

THE MEADOWS

STEPHANIE OAKS



DIAL BOOKS

CONTENT NOTE:

Please be aware that this story references topics such as queerphobia, transphobia, racism, misogyny, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicide, and conversion therapy.

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FOR JERILYNN, JUST AS YOU ARE

THE MEADOWS

CHAPTER 1

I glance up at the eye, a shining black bead atop an old telephone pole. I walk briskly through pelting droplets, head bent. A cascade of water skims off my hood.

I show my face again to the bead on the awning of a shopping center, and again to one on the bus shelter where people huddle like cattle.

Each eye, memorized.

Not to see them. For them to see me.

My face.

I've become very familiar with it since I moved to the city. When I arrived a year ago, I found a book about the muscular system, fallen behind the desk bolted to the wall in my room. The apartment block where I live was a girls' college dormitory once. The book must've slipped back there, forgotten by some long-ago student when women could still attend universities.

I hid it beneath my mattress, memorized the meaty striations bisecting my face, the delicate fish fin between eyebrows, the birds' nests encircling each eye. In front of the mirror—hours of practice—working each muscle like a marionette. Now I can make myself look like anything at all.

The face I show the cameras is my most faithful: placid, thoughtless, empty.

I arrive downtown well before my next adjudication. To pass the time,

I sit in a café, scan my calendar. Colored squares fill the screen—different adjudications around the city, documents of profiles and background information on each of my reformed.

My eyes close for a moment, and my ears range the café—plasticore plates sliding against each other, clink of utensils. A soundscape I never could have imagined where I grew up. In the Cove, only the shush of the ocean, carts on a rocky roadway, the scrape of a tiny knife slipping into the tight mouths of oysters, occasionally slipping into the pad of my thumb, a silent gush of red falling through my hands.

Seated nearby, a man some years older than me scrolls through the endless, bright feed on his screen. I watch his fingers fling past pictures. Palm trees forking the sky. A baby held in a man's arms like a loaf of bread. A woman sitting on artificially green grass in the high-necked, bulbous dress popular with young wives.

And then, an image unlike the others. A white building, rounded and hut-shaped, fashioned from opaque material. Against a backdrop of marshy jungle, the building glows. It makes a light all its own.

I stand from my chair. Water that had collected in the folds of my raincoat unfurls to the ground. I barely notice. My eyes, transfixed. That photo. A facility building. Not from the Meadows, but another, shrouded in overgrown foliage. Above the screen, the man suspends his fingers, engrossed in the image too.

Can't believe it's been well over a decade since I last saw the Glades, the photo is captioned.

"The Glades," I speak, and the man with the screen whips his head around, eyes wide. He doesn't know me, doesn't know if he's been caught.

"The Meadows," I say, placing a hand on my chest.

His shoulders dip, relaxing.

"I haven't met many of us," I tell him, though of course it's not true. By now I've met dozens. Hundreds.

The man scans the café for anyone who might overhear. “Not that you’d know,” he mutters.

He’s right. If we’ve made it here, we’re reformed. What happened in the facilities, what they did to us, are closely guarded secrets.

A gold band encircles his finger. For a moment, his eyes trail to my own wedding finger, bare. “They haven’t matched you yet?” he asks.

I shake my head. “They made me an adjudicator. My time’s up in a year, though.” An adjudicator’s term is two years and, already I’m half-done. Then a ring will be my fate too.

“You can’t have been out long,” he says.

I pull my shoulders back, trying to appear my full eighteen years. “About a year.”

“I’ve got almost fifteen,” he says. “Mine was one of the first cohorts.” The muscles beneath his face are controlled but too tight. Hiding something. “I don’t understand reminiscing,” he says, gazing again at the screen. “I’d never go back.”

“I would,” I say, surprising myself.

He frowns. “You would?”

And I nod, an unexpected knot forming in my throat.

For them. For her.

Rose.

The night I first saw Rose, the air was dim, blushing with dusty violet, as close as it got to night in the Meadows. Dinnertime. The girls would be inside the glowing walls of the dining room, straight-backed at white tables, eating their carefully portioned meals. From where I sat inside the yew tree, I could see for miles, a sea of purple flowers, hazy in the evening, stretching for what I knew was farther than a person could ever walk.

The shuttle was a slim black knife, cutting first with its glint, then with its sound. The rumble up the dirt road meant only one thing: another girl. Her hair, cut short at the sides. Her body, muscular. Stocky. She wore a shiny black raincoat, thick metal zipper laddering up the front—an alarming contrast to the thin white dresses we wore. Most of us were twelve, thirteen, fourteen when we arrived, but she was older. A dart of grief passed through me. The Meadows would strip all of it away. Her body, forced to be still, would lose its muscle, and her hair forced to grow, and that coat thrown out with the trash.

That coat. I didn't know how it was possible but her coat, I could see, was stippled with rain. No rain in the Meadows. No snow. No weather of any kind.

This girl carried rain with her.

Two matrons met her at the door, bulky white figures with a hand hovering over her shoulders. The girl took a few paces, and paused. She turned, so even from the yew tree, I could see her face. For the first time, I had an awareness of how many muscles must live inside a human face. I could see them all, the anatomy of her.

Every girl who'd entered the Meadows wore the same face: wondrous, bright-eyed. Hands clutching acceptance letters. Minds daring to imagine a future of easy breath in these bright halls and purple fields.

Rose's face—nothing like that. Looking like it could grip the sky and rip it in half. Looking like she wanted to.

CHAPTER 2

Neon sprays of weeds and scabby rust-colored scrub covered the rock-side. I picked over the basalt and peeked over the edge of our cliff where, far below, the ocean had peeled back to reveal a circus of tide pools, the violet blush of urchins, pink sea stars holding the rock like grasping hands. The ocean could sneak up on a person there, surging unexpectedly through blowholes in the pocked surface. You had to listen. You had to be always on guard.

This is the place I grew from, this dirt, this sea wind, this salted air. I didn't look at the ocean much in those days. It felt mean, uncontrollable. Now I know about the tides that pull at it, the moon—forces the sea couldn't possibly understand. I imagine it might've wanted to do something different, to stretch long and thin, to muscle inside the hidden pockets of caves and the every-color cavities of tide pools. To feel itself unfold across the midnight depths that nobody else got to touch. Perhaps it threw itself against the rocks for a reason.

The only cause strong enough to pull my eyes toward the sea was the hope of spotting June's boat. I'd known her since we were little, back when I recognized her only by sight, the fishergirl tying ropes, smelling of ocean and guts. She sailed with her father, pulling creatures from the depths, some grown grotesque from radiation. June saved them for me. "A three-headed crab," she'd whisper as we passed each other on market

day. Or, “An eel with one huge glowing eye. Come by later and I’ll show you. But you have to play for me.” And I’d spend the evening at her house, scratching a song from my shabby violin.

That day, it was nearly dusk before June’s boat bounced through the white-tipped froth, returning to harbor.

“Get back to work, Eleanor,” my mother called.

I tore my eyes from the wooden shape of the *Musketeer* and pointed them toward the ground. I harvested crab squash, and a blushing bouquet of sea radish. I reached over to pull up an apple-shaped kohlrabi, spidering green limbs reaching toward the sky. My mother had fashioned this plot years ago from a piece of land that nobody wanted. She’d hauled dirt, forced the ground here to mean something.

I looked at my mother and longed to ask her the question. The only one that mattered. Now and again I would slide it to her across a silent morning or afternoon.

“Where did I come from?”

She’d avert her dark eyes, continue assembling a candle from old drip-pings or rewiring a toaster there wasn’t enough electricity to use. “Somewhere else,” she’d say, gruff.

This was all she’d ever tell me. The people in town whispered, though. They said that I was left in a linen blanket on the doorstep of my mother’s cliffside cottage, that I’d simply shown up one day, a squalling pink bundle so incongruous in this windswept place. They said that I didn’t really belong to my mother.

This, the earliest knowing I had, reinforced every trip to market where people would stare and then not, and my mother’s face was still square-shaped and mine still soft and round. Even before I had words, I already knew I was not meant to be in that place.

Nearby, there was a tree, just outside the cottage. My tree—a craggy maple, clawing at the cliff, always threatening to send a root into rock and

crumble us into the sea far below. “Shouldn’t even be here,” my mother complained, kicking at its leaf-fall each autumn.

The tree was not native to the area—leaves with points like daggers that flushed crimson in autumn—suited to a different climate, perhaps even from across the sea. How it came to grow in that spot, no way to know.

I’d imagine, though. A green seedpod blowing in on a strange, wayward wind from northern parts. Or clinging to the wagon wheel of a traveling man trading radishes and copper trinkets, unsticking when it arrived in the Cove. Or carried in the pocket of a girl fleeing her town as it receded under water, like so many towns had in the decades before I was born.

The tree and I were both transplants, growing in dirt not our own. We were both meant for other things.

On the cliff nearby stood our cottage, abandoned for years before my mother made it a home. “How’d you do it?” I would ask her.

“No choice,” she’d say. “Nowhere else to go. Nothing to do but make the most of it.”

“Look at you now,” I’d said once, smiling.

“Look at me now,” she’d grumbled. “I’ve got a shack, a deviant maple tree, and a plot of rock the size of a football field that really, *really* doesn’t want to grow carrots.”

I didn’t reply, didn’t put voice to the flare of pain that filled my chest, didn’t say *But you’ve got me*. Instead, I asked, “What’s a football field?”

She waved me off, in that way of adults when they didn’t have the energy to explain about Life Before.

I placed the vegetables I’d gathered in my mother’s knit sack. There was an oval of dirt printed just above her cheekbone, placed there by one of her thumbs, those tiny squared trowels. I lifted my own thumb, already calloused and careworn at twelve, and, without thinking, placed it on the dirt-shape on her cheek.

She swatted my hand away.

“I just—I wanted to see if my thumb would fit. If our thumbs were the same size.”

“You can see plainly that they’re not,” she said. And with that she bent at the waist and meshed her fingers into the winding petals of lamb’s tongue.

People lived like this now, like ancient pictures I’d seen of feudal times, women bent over, plucking bits of wheat from a field, their task stretching for acres. I wonder if they ever recovered from a life facing the ground.

At sundown, too dark to work, we walked the short distance to our cottage, folded our limbs onto the threadbare couch, and turned toward our state-provided screen to watch dispatches from the city. The screen flickered to life, the picture ebbing and flowing with the unreliable current of electricity. The announcers were never named, but we knew they were important—messengers for the state. The women especially resembled each other, like dolls pressed from the same mold, merely in different colors, with glossy hair, thin limbs, delicate features. Not like in the Cove where people had the option of growing wild—fishermen with beards to their sternums, women whose faces were cracked by weather and time. A very few wore makeup and tamed their hair, but most didn’t bother.

This night, two announcers spoke in front of a blurred white background. A man with a waxen face, as though carved from soap, and a woman whose brown skin was buffed with makeup. The dispatches had told us that, during Life Before, all people hadn’t been treated equally. But, by the time I was a baby, the state had officially eradicated discrimination based on race. Their words, the certainty of them, reassured me, even as they snagged in my mind.

On our screen, the announcers said what they always said. *We’re working hard to fix this. We care about each of you, so much.* The tone was of a parent consoling a sick child. What was wrong in our country was a

malady that needed to run its course. *We are so sorry for your hunger, for your aches and pains. If we could take them, we would. If we could put them into our own bodies, we would. We are trying our best.* My mother made a gruff sound with her throat, but she didn't speak her true feelings, though there were no ears in our cottage. Illegal, to speak ill of the state.

I knew what she thought already. My mother didn't approve of the state, though I always wondered why. They'd saved us after the Turn, when nature rebelled, swallowing whole cities beneath oceans, the sun burning so hot, it turned much of the country to wastelands. The Turn happened slowly. People could ignore it, put it out of their minds. And then, fast. The country collapsed within a few years, and for a long time, all anybody did was survive. Until the Quorum took over.

My favorite part of the dispatches was any mention of the facilities, the schools where the most remarkable children in the country were sent. I watched hungrily for the occasional video of a child tearing open their letter of admission. "Congratulations! You have been accepted to the Estuary, a place where the best and brightest of our country learn to burn even brighter."

I'd never been in a car—had never traveled beyond the Cove—so the dispatches were my only means of seeing how others lived. Sometimes, enormous houses out of my dreams—screens that took up whole walls, slick self-driving cars shaped like bullets, bowls mounded with fruit in colors brighter than anything we got at the market. Other times, dim huts, worse off than any place I'd seen in the Cove. And it was those that gave me the greatest thrill. Because *any* child could be chosen for a facility. The state knew each of our names, could track us on satellites and cameras affixed to roofs and defunct telephone poles. The algorithm conducted intelligence tests just by watching us handle everyday problems, Mrs. Arkwright told us, always compiling and weighing results.

It didn't matter where the child was going—the Estuary, the Pines, the

Archipelago. Their faces beamed when they opened their letters. Parents wrapped them up, crying proud tears.

That is how I grew up, dreaming of a place beyond the Cove. Each night, lying beneath my woven blanket, wishing alternately for June, imagining the soft places of her, imagining her touching the soft places of me, and for one of those letters. Wishing with every muscle of me, every cell.

There was no camera crew like in the dispatches, but otherwise it happened remarkably the same. Thick envelope, an unbelievable white. Same words: *The Meadows, a place where the best and brightest of our country learn to burn even brighter*. Same gasp from my mouth. Same eyes searching for my mother's. There, the comparison ended. No joy in her gaze. No feeling at all but a sullen mouth, drooping in a familiar frown. I swallowed disappointment. No matter, I told myself. In days, I'd be gone.

The Meadows. I tasted the word.

Next morning, I ran down the hill, through fields of waist-high thistle that scratched my fingertips, toward the market square, ignoring the threat of gopher holes that could snap an ankle in a heartbeat. Had to reach the dock before the boats went out.

I pulled up in the market square, huffing. There—her father's boat, still rocking against the dock. June would be here soon, in her leather overalls, waxed and thick-smelling from seal fat, but beautiful. Perfect.

The square felt strangely hollow, market stalls covered with tarps, the only sound the wind faintly flapping a canvas poster hanging above the marketplace. The poster was secured to the wall of an old brick cannery. Stenciled across the top, in enormous red letters, *Strong Families Build a Strong Nation*, and beneath that a giant-sized illustration of a family. A man, smile cutting his meaty pink cheeks. Beneath him, two white children, plump and healthy-looking, one boyish and one girlish in the

obvious ways, blue gingham and pink gingham, as though masculine and feminine were perfect inverses. And beside them, a woman.

For as long as I could remember, my eyes had drawn to her. Her gaze was positioned permanently sideways, peering adoringly at the man and children, her mouth red-glossed and smiling toothlessly. Something in her carefully arranged face felt like a riddle I could solve, if only I looked long enough. One of these days, she'd break character and show me who she really was.

"You're leaving."

June's raspy voice. It sent a shiver through me. She stood in the doorway of an alley, backlit by sun. Her hair made a fraying halo around her head.

"Not till tomorrow," I said.

June's face was downcast, a wrinkle between her brows that had deepened in the last year since her mother had died. June's mother, smile eternally dimpling her amber cheeks, voice slightly accented from the island where she'd been born, had come here after that same island was erased by the sea. She fell for June's father, with his scrub of red beard and fair skin permanently flushed from the wind. After June's mother died, he remarried within the legally permitted six-month grieving period. It was customary.

June's face was already becoming copper like it did every summer, a scattering of freckles across her nose. The color she got from her mother, the freckles from her father. I thought about this often, the particular blending of features, and how much more sense June made, knowing what she was made of.

And me. Who did the blue of my eyes resemble? Who the lobe of my ear? Who the squirming in my chest, longing to be free?

"When did you get your letter?" June asked.

"Last night," I told her. "News travels fast."

“Stella the spinster’s daughter chosen for a facility—bound to be the thing on everyone’s lips.” She cocked her hip to the side. “What’s it called? Oh, yes, the *Meadows*. Sounds lovely.”

“You could be happy for me,” I suggested.

The intensity on her face melted a little. “It’s just that I’ll miss you.”

“You’ll miss me?” Most of our lives, we never went more than a day without seeing each other, in the market or the schoolmarm’s. Still, I felt a punch in my heart from surprise.

“Of course I’ll miss you,” she said.

Sometimes, on community devotion day, my mother would have us trudge to the rough-hewn sanctuary building for a service. The state had eradicated every shred of religion, but this was allowed, this sitting together in silent thought. It was always hair-pullingly dull until my favorite part, the Wanting Hat. Down every bench, the brown felt hat passed between hands—gnarled hands and salt-chapped hands and young hands not yet thick with calluses. The hat filled with whispered wishes, hushed desires. When it was my turn, I’d lower my mouth to the hat’s empty hollow, and wish for June. To do what with, I hardly knew. To be close to her, was all. Facing her in the market that day, I wondered, had she ever wished for me?

“What will I do without you? Nobody else cares about my daily catch,” she said. “Who else will I show the fish with no eyes?”

I smiled. “Who else will play music for you? Who else will draw you crass pictures of Mrs. Arkwright on their chalkboard? Or pick you a flower from the field and put it behind your ear before you even notice?”

Her face brightened as I spoke, then clouded, like the sky does. “No one.”

The buoyant feeling in my chest dissipated. I had always thought of June as permanent. Imagined our childhoods stretching out before us—walks among the junipers and cliff-diving and one day being brave enough to reach out and touch her skin.

“We could’ve had all our lives,” she said. “We could’ve had a million years.”

I took a step closer. “I’ll see you again—” I started, but bit off the rest. I didn’t know if it was true. Instead, I looked around, and walked backward into the alley, unobserved by any villagers. “Come closer.”

Her face rearranged, a smile breaking through her dubious expression.

When she moved close, I leaned near to her ear, cheek brushing hers. “June.”

I felt her shiver beneath my breath. Slowly, I moved my mouth from her ear, and she moved her mouth to mine. Our lips touched, softly. She moved closer, the movements like an unwritten language that we never needed to be taught. I cupped her bottom lip in my mouth, held it like something precious.

Five years have passed, and it occurs to me, the most miraculous thing about that moment: not June’s breath in my mouth. Not the current that arced through my body. Not the way she looked at me when our lips pulled away, her eyes wide and wondrous and reinventing the world.

Just this: Not once, not even for a second, did I think I was doing anything wrong.

CHAPTER 3

Light. This—what I noticed first about the Meadows.

Light in hanging lamps, and beaded along hallways, and inside the walls, glowing translucently from someplace within. Later, alone in my room, I'd run my hand over the wall. Plastic, the texture of fine-grained sandpaper.

At home, electric light was precious, and my mother doled it out frugally, more often using candles reassembled from wax drippings and thumbed into a metal mold that, when lit, made the air a waxy, smoky stew.

I huddled together with a few dozen girls in the Meadows' bright foyer. The white walls were smooth and rounded, a rabbit warren of tunnels and chambers stretching in unknowable directions. A giddy nervousness seemed to bounce off the gleaming floor. I studied the girls' faces openly, too excited to be self-conscious, drew my eyes across their noses and mouths and skin, some pale like me, some with skin shades of olive or brown, hair flat or wavy or curly, tightly coiled or ironed straight. Many with a bottom lip pinned nervously under her teeth, a wrist clamped inside fingers.

I'd seen several of these girls on the shuttle here, but we hadn't spoken. Now I wondered where each had come from, if any were from a place like the Cove. I couldn't tell by looking. We'd shifted into our new white

dresses, tiny pearl buttons cupping the light. Here we were. Best. Brightest. The hope for the future of our country.

My heart yearned behind my fresh new dress—to run, to carve through these abalone hallways. Anything was possible here. We were made blank.

“My dears.” A voice echoed through the room.

We swiveled to face the woman striding into the foyer, followed by a procession of others in thick white dresses that belled at their waists. A tall girl nearby flashed a smile at me. The air inflated with anticipation.

“I am Matron Sybil,” the woman said. Her voice was gentle as wind in heather, and I found myself smiling just looking at her. Two blue eyes sat brightly inside her fair, lined face, and her hair was tucked in a silver bun. “We are delighted to welcome you to the Meadows. This will be your home for the next four years. Here, you will grow into the young women that our country needs.”

I turned again to the girl next to me, looked up to her face, deep brown and inviting. She stood taller than me by a head, her hair in tight twists.

I darted my hand into hers, and grasped.

“Want to be friends?” I whispered.

The girl breathed a surprised laugh. I hadn’t made a friend in years, had known June and the other children in the Cove since I was born. Maybe this wasn’t how it was done.

A smile spread across her face. “Friends,” she said, squeezing my hand.

Matron Sybil introduced the matrons behind her. It was hard to distinguish them, so similarly dressed. Some looked stern, and others like kindly, weathered grandmothers. My eyes rested on the face of a middle-aged matron, who Matron Sybil introduced as Matron Calliope. She wore pearl earrings that shone against her dark skin.

“This place feels magical,” I whispered to the girl beside me. “Doesn’t it?”

“Exactly.” She nodded. “I’m Sheila.”

“Eleanor,” I said, smiling.

I noticed, then, a different matron, watching us. She was younger than the others—closer in age to the girls gathered around me—with a shock of reddish hair falling past her shoulders. Her eyes alighted on our clasped hands, and her mouth formed a gentle curve. She pulled a screen from the pocket of her dress and tapped on it, as though taking notes. A prickle walked up my spine.

“And lastly, Matron Maureen,” Matron Sybil said, indicating the young red-haired woman. Matron Maureen did a little comical curtsy. A ripple of laughter filled the foyer.

“I suppose you’re all very curious as to what this building holds,” Matron Sybil continued. “Shall we explore?”

We followed behind the matrons, a white-clad school of fish, and it struck me that I had never been among so many other girls. Smart and capable girls destined for great things. I let out a breathy laugh.

Sheila looked down at me, a grin lighting her face.

The matrons led us through rounded white corridors toward classrooms. “So bright.” Sheila’s whisper found my ear. The other girls’ awed mutterings surrounded us, a tight-fitting sleeve of voices.

They showed us the dining room. *So wide. So gleaming.*

They showed us the meadow fields. *So far. So free.*

We lingered on the edge of the fields, where the lawn erupted in hip-height stalks tipped in purple petals. We were surrounded, a white boat in a great, undulating sea of purple. The only variation was a single yew tree, sprawling and ancient, growing a few paces inside the fields.

A girl asked if we were allowed to walk there. “Of course,” Matron Sybil said.

“How far does it go?” another asked.

The matron paused. “Forever,” she said. And somehow, I thought she spoke the truth.

While the other girls filed back inside, I stayed at the edge of the meadow fields. I remembered fishermen describing the call of the ocean and I thought, *Yes, it's like that*. I rolled a single stalk between my thumb and forefinger, texture downy as lambswool. Along the stem were bundles of blooms, each petal a miniature purple trowel. Their scent filled the air, gentle but insistent, like the sweet green of new growth in spring.

Sheila waited for me in the hallway while the others funneled into an auditorium. The room's velvet seats were clean and crimson, and the domed ceiling shone opalescent. On the polished wooden stage stood Matron Sybil.

"I'd like to formally welcome you to the Meadows," Matron Sybil said. As she strode down the stage, I took in the gently creased white of her face. And her eyes, piercingly blue.

"You are all here because you're special," she said. "We've been watching you since you were very young, and we discovered something bright glowing inside each of you. Places like the Meadows were created to nurture that which you possess already. To grow it. To help it burn even more brightly, so that one day you might give it to the nation."

The audience of girls seemed to inflate with held breath. Matron Sybil strolled the stage, each girl's eyes carefully tracking her movements. The stiff fabric of her dress hardly moved with her, pleats encircling her waist. If the others looked like bells, Matron Sybil resembled a tall white column.

"Of course, in every cohort, there are some who may struggle to unlock what's inside of them," she went on. "Do not be afraid of that. Struggle is a vital part of this process. Those who give every effort will leave here and step into beautiful lives."

A hunger opened up inside of me. I felt I'd do anything to prove to her that I was as good as she thought.

I felt Sheila lean close. "My parents didn't want me to come."

I glanced quickly up at her. “Did they say why?” I whispered.

“Just, ‘There’s things about you that we don’t want to see taken away.’”

She shrugged. “Overprotective, probably.”

“They thought this place would do that?” I shook my head, wondering at the idea of a parent standing in the way of this place.

“The Meadows will teach you to become women, as women are meant to be,” Matron Sybil was saying. “Some of you perhaps have not had ideal examples of women in your lives. Some whose mothers discarded feminine traits inherent to womanhood—grace and composure and sacrifice. Some whose fathers foisted their duties on their wives. Some raised *without* a mother, or without a true mother.” For a flicker of a moment, Matron Sybil’s eyes rested on me. A flush crept up my cheeks.

“Regardless of your upbringing, we will help you blossom into remarkable women.”

An image flashed into my mind, the poster hanging above the market square back home. The husband and children gazing out at the world, and the woman only ever looking at them, absorbed by these people.

My hand shot into the air. Just as quickly, I regretted it, but Matron Sybil’s eyes had already clapped onto mine.

“Yes?” she asked, surprised. Clearly, this was not the kind of speech meant to be interrupted.

“W—when you say we’ll have beautiful lives,” I asked, tentative, “what do you mean?”

She smiled good-naturedly. “You will become useful, dutiful members of society. Brilliant wives. Adept mothers.”

“You mean, we’ll—get married?”

Her head tilted slightly. “What else would an accomplished young woman do?” I thought her smile was something other than a smile now. Something like a tool. “Not right away, of course. But eventually, you will find a husband, or the state will help match you to one.”

Husband. A squirming loosed in my stomach.

Matron Sybil's eyes seemed to pin me to my seat. "Don't you want to find an adoring husband to provide for you? To endow you with loving children to speed the regrowth of our country?"

"Oh yes," I said. The lie came smoothly, without hesitation.

Matron Sybil smiled again, but the squirming in my gut didn't ease. "Then study well, and listen to your matrons. And your future can be anything that you can dream."

CHAPTER 4

“What’s that cloud make you think of?” Sheila asked, pointing to one rimmed with sun.

The excitement of the first day had shifted into a deflated kind of exhaustion, and Sheila and I reclined on the grass, watching the clouds make their way across the sky, a blue so bright, it seemed unreal. Other girls clustered in groups nearby, and the matrons walked the perimeter of the lawn, white-clad sentinels. I’d assumed some of the girls would venture into the meadow fields, but none had, and as much as I wanted to, it seemed unwise to be the first.

“A crown,” I said, following the line of Sheila’s finger. “Or . . . a bridle maybe.”

Sheila laughed. “A what?”

“You know—what you put on a horse’s head. You’ve never heard of it?”

“The only animals I’ve ever seen were in the ecological center, and all they had was a cow, a hawk that can shell peanuts with its beak, and a really old turtle. When I was little, my parents showed me flashcards of animals, though, even the extinct ones.”

I turned over in the grass, wondering at her. I couldn’t fathom a childhood spent outside of nature. The other girls seemed unknowable to me, and Sheila should have, how she’d grown up in a suburb, how I had no better reference for the artifacts of her life than she had for mine, the words

that tripped off her tongue—ice cream, magneboarding, basketball court. But, something happened in the first hour of our arrival. Sheila's hand in mine. Friendship is really just a decision, one you make over and over again.

My eyes traced the fields. They stood strangely, knuckle-sized clusters of blooms perfectly still. Something shifted uncomfortably in my chest. I'd sensed it all day, but out here in the expanse of open air, it became oppressive. My mind had searched, unconsciously, for the buzz of an insect, the trill of a bird. I listened closely now. But there was nothing, not even the hush of a breeze.

Silence.

A loud noise can take up space inside the body, vibrating muscles and tendons and the tiny bones deep within ears. Silence, I realized, had a physical presence too. A heaviness.

The train station had been loud. My mother and I had had only a moment before I boarded the train to the Meadows. She had stood out in the bustling station—the busiest place I'd been in my life. Her eyes darted around as people swept past, and every so often a young girl boarded the train. She'd asked a porter where this train was bound, and he'd replied, "The algorithm's programmed the route. Not even I know."

My mother's eyes had flared. "Learn where you are, first thing you do," she muttered to me. Then she'd hugged me quickly, unexpectedly. "Be good," she'd called, her voice a whisper smothered by the churning noise of the train, and I was gone.

Only now, a day later, the question pulsed in all this silence. *Where are we?* I'd heard some of the girls whispering that we must be in the Annex, a huge expanse of land in the middle of the country that the government had cordoned off because the climate had grown too harsh for human habitation. Perhaps the state had found a way to reestablish an ecosystem, calm the effects of the oppressive sun. Grow flowers farther than the horizon.

“My dad would tell me about growing up in a small town,” Sheila said, “but it’s gone now. The whole thing wiped out by a mudslide.”

I nodded. Everyone’s parents and grandparents had stories like that. Their entire worlds shattered when the climate broke, whole swaths of population just gone, buried beneath land collapses, devoured by fires, starved. It had taken years for the world to settle, and when it did, the Quorum was who everyone thanked.

“My mother doesn’t talk about Life Before,” I said.

“What about your dad?”

“Don’t have one. I’m—not really my mother’s,” I said, clumsy. I’d never had to explain it before. Everyone in the Cove simply knew.

Sheila’s forehead folded as I recounted the story: a wrapped-up bundle on a doorstep, under the shadow of a maple tree, ocean swirling darkly below. “And nobody knows where you came from?”

“There were rumors. None of them made my mother look very good.”

Sheila squinted. “Because she didn’t have a husband?”

I nodded. “I think I made life hard for her. I try to imagine, sometimes, what her life would’ve been like if she’d never taken me in. Easier, I think.”

“You shouldn’t think that way about yourself,” she said. “I made life harder for my parents too, but that’s what children do.”

But I should have been different, I thought. More like what my mother needed.

I looked up at Sheila again, shoving my thoughts away. “What are your parents like?”

“My dad works at the university,” she said, smiling. “Teaching architecture. He could make a skyscraper out of plasticore, and it would stand for a thousand years.”

“And your mom?”

“She’s just as smart as my dad. He brings her books and they read together and debate. They can go for hours.” Sheila’s smile shone through

a veil of sadness. “When I started school, she was allowed to apply for work. She was assigned to a job on a printing row. The harvested material comes out in perfect white sheets, and she works a machine to shape it into objects. Cups. Plates. It’s tedious, and she has to hide her natural hair under an ugly kerchief, but she says it’s worth it, to be in the world.”

I felt my forehead frown, imagining the options available for most women.

“Do you ever want to find yours?” Sheila asked. “Your real parents?”

She threw the question out lightly, as though it held no weight. Heat prickled my neck. I rarely thought about them. “No hope of that. If there was an answer, somebody in the Cove would’ve told me by now.”

“But if there *was* hope?” she asked. “The algorithm must know.”

“Then . . .” I trailed off. My birth parents were behind a door in my mind, heavily bolted. Impossible, so not worth worrying at. But sometimes, the lock slipped and I let myself half-wonder: If they left, could they come back? Maybe they’d intended our separation to be temporary. My mind would trail its fingers through the possibilities . . . family around a dinner table, stories and laughter. Someone to love me the way my mother couldn’t. I looked up at Sheila, her expectant face. “Then maybe I’d wonder.”

A hairbrush made of opaque white plasticore. A tiny hand mirror. A sewing kit in a woven basket, its latch a knob of mother-of-pearl.

“What fine things,” I whispered, fingertips resting on each.

“Only the best for us,” Sheila said, laughing. But wasn’t she right? We were the cream that had risen to the top of the country. And this was our reward.

“I wonder why they didn’t allow us to bring anything,” I said, thinking of my violin.

“The same reason we can’t call home, I guess,” Sheila said, frowning. “A ‘fresh start.’”

From a small dresser, I pulled out clothing, let the silken fabric fall through my fingers like milk—white dresses, undergarments edged in lace, socks soft as calf hide. A whisper in my mind, my mother’s voice, scoffing. *What kind of fools make socks from something so flimsy? You’ll be freezing when winter comes.*

For the first time, I allowed myself to really think of home. Of June, the wide delight of her smile, the memory of her like the jolt of jumping into cold water. Of town, and the bustle of market days, the clatter of carts on the prairie road, the lowing of cattle carried on the sea wind. And my mother. There was a wringing in my chest, my feelings never quite complete—never angry enough to be truly angry, never loving enough to feel like I loved her. I remembered her startlingly long hug, the bones of her chest pressing into me when she left me at the train station the day before. Her final words, *Be good.*

“Can’t sleep?” Sheila asked later, curled beneath the covers of her bed. The lights had automatically dimmed, though the walls still glowed faintly. Our room, doorless, faced an inner common room, and spoking out from it, other bedrooms, and other girls nestled in their new beds. I could make out the shushing of whispers.

I shook my head. My body felt wrung out, but I couldn’t imagine sleeping.

“I thought for so long about coming here,” I whispered. “And now that I *am* here, I wonder, *What now?*” A knot formed in my throat. Stupid, to cry in this bright, perfect place. “I feel sort of . . . under water.” Warm tears slipped from my eyes.

“Hold my hand.” Sheila reached across the distance between our beds. “I know how to swim.” And though she smiled, I thought she was right. If we held on, we could keep each other afloat.

Crisp bedsheets held my body like an envelope, but Sheila's hand was soft. Most everything my body had ever touched had been soft—clothes patched and fraying, and sheets boiled soft as corn silk. And if there was the rare moment I stepped on a nail while picking for supplies in the junkyard, or felt the curved black nails of Captain, June's dog, great shaggy white hair always dried in saltwater curls, there'd been many more soft things.

Sheila's hand grew limp, her eyes drifting closed. I was nearly asleep too, when I heard it.

Banjo strings on the air.

The backward pull of memory, years before. I'd stood on the cliff beside my cottage. We had no neighbors, and there was rarely anything to overhear, so my ears perked at the music. I'd darted to the village, following the sound.

They'd set up in an alley—a kind of megaphone, the music funneled and shot out to the surrounding hills. And soon a small collection of us swayed at the ends of the street, and on rooftops, and heads hung out of windows up and down the buildings.

The band was shabby-looking. The trumpet player had an arm in a dingy sling, so she played one-handed. The cellist's cheeks were hollow and hungry, but she sawed away like a lumberjack. It took moments of watching before I realized each one appeared to be a woman. None wore metal bands on their fingers, though they were old enough. They should've been inside, shrouded by a home, smelling of milk and children and their husbands' skin. But they were not homed at all, I would later learn through town whispers. No money for food, but enough for a dented van to convey them across the country.

What for?

To play their song. To let it live.

There was something very right about each of them, about their

faces, their movements, the smiling glances they passed to each other like prayers whispered into the Wanting Hat.

Watching them, I felt an itch to play my fiddle. Mrs. Arkwright had taught me until I outgrew her skill, and after that I'd scratched out my own music, practicing into the night. My favorite, the Longing Song, was filled with everything I dreamed about. Ginger cake, and June's mouth, an anorak like the fishermen wore, a letter from a facility. My wishes collected and lined up inside the song. I wanted to play it for them, to show everyone that I was like them. And they were like me.

I see you, I wanted to tell them. Do you see me?

The alley grew crowded with villagers. I spotted Mrs. Arkwright, the schoolmarm. And June and her mother, still alive. Even Mrs. Johns, the local busybody, who looked more like the woman on the poster above the market than anyone else in the Cove.

The alley—a kind of megaphone. So when the shout rang out, the big meaty voice of a peacekeeper, it forced its way violently into our ears. And the screams of the crowd were magnified, and so too the painful silence of the music ceasing, instruments clattering to the ground. They dragged them by their ankles and elbows, those officers, threw them as though those bodies hadn't just created something wondrous and rare.

I huddled for a long time in a doorway, twisting away from what I'd seen. Why had they been dragged away? As though they'd committed some awful crime. I didn't know.

And I did.

On some level deeper than thought, I was piecing it together.

CHAPTER 5

On the sidewalk, breath rises in front of the pedestrians beside me, shrouded in wool, pre-married women in neat, dark work suits, and mothers with babies stuffed inside buggies, and men in slacks and jackets and hard shoes walking importantly. I twine between skyscrapers, white and silver, that grab at the sky like reaching arms.

For days after, the image of the white building has rested at the corner of my mind, even after leaving the café, even after performing my daily adjudications, listening to a half-dozen girls answer my questions—*How is your job? Your boyfriend? How much or how little are you pleased with your life?* Even now, I see the words on the man's screen: *Can't believe it's been well over a decade since I last saw the Glades.*

How had someone even managed a photo? Could a person go back? I'll save that thought for later. Because today will be a good day. I'm nearly to Sheila's apartment.

When Sheila opens the door, her face brightens. "Did you have eggs for breakfast?"

I squint at her. "How'd you know?"

"Egg, with a runny yolk," she says, pointing at my shirt where a yellow blot of yolk has dried into the navy blue of my blouse. "Always was your favorite."

I smile, stepping into her kitchen. "Some things don't change."

“You mean the eggs, or the spilling things on yourself?”

“Both,” I say, laughing, taking her in. These days, Sheila hardly resembles the girl I first met in the Meadows, her hair now falling in a straight golden drape around her shoulders, her deep brown skin polished with makeup. But when she smiles, I can see her still. The Sheila I once knew.

“Ed’s out,” she says, leaning into her kitchen counter and regarding the spacious apartment she shares with her boyfriend. My job allows me to meet with her every month. Our visits can extend no longer than thirty minutes or I get reprimanded for being too social. It’s necessary to keep up the impression of impartiality or they’ll replace me with someone who truly is.

Sheila asked, on our first adjudication, why I’d been assigned the position. “You weren’t like me, or Rose.” A shadow had crossed her face. “You followed the rules for so long. But I still can’t understand it.”

I squirmed a little. “They trust me,” I’d said. And she must’ve sensed I couldn’t say more, because she never asked again.

Sheila fixes me a cup of tea now, squeezing lemon juice from a metallic pump on her counter while I scrub my shirt with a tea towel. She wears a tangerine-colored dress, cinched at the waist. She seems diminished, smaller each time I see her.

When we’re seated on the balcony, I ask, “How are you?” out of genuine curiosity, not only because I’m required to demand answers and she’s required to give them.

Sheila’s apartment overlooks the river. The waters lap the concrete foundation beneath her balcony like a searching tongue, and of course I think of Rose, and her tongue slipping across my teeth, and I have to swallow a shiver that wants to ripple across my body.

“They finally found me a job,” Sheila replies, blowing on her tea, her breath white in the late autumn air. “A deli, cutting big pieces of meat into smaller pieces of meat.” The corners of her mouth downturn deeply.

I think back to our first year in the Meadows, back to a time when I never could've imagined Sheila's face like this. I don't write anything while we talk, but later, on the train, I'll need to record each detail. My reports could then be checked against the ears around us, small mesh coins set into the walls—one above the clock in her kitchen, one set into the balcony wall. When you start to notice, they're everywhere, always listening.

"And how's Ed?" I ask.

"Ed's . . . good. He's made great progress at his internship."

I nod, picturing Ed in his office, working busily in his starched work shirts like an over-eager schoolboy. Shirts that Sheila, I think reluctantly, must iron for him.

"Do you feel like they made a good match?" I ask. A year ago, when we arrived in the city, Sheila opted to be randomly assigned a mate rather than search for one on her own.

Her mouth shrugs. "Better than the Registrar's Office," she says. "Flicking through profiles, knowing boys are doing the same to mine. I heard they have some kind of new tech that lets you talk to a digital version of your potential mate. The idea felt . . . violating. It just seemed more"—she searched for the word—"honest this way."

Better to be randomly assigned than to accept the sham of a false choice. "And how are *you* . . . and Ed?" I'm supposed to ask all kinds of questions. About compatibility, about the amount of affection the couple has achieved. Premarital togetherness is allowed but not required. The state tracks menstrual cycles, so if a girl finds herself in a family way, a wedding is scheduled for the next day. This is considered a grand success—a marriage and a new citizen in one fell swoop. The option of choosing not to be a mother is, of course, strictly forbidden.

At once, Sheila's eyes begin to blur. She turns toward the brown strand of river beyond the balcony. This, the kind of thing I should be reporting, any glimmer of discontent with her state-appointed boyfriend. Any

sign that she's not entirely reformed. But I never do. Not for Sheila, or anyone.

Sheila coughs into her fist, and when she turns to face me again, her eyes are clear. "Things are great with Ed," she says, voice bright. "He's very . . . considerate. He brings me flowers every Friday. He brought me a prototype of something they're working on. Here, I'll show you."

Sheila goes back inside. By myself, as always, my mind tugs back to Rose. It's like that now, my mind like a boat, and Rose an anchor. The last time I saw her was in the common room. "*Coming?*" Her whispered voice. The surface of my skin dimpling with gooseflesh. And what came next. A long walk down a corridor. My hand on a doorknob.

When Sheila sits again, my muscles twitch, startled back to reality. She places an object on the table between us, a small square of plastic, like an empty picture frame. I've seen gadgets like it in shop windows.

"A periscope," I say, turning it over in my hand. Most periscopes like this are chintzy and can only materialize a few preset items before they run out of medium and stop working. I've used something like it once, in the Meadows. The memory chills me, mouth filling with the acidity of orange.

I run the pad of my thumb against the words etched into the surface of the periscope: *A Taste of Paris*. "Ed's office is working on a series of travel periscopes," Sheila tells me. Due to the fact, I assume, that actual international travel isn't allowed. To the general population, it's unknown how much of the rest of the world even remains. "Try it," she says.

I study a row of tiny buttons along one edge of the frame. A croissant. A steaming mug of something—coffee or hot chocolate. A crème brûlée. "That one."

Sheila holds down the button and, as though imagined out of thin air, a perfectly made crème brûlée in a round white dish appears, perched inside a background of endless black.

I slide my hand through the square, and my stomach lurches at the sight of my arm disappearing up to the elbow. My brain barely comprehends when my fingers brush cold ceramic.

"I still don't know how these work," I say, clinking a spoon against the caramelized sugar of the *crème brûlée*. My stomach is still nervous eating something assembled from a string of lactose and sugar molecules, though most food in the city is engineered. When I spoon a dollop into my mouth, extraordinary flavor blooms on my tongue. But before long it grows ashen—like color that's faded over time.

Sheila shrugs. "Even before the Turn, they knew how to print objects. Food too. Even human organs." Her face lights up as she goes on. "The big change came after state scientists discovered how to create space. With infinite space, infinite possibilities. That's what Ed says." Her mouth turns downward then, and I wonder how she stands it, Ed doing the work she dreamed of. "Something about printing molecules in another plane. A space between spaces. And the frame is a kind of a doorway there?" Her forehead furrows in a familiar way, frustration at all she doesn't know.

"They didn't get around to teaching us much science in the Meadows," I say.

"Or much else."

A few weeks ago during a bad windstorm, I watched from my apartment balcony as an electrical cord pulled away from a building. It flailed on the street, naked wire sparking, shooting white filaments of light before a gray-clad maintenance crew contained it.

And here's Sheila. Sparking with ideas. Desires. All that energy with nowhere to go.

She holds the periscope out to me. "Why don't you keep it?"

I startle, then sit back. "It's yours. What would Ed think?"

"Please, take it," she insists quietly. "I'll tell him I lost it."

I squint at her, watching her mouth form a slow frown. “Sheila, what’s the matter?”

She stares out at the water. “They used to have car alarms,” Sheila says, so softly I can barely hear. “My parents told me. They’d go off in the middle of the night, waking everyone in the neighborhood. It’d blare until someone clicked a button to turn it off.” She sighs. “I’ve got alarms going”—she gestures at her head—“all the time. Have since the Meadows. Before, even. You get tired. You’d do anything to make it stop.”

I lean toward her and reach out, but I don’t touch her. “What do you mean?”

Sheila’s eyes grow unfocused as she looks out over the river. “I’ve asked Ed to talk to his boss,” she says. “About letting me take the aptitude test. If I pass, I’d start in a low-level position in the department, but I could climb.”

“Ed’s really going to do that?”

She nods. “He says he just needs some time. To earn some clout in the department.”

“Well,” I say. “I hope his boss says yes.”

“If he doesn’t, I don’t know what I’ll do. My mind is starving, Eleanor,” she whispers, quiet enough to be drowned inside the steady rush of the river. “Ed never puts his things away. His screen’s always on the counter. When he’s sleeping, I type in his passcode. I find papers and articles. And I just—I read.” Tears perch on the ridge of her lower eyelid. “But, even if I learn everything there is to know, what good will it do? Someone needs to do something. Someone needs to fight.”

I lean closer, voice hushed. “I’m fighting.”

Sheila fixes on my gaze, and I know she recognizes the truth of my job. Changing reports. Collecting stories and rewriting them in safe words. “It’s not enough,” she says.

I blink. “What do you mean?”

“Keeping them safe until they’re reformed,” she says. “And then what?”

They get married. They start having children. Their future narrows to a small set of tasks, repeated daily. But what can I do to change that? What can anyone? I do what I can: listen, and see them, and hold on to their stories.

“It’s the best I can do.” My voice sounds weak.

And now I’m thinking of Rose, and how she railed against the courses in the Meadows. “Needlework, Eleanor,” she’d say. “And Homemaking, and goddamn Comportment—what kind of life do you think they’re preparing you for?”

“Rose,” Sheila says. “When you wear that face, I imagine you must be thinking about her.”

My heart seems to cram into my throat, and my pulse flickers nervously. This conversation—a tightrope. Can’t step too far, one way or the other.

“She was a good . . .” I clear my throat. “A good friend.”

Sheila nods. “You haven’t heard anything of her, have you?”

A cold fork of lightning strikes my chest. Each meeting, I’ve held out hope that Sheila might have heard something about Rose, a scrap of news that could mean she didn’t really die that night.

“No,” I tell Sheila. “She’s long gone.”

I recall what my supervisor, Mrs. Collier, told me the day I was placed as an adjudicator, assigned an apartment in the city, the scent of the Meadows still clinging to me. She pulled up the report of Rose’s death and read me the pertinent details. The night Rose tried to escape, a scuffle with peacekeepers. They’d had guns. My mind conjured an image then—a rain of blood falling from Rose’s temple into the stalks of purple flowers, soaking into the earth.

“I heard something—” Sheila says, and shakes her head.

“What?”

She glances sideways. “Something Ed mentioned,” she says. “That, no matter how harsh the facilities were, at least everyone made it out alive. No reformed has ever died inside.”

“But—Rose.”

“Her death might have been classified,” she says quickly, “and the average intern like Ed wouldn’t hear the full truth. But maybe—Eleanor, maybe she didn’t die.”

I picture it then, the unkillings of Rose, as though watching a backward video. The bullet pulling free from her mind like a silver cork, blood siphoned from the earth and returned behind the walls of her body. Rose, *alive*. Could it be?

I take a breath and fold the muscles of my face back into place. “No,” I say, with practiced calm. “I’m sure Ed was mistaken. Everyone knows what happened to Rose. Everyone knows she’s dead.”

CHAPTER 6

A cheek. A mouth. An eye made of paint.

We sat in a ring, drawing paintbrush across canvas with precise strokes, glancing occasionally into a small mirror clipped to the side of each easel. The air was full with the chalky smell of paint, the clink of paintbrushes dipped in water, the shuffle of Matron Sybil's footsteps as she paced the perimeter, her silver hair swept back in a precise bun.

I could hardly tear my eyes from the circle of girls. It had already been a month, but my heart still felt full at the sight of them, arranged before me like spoils from a treasure chest. Sheila. Johanna. Alice. Margot. Penelope. Betty. And so many others.

"I always assign a self-portrait in your first month, and another in your final." Matron Sybil's voice fell over us like cool water. "Not only will it demonstrate how your painting skills improve, it will illustrate your growth, from who you are today, to the lovely young ladies you will be when you depart here."

"I think that's her way of saying we're not quite lovely yet," Sheila whispered beside me, turning her head and squinting at her portrait. In the painting, her face looked a little funny, the proportions off, as though flattened.

"Yours looks great," I said.

"Don't lie to me," Sheila said.

I stifled a grin. "It's . . . unique," I said. "You have a fresh eye."

She let out a cackle. "Is that what you call it?"

Sheila glanced at mine, and her smile fell away. I'd painted my shoulders in my new white dress, buttons following the line of my sternum. All but my face. There, only a white hollow.

"I've never painted before," I explained. "I don't know how to—to make myself."

Sheila only nodded.

The truth was, I didn't like the mirror. When I first saw it attached to my easel, my impulse was to wrench my eyes away, a thunderclap of shock to see myself inside that metal circle. I'd never owned a mirror, had only glimpsed myself in June's palm-sized one, so tiny, I could see just one piece of me at a time—small mouth, blue eye, slightly snubbed nose.

I heard laughter from a few seats away. My eyes fell on Margot, her blond hair in a close crop. Next to her, Penelope, who had the kind of face you can't look away from, resembling an old-fashioned doll's—high round cheeks, face tapering toward a small, pointed chin. Her dark brown skin was stippled with white paint flicked from Margot's brush.

Penelope gasped. "How . . . *dare* you," she said, a smile pushing through her shock. She held up her brush and flung a constellation of paint onto Margot's face, laughing.

"Decorum, girls," Matron Sybil said, wafting toward them.

Margot's smile didn't slip. "I don't have much decorum, matron," she said. "We didn't learn that in the sticks."

"Then we shall have to teach you," Matron Sybil said, smiling. "Lesson one: We do not throw paint at other young ladies."

"Yes, matron," the two of them replied obediently, but as soon as Matron Sybil turned, Margot ran her finger over the brush and shot Penelope with new freckles of paint. The two suppressed their laughter.

A point in my chest tightened. I thought of June. In the month since

arriving, we'd been thrown into classes, my fingers dotted with pinpricks from clumsy attempts at needlepoint, sinuses burned from charring sugar while attempting a caramel in Homemaking. I'd been happily distracted, but now—now, the missing crept in like a poison. I slid out the memory of the alley—June and me, our lips touching. Thumbed it like a rare coin.

“Well done, Eleanor,” Matron Maureen said, walking past. Other matrons sometimes dipped into classes to watch us. Matron Maureen was a welcome presence compared with the hawk-eyed glare of Matron Gloria or the unimpressed *tsks* of elderly Matron Mary. “You’ve got good painterly instincts,” Matron Maureen said, smiling the same smile she’d worn that first day, when she saw Sheila and me holding hands, like we were in on a joke together.

“But,” I said, glancing at my painting, “I don’t have a head.”

“I noticed,” Matron Maureen said, laughing. “But what you do have is excellent.”

“Thank you,” I said, a little astonished.

And then she whispered, low enough that not even Sheila could hear, “I believe in you, Eleanor. I can tell already that you’ll do great things one day.”

“Me?” I asked. A place behind my sternum glowed like an ember.

“Just wait,” she said, eyes glimmering. “See if you don’t prove me right.”

“Chins high, girls!” Matron Maureen called later that day. “Glide, like you’re walking on air.”

Around the room, a swarm of us in billowing dresses conveyed our bodies silently through space, stockinged feet slipping across the white floor.

“I don’t think our bodies are capable of gliding,” Sheila said, tracking us in the enormous mirror that spanned one wall.

I laughed. "I'm not sure what you mean," I said, moving like a baby deer, with uncertain knees. "I'm the most graceful one here."

On cue, I glided away, and collided full-force into Betty, a pale girl with thick white-framed glasses and a plume of orange hair.

"Watch yourself!" Betty cried.

"Just an accident," I said. Betty cradled her arm, twisted against the parachute of her dress. Her face, a white expanse bisected by two thin brushstrokes of orange eyebrows, quivered, as though she might cry. "Oh, my goodness, you're really hurt. Let me help—"

"No." Just before Betty hid her arm behind her back, I saw it. Through the gauzy white material of her sleeve, a bloom of red. Blood.

I could only stare. Surely I hadn't crashed into her with enough force to draw blood. "I'm fine," she snapped. "But you ought to look where you're going."

"Betty," I said. "I'm sure—I'm sure there are bandages. You're my friend. Let me help you."

She leveled her eyes at me. "Friend?"

The single word sliced like a small knife. "We're here, aren't we?" I asked. "We might as well be friends."

Betty frowned. "I'm not in the habit of befriending girls from the Outskirts," she declared, "who walk like lumberjacks and stink like dead fish." She walked away.

I blinked, the air ripped from my lungs. I had the impulse to lift the back of my hand to my nose, to smell myself, though I knew I had none of the Cove left on me.

"Don't listen to her," Sheila said, gliding up beside me. "She's a stuck-up cow you wouldn't want to be friends with anyway."

"Thanks," I said.

"And you only smell a little like dead fish."

I smiled at her.

“Gliding is all in the toes, girls!” Matron Maureen said, flitting about the room like a slip of paper caught in the wind. “Imagine your bones are made of feathers.”

She winked as she moved past us. Every so often, I noticed her watching me. It felt warm, her gaze resting on my cheek.

“Why are we doing this in socks, matron?” Penelope asked.

“For a very important reason,” Matron Maureen said, twirling around in a pirouette. “Because gliding in socks is more fun.”

“Wouldn’t shoes be more sensible?” a light voice called from the open doorway. We came to an abrupt stop to face Matron Sybil. “After all, there aren’t many society events that will allow them in without shoes.”

“Don’t worry,” Matron Maureen said. “I won’t send them out into the world barefoot.”

“I hope not,” Matron Sybil said, moving through the room. She paused before each girl, lightly pushing shoulders back or instructing one to adjust her duck-footed stance.

When Matron Sybil stopped in front of me, she smiled slightly. I felt my heart beating inside my fingertips. She lifted my chin lightly with a finger. “Eleanor,” she said. “Eleanor from the Cove. You’ve never had a class in comportment.”

I shook my head.

“Well, we’ve had many girls from the Outskirts leave the Meadows as lovely as anyone,” Matron Sybil said. “You’ll be one of them, I’d wager.”

I smiled. “Thank you, matron.”

Matron Sybil turned to Sheila. “All the makings of an elegant young woman, Sheila,” she said, “but your movement needs refinement.”

“I’m trying, matron,” she said.

Matron Sybil’s eyes swept across Sheila’s face. “You didn’t grow up

with comportment either,” she said. “Or needlework. Or fine arts. But not for lack of access, as with Eleanor,” Matron Sybil said without question, as though she already knew. “Why is that?”

“Well,” Sheila said, hesitating. “I have aspirations. To work for the state. The Department of Engineering.”

“Do you?” Matron Sybil asked, fine eyebrows rising.

Sheila nodded. “My dad gave me machines to take apart, and I could always put them back together better than him.”

Some sort of emotion grew inside Matron Sybil’s blue eyes. Sadness, perhaps. “Well, I hope you get all that you want from life, Sheila.”

“But she’ll never become an engineer.” Across the room, Betty had elbowed forward, frizzy orange head emerging from the wall of girls like a marigold in bloom. She held her injured arm behind her back. “Women can’t work for the state. Everyone knows that.”

Sheila’s face grew sour. “I’ve heard there are special positions for women. For—for the best ones.”

I watched Sheila lift her chin, weathering the dubious glances around the room. “I’ve heard that too,” I lied.

Betty screwed up her pale face. “It sounds like a fairy tale.”

“Whether it’s a tale or truth isn’t for us to say,” Matron Sybil offered. “Bickering isn’t a ladylike trait, Betty.” Betty frowned, letting her gaze fall to the ground. “And Sheila, I hope you’ll give Comportment a chance. Everything we do here is for a reason.”

Matron Sybil moved away, her momentum already shifted toward another girl, when Sheila spoke. “But, Matron Sybil, if I already know I’m not going to be a painter, or—or seamstress, or whatever Comportment is for, why do I need to learn these things?” She asked it frankly, but the room stiffened. We weren’t afraid of Matron Sybil, exactly. Only, it seemed a bad idea to cross her, as if, in doing so, the careful serenity of the Meadows might shatter.

Betty's hand went into the air. "Matron, should she really be asking things like that?"

"There's nothing wrong with asking questions," Matron Sybil said. "That goes for all of you. Better to speak them out loud than to hold them inside where we can't see."

"Perhaps you should answer her question, then, matron," Matron Maureen said, a flash of mischief in her eyes.

Matron Sybil scanned the room and sighed. "I can see you're done with Comportment for today. Go on, take a seat."

Each girl pulled up a chair and Matron Sybil gathered herself in the middle, her posture perfectly erect. Something about her made me lean in to listen.

"Before the Turn, people went against nature's laws," she said. "Sometimes, I try to imagine what those people were thinking, before things went wrong. Before nature fought back. They must have believed that they could act however they liked, without consequence. But, of course, nature saw."

I cast a glance at Sheila. What did this have to do with our classes?

"I want you to imagine all the way back to the first moment things began to go wrong," Matron Sybil said. "What do you see?"

From around the room, voices called. We knew, from the dispatches. The reasons for the collapse of humanity. Why the Quorum had to take over.

"Divorce," one girl said.

"Children raised without fathers, or mothers," another added.

"Debauchery and freedom run amok." Betty's high voice rang out. "Wickedness and—and *whoredom*."

I heard Sheila giggle beside me, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stifle a laugh.

And then, from behind us, Matron Maureen's clear voice: "Women

with women, and men with men,” she said. “In the ways only a husband and wife ought to be together.”

A chord of shock struck inside me, my body ringing. For a moment, my vision went blank. My ears pulsed with the ocean sound of my own blood.

Women with women, the reason for the Turn? My mind flitted, testing the information. I’d never seen two women together, so it must be uncommon—uncommon enough to be wrong?

Suddenly, I felt like a child, small and stupid. Hadn’t I always sensed, on some level deeper than knowledge, that I should keep it hidden? That, when I kissed June, we should have ducked inside the shelter of an alley instead of staying out in the bright sunlight?

I dared a glance at Matron Maureen. Her mouth was a straight line, but her eyes sparkled as they always did, with some secret meaning.

My mind again picked up that precious coin, the memory of June, kissing her. Thumbed it like I had, but this time, I winced as though it were hot.

“Nature created men and women,” Matron Sybil continued, “and it expects us to perform as such. And to some, it may yet feel like a performance. This dress, a costume if you’ve been used to pants. To comport ourselves with elegance, like putting on a character.” She rested her bright eyes briefly on Sheila. “But, after a time, it stops being pretend. It becomes who you are. This is the first stage of your time in the Meadows.”

I set my eyes to my hands, the creases of my knuckles still showing dried paint. I concentrated on this image until it filled my brain.

“Here, you are learning to become fine young women. So that you can have fine families, and raise fine children. Vital to this is learning the role nature intended for you. Perfecting feminine arts.” Matron Sybil looked at Sheila again. “Painting, and needlework, and comportment.”

My gut wrestled. I glanced at Sheila. A deep crease had formed

between her brows. “But, who decided those are only for women?” she asked.

“Nature did,” Matron Sybil said gently. “Learning these subjects isn’t frivolous. Just the contrary. It’s guarding our entire country from nature’s wrath.”

At that, Sheila said nothing.

“Praise family,” Matron Sybil said, eyes still on Sheila.

“Praise family,” Sheila muttered, her words drowned out by the voices of the others.

CHAPTER 7

“Maybe she’s barren.” Betty’s voice carried down the table.

I looked up from the array of dishes laid out before us, salmon mousse on cucumber, scones with apricot jam, pink curls of shrimp on packed ice that I could tell had been engineered because they tasted nothing like the sea. The other girls seemed accustomed to invented food, but if my thoughts rested on the idea too long, my stomach grew tight. The flavor, bold for a moment, bled out like ink.

When the matrons told us it was already the dawning of autumn, I could hardly believe them. The air hadn’t chilled, mild as ever. And shouldn’t the sun have started spending less time in the sky? We gathered for the harvest feast at a long, white-covered table set on the lawn a few paces from the meadow fields. Here we were meant to “practice cordial conversation,” as Matron Sybil had instructed. Instead, the conversation had turned to Matron Maureen.

“Yes, I bet she’s barren, and she’s here doing the next best thing to having children of her own,” Betty continued. “Why else would someone so young choose to be a matron?”

“Bold of you, Betty, gossiping about the matrons,” Sheila said.

“Hardly gossip,” Betty said. “We have a right to wonder who’s educating us.” Betty glanced toward the main building, eyes focused on some-

thing, and smiled. I turned behind me to look, but there was no one there. “Why?” she asked. “Going to snitch to the matrons?”

Sheila shrugged. “Don’t you think they can hear everything we say?”

“There are no ears in the Meadows,” Betty declared. “We’ve searched.”

It was true. Eyes were mounted in various places, shining black bulbs the size of my fist set into the ceiling of the common room and the cafeteria, and over the curved overhang above the front entrance, but no ears that anyone had found.

We’d been here two months, and already Betty stood out vividly in the pale serenity of the Meadows, with her plume of orange hair and voice that never shut off. Absently, she fidgeted with a tiny pendant hanging from a string bracelet: a wafer of plasticore shaped like a cloud. I’d seen those on a few wrists in the Cove. Religion had been killed years ago, around the Turn, when the faces of churches were stripped bare, and people lined up to silently pass metal tokens shaped like crosses and stars beneath vestibule windows in local offices of the Department of Unity. There were some who prayed to the algorithm, though they couldn’t call it prayer. They spoke aloud their wishes and dreams, hoping the algorithm was capable of hearing. Some said miracles occurred (though, of course, the word *miracle* was itself forbidden)—like electric lights switching on the moment an intruder entered a home; emergency services alerted to a drowning child, though no people were around to report it. Some replaced the old religious tokens with new ones—computer chips or pendants shaped like clouds.

“Alice, sit up,” Betty snapped, eyes piercing behind her white-framed eyeglasses. “You’re slouching. My goodness, what are you training to be, a potato farmer?”

Beside Betty, Alice straightened quickly, pulling on a lock of smooth black hair. She had very faint eyebrows that almost disappeared against her russet brown skin.

“Betty, I didn’t realize you’d been made a matron,” Sheila called across the table. “Congratulations.”

Betty carefully repositioned her glasses, her features settling into something pious. “I only believe in helping those I can.”

Something inside me hollowed watching Alice, who, though her spine was now rod-straight, seemed to crumple. “My mother always told me you should help yourself first, before looking around for someone else to change,” I said.

Sheila nodded seriously. “Good point, Eleanor. By the way, Betty, your collar’s inside out.”

Betty’s hands fluttered to fix her collar, pink erupting on her cheeks.

Sheila wore a satisfied expression. “I knew girls like her back home,” she whispered, turning so her voice funneled into my ear. “The ladylike police. Always running off to tattle if you burped or swore.”

“Did a lot of swearing and burping, did you?”

“Oh, no,” Sheila said. “I did far worse than that.”

I laughed and sipped my tea, hot and floral, from a blue-painted ceramic cup, nervous touching something so fragile. And even more so beneath the flinty gaze of several matrons from across the lawn.

The matrons were, for the most part, older women. It was believed that they were widowed and had already raised their children, so could afford to take years away from normal life. But Betty was right—Matron Maureen was too young for that. Why she was here, when she could’ve been leading a real life, had become a topic of conversation before lights out, when we gathered in the common room in our high-necked nightgowns. Matron Maureen acted in ways the other matrons never would, like kicking a ball around during free time with a few other girls, rather ridiculous in her dress, like a magnificent white bird running across the grass. To the girls, she seemed like someone you could talk to, and her class, Comportment, was everyone’s favorite.

“Drat.” Across the table, Johanna, a mousey, pale girl who’d hardly spoken a word so far, clattered her teacup clumsily. Since the first day, her hand had been heavily wrapped in white bandages. Johanna was one of only a few raised in a setting more remote than the Cove. Shakily now, she carried the cup to her mouth and breathed a sigh when she returned it to her saucer without incident.

“Do you ever get the sense that the matrons are watching us?” Sheila leaned over to ask.

My eyes found Matron Sybil, conversing with stern-faced Matron Gloria and Matron Calliope, who always seemed to be half smiling, her face a pleasant, practiced mask. “They’re teachers,” I reasoned. “That’s their job, isn’t it?”

“They’re not like any teachers I’ve ever had,” Sheila said. “What do you think they’re looking for?”

My mouth opened, but no sound emerged. My mind had tripped, remembering what Matron Maureen had said during Comportment. Women with women and men with men, the reason for the Turn. What would happen if they found out about me? Would they decide they’d made a mistake bringing me here?

Matron Sybil swept her blue-eyed gaze at us, and I recalled a device June’s father had saved up for, a palm-sized screen that, if held over the side of his boat, could detect the cool bodies of fish in lemon-bright clusters beneath the ocean’s surface. I had the sense that Matron Sybil’s pale eyes had the same power. To slice beneath the surface, to search out what I’d rather keep hidden.

“Surprising they don’t have this place covered with ears,” Sheila said.

“Why would they?”

She shrugged. “The algorithm likes to know everything,” she said. “Ears are standard.”

I turned to her. “You had ears in your house?”

“You didn’t?”

I shook my head. In a place as remote and inconsequential as the Cove, where peacekeepers made rounds only every few months, all we had were a handful of eyes above the market and docks, and the ever-presence of satellites, shining above like pale stars.

What must it be like, I wondered, to never be completely alone. “Really, every house?” I asked.

Sheila nodded. “In the cities and suburbs. Except for people with privileges. Quorum members and the like.”

“Well, that explains it,” I said. “We’re the best and brightest. They trust us.”

“Maybe.” Sheila glanced toward Matron Sybil again. “It’s like they’re waiting for us to do something. I wish they’d just come out and say it.”

If I had the same sense, I brushed it aside, my chest still swollen with wonder at this place—the stiffness of my new dress, the pristine white of the round buildings studding the lawn like pearly teeth. The smell of the flowers, nectar-like and faint. And yes, even the matrons, with their watchful gazes, their eyes grasping at my face, my skirt, my hands. Something in me delighted in being seen. My mother’s eyes only ever skimmed off me.

I cleared my throat. “I’m sure the matrons do everything for a reason.”

“You think the best of everyone, don’t you?” Sheila asked. “Even Betty. You probably still think you can make her your friend.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said, watching Betty across the table, loudly demonstrating the proper way of grasping a fork.

“That’s sad, if Matron Maureen’s barren.” Penelope spoke, and a row of heads turned to look at her. She’d come from a wealthy family in the city, and moved with an elegance that didn’t need to be manufactured. Margot sat next to her, the two hardly ever apart. “I mean—she could at least get married.”

Betty scoffed. “Nobody wants to marry a woman who can’t have children. That’s the whole point.”

“That’s awful,” I said, without thinking. “A woman is for more than that.”

A strange silence followed, broken only by a scattering of tinks as several girls set down their teacups.

“What do you mean?” Betty asked, face crumpled with confusion.

“That’s just—something my mother would say.” A deep heat crept into my cheeks. My mother muttered such things when I’d come home with another story about a girl who’d left school early to get married. *They think a woman is for one thing only. We are so much more than they know.*

“There are rules for a reason,” Betty declared, and again her eyes twitched toward the main building, a faint smile on her lips. I glanced behind me, but there was nobody there. What did she keep looking at? “If women didn’t get married and have children, we’d die out.” Betty had come from a traditional family, with ten siblings and a mother who’d barely survived her last pregnancy.

Beside me, Sheila bristled. “Maybe Matron Maureen doesn’t *want* to be married.”

“By the time you’re Matron Maureen’s age, you have to be married,” Betty said. “Or else become a dried-up old shoe.”

“Well, I’m not,” Sheila said lightly. “It’s not like they can make me.”

Betty laughed derisively. “Are you dim? Of course they can make you.”

Just then, a clattering of dishes. Johanna’s bandaged hand had wobbled her teacup and now watercolor splotches of red erupted over her arms. Sheila and I stood, helping to mop up the tea spilled spectacularly down the front of her white dress.

“I’m no good at this fancy stuff,” Johanna choked out, her accent lifting each word.

"I spilled egg down my dress this morning," I told her. "Yellow yolk right down the front. We'll get the hang of it." I glanced at the heavy bandage, itching with curiosity at how she'd hurt herself. "And it'll be easier when your hand's healed up."

"I wonder if they made a mistake with you, Johanna," Betty called. "Some of us aren't the best and brightest, clearly."

A rivulet of laughter ran down the table. I felt my body light up, struck by Betty's words. They could have made a mistake with me too.

Sheila straightened. "Oh would you shut up, Betty?" she said. "That's how you treat someone who needs help?"

"She certainly *does* need help," Betty said. "Probably more than this place can provide."

I gaped at Betty, sitting back in her chair, her mouth in a satisfied twist. Sheila was right. I had plenty of practice searching for good in people, panning for it as though for gold. But this I couldn't make sense of. "Betty, how can you be so cruel?"

Betty's face slackened, and the pain she'd so successfully put away that day in Comportment flashed again on her face.

"All going well, girls?" Matron Sybil strode across the lawn, followed by Matron Calliope, who helped Johanna to her feet, speaking something low and comforting.

The table grew silent.

"Yes, Matron Sybil," Betty said. "Only, I wonder if some of us could benefit from additional lessons. I've already attended finishing school, but others might use some pointers." She looked beyond me again, with that faint, simpering smile, and then I saw it: She'd been glancing at the black bauble shining over the front entrance—an eye. Smiling at it, as though at a friend.

"Matron Sybil," Sheila pronounced, a fire lighting in her eyes. "Betty might need reminding that everyone is here for the same reason. And

nobody, not even someone who attended *finishing school*, is better than anyone else.”

Matron Sybil’s face was quiet, though I sensed her mind turning. “A vital lesson each of you must learn,” she spoke at last. “No matter the vehemence of your feeling, it’s far from ladylike to tell someone they’re wrong.” Her gentle scrutiny passed between Sheila and Betty.

Sheila frowned. “But what if they *are* wrong?”

Matron Sybil paused, her pale face in profile against the blue sky. “Then simply be satisfied that you know the truth.”

CHAPTER 8

The shower room was white tile, a single stall and a mirror perpetually shrouded in mist. We were to never undress in front of others. “Modesty, girls,” Matron Sybil intoned, “is the highest virtue of all.” So we went one at a time, stuffed our damp limbs back into stiff cotton, and emerged with dripping hair finger-painting wetly down the backs of our dresses.

The others were on the lawn, taking in the fresh air after a day of classes—the perfect time to find the shower room unoccupied. When I’d taken a shower for the first time—hot stream of water punching my back—I’d doubled over, breathless, as though someone had ripped a sweater roughly over my head. But months had elapsed, and I’d grown to enjoy this time, the dormitory empty, when I could sit inside the steam and imagine myself washed clean.

I pushed open the shower room door.

Anything other than white stood out vividly in the Meadows, so my eyes found it immediately. Blood. Drops of it, ribboning over white tile.

I traced the line of red. Where it had fallen across her pale leg. Where it began, inside a jagged wound along her forearm.

Betty stood in blousy underpants and bra, struggling to bandage her arm. The wound looked old, fringed by puckered pink scar tissue, healed and reopened many times.

My breath pulled in sharply. At the noise, Betty looked up, eyes flar-

ing. Her whole face seemed to tremble, a gush of rage pouring from her mouth: “Get out!”

My mouth fell open. “Betty, I—”

“Leave!”

She screamed it, but I found myself unable to move. This was something I couldn’t make meaning of, this wound, this slash of blood across the pristine floor. But the desperation in her eyes felt like that fleck of gold I’d been panning for. “Let me help you,” I whispered. “Please. Let me help.”

Betty was silent, wavering a little back and forth, as though seasick. Her glasses rested on the edge of the sink. Without them, she looked wide-faced, pale.

“Just . . . keep the door shut,” she said. Her eyes gestured toward the common room, its ceiling, where I knew an eye was mounted. She didn’t want to be seen.

I lifted the bandage from her hand. Slowly, she offered me her arm. As I wound the bandage, Betty didn’t make a sound. She had the look of a doe I’d seen once, its hoof stuck between old metal fence posts, where a house must have been once but was now a grassed-over field. Her expression, a mingling of gratitude and fear. My sense that she was only accepting help because, without it, she would die.

“How did it happen?” I asked, tying off the bandage.

Betty’s eyes screwed up in confusion. “Are you really that stupid?”

I shrugged. I guess I must have been. To not put the pieces together.

When I finished, Betty took several steps backward. A doe springing free.

“Don’t tell anyone about this,” she said. “Ever.”

“I won’t,” I said, not knowing what I’d even tell. I didn’t understand. Only that she needed help, and I was able to offer it.

Betty clamped her lips together. “We’re not friends.”

“I know,” I said. We were now something very different from that. I wasn’t sure what exactly.

I found Sheila a few paces inside the meadow fields, staring up into the tangled limbs of the enormous yew tree. This was the only tree in the Meadows, and it must’ve been ancient, its gnarled branches opening like a loose hand.

“I thought you were taking a shower,” Sheila said.

I reached to touch my hair, still dry. “I—decided not to.”

Sheila hoisted herself to sit on a low branch, her shoes swinging. “I just heard the wildest thing,” she said. “Penelope wants to be a messenger on the dispatches when she’s older. All made up and talking for the state.”

The messengers were beautiful and mild, with reassuring voices. It made sense for Penelope. “I can picture it.”

“At least she wants something,” Sheila said, sighing. “The way the matrons talk, it’s like they expect us to get married and have kids and that’s it.”

“Isn’t that what most women have to do?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I want more.”

“The Department of Engineering,” I said.

She nodded. “My dad told me that’s where the state’s real power is. They’re just people. I keep thinking, if someone started it, someone can end it.”

“But how? What would you do?” I asked.

She said in a hushed voice, “There’s an aptitude test for the Department of Engineering, and anyone who scores in the top percentile automatically gets a placement. My dad’s going to sneak me in with his students.”

“Are women allowed?”

She shrugged the question away. “When the algorithm sees my score,

it'll have to place me where I can be most useful. That's how I change things. From the inside."

My eyes traced the serious line of Sheila's mouth, the daring in her deep brown eyes. I wondered why I had never dreamed something so big for myself. I remembered the Longing Song. My only wishes: a coin to buy a handful of cherries on market day, my mouth warm with June's breath, to enter a facility, to leave the Cove, but to do what?

"I think you will change the world, Sheila," I told her. "I think if anybody will, it's you."

She smiled. "I applied for the aptitude scheme at my old school. Each year, they passed me over. No one who looked like me was ever accepted. One teacher even told me maybe I'd have better luck if I changed my hair and tried to look more like the women on the dispatches."

"What?" I exclaimed.

Sheila nodded. "In the cities, it's fine to be Black, but only if everything else about us is white."

I felt a sharp prickling at my neck. "That's so unfair."

She nodded again, stepping onto a higher branch and peering toward the lawn, where the girls sat in clusters on the grass. Betty was seated among them now, laughing, as though the moment in the shower room had never happened.

"Couldn't even point it out," Sheila went on, "without hearing 'We don't see differences, and neither should you.' When I got my letter here, I thought, *Finally, another way.*"

On the dispatches, the messengers sometimes spoke of the barbaric days of the past, when a person could be killed for the color of their skin. *Now, what once caused division—all color, creed, religion—are wiped away. In the eyes of the state, we are all one race.* I could tell that the words were meant to pass over us easily, like a breeze, but something in them always created an uncomfortable itch in my mind. Because, I thought now, if

everyone was expected to be the same, anyone different had the burden of conforming, of cutting away the parts of themselves that didn't fit.

"I just don't want to be anything but what I am," Sheila said.

"You won't have to be," I told her, hoping it was true, even as my eyes looked back to the lawn, tracing the image of each girl dressed identically, cloud-white. "Did your parents tell you anything about why they didn't want you to come here?"

She shook her head. "They said people sometimes come back from these facilities changed. And I told them, isn't that the point? It's a good change," she said. "Before I left, they said, 'There's nothing wrong with you. You are good as you are.' Over and over, they told me."

I swallowed an unexpected bloom of sorrow. I couldn't imagine my mother saying those words to me. "Why didn't they make you stay home?" I asked.

"My dad tried, but there's a penalty if you don't come."

Sheila hoisted herself onto a higher branch, holding the trailing end of her dress in her hand and revealing strong legs. "Bet you can't climb as high as me."

She negotiated the branches, up and up and up, kicking down her hard black shoes with a shout of "Heads!" Even with her draping skirts, she'd climbed so high, I could barely make out the slip of her dark skin against the sky, her dress a white flag.

Back in the Cove, I'd occasionally play with the village boys, run races, wrestle each other to the ground. When June joined in, I was uncertain, at first, of her wonderful face, her mermaid hair, until she placed a knee in the soft tissue of an organ and I wrestled her just as hard. Girlish grappling. Too young to mean anything except that we both had the instinct that *strong* meant *good*.

Sheila did too—the way she carried herself, her body spring-loaded. But the Meadows was a different place. In our classes, we were learning

to hold ourselves as though made of glass. I told myself, there must be a good reason.

School in the Cove had been basic, what Mrs. Arkwright deemed important—her patchwork knowledge of history and science. And while we worked, she usually prattled on about Life Before: Sunday nights watching films around the glow of a television, and grocery stores stuffed with vegetables shiny with wax, and trips to cities that rest now under the sea. It felt like being read to from an old storybook—dusty and threadbare and full of words we don't use anymore. I wouldn't learn until I got to the city that some people in our country still lived like this.

In our three months at the Meadows, the matrons had only spoken about Life Before to orient us to a new future. "The way we were then," Matron Sybil told us, "people running wild. We saw what came of that. The Turn. The earth ravaged. Millions dead. Wildfires charring whole swaths of the country, oceans stealing back the land. You see what can happen again, if we don't take measures."

I had watched her, rapt as ever, to hear how the world had looked not long ago. Before the Quorum came and righted the ship. What would have happened if they hadn't?

"Every one of you contains something special," Matron Sybil had said. "Something our country needs. If you use what you already have, what will happen?"

"We will be rewarded," we chorused.

She nodded. "You will marry men in the highest offices. You will live in the most beautiful homes." She took a breath. "Praise family."

"Praise family," we had chanted back.

"That's a new record," Sheila said now, hopping from a low branch of the yew tree and dusting off her palms.

“Not for much longer.” I threw off my shoes off and hauled myself into the gnarled branches, that familiar rush of blood in my veins, to be wild, free. When I finally stopped and looked down through the pick-up sticks of limbs, Sheila was tiny below.

“That’s too high, Eleanor!” she called. “It’s not safe.”

“You’re only saying that so I don’t win,” I called, placing my foot on the next branch, a thin one, I realized, just as it cracked beneath my stockinged foot, and the world fell out from under me.

I found myself on the ground, my right foot pinned beneath me. Pain gushed, hot and liquid, from my foot through every sinew and nerve. I cupped the air around my already inflating ankle and stifled a scream.

Matron Maureen was the first there, her knee grinding into the dirt, staining her impeccable white dress. “Oh,” she said, tutting over me. The ginger curves of her eyebrows thrust together. “This doesn’t look good, does it?”

“Will she be okay?” Sheila called. I looked for her, but the other girls had crowded around me, a ring of bent heads. A small bright feeling flickered in my chest, even as I bit the inside of my cheek to avoid groaning.

“Of course she is,” Matron Maureen said lightly. “Girls, why don’t you run along to dinner? I’ll help Eleanor to the infirmary.”

The girls wandered off, all except Sheila, who wore an expression that said she wouldn’t be going anywhere, not even if ordered.

An arm slung around Matron Maureen’s shoulders and Sheila’s waist, they steered me across the grass. My eyes traced the sky, and there it was again, in precisely the same spot it had been that first day, the cloud shaped like a crown. I craned to look, but they steered me inside, to the infirmary.

On a cold metal table, Matron Maureen pressed her thumbs lightly into my ankle, already bulbous and shining crimson.

“A sprain, I think.” Tenderly, she wound a bandage around the weird

orb of my foot, and I had to bite back a new rush of tears. From the hurt, or the feeling of being tended to in this motherly, strangely painful way, I wasn't sure.

"I—I can do that, Matron Maureen," I said.

Matron Maureen shook her head. "Nonsense. You need help, Eleanor."

I nodded, breathing labored. Sweat had gathered on my forehead. "I suppose."

Matron Maureen cocked her head, considering. "Didn't your mother take care of you? Didn't she tend to your wounds?"

I searched Matron Maureen's eyes. Surely she knew—surely all the matrons knew—about my mother. My mother who, when I flayed the skin off my knee falling in a tide pool, would merely point to the trunk that held our meager medical supplies. From a young age, she taught me to disinfect my own cuts with the evil-smelling liquid from a copper-colored bottle, to not bother her with less than a shattered bone.

Matron Maureen met my silence with a soft smile. "Well, you're not alone now. Not here."