

# [PDF] The Memory Thief: A Novel

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**Description:**

**About the Author Emily Colin** lives in North Carolina with her partner, their son, two reprehensible canines, and a betta fish. In her other life, she serves as associate director at DREAMS of Wilmington, a nonprofit organization that provides multidisciplinary arts programming for youth in need. *The Memory Thief* is her first novel.

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Madeleine

Six Years Later . . .

On the surface, there's no reason for me to be concerned—at least, no more than usual. All Aidan says is “I think I'm going to try the South Face of McKinley again.”

We're sitting at the kitchen table, me with a cup of coffee, him with a bottle of Gatorade. Gabriel is in his room down the hall, building something with his Legos. He'd gotten a big box of them for his fourth birthday, a mixed lot that J.C. scored on eBay. That was over six months ago, but they can still absorb his attention for hours.

Sunlight plays on the wood table, and Aidan runs one finger through it, tracing a rainbow of colors. It's an ordinary day, but still I feel a frisson of fear ripple down my spine. “Isn't that the route you tried last year? When you had to turn back?”

“Yeah, we were trying to do a new variation of the Cassin Ridge, and the weather turned on us. It's been bugging me ever since.” There's a pad of paper on the table, and he begins doodling something on it as he speaks—a face, it looks like.

“The one that's got that place called the Valley of Death?”

He looks up at me, his blond hair falling into his eyes. He needs a haircut, for sure. “That's the one. What's got into you, Maddie?”

“I don't think you should go.” I've never said this to him before, and his eyes widen with surprise before they narrow in puzzlement.

“What are you talking about? Why not?”

“I have a bad feeling about this one. I don't know why, but I do.”

“Don't be silly. It's an awesome climb. That was just freaky last year, about the weather. It shouldn't happen again. We got as far as the bergschrund with no problem—what?” he says, in response to the exasperated face I'm making over the rim of my coffee cup.

“You know I have no idea what you're talking about,” I say. “English, please.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “A bergschrund is a big crevasse near the head of a glacier. German for ‘mountain crevice,’ if you really want to know.”

“I don't need the etymology, Aidan. Just the significance.”

“'Schrunds can be a real pain in the ass,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest. “In the winter, they're not such a big deal to traverse. In the summer, you've got snowmelt, so they're these big gaping holes.”

“I just know there's a point in here somewhere.”

“My point is, what happened last year wasn't a technical issue. We got across the 'schrund just fine. It was after that that the crappy weather set in.” He unfolds himself and goes back to drawing.

My stomach twists. “I wish you wouldn't go. Can't you do something else? Go to Chile, or Spain, or, I

don't know, China. Anywhere else."

"Relax, honey. You're getting all worked up over nothing."

"I'm not," I say, and even as the words leave my mouth I know that it's the truth. "I'm telling you, Aidan, I have a bad feeling about this."

"What, are you psychic now?" His tone is light, but I can tell that irritation lurks beneath.

"I've never asked you not to do something. I'm asking you now."

When he lifts his head this time, his mouth is set in a straight, obstinate line. "Don't be ridiculous."

I look down at my coffee, my stomach churning. "I'm not," I say again, my voice as stubborn as his.

"Yeah," he says. "You are." And he gets up from the table, spinning the drawing around to face me. Seen from one angle, there is his face. I look again, and there's the mountain, rising snow-covered against a cloudless sky. I stare at the picture he's drawn, watching the image shift from one form to the next. "Don't go," I say in a whisper, but it is too late; the front door slams behind him, and I hear the Jeep's engine rev as he peels out of the driveway.

We fight about the Mount McKinley trip for two months, a record. I argue with him, I yell, I plead. At night I wake from dreams where Aidan goes tumbling off the mountain, crashing to the bottom of a valley and landing, lifeless, in a heap. I dream that he is crushed by falling rock, that his Cessna goes down before he even reaches the glacier, that he steps on a weak snow bridge and goes hurtling into the depths of a crevasse. Then I wake up, my heart pounding in triple time, and look over at Aidan sleeping beside me, peaceful and still. Don't go, I say into the darkness of our room. Don't leave me.

Where this premonition of disaster has come from, I can't say, but it sticks. Aidan tries everything he can think of to make me change my mind, to "see sense," as he puts it. He listens to all of my doomsday scenarios and then, one by one, tells me why they're nothing to worry about. He teases me that we've changed places, that usually he's the irrational one and I'm the one calming him down. He makes jokes ("Denali? De nada, baby"), he makes J.C. come and talk to me. He gives me books about successful ascents of the mountain, emails me websites. When none of this does any good, he screams and threatens and throws things. He begs. And finally he retreats into a stony, stubborn silence, from which he emerges only to say, "I'm going and that's the end of it."

The night before he leaves in May, I lie in bed waiting for him to join me, and when he doesn't, I get up to look for him. He's sitting in the living room, in the dark. I can make out the dim shape of a glass on the coffee table in front of him, next to his lighter and a pack of American Spirits. He smells like whisky.

I sit down on the couch next to him. "Hey."

"Maddie," he says, and his voice is rough. He is crying, I realize with some horror. "What's happening to us?" he says. His voice breaks on the last word.

I move closer, wrap my arms around him. He is shaking, like he was six years ago when he came to tell me that he loved me, that Jim Ellis had died on the Eiger Nordwand and he blamed himself. "I can't lose you," he says. "I can't. I don't know what I would do. Tell me I'm not losing you, baby. Please."

Now I am crying, too. My tears mingle with his as we hold each other. "You could never lose me," I say. "I'm the one who's going to lose you. I know it, Aidan. I know I am."

He presses his face against mine. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be back, honey. You'll see. I'll be back and everything will be fine."

"You can't know that. Look at what happened to Jim."

"To Ellis?" he says, sounding puzzled. "What's McKinley got to do with that? The Nordwand was a freaky set of circumstances, a whole bunch of bad stuff piling up at once. Ellis was sick. That cornice was shit. And then J.C. got knocked out. You know all this."

I don't know why I've got the Eiger expedition on my mind. Maybe it's the feel of Aidan's body trembling, the wetness of his tears. I don't think I've seen him cry since that day, not even when Gabriel was born, and it unsettles me. "All three of you could have died in the crevasse on that stupid mountain, not just him," I say, and shiver.

"But we didn't," he says, pulling away and wiping his eyes. I hear the familiar stubbornness line his voice. "I lost Ellis, true. I haven't forgiven myself for that. But I did the best I could. I built an anchor. I got us out of there. And I came back to you." He runs his hand through his hair. "It was a horrible thing, Maddie. But it also made me realize how I feel about you, after that stupidity with Kate. Those extremes—they're part of why I love what I do. I guess it's my version of a spiritual experience."

I roll my eyes, borrowing his bad habit. He sighs.

"Look, honey, there's a lot of guys who would be happy working a nine-to-five, or whose church is inside four walls rather than halfway up a cliff. But you didn't marry one of those guys. You married me."

"I know that," I say in a small voice.

"Are you sorry?" he says, turning his face to me. His cheeks are streaked with tears. He looks miserable, which is so uncharacteristic that it makes me start crying again.

"What kind of question is that?" I say, blinking my eyes so I can see him clearly.

"A real one," he says. "Answer it, please."

"No," I say without hesitation. "Of course I'm not. I love you for who you are. There's no one else I'd want to be with."

Relief flashes across his face. He stretches his arms up to the ceiling, brings one down around my shoulders. "Okay, then," he says, like everything is settled.

"But, Aidan, what if something like that happens again and you're not so lucky?"

His arm is still around my shoulders, and I can feel the tension seep back into it. He drums his fingers on the back of the couch. "If it does, then it does. That's why we get emergency training, so that we'll know how to handle tough situations. Skill and experience count for a lot up there. And I just happen to have a considerable amount of both. As do Roma and..."

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