1

Esther couldn't get over the blue of the sunlit sky.

It was a variated blue, almost white where it met the snowy horizon but deepening as Esther's eye followed it upward: from robin's egg to cerulean to a calm, luminous azure. Beneath it the Antarctic ice was blindingly bright, and the scattered outbuildings Esther could see from her narrow dorm window drew stripes of indigo shadow on the white ruts of the road. Everything gleamed. It was eight o'clock in the evening and not discernibly darker than it had been at eight o'clock that morning.

"Excuse me," Pearl said, and hip-checked Esther to one side so she could fit a piece of custom-cut cardboard in the window frame. Esther fell backward onto her unmade bed and propped herself on her elbows, watching Pearl lean over the tiny, cluttered desk to reach the glass.

"If you'd told me two weeks ago I'd block the sun as soon as it came up, I would have laughed you off the station," Esther said.

Pearl ripped the tape with her teeth. "Well, two weeks ago you were sleeping through the night. Never say the dark did nothing for you." She applied the last strip and added, "Or me."

"Thank you, darkness, and thank you, Pearl," Esther said. Though she had indeed been sleeping badly since the sun had reappeared after six months of winter, it was still somewhat dispiriting to watch the light and the distant mountains vanish, plunging her back into the realities of her cell-like room: the bed with its rumpled purple sheets lit by the baleful overhead bulb, the scuffed tile floors, and the plywood desk piled high with scattered papers, most of them notes on the Mexican novel Esther was translating for fun. The novel itself was on top of her dresser, safely

out of range of the collection of half-full water glasses leaving rings on the notebook paper.

Pearl sat opposite Esther at the foot of the bed and said, "So. Are you ready to face the unwashed masses?"

In response, Esther threw an arm over her eyes and groaned.

Esther and Pearl had spent the past winter as two of just thirty others holding down the small South Pole station, but November had ushered in the summer season and over the past few days, small roaring cargo planes had disgorged nearly a hundred new people into the station's hallways. Now scientists and astronomers filled the dorms, the galley, the gym, the upper workrooms; strangers who ate all the late-night cookies and booted up long-sleeping computers and asked constant, anxious questions about what time of day the internet satellite went up.

Esther had imagined she'd be happy to see all these new faces. She had always been a natural extrovert, not the typical candidate to be locked away on the ice in a research station that much resembled her tiny rural high school. She'd lived in Minneapolis for the year before she'd come here to the Antarctic, and her friends there had reacted with honest horror when she'd told them she'd accepted a job at the Pole station as an electrician for the winter season. Everybody knew someone who knew someone who'd tried it, loathed it, and flown home early to escape the crushing isolation. But Esther hadn't been worried.

She'd figured Antarctica couldn't be that much worse than the isolated, extreme conditions in which she had grown up. It'd be good money, it'd be an adventure—and most importantly, it would be completely inaccessible to most every other person on the planet.

Sometime over the long winter, however, Esther's extroversion had started to atrophy and with it the mask of good cheer she usually donned each morning along with her uniform. Now she gazed up at the ceiling, industrial white like the industrial white walls and industrial white hallways and her industrial white coworkers.

"Have I actually been an introvert this whole time?" she said. "All

these years, have I been fooling myself? The real extroverts are out there like hell yeah, fresh meat, nonstop party, bangtown USA."

"Bangtown Antarctic Treaty International Territory," Pearl corrected. Pearl was Australian with dual citizenship.

"Right," said Esther. "That."

Pearl got to her knees and crawled down the length of the bed toward Esther. "I imagine," she said, "that six months of unwanted celibacy plus a planeful of new faces could make an extrovert of anyone."

"Mmm," Esther said. "So you're saying I've become an introvert through the sheer power of . . ."

"My amazing body, yes, obviously," said Pearl, whose lips were now trailing along the sensitive shell of Esther's ear.

Esther reached up and helped herself to a handful of Pearl's blond hair, which somehow always looked sunkissed despite the utter lack of sun. *Australians*. So indefatigably beachy and up-for-it. She wove her fingers through those tangled strands and tugged Pearl down to kiss her, feeling her smile against her mouth as Esther pulled her closer.

For the past decade, since she was eighteen, Esther had moved every November—moved cities, states, countries. She made friends and lovers breezily, picking them up like other people picked up takeout and going through them as quickly. Everybody liked her, and like many well-liked people, she worried that if people *really* got to know her, if they managed to penetrate that glancing shield of likability, they wouldn't actually like her one bit. This was a benefit of never staying in one place.

The other, vastly more important benefit: not being found.

Esther slipped a hand beneath the hem of Pearl's sweater, fingers finding the smooth dip of her waist as Pearl nudged one of her long legs between Esther's thighs. But even as she moved her hips in friction-seeking instinct, her father's long-ago words began to echo unbidden in her head—a cold glass of water thrown in the face of her subconscious.

"November 2 by eleven o'clock p.m., Eastern Standard Time," Abe had said on the last day she'd seen him, ten years ago at their home in

Vermont. "Wherever you are, you must leave on November 2 and keep moving for twenty-four hours, or the people who killed your mother will come for you, too."

The summer season had officially begun a couple days ago: November 5. Three days after Esther, according to her father's urgent edict, should have been long gone.

But she wasn't. She was still here.

Abe had been dead two years now, and for the first time since she'd started running a decade before, Esther had a reason to stay. A reason that was warm and solid and currently kissing her neck.

Technically, Esther had first met Pearl at the Christchurch airport, as part of a big group of workers waiting for their flight into the Antarctic. They'd both been hidden in the many layers required to board the plane—wool hat, huge orange parka, gloves, clompy insulated boots, dark-lensed goggles pushed up on their heads—and Esther had gotten only the briefest impression of sparkly eyes and a full-throated laugh before the group was ushered onto the plane and she and Pearl were seated on opposite ends of the cargo hold.

Because of their different duties and different schedules, their paths hadn't really crossed again until the end of the first month, when Esther had hung a sign in the gym looking for sparring buddies. *Boxing, Muy Thai, BJJ, MMA, Krav Maga, let's fight! :) :) :)* She'd added the smiley faces to counteract the aggression of "fight," but had immediately regretted it when another electrician—an obnoxiously tall white guy from Washington who insisted everyone call him "J-Dog"—saw it and began giving her endless shit.

"The Smiley Face Killer!" he'd crow when she walked into their shift meeting. If they crossed paths in the galley at lunch, he'd pretend to cower. "You gonna hit me over the head with that big ol' smile?" But the final straw came when he started loudly telling everyone about his black belt in karate, and how he'd love to find a sparring partner who was "really serious about the sport."

Honestly, he gave Esther no choice. After a week of this, he approached her one day in the galley and planted himself in her path so she couldn't get to the pizza, grinning at her so widely she could see his molars.

"What are you doing," she said.

"Fighting you!" he said.

"No," she said, and put down her tray. "*This* is fighting me."

A few minutes later she had J-Dog on the floor in a headlock, one of his arms trapped in her hold, the other swatting at her face, his long legs kicking ineffectually at the tiled floor as onlookers hooted and cheered. "Not gonna let you go until you smile," she said, and he whimpered, pulling his lips up in a forced approximation of his earlier grin. As soon as she released him, he bounced to his feet, brushing himself off and saying, "Not cool, dude, not cool!"

When Esther turned back toward her abandoned lunch tray, suppressing her own very real smile, she found herself face to face—give or take a few inches—with Pearl. Shucked from her plane layers, Pearl was tall and tough, with a pile of sun-streaked hair wadded into a precarious knot that seemed in danger of sliding off her head. Her brown eyes were as sparkling as Esther remembered. More so, because now they were sparkling right at Esther.

"That was the most magical thing I have ever seen," Pearl said, and rested a slender, long-fingered hand on Esther's arm. "You wouldn't consider giving lessons, would you?"

Pearl was terrible at self-defense. She had no killer instinct and always second-guessed herself, pulling her punches and dropping her kicks and making herself laugh so hard she went weak in Esther's grip. Within three lessons, the "training sessions" had turned into make-out sessions, and they'd moved from the gym to the bedroom. The first time they'd slept together, Pearl had asked, hitching her hips as Esther began to slide her jeans down, "Have you ever been with a woman before?"

Esther looked up from between Pearl's legs, affronted. "Yes, plenty! Why?"

"Calm down, Don Juan," Pearl said, laughing. "I'm not questioning your technique. You just seem a little nervous."

This was when Esther had realized she might be in trouble. Because not only was it true, she *was* nervous, butterfly-stomached in a way she hadn't felt for years . . . but Pearl had noticed. Had read it somehow on Esther's well-trained face or in her well-trained body. Esther wasn't used to people seeing what she didn't want them to see, and the way Pearl looked at her, *saw* her, was unsettling. In response, she'd given Pearl her most confident, reassuring smile, then set her teeth very gently to the inside of Pearl's bare thigh, which had been enough of a distraction that the conversation ended there. But even then, at the very start, she had suspected how difficult Pearl might be to leave.

Now, a whole season later, thinking about this—about leaving, about staying, about the lasting echo of her father's warning—had the unfortunate effect of breaking her current mood. She rolled Pearl over onto her side and carefully ended the kiss, lying back against the pillows, and Pearl settled against Esther's shoulder.

"I'm going to get so drunk tonight," said Pearl.

"Before or after we play?"

"Before, after, during."

"Me too," Esther decided.

Esther and Pearl were in a Pat Benatar cover band that was scheduled to play at the party that evening. The whole long winter they'd been practicing and putting on shows exclusively for the same wearily supportive thirty-five people, and by this point it was like playing the recorder in front of a parent whose pride couldn't outweigh how tired they were of hearing "Hot Cross Buns." Performing for new ears and eyes felt as nerve-racking as climbing the stage of Madison Square Garden.

"We should drink water in preparation," Pearl said, "so we don't end up puking like beakers."

She fetched them two glasses and Esther sat up on her elbows so she didn't spill it all over herself as she gulped it. This was the driest place

she'd ever been, every last bit of moisture in the air frozen into ice. It was easy to get dehydrated.

"Do you think the scientists drink so much because they're making up for all the years they spent studying?" Esther said.

"No," said Pearl without hesitation. She herself worked with the carpenters. "Nerds are always absolute party freaks. I used to go to these kink nights in Sydney and it was all surgeons, engineers, orthodontists. Did you know that people who're into BDSM have notably higher IQs than their vanilla counterparts?"

"I don't think that's a testable hypothesis."

Pearl grinned. She had unusually sharp canine teeth in an otherwise soft mouth, an incongruity that did funny things to Esther's blood flow. "Can you imagine the variables?"

"I'd like to," Esther said, "but not right now. We need to get a move on."

Pearl glanced at her watch and jumped. "Shit! You're right."

They'd been holed up in this hole of a bedroom since dinner a few hours ago, and Esther stood to stretch before jamming her socked feet into her boots.

"God, I'm so glad you agreed to stay on," Pearl said. "I can't imagine facing this without you."

Esther wanted to answer but found she couldn't quite look at the woman in front of her, this person she liked more than she'd liked anyone else in a very long time. She felt a tight longing spread through her chest; not desire, but something even more familiar, something that was always with her. It was that she *missed* Pearl despite her presence. An anticipation of missing, like her emotions hadn't yet caught up to the idea that this time was different, this time she was staying.

Her father's paranoia had begun to hiss again in her ear, telling her to go, telling her she was making an abominable, selfish mistake; that she was putting Pearl in danger, and Pearl was still looking at her, face open and affectionate but starting to shutter a little at Esther's lack of response.

"I'm glad, too," Esther said. She had practice around Pearl now and

could trust her own face not to betray any of her sudden, melancholy mood, and she watched Pearl relax beneath her smile. "Come get me when you're dressed," she added. "We can fortify with a shot."

Pearl raised her hand, those long fingers wrapped around the stem of an imaginary glass. "Here's to the crowd. May they love us."

THE CROWD LOVED THEM. ALL FOUR MEMBERS OF THE BAND TOOK their practice sessions very seriously and had even managed to come up with passable eighties hair band costumes: black jeans, leather jackets. Esther and Pearl had both teased their hair to great heights, though it would've been more convincing with hairspray, which no one on base had. They looked good and they sounded good, and they were aided by the fact that by the time they plugged in their amps and started playing, everyone was well on their way to wasted and willing to cheer.

Esther was the backup singer and bassist, and her throat was raw, fingers sore by the time they finished "Hell Is for Children" and ended their set. The party was in the galley, which by day resembled a high school cafeteria, complete with the long gray plastic tables that had been pushed up against the walls to free up floor space, and even without the overhead fluorescents and a set of flashing red and purple party lights turned on, there was a distinct middle school vibe that made Esther feel young and silly in a pleasantly immature kind of way. The band had played at the front of the room beneath a web of white fairy lights, and once their set was over, pop music started piping through the new speakers Esther herself had rigged in the corners of the room some months ago.

The large, tiled floor was packed with people milling around, most of them unfamiliar to both Esther and to one another, and more sat in the row of chairs that blocked off the swinging gates leading behind the buffet-style hot bar to the darkened, stainless-steel kitchen. Esther noticed that the new summer crew looked amazingly sunned and healthy compared to their Antarctically pale colleagues. The new smells, too,

were overwhelming in their variation. When you lived with the same people, eating the same foods, breathing the same recycled air, you started to smell the same, too—even to a nose as keen as Esther's. These people were, quite literally, a breath of fresh air.

And a breath of something else.

Esther was midconversation with a new carpenter from Colorado named Trev, a man Pearl had described as "eager to please," when suddenly she raised her head like a hunting dog, nostrils flaring.

"Are you wearing cologne?" she asked. She'd caught something under the booze-and-plastic smell of the party, something that made her think, jarringly, of home.

"No," Trev said, smiling in amusement as she leaned over shamelessly and sniffed his neck.

"Hmm," she said.

"Maybe it's my deodorant," he said. "Cedar. Manly."

"It does smell nice," she said. "But no, I thought—well, never mind." They were closer now than they had been, and Trev's friendly eyes had become openly flirtatious, clearly taking her neck-sniffing as a declaration of interest. Esther took a step back. Even if she weren't taken, he looked like the kind of man who probably owned a lot of recreational outdoor equipment and wanted to teach her how to use it. However, she admired the controlled way he moved his body; it reminded her of the trainers she'd met at the martial arts gyms she'd been frequenting for years.

She opened her mouth to say something flirty, because she didn't want to rust, after all, but then her sensitive nose caught that other scent, the one that had distracted her a moment ago. God, what *was* it? It put her right back in her childhood kitchen; she could see the bulbous green inefficient fridge, the dents and dings of the maple cabinets, the feel of warped linoleum beneath her feet. Vegetable but not a vegetable, almost spicy, and it smelled *fresh,* which wasn't common around these parts. Rosemary? Chrysanthemum? Cabbage?

Yarrow.

The answer came to her, words tumbling back to her throat from where they had been perched on the tip of her tongue. Yarrow, achillea, milfoil, plumajillo.

"Excuse me," Esther said, eschewing social decorum, and turned away from the confused carpenter. She pushed past a cluster of people comparing tattoos by the cereal nook and ducked through the hanging blue streamers someone had taped, seemingly at random, to the ceiling, taking short breaths through her nose. She was tracking the unmistakable scent of the herb, the smell of her childhood, but she knew it was pointless even as she strained for it. It was already a memory again, supplanted by the aroma of pizza and beer and bodies.

She stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by music and chattering strangers, stunned by how strongly the fragrance had hit her heart. Was someone wearing it as a perfume? If so she wanted to put her arms around them and bury her face in their skin. Usually, Esther kept loss at arm's length; she didn't think about all the people she'd left behind over the years, she didn't think about any of the places she'd called home, and aside from the postcards she sent her sister and stepmother once a month, she didn't think about her family. It was a constant, tiring action, this not-thinking, like keeping a muscle flexed at all times. But the scent of yarrow had unflexed that stern muscle and with its relaxation came a cousin to the same sadness that had poured over her in Pearl's doorway earlier.

Pearl herself was across the room, face flushed, her teased hair tangled like she'd just stepped off the back of someone's motorcycle or out of someone's bed. She was wearing a dark purple lipstick that made her eyes look berry-bright and talking to a woman who was nearly as tall as she was. Esther charged toward them, intent on pulling herself out of this mood as quickly as she'd fallen into it.

"Tequila," she said to Pearl.

"This is Esther," Pearl said to the woman she'd been talking to. "Electrician. Esther, this is Abby in maintenance, she lived in Australia last year!"

Abby and Pearl were giggling at each other, cheerfully drunk. Pearl poured all three of them a shot, then poured Esther an extra after she'd gasped down the first. Already she was feeling better, shaking off the malaise that had been clawing at her throat. She was a person made for the present, not the past. She couldn't afford to forget that.

The party had done its job in starting to wipe away the over-winters' protective isolationism, and soon enough there was dancing, more drinking, a weird game that involved shouting the names of birds, even more drinking. A beaker, predictably, puked. Pearl and Abby spent some time screaming happily in one another's faces about someone they somehow knew in common from Sydney, someone who had a really bad dog, and then Pearl dragged Esther onto the makeshift dance floor and wrapped her long, leggy body around Esther's shorter one. The music was deep and pulsing and soon they were grinding like they were in a real club and not in a little heated box on a vast stretch of ice, many thousands of miles away from anything that might be called civilization.

Esther pushed Pearl's hair off her sweaty face and tried not to think about her family or her father's warnings or about the days that had ticked by since November 2. She focused instead on the present, on the thump of the bass and the feel of Pearl's body against hers. She thought, *I wish I could do this forever.*

But there was no "forever" where bodies were concerned, and eventually she had to pee.

In contrast to the noisy clamor of the party, the bathroom down the hall was almost eerily silent when Esther banged through the door and fumbled with her jeans. The sound of urine echoed loudly in the stainless-steel bowl and she could hear her own drunken breath, heavy from dancing, raspy from talking. The flush was a roar. At the sink, she paused in front of the mirror. With one finger she smoothed back a dark eyebrow, batted her eyelashes at herself, wound a few locks of hair around her finger to give her loose curls more definition. Then she stopped. Squinted.

There was a series of small marks along the mirror's perimeter, brownish red smears that sat atop the glass. They were symmetrical but not identical, one at each corner, a swipe as if with a paintbrush or thumb. She leaned close, examining, and wet a piece of paper towel to rub them off. The towel did nothing, not even when she added soap, her heart climbing into her throat. She tried to scratch the marks off. They didn't budge.

She stepped back so quickly she nearly fell.

A person didn't grow up like Esther had without recognizing the sight of dried blood, much less a pattern of it that could not be removed, and no one could grow up like she had without recognizing what that bloody pattern might imply. The smell of yarrow returned to her, though whether it was in her mind or here in the bathroom she wasn't certain.

Blood. Herbs.

Somebody here had a book.

Somebody here was doing magic.

"No," Esther said aloud. She was drunk, she was paranoid, she'd been locked in a cement box for six months and now she was seeing things.

She was also stepping away from the mirror, eyes still locked on her own terrified face, scared to turn her back on the glass. When she bumped up against the bathroom door, she whirled around and slammed through it, then ran down the narrow hallway toward the gym. The cardio room was so bright it seemed to buzz, the equipment standing in mechanical rows on the padded gray floor and the green walls making everything appear sickly pale. There was a couple making out on one of the weight benches, and they squawked in alarm as Esther crashed past them and into the gym's white, single-stalled bathroom.

The same reddish-brown marks were on the mirror, the same pattern. They were on the mirror in the bathroom by the rec room, too, and the one by the laboratory, and the one by the kitchen. Esther stumbled to her bedroom, heart in her throat, but thank god her own mirror was untouched. Probably just the public mirrors had been marked—a small

comfort. She couldn't smash every mirror in the station without calling attention to herself or getting in trouble.

Esther locked the door behind her, standing in front of her mirror with her hands on the top of her low dresser, leaning her weight on the wood so she could think. Clearly this was some kind of mirror magic, but she was too freaked-out and drunk to recall what that might entail. One of her family's books could turn a mirror into a kind of mood ring, the glass reflecting a person's true emotions for an hour or so, and then there was that mirror in Snow White, the one that told the evil queen about the fairest in the land . . . but was that kind of magic just fairy-tale shit, or was it real life?

She needed sobriety, clarity. She hung her head and steadied her breath. On the dresser, bracketed between her hands, sat the novel she was translating from Spanish to English, and she stared at its familiar green cover, at the decorative border and stylized sketch of a dark doorway beneath the title. *La Ruta Nos Aportó Otro Paso Natural* by Alejandra Gil, 1937. As far as Esther had been able to find, this novel was Gil's first and only publication—and it was also the only thing Esther owned that had belonged to her mother, Isabel.

Inside the cover was a tightly controlled cursive note; a translation of the title, in Esther's mother's perfect hand. "Remember," her mother had written to herself in English: "The path provides the natural next step."

Esther's stepmother, Cecily, had given her this novel when she was eighteen, the day before she'd left home forever, and at the time Esther had needed the translation. Spanish should have been her mother tongue, but Isabel had died when Esther was too young for language, and so it was only her mother's tongue. But it was the Spanish title she'd gotten tattooed across her collarbones several months later: "la ruta nos aportó" on the right, "otro paso natural" on the left. A palindrome and thus readable in the mirror.

The party felt like it had been hours ago, though the sweat from dancing was still drying on Esther's skin. She had stripped down to only

a black tank top; now she was shivering. In the glass, she could see the words of her tattoo around the straps of her shirt. When she'd first gotten the ink, she had just fled her home and family and been feeling adrift and frightened in a world that suddenly lacked any kind of structure, so the mere suggestion of a path, much less a natural next step, had been infinitely soothing to her. But now that she was nearing thirty, spoke excellent Spanish, and most importantly had actually read the novel, she understood that Gil's title was not meant to be soothing at all. Rather, it spoke of a kind of preordained movement, a socially constructed pathway that forced people, particularly women, into a series of steps they'd been tricked into believing they'd chosen for themselves.

These days the words struck her as a rallying cry: not to follow the path, but to veer from it. In fact, this very phrase had helped her make the decision to ignore her father's long-ago orders and stay in Antarctica for the summer season.

A decision she was now terrified she might come to regret.

"Leave every year on November 2," he had said, "or the people who killed your mother will come for you, too. And not only you, Esther. They'll come for your sister."

For these past ten years, she had listened, she had obeyed. Every November 1 she had packed up her things and every November 2 she had started moving, sometimes driving for that long day and night, sometimes taking a series of buses, planes, trains, not sleeping. From Vancouver to Mexico City. From Paris to Berlin. From Minneapolis to Antarctica. Every year, like clockwork, except this year. This year she had ignored his warning. This year she had stayed.

And now it was November 5, the station was filled with strangers, and one of them had brought a book.

2

The cat was back.

Joanna could hear him scratching at the front door, a plaintive sound like branches skidding across a roof. It was five in the evening and already growing dim, the sliver of sky outside her kitchen window fading from white to a smudgy charcoal gray. The weatherman on the radio that morning had said it might snow and she'd been hoping for it all day; she loved the first snow of the season, when all the faded browns of the sleeping earth were awakened into a new kind of aliveness, everything coarse made suddenly delicate, everything solid turned lacy and insubstantial. Magic that didn't need words to enact itself year after year.

The cat scratched again, and Joanna's heart lurched. She'd seen him stalking around her dead garden last week, a young blocky-headed tomcat, skinny and striped, and she'd put out a bowl of tuna one night and a bowl of sardines the next and now he had grown bold. But she couldn't attend to him right now: the stove was lit, herbs were charring in a pot, and her hands were covered in blood.

That last was her fault. She'd cut too deeply into the back of her left hand and instead of a trickle she'd gotten a flood. Even after she'd measured out the half ounce she needed, her hand bled sluggishly through the bandages, and it hurt more than she'd anticipated. It would be worth it if this worked—but this was her thirty-seventh attempt since she'd begun trying a year and a half ago, and so far, all she had to show for her troubles was a growing collection of thin white scars on her hands. She had no real expectations that now would be any different.

Still, she had to try. She *wanted* to try.

Tonight, she was experimenting with the new moon, after the last few

full moons had yielded no results—not even when she'd had a flash of what she thought was genius and managed to gather a whole half cup of menstrual blood. She had been so hopeful that might be the key. According to her admittedly surface-level research, peripheral blood was nearly indistinguishable from menstrual blood, forensically speaking, and she'd only ever managed to have three of her many books analyzed anyway—so it was absolutely possible the tests that had listed "blood" as the main ingredient of the ink had misled her in terms of where that blood may have come from.

But no. The book she'd written with her period blood was as ineffectual as all the others she'd attempted.

As ineffectual as she knew this one would be.

Still, hope and curiosity kept her at the stove, powdering the blackened herbs in a grinder and then mixing them with the blood from her hand, an egg yolk, a pinch of gum arabic, and honey. The result was a thick, dark paste that would write beautifully when mixed with water, but likely do nothing else. She kept her third ear pricked for any sound that might suggest the ink was more than just a homemade pigment, listening for the bodily hum that ran like syrup through her veins whenever she was near a book . . . but the ink stayed black and silent.

She had planned to write the book tonight, copying the text of one of the smaller spells in her collection, a ten-page sixteenth-century Persian incantation that was now faded but had once called up a fire that blazed without burning for roughly ten minutes. "The egg-cooker," her father had called it jokingly. But looking down at the quiet paste, her hand still stinging, she knew instinctively that the act of writing would be pointless.

Blinking back tears of frustration, she left the mess on the stove and moved across the kitchen, the green-and-white seventies linoleum buckling here and there beneath her feet. The floor always brought her father's voice to her mind, deep and cheerful and so terribly missed; "Gonna retile this soon," a sentence repeated so often it had taken on the cadence of ritual, but he hadn't retiled it and no one ever would. She opened a can

of tuna to scrape into a bowl, but when she stepped out onto the porch, shivering in the snow-scented air, the cat was nowhere.

It was full night now, no moon to light the sky, but the cloud cover sent down a distilled, silvery gleam that caught in the finger-bone branches of the birch trees lining her cleared yard. Among the pearly birches, the spruce and pine were little more than rustling shadows that dissolved into the darkness of the forest beyond. Joanna squinted through the trees, searching for movement, but other than a faint breeze the night was still.

Disappointment welled in her, black as the blood ink cooling in its cup, and she shook it off with a laugh. What was she doing, anyhow? Trying to lure a wild animal to her door and then what—invite him in? Offer him a bed by the fire, stroke his soft fur, talk to him, make him her friend?

Yes.

She put the bowl of tuna down on the top step and went back into the house.

Joanna had been born in this house and had lived here all her life; first with her whole family, and then, after her sister ran away and her mother moved out soon after, with just her father. For eight years it had been only Joanna and Abe, and ever since Abe's death two years ago, it had been only Joanna. The house was an old Victorian, too big for one, its formerly white paint now a stained old-tooth gray, the wooden trim aged from gingerbread elegance to stale exhaustion. Even the steep arches of the roof and windows had dulled, like overused knives. The door creaked on its hinges as she swung it closed.

Inside, it was as quiet as the forest. It always was. The dark wood of the front hall gave way to the artificial brightness of the kitchen, tinged faintly amber from the glass shade of the hanging overhead light, and the window above the sink—which during the day looked out over Joanna's herb garden—was a murky black mirror. Joanna felt herself unintentionally matching her footsteps to the quiet around her, soft, like she was trying not to disturb her own empty home.

More and more this ever-present silence felt like a function of the wards Joanna had lived behind all her life; another kind of invisible bubble that cut her off from the rest of the world, protective, stifling. For the first year after Abe died, she'd imagined him around every corner, had heard his voice as she cooked dinner ("Spaghetti again? You're gonna turn into a noodle"), practiced pop songs on the piano ("Fiona Apple, now *there's* a voice"), or sat on the porch with the watercolors he'd bought her ("You get this talent from your mother, I couldn't draw a polar bear in a snowstorm"). But little by little even his imaginary voice had faded and now she had to work to conjure it in her mind.

Sometimes Joanna couldn't help but try to imagine someone else in the house with her, a mutable dream-figure of a man, tall and strong and kind. She'd read a lifetime's worth of romance novels and had no trouble picturing the physical possibilities: his mouth on her neck, his broad shoulders crowding her against a wall, his hands hiking her skirts up around her waist. Not that she wore skirts, but the closet of her sexual subconscious was full of petticoats. It was the other parts of the fantasy that gave her trouble. The parts where she attempted to imagine anyone besides her family in this house with her. It stretched her imagination just to envision the little striped cat at her heels, though she was getting better at it. She could almost see him now, leaping onto the white-tiled tabletop to bat at one of the sprigs of dried herbs that hung in the window.

Her father had been allergic to most animal dander, but even now she couldn't bring herself to get a pet, though as a child she had wept for one. Her older sister had caught frogs for her, trapped garter snakes, collected jars of snails, but it hadn't been the same. She'd wanted something soft that could accept and return her love. Now there was something painful about the idea of letting an animal inside and making Abe's own home inhospitable to him, or to whatever wisp of his spirit remained.

If one believed in spirits, which Joanna did not. Of the hundreds of handwritten books her father had gathered, books that when read aloud

could do everything from tune a piano to bring rainclouds in a drought, none held spells to speak with ghosts or otherwise reach into the realm of death. That had to have been the first thing any early writers would have tried—whoever they were, however they'd written.

"It's not for us to ask how," her father had said, over and over. "We're here to protect the books, to give them a home, to respect them—not to interrogate them."

But how could Joanna not wonder?

Especially after one of the books Abe had protected all his life turned on him.

It had only taken her six months after Abe's death to break one of his most rigid rules and bring three books—though all of them with faded ink, the spells used up—outside the protective wards of her home and to a conservation lab in Boston. Even to conservationists who didn't know the truth of what they were seeing, the books were objects of fascination, ancient and rare, and Joanna had donated all three in return for access to their lab reports once the DNA and protein samples had been analyzed.

If she could finally learn how they'd been written, perhaps she'd understand why and how her father had been killed by one. And if she learned how they'd been written, well, it stood to reason she'd then be able to write them herself—didn't it?

Apparently not.

The lab results had thrilled and frightened her in turn, though in retrospect she thought she should've suspected. The magic within the books needed blood and herbs to activate, after all, so it made sense the ink itself was based in the same. But it cast a terrifying light on some of her longer books. How much blood was in those pages? And whose?

She spread plastic wrap over her bowl of ink paste then rebandaged her hand, which had finally stopped bleeding. With the stove off, the kitchen was chilly, so she made herself a cup of tea and took it into the living room. Only one lamp was on, the tall one with the green fringed shade, and in the

low greenish light the room looked even more cluttered and nest-like than usual: wool blankets piled on the faded red couch, abandoned half-drunk mugs of tea mingled with books on the floor-to-ceiling shelves, and sweaters tangled in the shiny black legs of the piano in the corner, their arms outstretched across the threadbare Persian rug. The woodstove, which Abe had installed in the brick enclosure where a fireplace had once been, glowed with warmth. Joanna felt, not unpleasantly, like a mouse returning to her den.

She had been sleeping down here by the stove since mid-October, trying to conserve heat. The tall narrow windows with their warped panes were already sealed tight in plastic, and she'd nailed thick army blankets to the ceiling and walls of the stairwell, to cut off the downstairs from the drafty upstairs—the latter of which would remain unheated and untouched until March. Functionally, her world had been reduced to four rooms: kitchen, dining room, living room, bathroom. And the basement, of course. She'd started this habit the winter her father had died and found it economical not only in terms of propane and wood, but comfort. One person didn't need a whole cold, dark house.

She fed the stove and checked the dusty face of the grandfather clock ticking by the cracked leather armchair—it was six forty-five, which meant she had fifteen minutes before the wards needed to be set, so she sat at the coffee table with a notebook and pen to make a list of errands for tomorrow's foray into town.

The list was short.

Post office.

Buy bread and see Mom at store.

Check email at library.

Like a pet, the internet was something she would have liked to welcome into her home, but the wards scrambled most kinds of communicative technology—phones fritzed, wires crossed, and so on. The radio worked, and so did walkie-talkies, which was how the family had

communicated when the house had held them all, before Esther, and then Cecily, had left. The soundtrack of Joanna's childhood was her sister's enthusiastic voice in her ear, "Esther for Joanna! Do you copy! Roger that! Over and out!"

She looked again at the clock. It was time.

Back to the kitchen, where she took the little silver knife out of the drying rack. She didn't look at the refrigerator as she passed it on her way to the basement, but she could see its colorful face from the corner of her eye, postcards magneted to every available surface. One for every month her sister had been gone. Ten years' worth. Soon there'd be another. Each month Joanna collected Esther's card from the post office and each month she told herself not to put it up, but she could not stop herself from adding to the collection on the fridge, even though she hadn't talked to Esther since their father had died.

Esther had an email address, though she seemed to check it rarely, and after Abe's death it had taken Joanna five separate variations of *Esther, we have to talk,* before Esther had written back with a phone number. Joanna had gone to her mother's house outside town and called from Cecily's kitchen floor, one hand pressed to the cool tile and her mother's cell phone pressed to her ear. When Joanna told her what had happened, Esther had sobbed instantly and noisily, her cries raggedly vocalized, her breath phlegmy in her throat; so exactly the way she'd cried as a little girl that briefly Joanna had felt close to her.

Then she'd asked Esther to come home.

Begged her, actually. Screamed at her, frenzied with grief, while Esther had wept, repeating *I can't, I can't, I can't,* until Cecily had prized the cell phone from Joanna's hand and stepped away to speak to Esther herself, voice low and soothing.

Joanna had tried to forgive her sister for leaving in the first place, for vanishing with no explanation, but she could never forgive her for this: for refusing to come back when Joanna had needed her the most, when

she was the only person alive who'd be able to read the book that had killed their father, the only one who could have offered Joanna answers. The only one who could have offered comfort.

Joanna had never reached out to her again.

Nevertheless, the postcards kept coming, one for Cecily and one for Joanna, faithful as the moon.

A skyline bright with an old neon sign for Gold Medal Flour: "Dear Jo, Here in Minnesota, everyone's got a sauna in their backyard. I think Vermont should get on this train. Your Northern blood will thank you. Love, your sweating sister, Esther."

A reproduction of *The Two Fridas,* the painter's dual hearts connected by delicate, bloodied veins: "Querida Jo, si quieres entender este postal en total, tendrés que aprender español. I'm here in Mexico City, bungling verb conjugations and failing at finding any information on my mother's family. Un beso muy fuerte de tu hermana errante, Esther."

The last one had penguins. "Dear Jo, Did you know that the word 'Arctic' comes from the Greek word for bears? *Ant*arctic means *no* bears. So remember not to picture me among polar bears, if you ever picture me at all. Love, your freezing sister, Esther."

How many nights had Joanna spent sleeplessly staring at these postcards, rereading words she already knew by heart? How many hours had she spent at the library or on her mother's computer, looking up all these faraway sights she would never see? She was an expert in every place her sister had been. An expert in mountains she'd never climb, seas she'd never swim, cities whose streets she'd never walk.

She didn't bother turning on the light when she tugged open the basement door. Even without years of sense-memory to guide her feet, the growing golden hum would lead her. In the black she made her way down the creaky wooden steps into the mold-fragrant dampness, moving past the pale shape of the washing machine to where the tarp was stretched across the floor, held down by cement blocks, the trapdoor waiting

beneath it. She pulled it open with a yawn of old wood and descended the second set of steps.

The hum filled her head.

At the bottom stair she paused to feel along the cement wall for the light switch, and an instant later the short hall was illuminated. The door to the collection was made of bare steel with vinyl weather-stripping at the bottom and a deadbolt above the handle. The key, strung with red ribbon, hung from a nail to Joanna's left, and she turned it in the lock with a familiar clunk.

It took her a moment, as always, to acclimate to the roar that surged in her mind's ears, a sound she had attempted to describe to her sister and mother more than once but never could. Like being filled with golden bees that were all actually one bee, which was actually a field of shining wheat rustling beneath a blazing sun. It was a sound but not a sound. It was in her ears but it was in her head. It was like tasting a feeling and the feeling was power.

"Seems uncomfortable," Esther had said.

It was.

It was also magnificent.

The door closed behind Joanna and she leaned against it, eyes shut, waiting until the sound was less physically overwhelming. Then she turned on the overhead light. It was warm down here, always 66 degrees Fahrenheit with 45 percent humidity—this was where all her electricity and gas went. At the front of the square room—what Abe had called "the business end," although no actual business had ever been conducted—sat a small stainless-steel sink, several behemoth filing cabinets, a towering set of oak shelves that held jars and jars of herbs, and a vast walnut desk they'd found at an estate sale in Burlington many years ago.

The rest of the room was filled with the books themselves.

There were five wooden bookshelves, each over six feet wide and taller than Joanna, each fitted with airtight glass doors. They sat in rows

on an old red wool carpet, a replacement for another red carpet that Joanna's mother had burned a decade earlier, though Joanna didn't like to think about that day. Taped at the end of each shelf, like a Dewey Decimal plaque, was a list of which books could be found on which shelf and in what order.

Some of the larger folios lay flat but most books were held in bookstands, and Joanna dusted them every morning with a paintbrush and examined them for signs of damage, for silverfish, bookworms, and mice, though the basement was airtight and pests hadn't been a problem for years. She had been doing this since her father had first tested her talents at five years old.

The books were roughly organized by approximate date, though they were all old. The oldest in Joanna's collection was circa 1100 and the newest from 1730. She didn't know what had been lost in the past few centuries: Was it the knowledge of how to write the books, or the magic that had once filled them? This was a question that had plagued her since she was a child, a question to which Abe had always claimed not only ignorance, but incuriosity.

It's not for us to ask how.

Abe seemed to think protection was at odds with knowledge, as if they could not properly protect the books if they knew too much about them. This belief—in silence, in ignorance—extended through the books and into other aspects of his life, particularly where his daughters were concerned. Keeping them in the dark, he seemed to believe, was tantamount to keeping them safe.

"It's a trauma response," Esther had said once to Joanna, with that annoying air of superior wisdom she'd adopted in adolescence. "He thinks if he talks about bad things that have happened, more bad things will happen."

This sanguine analysis came after the many less-than-sanguine years Esther had spent begging to know more about her mother, Isabel, about whose death Abe would only ever share the same scant details: how he

had come home one day to their apartment in Mexico City to find Esther screaming in her crib, all their books gone, and Isabel shot dead on the floor.

Isabel had been murdered, Abe said, by people who viewed the books as a commodity, like diamonds or oil—products to be bought and sold and killed for rather than a phenomenon to be guarded. Such people had been around as long as books had been around, and, like so many who dealt in commodities, book-hunters often took advantage of unrest and oppression in order to profit. Abe knew this better than most. His own paternal grandparents had possessed the same ability to hear magic that Abe had passed on to Joanna, and they'd owned a small theater in Budapest that was renowned for its incredible stage effects—actors passing through solid objects, set pieces floating with no visible wires, curtains engulfed in smokeless flame . . . Until 1939, when they were raided under the auspices of a law limiting the number of Jewish actors allowed in a theater.

Both husband and wife disappeared in the raid. So did all the books that had made their impossible special effects possible. All save for the few volumes the Kalotays had kept hidden in their home; volumes that made it to the United States with Joanna's grandfather when he came over on a container ship in 1940 to live with an uncle in New York. Three books, secreted away in the false bottom of a trunk.

These three books still sat behind glass in Joanna's basement, hard-won family heirlooms—and evidence of the danger in using magic too openly.

According to Abe, anyway. According to Cecily, the danger hadn't been in using magic; the danger had been in living under a fascist regime. The stolen books, she maintained, were simply more Nazi spoils of war, more precious things they felt entitled to, like paintings, jewelry, gold fillings, lives. It was true that Abe had a frustrating tendency to blame historical atrocity on an underlying hunt for books: once, when Esther brought home *The Crucible* in the eighth grade, he'd tried to suggest that the Salem witch trials may have been orchestrated by book-hunters, which had agitated Cecily nearly to tears.

"That's the kind of logic bigots thrive on," Cecily had said. "It makes it seem like the accusations were true, that the people killed for witchcraft were, in fact, practicing magic. But no: hatred and fear, that's all it was. That's all it ever is. Think of the lies told about the Jewish people, lies about blood ritual and human sacrifice . . . Hatred, fear, and the desire for control. Call it what it is, Abe."

However, given both the family history and what had happened to Esther's mother, Joanna supposed she couldn't blame her father for his paranoia. It was a wonder he'd kept collecting after Isabel's death, building the library back up until Joanna's bookshelves now held two hundred and twenty-eight magical volumes.

Two hundred and twenty-nine, if you counted the brown leather book Abe had borne with him into the front yard when he died.

Joanna did not.

That book was an outlier in nearly every way. All books required blood to activate, but that one hadn't simply accepted her father's blood—it had sucked him dry. And it was the thickest book she'd ever seen, its pages crammed with text, which meant it had been written with so much blood it made her own blood run cold. She was also relatively certain that the thread binding the pages together was hair. Human. It was also one of only two books in their collection that was, to use her father's words, "in progress"—a book whose spell was still ongoing.

Joanna did not know what the book did, because she could not read it. The only clear image was a small gold embossment of a book on the back cover. The words themselves eluded her eyes, they swam and darted like the colors in a kaleidoscope. This was what books in progress looked like to anyone but the reader, though Esther could have read it. Could have but wouldn't. A book in progress couldn't be destroyed, either: torn or burned or drowned. Only the person who'd first read the spell could end it. By choice—or by death.

Books in progress sounded subtly different from a resting book, too, the hum more a swarm, and this book, the one her father had hidden for

years and then carried with him to his death, sounded the strangest of all. It was deep like a rotting tooth.

When Abe had first died, she'd assumed the book was new to him, recently acquired. And, raised in the shadow of his paranoia, she'd assumed, too, that his death had not been accidental. It seemed certain that someone had given him that book on purpose; someone had killed him so they could take his books for themselves. The same fate that had met Isabel, and Joanna's great-grandparents.

Her father had gathered their collection several different ways: by combing used bookstores and estate sales, attending rare books conventions, regularly ordering huge lots of antique books on eBay and hoping the boxes would arrive buzzing, and buying directly from people who knew what they were selling. He had kept detailed records of each transaction and in the days after his death Joanna had scrutinized every note he'd taken, looking for suspects—but then she had found a different record. A notebook she'd never seen before, hidden beneath his socks in his top dresser drawer.

It was an old composition notebook, the pages yellowed, and the dates went back twenty-seven years. Abe had been keeping this notebook since before she was born. There weren't many entries, perhaps one or two per year, but as she read, it became very clear that the book in progress was not new to Abe at all.

Unbeknownst to Joanna, he'd had it her entire life, and for her entire life had been attempting to destroy it. He'd soaked it in turpentine and lit it on fire; he'd taken a chainsaw to it; he'd doused it in bleach. His last entry, made the day before he died, read, *Curious what will happen if I add my own blood to the mix. Will it negate or interrupt the spell? Worth a try tomorrow.*

Abe had been attempting to end whatever spell had been ongoing between the book's pages. Instead, the book had ended him.

Now it lived atop the desk at the front of the rooms and Joanna took care never to touch it with her bare hands. Nor did she let it come too close to her book of wards, which were too precious to sully.

(Abe's voice in her head, quizzing her as he'd done when she was young: "Not a book, technically. What do we call these early manuscripts?"

A codex. *Semantics, Dad.*

Precision of language, Jo.)

The book of wards—codex of wards—was in Latin, and despite its small size was the most powerful and rare in their collection; not only for what the book could do, which was considerable, but because unlike any of the others, whose ink eventually faded and with it the magic, the ink of the wards could be recharged. The codex had belonged to Isabel and at the time of her death had been in storage with a hundred other books, untouched by whoever had killed her. Three days after she died, Abe had packed up his daughter and driven without stopping across the border, across the continent, to his family's old home in Vermont. That night he'd used the wards for the first time and had not let them drop for the rest of his life. Nor would Joanna.

She went to the sink and washed her hands thoroughly, then held them for a long while beneath the hot air of the electric dryer, until she felt every last remaining speck of moisture wick from them. Then she went to the herb cabinet and put a pinch of dried yarrow and vervain into a small bowl, which she brought back to the desk.

Herbs and plants were not strictly necessary to read the spells—blood alone would suffice—but they enhanced all magical effects, strengthening potency and increasing duration. There was never a single "correct" answer, but rather many possible factors, and Joanna had memorized everything from innate magical properties (vervain for protection, datura for knowledge and communication, belladonna for illusion) to physical correspondence (delicate herbs for delicate magic) to geographic specificity (chamomile for Polish spells, chincho for Peruvian). This last was helpful only if Joanna knew roughly where a book had come from, and yarrow was one of her most-used herbs because it was circumboreal and grew widely across the world.

She set the yarrow and vervain aside for now, picked up the tiny, leatherbound, fifteen-page codex, and spread it out on wooden support wings Abe had made. She let it fall carefully open. Silver knife in hand, she considered reopening her cut from earlier, but that would hurt unnecessarily, so she went to the usual spot on her finger and poked with the sharp tip until a drop of blood welled obediently to the surface. It was the brightest color in the room, more alive than even the body it had just quit. She held her bloody finger over the powdered herbs and let the bright red slide down her skin. Then she dipped her bleeding finger to the mixture and pressed the cut to the codex itself.

Unlike most books, which simply absorbed the drop of blood they were offered, the wards drank. As soon as she'd touched her finger to the page it began greedily swallowing her blood, her finger stinging with slight suction as if a tiny mouth was latched on, and the ink grew brighter, blacker, fiercer on the linen page. She'd been setting these wards all her life and had always found that suction comforting, but after Abe had died, she'd been terrified for months that the wards would turn on her, as that other book had on her father. They never did, though, and by now she was used to it again. As she fed the words, the Latin—a language she didn't speak well—began to re-form beneath her eyes into something she understood. She took a slow, measured breath, and began to read.

"May the Word all-powerful grant unto this home a silence born of silence, and may the silence arouse to the heavens a flight of angels that none with ill intent shall see, for as the sky closes itself tight with a mantle of clouds so now shall angels obscure this home from the seeking eyes of the wicked world. Let life make dark the herbs and the life make dark these words, which make the Word . . ."

On and on she read, fifteen pages of angels and wings and malicious gazes, until the last sentence rang out and with a rustle like a million sweeping feathers, Joanna felt the wards reassert themselves. A slight popping sensation sounded in her already-buzzing ears, as if the seal

around the house was hermetic in science as well as etymology and magic. The house was again, as ever, unmappable, untraceable. Nobody with ill intent could find her.

In fact, nobody at all could find her. The wards—set each night at the same hour—made certain of that, circling the boundary of her property so that her driveway and the house beyond it were essentially invisible to anyone whose blood wasn't in the warding book. It was an invisibility not only of the eyes but also of the senses and the mind: the location of the property could not even be thought about, much less sought and found. The people in town had known Abe and Joanna for almost three decades, yet if asked where the two of them lived, a blurry look would come over the neighbors' faces and they'd shrug, smiling, baffled. "Up the mountain?" they'd suggest. Or sometimes, "Down the mountain?"

Not even Joanna's mother could locate her if she came looking; not since she'd moved out and stopped adding her own blood to the wards each night. If Cecily wanted to visit, Joanna would have to go and get her and drive her in, which Abe had made her swear she would never do.

This promise, at least, she hadn't broken.

Only Esther, whom magic had never been able to touch, would have been able to find the house if she tried. Only Esther could come right up to the front door and push it open and call Joanna's name.

But Esther wouldn't.

The wards reasserted, Joanna slid the codex back into its protective case. She stood from the desk and set things in order, then she turned off the light and closed the door. Behind her the books hummed, resonant and sweet and safe in their underground home.