CHAPTER 1

My cell phone rang, loud and shrill, shattering the classroom’s silence.

He’d found us. He was coming.

The teacher scowled, reaching out her puffy hand to confiscate my phone as I slid it open and held it to my ear. Answer on the first ring—that was the rule.

One word, my mother’s panicked command: *Run.*

With trembling hands, I swept my textbook and notes into my bag. Leave nothing personal behind—that was another rule.

Every second, he was getting closer. I stumbled toward the door.

“Maddie, where are you going?” Mrs. Landon demanded, then her voice softened. “Is something wrong?”

I rushed past her and out of the classroom, my breath coming in stuttery little gasps. Dennis Connelly was coming. How did he find us again?

I raced to my locker—the combination, what’s the combination?—and cleaned it out, stuffing everything into my bag. Flew down the stairs. Dashed down the hall, almost colliding with a girl carrying an armful of books. Sprinted past the office, reached the exit—

“Hey!” A security guard, belly hanging over his belt, grabbed my arm. “Where’s your pass?”

My brother darted over, lugging his bookbag and saxophone. “Let her go,” he said, his calm and firm tone betrayed by the terror in his eyes. He pulled me away, and when I stumbled, he pushed me out the door. “Tessa, run!”

We were in public, but Logan had used my real name. We no longer needed our aliases.

I glanced behind me. “Where’s Jillian?” The doors burst open and our sister shot outside, bookbag flailing, blonde hair flying behind her.

Its engine running, our getaway car waited in the pickup lane with our dad holding the back door open. We ran and dove in. Dad jumped in the front seat, slamming his door closed as Mom stomped on the gas pedal and sped us away.

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Night fell long before my mom pulled off the highway. She needed a break, the car needed gas, and we needed food. Weary, stiff, and achy, faces hidden under plain baseball caps, we filed into a 24-hour diner and evaluated the late-night patrons: a couple of truck-driver types sitting at the counter drinking coffee and watching CNN on the grainy TV hanging in the corner; a table of teenagers goofing around, shoveling forkfuls of syrup-soaked waffles into their mouths.

A few of the boys, and one of the truck drivers, noticed Jillian. They always did. But their glances were appreciative, not suspicious. We could stay.

Normally Jillian would have given the boys a sly smile in return. This time she tugged her cap lower and turned away.

At sixteen, I was only a year younger than my sister, but at 4’10”, I was almost a foot shorter. If the boys noticed anything about me at all, it was my lack of height. And that was fine with me.

When the gum-smacking hostess tried to lead us to a booth near the back, we asked for the table closest to the door. Always sit near the exit—that was another rule.

My parents took a newspaper from the counter and huddled over it while we waited for our food. Watching them closely, Jillian sipped ice water from a straw. Logan scribbled musical notes on a napkin.

I slid my hands into my sleeves, poking my thumbs out of the holes I’d worn in the cuffs. “How did he find us this time?” We didn’t use credit cards. We didn’t use the internet. We didn’t mail letters or borrow books from the library. Yet Dennis Connelly still managed to find us.

“We don’t know,” Mom said, looking up from the newspaper and wiping the graying hair from her eyes. “Your dad saw him so we ran.”

Logan looked up from his napkin. “Where do we go now?”

“How about Louisiana?” Jillian said. “Or—ooh—California?”

“We’re thinking Illinois this time,” Dad said. “It would work for our cover story.”

She groaned. “But winter’s just a couple months away! Illinois in winter will be no better than Nebraska was last year.”

“Don’t argue, Jillian.” Mom rubbed her fingertips under her eyes. “Please. It’s been a long day.”

 “You said our next place would be somewhere warm.” Jillian’s lip curled defiantly. “You promised.”

Mom wrung her hands on the table. “I know. I’m sorry. We’re just trying to keep everyone safe.” With a low rumble, the coffee mugs started to vibrate.

Every muscle in my body went rigid. Logan’s gaze darted to the kids in the back and the men at the counter. “Mom.”

The napkin dispenser tipped over, hitting the table with a sharp slap.

“Wendy.” My dad put his hand over hers, making a soft *clink* as their wedding rings touched. “Careful. You’re losing control.”

She gasped, and the mugs stopped rumbling. Keeping one hand on Mom’s, Dad glowered at Jillian. “We’re going to Illinois. That’s it. No more discussion.”

Jillian stared at the table and nodded. Mom set the napkin dispenser upright by hand, but only after she gave me a remorseful squeeze was I able to breathe again.

Our meals arrived, delivered by a bored waitress with lipstick on her teeth. No one ate much. This was our thirteenth run in eight years, but we’d never gotten used to them. My father ate nothing. He scratched the stubble on his jaw, then rubbed his temples. Mom caressed his cheek. “Is your headache that bad, Andy?”

“I just need to sleep.” He took her hand again, giving it a gentle kiss. “We all do.”

We paid for our meal in cash. Logan pocketed his napkin. Later he would copy the new song into his composition book, which he always kept with him. Then we would burn the napkin. We could leave nothing personal behind.

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Sometime in the middle of the night we stopped at a motel in a not-so-nice neighborhood where we could pay with cash, and without answering questions. After reserving two adjoining rooms, we towed our only belongings, one getaway bag each, Logan’s sax, and three heavy bags filled with cash, inside.

We spoke in whispers and kept most of the lights off. Noise and bright lights made my dad’s headaches worse. Reclining on the bed with his head in my mom’s lap, he fell asleep as she stroked his forehead.

I scrubbed myself clean in the shower, making the water hot, then hotter still, until the steam was thick as fog, thick enough to hide me from the world. I twisted the knob all the way up to wash my stomach. As I scrubbed the five jagged scars that ran from my sternum to my pelvis, I tried to ignore the memory of Dennis Connelly slicing me open eight years ago, with nothing more than his murderous glance.

When I was done I turned off the water but stayed in the steam, breathing it in, filling my lungs with it, filling every cell with it, until it dissipated and the world came back into icy focus.

After putting on pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, I lugged my getaway bag back to the room I shared with my brother and sister. Logan lay on one of the beds, eyes closed, listening to his iPod and waving his index fingers like he was conducting an orchestra. Even after this long day his conservative haircut was perfectly combed.

My mom sat with Jillian on the other bed, an issue of *Seventeen* open between them, their spat at the diner completely forgotten, or at least ignored. I crawled in on the other side and pulled the sheet up to my chin, using its sharp bleachy scent to conceal the stench of stale cigarettes from the mattress.

Mom shifted over to me. “I think,” she said as she smoothed my hair, “this is the last time we’ll have to run. He’ll either give up or he won’t be able to find us.”

I nodded, but she said that every time, her words generated only by wishful thinking. My mother was psychokinetic, not precognitive.

And Dennis Connelly would never stop hunting us. Not until he killed us.

A low moan came from the next room. Mom kissed us goodnight, then, shoulders slumped, went to rub my dad’s forehead again.

Jillian slid under the covers next to me. Her getaway bag lay open on the floor, a jumble of clothes, cosmetics, and well-worn ballet shoes spilling out. She flicked her fingers at the magazine and it rose from the bed, then set itself on top of the pile. “I wish we could’ve stayed in Vermont a little longer. I kind of liked it there.”

“I thought Vermont was too cold for you,” Logan said, pulling his earbuds out. With a dismissive wave, he sent his iPod floating over to the nightstand.

She sighed. “This morning Kenny Fitch asked me to Homecoming. I said yes.”

I wondered how long it would take Kenny Fitch to figure out he’d have to find another date.

It wouldn’t take Jillian long to find a new boyfriend. She would go on dates at our next location, too. Logan would probably start dating as well, now that he was in high school. They would make friends and go to dances and join clubs. I was the only one who couldn’t pretend our lives were normal.

But tonight, my siblings couldn’t pretend either. The door connecting to our parents’ room swung open a bit wider after Logan’s furtive glance. A tear slid down Jillian’s cheek, and when she saw me looking, she swiped it away and turned her back to me. She flicked one finger at the lamp and the room turned dark.

I lay awake for a long time, trying to imagine a life free from secrets and lies and Dennis Connelly. A life free from flinching at every horn beeping outside and jumping at every footstep passing by our door.

Wait. The door. Was it locked?

Jillian had come in behind me. She locked it. She must have.

But I didn’t see her turn the bolt.

I whispered into the darkness. “Will one of you make sure the door is locked?”

Their only replies were the soft, even breaths of sleep.

Holding my breath for courage, I scrambled out of bed, scurried to the door. The bolt was locked. I tugged on the knob anyway, making sure. The door didn’t budge. I rushed into my parents’ room to check their door too. We were all locked in.

Safe.

But not really. A locked door wouldn’t keep Dennis Connelly out.

I crawled back in bed and stared at the shadows until a cloud of exhaustion finally carried me away.

The nightmare came and quickly brought me back.

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Early the next morning we waited silently on one of the beds while Dad searched for Dennis Connelly. He closed his eyes and sat motionless.

My father was a remote viewer. All he had to do was touch someone, and from then on he could see from their eyes and hear from their ears, no matter where they were. Dennis Connelly was one of the very few who could block himself from my dad’s mobile eye. Dad could never see him, except when he was close. That was how we knew it was time to run. That was how we stayed alive.

Dad slowly raised his hands to rub his temples. Jillian and I shot each other worried glances. His headaches were getting worse.

Finally, he opened his eyes and blinked, his gaze unfocused.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“I can’t see him, which means he’s far away. We’re safe.”

I added a silent “for now” at the end of his sentence.

It was getting late, and staying in one place too long between locations made us all jumpy. Time to pack up. With a few waves of her hand, Jillian’s clothes stuffed themselves into her getaway bag. Logan directed his clothes to fold themselves up neatly. Our mom packed her things without even looking up from her crossword puzzle in the newspaper. A white washcloth scrubbed our fingerprints off every surface while our toiletry items floated out of the bathroom and tossed themselves into our getaway bags.

I collected my belongings and folded my clothes to put in my bag. “Relax, Babydoll,” my mom said. “I’ll do that for you.” She returned to her crossword puzzle as my pajama bottoms floated over to the bag.

I plucked them from the air. “I got it, Mom.” I may not be psychokinetic and move objects with my mind, or have remote vision and see through other people’s eyes, but I could pack my own clothes.

Before we left to spend another day on the road, Mom made two last calls on her cell phone. First, she called our school and gave the secretary the same story she used every time we fled. All that ever changed were the names she used.

“Hi, this is Susan Monroe, I must apologize for not calling to excuse Meredith, Maddie, and Michael from school yesterday. We had a death in the family and in my distress I simply forgot to call you. Thank you so much for your condolences. Actually, we’re not coming back. Burt finished writing his book so it was about time to move on anyway. You know, there is something you could do. The kids are still too upset to contact their friends. Will you please spread the word and tell everyone we’ll be in touch soon.”

We wouldn’t be in touch soon, or ever.

Next, she called the owner of the house we had rented with the same excuse. She told him to keep the security deposit, which we’d paid in cash when we moved in last April.

This was our thirteenth ‘death in the family,’ the thirteenth ‘book’ my dad had written. A flimsy story, but if anyone cared enough to look into it, they wouldn’t be able to find us. No one would be able to find us—not our classmates, not our landlord, not our neighbors.

Only Dennis Connelly. He found us every time.

My dad was still recovering from his headache, so Mom got behind the wheel of our getaway car again. We zig-zagged from state to state, town to city to sprawling farmland, flying down highways and crawling down small roads, sometimes doubling back to cover our tracks.

A few hours into our trip, we found a parking lot behind an abandoned building. We made sure there were no security cameras, then stuffed everything we could—our towels, sheets, and pillows from the motel, Jillian’s magazine, Logan’s napkin, our bookbags—into a metal garbage can. We stood back as a match lit itself upon Mom’s silent command and floated into the can, burning everything to ashes.

In the next state, we stopped at a used car lot. My dad hopped out and paid the sticker price, in cash, for the first car he saw, a rusty maroon minivan. He followed us to our last stop, a junkyard. After ensuring there were no witnesses, Dad and I watched as Mom, Jillian, and Logan pulled and twisted our old getaway car into tiny pieces of unidentifiable metal.

Now the Monroe family no longer existed.

The Carson family existed, but no one knew us. We were shadows.