Nobody knows how Peter ended up at the bottom of MacAdam’s Lookout. Chloe can’t figure it out, or why his mother seems to think she was his friend. Peter had no friends. He was a loner, more interested in astronomy than in other people. But something – or someone – pushed him over the edge...
To Bruce and Bruce and Marlene
— who were a little odd in high school

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Chapter 1

Peter Flosnick wasn’t the kind of guy you’d expect to just vanish. I don’t know why, but I always figured guys like him liked their lives. Sure, they were outside of things, but they were outside because they were obsessed with, well, whatever they were obsessed with. For some of them, it was computers. For others, mechanical stuff, engines or electronics. For Peter Flosnick it was the stars, as in twinkle, twinkle. He watched them. He studied them. He did science projects about them — award-winning science projects. And he wrote about them in the school newspaper, in an amateur astronomy column that appeared in three different local papers, and in a star-watching column in a kids’ magazine. Whenever I saw him around school, he either had his nose in a book — studying up on the history, trajectory or probable life cycle of yet another heavenly body — or in one of those science magazines that are the official badge of nerd-dom. I used to see him around town, too, wandering up a trail in the park or down by the lake, speaking into a pocket-sized tape recorder. I figured, the guy’s strange. I also figured he liked it that way — he’d probably keep on being strange until the day he died.

How I found out about Peter’s disappearance is this: I had just dragged myself out of bed — not exactly
my favorite activity, I might add. From the top of the stairs I smelled fresh-brewed coffee, bacon and toast. It was the coffee that interested me. I’m a mess without my morning fix of caffeine. When I got there, Phoebe — my younger sister — was sitting at the table, shoving a crust of toast into her mouth. She washed it down with the dregs of a glass of orange juice, then leapt up and dropped a kiss onto Levesque’s cheek. He was standing at the stove, frying bacon.

A word about Levesque. Louis Levesque. Mom keeps telling us we should call him Dad, which Phoebe, Little Miss Tell-Me-What-You-Want-and-I’ll-Be-Only-Too-Glad-to-Do-It, does. At least Levesque doesn’t push the issue. He says I can call him Louis, which I do sometimes. But in my head I always think of him the way he was referred to in the newspapers back home: just plain Levesque. Mom married him a year ago. Two months ago he took a job in East Hastings, and here we are. Some of us — well, me — are not thrilled with his career move. Phoebe loves it here. So does Mom. My older sister, Brynn, escaped exile by graduating from high school. She’s in college back in Montreal.

Levesque watched Phoebe race out the door to volleyball practice. An amused smile, barely visible below his bristling moustache, softened his large, square face. For a moment he looked like a regular dad on a regular weekday morning, instead of Mr. Officer-of-the-Law, cop-on-duty, the guy with the quickest, sharpest eyes in town. Look smart, there, pal, I know who you are and I saw what you did. Then the front door slammed shut and Levesque turned his attention to me.

“Juice?” he said. His tone was pleasant enough, but his eyes were burning into me, as if he were looking for something. He always seemed to be looking for something. I hadn’t gotten used to that yet. That look of his always made me feel guilty, even when I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Just coffee, thanks,” I said. I hooked the coffee pot off its warmer pad before he could do it for me.

“Eggs?” he said.

“No, thanks.”

“Bacon? Toast?”

“No, thanks,” I said again.

“You should reconsider. You know what they say, breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

I dribbled a little milk into my coffee and thought of plenty of things to say, starting with, hey, Sherlock, have you ever, in the whole year you’ve known me, seen me eat anything even remotely resembling breakfast? But Levesque could be a pit bull. If I started trying to be smart with him, I could be there all morning. He’d never let go. And besides breakfast, an argument was my least favorite start to the day.

I drank my coffee standing at the sink, looking out the window so that I could make a quick getaway if he decided to keep pestering me with questions. He didn’t — he didn’t have time to because the phone rang. Levesque handed me the
fork, said, “Watch that for me, will you?” and padded across the kitchen floor in sock feet to answer it.

I prodded the sizzling bacon. I would never have admitted it to Levesque, but it sure smelled good. I wondered whether he would notice if I sneaked a piece out of the pan. Probably, I decided. The guy was a detective, after all. Still, my mouth watered, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t stop thinking how great it would taste to bite down on a strip of crisp, salty bacon.

“Did you talk to his mother?” Levesque was saying into the phone. “Did she have any ideas?” His eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted down, giving his face a look of concentration that I recognized all too well. His cop expression. Whoever he was talking to was talking business. “Okay,” Levesque said. “Okay, I’ll be right there.”

He hung up the phone and disappeared from the kitchen. He was back a moment later with his jacket over his arm and his shoes in his hand.

“You know a kid named Flosnick?” he asked as he tied his laces.

“Peter Flosnick?” It sounds terrible now, under the circumstances, but I remember thinking, what could a mega-nerd like Peter Flosnick possibly have done to get himself in trouble with the police?

“I know who he is. Why?”

“He’s missing.”

“Missing?”

“His mother hasn’t seen him since Sunday evening.”

This was Tuesday morning.

“Apparently he wasn’t at school yesterday, either. You have any ideas?”

“Me?” He had to be kidding. Okay, so I wasn’t the big-league joiner Phoebe had turned into — she had signed up for the swim team and the volleyball team, after one debate she had turned into the star of the junior debating team, she had already been elected assistant editor of the yearbook and treasurer of the student council, and for the first time in her life she had zillionsof friends. I, on the other hand, was taking a little longer to get my bearings.

But that didn’t mean I was desperate enough to have a fix on Peter Flosnick’s comings and goings. It was just that my friends were back in Montreal, not here.

“I said I know who he is,” I told Levesque. “But that doesn’t mean I know anything about him.”

Levesque’s moustache twitched, a sure sign he was smiling somewhere under it. “Not your type?” he asked. When I didn’t answer he said, “A lot of police work is about asking questions. Sometimes you get lucky and get some answers you can use.” He got up and slipped into his jacket.

“What about your breakfast?” I asked.

“No time.”

I turned the heat off under the pan, lifted out the bacon strips and set them on a piece of paper towel to drain. The front door clicked shut. I looked at the bacon and took another sip of my coffee. Then I
began to eat the bacon one piece at a time.

Thirty minutes later, I was thinking and feeling and wishing the same thing I had thought and felt and wished every weekday morning for the past six weeks.

Look, this is me, standing face-to-face with the enemy and thinking: shoot me now and put me out of my misery. But, of course, that had already happened. I had been shot. Or run over or drowned or dropped off a cliff or fired out of a cannon. I was living in East Hastings, wasn’t I, a big pit of nickel and boredom. The bottom line was the same: I had died and now here I was in a town called . . . Well, never mind. I was doomed to tread the same path each and every morning, doomed to end up where I was right now, staring down the enemy. Staring it down and being swallowed up by it all at the same time. There was no escape.

Now this is me looking down at my feet. Looking down at my sneakers and wishing they were ruby slippers. This is me wishing I believed in magic and fairy tales and good witches, wishing I could click my heels together and find myself back home in my own version of Kansas — which for me is Montreal. Okay, so technically Montreal wasn’t my home anymore, but it still felt more like home than East Hastings ever would.

Now this is me raising my head and wishing I would see the big cross that stands on the top of Mount Royal in the middle of Montreal. I used to be able to see it from the front of my old school.

This is me raising my head and actually seeing East Hastings Regional High, built in the style of the nineteen sixties, with a ratio of brick to windows of about a thousand to one. The school as bunker, designed to keep distractions out, window cleaning bills to a minimum and window repair bills lower still. Twelve hundred kids trudge to and from East Hastings Regional every day. Twelve hundred kids who have no idea what they’re missing, stuck up here in a cluster of dots on a map, a handful of little towns that no one in Toronto or Montreal or Vancouver has ever heard of, or, if they have, they can never place. “Where exactly is that?” my friends asked me when I told them where I was going. It’s right here, comedres. It’s this rinky-dink town where everyone speaks the same language, ici on ne parle pas français, where there’s no rue St-Denis, no Place d’Armes, no Carré St-Louis, no Gare Centrale, no boulevard René-Levesque, no mountain you can climb to the top of and look out on a sea of twinkling lights. No St. Lawrence River, no Laurentian autoroute, no school trips to ski Mont Tremblant.

And — did I mention this? — there’s no escape. Not in the short term. Not that I’ve discovered. So, here we go, you place one foot in front of the other and repeat as often a necessary until you reach the top of the steps and — whoa! — look at that pair sitting on the wall. How sweet. Just what we all want to see first thing in the morning. Lise Arsenault and Matt Walker, tongue wrestling.
They were described around school as an “item.” Obviously not an item of good taste.

The bell rang. It was as if the switch on an electromagnet had been flipped, only instead of metal objects, it was kids who were pulled inexorably toward the double front doors. Another day in paradise. Or, as we used to say back home, *ça commence encore.*

That day, for the first time since I had set foot in East Hastings Regional High, I was acutely aware of Peter Flosnick, which was odd, because I had managed to survive almost all of my first six weeks without giving him a single thought. When Ms. Michaud read out his name in homeroom, I looked around and saw nothing but indifference reflected in face after face. Nobody seemed to care whether Peter was there to say “Present” or whether his name was followed by silence, signifying absence. Even Ms. Michaud didn’t pause longer than it took to glance for confirmation at his empty seat. If anyone in the room was thinking, gee, I wonder where Peter is today, they gave no sign of it. Probably in all of East Hastings only two people cared what had happened to him — his mother, who had called the police, and Levesque, who headed up the police force and was, therefore, responsible for finding him. Poor Peter.

Listen to me. Don’t be such a hypocrite, I told myself sternly. If I ever thought about Peter Flosnick before today, it was only to think what a nerd he was. You can’t have such a low opinion of a guy, and then march out an air of superiority when you find yourself the only person who seems to notice when something happens to him. When something *maybe* happens, I amended, because for all anyone knew, he could have stolen a car and gone joy-riding, or run away from home, or maybe bribed someone to score some beer or some hard stuff for him and gotten fall-down drunk and passed out somewhere, and maybe he’s waking up right this minute with a gigantic headache.

Forget Peter Flosnick, I told myself.

* * *

That night after Mom and Phoebe were in bed, I sat up, supposedly reading, but really waiting. It was nearly midnight before I heard the car in the driveway, then the footsteps on the graveled path that led to the front door. I swung off the bed to the sound of Levesque’s keys dropping onto the little table in the front hall. As I tiptoed down the stairs I heard the fridge door open and then close again. Levesque was pouring himself a glass of milk when I entered the kitchen. A bold black eyebrow arched as he glanced from me to the clock on the stove and back at me again.

“Up late studying?” he said. I couldn’t tell if it was a serious question or if that annoyingly amused look meant that he suspected I’d been up doing my nails or poring over a teen magazine or something equally frivolous. I could never tell. It drove me crazy sometimes.

“I have a history test tomorrow,” I told him.
He nodded and gulped down half of his glass of milk. He wasn’t going to volunteer anything. I don’t know what had made me think he might. If I wanted to know, I was going to have to ask.

“So,” I said, trying to sound casual, “did you find him?”

“Find who?”

“Peter Flosnick.”

He drained the rest of the milk from the glass.

“You know I don’t discuss police business at home.”

I didn’t have to be a member of the police detective brotherhood to figure out what that meant.

“So where was he?”

Levesque peered at me for a moment with those coal-black eyes of his. Then he said, “In the park, at MacAdam’s Lookout.”

MacAdam’s Lookout is a cliff. A dizzyingly high cliff. It seems some guy named Jock MacAdam was the first white man to stand on that particular spot and gaze out over what is now East Hastings Provincial Park. The lookout is solid rock, a big, bare slab of Canadian Shield that sticks out like an old man’s bald head up above a forest of pine and spruce and birch. There was a certain logic to Peter being there. A guy who loved stars, out in the park, away from the lights of town, where you could get a really good look at the night sky.

“Star-gazing, I bet,” I said.

Levesque shook his head. “He was at the bottom of the lookout, not the top.”

That didn’t make any sense. “What was he doing there?”

This earned me another long look from Levesque. “I’m sorry to say, he wasn’t breathing.”