

University of Strathclyde

Creative Writing Studies

PhD Thesis

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**THE LIVING METEORA: The outdoors as an inclusive space for female narrators;
from Nan Shepherd's Cairngorms to the fantastical world of *Meteora*.**

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-Adeline's Journal: Meteora Origin Story

-Adeline's Journal: Map of the World's Edge

-Adeline's Journal: The Unreachable Peak

-From Chapter Fourteen: Beyond, the vignette subtitled 'The Sister Peaks'

-Adeline's Journal: Tooth Range

-Adeline's Journal: Blue Mountains

-From Chapter Twenty-Two: Meteora, pp. 175, Adeline's monologue in dialogue on 'The Mountain of Loneliness'

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-From Chapter Twenty-Three: Taku River, pp. 183-184, subsection in italics

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ABSTRACT

This PhD thesis is comprised of two parts. The first is a fiction novel, titled *Meteora*, about two sisters finding self-acceptance through their relationship. The second is an accompanying critical reflection on Nan Shepherd's structuring of the Cairngorms in *The Living Mountain* as an inclusive space beyond gender. The creative novel takes place on the backdrop of Southeast Alaska. As children, Adeline and Jane Roan discovered another world of endless mountains, the door to which only opens during the Perseid meteor shower. They named it Meteora. When Jane and her boyfriend, Sean, are on a climbing trip, Sean falls to his death and Jane wakes up to find herself alone in Meteora. Rather than face what has just happened, she rejects the regular world and decides to remain. Adeline travels deep into the wilderness to find the door to Meteora and save her sister, unaware of how this will define their relationship. The critical portion of the thesis examines Shepherd's structuring of the Cairngorms as an inclusive space in *The Living Mountain* through her use of gender-minimization in both pronouns and description, as well as how this thematically relates back to Jane and Adeline's perceptions of Meteora. The concluding chapter concerns itself with the author's discovery of *The Living Mountain*, how Shepherd's work came to influence *Meteora*, and the author's own experience with the natural world as an inclusive place for a solo female walker.

CREATIVE PORTION:
“METEORA”

Chapter One: Fritz Cove

The search for Jane Roan was called off a month after she disappeared. Search and Rescue in the Gates of the Arctic National Park notified her sister, Adeline, back in Juneau. Jane and her boyfriend had vanished while climbing in the Arrigetch, and no sign of them since mid-July. Not even a missing pack. The last text Jane had sent, complete with her GPS coordinates, was still on Adeline's phone: *Starting climb. Last night, we saw a meteor. Think it may have hit nearby.*

It was the last day of the Perseid meteor shower. Adeline had been standing when she got the call, but now the phone lay dark in her hand. She needed to sit down. The most comfortable seat in her apartment was the window seat, so that was where she went. It was surrounded by her charcoal drawings of mountains and various landscapes from imagined worlds. If asked, Adeline could talk about any one of the worlds for hours. No one ever asked. No one ever visited but Jane.

Her usual view of Fritz Cove by the window seat was hidden in darkness—it was ten at night—so all Adeline could make out was the ghost of her own reflection and the room behind her. One of the falling stars in a nearby charcoal sketch reflected on her cheek like a new bruise. Pale star, pale woman with pale hair and deep-set eyes. She looked more ill than upset. Unfair that she couldn't look how she felt, even when her world was crumbling. Once, when Adeline was three, she asked her mother to hold her up to the mirror so she could see herself cry. Just a little discoloration around her eyes, some snot and dribbling tears—that was it—when inside, whole worlds of oceans were roiling.

People were supposed to be with other people when they got this kind of news. Search and Rescue had asked Adeline if she had someone to be with. Perhaps it would be good to see Kate tomorrow. She was Adeline's only real friend, an old co-worker from Thunder

Mountain High School where Kate still worked as an administrative assistant. Kate was a similar level of introvert to Adeline; a former professional fisherman who spent all of her time reading occult ‘ghost hunter’ style blogs and “getting high alone in my apartment with Mac.” Mac was her dog, an ancient, grumpy little bichon with silky ears. Adeline’s once-a-week lunch with Kate was her only social interaction. Jane had once accused Adeline of being in love with her, to which Adeline replied it was ‘complicated.’ After that, Jane forever referred to her as the CompliKate. It would be good to see Kate tomorrow.

Calling off the search in Alaska always meant the person was dead, Jane said. Adeline was a fool for thinking she couldn’t be. Jane would never stand in this living room again, surrounded by Adeline’s drawings, babbling on about whatever climbing expeditions she hoped to go on. She worked for the Forest Service and could only afford time and money about once every four years but had finally managed between changing positions to save and plan two trips—one for two weeks in Scotland with Adeline, and another month long one in the Arrigetch with her boyfriend, Sean. Jane’s last rant had been in May, standing right there on the Costco-brand Persian ‘influenced’ carpet, while Adeline patiently waited for them to watch Shin Godzilla.

Adeline lay down sideways in the window seat and tucked her knees under her chin, curling into a tight ball. She imagined herself trapped in a burlap bag and thrown underwater—a comically oversized, useless, sack of potatoes. She tried to distribute the terrible feeling around her body, trapping it in the small corners of her elbows and between her toes. A meditation video she once saw on the internet said it was best to visualize negative emotions physically, in order to control them.

Jane was gone, but she couldn’t be. The idea was too hot to touch.

“It’s like a god damn conspiracy movie in here,” Jane used to say when they were teenagers, gesturing to the sketches of Adeline’s imaginary worlds, maps, and people littering

their shared room, floor to ceiling. “Mom and Dad should let you set up the garage to complete the effect when the police finally bust in and arrest you for some guy’s murder.” Jane was supposed to still be giving Adeline a hard time while Adeline was a little old lady in a flowered bathrobe and she in a full set of workman’s coveralls—like elderly fishermen in bars.

The worst part was Adeline thought she knew when Jane had died. The day after the text about the meteor, she was taking a shower when she heard her sister come into the room. Or not exactly heard so much as felt with such certainty it seemed like a sound. She was so sure Jane was there; she called out to her. When Adeline pulled back the shower curtain, it was just an empty bathroom. She had been in the middle of washing her hair, hands and neck covered in lather, but she was so sure she even left the shower to look for Jane. Adeline was standing in her living room when she remembered: Jane couldn’t be here. Jane was in the middle of the Arrigetch, eight-hundred miles away, about halfway through a forty-hour climb.

Did Adeline believe in ghosts? She wasn’t sure. The Perseids were going on. For two summers when she and Jane were little, they had a childhood world called Meteora that they would go to during the Perseid meteor shower. A world made entirely of mountains. They reached it by crossing the woods and a strange crater in the woods behind their house—or so Adeline remembered, but Jane claimed that was only a game. What if there was another door to Meteora that Jane had stumbled through? Adeline still had diary entries from when she was eleven describing it. A small meteor had hit near the crater in the woods when Adeline was eleven and Jane thirteen. After that, they couldn’t get to Meteora anymore. Jane would admit the meteor had happened, but nothing else.

Adeline pressed her forehead against the windowpane. Jane’s last text had mentioned a meteor. What were the chances of the same person seeing two meteors actually strike, even

years apart and in different locations? If a meteor had closed their door to Meteora back in Iowa, couldn't it open up another? The dark, submerged feeling returned. If Jane was in Meteora, she was about to be trapped. Tonight was the last night of the Perseids and she was still missing.

Adeline watched her own reflection for a while, projected over the blackness of Fritz Cove. There were so few lights out in the dark.

Come morning, the idea of Jane alive seemed even more ridiculous.

It was another gray day in Southeast Alaska. Adeline arrived at the café an hour early.

Kate arrived—on time for once—and immediately went to hug her. She wore a new fisherman's knit sweater with a shawl collar and one leather button. As they reached for each other, the button shifted to Kate's throat. Adeline fought the urge to hook a finger in the neckline and pull the button back to a more comfortable place, like smoothing away a stray hair. When they hugged, it pressed into the hollow of Adeline's collar bone.

"I heard," Kate said. "What do you need?"

"Waffles."

They sat and Kate rested her hand on top of Adeline's. She had not done that before.

"We can have a normal lunch," said Kate. "We don't have to talk about Jane if you're not ready."

Adeline thought about turning her palm up so that their fingers intertwined. Then decided against it since Kate had chosen to place her hand that way, so that must be how she wanted to hold hands.

"Is there anyone still looking for Jane?" asked Kate.

"There are other climbers in the area," Adeline said. "The season isn't over until mid-September, but if they found anything now it would be by chance. No one else is looking."

She could tell by the way Kate squeezed her hand that by ‘anything’ she thought she meant ‘body.’

“So, then that’s it? There’s nothing anyone can do?”

Adeline didn’t want to say it out loud. She shook her head.

“Oh God. I can’t even imagine what you must be feeling. How are you?”

Adeline had been up all night going through old diary entries of Meteora. It was far more likely for Jane to survive in Meteora than the Arctic. She had decided to believe Jane was in Meteora. The true leap of faith would come later, but right now it was survival. There had been a comet visible in the sky when the meteor hit and closed their doorway when they were little, but Adeline didn’t think that was enough to disprove her theory. There didn’t need to be comets for there to be striking meteors. Jane was the best outdoorsperson that Adeline knew and Meteora had always taken care of them.

“I don’t think Jane’s in the Arrigetch,” said Adeline. She spoke under her breath, so if Kate wasn’t listening, she wouldn’t hear. If Kate ignored it, it was a sign she was not meant to tell her. “I’m doing fine,” Adeline added, remembering Kate had asked a question.

“Wait, what do you mean Jane wasn’t in the Arrigetch? Did she go climbing somewhere else and not tell anyone?”

“No, Jane was there. But she’s not anymore, not really.”

“Oh.” Kate’s expression grew somber. “You mean because she’s in Heaven.”

Adeline would have laughed out loud if it wasn’t embarrassing. “No,” she said. “At least I don’t think so. I’m not religious.”

“Right,” Kate paused. “Sorry, what do you mean then?”

It was a trap now. One Adeline had lain for herself; if she didn’t talk about Jane now, Kate was going to think it was her fault. But if she did, she didn’t dare lie because Adeline

was both terrible at lying, and what if—in the middle of pretending—she went back to believing Jane was dead? The dark, submerged feeling was still inside her, waiting.

“Promise you won’t be mad?”

“Why would I be mad?”

“Because maybe I’m not feeling what you think I should be feeling.”

“There’s no wrong way to grieve, Adeline. I would never judge you.”

Kate had always been superstitious. She thought the Zodiac and Tarot were bullshit but would not go out of her house on a full moon except to work. At the school, she insisted all the cups in their staff room needed to be hanging on their pegs, so the mouths were facing outwards. ‘The way they have to be at sea’ she said. That was different though—All sorts of people believed in ghosts, and whole droves of fishermen and grandmothers had maritime or full moon superstitions. Only Adeline and Jane knew about Meteora. What if Kate didn’t believe her? It all might be over. Their friendship. The CompliKatedness. Not to mention her childhood secret with Jane.

Adeline took a breath and explained Meteora. A world of only mountains. No people. Open only during the Perseids. Kate listened without interruption. When she finished, Kate had her free hand propping up her chin. Her eye contact was minimal, glazed and slightly misfocused, shifting towards the wall.

“You think I’m delusional,” Adeline said.

Adeline's Journal: Meteora Origin Story

In this world there are just mountains. No characters, and sometimes not even animals: all sentient life gone. The plants remain, caught up in the process of creation, bodies layered in a flesh-ripe basket of hills. Think of mountains lying down in bed together until they merge into one, sinking into sheets of earth. Think of their touch-eroded feet, smooth, wrapped up in each other's hair.

To create this, we first unmake the world of humans. Keep the green jagged lines of mountains, their cliffs hazed in salt and cinnamon bands of rock. Keep the unkempt vines, every natural shape that when faced with evening light will hemorrhage blue. A world of layers upon layers of mountains, their snowy crowns jeweled in ice-hued prisms. Give raw rocks dominion over the sun-bellied lizards that crawl across them, over their fiery gemstone eyes, over spidery clutches of eggs lain in warm sand. Give trees dominion over birds. Their claw-shaped arms reaching out, all the ravens, eagles, crows, owls, and seabirds reduced to ornaments vanishing in fog, no more glossy rings to grace gnarled wooden hands.

The world now thrives, feasting on juniper sap and rich, black dirt, unhindered, ivy and clover swarming over the earth like a horde of bees, a lick and twist of manes and reed-like tongues. Flowering trees swell and stretch their backs against the sun, shoots intertwined, and roses slick with thorns.

A world of silent, infinite valleys.

Chapter Two: Taku River

Two pack-rafters came down Taku River. Before, the valley had seemed a yawning maw of blue and green, but now they found themselves in a gilded tunnel of light. A ceiling of mist closed off the river from the rest of the world. The water, clouds, wisps of silt reaching out and sun bleeding through above were all gold. Their own skin. Each other's bright-tinged faces. Brush knitted either side of the shore, but now the spruce and devil's club were all brassy tipped in gold, gold-veined leaves, and thorns. The man and woman were too in awe to verify with each other what they saw as the breath coming from their lungs turned into frosted rays of pyrite. They were blooming with light, becoming it.

To Will, the man, it seemed they had stumbled across something holy. When he saw a flash of something at the end of the tunnel, he knew it had to be something resting on a sandbar, but he imagined it as a fallen star. He could see the exit with its snapshot of a full, gray river and green valley, but in comparison to the golden world it looked one-dimensional. An underdeveloped photo of an old postcard. To the woman, Amanda, the gold felt witchy. Its ripeness spoke of death, a rotting honey. The air in her lungs felt skinned. She remembered a story of ancient Romans executing powerful men by pouring molten gold down their throats. When she looked at the rushing river running through the open jaws of the mountains, she worried about the raft flipping. The air stank of spices, juniper, and rosemary but with the sinister ferocity of sulphur. Sunlight swarmed around her like bees. When the end of the tunnel of fog came, she could not believe it was real. The blue hurt her eyes and she held her breath as they entered.

But then; that was it. Nothing more. The gold was gone. In the end, the whole effect had lasted less than a minute. Mist lifted and the spine of a sandbar came into view, shaped like a fishbone.

They were both mountaineers, members of a volunteer wilderness rescue team, but neither recognized the fragments of a human skull lying on the sandbar. Will mistook them for shattered mussel shells. The four stone-smooth stumps of human vertebrae and a broken pelvis had been wound together into the unlikely shape of an elephant skull caked in flour. These, Amanda mistook for part of a bear carcass. But the half-decomposed hand—broken ulna dangling—neither of them could mistake. Glacial silt from the river had built up around the fingers until the bones became the unmistakable shape of a human hand, tarnished green like an old copper statue. Under any other circumstances they might have easily accepted they were about to find human remains.

“What is that?” Will asked.

Amanda leaned closer; she was nearer to the sandbar. “Is it-” she stumbled. “Is that a hand?”

“What. Like, a human hand?”

“What other kind of hand could it be?”

“Bear?”

They were closer now, golden tunnel all but forgotten. They pulled onto the sandbar and Will got out to check.

“Fuck,” he said. “It’s a hand.”

It was beginning to dawn on him—the inconvenience of this, the morbidity. To his knowledge they had both each only seen death once before and it was together. Called in on a rescue mission too late for a marble-pale tourist who slid off a snow exposure and cracked his head open. The memory came to Will sometimes in split-seconds before he fell asleep—blue-lipped face. Poor guy, he and Amanda had said to each other. And God, to think—his poor family. They were both wilderness EMTs; this was the risk you took going into backcountry. Do it enough and you were bound to roll up on something, maybe even end up that way

yourself. They had to think about it practically: the problem of a physical body in trauma, dead or dying and how to deal with it.

But they had come upon that body knowing the situation, a text from their team leader Reese on the Garmin communicator. This was different—their own expedition by pack-raft cut short as they entered the inlet. It was meant to continue as a scouting mission up Twin Glacier Lake, checking out their route over land up onto the icefield for a longer, bigger trip in three weeks. The night before, Will had made a nest for them in the tent with blueprint maps of the ice fanned out. They planned to kayak back in a group and ascend Devil’s Paw—a nearby four-pronged peak in boundary ice that jabbed above frozen names hinting at mountain religion: Unknown Glacier, Hades Highway, Michael’s Sword.

“Shit,” Amanda said, looking at the sandbar. “I guess we better text Reese and have him call the troopers.”

Will nodded. “Think it was the river or a bear that did it?”

“Would a bear leave bones like this in the river?”

“Could have washed down?”

They got out the Garmin two-way communicator and sent the message and coordinates of the body to Reese, then pushed off.

Amanda was thinking of the dead tourist they had found in the mountains too. Her rescue breaths sucking and rattling in his lungs, stomach rising even though he was already dead. He was done for the moment he hit the rocks, on a route far too advanced for his experience. Those pale blue Converse with flat rubbery soles; not even sports shoes. He slid down a snow exposure next to a waterfall, probably thinking it would be fun, but the speed sent him out of control and cracked his skull on the rocks. There was a better, safer, clearly marked way down past the waterfall off to his left. It seemed so sad, so unfair to let anyone judge him for that now.

The Garmin beeped again twenty minutes before they pulled up onto the beach by the cabin at Taku Glacier. They had kept silent as they passed the mud slick worms through the eddies, on to where the glacier churned the river to silt, redepositing the sediment of old stones into a quicksand fan of lace. Reese's message said the troopers were on their way, just waiting on a forensic anthropologist from the university.

It had always been the plan to stay a night at Taku Glacier cabin, but that was supposed to be two days from now. Both felt like pushing home. Will thought of a friend from his mountaineering group—Jane Roan—who vanished with her boyfriend in the Arrigetch the year before. He attended her token funeral that fall and remembered seeing her sister; a quiet, pale-haired woman. The mountaineering group went out that evening after to commemorate Jane and, in the end, someone had to call Amanda—who was Will's girlfriend—to come and get him. In the car, he sobbed, his head in her lap, so hard his body shook.

"The troopers are coming," he said as they pulled up onto the beach. "Could always say we'd rather push on and catch the tide."

"Might as well stay and talk to them," said Amanda. "We're going to have to eventually."

Will understood; she felt a sense of responsibility. It would take a few hours for anyone to get here. The tide was already high. At high tide you could paddle through grass near the cabin so high and thick that you couldn't see the water beneath. Like sailing through earth.

He lay on his back next to her on the wood platform in front of the cabin. He did not say any more about the remains or golden tunnel and neither did she. He reached for her hand. Amanda took it and climbed on top of him. Fishing boats often came by these beaches. They could have gone inside to the bunks or made use of the outdoor table, but they didn't

even stay on the wooden platform. Instead, he picked her up, lay her on top of a jacket on the mossy ground, brushing away twigs and spruce needles. Their knees and elbows prickled with grass and pressed into the silty soil.

The bones and tunnel of light were gone from Amanda's mind, but she could still see them in Will's. She guessed it was the memory of his friend from the mountaineering group last year—he had taken it badly. He would be picturing her now, the way they had found the hand. Amanda had only met Jane once before, but remembered she had a mainstream kind of athletic beauty to her: broad shoulders and a blonde ponytail that did not match her personality. They met by chance on a night out. When the bartender brought Jane a whiskey coke instead of whiskey ginger, she rolled her eyes but said nothing and kept it anyway.

“Why don't you just complain and get a new one?” Amanda had asked. “I'm sure he'll make you another.”

“No,” said Jane. “It is what it is. I don't like talking to him, and it's his mistake, not mine.”

“I can ask him for you?”

“Why would I want that?”

“You'd have the drink you wanted, but you wouldn't have to ask.”

“It's not about the drink. I don't need you to do anything for me.”

Jane was the only woman in Will's mountaineering group, and Amanda had hoped they might be friends. Sometimes, since the outdoors community was so predominantly male, it was easy to get to the point where you thought you always had to fight to be accepted. So used to fighting that you did it even when it might not be necessary—there was just no way to know until you knew. She had hoped, with Jane, things would be different.

Now Jane was gone. Another set of bones lying in a valley somewhere.

Amanda let Will lie on her chest as a cold wind blew. They had nothing left to do but wait for the troopers. She didn't waste too much energy thinking one day it could be her lying on a sandbar, but always she worried it might be someone she knew. Outdoor communities were close knit in Alaska and every loss sent a ripple through her world. She hoped this time the body might be older, some unlucky miner at the turn of the century, or older bones pre-contact. She hadn't gotten a good enough look to guess their age.

Will's breathing steadied, and they got up to put their clothes on without washing off the dirt. Mud dried under fabric, stretching on their skin in a way that flaked and puckered. She held his hand, tenderly now, smoothing bits of dirt off his fingers.

"Probably ought to at least wash our hands before they get here," he said.

"If you want."

In the cove around the glacier, the river and inlet swelled around as high tide peaked, then dragged out again. Strange to think they could be so close to all the coming havoc of tourism in Taku Inlet yet add a just couple miles and they were next to inaccessible. In a few days, there would be search planes tracing the river to the Canadian border. A neon orange mountaineering pack would be found, muddy with silt, as everything was in the valley, but not old enough yet to hide the brightness of the canvas, gleaming fresh as an egg just cracked open.

Adeline's Journal: Map of the World's Edge

There is a peak at both the beginning and end of all things, white as glare, silk-thin, puddled over the edges of the world. At ground level, it looks flat, as the flesh of the moon from its surface, but it is the tallest mountain in the universe: growing horizontally rather than vertically. The breadth of the mountain is so great that if you climbed it, even time and the movement of the sun would change. It exists cloth-like, in a perpetual state of cold. This is due to extreme elevation, and summarily, any living thing not native to the mountain, feels their steps grow heavy and slow. The laws of physics that govern here are not the same as elsewhere, so the mountain itself is impassable. It looks like fog. It moans like ice. The end and extension of everything, quartz-like rivets of cloud pulled up in snowy garters where it touches the sea.

Chapter Three: South Douglas

Will found the news article two weeks later, identifying the remains they had found. Amanda was still eating breakfast. The article said the pack of a missing Anchorage resident, Sean Greenly, had been found upriver, deep in the brush of the Taku. Greenly vanished last year with his girlfriend and fellow climber Jane Roan, some eight-hundred miles north of where Will and Amanda found the hand. It had apparently been sent along with the skull fragments to a lab at University of Alaska Anchorage where a DNA test matched the hand to Greenly. When Will read Jane's name, his stomach dropped. He was glad he was done eating.

"Eight hundred miles," he said. The words sounded eerie coming from his own mouth. "Arrigetch to Taku. How does that even happen?"

For a moment, they both went quiet, remembering the tunnel of light. Neither had spoken of it since the glacier and there seemed to be an unspoken agreement now that they never would.

"It's Alaska," Amanda finally muttered. "Bodies are bodies. Not everything gets explained."

She was from Alaska and Will was not. He supposed there wasn't much more he could expect her to say. The article featured the same picture of Jane and Greenly that circulated a year before: the two of them holding hands on some peak in Yukon, ice axes dramatically raised.

"That photo doesn't look a thing like her," said Will. "I wish they would at least run a different one."

He placed his shirts into neat, boxy piles around Amanda's plate as she ate. Yes, Jane had always worn a ponytail and if you looked at her from the wrong angle it gave her that wholesome cheerleader look in the picture. But to Will, the photo seemed impossibly

Alaskan, on-level with the outdoor reality shows that blew through the state without any regard for communities. Greenly's coat was brilliant green and very expensive, a hard-to-find brand of Norwegian outdoor gear. Will suspected he'd worked way too hard to find it. Green eyes, green name, expensive/particular green coat. It gave him a bit of an idea of who Greenly had been. Jane would have hated herself in that photograph. She didn't like to be the center of attention.

Once, while scrambling down Clark with the mountaineering group in bad weather, Jane had cut the palm of her hand open on a rock. She said nothing, wrapped it and put a glove on over the duct tape so she could still use her hiking poles. When they were all down safe on Granite Creek trail, Jane revealed the injury, but made no deal of it. She didn't bring it up again until when hit the parking lot and her glove came off wet with blood. A long rust-colored smear had covered her hand from wrist to fingertips where it bled through. Will had a hand injury like that at age thirteen from a box cutter, imitating a blood brothers pact with his best friend like they had seen on TV— he knew the pain was worse than Jane let on. A millimetre deeper, and Will never would never have been able to close his hand, let alone climb. Jane was the real deal in his eyes.

"It's not that bad a picture," said Amanda. "At least the family knows. Must be some comfort."

"Only her sister was at the funeral," Will said. "Though I think her folks had another funeral for her down south. In Idaho or Iowa or Ohio or something. She's from one those 'I' states, but then I think they moved to another."

"I meant *his* family," said Amanda. "You know. The one whose body we found."

Amanda didn't know why, even on weekends, Will couldn't wait until she finished eating her breakfast before getting started on tasks for the day. Her plate was dangerously close to their clean clothes, still covered in maple syrup from their pancakes.

“Do you think Jane’s sister has read the article by now?” he asked.

“What are you worried about?”

“It just feels like someone should tell her how we found the hand. It could be some closure. Anything connected to Jane. Especially since the body somehow ended up all the way down here.”

Amanda looked up the article on her phone. It said Greenly’s remains were found near the mouth of Taku River, but nothing else. No mention of either of them, or pack-rafters, or the sandbar. They weren’t details that mattered, but the sort of thing she knew wouldn’t sit right with Will.

“If you want to tell her, I’m sure you’ll find a way,” she said. “But I imagine the troopers filled her in.”

“It wouldn’t have been more than a courtesy call.”

Amanda took her plate to the sink, leaving him alone at the table.

“Do you think Reese has her number?” Will asked.

Will had yet to call Jane’s sister by her name, though Amanda knew he knew it. Adeline Roan had worked for a short time as a receptionist at Thunder Mountain High School, where Amanda’s little cousin went to school. Rumor had it that after Jane’s death, Adeline quit and rarely left her apartment now where she lived out the road in a house with homemade plumbing. What she did for work was anyone’s guess. Amanda and Adeline had never properly met, but Juneau was small enough she was pretty sure she knew what she looked like. She was almost certain she saw Adeline a month before at Costco, absent-mindedly pushing a cart twice the size she was—filled to the brim. She walked like someone sleepwalking, lips parted in a quarter-smile as she draped her arms over the handlebar clear to her armpits and 100% failed to keep the cart moving in a straight line.

“Adeline would have been Jane’s emergency contact at Wilderness Rescue, right?”

Will asked. “She’s her only relative in town.”

“Legally,” said Amanda. “I’m sure Reese can’t give you Adeline’s number.”

“But he could give her ours. If she wanted to know more or meet up, she could call. She and Jane were close. If it were me, I would want to know anything and everything.”

“Or maybe, it’s been a year, and it would just reopen the wound,” said Amanda.

Will didn’t understand why she got this way. “Maybe,” he said. “But it might mean something to her. I’ll text Reese. Just so Adeline has the option.”

“You do what you got to do,” Amanda said. She got up to take her plate to the sink.

She had a right to be annoyed, but Will had no idea how to explain. Amanda didn’t know about the night two months before Jane’s disappearance when the mountaineering group got back from Stoller White and Jane and Will stayed out. She didn’t know how they goaded each other into a back room of the Alaskan Bar where the lights shone red, and Will lifted Jane up onto a wooden ledge against the wall of mirrors. Amanda had been asleep at her parents’ house in Palmer when Will put his hand between Jane’s thighs and pressed his fingers up against her as she bit his lip and asked him, ‘Do you know what you want?’ If Jane hadn’t asked, they would have done it then. In the bathroom of the bar or in the attached hotel, the one that tourists came to from all over the world because it was supposedly one of the most haunted places in America. Or maybe in the cab on the ride home or the bed where he slept with Amanda. A thump of the wooden headboard against the wall and buzz of excitement gnawing away at him. Will had never come so close to cheating. But when Jane asked him what he wanted, he couldn’t give her a satisfying answer and Jane saw right through him. She wanted to fuck, but she did not want to fuck someone who didn’t know what he was getting himself into. It shamed Will; how clearly, she saw him for an opportunist. When he got home later that night, he accidentally knocked over the aloe vera

plant he had—Wilhem—and got on his knees to drunkenly try to repot it. Picking up the scattered clumps of darkened earth, Will tearfully googled *waht to do if you aloe Vera plant gets knockedover.*? By the end, he was a phlegmy mess, blubbering to Wilhelm as if the plant were a person. He could not have really been about to do what he had been about to do to Amanda. That wasn't who he wanted to be. He would not let it happen again.

Will brought his folded clothes back from the kitchen into the bedroom and texted Reese, trying to shake the memory of the hand. He wondered what Adeline would think of his role in the discovery. Would she expect him to be able to explain how Greenly ended up in Taku, eight-hundred miles from where he vanished? There were glaciers to cross. A plane would have had to be involved, and surely even the smallest bush-plane would have a radio. And what happened to Jane? Was she still with Greenly when he died? Strange to think that skeletal hand once belonged to a living person, someone just one degree of connection away from Will. Someone who, at least on some level, must have meant to Jane what Amanda meant to him. She loved him, didn't she? Will had known Jane had a boyfriend in Anchorage but never thought of him as a thinking, feeling human being. One who wore an unusual brand of green coat he probably worked stupidly hard to find, just because he wanted to look good, even on a mountain with no one but his girlfriend to see. The article said he and Jane had been together three years. Will had been with Amanda for five and thought he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He couldn't bear to think of Amanda lying in a river that way. All bones and silt-gray sinew.

But he couldn't bear to think of Jane that way either. She had been more than fair to him that night in the bar. To think that after a night of Jane drinking whiskey and gingers both he and Greenly may have touched her through her jeans the same way.

Chapter Four: Fritz Cove

Reese Cartwright described Will on the phone to Adeline as tall, “but not too tall. He walks with his shoulder forward in a hunch.”

There had been a lot of people Adeline didn't know at Jane's funeral. Will's walk didn't bring up any memories. The service was a parade of people all with Jane's same set of grim, gritting-your-teeth-as-you-go-to-your-death kind of facial expressions. Only sad. They seemed sad. There wasn't even a symbolic box or coffin for them to walk by since Adeline hadn't been willing to sacrifice anything of Jane's. What if her sister came back and wanted to know where her stuff was? Instead, Adeline handed over a framed photograph of Jane from high school. The sham funeral wasn't for her anyway, it was for them; Jane's co-workers and friends from climbing and skiing. When she saw the little crowd lined up, waiting to shake her hand on their way out, she realized she should have done more. It was more people than Adeline expected, since as far as she knew, Jane kept to herself and preferred to go out on her own. There must be a lot of loyalty in the outdoors community.

The only one Adeline knew the name of was Reese Cartwright: a mountaineer in his early sixties, head of her mountaineering group. Jane spoke of him often, and a little of a more regular climbing partner with an odd name Adeline couldn't remember. Something that started with an 'L.' Adeline gathered Reese was some kind of local legend. Something about him having first ascents on several ice-locked, remote, mountains in the area, but she only remembered his name because of the candy Reese's Pieces. She liked the idea that there still could be someone in real life with the name Reese. When he called, she was disappointed not to remember his face.

On the phone, Reese's voice rasped. "Sorry for calling like this. It's just, to me, when death or injury is involved, you owe someone something a little like face to face. That means a phone call."

He wanted Adeline to know that Will was good people, but she didn't owe him anything.

"What did you say his name was again?" Adeline asked.

"Will Morrow. Not William, just Will."

She liked the sound of that. Morrow, like marrow and tomorrow both, a future kind of bone. Names were important. Adeline had long rented the top floor apartment of a house out the road from Juneau and down a dirt road named for the man who made it and homesteaded there in the sixties. Parkinson's Lane—a name oblivious to its double meaning. She liked that about it.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll take the number."

It was unusual for Adeline to invite someone to her house, but she was shy about public places. She and Will agreed for him to come over in an hour. After they hung up, Adeline stood in the center of her living room, wondering if she should take her topographical maps of the Arrigetch down. They had gone up last year, along with maps of rest of the Brooks Range, replacing her old illustrations of imaginary worlds. Only the illustrations of Meteora stayed. When Adeline first realized that she wasn't going to be able to scrape together the money to charter a helicopter to drop her where Jane had disappeared, she almost took it all down. She sobbed for days. It hurt so much to look at the maps. To know that somewhere out there in the real world there was a door to Jane and Meteora, but she did not have the money or skills to get there. For two weeks Adeline didn't take on freelance work or meet with Kate for lunch. Instead, she lay in the dark, listening to the sound of her own breathing. Life, going in and out of her. Somewhere, in Meteora, Jane breathed too—but

Adeline was helpless to find her. There were commercial flights as far as Anaktuvuk Pass, but it would be impossible for Adeline to even get to Jane's route in the Arrigetch without a guide. 'Maybe next year,' Kate had said when they finally met up. "I could help you save for the guide and maybe we could go together. Or" she added, "you could think about letting her go?"

Adeline knew what Kate meant, if Jane could survive in the mountains one year, why not two? Adeline also didn't like where that line of thinking ended. It was the same thing as believing Jane dead. Which she supposed might also be what Kate was trying to ease her into, which made Adeline mad at Kate, which didn't make sense because Kate was only trying to help, which made her mad because Kate couldn't help, not really, which made Adeline mad because it wasn't fair and someone, somewhere should be able to. In February, when Kate asked Adeline if she wanted to come to her house for dinner and a movie, she turned her down. They still met up for lunch after that but didn't hold hands again. On the first night of the Perseids, Adeline curled up in her window seat and cried.

But Will finding Sean's body meant there was another way to Meteora, and close. Taku Valley wasn't exactly convenient, but it was certainly more accessible than the Arrigetch. There were still three weeks left of the Perseids, so all Adeline had to do was rent a kayak and take it into the inlet. She wasn't sure she knew how to kayak well enough to get to the exact spot, but people went to the cabin out by Taku Glacier all the time. How hard could it be?

She tried to remember what the door to Meteora looked like. A beam of light—like a tunnel, heading through the woods. That was what she wrote in her journal, but the memory itself was like a reoccurring dream. It didn't help that the doorway literally was hazy—the tunnel of light always appeared in mist. The one thing Adeline was sure she remembered was the door always came after she and Jane crossed the Crater—the name they gave to sort of

bowl in the ground near their house. She had drawn a picture of the Crater after the search for Jane was called off. It was map-style, a circle to represent the inverse dome of lush, sunken green. On approach, all you could see was its lip, a piled ring of earth and broken stones five feet deep and no more than twenty feet in diameter—Adeline had drawn a scale along the side. A rock stood in the center, represented by a second, smaller circle but Adeline suspected it wasn't actually made of the same materials as meteorites. As kids, she and Jane had called the rock a meteorite but their father said it was just a rock in a filled in sink hole that stopped sinking so the state filled it in. That, or an old, massive buffalo wallow.

While she was waiting for Will, Adeline decided she should take down the maps of the Arrigetch. Jane had disappeared there and she didn't want him to think she was obsessed. She could get new maps from Kate to replace them. Kate had loads of maritime maps, enough for all Southeast Alaska—she would have ones of Taku.

Will arrived on time, but he didn't look how Adeline expected. Reese said he was tall, so when she made him up in her head, she made him a half-head taller. The real Will was medium height. Was Reese Cartwright short? She couldn't remember. Adeline had also given Will longish, curly hair, but in reality, he had a close-cropped trim. It would make hygiene on outdoors trips easier, she supposed. The man in front of her had a disconnected looking face and high forehead that she could not help but think looked better on him than it should have. Adeline associated these features with Frankenstein's monster. She saw a hint of the walk Reese had described, but it wasn't so much that he hunched as he was hesitant. The only thing she had gotten right about him were his hands. Will had big, square palms with thick fingers.

"Wow," Will said, looking at her drawings when she let him in. "You're quite the artist."

Adeline never knew how to respond when people said that. She offered him tea as he sat on the couch. She had meant to go out and get beer since that was what she imagined he would want to drink.

“Weirdly good weather we’ve been having,” she said. Weather was a comfortable, popular topic of conversation with strangers.

“Looks like it’s going to be a dry summer,” said Will. “Well, dry for Juneau.”

Adeline served him tea in an older, gray handmade mug leftover from her parents’ house, hand-painted with an overcast sky and bare branches. She wondered if she should have given him something campier like the ‘Alaska’ tourist mug with its bright yellow map and sporty outdoor clip-art. She wanted to be the kind of host that gave guests cups to fit their personalities.

“Unless you have specific questions in mind, I figured I would just tell you how we found Greenly,” said Will.

“Sean?” asked Adeline. She had forgotten that was his last name.

“I brought a map with me so I could show you.” Will brought out a topographical map and set it on the coffee table. His hand wavered in front of the map as he traced the route. He seemed to not like having his side to her as they sat. Will’s finger hesitated along the bends of the river and paused finally by the entrance to the inlet. It wasn’t far from Taku Lodge, which was open seasonally and tourists came to by seaplane. Adeline had thought Sean’s bones must be deeper up the river, almost to the Canadian border.

“The river is bad going,” said Will, seeing where her eyes travelled further up the map. “He was somewhere around here; at the mouth.” He pointed. “Are you sure there isn’t anything specific you want to know?”

“No,” said Adeline, marking the map with a pen where Will had pointed. “Can I borrow this?”

“Sure. Why did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Mark it.”

“I want to try and kayak there,” Adeline said. “I thought it might feel like the closest I can get to her, you know. Try and find some closure.” She had practiced this part of the conversation. It seemed to be going well.

Will looked uneasy. “Current is probably too strong going the other direction. Do you kayak much?”

“I know how, but I haven’t gone that often. I’ll get better.”

“I wouldn’t go alone,” he said. “Do you have someone to go with you? Help you practice?”

Adeline hadn’t thought that far. She meant to get to land as close as she could and go on foot from there. She had never been out in the mountains alone, but Jane used to go on solo expeditions all the time.

“Do you think that I could get there on foot if I can’t kayak?”

“There’s a glacier in the way,” said Will. “And several rivers. Alone, I mean I don’t know your skill level, but I wouldn’t think so. You could take a float plane out to the lake?”

He pointed at Twin Glacier Lake on the map. It had two arms of ice emptying into it—East and West Twin Glacier heading up towards a place in the ice field called Unknown Glacier and Hades Highway.

“What was it like?” Adeline asked.

“The lake? I haven’t been yet. Me and the group are going in a week or so to get up onto the icefield to go up Devil’s Paw.”

“No. Finding Sean.”

Will went quiet. He could tell Adeline about the tunnel of light if he wanted. He had thought before that he wanted to tell her, but now he felt unsure. Adeline didn't seem the sort of person who would judge him or think he had imagined it, but neither was she what he had expected. She had a kind of dreamy feel to her. Distracted, as if the discovery of Greenly's body had nothing to do with her sister.

"There wasn't really much left of him," said Will. "It wasn't gruesome. Just a couple of bones. The river is full of thick silt, so it was hard to see. That glacier was advancing until recently you know, unlike all the others. We didn't quite know what we'd rolled up on when we found him. We thought the bones must have been lying there a lot longer."

"You mean like Sean was some miner from the 20s?"

"I don't know," Will said. "I don't know what we thought. The whole thing felt surreal. I knew Jane, we were in the same mountaineering group, but I never met her boyfriend."

"You were in her mountaineering group?" said Adeline. "She never mentioned you."

That hurt. Will and Jane had known each other long enough he would have thought she would talk about him, but other than a few nights of drinking, he supposed it wasn't that deep a friendship.

"Jane preferred to go out on her own, mostly. We only hung out outside the group a couple times. I admired her though. She knew her shit."

"She does." Adeline nodded, looking wistful. 'Does,' Will noted. Did Adeline believe Jane was still somehow alive after a year? No one Will knew could make it through a winter in the mountains living out on their own. Not at least without trips for supplies. Or was it just a slip of the tongue? Adeline didn't seem to really need his story. Which meant he was just here for himself, and Will didn't like that idea.

“If you’re really interested in getting down towards Twin Glacier Lake,” he said.

“Why don’t you come by the Alaskan on Thursday night at seven? My and Jane’s—” he cut himself off. “The mountaineering group is plotting an expedition out to Devil’s Paw in the icefield above next week. Maybe you could come with us as far as the lake and camp a night or two?”

Adeline smiled and, in the sharpness of her nose and chin, Will saw a family resemblance. The bottom half of her face had the same tapered lines as Jane’s, but aside from that, Adeline wasn’t very much like her. She seemed so much softer. It disappointed him.

Adeline had not been in a bar for a long time, and the thought frightened her, but she liked the idea of going somewhere Jane used to go and sitting next to the people she used to sit with. How many people would she recognize from the funeral? She still didn’t remember Will, even with him in front of her. If she was going to find Jane, this was her only opportunity; a bar was necessary.

Will checked his watch and got up with an apology. “I better go,” he said. “I’ve got lots of chores. But call me if you need anything? See you Thursday?”

“Sure,” said Adeline. He seemed so eager to please, yet also eager to get away. That was how Adeline often found herself feeling around people. She wondered if (in Will) it was the same instinct or simply because talking about death made him uncomfortable. She had never seen a body; she could imagine how finding one might shake you up. Adeline had only ever met Sean in passing but liked him well enough.

Adeline took the map that Will had left her and tacked it up on the wall next to her illustration of the Crater, and her other drawings of Meteora’s mountain ranges. Jane had to be alive. After a year of waiting, now was not the time to lose faith. She was so close. A helix of mountains tightly circled around one shadowy, towering peak in the map in front of her. There was also a mountain in Taku, along the border with Canada that was much bigger than

the rest. Adeline studied the two depictions of mountains next to each other for a while—Devil's Paw—the map legend said.

She went back to her drafting table. Her childhood journal was still stored in a nearby drawer. Adeline opened it to review for navigation.

Adeline's Journal: The Unreachable Peak

Only at night can you see the upside-down mountain range in the sky. You will never see its base, only the ridge, the line where it plunges through the underside of your world. A thing of stars wreathed in Northern Lights, all hooked cliffs and glaciers. It is where all the places you once thought to be your home have gone. The slopes of this mountain are so sheer; to stand on it would already be an act of falling. The world beyond it is unreachable. An endless realm, it sends you tumbling into space.

Chapter Five: Meteora

Fog seeped off the lake. Every morning Jane expected to wake up to a different place. Oaxaca with its layers of peaks in blue and green, the Alps, the bog-ridden granite molars of the Arrigetch, or even just Scotland with Adeline, getting bitten all to hell by midges. But every morning when Jane left the tent, she was on her ridgeline alone.

The sun and moon were a split like a screen on either side of Devil's Paw. When she first woke up and saw it, Jane recognized the four-pronged peak immediately. All ridgelines back home in Juneau had a distant view of Devil's Paw: Sheep Mountain and Gold Ridge towards the Twins, Backerby and Observation with its rocky pyramid—there was no mistaking it—but Jane had gone to sleep in a mountain range eight-hundred miles north from there. Her and Adeline's childhood world of Meteora was the first thing that came to mind, but it was a long time since Jane had believed in that place. Instead, Jane suspected she was dead, like Sean. Fallen off some cliff. She could still see the spot on the beach where she left Sean, then woke to find the lake moved and his body gone. Now, it didn't matter. Meteora or dead—the ridge was home.

Today would be a good day to fish, even if every time Jane ate one of the blue carp from the lake she felt as if she were destroying something holy. Their scales and iridescent auburn eyes glittered like cut glass. The first time she caught a carp, its colors startled her so much she dropped it. The blue was too dark to be tropical and yet still so true, with no hint of gray-black or silver—not colors that occurred in nature. Every time Jane neared the fish, the carp let out a gasp, and she retreated, hoping it would die on its own. *Motherfucking son of a bitch-ass stream. Goddamn gape-mouthed trout-Satan, why won't you die?* Jane needed to reassure herself that the fish was not immortal, some shade of Sean come back to haunt her. She had committed a terrible sin by trying to kill it, yes, but a fish was just a fucking fish.

Still, Jane cursed and sobbed every time the carp drew breath. It was the closest she had come since childhood to praying.

Then, after about an hour, Jane remembered a story she heard once from a Dutch tourist on a hiking trip she once guided. His grandmother claimed, when she was a child, her father used to wrap fresh-caught carp in a wet blanket and put them in the basement, feeding them bread drenched in milk to keep the fish alive and fresh. Some fish, especially carp, could apparently live for a while that way. Armed with the memory, Jane went back, looked the carp in its round, carrotty eyes and whacked it to death with a rock. There seemed to be an endless supply of them, but Jane knew if this were the real world (though there was definitely no lake this high or close to Devil's Paw on any map of Southeast Alaska she had seen) they would be endangered. Probably essential to some super-rare mini ecosystem running at the bottom of the lake. She felt much less guilty killing the ptarmigan that hopped along the rocks further down. They were stupid, normal-looking, and easy to catch. Scorch away their feathers and they were small but good eating, little breasts crispy and dripping with fat. There were low-bush blueberries that grew on that part of the ridge too—an area Jane had come to call Foodland—but the workload-per-calories was almost the same as harvesting edible algae that washed up from the lake.

Her fishing kit was still in its place, buried in the sand on the righthand end of the beach. Jane decided to use the good hook this time. She had a few clumsy wooden ones she'd made herself, but only one of the original metal hooks from Sean's kit. An avid salmon fisherman, Sean always brought them with him on backcountry trips. One warm, sunny afternoon two summers ago the two of them had camped by a river while salmon fishing in Kenai—illegally of course. It was a nice memory.

Jane's preferred fishing spot was far away from the tent where the ground grew steeper and water ran immediately deep, just before the right-hand cliff walls of the lake. She

had dug a kind of fishing seat for herself there, so she had a way to brace against the pull of the fish. The best way to catch them seemed to be with the remains of their brethren. A dried-up bit of a tail worked best. Jane had tried once to make a bone hook out of a carp's own jaw—there was something about catching one fish with the bones of another—but in the end, the hook snapped under pressure as she worked it.

Almost as soon as Jane set the line, she got a bite. The carp felt heavy, a wad of algae wrapped around it when it surfaced. Jane stepped on the tangle of algae to hold the fish in place and killed it with a rock. Something looked odd about the belly, a hard, curved angle to it as if the fish had swallowed something big and circular. Curious, Jane cut the algae away and set it aside for drying. With the algae removed, the bulge in the fish's stomach was more pronounced. Jane smoothed her hand across it and felt a hard, rounded line. There was something foreign in there.

Normally, Jane would wait until she had several fish caught, then get the fire going to start the smoking or cooking process but instead, she slung the fish onto a nearby rock with a big wet slap. Jane flipped open the big knife side of her multitool and nipped the tip into the belly. She reached into the dark, red-smeared envelope. The thick, half-moon side of something metal was pressed tight against the carp's innards. Jane couldn't get the leverage on her own to wiggle the metal object out, so she had to slide the blade of the knife back in and pry it out.

The object emerged circular and bloody, a smear of fish guts crusted on a brass lid, darkening an engraving. A metal heirloom kind of thing—maybe a pocket watch? Jane splashed a bit of water over the top to get a better view of the letters. There were three of them: L.L.S. She stared at it for a long time. Jane and Sean had theorized over the initials for L.L.S. for years, a game in the tent when they got bored.

Long Live Socrates.

Lester Long-Scrotum.

Leopards Love Skeksis.

The compass was old, dating back to the 1920s, or so Sean had always claimed. She laughed and called him a dick the first time he showed it to her. It seemed out of character for a man so obsessed with weight that he had sawed his toothbrush in half, to use an antique metal compass on climbing expeditions.

Jane dipped the compass in the water's edge to wash it. The lid was a bit gummy from being in the fish, but it didn't take much to pry it open. Inside, the glass covering the dial was clean and perfect. The little gold ornamental dots were still by each letter to name the cardinal directions—as was the over-emphasized N in black with gold edges. Jane flipped the lid open and shut twice. The hinge and clasp made a crisp, clicking sound. It couldn't be Sean's. But it was. She left the lid open and spun the compass end over end. The gold-etched red arrow held a steady mark no matter how she turned it, pointing away from Devil's Paw, towards the opposite end of the ridge.

"You," Jane said to Sean's compass. "Are not where you're supposed to be."

She put it in the pocket opposite her own compass, one on each hip, and started disassembling the carp. There must be evidence of how this happened. At a glance, Jane thought the carp's mouth was too small to swallow the compass. She gutted the fish and set the fillets to the side, then hollowed out the carp, tail to brain, prying apart every pale-blue rib and vertebra. She slit the cobalt gills and pried at the head and jaw and eyes. She pulled out the brain and gill sacs. When Jane finally had to accept that she couldn't find anything wrong with it, she went back to the guts and cut them into little bits. Aside from somehow being a suitcase for Sean's oversized, antique brass compass—the carp was just another carp.

"Not fucking helping," said Jane to the disassembled skeleton.

She built a low fire, then threw the fish guts onto the coals. They sizzled and spat and smelled. Jane went back to the fillets. These, she cooked wrapped in the seaweed they had been caught with. The familiarity of the motions calmed her. Just another fish, Jane repeated to herself as she cooked. When she felt ready, she got out Sean's compass and checked its bearings again. The arrow still pointed towards the opposite end of the ridge.

"Traitorous son of bitch. I don't believe you," Jane said aloud. Then, after a long, shivering breath. "Okay. Okay."

Her fillets were almost done.

As Jane ate, she licked clean the greasy algae of their wrappings. When she was done, she dry-cooked the algae in the coals, tore it into bits and ate it too. Jane heaped the fire high, hot enough to disintegrate the carp's bones. In an hour, there was nothing left of them but soft ash. She waited for the ashes to cool then dumped them into one of Sean's old stuff sacks—a yellow one. But when she went to toss Sean's compass in after them, her hands started shaking. Jane did not want to let it go.

"Coward," she told herself, but she still tucked the compass safely back into her pocket. Jane walked Sean's stuff sack full of the fish's ashes to the edge of the ridge. Below her, an infinite sheet of cloud shone. From this point on the ridge, there was nothing but the cloud. Jane took a breath, shut her eyes, and chucked the sack of ashes over the side.

"Please," she whispered to the tiny, closing hole in the cloud as the bag disappeared. "Stay away."

Chapter Six: Downtown Juneau

The Alaskan Bar and Hotel had been a brothel in the 1920s. It still had the indoor balcony up a long wooden stairway and red/gold velvet brocade wallpaper. A miner murdered his prostitute wife and her client in one of the tiny rooms and Will had heard if you stayed there overnight you could see her ghost reflecting in the hallway mirror. In the fifteen years he had lived in Juneau, he had been friends with some three generations of bartenders at the Alaskan. Behind the bar tonight was his ex-girlfriend, Marley Johannsson. Marley was from Fairbanks, lived on a wooden sailboat in Douglas Harbour all through winter, and did not believe in government. She also still filled out a pair of Carhartts really, really well.

Will and Amanda's mountaineering group met in the back room of the Alaskan Bar every other week on Thursdays. The lighting was generally red, but on meeting days Marley moved the lamps so the mountaineers could see their maps. These days, the group's founder—Reese Cartwright—mostly stepped aside and let his thirty-year-old son, Alfie, take the lead. It was to Adeline's benefit that Reese was at this week's meeting.

"Sorry. She's coming in from out the road," Will said when it became clear that Adeline would be late. "She's Jane's only family up here, you'll remember. I thought maybe she could come with us as far as Twin Glacier Lake and camp for a day or two. Give her some closure."

Alfie had been going over the drop sites for supplies, but now he went silent. They all knew where Jane's boyfriend's body had been found, and it was not far from the point where they planned to ascend the icefield next week. Will wasn't sure yet who knew it was him and Amanda that had found Greenly's body, but it was at least Reese and Alfie. The rest would end up figuring it out eventually. Their main theory about how Greenly wound up so far south of where he disappeared, was that he and Jane had flagged a pilot to charter them

straight home. Bad radio or no radio, one stop for fuel with no service for whatever reason, and it could have been done. If Jane's body was going to be found, it would likely be in the same area after a lot of heavy rainfall.

"Does Adeline have any experience?" Alfie asked.

"Some," Will said. "She did a big backcountry trip with Jane in the Scottish Highlands just before. Well, before whatever happened, happened."

"I've already spoken with Adeline about this last night to save time," said Reese. "If she shows, I think we can accommodate her."

Will's face went hot. Of course, he should have expected Reese to call Adeline before the meeting. Reese had a particular sense of morals. But Will would have liked to be present for the conversation.

Next to him, Amanda tensed. "Is that wise?" she asked. "I mean, I don't want to seem insensitive, but if Adeline comes, it will be a couple days on her own before anyone can take her back."

"That's worth considering," agreed Reese. "But this is family of one of our own. If we leave Adeline good instructions, make the bear hangs for her, show her how to pull them up and let them down, leave her a two-way communicator—I'm sure she can manage for thirty-six hours. This is within our ability to provide."

Amanda turned back to Will as Alfie began again. "I'm going to get another drink."

Will was about to reply, but she left too quickly to give him a chance. In the main room of the bar, Amanda stood at the stool Jane had been sitting on the one time they had met. The bartender, Will's ex, was still serving someone else. The bartender who had fucked up Jane's order and given her a whiskey and coke on the night they met instead of whiskey ginger wasn't on. Amanda wondered now if she ought to order either one of those drinks as a kind of tribute. She hadn't really known Jane and she didn't usually drink whiskey.

While she was still deciding, a young woman walked into the bar. Amanda remembered how out of place Adeline looked. She wore mud boots and a long blue wool coat shirt that swallowed her like a child. The handknit, long brownish-burgundy scarf was wound around her neck so many times Amanda wondered if she could turn her head. It was a chilly evening for summer, but not enough for that scarf.

“Hi there,” she said. “You must be Adeline.”

The younger woman stopped walking and stood without moving. “It looks the same,” she said. The last time she would have been in this bar was with Jane, but for the life of her, she couldn’t remember why. Adeline did not go out often.

“What do you mean?” Amanda asked.

“I’m not really sure,” said Adeline. “Three years since I was here last.”

“Three years is a long time to stay out of anywhere in Juneau,” Amanda said. “I’m Amanda, Will’s girlfriend. The rest of us are in the back room if you want to join. You are Adeline Roan, aren’t you?”

“I’m late,” Adeline said. Her voice suggested apology, but she didn’t actually make one. “You’re the one who found Sean with Will.”

Amanda nodded. It would be rude to not acknowledge. “Would you like a beer?”

“I don’t know what they have. I like light beer more than dark.”

“Marley, we’ll take two whites,” Amanda said. She wore her hair down and curled behind her ears and Adeline liked that. Her own hair wasn’t straight enough to stay that way if she put it behind her ears.

“Is Will here?” she asked.

“He’s in back with the others. It’s quite a few people today since we take off next week. Hope that isn’t a problem.”

Adeline paused. Rooms full of people were hard. She could never figure out who to focus on in conversation. Reese had called again in the morning and more or less explained that they would likely take her to Taku, but she should come meet everyone and see how she got on. Even a few days in the middle of nowhere could cause tensions. Adeline supposed, like the bar, a room full of people was necessary.

“I liked Reese Cartwright when we spoke on the phone,” she said.

“He’s a decent guy.” Amanda passed Adeline her beer. “You’ve got me and Will too. You’ll be fine. Do you need anything else before we go back?”

“I’ve already eaten.”

The bar did not serve food and it never had, but Amanda chose not to say anything. Jane’s sister seemed odd, but more of an approachable kind of odd than Jane.

As anticipated, there were too many people in the mountaineering group for Adeline to keep track of. She guessed fifteen and was too afraid to count. The only name she hung onto was ‘Laird’ because it was the name of a town with hot springs she had been to once. She thought he may have been the one Jane used to climb with. The mountaineers were all concerned about the ascent onto the ice field or something. With all the caving and melt from global warming, the arms of the glaciers didn’t quite go all the way down to the water at Twin Glacier Lake anymore. Reese thought it still should be safe. Adeline thought it was boring.

Instead, she tried to focus on the people in the room. They seemed like Jane’s kind of people. She maybe did recognize a couple from the funeral. Jane’s shift away from Meteora had begun with her interest in the Latin names of birds and these people seemed like they might know the Latin names for birds. Adeline imagined they would all have bookshelves at home, but the books wouldn’t be stories, they would be about the outdoors and faraway

places like Jane's 'mountain books,' she started collecting in her teens. Ones with tattered blue or gray covers with one-to-three-word primal sounding titles like *Walden*, *Travels in Alaska*, and *Self Reliance*. *Hatchet* was the only one Adeline ever managed to read from Jane's collection—written for kids—but it was just some fictionalized boy's life after a plane crash in the Canadian wilderness. The mountain books were full of tiny maps and indexes but in a school way. Drawn in the secret science-language of grids and numbers.

"We'll leave you a two-way communicator," Will said. "It's like a walkie-talkie but with text. You text Reese and it sends him the text along with your GPS coordinates. We can set it up so every couple hours it sends out an automatic text and coordinates with 'I'm okay' if you like."

Adeline realized she was being spoken to and became frightened. "It always sends the GPS?" she asked. "Even if I don't tell it to?"

"Always."

"Is there any way to turn it off?"

"Why would you want that?" asked Will. "GPS is an important safety feature. Are you planning on wandering off somewhere you don't want us to know?"

A ripple of laughter swept the room.

"No," Adeline replied. She knew better than to be embarrassed. Her phone got texts from Jane's two-way communicator while Jane was in the Arrigetch, but she had assumed the coordinates that accompanied the texts were Jane's choice. These people had no reason to think she actually meant to leave camp at Twin Glacier Lake and go looking for Jane—they just thought she didn't understand. People often thought Adeline didn't understand. Jane told her when that happened to stop focusing on being nice and focus instead on being clear, but Jane had an attitude that Adeline could not imitate, a sort of: 'fuck you if you don't understand me, you fucking prick.' Adeline tried to be clear by reproducing Jane's cadence

rather than her word choice. “I don’t like someone knowing where I am when I am supposed to be alone,” she said.

“Welcome to the modern era,” Will said. Next to him, Reese cracked a smile.

“In my day-to-day life, I’m with you,” Reese said to Adeline. “But backcountry is different. You want those coordinates sent out in case something happens.”

Adeline decided not to reply. She and Jane had always navigated to get to the door to Meteora by landmarks. The creek by their house filled with little brown fish they used to call ‘Fish City,’ meant they were coming up on The Crater. The last time they crossed Fish City, Jane had told her that kind of fish in it were *semotilus atromaculus*, more casually known as common creek chub. “Our fish aren’t common,” Adeline had protested. “They dig tunnels.” Jane rolled her eyes and explained it was just part of the name.

“We can have Adeline kayak out with us in the twofer,” Amanda suggested. “I’ll steer and she can just paddle. Will can take out the single alone.”

“Sure,” said Will. He seemed unhappy. Adeline hated not knowing why. There was never any way to know what was really going on in a room full of people. Who knew how long they had all known each other? What past experiences influenced everything they said and did? She was hopelessly ill-informed.

“That’s a great idea,” said Reese. “That way Adeline will have someone who really knows the water. That’s settled then. Four days, troops. The adventure begins in four days.”

Adeline filtered out with the rest of the group, as if she were one of them. In a way, she supposed she was. These were Jane’s people, taking her to the very place where she would find Jane. The excitement coming off them was palpable, that same, vibrating energy in Jane when she talked about expeditions. Everyone had come here today thinking of Jane because of Adeline, and now Jane would be on their minds as they kayaked to Twin Glacier Lake. Adeline couldn’t wait to see their faces when she brought her back.

As the mountaineers filtered out, Will and Amanda took care to ignore the younger climbers. Laird didn't think Adeline should be coming, Amanda was sure of it, and she didn't want to give him the opportunity to harass her. He always got away with murder because he was so good-looking, as if that passed for charm.

"We'll stay out with you if you like," Amanda told Adeline when they caught up to her. "I know you've got a long way to drive back out the road."

"Oh, I don't mind," replied Adeline. "Thanks for your help. Everything's working out beautifully."

Amanda and Will exchanged a look. She seemed awfully cheerful for someone about to travel to the stand-in for her sister's grave.

"If you're uncertain what to pack, please text me," said Will. "It's an early morning Tuesday. Pick you up at seven?"

Adeline waved at Amanda, even though she was standing right in front of her and headed off into the night.

When she was gone, Amanda started to head in the opposite direction, but Will seemed to lag. "What?" she asked.

"Why did you do that?"

Amanda glanced at the two heavy-set bearded Alaskan regulars in their 60s smoking to the side of the door. "Do what? I thought you wanted us to do that kind of thing for her."

"Offer the kayaks. From back home, clear up to a minute ago, you didn't want her to come at all."

"You're the one who's so convinced we need to make whatever happened to Jane our problem."

"You're pissed at me."

"Whatever gave you that impression?"

Will studied her. He wasn't ready for this fight. "Why are you pissed at me?"

"I don't think it's a good idea to take a grieving woman to the place where her missing sister's boyfriend's body was found. But no one seems to agree with me, and it's not as though I can tell Reese 'no.' So, we might as well be sure she has a kayak. I can keep us from rolling."

"Come on, Amanda. I'm trying to do the right thing."

"In this case, I don't think there is one. Not for her anyway, but she's the one you should be thinking about."

"Adeline wants this. Explain to me how we are not helping. Explain to me how I am making this all about me."

They reached the car and Amanda opened the door. She wasn't ready to fight either. "Maybe you're not. But this is the way you get when you feel guilty about something. Do me a favour? Figure out whatever it is and sort it out on your own before you drag in Adeline?"

"Okay," Will said.

Amanda pulled out of the lot, turned on the radio, and they drove home.

Chapter Seven: Meteora

Jane took Sean's compass to The End of the World. That was what she called the spot at the end of her ridge opposite Devil's Paw, where everything cliffed-out into a wide, flat ledge of rock reaching over cloud. You couldn't walk any further than it in that direction, and the other end of the lake had an impassable glacier. It might as well be the real End of the World. Most days, she walked there to track the moving peaks that appeared in the distance. Jane called this 'peak-gazing' because the mountains shifted throughout the day, rotating like stars. The ridge was forever in a perfect cloud inversion.

She didn't need much for the journey. Just her compass, Sean's, and her catalogue for charting new mountains. Jane had run out of space in her own notebook long ago, so she made notes in the margins of a giant fantasy novel titled SHADOWSTORM that used to belong to Sean. The cover featured a scantily clad man with a wolf skin hood with the wolf's head on top of his and a woman in some sort of loincloth, both with rippling muscles and swords drawn. The book was nine-hundred and thirteen pages long and Jane took notes over mountains she saw at the End of the World on the corresponding page number to number of journeys to the End of the World she was on. She did it almost daily, to mark the passage of time, so this made her two-hundred and sixty-eighth trek.

All in all, the journey took about seventy-five minutes. Jane guessed it was three and a half miles. She liked to watch the smallness of the motion of the tendrils of mist in the fog below her as she went, the way they dipped and circled before settling back into the floor of cloud. All the different features along the way, Jane had named. On the ridge, the first landmark was No Man's Land. No Man's Land was a big bolder by a cliff where the rock wasn't the same flaky-shale variety as other parts of the ridge. She used to call it 'Possibility' because it was the only spot where the rock seemed strong enough to plot a route. It was, at

best, a fuck-around-and-find-out kind of route. Jane had fucked around once, and risked finding out, but gave up once the mist got too thick to see her hand in front of her face. She didn't care for dying if she wasn't really dead and, while it was lonely, life on the ridge wasn't all that bad. It was quiet.

After No Man's Land came Foodland, where she collected berries and hunted ptarmigan, then the ridge narrowed to a thin thread of exposed rock. Jane sometimes called this the Needle, sometimes Aonach Eagach for a ridge she'd done in Scotland, and sometimes—more often than not—Bag of Dicks. The name depended on her mood that day. Finding Sean's compass in a carp made this a 'Bag of Dicks' kind of day.

The scramble only took about fifteen minutes, but they were a tense fifteen. With nothing but rock and air in her way from the sea of cloud below, Jane got the dizzying sense here that the line between rock and air and herself was quite thin. What would it feel like, if she let go, or simply slipped off the ridge and fell backwards into space? Sean had still been alive, skull cracked, bundled up in his gear three hours after he fell—when Jane went into the tent for the night. Depending on how you landed, even with a lot of distance, it could take a long time to die.

After Bag of Dicks came K2—a mountaineering joke with herself. The real K2 was the second highest mountain in the world, one of the deadliest, and this K2 felt like walking up a staircase. After that came the End of the World. Here, the mountains lifted their sleepy heads out of a vast ocean of fog to telescope like seals. Jane climbed down to the ledge, warm in the sun, and took off her shirt. As a kid, before Jane first even found an entrance to Meteora on the other side of the Crater, she used to climb the rock in the middle and hang around with her shirt off. The summer she turned eleven, her father had explained she could no longer go without her shirt. No matter how hot it was, or where Jane was, and not even

alone on her own property. “Why?” Jane had asked tearfully. Shirts were hot and sticky and kept you from feeling the wind on your chest.

“You’re developing,” her father said, and left the room quickly.

But there was no one at The Crater or the End of the World to tell Jane she had to wear a shirt. She first saw Meteora while asleep that way on the rock in the Crater. It was the day when she had told her parents she wanted to join the Girl Scouts to do more hiking and learn outdoor skills. Her father later explained that the Girl Scouts mostly sold cookies. Jane asked if the Boy Scouts would let her join, and he laughed. She did not ask again.

In her dream on the rock, Jane flew over a range of mountains like a meteor, hurtling through space. Some of the mountains were enormous, white and crystalline, shining with rainbows. Others were dark, black rock or pouring with rivers. Dry, red places. There were no people in the dream, only the long, unending realm of mountains. I’ll land, Jane thought as she looked down. I’ll land and live on some a ridgeline alone where I can scream as loud as I want when I’m sad and only wear a shirt when I want. But the mountains went on and on. Now, Jane did live alone on a ridgeline surrounded by mountains, which came with its own issues, but wearing a shirt when she didn’t want to sure as shit wasn’t one of them.

Warm on the ledge, she got out her compass and began to plot the positions of the new peaks as if they were on a clock. Jane’s compass pointed straight out from the ledge as if that were north (though she didn’t think it was north, the sun rose and set there as well.) At about 40° from the rock there was a smattering of five smaller other tower-peaks—one with a sort of bulge on the side that looked like a bulbous nose. At 168° was a broad plateau, butterdish of a mountain and to the left of that a mountain shaped remarkably like Suilven—one of the peaks Jane had climbed with Adeline in Scotland.

Jane noted Suilven in the catalogue. That made for two, serious discrepancies today. She had never seen a mountain she recognized before in Meteora while peak-gazing. The

peak had to be Suilven though. Suilven had a distinctive shape, like a prehistoric beached whale. Jane felt she ought to say something to greet it, but when she went to, her stomach plunged, and an unexpected, ragged sound spilled out of her. The cry echoed over the cliffs in a half-cough, half-croak. The last time Jane had been on Suilven was a year ago, with Adeline. If she could reach the peak, she felt the irrational certainty that she would find an older version of herself and her sister on it, waiting. A deep red ache welled up in Jane's chest, reaching. For a moment, it felt like Adeline was really there. Looking out from the peak back at her. Then she was gone.

Jane took out Sean's compass and set it next to her own on the rock. Her eyes still smarted, but tears hadn't actually had time to form. Adeline was safe at home in the regular world and Jane couldn't go back. When she looked beside her, the little arrow on Sean's compass did a couple rounds then seemed to slow, drifting back and forth. Jane picked it up, steadied it in the palm of her hand, then put it back down again. The arrow pointed at Suilven. Jane looked back at her own compass and saw the little arrow on it spinning as well. When it stopped moving, it was pointing back down the ridge at Devil's Paw.

She nearly chucked both compasses into the cloud below.

"Fucking traitors," Jane said.

In the mountaineering world, two solid, unmoving points meant navigation. Real navigation—you could use triangulation to figure out where you were in relation to those two points on a map, no matter where you were. Jane had preferred to think of that kind of navigation in Meteora as impossible. In her mind, her ridge was a comet, hurtling through space, no point to even try to leave. Now, she had to consider she might have made a mistake, like early astronomers, assuming the sun revolved around the earth rather than that the earth revolved around the sun. Her ridge might be stationary. Jane dimly remembered the view from the three peaks she had been up as a child in Meteora. There were infinite mountains in

every view, stretching into the horizon, different ranges every time, but one shadowy mountain, taller than the rest in the distance. Could that be Devil's Paw?

Below Jane, mist flowed below the End of the World in rivets like waves, then settled back down. Sean's rope she'd first used to climb down No Man's Land was still behind her, attached to the rock. What would it feel like, to leave the rope in full mist and keep climbing? How long could she really expect to free-solo it until her strength gave out and she fell? Was there even a bottom to the mist? Did she want there to be? Sometimes, she still dreamed of Sean, standing out by the crater lake. A hollow, blown-out image of him alone onshore, wearing the stoplight-green mountaineering jacket he disappeared in.

What are you doing up? Jane asked in the dream.

Just waiting. Deep, exaggerated sigh. *All alone in the moonlight. Did you see the meteor?*

She remembered the day Sean fell, but to look at certain memories you had to draw a line in the sand and say, 'I remember what happened and I am sure of all the details, including my own intentions.' You had to cross that line and relive them.

In the distance, a cloud line shifted around the base of Suilven, edging up and swooping down the other side in a wave. For a few moments the peak stayed the same shape, frosted like a cake. Jane felt a final pang of emotion at its absence, then nothing. The mist faded and there was no more mountain. She made a note of the style and manner of disappearance of Suilven in the catalogue. Sean's compass still pointed to the place in the clouds where it had been. Jane held it in one hand and her own in the other, eyes periodically drifting back to the empty span where Suilven used to be.

Chapter Eight: The Arrigetch

The day Sean fell, Jane had climbed with him all day in cloud. Cold, wet, hands and muscles cramping. The weather came on them out of nowhere. It was not in the forecast—they had waited for their weather window—but the rain was constant. The wind, beyond intense. Twice, it nearly blew Jane off the wall, roaring so loud she had no idea if she screamed. Once, Sean fell on the rope, smacking his head up against the rock hard enough for his helmet to come away dented, a crack running through.

“Free-Soloing,” Jane suggested, and they both smiled at the ridiculousness of the idea. They fought sometimes about his desire to start climbing that way. No ropes. No safety gear.

The fog clung to their ropes in thick, syrupy swirls of void. A muddy haze encircling Jane’s wrists and ankles as if it meant to erase her. It already had the sky, the ground, the rock, and empty air behind them. With GPS on the fritz, no sign of a bearing, Jane and Sean had no idea where they were, the drop to the next ledge might be thousands of feet or a matter of inches. When they could stop, they rubbed each other’s hands and arms to try and keep warm. Sean’s skin felt clammy, a sickly kind of heat. It had been hours since they tried to speak. “Must be the weather,” Sean said—some ten hours before. The antique compass was easier to read in the mist than her own. Jane’s compass was clear and plastic in the modern way, made to be ultralight and easy to chart over top of a map. The arrows on both spun. “Or” Sean had added. “Something magnetic in that meteor.”

The night before, they both saw a meteor, but not together, splitting the sky into pieces. Light seeped in through the cracks. Something terrible was trying to break through. It struck somewhere in the distance without a sound. Jane had been out getting water and Sean had gotten up in the middle of the night to pee. They had now been awake thirty-six hours. The meteor might as well have opened a wound in the sky. Maybe that was where all the

goddamn fog came from. The plan was to go over the back of mountain and come around, but somewhere, they got lost. Even Jane's bones hurt. With every step she imagined them crumbling away, starting with her knees. Nothing mattered now but getting down. Jane repeated the thought with every movement, every time she checked Sean's knots, every time they set up a new pitch. They were getting dangerously low on gear—carabiners, nuts, and webbing—essential for rappelling, the kind they had to leave behind, fixed to the mountain as they descended. Even one of the cams was gone. Jane slipped and fell then fell again, hanging, swinging in the driving rain. She had no idea how far they had come, but she didn't think it could be more than two thousand feet.

Minute by minute, their situation was becoming more dire.

As Sean set off down the current ledge, he raised his hand, their signal for 'climbing' since they were both too tired to speak. He backed into the fog and vanished in the slough of moving rope, lowering himself out of existence. The world ended right there—hungry—and he was feeding himself to it little by little. Jane was still watching when the rope went slack. She hoped Sean hadn't slipped on his way down or smacked his head against the cliff again. The cracked and dented helmet was at the end of its lifespan; when they got back it would have to be thrown out. She waited for the rope to jerk as he gave the symbol for coming off, but it remained slack.

"Sean?" she called.

She thought she heard an answer far below, muffled by the fog. Jane grabbed the rope, but it was loose. It took a second to realize what that might mean: Sean's weight was gone.

He had fallen off the rope.

No scream. No clinking of carabiners. Just gone.

Jane jerked on the line to be sure. The rope was lax and bumping against the cliff's edge, lost in the void.

"Sean?"

Maybe he reached the bottom and unclipped? But she had been watching the rope the whole time. He was supposed to tug on the rope twice when he hit ground. Maybe she missed it?

When Jane pulled up the rope, there was no Sean, just the clanking of his gear. His entire system was at the end. Jane examined the rope for any sign of a cut or fraying, but there was none. She sat on her haunches, focused on breathing. Jane could feel every notch in her spine. If the rope wasn't cut, it had to be his knot. Sean had forgotten to tie in a safety and a knot to catch himself at the rope's end. He hadn't closed the system. She had forgotten to check his knots when he set up to go down. The first thing every climber learned. The buddy-check. Beginner's shit: every time you clipped in you each checked each other's knots to be sure you if you fell, you wouldn't come off the rope. Sean had set up hundreds of rappels. It could still be an easy mistake to make though, when exhausted in mist and cold. He probably was just going too fast and rolled it, the belay device went with him, when he reached the end of the rope, he slipped off and then—.

What was worse, Sean failing the knot or her failing the buddy-check?

Jane went to the ledge and peered over the side. The mist below was nothing but white. Sean might have survived, even if he fell. He might be down there. Out of earshot. Maybe the answer she thought she heard earlier was him telling her he was safe. What if some part of her meant not to check the knot? An upsetting event at a party two months ago—the last time they were in Anchorage. What if some part of her subconscious decided to take matters into its own hands?

A fresh blast of rain crashed over Jane, seeming to come from deep within the mountain. No. She couldn't think about that right now. Whether Sean was down there waiting or dead and bleeding out, she had to get down.

The descent felt like walking backwards into space. It made the climb a blur. Which made climbing easy. The sight of the ground coming up below surprised her. When Jane tried to move away from the wall, her harness stopped her. She stared down at it. Of course, she had to bring the rope down from the system. The orange rope. Sean's rope. The back-and-forth motion it took felt like sawing, as if Jane were trying to take off one of her own limbs. When it fell, the rope came so softly that she felt tenderly towards it. Jane turned to face the beach. She knew it was a beach by the soil. She couldn't see the water for the cloud, but this was fine sand, not scree. An alpine lake. Jane didn't remember one on the map. She expected to find Sean pretty close to the route if he was okay, but there was no sign of him. No footprints in the sand.

So, he had fallen then.

That's how it was.

The ledge jutted far out from the rest of the mountain; there had been more than enough space for both of them to comfortably stand before he began his descent. A lot of overhang—Sean would have cleared most of the bigger rocks at the cliff base. He might have bounced. When Jane focused, she could see a form ahead on the sand. She heard the sound of water lapping, but still couldn't see it. It must be a big lake based on how quiet everything was. The wind roared on the ridge, but down here it was almost still. There must be walls to the lake on all sides. A protected spot.

As she neared the form on the ground, Jane knew it was Sean. The green Norwegian jacket and bright orange climbing trousers. His left leg was at an impossible angle. The rest of him lay partway on his side. He had his head on the flat of a rock like it was a pillow,

curled up to sleep. The pale blue helmet had broken clean away, half of it whole and on the sand next to him and the other half scattered in pieces like shells. His pack was still on. It must have struck the ground first, but at an angle that put too much pressure on his spine. In the end, his head hit the rock.

She was about to call out to him when she noticed he was still breathing. His eyes rocked in his head, but he didn't seem to see her.

"Hey," Jane said. Her voice cracked.

Sean's eyes moved again. By the angle he was lying at, Jane could tell there was something weird with his spine. She shouldn't try to move him, not unless he stopped breathing.

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

Jane bent down to give him a chance to focus on her. Sean's pupils dilated slightly, but he showed no recognition. His lips were pasty gray. It sent an animal revulsion through her.

"Sean," she said. "Sean, can you move?"

Jane talked to him mindlessly as she worked, describing what she was doing. She had access to his pack but had to be careful not to move him as she got out the sleeping bag to wrap him. It wouldn't be long until she collapsed herself; everything in her body gave way to the need to sleep. Jane thought she saw sparks flying in the fog out of the corner of her eyes as she worked. Pyrite reflecting in the sand. Hallucinations. A part of her brain wondered if it wasn't gold dust from the meteor. Sean had fallen on their last two cams for climbing and broken the springs. Not a good sign for Jane getting off this mountain in the morning. She wrapped all Sean's spare clothes around him from the pack to try and supplement warmth for him still being on the ground, then set up the tent.

Chapter Nine: Auke Bay

Before heading to Taku, Adeline met Kate for lunch one last time in the café beneath Squire's, across from the harbour. It was Friday. Adeline was early, but Kate was late. That was how it always went with them. A warm patch of sun lay across Adeline's folded hands as she waited. She wanted Kate to have the better spot to sit.

Adeline wondered if she should try to hold Kate's hand when she told her what she was going to do. They hadn't held hands since winter. Adeline missed the simultaneous warming and cooling sensation that touching Kate sent through her. Sometimes, they used to sit that way in silence looking out the café window, Adeline with her tea and Kate with her coffee—two creams, no sugar—watching snow blanket the harbour. It was perfect. Then Adeline ruined it. When Kate asked Adeline if she wanted to come over for dinner and a movie, Adeline kept thinking about a girl in her class when she was ten—Drew—with hair the color of changing leaves. During an in-class film, Adeline asked if it was okay to move her hair behind her ears for her and when Drew said 'yes' it felt like she was arranging auburn flowers. Adeline liked taking care of someone pretty enough to be a princess in a fairytale, but her teacher held her in from lunch after class. "Do you know why you were doing that?" the teacher asked. Then, after recess, Drew wouldn't sit by her anymore. She never sat by Adeline again.

Adeline didn't have friends other than Kate. It wasn't that she didn't want things to happen between them so as much as she needed them to stay the same. Terrified that Kate would stop coming to lunch after she turned her down, Adeline nearly broke into tears when she appeared the next Friday, later than usual, but smiling. Everything was back to normal after that. No matter how badly Adeline wanted to hold Kate's hand again, she didn't dare try.

The bell on the door of the cafe rang as Kate arrived. In the winter she wore almost exclusively heavy-knit fishermen's sweaters and wool pants, but in summer, on sunny days like this, she rotated through her three sundresses. They were all primary colors like a child's paint set; red, blue, and yellow. Today was the yellow one, a sort of mustardy sunflower color with eyelets around the hem. She looked like light—the kind Adeline imagined at the beginning of the world when all the stars first came into existence. Kate had not bought a new dress in the six years Adeline had known her.

“You’ve been waiting?” Kate asked.

“Not long. I ordered tea but it hasn’t come.”

“I’ll reorder for you, it’s my turn to pay anyway.”

“Was there traffic?”

“Tourists. Something like 20,000 in town today. Bunch of cruise ships.”

“Gross.”

“So gross.”

The waitress set Adeline’s tea down in front of her in a white mug and Kate ordered coffee. For lunch, they each ordered a Rueben sandwich, as was their summer tradition.

“I’m going away for a bit,” said Adeline. “So, I’ll end up missing our lunch next week. Maybe the next week too. I’m not sure how long it will take to do what I have to do.”

Kate had a habit of cocking her head from side to side when she was curious that Adeline was almost certain she had picked up from her dog, Mac. “Where are you going?”

Here we go, thought Adeline. Kate had always claimed to believe Adeline about Jane being in Meteora, but the topic seemed to make her uncomfortable. Adeline didn’t want to lie to her, but if it came down to it, she had practiced what she was going to say. “Camping and hiking.”

“Sounds restful.”

“I don’t think it will be.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“It’s where they found Sean, so, because of everything and nothing maybe. I think there’s another door to Meteora nearby.”

Kate made an expression Adeline had not seen before. She was still making eye contact, but her face froze. Slowly, her jaw stiffened.

“I thought the door to Meteora was in the Arrigetch,” Kate said.

“There must be more. I don’t know how else Sean’s body would get all the way down here,” Adeline explained. “I met with a mountaineering group that’s going past where Sean’s body was. They say they can take me. It will all be safe. I’ll have a GPS two-way communicator on me.”

“Like an awful lot of words that you just said, that could mean an awful lot of things.”

Adeline looked back down at the patch of sun on her hands and did not reply. She explained the details of her plan. Kayak with the mountaineers, wait until they were up on the ice, then go off looking for the door to Meteora. She hoped Kate would understand, she had to, Adeline had been praying for an opportunity like this.

“I don’t suppose you’ve told this group of mountaineers what you’re really doing?” Kate asked.

“If I did, I think they would assume I’m having some kind of a mental thing.”

“That is the sort of question you might want to ask yourself. If I were a different person, and if you were a different person—I might have a hard time trusting you.”

Adeline looked up. In all their conversations about Jane and Meteora, Kate had never once accused her of being unstable. She told stories of her own about ghosts and strange encounters she’d read about all the time. Whenever she spoke about them, she changed. Kate

had a round, open, kittenish face, but when she told those stories a darkness seemed to spool up from inside her.

“Do you think I’m having some kind of mental thing?”

Kate shook her head. “I think you have a good sense of how far to take things and you love your sister very much. I think the rigidity of the edges of our physical world are uncertain. I think there’s also a fine line. Maybe there’s nothing out there but a bunch of trees, and maybe the door to Meteora is there, but both can be dangerous. It’s knowing when to turn around that’s the problem.”

“Sure,” said Adeline. She didn’t know why Kate would bring up turning around. Adeline had almost given up hope on Jane when she realized she couldn’t get to the Arrigetch. There was no turning around. Maybe Kate was worried about what would happen if there wasn’t a door? But how could Sean’s body end up eight-hundred miles away from where he disappeared, if not for Meteora?

“What if I borrowed a kayak and came with you?” Kate asked.

A clogged, sticky feeling rose in the back of Adeline’s throat like the first signs of a cold. It was good that Kate wanted to help, but the idea made Adeline want to slide away through the floor. Meteora was her and Jane’s world. She had never shared it with anyone. Even telling Kate about it had been a breach of contract. In Meteora, Jane would have been without people in the mountains for a year, grieving Sean—and then to have Adeline show up with someone she didn’t know? Jane knew about Kate, but the two had never met. Besides, there were practical issues. Kate liked reading about supernatural things, but she herself seemed very nervous about them. What if Kate got too nervous and wanted to go home? In six years, Adeline and Kate had never hung out outside of a long lunch date. It had been a whole, all-day lunch date a couple times, from noon until the café closed at nine in the evening, but still. And then there was the two-way communicator. Adeline had convinced

Reese to have Kate on the other end of it instead of himself, that way Adeline's texts would send Kate her coordinates and buy her more time. If Kate came with her, Reese was going to want to see where she was. He would notice when Adeline left camp and worry.

"I don't think the mountaineering group would appreciate another tag-along," she said. "They're already being pretty nice to involve me."

Adeline explained to Kate about the two-way communicator.

"I could come by after they've gone," Kate said. "Or, once you find the door to Meteora, you could tell me, and I would come find you."

"If I wait for you, how am I supposed to have enough time to get to Jane? Reese will come to camp to pick me up in the day it takes you to get to where I am, and I won't be there."

"You need to think about this with the focus more on you coming back than like going in," said Kate. "This can get messy. If I can't come with you, can we at least set a time limit on how long you spend looking for the door? Then, if it gets later than that time, if you haven't found it, you turn around?"

Adeline supposed there was no harm in that. "We camp at the lake Tuesday night, then they leave Wednesday. We can say the deadline is Friday. By what would be our lunch date?"

Two days should be more than enough time to find the door. When Jane was in backcountry, she said she tended to go fifteen miles a day.

"If you do find the door, promise you won't just go in? The Perseids will still be going on for another week or so. You could come back like the mountaineers planned and we could go on our own."

If Adeline found the door, there was no way she wasn't going through. From what she remembered, looking out over Meteora from a peak she and Jane climbed—the place was

huge. Infinite, rolling mountains around one, big, barely visible, distant peak. With luck, Jane would be camped by the Entryway, waiting for the door to open, but Adeline couldn't rely on that. It had been a year.

The waitress came with their food and they both instinctively moved their hands away into their laps. Kate had her Rueben with the Thousand Island dressing on the side to use like a dipping sauce. She sat silently, looking at it. Adeline was going to have lie. She tried to imagine a world in which what she was about to say was true. One in which she and Kate were together, and it wasn't the middle of the Perseids, but the beginning. Jane wasn't lost. It would make sense to wait for Kate then, to show her Meteora.

"If I find the door," said Adeline. "I'll come back and tell you, then we'll rent kayaks the next day and come back together."

"You'll come back *alive* to tell me."

"Yes. Alive. I'll come back *alive* and tell you."

"You had better," said Kate. "These things have a way of trying to swallow a person. I don't want Jane to be dead, but it's you I'm worried about."

The image of a world in which Adeline and Kate were together dropped back into a long tunnel. Adeline had lied and now, at some point, Kate was going to be mad at her. Maybe, once Adeline got to Jane, she could get back before the deadline and when Kate realized they were back, she would understand.

Adeline picked up her Rueben and for a little while she and Kate ate in silence, watching rain move in over the bay.

Chapter Ten: Fritz Cove

When Adeline got home, she went into the back room where she kept Jane's gear. There wasn't space to pack her bag in there, so she dragged the boxes out. They were more or less exactly in the same order as they had been since she moved Jane's things in after the funeral. Hastily labelled boxes, waiting for Jane to return, crowding the window. The only organization to them was Jane's. Her spare hiking gear had already been in an eighty-litre blue plastic tote in her gear closet. She lifted the lid off to the smell of stale earth and cedar. Jane put cedar chips in her storage boxes to protect anything that had wool. Her jackets and clothing were on top of the more basic gear underneath.

The tote was packed according to Jane's ten commandments of backcountry.

1. Honor thy tent clothes and keep them holy.

Tent clothes had to be kept in the most protected place. That meant on top for this particular box, since all the heavier gear would be dirtier and best kept on the bottom. On top lay a few pairs of Jane's boot socks, double-layered fleece pants and half-zip. Adeline lifted them out and brought them into the bedroom. These she would put into a dry-evac sack and put at the bottom pack on top of her pack. In the Highlands, she and Jane always had separate clothes for in the tent and outside the tent, but she remembered seeing Jane wear this tent-fleece once in the morning while they made coffee. When Adeline did it herself the next day, Jane criticized her for it.

2. Always keep thy rain gear accessible.

Jane's rain gear lay in the layer between the clothes/jackets and her other gear to act as a kind of barrier between them and the other gear. Adeline had her own rain gear. Back in her bedroom with the pack, she wound up her rain jacket and rain pants to conserve space and

crushed them into the outside pocket across her pack's body. A universal outdoors truth in rainy climates.

3.

What was three? Something about tents? There were two tents here.

Adeline couldn't remember. In the Highlands, Jane had a saying: *where there's sheeps we sleeps*. She had to hand it to Jane, the best camping on their trip did always seem to be on ground trampled flat by sheep with grass worn short by their grazing, usually down by the water. Jane had little sayings for everything. The principal of *where there's sheeps we sleeps* wouldn't apply in Southeast Alaska. The nearest sheep was either three-hundred miles north in Mat-Suc, or somewhere in Canada, even further.

Which of Jane's tents should she bring? One big enough to share with Jane? These were both two-person tents. Adeline didn't know much about the differences between them. The one that they had used together in Scotland Jane had brought with her and Sean into the Arrigetch. She must be living in it now. What if Jane wasn't camped in Meteora? She could have built her own shelter or ended up in some kind of cave. Adeline supposed there was no way to know. Before, she and Jane had never been in Meteora longer than an afternoon, a time squeezed in between when they got off school and their parents got home from work. It had all happened over two summers. Less than three months because of the Perseids.

4. Thou shalt always remember when it comes to weight. Less is more.

The green tent in her left hand weighed less than the purple one. Adeline knew enough about kayaking to know that the kayaks would take the brunt of the kit, but it still seemed like a good idea to use the lighter of the two.

5.

She was struggling now. Weren't there supposed to be ten of these rules? She was through the tote and there were no more clues. It seemed Jane only ever really repeated the

first four. *Where there's sheeps we sleeps* was stuck in Adeline's head on a loop now, but that didn't make sense for Alaska. Here, there were so many trees. And devil's club and cow parsnip and bears and porcupines to think about when you made a bear-hang to protect your food. In Scotland, she and Jane kept their food in bags in the tent. Jane had spent ages camping on her own in Alaska, so why were her commandments centered around Scotland? Had she just made them up to share with Adeline on their trip?

Adeline sat on the bed. Jane's spare sleeping bag liner in the box still smelled like her. For a split second, her chest tightened, and Adeline couldn't breathe. It had already been so long. What if this really was all that was left of Jane? She shut her eyes and forced herself to exhale, long and slow. It was the Perseids. There had to be a door in Taku because that's where Sean's body was, and when she got through to Meteora, Jane would be there. Just a little longer.

While Adeline was out of the bedroom a fly had come in through the window and landed on the open journal on her bed. She imagined slamming it on the fly and killing it but did nothing. 'Mic-drop, motherfucker,' Jane's voice said in her head. Adeline had seen her slam a book shut once in Assynt to kill a midge.

Chapter Eleven: Twin Glacier Lake

The kayak journey to Twin Glacier Lake went better than Adeline had been led to believe it would. The day rolled in with gray, thick clouds crowding the sky, but Amanda did all the navigating.

“Water isn’t as fast as it was before,” Will told Adeline. “In the morning I’ll try to take you where we found him.”

He never seemed to call Sean by name. Always ‘him’ or ‘the body’ or ‘Greenly.’

As a group, they were a fleet of seven kayaks, boats loaded with skis and expedition bags. The bright colors of equipment and bags stood in stark contrast against the water and sky. Adeline did not think the colors fit in with this world of moving parts, of in-betweens. But sitting in Jane’s old brown insulation layer and blue hiking trousers, she herself did not feel separate. It was nice to be a part of it—the land between the water, water between the land, the land between the glacier, ice between the mountains and all of that reaching down. The shoreline of green, black, shrinking walls around her. Whenever she looked away, the trees traded places.

The rest of the group planned to go up the arm of East Glacier after a day’s rest, which meant porting the kayaks and gear a half mile across an old moraine to the lake. But Adeline had never had such a big day or ported a kayak so far. By the time they reached the lake her arms and shoulders ached with tight, cold fire. While the others collected driftwood their outlines wavered as if they were thinning into air. Adeline went into her tent to get a jacket, then woke in darkness. She did not remember lying down. She had to pee worse than she ever had before in her life. Getting out of the tent was a frantic ordeal, fumbling limbs, fingers clutching at her jacket, boots, zipping and unzipping the tent layers. When Adeline finally wrestled herself free, the black mouth of the treeline was too ominous, but the middle

of camp was far too open. She desperately staggered to the beach and ducked behind a driftwood log. Relief was warm and instant. It drew her attention to the sky. The glaciers glowed, reaching down to the lake in two separate arms. A star above the west arm drooped towards the ice, slim nebulous forming the hem of a nightgown. It blushed gold and grew a tail, and then the star was not a star, but a meteor. It couldn't be very big, but it was close enough that for a split second a clear ribbon blazed over the ice. Adeline almost rocked out of her squatting position and had to steady herself on the nearby log. Getting her pants up while still looking up at the sky proved impossible. When she looked back, she could no longer track the meteor, but knew it had been moving inland rather than back out towards Juneau.

Somewhere, in all this liquid darkness a door to Meteora was open.

"Did you fucking see that?"

Adeline turned so hard towards the voice she nearly fell over. Amanda had been sitting on the beach the whole time. Wrong side of the log to have seen Adeline peeing, but definitely close enough to hear.

"Oh God. I didn't know there was anyone here," Adeline said.

Amanda waved a careless hand. "During glacier travel I piss face-forward in front of everybody. It's too dangerous to get off the rope and deal with the mechanics. If anyone looks at me while I'm doing it, I stare right back."

It sounded like the sort of thing Jane would do. Adeline had not thought of Amanda and Jane as similar before. Jane went out alone and was very vocal about that preference. She had been warned against it a lot, so much so she bristled at any suggestion, though she understood the dangers better than anyone. She even went as far as to claim one of the best things about dating Sean was that he lived in Anchorage, so she could cut him out of regular trips. It wasn't fair, Adeline supposed, to assume that because Amanda seemed to genuinely enjoy being out with Will, that she was somehow a weaker, less individual person.

“You saw the meteor?” she asked Amanda.

“Definitely. Think it landed or burned up?”

“I think it burned up.”

“I’ve never seen one hit.”

“I have,” said Adeline. “But just once. I was eleven. It’s how you know when a door between worlds has been opened. They gravitate towards any newly opened space. Like a wind tunnel.”

Amanda’s silence reminded Adeline that it wasn’t a good idea to talk that way around other people. “Or so my grandma used to say,” she added quickly.

“Your grandma sounds like an interesting woman. But then my grandma used to tell me that interesting was a non-word used only by uninteresting people who are too stupid to understand.”

“She sounds awful,” said Adeline. Amanda seemed to have accepted the lie.

“I liked her, but I don’t think she liked me very much. Sorry for scaring you. Had to be sure I wasn’t seeing things.”

“It’s fine. Why aren’t you in bed?”

“Will snores. I don’t tell him because he’s self-conscious about getting old and bothering me. When he does it, I usually get up for a walk. Sometimes I even leave the house and go on a drive. Once I went all the way out to False Outer Point.”

“You must like it,” said Adeline. “Having a secret.”

Amanda studied her. “If you don’t mind my saying, you’re not how I imagined.”

Adeline hadn’t imagined Amanda before they met. She worried now that was rude.

“What did you think I would be like?”

“I don’t know. The opposite of Jane. I thought this trip would be hard on you. I thought you needed to be protected.”

It always surprised Adeline; how other people saw her. “From what?”

“Does it matter if it isn’t real?”

Adeline hadn’t given much thought to Will and Amanda’s motivations for getting her where she wanted to go. Maybe, Amanda could be a better ally than Will. If she really was like Jane, she had a better chance of understanding her.

“Will wants something from me,” Adeline said. “But I don’t know what it is. Do you know?”

“Who’s to say what Will ever really wants,” said Amanda. “You’d have to ask him.” Her tone was friendly, but Adeline got the sense she did not like that question.

“What do you think he wants?”

Amanda paused again, this time for longer. She had her hair up instead of down and tucked behind her ears and Adeline wished she would change it. She looked more like Kate the other way.

“Forgiveness, maybe? In place of your sister. Will is always pushing himself into spaces where he doesn’t belong. He means well and is usually just trying to fix it, but he’s not great at knowing when that isn’t his place.”

She seemed to be trying to tell Adeline something, slipping a note beneath a door.

“What about you?” pressed Adeline. “Is there something you want?”

“Not that I’m aware of. At this point, I’m just mitigating. I do it to myself. I like to have someone to look out for, you know. Then I don’t have to be the shitshow. I get to be the one who sees what’s coming.”

“And what is coming?” Adeline asked. Maybe the conversation within this conversation wasn’t about her. It was starting to sound more like Amanda and Will.

“Sorry. I don’t know why I’m saying this. We should go back to sleep.”

This must be one of those instances when Adeline had been too direct too soon. Jane often warned her to ration being direct unless she wanted that kind of reaction. Jane didn't mind it herself—she said it made her feel powerful.

“The meteor,” Adeline suggested. “Maybe you think you have seen something like it before?”

From the way Amanda shook her head, Adeline knew it must be true.

“We need to go to bed,” said Amanda. “Sorry again for sneaking up on you.”

“I enjoyed the conversation.”

Stones shifted in a clatter beneath Amanda as she stood. “Be careful tomorrow when you get near the river. Be sure you get whatever you need out of seeing where we found Sean.”

“I will,” said Adeline.

Amanda walked away with the grating sound of small stones and sand. Across the lake, Adeline traced the arch of where the meteor had been. From her understanding, it was the same direction and about the same place where they had found Sean's body.

Chapter Twelve: Taku Valley

Will came to get her in the morning at about nine. The sun was high, but Adeline shivered when she stood in the shadow of the kayak. The stream that ran alongside the moraine was rough—too rough to paddle down, but as they ported the kayak, she could not help but look at it with longing.

Will could not seem to stop talking. An anxious stream of words about weather and river conditions. Jane talked that way sometimes, so Adeline was used to it, but her sister did it mostly when she was trying to distract herself. In Scotland, she knew something was bothering Jane by the way she kept going on about camping. All their conversations seemed to keep coming back to where they could, or should, or would have been able to set up the tent if they wanted. Jane pointed out spots along the way, even though they were hours from where they planned to stop. Each time they unpacked for the night, Jane explained her set up in detail: hiking clothes in the dry evac sack for a pillow and water bottle and headlamp to the right for easy access in the middle of the night. And of course, there was the all-important process of getting inside the tent. One must take off one's shoes so as not to get the tent dirty, but also so as not to let in any midges, which meant you had to zip up the outside layer of the tent first, then the inside layer *around* your feet and hands while you took off your shoes. Adeline kept trying to open up conversation, and Jane kept giving instructions rather than answers. That's how Adeline knew something pretty upsetting must have happened to Jane before their trip, but she wasn't ready to tell.

The closer they got to Taku River, the worse the water got. Silty sandbars grounded them every ten minutes or so, forcing Adeline and Will to get out and port the kayak with the sand shifting and disappearing beneath them.

“It’s rough going,” Will apologized. “That’s why no one really kayaks past the glacier. The silt and current are too much. Amanda and I were packrafting down.”

They left yet another fast-deteriorating sandbar. Adeline couldn’t see Will because he sat behind her to navigate, but she could hear the tension threaded in every word he spoke.

“It must be soon,” he said. And then, “Any minute now.” They grounded on a sandbar moments after grounding on another.

Adeline felt no connection or sense of eeriness as she neared the trees that might indicate a hidden door to Meteora. From the water, each section of the woods looked the same.

“I’m sorry,” Will said when they grounded for a countless time. “Maybe the current swallowed up the sandbar. It was near the mouth of the river. It must have shifted away.”

He looked defeated, but Adeline understood. The river was impenetrable. They needed to turn around.

“You did the best you could,” she said.

They shifted the kayak into position to try and head back. Adeline’s disappointment was muted by her fear of losing her footing on the vanishing sandbars. She was too hot and cold and sticky and tired already all at the same time. The doorway was going to have to be found after Will and the others had already gone up the glacier anyway. It was going to be an ‘on foot’ kind of endeavour.

“There was a light,” stammered Will as he helped Adeline get back into kayak. The water kept trying to wrestle it from them. “Just before we found him. Some kind of natural phenomenon.”

Will was trying to apologize in all these different ways, but Adeline didn’t understand why. She didn’t need an apology. Sure, there would have been some kind of light if the door to Meteora opened, but that wasn’t going to help her.

“A golden tunnel,” Will said. The story was pouring out of him now. He wanted to tell Adeline everything. That had been his plan all along, wasn’t it? Rooted somewhere just out of sight inside him. Coming clean was how you made things right. He had fucked up by not telling her from the beginning. Besides, it would be a good practice run for later with Amanda. He needed to tell her about Jane sometime. “The gold light made it hard to see where we were,” Will went on. “And when we came out on the other side, we found the hand. I never met him. I knew Jane had a boyfriend. Before Jane and I almost happened even.”

The line lit up in Adeline’s brain. “What?”

“Jane and I almost went home together. We made out in a bar last summer.”

They hit another sandbar before Adeline could respond. She got back out again into the silt with the river swirling, ground draining at her feet.

“I handled it all wrong,” Will said. “In the end, she didn’t want me so we both went home. But now she’s gone and I—”

They freed the kayak from the sandbar and got back in again.

Adeline struggled to picture Jane and Will. He didn’t seem her type. That couldn’t have been the big thing Jane wasn’t telling her when they were in Scotland. The timing was right, but the shape of this conversation didn’t fit. Had Will done something truly bad? He didn’t seem to be aware of it, if so. At least not to the scale of the impression Adeline had from the way Jane had been acting. In a way though, that was worse. It meant Jane hadn’t told her about kissing Will—just because. She might have all kinds of secrets. Even full-blown affairs she failed to mention. A whole part of Jane’s personality to which Adeline had no access. Adeline didn’t spend the kind of time she spent with Jane with anyone else, but Jane always had her outdoor sports friends. If it were Adeline in Meteora, would Jane be working this hard to save her?

“I’m sorry,” said Will. “I’m going to tell Amanda eventually. It’s just with Jane dead—”

“I don’t care,” Adeline said. “I don’t care about anything you’re saying right now.”

Behind her, Will fell silent. She couldn’t see his face, but imagined it pinched like a stone.

“Jane’s not dead. You don’t know that. We know Sean is dead. You found his body near here. But he isn’t Jane, and he wasn’t Jane, and you don’t know anything about her. You’re just some guy she kissed once in a bar.”

The only sound around them was the river. Will did not respond. He narrowly guided them away from another sandbar and the kayak slid into slightly clearer water. Adeline felt bad for losing her temper, but it seemed like a bad idea to speak to him again. She had always suspected her relationship with Jane was uneven. Jane’s funeral was evidence of that. Skiing friends, climbing friends, work friends, a whole fucking mountaineering group. Why should Jane bother telling her little sister everything when she could rent a sports friend for a day, say whatever she wanted, then not see them for a month? Whatever she had with Will probably hadn’t meant anything to Jane, but that wasn’t the point.

They didn’t talk the rest of the way back. At Twin Glacier Lake, Adeline went straight to her tent without another word. On the two-way communicator Garmin, she messaged Kate.

How’s it going? Kate responded instantly.

Bad, thought Adeline. Really bad. *About how I thought it would,* she said.

Wut time r u taking off 2morrow? I want to kno when to start the clock.

Kate was taking that 48-hour window seriously. She must be worried. Adeline felt sick. She was trapped in the lie now. Nothing to do but go forward. Even if Jane didn’t think she needed to be as close to Adeline as she felt to Jane, Adeline still wanted her back.

Once they're far enough away that they won't see me. They plan to leave at 7am. So. Maybe 10am. Adeline texted Kate.

It was actually six. Adeline figured she would leave at eight. That bought her two more hours. Anything to increase the chances of her getting into Meteora without Kate knowing until it was too late.

Message when u leave?

Of course.

Message if u find anything.

I promise.

Message wut u plan to do if u find anything?

Someone was walking up to the tent. Adeline could hear their footsteps, heavy and slow. She hoped it wasn't Will, but it probably was.

I will if I do. Adeline texted.

"Do you mind coming on a walk with me?"

It was Will. Of course, it was Will. She couldn't flat out dismiss him after the way things had gone. If she did that, Will might not let her stay with the camp. He might decide their fight meant something. Why had she let on that she didn't think Jane was dead?

"Are you going to keep apologizing but acting like you know more about my sister than me?" Adeline asked.

"I'm not trying to be that way."

"Reality doesn't run on your intentions," she said. That was something Jane would say.

"That's fair. What would you like me to do differently?"

"I would like you to admit this doesn't involve you, but at this point I think that's only a long-term solution."

A pause on the other side of the tent. “It involves me because I’m the one that brought you here. I’m responsible for what happens to you and whatever equipment we leave behind.”

“I’m not going to do anything to the equipment.”

“I know. I just—”

“I’m the one that’s responsible for me. Jane’s been gone for ages. Nearly a whole year before you decided to show up. What difference do you think a few days makes?”

Will went quiet. Adeline waited to see if he would leave. She needed to find a fast resolution to this. Maybe if she tried channelling Jane again. On her own, Adeline wasn’t great at being clear if it meant hurting someone else’s feelings, but Jane had no problem with it.

“I appreciate the effort and resources it took for you to bring me here,” Adeline said. “I wouldn’t have been able to get here without you and Amanda. But this is the point where all that comes to an end. If you really want to help, you’ve already done so. Anything past this point is not helpful. It is intrusion.”

Will’s voice got very small. “Okay,” he said.

“You’ll see me in the morning before you take off. Right now, I just need some time to myself.”

“Yes. Of course.”

Will’s footsteps drifted away. When Adeline looked down at the Garmin again, she had another text from Kate.

U sure ur ok? Sure u wanna do this?

I promise, I’m fine. Adeline texted back. I absolutely want to.

Chapter Thirteen: Twin Glacier Lake

It was four-thirty in the morning when Will and Amanda woke to leave. The sun wasn't quite up, sending a pale blue glow through the tent walls. The air smelled of rain though none had fallen in the night. Will stretched the stiffness from his shoulders and threw on a fleece. Sleep had been full of dreams about ice-climbing and worry. In one, he looked down and saw Jane at the pitch instead of Amanda, with no eyes or tongue. It didn't frighten him as much as it could have; when you found bodies left out in the wild, ravens and other scavengers often took their toll.

They had agreed to meet the rest of the group and make breakfast together before pack rafting across the lake to the glacier. Adeline would stay with the kayaks and extra supplies until Reese came in about two days. She had come out of her tent briefly to say hello to him and Amanda at dinner, but ate in silence, then went back into her tent while everyone else talked around the campfire. Will sensed she wanted to be left alone. He was grateful. He filled Amanda in about their fight on his own before bed. With one omission.

"She said Jane wasn't dead," Will said.

"I agree. That isn't great," replied Amanda. "But what exactly should we do? No one is going to volunteer to stay behind with her. We've been planning this expedition for ages."

"Just, the way Adeline so easily brushed off not being able to see the very spot we brought her here to see. I think there must be some other reason she came."

"Like what?"

Will had no answer. And so, they went to bed.

The dream had brought to mind an uncomfortable parallel between Jane and Amanda. Both she and Amanda held their bodies defiantly open when they talked, shoulders squared. They both climbed with the same brusque, calculated style—they were the only two climbers

Will had ever met, who, rather than jumping off the wall when they knew they couldn't make a move, always went for it anyway and fell. From a distance, on the wall, he was not sure he could have told them apart. And neither Jane nor Amanda was the type to suffer fools, but Amanda had always been much kinder to him. He should have known better than to tell Adeline about Jane. Now, she might out him. Maybe, deep down, he had told her because some part of him hoped she would. Then he wouldn't have to tell Amanda himself. Fucking coward.

"What?" Amanda asked. He had been staring at her.

"I'm worried about Adeline."

"Will, we leave in an hour."

"Aren't you worried?" Now definitely wasn't the time to tell her, but he didn't know when a good time would be.

"Staying behind until someone can come get her is definitely overkill, and I don't have another solution," said Amanda.

"So, now that it's inconvenient for us, her mental health suddenly isn't our concern?"

"You and I made an underlying decision when we brought her here. Everyone did. Whatever Adeline is going through; she knows what is best for her. Adeline doesn't strike me as unstable. She isn't acting erratically."

"It can't be healthy for her to think that way."

"No. But she's also like, thirty. She's not a child whose every belief is ours to correct."

"What if we send Reese a message? Ask if he can come out early and check on her?"

"That's going to be a minimum twenty-four hours. What are we going to say in the message? Something's off with Adeline's 'vibe?'"

They were fighting again, Will realized. In trying to deflect from his own bullshit he had started a fight.

“Amanda,” he said. “Can I talk to you about something? Something to do with us?”

Amanda double checked her pack and pushed it out of the tent and onto the ground beyond. “Why would you ask me that right now?”

“Sometimes it seems like lately, maybe we aren’t okay.”

“Maybe we aren’t,” Amanda said. She followed the pack out of the tent.

Will pushed his pack out too and followed her. “I think I’m the reason for it. There’s something I need to tell you.”

The lake wasn’t misty in the way Will had feared. In fact, while overcast, the cloud line appeared to be pretty high, and he could make out the backs of the mountains over either glacier. What if he told her and she left him before they even got on the ice?

“Will,” said Amanda. “We’re in the middle of a group camp. I love you, so I’m not going to lie to you, but we don’t have time for whatever conversation you want to have. We need to get onto the icefield.”

Of course, she was right. All around them, the others were coming out of their tents to cook and do take-down. At the far end of camp, in front of Jane’s old tent, Adeline sat on the ground with a stove between her legs—also presumably Jane’s—making instant coffee. She waved when she saw them.

“I’m sorry,” said Will. It would be objectively selfish to tell her this way. They were about to be in tight quarters for a full two weeks. After the trip was over and he had enough time to think of the kindest, most honest way to tell her, that’s when he would do it. “After the climb then.”

“That about covers it,” said Amanda. “I’m sorry too.” She circled the tent, pulling up stakes. “Let’s go get ready for this mountain. Because I’m still quite excited about this trip in spite of everything. How about you?”

“I’m excited.”

“Great. Let’s go then.”

Adeline saw Will and Amanda off as promised. At breakfast, she did not sit apart from the group like the night before, but neither did she make conversation. She was grateful to Will for giving her space but still annoyed. When he asked her if she slept well while he went over camp details with her, Adeline only nodded. Will went over everything three times. Where the bear hangs were, how to take them up and down or rehang them if it came down to it. How far away from camp she needed to be to cook food so the bears wouldn’t bother her. To remember always to hang her trash up too. The kayaks were all out of the water. She got the feeling that they could have been left unattended, but Will went over how to tie them up anyway. She wanted him to stop asking if she would be okay.

“I’m good,” Adeline said. “I can manage two days.”

She supposed, now that their time together was about to end, she could see a bit of what Jane must have seen in Will. No self-awareness, going overboard when he did notice his mistakes. But Adeline had also spent most of her life trying to make up for a lack of self-awareness. Jane would have recognized that in him. She had spent her whole life trying to teach Adeline how to handle people. “Don’t worry,” Adeline told Will. “Everything will be fine.”

Will didn’t know how she could sound so certain. He asked to check the Garmin two-way communicator Reese had given Adeline to be sure it was working properly. An unread message from her friend said *Good luck tomorrow*. Will wondered why she hadn’t opened it.

He and Amanda did a final count with the group on equipment and loaded up. From shore, Adeline put her hands in the pockets of her coat. Will recognized it as one of Jane's old insulation layers. A brown one, the kind with a hood too big to fit unless you wore a climbing helmet under it. Adeline's hair blew everywhere under the ill-fitted hood, getting in her eyes over and over again. She did not look at all like Jane in it.

As Will and Amanda pushed off in the raft, she came down to the water and stood on its edge.

"Be safe," Adeline called out. Devil's Paw looked like a serious mountain, even just from the map on her wall at home. Well over eight-thousand feet. A whole second mountain of rock sticking out from the already four-thousand-foot icefield.

Will raised a paddle to Adeline in return. It was a two-and-a-half-mile paddle up to the West Twin Glacier arm and a rough climb after that. As Will and Amanda paddled with their skies wedged between them, Will kept glancing back over his shoulder to catch a view of camp. Adeline was still there. Sitting now as she watched them go. Her elbows rested on her knees in front of her and the toes of her hiking boots almost touched the water. She looked at peace. Like she knew something he did not know about the lake spread out before her. Will turned his attention to the mountains. The next time he looked back, Adeline was much further away, a dot on the shore. Then nothing.

Chapter Fourteen: Beyond

It didn't take Adeline long to take down her tent and pack. She zipped her journal in the side pocket of her jacket for easy navigational access and set off in the direction of the meteor. A bright, soaring feeling rose inside of her at finally being on her way. She was free of Will and Amanda with all their complications—free and alone and on her way to Jane.

Her joy was short-lived. Almost immediately, Adeline encountered devil's club. The flat, pointed leaves stood shoulders high with veins and thick stalks covered in thorns as tiny and abundant as hairs. She had known about devil's club—if you tripped on a trail, it always seemed to appear wherever you grabbed—but here, it was everywhere. No path to traverse it. When Jane went on lowland expeditions, she wore leather workman's gloves and a pair of cheap rain pants she said she planned on getting torn to bits. Now Adeline knew why. She caught a handful of the thorns within the first ten minutes. Splinters burned in the soft folds of skin between her fingers. She winced and flexed her hand, trying to pick them out. A few paces later, Adeline got hit again. In two hours, she went less than a mile. Fifteen miles a day, she had estimated before. Adeline was not Jane.

She gave up on the 'cut across the forest' strategy. Following a stream, Adeline walked along its banks until the silty ribbon of the Taku appeared through the trees. The crosscut of water running down to join the Taku made her new route, while less full of devil's club, still pretty slow. She crossed rushing tributaries with dry feet twice, then had to double back and recross with wet ones.

Any luck? Kate asked from the Garmin.

No.

Maybe u have to wait 4 midnight?

She could not tell if Kate was making fun of her. A moment later, the Garmin vibrated again.

Either the gps locator on ur garmin is off or u haven't gotten very far. Rough going?

Adeline ignored the message. She didn't want to be teased.

U can always just come back, u kno. Jane might not even b there. Will u be ok with that?

Adeline zipped the Garmin in her coat pocket, opposite the journal. So, she wasn't Jane. Jane had been doing this kind of thing for years, but she hadn't always known how. Jane didn't grow up in Southeast Alaska like Kate, rolling around on boats and in woods full of devil's club. She grew up with Adeline between two corn fields, a hayfield, and some woods. Everything Jane knew, she had learned after they moved to Idaho in their teens, or as an adult in Alaska. Adeline could learn too. The stream in front of her was the size of a highway, white and rushing. She followed it upstream, but there was only one spot where the water was shallower and slower, and it was still sketchy. Beyond that, the banks steepened to cliffs. Adeline puffed her way back to the shallower spot. As light rain fell, she dropped the pack to rest, dripping with sweat. Jane always said wet boots were dangerous, but Adeline didn't see how she was supposed to cross a riverbed full of sharp sticks barefoot. When they crossed rivers in Scotland, Jane had her leave her pack unclipped, but Adeline worried the weight of it shifting would throw her off balance. She kept on her boots and adjusted the hip and chest straps of the pack to keep it tight. On the first step, icy water reached past her ankles, poured in through the tops of her boots. The water level rose, liquid sharp and cold in a constant push at her knees. Soon, she was up to her waist and fighting to place steps.

Halfway across, her right foot went into a hole.

For a moment, Adeline fought the river. Then, in almost slow-motion, felt it take her. The pack tipped backwards, tugging her down. She couldn't quite manage to tilt her weight

back the other way. The water rose up in a choke and then Adeline was a part of the current, patches of splashing sky tearing past her. She dropped the hiking poles and tore at the clasps of the pack; one pole flew away and the other hovered parallel in the same stream of current. Pain webbed through Adeline's right side and arm as she hit a rock. She got the pack off and it sank immediately, popped up far ahead of her and wound away out of sight. The pockets of her jacket ballooned with water as she grabbed for the last hiking pole. It caught on a rock somewhere below the surface before she could get it and the end smacked against her chest, pushing her up and out of the water. Adeline gasped and lurched forward, hurtling blindly onto land. She belly-flopped, wheezed and groaned.

It was unbelievably lucky, but she found it hard to feel grateful while lying on her stomach, shivering so hard it felt like a seizure. Adeline had never been so aware of her skeleton with all its small, aching parts. The moth-shaped scapula of her shoulder blades stretched as she tried to shift onto her good side. She had messed up in a way Jane never would. Jane was actually capable. Jane didn't like most people, but she still had relationships with them—if Jane had felt about Kate the way Adeline did, things would have happened between them ages ago. Here, Adeline even had the benefit of Jane's advice on crossing a river—unclip your pack—and still messed up. Her right arm where she had hit the rock felt like jelly, but it at least still seemed to work. She had made it to the other side of the river, but all her gear was gone. The pack, food, water, sleeping bag, dry clothes, and tent. Adeline rose up onto her elbows. All the hemlock trees and Sitka spruce from before still needled the hillside, but now their outlines seemed to be fading away into a fog tinged with gold. The devil's club splinters in her hands were gold-tinged too, glistening in thin, metallic strands. Adeline put her hand to her chest instinctively to feel her heartrate change. As a child, she used to do that when she was excited, she liked to feel the fluttering bird in her ribcage change into a hammer, then slowly smooth into the beat of someone rowing. It couldn't be.

The beam of light winding through the fog looked exactly how it used to. She had found the gate to Meteora.

In one of the pockets of her coat, she found the Garmin. Meteora was here, and Jane would be on the other side. She would bring her back, so Kate didn't need to worry after all. Adeline fumbled with the Garmin, but it was too waterlogged to turn on. Then she remembered Kate didn't want her to go through the gate. As long as the Garmin couldn't turn on, in a way, the lie couldn't come to fruition. Adeline had only promised not to go in on the condition that she'd be able to tell Kate and get back. It felt weaselly, but if she couldn't tell Kate, or find her way back, that set up a whole new situation. Adeline felt around in her other pocket for her journal. It was wet but seemed to have been protected a bit by its leather cover. Wet socks in wet shoes rubbed against her heels as she got to her feet. The sensation worried her—in Scotland, Adeline got blisters.

After maybe ten minutes of following the light through the fog, white-capped mountains came into view, hovering over a sunny meadow. It was remarkably quick, like when they crossed over to Meteora through the woods as children. Adeline ran to the field. When she reached the rock in the middle, she stopped to catch her breath and put her hand against her chest to feel her heart catch up. It had been nineteen years since she last stood here. The mountains swept up to the sky above the Entryway. Adeline hugged the rock and lay down on the surface to let the sun soak into her wet clothes. Every day, all through two Julys and Augusts, she and Jane brought bologna sandwiches and notebooks to this rock. Jane jotted down discoveries from the surrounding area—a frog she saw, birds with elegant little necks flying south—and Adeline drew pictures. Trees, rocks, portraits of imaginary naturalist explorers desperate to travel through these mountains upon mountains. Some of Adeline's drawings were in the journal she still had in her coat pocket, assuming they had survived the river.

Adeline and Jane had only ever managed to explore a few miles of Meteora from the Entryway, the rest was up to them to imagine, so her early drawings were pretty cryptic. Adeline flipped through them. The pages were wet, the ink bleeding, but for the most part they were clear. The sharp-looking knife was meant to be the Mountain of Loneliness. It grew inside a person, then wormed its way down. The circular maze shape was Circle Mountain, which wound you up in rivers until you too became a part of the maze. A thin line on a blank sheet of paper was the World's Edge, a mountain so dangerous and high it looked flat as tundra.

None of these mountains fit those drawings and there was no sign of Jane. Adeline supposed it was naive to have hoped her sister would be waiting in Entryway. Jane might not even know it was the Perseids again. She flipped through the wet journal again for her written descriptions. As she went, a line from an entry near the back of the book caught her attention.

I hate rock climbers. They're so self-centred. I hope they all fall and smash their heads in.

Adeline didn't remember writing that. The date read around when she would have been fourteen, after they moved to Idaho.

All Jane cares about anymore is climbing, the entry went on. *She's always with her stupid climbing friends now. They're super pretentious about it.*

Oh. Adeline remembered now. That was the day she ended up stuck for three hours waiting for Jane at the base of a rock. Jane was supposed to drive her home after school, but then she and her friend decided to clean a spot so they could use it for climbing routes. They offered to teach Adeline how to belay and abseil, but she already knew from when Jane had tried, and failed, to get her into climbing. Adeline liked rappelling okay but couldn't ever get good enough at the going back up part to make it worth it. In the car later, Jane half-apologized. "Guess, that was a little selfish of me." Then, she switched into the Voice. A

game they used to play, reading their homework instructions and texts in the high-pitched voice of the Crypt Keeper—a skeletal puppet host of the 90s horror show *Tales from the Crypt*. “You know what they say kiddies,” crooned Jane. “They slay’s the thing! Guess that ghoooooul Jane can be a real bitch sometimes.”

Adeline looked out at the mountains until the tightness in her chest went away. It didn’t help to be angry. She flipped back through the journal to when she was younger and writing mountain vignettes. The ink was still clear here, though the pages were damp. The first one read:

SISTER PEAKS

To reach the peak at the heart of Meteora, the sister peaks must first be crossed. This may seem counter-intuitive, as one might assume the peaks themselves, being sisters, lead one up to the other, but as with all things at the center of things, there must be protections in place that keep the heart of things secret. The sister peaks are a part of that protection. They support each other. They are together, and so all things are together with them.

Right now, Adeline did not feel together with Jane. If Jane came to the Entryway she should have stayed and waited, knowing Adeline would come looking for her. It was irrational, and unreasonable, but Adeline didn’t care. She had spent plenty of her life waiting on Jane. Strange, how she remembered the sister peaks as if they were a real place. When in reality, Adeline knew the description was based on a couple nearby, interwoven summits that she and Jane had seen once from the top of a hill. They both were and weren’t real.

When she stood up on the rock to get a better look at the mountains, she caught sight of something large, white, and metal lying in the grass halfway to the treeline. Up close it

appeared to be a part of the wing of an airplane, tattered aluminium peeling up at the sides like foil in silver shavings and edges. She and Jane had always thought the main and defining feature of Meteora was that there were no other people. Nor had there ever been. Adeline wandered further down the field and found another piece of the wing. A trail of wreckage led to an area of broken branches in the trees. Her feet were really bothering her now, wet heels rubbing. As she limped along, she found a broken piece of the rutter and a rusted piece of landing gear with the remains of a tire still attached, rubber shredded. It ended inside the trees with the broken tube of a wingless plane cabin, overgrown with vines. The wreck was old. Some five to ten years. Whoever might have crashed it either died on impact or hadn't been back in a while. It was too old to have anything to do with Jane.

Adeline walked around the plane in a circle. The vines snaked in and out of the broken windows and emergency exit reminded her of horror-movie worms crowding the eye sockets of a skull. The metal in the smashed nose of the plane had an interesting shape too, pushed-up like a shirt sleeve. She supposed, if Jane had come here, she might have used the wreckage as shelter for a night or two. If it were Adeline, that's what she would have done. Gripping both vine-covered sides of the open emergency exit, she boosted herself inside to look for signs of a camp.

On the opposite wall, behind the door to the cockpit, sat a busted-out window. There was no sign of passengers but for a few red-upholstered seats. No bones. The plane appeared to have been unpiloted. Which followed, given that its windows were not actually windows but TV screens, each glitching out in static, then reappearing with new views of mountains. It reminded Adeline of a security camera command center. She picked her way across the aisle until she stood across from a particular TV screen full of white. On the other side was a long, featureless plain of snow. She would have never known what constituted ground and what

was sky if it hadn't been for two small figures paused, standing together, bundled up in winter gear.

Adeline recognized herself and Jane. This scene was from when she was eleven and Jane thirteen. She could tell by their snow gear. There was only one morning she and Jane ever tried to get to Meteora, after she and Jane saw the meteor—their last attempt to go.

"It's really a simple question," said the Jane onscreen. She turned toward the frozen figure of eleven-year Adeline.

Adeline took a sharp step away from the window, tripped over a vine, and almost fell over.

"Do you want to live in the real world or not?" asked Jane.

Adeline remembered this. It was the morning their door to Meteora closed. At school they talked about a comet passing and she had seen it with Jane before a blizzard came in. Then, the next morning there was a meteor streaking past their bedroom window heading towards the Crater. Adeline snuck downstairs and pulled on her snowsuit. When she came to a line of thin, branchless trees, she shone the flashlight through and found a perfect tunnel in the mist around the beam of light with a distant, gold flare shining somewhere on the other side. She ran back and got Jane.

The Adeline onscreen now wore the same blue snow suit and a big, pink scarf as she did then, wrapped around her neck.

"I mean it's time to grow up," said Jane. "Stop acting like little kids."

"I'm not pretending. The gateway to Meteora is back open. We don't have to wait for July. We can go now."

"I don't care. We live in this world, where I have to take care of your dumb ass and go to school and shit."

"Why are you being mean? I don't like it when you swear."

“And I don’t like it when you play stupid like a baby.”

“I’m not being a baby.”

“Why do you think we need Meteora then?” asked Jane. “Don’t you think you can meet other kids and make friends here? You think if we lived there things would be any better?”

“No, I mean. I hadn’t really thought about it. Why don’t you want to go back?”

“Because that’s how people lose their minds,” said Jane. “We’ll be trapped whichever way we go, and here, in this world, at least I know the rules. You think in Meteora we would be heroes? We’re not special, you and I, just wrong. We have to learn to be normal. You can’t live in two worlds at once. This kid’s stuff is going to get in the way of your actual life. Don’t you want to just go home, make pancakes and watch TV before mom and dad wake up with the volume on really low? Doesn’t that sound nice?”

It did sound nice. Adeline remembered standing in the snow and thinking how nice it sounded. Jane made good pancakes. Crispy on the outside from the griddle like their dad, but with a splash of orange juice. From this angle, onscreen, the tunnel of fog looked threatening. It was a long hole, leading away from the pale light of the rising sun—forward into darkness.

The scene on the TV melted away into static. In the regular world, Adeline had agreed to go home with Jane after that conversation. They never saw Meteora again.

Adeline sat down hard on the vine-covered floor of the plane. Jane would have never come here. One look at them in the snow and she would have left this plane without a word. Adeline hated her for that. Meteora had always belonged to her more than Jane anyway. Adeline was the one who kept on believing after the gate closed. The one who tried to go back in July and discovered the rock in the middle of the Crater had been split. Jane had abandoned Meteora. After that morning, she claimed it was just a game. It was Adeline who wrote descriptions of the mountain and went back over them, editing them to keep the

memory alive. It was Adeline who drew pictures of Meteora's mountains and hung them all over her own home.

The wall across from Adeline was empty now but for a row of little darkened plane windows full of vines. At first, nothing struck her as odd about that. Then she realized there was supposed to be an exit there, the door she came through. Adeline got to her feet, crying out as the wet boots rubbed against her heels. There were those blisters Jane's advice about wet boots promised.

"I guess you just fucking know everything, don't you?" Adeline yelled at the wall where the door had been.

She moved to the back of the plane and sat down as lights flicked on and off throughout the cabin. Adeline was in a realm in Meteora she didn't understand, and in it, things seemed to be moving. The Garmin buzzed inside her pocket, and Adeline fumbled for it. A string of old messages from Kate all seemed to be coming in at once.

Sorry if I upset u.

Ur sister isn't the only one that matters, u kno?

U matter too. U matter to me.

Adeline?

Adeline, R u there?

Adeline, please text back.

I'm worried, Adeline.

Did u find Meteora?

Red, illuminated arrows that appeared to be pointing where the emergency exits used to be blinked to life, then out again. The mud-smeared, dusty reading lights over a clutter of busted up re-plastered passenger seats winked in and out. The plane appeared to be about to take off.

U don't have to do this. Kate texted.

Adeline, please come back.

Please.

Adeline braced herself against the broken passenger seats and put away the Garmin. The plane kept jerking too much for her to text back anyway. If a plane could crash here, if Sean could die here, then Adeline could die too. She might die without being able to say that she was sorry and leave Kate alone in Juneau, thinking she betrayed her. Kate would think that Adeline cared about her so little, she didn't even bother to respond. Adeline would die and Kate would feel even worse than Adeline was already making her feel.

A cloud of dirt and dead leaves fell towards Adeline as the plane's nose jolted into the air. Her stomach dropped once, then again as the plane jolted forward and rose in a steep ascent. Static flashed on the TV screens. One of the passenger seats shook free of the bolts, shifting away at a dangerous angle from the others. The nose of the plane levelled, then dipped down the other way. Adeline shut her eyes as the plane fell. If she was going to die, that solved everything, in a way. No more Jane. No more Kate. Just smashing into the earth like the meteor that hit the Crater.

The impact never came. When Adeline opened her eyes again, the plane was not falling. An emergency exit door stood opposite her. She turned the handle and fled the plane. The other side was in cloud—so thick that when she looked down, there was cloud instead of her feet. Adeline checked the Garmin again, but there were no new messages. *I'm so sorry, Kate*, she texted. *I promise I'll find a way back to you.*

The sending arrow circled for another minute or so, then a note popped up that the Garmin couldn't get satellite signal.

Adeline took a few steps forward and ran into something. At first, she thought it was a vine, but then, when she grabbed the hanging thing and pulled, she saw it was bright orange.

A climbing rope hung from nothing, the other end in cloud. There was a knot in it, big enough to stand on. Maybe, Meteora still planned to take care of her after all? A rope seemed to imply Jane. Adeline lifted herself up, hopping onto the first knot. When she pulled herself up, another knot appeared above her. She clung to the rope as she swung for a while—a lightbulb in thin air.

Adeline climbed on, knot to knot. Her arms strained. Twice, she had to stop and rest, hanging onto the rope. After about fifteen minutes, she looked up for the next knot and saw a clearing in the cloud. The other end of the rope came into view, tied around a big rock on a steep, grassy ridge. She stepped onto the last knot and pulled herself onto the ridge. A chilly gasp of wind hit her, and Adeline breathed in deep.

There was a woman there, standing on a path that ran parallel to the edge. “Holy god damn actual fucking shit,” she said, and dropped her backpack.

Jane was dirty, tanned, and underfed. The blonde ponytail was gone. Instead, a long shallow braid hung low at the base of her neck like a rat’s tail, curled over one shoulder. There were new lines in her face. Not the kind a person got from getting older but the kind that made them look old. Jane bent down and retrieved the day pack she had dropped, then crossed the distance in the path between her and Adeline. She smiled, but the expression felt strangely cold.

“Hey, Adeline,” Jane said. “Welcome to Meteora.”

Chapter Fifteen: Meteora

Jane had known something was off from the moment she woke up. Most of the time, her body felt like some half-asleep child that she led around by the hand—dully hungry, dully tired—but today, it had unusually specific demands. She wanted an old-school breakfast with bacon and eggs. Jane did not want her reserves of unsalted algae. She did not want a surreal blue disk of a lake filled with carp. Usually, Jane’s favorite part of the day was sitting in front of the lake with a cup of spruce tip tea in the morning, watching the wind move tiny ringlets across the waves. She liked the view of Devil’s Paw, ridges pushing through in granite-like bones in the back of a hand. Today though, it felt impersonal and cold. Sure, she was lonely, but hadn’t she had enough of people? The terror of other human beings was that they were unknowable and uncontrollable, so in the end you were either forced to trust them or live in fear. Jane didn’t want to do either.

Along her walk to the End of the World, she had decided she would look for ptarmigan nests. The eggs would be tiny, but they would still be eggs. *See?* Jane thought to her body, to soothe the hunger. *Go back to sleep, baby. Go back to sleep and leave me alone.* She rubbed her stomach to sooth it, packed up her two, treasonous compasses, and headed off to peak-gaze at the End of the World.

Then, impossibly, she ran into Adeline.

Adeline looked like a fucking mess. Hair dripping with water, saturated clothes sagging from the extra weight. As far as Jane could tell they hadn’t fit her right to begin with, baggy everywhere but the joints as if she were a snake that failed to wriggle out of its old skin.

“Did you fall in a river?” Jane asked.

Adeline looked down. She supposed it was true but didn't know why Jane would care. "Yes," she said.

"Maybe you're dead then," Jane said. "For a while, I thought I was."

"I didn't die," said Adeline. "For a second, I thought I might have. I found the Entryway, found a plane that crashed full of TV screens, flew in the plane, climbed up on a rope with knots on it, and now I'm here."

Jane did not like that answer. Plans were falling away before her eyes. No more solo journey with the compasses to the End of the World. No more solo expedition to get ptarmigan eggs. No more sitting peaceful and alone in front of the crater lake. No more peak-gazing or fishing or filling her own time how she wanted. Her life on the ridge as she knew it was about to end.

"I don't know about any planes," Jane said. "But I know about that rope because I tied it there. There are no knots."

To make her point, Jane pulled the orange rope up, all the way to the end to show to Adeline that it was smooth. Relieved, she ran, her hand lightly along it for emphasis, then let the end drop back over the side.

"There were knots before," said Adeline. Why did Jane care about a rope in a time like this? Adeline was here. She had come to save her and, albeit not ideally, that plan had worked. She was exhausted, but happy. Why wasn't Jane? She went to hug Jane and her sister took a step backwards. Adeline stopped in place. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Sorry. Of course, I am," said Jane. "It's so nice to see you."

She went to accept the hug but wasn't sure where to put her hands. It had been a year since Jane had hugged someone. Eventually, she settled on placing them on Adeline's shoulders but found she didn't like the texture of her shoulders inside the coat. Something

about a muscled bony thing inside a slick and slimy one. If she pressed down too hard, she was afraid she would squeeze the water out of her sister like a crushed slug.

“You’re sure you’re not dead?”

“Why would I be dead?” asked Adeline. “Do you think you’re dead?”

“Not anymore. You must have thought I was.”

“No. I knew you couldn’t be,” Adeline said. It was so far from the truth the words stung her lips like windburn. One day in particular in February, the day after Adeline realized she couldn’t scrape together enough money to go to the Arrigetch, she had a breakdown. The Taku winds were blowing down from over the icefield and slammed into her while she was walking to the courthouse to pay a ticket. Adeline had been thinking about anything but Jane, thinking how it was always colder where she lived out the road than downtown: 25° Fahrenheit, before it was 24°, when a sudden, icy blast cut through her clothing and bone, and it was -20°. The cold was so intense Adeline’s eyes smarted and she let out a gasp like something breaking. She thought for a moment she had been run through by a spirit. Like in a ghost movie she’d seen after Kate told her about it at lunch, where the woman’s dead brother tried to possess her through a mirror. But when Adeline thought of ghosts and spirits, there was only Jane. She remembered the moment in the shower, when she thought she heard Jane come in, and went to her knees in the snow.

“Want to walk to End of the World with me?” Jane asked.

“I would love to come to the End of the World with you,” said Adeline. She was ready to go anywhere with Jane.

Along the way, Jane explained the names for her different landmarks. Adeline dawdled in Foodland, crooned over ptarmigan chicks, and pulled handfuls of blueberries off the bushes. Jane tried not to be annoyed. Her sister had never been on the ridge in Meteora before or,

maybe, even seen ptarmigan. Adeline wasn't much of a hiker. Jane decided not to tell her that No Man's Land, where she climbed up, used to be called Possibility. When they reached the part of the ridge called Bag of Dicks. Adeline hung back from the edge, staring at the bands of threaded, narrow rocks and the drop down into fog.

"Is this really the way?" she asked.

"I don't call it Bag of Dicks for nothing. But honestly, it's not that bad once you get started," said Jane.

"I don't know. It seems like an awful lot of dicks."

"It's not like *that* many dicks." Jane was pleased her sister embraced the terminology.

"I mean. They fit in the bag."

"It may be too many dicks for me."

Jane looked at the route. She used it every day, twice—there and back. "I guess, that's fair."

"Is that Devil's Paw?"

"What? How do you know what Devil's Paw looks like?"

"I saw the mountain kayaking down Taku Inlet with Will and Amanda. They left to ascend the glacier by it today," Adeline said.

"Since when do you kayak places like the Taku?"

"Since I came to find you. Now, we can go back together."

Jane couldn't picture Adeline kayaking in Taku. Had she gone upriver? Jane would have thought the current made that impossible. Maybe Adeline meant she had been airlifted and pack rafted downstream?

As they crossed back to camp past No-Man's-Land, Adeline peered at the way she had come and whistled. When Jane didn't smile, she turned her attention back to Devil's Paw. It was certainly impressive close up. A claw of a mountain, snowy headed, it loomed

over the lake and Jane's campsite. Adeline sat down on the beach in front of it and dug both hands into the sand, wiggling her fingers until all the grains fell away and her hands were on top of the sand again. The repeated act felt soothing. Jane's tent was perched on raised ground above the beach behind her, facing out towards the crater lake and glacier. The glacier, lake and mountain were all contained in a thin bowl of rock, as if whatever volcano or meteor that formed this part of the ridge nearly shattered the structural integrity.

"This is gorgeous," Adeline said. Jane sure knew how to pick a camping spot.

Jane tried not to picture her sister's hands on top of Sean's. She was sitting right on top of where he had been when this beach was back in the Arrigetch.

"It is," Jane said. "I always wanted a place where I can be just as I am and now, with no one else around to mess it up, I have it. Tell me more about how you got here? I can't believe you kayaked the Taku."

"Just to the end of inlet," said Adeline. "The river wasn't passible. But when I actually found the gate, I was on land. It's the Perseids now, did you know? I thought for sure you would be by the Entryway. Since you texted that you saw a meteor before you went in. I think it opened the doorway like the one that closed ours in Iowa."

"You were little when that happened," Jane said. "I'm surprised you remember. When I woke up, I was just here. I didn't come through the Entryway."

"I was eleven when we saw the meteor, and we didn't come back to Meteora after that. How could I not remember?"

Jane flinched, thinking of the tunnel in the fog that snowy morning. It felt sinister. Darker than usual, like a mouth with a flicker of light at the far end. "Tell me more about the gate that got you here," she said.

“They found Sean’s body a couple of months ago in the Taku,” said Adeline. “And since that’s eight-hundred miles south of where you disappeared, I figured that was a good bet.”

Jane’s palms prickled as if she had plunged them into the crater lake.

“Sean’s body,” she said.

“I think it was mostly just a hand.”

Jane had known Sean was dead. The head injury. The rain. He had to have died. But a part of her still wanted to wonder. Reese had their route plan and would have called Search and Rescue when they didn’t check in, though the weather would have made it hard for anyone to get there in time. A small, less than sliver of a chance. But she had hoped it might work out.

“Where on the river did they find him?”

“A couple miles from Twin Glacier Lake,” said Adeline. Jane’s face did not match the reaction she had been hoping for. She thought she would be proud of her. Adeline had kayaked all the way down Taku Inlet, had ported the kayak up and down that mile of moraine up to Twin Glacier lake. She convinced Reese, Will and Amanda and the whole mountaineering group all to take her on the trip. She nearly died fording a river to get here. She flew in a surreal half-an-airplane. Climbed a knotted rope. Couldn’t Jane appreciate that? Her sister’s lips were drawn tight, corners turned down as if it took all her energy to keep from frowning.

“It was too rough for Will and me to take the kayak upstream,” Adeline said.

“Apparently, there were skull fragments from Sean on the sandbar too, but Will didn’t see them.”

“Will,” said Jane. “Will who?”

“Will Morrow. The guy from your mountaineering group you almost slept with. Him and his girlfriend Amanda were the ones that found Sean.”

Adeline could be a little tone-deaf at times, but Jane guessed that jab was intentional. She smiled tightly. “Did I almost fuck him? You’ll have to forgive me for not remembering. There have just been so many.”

It wasn’t true, at least, not how Jane had said it. She had simply forgotten. On the night Adeline was referring to, Will babbled so long that he talked himself out of the opportunity. All this mess about how they shouldn’t do it, then concluding it was inevitable. Once that word came out, Jane was done. Inevitable, her ass. She did not have time for that level of self-deceiving bullshit.

“They brought me down Taku a couple days ago,” Adeline said. She didn’t understand why Jane was being so confrontational. “I wouldn’t be here without Will and Amanda.”

“Pass on my thank yous and condolences. I don’t know Amanda, but Will’s a great climber and outdoorsman if a pretty basic human being.”

Adeline wasn’t sure that was a fair description. She had been annoyed at Will by the time she left, but he wasn’t shallow. He seemed to be genuinely trying to help.

“What?” said Jane. “If you’ve been around him, I’m sure you noticed.”

“Why is it that whenever something bothers you,” asked Adeline, “you get mean?”

“Isn’t that the best time?”

“Will isn’t even here.”

“I know, and that’s excellent.”

For a split-second, Jane thought she should apologize, but if she did, she wouldn’t mean it. Jane did not like that Will had met Adeline. She did not like that he had found Sean’s body. Will could take the hit.

“I wanted so badly to find you,” Adeline said. “To bring you back. You were my everything. My everything to do with people.”

“Are you trying to say I haven’t missed you enough?”

Heat rose in Adeline’s face, spreading down her neck in a fan. “You’ve been gone a year, and now that I’m here, you don’t seem to care.”

“It’s just that I wasn’t expecting it,” said Jane. She should be happier, she supposed. She probably was. When she saw Suilven and thought about Adeline, she had cried. If there was anyone in the world Jane wanted to see, it was Adeline. “This is all just so sudden. I’ve got a set routine. I’ll have to figure out how to add you in.”

“Fit me in?” Adeline couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She had lied to Kate, scrambled through Devil’s club, flown in the creepy wreckage of a plane, and now Jane was worried she still couldn’t fit her in with her schedule? “Was I not invited? Am I not allowed to come back to Meteora? Am I not allowed try to save you?”

“Please, Adeline. There’s no need to get dramatic.”

“Are you kidding me? Dramatic?” Adeline’s face was getting so warm now, she felt like she might pass out.

“Okay, not dramatic. More like, overreacting. Not to the situation, but the moment we are in.”

“And I guess dramatic would be if I threw sand?”

“Please, don’t throw sand. You’re not actually going to start throwing sand, are you?”

“Fuck off, Jane. No, I’m not going to throw any fucking sand.” Adeline could feel her words starting to spit. Like an actual dog, drops of saliva flying out of her mouth.

“Maybe we should take a break,” Jane said. “We haven’t seen each other in a while, and it’s bound to take some readjusting.”

Adeline tried not to hold her breath. When she was little and she got really upset, she used to get this warm, then hold her breath and pass out. When she saw a line of black moving up her vision, she knew the release of energy was coming unless she forced herself to exhale.

“Why don’t I show you the spots I like around the lake?” said Jane. “There’s one right before the cliffs get too steep with a bunch of pretty cool fossilised fish bones.”

“Maybe,” Adeline said. She watched the line of black go back down. Maybe Jane wasn’t trying to placate her. Maybe she really was sorry. To her, Adeline had showed up out of nowhere. She had no way of knowing it was the Perseids. Jane had been living for a year without a clock. She knew Adeline liked fossils. When the door to Meteora wasn’t open she and Jane used to sit at the rock in the Crater. Little brown fish from the creek swam up through tunnels and into the moat of water around the rock. There were fossils of them there too, down in the muddy rock around its base. Adeline always felt there was something alike between herself and those fish. They were so hesitant, almost polite in the way they avoided her at the rock.

“Let’s go,” said Jane. “You’ll like it, I promise. Please, come with me.”

“Okay,” said Adeline. Her face was almost a normal temperature again, leaving her lightheaded. “Okay, let’s go.”

Adeline's Journal: Tooth Range

Tooth Range, or Ghost Range, is a mountain range made up entirely of the memory of other mountain ranges. Since in Meteora there are no people to remember these mountains, they are instead made up of the memories from animals. Tooth Range is the mountain range in the distance of any plain, clouds seen in a mirage, peaked and glimmering. To be there is to be dead. A thing too simple to be known—like trying to understand the shape and sight of your own mouthful of teeth.

Chapter Sixteen: Fossil Bay

Adeline named the cliffs of carp bones ‘Fossil Bay.’ Jane had never managed to name the place herself, so she supposed she didn’t mind. The little enclave wasn’t a bay though, more like a grotto; a half-moon of shallow water slicing into the knife of cliffs above. Even the word ‘cove’ would have fit better. It was too small to be a bay, even if it was that kind of topographical defining feature—an indent in an otherwise circular lake—right at the point the beach disintegrated into crags.

“Have you ever climbed the cliffs?” Adeline asked.

“God no,” said Jane. “Too chossy.”

“What’s chossy mean?”

“Unsafe, crumbling, flakey rock. If you tried to climb it your gear might rip out and you’d fall.”

“There are so many bones.”

Adeline had calmed down over their walk along the lake, but Jane still worried she had bullied her. Jane knew she could be intense. ‘Aggressive’ was the word people often used. She herself couldn’t see it, but she saw the results. The cliffs full of carp bones were one of the great anonymities of her ridge, and she hoped they would help her fix things. When she first arrived, the beach itself was smoking, a half circle of steam in the morning sun. Jane had walked all along the sand looking for Sean’s body until she came to the cliffs covered in bones. The skeletons were fresh and clean, white as shells. Cliffs and rocks stamped with older prints of them, over and over like paisley fabric.

“What could have made the carp throw themselves on the rocks that way?” Adeline asked. “Or do you think they get washed up? Like the oldest layer of bones is from when the lake was first formed by a meteor.”

“It might not have been a meteor. Crater lakes form all kinds of ways. Most are sinkholes or extinct volcanoes.” Jane didn’t actually think the lake was formed by either, Meteora being Meteora, but she didn’t want to say so. Shared mysteries fostered intimacy.

“Do you have any books?” asked Adeline.

Jane thought of SHADOWSTORM more as her catalogue, but it was still technically a book. With its treasure-map style font and scantily clad barbarians, it looked like such garbage Jane had never gotten past the blurb on the back.

“Just the one.”

When Jane handed the book over, Adeline scanned the blurb. She expected her sister would have something, but this wasn’t the usual. Why wasn’t it a mountain book? All Jane’s books were mountain books. She poked fun of Adeline for reading literature and sci-fi, yet here Jane was, in Meteora, with a pristinely kept doorstep of a high-fantasy novel.

“Cleaver Fairisle, Chokeholder of Souls?” Adeline read aloud.

Jane almost burst out laughing. She had forgotten about that.

Adeline cracked the first page. “Having just decapitated the Dragon of Thundermore—”

“Son of a bitch. It’s a sequel,” Jane said.

“You never read this?”

“It was Sean’s. Keep going.”

Adeline could not imagine spending a whole year without so much as looking at the first page of her only reading material. What kind of person did that?

“Cleaver Fairisle, Chokeholder of Souls looked upon his bride-to-be. Grittle Sharpsmaiden’s golden hair dripped with blood as she cleaned her blade...” she paused. “Do you think it’s Grit-ley like in Italy or Grit-el like in brittle?”

“Oh, definitely Grittle as in brittle.”

“... Grittle reached down to pet her sky-wolf companion, Tromsoya. Okay, that is the name of an actual Norwegian island. I don’t think I respect this author.”

“Awh, cut him a break,” said Jane. “No worse than naming an imaginary world after a bunch of rock formations famously in Greece, covered in monasteries.”

“Meteora isn’t imaginary,” said Adeline.

“Exactly. Because they’re in Greece.”

Adeline didn’t know why Jane had to make fun of the name. They could have done a lot worse. The winter before Meteora, she and Jane made up a world called ‘Queens’ House,’ digging a series of tunnels through the snow in the long grass behind their house. The dead, thick stalks arched like joist beams in a great hall, matted to a thatched roof in the snow—but the best they could come up with was ‘house.’ In ‘Queens’ House’ she and Jane hollowed out a big, flat room at the end and sat together, making up rules. In Queen’s House, it was always winter. In Queen’s House, cats walked backwards, but only on Tuesdays. People drank mead (whatever that was, Jane had read about it) and blessed each other by licking table salt out of each other’s hands.

“What if we could make this world work more like its name?” Jane asked Adeline.

“What do you mean?”

“Make it more like the Meteora when we were little. How it felt. Now we’re adults it isn’t the same, but it still consists of us and only mountains. We can make it magical again.”

“It still feels pretty magical to me,” Adeline said, thinking of the realm with the broken plane and TV screens. “We don’t have a lot of time to explore. It’s almost the end of the Perseids. In two weeks, the gates may not open for another year. We’ve got to get you back.”

“Why?” asked Jane. “There isn’t anything for us back there.”

With all the people Jane had at her funeral, Adeline didn't know how she could say that. She was a loner, sure, but not to Adeline's level. Jane had casual friends. There were thirty or so people at the service. Adeline was pretty sure if she didn't make it back, there would only be Kate. How was this the Jane who made them turn around that morning in the snow and abandon Meteora? The Jane that told Adeline Meteora would drive them crazy?

"There isn't a way off the ridge anyway," Jane said. "The only way is the way you came up and you saw how the knots aren't there. We don't have enough climbing gear."

"There will be a way back if we try though," Adeline insisted. "Meteora brought me here to find you and bring you back. There were knots in the rope to guide me."

"For all we know, it brought you here to find me and stay."

Adeline hadn't thought of that. The rope losing its knots after she reached the top certainly supported Jane's theory. Was she trapped? Kate and her own comfortable little apartment back in the trees back in Fritz Cove, surrounded by her drawings, suddenly felt very far away. Was that what all of this was really about? Meteora drawing her and Jane in and keeping them? She had never thought of this place as sinister. For a second, Kate's warning, 'these sorts of things have a way of trying to swallow you' ran through her, cold to the bone. But Adeline knew Meteora. This was her and Jane's childhood world, their second home. She wasn't afraid of her home.

"I promised Kate I would come back," she told Jane.

"You mean the CompliKate?" Jane laughed. "Oh my god, is that still going on? I thought for sure by now it would have either come out that she wasn't gay, or she would have gotten sick of waiting for you."

That felt unfair, but Adeline supposed Kate had gotten sick of waiting for her. She had stopped trying to hold hands. Adeline was grieving, not ready, and taking forever to decide. Wasn't she being shitty to Kate, even as a friend? Sharing secrets, then lying, sending

romantic signals she either didn't know how to or wasn't ready to follow up on. Wouldn't any other friend of Kate's tell her Adeline wasn't worth the effort? Too scared, too quiet, not self-aware enough to maintain a real relationship—impossible. An okay fair-weather friend, but keep your distance, don't get invested, too many red flags. Adeline tried to be a good friend. She listened to all of Kate's stories and read the ghost blog entries she sent links to, but she supposed anyone could do that. When Kate wanted to complain about work or her family, Adeline listened. She did her best to tell Kate that she was right to feel the way she felt, but what if that wasn't the right thing to do? Kate didn't seem to realize she was allowed to feel overwhelmed by her family. They wanted so much of her time, phone calls every other day and visits to Ketchikan every couple of weeks, but that wasn't the kind of person Kate was. She was more like Adeline. When Kate got sad, Adeline tried to send her funny videos and memes or links to calming playlists so she didn't have to talk if she didn't want to, but was that what a good friend would do? What if Kate needed someone sure enough of themselves to just call and come over? What if Adeline's own compliKatedness was getting in the way?

“Why does it have to be one of those two things?” Adeline asked Jane.

“Because you're like me. You don't actually like people. You want to like them, but in the end, they just make you uncomfortable. You don't actually want a real relationship with any of them. Romantic or otherwise.”

Adeline was starting to feel sick now, as if she had swallowed too many oysters. There was something to what Jane was saying, but Jane had also changed. Or maybe she hadn't. Maybe something that had always been inside her had gotten bigger, swollen and bloated. Adeline was pretty sure, no matter how complicated it might be between them, she still looked forward to her Friday lunches with Kate. She looked forward to them more than anything else. To see which of Kate's three sundresses she would wear in summer, and which

fishermen's knit she would wear if it was winter. For a while, she thought Kate was dating the woman in Hoonah that made her silver earrings and things were harder. Adeline spent months with her stomach feeling hollow and tight, but she still wanted to see Kate. Even if it hurt, she always wanted to see her.

"I don't think that's true," Adeline said. "I just don't like how I feel with other people most of the time. I never seem to be acting or saying what they think I should."

"That's the same thing," Jane said. "I do know how to do what they want and say what they want and I hate every minute of it. It makes me hate everyone around me for existing because it imposes their expectations on me, and then I hate myself because I know how shitty of me that is. There is nothing wrong with who I am in Meteora. No one to explain who I am to. You know what I mean; you have to feel the same."

"Maybe," said Adeline. "But I still think I like Kate."

"Sure, so you like her. Maybe, one day, if you go back, you'll actually fuck. Miracle of miracles—say, somehow, that relationship works out. Are you really going to stay in a world that doesn't understand you, and refuses to even try, just for one person?"

"I stayed before for just one person," Adeline said. "I stayed for you."

"Then stay for me again," Jane said. "But this time, in a world that actually wants you."

Jane could see by the look on Adeline's face that she was winning her over, if only a little. She could make this life work, her and Adeline at the crater lake. Adeline was maybe the only person in the world she could make it work with. They could collect berries and hunt ptarmigan. They could talk over spruce-tip tea in the mornings and read *SHADOWSTORM* in *The Voice*. They could imagine worlds the way they did as children with no one around to judge. Be alone when they wanted, be together when they wanted, and never need to ask each

other why. Adeline was old enough to take care of herself now, it wasn't going to be all on Jane.

Adeline mentally counted the days left in the Perseids as she thought about what Jane had said. There were ten. The longer she stayed, the more time she had to figure out what she was going to say to Kate. Kate was already going to be upset, no matter how much longer it took. "I suppose I could stay for a little while," said Adeline. "Just a bit. Since there isn't a way down yet. I would like to figure out what's going on with all these abandoned fish bones."

Jane loved her for that. 'Abandoned.' As if the carp had one day come on shore, stepped out of their skeletons and walked away.

"That's right, help me figure out what's going on with the fish. We can look for a way home later. We have all the time in the world."

"A couple weeks anyway," said Adeline. "Once the Perseids are over all the gates will be closed."

"If that's what matters to you, sure," Jane said. With a couple of weeks in Meteora, she could get Adeline to change her mind. They smiled at each other.

Much later that night, after Adeline had gone to bed, Jane got up to go fishing. She liked to walk around the lake or fish at night to clear her head, when the moon was in its fuller phases. Tonight, there were no clouds to block out the stars and it was waxing, a white wheel with no more than a chip off the side. There were different constellations in Meteora than in the world she had grown up in.

Beneath Devil's Paw, the crater lake lay in a puddle of black silk. A star fell, far off to the right. Most of the falling stars Jane had seen were during the Perseids. The summer she was eleven, her father bought a cheap telescope to watch them and a pair of binoculars. The

binoculars made the cheap telescope like a better one. There were a couple of falling stars every minute that night—a match striking over and over, refusing to stay lit. Her father explained the Perseids had been going on for a month, but it was hard to see much with the naked eye until they hit their peak. In a day or so, they would be over. When the next week Jane and Adeline found there was no longer any Meteora beyond the Crater, she made the connection.

Jane cast the fishing line into the moonlit lake and kept her homemade dip net ready as she waited for a fish to bite. It came surprisingly soon. As she hauled the carp onshore, she grunted at the weight of the ripe belly. The scales were prickled by something hard and bumpy inside.

“For fuck’s sake, what now,” Jane muttered. She half expected to find Sean’s compass again.

Instead, the fish’s stomach was full of carabiners, climbing nuts, and webbing. Some of the carabiners were shiny, cheap locking ones like the ones she and Sean left behind on the mountain and some heavy-duty, the expensive kind strong enough to haul a car. They spilled out of its belly, one even as thick as Jane’s pinkie. What even was the point of Meteora sending her all this climbing gear? The dead carp looked at her with round, orange eyes and knew.

“What are you looking at?” Jane asked.

She didn’t want to abseil down No Man’s Land. She did not want to use the two compasses, one pointing out towards Suilven and presumably the real world, and the other back here, to lead her and Adeline home. Sean’s family were there. His friends. Jane’s old friends and co-workers. She didn’t want to go through it all. To tell everyone how Sean had fallen. Over and over. To say Sean was brave and kind, the love of her life or something, and she didn’t know how she had survived or what she was going to do without him. As if she

could pretend that was true. That what happened between them hadn't. Jane had loved Sean, but there were two kinds of climbers, the kind that took obsessive care of their bodies, and the kind that lived to push limits. Sean liked beer, recreational drugs, risk, and blank apartments full of like-minded people. His apartment in Anchorage had been nothing but an advanced closet for outdoor gear.

The last night they were together in Anchorage, Sean had insisted they go to a party, even though the next day Jane had a flight to Scotland for her trip with Adeline. They had ironed out the last details for the Arrigetch trip when she got back, and Sean had wanted to celebrate. He was looking for coke. Sean didn't often do coke, but when he looked for it, he put his whole heart into it. Or maybe it wasn't that he was looking for coke, so much as he had an idea where to get some, but it was from a source he didn't trust, or rather he knew that person sold shitty coke, so he wanted to go to this particular party to try and score something better. Jane couldn't remember; she didn't want to be at the party. She wanted to go home.

When Jane tried to leave though, Sean did something strange. It seemed he meant to pat her on the back—he was laughing as he swung—but then somehow ended up missing her shoulder and hit her in the ear. It could have been an accident, but if it was an accident, Jane didn't know how he would have ended up hitting her so hard. The look on his face when he did it didn't match the tone of his voice. He was laughing. A flatness to his eyes, like he was reading something grim online. The ringing in her ear was immediate and painful, so full of bright, hot sound. Like being blind, Jane thought, but in the depth perception of her hearing. The ground rose up on a tilt and threatened spill her over like she was standing on a slope, which she abstractly knew meant some kind of inner ear thing, but she didn't understand how that could happen so fast—so instead she thought 'Earthquake!' and yelled to everyone to grab onto something. They stared. Then a girl with a ponytail had seen what happened and came up to Jane, asking, 'did he just fucking hit you?' to which Jane said 'maybe?'

because she didn't really know, or at least she couldn't be sure that she knew, and then the room exploded.

Ponytail was in between her and Sean, right up in his face, cussing him out, screaming 'don't you fucking touch her.' Ponytail was at least ten years younger than Jane. Young enough to be one of the college kids Jane trained in the climbing gym, and she was losing her shit on Jane's behalf. Jane didn't know what to do with that. First and foremost because it seemed obvious Ponytail had seen someone get hit before. Someone who wasn't Jane, but Jane was standing in for that person now, a mother or sister or maybe even Ponytail herself. Either way, she certainly wasn't herself, she wasn't Jane, not to Ponytail or anyone else in this room. Just a fear of consequences or dramatic spectacle—The mythical Girl Whose Boyfriend Has Just Hit Her At A Party—and Jane wasn't sure what to do with the weight of all that narrative. She could feel the life being sucked out of her, all the things that made her 'Jane' flying away like a balloon with the end untied. She needed quiet, to sort out what had happened, but she was afraid she already knew, and even though everyone was supposedly reacting to something about her, there was no space for who she was in it. Everyone was just staring, and Ponytail was screaming, and Sean seemed more afraid of consequences than sorry. He didn't ask Jane if she was okay. He *told* her she was okay without looking at her. Whatever that meant, Jane certainly didn't like it. "Calm down, small fry," Sean said to Ponytail. It was such a ridiculous phrase; Jane half expected a camera crew to step out and claim this was a prank.

"Everything is fine," Jane told the room, as loud and evenly as she could.

Ponytail stopped screaming. Sean too. Jane had everyone's attention. She held up her phone confidently and said her Uber was here. She had to go. Jane asked Sean for the keys, which he wordlessly handed over, said everything was fine again, and left the apartment. Left Sean, Ponytail, the room, the floor, the building, the block of the city and the street it was on,

walking and walking in the warm, June air. She was free. Jane had walked nearly a mile before it occurred to her that she was shaking so hard she could barely stand. She sat down on the curb. Then, she actually did call an Uber.

She and Sean never spoke about what happened. Jane went to Scotland in the morning and met him in the Arrigetch a month later. Her ear stopped ringing off and on after a couple days in Scotland, and everything went back to normal. But if that was true than why was it now, faced with the dead, blue carp, and its belly full of climbing gear, that Jane's ribcage felt like it was made of two hands squeezing? The blue carp fed at all times, so she supposed she could get away with telling Adeline they fed only at night. Adeline liked to go to bed early, she wouldn't want to wait up to see Jane fish. The Perseids were over soon and then the doorways to Meteora would shut. She didn't have to keep the lie going long. When the truth came out, it might take some work to win Adeline back, but Jane could do it. They loved each other more than anyone. Adeline had always meant worlds more to Jane than any fucking boyfriend. Likewise, with time, the Kate problem would solve itself.

Jane threw every last one bit of the webbing, nuts and carabiners back into the lake. The carabiners struck in a silvery, clinking rain.

Chapter Seventeen: Meteora

Adeline's spent most of her time reading SHADOWSTORM during her first week in Meteora. She liked reading at Fossil Bay to the silent audience of fish bones and fossils mixed with the living carp. Sometimes she read aloud, and sometimes in her head. Usually, Adeline woke up before Jane since her sister spent her nights fishing and Jane kept the embers from the cookfire going so she wouldn't have to start it on her own. In the mornings, Adeline had spruce tip tea alone while looking at the lake, smooth and cool as a coin, and ate some smoked fish, then walked out to Fossil Bay. By lunch, when she came back to camp, Jane was awake and drying or smoking more fish. They ate, usually berries or dried algae, and had more spruce tip tea. Then, they either went to Foodland to pick berries, or raked and hung algae to dry on racks of split wood Jane kept by the lake. Once, Adeline helped Jane hunt a ptarmigan. Her job was to flush one out of brush so Jane could catch it and snap its neck. It was better for the bird, Adeline guessed, that there be no moral wavering or hesitation, since that meant it wouldn't suffer, but at the sight of it, she still cried. She expected Jane to criticise her, but instead Jane became very gentle. She reminded Adeline that she used to help her father when he still farmed. The farm failed when Adeline was six, so she didn't remember when the pigs were slaughtered, or when their father started taking nursing school at night. Jane was eight though and old enough to do chores, she knew more about animal death than Adeline. To her, it was a part of life, but she said there was plenty of fish, algae, and berries in Meteora. If Adeline wanted, they could be pescatarians. They would eat this one last ptarmigan together, since after all, they had killed it, and shouldn't waste it. When that happened, Adeline cried again, this time in relief.

Usually, after their afternoon chores were done, Jane went off peak gazing at the End of the World. Adeline was still too afraid to scramble across the narrow part of the ridge Jane

called 'Bag of Dicks,' so she either returned to Fossil Bay to read more or sat on top of the big boulder with the rope she'd climbed up at No Man's Land, looking down into the fog below until dinner. Jane insisted there was nothing but fog at the bottom of the cliffs. They needed more carabiners, nuts, and webbing to even try. In the evening, when they ate, they talked until the moon rose. Or sat together in comfortable silence, staring at the fire. With the fire still high, Adeline usually went to bed and Jane stayed up to fish. It was a beautiful routine, and Adeline was so happy sometimes she barely thought about Kate. But it was impossible not to worry about the amount of time that was passing. Maybe, if they couldn't find a way down, it wouldn't be all that bad to live in Meteora. It was nice enough, but Adeline missed her apartment and the view of Fritz Cove. She missed her lunches with Kate.

Sometimes, she liked to look in Fossil Bay for clues about the fish skeletons. When Adeline was ten in Meteora, she once saw a fish reanimate. She and Jane were sunning themselves on the rock in the Entryway when, Adeline noticed mangled remains of a fish skeleton in the little mote of water at the base of the rock. Its ribs were thin as needles. As Adeline watched, mud and grass mixed, running in threads along the sunken bones. Then its flesh returned: brown, sinewy strings of muscle and dark clotted raisins of the fish's internal organs reappearing in the rib cage. When Adeline shook Jane to wake her from her nap, she swatted her away. Intestines wound themselves out through the belly towards the fish's tail. Then, almost as quickly as they had appeared, brown scales sprouted to cover them. The fish was not a skeleton anymore, but one of the little brown fish that swam in the creek before The Crater. With a little flick of a listing fin, it swam out of view under the rock and disappeared. Jane had missed everything.

Adeline wondered now if those fish and the carp could be related. It was hard to ignore the correlation of so many skeletons, but with all the time she spent at Fossil Bay, she never once saw a carp come back to life. They had no reaction to her reading

SHADOWSTORM aloud. Adeline found the book interesting despite how badly written it was. Jane's notes in the margins were fascinating. After page ten they were on every page, always with a number and a few descriptive words, but never a number greater than three-hundred and fifty. It seemed some kind of code.

232- *Upside down coffee cup?* Jane had written next to a description of Cleaver Fairisle's mutton dinner at the Purple Rogue's Inn. Then: 17- *Big fat log* on the next page by the scene of his and Grittle's post-brawl lovemaking. When she asked Jane about them, she said they were her 'readings,' whatever that meant.

"Come to the End of the World and I'll show you," said Jane, but Adeline was still afraid of the narrow, rocky part of the ridge.

"Shouldn't we be trying to find a way back home?"

"Sometimes in climbing, you climb yourself into a trap you can't get out of," Jane said. "There are walls you might be able to climb up, but you can't get back down."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of a metaphor?" Adeline was bad at metaphorical conversations. Whenever she ended up in one, the other person got frustrated.

"No, that's how the physical world works."

"But this isn't the regular world," said Adeline. "And I wasn't with you then."

Jane hugged her but didn't say anything more about finding a way back home.

Adeline had noticed Jane also did not like to talk about Sean. The things Sean had left behind puzzled her. His book, SHADOWSTORM, but not the backpack or any stuff-sack he might have been able to keep it in. His orange climbing rope, but not his harness or raincoat or hardly any climbing gear. She had considered that Jane might have killed him, but liked to think she knew Jane well enough to know if she had committed murder. As far as Adeline could tell, Jane's secrecy was just secrecy. Stemmed from the same, shallow, self-absorbed brand of distance Jane always had.

“I’ve stopped questioning how Meteora works or how this particular ridge came about,” Jane told her one night as they ate.

Adeline had brought up the ticking clock of the Perseids again—only two days left—along with her newest theory about the carp—maybe the lake was not formed by one meteor, but many impacts. Repetitive meteors, striking the same exact spot in its center, pushing waves of carp onshore throughout the years.

“The origin of this lake is like the Big Bang to me,” Jane said. “Interesting, but like, in the day-to-day who gives a shit.”

“Couldn’t that be a problem though?” Adeline said. “If a meteor slams into this lake whenever a new gate opens or closes? The shockwave underwater would kill the fish, and they are our main food source.”

“There’s plenty of algae and berries. Besides, if that’s true, why didn’t a meteor hit the lake the day you came? Or when the Perseids started this summer?”

Adeline wasn’t sure that disproved the theory. Jane’s one year anniversary of arrival was going to be on the last day of the Perseids. Who knew what would happen then.

“Have you ever been out on the lake?” Adeline asked.

“You see me out here with a boat?”

“I mean, have you ever noticed anything odd about it?”

“You mean besides the fact that the carp are dark blue, live in freshwater full of glacial ice, and only feed at night?”

Sometimes, Adeline found it very difficult not to laugh when Jane was being a dick.

“What if we made a raft?” she said. “If we made it to Devil’s Paw, do you think Will and the others would be there? It could be another gate.”

Jane dug up the fish they had buried to cook with a stick and pushed Adeline's over to her. "I think there would be an uncrossable glacier and an eight-thousand-five-hundred-foot mountain with four granite mastiffs that we don't have the crampons or ice axes to climb."

"We could still make a raft," Adeline said. "Not to get to the glacier, but to sail around the lake and look at the other cliffs. Other options."

Jane had thought of making a raft before, to explore, but the bushes in Foodland didn't offer thick enough branches, and the little spruce she got spruce tips from for tea would take a long time to fell without a hatchet. "How about before we think about that, we find a way to rope up the scramble to the End of the World so you can come with me," she said. "That's a climb you could actually manage."

Adeline didn't respond, so Jane decided to explain peak gazing to her. She didn't seem to be paying attention.

"I thought about you all the time when Suilven first appeared," Jane told her. "Meteora must have known I needed you with me."

"Suilven? Is that a mountain we were on in Scotland?"

Jane was surprised she didn't remember. "It's the only peak I've seen more than once. I've recorded readings in the catalogue more than two-hundred times and checked them all. Only Suilven repeats."

"What catalogue?"

"SHADOWSTORM," said Jane. "That book's just paper to me—I use it as my catalogue. I thought you knew."

Adeline looked away. Of course, that's all the book would be to Jane. So much for the mystery of her notes.

"Why don't you give me a rundown of the plot?" Jane said. "Since you're enjoying reading. You could do it in the Voice."

Adeline couldn't help but smile. Their old high school game. She let the disappointment go, took a deep breath, and forced out a shrieking cackle.

"In tonight's dreeeeary drama. Man, woman and wolf-dog wander through a cursed land harvesting soulllls! The soullls must return them to their owners, as they have been stolen by a powwwerful necromancer. But what about when soulllls do not want to be returned? When owners are not only ungrateful, but despite a highly convoluted magic system that supposedly works on personal connection—"

"Take a breath before you pass out," said Jane.

"—does not see a point in the maintenance of their own sooooulllll?"

"Are Cleaver Fairisle and Grittle moral cosmic janitors?"

"Only their scare-dresser can say."

"Is that hairdresser? Nice. Such a stretch, even for a Halloween pun."

"Anyway," Adeline went back into her own voice. "That's the sort of thing it is."

At home in Fritz Cove, Adeline still had six seasons of *Tales From the Crypt* downloaded on a flash-drive. After Jane disappeared, she used to rewatch their favorite episodes and do the Voice along with the Crypt Keeper. She had always hoped to share the show with Kate one day. The Garmin with all Kate's text messages was still safe in her coat pocket, switched off so that the battery wouldn't drain out. Sometimes, Adeline got it out and imagined ghosted messages to her on it, trying to explain.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Jane. "Not SHADOWSTORM. You look sad."

"The two-way communicator," said Adeline. "It doesn't work here, but it still did until I came here in that airplane. I got all these messages from Kate." She half-expected to feel the vibration of a missed message as she said it, as if saying Kate's name would evoke her, bare shouldered in her yellow sundress.

"So, things really were finally moving along with that then," Jane said.

“Maybe they weren’t,” Adeline said.

“Did you want them to? Does she know where you went?”

Adeline didn’t know what Kate’s default assumption to her radio silence would be. Maybe more that she had fallen in a river and drowned than actually made it to Meteora? Was she lying in bed the way Adeline had when she thought she couldn’t get to Jane? Adeline hoped not. She didn’t want Kate to forget about her, but she also didn’t want her to be sad.

“She knows I was looking for a gate to another world, but not that I found it.”

“And she believed you?” Jane was impressed. She had always thought, deep down, Adeline didn’t actually want a partner.

“I think she mostly saw it as something I needed to do for myself. But she did also say if I found it to come back so we could go in together.”

“That’s sweet,” said Jane. She put the compasses back in her backpack and handed Adeline back SHADOWSTORM. “Do you think the CompliKate will come looking for you?”

“Please, don’t call her that,” Adeline said. She couldn’t see Kate willingly entering any unexplained tunnel of light, she was too superstitious. “I don’t think Kate would come on her own.”

“What if we could get a message out to her?” asked Jane.

“How? The Garmin doesn’t work.”

“There isn’t a way down right now. But maybe we could get you down far enough to get reception. You said you got some before. I do still have another rope. You could send Kate a message and tell her you’re okay.”

“It might upset her,” Adeline said.

“It might not. If you really need to, you could give her instructions how to get here. If it’s meant to be, there will be a way. Like you said. Meteora brought you to me.”

Adeline’s hadn’t thought of having Kate here, in Meteora. There wasn’t space for Kate in the tent but maybe if she brought her own. They wouldn’t have to share a tent right away. For all the time she had spent longing, Adeline wasn’t sure if she was ready for that. Would Kate even come?

“There’s still enough rope to abseil about eighty feet,” said Jane. “It’s not the bottom, but it might be enough for the Garmin. I can show you how.”

Adeline scooted around the fire until they were side by side and hugged her with one arm. “I already know,” she said. “You taught me in high school, remember? It’s the only climbing thing I was good at.”

Jane did remember, but she wasn’t sure she would say Adeline was good at it. More like proficient. Adeline didn’t know any tricks for bringing your ropes back down to you once you hit the bottom, and she didn’t have the skills to climb back up and get them. Also, that had been more than ten years ago. “Rappelling is dangerous,” Jane said. “The rope on the rock now is hanging about fifty feet, forty once you rig up your system and we only have enough gear to make one more pitch past that.”

“I know,” said Adeline.

Jane patted the top of Adeline’s arm with an uncertain motion, like touching the head of a puppy. “Let’s finish up this meal and go to bed.”

Adeline returned to her place across the fire.

“Huh,” said Jane. She had just noticed a glimmering dot far off on the horizon, brighter than the others. “I think that star wasn’t there before.”

Adeline followed her finger but couldn’t tell which one she was talking about.

“Is that a problem?” she asked.

“No. I must have missed it.”

Later that night, Adeline had a hard time sleeping. She kept thinking about Kate. Adeline loved Meteora and being back with Jane, but adding Kate to that was a big step. Was it possible to both want and not want something at the same time? Kate did not often go camping, but she was used to living on a boat, so she could probably get used to the way Adeline and Jane lived. The real issue was her dog Mac, the ancient, angry little bichon. For Kate to come, Mac would have to come. It might be difficult to get him up the rope onto the ridge, but if Adeline had Kate bring a backpack, maybe she could put Mac in, tie it to the rope, and haul him up. She wasn't sure Kate would like leaving the regular world forever. She liked supernatural things, and with all her time on boats she had to be up for at least some level of adventure, but she had more friends than Adeline. She was close with her family and cousins.

It was late now, and Adeline felt restless. Jane was out night fishing, so she didn't even have her to talk to about this. The night air outside felt full of possibility. It reminded her of the night she saw a meteor with Amanda. Maybe because she had to pee? Adeline hadn't thought about Amanda or Will in a while. By now they must be camped on the glacier at the base of the mountain. Or maybe their weather window came up and they already made the climb. She hoped the news of her disappearance hadn't reached them. Kate would have told Reese—Adeline was well passed the deadline—but Reese might not have chosen to share that information with Will and Amanda if they were still on the glacier. She hoped Kate wasn't too angry with her for not being able to stay in touch. If she was, even if Adeline could get out a message, there was no way Kate would come. She should at least try to message her though, to let Kate know she was all right.

Outside the tent, the white ribbon of the glacier gleamed across the crater lake with Devil's Paw resting on it like a crown. Adeline pulled on her boots and shuffled into the dark. Jane's silhouette was a dark blur along the shore to her right, about a quarter of the way around the beach. She could hear her grunting and swearing as she dragged up a carp. Her first thought was to call out, but it felt weird to do that and then pee, so instead, Adeline crept along the distance between them but back out towards the ridge. She pissed while watching the sky for meteors, but there was no sign of any. Instead, the stars hung cold under a haze of moonlight. She might have to wait a while.

As Adeline stood back up, Jane appeared to be throwing a good deal of fish guts out into the water. Moonlight flashed off metal as she tossed another handful and a strange, metallic, clanging sound bit the air, followed by a heavy series of plops.

She squinted to try and get a better look at what her sister was throwing away. Maybe it wasn't fish guts?

Something about it felt private, and since Adeline wasn't meant to see, she wondered if she ought to head back to the tent. Just as she was about to turn around, one of the objects went off course and hit the sand below. When she went down to pick it up, it appeared to be some kind of metal loop, steely and shiny. It was a carabiner. The cheap kind you used to set up an anchor for your climbing system, then left on a mountain. The exact kind of thing Jane said they didn't have enough of to try and leave the ridge.

Adeline opened her mouth to call out to Jane and tell her what she had found, but then realized what it meant.

It was Jane who had thrown the carabiner away in the first place. She meant to do it. She was throwing the carabiners away.

Adeline pocketed the carabiner, then looked back at Jane where she sat pulling more out of another fresh fish. Her sister was still too preoccupied to notice her, throwing handful

after handful of climbing gear into the lake in a clanking, glistening rain. She went back into the tent without ever letting Jane know she had been there.

Adeline's Journal: Blue Mountains

Time itself is a mountain range. While you are alive, you wander through its valleys. The mountains on either side of you have a specific color. If you're wondering what this kind of blue looks like, imagine a postcard tucked into a mirror frame. All mountains, except when covered in snow, look blue from a distance. Blue is the last color to appear in written history, first showing up in texts about four-thousand-five-hundred years ago. They think this may be because humans used to perceive color differently. As babies, we are born with a perception of both light and darkness, but blue is the last color we recognize, at around five months old—much later than other colors—around the same time we develop conscious awareness.

Picture your place in time as a mountain both in front of you and behind. One is the past; the other is the future. Even if you stand on the exact same spot on the earth as someone who is dead, or a place you have been before, you will never see or touch each other. You are together, but apart. A vast peak is between these two people, impossible to cross. But the version of yourself is there—in the opposite valley—waiting. If only you had a way to reach over. If only there were a way back to who you used to be.

Chapter Eighteen: No Man's Land

In the morning, before Jane was up, Adeline went to No Man's Land. She set up her rappel from the fixed point at the rock, like they used to do when Jane forced her to hang out with her climbing friends. At first, Adeline had a hard time resetting the rope and fed everything through the belay device wrong. She had to redo it twice. Jane was half-sleeping on the second rope, so she had decided not to take it with her. Forty feet would have to be enough. When the plane first brought Adeline here, it had landed somewhere below the end of the orange rope, which certainly had felt further then, but maybe the plane was still there. If Meteora had found a way to get her on the ridge in the first place, there had to be a way for it to get her back down. Jane didn't get to trap her. When Adeline got reception on the Garmin, she would message Kate and find her way from there.

She adjusted Jane's harness, tied in, and walked backwards off the cliff, shifting the rope to control her descent. The sensation of standing perpendicular to the ground disturbed her. Her spine would be first to hit the ground if she fell. Adeline moved in halting little jerks at first. One step backwards, two. The crisp sound of fibres stretching like lines on a ship. She imagined herself letting out sails, a deckhand, like Kate used to be. Then, that she was walking on water. After about twenty feet, there was a ledge in the cliff Adeline had to walk over. As she moved to the portion of the cliff below it, her toe hit a loose rock, she lost her footing, and let go of the rope—dropping the remaining twenty feet into nothing.

This must be what Sean feels like, Adeline thought as she fell. Not felt. 'Feels.' In the rush of momentum, she was floating. Deconstructed, then reassembled like the skeleton of the fish she saw come back to life. Adeline would die the same way Sean died. When the rope caught her, her brain jarred more than her body. Adeline screamed, not at the fall, but at the sound of the rope catching and stretching again, telling her she wasn't dead. She swung

violently, and hit the cliff, bounced, then hung twisting in mid-air. The ledge she crossed extended too far from the rest of cliff to get her feet back on the wall—but she guessed it was also what had saved her from a harder impact. Adeline would not go the way Sean had, at least not yet. She shifted positions to hear the reassuring flex of fabric against the harness, the clink of the belay device. The stopper knot was the only thing keeping her from sliding off the rope. Adeline had forgotten to tie a back-up in case she let go of the rope, but at least she had remembered to close the system. She had never been in a situation before though where the stopper knot at the end of the rope had to hold. Adeline was out of rope and had not hit the bottom of the cliff, dangling at the height of a four-story building.

When she kicked her legs to try and get her feet back onto the cliff, a small rock dislodged and dropped into the mist below without a sound. The rope may have reached to the bottom when Adeline climbed up by knots from the plane before, but it sure didn't now. She tried to lift herself into a standing position by pulling on the rope, but her own weight worked against her. Impossible to climb the rope without knots to stand on. She was trapped. She had let anger trick her into finding the reckless kind of courage that reason never would. Jane was going to love this. Saving her little sister yet again. The poor, useless amateur.

Adeline fumed and swung on the rope for a while before the actual danger of it occurred to her. She was getting thirsty and had no water. What if Jane didn't figure out what had happened in time? There had to be a way climbers got themselves out of this kind of situation. She couldn't be the first to go over a cliff and end up hanging. Try as she might though, Adeline could not think of anything.

When she turned on the Garmin, the little circle spun and spun looking for reception, and she spun with it as she watched. The mist was getting very cold.

Jane woke at her usual time but didn't notice Adeline was missing. She was usually at Fossil Bay reading in the mornings. Jane's plan for the day was morning tea, lunch with Adeline, berry picking, peak-gazing, and dinner—fish cooked with some mashed berries inside the algae wrapped together. It might end up gross, like a jam, but Jane hoped the jam would feel like sauce. Fruit-based savoury sauce and poultry dishes were common enough—chicken and apples or orange duck—though Jane hadn't heard of fish prepared that way.

When her sister still didn't appear for lunch, Jane didn't worry. Sometimes, Adeline got caught up in reading and didn't arrive until midday. When they were kids, Jane once asked for a watch with a silver band for her birthday specifically so she could help keep Adeline on time. Before that, in Meteora, she had to track how long they had been away the way her dad showed her when she was little—by counting how many widths of her hand the sun was from the horizon. Each hand width was about an hour to sunset.

While she waited for Adeline, she set her compass next to Sean's in the sand. The brass arrow of Sean's still pointed outward, away from the crater lake and presumably, towards the invisible peak of Suilven. Jane's own compass still pointed at Devil's Paw. She triangulated her position from two little arrows, and determined what angle her own position would end up being from each point. Then Jane plotted out the current position of the sun from each and her position compared to that. Then she got sick of math and bored.

When the sun was six hand-widths from the horizon and Adeline still hadn't shown up Jane decided to go to Foodland without her. She filled the two stuff-sacks and brought them back to camp. Still no Adeline. Fossil Bay was partially visible from where Jane stood, but it was a good mile and a half one way, and she wanted to get to the End of the World in time to peak-gaze before sunset. Jane got her daypack together. It wasn't until she was holding SHADOWSTORM to pack it, wondering how Adeline could stand to read such a

book, that she realized her sister couldn't be out reading because SHADOWSTORM was here, in her hands right now.

Jane walked out to Fossil Bay to see what the hell Adeline was doing. Before Meteora and having to babysit Adeline, Jane had a habit of trespassing in the fields and timber around her house, taking a backpack with her and a bologna sandwich on white bread. Her grandmother gave her a cheap, plastic nautical compass for her tenth birthday with a little mirror for signaling. She had never approved of Jane running around without a shirt, but Jane forgave her after the compass. Before that, Jane had always assumed everyone liked Adeline more. Adults always said Adeline had such a 'sweet temperament.' When she and Adeline played the game with their grandmother where they threw a string of beads on the ground and scried out predictions or described the shapes they saw—Jane got chastised for her interpretations:

'This one is an elephant drinking tea. He's going to use it later to poison a spy.' (Oh, Janie! Why does it have to be poison?)

'Tomorrow it will rain.' (Thank you, Addie. That's much nicer.)

'This one looks like a hamster who is also a pirate.'

'One day, when we are all gone, the sky will be green.' (What a lovely idea, Addie!)

Now, Jane was wasting valuable time she should be using peak-gazing, all because Adeline had changed plans, yet again, without telling anyone. When Jane used to adventure alone, sometimes her parents got the call, 'your weird kid is coming too close to the house' from the neighbors, but other than that, no one minded. But when Jane babysat Adeline, her sister went off on her own and got them caught by wandering further from the house than she was allowed. Then, of course, it was Jane who got in trouble.

Jane hit Fossil Bay after a thirty-minute walk, but in the end, the shadowy carp were swimming in the shallows all alone. Now, she was pissed. Where the fuck was Adeline? For

a moment, her thoughts went to the lake. Adeline wasn't a strong swimmer, but there was no current. If Adeline had left SHADOWSTORM in the tent, she might have never actually come to Fossil Bay. Jane walked back to camp at a quicker pace than before. There was still enough time for about an hour for peak-gazing, as long as she resolved this quickly. At the tent, she took inventory of everything twice, looking for clues. At first, nothing appeared to be missing, then, something definitely was, but she didn't know what. The most likely scenario seemed to be that Adeline had tried to hike out to The End of the World, forgotten to eat, and waited for her there? Jane prepped the spare rope and climbing gear in case Adeline had gotten herself stuck on the scramble and needed rescue, then searched around for her harness.

That's what was missing.

But, no, Adeline couldn't have. She was smarter than to attempt a rappel off No Man's Land on her own. Why would she want to do that anyway? Jane grabbed her prusik loops and the ones from Sean's leftover kit. If Adeline had tried to go down No Man's Land and fucked up the pitch, she was almost certainly dead. If she hadn't fucked it, she would still be hanging there. In cold mist, possibly braindead from smacking her head into the cliff when she fell. Either way, she would be hypothermic. Without food or water for the whole day, caught on a stopper knot that she might have not tied super well. Jane's ears started ringing. Her mouth went dry.

She ran to No Man's land. Fear had her now—brain poached to a soft sludge. The primal *oh god oh god no* kept repeating on a loop in her head. Last night Adeline was fine, sleeping next to her. Why hadn't she woken up when Adeline left? Adeline might be lying broken without a helmet now, pupils shaking in her head like Sean, the sense of a living person behind them getting further and further away. The image upset Jane so much, she

started hyperventilating. She almost had to stop running. A clawing feeling thrashed in her stomach, a caged animal trying to get out.

At No Man's Land, Jane saw the knot in the rope around the rock pulled taut and her wilderness rescue training kicked in. She forced herself to take a long, slow breath. A taut rope with a new knot meant Adeline was still there, on the rope, hanging forty feet down. If Jane was going to perform a successful one-person rescue—she needed a clear head. The panic was still there, like venom from a snake bite, but there were things you could do to slow venom down. She made a mental checklist. Adeline's knot looked solid. She should have noticed on the walk, when she passed by No Man's Land earlier, but there was no point in beating herself up about that. If Adeline had been hanging then, trapped on the side of the cliff, the real concern was why didn't she yell for help.

Jane called out to her and got no answer. Maybe she hit her head? She wouldn't know though until she saw. To see, she had to rig up some kind of pulley system. But there was no way to build a pulley system with Adeline's rope tied to the only feasible anchor spot and so close to the edge. Having thrown out all extra webbing and carabiners from the carp the night before—Jane also didn't have enough gear to build a haul system. That left her fashioning a make-shift harness for herself out of webbing so she could rappel down to Adeline and do a rescue the old school way. Jane used the last of her gear to set up her own rappel, sweating.

On the rope, Adeline sometimes thought she saw Kate above her. Perched like a big kite. Or as a long dark terrible thing, a snake sliding down the rope. Other times, in the crumpled-up form next to her of someone trying to sleep. She imagined all the things that she would say and wouldn't say, but Kate did not answer. Adeline never saw her eyes. She shapeshifted into the shadow of a slitted fence, slow fingers reaching out from the void.

“Adeline. Hey, Adeline,” Kate’s voice said. “For fuck’s sake, Adeline. What have you done?” Adeline didn’t reply. She could almost swear she could feel warm breath, far too near her face.

“We’ve got to get you up, Adeline. But to do that, you’re going to have to be able to move.”

The hallucination didn’t sound like Kate anymore but was still familiar. Whoever-it-was kept saying her name. Adeline wondered if it had something to do with the cold. She had only been this cold once before. That first December, when she and Jane decided to try and go to Meteora during a different meteor shower and failed because it only appeared during the Perseids. School called an early out due to snow and freezing rain, but Jane said that just gave them more time. Along the little snow-speckled trail through the timber, the trees sagged, heavy branches dipped in glass. The ice formed a smooth, even coat over everything. The jangling sound of it made Adeline think of when her mother broke a wine glass once doing dishes. After a couple hours, the faint blue hint to the overcast sky signaled evening was coming, and they had still not found Meteora. The door wasn’t open. Adeline’s teeth chattered so loudly she couldn’t hear her sister speak. Twice, Jane led them into trees on their way home and had to backtrack. Typical Jane, overextending then panicking, pretending she knew everything. A thick rind of snow covered the ground, scraping Adeline’s ankles. By the time they finally reached the house, the world was nothing but shrieking black.

“Adeline. You need to hold yourself up.” The voice was Jane’s. “Put your foot in the stirrup, Adeline.”

“Stop saying my name. It’s annoying.”

“So, you can hear me. Nice of you to let me wonder if you were hanging there with a brain injury.”

The only options Jane knew for this kind of rescue were tying her sister to herself and hauling her up bodily, or prusik loops. She wasn't sure she had the strength to do the first. The way prusik loops worked was like stirrups you tied on and stood in, sliding up to make steps, one by one. A climber's hail Mary—but the process was beyond exhausting. She needed Adeline to be able to hold herself up and step into them. Jane could tie the prusiks on for her and help Adeline slide them up, but she had to stand. Not something Jane was looking forward to since she had to use her own prusik loops too.

"I'm mad at you," said Adeline.

"Be mad at me when we're on the ridge. Please, put your fucking foot in."

Not being cold or on this rope anymore mattered to Adeline more than anything else. Including if Jane was real, or thinking about how angry or embarrassed she would be if it really was Jane. The loop of rope felt alien around her foot, like a hangman's noose. She halfway expected it to snap in two when she stood up.

"Easy, Adeline. You've got to keep yourself upright. You don't want to fall off and have us go through this all over again."

"Stop saying my name."

"It's to help keep you awake. Why don't we focus on getting you to the top, so you can be mad at me in a safer location."

"Whatever," said Adeline.

As they moved, one painstaking step at a time, Jane could feel her body maxing out. All this tying and straining to help Adeline with the prusiks, combined with Adeline's weight as she helped her stay up, combined with her earlier panic. What had Adeline even been trying to do? Could she not have waited until Jane was up to try and message Kate? None of it made sense, but she was clearly too exhausted to ask, and Jane was quickly getting too tired to care. On a ledge about half the way back up, she got Adeline over the lip and let them rest

on the narrow crest of rock for about ten minutes, tensing her muscles one by one to feel for injury. Everything felt tight and cold—but as far as she could tell, she was fine. Adeline seemed fine too, if completely drained. She had hit the wall when she fell, Jane was able to get that out of her, but any bruises would take a while to form. If they rested any longer on the ledge, Jane sensed she was going to crash.

“Come on,” Jane said through gritted teeth. “Halfway there.” She was getting cold too. A memory of one night babysitting Adeline when the power went out. Their parents worked long hours as nurses at the hospital, a forty-five-minute drive away and it was a small, farming community. No one thought twice about Jane being only eleven and left alone to take care of her sister. That night in February, their parents didn’t make it home because of a snowstorm. The power went out and the heating was electric. Jane had to keep them warm by building a blanket fort in the living room. “What a wonderful day,” Adeline said as they sat in the fort. “This is really exciting. I’m having so much fun.”

“I’m having fun too,” Jane had lied.

It was dark by the time they reached the ridge. When Adeline tried to stand, her legs gave-way. She was still angry at Jane, even angrier now that she was also grateful. Her hands and feet and calve muscles all felt torn. The world swam in front of her, the half-moon, fan-shaped, like a moth’s wing. The ground beneath her cheek smelled of dirt and wet. Of life. Foodland in the distance with its piney scent of bracken. Once, through the mist around the rope, Adeline had thought she saw the moon shining even though it was daylight. Then, she saw a long, bright halo of the Kate thing, slithering towards her.

Jane must have tried to leave Meteora at one point; otherwise, the rope wouldn’t be there. Was it a hollow gesture? Jane could be that way sometimes. Hard on herself, cruel reminders everywhere. Jane never threw away pictures of ex boyfriends. Instead, they all went into a box labelled “Extra Bedding” that Adeline had found when she emptied Jane’s

apartment. Someone who really wanted to leave Meteora did not name their only possible route down 'No Man's Land.' Adeline struggled to stand, and Jane helped her onto her feet.

As they went, Jane imagined the two of them as two blue carp, wriggling through dark water. She tried to understand why Adeline would leave. She supposed, sometimes, you had to try. To know why you chose the way you did. People who really wanted to go home would try more than once and Jane had only tried the one time and it had been out of obligation. You had to try once. Would Adeline try again? The Perseids were almost over. Above, the shadowy claw of the mountain reached for the moon. The lake was smooth and black, asleep in its crater. This was Jane's place.

When she got Adeline into the tent, she stripped off their wet clothes and bundled Adeline in the sleeping bag. She lay with her bare chest pressed against Adeline's back until she felt her sister's body heat return. She would be too exhausted to make another attempt on No Man's Land by the time the Perseids were over, Jane was at least pretty sure of that. Whether Adeline liked it or not, Meteora was about to be her place too.

Chapter Nineteen: Hades Highway

Will received the news of Adeline's disappearance in the shadow of Devil's Paw, from their basecamp on the icefield. After days of waiting for a weather window, they were finally supposed to begin the climb up Devil's Paw the next day, at four in the morning. Will was adjusting his sunglasses when the Garmin let out a sharp, blast of tone like a popped cork.

Don't worry, Reese signed off his text. Focus on the climb.

As if Will wasn't going to worry. He pictured Reese radioing a helicopter with the Garmin to his mouth like a walky-talky, small wire-framed glasses slipping to the end of his nose as they did when he bent over a map. Somewhere below was Adeline, shivering by a stream, crawling from bush to bush to avoid capture. Adeline with an apple in her pocket and ribcage torn like honeycomb. Adeline with purple lips and stomach swollen. Adeline as a grayed, severed hand on a sandbar. Like Sean Greenly who was dead like Jane, who, if it were her with him on this trip instead of Amanda, would have climbed the mountain exactly the same way Amanda was doing it. Twice, ice climbing behind Amanda on the glacier, for a split-second, Will thought she was Jane.

In trying to tip the scales of 'right' back his way, Will had killed Adeline.

Fucked that up.

When Amanda left him over this, he was pretty sure she would sleep with Laird, who she was talking to on the glacier right now, not fifty feet away. Laird was twelve years younger and had an eight-pack—Will had seen it; the little shit climbed so regularly without a shirt. If Amanda wanted to keep climbing and spend much time with anyone she was sleeping with, realistically, that meant it had to be another climber. The climbing community in Southeast was small. He could win her back if Laird himself were the problem, but when Amanda was done with something she tended to be really done. Will pushed the sunglasses

back up onto his head, flinching as the color of Laird's hair shot up in a white-hot flare. Everyone else was wearing beanies. It seemed inappropriate for Will to give Amanda the news while wearing sunglasses. She and Laird were both still wearing theirs to protect against snow blindness. He squinted as he walked.

"What's wrong?" she asked when he got close. Amanda knew when he was feeling shit; she never made him wait for a lull in conversation.

"Adeline's gone radio silent," he said. "Reese took a float plane to camp, but she's gone."

"Gone how?"

"Her pack too." As in, not for-sure dead.

"Might be lost," said Laird. "Never should have been there in the first place."

"Shut up, Laird," said Amanda, without malice. She touched Will's sleeve and asked how he was doing. Christ, he loved her.

"I've fucked up," Will said. He meant it as punctuation. No confession or pleading. He owed her that.

"Let's talk."

"Tent?"

"Walk."

"Guess I'll just fuck off then?" said Laird. "Tell everyone for you?"

"Do whatever," Amanda said. "We need a moment."

"Fuck you both," said Laird.

They walked away from him, out onto the ice. As Will went, he put his sunglasses back on. He needed them. A stupid gesture that just moments ago seemed noble. How many things in his life had he fucked up by being that way?

“Just say it,” Amanda said. “Whatever it is you think you did.” She could see on his face that it was time. The big ‘whatever-it-was’ he had been hanging onto. Timing be damned.

Will didn’t know where to start. The fight with Adeline in the kayak. Jane’s face bathed in red light as they stood next to a stack of kegs in the back of the Alaskan. Her desire looked like another form of anger. Climbing calluses on her hands so rough her palms caught like tattered wood.

“I cheated on you,” Will said.

Amanda broke out laughing. “With Adeline?”

“With Jane.”

They were still walking. Same steady, even pace with the crunch of snow. Will couldn’t see her eyes through the dark sunglasses, but he hoped she was looking at him. He should have suggested they ski to get further away from camp.

Amanda stopped walking. She had always assumed you were supposed to leave a partner who cheated on you, like that minute, out of self-respect. But leaving someone you loved took time, energy, and preparation. Also, She didn’t want to leave Will. An overwhelming, knee jerk-reaction at the thought. Will tried so hard. At least, she thought he did. Whatever else he had done, Amanda was sure Will tried, very hard, to be a good person and partner. Or at least he had. Did cheating negate everything? Hadn’t this conversation somehow started with Adeline?

“Is that all?” she asked.

“Isn’t that enough?”

“It has nothing to do with Adeline. Unless you told her before we left.”

Will knew not answering made him a coward. He didn’t answer. The image of Jane in red light drifted far back in his mind to the dark bottom of a well with Adeline lying face

down next to her. A pool of color under her head. The pack Adeline had brought with her bobbed in the water between them. An old pack of Jane's from a few years back, he should have caught on. Everything Adeline brought with her on the trip had at one time belonged to Jane. She wore Jane's brown insulation layer their first day out—a favorite of Jane's climbing from about two years back. He had taken it as a sign of closure, but it wasn't.

“Christ, Will,” said Amanda. “You didn't tell Adeline you slept with Jane, did you?”

They stopped and stood, surrounded by the glacier, Will getting smaller and smaller. The sky was too close up here. In Juneau, the town was so crowded between mountains of the mainland and Douglas Island, Will sometimes got the feeling he was a spinning top, trapped between two walls. But there was a kind of safety in that motion. Here, the sky was unrestrained. It ballooned a long, endless horizon. Anything could happen to him up here.

“It was selfish,” Will said. “I know. I tricked myself—”

“Please don't,” said Amanda.

“I'm sorry—”

“Will, please stop.” How she felt about what he saying kept changing by the second. One moment he seemed to be genuinely remorseful, the next, grovelling in self-pity. “If you say you're sorry one more time,” Amanda said. “I will lose my mind.”

Will's throat tightened, a memory of popping the heads off of dandelions as a child. Pressure closing in, all it would take was just a simple flick of her wrist, like flipping on a lighter.

“Right now, I don't give a shit that you fucked Jane,” Amanda said. It wasn't true, but the Adeline crisis called for prioritisation of messes. “What I care about is what you told Adeline.”

Will couldn't remember. He remembered rehearsing various phrasings, but in the end, he hadn't used any of them. Words slipped from his lips like clattering stones, sliding away in scree.

"I told her that Jane and I made out in a bar," Will said. He was sure of that much.

"Is that all?"

"Adeline wanted me to shut up. She said I didn't know anything about Jane. I was just some guy she kissed once."

"I'm impressed by your restraint." Amanda couldn't keep the nastiness out of her voice. At least, Will had the sense to save Adeline a full confession.

"I would have done more," said Will. "We were both so wasted. But Jane turned me down."

There it was. Amanda closed her eyes. Thank god. She took a long, sweet breath. Kissing with intent while wasted in a bar was a problem, a fight to be sure, but in her mind, it amounted to more of 'grievous mistake' than full-on cheating. She could get past that, couldn't she? Jane was dead after all. Though, of course, cheating was never really about the other person. There would be something else, slippery, and hidden. Will never did like to give up opportunities. Could it really be that simple? The arrogance of that thought. Amanda took another long breath, a deep-sea diver getting ready for the plunge. "You mean the two of you didn't even fuck?"

"I never touched Adeline."

"I swear, Will. Sometimes, it's like you're trying to misunderstand me."

"I got confused because you said you didn't want to know. Jane and I never had sex."

To another woman, Amanda knew the distinction might not make much of a difference—it made sense that Will was hung up on it—but the real problem was that Will had sought Adeline out, dragged her into this, then lost her over a drunken make-out with her

dead sister. Why did he think his guilt mattered more than her grief? What kind of a person was she with, if Will was so self-absorbed, he didn't notice that? He still didn't seem to understand.

"Let me get this straight," Amanda said. "You didn't sleep with Jane, but you felt the need to tell her grieving sister about some random drunken make-out?"

"I—" Will's brain surged. A bad decision, he saw that now. "I felt like I was betraying her."

"Which one?"

"All? You? Adeline? Jane? It seems like every time I try to do right, I end up making selfish decisions. It's like my mind is playing tricks on me."

"It's called self-awareness, Will. It's not some grand conspiracy."

"I'm trying," he stumbled, tongue thick and foreign. "Please. Amanda, I'm trying."

"I know," she said. "I just don't know how much longer I can wait for you while you try."

The white of the glacier pressed around Will so tightly the color felt like sound. A buzz loud enough that he had a hard time discerning the faint hum of his own consciousness against it. Amanda turned away from him and towards Devil's Paw, towering over the nearby granite mastiff of Michael's Sword. A shimmer of colored spots followed her—the beginnings of snow blindness—and for moment Will saw a world superimposed over the snow in which it was a lake.

"This isn't what you think it is," Amanda said. "I could work through the bit about Jane. I really could. The rest—this bit about Adeline. That I don't know. We need to get back to the others. God knows what Laird's told them."

Will blinked away the spots and nodded.

In the cook-tent, they called a meeting. Laird had told the other mountaineers about Adeline's disappearance but taken creative liberties—supposedly, Adeline had wandered off on her own and got lost. Will could have hit him. All through the meeting, Will kept going back over what Amanda had said. He needed to pay better attention, he knew that now, but he didn't understand how he was going to unwind what parts of him were trying to be honest, from those that were also self-serving. Will had always thought telling the whole truth was supposed to be the right thing. The truth was supposed to keep you right and safe. It hadn't occurred to him it could also be selfish. The night he and Amanda met kept running through his mind. 'Set-Night,' at the climbing gym five years ago. Will noticed her as he put up a route with holds that looked like globs of black tar, another wads of bubble gum. While the drill whirled, he felt her watch him and knew he could have her. The cockiness of that wasn't exactly 'right' was it? It worked out in the end, but that ugly bit of ego—was he any better than someone like Laird? Laird at least had the excuse of being twenty-three. All the work Will thought he had done on himself, and he was still the same asshole. Change wasn't always linear though. He could keep working, keep trying. He had to.

Amanda wasn't paying attention to the meeting. The longer it went on, the more pointless to her it felt. It was obvious the group would still decide to go up Devil's Paw. She didn't see the point of acting like they wouldn't, but of course, everyone had to have feelings first. She wasn't sure she wanted to sleep in the same tent as Will tonight. Still, the Will sitting next to her with a perpetual look of a house cat denied early dinner, was the same Will who planned their five-year anniversary back in February, who secretly took a half day at work so he could haul all the ingredients out to Windfall cabin and make shrimp gumbo. When Amanda had arrived late from work in the dark—stomping ice off her boots and eyelashes fringed with snow—she found him in a warm cabin full of tea candles, sitting surrounded in glass jars of dried spices, the eucalyptus smell of ground sassafras leaves, fresh

thyme, garlic husks, celery, and parsley. He sat amongst the herbs like the captain of a merchant ship. Between the food, their gear, fuel, firewood, and a smoky bottle of scotch whisky it took Will two separate trips from the car. Three miles one way, nine total. He had been tending the gumbo for hours.

By the end of the meeting, Amanda had decided to dig a snow cave. She could sleep in it if she wanted but didn't have to decide yet. She was mad and sad, but physical labour tended to beat that kind of feeling out of you. At home, when Amanda felt sad, she did chores until she dropped. No time or energy to think until you were done, and after hours of chopping wood you didn't care much about anything anymore. To top it off, you had a clean house, firewood, and a shovelled driveway. Maybe your neighbors had shovelled driveways too and you'd built up some social capital.

In the end, they all decided to still go up the mountain, like Amanda knew they would.

She warned Will she needed some space and found a good area on the glacier that was set into a slope at least six feet deep. Working alone, she figured it would take about four hours to dig the snow cave, and she was likely to sweat through the set of clothes she was wearing. The last snow cave she made she and Will lit with the cheap, clear plastic solar light his brother got him for Christmas. An egg-white glow in the blue hollow that reminded her of farmhouse porchlights getting snuffed out in horror movies.

Only a few minutes into digging, sweat already tickled the cervices of her elbows. Every thought she had now was simply a repetition of the plan: entry a foot and a half wide and five feet tall. Extend it three feet into the slope. Inside, carve out a platform waist high in a T shape so all the cold air would get trapped at the bottom. Amanda felt good.

Then, Laird came over and ruined it.

Sometimes, Amanda wished human beings were allowed to communicate like dogs. Then, when she wanted to be alone, she could growl at the other person until they went away.

“Neat project,” he said.

“Always good to have extra space.”

“If my boyfriend brought along some newbie, then lost her in the wilderness, I might need some space from him too.”

No points for subtlety. Amanda would have thought bringing Adeline on the trip came across to the rest of the mountaineering group as her idea. But maybe Laird knew about Will and Jane. Maybe everyone had. She got why Will felt threatened by this bratty kid, but she could not stand him. He looked like a Scandinavian model but made a show of not caring by cutting his hair in outrageous styles. He was an untrustworthy kind of pretty, bottle-green eyes and one of those strong jawlines that straight men seemed to assume all women liked. Amanda had slept with men that muscular before and their bodies were so hard and heavy, she found them genuinely unpleasant to touch—it felt like fucking a stone. Before the expedition, Laird had cut his mullet short for outdoors practicality. The trip before he’d shaved off a mohawk, then, just for the hell of it, shaved off his eyebrows too.

“You could help me dig,” Amanda said. “If you’re so concerned.” She did not want him to.

“Are you going to sleep in the snow cave before the climb alone? Like a yeti?”

Laird picked up the shovel as she set it down to keep her from digging. When Amanda switched to the ice axe, he jumped down close and put his free hand on the handle of the axe, just above hers. The gall. He probably thought he was charming.

“Look, Adeline missing upsets me too,” he said. “Remember how upset Will got when Jane died? When we called you from the Alaskan to come get him?”

So, Laird knew about Will and Jane. Amanda had held Will's head in her lap in the car for hours in the car that night, thinking him soft-hearted. At one point his face went purple, and she had to make him breathe into a paper bag left over from the McDonalds drive-through. Maybe Laird hated her the way she hated him and was here to gloat.

"I didn't cry when Jane died," Laird told her. "I've not cried in years. I don't think I can cry anymore."

He would think that. Amanda let him have both the ice axe and shovel, stepping away. "Laird," she said. "What is this about?"

"I was Jane's main climbing partner."

Amanda hadn't known that, and it only made her more suspicious.

"I know you didn't like her," he said. "She wasn't exactly a nice person. It's more like: you know how sometimes you wonder what it would be like if there was a war?"

"I don't fantasize about wars, Laird."

"But if there was one, you know which of your friends might not be there. You know which of them might stab you in the back to save themselves. Jane and I climbed well together, because I knew she had my back, and she knew I had hers. If it came down to her or me on a climb, she would have had the decency to look me right in the eye when she cut the rope. You see what I'm saying?"

"No," said Amanda. "She sounds scary."

Laird's set down the ice axe and shovel so tenderly it seemed like an apology, then moved a more respectful distance away. "I think I'm doing this wrong. I'm not good at explaining feelings."

Amanda resisted the urge to laugh openly, though the instinct itself softened her towards him. "Feelings are hard," she offered.

“Jane didn’t like me, but we understood each other. She did all the wrong things socially, just, for some reason no one let her get away with it the way they let me. I think maybe because I’m hot?”

“Can’t say I feel particularly sorry for you.” Amanda’s patience was running short. She did not know what to do with a version of Laird trying to be vulnerable.

“All I meant to say is that you don’t need Will, I get that. Without him, you’ll be fine. People like you and Jane will always be fine. But I don’t think Will would even consider choosing himself over you in a life-or-death situation. And not in self-righteous, martyr way. For the right reasons.”

The line was meant to be loaded, and Amanda supposed it was. But the gesture appeared to be genuine. She felt a little bad now. It was a shitty thing to do to underestimate someone. “I would like to be left alone to build my snow cave now,” she said gently. “If you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Laird said, and left. Amanda let out a long breath. She had been standing still long enough to start shivering in her cooling sweat. As quickly as she could, she got back to digging, though she had decided to sleep in the tent.

The morning of the climb, Amanda and Will got up early to eat the special dehydrated meal they had saved for the occasion, BBQ beef. It was the tradition to eat protein heavy, non-breakfast food the morning before a big climb. Will did not pressure her to tell him what she was thinking, and Amanda appreciated that. He had given her space all night. They roped up with the others at four in the morning and did their buddy checks. It was methodical, habit, but Amanda found it comforting.

Once they started, her world was nothing but pure motion. For hours, she thought of nothing but hands and feet and gear. The clink of carabiners. Of crampons. The sun rose over

the world in a flood of pink. Amanda's thoughts expanded with her first breath of air on the ridge, reaching out to remember the glimmering life signs around her: Will as a presence. The other mountaineers. She pictured Adeline as a thin, fragile life-sign somewhere in the valley, flickering in and out. She wanted to believe that Adeline was still alive, but Amanda knew not all people could be saved. The tourist that died with her and Will had only lived a few minutes after they found him. Slow, heaving gasps 2-3 seconds apart, head cracked, leaking purple blood. The death rattle, Reese called it.

As Will looked out over the ridge, he saw a strangely bright and moving star in the sky to the east. "Hey," he said to Amanda and pointed.

To Will's knowledge, there were no comets in the forecast—certainly nothing seen by daylight—but what he sure looked like one. The star blistered so brightly he thought it had the semblance of a tail.

"I'm not exactly up to date with the astronomical forecast, but is that a comet?" Amanda said.

"UFO?" said Will. Neither of them laughed.

In the Middle Ages people used to think of comets as signs of doom. Will had read somewhere that the arrival of Halley's Comet foretold William the Conqueror invading England. Another heralded the death of Julius Cesezar. Famine. Earthquakes. The smoking star was moving a little slower than an airplane. As they stood knee-deep in snow, a bit of low-lying cloud moved in below, blanketing the glacier. Devil's Paw looked like the last island standing in a sea of fog, their own Ararat. The mountaineers were supposed to be crawling on, moving between the mastiffs to get them all there in a timely matter, but the moving star had been noticed by everyone. It was getting closer. Laird was at the front and held his hand up to signal it was time for a break.

"What the hell is that?" Will heard him ask his climbing partner.

“Have we entered the Bermuda Triangle?” someone said.

“Doomsday meteor. Like with the dinosaurs.”

“Come on, it’s clearly the star for Jesus and the three wise men,” offered Amanda, smiling beneath her balaclava. “We follow it to the Christ child.”

Laughter rose, then died again. The star was definitely closer. Pale yellow, darkening into gold. Will’s breath caught and he put a gloved hand out to Amanda. She took it. The star tunnelled through the sky in a long streak like a gilded worm. Will began to plan his last thoughts; in case this really was the end. He did not want to spend his last moments thinking of that day on the river when they found the hand. Wondering if Sean Greenly’s body had cursed them, or if Amanda was going to leave him. If he was going to die, he wanted a self-contained image to float away on that was his own. Maybe the white-blue view of the sky beyond the star. Too clear to be the sky in a painting. The feel of Amanda’s hand within the clunky exoskeleton of her alpine gloves.

Amanda noticed Will shut his eyes as the star neared. The way a child might to block out the scary part of a movie. She thought about doing the same but waited too long. Before she knew it, the star crept past, onto the opposite horizon. It did not look like a plane. August was the time of year of that one reoccurring meteor shower, wasn’t it? What was it called, something Greek? They were all named for Greek or Roman things. She was glad Will was with her. Amanda didn’t realize she had been holding her breath until she let it out and the frozen smoke of drifted up through the balaclava and dissolved. Will opened his eyes and the frost of his breath joined hers. A collective frozen breath of relief rose up from the mountaineers. Somewhere, someone began to snicker. The nervous laughter travelled from pair to pair, passing through the group in a wave.

“Can’t wait until I tell my dad I’ve seen a UFO,” someone said. “He’ll be so jealous.”

Will relaxed. Below them, there was a part in the clouds, and he caught sight of a ridge, wildly green against the glacier's white. The place lay right in the middle of Hades Highway, where they were meant to be camped, a blue marble of a round lake glimmering.

"What's that?" he whispered to Amanda.

The crater lake smoked as if recovering from some terrible impact. Ripples trickled out in enormous waves that swamped the beach, a rumbling sound travelling through the ground. At first, Will thought it must be an avalanche, but no one but the two of them seemed to notice the noise. A curtain of white cloud pulled over their view and all sign and sounds of the mysterious ridge were gone.

"I saw it too," said Amanda. "But what?" she trailed off. The optical illusion of a *fata morgana*, she supposed— a mirage caused by temperature inversion, making the light rays from some distant mountain range refract, bending down. She had never heard of it happening with a lake. All around them, the other mountaineers chatted as if nothing had happened, commenting on the cold, the silliness of seeing a UFO or maybe a comet, and then, eventually, what they needed to do to summit the next mastiff. Nothing about the hidden ridge. Laird came over to Will and Amanda and put a hand on each of their shoulders.

"You two ready to go?"

Will gave Amanda's hand a gentle squeeze. "Are we?" he asked.

"I think so," Amanda said. "Yeah. I'm ready." Will couldn't see her face through her balaclava, but he thought she was smiling.

"I love you," he said as they rose to their feet.

"I love you too," Amanda said.

By the time they were standing, the world felt almost normal.

Chapter Twenty: Meteora

On the last day of the Perseids, Adeline limped out to Fossil Bay. Jane was still asleep, curled up in the sleeping bag like a cooked shrimp. She didn't wake when Adeline took the multitool and handmade dip-net from their usual position in the corner. They had slept for half a day. The high sun over the lake turned the electric bones of the glacier blue. The new, bright star Jane pointed out the other day was still there, over to the right of Devil's Paw, a white spec waxing on the horizon. Adeline swore it looked bigger than before. She selected a route over the beach so when Jane woke, she would see the footprints in the sand and know where she'd gone. When Jane disappeared, grief overwhelmed Adeline. She felt faint and thirsty, alone in Juneau. An animal on fire, caught and thrashing; she would have chewed off her own hand to get away. She didn't want Jane to wake again and feel that way, no matter how upset with her she was. After No Man's Land, she figured she at least owed Jane that.

The Meteora they lived in was not how Adeline had imagined it as a child. She never had gotten the sense it was dangerous, but she had also never imagined Meteora itself to be plagued with meteors. Now, Adeline worried her earlier hypothesis about the origin of the fish bones was correct. The crater lake here looked only slightly smaller than Twin Glacier Lake, about two miles, so the meteor that formed it had to have been five-hundred feet wide. Whatever was left of it that hadn't vaporized on impact was sitting at the bottom of the lake, dead center. Adeline pictured the remains of meteor after meteor, piled on top of each other like a cairn. When she reached the cliffs with the bones, she sat down on her haunches to rest at the edge of the beach. She was tired, but not as badly as expected. Beyond this point, the beach descended into fossilized stones spread too far apart and too slippery to climb across. Where she sat, the fossils were the oldest. The rocks containing them lay in broken tiles, but further inward they were sharp, inaccessible, and fresher fossils emerged. Lighter-colored,

close to the surface. Fresh, aging bones sat on the rocks below a few yards beyond that, gleaming white; the youngest rings in a birch tree.

Today, beyond this graveyard of stones, living carp swelled in black waves, drifting with the pull of the water, swarming close enough to touch. Before Adeline reached down, she looked up to check the star. It drooped in the sky opposite her, as if the carp were pulling it to shore. She took out the dip net. If Jane could get climbing gear out of the belly of a fish, she could too. This was their last day to leave. This was the only way she could get back to Kate before being trapped in Meteora for a year—or, possibly, getting killed by a meteor. Even if they survived, Kate wasn't going to wait another year for Adeline. Jane hadn't even expected her to wait a year for her—she had made that clear. Would Adeline have expected Jane to wait, then come and get her if their positions were reversed? An ugly, guilty feeling welled up inside her. She would have. Either way, Adeline couldn't leave Meteora without Jane's help, of that much, she was sure.

It hurt Adeline's stomach to drape herself across the fossil rock on her elbows, but she didn't have the strength to crouch. She aimed for the biggest fish, a massive, cobalt carp with eyes so orange they looked bloodshot, nearly twice the size of the rest. There were two other large fish, but she could only handle one at a time. The net went under the carp easily, but the thrashing fish nearly pulled her in. Adeline had to drag it back over the rock with all her weight, grunting and wheezing. Once the fish hit the sand, it barely twitched. The blood orange eyes glazed over before she could even find a rock. Adeline dragged the two other big ones out in the same manner. The first fish's belly opened easily under the blade of the multitool. Sticking her hand into its massive belly felt like sticking her hand into a dangerous hole in a cave. Adeline pictured poisonous snakes and spiders. She had thought that holding onto the carabiners and climbing nuts would feel like grabbing metal popcorn, but instead there was some sort of thick folded plastic thing inside. Like a massive, deflated beach ball.

She dragged the object out by a corner, the way she would an envelope trapped under a stack of books. Once in the air, it expanded a little into a box-like shape, no longer vacuum-sealed by the fish. Adeline had to turn it around a few times to figure out what it was, wiping off the blood to reveal a label. It appeared to be some sort of camping equipment. The illustration on the side of its casing looked like a boat.

Adeline opened up the two other fish in quick succession, feeling around again for anchors, only to discover two long stick-like things with a wide blade like a fin. At first glance, they looked like shovels. Then tiny, impractical paddles with a handle no wider than the blade. She pulled on one end until the paddle expanded to normal size. An inflatable pack raft and two collapsible paddles.

Jane sat outside cooking breakfast as her sister returned. She watched Adeline walk clear around the lake with a bright red awkward bundle slung over her shoulder in the dip-net like a hobo in a children's illustration. Impressive that she could move so well after yesterday. Jane wondered if she should be worried. From Adeline's stance, she could tell her sister was upset. A quick, bobbing up and down step, turning it into a kind of angry skip. Adeline had done that walk ever since she was small. Difficult not to find it funny. The drama with which she emptied the contents of the dip net at Jane's feet when she arrived did nothing to help the effect. Two paddles bounced at odd angles, but the box-shaped, heavier item sent a spray of sand over Jane's legs and up into the fire. Grains rattled on the side of the cooking pot before dropping into the flames.

"Good morning to you too," said Jane.

"You threw out our climbing gear," said Adeline, breathless. From the look on her face, she was well prepared for this fight, but Jane was not. She set the stick to the side that she had been using to move the cooking fish. So, that was why Adeline had tried to rappel

from No Man's Land. Jane could play dumb now, if she wanted, and try to stall for time, but that seemed likely to only enrage Adeline further. They had both been through too much for that. Jane brushed the sand off herself.

"That's true," she said.

"Why would you do that?" said Adeline. A dial inside her had been cranked on high. Jane wasn't even denying the betrayal. With a new doorway to Meteora, Jane didn't even have to leave her ridge forever. She could come back every year during the Perseids, when there weren't impending meteors threatening to flatten their camp. Did Jane care about what Adeline actually wanted from her own life at all, or only about keeping her?

"You caught your own carp, I'm guessing," Jane said. "You know, you really should be resting after yesterday."

"Since you've been throwing out our only hope to get back home, and tomorrow the Perseids end, I had to go fishing myself."

Jane examined the boxed-up raft. As she had feared, she recognized the make. Difficult to focus on which words to use with the knowledge drowning out all other thoughts. "This is Sean's old inflatable pack raft," Jane said, as calmly as she could. "He kicked it off the ledge in his sleep our last night in the Arrigetch."

Adeline tried to picture that, Jane and Sean curled up in their bags, inky darkness below. Burrowed into the side of the mountain, a part of it, his foot dangling over the edge.

"Meteora is trying to save us," she told Jane. "Climbing gear. A boat. And you're throwing things away."

"What do you want me to say?"

"That you're sorry, for a start," said Adeline. "And that you'll listen to me. We need to leave. I think this lake is a crater because it is a lightning rod for meteors. You told me

when you came here, everything was covered in steam. I think Sean passed through the lake when the last meteor struck, just ahead of you, and that's where his body went."

The look on Jane's face was that of someone stepping unexpectedly into a deep bog. "I'm listening."

It was difficult to resist the urge to berate Jane now—an ugly, squirming feeling. Her sister certainly talked down to her sometimes, didn't she? But Jane didn't take being insulted very well and there was a very real danger to convey. "You told me when you first woke up here the waterline was higher," Adeline said. "Based on the fish fossils and the size of this lake out at Fossil Bay, Meteors hit here often. Each with a blast radius big enough to kill us, regardless of where we are on this ridge. I think there's going to be another one and I think it's coming here, tonight, when the Perseids end."

Jane picked up the inflatable raft and set it behind her, out of view. Would these ridiculous fish ever stop bringing up little bits of Sean? At this rate, she was surprised they didn't jump onto land and start coughing up his vertebrae. She tried to contextualize what Adeline was saying, but the image of Sean in the Arrigetch was still too loud. The view in front of her was identical to the one she had when she stepped out of the tent to find him gone, sand steaming despite the cold air as if a whole geyser of hot springs lay beneath. Everything, the dripping-wet and hissing. She supposed that could have been from a meteor strike.

Jane pointed to the dip net. "I made that from berry bushes in Foodland not long after I got here. Splinted and split into a hoop-shape and handle, then dried it out in the sun. Foodland couldn't exist if there were constant meteors."

"I don't pretend to know how things work on this ridge," said Adeline. She pointed at the new star on the horizon. "But tell me that doesn't look exactly like the comet that passed by our house when I was eleven?"

Jane remembered. It was supposed to be one of those once-in-a-lifetime comets, but from their bedroom window it just looked like a ball of light with hair. The meteor that followed the next morning resulted in her fight with Adeline in the snow. Their doorway to Meteora shut. Alone, just before they moved to Idaho, Jane tried to go back one last time. Adeline was at a doctor's appointment. When she got to the Crater, the rock in the middle was split to rubble. The debris wrecked the Crater's perfect circle, but not in an impressive way—a muddy hole where the rock used to be. Jane went into the timber beyond, taking her shirt off as she walked. She walked until the trees began to thin and she realised she could still hear a car creeping down grade B gravel road on the other side. It was the Perseids, but Meteora wasn't there. Jane put her shirt back on and stood for a long time, trembling.

“It looks like a star,” she told Adeline.

“When you and I saw the comet,” Adeline replied. “There was a meteor the following morning. You know which one I mean.”

“Yes,” said Jane. “I fucking remember.”

“Then why lie to me about the climbing gear? Do you not see how these things are connected? A meteor is going to come and hit this lake tonight. We have to get off the ridge. What could possibly be so important you want to trap us here?”

Jane supposed Adeline was owed some sort of explanation, but she didn't think her sister would understand. Adeline was already suspicious of everything having to do with Sean, and Jane could feel a strain in herself, a hollow, dark emotion rising, like a cracking in her features. A bad sunburn. She wished she could be a forensic investigator and go into both her own and Sean's brains post-mortem to sort it all out. Slice up the pieces and line them up against each other under a microscope. His intentions laid bare alongside hers.

“I didn’t mean to kill Sean,” Jane said. “I forgot to check his knots. How am I supposed to know what I was or wasn’t thinking when it happened? He had hit me a couple months before and I hadn’t decided how I felt about it.”

Adeline’s mouth seemed to have gone to mush. She couldn’t make it work.

Jane let out a forced, sarcastic laugh. “Is it easier if I explain in the Voice?” she asked. “Evening boils and ghoooooouls, today we’re going to have a little public Deeenouncement. Remember kiddies, you have to beeeeeee careful when talking about abuse—”

“Stop,” Adeline interrupted. “Just stop. Don’t do that to yourself.”

Jane stopped. She went so quiet, Adeline worried she wasn’t going to speak at all. There were times, growing up, when Jane would go silent like that. When their parents fought or asked her why she was in trouble at school. When, at parent teacher conferences, a teacher mentioned that Jane didn’t have friends or want to play with other children. Whenever they implied something was wrong with her, Jane shut down like a stone. Adeline used to go into hysterics then, after the adults were gone, trying to revive Jane. She followed her around, crying, begging, ‘please talk to me, Jane please,’—but every word and touch seemed to drive her sister further away. It wasn’t until they were teenagers that Adeline realized, Jane didn’t respond at the time because she really couldn’t. She was so upset; she temporarily lost her ability to speak. In those moments, Jane didn’t need to be pleaded with but protected.

“Do you think,” Jane asked finally. “Once something unforgiveable happens, it changes who you are, fundamentally?”

“That would depend on the thing,” Adeline said. “Based on what you just told me, I think you know what happened.”

Jane set her tea down. “I need to start again. Remember the movie we talked about in Scotland on the mountain I keep seeing here? Suilven?”

Adeline did, but barely. Jane had gone on a fifteen-minute rant about an old movie. She hoped it didn't make her selfish that she hadn't listened to the whole thing. Sometimes, Jane went on technical monologues or rants about the outdoors and Adeline just couldn't keep up. Most of what she remembered of their trip in Scotland was missing the comfort of her own apartment back home. Her warm, perfect little house in the trees at Fritz Cove with a window seat. Getting lunch with Kate, then going back to her drawings. She wondered if she would ever see them again.

"It's a movie about the serial killer in Anchorage in the 70s," Jane said. "The one who raped all those women then took them out into the bush to kill them. They called him Butcher Baker. Remember how the movie falls apart because they're trying to act like it's the detective's story? Like he's a hero just for trying to get this victim that escaped to talk? When really, it's clearly her story?"

"Maybe?" Adeline said. This was starting to sound familiar. She didn't think she had enjoyed that movie.

"It makes it out like the girl is just a victim," Jane went on. "But really, I don't care about the fucking detective. I care about the girl—she was what's interesting."

"I'm sorry," said Adeline. "I'm not quite sure what you're getting at."

"Think about what it would be like to be that girl in real life. Not that something like that happened to me. I wasn't raped."

"Well, that's good. That would have been really fucking awful."

"But like, back to the girl. She's had something completely out of her control happen."

"Cindy Paulson," Adeline said. "She was a real person." Jane had to know that movie was based on a real story, and even if Adeline didn't remember the movie that well, she knew about the murders. Cindy Paulsen's name was used every time the murders came up because

it was her testimony that put the serial killer in prison. She didn't know why Jane kept refusing to name her.

"You're getting wrapped up in the wrong details," said Jane. "Think of this like a thought experiment for the Butcher Baker's other victims. The ones that weren't Cindy Paulsen."

"There were twenty-one of them. That they know of. What does this have to do with Sean?"

Jane fought the urge to snap at her. Sometimes Adeline could be so literal.

"It's not about Sean," said Jane. "It's barely even about a thing he did. It's about me and how I am. Why is it whenever stories like this come out, people always want to focus on the wrong person?"

"Okay, okay," said Adeline. She must be missing something metaphorical.

"Say there is a girl out in the bush and she escapes," said Jane.

"Someone not Cindy Paulsen? Because that's not what happened. They don't know if anyone else ever got away."

"Sure. Someone else. This upsetting, confusing, and incredibly personal thing has happened, and now this woman is alone in the mountains. If she goes home, she's going to have to tell someone what happened. And if she doesn't tell someone, she will have live with the fact that she isn't telling. The knowledge of that thing will eat up who she is and how she thinks about herself. But if she tells other people, it takes away her individuality and joins a narrative. Serial killers, rape, abuse. It won't be hers anymore; it will define how other people see her. Everything she is will be tainted by this thing that happened that was completely out of her control. When really, she's a whole person outside of it. What happened can't touch who she is, not unless she gives it a chance to. If she stays in the mountains, she can deal with what happened there alone, however she needs, until she decides how she feels and what she

wants. Or she can choose to not deal. There is no one else around to exert pressure. She can keep who she is safe.”

“I still don’t understand,” said Adeline. “What exactly happened? You can tell me. It’s not going to change how I think about who you are.”

“I know you’re a safe person, Adeline,” said Jane. “What I’m saying is that right now, I am not. Who I am is unstable. It is shaken to the bone. But, in Meteora, I’m safe. The uncertainty and confusion can’t get at me.”

Adeline understood now, but having the knowledge felt like being trapped under a fitted sheet.

“Jane,” she said, as gently as she could. “Sometimes things happen beyond our control, and they do change us, even if we don’t want them to. You know that’s okay, right?”

“I disagree.” Jane’s throat was closing on her. The feeling rising up like she couldn’t fit words around meaning. She should have known better than to think Adeline would understand. It wasn’t the kind of thing you could say out loud.

“You disagree that things beyond our control can change us?” Adeline asked. “Or that it’s okay if they do?” She was getting worried. Jane was out of breath. She kept picking up tools around her as if she meant to continue making breakfast then putting them down again.

“Once you accept something has happened,” said Jane. “It can change you. I don’t want to give these things the power to—”

“You’re living on a mountain ridge in Meteora, refusing to go back to the regular world,” interrupted Adeline. “It has changed you.”

Jane stopped talking. This situation was too far outside of Adeline’s experience for her to expect her sister to relate. Adeline’s life was so self-contained, her world-building and drawing and apartment with her walls full of illustrations in the woods. Adeline had only one person in her life other than Jane, Kate, and somehow seemed happy with that. If people

didn't accept her, it didn't matter because Adeline did freelance graphic design work and never had to interact with anyone she didn't want to. Camping alone in the mountains helped Jane feel more like herself, but eventually, she always had to go back. She needed to pay rent or buy more supplies or she missed Adeline and Sean. She missed her stupid climbing group and her stupid bratty climbing partner, who never asked personal questions, just let her be quiet around another human.

"There isn't a real route down off this ridge anyway," Jane said finally. "Even if we had enough gear to make a hundred pitches. You're not strong enough for that after yesterday."

Adeline supposed her sister was right, though she didn't feel as weak as Jane kept making her sound. Maybe going down No Man's Land wasn't the way. Jane was clearly hurting, and something needed to be done to get her through that, but they also had a very serious problem. Why would Meteora give them a boat if they could never make it far enough off the ridge to use it in the world below?

"Then when the meteor comes," Adeline said. "Maybe we should take the raft to the middle of the lake."

"Why? So, it can fall on top of us?"

"No, so when another gate opens right before the meteor hits—the gate that brought you here, that Sean's body passed through—we'll be able to exit out that doorway. I think it will take it us back to Taku."

"You think," Jane shook her head. "Adeline, I really don't think there's going to be any meteor."

"If there is though, will you come in the raft with me?"

Jane looked over the cliffs of the crater lake to the new star. It was brighter than when she had first noticed it for sure. "I'll get in the boat with you if you come with me to End of the World peak-gazing," she said.

"Okay," said Adeline. Jane had certainly harped on that enough. If she needed Adeline to give her a token, something to show that she cared—Adeline could give her that.

"Okay, what?" asked Jane.

"We'll go now. You can rope-up the bad part of the ridge up for me. Let's go peak-gazing."

Jane hadn't meant to make the offer; she had hoped it would put Adeline off the meteor idea. Trapped in the lie about the fish earlier, and with all that Adeline had been through, now she kind of had to go along with it now.

"If we're careful," Jane said. "And we'll take lots of breaks. You have to listen if I say to stop, since yesterday was so rough."

Adeline looked back at the inflatable raft and its two paddles. It probably didn't make any sense to bring them with her to the End of the World. They would still be back here, and maybe, if she could get Jane to see that Meteora wasn't the right place for them anymore, Jane would suggest the raft again on her own. "If we get back home," Adeline said, "you wouldn't have to tell anyone that you forgot to check Sean's knot, you know. Even if you did, I think most people would understand it was an accident."

Jane didn't answer. She opened the tent flap and collected their climbing gear.

Chapter Twenty-One: The End of the World

The climb to the End of the World went off without a hitch, much to Adeline's surprise.

Jane went over first and roped everything up a way she called 'ferrata style.' Tired as Adeline was, she made it by imagining that instead of cloud below her, it was a gray carpet. Or water. Adeline had seen the sea covered with a thick layer of fog before, and falling into water was still scary, but it wasn't as frightening as the idea of being eaten up by nothing. They took a long rest both before and after the scramble. Adeline didn't ask for more rests, but Jane plotted them anyway, and she was silently grateful.

Jane thought about Sean only a little as they went. She regretted telling Adeline—ancient history. Something she still hadn't ruled on and had never intended to. It wasn't supposed to matter anymore. What frightened her the most about the idea of returning to the regular world, was the feeling of a pint glass in her hand, branded decal raised slightly in alien code. Things that used to be normal didn't sound normal anymore. The perfumed smell of a fresh orange. The skinned slipperiness of a sidewalk on an icy morning walk. Adeline had just come from that world, of course she wanted to go back to fresh oranges and icy sidewalks and beer glasses, but what did Jane have to go back to? As if she could really just walk into the Alaskan Hotel and Bar, order a Blue Moon for the orange slice, and sit. Look back to the area of red lighting by the kegs where she once made-out with Will-fucking-Morrow and then go to a mountaineering meeting. Feel Reese Cartwright's look of sympathy and Will avoiding eye contact as they bent together over a topography map.

When Jane and Adeline reached the ledge at the End of the World, she asked to borrow back her catalogue to take the day's readings. Adeline was bone tired from the short hike. She lay on her back in the warm sun on the rock. An endless span of cloud and mountains below them, peaks sticking up from the haze like islands. Jane hadn't lied about

this spot being beautiful. It took Adeline a minute to pick out the shape of Suilven, since she had only seen the mountain last year for the time it took to climb it. She recognized it by the grassy ridge below the summit. When they were on Suilven in Scotland, Jane had suggested they sit in that spot for a while and make coffee. In Assynt, the geology made the hills look unlike any other—metamorphic bedrock—so it held onto water instead of letting it drain. This made little patches of lochs littering the horizon, so many of them trapped on the bedrock, but the tops of the mountains were all sandstone, turning them into weathered sea monsters. Adeline had loved looking at all the little lakes and ponds below. From her view on Suilven, the sea rose in the distance, a smooth band of indigo. Suilven's ridge was pronged on one side like the bow of a great ship and Adeline felt like they were cut adrift and sailing. From where she sat now, she could make out that same prow.

“Hey,” Jane said, gesturing to her compasses. “Let me show you something.”

As Adeline watched, the arrow on the bigger, brass, and antique-looking compass listed towards Suilven, then finally went still when it was facing straight at the mountain. The other compass, which she assumed was a regular technical one, pointed back towards Devil's Paw and the ridge, where they had come from.

“Why do you have two?” she asked.

“The old-school one is Sean's,” said Jane.

“You took it off his body? Or it was with the gear he left behind.”

“Neither” said Jane. “It was on him when he disappeared. I found it afterwards in a fish. The way you found the raft.”

“You said the raft was his too?” Was it better to press Jane to say more about Sean, or give her space? Adeline generally sided with giving people space, but there was no way to know with Jane.

“It was with the stuff I left wrapped around him to keep him warm on the beach where he fell,” Jane said.

“Is there a reason you kept his compass, but not the rest?”

“I like compasses,” Jane said.

It was true, but Jane’s memory of Sean and his silliness about having such an antique, heavy compass had more to do with it. The beauty of the compass as an object. Even the symbolism behind having a sense of direction that wasn’t her own ridge. Jane supposed those were all a part of the reason, but it took too long to say. Meteora had never hurt Jane. It killed Sean and had almost hurt Adeline, but not really. Sean was already dying when he entered Meteora, and in the end, Adeline was okay. If it really could hurt them, if there really were recurring meteors, there would have to be more evidence of them along the ridge, wouldn’t there? Large chunks of rock would have been flung high over the beach onto the rest of the ridge. She supposed the anchor stone at No Man’s Land wasn’t mossy at the base but hard dug, as if it had been thrown there. The shattered, loose-rock sides of ‘Bag of Dicks’ could also be that way from decades of being hammered with debris. K2 could have been formed over the ages from the piling of debris, meteor after meteor, and the ledge in front of them that made up the End of the World. A sharp drop after one of the impacts could have caused a landslide that tore the rest of the ridge away.

“We should head back,” said Adeline, pointing again to the star in its bright, sunlit asterisk.

Jane didn’t respond. Danger or no, she did not like this raft idea. It would be nice to explore the far reaches of the crater lake and look at all the sheer, dramatic-looking cliffs circling the lake, but hanging out in the middle waiting for a meteor that wasn’t coming would get cold and boring. This new star reminded her more of a different night with the comet than the one Adeline kept going on about. A couple of nights before the meteor, there

was a snowstorm that trapped her parents away from home in bad roads. Jane had been watching Adeline when there was a blackout. Her dad had called to warn her they might be stuck, and the weather radio screamed and screamed. *The National Weather Service has issued a severe winter storm warning for the following counties: Cedar, Johnson, Clinton, Scott, Muscatine...* by the end of the announcements, more counties were listed than Jane knew. During the last one, outside the kitchen window to Jane's left, a flash of light streaked towards the end of the road. White-hot and whip-shaped, it snapped in a shower, leaving its imprint in the liquid of her eyes. The house plunged into darkness. No more lights twinkled from the neighbors down the road. If there had been a meteor, Jane didn't want to go outside. That felt all wrong, inside out and twisted, like trying to get to Meteora by wishing on a monkey's paw. If it was a snapped power line, Jane *really* shouldn't go outside. The wire might still be live, lying on the ground somewhere. To keep Adeline calm, Jane made up a game, talking about all the times they had been too warm. Summers of playing in sprinklers and that time they went to Florida and Adeline got sunburned so badly she had blisters on her shoulders. Adeline made up a mountain in Meteora that would be made up of summer bonfires. Campfires left alone after everyone else had gone to sleep, when you could sit peacefully and push the ash around with a stick. When Adeline finally fell asleep, Jane snuck outside. A flicker of light flashed in the street below, in and out. Jane looked hard at it, squinting to be sure it was not a meteor, but the spluttering light was a broken power line, gone so heavy with ice that it went down. Sparks hissed weakly in the snow. A clearing in the clouds passed overhead and through it, Jane saw the comet. Sparks popped next to it in the sky like embers dying together in a fire.

At the End of the World, Jane packed up her catalogue and compasses with painstaking slowness.

"Jane?" asked Adeline. "Don't you think we should head back?"

By the time they reached the narrow part of the ridge again, there was a faint tail forming behind the new star. Adeline went over the scrambly part first, roped up and safe, and Jane followed her, taking up the ropes behind her as she went. As Adeline watched her sister cross, she couldn't help but notice that elegant pivot in Jane's hips as she shifted her balance—she looked like a dancer. If Adeline took a picture, every frame Jane was in would look posed. When Adeline scrambled, she was pretty sure it looked like what it felt like—a rush of stops and starts, cold-pressed air squeaking in her lungs.

Jane was unaware of Adeline as she went. She had crossed this part of the ridge twice almost every day since she arrived back in Meteora. She kept track of each journey in her journal based on page numbers in SHADOWSTORM, which she supposed meant she had come from this direction two hundred and ninety-four times, which made five-hundred and eighty-eight crossings in total. Wild to think of that. Five-hundred and eighty-eight.

About halfway across, Jane noticed a loose, scree-filled step in the divot between humps in the ridge where she was out of Adeline's view. With the rope still on, it seemed a better place to put her foot for balance. The mistake she made was an easy one. Jane had safely crossed this spot in the ridge so often it no longer registered as 'dangerous.' There had been the famous 'pull-up incident of journey one-hundred-and-forty-five,' in which she missed a step and half walked off the ridgeline into nothing and found herself hanging on by both wrists—but that had been her only mishap.

Scree gave way beneath Jane's foot, and she skidded down fifteen feet to a ledge where she felt her ankle snap. Oh, Hell-bound fucking shit, no. The pain was instant, blind, but not yet connected to her brain so Jane found herself ruminating on the sense of the sound. It wasn't a shatter at least—just a snap—which was good. Instead of a weird jelly-foot she might still have some mobility.

She found herself on a ledge that overlooked oblivion. Jane didn't think she had screamed, but the shock still had her ears ringing. The pain wasn't the kind of pain you screamed from. It was the kind you sat with, rocking back and forth, deaf and blind, waiting to see if it got worse. If it got worse, it was definitely broken, and as anyone knew living in the outdoors—Jane was fucked. Somewhere above, Adeline called out but there was no way Jane was going to answer. Focus on the pain. What happened with it now determined all the rest. The pain did not get worse. It maintained. The ankle may have been broken, but it was not shattered. At best it was badly sprained and the rock on three sides of her was in a perfect chimney. There were worse places to fall. A lucky catch. Jane should have gone over the cliff. She did not feel lucky.

“Are you okay?” asked Adeline from the ridge.

“Yes,” yelled Jane, confused, even as she said it. When she got her bearings, then she could correct the news to Adeline. Don't worry her yet; don't let her panic. Jane pressed down with her foot and went dizzy. No grating feeling of bone. If it was broken, the break was clean. All kinds of good luck in the bad luck against the shit luck of waiting to maybe be killed by a fucking meteor. From where Jane sat, she had a perfect view of the star. And fuck everything, it did look closer. It probably was. Adeline was right and instead of being a dick about it she had offered to do what Jane wanted, which made Jane the dick. The guilt in that was much worse than the panic from the pain. Jane decided to focus on the pain-panic. Fifteen feet of chimney-climbing was easy to do with two working feet, but Jane did not have them. It dimly occurred to her she ought to re-respond to Adeline, but she didn't want to, so she did not. Jane needed both hands to make it out of the chimney. Easy normally, but a puzzle with the leg.

“Is there a problem with the rope?” Adeline called from her place back on the ridge. Her voice didn't sound far.

“No,” said Jane.

She braced the wall with her good leg and pressed her back against the other side. When she tested her other foot again, sharp serrated pain shot up the muscle through her knee. A sprain then—a bad one. Wrapped up in a possible hairline fracture from the impact. Better than a break. Jane shifted her weight again, inching up the walls, and nearly cried out as her bad foot bumped behind her.

Adeline could hear her shifting, the scrape of rock against Jane as she moved. A faint whimper at one point, followed by a string of whispered swearing. Jane could clearly speak; she just wasn't answering. The climb across had felt to Adeline like flying. Without the safety of the rope, she wondered how likely she was to end up falling if she tried to check on Jane. But Jane was not okay—which meant she needed to get to her. Adeline forced herself to breathe even as she stepped out onto an exposed rock. Her stiff muscles felt slow to uncoil. She got on her hands and knees, crawling forward with three points of contact at all times, like a scorpion. She kept that analogy as she went. She was a small, hard little creature on the rock with a poisonous tail. Adeline could be hard. She could be dangerous. She was already hurt and angry and that felt a bit like carrying poison.

From the chimney, Jane was inching her way up too, bumping and groaning. Sweat poured down her, making her hands slippery. She was at the wrong angle from the top to lift herself up over the edge with her bad leg. Jane gripped the rock like a cat, claws on a blanket, shaking. She was about to call for Adeline when Adeline appeared all on her own. She had dirt on her elbows from scrambling low to the ground—the way a beginner would, or someone afraid of heights—but no cuts or bruises. And she looked pissed.

“Why won't you let me help you?” Adeline demanded. She grabbed Jane's wrists and hauled her over to safety. Her ankle bumped the wall and Jane yelped.

The climb must have sounded terrible to Adeline from above. Each tiny grunt of effort as Jane's foot jammed against the wall. "Please, be careful," she moaned.

"I came to another world for you," Adeline replied, words spilling out of her in waves. "I had to make friends with your old climbing group. I learned to kayak better. I came up the Taku, Jane. I believed you when you said we had to stay here. I forgave you when you lied. I listened to you that day in the snow when you said we couldn't come back, apparently, just so you can decide that now we can't go home. You treat me like a child. You always have. You spent a whole month with me in Scotland and never trusted me enough to say what had happened with Sean."

Adeline was listing more grievances than she herself knew of now, a long, endless stream clear back to childhood. Jane was self-absorbed. She took Adeline for granted. She kept her at arm's length on purpose so she wouldn't have to share her with anyone else. Adeline felt sick with each new wave, but while Jane seemed to be listening, it didn't feel like she was absorbing the information. When Adeline finally wore herself out, she sat in silence for a moment, waiting for Jane to react. It was Jane who had broken her leg. Why did she still get to be the one in control? She looked up at Adeline, expressionless, mouth slightly open.

"Well?" Adeline demanded. "Say something."

Jane was aware she needed to answer, but she was in so much pain she couldn't stop returning to the thought of the hike to come. Halfway across meant a whole other half ridge to cross, bumping and crawling. It wouldn't be that bad. But it would also be fucking terrible. Of course, Adeline had managed the scramble, exhausted as she was, when she thought Jane needed help. She had been naïve to think her sister would wait when she was in danger. Naïve to think that hanging on the rope all day yesterday would have destroyed Adeline. Adeline had a point: to reach the place in Taku where she said Will found Sean's body, she

would have had to kayak for twenty miles. She would have had to plot a route, and make friends who knew the way, and with the right skills, to figure out Jane's gear. She would have had to believe, month after month, that Jane was alive based entirely on some last-minute, half-hearted text message she sent about a meteor. To remember back to Meteora and their childhood, recounting the mountain realms they saw from the couple minor peaks they climbed. Then she would have had to decide, of all things, to act on that memory. It was a lot. So much to not give someone credit for. Adeline wasn't the little kid anymore that Jane had to show four times how to make a grilled cheese. She hadn't been for a long time. Jane wondered how she had missed it. Her sister had probably been this way for years.

"I'm sorry," Jane said. "I've fucked up my leg. Please, help me back to camp."

Chapter Twenty-Two: Meteora

They set Jane up on the beach while Adeline started the process of inflating the pack raft. A rolled-up jacket lay cinched in a tight pack under her foot. The ankle was in a splint, homemade by Jane from green branches back in Foodland, but it was Adeline who wrapped it into place. She made Jane spruce-tip tea, then moved on to the raft. The excitement of the approaching star seemed to have given Adeline a second wind. Jane felt manic, almost giddy, but she was not used to being catered to. The tea in her hand reminded her of the tea Adeline used to make her in her home in Fritz Cove. Jane supposed back in the world of multiple flavored teas, Adeline's house was still there, cupboards filled with metal tins with painted gilt-edges and flowers on them. Soft, earthy smelling loose-leaf or little packages tucked like raviolis in perfect squares and circles. Jesus, ravioli. That still existed. She was thousands of miles from ravioli now. Jane preferred this battle worn metal mug to the ceramic ones in Adeline's kitchen. The dented copper, battered as a bullet casing. She remembered Sean liked to use a dog mug in the mornings and a red one in the evenings. When she came out of the tent that last night together and he was standing with his green plastic camping cup, watching where the meteor had fallen. He looked so calm. The old, dramatic joke between them about his insomnia from when they first started sleeping over at each other's places.

‘What are you doing up?’

‘Oh, just waiting. All alone in the moonlight.’

When they got back, she would have to adjust her explanation of what happened to him over and over. You had to make sure, when talking about death, the listener wasn't left too unhappy, which meant tailoring it to each of them. If anyone asked, she had to be okay. She was sad, but fine. Not too sad though, or too fine, a normal amount. Jane would have to go back to the Alaskan with her old mountaineering group and Will Morrow—Will fucking

Morrow—knowing he was the one who found Sean’s body and brought Adeline here. So, Adeline could—save—her? Jane didn’t feel saved.

The new star overhead looked brighter and had the beginnings of a tail.

“You’re crying,” Adeline said.

She was. She hated it. “Maybe you should go on the raft without me.”

“There’s space for both of us,” Adeline said. “The package for the inflatable raft says it holds two.”

Adeline was afraid their conversation about the Butcher Baker and Cindy Paulsen had another meaning. All this talk of disappearing. Jane seemed to be dancing around a different kind of subject, as if she herself might want to disappear. For someone with Jane’s interests there were a lot of ways to die without making it look like she tried. Is that what Meteora had become? Static fizzling through Adeline’s body at the thought, like every bit of her was an elbow she’d smacked on a rock. Kate said once she knew plenty of people in the outdoor and fishing communities who lived their lives in a constant state of adventure or (depending on how you looked at it) passive-aggressive suicide. She said she asked a friend once if he knew which it was, and he immediately changed the subject.

“I’ll carry you onto the boat,” Adeline told Jane. “You won’t have to do anything. I’ll take care of it all.”

“I don’t know there’s anything left for me to do in the regular world.”

“Please,” said Adeline. “At home, I have all your things in a room.”

“I don’t remember them,” said Jane. She wondered how long it would take for a comet to have a piece break off into a meteor, then how many seconds from then to impact. Every meteor Jane had ever seen, including the one that destroyed their door to Meteora, was just an extended shooting star. Not even enough time to make a wish.

“We can keep it all or nothing.” Adeline was talking a mile a minute. “You can set up a tent in my backyard if the house is too strange. We’ll do whatever you need.”

“I don’t need anything.”

“Yes, you do. Everyone does sometimes. You need me.”

Adeline took Jane’s empty cup back to the fire to get more tea. Jane couldn’t do that for herself, and the tea was gone. She was crying more obviously now, eyes shut tight and covering her mouth with the back of her hand. Adeline steadied her own breath and sat with the full cup in front of Jane and waited for her to be ready to take it. She had heard Jane cry this way at night in her bottom bunk when they were teenagers, pretending to be asleep. Adeline went to the tent and brought out her old journal. It had long dried since she fell in the river on her way to Meteora, but the pages were stiff and wrinkled now. She flipped past old entries carefully, past where she wrote while Jane was climbing, the bitterness about climbers, and then, finally her imagined vignettes of mountain worlds from when they first started coming to Meteora. She knew which entry she was looking for.

“The most dangerous mountain in Meteora is a peak that bridges into the regular world,” Adeline read. “A mountain grown so big it has begun to grow in reverse, inverted like a spike leading downwards. Picture a hole in you, the weight of the thing, emptiness stretching until it inhabits you like a parasite. Some secrets clot this way, freezing into a knife point, piercing to your core. Loneliness is this variety of mountain. Undisclosed pain. Isolation. A long, ivory needle, of a mountain, bone-hooked tooth worming inward. A piece of yourself—lost and rotting away. Left alone long enough with this kind of mountain, a person will be swallowed up, wrapped in the overgrowth. They will become like a tree drinking water. A stone so choked in vines it is no longer recognizable as a stone.”

She stopped.

Jane shook her head. The tightness in her throat kept threatening to seal off everything. “I want to stay where I make sense. Where there’s no one to feel like I should be taking care of them or making them feel like they have to take care of me.”

“But that’s just part of being human,” Adeline said. She handed Jane her tea and wrapped her sister’s hands around the warm cup with her hands on top of them. “Human beings care about each other. It’s the one thing we’re good at. I don’t mind taking care of you.”

“What if I don’t want to be human,” said Jane. “On this ridge, I might as well be a rock or any other kind of animal. An animal will die when they break their leg in the wild. Maybe that’s an okay way for me to go.”

“Please. Don’t say that.”

“Why not? I don’t understand what’s so great about being human. I really don’t. As the kind of human in the skin and body that I am, I have all these advantages back in the regular world, and I still can’t stand it. I want to run away from everything screaming. I want to be left alone, Adeline, but no one will ever let me do it. I don’t give a shit if ‘being alone’ the way I want seems unhealthy. It’s a part of who I am. If I’m honest, I feel like who I am—not my body, but me, everything about me—is inherently selfish because I’m forcing others to spend their energy trying to understand me. And I’m not intricate or interesting. I am not complicated, Adeline. I’m no one. I would rather vanish than continue that way, and I have the opportunity now. I’ll disappear into this this lake. Become a part of Meteora. A rock or a piece of mist floating, dissolving into the air.”

Adeline ran her thumb along the back of her sister’s hand the way Kate had held hers in the café.

“I don’t think who you are is wrong,” Adeline said. “You’re not wrong to me. You’re just Jane. And you’re hurting. Let me take care of you for a while.”

“But I get so mean when I’m sad,” Jane said.

“There will be opportunities for me to forgive you.”

“I don’t know how.”

“To be forgiven?”

“I wasn’t supposed to have to go back.”

“You won’t have to think about it. All you have to do is not stop what’s happening. You just don’t do anything to stop me from keeping you alive. Let me get you in the raft.”

The tail on the comet looked shimmery, a trail of gold drifting up from the horizon. Adeline wondered if she should pack up their things or leave them. Whatever she did, with Jane’s foot, she was going to have to do it alone. She needed Jane’s cooperation to get her into the raft. She wanted to see Kate again so badly, to hold her hand in the café and watch the boats in the harbour, touch her bare shoulders in the yellow sundress—but going back alone was not an option.

“I don’t think we have a lot of time left,” Adeline said. “Please, let’s get you into the raft. Do you want to take the tent with us?”

“Leave it.” Jane wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Adeline nodded and went to the tent to pack. They were going to make it, as long as she was fast. She hoped the time she had spent giving Jane the space she needed wasn’t wasted.

As Jane watched Adeline work, she couldn’t help but notice while Adeline was clearly at the end of whatever energy she had left, she was methodical in her planning. She wasn’t a beginner at this anymore. All of Adeline’s choices were clear and targeted. She didn’t bring the cookware but found space for SHADOWSTORM. She must know that Jane would want to keep her catalogue of peak-gazing, to remember the way it was to sit at the

End of the World, looking out at the mountains and cloud. Was that all this place would be to her soon? A home split and shattered?

The comet was nowhere near the direction of Suilven or Devil's Paw, but it was getting close. No meteors had separated from it yet. Adeline dragged the pack raft to the edge of the water. She had to move quickly. Getting Jane in took several minutes. She could feel the strength leaking from her like a ship full of holes, but it was only a little further. She was going back to Kate and the world of her apartment. Adeline tried not to think about what she might have to do after they got to the middle of the lake. Getting there came first. When she got the boat into the water, from their angle they still faced the tent. Behind them, Devil's Paw looked unnaturally close, snowy talons clawing at the rising moon.

"You can say goodbye if you like," Adeline told Jane.

A hint of rainbow appeared in the comet's tail.

Jane watched it. 'Goodbye' was something she always thought you said to lovers in movies before you woke and found it was all a dream. Jane said nothing.

Adeline pushed the raft into the water and tripped over herself getting into it. When they reached the middle, they put up their paddles. The raft stayed listed soundlessly as the sky changed. Stars came out below the comet, the ribbon of its tail stretching across the sky in colors of the northern lights, gray-purple, glacial-blue, and green. Burning core of its heart blue and twisting, the hottest point of a flame.

"Fuck," said Jane. Her ankle throbbed, rhythm pulsing in time to the soft motion of the boat. A piece split from the comet, small and twinkling. A falling star with its own golden tail. "It's going to happen."

Adeline could feel her sister's body shaking. She was shaking too, but in a different way than before; any moment, it felt like the world might break. The star was moving much,

much faster. When she looked out over the lake at Meteora, the light from the meteor turned the crater lake gold.

“Everything will be okay,” she told her sister.

“How do you know?” The fear in Jane’s voice was ragged, catching. Everything was bathed in golden light, but Jane could not find it beautiful.

Adeline grabbed her hand. Their breath and heartbeats joined, churning.

“Close your eyes,” Adeline instructed.

The meteor didn’t look the way Adeline had pictured it, too rich a color to be starlight or the harsh, hot white of a star. As it neared the lake, it split and split again, a molten needlepoint of gold thread pouring down. The whole sky rained in a sea of blazing daylight. The reflection of falling gold mirrored on the lake’s surface, as if a fiery hailstorm were coming up from below to meet them. Adeline imagined it as an army of glow worms tunnelling up from the lake’s bottom. Something splashed nearby and Jane gripped Adeline’s hand with all her might. Her eyes were shut. Adeline did not shut her eyes. She watched the lake and meteors, they had not hit yet, drawn together like buckshot. The splashing sound that frightened her sister had been a host of blue carp jumping. They swarmed in waves around the boat, circling the beam of light below as it grew nearer, two sides of the tunnel about to meet and spear them. Gold-tipped blue scales formed a rippling, swirling wall. The air smelled suddenly of juniper and dried spices.

Adeline looked up. The meteor was there. She felt its heat, saw only gold, and the raft dropped out from beneath them.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Taku River

Jane was falling through thick water clotted with silt. She thought of the danger warnings she saw every winter about walking too far out on the frozen lake by Mendenhall Glacier. Up close, the glacier was breathtaking, a rippling cliff of white with a blue skeleton, but the water at its crumbling was barely water, full of fine-ground debris. They hit your eyes like shards of glass. If you fell in, you wouldn't even be able to see your hand in front of your face. Opening your eyes was opening them straight into microscopic bits of gravel. With one ankle already busted, the last thing Jane needed was scratched corneas. She kept her eyes closed as she fell.

Adeline kept hers open. From her place between the crater lake of Meteora and the gate, two worlds spread out in the shape of an hourglass, Meteora upside down above and full of light as it hung over the other—bright and sunlit Taku Valley. Adeline and Jane were at the center of the hourglass, passing through the stem. Below, beyond the golden shot of light where the two worlds mixed and combined, fog crested the thread of Taku River, gold veins of sandbars. A living topographic map, the one where Will had marked where he found Sean's body. From above Devil's Paw's four tops looked like a set of brass knuckles. She spotted the mountaineering group by their brightly colored jackets. Little patches of red and orange and yellow. They were almost to the top of the back mastiff of the mountain. Then the bell of the valley opened beneath Adeline, and she lost sight of the mountaineers as she and Jane fell. The wind generated by their fall gave her a sensation as if she was in swamp water. Next to her, Jane flailed and clawed, but Adeline kept hold of her. The raft was lost, far below them it flew off course and landed somewhere in the greenery toward Canada. Directly below, Adeline could see they were heading for a sandbar. Behind, a gaping hole in the sky,

clouds swirling around the distant starburst of light coming from the crater lake. She could still see a faint hint of swirling carp beyond. Then came the impact.

To Jane, it was more like rolling over on her side in her sleep, a sandy, silty turn. When her hurt ankle twisted, she opened her eyes and found herself looking up at a wound in the sky. On the other side of the hole was a far-away sun, deep-set like a bullet hole. She blinked and the hole closed and became the glowing ball of the regular sun. Jane sat up, wincing at her leg. She was in no condition to hike her way out of this. From what she could see, she and Adeline were stranded in the river on a giant sandbar, muddled teal and brown. Glacial silt. It must be the Taku. Adeline lay nearby. The pack was nowhere to be seen. Nor the raft they had been in.

Jane couldn't help but smile. Alas, the end to the adventures of Cleaver Fairisle, Chokeholder of Souls and Grittle Sharpmaiden would never be known. SHADOWSTORM was gone with the pack, her peak-gazing catalogue, most of her gear and Adeline's childhood journal of Meteora. She wished for hiking poles to help her stand. It seemed a poetic end to go like Sean, falling through a door between worlds, only to leave her bones in Taku River.

"I've got the Garmin." Adeline produced it from her jacket pocket and held it up like a torch.

"Does it work?" asked Jane. She halfway hoped it did not as Adeline turned it on. At the same time, she also wanted it to work, for Adeline. Rescue. Humans. Kate. Adeline must love her, or something close to it. Jane wasn't so sure Kate loved her back based on what Adeline had said, but if anyone deserved to be happy, it was Adeline. If Kate could make that happen, more power to her. She was going to be the person on the other end of that Garmin either way—the first person to know they were alive. The regular world felt rawer and colder than Jane remembered, a terrifying sense of newness to what should feel familiar. She had never been this far up Taku Valley. Soon, Adeline would text Kate, and regardless of

what happened with that, Kate would call Reese. Reese would probably arrive himself with the rescue helicopter. Jane was glad it would be him. He always told mountain rescue volunteers not to ask more questions about what happened than what was needed. Reese would insist on taking them to the hospital, there would be no way around that, but it wasn't until then that the real questions would start. Jane's entire life for a while would be repeat after repeat of those same questions. The troopers. Journalists. Everyone she used to know. For at least a couple years, then maybe if she was lucky, they might taper off.

"What are you doing?" asked Adeline. She had noticed Jane inching towards the water. The Garmin beeped as she grabbed her sister's arm.

"I don't know what to tell people," Jane said.

"Then don't. You don't have to tell them anything," Adeline replied. "We'll figure out what to say and stick to it. You don't remember anything until I found you."

"That's not going to fly. I don't have a head injury."

"Trauma then. Seeing Sean die when he fell. You lived on your own for a year. People will understand."

It was a nice thought, but Jane didn't think they would. Next to her, Adeline's eyes were very wide. She had seen that Jane was playing with the idea of throwing herself into the river. That thought was gone now though. If Jane were going to die, the place to do it would have been in Meteora. Buried by the meteor in her camp on the beach.

"Your Garmin is beeping," Jane told Adeline. "You better text back Kate."

Adeline looked at the Garmin. There were indeed three new messages from Kate. Her heart was pounding. It felt very near the surface of her chest. An itching desire to try and push it down.

"Talk to her," said Jane. "I'll be okay. I just want to check on something."

Adeline bent over the Garmin until she saw Jane take out her two compasses out of the corner of her eye. The one she said had been Sean's righted itself towards magnetic north, but Jane's own compass did not. It pointed off into the trees somewhere behind them. She suspected that was not towards Devil's Paw, but the doorway to Meteora.

"Maybe you should throw that one away," Adeline said.

Jane looked at the sand below and imagined her stomach and heart there in a gross, bloody snarl, but all she could see was murky sand and silt. A thread in her chest stretched after the arrow that pointed back to her ridge.

"If you don't throw it away, you'll end up looking at the compass that points to Meteora all the time. Wondering if you could follow it back. It could be dangerous."

Jane gripped the compass more tightly. "I'll throw it away," she said. "Just give me a moment."

Adeline kept an eye on Jane as she opened Kate's string of messages.

They were long. Some of them so long she was scared to read them. Kate seemed angry. Then, sad. She said she missed her. She said she didn't understand. Then, she said she did. Search and Rescue were out looking for Adeline. There was another 'I miss you,' and a few days later one last, long, winding text, without Kate's usual abbreviations, describing her day. Kate had woken up one morning to see the sky and water all flat and silver. There were no waves, smooth as a mirror. Her cousin was up from Ketchikan with a boat, so she convinced him to take them into Taku Inlet. They took the boat as far as it would go, then dropped anchor. The water got so still it looked like sky beneath them. Kate wrote:

Suddenly, we were falling, and it was sky below us, not water. We screamed. You see, my uncle, who you've heard me talk about before, used to tell us stories about the people who lived on Underside of the World. In the beginning, there were a million pieces of the world

and none of them fit together. All kinds of things fell through the cracks, but there was nowhere for them to go, so they had to keep in motion all the time—falling and falling again. The cracks got so full they kept the pieces of the world from drifting apart, which made it seem on the surface like the world had some semblance of order, but in reality, nothing worked how it should. Sometimes, people saw the world was in pieces and couldn't handle it. They forgot how to live and slipped into the cracks themselves where they became monsters, half sea-creature, half-human, dragging others down to fill the cracks too. When my cousin and I fell—that's what I thought was happening to us, and what had happened to you. But then, I realized we weren't actually falling. It was just the weather conditions. That can happen sometimes when there's no wind. The optical illusion of the reflection of sky on water tricks your brain into thinking you're falling. When my cousin and I realized that's what happened, we laughed so hard. It must have been a full five minutes. He was literally rolling around on the deck. Then, we hugged each other and sailed back to Auke Bay.

Kate's text ended there. There were no more messages.

Adeline felt like she was like looking through the keyhole in a door, trying to see to the other side.

I am back from Meteora, she texted Kate slowly. Jane is with me. We are okay. I'm so sorry I didn't wait for you. Please, let Reese know to get us at this location. I miss you and want to see you as soon as I get back.

She showed the message to her sister.

Jane forced a weak smile. "You're going to catch hell."

Jane expected Adeline to blush, but she didn't. She just went back to rereading Kate's last text. It looked like a long one. As Jane tried to stand and stumbled back down, she watched the water. She couldn't help but notice the trees had their own dark, fluid look. She

hadn't seen so many trees in one place in a long time. They were like walls. Foodland had been just brush, and tiny, underdeveloped spruce trees, but this was a real forest. The kind of place in fairytales that gobbled people up. To think, Meteora had seemed that way once to her before. In the next few days, she would probably see heavy rain from her sister's windows and sit, pressing her hand to the glass until her fingers left smudges—proof that both she and it were real. The sun would go down on her ridge in Meteora without her and rise again. Over the rotating peaks at the End of the World.

Jane collected her compasses and put them back in the pockets of her jacket. "Help me stand," she said.

Adeline scooped her arm under the hook of her sister's armpit. When she got Jane on her feet the Garmin beeped, then beeped again, but she was too afraid to check it. Kate had enough information to pass on to Wilderness Rescue.

"You know, you don't actually have to throw it out," Adeline said. "It might have been a little harsh of me to suggest that. We could just put it away until the Perseids. I've believed in Meteora for years and lived in the regular world just fine."

Jane shook her head. "If I know it's still out there, but I can't get there, it's going to hurt."

"It's okay for some things to hurt," Adeline said.

Jane ran her fingers along the plastic edge of the compass, then traced the little red arrow pointing backwards. "Give me some space to say goodbye, will you?" she asked.

The idea of there being any solitude on a sandbar this size was comical, but Adeline removed her arm so Jane could balance anyway. She steered her sister, so she was at the far end of the sandbar, looking towards where the river stretched to Canada. One-legged, Jane stood, and Adeline walked to the other far end of the sandbar. The way Adeline faced now was towards Juneau. Fritz Cove, her home. Adeline wondered how she was going to protect

Jane from everyone. She was good at being quiet, and so was Jane. Maybe if they both agreed to say nothing. Human beings didn't like mysteries, but they also were, by nature, self-absorbed. Once the questions got old, she imagined everyone would go back to their own lives. If she said she found Jane in the woods, they got lost, and found themselves on the sandbar, eventually, with no other story out there, everyone would have to accept it. Even Will and Amanda. It didn't matter whether or not they believed her. Other than Kate, Adeline had never told anyone about Meteora, and she trusted Kate not to tell. She and Jane could keep their secret, sitting in front of the wood-burning stove in her apartment, beneath her wall of drawings of other worlds. In Adeline's coat pocket, the Garmin beeped again. Kate was mad. Or relieved. Or saying help was on the way.

The sound of a splash behind made her think for a split second that Jane had jumped in the river. But the splash wasn't big enough, more like the 'plop.' It was the compass hitting the waves.

"All done?" Adeline asked.

Jane nodded. "What do we do now?"

"We wait."

Jane looked a little better than she had earlier, less tired. The color was coming back into her cheeks. Adeline crossed the distance back to her and they sat, manoeuvring Jane's weight off her bad foot so they could face the Juneau-side of the valley. The way the helicopter would come from. Adeline predicted the troopers would be on this sandbar about two hours behind the helicopter. They would catch up to them at the hospital and demand their statements, but then they would be allowed to go home. She hadn't shared a bedroom with Jane since they were young. She had no idea what living with her sister was like. Before it meant stacks of mountain books and papers, laundry never in piles the way Adeline left it,

but neatly folded in the hamper. Folded—because Jane thought it looked better that way. She wondered if she still did that.

The story Jane told people might be better if she didn't include Sean's fall. Jane decided to end it with his profile, blue silhouette in the moonlight the night they saw the meteor. The moon so bright it carried its own halo. That was a nice moment to end on. Sean's compass was gone now. Her last bit of him. In the end, she had decided to throw his repolarized compass into the Taku instead of her own that still pointed back to Meteora. She would have to hide that from Adeline for a little while out of pride, but in the end, her sister was right. For now, it was tucked safe in the inside pocket of her climbing jacket. Just in case she decided to try again.

Next to her, Adeline put out her hand for Jane's again and Jane let her take it. They rehearsed their story. Jane remembered nothing after the Arrigetch. Adeline found her, impossibly, sitting by a lake that she had never seen on any map. She had no memory of how she got there. They fell into a river and found themselves on the sandbar. No memory of the last few days. In the way of many mountain rescues, not everything that happened was going to get explained. As Jane and Adeline watched the river, a gold tinge washed over the mist on the Canada side of the Taku behind them. The Garmin beeped again.

Shadows rearranged themselves around the disintegrating tunnel of fog, and the door between worlds closed. The two sisters sat in the eddies of Taku River together on sandbar shaped like a fish bone. Together, they waited.

**CRITICAL PORTION:
“THE LIVING METEORA”**

Introduction:

THE LIVING METEORA: The outdoors as an inclusive space for female narrators; from Nan Shepherd's Cairngorms to the fantastical world of Meteora.

In 'Sleep,' of Nan Shepherd's book *The Living Mountain* (1977), she writes: "I have discovered my mountain...but if the whole truth... is to be told as I have found it, I too am involved. I have been the instrument of my own discovering" (TLM 90). In the spirit of this, the investigative portion of this Creative Writing PhD thesis is concerned with the critical analysis and reflection on *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd and its influence on my own novel *Meteora*—the creative portion of this thesis. This critical portion draws on Shepherd's notion of the self as the instrument of discovery, consisting of four chapters; three critical and one investigative personal essay with critical elements. Each of these are centered around key points of commonality between Shepherd and *Meteora*. The first chapter, 'Nan Shepherd, Jane Roan & Acceptance of Self,' focuses on Shepherd's fluid sense of oneness between the self and the mountain as a form of not only self-discovery, but also self-acceptance. Shepherd rejects the binary dichotomies of civilization/man over nature/the feminine through her conflation of the mountain with her sense of self, while Jane Roan, who is on her own quest for acceptance, is thwarted by her internalization of them. Eventually, both women find their sense of belonging by redefining the categorization of the natural world around them. The second chapter, 'Nan Shepherd, Adeline Roan & Geography Beyond Gender,' investigates Shepherd's construction of the Cairngorms as an inclusive space beyond gender, in conjunction with Adeline Roan's similar written construction of *Meteora* in her journal entries. The third chapter, 'The Cairngorms & Meteora, Disanalogous Ecologies,' considers the disanalogous elements in *Meteora* from Shepherd and the development of the world 'Meteora' as a more fantastical, fictional landscape. Finally, the fourth chapter 'Nan Shepherd & Me,' offers investigative insight essential to the understanding of the connection between both works—the author's personal and direct

relationship to *The Living Mountain* as an influential text during the construction of *Meteora*. As this is a Creative Writing thesis, the closing chapter is in a unique position to offer a rigorously investigative and necessary element to add to what purely formal research cannot. It unveils the personal experiences within the construction of a text that shape how that text grows and is enriched by the work and life of another writer.

Constructing a narrative space in which the natural world of the outdoors can exist beyond gender demands investigation of both texts from a gender studies perspective. From the work of new materialist scholars Stacy Alaimo (*New Materialisms* 2008) and Jillmarie Murphy (*Gendered Ecologies* 2020) to Samantha Walton's 'oneness' of self in Shepherd's work (*The Living World* 2020) to a modernized ecofeminist critique of Nan Shepherd by Iratxe Ruiz de Alegría Puig ('Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*: Making Female Pleasure Visible' 2022) this thesis explores Shepherd's text *The Living Mountain*. This, coupled with an in-depth analysis of gendered pronouns against language in nature writing descriptions of landscape by Henry Thoreau and John Muir, places *Meteora* alongside *The Living Mountain* as works engaging in the same methodology of recreation of the mountains as an inclusive space.

Nan Shepherd was a mountaineer, novelist, feminist, English lecturer at what is now Aberdeen College of Education, and a nature writer born in the Scottish village of West Cults in 1893. She lived, wrote, and finished her life within the same area about three miles outside of Aberdeen. She is best known today for her prenominal work of nature writing, *The Living Mountain*, a slim book written in the 1930s. After two rejections from publishers (the notes of rejection themselves did not survive) *The Living Mountain* sat in a drawer unpublished until Shepherd herself was in her late seventies. In her biography of Shepherd, *Into the Mountain* (2017), Charlotte Peacock illustrates Shepherd's modest reaction to the book's success:

I confess it is with some considerable delight that I re-read the manuscript of *The Living Mountain*. I'm glad you like it,' Nan replied to Helen Bain after the book was finally published in 1977. In her forward, Nan says that on rereading it again, she realized the tale of her traffic with the mountain was as valid in 1977 as it was over thirty years ago when she put away the manuscript. (310)

Fifty years later, it remains worthy of its place in mountain literature. As Robert MacFarlane, writer and recent recipient of the 2023 Weston International Award for career achievement, writes in his forward to the 2014 edition of *The Living Mountain*, “it is one of the two most remarkable twentieth-century British studies of landscape... For many reasons—but especially the current surge of interest in ‘nature writing—it is a book that should find new generations of readers” (TLM xi-xii). *The Living Mountain* itself is comprised of twelve chapters dedicated to the Cairngorm mountains; from geography, plant and animal life to Shepherd’s own philosophical meditation on what it means ‘to be’ and experience of interconnectedness with them. *The Living Mountain* is an elemental journey best illustrated by the titles of the chapters themselves: The Plateau; The Recesses; The Group; Water, Frost and Snow, Air and Light, Life: The Plants; Life: Birds, Animals, Insects; Life: Man; Sleep; The Senses; and finally—Being.

With that summary of Shepherd’s persona and her work, it is necessary to define some terms that will be relevant to this critical analysis of her work alongside my own novel, *Meteora*. New materialism is a field of theoretical, political, and cultural inquiry reaching across the humanities and sciences. The field rises predominantly from feminist, philosophical, and cultural thought. It is centered around the materiality of the human body and the natural world (Yi Sencindiver 2017; Alaimo and Hekman 2008). In the context of the following chapters, new materialism is adopted in a feminist and gender studies perspective, building from, but not without critique of postmodern feminism. As new materialist feminist scholars and theorists Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman write in their introduction to

Material Feminisms (2008), the strongest contribution of postmodern feminism to the field has been its unmasking of the gendered dichotomies around which Western thought is structured:

... culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object, rational/emotional, and countless others. Postmodern feminists have further argued that it is imperative not to move from one side of the dichotomy to the other, to reverse the privileging of concepts, but to deconstruct the dichotomy itself, to move to an understanding that does not rest on oppositions. (2)

For new materialist feminist scholars, the issue with postmodernist thought becomes that while it claims to reject these dichotomies, postmodernists embrace one dichotomy without exception, that of language and reality. Arguing that the ‘real/material’ is ‘constituted by language’ in its entirety, postmodernists end up turning to “the discursive pole as the exclusive source or the constitution of nature, society, and reality” (Alaimo and Hekman 2). This distinguishes nature from culture by focusing on cultural elements as means to which to define reality, to the detriment of the more-than-human world. The concern of New Materialist Feminisms with the investigation of interrelationships between human, nonhuman entities and the natural world is in an ecological sense as represented in literature. This crossover into nature writing and literature is where the field finds its relationship to *The Living Mountain* and *Meteora*. This thesis is primarily interested in addressing how female writers or narrators can textually place themselves in their writing about the natural world and their lived experience, reimagining their sense of belonging to a more-than-human space. The term ‘more-than-human’ in the context of this thesis also refers back to new materialisms though coined by David Abram in connection with new animism (*The Spell of the Sensuous* 1996), indicating the natural world and life is not exclusionary of humans as humans are indeed a part of the biological systems of the world (Alaimo 2008a: pp. 237-239; Abram 1996). The thesis itself is focused on how Shepherd creates her own narrative within the

more-than-human space of the Cairngorms is in contrast to the narratives of male writers and narrators. This creates not only an environment of inclusivity in the described natural spaces like the Cairngorms, or reimagined natural worlds like *Meteora*, but recasts them as spaces beyond gendered categorization.

In Chapter One, the section ‘Essentialism and New Feminist Materialisms in Nature Writing,’ first addresses this through establishing a brief definition of essentialist thought and the problem of its use, creating binary dichotomies in nature writing. It then looks at new materialist scholarship around the work of female nature writers and Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* as a rejection of this line of thinking, introducing scholar Stacy Alaimo’s theory of transcorporeality (2008a) as a means of imagining interconnectedness between humans and more-than-human nature. In ‘Shepherd’s Positioning of the Self: ‘To Be’ and the Dee,’ I establish Shepherd’s unique positioning of the self as both within Shepherd and the mountain through a review of the research of scholar Samantha Walton (*The Living World* 2020) and continue an in-depth analysis of Shepherd’s textual journey into her own identity. This is done through the analysis of her journey to the origin of the River Dee. As Shepherd finds the Dee to be ‘nothing but itself’ (TLM 23) so is she able to be and accept herself as she is, wholly, by the end of *The Living Mountain*. Moving onto aesthetics in ‘Sublimes in Shepherd and *Meteora*’, I interweave Shepherd’s work with *Meteora* through Jane’s sense of conflict around transcendence in a discussion of the masculine vs. material sublime. As Jane cannot see a place in any world for her to be accepted or experience transcendence, ‘Jane and the Essential *Meteora*’ is a section dedicated to the unravelling of her essentialist views around the world. For Jane, both the regular world and *Meteora* can only ideologically exist as a space for her at the expense and rejection of the other, at the cost of her own sense of value and substance. Finally, in ‘Jane Finds Belonging with Adeline’ I will show how when Adeline shows Jane that she accepts and loves Jane unconditionally, Jane’s sense of the

problematic categories to which she is confined between worlds crumbles and, like Shepherd with the mountain, she is able to find a place she belongs.

Chapter Two shifts the focus onto Shepherd's depictions of the Cairngorms as an inclusive space beyond gender, as are Adeline's views of Meteora. This begins with the section 'Queer Ecologies: Sensual Language in Shepherd.' For Iratxe Ruiz de Alegría Puig ('Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain: Making Female Pleasure Visible*' 2022) Shepherd's work is erotic in its use of sensual language, and this goes against the heteronormative grounding her sexuality in the male gaze or to reproduction. It also opens up Shepherd's work to a queer ecology reading. I argue, using an in-depth analysis of language within the text alongside the work of queer theorist Stephanie Springgay and literary researcher Kirsteen Bell, that while Shepherd's intimate relationship with the mountain is a queer one, it supersedes eroticism. As Shepherd's body is material first and a sexual entity second, her interconnected use of 'sensual' descriptions and words choice challenges the presumption of them as sexual. Adeline's descriptions of Meteora bear similar word choices and expressions, and like Shepherd with the Cairngorms, Meteora is a place of more-than-human intimacy for Adeline rather than erotic encounter. The next section, 'Gender Minimization and the use of 'One' in Nature Writing,' explores Stacy Alaimo's work around gender minimizing in the nature writing of female writers (*Undomesticated Ground* 2000) and the implications of this in Shepherd's use of the pronoun 'one,' as well as Adeline's lack of gendered pronouns in her descriptions of Meteora. 'One' is identified by postmodern feminist scholar Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble* 1990) as a potentially problematic stand in for 'all' in the contextualization of postmodern feminism and feminist existentialist thought. For Butler and many postmodern feminists, men are traditionally imbued with personhood and women seen as less-than, creating a paradox in which 'one' the written subject is presumed to be male. This can be seen through an analysis of the canonical use of 'one' by male nature writers Henry David

Thoreau (*Walden* 1854) and John Muir, (*The Yosemite* 1912; *Travels In Alaska* 1915) as well as, to a lesser extent, Shepherd's own friend Neil Gunn (*Highland River* 1937). However, Shepherd's use of 'one' is different in the context of gender minimization—she does not negate it by using gendered pronouns in conjunction with it unlike these other authors. Instead Shepherd uses 'one' to conflate the point of view with herself, the reader, and the mountain itself, to further facilitate an interconnected narrative. Furthermore, she uses any mentions of gender sparingly or to the point of coincidence, which results in her depiction of the Cairngorms being an inclusive space. The final section of this chapter, 'Adeline's Nongendered Descriptions of Meteora,' then turns to look at these methods of gender minimalization as they are also present in Adeline's journal entries describing Meteora. Through the use of nongendered pronouns like 'you' and 'we,' Adeline constructs Meteora as also a world beyond gender.

Chapter Three explores the ways in which the alternate world of Meteora differs from Shepherd's Cairngorms as a fictive place and ecology. From the early influences of literary cartography on *Meteora*, in particular Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972), to the fantastical genre world of 'The House' in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* (2020), Meteora has fictional influences as a world—beyond the nonfictional ecology of Shepherd's Cairngorms. This is explored first through a craft-writing based examination of the early origins and influences of *Meteora* as a text and the decision to shift the original mountain vignettes published in the literary journal 'Territory' (2020) from creative nonfiction to fiction. As the *Meteora* grew into a novel and the characters Jane and Adeline were introduced, the vignettes split from a representation of Alaska into a different fictional world, and this world became known as Meteora. There are, in essence, two Meteora's in the text: the co-created Meteora of young Adeline and Jane, reimagined through Adeline's eyes in her vignettes and then the literal ecology of Meteora on the page. To explore more analogous fantastical worlds for Meteora

beyond the nonfictional Cairngorms, this chapter looks at the Brontë sister's co-created childhood world of Gondal, and the cocreated fictitious world of queer belonging, Borovnia, from the 1994 film *Heavenly Creatures*. A direct comparison of *Meteora*'s ecology and Shepherd's is then made to outline the two world's ecological discrepancies. Finally, in order to better understand the place of transcorporeality and new materialist feminisms in *Meteora*, this chapter looks at the world of *Meteora* as an ideological battleground for the two sisters. This discussion outlines important differences, as well as the ontological link between Shepherd's own transformation in *The Living Mountain*, and Jane's place at the end of the novel, as she is only just beginning on that same journey.

Chapter Four breaks from the formatting of subsections and is dedicated to an investigative take on the circumstances surrounding the construction of *Meteora* and the direct influence of Shepherd on the author and novel's conception. This is done through the format of a rigorously investigative personal essay. Drawing heavily from my own experiences as a solo female walker, Chapter Three looks first at the experiences that lead to my construction of *Meteora*, the creative portion of this Creative Writing thesis and primary source for the other critical chapters. From there, the essay moves into a discussion of my discovery of *The Living Mountain* and Shepherd's own time as a solo female walker, rooted in the in-depth research and interviews of Charolette Peacock's biography (*Into the Mountain*, 2017). Shepherd does not write of a sense of disapproval from the outside world of herself as a writer and solo female walker in *The Living Mountain*, but evidence of this in her personal life survives. This investigation of Shepherd became key for me as I formulated my own questions around my own time walking, and the essential development of the characters of Jane and Adeline—two very different women who both prefer much of their time to be spent alone. Ultimately, the chapter culminates in a reflection upon the influence of Shepherd

on *Meteora*, as I was reading *The Living Mountain* at the time of the novel's conception, and the final, encounter with a death in the mountains which resulted in the first written chapter.

From transcorporeality and new materialist feminisms in *The Living Mountain*, to Shepherd's construction of the Cairngorms of as a space beyond gender, *The Living Mountain* stands as a feminist and mountaineering text far beyond its time. It is likely to stand for, at least, fifty more. The creative portion of this thesis—*Meteora*—was directly conceived within the greater literary landscape around *The Living Mountain*. From Jane's struggle with an essentialist ideology that blocks her from feeling accepted in either Meteora or the regular world, to Adeline's embracing Meteora as a world beyond gendered dichotomies, *Meteora* follows in Shepherd's philosophical tradition. The more-than-human worlds of the Cairngorms, the mountains of Southeast Alaska, and Meteora all become inclusive, interconnected and transcorporeal spaces, where their inhabitants have the potential to be exactly who and as they are.

Chapter One: Nan Shepherd, Jane Roan & Acceptance of Self

This chapter compares the sense of fulfilment Nan Shepherd finds in the Cairngorms in her book *The Living Mountain*, and the struggles of Jane Roan to find that same fulfilment in Meteora. Both women are mountaineers, solo female walkers, and wild campers who prefer the traverse style of walking to summits, and both seek isolation in the hills as a means of self-expression. The true commonality, however, lies in their quest for a relationship with the land through an acceptance of self.

For Shepherd, this is brought about through the trance-like physicality of the act of walking, a process through which ‘flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled’ (TLM 106). The Cairngorms take on a transformative quality for Shepherd through her ‘journey into Being’ (TLM 108) in which she feels both accepted as an individual and part of a whole in the natural world of the mountains. For Jane, the idea of such acceptance, whether it be in nature, growing up in rural Iowa, or her home in Southeast Alaska, feels impossible, yet she craves the same freedom and connection with place. This chapter examines Shepherd’s Cairngorms in *The Living Mountain* (1977) alongside Jane in Meteora, as well as examine related environmental feminist theory in nature writing and ecocriticism through articles by scholars Jillmarie Murphy, Samantha Walton, Louise Ann Wilson, Barbara Freeman, Greta Gaard, and, in particular, with the approach of Stacy Alaimo’s theory of transcorporeality (2008a). This approach is necessary to understand why Jane abandons the regular world altogether, even at the cost of her life, as well as illuminate how Adeline’s less binary, essentialist views prepare her to better accept herself.

Essentialism and New Materialist Feminisms in Nature Writing

Essentialism refers to a way of looking at the world in terms of binaries—‘us’ vs. ‘them,’ ‘civilisation’ vs. ‘nature’, with lines of division strictly gendered along the masculine and feminine. In *Gendered Ecologies* (2020) Jillmarie Murphy introduces the history of essentialism in nature writing:

Whether framed as a universal taxonomy or as an established literary convention, the term ‘nature writing’ has essentialized human and nature as a subject-object dyad. In particular, the nineteenth-century nature writer was frequently understood as a masculinized subject who imposed a hierarchical system of power relations between civilization/man and nature/feminized other. Hence, much like the feminine, natural spaces were often fetishized, exoticized, and romanticized through binary representations that heightened both gender and racial distinctions and created strict, gendered hierarchies of living things (Murphy 2).

This imposed, gendered binary is foundational in the understanding of the legacy of nature writing in which Shepherd found herself, as well Jane’s as reading material and philosophical influences in *Meteora*. Murphy’s scholarly work itself and the collection of *Gendered Ecologies* is focused on examining the texts of literary female writers of the nineteenth century with a lens of contemporary feminist ecocriticism. At this point, it is necessary to provide some context to the relationship and history between ecocriticism and feminism in order to understand the placement of Murphy’s work within that space.

The exact point of origin in the link between ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and feminism is contentious, with two different lines of thought and histories behind the different academic fields that concern themselves with the practice. Many ecocritical scholars from the environmental humanities side contend that there is a parallel development of thought between themselves and ecofeminism, from Simon Estok’s ‘Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia’ (2009) to Lawrence Buell (*The Future*

of *Environmental Criticism*, 2005) and Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004). Buell in particular presents ecocritical history through the "wave" narrative in which liberal feminism is described as feminism's "first wave," and the 1960s herald the "second wave" of feminism during which other feminisms emerge: Marxist feminism, radical feminism and cultural feminism etc. "Third wave" feminism, then consists of exploring hybridity and intersectional identities after the 1990s (Buell 2005). Gender studies and environmental feminist scholars such as Greta Gaard, Lori Gruen and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, all contest this "wave" narrative as inadvertent erasure of feminisms contribution to ecocriticism. Gaard in particular details the account of the troubled relationship between feminist and environmental studies throughout her work. Two articles in particular, 'Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism' (2011) and 'New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism' (2010) are emblematic of this environmental feminist critique of the "wave" narrative for feminisms relating to ecofeminism and ecocriticism. In 'New Directions for Ecofeminism' Gaard deconstructs the wave model by detailing two main points that have been historically and meticulously raised against by feminists the narrative as outdated. Firstly, Gaard points to the narrative as defining feminist history "exclusively in terms of white women's activities and philosophies, erasing the histories of indigenous women, African-American women, Chicanas, Asian Americans, and other feminists who allegedly just 'pop up' and make amendments after Euro-American feminists have laid the groundwork of feminism's first two waves" (Gaard 646). Secondly, Gaard contests this narrative "offers no place for ecological feminisms" leading to the erasure of the contribution of feminisms to the field of ecocriticism as ecological feminism is neither a second nor a third-wave feminism and has in fact been present in various forms from the start of feminism in the nineteenth century (Gaard 646-647). For Gaard and her environmental feminist contemporaries, the result of this is that the

utilization of Buell's "wave" metaphor inadvertently erases the history of ecological feminism and feminisms of color from both feminism and ecocriticism alike. Through the work of Mortimer-Sandilands, Gaard herself and ecofeminist literary critic Patrick D. Murphy, Gaard goes on to point out linguistic choices and credited sources of environmental academic conferences and in diversity caucuses from the 90s on onward that led to the erasure of ecofeminist involvement. She in particular cites the ASLE conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan where she herself was present and helped to organize. Gaard describes the conference, in which ecofeminist scholars "circulated the call to organize a critique of the overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, male-dominated program key notes" and feminist scholars sparked the Diversity Caucus, as well as took on leadership. Yet, "out of a commitment to grassroots democracy and inclusiveness, no one proposed naming the caucus 'feminist; based on the radically democratic belief that the inclusive ecocritical future we envisioned would be larger than any single link in the chain of equivalences" (Gaard 2010: 647). The result, according to Mortimer-Sandilands in her article 'The Good Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy', as well as Gaard, is that "the feminist and ecofeminist presence has become unnamed, invisible, and all but erased from the Diversity Caucus—paradoxically at the same time that feminists and ecofeminists have been the earliest proponents and primary midwives of environmental justice ecocriticism, as Buell acknowledges" (Gaard 647: Buell 112).

In Gaard's second article, 'Ecofeminism Revisited', (2011) she chronicles instances of erasure through the lack of credit given in other humanities to "ideas formed in an ecofeminist context" (Gaard 26-53). From the work of Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*, 1962) and Carolyn Merchant (*The Death of Nature*, 1980) to whom multiple lines of environmental humanities and feminist scholarship both claim allegiance—by the end of 'Ecofeminism Revisited', Gaard asks the open-ended question if the erasure of feminism's influence might

be attributed to purposeful academic dishonesty, an innocent lack of knowledge of the development of feminist thought by other disciplines, or even blatant (if inadvertent) sexism through the erasure of women's academic work, as feminist studies and ecofeminists are predominantly female scholars (Gaard 53).

All of this goes to say, the relationship between ecocriticism and feminism is far from a clear, parallel separate formation of ideas. A parallel development of thought may have taken place between the discipline at times, but the origins of ecocritical philosophies are entangled with ecofeminist ones, leading the discussion around the relationship between gender-based imagery in nature writing philosophies as far from a simple complication. This leads to the discussion of the issue of essentialism within ecofeminism itself.

Ecofeminism is, simply put, a term that refers to a movement that considers the concerns of ecological studies in conjunction with feminist ones, as both issues are understood to the results of a hierarchal, patriarchal society. The movement of ecofeminism is broad as its origins remain outside the timeline of the wave narrative of feminisms, yet it remains criticised by scholars both within and outside feminist studies for underpinnings of essentialist thought. This includes internationally renowned and new material feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo. Specifically, the arguments against ecofeminism suggest it leans on the very ideas it proports to combat, either embracing nature either as feminine or rejecting it, rather than seeking to redefine these binary categories. For other environmental feminist thinkers, like Gaard, the issue of essentialism lies not in the actual ecofeminist theories themselves, but with the continued debate around language tied to ecofeminism, and the difficulties of essentialist language embedded in that discussion (Gaard 2011). For this reason, for Gaard, it is not useful to examine particular movements of feminism as "more" or "less" essentialist but delve to the heart of the matter and look at the issue of the categories themselves (Gaard 2011, 42-44). That said, for this reason, new materialist feminists like

Alaimo have re-examined ecofeminism and often discuss these theories instead under the broader category of environmental feminism with respect to ecocriticism (Gaard 2011, 41-43). Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality within environmental feminism seeks specifically to challenge the idea in Western thought of human physicality as separate from the more-than-human world. She does this by proposing the idea that human corporeality and the more-than-human world are not only related, but inseparably linked (Alaimo 2008a: 239).

To return to Murphy, Shepherd, and the practical application of the discussion of essentialist imagery in nature writing, Murphy's work in *Gendered Ecologies* looks at nineteenth-century female nature writers (a part of the intertwined lineage of ecofeminism and ecocriticism) in line with new feminist materialisms, a branch within environmental feminist theory with which Alaimo identifies transcorporeality. In new feminist materialisms, human bodies and materiality in nature are "active, interconnected, and always transforming... striking to the root of gender, race, and other essentialisms (Alaimo 2016a: 49). In short, like Gaard, Alaimo too contests the ontological categorization of gender and the natural world, but she does so from a stance grounded in the linked materiality between the human and the more-than-human. Understanding this idea of transcorporeality connection and exchange between humans and nature is key to Murphy's work in 'Beyond the Binary' where she focuses on the texts of Susan Fenimore Cooper and Celia Thaxter.

Murphy uses Cooper and Thaxter's work to examine the 'inconsistencies represented in feminized nature' which "lay bare the ways in which scholarly interpretations of nature writing are traditionally structured around binary boundaries" (1). While Murphy does not directly place this legacy of essentialism in nature writing into conversation with Nan Shepherd, Shepherd's work as a female nature writer shares the same lineage with Cooper and Thaxter. These female writers and their male contemporaries carved the ideological landscape of nature writing in which Shepherd later became situated. Susan Cooper's nature

writing focused on with the rural area of Cooperstown, New York in the nineteenth century, while Thaxter's focus is on the Isle of the Shoals (bordering Maine and New Hampshire.) These natural environments "enabled both writers to define their individual identities through powerful, narratological representations of the very ecological spaces that helped shape their personalities" (Murphy 3).

To establish this literary landscape, Murphy lists several well-known male writers of the time of Cooper and Thaxter, and subsequently those Shepherd was familiar with, such as Emerson and Thoreau. Cooper and Thaxter pushed against this masculine-centric cannon in nature writing, "by actively integrating non-hierarchical perceptions of more-than-human nature into their writing," they (Cooper and Thaxter) "sought to define their own 'history' and sense of 'becoming'" (3). This was done through creating a 'habitat for gender-minimizing; (Murphy 2: Alaimo 2008, pp. 240) in their discussion of living entities in their respective studies. This means that rather than focusing on the sexual or gendered characteristics of plants, animals and similar language relating to the natural world, these authors instead focused on the interconnectedness of life in nature, bringing the focus away from otherness. Shepherd herself writes often in a similar mode in *The Living Mountain*, focusing on the interconnectedness of life on the Cairngorm plateau and using non-gendered pronouns to refer to other life and the self as 'one.' I discuss this, as well as a more of Alaimo's work in Chapter 2: 'Nan Shepherd, Adeline Roan & Geography Beyond Gender.'

In Robert MacFarlane's introduction to Shepherd's work, he also makes a brief acknowledgement of the literary legacy of nature writing she finds herself in with *The Living Mountain*:

Most works of mountaineering literature have been written by men, and most male mountaineers are focused on the summit: a mountain expedition being qualified by the success or failure of ascent... Shepherd enters this tradition as traverser and engaging with nature as a friend... There is an implicit humility to her repeated acts

of traverse, which stands as a corrective to the self-exaltation of the mountaineer's hunger for an utmost point. (TLM xv)

As MacFarlane identifies here, Shepherd's journey goes beyond the established binary mountain narrative of triumph (man) over the mountain (nature/feminine.) While MacFarlane frames this within the practical approach to mountaineering, the insinuation remains the same. It can be understood to mean that Shepherd is innately at odds with the essentialist dichotomy of civilization/man over nature/the feminine. The binary is therefore not only defied by her experiences, but by the fact that Shepherd goes as far as to relate the mountain itself to her own sense of being. MacFarlane is well aware Shepherd has an entire chapter on 'being' as he writes this passage. The book itself meditates often on the very concept of what it is to be—in body and mind—and it concludes that one can both be within the self and connected to the mountain at the same time. When MacFarlane writes that Shepherd has no intention but 'to be with the mountain,' he encompasses all of these modes she uses in her own text by referencing her own mediation on 'to be.' As the mountain is simply allowed to be, and Shepherd to be with the mountain, so she herself is simply allowed to 'be' as she is with nothing else asked. The assertion is humble yet plays host to a realm of more modern ideas about the place of a nature writer within the natural environment.

Shepherd's Positioning of the Self: 'To Be' and the Dee

Literary scholar and environmental studies researcher Dr. Samantha Walton devotes a chapter to Shepherd's sense and positioning of selfhood and in her book *The Living World* (2020). In this chapter, 'Being,' Walton tracks diverse theories of selfhood that were a part of

Shepherd's 'intellectual climate,' through Merleau-Ponty's theory of the flesh of the world, to more modern theories of David Abram in new animism, and finally the ecological self. Through this in-depth discussion, Walton illustrates how in *The Living Mountain*, for Shepherd, "sensual, physical and affective encounters produce transgressions of the boundary between self, the more-than-human and the human 'other'" (Walton 167). As Walton's chapter is focused on Shepherd's philosophical influences and selfhood, it does not deal directly with Alaimo's work or theory of transcorporeality. However, the model of an interconnected self that Walton presents through Shepherd, shares the same ideas in which human beings and the more-than-human are intrinsically linked, fluid, and transforming (Alaimo 2008a). Walton points to Shepherd's departure from the individualistic self of Western thought from her affinity with Merleau-Ponty in her writing of the oneness of self as 'both perceiver and part of the mountain' (174) as well as embedded in a living, interactive world. For Walton, this oneness is essential in understanding Shepherd's sense of self as both her own and with the mountain, "not a dulling disembodiment but a meeting of the world through the body... Shepherd experiences a fundamental embeddedness and co-continuousness with the living world" (Walton 183). This co-continuousness and linkage with the natural world through the body, as the body is also part of that natural world. It also bears much in common with Alaimo's call for the necessity of a reimagining of the binary categories between the human and the more-than-human world. An example of this is how, for Walton, Shepherd's oneness ultimately leads to her "presence with the mountain assuring and deepening Shepherd's own 'sense of outer reality', and her own self-identity in the process" (185). Shepherd's sense of self, in this way, participates in an exchange between the natural world, in which she is both her own body and more, suggesting a new category of self, identity and being altogether. This unique capacity for transformation of the self in the natural world is seen by Walton in Shepherd as an example for an ethical model for

encounters between people and the environment ‘while the self remains a locus of ethical agency, choice, experience and love’ (193). I would argue it also shows that, for Shepherd, this interconnected relationship with the natural world, has become not only a place of both, but self-acceptance. As Shepherd ‘assures and deepens’ her sense of the world and her own ‘self-identity’ (Walton 185) she not only finds herself with a better understanding of being, but a transformational acceptance of who she is as a whole, beyond essentialist categories.

Shepherd’s conflation of the mountain with her sense of self as a categorization that defies binaries is perhaps best represented by her exploration of the River Dee in *The Living Mountain* and her final chapter on Being. Throughout the text, Shepherd often focuses on the body as the means through which to know and experience the mountain, but her journey into the mountain itself, as if it is the same journey into her own sense of self, to be ‘not out of herself, but in herself’ (TLM 108) is established early on with the Dee. This is an example of how Shepherd experiences an interchange with nature that defies essentialist categories of nature and humans/masculine and feminine. In her chapter ‘Water’, in which she finds the origins of the River Dee in the mountainside, readers can easily see the beginnings of her metaphysical exploration. On finding the infant Dee, Shepherd writes:

This is the river. Water, that strong white stuff, one of the four elemental mysteries, can be seen here with its origins. Like all mysteries, it is so simple that it frightens me. It wells from the rock and flows away. For unnumbered years it has welled from rock and flowed away. It does nothing, absolutely nothing but be itself. (TLM 22-23)

As Shepherd herself was born in Deeside, it is worth looking into this text from the context of her own personal geography. Shepherd once claimed during an interview in the 1970s to have had the same bedroom all her life, looking over the Deeside Valley (Peacock 2017: 45; Forrest 1986: 17). The River Dee was no more than four miles away from her at all times and would have been a defining geographical feature for Shepherd throughout her life. It is an

image of her own origin and home. It is by no mistake in her narrative that she visits the Dee at its source. This journey to the beginning of the Dee is, in this sense, a journey to the source of herself within the landscape. In this section the Dee is also understood to stand in for the ‘elemental mystery’ of water, forever welling from rock and flowing away. Its ability to simply ‘be’ poses Shepherd with the existential question of her own being and origin in connection to the natural world around her. The Dee in this way becomes essential water in this chapter in the same way that Shepherd later becomes ‘essential body’ by the end of *The Living Mountain*. She writes in ‘Being:’

Walking thus, hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks as flesh transparent... one is not bodiless but is essential body. It is therefore when the body is keyed to its highest potential...that I discover most nearly what it is to be. I have walked out of the body and into the mountain. I am a manifestation of its total life... (106)

This experience of both being in the self and out of the self in the mountain at the same time creates a kind of third experience for Shepherd in which she reappears within the landscape as both herself and a part of the whole. Here, Shepherd is both body and more-than body, as Walton’s description of her sense of oneness suggests: ‘Being,’ for Shepherd, is the capacity for transformation in relation to an other – human or nonhuman – and the achievement of a perspective that is fluid, multiple and liable to be repositioned once again” (Walton 193). To analyse Shepherd’s own phrasing further: ‘one is not bodiless but is essential body,’ and can therein ‘be’ in both in the body and a part of the mountain *as* body in its purist form—essential body connected to the landscape. This draws a clear line to the human form being inherently linked and inseparable from the more-than-human. That essential, physical form is then referred back to the mountain as ‘a manifestation of its total life,’ but that is not all that is happening in this moment. The language here and in the final lines of Shepherd’s book also carries echoes from her scene at the origins of the Dee. As the Dee is described as elemental

mystery and a stand in for essential water, so Shepherd has now become essential self. In this way the absolute acceptance we see her have for the Dee when she writes it ‘does nothing, absolutely nothing, but be itself’ (TLM 23) can now be reapplied to Shepherd. She is essential Shepherd. As a part of the mountain, this wholistic self that is both beyond human, and space that is more-than-human and beyond gender, Shepherd herself is then, by her proximity to this, no longer confined by these categories as well. She is essential body: she becomes something greater in conjunction with the mountain. Her body and sex characteristics do not define her for she is essential body, which is neither specifically male nor female as it encompasses all humans. This is, in its own way, gender-minimizing; in league with the same techniques Murphy identifies in the discussion of the works of Cooper and Thaxter—it focuses on the interconnectedness. Shepherd is her essential self in this way and a part of the space she inhabits, free to be everything she is, beyond how other culturally burdened spaces might define her based on gender.

In the final lines of *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd finishes:

It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain’s life, I penetrate also my own. For an hour I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy, that leap out of the self that makes man like a god. I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain. (108)

Here in the language is another direct link to the origin of the Dee through Shepherd’s analogy of penetrating into the mountain’s life as penetrating her own. This harkens back to the Dee in the way the water of the Dee flows from the mountainside itself, both going into rock and coming up from it. Shepherd too, might have been said to go within the mountainside as she followed the Dee. She writes shortly before its discovery, “I go towards it, and almost immediately the view is lost for the plateau has its own hollows, and this one slopes widely down to one of the great inward fissures, the Garbh Coire” (TLM 22). Standing

as close as she dares to the fissure from which the Dee is born, Shepherd is as close to inside the mountain as she can be. She has, herself, gone into the mountain to find the origin of the Dee—her own origin. She does this in the same manner that she identifies how she has become a part the mountain's life by the end of the book. Her choice of the word 'penetrate' might read as sexual to some, but it is also often used to describe the specific movement of water permeating and originating from rock. Shepherd uses the word in a wholistic sense as transitive matter in the way that water both originates from rock, is inside it, a part of it, and moves beyond. The water is a part of the mountain, as is Shepherd, rather than being an invader. 'I am not out of myself but in myself. I am', Shepherd writes at the end of the text, carrying the same echoes of the Dee. This absolute acceptance of Shepherd's own being is key as she writes, 'this is the final grace accorded from the mountain.' This notion of 'the final grace accorded from the mountain' is transformative for Shepherd.

Sublimes in Shepherd and Meteora

To bring Shepherd's work into conversation with my own and Jane's search for acceptance, it is useful to look at aesthetic modes of transformation in nature writing. Specifically, the masculine 'transcendent' sublime as a traditional approach to the mountain, versus the contemporary 'material' sublime which is purposed as an alternate mode to examine transcendence outside the essentialist paradigm. This is, by no means, the only approach to looking at sublime in Shepherd's work—Walton and literary researcher Gillian Carter have both written about her rejection of the individualist, egotistical sublime through her focus on the mountain as a traverser. Walton writes of *The Living Mountain*, "One of the

most striking and often-remarked-upon qualities ...is the fact Shepherd resists the egoism so often associated with mountaineering narratives. Her book is not about a valiant ascent, and she refuses to frame her walks in terms of conquest and mastery” (180). Carter too, focuses on Shepherd’s undermining of “the traditional authority of . . . the “Monarch-of-all-I-survey” scene, typical of European romanticism” through a redrawing of the lines between the self and mountain, and loosening of boundaries (Carter 2001: 29-30). All of this is representational of ways in which the sublime is addressed in Shepherd’s work. However, to better link and address the internalised views of Jane about gender in *Meteora*, I will limit my own focus to the sublime in Shepherd as it relates to a rejection of essentialised aesthetics around gender.

Theoretical writings on the masculine ‘transcendent’ sublime are best represented by 18th Century theorists Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant. The masculine sublime in nature writing for Burke and Kant is the mountain summit which cannot be reached, the uncrossable ocean, and views of an endless sky. In essence, representational, ungraspable ‘objects’ in nature which create a sense of awe, terror, and limitlessness—a philosophical or spiritual experience that exceeds the physical substance of the everyday (Wilson 2019: 109; Battersby 2007:8). They are a place for the subject/man to disappear or escape. Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry into the Origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) splits aesthetics into two essentialist, gendered categories—the masculine sublime and the feminine beautiful. In his philosophical writings on gender, nature, and beauty, Kant takes this ideology further by suggesting that women should “show nothing else than a beautiful nature ... charm and beauty are positive virtues for women ... but the masculine sublime is ruled out’ (Wilson 2019: 112; Kant 1951:78; Battersby 2007:8).” In short, the historical lineage of theoretical aesthetics in nature writing both denies and puts women at literal, binary odds with the very concept of transcendence or experiencing the sublime.

As Jane's early experiences with Meteora take place and her interest in mountains grow, she reads a host of traditional nature writing by male authors—specifically mountaineering accounts alongside Emerson and Thoreau. This introduces her ideologically to the masculine sublime. All of the narrators and main characters Jane encounters in her books about the outdoors and natural sciences are male, from Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) to the popular young adult book *Hatchet* (1986), written by Gary Paulsen. Jane cannot help but notice there are no women in these narratives. She thus sees herself—a young woman who enjoys being alone in the outdoors—as culturally unacceptable. This is reinforced by her experiences as she grows into adulthood and is often warned against going out alone. Her sister Adeline observes of Jane “she had been warned against it (going out alone)... so much she bristled at any suggestion” (Meteora 71). This contradiction of identity and ideology drives Jane to simultaneously pursue and reject Meteora as she pursues belonging and rejects herself.

For Jane, who thinks of nature often in terms that align with the masculine sublime, this means that transcendence must be unobtainable. Not just from Kant and Burke's point of view, but from her own internalised opinion that she will never find a place where she belongs. In her initial dream of Meteora, the place screams of the masculine sublime:

In her dream on the rock, Jane flew over a range of mountains like a meteor, hurtling through space. Some of the mountains were enormous, white and crystalline, shining in rainbows. Others dark, black rock pouring with rivers. Dry, red places. There were no people in the dream, only a long, unending realm of mountains. (Meteora 53)

Here, in the reader's first encounter with Meteora, the world exists as a literal manifestation of the masculine sublime. In Jane's dream it is endless and unobtainable in the tradition of Burke and Kantian standards (if they could conceive of Jane as able to experience such a thing.) An endless sky and never-ending mountains that go on forever, producing a

state of metaphysical ecstasy and terror. For Burke, Kant, and the male protagonists of the literature young Jane consumes they become conquerable, but Jane also cannot help but notice they are male and she is not. Women are excluded as active participants in the texts she loves, and young Jane is reminded that she is female at every turn. Yet, it is only in that unachievable, impossible landscape, that eleven-year-old Jane imagines she can exist comfortably: “I’ll land, Jane thought as she looked down. I’ll land and live on some ridgeline alone where I can scream as loud as I want and wear a shirt only when I feel like it” (Meteora 53).

In this moment, Jane’s desire both to disappear, escape and be as she is without the societal limitations of having to wear a shirt gets all wrapped up in the landscape of Meteora. Shortly before this moment in the timeline, Jane has also been told by her father she cannot go around shirtless because she is sexually developing, despite having gone shirtless throughout her whole life in the summers. This is a social rule that Jane knows now will dictate the rest of her life. The desire for her to reappear in that state of freedom she knew before and live in the space of Meteora where she can be who she is and comfortable in her body is clear in her desire to ‘land on the ridge and scream’. Yet the landscape she has placed that sense of herself and freedom is ungraspable. Just as prior to her dream, Jane also learned in school that while the Boy Scouts go on outdoor treks and learn about natural sciences, she cannot join. When she pictures Meteora—which she sees as a kind of natural paradise in the way of the masculine sublime—she cannot land there, only fly over at a distance, going on and on (Meteora 53).

However, the masculine sublime is not the only mode of sublime in terms of aesthetics. Nan Shepherd specifically might be said to write and experiences the Cairngorms in the contemporary aesthetic mode of the ‘material’ sublime, beyond this gendered binary. This allows her to experience self-affirmation, as well as a sense of unity, with the natural

world and mountains around her in the very way that Jane strives for but cannot access. The ‘material’ sublime is, by contrast to the ‘transcendent’ masculine, a more recent and contemporary theoretical construct. Scholar and performance artist Louise Ann Wilson makes an argument for the material sublime, which she refers to interchangeably as the ‘feminine’ sublime, in her 2019 article in the performing arts journal *Performance Research* ‘Dorothy Wordsworth and her Female Contemporaries’ Legacy’. For Wilson, the material or ‘feminine’ sublime is an aesthetic mode directly counterpoint to the masculine ‘transcendent’ one established by Burke and Kant. The feminine ‘material’ sublime is “located *in* and present *to* the physical landscape, not as a place from which to ‘escape’ or ‘disappear’ but as a place in which to ‘reappear’ (Wilson 109). This is key to understanding Wilson’s relationship to the sublime. However, with its return to the essentialist split of masculine and feminine, the terminology of the ‘feminine’ sublime rather than ‘material, is potentially problematic.

In Barbara Freeman’s foundational text, *The Feminine Sublime* (1997), Freeman writes:

The feminine sublime is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness—social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic—that is excessive and unrepresentable....not a discursive strategy, technique, or literary style the female writer invents, but rather a crisis in relation to language and representation that a certain subject undergoes. (2)

In the context of this essay, Freeman’s ‘crisis of language’ as explained here relates to the carving out of new categories in gender and nature that resist the essentialist binary so engrained within nature writing. To follow the line of thought of Kant and Burke, the ungraspable nature of towering mountains in the masculine sublime becomes obtainable for a man, through the act of climbing the mountain. Burke and Kant could not conceive of Jane or

Shepherd achieving such a transcendent state as women, yet when both men write about beauty, art, and the sublime, they mean for it to stand in for the human experience. For Kant and Burke, the human experience is the male experience—women being closer to nature. Women are excluded from full personhood, a traditional patriarchal and essentialist theme that has become embedded in language around the idea of the sublime and transcendence filtering into the modern era (Freeman 2-5). This creates cultural baggage in language around gender and nature in particular, making the subject precarious and difficult to manoeuvre in linguistically.

The ‘feminine sublime’ terminology is chosen by Freeman and Wilson as an antithesis to the masculine sublime. Using ‘feminine’ aligns it with the word ‘feminism,’ as ‘feminist critique,’ is meant to be inclusive and not only concerned with traditional ideas in the Western world of what makes a woman. However, as Greta Gaard points out in her 2011 article, “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism,” it is difficult to firmly separate feminist ideas on the natural world from essentialist terms in language when the very nature of essentialism linguistics is a dichotomy of opposites—if not masculine, feminine etc. It is not so easy to separate oneself from a firmly established and assumed ideology by using the language of in-betweens. In *The Feminine Sublime* (1995), to address this, Freeman writes:

I employ the term "feminine" as that which contests binaries, including a rigid notion of sexual difference that would insist upon separate male and female selves. The appeal to a "feminine sublime" is not to a specifically feminine subjectivity or mode of expression, but rather to that which calls such categories into question. (Freeman 9)

For Wilson, who comes from a literary and theatrical performance research perspective, Dorothy Wordsworth and other women writers work in this material or ‘feminine’ sublime by “engaging with landscape that enabled them to see afresh ‘everyday’ objects, people and experiences that were ordinarily overlooked” (Wilson 109). This process is transformative in

the capacity of Wordsworth and her contemporaries “approach to landscape...” which comes, “from their aliveness to their environment and the way they could see and find the feminine ‘material’ sublime – as a form of ‘wonderment’ – in the human and non-human material of the everyday” (Wilson 118). This might be anything from Dorothy Wordsworth seeing the way the light gleams on a sheep’s fleece to Shepherd’s focus, decades later, on the smells of plants within the Cairngorms. As Shepherd writes in *The Living Mountain*, “the blossoming is not the best of the heather...it is simply its being there...the feel of it under the feet” (51). Shepherd’s wonderment at the touch and feel of the heather in its most everyday form, rather than focusing on the more traditionally revered time of its blooming, places this outside of the realm of the masculine sublime. Instead of picking a moment when the heather is at its peak, or most supposedly beautiful, she instead finds a moment of the sublime in her connection with it and the natural world through her material body, redefining the formerly separate categories of body and nature. Wilson’s work leans heavily on Dorothy Wordsworth, but she lists Shepherd in direct lineage with Wordsworth and the material sublime, an inheritance that “leaves a rich heritage for the next generation of landscape and environment-artists to claim, work with and subvert” (Wilson 119).

Reading Wilson, this domestic aspect of the sublime might appear to be argued as an anecdote to the masculine transcendental sublime, with an ignorance to the use of the domestic and pastoralism of many of the Romantics, such as William Wordsworth, Dorothy’s brother. The key differences for Wilson in the ‘material’ sublime are this sense of reappearance of the self *within* the landscape, both ‘in’ and present ‘to’ (109). In order to better understand this difference from the domestic in the sublime of the Romantics, William Wordsworth’s writing on the domestic or everyday aspect of the sublime make for a good example. In Wilson’s ‘feminine’ or ‘material’ sublime, like Freeman’s, the mind and self are not separate from the natural world in the sublime moment, nor is the natural world subdued

by the mind's experience of it. Instead, it is arrived at from a place of respect and acknowledgement of the self as connected to the other. In James A.W. Heffernan's classic 1967 analysis on the sublime across William Wordsworth's work, he explores Wordsworth's use of the domestic and every day in the sublime, as detailed in his article from that appeared in *Studies of English Literature*, 'Wordsworth on the Sublime: The Quest for Interfusion Author(s)'. Here, Heffernan points to Wordsworth's descriptive work in the 'Prelude' and letters to his sister describing the Alps as "equally struck by the setting sun and the midnight storm, by the valley and the mountain, by tenderness and grandeur" (609). For Hefferman, Wordsworth's work is focused on balance and the unity of both the grand and domestic every day in the natural world, making Wordsworth more than simply 'Burke's disciple' (610). Yet, he also points to Wordsworth's discussion of the beautiful and sublime in nature in writing to Jacob Fletcher (Later Years 1, 184) to distinguish Wordsworth's thought from Burke's. In this source, for Wordsworth, the mind remains perceiving rather than a part of the natural world and overcoming nature is paramount:

Where Burke had enumerated special attributes of the sublime and the beautiful, regarding each as an objective quality separated by 'an eternal distinction'... Wordsworth told Fletcher that 'our business is not so much with objects as with the law under which they are contemplated' Under this law, differences in the features of natural objects could be at once perceived and resolved, recognized for their individuality yet embraced within the context of a larger whole. (Hefferman 610)

Here, in Wordsworth's own words, as analyzed by Hefferman, nature is shown to not be reducible, unlike Burke's claims of the separation of the sublime from 'feminine' beautiful objects, but the natural world remains clearly separate from the self. It is instead (for the privileged 'higher' mind and self) a place of transforming power, much like Wordsworth's details in the description of Snowdon concluding the Prelude, to be accessed and used. In Wordsworth's 'Excursion' and 'Poetical Works,' Hefferman points to Wordsworth's

response to “the infinite life and mystery which permeates ‘the least of things’” (Hefferman 607: Wordsworth; *Excursion*, I, 223-234). He also discusses Wordsworth’s use of adjectives as significant in an indication that, for him, “the ; ‘sources of sublimity’ lay not in nature, but rather deep within the ‘soul of Man’” (607). Therefore, the experience of the sublime, for Wordsworth, is “impossible without the exertion of power in the mind” (Hefferman 607-608: Wordsworth; *Poetical Works*, II, 427). In this sense, Wordsworth’s experience of the sublime, even in with unity of the everyday domestic aspect of nature and contrast of Burke’s premeditation on transcendental terror, can be seen as within the human mind as separate from the natural world. This is not the same as Wilson and Freeman’s sublime which remains both with the self and simultaneously ‘in’ and ‘present to’ the landscape as a place for the self to reappear. The self in Wilson and Freeman is intrinsically linked to the natural world and therefore encounters nature with respect and without the need to subdue.

Shepherd’s own ‘grace accorded by the mountain’ (TLM 108) can be seen as self-acceptance, intra-connectedness, and reappearing in landscape, even within the same ‘crisis of language’ of Freeman (Freeman 2) in which Shepherd determines how to represent herself in the landscape. Her linguistic twisting of prepositions shows how she is moving in the language of in-betweens to deal with this representation of her selfhood, rather than that of essentialised binaries, or an isolated transformation of self within the mind and separate from the environment, unlike W. Wordsworth. Shepherd’s self is by no means disconnected from the mountain; this can be seen in the way Shepherd tries to place herself in relation to the mountain spatially, both in the physical and metaphysical sense. This is particularly evident in the chapter ‘Being’ where she attempts to explain where she finds her sense of self located. Shepherd writes that she is ‘not bodiless but essential body’ no more than two sentences before, then, ‘I have walked out of the body and into the mountain’ creating a sense betweenness in the language in which she is both ‘out’ and ‘in’ herself and the mountain

simultaneously. Similarly, Shepherd's final lines 'I am not out of myself but in myself. I am', she puts that geographical sense of betweenness back on the self in which both is and is not the mountain. Shepherd reappears here in the landscape with all its presence, a transformative self beyond categorization.

Jane and the Essential Meteora

Jane craves the same sense of an interconnected self, located within landscape that Shepherd finds in *The Living Mountain*. When she first meets Adeline, she proclaims, "I always wanted a place where I can be just as I am and now, with no one else around to mess it up, I have it" (Meteora 102). In this unique situation Jane has found herself in, her acceptance of herself as who she is and 'being nothing but' the way Shepherd finds herself with the River Dee, has become dependent on her being isolated. Jane sees herself as separate from the landscape and has never imagined herself able to live in Meteora, but now that she does, she rejects the real world (as she perceives it) for having rejected her. While Jane may not be an essentialist in the purist, gendered sense as it applies to the legacy of nature writing discussed thus far—man/civilisation/subject vs. female/nature/object—her views about the natural world were formed around this dyad. Jane is nothing if not a creature of binaries. From the very first time Jane appears in the novel, we see her uncompromising personality:

When the bartender brought Jane a whiskey coke instead of whiskey ginger, Jane rolled her eyes but said nothing and kept it anyway. "Why don't you just complain and get a new one?" Amanda asked. "I'm sure he'll make you another." "No," said Jane. "It is what it is. I don't like talking to him, and it's his mistake, not mine." (Meteora 20)

Here, the reader can see Jane—to her own detriment, not getting the drink she wants—holding a line on principle, even though it does nothing but make a point only she knows she’s making. There is a way the interaction can go right (her receiving the correct drink) and a way it can go wrong, with no second chances. By refusing to correct the bartender, in her mind, she maintains a self-righteous high ground. When Amanda offers to help, thinking Jane’s refusal is about social awkwardness, she responds by saying, “It’s not about the drink. I don’t need you to fix it for me”. In Jane’s binary mode of thought, she can be independent, self-sufficient, and uncompromising—strong—or she can allow others to help, be forgiving, and risk needing them—weak. There is no in-between.

She can exist for others or herself, but not both. She can believe and be in Meteora or the Real World, but not both. Both are insanity, chaos. “That’s how people lose their minds,” young Jane says to Adeline. “We’ll be trapped whichever way we go, and here, in this world, at least I know the rules... You can’t live in two worlds at once” (Meteora 94). In the process of trying to carve out a metaphysical space of betweenness for herself to exist in, Jane is in conflict. This leads her (at the end of the novel, when the meteor is coming to Meteora) to believe she must stay in Meteora and be eliminated, as if death will be the only space in which she can exist as she is. It is only through the overt gesture of acceptance at the end of the novel, given to her by Adeline, that Jane is finally able to step out of her own way. For Adeline, not only can there be multiple worlds (Meteora and the regular world) and modes of ‘being’ co-existing peacefully, but there always have been, and will be without the exclusion of one belief in favor of the other.

For Jane, the problem begins with her as a child entrenched in traditional nature writing—but when finally in Meteora, she firmly attaches it to the same binary logic. This is notable in young Jane’s reaction when she first discovers Meteora and is frightened by its vastness. Then again when Adeline suggests they enter Meteora when the meteorite strikes in

winter, outside Jane's established understanding of Meteora only being accessible during the Perseids. In this moment, Jane even rejects Meteora outright. She tells Adeline:

“We live in this world, where I have to take care of your dumb ass and go to school... You think if we lived there things would be any better?... We're not special, Adeline, just wrong... We have to learn to be normal. Don't you want to just go home, make pancakes and watch TV before mom and dad wake up?” (Meteora 93)

For Jane, expressed here through the analogy of her taking care of Adeline, there can only be one version of the world she understands: the one in which she is overwhelmed with responsibility. She, and by association Adeline, cannot have a place where they would be allowed to exist as who they are. When Jane says to Adeline that they need to learn to be ‘normal’, she means they need to learn to be different people. The way she likes to be in the outdoors by herself, and the fact that both she and Adeline like to spend so much time alone—is not permitted. Jane doesn't understand the rules of what it would mean to actually be herself and accepted, and by association what that would look like for Adeline. Therefore, Jane denies her own sense of self and Adeline's, actualising this through the literal metaphor of Meteora. The regular world, in which Jane is overburdened and unhappy, remains the only place Jane can imagine or understands. She knows how to categorize her existence there. The lack of boundaries in Meteora are too frightening. In this way, by the very act of Jane trying to imagine Meteora as a place for herself to exist, she has carved herself out of existence.

When, as an adult, Jane finds herself in Meteora—which she has imagined to be impossible—she has to adjust her way of thinking. Having experienced an abusive incident with her boyfriend who recently fell to his death, Jane's life beyond her immediate present has already been uprooted. She attempts to leave Meteora only once, immediately renaming the only possible route down from ‘Possibility’ to ‘No-Man's Land.’ As Adeline herself observes when Jane has to come rescue her from her attempt to climb down from the ridge,

“someone who really wanted to leave Meteora did not name their only possible route down ‘No Man’s Land’” (147). Jane’s sense of home and self has completely relocated to Meteora. Upon rescuing Adeline, she tries to understand her sister’s attempted escape:

She supposed, sometimes, you had to try. To know why you chose the way you did. People who really wanted to go home would try more than once. Jane had only tried the one time...Above, the shadowy claw of the mountain reached for the moon. The lake was smooth and black, asleep in its crater. This was Jane’s place. (Meteora 140)

In this scene, Jane depicts Meteora as a place in which she has found a space for herself. She has reappeared in the landscape—if through a complete rejection of her past and the world where she was born. She expects Adeline to feel this way too and believes in her own understanding of the virtues of Meteora vs. the regular world so much that she is willing to manipulate her to keep her there. In Jane’s mind, this is because Meteora is the only place where either of them can be accepted. When confronted with Adeline’s desire to return to the regular world, she asks if Adeline really wants, ‘to stay in a world that doesn’t understand’ her and ‘refuses to even try’ (Meteora 113). Then, even when Adeline points out that she stayed in a world once (the regular world) for another person before (Jane), Jane responds: “Then stay for me again...But this time, in a world that actually wants you” (113).

The way that Jane moves across the ridge in Meteora is also indicative of a change in her mode of thinking: she is no longer thinking of summits, but content to simply walk her own ridgeline. Like Shepherd, Jane has become a traverser. Shepherd writes of the Cairngorms not as peaks but as a conglomerate, “the plateau is the true summit of these mountains; they must be seen as a single mountain, and the individual tops... no more than eddies on the plateau surface” (TLM 2). Jane, similarly, does not think of her home in Meteora as centered around the peak—Devil’s Paw—but simply as a ridge. She names each individual section of the ridge for its features equally, with Foodland—a place full of plants

and ptarmigan—given the same, if not more importance in her internal map than K2, her one summit other than Devil’s Paw. Jane also has no interest in trying to cross the crater lake in Meteora and ascend Devil’s Paw. While she names the opposite end of her ridge ‘The End of the World,’ her journeys to it are not investigative, so much as simply ‘to be with the mountain’ (TLM 15) like Shepherd. Jane takes notes over the peaks she sees at the End of the World, but she has no intention of trying to reach them. Her notes are taken on the corresponding page number of Sean’s old book—her catalogue—marking the number of journeys she has made, rather than any ideas about how to reach them. Jane does this ‘almost daily, to mark the passage of time’ (Meteora 51) and lingers there, spending most of the day just with the view. This is closer to Shepherd’s experience in the Cairngorms, but still dependant on Jane’s dedication to a solitary existence. Jane does experience an interconnectedness with the landscape, but in her mind, this depends on isolation. Unlike Shepherd, Jane feels that oneness with the landscape is not so much a transformation of the self—but an annihilation of the self as human.

By the time the reader encounters Jane in Meteora, she has begun to feel disconnected from her body. The text states, “it was hard to think about the needs of her physical body when it wasn’t complaining. Most of the time, her body felt like just some half-asleep child that she led around by the hand” (Meteora 98). Jane even addresses her body directly, as if it is separate from her, telling it “go back to sleep... leave me alone” (98). In Shepherd’s sense of oneness, the body is the key to her transformation, ‘not negligible but paramount’ (TLM 106). Yet in this scene it is clear that for Jane, who sees her gendered body as an obstacle, her continued physicality is a problem. While Jane views her body as more disconnected from her sense of self in Meteora, she begins to contemplate her body disappearing altogether. At times, when Jane is crossing the ridge, she connects it with the landscape: “With nothing but rock and air in her way from the sea of cloud below, Jane often got the dizzying sense here

that the line between rock and air and herself was quite thin” (Meteora 52). However, when Jane thinks of this, she also thinks of the act as if it is akin to erasure. When considering a final attempt on No-Man’s Land, Jane muses: “What would it feel like to leave the rope in full mist and climb without it? ... Was there even a bottom to the mist? Did she want there to be?” (Meteora 55). Here, the physical connection of the rope to Jane’s body is linking her back to the ridge that has become her home. To leave the rope and go into this mist is to both visually erase her body from that link and risk death.

There is a similar moment in *The Living Mountain*, in which Shepherd stands in the waters of Loch Avon and realizes she is on the edge of an underwater cliff. “There was nothing that seemed worth saying,” Shepherd writes, “my spirit was as naked as my body. It was one of the most defenceless moments of my life” (TLM 13). There is a sense of fear in this passage, like with Jane and her gazing down at the foggy abyss, but for Shepherd, this moment does not lead to her fantasizing about her own self-destruction. It is, instead, a moment of self-affirmation, as the experiences of Shepherd’s physical body are key to encounters with the spiritual. Shepherd writes of the moment, “That first glance down had shocked me into a heightened power of myself, in which fear became a rare exhilaration: not that it ceased to be fear but fear itself ... enlarged rather than constricted the spirit” (TLM 14). This intense sensation puts Shepherd into a keen state of bodily awareness, in which she feels more connected to her body through the fear as opposed to disparate. Her spirit then is ‘enlarged,’ to the point that she feels a sense of her own power and agency.

For Jane, in her similar moment of fear on the ridge, the realisation that she has the power to affect her own destruction, only makes her feel out of control. Without the rope, Jane knows she is not able to climb forever, not to mention the fact that she will not know where she is in the fog. She is afraid, and her thoughts about her inability to see the bottom of the precipice are not wonderment or self-affirmation, but of joining nothingness. Jane

wonders if the mist ‘has a bottom’ and if she even ‘wants there to be’ one. Effectually, this shows Jane fantasizing about her own death and her sense of self. Since, even in a world without people, Jane cannot feel that she is completely whole and a part of the world she lives in, she is left facing the contemplation of her own destruction.

Jane Finds Belonging with Adeline

Jane has been through a lot by the time she and Adeline meet in Meteora. She has experienced a confusing incident of abuse, the reality of which, and consequences of, she is not willing to accept. She has witnessed her boyfriend of three years fall to his death in a climbing accident for which she bears partial blame. She has lived for a year in a world she was not born in, in total isolation, without any hope of returning home. In light of this, it is perhaps of little surprise that when faced with Adeline’s suggestion that they might need to leave Meteora, Jane struggles with her own sense of identity. Her reaction to the trauma of Sean’s death, and at his hand, comes out in her speech to Adeline through the analogy of an Alaskan serial killer and his surviving victim Cindy Paulsen:

This upsetting, confusing, and incredibly personal thing has happened and now this woman is alone in the mountains. If she goes home, she’s going to have to tell someone what happened. And if she doesn’t tell, she will have to live with the fact that she isn’t telling... But if she tells other people, it takes away her individuality and joins a narrative about abuse. It won’t be hers anymore... but not if she stays in the mountains... she can keep who she is safe. (Meteora 164)

This conversation takes place directly after Jane has confessed to Adeline about her failure to check Sean’s knot resulting in him falling to his death. It also illustrates her thought process of how she came to decide to stay in Meteora. Even when confronted with her own desire for

a space in which she can safely deal with Sean's death, Jane sees the world in terms of binaries. She has decided to stay and reject the regular world with its never-ending parade of people and judgement. However, when Adeline arrives, she is immediately confronted with the problem of her sister, as Adeline is also human. For Adeline, Meteora and the regular world have always existed, and this is not a problem—she can hold both ideas in her mind. We can see this in how the apartment is covered in drawings of imagined worlds and Meteora long before Jane disappears. She has chosen to live in the regular world with Jane, but that decision does not cause her to reject herself, her solitary tendencies, or Meteora's existence. When confronted by their need to leave Meteora due to the impending meteor, Adeline can easily adjust to the idea of returning to the regular world.

After all that Jane has been through, she cannot accept that she can exist as herself outside of Meteora and decides to remain and die. This can be seen in their final discussion before getting into the raft:

“I don't know there's anything left for me to do in the regular world,” said Jane. “Please,” said Adeline. “At home, I have all your things in a room.” “I don't remember them,” said Jane. She wondered how long it would take for a comet to have a piece break off and look like a meteor, then how many seconds from then to impact. Every meteor Jane had ever seen... was an extended shooting star. Not even time to make a wish. (Meteora 177)

In this moment, as Jane watches the comet, she is still trying to detach herself from any links to the regular world. Anything Adeline suggests—her physical possessions etc.—Jane rejects. As the regular world is now her only chance for survival; this rejection of her old life is analogous to Jane with dying. She visualizes the meteor striking the crater lake as if she is already watching it from the shore and her death in Meteora is inevitable. Jane cannot see any version of a place in which she is accepted as who she is, and that seals off the possibility of her own continued existence.

It is only when Adeline shows Jane that there is actually a place where she cannot only be accepted, but already has been, as who she is, that Jane sees a possibility for her own survival. It is a space beyond the physical boundaries that Jane has drawn between worlds, as Adeline, has bridged both worlds to find her. Jane's sense of self-acceptance, until this point, has been conditional on isolation. She has told Adeline that she wants to stay where she 'makes sense' and where there is 'no one' for her to have to take care of or make feel as though they should be taking care of her (Meteora 179). Jane also talks about not wanting 'to be human' anymore or seeing 'what's so great about it' (179). What turns that around is when—after Jane has spoken for a long time about wanting to be 'left alone' Adeline comes to her from a place of love and unconditional acceptance: "I don't think who you are is wrong," Adeline says. "You're not wrong to me. You're just Jane. And you're hurting. Let me take care of you for a while" (Meteora 179). When Jane realizes that Adeline accepts her as who she is and has always accepted her, she finally sees a place where she can belong—with her sister. Adeline is another human being, someone who loves her and wants her to not only live but to be the whole of who she is. This means that wherever Adeline is, Jane has a safe place to be. Only after this realization, does Jane get into the raft and leave Meteora. Ideologically, for Jane, this is because her sense of connectedness and self is no longer grounded in an impossibility. The landscape of the regular world can be a place for her to return and ground herself in, with Adeline's help and support, because any place with Adeline is a place she can belong.

In this way, Jane finally reaches beyond her essentialist line of thinking and finds a kind of unity with her sister. As Shepherd's sense of self is located both within her own body and a oneness with the landscape, so is Jane no longer bound by a binary, essentialist definition of what is allowed for her own gendered body. Jane's sense of self no longer needs to reside in an impossible landscape but can be reflected by the real one. She finds an

acceptance and sense of connectedness within her own relationship with the Alaskan landscapes around her and her sister—both of whom are an integral part of her personal geography.

Chapter Two: Nan Shepherd, Adeline Roan & Geography Beyond Gender

This chapter examines Shepherd's recreation of the Cairngorms in *The Living Mountain* as a space beyond gender, together with my own character—Adeline Roan's—construction of her ideal world, Meteora. Both women depict the mountains as a space unconfined by essentialist binaries by using what Stacy Alaimo calls “gender-minimalizing” (‘Trans-Corporeal Feminisms’ 2008a: 240). This removes the focus from masculine and feminine imagery, holding up the natural world as an inclusive space in which all humans can belong. Shepherd does this by focusing on interconnectedness rather than traditional essentialist imagery. Her use of the nongendered pronoun ‘one’ as a stand in for both narrator and reader, and her description of the Cairngorms themselves as less individual summits than an interconnected whole—the plateau. These same gender-minimizing practices can be seen in the way Adeline describes Meteora in her written vignettes, as well as the way she looks at the natural world around her in Taku Valley. Adeline uses ‘we’ or ‘you’ instead of ‘one,’ avoiding gendered pronouns in her vignettes and observations about landscape, focusing instead on the interchange and betweenness of all natural elements, including herself.

Building on the new materialist theories discussed in Chapter One— ‘Nan Shepherd, Jane Roan & Acceptance of Self’—this chapter studies Shepherd's style of nature writing in *The Living Mountain* in close comparison to the nature writing of her time or literary inheritance: Henry Thoreau, Shepherd's own friend Neil Gunn, and John Muir. This approach to Shepherd's work begins with the analysis of two recent articles of scholarly work published in the last year about *The Living Mountain*, written by PhD researcher Iratxe Ruiz de Alegría Puig, and literary researcher Kirsteen Bell. These two researchers each bring their own unique takes on Shepherd's style of description. For both, her descriptions move against the essentialist language of the woman/nature paradigm, but the two differ in what that means

for her relationship of exchange between the landscape and her body. By examining these works together in a transcorporeal approach incorporating queer ecologies—a perspective developed in environmental research and embedded in material feminisms (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010)—Shepherd’s interconnectedness with the Cairngorms can be seen as more than just an experience of her gendered body. It is an insight into belonging with the natural world through transcorporeal intimacies both more-than-human and beyond gender. Analogously, Adeline’s way of thinking about Meteora as a space beyond human focus, leads her to be more open to its own interconnectedness with herself and the regular world. This allows her to better interpret the mechanics of Meteora and convince Jane to flee from the impending meteor in time.

Queer Ecologies: Sensual Language in Shepherd

The approach of queer ecologies in this thesis is best understood in the broader context of feminist new materialisms. It is rooted in the legacy of dissolving the essentialist binary opposition between object/subject, knower/known, nature/culture, and word/world in laying bare their inherent connections (Bauhardt 2013: 368-369; Barad 2008: 137). Queer ecologies are concerned with using the knowledge of this false dichotomy to “deconstruct popular assumptions and scientific assertions concerning the nature of gender and sexuality as cultural constructions rooted in the heterosexual matrix” (Bauhardt 2013: 369). In Iratxe Ruiz de Alegría Puig’s December 2022 article, ‘Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain*: Making Female Pleasure Visible,’ she proposes “using gender as a lens through which to read *The Living Mountain*” (172). She then explores Shepherd’s novel from an ecofeminist

standpoint. For Ruiz de Alegría Puig the way in which Shepherd uses her body as a sensory mechanism results in her “achieving female pleasure through nature... to a certain degree of sexual empowerment, challenging the classical identification of the female body with nature, and the categorization of women by their reproductive role” (Ruiz de Alegría Puig 172). This narrative works against the marginalising nature/woman connection by opening up new possibilities for ways of looking at the natural world and women beyond an essentialist passive role. There are crossovers with the queer ecological approach evidenced in Ruiz de Alegría Puig’s work, as well as her proposal that Shepherd’s physical pleasure exists in a place beyond male spectator enjoyment. This goes beyond Shepherd’s perceived role as a woman in 1930s Scottish society as intrinsically moored to reproduction (Ruiz de Alegría Puig 184).

For a better understanding of a queer ecological approach to Shepherd, the work of Gender Studies researcher Christine Bauhardt provides some insight. In her 2013 article ‘Rethinking Gender and Nature from a Material(ist) Perspective: Feminist Economics, Queer Ecologies and Resource Politics,’ Bauhardt’s approach is through resource politics, but her thoughts on the relationship between the natural world and the physical body echo Shepherd’s focus on interconnectedness. Bauhardt’s work looks specifically at Stacy Alaimo, as well as ecological researcher Mary Mellor’s 2001 article ‘Nature, Gender and the Body.’ For Bauhardt, the body’s relationship to the natural world is queering in that it unmoors the sex/gender and nature/culture complex from reproduction. For Mellor, this is done by writing of sex and gender in relation to the materiality of the body: “Certainly sex/gender is important in relation to the particular embodiment that relates to sexed bodies, but that is by no means the whole story of humanity’s relationship to biology/nature” (Bauhardt 2013: 371; Mellor 2001: 131). For Mellor and Bauhardt both, sexual desire is not dependant on heteronormative order, as the body is physically material firstly, and all other aspects are

secondary. For Ruiz de Alegría Puig, we see this is also the case—she describes Shepherd achieving sexual empowerment, though she arrives at it from the point of view of eroticism.

To bring this approach back to Shepherd, we return to Ruiz de Alegría Puig's reading of sensuality in *The Living Mountain*. She builds her argument for eroticism around Shepherd's frequent use of the word 'naked' while describing various elements in the Cairngorms and her own body. She also argues that this is confirmed by Shepherd's use of the word 'pleasure' in proximity to these same descriptions. In doing so, however, Ruiz de Alegría Puig makes an interesting choice of omission. While she quotes MacFarlane's introduction to *The Living Mountain*, in terms of walking as pilgrimage (Ruiz de Alegría Puig 180: TLM MacFarlane xxxi) she does not involve him in her argument about erotic language. This despite MacFarlane's own claims that Shepherd's descriptions of the mountain are erotic, not five pages before her chosen quote from him in his introduction to *The Living Mountain*. What makes this interesting is not why Ruiz de Alegría Puig has decided against using MacFarlane's words to back her own, but that both of their claims remain grounded in the same exact moments of text. MacFarlane cites the appearance of the same words 'naked' as Ruiz de Alegría Puig, referring in part the same quote (albeit amongst other inferences) within *The Living Mountain*: "after rain I run my hand through juniper or birches for the joy of the wet drops trickling over the palm or walk through long heather to feel its wetness on my naked legs. The hands have an infinity of pleasure in them" (TLM 102). For MacFarlane and Ruiz de Alegría Puig, the evidence of eroticism in this passage is in the nature of touch and the proximity of the words 'naked' and 'pleasure' to each other. Given the other interconnected elements in Shepherd's descriptions, such an interpretation might risk a reductive turn. There is certainly a vulnerable, intimate element in Shepherd's description of her own body touching the heather, but for the same reasons that Ruiz de Alegría Puig and MacFarlane find this description erotic, I find that implication loose. To be sure, Shepherd's

relationship with the mountain is a queer one; her representation of the Cairngorms does not fit into a heteronormative sense of gender or gendered roles, but the language of the erotic—nakedness, pleasure—is not just the language of sex but also the language of intimacy and connection.

Ruiz de Alegría Puig notes this by examining Shepherd's text in terms of its description of the mountain not just in terms of sensuality, but also love (Ruiz de Alegría Puig 182). For her, this is evidence that Shepherd does not seek to conquer the mountain but to be in a democratic relationship with it "in contrast to the classical rapport of subjugation of the land... Unlike the explorer who seeks to discover a remote, unspoiled, and alluring mountain, penetrate, and eventually conquer it, Shepherd seeks an interaction with an equal" (Ruiz de Alegría Puig 183). Love is, however, far from confined to the romantic or sensual sphere, and nakedness is the natural biological state of the human body. It is true in the quoted passage (held up as the only quoted evidence in the Ruiz de Alegría Puig article, as well as by MacFarlane) that Shepherd touching and being touched by the trees acts as a means through which she is able to connect with the natural world. It is also true that she derives an enjoyment from that encounter: pleasure. Word choice is very important in a text so concerned with the body and sensory language that Shepherd devotes an entire chapter just to 'The Senses.' In context with the rest of the book, however, the word 'naked' in Shepherd's text holds more potential to be representational of the body in its truest, material form, than the body as in an active state of sexual excitement. If, as discussed in Chapter One, Shepherd is writing about essential body and using her own physical body as a means through which to experience the mountain; she can hardly exclude touch. The word 'pleasure' has connotations (albeit often erotic) rooted more in the body than its synonyms. Enjoyment, satisfaction, joy—these are all words Shepherd might have used, but they are detached from touch, rooted instead in the physically immaterial.

In *Meteora*, Adeline Roan, uses similar description of the mountains as rooted in touch and intimacy. She describes them as “lying down in bed together” and having “touch-eroded feet” (15). With the erotic interpretation that Ruiz de Alegría Puig applies to Shepherd, one might read Adeline’s description as also sexual, or one might note that the language resembles that of sleep and intimacy. It has the potential to be equally, if not more likely, a passage of description using metaphor focused on interconnectedness, using the language of intimacy and in-betweenness; the same language with which sex also sometimes stakes its claim, but does not have a monopoly on.

While words like naked, pleasure, and touch are certainly sensory, and the senses can certainly be sensual, nakedness and pleasure are not words confined to eroticism, and sensory imagery is not confined to sex. It is true that instead of using the word ‘naked’ to describe her legs or trees, Shepherd might use the word ‘bare,’ interchangeably. That said, ‘bare’ also has a different connotation as a word. Trees without leaves are most often described as bare, and the idiom ‘bare bones’ comes readily to mind. These images attached to the word ‘bare,’ both give a sense that matter in ‘bare’ as a condition is a lesser state, a state of ‘without,’ or incompleteness. ‘Bare’ implies the barer is deficit, bones—a skeleton—without life, and trees without their leaves also without life. Naked, however, can be the whole and natural state of an entity. Shepherd’s use of ‘naked’ to describe both her own flesh in this quote, and the way she uses it elsewhere in *The Living Mountain* to describe leafless trees, gives the bearers of nakedness a sense of completeness and belonging. “Birch trees are least beautiful when clothed,” Shepherd writes. “Exquisite when the opening leaves just fleck them with points of green flame.... They are the loveliest of all when naked” (TLM 53). Much as Bauhardt and Mellor say, if sex and gender are a part of sexed bodies, they do not encompass the whole connection between humans and the more-than-human world (Bauhardt 2013: 371; Mellor 2001: 131). I argue the same applies here for Shepherd’s sensory descriptions of the

mountain as it relates to her own body. She is experiencing the mountain in a physical sense first, her body in its essential state of body and oneness with the mountain; any erotic experience is secondary.

In ‘How to Write as Felt’: Touching Transmaterialities and More-Than-Human Intimacies,’ scholar and queer theorist Stephanie Springgay explores the act of human beings touching the more-than-human natural world as what Alaimo calls transcorporeality (Springgay 2019). Springgay traces touching as an encounter between human and nonhuman matter through the work of feminist scholar Donna Haraway and philosophical researcher Erin Manning. For Springgay, this form of transcorporeality relates to the interaction of touching with the natural world itself. Touching, in this sense, becomes a form of transcorporeal intimacy—unspoken communication and an exchange between the more-than-human and human. Boundaries are not crossed so much as un-invented, the ‘secrets’ of the ‘other’ shown to be intra-action and communication between the human and more-than-human, rather than knowledge to be possessed. This, for Springgay, is experienced in conjunction with the written creation (writing about touching the natural world) and writer as they try to reproduce a ‘felt’ moment, describing this touching encounter. Springgay writes, that connecting ‘felt’ (the term she gives to this trans material experience) with theories of touch and transcorporeality becomes “a way to open up and re-configure different bodily imaginaries, both human and nonhuman ...that opens bodies to helices and trans connections” (Springgay 2019: 59; Springgay and Truman 2017a). In this sense, both touch and recreation of a ‘felt’ moment create transcorporeal alignments and intimacies. When Shepherd writes about her own experiences with touch in the Cairngorms, she is taking part in this process of Springgay’s ‘felt,’ and the descriptions Ruiz de Alegría Puig and MacFarlane find erotic can be shown instead as indicative of this variety of more-than-human transcorporeal intimacy.

Ruiz de Alegría Puig is not the first to notice Shepherd's sense-based descriptions, or that she uses own gendered body as a means to enjoy the natural world, undermining the essentialised, restrictive, and even arbitrary narrative aligning both female bodies and nature with passivity. Researcher Kirsteen Bell also devotes her article—'Word and World: Bodily Perception in the Narrative Non-Fiction of Kathleen Jamie and Nan Shepherd' (Edinburgh Press 2022)—to the sensory aspects of Shepherd and Jamie's writing. Bell focuses an entire section in her article specifically on the way these writers write about touch. For Bell, Shepherd's writing through her senses as an interconnectedness with the mountain does not result in erotic experience. Bell points to Shepherd's own written testament of prioritization of touch in *The Living Mountain*, noting that when Shepherd to put aside her gloves to touch the living world around her "her sense of touch through her hands became a source of internal strength that stemmed from the sensed world" (Bell 137: TLM 56). It is only when Shepherd's hand's most uninhibited, even naked form, she is able to see the natural world as it truly is:

... Jamie and Shepherd demonstrate a way to see past the meaning imposed by our ideological constructions as they attempt to see what is really there through the body. The senses of the body exist as a part of the world before the mind interprets that information through the veil of ecological ideology, in whatever shape that may be. (Bell 145)

By touching more-than-human nature and relating that information to us, Shepherd is then, as Springgaay suggests, participating in a transcorporeal event. She touches the world around her, experiencing transcorporeal intimacy with it through her body before her mind has a chance to interfere. Bell also writes of the danger of revisiting a moment in memory "having the capacity to change how we interact with the moment," and how by writing about their lived experiences Shepherd and Jamie have "opened the circuit out beyond themselves and their sensed experience of the world" (Bell 147). This means that, for Bell, by adding a

presumed reader to this felt moment with the mountain, Shepherd has actively brought in a kind of ‘other’ into her lived experiences and forced herself into a space with that ‘other.’

This harkens back to the importance of Shepherd’s specific characterizations of the Cairngorms in *The Living Mountain*, and how she constructs the mountain around her as something outwith the ‘other,’ male or female. On the first page Shepherd uses ‘I’ to state “however often I walk on them, these hills hold astonishment for me” (TLM 1). Then, on the second page, Shepherd describes the summits as a single mass, “the individual tops... though sundered from one another by fissures and deep descents, are no more than eddies on the plateau’s surface” (TLM 2). She switches to the pronoun ‘one,’ here, when the point of view moves up to the surface of the plateau. From the very beginning of the text, and counter to male nature writers of her time and legacy, Shepherd shows us a natural world where there is comparatively little need for gendered pronouns—there is only ‘I’ and ‘one.’ Already, this is counternarrative to the essentialized focus of conquering summits and the mastering the natural world. It also presents a unique point of view. Shepherd continues: “One does not look upwards to spectacular peaks but downwards from the peaks to spectacular chasms.” Here, she introduces the concept of the mountains as a unified mass and then unifies the perspective of the reader and narrator with the general pronoun ‘one.’ This grounds the vision of the plateau as if it is viewed simultaneously through Shepherd’s eyes and the readers. By referencing the chasms in the plateau, the point of view further shifts to encompass the mountain as a part of that ‘one,’ peering simultaneously both into the mountain through its chasms and around at the unified plateau. This creates a distancing affect, as if the point of view is, in fact, in multiple places at once. The term ‘one’ here is then not really used for a specific human individual but becomes ‘one’ of ‘many,’ encompassing Shepherd, the reader, any other viewer to stand in this space, and the mountain itself. This opens up the setting of the Cairngorms to the possibility of being not only a more-than-human space, unconcerned

with the gender of the speaker or observer, but in fact beyond the very concept of gender itself.

Gender Minimization and the Use of ‘One’ in Nature Writing

In her book *Undomesticated Ground* (2000) Stacy Alaimo finds that throughout literature and theory, as early as the 19th century, women writers were creating alternate versions of categorization for nature in which “culture was the place that was static and confining, in terms of strict gender roles, and nature was a liberatory space that allowed for critique of or escape from rigid cultural constructions” (2020, Interview with Julia Kuznetski: 142). For Alaimo, these alternate versions of nature, and the human subject as they move through it, are created through gender-minimizing. This created by the authors using fewer binary terms and gendered ways of referring to the natural world, which shows the natural world to be outside of the essentialist paradigm. Shepherd’s use of it in her own work is a part of this legacy of reimagining nature and the self around gender. She does not erase gender from her text, but it is a struggle to find it presented outside of the circumstantial. By the end of the text, Shepherd’s instances of gendered identification end up creating a representation of the mountain as beyond gendered categorization.

Shepherd’s use of gender minimization—the use of ‘one’ and such descriptive methods of transcorporeal intimacies—goes beyond their use in the style of nature writing at the time. ‘One’ is often utilized famously in the work of Emerson, Thoreau, John Muir and the work of Shepherd’s own friend Neil Gunn, but Shepherd’s use of it is different. In order to look at the texts of male nature writers use of ‘one’ in comparison Shepherd’s, it must be

understood that in a historical context ‘one’ has not always been grammatically nongendered or a stand in for all people.

Gender studies scholars, in particular those coming out of postmodernism, have a well-documented objection to ‘one’ as being representative of ‘all.’ Judith Butler, a writer of foundational texts in Gender Studies, and postmodernist thinker, explores this history of gender representation in their book *Gender Trouble* (1990). *Gender Trouble* has since come to be considered a cornerstone of gender studies in the twentieth and twenty-first century. It is building block from which ecofeminism, new materialism feminisms, post-humanism in feminism, and other feminist theoretical models dealing with gender rise. In *Gender Trouble’s* first chapter, third section: ‘Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate’ Butler specifically uses ‘one’ as an example to discuss discord around gender in the metaphysics of being. They begin by posing the reader with two questions: “to what extent does the body come into being in and through the marks of gender?” (Butler 12) and “what is the metaphysics of substance, and how does it inform thinking about the categories of sex?” (Butler 14) From there, Butler moves on to discuss the views of three major feminist French philosophers: Simone De Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig. These women all have conflicting views around language and the use of ‘one’ as it relates to metaphysics and gender, but all agree it is not truly inclusive. Butler writes: “Central to all these views... is the notion that sex appears within hegemonic language as a *substance*... a self-identified being. This is achieved through a performative twist of language... that conceals the fact that ‘being’ a sex or gender is fundamentally impossible” (26). The difference in arguments that Butler discusses between De Beauvoir, Irigaray and Wittig is not the notion that the masculine is assumed to be the universal, but rather what the feminine then stands for as outside of the universal, outside of ‘one.’

This puts an emphasis on the idea of sex as a false substance in metaphysics. This idea of sex as a false metaphysics is also essential to the understanding of how, for Butler, gender is constructed only through language, yet then is used to presume men to be the forebearers of selfhood and ‘being’ in Western thought. De Beauvoir is the first to argue this. ‘One,’ for De Beauvoir, becomes a part of a linguistic twist—in which ‘one’ may be many and assumed to stand in for ‘everyone’ but is not in fact ‘all.’ For Butler, this conceals the fact that the assumed subject is male and much of this is buried in the binary understanding of men as being aligned with culture and women with passive nature.

Henry David Thoreau’s famous conclusion of *Walden* (1854), a cornerstone text of nineteenth century nature writing, is an excellent example of this use of ‘one’ in language. He writes: “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours...” (Thoreau 323). No sooner in this passage has Thoreau used ‘one,’ he immediately qualifies it with ‘he,’ and continues in that fashion. This is typical of the use of ‘one’ in nature writing of the legacy Shepherd finds herself situated in. The use of ‘one’ is less of a veil for Shepherd’s friend and contemporary, Neil M. Gunn, but less frequently utilized than by Shepherd in her own work. In Gunn’s *Highland River*, published in 1937 (the same timeframe in which Shepherd was writing *The Living Mountain*) Gunn turns to ‘one’ in the more lyrical moments of his narrative. “There was nothing one could do with the tragic conception of life except acknowledge it,” Gunn writes. “Bow to it, giving nothing away, and pass on the moor like sunlight, like shadow... In this way one is undefeatable-until death comes” (237). Here, Gunn is given the same opportunity to interchange ‘one’ with ‘he’ the way Thoreau does, yet—even though his main character, Kenn, who is thinking these thoughts, is male—Gunn keeps the moment in ‘one.’ The scenes where the book does this, however, are few and far between. Kenn’s thoughts are kept in the third person, gendered pronoun ‘he.’

If we are to continue to think of this issue of universal personhood and of ‘one’ in the terms of the literary world, we must keep in mind that while *The Living Mountain* itself touches on the metaphysics of ‘being,’ it is not a solely metaphysical text. Therefore, it becomes useful to ask the following question: if ‘one’ is to be understood in Shepherd’s time in the 1930s, and the legacy of nature writing, as culturally coded to represent men, yet Shepherd herself, who is not a man, still wishes to write an inclusive text about mountains that incorporates her own experiences—in regard to language—how exactly is she meant to do that?

Shepherd must still use the language available to her if she wants to write about the human experience at all. To do that, she works within the established grammatical bounds of her time. ‘One’ becomes how she moves about the landscape to include both herself and any other reader. In this way, she carves out the Cairngorms as a place that is truly for all humans. The mountains are for her, as a part of ‘one,’ as well as the reader and any other human being who might stand on the plateau. In Shepherd, at last, we find that ‘one’ can contain all genders, and the mountain even more.

Throughout the text of *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd does not flinch from ‘one’ to qualify it. As she wanders through the Cairngorms in her text, she grounds the experience of them in terms of her body and senses, describing the sights, smells, and sounds in great detail. Yet, never once does she dwell upon the gender of that body. Her present-tense hiking companions remain only “my companion” or “we,” and she speaks of gendered walkers in the past-tense as local personalities associated with the region. In fact, the only direct hint of Shepherd’s own gender throughout the entire text of *The Living Mountain* comes in two instances, and the first is too passive to be considered clear identification. It appears three-quarters of the way through the entire book. Here, Shepherd writes that a woman who housed walkers wouldn’t turn away any climber while there was space, nor did she stop to wake

‘him’ up “to give his bed to a lady benighted and trudging in at one in the morning” (TLM 85). While the reader might assume this is based on Shepherd’s personal experience, the reference is very subtle. Were someone to have missed the author’s first name was ‘Nan,’ it might not register as any relation to Shepherd at all, and instead as a general rule of the homeowner regarding climbers staying with her. For all purposes, it might as well be. In her continued discussion of the mountain and its many inhabitants with their ‘gnarled personalities,’ Shepherd refers to James Downie who “insisted on carrying my bag all the way to the bus” even when Shepherd at first objects (TLM 86). In the end, Shepherd relents and allows it, knowing Downie has done this for all previous ‘lady climbers’ from before (86). This is the only true mention of Shepherd’s gender in the text and one in which her gender is spoken of not through Shepherd’s own eyes, but Downie’s behaviour. Since this instance with Downie is the entire extent to which Shepherd’s gender identity appears, that is something in and of itself. It becomes even more of note when we realize how infrequently gender is mentioned in landscape descriptions throughout the text. Shepherd refers to femaleness outside of named persons only eleven times in *The Living Mountain* and there are only slightly more mentions of men. I will now chronicle a couple of mentions of femininity for a contextualised show of how gender on the mountain is presented as circumstantial.

The first mention of femaleness comes in the 1977 foreword to the book, where Shepherd writes of recent events in the Cairngorms: “A man and a girl are found, months too late, far out of their path, the girl on abraded hands and knees as she clawed her way through a drift. I see her living face still (she was one of my students)... She should have lived to be old” (xxxvi). The next mention is eighteen pages later, a bare mention of the presence of the wife of a man leading a walk to the Barnes of Bynack (17). It is not until some twenty pages then after that the next mention arrives. This time it is in a cluster of sparing stories about those who have perished in blizzards. “Three fell from the rock,” Shepherd reports of deaths

in storms she has heard of in her time in the hills, “one of them a girl” (37). On the following page there is the brief story of the memories of an old woman—Mrs. Mackenzie—who housed two boys the night before they died in a blizzard. Shepherd identifies the West Highland terrier that found the bodies of two boys to also be female. “You will not be finding a thing but in the place where it will be” (38) says Ms. Mackenzie of the bodies, and then she is gone. It seems only logical in this context these women should appear, however briefly, amongst those who are catalogued by Shepherd to have died in the hills. Extra attention is given to the death of the female student Shepherd knew herself, Shepherd’s remembrance of “her living face” yet in her following description, the girl’s death focuses only on the injuries of her body. Shepherd’s student is said to have had “abraded hands and knees” from clawing her way through a drift. Shepherd also writes of two boys later “one of the men who did the finding described to me their abraded knees and knuckles” (39). This is a common trait amongst those who die on mountains during a blizzard, and Shepherd herself notes this in her own description. It can be assumed therefore, the appearance of gender in each of these instances is, once again, circumstantial.

That said, it remains significant that while Shepherd may not be preoccupied with gender in the sense of her narration and point-of-view in *The Living Mountain*, she is mindful of her own privileged position as a woman who is able to wander all over the mountain. This assertion is more inferred than direct, but clear in the way she gives voice to the working-class women mentioned in her text. Environmental Humanities scholar and literary researcher Samantha Walton points to this distinction between the two types of women that Shepherd speaks to in her section on ‘Place’ in her book *The Living World* (2020). According to Walton, there is a clear distinction Shepherd makes between herself, the woman, who can go running all over the mountain, and those whose time is consumed by domestic labor and either cannot, or do not choose to spend their time that way (Walton 42-43). This is, in a way,

another version of Shepherd's acknowledgement of gender, though it does not infringe on the genderless point-of-view of the book in a craft sense, so much as it exists as an acknowledgement of Shepherd's own privilege. Shepherd knows that the working women that she speaks to in her text may have different perceptions than her own, so she seeks to give voice to that, rather than grounding all experiences of the mountain in herself. Walton pointedly marks places in where in the text that Shepherd gives careful attendance to that other voice of women in a different position. In 'Life', she shows that Shepherd openly points to the lives of working women in the Cairngorms, noting "the day's work keeps them busy, in and out and about, but though they do not climb the mountains (indeed how could they have the time or energy?) they do look at them'" (TLM 83). Shepherd's specific brand of point-of-view weaves a gender inclusiveness into the space of the Cairngorms, but she remains aware that her 'one' is not the one and only. While the mountain might be in and of itself a space for all, that does not mean all have equal access to time and resources required to spend the same amount of time as Shepherd with the mountain. While the mountain is a space for all humans, Shepherd does not claim to be the barer of universal truth for how that experience of interconnectedness or transcorporeal intimacies with the mountain are conducted.

As a means of comparison how in gendered language appears in the text of other nature writers without respect to transcorporeal intimacies, I will now examine a few examples from the work of fellow Scotsman and nature writer John Muir. Muir was not a contemporary of Shepherd's time, but his work was popular, canonical, and the legacy standard within which Shepherd would have found her work situated. In *Yosemite* (1912) Muir writes:

Down through the middle of the Valley flows the crystal Merced, River of Mercy, peacefully quiet, reflecting lilies and trees and the onlooking rocks; things frail and fleeting and types of endurance meeting here and blending in countless forms, as if into this one mountain mansion Nature had gathered her choicest treasures, to draw her lovers into close and confiding communion with her. (4)

It is worth noting that Muir's gendered imagery here does contain some elements of interconnectedness. He writes of the lilies and various other forms blending, nature as a state of in-betweenness and many parts that make up a whole; this is in the line of Shepherd's descriptions of landscape. However, the natural world is imbued by Muir with the ever-present and limiting imagery of the feminine. Nature becomes 'she' and not only in a gendered sense but sexualised as these other parts of the world become her 'lovers.' The interconnectedness mentioned here is intimacy, but specifically sexual or romantic intimacy, as 'lovers' is unmistakable in its meaning, and 'confiding communion' might refer to sharing secrets, or communion of the flesh. Furthermore, Muir himself is not a part of this interconnectedness in the description, he is simply a beholder, looking out at the natural world. Nature is female, and he, as a subject of civilization, is male; her treasures clutched close to protect them from him. The use of the word 'treasures' too, indicates possession, both Nature's possession of these beautiful things, and Muir's good fortune to view them. It hints that he might too be able to possess them, as he has stumbled upon this confidential communion as an outsider, though we do not see any particularly violent language in this instance. The 'secrets' unearthed by the natural world and Muir are not through the unspoken communication and boundary transgression of transcorporeal intimacies, but objects imbued of the feminine 'other,' which Muir is capable of sullyng and subduing, even if he does not desire to.

Muir does not always describe the natural world in terms of the feminine, which distinguishes him from the imagery of the nature writing legacy of his time—Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Emerson. It is also what makes him the more ideal comparison to Shepherd. As Shepherd also does not exclude male pronouns and uses the words 'man' and 'mankind' as a stand in for humanity from *The Living Mountain*, it might be considered unfair to not also

look at the way in which she and Muir use those terms in the sense of landscape. In Muir's *Travels in Alaska* (1915) he builds a fire and writes of the trees around him with "lichened trunks with sparkling streams pouring down the furrows of the bark, and the gray bearded patriarchs bowing low and chanting in passionate worship!" (19) In this instance, the imagery likens the trees to men, and great men specifically, participating in religious ritual. Muir's male-focused landscape imagery is often tied in with God and Christianity throughout *Travels in Alaska*. This might be owed to the fact that Muir seems particularly preoccupied in these moments with terrestrial manifestations of God in nature. He writes of an expedition returning from a particularly beautiful day of sights and good weather that the group was: "rejoicing in the possession of so blessed a day and feeling in that very foundational truth we had seen in one of God's own temples and seen Him and heard Him working and preaching like a man" (54). As God in Muir's eyes is male, when the natural world takes on religious significance, it slips out of its usual feminine confines and takes on male gender as well. This passage also bears some similarities to a biblical metaphor with which Muir would be well-acquainted—that of marriage being like the covenant between Christ and his church, with the husband in the role of Christ and the wife in the role of the church—with the word 'temple' standing in for church and 'Nature' (Ephesians 5:22-33).

The only time Shepherd uses gendered imagery in landscape in *The Living Mountain*, is the reference to the individual peak Ben MacDui¹ as 'he.' This appears in chapter three 'The Group': "My First climb was Ben MacDui—rightly, since he is the highest" (16). There is not much else to be said of this, as from there Shepherd does not use the pronoun again, and instead describes her route up MacDui (the Etchachan ascent) "... to then find no spaciousness for reward, but an interior... And what an interior! The boulder-strewn plain,

¹ Ben MacDui is also associated with a well-known folkloric monster known as 'The Grey Man.' Shepherd would have been familiar with this legend, and it still persists in hillwalking circles today. However, to ascribe the Grey Man's gender as influential to how Shepherd thought of Ben MacDui would not only be speculative, but possibly reductive as well.

the silent shining loch ...and on every side except where we had entered, towering mountain walls” (16). Here, even in a moment specifically about ascent in which Shepherd might use a metaphor of conquer or possession, she instead draws the attention of the reader away from Macdui, and back into the Cairngorms as a whole. Loch Avon, the loch in her description, is the focus and center between multiple peaks, drawing the reader’s view down and inwards—towards the interior of the plateau. Shepherd describes herself as still within the mountain, rather than being completely separate from it by being on top of it, and intimate with the plateau in her own state of betweenness.

Adeline’s Nongendered Descriptions of Meteora

In my own text, *Meteora*, Adeline Roan describes the otherworldly nature of Meteora in a similar way to Shepherd: everything is interconnected, in transition, or spoken of in the language of transcorporeal intimacies and in-betweens. While Shepherd’s world of mountains is reported from memory, when Adeline writes her vignettes describing Meteora, she is half-remembering, half-reimagining them. With nothing but her brief glimpses of far-off mountains to go on over her time in Meteora as a child, Adeline abstracts the different mountain realms then from how she sees the natural world around her. She maps Meteora as a part of her obsession with world-building to make up for the regular world in which she does not know how to function. Like Shepherd, Adeline’s vignettes have a lack of gendered pronouns and explore a more-than-human and beyond human connection to the world. She doesn’t use ‘one’ like Shepherd, but bends towards the more general ‘you,’ or ‘we,’ even using at times preferred the singular nonbinary pronoun ‘they’ when describing personhood.

This, like Shepherd's use of 'one' and other gender minimalizing details, presents Meteora as a space beyond gender. Adeline is writing from the modern era rather than the 1930s, so rather than using the more formal sounding 'one' she adopts these other, more casual nongendered use of subjects, to the same affect.

In the very first vignette, Adeline paradoxically gets rid of the idea of humans in Meteora altogether, characterizing it as a space inherently beyond human categorization:

In this world there are just mountains. No characters, and sometimes not even animals: all sentient life gone...Think of mountains lying down in bed together until they merge into one, sinking into sheets of earth. Think of their touch-eroded feet, smooth, wrapped up in each other's hair. (Meteora 15)

The personification of the mountains here is clear, then dispelled by the imagery is then all about interconnectedness of them merging into one. The mountains are in bed and underneath the same sheet, sinking, their 'touch eroded feet' implying even further transcorporeal intimacy. As there are no other entities mentioned in this description, it implies that it is the mountains themselves who have touched each other's feet, and that act had a uniquely transcorporeal affect, blurring the lines between each other. The mountains are wrapped in each other's hair, then personified threefold and connected to each other spatially—both individual selves and others-within-the self. This bears a strong philosophical commonality with Shepherd's approach to describing the Cairngorms in which she describes the plateau itself is as the 'true summit' of the mountains.

Shepherd does not use her text to talk about the individualized peaks often, other than by brief geographical mention of name, and similarly, neither does Adeline. Adeline predicates all the descriptions of the different mountain realms within Meteora, with this thesis statement entry about the mountains 'lying down' together showing that all of these mountains are really one (Meteora 15). In this way, Adeline shows that, at least to her, there

is one world of Meteora, each domain bleeding into the next. We are in a place beyond human categorization, but Adeline cannot truly conceive of such a place outside her own understanding, so she gives it human characteristics, removing gender and allowing it instead to be as it is, beyond such classifications.

In Adeline's process of recording Meteora in her journal, she must also deal with point-of-view. There is an assumed 'you' in the vignette when she uses the command 'Think of mountains lying down together.' The 'you' as genderless, in conversation with an unspecified omniscient narrator, continues throughout her vignettes. Another example of this is in the vignette Adeline shares with Jane when they are together in the physical Meteora, describing the Mountain of Loneliness:

The most dangerous mountain in Meteora is the peak that bridges into the regular world. A mountain so big it has begun to grow in reverse, inverted like a spike leading down... Some secrets clot this way, freezing into a knife point, piercing to your core... Left alone long enough with this kind of mountain, a person will be swallowed up, wrapped in overgrowth. They become like a tree drinking water. A stone so choked in vines it is no longer recognizable as a stone. (178)

Here, not only does Adeline use 'they' and refer to the subject or viewer of this space, as well as the nongendered term of 'person,' she also writes of a direct correlation between nature and human corporeality, undermining the essentialist binary. In the theoretical tradition of Alaimo's demand for a rethinking gendered and corporeal categorization, the lines between the person/viewer and Meteora become blurred. They are joining the mountain and its systems 'like a tree drinking water,' an act in which the physical point of where the water ends and tree begins can be questioned. The categorization of a person in Meteora and this realm in Meteora itself as separate in this journal entry can also be questioned. Their blending is portrayed in the context of the journal entry as dangerous, as the passage warns against loneliness, but while the language speaks of being 'swallowed up' and 'choked' it also uses the language of

interconnectedness rather than annihilation. Like Shepherd's sense of self, the person in Adeline's text becomes located both in the individual and landscape simultaneously. They are both the 'stone' and a part of the natural world around it to the point where they are 'no longer recognizable as a stone,' becoming more as they join the living greenery of the world. This focus in the language remains on blurred lines and boundaries, as Shepherds describes her being 'not out of myself, but in myself' when with the mountain (TLM 108).

Furthermore, there is an unspoken communication here between Meteora and the 'you.' Secrets in particular are referenced, but not in the sense of Muir's witness of the secrets of feminized nature and the 'other.' Here, secrets are kept by and literally within the 'you' themselves, a transgression of the border between worlds and a way not only into Meteora, but as a part of the world. The 'you' and Meteora are intertwined this way and a part of each other through this unspoken communication of loneliness, a transcorporeal intimacy brought about through the very pain of those same unspoken secrets, and the untranslatable nature of the pain brought on by them. The interconnectedness between the 'you' and this particular mountain in Meteora, becomes a circle—the transcorporeal intimacy of the secret destroys any depiction of nature in Meteora as completely separate from the self. Instead, the intra-action of the secret between the self and both worlds—Meteora and the regular world—becomes an endless overlaying of both emotion and matter.

Physicist and philosophical theorist Karen Barad's work in quantum field theory and agential realism is a critical baseline to Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality. It addresses the very basis of 'matter' and all 'being' in the universe as overlayed and intra-active, much like this relationship between person, place, and secrets in Adeline's vignette. Rather than focusing on the 'thingification' of classical physics, Barad's 2007 book *Meeting the Universe Half Way: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, illustrates how the basic unit of existence is not the atom or electron but phenomena, blurring the subject-object distinction

as electrons are always in intra-action with the void (Barad 2007). Adeline's sense of overlaying between Meteora, the self, and the regular world, mirrors this understanding of matter in a direct relation to transcorporeal intimacy. The phenomena, in this case, is the concept of the secret within the 'you', unspoken, an action between the 'you' and both worlds rather than a boundary to be crossed, creating an intra-action between the self and Meteora as well as the regular world—thus deconstructing classical ontology and the essentialist division between the natural world and the self.

Adeline's simile of the tree drinking water further brings a connection between place and person that also is not presented as unnatural, but in fact a part of the natural system of Meteora. Both trees and water are already a part of the mountains, as are stones and vines, but by comparing them to a person and the mountain, Adeline presents the idea that all of these elements, including humans, are already connected. Loneliness as an emotion and subject is therein given literal substance through the mountain. In its newfound substance, it becomes a thing just as solid as its human host. While ominous, this presentation of Adeline's imagined mountain within Meteora shows us that she sees neither nature nor people as solid or even separate entities. This is only enhanced by her lack of gendered pronouns in the vignette and attention given to the transient state of substance in the subject/person.

Through this we can see how, for Adeline, Meteora and the regular world not only coexist, but there is an inherent exchange between them. This is both through the physical exchange in the text of the door to Meteora being linked to meteors, and the more metaphorical experience of what Meteora has come to represent for both Adeline and Jane. Adeline's journal entries about Meteora subvert the idea of it as a distant, impassable place, contrary to Jane's more essentialist views. They have both entered this other world as children, yet, though Adeline has not been to Meteora since she was eleven, she continues to keep its memory alive. Adeline maintains the world is real despite Jane's rejection of it, drawing pictures of the

different realms in Meteora to hang on her drawing wall alongside real maps of mountains. Even Adeline's early childhood drawings in her journal echo the interconnectedness of her written journal entries:

The sharp looking knife was meant to be the Mountain of Loneliness... The circular maze shape was Circle Mountain, which wound you up in rivers until you too became a part of the maze. A thin line on a blank sheet of paper was the World's Edge, a mountain so dangerous and high it looked flat as tundra. (90)

Each of these represents Adeline's vision for a different mountain in Meteora, and in each, despite the fact that Meteora is meant to be a realm without people, it is described with an interactive element between the subject/person and the natural world. Either they become a part of each other, or as in the World's Edge—the defining feature of the realm is based in perception, subverting Jane's premise of Meteora that it has no interchange with humans. For Jane, that binary separation from humanity is what makes Meteora a safe space, but for Adeline, the regular world and Meteora share the same possibilities as a safe place—human and natural world elements are not in opposition. We can see this in way she sees Taku River Valley when kayaking with Will and Amanda in the regular world:

The bright colors of equipment and bags stood in stark contrast against the water and sky. Adeline did not think the colors fit in with this world of moving parts, of in-betweens. But sitting in Jane's old brown insulation layer and blue hiking trousers, she herself did not feel separate. It was nice to be a part of it—the land between the water, water between the land... Whenever she looked away, the trees traded places. (70)

Put up against the earlier passage in which Adeline describes Circle Mountain, the movement of the trees reads similarly. However, this is the regular world where trees do not move, and still Adeline does not find the idea unnatural. There is a hint of the ominous in their trading places, but Adeline explicitly feels early on in the paragraph that she is not separate from this

world of nature around her. This makes that unfamiliarity less oppressive and more indicative of the fluid state of matter through which Adeline sees the physical world. The lack of separation here between herself and nature, like the lack of separation between the subject/viewer and mountains in her descriptions of Meteora, shows that Adeline views all spaces to be a place where she can belong, since she herself is inherently a part of the natural world.

This draws to mind a particular passage by Shepherd in *The Living Mountain* in which a similar exchange of matter takes place between the Cairngorms and deer she has seen. Shepherd writes “I have seen a hind turn her head to look at me, twisting her neck round until the face seemed to hang suspended in air alongside the rump and some atavistic fear awoke in me” (72). This image of the hind takes the deer out of the animal world and into the more-than-human world of the mountain. The hind loses gender in the second half of the sentence, as she becomes more surreal and in connection with the more-than-human space of the Cairngorms themselves, as does Adeline when brought out into the betweenness of the natural world in Taku River Valley. Shepherd does not write of the hind that she twisted her neck round until *her* face seemed to hang suspended, she writes *the*. The phrasing makes it seem as though the closer the deer is to the mountain, the less gendered the hind becomes. Shepherd is also describing an optical illusion she has seen in the hills literally. The hind is not described past this point, so she exists within the text both ways at once—as deer and mountain spectre.

When Adeline and Jane finally meet, they disagree on the ideological state of Meteora vs. the regular world. For Jane, the fact that Meteora does not have people in it, makes it the antithesis of humanity, an isolationist version of the false dichotomy of nature/humanity. There can be no transcorporeal intimacy between Jane herself and any physical space as long as Jane sees humans and therefore her own humanity as an obstacle to

belonging. Jane tries to convince Adeline that neither of them belong to or should return to the regular world because Adeline is ‘like’ Jane. “You don’t actually like people,” Jane tells her, “you want to like them, but in reality, they just make you uncomfortable. You don’t actually want a real relationship with any of them” (Meteora 112). The two sisters are in conflict because Jane’s rejection of all people who are not Adeline, demands that Adeline make the same choice she has of rejecting humanity, which to Jane is analogous with the regular world. However, Adeline does not see Meteora as separate from humanity, and sees the flaw in Jane’s thinking. Adeline’s origin story journal entry describes that in order to imagine Meteora “we must first unmake the world of humans” (15) but every single realm that she describes within Meteora after this demands an exchange between the human reader and the world in order for it to be understood. This goes to say that Adeline does experience some conflict in trying to imagine what Meteora is really like—in reality, she has not spent that much time there. Yet, for Adeline, humans and the natural world are intrinsically linked—it is Jane who demands Meteora’s virtues are on the basis of isolation. Adeline sees Jane’s rejection of humanity for what it is—another form of self-rejection. She knows that rejecting one’s own substance is not how one builds another.

As Shepherd includes human beings in her illustration of the mountain, so does Adeline understand that people are also a part of the same substance as the natural world. Shepherd writes of ‘discovering the mountain itself’ that “Everything became good to me ...I have discovered that man’s experiences of them enlarges rock, flower and bird. The thing to known grows with the knowing” (TLM 108). The exchange between humanity and the natural world, for Shepherd, is natural, as is the desire to know more about them—oneness, world, and self. This comes through recategorization and transformation of the way one thinks of the natural spaces in which human beings exit. That actualised transformation and

reimagining of categories, is how Adeline sees Meteora; for her, it is a space rich with transcorporeal intimacies.

For Adeline, as well as Shepherd, the more-than-human world of nature is an inclusive space, it encompasses any and all genders. It is outside of the human heteronormative categorizations of gender, queer and beyond. In this way, it disrupts the balances of classic ontology, and becomes a space in which human beings and the natural world are intrinsically linked, in line with Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality. A place where truly anyone has the ability to be exactly who and as they are.

Chapter Three: The Cairngorms & Meteora, Disanalogous Ecologies

This chapter deals with Meteora as a world in comparison to the Cairngorms in Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* and other more fantastical ecologies. First, a craft-based, critical approach is taken, describing the progression of the world Meteora as it moved from its conception as a place-based, nonfiction, literary cartography narrative, to its break from nonfiction in the style of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972). This eventually led the text to become a character-driven piece focused on chronicling the relationship between the two sisters—Adeline and Jane. There are co-creative dreamscape and world-building game elements to Meteora, much like the fictional world of 'Gondal' written by the Brontë sisters, or the landscape for queer belonging and desire of 'Borovnia' in the New Zealander film *Heavenly Creatures* (1994). Meteora also exhibits an almost agential sense of will at times, more in line with 'The House' from the genre fantastical novel *Piranesi* (2020), by Susanna Clarke. Furthermore, the distinct central focus around Jane and Adeline—the only humans in Meteora—tells a different tale of their interrelationship with the landscape than Shepherd's nonhierarchic decentering of humans from the ecology of the Cairngorms.

Only through a deeper examination of Meteora as a world, can the manuscript be wholly understood as to where it falls within the realm of feminist new materialisms and transcorporeality. The key to this is Alaimo's attention in her discussion of transcorporeality on the importance of unravelling old ways and models of thinking that keep the natural world separate from the cultural. The novel follows this very ideological dispute between the sisters. It's resolution hinges not on Jane's transformation through osmosis in the landscape but through the direct challenge of her essentialist views by her sister. It is through Jane's time with Adeline in Meteora, rather than her time there alone, that she begins her awareness of the transcorporeal connection between humanity and the natural world.

Literary Cartography and Meteoric Origins

In *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd writes: “their (the Cairngorms) physiognomy is in the geography books—so many square miles of area, so many lochs, so many summits of over 4000 feet—but this is a pallid simulacrum of their reality, which, like every reality that matters ultimately to human beings, is a reality of the mind” (TLM 1). Meteora too, is more than the sum of its geological parts, a vastness that pales in relation to the simple view that Adeline and Jane had of it from peaks as children (Meteora 94). The transcorporeal roots of that space are grounded in Adeline and her journal entries, but there is also the Meteora that exists on the page—that which feeds Jane and through which the sisters move. To understand the traffic between these two elements of Meteora, it is important to look at how that world began—a literary cartographic series of mountain vignettes (almost unchanged from Adeline’s entries) alongside a creative nonfiction essay that appeared in the online literary magazine *Territory* in 2020, titled ‘On Alaskan Literary Cartography: A Topographical Map of the Cartographer.’

Literary cartography refers to the mapping of literary landscapes, real and unreal, by interpreting the shapes they form through the construct of narrative within the text (Piatti and Lorenz 212-223). For example, a literary cartographical perspective was applied to Nan Shepherd’s Cairngorms in *The Living Mountain*, the map would not be the geographical one provided at the beginning of the text. A literary cartography would instead seek to deal with more of the Cairngorms in that “reality of the mind,” that literal spatial representation of the point at which “place and a mind may interpenetrate until the nature of both is altered” (TLM 8). Such a cartography itself might be another text of descriptions, or an elongated, virtually

interactive map created through GIS. Such a cartography would deal with ontology, and work to find creative ways of representing Shepherd's own oneness with the mountain.

In their article 'Cartographies of Fictional Worlds,' (2011) cartographic researchers Barbara Piatti and Lorenz Hurni explore the cartographic exchange between texts and readers. To do this, they first split the field of literary cartography from literary geography. Both are fields meant to validate "a humanistic approach that regards literature as a source of environmental knowledge... to understand landscape not only in terms of artifacts or physical features but also 'in terms of behaviour, sensations, ideas, feelings, hopes, and faith'" (Hones 1305). Both fields look at the qualitative measurements of landscape as well as human connections to environment. The main difference is literary geography's spatial focus on the emerging event between reader and text whereas literary cartography is, in and of itself, a creation—be it visual or textual. The lineage of this is traced by Piatti and Hurni back to Virginia Woolf in her own 1905 essay on literary geography (as it is the field from which literary cartography evolved.) Woolf writes "A writer's country is a territory within his own brain; and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible brick and mortar" (Piatti and Hurni, 218; Woolf 35). James Joyce has a differing opinion, brought into the conversation through his proclamation to Frank Budgen: "I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book" (Piatti and Hurni 219; Budgen, 1934, pp. 67–68). These two perspectives represent the two sides of the coin in literary cartography, in that neither supposes the writing of place to be the same as a literal map—but the cartographic importance of a literary representation remains.

My own creative nonfiction piece dealing with Alaskan literary cartography contains a reflective essay titled 'The Inefficacy of Maps.' In this portion, I describe my struggles with the ontological literary landscape of Alaska. I write: "At its worst, the mythos of Alaska is a

racist, frontier, white male wet dream and/or ecofascist fantasy. At its best, it's a sentimental attempt to describe the indescribable" (Glasson-Darling 2020). I follow this by discussing how I wanted to show Alaska as more than its mythos, more than a map, more than even my own representation of it, but still a part of what these places meant to me. In Shepherd's forward to *The Living Mountain*, in 1977, she writes of a similar desire, "All of these matters involve man. But behind them is the mountain itself, its substance, its strength, its structure, its weathers. It is fundamental to all that man does to it or on it" (TLM xxxvii). In this passage, Shepherd decenters both herself and humans from the ecological world by placing the mountain in the forefront of the text, but she does not erase them. In this original essay that grew into *Meteora*, I also try to decenter myself from the narrative. "You can't actually hurt anyone by incorrectly describing an orange" I write. "but do that to a place, a community, and it becomes a part of a larger narrative about that place... Do that to a community with marginalized voices like indigenous Alaska... and that can be dangerous" (Glasson-Darling 2020). This sentiment stayed with the novel as I sought to expand it into a longer work and influenced its construction. As the vignettes already were closer to fiction than nonfiction, I feared risking misrepresentation of Alaska if I expanded them. Therefore, I decided to split the vignettes from Alaska and *Meteora* and *Meteora* as a separate world was born. This is clearly reflected in Adeline's own acknowledgement of the split in *Meteora*. On the page, she also knows her vignettes are not the whole of *Meteora*. Entering *Meteora* as an adult, Adeline thinks upon rereading her own vignette: "Strange, how she remembered the Sister Peaks as if they were a real place. When in reality, Adeline knew the description was based on a couple interwoven summits that she and Jane had seen once from the top of a hill. They both were and weren't real" (*Meteora* 91).

A more analogous work for the role these mountain vignettes play in *Meteora*, might be Italo Calvino's 1972 novel *Invisible Cities*. Calvino's descriptions of his fictitious cities

are all about a paragraph long, like the *Meteora* vignettes, and function as a kind of literary cartography. Most of the descriptions have surreal or interactive elements—from the city of Octavia held up in the sky by a spider web of wires (Calvino 67) to the city of Agria where, “The streets are completely filled with dirt, clay packs the rooms to ceiling...putting your ear to the ground, you can sometimes hear a door slam” (Calvino 114). These cities are understood to be being described by a fictionalized Marco Polo to the fictionalized Kublai Khan. In brief interludes, the two talk about the impossibility of possessing place and dream up other cities together. At one point Marco Polo proclaims the vignettes are all versions of his home, “Every time I describe a city, I am saying something about Venice... perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it,” (Calvino 78). In this way the vignettes also become infused with elements of both belonging and loss. In ‘Cities & Desire 3,’ the city of Despina is described: “when a camel driver sees, at the horizon of the tableland, the pinnacles of the skyscrapers come into view... he thinks of a ship; he knows it is a city, but he thinks of it as a vessel that will take him away from the desert” (14). The city here for Marco Polo is shown through the ship analogy as both means and a reality of returning to Venice, a place where Marco Polo is no longer a foreigner, isolated from his own culture—and yet the reader knows it is only a fantasy. Even the ship as an image is not real but a dreamscape, another place on the horizon that both is and cannot be home.

As I began to envision *Meteora* as a longer work, Calvino’s device of two characters for developing a world appealed to me. However, I was very aware that in Calvino’s work the direct discussions between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo often involve conquest and possession, as the unreal cities are all supposedly in Kublai Khan’s empire (Calvino 65-66). I was concerned about the colonial narrative in Alaska, down to the state’s motto as ‘The Last Frontier’ which I saw as a clear reference back to the problematic “narrative roots of the Wild

West” (Glasson-Darling 2020). Therefore, rather than having my characters speak about mountain vignettes from a comfortable distance like Calvino—I determined their relationship to the two worlds must be more complicated. They must also be inhabitants.

Meteora and Shared Oneiric World-Building

From the moment Jane and Adeline entered the draft *Meteora*, their relationship became the heart of the story. The sense of *Meteora*’s co-creation by the sisters, in some sense, gives it more in common with fictional worlds than nonfictional ecologies like the Cairngorms. Two similar models are ‘Gondal,’ as created by the Brontë sisters, and ‘Borovnia’ as in the 1994 New Zealander film *Heavenly Creatures*.

Gondal, written about jointly by Emily and Anne Brontë, exists not in not one text, but several poems, drawings, and ‘diary papers’ compiled first in a tin kept in their childhood kitchen (Chitham 284). Literary researcher Edward Chitham outlines the Brontës’ ‘Gondal’ period from 1834 to 1845 in his 2018 article ‘The Several Stages of Gondal.’ For Chitham, the Gondal documents evolve from a period in which the sisters are ‘playing’ imaginary characters, becoming those people while acting, then finally they morph to fit the sisters’ more individual writing needs. This is particularly the case for Emily, for whom the childhood game develops in parallel with her drive to ‘become a poet’ (Chitham 297). The characters of Gondal, particularly its queen A.G.A—Emily’s creation—have their epics told in poetry as Anne and Emily develop their talents or have need of a mouthpiece. In this way, the world is created together by the sisters and inhabited by them, but ultimately used for their own personal development and fostering intimacy in their sibling relationship. This

resembles Adeline and Jane's early relationship to *Meteora*, at least through Jane's eyes, as she claims at a later date that *Meteora* has always been just a 'game' (*Meteora* 10).

Other researchers' opinions differ from Chitham, but their conclusions on the purpose of the Gondal documents remain in the same vein. Brontë scholar and researcher L.P. Hartley in his 1965 article 'Emily Brontë in Gondal and Gaaldine' focuses on Gondal not simply as a device for Emily's poetry, but as an outlet 'to satisfy a private need' (3). Here, Hartley argues while the Gondal works were a saga of the imaginary, rather than Emily's own private life, Gondal remained an important emotional outlet for her. Hartley points to text Emily wrote on her eighteenth birthday that she was as 'friendless' as the day she was born (Hartley 3). He also examines her sister Charlotte Brontë's writings about Emily as means to show her need for belonging. This provides an interesting possibility for the connection between the construction of Gondal and *Meteora*.

In Adeline's own vignettes of *Meteora*, there are similar elements that indicate Adeline also writes from a private need. Adeline is described from the first page of *Meteora* as someone who lives surrounded by world-building. We know that "If asked, Adeline could talk about any one of the worlds for hours. No one ever asked. No one ever visited but Jane" (*Meteora* 9). Her world-building manifests more openly in her drawings, but Adeline's journal entries about *Meteora* also share the search for creative development that Chitham claims drove the Brontë sisters with Gondal. *Meteora* functions as a conduit for intimacy between Adeline and Jane, linked to the original experience in which they entered *Meteora*. It is not even their only cocreated world. 'Queen's House' is a fictitious world they made up as children before they found *Meteora* though the rules of 'Queens House' are less developed: "In Queen's House, cats walked backwards, but only on Tuesdays... people blessed each other by licking table salt out of each other's hands" (110). Like Hartly's claim Gondal is an emotional outlet for Emily Brontës, Adeline and Jane are both lonely, looking to different

worlds, and ultimately Meteora becomes a place of belonging and an outlet through which to express themselves.

In the film *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) two young women (Kate Winslet as Juliet Hulme and Melanie Lynskey as Pauline Parker) also construct a fictional world for themselves in which to belong and connect to each other. The teenage girls each play out both male and female romantic roles for each other in 'Borovnia' and even eventually engage in a sexual relationship. The film is fictionalized, though heavily inspired by a notorious murder case in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1954 (Ribeiro 33). Gender studies researcher Andrew Scahill discusses the progression of the girl's fantasy world as a queer space for belonging in his 2012 article in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 'Wonderful, Heavenly, Beautiful, and Ours.' For Scahill, the fantasies serve a dual function "as a space to enunciate desire and as a coping mechanism to escape from trauma and to re-signify reality into a manageable form" (Scahill 370). This is expressed in everything from the way Borovnia is shown, cutting between Claymation, real-life, and technicolor, to the points at which either character is shown engaging in sexual intimacy with the other in the body of one of their fantastical characters, or as herself. Particularly, the moment at which Pauline seeks out Deborah/Juliet as another female character, Gina, rather than her male alter-ego, Charles, is significant to Borovnia as a landscape for queer belonging. For Scahill, this scene shows that "the fantasy has progressed to a level of articulation where Pauline no longer 'needs' to assume a cross-gendered identification in order to express her desire for Juliet; for a moment, she conceptualizes the possibility of loving a woman as a woman" (371).

The main difference between Borovnia and Meteora is the nature of Jane and Adeline's relationship, but the analogy of how the place came to represent a space in which they can truly be themselves as they are, holds firm. Scahill points to Borovnia as a place where Juliet and Pauline can escape class, trauma and heteronormativity, and there are

elements of this same sense of escape for Jane and Adeline as well, though the specific implications are more subtle. The sisters feel at odds with the regular world; from Jane's inner dialogue about being left in charge of Adeline as a child, the reader knows that their parents had a failed farm that resulted in both of them working night shifts as nurses at a hospital far from home. Due to necessity and the culture of the community where the sisters grew up in "no one thought twice about" Jane being left to take care of her sister at eleven years old (Meteora 139). The unintentional consequence of this responsibility on young Jane's psyche, can, however, be seen clearly in her confrontation with Adeline in the snow as depicted in the chapter 'Beyond.' Jane describes the 'real world' to young Adeline as a place where she has to take care of her "dumb ass" and follows the remark shortly with, "You think if we lived there (Meteora) things would be any better?" (Meteora 93) In Jane's mind, the escape and belonging that Meteora offered cannot last, so she rejects its existence. Meteora is a place beyond the world's pressures of heteronormativity for Adeline, which we see reflected in her relationship to Kate. Adeline has romantic feelings for Kate, we know this from the very beginning when they hold hands, and from Adeline's fearful declaration that it isn't that she doesn't want things to "happen between them" so much as she needs them to "stay the same" (Meteora 61). When Kate asks Adeline over for dinner, all Adeline can think of is her childhood friend, Drew. When Adeline touched Drew's hair she was held in from recess and interrogated by her teacher, an event after which Drew "never sat next to her again" (Meteora 61). This shows how in the real world, Adeline is too afraid to accept Kate's offer, but later, when Adeline is in Meteora, she allows herself to consider bringing Kate there and them living together. This shows that she views Meteora as a safer space for her to express her full identity.

Meteora's Fantasy World Ecology vs. Nan Shepherd's Cairngorms

There are two different worlds of Meteora in the text—the Meteora of Adeline's vignettes, and the literal ecology she encounters in it. To compare Meteora with Shepherd's Cairngorms, the second ecology is best examined, as the vignettes are constructed by Adeline and limited to her interpretations of it before she returns as an adult. The ecology of Shepherd's Cairngorms is very clear: animals and plants explored each in their own chapters on 'Life.' They are not listed by scientific names though Shepherd gives acknowledgement to the fact that they can be chronicled. Many species exist, even on the seemingly bare Cairngorm Plateau: "The botanist with whom I sometimes walk tells me that well over twenty species of plant grow there" (TLM 49). Shepherd writes of eagles, deer, snipes, lichen, heather, and true to her ontology of an interconnected natural world, these animals and plants are not limited to the discussion of their own chapters but also appear in others. Some of these instances include the snipes in 'Sleep' (TLM 95), St. John's Wort in 'Air and Light' (TLM 45) and the "white winged ptarmigan" in 'Being' (TLM 106). For Shepherd, human beings are also a part of the ecological mountainscape—we see this as she gives them their own chapter. All elements of the mountain are explored through Shepherd's own experiences rather than as a means of catalogue, yet, for Shepherd, she is merely the lens through which the mountain is seen. Neither humans, nor Shepherd, are the center of the ecological story. As Shepherd points out: "you wait, and soon the bird forgets you" (TLM 65). Her mountain ecology is one that human beings are a part of, but in the eyes of the natural world, they are no more important than anything else—a bird can notice them just as easily as forgotten. There is nothing transactional about Shepherd's mountain or the ecology on it—humans and mountain exist, interacting, both themselves and a part of each other. *The*

Living Mountain is so full of these encounters with animals and plants, by comparison, Meteora might feel empty.

To examine the ecology of Meteora beyond Adeline's vignettes, it is important to make yet another distinction—that between the ecology of Jane's ridge and the greater world of Meteora. Adeline's first vignette says there are sometimes no animals in Meteora (Meteora 9) yet we know from how the ecology in the Entryway is written, Meteora is far from empty. Though not as much time is spent on the ecology of Meteora as Shepherd spends on the Cairngorms, animals are everywhere—both on Jane's ridge and in the Entryway. When remembering their time at the Entryway as children, Adeline herself says, “Jane jotted down discoveries from the surrounding area—a frog she saw, birds with elegant little necks flying south” and she herself drew pictures (Meteora 86). Jane's ridge is different, there are no frogs but ptarmigan, blue carp, berry bushes, grass, insects and algae. Most of these are encountered through Jane's lens of survival and this might be construed as transactional, however, the ridge has a relatively realistic Alaskan alpine ecology. On a ridge over 3000ft high in Alaska, there will be no frogs or waterfowl—it is too high up and cold. Even the physiology of the fish in the crater lake, while they are a blue “not colors that occurred in nature” is relatively realistic to an alpine landscape—carp can survive at elevations up to 3200 meters (Tian et. al. 2019). Furthermore, Jane's survival on the ridge as an experienced fisherman and outdoors is not unique—the carp she catches did not contain outdoor gear for the year before we encounter her. It is only once Sean's body is found and the Perseid meteor shower returns that the phenomenon begins. The gear found in the fish all appears to be related to Sean—in particular, his compass and the inflatable raft that Sean “kicked off” the ledge during his and Jane's “last night in the Arrigetch” (Meteora 158). The only discrepancies to this are the climbing carbineers and webbing, but these might be interpreted as gear left on the mountainside during Sean's descent with Jane into Meteora. This suggests

that Meteora is not so much providing Jane with what she needs to survive, as it is spitting back up foreign elements left behind by Sean. This would make sense, given that the carp reside in the crater lake which is connected to the gate between worlds at its bottom—the gate which Sean’s body fell through.

There is an interactive, even agential, element to Meteora that is best seen in Adeline’s time in the ‘Entryway’ in which she encounters a plane. TV screens depict a memory of Adeline’s from the time she and Jane decided not to return to Meteora. Then, the plane miraculously takes off, and Adeline is brought to a place of fog where she climbs a knotted rope to find Jane and the knots disappear (Meteora 92-97). This is all indicative it is aware of her. It is also clear that Adeline believes the place to have agential will, even before these indications of agential awareness. She often thinks of Meteora as having ‘always taken care’ of her (Meteora 13) and interprets items found in the fish as a way in which Meteora is speaking to them. She tells Jane that Meteora is “trying to save” them when she finds an inflatable raft in one of the carp (Meteora 158). Whether that is actually the case is unclear, given the connection of the items back to Sean, but other elements like the rope and plane suggest that Meteora does at least have an agential awareness of the sisters.

In this way, Meteora has a more fantasy-based world than Shepherd’s nonfictional Cairngorms, though the two have much in common. A more analogous world might be ‘The House’ Suzanna Clarke’s 2020 fantasy novel *Piranesi*. The House also has a seemingly agential awareness and realistic ecology consisting of birds, mussels, and seaweed, sculpted by the tides of an unknown sea that often sweep through its halls full of statues. The narrator, Piranesi, can survive because of this ecology, but only because he has the survival skills to do so. This is pointed out through Piranesi’s conversation late in the novel with another character who has been to The House, James Ritter. “You would die here unless I fed you,” Piranesi says, and Ritter agrees (Clarke 239). While it is never pointed out directly that

Adeline would die in Meteora without Jane, Adeline issues with blisters and No Man's Land are indications that Meteora itself will not take care of her survival. Adeline must be taught by Jane both how to fish and hunt ptarmigan. Meteora's meteors, which threaten the sister's lives, also present them with a genuine, uncontrollable danger in the world, much like The Houses' tides.

The House also seems to exhibit agential will. When Piranesi journeys to the furthest room he has been, he falls through an edge into darkness and finds himself caught by the statues—"almost dead from the cold but deeply thankful to the Trampled Man (statue) for saving me" (Clarke 38). Were this the one instance in which it seems The House has interfered to save him; it might be insignificant but there are two other instances. When the tides first sweep through the halls Piranesi is saved by another suddenly appearing statue (Clarke 4) and yet another statue saves Piranesi at the end of the novel when the tides return (Clarke 206-207). It is also worth noting, that in Piranesi's mind, much like Shepherd's, The House as not an androcentric environment for him to inhabit. In his world, the natural elements of The House are interconnected with himself and the ecology. "What is a few days of feeling colder compared to a new albatross in the world?" Piranesi thinks, though he knows he will suffer for the lack of fuel for warmth when he gives up his fuel (dried seaweed) to help the nesting albatrosses and their chick (Clarke 32).

Where the comparison between The House and Meteora ends is that, like Shepherd, the natural world of The House is a transformational space for Piranesi. By the end of the book we learn that Piranesi was originally trapped in The House by an academic who sought to use him to harness its magic and use it for himself. Piranesi states that "the House in its Mercy had caused him (Matthew, his old identity) to fall asleep—which was the best thing for him—and it had placed him inside of me" (Clarke 191). Jane, like Piranesi, has experienced trauma and ended up in a fantastical world with an agential awareness of her, yet

her time alone in Meteora does not transform her. This brings the discussion to *Meteora* as a conversational text around transcorporeality, rather than as a direct example of transcorporeal space through analogy.

Meteora and New Materialist Feminisms/Transcorporeality

In Alaimo's 2008 article 'Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,' she writes: "How to conceive of nature's agency has been a central problem for the dismantling of discourses that define nature as empty ground... It is difficult, however, to imagine what agency would look like in an other-than-human sense" (Alaimo 2008a: 245). As a natural world with agential will, Meteora is hardly a passive substance. However, in trying to conceive of it beyond human terms—as Alaimo suggests—even Adeline struggles to describe the world outside of the same essentialist binaries that she herself resists. In Adeline's first vignette describing Meteora's 'origin' she gives a description of the place without humans and gives "raw rocks dominion over the sun-bellied lizards" and "trees dominion over birds" (Meteora 15). This is an almost ecofascist depiction, in contrast to Adeline's later vignettes with all their transcorporeal imagery. There is a noticeable reversal of the traditional, Darwinian hierarchal sense of life in this first vignette, as if Adeline is trying to undo the essentialist 'order' of the natural world that she has been taught. That said, her description still ends up entangled back in old hierarchies by her use of the word 'dominion.' She spends the rest of the novel redefining the ways she thinks about Meteora—from her and Jane's childhood world for only them that would never hurt her, to a world of unknown interconnections and inundated with life-threatening meteors. Jane's progression of ideological development is different. At the end of the novel, despite having spent more time

in Meteora than Adeline, Jane appears mostly unchanged. Is Jane's transformation necessary for the narrative to have a place within feminist new materialisms and transcorporeality?

Alaimo states that transcorporeality is founded in reimagining the world as a place in which humans and the natural world are inseparable. In order to do this, it is important to unravel the old essentialisms and binaries separating the two, and that is not a passive process (Alaimo 2008a: 239). It is Shepherd's openness towards the mountain that leads her to an active oneness with the space, but Jane is not open to such a fluid definition of self. She desperately clings to older, more traditional ontologies of a static self, of human beings as separate from the natural world. It is not until a part of Jane literally breaks (her ankle) that she becomes open to other understandings of humans, culture and the natural world as inseparable, meaning she herself is also changeable. Given that Jane has had more time in Meteora and leads a more outdoorsy lifestyle, it might be tempting to suppose that she should be the sister more in line with Shepherd and Alaimo's transcorporeal way of thinking. Yet (as discussed in Chapter Two) Muir, Thoreau, Emerson, William Wordsworth and the whole cannon of nature writers that Jane reads all spent a lot of time in the natural world and maintained their essentialist views. In modern scholarship, a wealth of research explores the Anthropocene, environmentalism and ecology with little to no regard for the contributions of new material feminisms or the deconstruction of the nature/human, masculine/feminine dyad (Gaard 2011). Alaimo addresses this in her chapter on 'Ecology' in the 2016 textbook *Gender: Sources, Perspectives and Ecologies*. "Why even bother to bring up gender in the face of climate change?" Alaimo asks (2016a: 41). For her, the answer is that the thinking behind these false binaries around gender/nature/culture are what led the world—of which humans are intrinsically a part of—to crisis. She writes:

It may also be useful to consider how ecology, which focuses on the natural world, requires that gender studies be interdisciplinary, in that it must cross over from the social and cultural realm to grapple with data...scholarship in gender studies, feminist science studies, material feminism, and feminist posthumanism is well suited for

thinking about contemporary ecological conditions and crises, because it no longer makes sense to imagine nature and culture as separate realms. (2016a: 41)

To suppose that Jane's gender alone would be an antidote to the ontologies of the reading material she has immersed herself in—defining nature and culture as separate—would be very optimistic. These narratives in nature writing are powerful, they have dominated the philosophical narrative around the natural world for hundreds of years (Alaimo 1996: 48-51). Shepherd's openness to the mountain, her "traffic of love," which then when "pursued with fervor is one of the roads to knowledge" (TLM xxxvii) is what facilitates her own transformation. Her oneness with the mountain shows an understanding of a human self that can be simultaneously a part of the proverbial other (the mountain) and does not inherently separate nature and culture/humanity. Jane, conversely, does not want to think of her 'self' as changeable or fluid. This can be seen in the penultimate pivotal scene with Adeline at the crater lake and Jane asks "Do you think... Once something unforgiveable happens, it changes who you are, fundamentally?" (Meteora 161). Jane claims as long as a woman who has gone through serious trauma were to stay in the woods "she can keep who she is safe" and says, "once you accept something has happened...It can change you. I don't want to give these things the power" (Meteora 161). The reader knows that from the moment Jane switches from 'you' to 'I' in this scene, she is talking about herself. Jane also tells Adeline that in Meteora she can keep who she is "safe" (Meteora 164). For Jane, this protection is dependent on her being away from other humans and cultural aspects of humanity, so she does not have to construct a narrative around the trauma she has experienced. For Meteora to transform Jane and for her to experience oneness and belonging with the natural world like Shepherd, Jane has to first unravel her belief of humans/culture as separate from the natural world. What leads her to do this at the end of the novel is a direct challenge of her ideologies from Adeline, coupled with the realization that in spite of herself, she has already changed. Adeline brings this to Jane's attention when she points out to Jane

that she has been living in Meteora for a year and refusing to return to the regular world (Meteora 164). We see Jane's final acceptance of this when she agrees to return to the regular world with Adeline. This leaves Jane only on the first step in a long journey towards transforming the way she thinks about herself as a human connected to the greater world. There is evidence of how this transformation will progress in the novel's final scene in which Jane throws Sean's compass into the river. As this is Jane's "last bit of him" it might be understood as Jane letting go of the trauma that keeps her clinging to the idea of a static self (Meteora 190). Jane also keeps her old compass that points back towards Meteora in case she decides to "try again" (Meteora 190). What this idea of 'trying again' might look like to Jane remains uncertain. She is hiding that she kept the other compass from Adeline for the meantime "out of pride" but also thinks "in the end, her sister was right" (Meteora 190). This refers back to her conversation with Adeline a moment before, about acknowledging that the pain of Jane's experience has changed her and that is okay. There is some intentionality here, showing that Jane is beginning to reevaluate the way she thinks, though it is likely she has a long way to go.

Meteora and *The Living Mountain* are both texts that deal with human beings and belonging in the natural world as the deconstruction of that world as a binary/gendered space. It is true that the ways the world is viewed by Jane and Shepherd, as well as its relation to belonging are different, but this does not take the text out of the realm of feminist new materialisms or transcorporeality. Conversely, *Meteora* is concerned with a direct discussion on how old essentialisms effect ontological belonging in the tradition of Alaimo and what it looks like to try and imagine the transcorporeal connections in our world. Shepherd's work is concerned with the expression of the nonfictional transcorporeal world simply as it is and holding that up to see. *Meteora*, on the other hand, seeks to add to the conversation rather than show it through fictive analogy (as Jane being transformed by it would be) and throws

readers into an active space with Jane for ontological questioning. Pitted against the false binary of nature/gender/self and challenging preconceived Jane's categories of 'being,' readers are then forced to reconsider the ways they, Jane, and Adeline think about the living world—to reimagine it and themselves as a part of an interconnected, inseparable space.

Chapter Four: Nan Shepherd & Me

Spray blown like smoke from a mountain loch in a gale; a green gleam on the snow where I know a loch lies, caught before I can see the water itself; Loch Avon, glimpsed on a rainy day from the side of the rocky burn above it, as deep green as Loch an Uaine itself...How can I number the worlds to which the eye gives me entry? —the world of light, of colour, of shape... of rhythm in the fluid curve and plunging line of the mountain faces.

-Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* pp. 101

When I reread this passage from Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* in September of 2020, I found myself remembering an experience of my own just a couple of months before. It was July and a warm, windy day when I climbed a mountain called Observation near my home in Alaska—a 5000ft peak of bare rock, scoured by the winds that scrape across Lemon Glacier and the Juneau icefield. Observation is thousands of miles from Loch Avon, but on the ascent, I witnessed a similar phenomenon. I had just come over the lip of Backerby Ridge, where the ridge dips between Observation and a mountain called Cairn. Before this point, some part of Observation had always been in view, but it was the first time I could see the thin, rocky saddle connecting it to Cairn. There was a lip of white ice, pulled up like a sheet against the mountain's spine. Below, the midday light shone so harsh I saw a faint glimmer of the mountain's reflection on the ice in its own shadow. There was a cave-in along the ice shelf, a hole reaching through the veins of bright blue ice into navy, then fading black. It looked like a tunnel through both the shadow and reflection of Observation. A kind of inversion of Plato's cave, in which the cave becomes no longer a wall for shadows but a window into them. I stood, observing the layers of the natural world in this stark atmosphere of exposed rock and ice with no one else to confirm what I saw. Since there were no other witnesses, I almost questioned if the phenomena were real.

I was alone that day on the mountain and winds were high—Cairngorm plateau high—gusting somewhere between 40-50 mph. I had already run into two groups of hikers that intended to do the loop over Observation and go down by way of Salmon Creek Ridge, but quickly turned back. In the end, I reached the top, but only by flattening myself again and again against the rocks to keep from getting ripped from the slope as the wind whipped across the glacier. I was too afraid to descend the other, much steeper side of Observation, so I went back the long way I had come, for an exhausting day of eleven hours hard walking with no breaks and more than 8000ft elevation gain.

Why—asked my roommate when I was safe at home—in bad wind, would I go up such a remote mountain alone?

On that particular evening in Alaska, I don't think my roommate's concern had anything to do with me being a female-presenting walker (they would, after all, have been the one to have to call Juneau Mountain Rescue if I did not return), but the question still reminded me of others I have heard time and time again. In another situation, I might have bristled. Friends, family members, acquaintances, and even strangers often ask me why, as a woman, I prefer to hike and camp alone. Usually, it's tied to the question of safety. Part of that issue of safety, like my roommate's concern with high winds, is fair. Hiking alone is a risk for anyone—if you get blown off the ridge there is no one to see and get help—but so often when questioning my reasons, people specifically tie it to gender. In 2019 in Juneau Alaska, I once spoke enthusiastically to a female tourist my own age about upcoming camping trips and nearby hiking options in a bar. The longer she listened, the more she looked away, holding her arms closer and closer to her body. Finally, I asked if I said something to offend her. “No, she said. “It's just that I wouldn't be able to do any of that. What if something happened, and people thought because I went out that way, I deserved it?”

I asked if she meant bears and she shook her head. “No,” she said. “I mean danger from other people.”

I left the subject alone after that. I didn’t know what first-hand experiences she was coming from, and many women I know have expressed similar fears. The preoccupation with gendered violence often dominates my conversations about hiking and camping alone. My grandmother and both aunts on my father’s side have expressed concern on multiple occasions, as if serial killers are often traveling off-road and off-trail miles and miles away from the nearest road, in hopes a vulnerable woman will appear in the darkness. The unlikely scenario hangs like a constant cloud over my head. Yet, in the fourteen years I have spent as a part of outdoors communities and ten years as a part of outdoors internet forums, I have only once heard of a woman being attacked. It was in June of 2023, and she was in the Scottish Borders, camped within a mile of a town with her family. Someone from the nearby town, drunk and wandering in the area, jumped her while she went outside the tent to pee and ran off when he heard her son call for her. Frightening, to be sure, but given the years I have been hiking and following online camping groups—quite an anomaly.

The number of times I have been asked why I would risk going out alone by friends, family, and even strangers, is staggering. None of my answers seem to satisfy. If I can manage to steer the conversation away from safety, other aspects of confusion at my life choices comes into play. “Why would you want to spend that much time alone?” a co-worker once asked me in an Alaskan bar after work. “Human beings are social creatures, you know. That just can’t be very good for you.”

It was my frustration with all these conversations that began the seedling thought of *Meteora*, though since then, a lot about the book has changed. It is now a story of two sisters, both two very different kinds of female loners, and how they come together to support each other in who they are—each with very different reactions to that question of ‘why’ they

prefer to spend their time alone. The characterized manuscript began with Jane though, and at the heart of Jane, a bitterness built up defensively as she spent so much of her life feeling disapproved of.

I first encountered Nan Shepherd and *The Living Mountain* in 2019 along my own quest to find the right response. I was curious why it mattered so much to everyone around me to know why I wanted to be alone in the mountains. To me, it was a part of who I am, and none of their business. I didn't understand why I needed a reason for enjoying what I enjoyed. Being in Alaska, I had several male friends who hiked and went out alone, one a friend of more than fifteen years, and neither he nor anyone else seemed to have been asked why they preferred to hike and camp alone. "My family doesn't care," said my friend on the phone when I asked him in July of 2019. He is Ukrainian and first came to Alaska when he was eighteen. "Everyone I know is more concerned with when I will become a serious person. That is why I prefer it in Alaska. In Alaska, I am less strange."

I empathized with this sentiment, it was more or less the reason I myself moved to Alaska from rural Iowa, but I couldn't help but feel a tinge of jealousy. It felt like I was being asked why I hiked and camped alone almost constantly. From that summer of 2019, I decided to make it my mission to read anything I could find about female solo hikers that did not buy-in to the "you-go-girl" kind of narrative. By this, I mean that sort of commercialised narrative where a woman travels alone on a journey or into nature to make a point or get over a trauma. The way books like *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, or worse, *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert were advertised left a bad taste in my mouth. In 2018 my parents gave me a copy of the movie of *Wild* for my birthday and while I had no objection to Strayed's writing or Reese Witherspoon portraying Strayed's lived experience, it simply wasn't anything like my narrative at all. I wanted to find a story somewhere in which a woman or feminine-presenting

person didn't need a reason to enjoy being out alone. It could be normal to do that because they were a bit of an outdoorsy loner, like me.

That year, I had finished my MFA and moved back to Alaska. Just before I left Virginia, I was talking about how I was looking forward to spending more time hiking and camping alone again with another young woman from my program. She smiled when I was finished and said enthusiastically: "I love how you stick it to the patriarchy. You're such an independent woman." For all her good intentions, the comment left me feeling hollow. The phrase 'independent woman' has always read to me like a buzz phrase made up to explain what a 'good' single woman looks like, instead of resisting such problematic categories of 'good' and 'bad' women. It is language I know is meant to empower me, but it ignores my individual reasons and choices, which then feels disempowering. I don't want an integral part of who I am to be treated as another rung in the narrative ladder towards some kind of ambiguous feminist progress: I am a person.

When I heard about Shepherd later in the year, I had just started reading a book called *Idaho Loners* by Cort Conley, published in 2003. I had not yet finished the book. It is a book on hermits and solitary people in Idaho, and the majority of whom I had read about thus far were men, and all of the quotes in the book thus far were attributed to men. The book is researched, with direct interviews with some solitary people later—including women—but I had not yet gotten that far. In the chapter I had just read, Conley discussed a woman named Cleydus Dunbar from the 1930s who had been known as 'Wheelbarrow Annie.' He begins the chapter with a quote from Louise Edrich's character Mary Adare, "I did not choose solitude. Who would? It came on me like a vocation, demanding an effort that married men can't picture" (Conley 59). I read that quote and felt emotionally exhausted. There is, of course, a difference between walking alone in the mountains and being a hermit, but there seemed to me a connection in the choice of preferred solitude. The men in the book clearly

were allowed to make that choice, so why couldn't this woman? It was the author who had chosen to begin Dunbar's chapter with the quote, and there were no interviews or information to be gathered from Dunbar herself. I felt bad for these men out in the mountains just trying to exist, when the whole pretence of the book seemed intent on intruding on them, and I felt worse for Cleydus Dunbar who could not speak for herself about her preferences.

I was on the phone mid-rant to a friend about it when she interrupted, suggesting I read Nan Shepherd. "She hiked alone a lot, I think," my friend said. "Could be a good book for you. Someone mentioned it in my climbing group."

I bought the book online while we were on the phone and forgot about it until it came in the mail two weeks later. It took me another month to read it, but when I did, I read it in one sitting. For the first time since reading outdoor literature, I found a relatable point of view in Shepherd. In *The Living Mountain*, Shepherd is not concerned with justifying her desire as a woman to be in the hills, alone or otherwise, it is taken for granted by her narrative. The book begins quietly with Shepherd on the mountain, and it is through her eyes the narrative progresses through the Cairngorms. As a reader, I could decide whether to come along and accept her, or not. There was no self-defensive discussion of 'why' she belonged there, she just did. That approach was like a breath of fresh air to me—and all of it written in the 1930s!

In Charlotte Peacock's biography of Nan Shepherd, *Into the Mountain* (2016), she explores what records remain of who Nan Shepherd was outside of her work. She is far from Conley's hermits, but still described as a private, if eccentric woman, who taught as an English lecturer at the University of Aberdeen and spent much of her free time in the hills. "On the surface," Peacock writes. "Nan appeared to be content to live within the confines of community and to accept the domestic, female-centric environment of Dunvegan...But from 1928, while she was *in* that life, she was not *of* it... she was somewhere else—on a mountain" (205). Not a hermit, but Shepherd seemed to be a woman who unapologetically

and very much enjoyed her time alone in the mountains, like me. In the archival collections on Shepherd at Edinburgh, what remain of her are mostly letters to colleagues and friends, as Shepherd is known to have been very private. She did not journal much, and what remains of her personal correspondence in the archives, is often crossed out and redacted, “presumably by Shepherd herself” (Peacock 11). One of the standout features in Peacock’s biography about Shepherd is that she was known walk alone; her name appears on extensive lists of hillwalking groups in the 1930s which Peacock investigated for the biography. However, Shepherd herself does not seem to have written or spoken with friends much about it. The emphasis on this aspect of her in the biography is placed by there by Peacock. In her chapters about Shepherd’s life around the time she wrote *The Living Mountain*, she takes special time to note that contrary to popular belief, a woman out walking in 1930s Scotland was not as abnormal as one might think, however “what was more unusual, was Nan’s habit of walking alone” (209).

Peacock paints a vivid picture of Shepherd in the hills on her walks, and one of the main details of this is that she always wore a skirt when out in the mountains. This leapt out to me immediately, as when I hiked solo in the Appalachian mountains during graduate school, I also wore a skirt and had always wondered why. I was aware it was unusual choice, though some of it had to do with being in Virginia in the heat of summer. When I look back, I can’t remember why I did not want to wear shorts, but it seemed to have something to do with wanting to own the space. The hiking style in Shepherd’s time did not lean towards skirts any more than ours now. “A well-turned-out woman climber in the 1920s wore a tailored jacket with a belt and breeches to match,” Charlotte Peacock writes. “Breeches were not for Nan. In all the photographs taken of her out on the tramp, she is wearing a skirt” (208). Shepherd was, in general, known for wearing less traditional clothes, from her ‘hessian dress’ to one that “appeared to be made from sewing two patterns together” (117). At the

time when I wore skirts in the mountains, I also dressed less traditionally. Looking back at myself and trying to decipher my own reasons, since skirts are often seen as an outward expression of gender identity, I remember feeling aware that if I met someone else on the trail, I liked the idea of them seeing me in a skirt. I thought of it as a statement that the mountains were a place for feminine bodies too.

A close friend and neighbour of Shepherd's, Cameron Donaldson, once said of her, "Oh aye, she was a feminist. Not in a militant way. It was all to do with the worth of women... she did what she did, going on her own to the hills, for example, partly to prove what women could do. It was a statement" (Peacock 25). As much as this heartens me to read, I am grateful that there is no reflection from Nan herself on this in *The Living Mountain*. By showing her world how it is, her existence in it, and her right to be there as taken for granted, she chose her own footing rather than leaning on statement alone. Shepherd's former students and friends have shared anecdotes with Peacock and written some about her views on women and hillwalking, since there is very little left from Shepherd herself. In *Into the Mountain*, Grace Law—a former student who went on to start up her own hill-walking club says, "She (Nan) encouraged women to just do things—hillwalking for example. She said women had a place in doing that too, not just sitting by the fire knitting" (Peacock 119).

That seems significant, though thinking about skirts and hiking also reminds me of an uncomfortable event a friend had once when she was glacier guiding back in Juneau. She happened to be wearing a hiking skirt once while out guiding, a simple, grey skirt that she had found in a thrift store, when of the clients of the other hiking groups saw her and yelled "you go girl!" When she told me about the encounter, her face twisted in a grimace. We were sitting in her house—a two story rental with shiny metal siding at the top of a hill not fifteen minutes from the trails we both frequented. The ceiling of her living room was covered in

living vines tacked up amongst the white Christmas lights. As we sat beneath them, she wore a faded blue, dirty pair of jeans that she had trail-guided in earlier in the day. It would not be like her to change out of them before we headed downhill to the bars. “You didn’t like that?” I asked when she didn’t expand the story.

“You know how trail boys are,” she said (meaning the other hiking guides.) “One of them hears about it and they’ll be yelling it in front of clients. It’s bad enough that some of them already try and change guides once they get an email with my name in it—you know, because it’s a girl’s name.”

I saw the hiking skirt hanging in a second-hand shop about a week later.

Since Shepherd was so private, it might be no surprise to readers that she puts so very little of her personal life in *The Living Mountain*. It means that whatever gendered experiences she might have had, like mine or my friend who was a hiking guide, are excluded, but adds an unmistakable sense of confidence to her narratives. Shepherd belongs in the hills and does not justify that. To read the book, you might think her an elemental, our nearly genderless narrator journeying both outward into the hills and inward. She maps her surroundings, yet in *The Living Mountain* we are told no family details, no close friends, no romances, nothing. Despite this, it is still not an impersonal narrative. *The Living Mountain* is filled with Shepherd’s memories of people she has known, even if she does not choose to delve too deep. In her concluding chapter ‘Being’ she shares a childhood story in which she first climbed alone up to Loch Einich. “I climbed like a child stealing apples,” she writes, “with a fearful look behind” (TLM 107). The vulnerability of Shepherd’s fear here and the hint of the simile gives this sentence a more personal touch than much of the metaphysical preponderance she often lingers in. Shepherd mourns the loss of her student who perished in the hills, the girl who “should have lived to be old.” She talks of how two boys who perished in the chapter ‘Frost and Snow’ had spent their last night alive in the Mackenzie residence

where Shepherd had “spent some of the happiest nights” of her life (TLM 38). This is part of the magic of the book, intrinsic to how she recreates the space of the Cairngorms as inclusive for everyone—but still leaves a lot to wonder about Shepherd.

In 2021 I began research for my PhD and had about a third of a draft of *Meteora*. I returned to *The Living Mountain* again. For the same exact reasons that I felt elated by the book on the first read and by my own memories climbing Observation on the second read, I felt cheated on the third. Not by Shepherd’s representation of herself, but of the world beyond. I was knee-deep in writing Jane on her mountain ridge, resolved in her gripes against humanity for not allowing her to be as she was. Surely, Shepherd must have experienced some of the same judgement as me and my female hiking friends. It was hard for me to let go of that idea and enjoy how Shepherd (at least in the text) seems whole and comfortable in the Cairngorms, no matter what anyone outside of them had to say.

In *Meteora*, Jane was not only raging, but appeared to be turning into an outright isolationist. I didn’t want that for her. Adeline was coming to try and save Jane but given that, for most of Adeline’s life, she had chosen to be even more socially isolated than her sister, I didn’t know what chance she stood. How had Shepherd managed to write a book so at peace with herself? In *The Living Mountain* she seems so confident with who she is in the mountains. It was this attitude of Shepherd’s that led to my expansion of Adeline’s acceptance of herself in all her strangeness as a loner, which leads to her ability to reach Jane. I imagined Shepherd to be like Adeline, someone who has learned to accept that she is too strange for some and reached a point where she has stopped caring what people say. Like Shepherd in the Cairngorms, when Adeline is alone in her living room full of maps and pictures of *Meteora*, she is happy. The one confidant Adeline has—Kate—is chosen, and kept close, because she understands that essential, private part of her.

When I am alone in the mountains, to me they feel the same way as Shepherd's vast and inclusive space of the Cairngorms. Yet, like Jane, I struggle with the fact that I do not get to be alone and feel this way all the time. I am not really alone even in the mountains back home in Alaska, unless I go so far out it is truly dangerous. Anywhere, both in Alaska and in Scotland, I can run into other hikers, can worry about running into them (the social aspect more than safety) and inevitably encounter other people even who are not hikers, when I come out of the mountains. Shepherd makes acknowledgment of humanity's influence on the hills in her chapter 'Life: Man', but her discussion is tailored to the ways in which people influence the space and vice versa. Shepherd's chapter focuses on the 'gnarled personalities' of people who live with and near the hills, who "respect, whether they share it or not, your passion for the hill" (TLM 83). There are other elements of course, planes encroaching on the Cairngorms, paths made by humans, but her focus is on people like the second wife of the gamekeeper known as 'Big Mary,' who Shepherd describes as "too exquisite—a spectacle; but the earthy and tempestuous was her truer element. She belonged there and knew it" (TLM 86). For Shepherd, people are a part of this world, and do not exist in opposition to her sharing it.

There is, in fact, no examination in *The Living Mountain* of the disapproval I have encountered as a solo hiker or wild camper. No time is given to the fact that sometimes, the people you encounter in hill settings or in conversations around them, have strong opinions about you and what you are doing. From the very direct questions like the female tourist in the bar I have been asked countless times like 'are you sure it's safe for women?' to the over-explained, well-meant, advice of male walkers. Their enthusiasm has always left me unsure if they are simply excited to talk about what they love the way that I do, or if they presume—like my female friend who is a hiking guide dealing with sceptical clients—I do not know where I am or what I am doing as well as I should.

The ways that disapproval of my solo hiking show up have notably changed since I moved from Alaska to Scotland. While in America friends and acquaintances most often expressed disapproval under the guise of concern for my safety, now that I live in Scotland, the concern seems more to lean towards my happiness. I have often found this refreshing. Early on in my trips into the Highlands, I ran into an elderly woman by the shelter with public toilets off a brief intersection with a road on the Glen Affric trail while I had stopped to make coffee out of the rain. “Are you all on your own?” she asked. I answered ‘yes,’ preparing myself for the worst, but instead, she surprised me by smiling warmly. “My husband and I used to go out all the time when we were young,” she said. “They’re some of my fondest memories, but I can’t imagine being out without him. Don’t you get so lonely?”

I hadn’t thought of that, and it forced me to look inward in a new way. I’ve not heard of anyone asking a male walker that question, but there is something to be said for it because of course—I do get lonely. In summer of 2022, while in the Barrisdale bothy, I decided to ask a solo male hiker my age if anyone had ever expressed concern for him about him getting lonely. He looked surprised by the question, but took it seriously, and thought in silence for a moment before answering. “No one’s ever asked,” he finally said. “But I have talked about it in a roundabout way with other walkers. Afterall, isn’t that the point of bothies?” I hadn’t thought of that either, but of course, he was right. Bothies are a place for hikers to get in from the elements, but they are also a welcome place for conversation and comradery. It is natural to get lonely after a several days out in the hills alone.

I’ve heard through online communities about women out alone having issues with male hikers or the occasional condescending conversation in a bothy, but these comments usually seem to come from a different place than the questions posed by non-walkers. In a post from July 2023 in the “Scottish Hills” group on Facebook that I follow, a woman, having commented on a post about Ben Mhanach reminisced about when she first started walking

alone some forty years ago. She had run into a group of men in Drumochter who asked her if she knew how to use a compass, to which she replied “aye, I use it to eat ma yogurt.” The Facebook group rallied around her, with other women walkers sharing stories, and men commenting in support. One guy added “I bet they couldnae keep up with ya.”

On another group I follow called “Wild Camping” a younger woman had commented on the “Wild Camping” group not two days before that if people didn’t stop privately messaging her to ask her what underwear she was wearing when she posted, she was going to name names to the administrator. The comments were all supportive and said she should name names either way to keep it a safe community, but this was of course all on a public forum where everyone could see. Like with private messages, in private, some of those people might have behaved differently. I have never had these outright kinds of problems with the outdoors community, but then I do not often hike with anyone else or post about my trips in online groups. If anything, my experience with fellow male hikers has been pretty positive. There were even two romantic relationships I remember with solo male hikers where they seemed so proud of how I liked to hike alone and wild camp, and spoke so loudly of it, I sometimes wondered if there was anything else about me that they actually liked.

Most of my negative encounters, or those of overt disapproval, have been from people outside the walking community, with a few exceptions. One moment of disapproval from the outside world that has stuck with me in particular is with a woman on the Isle of Mull in the autumn of 2021. I was coming out from five days in the hills and hiking through remote coastline. During that time, I tried to stay as far away from people as one can on an island, but when it came time to go home, I really wanted to use a flush toilet. (I say ‘wanted’ only because one does not ‘need’ to use a flush toilet to survive, but anyone who has gone without one for an extended length of time will sing their praises. It is like the invention of the bridge: we have a deep, personal understanding and appreciation.) I was looking for a bus stop that

was not clearly marked, and nearby there was a hotel, so I walked to it in hopes I could ask for clarity, and more importantly, to use the toilet. The proprietor, a woman in her sixties with a very posh English accent, saw me coming.

She came out of a building behind the hotel walking quickly, red-faced and breathing heavily when she met me in the parking lot. She was moving with such urgency, at first, I thought something was wrong, and she needed my help with something. I stopped short of the flower beds at the entrance to give her time to catch up with me. She stopped so uncomfortably far off I worried if I spoke at normal volume, she wouldn't hear me. She had her hands on her hips and eyebrows furrowed, fixing me in a standoffish glare.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a tone so curt, even though we were in the middle of nowhere, I looked around to see if there were someone else, she was talking to. I'm about five foot four and was carrying a heavy pack at the time that made it hard to move fast. She was an inch and a half taller than me.

I explained the bus stop dilemma in as friendly a tone as I could.

She raised her chin slightly and looked down at me. "Well," she said. "It certainly doesn't stop here." The long vowel of her accent and stretched emphasis it put on of 'here' seemed to emphasize how she didn't feel she owed me an actual answer to my question.

She had placed herself firmly between myself and the door to the hotel, so I could not get any further into the parking lot without shoving past her. I was also in a position physically where I couldn't move backwards anywhere other than to the gate I had come through, because of the little white picket fence. My stomach plummeted and I felt keenly aware of how small I was, tired and dirty, and how humbling it was to need to use the restroom this badly. All I wanted more than anything was a little physical relief and dignity, but this woman seemed to be making it clear that wasn't available. I was too ashamed to

bother her further, I didn't even try. I thanked her for the information she had 'given me' and slunk off to wave down the bus by the locked community center in gastrointestinal agony.

Surely, disapproval for Shepherd's lifestyle still existed back in the 1930s. Peacock's biography offers some answers, but given Shepherd's private nature, she has to dig for them. After a couple of rejections from publishers *The Living Mountain* was left by Shepherd in a drawer until the 1970s, but she had published three literary novels before *The Living Mountain*. Shepherd's friends were open in letters that her novels were highly autobiographical, and though the novels were written after the right to vote, and women were "starting to be able to see themselves as more than just mothers and homemakers... it was a slow progress" (Peacock 23). According to Peacock, Shepherd's female protagonists are "educated young women living in the early decades of the 20th century, each whom, realizing there must be more for them in life than the roles allocated them by society, tries to find a space in it for the self" (23). I have read all of these novels— *Quarry Wood* (1928), *The Weatherhouse* (1930) and *Pass in the Grampians* (1933) and would agree with this characterization of them. Whatever inner turmoil Shepherd had about these expectations of herself came out only in her writing.

In her 2014 interview with Peacock, Shepherd's friend Jean Rodger was of the opinion that Shepherd was so private about her writing and did not talk about her novels because 'nobody approved of them.' "They were very prim and proper in Aberdeen in those days," Rodger said. "They thought 'that funny woman,' and 'those funny clothes,' writing these very off novels. And they didn't quite approve" (Peacock 184). Peacock attributes Shepherd's refusal to engage with that disapproval also in part to her privacy and modesty, which is described by her friends. *The Living Mountain* does not engage in discussions of defiance, which allows Shepherd to avoid wasting time on defence, and instead get to what she actually wants to say: here is the mountain. This is what it is to me.

In September 2020, four months before I moved from Alaska to Scotland, I hiked the Juneau Ridge, five miles from my home, alone in a particularly heavy rainstorm. The weather came on me suddenly, just after I had summited Tlaxsatanjín, a Tlingit-named 3600ft peak along the ridge. The wind seemed to come at me from all angles, including up from under the ground. For the first time in years, I had to put on every last bit of gear I had. Rain was heavy, and I could see snow falling sideways at about 4500ft on Observation where it sat along the ridge parallel to me.

As I pushed through the storm, I became keenly aware that my face was constantly twisted into the half-grimace I get when I am trying to muscle my way through something physical. The Juneau ridge is not complicated, with negligible scrambling and only one spot where navigation gets tricky. However, the kind of wind and weather I was in that day was not to be underestimated. I had no exit routes. The only way was back over Mount Juneau and down to Perseverance trail or forward on to the descent at Granite Creek. In all truth, it might have been wiser to go back, but I was more or less at a midway point. A friend of mine who is a more experienced mountaineer than I, knew I was on the ridge that day and later said she had been worried for me.

But I was dedicated to the route out past the waterfall on the other side of the ridge. A little more than a month before, a hiker had died descending that route down off Juneau Ridge to Granite Creek. I was the first would-be rescuer on scene.

There are two routes around that waterfall, but neither are official trails, so the safer route was not marked. This man's friend made it down, but he did not. His friend ran to get help and stopped me and my hiking companion on the trail below. My companion had an emergency locator button, but I was the stronger runner, so, having just come over the ridge myself, I ran two miles back uphill to reach the rocks where the man had fallen. I pushed the locator button to call a rescue helicopter and after about an hour and thirty minutes one

came. Other hikers and my companion also joined to try and help, but in the end, we were all too late.

The trip during that storm was the first time since that day I had hiked the Juneau Ridge. A bright pink highway construction marker—the kind you pound into the ground with a spike leaving brightly-coloured neon bristles exposed—was in my pack to mark the safer route.

I remember that towards the end as I was leaving the ridge, the wind got quite intense. At one point, I had a hard time keeping upright. Yet, when I finally dipped below the cloud line that filled the valleys and descended to a quiet shelf below: everything went silent. There was cloud both above me and in the next level of the valley below. The ceiling of cloud shone moon white, so bright it felt like sun, and all the world was no longer rock but green. It was dead silent. I could hear nothing but my own breath. As I walked along the green knolls I caught a trickle of sound from Granite Creek, then again on the descent down back into cloud again. Now I could see nothing but hear the creek rushing on my right. I knew this route very well—but picking my way down in thick cloud took focus, too much really for me to think about anything but the movement until I was on top of the waterfall.

I found the turn-off for the safer route and pounded the long spike of the trail marker into the ground with a rock. Conditions were much safer now than they had been when the hiker died—there was no snow. So, I went down the other way—by the scramble. When I reached the rocks where I had found the hiker dying, the fog had become so thick I couldn't even see the falls though I was directly below them. All I could hear was their roaring, so constant and loud it felt like static.

It had started raining again, hard, and I still had miles to go before I got back to the car.

In her ninth chapter 'Life: Man,' Shepherd writes:

Up here, no movement, no voice. Man might be a thousand miles away. Yet, as I look around me, I am touched at many points by his presence. His presence is in the cairns, marking the summits, marking the paths, marking the spot where man has died, or where a river is born. (TLM 76)

It has always been of some disappointment to me, that for all the effort Shepherd makes to minimize gender from her narrative in *The Living Mountain*, she still uses the gendered term of 'Man' for humanity. *The Living Mountain* is, however, still written in the 1930s. No matter how far ahead of its time, no matter how unique a narrative in nature writing, or what the text has done for me personally as I consider my own relation to the mountains and who I am in them—it was written fifty years before I was born. Throughout *The Living Mountain*, referring to humanity as 'man' is really the only point, where Shepherd's inclusive language defects back to stylistic 1930s default. That's incredible.

Where the man I found had died, I made a tiny cairn out of stones. I was careful to keep it small enough that it would not be visible from the route and not mistaken for directions.

We never spoke, this man and me. He was unconscious when I found him. We are connected only by the mountain. The spot where he died would not be a good spot to camp or swim, but it would be a good place to splash water on your face on a warm day midsummer, a good spot to rest on your way down after the scramble. I had done that before, on other, earlier, less perilous hikes. I did not think of Shepherd as I sat in the fog and rain next to the cairn I had built, alone on the mountain. Nor did I think of *Meteora*; the book was only a series of mountain silhouettes and character sketches at the time, though it was brewing. In that moment by the waterfall, I was too deeply inside myself, but if I had a thought from Shepherd to share in that moment, I might have thought of her concluding chapter in *The Living Mountain*: 'Being.'

So, I lie there on the plateau. Under me the central core of fire from which was thrust this grumbling grinding mass of plutonic rock, over me blue air, and between the fire of the rock and the fire of the sun, scree, soil and water, moss, grass, flower and tree, insect, bird and beast, wind, rain and snow—the total mountain. Slowly I have found my way in... the thing to be known grows with the knowing... I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am.

-Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, pp. 107-108.

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