

The background of the cover is a dark, textured charcoal grey. In the upper half, there is a stylized illustration of a cluster of houses with purple roofs and red chimneys, set against a lighter, textured purple background. In the lower half, a person with dark hair in a bun, wearing a grey sweater and dark pants, stands with their back to the viewer. Next to them is a glowing, white, ethereal figure of a person in a similar pose. The title text is written in a white, cursive script, flanking the figures.

*The
Silence
of*

*Lavender
and
Blood*

BY NICOLE POLGLAZE

THE SILENCE OF LAVENDER AND BLOOD

by Nicole Polglaze

*For Hugh and Ann
Family is more than blood*

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CONTENT WARNINGS: CHILD ABUSE, MENTIONS OF SUICIDE & RAPE



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THE SILENCE OF
LAVENDER
AND BLOOD

22

I turn from the balance on my banking app to the price on the laptop screen.

“We don’t have enough money,” Riley says from where he’s stretched on his stomach on the bed beside me.

Selecting *One Way*, I purchase the ticket.

21

The radiator thrums, puffing dusty air into my face but I'm too close to the window to feel the warmth. An aura of cold surrounds the glass, slipping through the yarn of my handmade sweater. I spent my first two and a half weeks at the hospice knitting this monstrosity. My nurse offered to buy me a new one but I wear this creation to spite my illness—even the dropped stitches are evidence that the sickness hasn't devoured all of me.

The blood drains from the tips of my fingers, making them grow cold, as I press the cell phone to my ear.

"You're coming here?" Geordie asks. She isn't fully committed to our conversation. Someone on her end of the line tells her about plummeting stock prices.

I can picture her, marching through the halls of her towering agency with a view of the clouds, her legs shaded by pantyhose, her steel-grey skirt tight although you wouldn't know it by the way she glides, a smartphone in one hand and her iPad in the other, trailed by an assistant porting Geordie's green tea latte, soy milk, no sugar, thank you awfully.

Exacerbated by this plastic chair, the soreness in my bones makes turning around a struggle but I glance back at Riley. He's perched on the edge of my single bed, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his palm. He nods encouragement. The movement casts his ratty hair into his eyes and he pushes out his lower lip to blow it away.

"Have you spoken with Olive or Darcy recently?" I ask.

"I saw something about one of Darcy's gigs on Facebook last week," Geordie says. "No, it was the week before. Why?"

Ice coats the glass again so I bunch my sleeve into my fist and scrub until I can see out. "I have something I want to tell you all."

"In person?" The other voice ceases as if Geordie waved her into silence. "Jael, are you all right?"

Eight months before we graduated from college, Geordie had four job offers. Two of them promised a starting salary of eighty thousand dollars. She chose based on location. Two of Darcy's many friends begged him to join their band, promising him national tours and platinum records. He ignored them as well as the encouraging letters he'd received from three of his idols whom I had forced him to contact, offering him positions as their opening act. When he bummed a ride from Geordie on her way to her new job, he fell in love with her

city and decided to go solo and stay there. It's not like he needs the money anyway. Olive received an acceptance letter to the medical school of her dreams in—you guessed it—Geordie's city.

Eight months before we graduated from college, I submitted my application to the Peace Corps. Four months later, "due to an increase in applications this year," I started looking for something else to do after graduation. Two months after that, I received an email from a retired Pakistani soldier with a scar burned across his collarbone whom I had met during the summer after my second year of college. He offered me a spot on his climbing team. I would be the only Westerner and the only woman. Of course I accepted.

One week after graduation, my three friends departed for the prosperous futures our college and their parents expected of young people of our caliber. I shoved what I thought I'd need into a mountaineering backpack and a duffle bag patched with duct tape, leaving the rest on the curb outside Goodwill, and hitched a ride to the airport in a silver minivan filled with toddlers.

A year and a half later, my entire life savings are paying for this room in this hospice in this tiny town where I know I can't be found as I wait to die.

I watch the snow. The flakes only become distinct from the white ground, white sky, white world once they pass in front of the oak's trunk. My breath clouds the window until I can't see the snow anymore. "It's almost Christmas. I just want to see you three."

Riley sits up, expectant.

"Well, I'm not going home this year," Geordie says.

I think of her parents in their cable knit sweaters, sitting with their tea in those tear-drop shaped mugs by that huge hearth where they've hung Geordie's stocking even though she's not there. In a world like that, Christmas is little kids in their pajamas bouncing on their parents' bed, exclaiming their urgency to open presents. It's a special breakfast with cinnamon-spiced cider. It's wrapping paper and ornaments and Christmas jingles. That Christmas is nothing like empty cartons of spiked eggnog piled in the sink, one package on the coffee table with To Mom, From Jael with love written in my mother's hand, my little brother screaming that he had tried not to be naughty this year, he'd really tried.

Geordie's still speaking. "Why don't you ask Olive and Darcy if they'll be around and I can set something up?"

"I'll call Olive," I say.

"But?"

"What but?"

"I sensed a but," she says.

"I'll call Olive," I say.

"You need to call Darcy too. You need to talk to him."

Riley plays with a loose thread on my duvet. I bat his hand aside. The whole thing will unravel if he keeps toying with it.

"Would you do it for me?" I say. "Please?"

"If you expect to have the courage to face him at Christmas, you have to talk to him."

"Please, Geordie."

"No, you have to call him. Listen, Jael, I have to go. You'll do it, okay? I'll call you this weekend. We'll make plans. I like this idea. I'm getting excited.

Okay, bye-bye."

I listen to the emptiness inside my phone for several minutes after she hangs up.

"She's right, you know," Riley says. "You have to call him."

Michelle comes in to change the water of my bouquet. Today, her scrubs show little Victorian picture frames that cup disproportionate images of dogs and cats viewed in profile. Her usual set of faux pearls doesn't match the look. "Oh, honey, what's the matter?"

I smile but it feels foreign and I can't keep it up when I see my reflection in the window. "Just thinking of what my life was like before."

"That's no good. You have to think about the good times to come."

My laugh turns into a cough. "Between now and January, you mean?"

She seems to realize her mistake because she doesn't speak again as she plucks the dead blossoms from the arrangement and leaves my room, circumnavigating the four and a half paces from the nightstand to the door. Riley measured the distance one afternoon. In fact, he measured the whole room and never loses pleasure in reminding me how small it is. I tried to describe the types of rooms I had in college, but he didn't seem to hear.

I watch the falling snow that's reflected in the screen of my phone. Wondering if perhaps Olive will be on shift, wondering if I prefer that outcome so I only need to hold a conversation with her answering machine, I flick through my contacts until I find her name. I haven't changed her profile photo since freshman year. Her tongue sticks out, the piercing sparkling in the yellow light from the streetlamp.

The photo is low quality because of the questionable lighting but she didn't let me snap a photo of her silver tuxedo until she was several shots into her night. I adore her not-giving-a-shit war cry and can't find a better photo with which to replace it.

Riley glances over my shoulder and tries to mimic her expression. He looks like an idiot.

When Olive picks up, I wonder if I can talk her into calling Darcy for me.

"Jesus Christ," she says. "You're still alive?"

I know her comment is more about my radio silence than because she somehow figured out my secret, but I still have a split-second of dread. "Hello, Olive."

"Hello, Olive?" she says. "That's all I get? It's been what, a year?"

"Nine months."

"Eight and a half," Riley says, splaying his fingers.

"Still. God. What a crappy friend," Olive says.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I've been busy."

"Doing what?"

"I was in Pakistan."

Then in China, hacking my lungs into a tin bucket. Then in Germany to see a specialist who took half my life savings and offered one line in return: "This sickness you caught is rare, Liebling, and you have until the New Year. Es tut mir leid." Then in my apartment—in a town chosen for its distance from an airport, its lack of public transportation, and its high annual snowfall—before I fainted in the bathtub and nearly drowned. Then here, this single bed, this grey room with this white view and these dying flowers, dying faster than I am, which must be hard, considering.

"Well, that's as good an excuse as any," Olive says. "What makes you pick up the phone to call now?" Her voice quiets as she moves the phone from her ear. "No, dick-bag, this is my seat. Yes, I need both seats, look how comfortable my backpack is. Thank you, move it along." She comes back. "Sorry, Jae. Yeah, asshole, that's a very flexible finger. Sorry, go ahead."

"Are you going anywhere this Christmas?" I ask.

"Nah, I'm working a double shift Christmas Eve." Along with her acceptance letter, Olive received an invitation to intern at a local hospital as a lab technician. "Why?"

I trace Riley's initials in the condensation on the window. The glass is cold. "I'm thinking of visiting."

"Fuck yeah."

"Excuse me?" I say.

"I said, fuck yeah. That would be so cool," she says. "Oh, Jae, I would seriously love that."

"Yeah?"

"Have you told Geordie and Darcy? They're going to love it too."

"I just hung up with Geordie. She's excited." I pluck a petal from one of the drooping flowers and inhale its faint scent. I wonder where Michelle finds flowers at this time of year and how far they have to travel to die in my room. "Hey, Olive, could you do me a favor?"

"No."

"What?" I say.

"I'm not calling Darcy for you."

"I wasn't going to—"

"Yes, you were," she says. "Listen, I love you,

but you need to talk to him.”

Riley flops over on my bed. His sigh is a moan meant to catch my attention. I ignore him.

I swallow a cough so Olive doesn't suspect. “Have you—” It threatens to come back up so I pinch the skin beneath my chin. “Have you talked with him recently?”

“I saw him at this Halloween bash an alum threw,” she says. “Why?”

I remember his scent, so different from the ghosted smell of this flower, so real and so boisterous, like he awakens every sense with his presence to make sure you don't miss the fact that he's standing next to you.

“How is he?” I ask.

“He seemed fine. Busy. You know him. He's always off somewhere else but can treat you like you're the only thing he wants for that second he's paying attention to you. But I'm sure he can tell you more when you call him.”

“Okay, fine.”

“Good,” she says. “Ah, shucks, here's my stop. I gotta work. Text me the info when you and Geordie cook it up, okay? I really am so thrilled.”

“Okay.”

“Love ya.”

“I love you too,” I say.

After I hang up, I try to find the right words to mend the rift between me and Darcy but there are so many words and each one feels insubstantial. Even after ten months, I still feel the fistful of joy that had been ripped from my heart, to be replaced by dread of ever having to speak to him again. How can I breathe when I'm with him?

Riley slides from the bed and stands behind

me, slipping his arms around my neck. His breath is warm against my cheek as he kisses it. “He's an idiot if he doesn't forgive you.”

I press the first digit. My phone spits out suggestions, so confident it knows who I want to call. I'd rather not hear from any of those people. I want to forget I ever knew them. Truthfully, I don't want to speak with him, either, but I want him to talk to me. I want to hear him say my name. I type out the rest of his number, ignoring his name which jumps further to the top of the list with the more digits that I enter.

I fist around the sleeve of my sweater as the first ring fills my head, uninterrupted. I'm crying by the fourth. Tears splash on the windowsill. The brine pools on the white-washed wood. Riley's arms tighten. My heart stops when I hear Darcy's voice and I am terrified that he has finally picked up.

“Hey, it's Darcy Buchannan.”

I'm going to be sick.

“I'm sorry I'm not available but I'll give you a call back when I get the chance. Best.”

The beep is hysterical.

“Hi—” My throat is tight so the word sounds smoky. “Hi, Darcy, it's me. I was just calling because I'm coming to visit the girls for Christmas and was wondering if you'll be free and interested in catching up.”

Riley's chuckle vibrates against my spine. “Not your smoothest moment.”

“I'd love to see you and I have something I want to tell you all. Anyway, call me if you get the chance. I hope you're well.”

I hang up, press my forehead against the sharp bones of my forearms, and scream.

20

Standing beneath the sign for American Airlines, Delta, and United, I gaze down the arrivals lane. Rain dances off car roofs. A bus passes, splashing water streaked with oil rainbows onto the neat black bag of a woman who waits too close to the curb. She swears in Norwegian and Riley repeats the word under his breath. The journey has exhausted me and I slide my backpack from my shoulders. A cough rumbles in my chest and I hide my illness behind my sleeve.

More signs mark other airlines: Frontier, Jet Blue, Virgin, Alaskan. Each one is ready to take me anywhere I could hope to go. I've always loved airports. They suggest so many possibilities of escape.

The silhouettes of aspen leaves and pine

needles have been painted onto the glass overhang above me. The watered-down light filters through the glass and mirrors the leaves on the sidewalk. Rain warps the shapes. The scent of wood smoke mixes with that of exhaust and cigarettes.

Geordie's Nissan Leaf pulls up to the curb in front of me. I flinch against the rain as I step out from beneath the overhang.

Geordie bounds from the car and around the bumper. She hesitates at the sight of me and tries to hide it when she draws me into a hug and whispers, "I missed you, Jael."

"I missed you too. Thanks for hosting."

"It's a pleasure."

She takes my bag and carries it to the trunk.

Riley gazes up at the damp sky, blinking with indignation.

"Olive is coming over tonight," Geordie says. "She's working tomorrow but managed to take off Christmas day."

I slide into the Leaf.

"I was thinking we could do a tour of the city tomorrow, if you want," Geordie says. "I'll show you the sights. It's forecasted to rain, of course, but I have a spare raincoat if you didn't bring one."

Riley climbs in behind me, resting his arms on the back of my seat and breathing into my ear.

"Thanks."

The seatbelt provides more of a challenge than it should.

Geordie watches me fumble with the buckle and the folds of my sweater. "Has Darcy called you back?"

With my elbow on the door handle, my chin in my palm, the rain washing the window, I avoid her

searching gaze.

"There's a bus behind us," Riley says.

Geordie starts the engine and pulls into the flow of holiday traffic leaving the airport.

"I called three times," I say, "and texted twice. Has he said anything to you?"

"He hasn't called. I'm sorry, Jael. He's a jerk."

The Leaf crests a hill and the ocean stretches out to our left. Rain upsets the grey surface and creates a carpet of mist over the water. It's eerie and uninviting and I am suddenly jealous of my three friends.

"No, he's not," I say.

She slows to allow a Subaru in front of us. "What happened, Jael?"

The shadow of mountains haunt the horizon. I try to count them but the rain obstructs my view. I wish I could climb them. I wish I could climb anything, one more time. If I had the energy. If it weren't winter. If I weren't dying.

"I've just been sick. I caught a bug in Pakistan." I search the cityscape for a change of subject. "Is that it?"

Geordie leans forward to see the spire out my window. It pierces the clouds. "The face of every postcard."

"It's not as impressive as I expected."

"That's because it's a building," she says. "You've never been impressed by anything manmade."

"That's not true. I think you're pretty impressive."

She croons. "I've missed you."

19

Olive assaults me when I open the door to Geordie's flat for her. She lifts me off the ground to spin me around, something she knows I hate but insists on doing anyway. I feel short enough around my friends. There's no need to treat me like I live in the body of a child.

"Crap," she says, "you look horrendous."

"Wow," Riley says.

He doesn't cast a reflection in the platinum-framed mirror that hangs above Geordie's entryway table. She has one of those bowls to drop your keys in when you return home, the kind you only see in movies. The sides are ribbed and Riley leans his face close to watch the light reflect off them.

Olive's green scrubs smell like acid.

"Olive," Geordie reprimands, gliding into the

hallway.

“Just because you were too polite to point it out doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

“How would you like it if I said the same about your haircut?” Geordie says.

Olive has shaved the hair above her left ear, let the fringe on the right swoop in front of her eyes, and has dyed the rest bronze. She looks unstoppable.

Geordie hands her a glass of something. “What’s the plan for tonight?” She hands me a glass of nothing. They know how hard I’ve tried to avoid alcohol, how hard I fight not to lose control, how hard I long to be as different from my mother as possible. “I let Olive arrange our evening.”

“Is that safe?” I ask.

Olive peers into her cup. “I think it’s just vodka and something.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I told her to keep it slow,” Geordie says as she disappears into the kitchen again.

18

Olive's phone says it's past ten by the time it stops raining, but water droplets still twinkle in the air around streetlights. My feet throb in my modest heels. Still not recovered from my flight and after walking across the city, I begin to feel the sickness enter my chest. Each breath hitches and I hope my companions can't hear my wheezing. I'm ready to sit down by the time Olive stops outside a black-faced building set between a natural foods store that has been closed for hours and a divorce lawyer's office with a menorah in the window. Above a burgundy door is a hand-painted depiction of a man being suspended upside-down by one ankle, with Hanged Man written in gothic print beneath. Riley tilts his head to see the man's face the right

side up. Piano music slips onto the sidewalk as a couple tumbles out, arm-in-arm, giggling.

"What is this," I ask, "a jazz club?"

"Geordie said slow." Olive holds the door for me. Her black dress shows more leg than is practical in December and more ass than I thought possible on my willowy friend. "Cover up, Geordie, everyone's staring at you."

Geordie harrumphs and leads the way into the club.

The scents of candle-smoke, cologne, and cognac cloak my nostrils. Russet-stained glasses cup candles on each tabletop, toning the light down several octaves. A collection of chic men leans on the bar, casting appreciative glances at my companions. Most of the tables are taken, the occupants leaning forward to get as close as possible to each other. Piano music entwines with the low chatter and I feel like I have been transported through time, not necessarily forward or backward, just to somewhere other.

Riley takes it all in, his eyes huge. "I have been missing out."

"Wow," Geordie says. Her dress was red beneath the streetlamps outside but in here it is lavender. She looks crystalized, preserved for eternity. "This place is incredible."

"It's incredibly something," Olive says.

Her fringe of hair doesn't hide her frown.

"How did you find this place?" I ask.

"A friend."

The bartender leans across the countertop. His blue eyes glow beneath dark eyeliner. "What will make your evening perfect?" His voice is tainted with all the scents of this place—smoke and power and booze.

Olive's mouth rounds.

The piano music thrums for a moment before ending on an optimistic note. The chatter silences to make way for applause. The proprietor slithers through her patrons, clapping her fingers against her wrist.

"That's quite the offer," Olive says, testing the waters, waiting to snarl if the bartender says the wrong word. "What do you recommend?"

Riley dips his finger in a glass of sherry and licks it.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," the proprietor says, her voice smooth over the microphone.

"How much do you want to remember tomorrow?" the bartender asks.

I've been standing for too long. The smells go to my head. The room swirls and I clutch Geordie's arm to keep from toppling.

"Gosh," Olive says, her kohl-lined eyes narrowing.

"What's going on?" Riley asks. The outline of his body flickers with the candles and he grips the bar to keep himself from slipping away.

The woman on the microphone continues. "We will take a short interlude so our pianist can rest."

"Jael," Riley says, moving toward me, his outline fading with every step.

People clap again with the same smooth appreciation. The pianist stands, smiling.

"Oh, shit," Geordie says.

"Once again, ladies and gentlemen, this is Darcy Buchannan. Isn't he just wonderful?"

17

The smile that crinkles one eye more than the other. The tendency to run his hand through his hair when he's nervous, upsetting it into dark tufts. The energy in the way he holds himself, the way his fingers move like he's playing the piano even when he can't, the way he enters the room, beams at me, and leaves before I can tell him to stay.

There's something wrong with my throat. The sickness has blocked the airflow. I lean against the bar. Geordie is reprimanding Olive, quietly so we don't make a scene, asking her what she was thinking by bringing us here when she knew he would be here, when she knew he hadn't returned my calls. The bartender is asking me if I am all right, if I think I should sit down, if I need to drink something, here drink this it will make you feel

better, it's not too strong. Olive is saying I'm sorry I'm sorry I had no idea I thought it would make it better that they would talk to each other again that we could be a family again that it wasn't a mistake. Riley is screaming my name. Darcy (oblivious as always) is walking up and looking from Olive (frantic, apologetic) to Geordie (righteous, furious) to me (pale, wheezing), saying, "Jael, you don't look so good. Why don't you sit down?"

16

Olive always knew just by looking when I needed help and she was perfect enough to ask. She was rubbish at helping, but at least she asked. Geordie was always too busy to notice but if I requested her time, she listened to everything, no matter how much I complained or sobbed. She knew the perfect questions to guide me through my labyrinth of sorrow. Darcy never asked and he never listened but he saw and reacted. When I was at my lowest, he poked me and tickled me and turned up the music until the neighbors yelled at us and we ignored the complaints and he danced and sung until I forgot how to feel sad because I was laughing too hard.

15

When my freshman roommate screwed her boyfriend on my desk and used my computer as an ashtray, Geordie stroked my hair as I sobbed. She offered to help me research to buy a new computer and didn't question when I told her that I couldn't afford it, that I had barely been able to purchase the one I had brought to school. I knew she told Darcy when the next week he bought a new model and shrugged off his previous laptop on me even though it was only a year old. He sold it to me for twenty dollars and said he was just going to throw it away anyway, that I was doing him and the environment a favor.

14

I remember the wind was especially bad that Wednesday during my second year of college. It ripped ice crystals from the finely-packed snow to slice at any exposed skin. My cheeks were raw from it as I walked to class. Ice blades were in my eyes but tears made the experience worse. They froze to my lashes and it was a struggle to open my eyes after I blinked. With my chin buried in my collar, inching my neck away from the sting of the zipper whenever the wind pushed it too close again, I flinched when my phone buzzed against my side. I always kept it on vibrate so it would never get me in trouble during class. Not that it mattered. No one ever called me. No one but Riley on his worst days. So, despite the wind that rubbed my skin raw, I took off my glove to answer the phone.

He still wasn't doing well. Mom was making it worse. She had refused him dinner again.

He talked a lot about death.

I don't remember anything that happened in number theory that day. When I returned to the dorm, I went to Darcy's room. He looked up from his laptop, an eyebrow quirked. When I dropped my backpack on his rug, he took me in his arms and I sobbed into his chest for half an hour. That was the only time he didn't try to distract me from my sorrow.

13

My friends cut class to attend my brother's funeral. We loaded into Geordie's car and drove in silence the entire way—and I grew up ten hours from school. I don't remember much of the funeral. I think Sheriff McKinley was the only person from my childhood who spoke to me during the reception. Perhaps the others were intimidated by my three, much taller shadows who never left me alone the entire day. More likely, my neighbors still hadn't forgiven me for abandoning my mother to deal with my suicidal brother alone when I could have gone to the community college down the mountain.

I snuck out around the time the party started to wane and my mother burst into tears so her guests' sympathy would keep them there until the hors d'oeuvres were finished. The snow had been pushed

to either side of the road, making the sidewalks unusable. Few cars populated the streets, especially since most of the town was in my mother's living room, so I walked down the center of the road.

The cemetery staff had finished pushing the frozen clumps of dirt onto Riley's casket by the time I arrived at his grave. It didn't take long before I couldn't breathe, I was crying so hard, begging him to forgive me for leaving him alone, for letting her kill him.

After I left Riley's grave, scrubbing away the tears so my mom wouldn't see, my friends helped me load my last possessions into the car. That wasn't home anymore. Then we sang moody indie-folk songs from Darcy's playlist until our eardrums throbbed and our throats grated every time we swallowed.

12

Geordie's living room fits her personality. One wide couch and two armchairs surround a glass-topped coffee table that supports The Wall Street Journal, a heavy book on the top ten best American cities in which to live, National Geographic (probably purchased for my visit), coasters in the shapes of extinct flowers, and a fairy garden filled with succulent plants and tiny figurines.

Darcy barely touches the edge of the armchair. He leans forward, elbows on knees, fingers tapping a melody on his arm. He's wrenched his maroon tie loose and I can see his pulse in the dip between his collarbones.

Pulling my legs onto the couch, I tug the hem of Geordie's hoodie over my knees and hug the mug

even though the heat makes my palms throb. “I’m sorry,” I say again.

“No, I’m sorry,” Olive says. She leans back in the other armchair, hiding her face beneath her tuft of hair. “It was a mistake to ever bring you there.”

“Why?” Darcy asks.

“Because you hadn’t returned her phone calls, asshole,” Olive says.

“How could we have known you wouldn’t be mad at her?” Geordie adds.

She perches on the arm of Olive’s chair and blows across the surface of her tea until the steam loops back and fogs her glasses. Now that her contacts are out and her grey eyes are once again framed behind those familiar square lenses, I begin to feel the memory of the comfort and regularity of college lowering my pulse.

“Because she looks like that.” Darcy gestures at me.

“So you’re saying that you would have yelled at her if she’d come here looking all rosy as usual?” Olive says. “You really are an asshole.”

Riley, the distinction of his form finally coming back, presses his palms against his ears.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” Darcy says. He always cracks his knuckles when he’s nervous.

“Oh yeah? Then what did you mean?”

“Olive,” Geordie says, brushing the tuft of bronze hair off Olive’s forehead. She turns to Darcy. “Why didn’t you return her phone calls?”

“Because I needed time to think,” he says.

“You had ten months,” Olive says, nodding the hair back to its previous position.

“It was a lot to think about.”

I avoid his gaze. “I love you,” he’d said. He wouldn’t understand why I was incapable of loving him back, at least not in the way he wanted to be loved.

“Make them stop,” Riley says, his voice a moan in my ear.

“You could have at least texted back okay,” Olive says.

“Don’t you think that would have made it worse, sending only okay after everything that had happened?”

“Make them stop,” Riley repeats.

“Guys, come on,” I say. “Stop arguing.”

“No, Jae, this needs to be said,” Olive says.

“Tell them you’re sick,” Riley says.

“Please stop,” I say.

“I didn’t hear from Jael either,” Darcy says. “Obviously I wasn’t the only one who needed to think.”

“She was in Pakistan,” Geordie says. “She got sick. She had other things on her mind.”

“Oh, and I didn’t?” Darcy says.

His gaze brushes me for an instant. He looks at me like he just remembered how to fix me.

“Tell them you’re sick,” Riley screams.

“Stop,” I shout. “Please don’t let my last month be filled with more arguments.”

That shuts them up for only as long as it takes them to process my words. The pause isn’t long enough.

“Your last month?” Darcy asks.

“What the hell happened in Pakistan?” Olive says.

“What can we do?” Geordie asks.

“Nothing,” I say. “You can’t do anything. I can’t

do anything. I'm dying and there isn't a cure." My voice catches.

Riley is forced to move as Geordie shifts onto the couch and wraps an arm around me, pressing her nose against my shoulder. Darcy's dark eyes capture me over the tips of his fingers that he pushes to his lips. Olive opens her mouth, but I interrupt.

"I'm coming to grips with it," I say, "really."

There's nothing in this world worse than pity. I understand that it's a natural reaction when someone on the outside is faced with my situation. "Oh, you poor dear," seems like the correct response. "You're only twenty-two and you've lost everything?" That bending of the eyebrows comes next, the edges skooching downward. They can't hide the pity from their skin. "You poor, poor dear." Like any of that is supposed to make me feel better. Like it's supposed to make up for the fact that this sickness inside me is siphoning the sand from my hourglass. It shattered the glass and is letting the sand just pour out onto the floor and I have to watch while everyone around me tilts their eyebrows down in pity.

No, it's not all right. But there's no way I'm going to see that look on the faces of the only people I love.

"There's nothing else I can do," I say, forcing the words to sound comforting. I rush them to get past this part I've been over too many times. The words come out flat. I know they don't believe me either. "Of course it's terrible. Of course there are so many things I won't be able to do. But I know that I have time for one more thing, something that I need to do before I die. I was wondering if you would help me. You're the only family I have left and I need you."

"Help you with what?" Geordie asks, circling her finger around the knob on the tip of my shoulder.

Riley shows me his crossed fingers.

My breath sticks somewhere between my chest and my tongue. "I know that you didn't believe me before that Riley's death was anything other than a suicide." The temperature in the room seems to plummet as my friends' hackles rise. "You were all so supportive," I push forward, "and I'm grateful that you stood beside me. I need you to have my back one more time."

It's begun to rain again. Water glides across the window, squirming shapes of light as the strands capture the illumination of the streetlamps outside. It seems a whole other world compared to the golden light inside the flat.

"I know my mom killed Riley," I say. "You don't have to believe it now, but would you at least let me help you believe it before I die?"

11

The world outside the airplane's porthole window is a chaos of clouds. Individual wisps can only be picked out from the others by their differing shades of white. Any blue has been swallowed by the whiteness. My eyes adjust to the brightness of the outside world so when I return my gaze to the interior of the plane, I struggle for several seconds to pick out any details of the plastic ceiling, the blue leather seats, or the rows of heads.

The airplane enters a bank of clouds and my seat vibrates. Riley's eyes peer through the crack between the seats in front of me, his irises swollen with fear. I flash him a smile. He never flew when he was alive and still hasn't adapted to it since he died.

Darcy leans forward to see Olive, who sits on my other side, and asks, "Would an autopsy show anything?"

"It's been three years," she says. "I'm not sure how much we could get from his body."

"We might as well try."

Darcy slides back in his seat and stares out the window. He insisted on paying for my ticket. "It's your Christmas present," he said. So I didn't argue when he placed me in the middle seat with the words, "Because you're the smallest," as he pressed his forefinger against the crown of my head as if to measure me.

The airplane rattles again, bumping my stomach against my ribs. Bile stings my throat. I cough the sensation away until my spine throbs.

Darcy strokes my back between my shoulder blades, his pianist's fingers finding the tension and toying it out. There's a knot of concern between his eyes.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Liar," Riley says with sorrow.

He sits in the empty seat in front of me, his knees up, his arms on the headrest. I want to tell him to sit down and buckle up, but I know that's silly. He's already dead.

"Who would be able to issue us permission to dig up the body?" Geordie asks. She sits on the other side of the aisle. Fortunately, her row-mates are asleep. "Jael?"

The airplane shudders and my stomach follows suit. I gasp. Those pills really upset my body, but I know that if I don't take them, I won't make it to my childhood home in time to prove my mother guilty of murder.

"We can try the sheriff," I say.

The intercom garbles the captain's voice so I only glean a few words: "apologies" and "turbulence" and "fastened."

"If that doesn't work," Olive says, "what's our next move?"

"I wish we could get our hands on the police's report that was filed after they searched your mom's house," Darcy says.

When my mouth fills with saliva and a metallic sting, I tear off my seatbelt and trip over Olive's lap while she asks if I'm all right. The flight attendant scowls at me and suggests I take my seat again, ma'am, as I fall into the bathroom, just managing to close the accordion door before I throw up against the grey plastic inside the toilet.

Riley coos at me, stroking the hair off my forehead. His skin is refreshingly cool but the heat of his body warms my back and I relax into him. When I blink the tears from my lashes and wipe the snot from my chin, I notice how blood coats the bile in the toilet. I stand, bracing myself against the mirror as the plane rattles again. Forcing my mouth to open as wide as it will go, I turn this way and that to see where the cut might be. A cough burbles up and I hunch over the sink. More blood dribbles from my lips to pool into the soapy foam left by the bathroom's last occupant. The blood pops the bubbles.

I turn on the water and watch as the blood dilutes, swirls around the drain, and disappears. Riley's face has blanched when I face him.

"You're killing yourself," he says.

"I'm already dying."

"But you're dying faster now."

The overhead light flickers as the plane flinches again.

"I wish your friends could see me," Riley says.

"Me too," I say. "They would have loved you."

"That's not why. I wish they could share this burden."

"You're not a burden," I say.

"But I'm killing you. I should never have told you the truth about Mom. Then you wouldn't be running yourself into the ground trying to uncover her secret." When he sees me about to object, Riley adds, "And you said I can't talk to you or distract you when you're with other people."

"I can't appear to be crazy," I say. "Otherwise, no one will believe me when I prove that Mom killed you."

Someone knocks on the door. "Ma'am, are you okay? You better get back to your seat, now."

"I'm not crazy," I say and flush the toilet.

10

My foot snaps the hardened top layer of snow when I step from the car. Ice slips into my shoe, melting against my skin and bleeding down my heel. Smoky breath escapes from between my lips, curling into the dusking sky. Light from the scar of the moon tangles with my breath for a second before the mountains' shadows engulf it. Holding out through sheer stubbornness, the lights of the village fight against the peaks surrounding them. There aren't many lights and the winter does its job of smothering them. Snow stacks on the roofs, poised to ambush passersby, hanging in front of windows so the crystals diffract the light. Icicles grow from the eaves of many of the houses, fangs that frame doors.

Riley doesn't crack the snow beneath his weight.

I pull my cell phone from my pocket to find that it has no reception. That hasn't changed, then. This town is still medieval.

Darcy disembarks from the car behind me, shrugging the collar of his coat to his ears. "You okay?"

"We have to stay at Porter's bed and breakfast," I say.

"That didn't go so well last time."

We booked a room at Porter's for two nights to attend my brother's funeral. The first night was filled with accusations and empty of hospitality and pushed us to leave the evening after the reception, forsaking our eighty-nine-dollar reservation for the second night.

"There isn't a hotel," I say.

"Porter's it is, then."

Olive carries my backpack so I bury my fists in my pockets. The sparsely-placed streetlamps turn the snow orange beneath our boots, fading into blackness between the posts where no light reaches. A few flakes flutter around us, a reminder from the sky that there's more to come.

When I was younger, I used to run from my mother's house to escape the noise and the dread. Out in air as sharp as the edge of a knife and beneath mountains as silent as death, I felt safe. I knew she wouldn't follow me. She's always been afraid of the thoughts that breach her head when she's alone.

The piercing air and quiet wilderness that once calmed me carries a hint of danger today. I hate that feeling that something's about to happen.

None of the townspeople notice as we push through the drifts on the snowy pathway to Porter's inn.

She answers Geordie's knock with that smile she never showed me. "Good evening, sweetheart." She notices four figures on her stoop. "You must be

cold. Come in."

We shuffle into her living room. The fire snaps at us.

"No," she says when she sees me. "You aren't staying here."

Her finger is an accusation pointed at my heart.

"We're paying guests," Geordie says, her bureaucratic smile useless against Porter's ornery, small-town attitude.

"You abandoned your mother when her son died."

"She was in college," Darcy says.

"She should have come home."

My mother won these people over sometime before I was born. They adore her, so they hate me. I will never be enough for them because I've never been enough for her. If only they knew the truth about that woman, about how she raised her kids. If only they knew.

"I'm not sleeping in the snow," I say.

"Then go home," she says.

"That isn't my home."

"You aren't sleeping under my roof."

"We're paying," Geordie repeats, holding up her fine leather wallet. "I can't imagine you get much business up here."

"I'm here to visit my brother's grave," I say, "and to see my mom."

Porter pushes the wisps of grey hair from her forehead. "She won't forgive you."

"I don't expect her to," I say.

"He won't forgive you either."

Riley slips his hand into mine. Pressing his nose against my temple, he breathes into my ear, "I already have."

9

The smell of the police department has changed since my childhood. I used to visit Sheriff McKinley here. I'd bring her cookies, English essays that needed editing, descriptions of my nightmares. I never told her about my mother. Mom had threatened me so many times to keep her secret hidden. The rest of the town didn't need to know. That problem was ours. I knew what she'd do to me, to Riley, if I told anyone. I knew that no matter how hard I tried to keep it a secret, Mom would always find out what I had done. I grew up imagining that no one would believe me, so I never bothered to tell anyone.

Then during my sophomore year of college, a game of Truth or Dare turned dark. I told my friends what Mom did to me. I knew from their eyes

that they believed me. What they couldn't believe was why I'd never gone for help.

Before I left for college, the police department smelled like wood varnish, gunpowder, and cocoa. Today it just smells like piss. The odor has seeped beneath Sheriff McKinley's door and into the pallor of her skin, but she doesn't seem to realize.

"That's not possible." Sheriff McKinley pushes her thumb and forefinger into her eye sockets.

Silver dusts her hair. For the first time, this defender of the innocent, this superhero sidekick, my hero has begun to show signs of age. Yet she's still as beautiful as the day I first saw her drive into town in her sleek sheriff's car with the promise and the gumption to change my life. It's her eyes that make her beautiful, not the color necessarily, although the chocolate shade is nice. It's her eyebrows, their curve, the way they meet the tips of her lashes, the way it always looks like she's smiling.

She's not smiling now, though.

Darcy leans forward, his elbows on his knees. "Why not?"

"The villagers would crucify me."

"When has that stopped you?" I ask.

I didn't sleep well last night. Porter's house spoke of spies. I kept waiting for her to unlock our room with her master key and unleash my mother on my friends.

A cough threatens, and I clench my fist hard enough that the pain distracts from my need to clear the itch from my throat.

"It's been harder the last couple of years," Sheriff McKinley says. "Besides, the ground is frozen and beneath several feet of snow."

"I'm willing to dig myself if it means I can learn the truth," I say.

"We'll help," Olive tells her.

"He's been dead for three years. It will be hard to find any evidence on the body."

I press my palms against her desk. Age has turned the blackened burgundy wood craggy, so it feels like I'm cupping an old man's cheek. "Please. I need to know."

"Know what, Jael?" she asks. "I know that losing your brother was difficult, but you can't still believe that your mom killed him, can you?"

Riley runs his forefinger across the brass buttons on the arm of McKinley's chair. His fingernail clicks.

"Yes."

She leans across the desk and cups my hands, lowering her voice to keep her words from my friends. "Why are you back, Jael?"

"I told you," I say.

"You got away. Stay away."

I feel their eyes on me. "You believed me then. Why don't you believe me now?"

Her patience after the funeral couldn't have been charity. She knows not to hurt me like that.

"I couldn't find anything no matter how much I looked," she says, "and I really looked. You told me I'd find something and I knew you wouldn't make up something like that. I didn't know what to look for, but I searched nonetheless."

The sickness takes me by surprise. My stomach drops, leaving me lightheaded. Gripping the arms of my chair, I bite back nausea. Riley reaches for me. The edges of his form flicker like he's about to disappear.

"I looked until they threatened my job," Sheriff McKinley continues, not noticing the life leaving my body, "and then I looked a little more."

"What she did can't be found." My voice comes through warped space. "She didn't leave any trace."

"What do you mean?"

Riley flinches down, his arms raised to protect himself. His gaze is somewhere distant. My pulse ceases. The absence of life resounds in my limbs, making them tingle, leaving me praying for my heart to start again. Riley flickers out, smoky wisps all that remain of his silhouette. I clutch my chest, sobbing for breath, watching the outline he leaves beside the bookcase.

Darcy grabs my elbow. "Jael?"

Geordie's hand brushes my forehead, searching for heat.

"She's freezing," she whispers to Olive.

"What's wrong with her?" the sheriff asks. "Should I call a doctor?"

My heart kicks back in, leaving me gasping. Riley flickers into sight on the other side of the room. He's pale and wobbling, leaning against the wall to keep his balance.

"I know she did it, Sheriff," I moan.

"Jael, you should—"

"I don't need proof. I just know."

She shakes her head. "That won't hold up in court, Jael. I'm sorry."

I lean against Darcy to stand upright. Everyone watches me with concern. "I don't need her to go to court." Riley staggers toward me. His feet struggle to find purchase on the floor. His shoes melt through the floorboards. There is such terror in his expression. "I just need you to know." It comes out as a sob.

When my legs threaten to give, Sheriff McKinley helps Darcy hold me upright. "Why?"

"Because the truth will die with me in a month."

8

Water floods the toilet, washing strings of blood from the porcelain. With my legs folded on the tile floor beneath me, I lean against the seat, struggling to retain the energy it takes to stay upright. Riley perches on the edge of the vanity, watching me.

“What do you think is the likelihood that anyone in this town will believe us?” I ask.

“They love her.”

“They always have,” I say.

“Jael?” Darcy asks, rapping gently on the bathroom door. “Are you all right?”

“It’s open,” I say.

He cracks the door. When he sees me on the floor, he rushes forward. His hands are warm on my sides.

“Let’s get you to bed,” he says.

I permit him to carry me to one of the beds. He pulls the sheets to my chest and brushes the bangs from my forehead. I unconsciously lean into his touch.

I wish my breath didn’t smell like blood and bile.

“Is this really the way you should be spending your last month?” he asks.

He won’t meet my gaze.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Riley leans against the bathroom doorframe, his arms crossed.

Darcy runs his fingers through his hair and leaves his hand gripping the nape of his neck. “You only have a month and you’re here, dredging up all of the horrors of the past that you ran away from for so long.”

“I need to do this for Riley.”

“What about you?” he asks.

He brushes my bangs again, threading them through his fingers, leaving his palm against my forehead. I watched him from beneath his hand. He looks at me like he just remembered how to break me.

“What is it?” I ask.

He leans forward and kisses my forehead. I realize he does it so he doesn’t have to look me in the eyes. His lips caress my skin as he speaks.

“I wanted a life with you, Jael. If all you have is a month, I’ll give you the life you always needed in that time.”

I push him away. When I see his eyes, I can’t take my hands from his sternum. I battle against my tears. “I told you I love you, Darcy,” I say, “but I don’t know how much more I can do.”

“Try to allow yourself to get close to someone, once, before it’s too late.”

“I’m already close to you and the girls.” I tense my fingers so I push him another few inches backwards and I can feel him with only my fingertips. “I can’t let myself love you any more than that. You don’t know how hard it is.” Pulling my legs up, I hide my tears behind my knees. “I can’t love you how you want to be loved, Darcy.” A sob tries to mangle my words. “But I love you enough to know that I never want to hurt you. I can’t let you have a month.”

The absence of his weight resets the bed beneath me when he stands.

7

Every house I pass has a Christmas tree in the window, each with a silver star on top. Lights circle porch railings, reds and greens and golds glittering on the snow in the front yards. Snow has nestled in the curves of wreathes. Smoke twines from the chimneys, filling the still air with the scent of arson.

Hugging my coat tighter, I stumble through the snow. “Are you sure about this?”

Riley kicks a drift. “Dr. Culver filed it after every appointment.”

“But that was three years ago,” I say. “I’m sure she’s moved it by now.”

“The clinic isn’t that big. We’ll find it.” He looks back to Porter’s inn. “It’d be faster if we had four people.”

"I'm not going to force them to do something illegal."

"Then why'd you bring them?" he asks.

"Same reason you brought me." I slip on the sidewalk.

He shrugs.

The cold mixes with the altitude to poison my limbs. I just want to lie down. When Riley's outline shimmers, he glances back at me with concern.

The clinic drowns in snow. I push through the drifts. Snow numbs my shins but I'm past shivering.

I try the knob. The metal's cold creeps through my glove. "It's locked."

I'm desperate to be warm.

Riley wades through the snow, squats down, and shoves his hand into the drift. The outline of his body fades. His hand doesn't mark the snow.

My heart hesitates again. I clutch my collar. My nostrils have frozen together so I can't breathe through my nose.

Although his shape is still faint, Riley's pleased expression is unmistakable. I stumble to his side. Beneath the snow and a warped rose bush is a fake rock cupping a key. I grin.

Once I unlock the door, I kick snow against the doorframe so I don't leave a trail. Warmth flushes my cheeks and I lean against the wall. The sickening heat pushes into my numb limbs and draws me deeper into fatigue.

Riley's silhouette has faded so much that it blends with the darkness of the clinic.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

He doesn't respond.

I step forward, my body grumbling with the requirement to move. "Riley?"

My little brother turns slowly, his head drooping and then snapping back straight. With distant eyes, he stares at me, his features flickering, the outline of his body pulsing in and out of visibility. One second he's standing in front of me, the next he's several paces away with the same posture.

Pain slices through my chest and I stagger, bracing myself against the wall. My wet boots slip on the linoleum and I fight to stay upright. Each breath is a battle. A cough rages through my lungs. Blood dribbles down my chin after I hack myself breathless.

"Jael." My name is garbled through my little brother's lips.

He reaches for me, his fingers searching for something solid to keep him anchored to this world. Pressing my bloody glove against my sternum to steady my breathing, I stumble forward with my arm outstretched, hoping to take his hand before he disappears entirely. I can't let him disappear.

His body flickers one more time. The space he leaves seems darker than the rest of the hallway.

Once again, I'm too late to save him.

6

The quilts are the worst part about our room in Porter's inn, I think. The paintings are ugly, images of farmers and oxen and women in little bonnets trudging through their mundane lives. The fake flowers are hideous. No one would believe she picked plumeria in the mountains. The gaudy oriental rug that hides the scarred wood floor doesn't fit the rest of the decor. But the quilts are the worst. My mother made them during those terrible months when she was pregnant with Riley.

"Are you insane?" Darcy kicks the foot of the bed as Olive wraps one of those quilts around my shoulders. I shudder. "We told you it was a bad idea."

"It was illegal," Geordie adds softly.

"And dangerous," Olive says. "You're pushing

yourself too hard.”

“I have to.” Words hurt. “I’m running out of time.”

“You’re speeding up your clock with your recklessness.” Darcy shoves his hands through his hair, upsetting it into wild tufts. “You’re dying, Jael. Act like it.”

I struggle for breath.

“What does that mean?” Olive snaps.

“She can’t break into a hospital to steal her brother’s records if she’s so sick,” he says. “She’s putting herself at risk.”

“Like you said, I’m dying. Going easy won’t save me,” I say. “I’m a time bomb.”

His breaths are exclamations.

“I love you for caring, but I have to do this for Riley.” I look for my little brother in the room but can’t find him.

“What’s our next move?” Geordie asks. She eyes me. “Our move.”

5

I remember that this fence outside my childhood home used to be white, once, when I was very young, back when Dad was still around, before Riley was conceived. Mom grew creepers in front of it. They twisted up the whitewashed wooden planks, blooming pink in the summer. She would help me water them. My tiny hands would wrap around the spout of the watering can while she supported its weight. I'd watch the droplets transform into shooting stars in the sunlight and would squeal when the water touched my toes. Well, I don't actually remember any of this, but I found a video Dad had recorded on his camcorder of the event. I know about the white fence and the pink flowers and the squealing through the memories of a machine.

Now the only white part of the fence is the inch of snow balanced on top of each post. The planks have faded to a sorrowful grey over the years, not a color that makes passerby believe the house has turned ramshackle, but the type of shade that lets you know the inhabitants of the lavender house are still pretending to be normal.

Snow blankets the yard, brushed from the cracked pathway. Weeds grow through those cracks in the spring, spilling onto the concrete, providing shelter for ant colonies. Mom has removed the two-seater swing from the front porch, but the hooks remain in the ceiling. The front door is new. The old wooden one that I watched Dad install has been replaced by painted metal. In theory, the off-white color should match the lavender walls, but it just shows how faded the rest of the paint has become.

Darcy's nimble pianist's fingers make quick work of the lock and I'm assaulted by the scent of my mother as we step into the house. Even after twenty years, she still uses the same spray to dust. The smell brings to mind that song she always plays to get into the cleaning mood. It brings to mind the sting of the lemon-scented Pledge entering my eye as she held the lids open with two fingers. It brings to mind another smell, metallic blood mixed with that spray as she cleaned the edge of the shelves and I wrapped a bandage around my little brother's forehead.

The week's mail has been lined up neatly with the edges of the entryway table, placed in three piles: junk mail, bills, magazines. She'll go through it on Sunday night, as usual, with a glass of white wine or a mug of coffee. Her keys are missing from the hook, which I expected since

her car is gone. She'll be down the mountain at Costco. It's Thursday.

I follow Geordie up the stairs. There are thirteen. I've fallen down them twice. Mom's toiletries are lined up in alphabetical order on the bathroom vanity. The color of her toothbrush matches that of its porcelain holder. The tip of the toilet paper roll has been folded into an arrow's point. The toilet seat is down.

When Riley was five, I had to carry him on my back to the clinic after she caught him peeing standing up. She refused to look at his penis and used a hand towel to place it on the seat so she could slam the lid down onto it. When he slumped to the floor, screaming, she took the towel into the basement and dropped it into the empty washing machine. After drowning it in laundry detergent, she turned the knob to Full Load and started the cycle.

The walls in her room are empty. The clothes are folded and placed into their drawers with the smallest items like underwear and socks in the top drawer and the heaviest items like sweaters and jeans in the bottom drawer. The coverlet on her queen bed is tucked perfectly, so taut that it wouldn't produce wrinkles if I sat on it. Nothing occupies her nightstand but the landline phone. She'll bring a clean glass of water to bed with her tonight.

I cross the white carpet into the room Riley and I shared. A desk sits where our bed used to be. She took down my posters after I left for college, scraping off the hanging strips with an X-Acto knife. The closet has been filled with boxes of tax reports and receipts, labeled by month. She painted over the poem Riley wrote on the baseboard around the

entire boarder of the room. I still remember most of it by heart. He could have been famous.

When Riley was born, Mom left him in my room. He slept in my bed until I could convince her to buy a crib. He played with my toys growing up. He wore my hand-me-downs and anything I could scrounge from the other mothers in town. This room was never his. He just occupied my space. I'm surprised Mom kept the bed after I left for college.

We used to hide under the bed when we heard her on the stairs. Most of the time she just went into her room, but sometimes she came into ours. I went through a transformation when I was thirteen, when I found those videos Dad had made. For the first time, I remembered what I had lost when he was born. That night when the stairs murmured of Mom's ascent, I braced my back against the wall and used my legs to push Riley out from beneath the bed. He didn't say anything because he knew any sound would bring her into the room. It didn't matter. She came in anyway.

I turn my back on our bedroom. The claustrophobia of the house tightens around my chest and my heart stutters as I come down the stairs. I don't go into the kitchen. I know the spices will be arranged by color. I know the knives will be ordered by serration, clean of our blood. I know the kettle will be free of char stains and my little brother's handprint. She only did it once, but he never forgot.

The living room is the only room in the house with pictures on the walls. They're all photographs. I used to wear overalls and poke my tongue out. Mom had the same plastered smile, the same cocked head. Riley is missing from the images.

"I've searched upstairs," Geordie says.

For the first time, her eyebrows dip into that pitying expression. I wonder how terrified I look.

Darcy follows Olive into the room. "I'm sorry, Jael."

I see all the edges of this house, the corners of tables toward which she shoved me, the meeting of two walls where Riley cornered himself, the shattered glass of my childhood. I wish Riley were with us.

No, that's not true. I'm glad he's not. This would be worse for him.

I can't believe I left him here. I can't believe I pushed him out from beneath that bed, turned my back on him when he wept, applied for that college so far away just so I could escape her.

"There isn't anything in her room?" I whisper.

Geordie hugs me. "Let's go back."

I bend over as coughing takes hold of me. Geordie strokes my back. I cough until tears fall between my boots.

What have I done?

The shadows of the frost on the window shift across the wall as a car pulls into the driveway.

"Shit," Olive says.

We hadn't planned for her to return. I know my friends haven't prepared themselves for this moment.

"We have to get out of here," Darcy says. He grabs my arm. "Come on, Jael, let's go."

I pull away from him and stumble to the garage door. Tugging it open, I face my mother, my panting breaths made physical in the air.

She eases the car door closed and gazes up at me. "Why, Jael."

Not a single grey hair taints her bob and I know she doesn't dye it. How can age not have touched her yet? That isn't fair.

Geordie takes my hand, squeezing the life back into me.

"Hi, Mom."

"What are you doing here?" my mom asks. She ascends the shallow stairs and I am forced to step aside so she can make her way into the house. "Close the door, honey, you're letting all the cold air in."

I slam it.

My friends edge behind me, my guardians against the past.

"Oh, hello," she says. "We met at Riley's funeral, didn't we?"

Olive nods.

My mother hides it so well. She's always hidden it well. There's a reason the people of this town love her so much. There's a reason no amount of evidence will ever convince them that she killed her son.

"You should have called first, sweetheart." She starts toward the kitchen. "Would you like tea?"

"No," I say.

The venom catches in my throat and I slip back into coughing. When Mom moves forward to stroke my forehead, Darcy glowers at her. I wipe my mouth so no one sees the blood.

"What happened to you, Jael?" Mom asks.

"Stop saying my name."

She blinks rapidly.

I straighten, breathless. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Why did you kill my baby brother?"

She wavers on her feet and clutches the arm of the reupholstered chair, the paisley design hiding Riley's blood when she hit him too hard on the day after his eighth birthday. "How dare you?"

Desperation fills my throat but it sticks on another round of coughing. It won't stop. I can't breathe. Olive takes me in her arms, pulling me away from my mother. Geordie leads the way out of the house and into the frozen night. When my legs give and I crumple to the ground, Darcy scoops me up and I sob into his shoulder.

4

When I was in Nepal, a Sherpa told me about how his son nearly died on Lhotse. The young man lost his footing while crossing an icy incline and fell into a crevasse. His climbing team assumed he'd died so prayed over the mouth of the crevasse and kept going.

Yet the Sherpa hadn't died. His backpack caught between two crags which saved him from falling to his death. However, one of the straps encircled his neck and crushed his esophagus. His crampon sliced open his leg. Blood dribbled from the wound, falling away into the dark blue of the crevasse below. He hung there, struggling to breathe, unable to call for help, listening to the prayer meant to speed his soul to the Bardo, the intermediary stage between death and rebirth. He later told his father that he felt as

if his soul were dripping out of his body along with the blood from his leg. He said that it went in little stages, one globule at a time. He lost more than half his soul before he was able to pull himself out of the crevasse and was found by another climbing team who carried him down to Base Camp safely.

Sitting on the quilt my mother sewed while she nourished a baby she detested, I wonder how much soul I lost in that lavender house. Did some of it spill out every time she hurt me? Did I lose a fist-full every time I turned my back on my brother's tears? What would my karma look like when I finally reached the Bardo?

"I can't watch you kill yourself." Darcy shoves clothes into his duffle.

Gentle coughs shake my torso. I feel like I've lost most of my soul already.

Geordie grabs the other side of his bag, tries to take his toothbrush out again. "What are you doing?"

I curl tighter on the bed. "Darcy." I can't keep the tears from my voice.

He tugs the zipper, nearly ripping it from the fabric. "Just give up. He's already dead, isn't he?"

"I can't," I say. Riley's absence throbs. "I made a promise."

"He's dead."

"Not to me."

Darcy shoves his arms into his coat, snapping the collar up to his neck. "And you're not dead to me. Not yet." His beautiful pianist's fingers blanch from gripping the straps of his bag so tightly. "I love you, Jael."

"I know."

"That will never change."

"I know."

"I haven't stopped loving you since I told you ten months ago," he says.

"I know."

Olive's brown eyes are huge.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Yeah, sorry like you were then."

More of my soul dribbles out when I hear the agony in his voice.

"I love you too, Darcy," I say. "I love you all. That's why I asked you to waste your holiday and come to this horrible town to face my horrible mother. I love you despite every reason that I should never love anyone. Loving has only ever hurt me but I love you."

"I can't be here," Darcy says.

I know.

"You can't just leave," Olive says. "She needs you."

"When has Jael needed anyone?" he asks.

Geordie blocks his way to the door but Darcy brushes past her.

I press my face into the pillow, stifling my sobs. The sadness coalesces in my stomach and I stumble out of bed and into the bathroom. Curling over the toilet, I vomit my emotions into the water. Tears run down the tip of my nose, plinking in the bowl. Sorrow carves a cavity in my chest.

"I should go after him," I hear Geordie say.

"I'll watch after her. It'll be okay," Olive says.

I spit the taste from my mouth.

3

The moon peers over the summit of the mountain, the faint light tumbling down the hill like a celestial avalanche. It collides with the small graveyard, stretching the shadows of the stones. I inhale until my throat hurts and then I breathe out my tension.

Riley's stone is smaller than the rest, like he cowers among the other ghosts. Even in death, my mother placed him in a position of weakness. I brush snowflakes off the inlaid letters. The harsh air makes me cough. I spit blood onto the snow.

Although I know Olive will be anxious when she wakes up to find that I've left, an action I regret, I can't involve her any longer. Darcy was right. My friends shouldn't watch me kill myself. They can't be here for what comes next. I made a

mistake when I asked them to come. I just needed my family.

Tearing off my glove with my teeth, I take out my phone and open my text chat with Darcy. While my fingers throb from the cold, I type: If you ever doubt yourself, know that there is nothing to forgive. I'm grateful you support me enough to leave me the space to do what I feel needs to be done. Show this message to the girls after it's over. I love you all.

It'll send the next time I'm within range of a signal.

I sense Riley a second before he droops his arms around my neck and rests his chin on my shoulder. His chest taps my spine as he inhales and leaves an entrance between our bodies for the wind as he exhales. My bangs shift in his breath. Snow numbs my thighs but his chest warms my back.

"Why are we here?" he asks, his voice husky as if from sleep.

"I thought it might bring you back."

He hums, impressed. "You went to the house."

"I wish I hadn't," I say.

"Did you explore the places where we used to hide?"

"Like the cupboard beneath the bathroom sink?" I ask.

"The far corner of the attic."

"Under our bed."

"The cubby beneath the basement stairs," he says, "behind the washer and dryer."

"I'd forgotten about that place," I say. "We've been too big to hide there for years."

I cough again. He strokes my head.

"Did you know," he says, "Mom forbid me from going back there after you left."

"Under the stairs? Why?"

He shrugs.

"Riley?" I've stopped feeling the cold. "I don't want to die."

"Neither did I."

"I'm sorry," I say.

He leans forward, his chest forcing my shoulder to curl inwards, so he can kiss my cheek. "You're silly."

"Do you forgive me for putting you in danger when I left for college? For putting you in danger all those other times?"

"I never needed to," he says. "Do you forgive yourself?"

It has begun to snow. Starved flakes flutter to the gravestones around me. They settle on my lap, in my hair, on my shoulders. Riley raises his hand to catch one but it passes through his palm. He sighs.

"I will, soon."

2

I break a window this time. I don't have Darcy's quick fingers to pick the lock. Mom's car sits in the driveway, but I know she won't hear me. She sleeps with earplugs to block out the demons that whisper to her at night.

The shattered glass cuts through the sleeve of my down coat and I leave a trail of feathers as I make my way into the basement. The familiar scent of Mom's laundry detergent coats my nostrils. My muscles tense of their own accord and I fight the longing to flee.

When I flick on the light, Riley flinches. He watches the stairs behind us.

I try to wriggle between the washer and dryer like we used to when we were little and hoped to hide from our mother. I don't fit anymore. Pressing

my back against the dryer, I push the washer aside with my legs. The action strains me and I struggle to catch my breath.

Riley flits back and forth nervously.

I kick through the flimsy plasterboard. Dust puffs into my face. Shards litter the contents. Other pieces hang from paper threads.

Small bottles line the wall, placed with two inches between them. I pick one up, brushing the dust from the label with my thumb. I recognize the name from Olive's capstone essay for her Medicines, Drugs, and Poisons course. Through the amber glass, I can see that the bottle is empty. When I drop it, it shatters.

A shoebox sits in the center of the cubby. I tremble as I flip the top off. A pistol sits on a stack of papers. Mom used to keep the pistol nestled between scarves in the drawer of her nightstand. It protected her, she said. She couldn't sleep without it, she said. She never knew who'd come for her, she said. I don't have to wonder why she decided she didn't need it near her any longer.

Pushing the pistol aside, I pick up each document, reading it slowly, placing it in the cradle of my lap. Riley's birth certificate is on top. No father is listed. His death certificate is next. Mom's signature didn't change in fourteen years. His school reports follow. He received perfect scores through all of elementary school. His grades dropped to B's the year I stopped protecting him. He received only D's the two years I was at college. Beneath those are finger paintings of flowers and suns and grinning families, poems of noble quests and demons and torture and death. She's saved cards from faceless relatives: Happy birthday, Reilly! Merry Christmas,

Reilly! There are all those photographs that are missing from the walls upstairs, Riley's empty smile, his eyes squinted against the world.

I cradle the letter from Mom's parents telling her that she would be disowned if she had an abortion. She has ironed out the two creases where it was folded into an envelope. They used letterhead, added the address, a date, Dear Ms. Ella Cross, and Sincerely, Simon and Louisa Cross.

When I pick up the final item, I stand on my knees. The other papers coast off my lap and onto the floor. It takes a moment for me to understand the official language of the doctor's report that lists the damage the man did to my mother when he'd raped her.

"Oh," my brother whispers.

"She did it. Just like you said." I spring up and spin around but have to brace myself against the washer. My head pounds. "She killed you."

Riley's image flickers. "Jael," he warns.

I walk toward him but lose my footing and fall. I don't react quickly enough to catch myself and I bruise my side on the unfinished basement floor. Pushing myself upright, I struggle to stand. Coughs wrack my body and I curl on my side so the blood doesn't suffocate me. A small pool forms below my lips.

My brother hovers over me, pressing his hands against my head, my shoulder, my back. "Jael."

"Riley." The world topples and I dig my fingernails into the cement floor to keep myself stationary. "I love you."

He moves his face close to mine. His breath upsets the skin on my cheeks and I feel the chills down my chest. "What are you planning to do?" he asks.

"The only thing I can."

What's left of my soul reinserts itself in my body. I feel heavier than before but I have enough strength to push myself upright. My arms quiver. I spit the taste of iron from my mouth.

Riley skitters back. "Jael?"

I crawl back into the cubby, picking up the pistol, pressing it into the pocket of my jacket. Once on my feet, I move forward but have to catch myself against the wall as I stumble again. I use the wall's support to push myself up the stairs.

Riley's image snuffs out in the basement behind me and he reappears at the top of the stairs. He hovers, watching as I struggle to climb.

"I don't want to hurt you again, Riley," I say when I reach the top. "I think you should stay here."

I turn and begin my journey to the second floor. Thirteen stairs have never proved more of a challenge. I wonder if the pistol is weighing me down.

The shattering of the glass must have made its way through my mother's earplugs because she stands at the top of the stairs, watching me climb. Sleep has upset her bob and she's brushed it from her eyes. It looks agonized.

"I'm very upset with you," my mom says.

I curl my fingers around the metal fixture that keeps the handrail connected to the wall and use it to hoist myself up another stair. The effort grinds my throat to pulp and I spit blood onto the white carpet at the top. Mom stares at the stain.

"The townspeople were on my side when Riley died," she says. "He was always a troubled boy. They believed that he would harm himself. Why couldn't you just leave it at that?"

Riley stands on the other side of my mother, near the door to our old room. He's backed himself into the meeting of two walls and watches Mom with wild eyes. I want to go to him, to comfort him, to finally protect him but the urgency of the pistol in my pocket locks my feet to the carpet.

Mom reaches out for my shoulder but I move it away, staring at her slender fingers.

"I never meant to hurt you, honey," she says. "I'm sorry you got stuck in the middle of that mess."

"That mess?" The words rub my throat raw.

"I never wanted to hurt you."

"But you meant to hurt Riley," I say, stepping away from the stairs, close enough that I stand beneath her, her height against mine, "and that hurt me."

"Riley deserved it."

Her breath flicks my forehead.

"What did he ever do to you?"

Mom scowls. "He was just like his father."

When I step forward again, she has to retreat.

"You know that's not true," I say.

"I couldn't stand to look at him," she says. "You don't know how hard it was."

We're in her room now.

"I don't, that's true," I say. "I was never raped, but my mother abused me for fifteen years and killed my little brother."

There it is, the familiar, terrifying light in her eyes. Riley whimpers.

The lamp on her bedside provides the only light in the room. It casts her shadow to the far corners of the room. The black outline of my mother stretches to Riley's toes. He's pushed himself against the window. He will never be able to escape her when

I keep pursuing her. My presence draws him into this room.

His mouth is wide in a scream that makes no sound.

Mom perches on the edge of her bed. She arranges the cloth of her pajama pants, smooths the wrinkles from the coverlet, brushes her hair into alignment on her head.

"Do you love them, your friends?" she asks. "Is that why you brought them here to ridicule me?"

I move closer until the lamp catches my shadow and entangles it with hers. "I wanted you to see my family, for you to know that I don't need you."

"What do you want from me, Jael?"

"For you to admit to killing Riley." The words are translated into threats through my gritted teeth. "For you to feel my pain." I step forward. The weight of the pistol in my pocket is a pendulum that swings out and knocks against my hip. "For you to be afraid, alone, abandoned. For you to lose everything. For you to accept the blame everyone lumps on me." Another step brings me close enough that I could touch her. "I want so much from you. I want to ruin your life like you ruined mine."

The weight of the gun gives me the courage I never had before. It terrifies me.

"But I won't get any of that," I say. "Do you see? No one will ever change their mind about us. I will always be the daughter who ruined this family. You will always be the abandoned mother, the pitiful neighbor."

My lower lip trembles, no matter how hard I fight it. I bite onto it, hard.

"The beautiful thing is that you've lost your power over me, Mom." My voice hitches. "I literally

have nothing left to lose."

Her frown is more confused than angry. "We were close before, weren't we?" she asks.

"I don't remember," I say. "I was young when you turned me into an adult."

That's not entirely true. I remember enough, have spoken enough with our neighbors, have watched enough of Dad's home videos to know that Mom used to be perfect. She ran bake sales to raise money for the local school. She added a kindhearted voice to the city council, encouraging her fellow members to work towards a brighter future for our town. She always had time to play with her little girl, to teach her how to draw with sidewalk chalk, teach her how to walk, teach her how to laugh. I remember I used to love her, when I was very little, before she went to that city to find Dad, before she came back in tears with bruises across her face, her chest, her stomach. I loved her before that bastard made her insane.

I remember enough to know that the people here will never believe me.

"Do you regret what you are trying to do?" she asks. "Do you regret that you're trying to send me to prison?"

"Do you regret what you did to Riley?" I ask.

"No."

"Then I don't regret it either," I say.

The edges of her eyes crinkle. Her shadow bows its head. "I didn't want to hurt you." Tears trace her cheekbones, collect beneath her chin, drop onto the pressed fabric of her pants. "I loved you."

I lean forward and kiss the crown of her head. Her hair smells of lavender. Her body quivers with tears. She doesn't flinch when I press the barrel of

the pistol to her forehead.

The gunshot shatters my senses. It deafens me. Sound is sucked from the world. Our shadows are shredded as the flash illuminates the room. Drywall powders the carpet beneath the hole that the bullet makes in the wall.

Mom falls onto the bed. Her eyes are closed. A teardrop curls down her temple and collects in her ear. Creases on the coverlet splay out from her body. The blood that runs from her forehead catches in the valleys of the cloth, running across the white bedspread until it soaks into the fabric.

Riley slides to the floor, pressing his forehead against his knees. His sobs crawl into my head as my hearing returns. My tears collect Mom's blood from my cheeks, splashing onto the coverlet and dotting it with pink.

My soul is pooling at my feet. I wonder how I'm still able to breathe.

I lay the pistol on Mom's nightstand next to the glass of water and pick up the phone. I dial Sheriff McKinley's home phone number from memory. When she picks up, she sounds like she's still submerged in a nightmare.

"Hello?"

"Cynthia will call you in a minute and a half," I say. "Mrs. Lory has reported gunshots, although Cynthia doesn't believe it. You know how Mrs. Lory is prone to paranoia. When you drive to this address, however, you will find my mother dead on her bed."

"Jael?" Terror washes the sleep from her voice. "What did you do?"

"When you investigate her death, you will probably have to interview my friends, for the sake

of checking boxes. You will learn nothing from them because they didn't know I was planning this. Darcy and Geordie are out of town. Although she won't want to admit it, Porter saw them leave. Olive is still in bed. I suppose Porter can tell you that, too. They weren't anywhere near this address."

Riley's sobs have petered out and he watches me from across the room. Neither of us look at my mother's body.

"I'm admitting to the murder of my mother," I say. "I killed her. They had nothing to do with it."

"Jael."

"I'm sorry for the trouble, after everything you've done for me."

I place the phone beside the gun and the glass.

Mom's blood drips down the edge of the coverlet and pools on the white carpet.

1

Going down the stairs is harder than going up. I grip the railing to keep myself from falling. Mom's keys are hanging on her hook, the teeth lined up perfectly. I clench my coat sleeve and brush the snow from the windshield with my arm. The streets are empty, but not for much longer. Soon the police will arrive. My busybody neighbors will have fodder for their gossip. They never seemed to notice anything wrong inside our lavender house when I was a child. The streets have become slick with snow but I press the accelerator. The back end of the car slides. Riley gasps. His tears have disappeared but I'm still crying. My fingers smell like gunpowder. The car smells like lavender. Snow attacks the windshield, screaming in at me, catching in the illumination from the headlights. Each flake

splashes against the glass. I flick the wipers. The road narrows, turns, steepens. The darkness engulfs me until there's nothing left but the sound of the engine in my ears and the taste of blood on my lips. I know that, this time, it isn't mine.

I leave the car running when I reach the top of the overlook. Heat rolls from the open door. The light over the console fills the front seat of the car. It pales Riley's skin as he sits there, watching me. I follow the headlights to the tip of the cliff. Threading my legs over the edge, I sit on a wet rock. The town spreads out below me. Red and blue lights wink up at me as they converge on my neighborhood.

I tilt my head back and breathe into the sky. Snow settles on my cheeks, soaking into the blood. Flakes cut holes in my smoky exhalation.

My cell phone trembles against my side. When I bring it out, snowflakes collect on the glass, blotching Darcy's name. I must be in range of a signal up here where the mountains don't block it. The text must have sent.

I place the phone on the rock beside me. It vibrates closer to the edge of the cliff.

I wonder if I will fall over the edge when I die or if Sheriff McKinley will find me up here, slumped on this rock, still bathed in the headlights of my dead mother's car.

Riley sits beside me and takes my hand. I feel his heartbeat in his wrist. It matches mine, growing feebler by the second. He kisses my fingers.

"I'm sorry, Jael," my brother whispers.

"Why?" I can't feel my heart anymore. "I was dying anyway."

"But this is so much worse."

The snowfall has intensified so much that I can't

see the town anymore. I'm trapped in a wilderness of white and I am finally at peace.

"Is it?" I ask.

"I love you."

I close my eyes. "Not as much as I

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Some secrets are too big to share. Jael has known that her whole life. The truth about her illness has to come out at some point, even if it is the month before the doctors predict she will die. She plans to tell the only people who have ever meant anything to her: her college friends. Geordie will try to fix it, of course. Olive will be there until the end, no matter what. And Darcy? Darcy will be different. He's always tried to be different.

How many more secrets can she share, should she share, before she dies and everything she knows is lost? Her friends struggle to understand, but Jael needs their support to confront her mother and the suspicious nature of her brother's death. Can she survive long enough to return to her childhood home, withstand her devastating memories, and reveal her most important secret? Will anyone even believe her?