

Abe Kalotay died in his front yard in late February, beneath a sky so pale it seemed infected. There was a wintery wet snowbite to the still air and the sprawled-open pages of the book at his side had grown slightly damp by the time his daughter Joanna came home and found his body lying in the grass by their long dirt driveway.

Abe was on his back, eyes half-opened to that gray sky, mouth slack and his tongue drying blue, one of his hands with its quick-bitten nails draped across his stomach. The other hand was resting on the book, forefinger still pressed to the page as if holding his place. A last smudge of vivid red was slowly fading into the paper and Abe himself was mushroom-white and oddly shriveled. It was an image Joanna already knew she'd have to fight against forever, to keep it from supplanting the twenty-four years' worth of living memories that had, in the space of seconds, become more precious to her than anything else in the world. She didn't make a sound when she saw him, only sank to her knees, and began to shake.

Later, she would think he'd probably come outside because he'd realized what the book was doing and had been struggling to reach the road before he bled out; either to flag down a passing driver to call an ambulance, or to spare Joanna from having to heave his body into the bed of her truck and take him up their driveway and past the boundaries of their wards. But at the time she didn't question why he was outside.

She only questioned why he'd brought a book along with him.

She had not yet understood that it was the book itself that had killed him; she only understood that its presence was a rupture in one of his cardinal rules, a rule Joanna herself had not yet dreamed of breaking—though she would, eventually. But even more inconceivable than her father

letting a book outside the safety of their home was the fact that it was a book Joanna did not recognize. She had spent her entire life caring for their collection and knew every book within it as intimately as one would know a family member, yet the one lying at her father's side was completely unfamiliar in both appearance and in sound. Their other books hummed like summer bees. This book throbbed like unspent thunder and when she opened the cover the handwritten words swam in front of her eyes, rearranging themselves every time a letter nearly became clear. In progress; unreadable.

The note Abe had tucked between the pages was perfectly legible, however, despite the shakiness of the hand. He'd used his left. His right had been fixed in place as the book drank.

*Joanna, he had written. I'm sorry. Don't let your mother in. Keep this book safe and away from your blood. I love you so much. Tell Esther*

It ended there, without punctuation. Joanna would never know if he'd meant to write more or if he only wanted her to pass on a final message of love to the daughter he hadn't seen in years. But kneeling there on the cold dirt, with the book in her hands, she didn't have the wherewithal to think about any of this yet.

She could only stare at Abe's lifeless body, try to breathe, and prepare herself for the next steps.