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PRINT TRANSCRIPT

TRANSCRIPT: The Next Call, The Case of Melanie Ethier, E1 “The First Call”

[Birds chirping]

[Intense intro music fades in]

CELINE ETHIER: [CLIP] I asked myself, ‘Why am I here? Like, I never watched Melanie leave the house.’ It was so weird, but it was the last time I saw her.

[Intro music fades out]

DAVID RIDGEN: Hello?

CELINE ETHIER: Hello.

DAVID RIDGEN: Hi, is this Celine?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] This is Celine Ethier. I’ve reached her in the small town of New Liskeard, Ontario.

CELINE ETHIER: OK, so I'm sitting by the lake. I usually come here almost every morning and during the day when I think of Mel.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Celine’s daughter Melanie, age 15, disappeared on a walk home from a teen get-together in New Liskeard early one September morning in 1996. Mel has never been found and Celine still lives in the same town. And 24 years later she still, every day, works through Mel’s disappearance.

CELINE ETHIER: So it's a — there's a big tree by the lake in New Liskeard, and so quite often I go grab my coffee and sit by the lake by her tree.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] This call isn’t for Someone Knows Something, but for this new podcast I’ve developed with the CBC called The Next Call. The Next Call is all about...the next call. Investigating crimes over the phone, to go as far as I can in furthering a case, and showing as I go, my process of investigation. COVID distancing-inspired yes, but also an approach that potentially allows me to work on more cases in more places. Episodes will mostly take the form of the calls I make in the order I make them. And I will go as far as I can, until I can’t go any

further. I'm David Ridgen and welcome to the Next Call, Episode One in the case of Melanie Ethier.

CELINE ETHIER: So there's a tree that I chose. That's the one that I have a plaque on...

DAVID RIDGEN: Do you know what kind of tree it is?

CELINE ETHIER: I don't even know. But it's huge and it's beautiful. It's right by the lake. Lake Temiskaming.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Lake Temiskaming is a widening of the Ottawa River that divides Ontario from Quebec. And New Liskeard, now called Temiskaming Shores sits at the northwest tip of the lake surrounded by a vast wilderness of public Crown land.

DAVID RIDGEN: Just tell me a little bit about Mel, and what was she like?

CELINE ETHIER: Melanie was born on Christmas Day. And she was a very bubbly kid. She loved everyone when — even when she was little, she would stop people on our street and say, 'Come and have coffee with my mom.' Like, she was always very social. She worked at a daycare. She was in high school. So she would go to the daycare that's attached to the high school and she would open it in the morning until the workers would get there. And then she'd go to school. And after school she'd go back there and lead the kids off the bus and then she would be the one closing the daycare. So she was very trustworthy, responsible. So it was really hard after she went missing because my other daughter, who was only five-year-old at the time, she used to be one of the kids that would get there on the school bus.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Celine's other daughter is named Jessie, and it was Jessie who sent me Celine's number to call. And I'll be talking to her soon.

CELINE ETHIER: So Melanie would always hold her hand then all the kids would walk in. Then Melanie and Jessie would be the last ones to walk in, always hand in hand.

CELINE ETHIER: So anyways, even when she got a job, I ended up buying Melanie a watch and I told her so she would always be on time. So when I got a job too, she ended up buying me a watch and said the same thing. Anyways it was kind of funny.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, and Melanie, what was her birth year, when she was born in?

CELINE ETHIER: In '80.

DAVID RIDGEN: 1980. OK. Christmas 1980.

CELINE ETHIER: Yes.

CELINE ETHIER: I had Melanie and Jessie ten years apart.

DAVID RIDGEN: And so Jessie was five-years-old at the time.

CELINE ETHIER: She was only five. But like it, it was really hard on her all the way through because... like you walk in the store and everybody's whispering. 'That's the mom of Melanie.' So for Jess, it's always been a living in the shadow of Melanie kind of thing. I've tried to protect her from, from it all...So I think it probably made her feel like she was left behind in that part. She grew up having people look for Melanie, so I think it's affected her, in a way of feeling like she was not as important as Melanie, although she was. And I always made sure to even from the beginning, I always made sure that I gave Jessie as much time as Melanie, because even though Melanie hasn't been there all those years, it's like every day. There's a big part of my energy spent on Melanie...

DAVID RIDGEN: I understand.

CELINE ETHIER: ...and trying to find her.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Knowing that most of Jessie's life has been overshadowed by her sister's disappearance, I wonder aloud if my calling her might be helpful...or not. Celine quickly jumps in with her opinion.

CELINE ETHIER: But I think... I'm thinking that it would probably be good for her because lately she's really come forward and trying to find her sister.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK. And what took you to New Liskeard?

CELINE ETHIER: We were in Haileybury from...since I was six-years-old. And then I went to college in Sudbury when I was 18. I was pregnant with Melanie at the time, actually, and gave birth to her Christmas Day and went back to college right January 4th, because I always wanted to support myself and my child. So I went to Cambrian college, took social work and graduated the year after. And I ended up coming back to Liskeard and working in Liskeard.

DAVID RIDGEN: And did Melanie like New Liskeard?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes, she did...she did like Liskeard, like she did have some really good friends. She wasn't exposed to that much prejudism [sic] at that time. Because she hung out with really good people. So she stayed away from the bad crowd. And like I find my second daughter was more exposed to the prejudism [sic].

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Melanie's father is Black and Celine, her mother, is white.

CELINE ETHIER: I guess what I'm saying is there really wasn't that many Black people around at the time. I met Melanie's dad. He was from Africa, from Botswana. I met him when he went to

the mining school in Haileybury. After I was pregnant, he ended up being sent to a different college...and then he had to go back to Africa. So we didn't leave on bad terms. We still talk to each other once in a while on the computer.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Melanie's father returned to Africa just after he completed his schooling and was not in New Liskeard at the time of Mel's disappearance.

CELINE ETHIER: You know how I said there was only a few Black people in town? Well, there was three Black girls in town, so there was Melanie, there was another girl who lived exactly on Pine.

DAVID RIDGEN: Were they all the same age or similar age?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes. Yes, all the same age. But the other two were from the English High School. OK, so Melanie didn't really hang out with one of them, at least she didn't hang out with the one who lived on Pine.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] While none of these people have been shown to have anything to do with Melanie's disappearance, one of them figures into a mistaken identity theory that we'll talk about later.

CELINE ETHIER: I think we would both like for everything to end, for Melanie to be found and for us to live more of a normal life than we've had, because every day, has been consuming and putting all our energy in finding Melanie. And I think our life would have been so different with Melanie had been there with us... I feel like we've been living on one day, like we haven't moved forward. Because we need to find Melanie.

CELINE ETHIER: Every day I've been getting private messages that I'm trying to follow because I don't want to miss the tip that will be the right one. So it's pretty much all I do lately. From morning to night, I grab my phone and I, I'm trying to text.

DAVID RIDGEN: So I wonder if, Celine, you can just describe your understanding of events as they unfolded.

CELINE ETHIER: OK, so what happened... Melanie was in a relationship from grade nine till that summer, like at the end of the school year, she was in a relationship. But they ended up breaking up at that time and still stayed on good terms. But anyways, she ended up meeting a guy, so I didn't know those friends. It was all new friends because it was... they were from the English high school. Melanie went to the French high school. So I didn't know them...So at the time Melanie went missing about I'm thinking about three weeks before she had started dating one guy from the English high school.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Melanie's previous boyfriend, who she had dated for about a year, was a teenager named Jacques Laplante. Mel had started seeing a new boyfriend, Neil Fortier, for just a short while before her disappearance at the end of September 1996.

CELINE ETHIER: So the day before Melanie went missing, she went shopping because she was looking for a gift for my mom, whose birthday is on the 30th of September. So they were supposed to be coming to my house the next day because Melanie wanted to make my mom a cake. She was always close to them... So she... went to buy little hearts and icing and she had bought her candles for her birthday as a gift.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Celine says Melanie then met with her best female friend and spent the afternoon with her. This best friend has asked that her name not be publicly revealed. I'd like to find out more detail about that day from this best friend. Eventually, later that day, Melanie and her friend met with a group of boys.

CELINE ETHIER: So they met with the boys to go watch movies...

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] The first place the group went, Celine says nobody was home, so they found their way back to Mel's house.

CELINE ETHIER: So they ended up coming to my house around 10 o'clock that night. And Melanie said, 'Mom, can we watch movies here?' And I said, well, my mom was with me. So I said, 'Oh, there's really not much room.' Like the place we were at was so small, so anyway. So she said, 'Well can I watch in my room?' And I said, 'Well, your room's a mess, but it's up to you.' So she said, 'Let's go guys!' Like that was her last thing that she said to me. 'Let's go guys!' With a big smile on her face. She figured they would go watch it somewhere else because the room was messy. So anyway, so they left. So the boys were with them at that time...Melanie, and her close friend, her best friend. And—

DAVID RIDGEN: Do you... can you just... can I interrupt? So the close friend that she was with that day is the same close friend that she was with that night?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK. So she said, 'Let's go, guys.' Then what happened?

CELINE ETHIER: So then they walked out of my house. And the weirdest thing is I left... Like I opened the door as I was watching them go and I walked to the sidewalk like I, which is really weird. So I was there and I asked myself, why am I here? Like, I never watched Melanie leave the house. It was so weird, but it was the last time I saw her.

DAVID RIDGEN: What time was that about? Can you remember?

CELINE ETHIER: So that was at 10:00. So they left my house at 10:00.

DAVID RIDGEN: At 10:00. OK, yeah. And you went to...

CELINE ETHIER: So they came to my house around 10:00 and then out they went.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, and you went out to the sidewalk just in front of your house?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes. Like it's still about like ten steps up, I'd say.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, what was the address of that house?

CELINE ETHIER: So I lived at Wellington.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] On Wellington Street, about a two-minute walk from the main street.

DAVID RIDGEN: Wellington. OK, and you saw them leave. In what direction did they walk in when they left?

CELINE ETHIER: So they left my house and walked to the right.

CELINE ETHIER: I believe that they went to a girl's place, which is also friends with all of them, but that they couldn't watch it there. And from there they would have walked to where they were that night.

DAVID RIDGEN: And what was that girl's name that they were supposed to go to? You know her name?

CELINE ETHIER: I believe the first name is Samya.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Celine is talking about Samya Benchabi, who was dating Dave Bromley at the time. According to Celine, the group was not allowed to watch the movie at Samya's, so they left. And Samya went along with them, bringing her dog with her for the walk. Dave and Samya did not join the group at the Chatwin house for the movie.

CELINE ETHIER: After they went to that place, they ended up going to where they actually watched the movies.

DAVID RIDGEN: Who told you that they were at that house watching a movie?

CELINE ETHIER: OK, so I didn't know at that time, I guess I have to backtrack on that Friday when Melanie got home, on that Friday on my lunch hour when I went home, I realized my phone line had been cut by the telephone company because I was struggling with money at the time. I was supposed to have my paycheck on Monday. So I— when I went back to work, I contacted the telephone company and said, 'Could you please connect my line? Like I'm getting paid Monday so I can pay my bill Monday? And they told me, they said, 'Well, we'll connect it once you pay your check Monday.' So... So anyways when Melanie got home from school that night, I had told her we're not going to have a phone this weekend, but it's not going to kill us. I remember saying those exact words to her...And so, so I didn't know until the next morning because what happened that night, I went like I went to bed thinking that everything was OK, that Melanie was watching movies and should be home.

DAVID RIDGEN: And that was the night of Saturday, September 28th.

CELINE ETHIER: Yes.

CELINE ETHIER: She went missing in the early morning of the 29th. That night I went to bed. It's the next morning when I woke up that her alarm in her room went on, I believe it was at six o'clock because she usually got up to go work at the daycare.

CELINE ETHIER: So she hadn't turned the alarm off because she hadn't been home that night, so, her alarm went on. So I was like, 'Come on, Mel. Get up and turn your alarm off.' The alarm kept on going on. So I got up and went in the room and turned the alarm off and noticed she wasn't there. So at that point, I thought, well, I guess she fell asleep watching movies. So I still didn't think nothing of it at that point, so I just went back to bed thinking she'll be here in the morning because she had to make my mom's cake for my mom to come that morning to eat her cake before they were leaving town, my mom and my dad.

DAVID RIDGEN: Had Melanie ever done that before, not come home because she fell asleep somewhere, or?

CELINE ETHIER: No, but because I had no phone, I thought maybe she'd call me to tell me she was going to stay there, or maybe she just fell asleep. She would fall asleep during movies, yes, if that's what you mean.

DAVID RIDGEN: I mean did your radar go up? Were you a little bit worried at that point or did you just think because Melanie's so reliable she'll be home and it'll be fine?

CELINE ETHIER: Well I was sure she would be home because she knew she had to make my mum's cake and I thought she would have probably called me but because I had no phone, she couldn't call me. So like, I was making a thousand excuses. Like, to me, in my mind, everything was still OK... because I thought she'll be here soon. So when I actually woke up in the morning and got up, then I was like, OK, this is weird, where is she? So I had no way of reaching her, I had no phone.

DAVID RIDGEN: What time was that when you got up?

CELINE ETHIER: Between eight and nine, I believe?

CELINE ETHIER: So then my parents showed up...at about 10:00 in the morning. So when they showed up, so I told my mom, I said, 'Shoot, we don't even have a cake Melanie's not even here. I don't even have a phone. I don't know the names friends where they're watching the movie.' So then I...my mom, my mom got worried right away. Like to me, I was still trying to think, like, this is really strange. But obviously she must be okay. Like, I just thought it was really weird. So my dad drove me to Tim Horton's because I thought, I guess I'm going to go buy a cake...and I asked to use their phone. So I called Melanie's best friend, and I said, like, 'Where is Melanie?' so then she said, 'Well, she should be home.' So then she said, 'Well, let me call them.' And I said okay, because I don't know their name.

DAVID RIDGEN: So you called the best friend. And what did the best friend exactly say? What was... did she say anything about when they left or anything about where she saw?

CELINE ETHIER: No, at that point no. Because the best friend, like the best friend, had left before...I believe.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Melanie was still at the Chatwin house watching the movie when her best friend left. The friend then apparently walked to Melanie's house where she was picked up and driven home by Melanie's grandparents.

CELINE ETHIER: I saw the best friend after that. That's why I knew that the best friend left early. ...So I asked the best friend like, 'Can you reach them to see, like, why is Melanie not home yet?' So the best friend said, 'OK, give me a few minutes.' So I'm still at Tim Horton's waiting. So I said, 'OK, so I'll call you back in a few minutes.' So she called their place and asked like, 'Where was Melanie?' And they said she left last night around 1:30 or 2, something like that.

CELINE ETHIER: So then I was like, 'Oh, my God, what's going on?' So then I got my dad to drive me to my close, close friend. So I used her phone and called all the friends and all the people who she babysat in case she met one of them and they asked her to babysit or something. Like I was trying to make a thousand reasons that she was OK. So right at that point, right after I finished calling everybody, I was like, OK, this is so not Melanie, because she always told me where she was. She would never walk outside in the dark by herself, like and she was always a homebody with her friends at my house. I never had to worry.

CELINE ETHIER: So by that time I thought, OK, like something is not right. So I called the police right away. I said, I know it's not 24 hours, but my daughter never ever does anything like this that I don't know where she is. Something is really strange because they said she left last night

around 1:30 and 2, so I said something is wrong, can you tell your officers out on the road if they see a Black girl? Because in those years there was only three Black girls in town.

CELINE ETHIER: So I ask the police, can you please ask your cruiser, did they see my daughter to tell her to come home? I'm really worried this is not like her. So at that point, I left my friend's place. My dad drove me back to my house and within not even long all of the firemen and policemen were looking under the bridge that she would have had to cross. So then it really hit home that, oh, my God, like something was really wrong.

DAVID RIDGEN: What time was it when you called police, would you say?

CELINE ETHIER: I'm thinking...see, I'm not clear about things like that. I can't be precise.

CELINE ETHIER: Maybe around 1:00.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, and were you ever, ever able to talk to the boys or the people that Melanie was watching the movies with? Did you ever speak directly to them about what happened that night and when she left and things like that?

CELINE ETHIER: I had some help to put posters on around town from Jay. The boy where they were watching the movies that it really affected them big time. The mother was really upset that her son had not walked Melanie. And like, I've never put any blame on them for not walking Melanie, I don't know what happened. I don't know why the boyfriend didn't walk Melanie home. I don't know what really happened that night in the house other than the parents were in bed sleeping and the kids were just watching movies and eating Joe Louis. That's all I know about that night. I've never really had a conversation with the boyfriend. It was a new boyfriend, so I didn't really get to know him. I do believe that they're all good people. I've never heard nothing wrong about them. To me, they're not—they're not on my suspect list.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK. I'd like to talk to them, to that family, the house where she was. Anybody that had seen her that night would be useful for me to talk to, I'm sure.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] With so few details, the timing and the route Mel took are important. What streets did she take, where was she last seen, where is the highest percentage chance of someone or someones taking Melanie? And how would they have done it? The house Mel was at is in the northeast quadrant of New Liskeard, at the corner of Robert Street and Pine Avenue. Mel would have had to walk around a km to get to her house on Wellington street North, closer to the downtown area. At most a 15 or 20 minute walk. Not far.

CELINE ETHIER: She had to come down Pine. So I think that this is about maybe three or four intersections and then go down the bridge and then she would have had to pass right beside a gas station. And then there's a back alley that as soon as you get up from that back alley, then you're right at our place.

DAVID RIDGEN: Is the bridge part of a main road through the town?

CELINE ETHIER: The bridge that you have to go up to go... Let's say you leave from New Liskeard to go to the mall like or the police station. You have to go up that bridge.

DAVID RIDGEN: So it's a main bridge?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, it's a main thoroughfare then.

CELINE ETHIER: It's when you cross town, you go through the bridge.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK. OK.

DAVID RIDGEN: And would she regularly take the back alley or would she take the main street?

CELINE ETHIER: It would probably be that... It's kind of a street that goes right in front of a video store, it used to be Mike Walton's video store.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK.

CELINE ETHIER: So as yeah soon as she passed the gas station, there would be like just one.... There's a building on the corner. And then she would just go up that little back alley.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] This route that Melanie took or intended to take, is the subject of some discussion, but the general consensus seems to be that she would have gone down Pine then south on Armstrong across the bridge over the Wabi River towards the downtown core of New Liskeard, then taken the shortcut across what Celine calls a back alley, and then up Church street to her house on Wellington, located pretty much at the top of Church Street.

DAVID RIDGEN: Was there ever any indication from that time until this time that we're talking.... Has anybody ever come forward saying that they saw her at any point along that trip home? Did anybody come and say, 'Oh, I saw her at X Point' or 'I saw her at this point?'

CELINE ETHIER: Well, for many years there was.... There was never a sighting of Melanie. But then at some point, I was in the store. I was in Wal-Mart, actually in New Liskeard. And somebody approached me and said, 'So did the police tell you that I saw Mel that night? Me and my husband saw her on the bridge. 'So then I said, 'No, I didn't know.' So I said, 'Did you ever tell the police?' And they had told the officer, but it was not entered in the information. So when... Once I gave them the police, they were able to check back on the notes. And yes, it had been mentioned, but I never knew all those years.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] That eyewitness is another potential next call. There have been other alleged sightings of Mel at or near the bridge from more recent tips - and while it is impossible without photographic proof to know if the person was Mel - I'm most interested in any of the original sightings, that predate social media and the rumour mill.

DAVID RIDGEN: So what time did they say or what time did they place her on top of the bridge?

CELINE ETHIER: They're placing her there around 1:30 or 2.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, and then from the bridge to your place, how far is that?

CELINE ETHIER: Less than five minutes, I'd say.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, and Melanie, her state of mind was fine, like there's no sign of any psychiatric issues or...

CELINE ETHIER: No, there was no issues at all.

DAVID RIDGEN: No medication?

CELINE ETHIER: No.

DAVID RIDGEN: No depression, nothing like that?

CELINE ETHIER: Nothing at all. She was a bubbly person. Like when she'd walk in a store, like even during that week, she had bought herself some clothes at the Tritown. She had bought windbreaker and the pants. And she even when she bought the candle for my mom, like when the police had to go back to where she had been, like the people in the store described her as bubbly, like she would walk in and she was loud and would say what she liked. And like she was funny. She...she was never into drugs. I never had to worry about her.

DAVID RIDGEN: Physically...how big was she?

CELINE ETHIER: Like, she was not, she was not a big build. But she was about 5'5. 120 pounds.

DAVID RIDGEN: What was she wearing at the time?

CELINE ETHIER: So she had a green windbreaker. She had a white t-shirt with a blue logo. She had a black buckle belt, black belt with the silver buckle. She had jeans, black boots with just a bit of a heel, like the thick one, like not a pointy thing. She had a necklace.

CELINE ETHIER: I believe she had her watch.

DAVID RIDGEN: And OK, so then police, you say that they were searching under the bridge the next day?

CELINE ETHIER: Well, the police and the firemen, like we're looking on the side of the riverbank.

CELINE ETHIER: They had the police dogs around the high school where she was and from the house where she was that night, they had the divers and I'm thinking within the week...and it was really hard because it's all clay down there and there's like they had to go by feel because they couldn't see anything.

DAVID RIDGEN: ...is the river fast flowing there? Does it have a current to it or is it just kind of lazily moving along...in that river?

CELINE ETHIER: It's not that big of a flow. It's like the rest of the lake, so sometimes it's pretty calm, like.

DAVID RIDGEN: And is it right at the mouth of the lake? Or is there a long stretch before you get to the lake?

CELINE ETHIER: There is a long stretch from both sides there's water.

DAVID RIDGEN: And Melanie, did she know how to swim?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes.

DAVID RIDGEN: So... the New Liskeard police brought dogs... were the dogs brought in like the next day? Do you know?

CELINE ETHIER: I'm thinking it's two or three days after, I'm not sure.

DAVID RIDGEN: And did the dogs ever pick up any scent?

CELINE ETHIER: So I think... I don't think they got any sense of any place.

CELINE ETHIER: So they didn't get anything from the dogs.

DAVID RIDGEN: Has there ever been any sort of aspect of clothing or any remainder found that Melanie was wearing that night or?

CELINE ETHIER: I was told that there was nothing at all. Like, I'm just starting to hear rumours, I believe it's rumours that one thing was found, but to me, that's just rumours, I haven't confirmed it with the police, I just found out this morning.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Celine has been working on the case herself and keeping in regular contact with the Ontario Provincial Police since Mel's case was transferred to them from the New Liskeard police. The various tips and case transfers always add layers of complexity to unsolved cases. But, again, I will try to confirm what I can with police when I speak to them next...

CELINE ETHIER: It's been very hard because there's been so many possibilities, there's been... Because of people bringing information forward.

CELINE ETHIER: It's almost like it's been a game for some people, actually, because it's really weird to imagine all the different tips being true because there's been so many different stories. And the minute I'm told one, there's another one that comes out.

CELINE ETHIER: So obviously some people are having fun with it because it's been ridiculous. I've been told she's in the mine shaft. I've been told her body was burned. I've been told her body was put through a wood-chipper. I've been told that she's been put in a pond, that she's been buried. I've been told just about everything.

CELINE ETHIER: Some of the biggest tips have been that at the time when Melanie went missing, there was there was a murder in our area in April of that year. And then Melanie went missing on September 29th '96.

CELINE ETHIER: The person who was part of the first murder were one uncle and two nephews...

CELINE ETHIER: So I believe that a lot of attention was put on them because everybody in town was saying, like nobody else goes missing after they're in jail. So it's got to be them who killed Melanie. So that was the... that was the biggest focus for many, for many, many years. Like we're at 24 years still and Melanie's still missing.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] The uncle in the murders Celine is talking about is named Gregory Crick. He and his two nephews, Michael Lafreniere and Robert Goulet, planned and carried out the murder of Louis Gauthier. But, later, Robert Goulet's body was found in a gravel pit and it was ultimately determined that Goulet was stabbed by either his uncle or his brother after they suspected Goulet of telling people about the initial murder. The Crick Murders, as they've come to be called in the community, are a main focus among the online theorists surrounding Melanie's case.

DAVID RIDGEN: Those three men lived in the area of New Liskeard?

CELINE ETHIER: Yeah. They lived in the area not exactly in New Liskeard, but within about 20 minutes, let's say, from New Liskeard.

DAVID RIDGEN: And police you think looked into that very, very meticulously?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes, I believe they — they really worked hard at trying to eliminate them as a suspect because a lot of fingers were pointing to them.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] The Crick murders, and Melanie's disappearance share just one loose commonality that I can see — the timing. And Celine says that she's been reassured by police that they've looked into the theory extensively.

DAVID RIDGEN: And any other tip or explanation or theory that came forward, that was something that you thought was more believable or that police had followed more closely?

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] What Celine tells me next has the ring of something I should pay extra attention to.

CELINE ETHIER: OK, so to me, that was always the first the biggest thing, but the other big story is also someone who I've known my whole life...well not my whole life, since he was maybe 17, 18, no 19, I'd say.

CELINE ETHIER: So I had a friend that I've known since I was six and her boyfriend at the time, in my mind, he was also a suspect because of many tips that came forward to me.

CELINE ETHIER: So her boyfriend at the time was Denis Leveille.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Celine's friend is named Sylvie Chartrand, and her boyfriend, Denis Leveille, has been a suspect in Celine's mind for a long time.

CELINE ETHIER: So right from the start, he was really involved in trying to find out what I knew from the police, what was going on. And so anyway, so on the third day, somebody had arranged for me to go see a psychic and—

DAVID RIDGEN: Hang on. So within three days of Melanie disappearing, you were going to see a psychic?

CELINE ETHIER: Yeah, somebody stopped at my house and said, you got to go see this woman, she's helped the police solve a case before, so you got to go see her.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Celine was willing to try anything in these initial days after Melanie's disappearance, so she went to see a psychic. She was driven to the psychic by Denis Leveille. And throughout the trip, Celine says, he was very agitated.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, OK...this boyfriend was asking you information about what you knew and what police were asking you and things like that?

CELINE ETHIER: Yeah, like because they were.... Like we were there quite often and Melanie was even there at that exact morning. But apparently, he was gone fishing for the weekend. That's what I was told.

CELINE ETHIER: So anyways, about three days after he drove me because my car was still not good. So he drove me to the physic he was very stressed about what was — was being said.

CELINE ETHIER: He was making loud noises, he was going [heavy breathing] like he was really stressful for him, so I thought that was kind of odd.

CELINE ETHIER: So then I got back to New Liskeard, he drops me off at my house, and then he says, 'Well, whoever, whoever took Mel has to have marks because she made me marks like play fighting.' And he lifted his sweater at his wrist and showed me he had nail marks like deep nail marks, and he said it was from Melanie.

CELINE ETHIER: So he said whoever took Mel has marks, because look at the marks I have from her, from play fighting. So I thought that was odd because Melanie was in school all week and then they were supposed to be gone fishing. So she should have never seen them that week. And the marks were so deep. Like it was just straight nail marks like right down into his wrists.

DAVID RIDGEN: And this fellow said that Melanie had made those marks?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes, he said whoever took Mel has to have marks because look at the marks I have from her play fighting with me.

DAVID RIDGEN: And how many days after Melanie disappeared did he show you these?

CELINE ETHIER: So that's on the third day. That's the day I went to the psychic.

CELINE ETHIER: Cause he lifted his coat sleeve just to show me those marks. I didn't see his arm...and it was really deep and red.

DAVID RIDGEN: And have you...are you still in touch with this, this guy?

CELINE ETHIER: He's dead now.

DAVID RIDGEN: Oh, he's dead?

CELINE ETHIER: Yeah.

DAVID RIDGEN: And did the police look into him? Did you get them the information about him before he died?

CELINE ETHIER: Umm they've had the information from the beginning.

CELINE ETHIER: ...So I was always under the impression that the police did look into him because of many tips that came forward, even from his friends, saying they believe he did it.

DAVID RIDGEN: They believe that this Denis person did it.

CELINE ETHIER: Yes.

CELINE ETHIER: And so his story never made sense and twice even contacted me to go meet him in the motel room because he was going to commit suicide. So I thought, like, I went both times thinking he's probably maybe he's going to tell me he killed Melanie like it was so weird. So I went both times and nothing.

DAVID RIDGEN: What happened? Was he there?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes.

DAVID RIDGEN: Oh.

CELINE ETHIER: Yeah. Yeah. He was at the motel room. He wanted to talk.

DAVID RIDGEN: And did he talk about anything in particular?

CELINE ETHIER: Yes, but not about Melanie. It was always about his relationship and how it was dysfunctional. So I was hoping he would talk about Mel, but it was...

DAVID RIDGEN: Did you ever ask him directly if he had anything to do with Melanie's disappearance?

CELINE ETHIER: OK, so at some point, so at some point he ended up getting charged for a sexual advance on the babysitter, the 14-year-old. So he ended up in jail. So I went to see him in jail because I had totally pushed myself away from the family because of all the tips from friends that I was getting from their friends. I went to see him in jail. So I was there and I told him, I said, 'I need to eliminate you as a suspect.' So let's talk. So he ended up giving me the name of somebody else who he believed killed Melanie.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Celine says that Denis mentions the name Goulet from the Crick murder case as a possibility for the person who took Melanie. I'll be asking police about their take on Denis, the Crick murder story that Celine says they've told her they have investigated, and other theories.

CELINE ETHIER: And anyways, a while after that...at some point when I drove in town, I noticed he was back in town. So I thought, 'OK, he's out of jail, here's my chance to go see him again.' So I made contact with Sylvie, his girlfriend who was my friend for many years. And I gave her my cell number and I said, 'OK, so now that he's out, I need to talk to him, to eliminate him as a suspect.' So I said 'Give him my cell number for him to contact me. If not, I'll be stopping in tomorrow.' So I waited the next day and I had no, no message. Then I got a call the day after that he had a stroke.

DAVID RIDGEN: Oh.

CELINE ETHIER: So apparently, he was well — I have been informed by the daughter that he was so stressed that I was going to go and talk to him about Melanie, that she saw him that afternoon and. Anyways, he was so stressed and then had his stroke. So I went to see him in the hospital. He was paralyzed on the one side and had lost his speech.

CELINE ETHIER: All he could say was pretty much make a sound like he kept on saying 'away, away.' That's all he could say. Like there was no more words coming out of him.

CELINE ETHIER: He couldn't walk, couldn't do anything. So I went to see him quite a few times and I did the talking at some point and he was unable to tell me stuff. But he was only like, I thought that he knew what I was saying by his response. So anyways, he ended up passing.

DAVID RIDGEN: How long was it between having a stroke and passing away? How long was that?

CELINE ETHIER: Mmm, I'm thinking... I think it's about almost two weeks.

DAVID RIDGEN: Oh, just two weeks. OK.

CELINE ETHIER: Yeah.

DAVID RIDGEN: So back at the jail, when you went in to talk to him and you first time said, Denis, I need to clear you as a suspect in the murder or the disappearance of Melanie. What was his reaction?

CELINE ETHIER: Well, I remember him saying that he would never have done anything to Melanie, that she was like a daughter to him. But to me, what made it suspicious is... Oh, I forgot to add one thing.

CELINE ETHIER: What made it really suspicious is the day that he took me to the psychic and that he brought me home and then showed me the marks on his wrist and said it was from Melanie play fighting. On that day also he told me, he said, 'Oh, just so you know, Melanie was the stripper. And I said, 'Well, no, she wasn't. She was in a friend's place. So why would you say that?' And he says, 'No, she was a stripper.'

CELINE ETHIER: And so I said, 'Well, that doesn't make sense.' I said that's false. Like, he's like, 'No, I swear.' So I said, 'So you were there?' And he said, 'Yeah.'

DAVID RIDGEN: The stripper at a bar, a local bar?

CELINE ETHIER: Yeah, it's a local bar in Notre-Dame-du-Nord. So that's about like it's almost 20 minutes from New Liskeard; 15, 20 minutes on the Quebec side.

DAVID RIDGEN: What do you think the likelihood of Melanie being a stripper at that bar in Quebec would be?

CELINE ETHIER: So, no, that's a zero possibility. So what happened — I had sent posters to all my relatives to put out in their different section, like in Ottawa, Montreal, Timmins, everywhere.

CELINE ETHIER: So one of my aunts had went to put posters in Timmins and she gave the posters to the lady from the restaurant, the woman said 'Well she was here yesterday.' So my aunt said, 'What do you mean she was here yesterday?' She said, 'Yes, she was sitting with so-and-so' and gave the name. So my aunt told me that. And I said, 'Well, that's, that's really a weird story.'

CELINE ETHIER: So it ended up that that girl was a stripper from Notre-Dame-du- Nord

CELINE ETHIER: And so there was some sighting at some point of them hitchhiking on the highway. So wherever they would go, the police would be called saying that they thought they saw Melanie. So all those tips got eliminated.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, well, that's good that that was eliminated.

CELINE ETHIER: So I know that that was not Melanie. I have no doubt in my mind, but that confirmed everything.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Melanie allegedly looking like this stripper caused many tips to come in claiming to have seen Mel. Denis saying he saw Mel working at a strip club the weekend she disappeared raised more red flags in Celine about why he was saying these things. There's been a number of theories around Melanie's disappearance that focus on the notion of mistaken identity. That Melanie was abducted or taken by persons because she was mistaken for this stripper or someone else. Another young woman allegedly looked like Mel, and she lived on Pine Avenue, the same road Mel most likely began walking down to get home on the night she disappeared. This other young woman, supposedly, had a drug debt the story goes, and a rumour is that Mel was taken by drug dealers looking for their money. But for now I'm more interested in Celine's hunch about Denis Leveille.

DAVID RIDGEN: Have you ever seen Melanie play with Denis or play fight with Denis?

CELINE ETHIER: Well, I don't think she would have ever left marks on him. No, no. Because it was really weird.

DAVID RIDGEN: But did you ever see her play fight with him?

CELINE ETHIER: No. Like, he could have grabbed her arm and she would have got away. But that would be it like I never seen her play with him that way.

DAVID RIDGEN: And did police look into Denis?

CELINE ETHIER: I don't believe they did... You see, Denis ended up having quite a few sexual events on all of his daughter's friends when they were around the age of Melanie.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] I've requested Denis's criminal record so I can see how any of these allegations Celine is talking about may have led to criminal charges or convictions for sexual assault or similar.

CELINE ETHIER: One of his close, close friends, came to me once and said, 'Just so you know, I believe that Denis killed Melanie.' Because at some point he saw a Black girl in town and said, 'Oh, there is black chocolate in town. You know how much I love my black chocolate.' And that was another young girl also.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] Denis had said he was fishing when Mel went missing, but he also said that he wasn't alone and that he was accompanied by his brother Andre and his teenage stepson Jason and Jason's friend named Joel. I'd like to see if they can confirm whether Denis was fishing that weekend, as he claimed. Celine says she has not really gotten the answers she needed from any of the people Denis said were with him in his alibi. But after so many years, the details of who might have been with whom, and when, are fuzzy. It's possible the fishing happened on the weekend Melanie disappeared, or that it happened but on a different date or, maybe, the fishing story didn't happen at all.

DAVID RIDGEN: And did your friend that was with Denis, did she ever talk about any suspicions she might have had? Or give you any thoughts on that?

CELINE ETHIER: So... She never talked about any marks on Denis, she never talked about the marks on the wrists. She always said that they were fishing. She still sticks to that story.

CELINE ETHIER: I've talked to Jason...and he says he can't even remember where they were. And I mean, he was like a brother to Melanie, so they were close.

CELINE ETHIER: So I spoke with the other kid Joel, and he also says he doesn't remember. So they can't even tell me.

CELINE ETHIER: And all I know is that Denis, when he got back from fishing, apparently fishing, that he drove Sylvie to my house because she was waiting for him to have a ride to get to my house because there was no bus on Sundays. So she got to my house around 1:30. And I remember Denis parking in front of my house, Sylvie getting out and him taking off.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, he didn't say anything?

CELINE ETHIER: No, they didn't even get out of the car. Nothing like...

DAVID RIDGEN: What colour is the car? What colour was their car?

CELINE ETHIER: I can't even remember because I've tried to get that information lately. I asked them and nobody is clear about nothing about that.

DAVID RIDGEN: And so have police been working steadily on this case?

CELINE ETHIER: I've always had lots of contact with the police, like whenever I get information, I pass it on right away.

DAVID RIDGEN: That's good.

CELINE ETHIER: I feel like Melanie has passed. I felt like that since the third day. I don't believe I'm going to find her alive, but I do want to find her body, and then I feel I'll be able to move on. I believe Melanie deserves to be found, she's not just garbage that you throw her on the side of the road. I mean it really bothers me somebody can just dispose of her and think all is good.

CELINE ETHIER: I mean, to me. I can't let it go. I need to find her. She deserves that much.

DAVID RIDGEN: OK, well, let's leave it there. I'll try to keep making calls and connecting with people and finding things out. But I think we've talked a lot and I want to give you a rest.

DAVID RIDGEN: But I'm going to push forward and try to get something going...we'll talk again.

CELINE ETHIER: OK, thank you.

DAVID RIDGEN: Thank you.

DAVID RIDGEN: [VOICEOVER] The first conversation I have with the victim's family sets the tone and makes my mission clearer. There are theories to look at and people to talk to, including police. But in cases like Mel's, where the victim has never been found, facts to cling to can easily be confounded by rumour and speculation. People will tend to fill in the unknown with a story that makes sense, to them. I'm going to start at the beginning and try to talk to those who were known to be with Mel the day she disappeared. And at the same time I'll try to find out more about the main theories Celine has told me about. Is the notion of mistaken identity

enough to end someone's life? And what about Denis Leveille? What were those scratches on his arm that he said were from Melanie?