired after longer use. The only thing is that the ink cartridge's capacity is quite small."

“It’s really cute!” The girl writes ‘bonjour’ all over the white pad I give her, the letters bubbly.

“It makes your writing so nice,” says her friend.

“The LAMY Safari is also a good choice. It can hold a bit more ink and we have a good variety of colours, some of them special editions of this year.”

The girl now moves on to testing the LAMY pens, and she picks out a LAMY Safari in Blue Macaron, one of the new special editions for 2019, with a medium nib.

“I thought the other ones were cuter,” the friend mumbles as I grab a new boxed pen from underneath the counter.

“We have different coloured ink cartridges. I can show you the swabs, so it’ll be easier to choose which one you want,” I explain.

I hand the folder to the girl, indicating which inks come in cartridges. She takes her time to decide, with her friend muttering “mmm... too flashy”, “um... kinda boring”, or “yeah... no”. She begins to tap her long acrylic neon pink nails against the counter. The girl ends up picking LAMY blue, probably the most generic colour to choose. I’m unsure why, but I thought she’d pick something more vibrant, less boring. I take her items to the cash and ring up the total to fifty-five dollars. The girl takes her debit card out as her friend’s eyes go wide.

“Shit, Steph, that much for a pen?”

*She got ink cartridges too. And it all probably costs as much as those nails do.*

I hope I haven’t said that out loud, but they don’t seem to be paying too much attention to me.

The friends leave, and for the rest of the day, I help customers with their questions as they come and go. Close to the end of my workday, Leila arrives.

“Hey!” she says as she takes me into a quick hug. I smell the warm June air still clinging to her hair. “You closing tonight too?”

“No, I actually finish soon.”

Leila is twenty-two and in her second year of university studying psychology. She has dark curly hair and is a few inches shorter than me. Leila’s been working at Scriptum for a little over a year.

“Nice. You have any plans tonight?” she asks.

I think of the journal again, and what could be written inside.

“I’ll probably just spend the night in, do some reading.”

“I don’t know why I asked, honestly. Half the time you’re lost in a book or a pen,” she says as she winks at me.

“I have a very low tolerance for people.”

Leila bursts out laughing. Her teeth are straight and surprisingly white for someone who drinks two coffees a day.

“As much as you say that, everyone you meet loves you, Indie.”

“As they should,” I tell her, trying to keep a straight face.

Leila just snorts and shakes her head. Her curly hair bounces as she goes to help a woman in need of some ink.

It’s a little past four-thirty by the time I walk out of Scriptum. As I wait for the 129, I look inside my tote bag to make sure the journal is still there. It would be sad to lose it.

I hear the rumbling of the bus get closer and take my OPUS card out. Once on the bus, I try not to fall as I make my way toward my preferred spot. As I drop my wallet back into my bag, my hand brushes the Rhodia notebook, and I take it out.

Its cover is a solid magenta colour, the uniformity of it interrupted on the right side by an orange elastic strap to keep the pages in place. The edges are slightly worn and browned. The faux leather cover feels soft yet rugged, a dozen little scratches on its surface. The strap is somewhat loose when pulled away. The journal is light, with probably sixty pages or so, only two-thirds of it seemingly full, and just a bit bigger than my hands. The back cover is thicker than the front, and there's a small folder on the inside, likely for keeping any folded pages. Instead, there's a tissue. It also happens to look used.

*Who keeps a used tissue inside a journal?*

I still refrain from reading. I stare at each lavender letter on a random page, at the way the ink shades from light to dark, an indication toward this person's way of writing. Where the pen was lifted from the page and brought back down again. The scrawl is rather small, only taking up half of each line, with every word tilted toward the right. The ink is lovely, but I knew that already.

The paper is like soft, dry skin. If I close my eyes and pass my hands lightly over the surface, there's only a small hint of something written there, the way a long-forgotten scar is barely felt by the fingertips.

*Indie, why are you so odd?*

Why I'm so fascinated by something most don't pay attention to is a mystery, but then again, that's the way things have always been. Maybe I just really love writing, but maybe it's something else.

2 May

The pen feels heavy in my hand. For a while, I watched the ink slosh around the clear barrel. Fuchsia purple. A pop of colour to go with the white of the fountain pen. It's still almost full from two months ago.

I didn't think I could ramble in writing. Who cares about the pen.

I walked by your room today. The door was open. Lately we've always kept it closed.

I stood in your doorway and saw your unmade bed and ruffled sheets. I wondered how I could have forgotten you're gone. Then thought, fuck, how could I not forget? I've been waking up to you here for 16 years. I'm terrified of forgetting what that feels like.

It's been two months and Dad still hasn't tried to make your bed. Even though he always nagged you about that. Through the crack of my door, I saw him earlier this morning, maybe thinking I couldn't see him. He was standing outside your room. I didn't know what he was staring at. Now I realize nothing. Just the same things we see every day. They lose their meaninglessness. Because they're your things. Were. And I don't know whose they should be now.

What was the last thing you touched? Your sock drawer after getting a pair out? Your small round stud earrings that for some reason you didn't wear that day?

I saw something balled up on the floor. Mustard yellow. Your favourite cardigan. Knitted and soft, with little balls of fabric where the material rubbed against your backpack. I never understood why you loved Mom's old cardigan so much, but you did, even though you told me some friends teased you. Called it old yellow, a shade for 'women', a colour cool girls your age would never wear.

“They’re kind of stupid and superficial anyways,” you’d said. I think you were around fourteen then. “I love it. It’s the colour of egg noodles.”

The cardigan looked as if it knew it wouldn’t be worn again. You hadn’t worn it in the last few weeks. I couldn’t walk in and pick it up. Or change the way you had thrown it on the floor who knows when? I pretend that you’ll be the one to pick it up someday. It must be gathering dust.

I made a mental note of the layout of your room, with your single bed in the corner, the small white night stand on one side and your dresser on the other wall, at the foot of the bed. The door facing the desk, the desk facing the window.

Your room has always had the best lighting. The sun coming into it made the dust particles visible in the air. I remember how you’d stop breathing when you saw those. You didn’t want them to tickle your nose hairs. Even though you probably knew they were everywhere, just not always visible.

Then I looked at your closet. The sliding door was still open. There weren’t that many pieces of clothing hanging in it, since you preferred t-shirts and leggings over fancy blouses and dresses. Even with the small amount of clothes in the closet, the space you’d made between the hangers was still there. Large enough for you to fit.

I jumped as my phone vibrated in my hand. I forgot I was holding it and saw it was a notification from the cousins’ group chat. Mel had tagged me in a message.

*My mom told us about your dad wanting to sell the house. You OK?*

Then Andy.

*Yeah, a big move, but I get it. It’s probably not easy to still live there...*

And Max.

*I can come over tonight and bring some Shrimp chips and Pocky?*

Andy liked Max's message. Olivia's reply came a second later.

*Ooh, yes, I'm totally down for that! I'll bring some bubble tea.*

Alex sent a thumbs up emoji and the one with the affectionate, hugging smiley face.

*Yes please,* I messaged them back.

I closed the door and walked to my room. Dad and I haven't spoken all day. It's just a cardigan, but the image of it hasn't left me since this morning.

The cousins came by after dinner and we hung out in the basement playing Rummikub, like always. We played and there was small-talk. About how Max had gotten an A+ in his hardest university class. How he hadn't expected it. "An A+ after your cousin just died?" He asked.

Why are we expected to fail when we lose someone?

Alex mentioned he had to sit on the other side of the bus on his way to school now. The funeral home was on the bus' route.

Part of me wanted to hug each of them hard, while the other wanted to scream at them to leave me alone.

This is what I have left.

Now I'm alone in the basement. I thought I'd find something here, but you never really hung out here by yourself. I don't either. I looked in the bathroom cabinets, knowing there are only cleaning supplies and toilet paper anyway. Then around the room, but apart from the TV, the sofa, and Dad's workout equipment, the room was empty. I checked between the sofa cushions, but only found breadcrumbs – not clues, but literal crumbs of whatever we'd eaten down here.



## Chapter 3

It takes me a moment. My eyes aren't focused on anything specific.

What did I just read?

I close the journal and place it on the coffee table. The cover pops against the brown of the wood.

What do people do when they find a stranger's journal?

I take the notebook in my hands and stay like this for a while. By now, the places where my fingers touch are warm and slightly humid.

I sigh and set the Rhodia down again, only to realize I'm going to be late for work. I get what I can and am out the door before noticing I'm still wearing my t-shirt I use as a pyjama top. The 129 doesn't arrive at its scheduled time, and I know I have no choice now but to call Peter because I really will be late.

"Indigo, late? Well, that's a first." I can hear the eyebrow raise through the phone.

"I know, it's the first and last time, I promise," I say as I start to break into a sweat.

Where the hell is the bus?

An older woman is sitting in one of the two seats under the bus shelter big enough to fit a handful of people, which is crazy considering the suffocating heatwave Montréal is going through. Sitting in the shelter in this heat is like being in a see-through sauna, but fully clothed. I stand next to the shelter's entrance, where, from here, I can at least feel the sad, sticky breeze.

"On est bien," the lady tells me as she smiles and closes her eyes. She's wearing black pants, a dark shirt, and some flats. It's definitely not nice out.

"Madame, je trouve votre opinion un peu douteuse," I tell her, only half-joking because I truly have a hard time taking her enjoyment of this intense humidity seriously.

She just laughs, and we stay silent until the bus comes to a stop in front of us. The yellow cardigan flashes in my mind as I get on. The heat almost makes the image anything but heartwarming. Then I picture it on a bedroom floor, crumpled.

The stickiness I feel seems to worsen. My hand gripping one of the bus poles is clammy, and I try not to think about where people have put their hands before holding onto the pole.

I need to get off in three stops, so I make my way toward the door even though I was standing only a few steps away.

A man, maybe 30, is talking loudly on the phone.

“Let’s just say I’m happy to finally be out of the closet,” he almost screams.

I see other passengers give him side-eyed looks and the driver glare up at her rear-view mirror.

Closet. The word stands out, and that line pops up in my head.

*Large enough for you to fit.*

What an odd detail.

“I swear, my dad lost his shit when I told him. I said if he really knew me, then this wouldn’t be a surprise. I felt like crying until I was like, who the fuck cares about this guy? He’s always been an unsupportive asshole anyway.” He starts to slap his knee and laugh, but without any noise coming out of his mouth, like a mime. I don’t have time to hear the rest before I get off the bus.

The line still resonates like a question that’s vague yet somehow crucial. Surely it must mean something.

Maybe I’m reading into it too much.

The cool air inside Scriptum greets me as I walk in.

“Peter, I’ve never been so grateful for AC,” I say.

“I think I’m going to stay here as long as I can to avoid going back to my AC-less apartment.”

“I’m so sorry.” I put my hand to my heart and attempt a sad facial expression.

“I appreciate the sympathy.”

Placing my tote bag in the employee room, I spot my pen roll inside, with the tips of the pens facing up toward me. The red TWSBI finial from my Eco flashes, which makes me think back to the first few lines of the journal, about the ink sloshing around. The pen used by the journal writer, E.F., could be a TWSBI. There aren’t many other pens I know that come with a clear barrel. It’s one of the most popular, too.

*It must be a TWSBI*, I think as I go back to the front of the store.

The possibility makes me happy, even though there’s no way to be sure.

A short and stout woman walks in, her forehead damp and the small hairs along her hairline curling due to her sweat. She has big-framed glasses on, which she doesn’t take off. She fans herself with her hand as she breathes heavily.

I nod and smile at her.

“I really need your help,” she says, still catching her breath.

“Sure, what can I help you with?”

“I’m looking for a gift for my brother’s 50<sup>th</sup>. He loves fancy pens and I’ve always wanted to offer him one, but I never know where to look.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. Do you know if there’s a brand he loves?”

“You’ll think this is stupid, but I’ve never paid too much attention to his pens. I only know he’s loved them for years and uses them often at work. Oh, and they’re black. All of them. I want to spice things up and get him something a bit out of the box, but that he’ll still want to use, you know?”

“What’s your budget?” I ask as I examine the pens in the counter.

“I want to spoil him, so no limit, really. I don’t mind paying a few hundred.”

“Wow, that’s great! Can you let me know how I can get my brother to do the same for me later on?”

“Honey, the trick is to keep a close-knit relationship and support each other. I don’t know what I would’ve done without my brother.”

*What if you don’t get the chance to keep a close-knit relationship?*

“Anyway, since he’s been using pens for a few years now, he must be pretty well into the hobby,” I continue, brushing off the thought. “We just recently got this limited edition pen in stock, one that’s among the top gold nibs in the fountain pen world.” I take the blue LAMY 2000 out from under the counter.

I go over the specs of the pen and let her test out another LAMY 2000 with the same nib size. I can tell this is her first time trying out a fountain pen because she hesitates before writing.

“I’m sold,” she says, handing me back the pen. “Now I’ll admit I don’t really get the whole fancy pen hobby thing, because a BIC ballpoint is just fine for me, but it does write nicely.” She brings her sunglasses down on the tip of her nose.

“In all due respect, I’m going to ignore the first part of your comment because it stung my soul.” She and I both laugh at the same time, and I’m surprised by how loud hers sounds compared to mine.

She claps her hands a few times as I ring her up. Before leaving, she turns back.

“I wanted this to be really special and you helped me so much. Have a lovely day!” And she’s gone.

“She seemed nice,” Peter says as he comes up to me.

“She was.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding in.

*8 May*

I just had a dream. I'd been lying on my bed. You'd started to call me from downstairs. You'd been screaming "help me" over and over again. It had started loud and persistent, then had become quieter. It had seemed as though you'd started to cry. I'd been unable to move or speak. Only breathe and stare at my white ceilings. There had been a spiderweb along one of the corners. I'd willed my body to move, but nothing. All of a sudden, I'd heard your footsteps on the stairs. Quick and light. I'd even heard you skip the last one. Like you always had.

Then I jolted awake. I felt the sweat through my clothes.

The staircase is quiet now. I swear I can hear the echoes of your steps, but it's only my heart beating fast.

My mind makes me hear things. Your bed creaking. You knocking the TV remote with your feet. The constant clink of your chopsticks on the bottom of the bowl. You could never not do that. Always so noisy. Dad often teased you about how you were so small, but so loud.

I didn't know I paid attention to stuff like that. Stuff that didn't matter. Now I hear it everywhere. You filled this house with your noise. I can hear it in the quiet.

I even thought I heard your laugh this morning. I rushed down the stairs, almost tripping, but I caught myself just in time. It was just someone on TV. Dad was there too, sitting on the couch. He stared at the screen, holding his breath.

"That sounded just like her," he whispered.

He looked haunted, and I didn't know how to approach him. He probably hears these noises too, because he'll be looking out the kitchen window, and then close his eyes. Shut them tight. Squeeze his thin lips together so I can't see them anymore. Hold his breath. In 10 seconds it's done. At first, I'd pretended not to notice. A few weeks ago, I'd seen how blueish the bags

under his eyes were. I'd asked if he had been sleeping well and if he had still been taking sleeping pills.

"Some nights are just so unbearable that I can't fall asleep unless I take one," he'd said. "I know one day I'll need to be able to fall asleep without them..." He'd paused. "Sometimes, I tell myself I don't need them anymore and I end up sleeping with a pillow over my ears."

"I do too," I'd told him. "It feels like she's still here – Not like a ghost or anything but... I don't know."

Dad had nodded and gone back to washing dishes. Then he'd stopped again.

"Sophie told me a few months ago that she would be my caretaker when I became an old man," Dad had said. Then he had walked to the patio door, fingers dripping of soapy water, and gone outside. He had stood facing the sun, eyes closed. I had watched him from inside the house for a long time.

Then this morning, I noticed how his eyes were ringed red. The bags under them no longer looked like shadows. More like bruises.

"It's too much, this house. I thought when your mom died, we'd still be okay here, your sister and us. And it was great for so many years. Or I thought it was. But now... Sophie's all I think about here. I can't even..." He paused. "I can't even go in her room anymore. We can't... just not live in half of the house."

"I know Dad. But can we just leave like that? Isn't this going too fast?"

"I don't know, but I've made up my mind." He rubbed his hands together aggressively. "The agent said she'll be sending a photographer to take pictures of the house soon. We need to get the house ready."

“Um, OK. I, it’s just, a lot has changed in the last few months—”

“Your sister decided she didn’t want to be here anymore, so I don’t want to be here either. One more change won’t make my life any more miserable at this point.”

He got up from the couch and went upstairs to his room. For a while, I stood in the same spot. The TV volume had been turned off and the curtains closed. All I saw was the pulsing light from the screen against the white walls of the living room. I could hear Dad throughout the day, walking around, then not.

It’s like we don’t know how to act around each other now. We spend our days in our rooms with our doors open, or one in the dining room and the other on the couch. Close enough to know the other’s there, but quiet on both ends. Half the time I hold my breath.

Dad’s in his room sleeping now. I can hear his pattering snores from here. I’m back in the living room, sitting on the couch. It’s not the best place for writing. I should be at my desk, but I haven’t used it in weeks. I dropped my semester. I bet you never would’ve thought you’d hear that from me.

I’m sitting at your spot. I never realized how often you sat here. It’s so worn in I feel like I’m sinking. What would happen if we removed the outer material? Would we see the imprint of your body on the cushion?

There’s something comforting about this spot. It’s so in the middle of it all. You can feel everything going on in the house. Which is not much anymore.

I wish you were here. Sitting next to me. Watching me. Just here. I wish this with every part of my body. Even with my eyelashes.



I'm holding the TWSBI so tightly I'm scared the plastic barrel will crack. That's the pen's only downfall. Plastic means fragile.

Did you get up from this spot and go straight to your room on that last morning?

I had only one class, at 12:30. I'd woken up to the smoke alarm going off. You'd burned your eggs. I'd heard the little screams of frustration you'd made every few seconds, your bare feet clapping on the kitchen tiles. I don't know how your feet never got cold. That's why I always wear slippers. After a minute, the alarm had still been ringing. I'd been annoyed that you'd ruined my chance to sleep in. I'd gotten up in a bad mood. Had come to the kitchen. Seen you waving a dish cloth at the alarm in the dining room. Burst out laughing. Then grabbed a dining chair. Used it as a step-stool to press the button on the alarm. It had stopped. Your cheeks had puffed. Then you'd exhaled.

"Sorry," you'd muttered.

"You should definitely stick to toast," I'd said.

You'd bumped your hip against mine as you'd gone to throw the eggs out.

"Whatever," you'd replied.

I knew you hadn't been mad because you'd been smiling. We never really got mad at each other.

I'd made us an omelette that we ate with leftover white rice and soy sauce. We'd sat in front of the TV and watched *Stranger Things*.

"Wait, shouldn't you be at school?" I'd asked.

"My French exam is only at 1:15."

I'd nodded and gone back to watching TV. After the episode had finished, I'd gotten ready and left a bit after. I don't remember the exact words I'd last said to you. Or the ones you'd said back. All I see is you. Still at your spot on the couch. On your phone. You'd been smiling at the screen. I'd thought everything was fine. So, I'd left.

Now, all I can think about is the stuff you left behind. I don't know what we're going to do with it. None of your XXS clothes fit me. Maybe we'll donate them.

The only ones who've been inside your room are the police. Just to make sure. They took your phone and laptop too, to check your search history and social media accounts. Nothing. No online bullying. No secret teenage heartbreak. No typed note.

Yours looked like any normal room of a 16-year-old girl. It gave nothing away.

I read some things about teen suicide. The sites say girls attempt suicide more than boys, but that boys are more likely to die from suicide attempts.

Why couldn't you have been one of those who attempts but survives?

## Chapter 4

I exhale.

Suicide.

I place the orange page-marker, a string integrated in the journal, to where I left off and flip through the rest of the pages.

Then I go back to the page I was just on. 16. She was 16.

I hear Ezra make his way to the kitchen and I stuff the notebook between my leg and the couch.

“Were you napping?” he asks as he comes into the living room.

“No.”

“Then why are you just lying there?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes it’s nice to do nothing.”

“Right, well, there’s nothing that says “fun” like staring at the ceiling in the half-dark.”

“Mhm,” I say as he walks back to his room, chips in hand.

Ezra is 20 and nowhere near knowing what he’s doing with his life. Neither is my 23-year-old self, for that matter.

The number 16 has never felt so small.

I stare up at the ceiling, my head against the cushion. It’s painted white, so there really isn’t much to look at. The ceiling has a yellowish tint because of the kitchen light. My eyes are hazy and can’t seem to focus on anything else.

I feel the notebook pressing against my thigh. I take it, resting it on my stomach. It’s lighter than a hardcover book, yet I feel like I’m having a hard time breathing.

*I can’t keep reading this.*

Of course a journal is going to be personal.

*What kind of a person would I be if I kept reading?*

I still feel its weight on me. I'm almost scared to touch it again. I know I want to read more, no matter how messed up that may be.

This person will never know. But maybe that's worse – not being able to give consent on who gets to read your grief.

I can't just bring the notebook back to the bus. That wouldn't lead to anything.

Instead of sitting up to make things easier, I extend my arm and bend my back to open the lamp on the side-table. The light, this one whiter, makes my eyes squint for a few seconds.

There must be something online about this type of situation, like “what to do when you find a stranger's journal that happens to be about the suicide of a 16-year-old girl”.

I look at my phone on the coffee table.

*There's no way. Don't be stupid.*

I grab my phone anyway. I start typing, but halfway through the search bar, suggestions for what to type next stop popping up. My thumb is on the “back” button, and I leave it pressed against the screen until the cursor blinks in an empty search bar.

My hand reaches for the journal again. I hold it up in front of me for a few seconds, then open it by grabbing the loose end of the orange page-marker.

Rather than start to read, I focus on the small handwriting. I can't help it. It's quite beautiful – much better than my rushed and messy scrawl. E.F.'s writing is loopy and aesthetically pleasing. Each letter is fully distinguished from the others, yet what I really love is

the way the 'f's are written. Quite similar to the generic, cursive 'f', with loops at both ends, like a vertical ribbon. Perfect.

Then my eyes wander to the beginning of the next entry, "11 May", and the handwriting calls to me like an unknown landscape.

*11 May*

“I’m sorry for last time,” Dad said this morning as he took a sip of his black coffee.

“Dad, it’s –”

“It’s not okay. I shouldn’t lash out on you like that. And it shouldn’t take me days to apologize, but it did.” He sighed, then scratched his head. Did he have more grey hair? “I’ve been pretty shitty lately, haven’t I?”

At first I didn’t say anything, because no parent ever says that kind of thing to their kid. But there’s no point in holding things back.

“I mean, yeah. But so have I. It’s hard not to act shitty when life is shitty.”

“Life is definitely shitty right now,” he answered. I saw him look at something, and his chair scraped the tiles as he said he was going to go shower. Only when he left the kitchen did I realize what he’d been looking at.

Your cleats are still on the mat in front of the patio doors. I’m not sure since when they’ve been there.

I’d been watching TV when I’d heard you and Dad talking in the dining room. I’d let you guys talk alone at first. If he was giving you a serious talk, I didn’t want him to turn on me. But I’d gotten curious, so I’d made my way to you. As I’d gotten closer, Dad had been talking about “sending the ball wide” and “opening up in front of the net”, energetically drawing arrows and squiggly lines across his mini whiteboard. He’d been in full assistant-coach mode.

You’d been looking at the board and said: “OK, but what if the mid is unable to cross it to me?”

“Well, if the mid is on your side, you go support her. If not, you put yourself in front of that net. If someone sends you the ball, you –”

“Put your body in front of it, I know,” you’d finished.

“Right. I don’t care if you use your foot or your butt to score, but you do what you can to be on the receiving end of that pass,” Dad had said.

“You should try to elbow it in,” I’d told you.

“Stop that, you know we’re trying to have a very serious discussion here,” Dad had said, poking my arm.

“Do you really need to be so intense?” I’d asked you both. You’d looked at each other. Then you’d shaken your head.

“Dad, it’s no use talking to people who don’t understand the art of soccer,” you’d said, giving me a look of pity.

“I’m being serious! Why are you guys so stressed? Let’s watch a movie or something.”

“We need to go over the game plan because we’re playing against TMR next,” – Dad had started as you’d scoffed – “and we really need to beat them if we want to end up first place in the division.”

You’d nodded for what seemed like over five times and had turned to me.

“You don’t get it, we, like, *really* have to win.”

I’d laughed and rolled my eyes. “Fine, you guys have fun,” I’d said, walking back toward the living room.

“You can still pick out a movie. We’ll be there soon,” Dad had told me as you’d gotten back to your game plan. “You’re the team’s top scorer, so I have no doubt you’ll be able to score on TMR next game. Just pull out a shot no one expects...”

I still remember that game you guys had been planning for. It had been tied at 1-1 until, a few minutes before the end, you had taken a shot from higher up the field. The goalie had come out too far from her box. You'd taken a chance, your shot not lightning fast, but aimed perfectly so that she hadn't had a chance of stopping it. Amel had jumped on you, and Dad had kept jumping next to the team bench, arms in the air. After the game, we'd gone to get soft-serve. Dad had taken a medium chocolate and vanilla swirl dipped in dark chocolate, as always. Halfway through, he'd ended up with melted chocolate on his chin.

"I'm really proud of you, Soph. You played awesome today," he'd said before going back to his ice cream.

"Thanks Dad," you'd answered as you ate your plain vanilla soft-serve.

"You really killed it," I'd told you, and you'd smiled at me.

Dad had been looking at us, the chocolate still on his chin, and he'd smiled as he'd started to say: "You girls make me so happy, I hope you know that, and I know it hasn't been easy without a mom..." He'd looked like he'd been about to cry when he spoke again.

"I love you both a lot."

"We love you too Dad, but we can't take you seriously with chocolate all over your face," you'd said. We'd both started to laugh as I'd taken my napkin to wipe his chin.

During dinner at some point in December, Dad had noticed your cleats at the same spot they're still in now. He'd asked if he would need to buy you a new pair for next summer. You'd said they still fit. Then that you hadn't known if you'd want to play next season. Dad had put his forkful of pasta down.

"What do you mean? You don't love soccer anymore?" he'd asked.



“I still do, but...” Then you’d shrugged.

“OK, is there a reason? Did something happen with one of the girls?” he’d pressed on.

“No, I love the team... Maybe I will play. I don’t really know what I’m saying.” You’d continued to eat.

“I don’t want to force you to play, Soph. If you want to stop, that’s fine. I just thought you loved soccer,” he’d told you. He still hadn’t picked his fork up.

“Do you want to play something else?” I’d asked.

“No... I mean, sumo wrestling would be cool, but that’s it.”

I’d told you that you were a goof. The rest of the night had been like any other. You’d never mentioned quitting soccer again, and I’d forgotten about it.

Websites online say one of the signs that someone is feeling suicidal is that they’ll lose interest in things they love. I don’t know what would’ve happened if I’d have known that at the time. If it would have even crossed my mind that you could have been thinking about suicide.

I can see black scuff marks along your shoes, whether from soccer balls or other players’ cleats, I’m not sure.

They do look pretty worn down.

## Chapter 5

The more I read, the less I want to stop.

I've only read three entries and my hands have been sweating, which has caused some of the ink on the corners of the pages to smudge.

I picture the soccer cleats in my head and I get the sudden urge to cry.

The closest I've gotten to losing someone is my however many "best friends forever" I had in school growing up, which is really no comparison at all.

Because of this, I'd always been curious. Of how your body reacts to the news. Or if you start seeing the person's ghost.

I don't know what this says about me, but I've often wondered what would happen if I lost someone close. How other people would treat me after.

And then feel like an idiot for focusing that kind of tragedy on myself. Why do I do that?

Ignorant. That's what I was. I snort.

*You're still ignorant, Indie.*

In high school, a student two years younger than me had committed suicide. He'd actually died from his wounds in the hospital. I hadn't known him, not even remembered seeing him in the halls, but I had friends who'd been close to him. I didn't understand any of it, and yet I remember feeling sad. Intrigued. Almost like I wanted to be a part of this communal grief.

I checked his Facebook profile, where people had written posts dedicated to him. Things like "I didn't really know him, but he was a good kid and part of our family". I still remember his name, Thomas Lavigne. I'm unsure why his name sticks, but it does.

What went through Sophie's mind before she committed suicide?

They seemed like a nice family. Something in my chest jumps at the thought of them losing yet another member.

I look at the initials on the first page, E.F. Long enough so that my eyes drift in and out of focus.

*Who are you, E.F.? Elsa? Élodie? Erica?*

Maybe it's for the better, not being able to put a face to this writer. Not having to look her in the eyes, or pat her shoulder in a time too short for her to feel the clammy heat of my hand. Just keep reading her words, safely at home in my own space.

I brush over the writing again with my fingertips. Maybe strangers can tell what we've been through by our writing.

Perhaps beautiful handwriting belongs to those who've lost.

15 May

I'm not sure how much time I've spent sitting on the upstairs bathroom floor.

From here, I see Dad's bottle of sleeping pills, the ones the doctor had prescribed him the night we were at the hospital. I feel weird in my stomach when I remember how our family had crumbled. Staring at the hallway floor. All squeezed against the wall. Trying not to be in any nurse or paramedic's way. Dad had been in a bereavement care room with a nurse and the tatis. I'd hesitated before going into the room. Before seeing him like that. Olivia had been the first cousin to come to me. She'd taken my hand, and we'd walked in together. The nurse had come into the room just as we'd entered. Dad had been sitting on a small grey couch, tati Phethmany and tati Khamla by his side. He'd sat, so rigid, his hands in fists, staring at something straight ahead of him. He'd been crying for hours, but tears had no longer been coming out. He'd still been sobbing, murmuring "Pourquoi?" and "Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait?". The same questions of 'why' and 'what did I do' had spun through my head. Olivia and I had been standing in the corner, our hands gripped together. Maeh thu had been sitting on the other couch, then had gone over to Dad, where tati Khamla had given her her spot. "C'est pas ta faute, loukh". Her calling him *loukh*, child, had made me cry harder. She'd taken his hand, unclenching it, and had begun to massage it. Tears had streamed down her cheeks.

The nurse had broken her silence, telling us that we could see you before the inspectors took you to the morgue. She'd warned that you wouldn't look like you used to. She'd had a soft voice as she'd said your face was a different colour, and that it could be triggering for us.

No one had gone. We'd wanted to see *you* you, not the Sophie that was left.

The only one who had seen *that* you was Dad when he'd found you earlier that day. He'd gone to work early that morning. Before leaving, he'd gone to give you a kiss. You'd been at the

dining room table, and you'd seemed to be studying. He hadn't felt like anything had been off, but he can't remember since then what exactly you'd been busy with. He'd told you he loved you, and you'd said it back.

Dad told me that he's glad those were the last things you'd said to each other.

You'd told him you loved him, and he'd found you dead in your room later that day.

Dad had only given the full story once since it happened, to the police officers, who had then told tati Khamla, who had told us. Once he'd realized you hadn't been breathing, he'd called 911 and the operator had given him instructions on how to do CPR. Dad had only stopped once the paramedics had arrived.

When I grabbed Dad's bottle of pills earlier, I noticed how it's now only a third full. I set it back on the shelf. Stared at the small mess of hair elastics, skin care products and other random stuff gathering on the counter. With three people, having a bathroom counter with two sinks always felt a bit extra, but now it feels stupid. Next to the sink we barely use, there's a small, dark purple ink stain, probably from the last time I'd inked my fountain pen. When I'd shown you how to do it because you'd been curious. A small drop you'd made that we had forgotten to clean. I don't know if Dad has seen it since, but it's still here. All I'd need is a bit of water and a piece of toilet paper to remove it. Instead, I've stared at it each time I've brushed my teeth. A reminder of the day you'd finally asked me how to ink a pen.

“You have to twist the knob counter-clockwise to move the piston up into the barrel, then dip the nib in the ink, and twist the knob clockwise for the ink to be sucked into the pen,” I'd shown you.

“OK, got it,” you’d said. You’d taken the TWSBI out of my hand and filled it in one try.  
“That was easier than I thought.”

I’d been impressed and kind of proud.

“You think you’ll ever want to try one out?” I’d asked you.

“Maybe, I don’t know.”

“I could buy you your first pen.” I’d hoped I sounded tempting.

“It looks so fancy. I don’t know if people at school would look at me weird.”

“Who cares about them? You’d just look badass in my opinion,” I’d told you.

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t know if I’d have time to use it.”

“Why wouldn’t you? You don’t have to bring it to school. You could use it at home.”

“That’s true...”

I thought I’d been on the verge of convincing you. I don’t understand now why you’d think people would find you weird, or why you’d say you might not have had the time. That was, what, three months ago? And a month before we lost you. Had you already made up your mind by then?

I’m trying to remember what you looked like that day, if you were happy, if you looked me in the eye. All I can remember is you were there.

Now, on the bathroom floor, I see dust gathering at the corners. I only have pyjama shorts and a t-shirt on and the tiles are making me shiver. I think of the funeral home bathroom and the goosebumps along my arms. I’d kept expecting something to jump out at me. There had been boxes of tissues on the counter next to the sinks, and I’d taken a few. There had also been a chair and a small table squeezed in the dimly-lit corner. The lights on top of the stalls had hit at weird

angles, some bulbs burnt out. I'd felt like one of the stall doors might have creaked open at any moment. If any place were to be haunted, a funeral-home bathroom would be a good one. But nothing had happened. The bathroom had stayed quiet and still. My heart had been beating fast at the thought of seeing your body. I had been scared of throwing up. This nervousness, it was new.

Olivia, Mel and I had walked to the reception, with Max, Andy, and Alex sprinting to reach us. From oldest to youngest cousin. We hadn't planned it, but it had struck me.

Tati Khamla had given me two incense sticks. Alex had held my elbow as we both cried and walked toward the table where a picture of you surrounded by food offerings and incense had been. We'd placed the incense, gotten on our knees, and bowed three times. Then we'd each taken a white flower and walked to your casket. This was where we had to express our last wishes for you. I'd wished you rest from whatever had made you leave, and hoped that whatever or wherever you were, you were okay.

Then I'd put a flower on your chest. Just with my fingertips. I'd been terrified of touching you. Of feeling your cold, waxy skin. It had looked a bit purple, even with makeup. I could've sworn seeing your chest rising and falling. I think it was only my tears making your chest move. I'd looked down at your body, at your face. It had felt as if your eyes would open any second. Your child-sized hands had been linked together, resting on your chest. They'd put makeup on those too. I'd seen traces of it on your nails. The powdery finish had stuck to your cuticles. You'd looked like a doll. I'd stared at your mouth and thought of your voice.

During most of the ceremony, Dad had sat in the first row, with the tatis at his sides. As your friends from school had arrived with their parents, they'd all walked up to offer us their condolences. Your entire class had shown up. They'd worn all-black, but some only had jeans

and a t-shirt. I don't remember what black clothes I could've worn to a funeral when I'd been 16. During the service, they'd gone to the front for a speech. Amel had spotted me as she walked and had given me a small smile. She'd been fidgeting with her hands. At the podium, she'd brought the mic down. I'd always found it funny that you had a best friend as short as you, barely over the five-foot mark.

She'd told one of my favourite stories, the one from when you'd both been in grade three, and you'd seen her fall on her knee. It had been bleeding, and you'd taken the band-aid from your arm, handed it to Amel, and told her your cut was almost healed. At first, I'd found this story gross – I mean, who would want to use a kid's used band-aid? But it was sweet.

You'd seen Amel's bloody knee and realized she'd been in pain, and you'd offered your band-aid even if your bruise hadn't completely healed yet.

Amel had told us how everyone would miss your unconscious humming in class, and her voice had become wavering as she finished her speech by saying you'd been one of the best people she'd known.

After that, some monks had chanted songs I didn't understand. We had knelt for an hour as they did. My legs had felt full of ants. At the end of the ceremony, each person had rested a flower on you again. I'd held one of Dad's arms while tati Phethmany had held the other. Dad's movements had been stiff. Your chest had been covered in flowers once everyone had gone up to you. The only other funeral I'd been to was Mom's. Obviously I don't remember it. I'm not sure I was really there all that much either. A funeral isn't a place for a four-year-old. I had no idea they just closed the casket's lid on you. With everyone watching. My throat had made an unnatural choking sound. The cousins and I had walked to you and huddled around your casket.



Tried to say something that made sense. Even our faces had been a mess, lips wobbly, eyes glossy and squinting from the tears.

When I'd left the hall, I'd looked back. Your casket had still been closed.

Tati Khamla had told me at least ten times not to bring anything back from the service. Apparently it's bad luck in Lao tradition. I'd wondered what could be worse than losing your baby sister like this.

Everyone came back to our house after. Bowls of blessed water full of flowers had been placed at the front door. We'd washed our hands before going inside.

I'd found the still-humid tissue from the bathroom that I'd stuffed in my pocket during the ceremony.

## Chapter 6

I flip to the back cover of the notebook, to the small integrated folder, lifting its flap. I'm only holding onto it with two nails, my skin not touching the flap. I don't reach for the tissue. It looks stiff, yet like there's still some softness left to it. There are wrinkles all over it.

If I were to drop the tissue on the floor, it would keep its shape. It's probably been in this journal for more than a month, folded up and tucked away like this in a place no one tends to check.

I close the notebook again, with the orange elastic string secured across the cover. I walk to my room because it's late and I haven't packed for the cottage yet. I try not to make any noise so as not to wake Ezra.

The task is robotic, and my eyes become blurred and unfocused. I don't try to focus them. I only settle into bed, in the darkness, and think of the tissue.

## Chapter 7

I jostle awake at the sound of my alarm. I don't know why I always pick the most aggressive alarm, but I do, and I scare myself out of bed every morning.

It's 8:35 and I only set my alarm early enough to wash my face, brush my teeth, and make sure Ezra has at least *started* to pack.

"Ez, wake up if you're not awake yet," I semi-yell.

I only hear muffled mumbling as an answer.

Even though my stomach is growling, I know I don't have time to eat.

"Did you pack your bags yet?" I ask Ezra as I pass by his room again.

"Actually," he begins as he opens his door, "while you were busy staring at the ceiling last night, I packed all my stuff." He brings his bag out to the living room.

"Wow, I'm impressed at your preparedness."

We've both packed, yet we spend the time until Mom and Dad arrive scurrying around the apartment. Soon, there's a car honk and a knock on the door.

Dad stands on the porch. "I didn't think she'd honk," he says, turning his head back toward Mom. "That's why I came up." He turns back to me, raising his eyebrows and pursing his lips.

Ezra rushes out, and I'm on the verge of locking the door until I realize I don't have the journal with me.

"I forgot something, I'll meet you at the car."

I don't wait for their response before half-jogging back inside to where the journal is on my desk. I let it fall in my tote bag, looking down to confirm that it lands inside.

When I get in the back seat, Mom turns to me.

“You had all week to prepare your things,” she says with an eyebrow raised.

“Mom, it’s 8:58,” I say as I check my phone. “You said you’d be here at 9.”

“Well, you still had all week.” Then, “Anyone want food? Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” Ezra and I answer simultaneously.

Once everyone has their stash of muffins and coffee, we’re off to the cottage. The car ride is around eight hours long and throughout all of it, the magenta cover peeks through my bag. I see it from the corner of my eye.

More than once, my hand almost reaches for it. No one’s paying attention to what I’m doing, but I don’t want them to ask questions.

I’m not sure what I’d tell them if they were to ask what I was reading.

Although I don’t let myself read it, I keep thinking back to it. Especially about Sophie’s body in the casket. I steal a glance at Ezra, earphones on and eyes closed.

At 23, I’ve never seen a dead body. I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing. Because there’s no doubt I’ll have to one day. I’m not prepared.

I stare out the window for most of the ride, but it feels as though my eyes come in and out of focus like my thoughts.

The view of the Saint-Lawrence River, so vast this far up the North Coast, is mesmerizing. The water looks turquoise in some places. There are country houses with green grass going on for kilometres around them, white porches wrapping around the entire house, and sometimes I can see the view of the water from inside the houses themselves. A glimpse into what they see from within.

By the time we arrive, it's well past 6 pm. The cottage sits on a small hill, its white facade and wooden rooftops catching my eye. Something about white and wood really pleases me. I open the door once I find the key the owner left us under the mat, which is something I thought no one did because it's such an obvious hiding spot. The large white door creaks as it opens, and from the inside, the cottage looks like a farmhouse, with its wolf skins hanging on the stair railings and the log burners in the dining and living rooms. The kitchen table is placed in front of big windows that face the front lawn, and I'm mentally claiming this spot for reading.

Everyone is starving, but we have ready-made tomato and garlic sauce so that all we have to prepare is the pasta.

There's no need to light the log burner because, although it's cooler than Montréal, it's just perfect for sleeping. Tired from the drive, Mom and Dad go to bed early. Ezra and I sit in the small living room, the static TV on with *Titanic* playing.

"I never thought I'd bond with my sister by watching *Titanic*."

"Just don't start crying, or else I'm going to cry too," I tell him.

"I'm good until we get to those final scenes. That shit's sad," Ezra says, shaking his head.

We watch it all, and at the end of the movie, I turn to Ezra, eyes full of tears that haven't fallen yet. I'm not sure by my blurry eyesight if he's been crying, but as my vision clears, I feel my cheeks, wet and cold, and see he has a tear streak along his cheek facing me.

"Looks like we're both cry babies when it comes to this stuff," he says.

We both laugh, and I do my best to keep it quiet so as not to wake Mom and Dad sleeping right above us.

"I think I'm going to read a bit," I tell him as I get up.

I take the journal out from my tote bag on the floor, then make my way to the dinner table. The light is quite dim, barely bright enough to read, but it works. I hear some type of action movie in the background, and I do what I've been eager to do all day.

*20 May*

As soon as I woke up today, I wished the day could end.

This time last year had been so different. You'd just turned 16. I'd stayed up until midnight as always to jump on you and wish you a happy birthday. I'd hugged you and kissed you on your face a bunch of times, and you'd laughed and said "Ew" as you'd wiped the saliva I'd left on your cheeks.

Then Dad had joined us in your room, taking us in a bear hug like he's done forever.

"Happy Birthday, Soph. I hope this year you keep on fartin' in the free world," he'd told you.

"Ugh, Dad, you really need to stop saying that," you'd said as we'd both snorted. Who knows when Dad had begun to say this but, for some reason, he'd kept it in his repertoire of weird lines he found funny.

It had been a school night but, instead of going to bed, we'd decided to play a game of Rummikub. It had been two in the morning by the time we'd called it quits, and you'd slept in my room that night like we did for each of our birthdays.

Today, I spent the morning eating cereal at the kitchen table and staring out toward the backyard. For once, I'd made the coffee for Dad and me, and he helped himself to his cup as he sat down at the table.

For a while, we said nothing.

"It feels so weird for it to be her birthday but for her not to be here," I said. I started to cry.

"I always thought she would end up spending her birthdays without me here, not the other way around," Dad said.

“Same. I mean, she was only a bit younger. But you always expect your baby sister to outlive you.”

Silence again. We finished our coffee. As we got up from the table, we hugged. I smelled Dad’s remnants of Old Spice deodorant.

Throughout the day, I got a notification from the work chat.

Allie sent the schedule for next week, which I’m still not on. I hadn’t written to them in a while and impulsively sent “miss you guys” in the chat. They started answering at once.

*We do too! We can’t wait to have you back,* wrote Allie as she added a smiling emoji.

*Girl, come back please! I can’t make the mocha matcha the way you do!* Replied Dara.  
*It’s not the same without you here.*

*It’s really not,* said Christopher.

Going back to work is scary. Every time I leave the house to go anywhere – the grocery store, the park, literally anywhere – I’m killing off the last places where you were still alive. So that every memory I have of each place now is after.

*I’ll be back soon, I promise,* I wrote back.

And I meant it. Over two months without work and I’m really missing the café. Dara’s also making me crave the mocha matcha latte that no other place can beat.

Maybe it’s time I stop wasting so much energy trying to find clues that aren’t there.

The tatis and cousins came over for dinner. It was a potluck full of sticky rice, lahp, papaya salad, and fried rolls. The adults ate in the dining room, the cousins in the living room. We sat in front of the TV listening to throwback songs and sang along.



I was on the sofa watching Max, Andy and Alex belt out to *Rocketeer*, their voices doing anything but staying in pitch. We spent the night doing that, watching throwbacks of songs we hadn't heard in a while.

Eventually, it was time for cake. We sang Happy Birthday to you. Actually, no. Not to you. To your graduation picture propped up on a table next to the fireplace. The one with the background you chose. A field of sunflowers with a bright blue sky. 104 sunflowers that I was able to count. Your long hair. Extra straight. No use trying to curl it. It never stayed that way. One misplaced strand on your right shoulder. Your unpolished nails. Clean and filed. The one on your middle finger on your left hand a bit longer than the right. The writing on the diploma. "Promotion 2019". The hat so tight your hair puffed out a bit where the rim circled your head.

Tati Manivanh had called it cheesy when you'd first shown us. This is what we have left of you. Is this how other families do it? Your eyes stared at us. Lashes thin and long. You had mascara on. You never wore makeup. No need for that. Dimples pressed into your cheeks. You look so beautiful.

Part of me wishes you could look older.

Tati Phethmany brought the carrot cake, your favourite. I sang louder only to stop myself from crying. I didn't want to ruin your song. Some were singing in a different tempo. No one was singing in the same key. Others weren't even singing in the same language, a mix of "bonne fête" and "happy birthday" ringing out. I looked around at everyone's faces. Dad and the tatis were teary-eyed, which didn't help my case at all. I turned away and toward the cousins instead. The boys were either looking at the cake or the floor. Mel was only mouthing the words, her brown eyes seemingly focusing on nothing specific. Olivia was looking at me, and as we stared

at each other, she grabbed my hand. I squeezed it and looked back at the cake going toward your picture. Tati Phethmany put the cake in front of it.

No one thought about who would blow out the candle. No one had ever had to think about that. Everyone stayed still. The candle burned. Blue wax dripped on the white icing.

Then, tati Phethmany looked at me. My hands grew clammy. She nodded her head at me as if to say, "Come on". I got up and blew the candle out. Looked at your picture when I did.

I never want to blow out your candle ever again.

## Chapter 8

I have no words, no thoughts. I look up and actually jump until I realize it's only my reflection in the window.

My eyes are still damp from *Titanic*, and I want to cry again.

It feels like I'm reading a book.

*Indie, that's messed up.*

It is. This is real. And somehow, I have a hard time believing it.

"Indie."

I jump again.

"Shit, sorry. I'm going to bed," says Ezra.

"Oh, OK, yeah."

"Goodnight. Oh, and I'm taking the bigger bed."

"They're both single beds," I say as I roll my eyes.

"I'm pretty sure the one next to the window's bigger."

"Ez, just take the one you want."

"Goodnight for real now."

The stairs creak as he makes his way upstairs.

*24 May*

I got a new ink in the mail yesterday. I'd wanted one that was your favourite colour. It took a few days of searching for the best ink. I didn't want something boring.

I'd gone to the store first, the cute stationery shop not far from the café. The girl at the shop had been really sweet. I'd told her I wanted to see all of her lavender inks. She'd asked me if I'd been looking for myself or someone else.

"For me – or, I mean, my sister – it's, it was, her favourite..." I'd stopped, feeling my cheeks get hot at my stuttering. "It's for me."

"Of course, let me show you what we have," she'd answered without missing a beat.

She'd opened up a binder full of swabs of different colours, showing me all of the three lavender inks they sold. They were ordinary lavender inks. I think I'd hesitated, because she'd laughed.

"I know, pretty sad selection, yet we have a million shades of blue and black," she'd said.

"Sorry, it's not you – I mean, obviously – but none of them feel... right. Does that make sense? I mean, it's just ink –" I'd stammered.

"I completely get it. If it was 'just ink', you'd buy the boring black ink and get it over with. Honestly, I think you should look online. You'll definitely find something." Then she'd smiled at me. I'd told myself she seemed happy. She had one of those genuine smiles that made you want to smile too.

She'd asked me what fountain pens I had, and I'd told her about my TWSBI Eco.

"I love Ecos!" Her eyes had gotten wide. "Seeing the ink gush inside is so hypnotic. And the nibs are very smooth for the price, too!"

"Yeah, mine's white, kinda boring," I'd said.

“There’s nothing wrong with white. It matches every ink colour,” she’d answered.

“Anyway, thanks for your help,” I’d told her, heading toward the door.

Even though I hadn’t bought anything, she’d said thanks for coming by, and had wished me a good day. Did she act like this with every customer?

After the trip to the stationery shop, I’d looked online for a while until I found it. As soon as I’d seen pictures of the writing samples, I had to get it. People online call it a dual shading ink. I just love the way it’s a light purple. Then it surprises you. Turns blueish in some letters. In the sunlight, I stare at the ink in the pen’s barrel, and it looks almost fluorescent.

This ink, it’s the shade of you.

It makes me feel good. Is that weird?

For a day, I felt something that resembled happiness tinged with nothing sad. Part of me wanted to go back to the stationery shop and show the girl the ink I’d bought.

Then Dad said we’d have to go into your room today. To clean up and go through things. Make it look nice for when the agent’s photographer came by. So I went into it for the first time since you died. One last look.

I went in, closed the door and stood in the middle of the room. I’m not sure for how long. I lingered on your cardigan, your black Herschel pencil case and notebooks on your desk, the round outline in your pillow still there. My breath caught in my throat. Then I sat at your desk and flipped through everything I could – agenda, notebooks, any piece of paper – but nothing. Just some French grammar exercises and math problems. It was nice to see your handwriting again.

I traced the pencil marks on the paper, and if I closed my eyes, it felt like I was touching skin. All that was missing was body heat.

I studied the way you mostly wrote in print, each letter standing out on its own. I set the notebooks aside, knowing I'd bring them to my room afterwards, when Dad rushed in the room.

I turned around and saw his grip on the doorknob, knuckles white, his eyes wide, the green looking greyish, and his gaping mouth. He seemed breathless.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

*Who else would it be*, I wanted to ask, but didn't.

"I didn't realize you were in here. What are you doing?"

"Going through her stuff. Just one more time before we clean up."

"OK," he said, nodding mostly to himself. "I'll be back up in about an hour so we can start. The agent said her photographer should be here before lunch."

He closed the door and I was alone in your room again.

I walked to the bed, checking if there was anything underneath, but as I removed the covers, all that was there were your soccer ball and some shoe boxes. I went through them anyway, but none of them had anything important inside.

Somehow an hour passed, and Dad came back in. We cleaned your room for the first time in weeks. Dad closed the sliding door of your closet.

After 30 minutes, we were done. Your room spotless. Ready to be seen by unknown eyes online.

The ad went up a few minutes ago. Dad came to my room. We looked at it together. It didn't look like our house, with pictures at weird angles and the rooms looking empty.

But the pictures were nice. A house I'd want to buy.

Your room looked like it didn't know you.

## Chapter 9

*Holy crap. Did I meet this girl?*

I try to think back to around that time in May, but it was more than a month ago.

I read that last part about the conversation again. It sounds like so many conversations I've had with other clients, but maybe I *do* remember a bit. I keep thinking about a young woman with dark hair, skin slightly tanned, but the rest of her features are blurry. I recall finding the beginning of the conversation weird, just because of the way she stammered and corrected herself about the verb tense. I think she seemed shy, or maybe even uncomfortable, but it was so long ago.

*What are the freaking odds?*

I will my brain to think back to that day, but the memory is too fuzzy to remember any other clear details.

*This is impossible.*

I can't think straight. The thought of having talked to her, seen her. Wow.

I wonder if she wrote about me again. Or if she came back.

I don't remember her coming back.



29 May

Earlier today, Dad told me he was going for a walk. He asked if I wanted to go, but I said no. I heard the door open and close, and I waited a few seconds.

Then I screamed. Gave it everything, to the point where my voice came out raspy.

And heard Dad bolt up the stairs shrieking “What’s wrong?”.

“I thought you went out for a walk,” I said.

“I was about to, but I felt how warm it is outside and wanted to change into shorts instead,” Dad answered, a bit breathless.

“Oh.”

“What was that about?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just a bit frustrated. No biggie.”

Dad looked at me, eyes big, a look of concern on his face. “People don’t just scream like that for nothing.”

“Yeah, well, nothing is a lot of things when your sister commits suicide.”

I could tell Dad didn’t know what to say. He stood in my doorway, mouth slightly agape. He was looking at me, but not truly *looking* at me, his eyes glossy.

“You should go on your walk,” I finally told him. “Sorry for scaring you. I had to let it out.”

Dad stood there, arms crossed.

“For real, it’s fine,” I pressed on.

After some convincing, he finally left, saying he’d be back in an hour or so.

I went on your Facebook profile again. I hadn’t done that in a few weeks. Which is weird, because that’s all I’d do the first days you were gone. I scrolled through the messages posted by

some classmates and teachers. I could probably recite most of them. They were all so vague. Saying you'd been an amazing, fun student, or how everyone from class 531 would never forget you. Posts that say the same thing from one to the next, but with different words.

No one posted anything new other than Amel. She uploads pictures of you both, ones when you were in elementary school up until recently. She does this every month. I always see them, but never like or comment.

I decided to text her. A simple *Hey, can we meet up?*

*Yeah, u free now?* she replied almost instantly.

*Yes, meet you at the park in 5.*

I texted Dad to let him know where I'd be.

When I got to the park, Amel was already there. She was on one of the swings, and I sat on the one next to her.

“So, what’s up? You been OK?” Amel asked. She looked at me, and her loose curls blew in and out of her face as she swung.

“You know, not really, but yeah,” I answered.

“Same.”

We said nothing for a while until she looked at me again. Her brown eyes were orange in the sunlight.

“The reason I wanted to meet is just to ask a few questions. About Soph. I’ve been trying to understand...” I left it there.

“I mean, sure, I’ll answer anything, but –” she paused. “I keep replaying the last months in my head and I just go in circles.”

“Did she really say nothing? Not even hint at anything?”

Amel shook her head.

“She was texting me like normal the day before. She never made weird jokes or said she was feeling down. It’s like it came out of nowhere...” Amel began to cry.

“Sorry,” I said as I tried to hold my own tears back. “I don’t want to bring all of this back. I just needed to talk to you. To make sure I’m not missing anything. Actually, that’s a lie. I’m missing everything.”

“I mean, there was this one time...” I waited for her to continue, but she didn’t pick up where she left off. She just swung and stared ahead.

“Amel? What happened that one time?”

“I don’t think it really means anything, but it’s the only time I remember feeling weird.” She stopped again, and I waited. “A few weeks before she died, she came to my house after we had to put Pickles down. I’d been feeling really sad and she comforted me.”

“I remember her sleeping at your place for a whole weekend.”

“Yeah, exactly. Anyway, she seemed off. Sometimes we’d be watching TV or talking, and she’d kind of stare off into space. I didn’t worry too much about it since I was so sad about Pickles. I figured she was sharing the pain with me, you know?”

I nodded, edging her on, even though Amel wasn’t looking at me.

“On the Sunday, I said something like “I can’t believe she’s gone”, and Soph put her arm around my shoulders. Then she said Pickles was in a better place, that the cancer couldn’t hurt her anymore, and I looked at her. I was mad because I felt like she didn’t really understand, and I told her that’s the kind of thing people always say that doesn’t mean anything. Then she turned

away. I felt bad for lashing out at her and apologized right after because she was there for me and didn't deserve what I said."

Amel was still swinging, and the wind was making her tears zig zag along her cheeks.

"She said it was OK, and I confessed how guilty I felt that we didn't realize anything had been wrong with Pickles until it had been too late. Soph looked me straight in the eye then, literally took my face in her hands and looked me in the eye, and said: "It's not your fault. You can't blame yourself for something you couldn't see, OK?", and she hugged me super tight."

My cheeks were cold and I realized I was crying too.

"I don't know if she knew what she was going to do then, but I think back on it and I feel like that was her comforting me ahead of time. It's like she was preparing me for the guilt I would feel after she died. And part of me is so mad that I didn't see those words as a warning. But I'm also grateful for that moment."

"Wow," was all I was able to say. The chains creaked as we swung.

"Looks like I'm that kind of person who cries in public now," she said, one hand wiping her face and the other holding on to the swing's chain.

Another pause.

"Sorry I didn't tell you about this earlier. I didn't feel like it proved anything..."

"It's OK. I'm glad you told me now, though," I answered. I looked at her and we wiped our noses in unison.

"We're moving."

"Really? When?" Amel asked.

“Hopefully in a couple of weeks, but we still need to sell the house. My dad’s probably going to buy a condo, some place big enough for the two of us.”

“That makes sense.”

More silence, until I said: “You know, we can hang out sometimes. I know you were Soph’s best friend, but I see you as a little sister too. Just because we won’t live nearby, doesn’t mean we have to stop seeing each other.”

“I’d love that,” Amel replied. She smiled at me.

I told her I’d keep her posted about the house, let her know when we found a new place. We gave each other one of those long, tight hugs.

“Thanks again for coming,” I said to her.

When I got home, Dad was there. I told him about what Amel said, and he cried too.

“I miss her,” he said as he looked down at his hands. “Sometimes I feel like Sophie’s just away on a trip, having fun, living.”

“I miss her too. So much.”

We spent the rest of the night watching Disney movies until Dad fell asleep on the couch. I turned the TV off and let him sleep, tiptoeing my way up to my room.

## Chapter 10

I want to talk to her. For her to show me her ink.

Even though there isn't a need for her to do that now.

I stare at E.F.'s writing. Think of Sophie and how her sister thought of her as a beautiful shade of lavender ink. How nice it is for someone to be seen in that way.

I want to ask E.F. about stationery. Why she uses fountain pens. What it all brings her.

Peace? Relaxation? A way out of her grief? Something I haven't discovered yet?

Or maybe why she chose the TWSBI. What she loves about the pen. If she has anyone else she shares her hobby with. Having a hobby you can share with someone is always fun.

Maybe I could find her. Give her the journal back. I've already seen her in person. That must be good enough to recognize her if I saw her again.

*How in the world would you even do that?*

I'll keep reading. See if I can find any other clues. She said she worked at a café nearby. Even though there are a few near Scriptum, I'm sure there's a way.

I sigh. It's almost one in the morning and I need to get to bed if I want to go out and explore with everyone else tomorrow.

I draw the string and close the journal. A sudden wave of fatigue hits and I don't know if I'm overwhelmed or actually this tired. As I go upstairs, the stairs creak under me, but less loudly than they did with Ezra. I shine my path with my phone, the journal in my other hand. In the small bedroom I share with Ezra, there's no table or desk, just two single beds and a window, so I set the journal under my pillow. Maybe that'll make me think of what to do next, or even bring this journal writer to me.

## Chapter 11

“Indie?”

“Mmm?”

“We’re going to head out in half an hour. Mom said to wake you now if you want to come with us.”

Ezra leaves the room. The sun is on me and I see from my phone screen that it’s almost 10 am. I scramble to get ready so that I have enough time to eat, but all I really want is coffee. I tossed in bed all night.

Every time I closed my eyes, I tried to picture E.F. in my head, to recall any other detail, but nothing.

We spend our day in the small town near the cottage, visiting what’s considered “downtown” this far away from Montréal. In reality, the town is made up of one main street lined with restaurants, ice cream parlours, chocolate shops, and various boutiques with either local artwork, household items, knickknacks, or a mix of everything.

The day is warm and sunny. Maybe this is the type of weather robbers like to steal in because they know people will be enjoying the outdoors in some way.

*Wow, Indie, relax. Even if someone came into the cottage, the last thing they’d want to steal is a used journal.*

I shake my head in annoyance and try to forget about the journal.

After lunch, we head to the store with Dad’s favourite, freshly-made cheese curds. We have to drive there since it’s further away. It seems like a long way to go for cheese, but I don’t tell him that. At least the view to get there is nice.

I do one of my favourite things during a road trip, which is looking out at the passing landscape. Especially when it's this pretty.

I turn to Ezra and see him asleep, completely slumped over on his left side near the door. How is that comfortable?

He's always been the lucky one when it comes to sleeping anywhere, anytime.

We stop by a grocery store on our way back to the cottage to get frozen fries and some sauce for our home-made poutine. We get back around 5 pm and begin prepping the fries right away. While they cook, Dad takes care of the sauce as I help Mom with the salad, so that we can at least pretend to eat healthy.

After dinner, I feel both bloated and satisfied.

"How about some Jok-R-Uummy?" Dad asks once we're done washing the dishes.

"Sure, if you're ready to lose," I tell him.

"Yeah right, I creamed you guys last time," says Ezra.

"For the first time in your short life," Mom answers back, to which I snort.

We play at the table until it's way past sunset, once Mom and I have each won.

"I think it's time to accept that the women in the family run this game," I say to Dad and Ezra.

"You definitely cheated," Dad says, eyes squinting back and forth between Mom and me.

"Henri, you say that each time you lose. I'm going to bed." Mom kisses each of our heads. "We need to be up at six for our hike."

Going to bed now is probably a smart decision. If I were someone who made smart decisions, I wouldn't have read the journal in the first place.



Dad and Ezra both get up from their chairs.

“You’re going to bed too?” I ask them.

“You know I never make it past 11,” Dad answers, yawning loudly, which makes Ezra and me yawn too.

“I’m really tired.” Ezra shrugs.

Before my brother goes to bed, I take the notebook out from under the pillow. Tonight, I sit in the small, secluded living room. Two of the walls have big windows that only let in complete darkness at this time of night. As I sit, the leather of the couch is cold against my skin, and goosebumps form along my arms and legs until the leather is warm from my body heat.

There’s not much of the journal left to read. I only have so much time to decide what I’m going to do once I’m done.

I should find her.

I don’t even have a name, but the café is worth a shot.

There’s something strange about being able to carry a stranger’s grief in your tote bag.

*3 June*

I went back to work today.

Allie was there. She didn't really say anything. Part of me wanted to say I'm still the same. That she could talk to me like before. But I just went on making customers' drinks. Asking things like "Could you get me another bag of milk?" or "Did you sell the last chocolate croissant?". She wasn't ignoring me. I just wanted her to act normal. To not need to think before saying anything. For me not be reminded everywhere I go and by everyone I talk to that you're gone. It's like people are scared of me now. Or something.

Then Dara got there after lunch. She gave me a big hug and I hugged her back. I wanted to say again I'm still me. Just maybe a bit different now. And maybe she felt it in my hug. She talked until the end of my shift about her crush from school. I'm trying to remember the conversation word by word because everything that comes out of her mouth makes me laugh.

"Remember Geneviève? The girl from my sociology class? Well, she started playing with my hair in class yesterday. Like, who does that to a friend? There's no way she wasn't flirting. I mean, is that something you do to your friends?"

"No, she definitely might be flirting," I told Dara.

"Right! We were sitting next to each other and her knee brushed up against mine like, ten times. I swear she's flirting and I'm all for it. But I dunno if she's just super comfortable with people or if she's interested. I mean, she knows I'm into girls but I dunno if she's into girls too. Like, I just met her this semester so I don't feel comfortable just going up to her and being all like 'Hey, are you into girls too?' because that's a bit too direct, you know? Even from me."

"Yeah, maybe you should try a more subtle approach."

“Right? I was thinking of putting a pride flag on my lock screen and have her check the time on my phone and maybe she would say something about that. What do you think?”

“I mean, I’ve never had to do something like that, so I don’t know if I’m your best reference here,” I answered between laughs.

“Ughhh, your girl just needs to know! I don’t have time for all these questions!” Dara said. She took a sip of her iced vanilla latte and shook her head.

I actually laughed today. A lot. And part of me felt bad for not being sad. But what hit me harder is that it won’t be this sad forever. Things will get easier eventually.

When Dad picked me up after work, he asked me how my day went. I said good. Really. He told me he was happy to hear that. I saw him dab at his face a few times. He looked at me and smiled.

We had an open house from 7-9, so we went to see a movie. We weren’t supposed to be home, as if people would be uncomfortable. They’re the ones walking around someone else’s house.

When we got back, I tried to spot something. Anything. Nothing had been touched. Only a lingering smell of something like artificial peach. So sweet it turned acid in my mouth. I stood in your room, in the dark. The light from the hallway cast my shadow across the floor.

I saw something gleaming in the corner of my eye. It was only one of the handles from your dresser. I went to it and began to look through the drawers. The top ones with your socks and underwear were smaller than the others, so it only took a few quick passes of the hand to realize nothing was hidden in them. Everything looked black or grey because the light was still off. Something about doing this in the semi-darkness made it easier.

Instead of continuing from top to bottom, I went through the last drawer with your pants and leggings. No one really expects someone to keep anything in their pant drawer. I didn't, anyway. I was right and moved on to the next drawer, with your sports clothes and pyjamas. I rummaged around, feeling the different textures of soccer shorts, sports bras, swimsuits, and pyjama bottoms. I was about to go to the last drawer when my fingers hit against something box-like buried beneath all of your swimsuits. I grabbed it and whatever was inside rattled a bit as I did.

The small box was wrapped in craft paper, and it looked like the box of some sort of lip gloss. Something was written across it. It was too dark to see, so I finally turned the light on. When I did, I recognized your handwriting and I froze.

*Happy Birthday sista, I love you (almost) as much as I love noodles. I hope I did good!*

I sat at my desk for a long time, staring at the box. Did you really get me an early birthday present? It's coming up soon and I've been dreading it.

It looked like any normal birthday message.

Each time I reached for the box, I pulled my hand back. My hands were sweaty and I didn't know if they would wipe away your handwriting.

Then I picked up the box and went to see Dad in the living room. I held it out to him.

He looked at me, eyebrows raised, and asked: "What's this?"

I couldn't say anything and let him inspect it for himself. He gave a small shout of surprise and put his hand over his mouth.

"Oh," he said. He held the box back, his arms fully stretched out in front of him, as if in wonder. "Are you going to open it?" he asked, hands a bit shaky.

“Should I?”

“Why shouldn’t you?” Dad looked at me then.

“Well, it’s not my birthday yet, and if I open it, it’ll be the last gift I ever open from her.”

I felt a lump in my throat.

“Your birthday’s soon enough,” Dad said. He passed his thumb over your writing.

I sat down on the couch next to him and he handed me the box. I paused, breathing harder than I thought because Dad asked: “You okay? You don’t have to open it if it’s making you nervous.”

I think I nodded then, before carefully taking off the tape stuck to the craft paper. Nothing ripped. Underneath was a black box with “Kaweco” written on it.

I gasped. “It’s a fountain pen.”

It was a Kaweco Sport. You obviously know that.

“She nailed it,” Dad said. He hugged me tight and after a while, he told me I should try it out. I put the blue ink cartridge in, the one that came with the pen.

The fountain pen is nice, small, not even the length of my hand when closed. I know now why they call this pen pocket-sized. I love the cute octagonal cap and the mint colour of the pen.

I love the broad nib too. It’s so different from the fine nib on my TWSBI. I can see the ink better, how it shades and changes colour. The words thicker on the page. The nib is smooth and has detailed engravings. I realize now I can use it with the new ink I got recently.

It’s so nice to write with a pen you gave me.

You did so good, Soph.

## Chapter 12

My mind is rushing at the thought of possibly having met Sophie. Did she get the Kaweco at Scriptum? We sell them, but she could've shopped online.

I can't remember having ever seen her. I barely remembered seeing her sister until reading the entry.

Shit.

Even if Sophie did come to Scriptum, she could've asked Peter or anyone else for help.

There's no way I met Sophie.

The slightest possibility makes me want to cry.

None of this matters. I'll never be able to find out either way. The only one who could've remembered is gone.

*6 June*

When I got to work, Christopher was already there. Although it was still early in the morning, I could already tell by then that it was going to be a gloomy day.

The lights in the café seemed cozy from the outside, and I sighed as I entered.

Even though we weren't open yet, it already smelled of coffee beans. The smell never left.

"Hey," Christopher said. "It's awesome that you're back."

"I missed this place so much," I told him.

"You want a mocha matcha latte?"

"Is that even a question?"

He laughed and began making us both drinks. Soon enough, the smell of coffee was accompanied by that of matcha powder.

"You don't understand how badly I've craved this," I said in thanks as I took the latte. I couldn't help but close my eyes at the first sip. Before working at the café, I never would've thought matcha powder and chocolate would taste good together. Then I tasted the mocha matcha latte. "This is freaking amazing."

He bowed and said: "Thank you, thank you very much."

"So, you've been growing your hair out?" His thick, dark brown hair fell at his shoulders now.

"It wasn't intentional. I was lazy to get a haircut, but it's growing on me."

"You're starting to look like a samurai."

When I'd found out Christopher was Lao on our first shift together, I'd been shocked. What were the chances?

“Wait, you’re Lao too?” he’d asked, his eyes wide.

“Half. On my mom’s side,” I’d answered.

“Shit, no way! I don’t think I’ve ever met another Lao person my age outside of family gatherings and the Lao festival.”

We’d cracked up at that.

Two years later and he’s one of my favourite co-workers. You only met him once, but I remember you’d found him cute. Looked at me and raised your eyebrows a few times. I’d seen him see you, and he’d laughed to himself and shaken his head. He’d actually asked me to go to the movies, but we’d never had the time. You’d died a few days later, and everything else had stopped mattering.

We spent this morning making up for the weeks I’d been away. It was mostly me catching up to his life. He just finished his last semester in Social Sciences, and, as if it was no big deal, he mentioned he’d been accepted at Concordia.

“No way. Congrats, you should’ve told me earlier!”

He hesitated a moment before saying: “I figured you still needed some space.”

Right then, a client came in and we changed the subject. We continued talking until I heard your name spoken out loud by a stranger. A woman came in the café with bright yellow rain boots. Then a little girl with curly hair. She had yellow boots too.

The woman asked the little girl, “Sophie, veux-tu un biscuit aux brisures de chocolat?”. The little girl started to jump. The mom laughed. Looked at me and saw me looking. Said her daughter really loved chocolate.



I didn't think, and maybe I should have, but I told her my sister did too and that her name was also Sophie. The woman said she loved the name. I thought, *Duh, I hope so*, although I didn't say anything. Just smiled.

After ordering, they sat at one of the tables next to the windows. The woman sipped her coffee. Sophie ate her chocolate chip cookie, slowly. Then, she finished and sat quietly. Sometimes she pointed at things and whispered to her mom. She looked about two or three. I stayed behind the counter and did... whatever. Christopher and I would serve the few clients that came in. Between the small talk, I noticed that sometimes Sophie turned to look at me. When I caught her, she'd smile and look back at her mom. Her mom was always looking out the window.

The rest of my shift was a blur.

When I got home, Dad told me we already got an offer on the house. After only one open house. Two offers, actually. One a bit lower than the asking price, and the other 10k over. The agent says we should jump on it, because this isn't the kind of thing that happens much. Dad is accepting it.

He said we would be moving out at the end of June, which gives us a few weeks to pack. I didn't expect the house to sell so quickly, but Dad told me the agent said that with a nice house like ours, she's not surprised. That the houses she sells aren't always as well looked after.

He was using his hands a lot as he talked, his voice cheerful.

Maybe this will be good.

## Chapter 13

A mocha matcha latte. I've heard that before.

I'm not a big café person, but the name of the drink rings a bell. I think E.F. might have mentioned it in an earlier entry. But I also feel like someone at Scriptum has been to this café. I'll have to ask around on Monday.

How hard could it be? There probably aren't that many cafés that make mocha matcha lattes.

All I need is the name of the place. I hope she's left me that somewhere in the pages I still have to read. I flip through them and my shoulders droop.

Only one entry left. *One.*

My hands are clammy again, which is a nervous habit I'm starting to find annoying.

There's so much left to know. Which is why I need to find her. To give the notebook back, but also to see how she's doing. Even though she won't talk about her life to a stranger. That's exactly what I am to her.

And yet, finishing the journal feels like leaving a friend behind without being able to say goodbye.

## Chapter 14

Getting up is rough this morning. My eyes are dry and even splashing cold water on my face doesn't help. The drive to the national park is barely a half-hour away, but I manage to fall asleep in the car for once.

I wake up as the car pulls into the parking space. The colours of the new day coming in fill the sky in shades of orange, pink, purple, and blue.

The hike should take around four hours, and although I'm still exhausted, this should be nice.

The walk up is almost a constant climb, and as we reach the peak, the wind is strong and refreshing, with only small shrubs for cover. From up here, you can see for kilometres in every direction. The peak isn't truly a peak, but more of a smooth, rather flat surface stretching over a few hundred metres.

I feel so small yet present.

Mom, Dad and I stand still and admire the view, our hair and clothes blown about by gusts of wind. Ezra is closing his eyes, a small smile on his face, arms slightly apart from his body, as if he'll be lifted at any moment.

I don't say anything. I continue to absorb the panoramic view, and when I turn back to Ezra, he still hasn't moved.

"Shall we eat?" Dad asks.

"Good idea," Mom answers.

We find a place to sit on the smooth rock, taking out our sandwiches Mom made yesterday. It's barely nine in the morning, but the hike has made us hungry.

“We should come here again. Beautiful trail and amazing view,” Dad says as he bites into his food.

Mom and I nod. Ezra is chewing slowly, his eyes wandering over the landscape.

“You good?” I ask him. “You look like you’re having a moment.”

“Yeah,” he says, smiling into his sandwich before taking another bite.

A couple reaches the top as we start to make our way down. Part of me doesn’t want to leave yet, but another is eager to do just that.

By the time we get to our starting point, my legs are wobbly, my back is sweaty, and I can feel the bounce of my short baby hairs that have curled around my forehead.

We get back to the cottage before lunchtime, and since I’m the last in line to use the only shower here, I take the journal out to the small pond by the cottage to wait. There’s a swinging chair facing the water. I wish I could’ve spent more time in this spot, but at least I’m here now.

*11 June*

We were at tati Khamla's when Olivia came up with the idea.

“How about we go on a cousins-only trip this summer?”

All of the cousins seemed to agree instantly. Mel suggested we go somewhere in the States for a few days. Max and Andy offered to drive in their cars since we'd be too many to fit in one.

I said nothing at first, letting them plan things out. They noticed I wasn't speaking and turned to me.

“You're not down?” Olivia asked.

Right then, I felt like a road trip with them would mean leaving you behind, even though you're already gone. I didn't realize I spoke out loud because everyone was silent. That's not fair though, is it Soph?

That you get to leave and that I begin to feel like I can't go anywhere anymore.

Everyone was still silent when I told them about our passports we had ordered a few months ago.

Still, no one talked. A rare occasion, the cousins being so quiet.

“I don't think she knew she was going to do it yet,” Mel said suddenly. “We were talking about travelling and she seemed to be in her own head. You know how she drifted off when she got excited about something.”

We nodded, everyone's heads wrapped in thought. Then Dad called me from upstairs telling me it was time to go.

“Think about it for a bit,” Olivia told me. “It would be really fun.”

I said I would and hugged them before leaving.

I talked to Dad about it on the way home and he thought the trip would be good.

We listened to the radio for a while until he said: “I don’t think your sister wanted you to stop having fun. You need to have fun. I know that feels impossible to do right now, but I won’t let you feel sad for the rest of your life, Emilia.”

I looked at him under the orange lights along the highway. His face came in and out of the light as he drove. He still had bags under his eyes. His hair was definitely greyer. I’m not sure if hair can be tired, but that’s what it looked like to me.

“I won’t let you feel sad for the rest of your life either,” I said.

There was a rattling coming from the glove compartment. As I opened it, I spotted the car manual, some CDs, tissues, and a small bottle of vanilla-scented body spray.

It brought me back to when you’d dropped the papaya salad on yourself at the Lao festival in Sainte-Julienne last summer. The way you’d hunched your shoulders knowing that fishy smell would stick to your clothes for the rest of the day. It had been really hot out too. I can’t imagine how sticky you must’ve felt. You’d said maybe we should go home, but had then gotten over it a bit later. I’d obviously gone to buy another because the one you’d dropped had barely been touched. No way was I not going to have my papaya salad. It had been amazing as always. Just the right amount of crushed tomatoes and papaya strands, Thai peppers, sugar, lime, padek.

I’d gone to wash my hands right after eating, so that the smell of the salad wouldn’t stick to my fingertips. I’d caught a whiff each time you’d passed by. After a while, you’d seemed to have gotten over the smell on you. Older maeh thus and tatis had sniffed at the air, giving you strange looks and mumbling some things in Lao like, “mmmm, mehn noh”. They’d been right: it

had smelled bad. You hadn't cared, spending the rest of the afternoon cracking up with Max and Andy.

On the way back home, you'd said you were glad you'd dropped the salad. That you'd learned to appreciate the smell. It was stinky, but it reminded you of family. You'd wanted to learn to make it to carry on our family's papaya salad legacy. Those had been your exact words. I'd told you to take a shower because the sour fish smell was getting to your brain. "You'll be the first one to eat my papaya salad," you'd said as you'd made your way to the bathroom. I'd gone to my room and started browsing inks. I'd heard the water run. You'd started singing the words "papaya salad" over and over again, each time in a different rendition.

I stared at the bottle of body spray in my hands and pumped it once. The smell of artificial vanilla filled the car, and I laughed.

When we got home, we spent the rest of the night looking at places Dad could buy. The ones we browsed were all closer to the café. He asked what my ideal place would be. I said as long as there was lots of natural light, I wasn't picky about the rest. Dad really wants a small yard, or a balcony big enough for when the tatis and cousins come over. We saw a lot we didn't like, but by the end of the night, we saved four listings. My favourite out of those had lots of sunlight in the pictures and a cute lavender-coloured front door. Dad's placing an offer tomorrow morning.

It's really late now and I can't fall asleep. I don't know if it's hope or nervousness, but I can't stop thinking about that lavender door.

## Chapter 15

“Emilia,” I say out loud to no one. It’s funny, speaking a name you’ve never said before.

I see the lavender door and want to ask Emilia if that condo’s what they ended up moving into.

Her name creates a fizzy, bubbly feeling in my head. Finally knowing it is a small victory, but this can’t be it.

I flip through the rest of the pages, but they’re all blank.

“Indie, the shower’s all yours,” Mom shouts from the open front door.

“Coming!”

I place the orange string at the end of the last entry. The left page full of writing and the blank right page stare up at me, a bright line across the middle.

\*

Mom and Dad are still out looking for the small, sweet blueberries sold this time of year, those perfect for making jam. They told Ezra and me to eat and be ready to pack up the car once they get back.

I’m finishing my sandwich while Ezra eats his canned ravioli. He stands up abruptly to get closer to the windows facing the kitchen table.

“Is that cat killing a mouse?”

“Where?” I ask, getting up as well.

“Near the tree over there,” he says.

There’s a small cat with orange fur. It has something small and fluffy in its mouth and drops it to the ground. It’s too far and I can’t tell if it really is a mouse or not, but the small round thing tries to move away. It looks hurt as it backs away once and then only jerks in place.



We both wait, our unfinished food on the table. The more I stare, the more I'm convinced it really is a mouse, since I don't know what else it could be. The cat backs away from it, only to sprint toward it again and paw at it.

"If it was killing the mouse to eat it, then fine, but it's clearly just messing around with it," Ezra says.

"I don't know what we could do. If it's hurt, I doubt we could actually help it."

"Maybe we could put it somewhere away from the cat."

Ezra bolts to the door. As soon as he unlocks it, the cat freezes, and Ezra runs toward it. The cat darts off, and when Ezra gets to the mouse, he puts one hand to his forehead. I join him outside.

"Is it dead?"

"No, but it's breathing really fast."

"Is it bleeding? Is there anything hanging out of it?" I ask, not getting too close.

"No. It's so cute."

I come up to it and almost don't see it at first. It's about the size of a golf ball. I expected it to be bigger. The cat tries to come back a few times, but Ezra keeps scaring it off until the cat stops trying.

The mouse makes an attempt to move, pushing itself with its tail, but only drops back down onto its back. We wait a few seconds to see if it'll move again or try to skitter away.

"What should we do?" I ask. "If it was OK, it would've run away by now."

As we get closer, we realize the mouse is starting to twitch. Its mouth keeps opening and closing, and each time it twitches, there's a clicking noise coming from somewhere in its throat.

“Shit, I think it has nerve damage,” Ezra says.

We both sigh in frustration.

“I could never explain why I hated cats, but now I know why. Shit,” Ezra exhales.

“I mean, you’re also allergic,” I tell him.

He says nothing, so we both stay quiet.

“It looks like it’s suffering,” I finally say.

Ezra mutters another ‘shit’ under his breath.

“I think I’ll need to kill it.”

“With what?” I ask him.

“The axe for the firewood. Just to put it out of its misery. It’s still blinking.”

I look and he’s right. The small eyes are still opening and closing while the mouth and neck continue to twitch.

“I’ll get the dustpan so you can scoop it and bring it to where the wood-chopping corner is.”

I run to the cottage and come back. Ezra scoops the mouse up gently, enough for it to be securely on the pan, and brings it to the back.

“I’m going to aim for the neck. It’s the only way to make it quick.”

“Is it OK if I go inside?” I ask him.

Ezra nods. His mouth is set straight, green eyes almost brown. I make my way back inside and to the kitchen, where there’s a window facing the spot made for chopping wood. I watch Ezra from the window as it takes him a few moments before he moves. He stares off toward the ground, likely in the direction of the mouse, as if convincing himself that this is what

he should do. He grabs the axe, takes a breath in, and I hear the dull thud of metal against wood. His face grimaces in a way that makes him look upset or disgusted. Perhaps both. Then he bends down, and soon after, he leaves toward the front of the cottage again. I hear the front door open and close.

“Where’d you put it?” I ask Ezra as he walks into the kitchen.

“I buried it near a bush. I almost wanted to leave an acorn on top,” he says, a small smile on his lips, sad.

I don’t notice the tears along my cheeks until Ezra looks at me, face frowning.

“What?” I ask him.

“You’re crying.”

“Really?” I touch my face and feel the tears. “Oh, I guess I am.”

“I didn’t know you liked mice so much,” Ezra says.

After having read Emilia’s journal without crying, I’m not sure why this comment makes me start bawling, but it does.

“Oh shit,” I hear my brother mutter to himself. He puts an arm around my shoulder, and we stand in the middle of the kitchen like this for a while.

“Sorry,” I say eventually. “I don’t know what happened there.”

He’s looking at me, forehead creasing and eyebrows furrowing. “You sure? That was intense.”

I nod my head a few times. “I just had a moment, but it’s fine.”

We say nothing, but the silence is comfortable, his arm still around me.

“We should probably start to bring our things to the entrance room,” I say.

We do just that, and by the time we start heading back home, it's nearly 2 pm. I spend a good amount of the drive back flipping through the journal in case I've missed anything, but by the end of my search, I'm still left with only Emilia's name and the drink from her café.

It's past 11 when I fall onto my bed and barely minutes before I'm asleep.

## Chapter 16

I feel the tap of the journal against my hip as my tote bag moves back and forth to the rhythm of my walking.

“Hi, Indie,” I hear from somewhere beneath the pen display counter.

“Hey, Peter.”

“How was your weekend?”

“Good.” I start making my way to the back before turning around. “Hey, do you know which café around here sells a drink called a mocha matcha latte?”

“I’m afraid the only café I’m familiar with is my apartment, and it only has filtered coffee from the dépanneur.”

“That’s very depressing.”

“Let’s just say I spend my money elsewhere,” he says, looking around the shop.

“I’ll ask Leila when she comes in later. Her coffee-addicted self might know more than you.”

The thought of possibly seeing Emilia today makes it hard for me to focus on what I’m doing. For the next hour or so, I ring customers up at the cash, and although it sounds boring, it’s one of my favourite parts of the job.

You get to see what people pick out without seeming nosy. It’s usually lots of notebooks, often Rhodia or Leuchtturm1917, some double-tipped highlighters, and non-reusable pens. There are fountain pens and ink bottles every so often.

The best is when people choose matching pens and inks. It’s not a habit everyone has, but it’s something I enjoy doing with my own collection.

I have to manually enter the price of each article in because we don't have a digital list of our inventory. This makes me love Scriptum that much more.

Then a young woman walks in. I do a double take because her features match what I remember of Emilia, dark hair and slightly tanned skin. We make eye contact and she smiles, but without any recognition.

I'm not sure what I would've done if that had been her.

"Hi, can I help you with anything?" I ask her.

"No, I love browsing, but thanks," she answers, smiling again.

She starts going around the small shop and examining almost everything she passes. I try not to stare, but it's nice to see someone taking their time.

She stays in front of the notebooks, sometimes opening one and passing her fingers over the paper.

The front door of the shop opens and Leila makes her way to me.

"Hey."

"Hey, Indie." Leila looks at the woman too. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're looking at her weird." This she says with her voice low.

"Oh, I thought I'd already seen her before, like I knew her from somewhere, but turns out I don't." I match her hushed tone of voice.

Then Leila goes to the back and I hear her and Peter chatting. The young woman makes her way to the cash. She places her things on the counter: a Clairefontaine spiral notebook, a

light turquoise highlighter, and an orange one. I put her things in a paper bag as she continues to browse the shop with her eyes. Then I hand her the bag and wish her a nice day.

“You too,” she says as she takes her ringing phone out. “Hey, mom,” I hear before her voice fades as she leaves Scriptum.

My shoulders drop at the mention of her mom.

Leila’s back on the floor, her curly hair in a high bun. She takes a sip of her coffee.

“Hey, as a coffee enthusiast, do you know the cafés around here well?” I ask her.

“I wouldn’t say well, but I know TropiCafé. That place is really good. It’s a bit further down du Parc.”

“Do you know if they sell mocha matcha lattes?”

Leila looks at me, an eyebrow shooting up.

“That’s pretty specific. I don’t know, I usually choose coffee over any form of tea. Why?”

“Just curious.” I shrug my shoulders.

Leila’s still giving me a questioning look.

“I heard about it somewhere and I’ve been curious to try it out.”

I want to tell her about Emilia, but any way I try to phrase the situation in my head sounds weird.

“We received a few boxes of inventory this morning. Can you stick the prices on them?”

Peter asks, popping his head out of the entrance to the back-store. “I’ll probably be stuck in the back for the rest of the day doing paperwork.”

I bring the boxes full of journals to the front as Leila watches the floor. I give her one of the two pricing guns and we only get to work for a bit before Leila needs to help a customer.

She's with the man for a while – he's picky and wants to see a few dozen fountain pens. Leila frowns when he leaves without buying anything.

“Well, I hate to leave, but my shift is over.” I give her a small smile as she sulks. “On the bright side, you only have this box left.” I slide it over to her.

“When's your next shift?”

“I'm off tomorrow and Wednesday, but I work Thursday. Oh, and for TropiCafé, you said it's on du Parc?”

“Yeah, maybe you could grab the 129. It's only two stops away.”

Once I have my bag, I say bye to Peter and Leila and walk out into the rain.

I check my bus app and see the 129 has just passed, which means the next bus will only come in about a half hour. Walking to the café takes a few minutes, and I'm happy I didn't forget my umbrella.

I spot the front of the café, the white and green sign sticking out from the red brick of the building. Inside, there's a wall entirely covered with a wallpaper of tropical leaves, and some monstera plants line the windows. Mostly all the decor is a mix of white and dark green, along with the black of the coffee machines.

I close my umbrella, shake it, and walk in before abruptly stopping once I cross the door.

*What exactly is your game plan here, Indie?*

Well, that's something I somehow forgot to think about.

I can't go back out now because that would look strange, but no one is paying attention to me as the baristas are serving two customers. I let a breath out when I see both baristas are blond.



I wipe my sweaty palms on my shirt and look at the menu on the wall in front of me. No mocha matcha latte, or any matcha drink for that matter.

The guy says “Bonjour, hi” as I approach him.

“Hi, do you have anything with matcha?”

“We have this green tea cake, but that’s all.”

“Oh, then I’ll just have...” I take a pause, looking at the menu again. “A vanilla latte, please.”

“Coming right up. Anything else?”

“That’s it, thanks.”

I pay and wait to the side. I watch the girl making my order as she pumps what I assume is vanilla syrup in the coffee cup. She brews the coffee and froths the milk, pouring it all into the cup.

“Here you go,” she says.

I thank her and grab the coffee before blurting out: “Excuse me?”

She jerks back around, wiping her hands on her black apron.

“Mhm?”

“Is there an employee here called Emilia?”

She shakes her head.

“Oh, I thought she worked here. She’s my friend’s cousin, so...”

She nods and emits a small laugh, one that someone lets out when they don’t know what to say.

“OK, well, bye,” I say as I leave.

I see the 129 from two streets down and hop on as it arrives.

It's only once I'm home that I realize I haven't had a sip of my coffee. It's good, but lukewarm by now.

A part of me expected to find Emilia at TropiCafé. I sigh, then do what I should've done in the first place. I make a search to know which cafés there are around Scriptum, then go through the pictures associated to each place. I swipe through every one, searching for mocha matcha lattes on the menus or the pictures of drinks people have posted online. I also go through the pictures people have taken of the cafés themselves, often with baristas working behind the counters, but their faces are always blurred.

It's when I'm looking through a third café's images that I spot a mocha matcha latte written in white on a chalkboard menu. It's called Café Ine.

I spend all night going over what I'll say if Emilia is there, but nothing sounds right.

I should wing it instead of sounding like I'm spitting out a rehearsed speech.

There's a feeling in the pit of my stomach, the type of feeling you get the night before a big event.

Perhaps that's what tomorrow will be. But I might also be freaking out for nothing and, in reality, nothing will happen at all.

## Chapter 17

To get to Café Ine, I need to take two buses, the 129 and another one. From Scriptum, it's only about a ten-minute bus ride.

The café opens at 6 am, and I'm happy I'm not the one working there.

I decide to get there later in the morning. Once I get off the bus and closer to Café Ine, I feel my pace slow.

*Holy shit.*

I stop before reaching the front of the café. From here, I spot a display of the pastries and cakes, as well as a red brick wall.

I move a bit closer until a few people come into view, but stay far enough for them not to see me. A customer's standing in front of the counter, while a girl with dark hair tied in a short ponytail makes the beverages.

I don't think that's Emilia.

The customer's head blocks the face of the person at the cash, but the barista has long dark hair and tanned skin.

I take a breath, then another, and walk inside without another thought.

A bell rings as I open the door, and the baristas turn to me. I smile at the one with the short ponytail and walk closer to the cash.

The young woman standing there is shorter than my 5'4. She has dark brown eyes and a necklace with a Buddha on it.

*Emilia?*

I hope I'm coming off as casual even though I can hear my heart pounding in my ears.

She has no name tag, but I'm positive it's her.

“What can I get you today?” she asks with a smile.

“Sorry, one second,” the girl with the short ponytail says to me. Then she turns to her coworker. “Emilia, I just need to go check my phone quickly while it’s not busy. I’m expecting a call.”

I reach inside my tote bag and my hands find the notebook.

“Um, a mocha matcha latte?” I ask Emilia as she turns back to me.

“Good choice.” She enters my order. “Anything else?”

*Yes, I have your journal!*

“No, that’s it,” I say instead, letting go of the notebook and grabbing my wallet.

I pay and she starts to make my drink. I watch her for any signs of what she’s been through, but she just looks like a normal person making a latte.

She’s focused on each task and doesn’t look my way once until she’s done.

“Here you go.” She hands me my order with a small smile. She seems nice.

“Thanks.” I stand there a second longer, the heat from the disposable cup scolding my hand even with the protective sleeve around it.

Then I turn and almost bump into a woman who’s just come in. She lets out a surprised yelp as I apologize and sit at a table facing the windows.

*Smooth, Indie. Just keep drawing attention to yourself.*

I don’t have anything to keep myself busy, so I sit and watch Emilia and her colleague work. I sip the mocha matcha latte, which is actually quite good, but I don’t give myself a chance to stop.

In a matter of minutes, I finish my latte and no longer have an excuse to be here.

*The more you wait, the harder it'll be for you to give her the journal.*

My foot taps under the table against the tiled floor.

Emilia doesn't notice me. She's either serving customers or talking to her friend, who I know now is Dara.

If I'm going to leave, it should be before she notices I'm still here.

I grab my tote, put my cup in the garbage by the entrance and turn to Emilia as I open the door. The bell doesn't get her attention this time as she laughs at something Dara says.

\*

The more time passes, the more annoyed I am with myself.

I need to go back. But going back also means Emilia will know I've read her journal.

I attempt to prepare something decent for dinner, but I overcook the pasta and burn the pieces of garlic I wanted to fry for the sauce. Ezra's out for the night, so I stick to eating my failed supper.

Then I pick up my book before bed, which usually helps me relax. I end up rereading the same passage a few times before grunting, snapping my book shut and closing the lamp on my nightstand.

I don't even know if Emilia's working tomorrow, but it doesn't matter. I'm going back.

## Chapter 18

There's a breeze coming from the window in front of the kitchen sink where I'm inking up a few pens. It's barely 7 am and grey out, the clouds' outlines almost invisible, just one dark grey mush of a sky. I woke up around 5 and couldn't fall back asleep, but I only want to get to Café Ine around the same time as yesterday in case Emilia's working the same shift.

I've been meaning to ink up some pens for a week now. I finally finished two of the five pens I like to keep inked at a time, which reminds me – I should clean those. As always, inking up other pens is more exciting than cleaning some out. I pick up my turquoise TWSBI Eco and dip the nib in the turquoise ink. I twist the piston knob clockwise, and ink starts making its way in the barrel of the pen until it's full. I pass a napkin over the nib to wipe off the excess ink and close the cap over the pen. With the clear barrel, I have fun sloshing the ink around a bit, two, three times.

I set the TWSBI down and disassemble my Kaweco Sport. I open up my bottle of coral ink and fill a small part of the syringe. I take an empty cartridge and fill it up with the ink. This time, no matching, the bright ink clashing with the milk-coffee-coloured pen. I clip the cartridge onto the pen, reassemble the Kaweco and rinse out the syringe a few times, the pinkish water eventually becoming clear. I do the same with my light grey Sailor 1911S, but choosing a soft grey ink the colour of clouds after a rainstorm has passed.

I check the time: 7:38 am. Still more than enough time to kill.

I reach for the two pens I've been meaning to clean. Luckily, they're Ecos, so I only need to rinse them out with water instead of dealing with cartridges. Then I press the nibs down on a paper towel until there's no more trace of ink.

It's not much later once I'm done, but if I start to get ready now, maybe I can get to Café Ine a bit earlier than planned.

Within 25 minutes, I'm out the door and waiting for the 129. I brought a book today, just in case.

When I step off the bus, I don't see Emilia inside the café. It's gloomier outside now, so the lights in Café Ine look even brighter from the street than yesterday.

When I walk in, two different baristas look up at me, a young man with longer hair, who I'm guessing is Christopher, and a woman closer to 30, with short light blond hair, who might be Allie.

I order another mocha matcha latte and pick a spot at the small table next to the window, taking a seat on a chair facing the counter and door.

I bought a large drink – there's no telling how long I'll have to wait. I try to savour it, but savouring is hard when you have other things on your mind.

*Should I just ask them if Emilia's coming in today?*

I think.

*No, I'm not supposed to know her name.*

I resort to waiting and pretending to read. At least an hour passes, and by this time I'm taking the last sip of my drink. It's cold and there are small clumps of matcha, making the sip more bitter and powdery than the rest. I have to pee and spot the small door at the back of the café.

“Sorry, is that a bathroom?” I ask the baristas.

“Yeah,” the guy answers before greeting the customer that just walked in.

Once I get back to my table, still no Emilia.

*One hour. If she's not here in one hour, I can leave.*

I turn back to my book, to the same page I've been stuck on since being three quarters of the way done my drink. Somehow, I'm able to get into the novel until I hear a male voice say, "Hey, Emilia."

My head snaps up and I see Emilia standing behind the counter hugging each colleague.

I instantly freeze, even though she's not looking my way. My hands get clammy, and I hope they'll dry quickly enough so that they won't leave marks on the notebook.

Christopher collects his backpack from what seems to be a closet near the cash, and he waves bye to Emilia and Allie as he leaves.

I want to get up, but my legs don't obey. I open my book again, so at least I look like I'm doing something.

*Come on, just get up and give her the journal.*

My heart is pumping and I feel a headache coming on.

Emilia and Allie take turns at cash and making the drinks. Emilia is preparing a coffee as I hear the grains being ground. The sounds of the steaming milk frother and ice being scooped seem to resonate closer to my ears than usual.

I gather my things and get up from my spot before Emilia has to serve someone else.

"Hi," she says as I come up to the counter. She smiles at me as if she knows me. "What can I get you?"

I'm unable to let anything out other than a long "uhhhh..." and think of leaving before I really do something stupid.



“Hey, I know I might sound like a stalker,” she starts to say, looking at me, then looking away, around the café. “I’m pretty sure I’ve seen you before. You looked familiar yesterday, and when I saw you sitting here today, it hit me. Do you work at the stationery shop not far from here?”

Her almond-shaped eyes are almost round now as she’s looking at me, waiting.

“Uh, Scriptum, yeah, I work there.”

“Nice. Anyway, sorry, I promise I’m not a creep.” Emilia gives a short, strained laugh.

“Did you want to buy anything else?”

“Um, no, thanks.” She frowns then.

I grab the notebook from my tote bag, which feels like ripping off a band-aid that you’ve had on for days, but you don’t know if the wound has healed or grown infected. I set the Rhodia on the counter and push it toward her.

She’s frowning more deeply now, big creases on her forehead. Her hand is already on the counter, but she doesn’t reach for the journal. She stops moving until she looks back at me.

“I, that’s why I came yesterday, I wanted to give you this. I thought you’d want it back since...” I let the sentence trail.

Still, she says nothing. There’s confusion, but something else. Her lips are slightly parted, and she seems to be looking through me.

“I wasn’t sure how to do this, clearly I should’ve thought this through more –” I look around and a man has just come in. “Listen, if for some reason you want to talk, or see me, or, I don’t know... You know where to find me.”

With that, I dart out of Café Ine, not looking back this time.

*Fantastic, Indie. How fucking fantastic.*

I'm lightheaded, but the adrenaline keeps me moving until I get to du Parc Avenue.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it was definitely not this train wreck. Why in the world would Emilia want to see me again after that?

Scriptum is a few minutes away, but there's nothing I want less than to talk about what just happened.

Home it is.

Ezra isn't working today either, and he's watching TV when I arrive.

"A *Lord of the Rings* marathon is starting soon. You down?" He's lying on the couch, one of his hands behind his head.

"Um, sure."

"Nice, I'll make some snacks since we're going to be here a while."

For the rest of the day until late at night, that's what we do. We've seen the movies so many times we know the plot by heart. Ezra and I cite our favourite lines in time with the actors, proud of ourselves when we match them perfectly.

I might have blown it with Emilia, but this is enough.

## Chapter 19

Thursday mornings are the best days to work. It's almost the end of the week but not quite

Friday, and because of this, people seem less inclined to come in than any other day.

I internally grunt at myself every time I wonder about Emilia and if she'll come or not. I've never felt so stupid.

It's only Gertrude and me this morning. I like working with her. Gertrude's calm, mellow. Today, this makes me restless.

I want to ramble, to distract myself, but she seems to be having a peaceful time doing her tasks in silence. I go to the table in the corner where we keep our normal markers, highlighters, and various types of non-reusable pens. We need to sort through this section every few days since some customers put things back where they shouldn't. It calms my agitated mind for a little while, but when I'm done reorganizing those, the feeling is back.

"Gertrude?"

"Hm?" She doesn't look up, her purple glasses resting on the tip of her nose as she's cleaning out fountain pens from our display counter.

"What do you do when you think you've really messed up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." I pause. "OK, say you find something that's not yours and you give it back to the original owner, and that person reacts in a weird way. What do you do?"

"You didn't do anything wrong if that's the case. You gave it back, shouldn't that be the point?" Even though she looks up at me, her head is still inclined and she seems to be giving me the look you give to someone when the answer is obvious.

"Well, say I took my time before giving it back. And that it's something really personal."

“It depends. If I don’t think I did anything wrong, I move on without giving it another thought.”

This isn’t helping at all. I sigh as I go to the back to get some stock. We’ve received enough new ink bottles for me to redo the shelves behind the cash where inks are displayed.

I can’t help but look through the new arrivals to see if we have any new colours or brands. I hope for Vinta Maskara, the ink Emilia used, but it’s not here.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes?” I say, placing the last bottle before turning to look at the customer. “Oh shit,” I mutter more loudly than intended.

“Hi.” Emilia brushes a strand of hair behind her ear. “Do you finish work soon?”

“In about an hour.”

“Oh, well, do you think we could talk after your shift?”

“You want to?” If I could slap my forehead, I would.

“Yeah, I’ll be back in an hour.” Then, she turns and leaves.

*How am I supposed to work now?*

“Was that a friend?” Gertrude asks.

“Of sorts.”

She pauses what she’s doing to look at me.

“Let’s just say I feel like I’m closer to her than the other way around.” My cheeks are hot.

Business has picked up a bit, and because of it, time passes quickly. I can’t decide if that’s good or bad.

Then Leila arrives and my stomach flips. She's not scheduled to start just yet, but she comes on the floor anyway. She can never sit still or alone in the back.

"Why is it we see each other almost always when your shift ends?" she asks me.

"Don't tell anyone, but I told Peter I didn't want to work with you."

"Now Indigo, that's very rude." She points her finger at me.

A client asks for help with fountain pens. I hope this won't take too long until I realize Emilia's back earlier than expected. When she comes in, I stare at her, forgetting about my customer for a second, waiting to see what she does. Emilia turns away from me and starts looking at our products while I wait as the woman in front of me tries out a pen. Emilia flips through the notebooks and eventually comes to where I am, but Leila is the one to help her as she asks about the Leuchtturm1917 journals.

The woman is getting impatient because every time she asks me a question, she has to repeat it. A few minutes after my workday was supposed to end, she leaves with a Kaweco AL Sport, and Leila is ringing Emilia's lavender notebook up.

I go to retrieve my things. Emilia is waiting for me outside, so I say bye to Leila and Gertrude.

"You look stressed. Maybe you should treat yourself to a face mask and a movie tonight," Leila tells me.

"Maybe. See you guys tomorrow." I don't wait for their response.

I walk out and Emilia and I stand in front of each other without speaking. She's wearing a light grey dress, one of those that look like an oversized t-shirt. On her feet are a pair of high-top black converse.

“Did you want to go somewhere?” I ask.

“Not really.”

“Um...” I look around. Nothing but storefronts and asphalt. “How about we walk around Mont-Royal? We can take the 129 there if you want.”

“Sure.”

Soon, we’re on the bus, and we don’t speak for the few minutes the ride takes. We get off and make our way to the George-Étienne Cartier monument.

We walk in silence. Emilia seems happy. Or rather, she doesn’t seem angry, which I’m relieved about.

“So, how did you find my journal?”

“On the bus on my way to work.” She nods, as if this had been her theory.

“Did you read it all?”

I’m glad we’re walking because I’m not good at eye contact during a serious conversation. I think of lying, but there’s no point.

“Yes.”

“I figured.”

“But I didn’t mean to. I just thought your writing was pretty, and then I started to read and I had to finish it. I’m sorry.”

The path is full of joggers and dog-walkers, so I speak as quietly as I can.

“I know you didn’t write it thinking someone would read it. I shouldn’t have, but I was too curious.”

I notice the nervous sweat I’ve broken into, feeling the small pool of it under my armpits.

“Honestly, I’m OK with it.”

“Really?” I look at her.

She nods without returning my gaze.

“I didn’t know what to think when you came to the café. I thought I’d lost my journal for good, but I never thought about getting it back. Why did you do that? You could’ve kept it. Avoided all this.”

“It wasn’t mine to keep. Doing anything else with it would’ve been weird. It’s not like I could throw it out or give it to someone else.”

“Well, thanks.”

“Thanks?”

She must hear the confusion in my voice because she turns to me now. “Yeah, thanks. For thinking the stuff I wrote was valuable enough for you to give it back.”

“I assumed you’d get mad and never want to talk to me again.”

“I mean…” Emilia looks around. “I was mad when I knew you read my journal.” She pauses. I don’t know if she wants to make me nervous, but that’s what she’s doing. My eyes dart from one thing to the next, waiting for her to say something else. Then she lets out a long sigh. “If it had been me, I know I would’ve done the same.”

I say nothing, not knowing how to answer. We walk in silence again.

“Did you guys buy the place with the lavender door?”

Emilia nods, smiling. “Yeah, we just moved in at the beginning of the week.”

“I was hoping your dad would be able to buy it.”

Emilia laughs even though I haven’t said anything I meant to be funny.

“It’s weird how you know so much about my life. You’re probably the one who knows most about what I’ve gone through in the last months.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s kind of nice, actually. Not having to say anything about Sophie yet you still knowing. Not asking any questions I don’t want to answer.”

“I didn’t think of it that way.”

A pause again. Somehow, there’s nothing awkward about it.

“By the way, you never told me your name.”

“Oh, I’m Indigo. You can call me Indie.”

“Huh, nice. I don’t know anyone called Indigo.”

“Well, now you do.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

We reach a viewpoint and decide to stop, Montréal stretching out in front of us. There’s a man with his bike trolley full of popsicles.

“You want one?” I ask Emilia.

“Sure, thanks.”

We walk as we eat our ice cream, Emilia’s a red, blue, and white Cyclone, mine a regular ice cream sandwich. I feel like a kid again.

“I haven’t had one of these in so long. It’s reminding me of how much I loved them when I was younger,” Emilia says, biting into her popsicle.

“You just bite into it like that?”

“It’s the only way to eat it.”



I pretend to shiver.

“You’re biting into your ice cream sandwich. What’s the problem?” she asks.

“The cookie part of the sandwich isn’t as cold.”

She takes another bite and I can feel an ache in my teeth, almost as if they shiver too.

We throw our wrappers away and go back the way we came.

“I have a random question. What does papaya salad taste like?”

“Is that what you got out of reading my journal?” She chuckles. “It’s definitely not everyone’s favourite – a strong fishy taste and smell, and usually spicy.”

“I love fish. I’m not that great with spicy food, but it’s worth a try. Do you have a recipe?”

Emilia lets out a laugh.

“There’s no recipe – you just go by taste.” She gives her head a few small shakes, as if thinking how silly my question is. Then, “Papaya salad is the test to know if people who aren’t Lao will stick around.”

That last comment hangs in the air. I look at her, but she’s looking away.

Eventually, Emilia turns to me again.

“So, Indigo.”

My eyebrows go up at the fact that she’s still using my full name.

“It’s your turn now. Tell me about yourself.”