

*The  
Secret  
Language  
of Sisters*

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*Point*

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Summary: Mathilda (Tilly), fourteen, and Ruth Anne (Roo), sixteen, are sisters and best friends in Connecticut, but when Roo crashes her car while texting she is confined to a hospital bed with “locked-in syndrome,” aware of her surroundings, but apparently comatose—and Tilly must find a way to communicate with her sister, while dealing with her own sense of guilt.

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*Prologue*

*Roo*

*I*'m late.

And I'm hardly ever late, that's the thing. I tend to be so on time it drives some people—namely my sister, Tilly—crazy. She says I make her look bad. Right now she's waiting for me to pick her up at the river museum, and I should have been there five minutes ago.

It is four o'clock on Saturday afternoon, bright, clear, and cold. Driving through the marshes, I see ice on the banks, sparkling on the golden grasses and the splintery old dock. The Connecticut River is nearly frozen over, but it turns dark blue in the wide-open sections where it meets the salt water of Long Island Sound, and the late-afternoon February light is perfect. I slow down to take another shot.

I am unfashionably into landscapes; I apologize to no one. I park my dad's old Volvo in the sandy lot behind the bait shop, shuttered for winter. Grabbing my camera, I cross the street to snap a few shots of cold winter sunlight on the broken ice.

## 2 *The Secret Language of Sisters*

The phone in my pocket buzzes. I ignore it and keep taking photographs. I had set today aside to do this, but driving Tilly around has cut into my plans. I can't help that I'm a little compulsive about getting things done, and if one thing has to slide today, it's going to be punctuality. My portfolio for the Serena Kader Barrois Foundation Photography Contest needs more work. Although it's not due until June, I want it to be as perfect as I can make it, and capture these winter days. I'm a junior and want to apply to Yale early decision. The award would boost my chances of being accepted at my dad's old university, but it also includes a thousand-dollar scholarship, and that would help my mom a lot, no matter where I go.

Just as important as the scholarship: If I win, I'll dedicate the prize to Dad. I think that's partly what's got Tilly acting so mad at me. He died last summer, and to say we both miss him is a slight understatement, like saying the sun is bright. Taking pictures of nature is my way of staying connected to him, making him feel alive to me. Tilly and Dad used to go owling, searching for the owls that live in the woods at the far end of the beach. She hasn't returned to the owls since he died, hasn't found a way to keep him close.

I miss him so much, glancing over at the car actually hurts. It was his before he died. There's a shadow in the front seat, cast by the bait shack, and for one sharp instant I pretend it's his ghost or, even better, *him*. I'll get in the car, and he'll be there, and we'll go pick up Tilly, and none of the last year will have happened.

Another buzz. My fingers are stiff from the cold, but I pull the phone from my jacket pocket and check. Four texts: Two

are from Tilly. *Where are you?* And then, *I mean it, WHERE ARE YOU?* My heartbeat picks up—her anxiety is contagious, and I write her back: *On my way, O impatient one!!!*

And she *is* impatient, my little sister. Two years and a lifetime younger than I am. The world revolves around Mathilda Mae. Well, it always has for me, anyway. I'm sure I had some normal sibling jealousy, being the first child, then having her come along. Mostly, I adore her and try to protect her. Sometimes I feel like her mother. Still, she can be incredibly annoying.

The third text is from Isabel Cruz, my best friend. She's also entering the photo contest, and she has shot me a picture of the shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe in her mother's bedroom. The photo shows the most recent addition: Her mother is constantly making offerings, and now the brightly colored doll has four dead roses, no doubt taken from one of the tables her mom had cleared that day, wedged into her veil.

I write back, *Brava, preciosa!* Then I take a photo of the bait shack's faded sign with my phone and send it to her.

The fourth text is from my boyfriend, Newton. How can I explain what one question from him can do to me? We have been together for so long, through the best of times and the worst of times. He sat in the row behind me at my father's funeral, and I reached back to hold his hand through most of it. So why have I been pulling away? It's not that I don't love him. I want to say, if anything, I love him too much.

He's written: *How can you say being apart is better?*

Oh, Newton. That's too hard to answer by text, and I'm late for Tilly. Or at least that's my excuse. It's Saturday, and he and I haven't seen each other once since getting out of school

4 *The Secret Language of Sisters*

yesterday, and to tell you the truth, I plan to avoid him until Monday.

I get back into the car; my father's ghost is gone. I throw my phone and camera on the passenger seat, and head north on Shore Road. Now I really need to hurry to Tilly.

My sister's not that strong, academically. She's having senior slump, and she's only a freshman. So the fact she spent hours at the museum doing research for a school project deserves praise and encouragement. Our mom is grading papers, so I am Tilly's designated chauffeur. I'll make up for being late by taking her out for hot chocolate.

Long shadows fall across the road, dappling the two-hundred-year-old stone walls with black and silver. Everything is a photograph. I want to stop here, see if I can capture the spare and haunting beauty, but my phone buzzes again. It's on the seat beside me, right against my camera. The metal on metal sounds loud and jarring. It's Tilly, of course.

If she could just wait, I'd be there soon, and we could take the long way home, listen to the radio, and when we stop for cocoa, I'll make sure she gets extra marshmallows. But my phone is exploding with texts, little Tilly-isms: *Whatcha doin that's more important than your ONLY SISTER?* Followed shortly by *Um, I'm still here.* Then, *Just here killing time while the MUSEUM is trying to CLOSE! You are keeping people from their DINNERS.* Maybe I'll take the passive-aggressive route and ignore her. SO TEMPTING. Instead, I speed up.

And here she is again: *At least tell me how long you'll be.*

My hand hovers over my phone; I'm a bit torn about whether to just keep going, or to waste time pulling over to respond.

She sends another, all caps, as if she's screaming at me, so obviously agitated she misspells: *ANSERE ME!*

That makes me laugh, which she would hate.

I'm heading down the long straightaway toward the bridge. The two white church steeples that mark the town of Black Hall rise above bare trees scoring the low hills. It's a sleepy little town in wintertime—summer people come from New York and Hartford, with fancy cars and lots of money—but in February it's just us locals, and the roads are empty. So I grab my phone.

Everyone knows: Don't text and drive. And I don't! I swear. Well, I do. But only when I am sure it's safe, when there are no other cars, no bends in the road, only in daylight, and only when it's a quick reply.

I see our town's single traffic light half a mile ahead. The bridge is on my left; it arches over the Connecticut River, a simple span with the most beautiful views in the world. Fields and wetlands, winter brown and crisscrossed with frozen tidal creeks, glisten on the right. I am going forty-three miles an hour, just slightly over the speed limit. I pump the brakes as I approach the light. Forty miles an hour.

Phone in my right hand, thumb hitting the keys as my eyes dart from the road to the keyboard. There's a pickup truck coming toward me, but still far off, on the other side of the traffic light, and even from this distance, I recognize it: the Johnson family's farm wagon, bright red with wooden slats around the truck bed.

Plenty of time, slowing more, thirty miles an hour, and I press the numeral 5, and I look down directly at my phone to

quickly type the next part: *mins away*. And I hit SEND just in time to look up and see that I have veered off the road onto the shoulder, where an old woman is walking her dog in the shadows, and I am going to hit them.

I see it all: She is wearing a black coat, and she has gray hair and glasses, and I don't know her name, but I have seen her in the grocery store, and her dog is a Labrador retriever with a red collar and has darted after a blur that might be a squirrel, and the woman's eyes are wide open and so is her mouth. I can read her lips: *Oh, NO!* And I have dropped the phone and I am yanking the wheel left as hard and fast as I can. The car turns, the bumper misses the lady by an inch, no more, and I feel a thud and my heart sickens because I know I have hit the dog.

I scream out, and I would do anything if I could turn back time just eleven seconds, just thirteen seconds, to save the poor dog, and the car spins around so fast, one circle, then another, and I remember my father saying steer into the skid, which makes no sense, especially because now the car is somersaulting down the bank, the windows are smashing and glass is flying, and just trying to breathe I gulp a piece of it down and have time to wonder if it will cut my insides, shred my throat and stomach, when the car lands in a place no car should ever land, nose down, on its roof, in the frozen creek.

I am hanging by my seat belt. I look around, and everything is quiet except the sound of rushing water. Only, the stream is solid ice; it isn't moving at all. The only liquid is the hot river of my blood, and then the world goes away.