

The
A NOVEL
MUSEUM
of
Human
History

REBEKAH BERGMAN



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
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For Penina

The horses fell asleep in their stalls, the dogs in the courtyard, the pigeons on the roof, the flies on the walls, and even the fire on the hearth flickered, stopped moving, and fell asleep. The roast stopped sizzling. The cook, who was about to pull the kitchen boy's hair for having done something wrong, let him loose and fell asleep. The wind stopped blowing, and outside the castle not a leaf was stirring in the trees.

“LITTLE BRIER-ROSE”

THE BROTHERS GRIMM



PART
ONE



A QUARTER CENTURY OF SLEEP

THE GROUND IS NOT YET SHAKING, AND THE CAVES ARE solid and unmoving as the doors of the Marks Museum of Human History open and the audience files in.

Seats are found in the central hall. Coats are placed on chair-backs. Programs are picked up and paged through. Throats are cleared.

The air is damp and musty and holds the scent of sweat and impending rain. Old neighbors from Jacob's Circle gesture with chins to avoid pointing as they whisper, "Look—there's the father."

The father smiles his goofy, sad smile at no one. He appears the same, if older.

Beside the father, there is a woman with vacant brown eyes that dart around. She holds the arm of a man with a very serious expression and perfect posture. The two strangers and the father make their way to three empty chairs at the front of the room. The man holds a hand to the father's back. This, presumably, is to support him, though it is also a gesture not unlike a puppet master's.

In the aisles, the former Congregants reunite and greet one another. Their traditional orange robes are faded from too many

washings. They say hello and hug, but their eyes are fixed on the caves before them.

They have been waiting for this for a long time.

Inside the caves, once, there were the remains of prehistoric humans. Inside the caves, now, there is Maeve Wilhelm.

Maeve has been sleeping, breathing, and not aging for twenty-five years.

At the front of the line, a large man in a gray suit pushes through to find a seat with an unobstructed view.

And outside, a woman driving a rental car pulls into the parking lot. She's going to be late, she knows. She holds a stone in her fist and reminds herself what she has come here to do.

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Ten years before Maeve's sleep

THE MAN WAS SHORT WITH A SAD-LOOKING MUSTACHE, but a mustache was not a permanent feature, so the singles event at the bar where Naomi Clarke met her future widower was not as bad as she had feared it would be. The songs were playing at a reasonable volume. She could hear him over the music, but she could use the music as a topic of conversation if they began floundering.

She asked the mustached man what he did for work, realizing a half second later, with some dread, that this question was bound to bounce back at her. He was telling her of Curious Critters, the insect and arachnid museum he had recently opened. It was in the shopping center next to the hair salon right off the exit to Marks Island City. The storefront that still looked like a deli, did she know it?

No, she couldn't say that she did.

"I have to work on our marketing," he said, undeterred. "People keep coming in wanting an exterminator."

Was that a joke? She could not decide. She looked at him quizzically.

So, she thought, an entomologist. That could be endearing. Couldn't it? Science would be something they had in common.

Both of their fields branched off from biology. There was that at the very least: life.

He did begin to tell jokes now. Bad jokes. Not distasteful, just bad. Entomology puns. Why didn't the butterfly go to the prom? She heard it was a moth ball. That kind of thing.

If she forced a laugh, Naomi knew it would sound fake, so she did not laugh. Instead, she arranged her face to gesture toward laughing. She squinted and tilted her head back at an angle and blew a little air out her nose in a barely audible huff. This was enough to keep him going. How many insect puns might one man know? Quite a few, it turned out.

She tried not to look at the bald spot emerging at the top of his head. She pretended she could not see this dry patch of scalp as she stood at the bar beside him. She had a bird's-eye view and though she tried not to think this, it *did* look like an egg resting inside a wispy-thin nest.

Stop, she told herself. She dug her nails into her palms. She could be happy if she decided to be.

This was a sentence she liked to repeat. She did not think it was true, but she liked pretending she was the type of person who could trust in something that simple: that you could be happy if you decided to be. Magic.

Finally, the man fell silent.

"And how about you?" he asked, as she'd known he would. "What do you do?"

Lionel was marveling at the woman as he rattled off bug puns. He would soon exhaust his inventory, which she seemed to delight in. She had long legs and a beautiful globe of curls. The scalp of his own bald spot reddened, hotly, but he tried to take faith in his mustache. Without meaning to, he twitched his nose so that his mustache writhed.

He had never been to a singles event. He came to this one prompted by a recent milestone in his nascent adulthood: the opening of his insect museum.

Lionel's father, a physician and entrepreneur, had hoped his son would become a different kind of scientist. But when Lionel chose bugs, his father had loaned him the money to get the museum up and running with no expectation that he'd be repaid. Lionel was not entirely self-unaware. He knew his father lacked faith in him. But he was also relentlessly optimistic, about his newest endeavor as with most aspects of his life. He'd had no reason not to be; good things had happened and so they could keep on happening.

When he pictured the future, Lionel saw himself as he hoped he would be. That was, presenting tarantulas to squeamish six-year-olds, pinning perhaps his hundredth exotic butterfly to the exotic butterfly wall, turning his passion into a living. How lucky he was.

But while he loved his critters, he was mostly convinced that they did not love him back and never would. He did not blame them for this. They were incapable. But he did not want to be—in that future he was certain he'd grow into—alone with his unrequited bug love. What he needed, he had thought, pleased with his knack for wordplay, was a lovebug.

He'd lost the thread of what the woman was saying. He had been too preoccupied by her legs and her hair and his own reminiscing, and—anyway—what did she do for work? He had just asked her that. Damn. It was some kind of scientist. Right?

“So, where is your office?” he asked, he hoped, casually.

“Downtown. You know, the Genesis facility?”

Biotech, that was it!

Genesis Labs was one of the three biotech companies that had recently built outposts in the city. None had publicly shared

what they were developing. How exciting. A brilliant and beautiful woman of science and intrigue.

It was surprising too, this new position. She went on to tell Lionel that she had not been expecting the job offer. Biotech, she explained, was not her field of study.

“No?” he said.

No, her doctorate was in paleobiology.

“That’s a funny change,” Lionel acknowledged. He knew nothing of paleobiology and, honestly, he wasn’t very interested. Paleontology, maybe. But even then. Insects were old and relatively unchanging and that was partly what he loved about them.

He could tell that she took pride in her studies. It was obvious from how she’d said the word “doctorate.”

“Did you study Marks Island?” Marks Island proper was not an actual island. It was connected to the city by an isthmus. But thousands and thousands of years ago, it really was an island. Everyone knew at least this much local history: Marks Island had been home to humans far earlier than any humans were thought to have lived anywhere else in this part of the world.

“It was the focus of my research,” she said.

“The ancient tribe?”

“Well, the whole ancient ecosystem,” she said, “but I won’t bore you.” She looked at him. “Not yet.”

“I wasn’t always a bug guy myself,” Lionel said. “My first love was astrophysics. It’s strange sometimes, the paths life takes us to.”

Before Lionel learned to see the universe in an anthill, he’d seen the universe solely in the universe itself. His father had harbored great hopes for his only child becoming an astronaut. But in the end, while Lionel enjoyed the abstract parts—the puzzles and thought experiments presented by the fabric of space-time—any concrete consideration of the cosmos overwhelmed him. More than once he had hyperventilated during a lecture to the point of nearly passing out. He couldn’t bear how small

he was. Infinitesimal. That was the word for it. He shifted to insects. They had their own tiny cosmos where he was a god.

If Lionel were a more perceptive man, he might have seen that, unlike him, this woman had not found a more stable, deeper love in the career she'd unexpectedly stumbled into.

All her life, Naomi had been pulled by her single scholarly pursuit, which she had followed ferociously: the reconstruction of ancient systems of life. For her dissertation, she was given permission by the Marks Foundation to excavate on their shores. There were still many mysteries about the former island. Naomi had been hoping to solve some.

She'd developed a theoretical model of the ecosystem and she had published a paper. The research made waves in academic circles, so she'd assumed she would be able to secure a postdoctorate. After defending her thesis, she was awarded the top prize from the Academy of Paleobiologists in a ceremony she'd had actual dreams about.

But as she heard herself introduced and as she stepped forward to accept the award from the president of the academy, she knew it was the end of that dream.

The funding landscape had shifted during her years of graduate school, leaving no space for the ancient sciences. There were no grants that would allow her to continue the research she'd been digging into—literally digging into—for years. In what felt like a final bit of symbolism, the Marks Foundation closed Grace Beach, where she'd been excavating, to the public.

She'd never dig out there again, she realized. The disappointment of this felt starkly familiar.

In high school and into college, Naomi had been an open-water swimmer. She had been one of the fastest in the division, though she had quit the sport to take her first coveted work-study job at the lab.

As she accepted the award at the academy, she was reminded of what it had felt like to swim those long races. Concentrating on the distance she had to travel, committing to that expanse of ocean, pushing her body beyond what she thought her body or any body was capable of, and, at the end, looking up to see two things simultaneously: that she'd won and that she was alone.

True success came with loneliness. She had known this before and now she knew it again.

The three new biotech outposts had been all that her classmates wanted to talk about during their final months of graduate school. It was either that or continue lamenting the lack of jobs and their pitiful, overeducated predicaments. Their conversations were tinged with resentment and skepticism. The rumored political ties to “Big Bio” and the “looming crisis of bioethics” they felt the city—the world—would soon be thrust into. Naomi found this chatter excessively dramatic but not altogether baseless. There *was* that billionaire biotech mogul, and his electoral influence was well documented.

Two days after the awards ceremony, a man from Genesix showed up outside her lab. He looked like a comic book villain—slick hair combed back from his wide forehead, an expensive suit, a dimpled chin, prominent eyebrows. In his enormous hands, he held a copy of her CV.

He introduced himself as Dr. Gregory Dean. He said he had heard of Naomi and of her work. That he was impressed by it, and by her commitment to science, and why didn't she leave the ancient past now and join his team in designing the future? It felt like a pickup line.

Plus, he said, the pay would be tremendous. When he smiled, his skin tightened in a way that made Naomi consider the shape of his skull.

“Let me sleep on it,” she said.

His smile snapped closed in an instant. “Sleep,” he told her, like a command.

But he didn’t move and she felt she couldn’t either. He had one more thing to say. Life advice from a biotech executive. “Naomi,” he said, his voice changing completely, “you know, you can be happy if you decide to be.”

She reconsidered him at that moment. Was he an idiot? He couldn’t really believe that. Could he?

Then again, it was a nice idea. Simple. And anyway, she didn’t really need to sleep on her decision. There were no other offers, so she took the job.

What did it say about her that she hadn’t told a single classmate that she’d be working for Genesix come August? What did it reveal that, when she thought about it for one minute, she realized it would be far easier to lose touch with all of them after graduate school was done?

“Paleobiology,” she said to Lionel, waving all of this away with the hand that wasn’t holding her drink, “there isn’t a future in it.”

Lionel took off, excitedly, on a tangent, praising her choice to pursue biotech. He had a wholehearted earnestness that Naomi found admirable. Or she *wanted* to admire it. There were many promising offshoots blooming from the field, he was saying. The potential of resurrecting the clinically dead, of reanimating extinct species. And what luck for the world that she would be the captain of this marvelous ship, he concluded grandly.

She was tickled by his mixed metaphors, his overblown sense of her entry-level position. She understood that this man could love her, that he was eager to. And it could be easy to let him. Why not? She only had to give him an opening and he would take it. So she did laugh. At last. A true laugh. She laughed with him and at him, and she laughed at herself.

The music cut out abruptly and the woman was still laughing. It disarmed him, that laughter as it rang through the bar. He watched her and found nothing to say. She was even more beautiful when she was happy. He wanted to make her stay happy like this. Should he tell her that? Should he offer to buy her a drink? Should he ask for her number? He didn't usually feel this level of self-conscious anxiety in social situations. He began breathing heavily.

Lionel knew he would marry this woman. He knew it with a concrete and sudden certitude that dazzled him. He would marry her.

Only—what was her name?

It was biblical, he remembered. Old Testament. Mara? Or Leah? Ruth?

Naomi could not stop laughing. How much had she had to drink? Not much, it was not that. It was the blatant fact of Lionel's panic, adorable and plainly visible, and the absurdity of his being immediately enamored with her.

She thought, still laughing, that every detail of this night could become a story she might tell again and again: the story of how they first met. She could spend years with this man, a lifetime. She pictured her life married to this balding man, working in biotech, raising children. She imagined moving away from the bustle and crowds of Marks Island City, making a home in one of the quiet seaside suburbs. She would be happy. Because she could be if she chose to be.

She swallowed and heard the new song that was playing. It was by that handsome singer, Skip.

"Has anyone called you Skip before?" she said. "You look just like him." Lionel did not look very much like Skip. Perhaps slightly in the hairline and brow. But she said this regardless, hoping that, this way, they would remember the singer even if

they both forgot which song of his was playing. “His wife is named Naomi too,” she said, taking his hand.

Naomi! Lionel thought. Yes. Thank you, Naomi.

“Never,” he said aloud.

He looked up at her. She looked down at his bald spot before she blinked it away.

If Evangeline and Maeve were, impossibly, to see their parents at this very moment, they’d recognize their father at once. The exact same expression he wore now would be frozen most of the time onto his face. But their mother, no. The twins would never believe their mother had been this person who, on a whim, blindly leapt over the boundary of being strangers toward the slim possibility of future happiness.

“Come on, Skip,” Naomi said, pulling him gently. He placed the glass down. She would not call him Skip again. “Let’s dance.”

She imagined him with no mustache on their wedding day, standing at the end of the aisle, watching her. It made her giddy to see what might become a memory but hadn’t yet happened. She liked it—she liked the way she pretended she’d feel.

IT WAS DIFFICULT TO keep track of which was which: Maeve and Evangeline. Evangeline and Maeve. The twins would hear their father’s same jokes twice or not at all. If their mother was mad at one, she was mad at both. It wasn’t just that they looked alike, though they were identical, but also that they occupied the same space in the same manner. They even sneezed in unison and, reopening their eyes, wore the exact same slightly surprised expression on their matching faces.

At age four, with their concept of self newly formed, the girls became fascinated with the bathroom mirror. Who was

it inside there, her sister, herself, or a strange, silent triplet trapped in the glass?

By age five, they knew better. While they brushed their teeth at night, unblinking, the game was to pretend they were looking at their sister in the mirror until they felt a funny sensation in their body like they were neither here nor there but nowhere, everywhere.

At six, they had the same recurring night vision. It was not a full dream but a set of images that floated in and out in the moments before sleep arrived: the girl in the mirror spits her toothpaste into the sink while you are still brushing, she nods at you knowingly, waves, disappears.

Curious Critters was struggling. Admission fees were not enough to pay the rent on the museum. But Lionel's father gave him another loan and Naomi got a promotion, and they managed to keep it afloat.

Lionel took on extra work as an animal sideshow for birthday parties and spent weekends loading his dragonflies, beetles, and beloved ant terrarium into the station wagon. He set up a booth on a large, manicured backyard where, typically, his critters were one of several such attractions. There might be a face-painting station and other animals—ponies, parrots, a crocodile once, memorably. Whenever possible, he brought the twins along with him and they worked as his special assistants. The girls didn't care for this duty and found it weird to attend the birthdays of kids they'd never met.

Naomi worked long hours, commuting forty minutes from their suburban enclave of Jacob's Circle into the city, where she was the lead researcher. She hated the job and yet she buried herself in it and she had very little time to spend with her family.

They found a babysitter in the neighborhood and because of their work schedules, they came to rely on the girl fairly

often. The babysitter had one of those faces that made it impossible to determine her age. She might have been sixteen or twenty-six.

Naomi took their daughters on the same outing every Saturday, when the weather allowed. Leaving Lionel at home to prepare for a birthday party or whatever it was he did in his office, she took the girls out to Rocky Beach for a dig.

The girls loved this tradition. They'd walk down the hill very early and stay until just before breakfast. They'd show their mother whatever they found, and she'd make the determination of what was worth keeping and what to toss back. She was especially looking for a certain kind of red rock. They'd found the right kind once and it had made their mother very happy. Digging was a mostly silent activity. There was the noise of seagulls and the rhythm of waves and it was calm and boring in a way the girls liked. "Therapeutic" was the word their mother used to describe it.

Once, they bumped into their mother's boss while digging. The girls knew very little about what their mother did. Just that she was very smart and very busy and a scientist.

"Dr. Wilhelm!" the man called from the boardwalk. He had been jogging with a puffy brown square of a dog. They could not see the dog's face for its puffiness. "Hello!" he said brightly. "Are these your children?"

The man was gigantic. He had shiny hair pushed back from his forehead by a neon-green sweatband. His arms were bulgy with muscles and his face was mean. He smiled at them and it made him look meaner.

"Yes," their mother said. "Maeve and Evangeline." She did not specify who was who.

"Twins!" said the man, thrilled. "Nature's clones!"

The girls glanced sideways at each other. Clones? What did that mean?

He stepped closer and they thought, horrified, that he was going to pet them, but a loud yipping began emanating from the dog, so the man bent to pet the animal instead.

The girls turned back to their digging and mostly stopped listening because the conversation made little sense.

“I see you’ve kept up your digging hobby,” the man said near the end of the encounter. He was still smiling. He might have been making fun of their mother. They could not tell.

Their mother’s lips thinned, and she angled her head at him.

“Enlisting child labor, though.” He gestured toward the girls. “You know that’s illegal, Naomi.” He laughed.

Now, their mother put her shovel down, and for a second it seemed like she could burst out either screaming or laughing along with him.

“Oh, Dr. Dean,” she said, “a lot of things are illegal.”

They stared at each other without speaking, and soon after that, the man and his dog jogged away.

The girls did not ask their mother what being “a legal” was or “labor” or even “clones,” which seemed most important. They kept digging a bit longer but no one found any red rocks. Their mother let them keep a smooth shard of blue sea glass and one stone in the exact shape of a heart. As the digging slowed, their mother stopped to look up and shield her eyes from the sun and stare, across the water, at Grace Beach over on Marks Island.

Eventually, the girls stopped digging also.

“Six today,” they said as they packed up to leave. This was the final part of the Saturday ritual: the counting of fishing boats.

“Seven tomorrow,” their mother would’ve replied. In the warmer months, every day brought more and more fishing boats to the harbor. In the cooler months, every day brought fewer and fewer.

Today, their mother must not have heard them, for she said nothing. Or she had heard them but simply forgotten the line she always said next.

IT HAD BEEN A SNOWY winter. The girls' mittens were too big and flapped over their fingertips uselessly. That was the bad part of this season. How your body got lost inside your clothes. Under their boots, the fresh snow made a noise like the garbage compactor.

"Hey," one sister said. "Watch this." She bent her knees deeply and jumped forward, springing up and out like a frog. When she landed, she was suspended. She stood on top of the whiteness before descending through the snow and touching back to earth.

"Try," her sister told her. She did.

So that was the day they hopped all over the front yard, feeling weightless and then weighted. It became the basis for two invented competitive winter games: long jump, in which they measured who could jump the farthest forward on the snow, and time jump, in which they measured how many seconds they could stay on top before it compacted and sent them down.

For time jump, Evangeline counted one one thousand, two one thousand while Maeve used Mississippi. And as far as measuring distance, they weren't very careful to have the same starting line. They weren't trying to win as much as they were trying to complete the challenge and look less like a dolt.

"Dolt" had been Maeve's contribution originally. Evangeline had gotten in trouble for saying the word "idiot," but Maeve had been allowed to say "dolt." So now it was "dolt" everything. "Oh dolt!" if they slipped and "Don't be a dolt."

They began racing, a good old-fashioned race from the tree to the mailbox. But a hopping race. The only way you could move was to keep your legs together and hop.

Occasionally, one of them would lose her balance, thrown off by the layers of clothing wrapped over her body.

When you fell, the rule was you had to get up with your legs together. It was extraordinarily difficult. Whenever one sister fell, the other stopped her racing to watch the struggle.

“You dolt!” she’d say. “Hurry! Get up! I’m going to win!”

Winning alone was not very fun, they’d found. There had to be at least some competition.

Inside the house, Naomi readied mugs of hot chocolate. The girls had been out there for an hour, which was too long. It did not matter how many layers of socks and sweatshirts they were wearing beneath their jackets and snow pants.

“Don’t you think they should come in?” she said to Lionel. She could hear how taut her voice was. How close she was, already, to breaking. Why was she like this even on a cozy Sunday?

Lionel went to the window. He watched his daughters. What were they doing? Hopping as if in potato sacks, their hats falling over their eyes, lower and lower, both of their noses runny and red. Such strange little rabbits, his children.

“Give them another minute?” he said. It was his turn to be the parent to ruin their fun. He hated to do it.

“Fine.”

They seemed to move in slow motion, with the labored movements of astronauts in low gravity. Each step, a small leap forward, then down.

Naomi still did not feel accustomed to it: her life as a wife, her life as a mother, her life generally. The twins were seven, which meant that for seven years, Naomi had daydreamed that somewhere, she had a twin too. A secret twin she hadn’t known about who was living what should have been her own existence, one where everything that was misaligned for Naomi had fallen perfectly into place.

This secret, imaginary twin would be famous for her work on the ancient ecosystem of Marks Island. She’d have earned a

place beside Dr. Francis Marks Sr. himself as one of the city's most notable residents. She'd be a tenured professor, the next chair of the department, blissfully childless, unmarried, alone. She'd have a lab at the city university named for her and a research hospital and a fellowship. What else?

Naomi had no twin, of course. Not even a sibling. And whenever she remembered this and floated back into her real life and saw it anew and as it was, she would think, incredulously, *This?* After everything, it all led to *this?*

There was Lionel with his bright mind but his dim wit and his expanding bald spot. Her girls, who were mostly afraid of her.

Her job. The fact that she was still at Genesisx at all was unbelievable. Let alone that she'd moved up the corporate ladder to a senior title. It had happened with an ease she never suspected could bring success.

When she'd joined, there had been a thick veil of secrecy around her work and she couldn't see through it; her research team was not allowed to disclose anything, not even to the other research teams at their same arm of the company. She knew Genesisx was racing two other biotech firms for a landmark discovery, but that was all she had known for close to a year.

She had been in Dr. Dean's office, sitting across from him. He always kept it dark in there and on that day, his eyes shined through the darkness and he wore that same smirk that made Naomi think of rigor mortis.

"A cure for age," he had said. "It's the next frontier for human ingenuity. There's no reason a body should have to suffer through time anymore. Picture it: a world where humans don't age."

He asked her to explain her graduate research and her model of ancient Marks Island.

"The algae," he said. "Tell me about *that*."

In truth, she was thrilled to talk about it again even though she had no idea what Dr. Dean was getting at or why he was

interested. She explained the theory: that a unique species of alga once thrived in the water around Marks Island. Likely, it had been a keystone species, playing a crucial role in the ecosystem. It would have needed very large amounts of phosphorus to sustain a prolonged bloom. But she believed the island's coast had once been rich in that red mineral and—

“And is it still?” Dr. Dean asked, interrupting.

“We don't know for sure,” she said. “There are traces that wash up every now and then, but we don't know how much of it might remain.”

She explained that the same seismic activity that had shifted the landscape and attached the island to the mainland may have buried those deposits much deeper.

“I'm oversimplifying,” she said, “and I should stress, again, that this was purely theoretical. More research was needed, more evidence.” She paused. “I didn't really get to finish the project.”

“So finish,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

He'd already procured the approval from leadership, he told her. She could pick up where she had left off.

She was thrilled to hear this. Also confused.

“But what does my research have to do with an age cure?”

She'd crossed a line. She saw this at once. His eyes flashed and he made a tut-tut noise. “Oh, but you can't ask those kinds of questions, Dr. Wilhelm. That's the deal here. Okay?”

He could be so horribly patronizing. He might as well have been wagging a finger at her. But she wanted to return to her research. Okay, she told herself, she would be allowed to know some things, but not everything. She could live with that, couldn't she? She could live with a lot of things. That was something she'd learned.

“Yes,” she said. “Sorry. Okay.”

Her work would focus entirely on the ecosystem of ancient Marks Island. She would not do any of the digging, Dr. Dean explained. The land was restricted to a limited number of researchers. Another team would be collecting and testing the samples. That team would send her the relevant information and she would refine her computational model.

He had faith in her, he was saying. Full faith.

She thanked him for that because she could see she was supposed to.

“No need to thank me,” he said. “Just get to work.”

By all appearances, their competitors had outpaced them with other biotech breakthroughs—Xioneva had been testing an experimental cancer treatment for terminal patients and VextaGen announced their plan to transplant a human head—but Genesix remained single-minded, secretive, and set on the one mission: a cure for age.

Naomi was promoted to senior researcher but had no team working behind her. She was charged with her one small piece of an overall puzzle, a puzzle she still saw almost no details of, and she was not supposed to ask questions or share anything, not even with her own family.

Through the window, she watched her girls in the snow. Little aliens. She did not understand them, but they understood each other perfectly.

Lionel saw the lunar landscape they were making on the lawn. The girls were almost identical except for tiny discrepancies that had recently surfaced. He believed only he had observed them, for he'd been observing tiny discrepancies his entire professional life. One was proving to be ambidextrous and the other was not; one was slightly smaller than the other now, shorter and thinner at her knees and elbows especially.

He thought of mirror matter—that hypothetical substance that could explain away the asymmetry of the universe. He could still get lost in the riddles of astrophysics. Like parallel universes, and the Fermi paradox, or the twin paradox, which was one of his favorites.

In another moment, he would get up and put on his coat and go out there to get them. He might play with them after they taught him the rules for this game they'd invented. But just briefly. After that, he would have to give them the bad news. The day was ending, and it was time to come in. They would protest and get one more game out of him. "One game, that's it," he would say. But it would not be it.

Eventually, Naomi would have to go outside herself, jacket unzipped, standing on the snowy steps in her slippers, and call for him.

"Lionel!" she'd yell. "What are you doing?" But she wouldn't be angry. She'd just want an invitation.

So he would invite her. He could see it all playing out: Lionel would get Naomi to play the game too. She'd disappear for a second and reappear with her boots and they'd hop around the lawn together, racing, falling over, calling each other dolts, until the sky was dark and the day really ended and, cold and exhausted, they went inside.

The mugs of hot chocolate would be cold and in need of reheating. Everyone's sopping socks would be hung out to dry. Each of them would remember this.

Everything was in the process of ruin, Naomi thought as she watched her girls' booted feet make divots in what might have remained an unblemished stratum of white for at least the one evening.

She imagined her former excavation site on Grace Beach and how it might have looked now according to the rumors of what Genesis was doing. Usually, corporate leadership did a good

job of tamping such rumors down. But this gossip was pervasive. Naomi couldn't say where she had first heard it. Once you learned a thing like that, it rooted down as a fact.

Genesis had made a deal with the Marks Foundation to dispose of their biowaste off the shores of Marks Island. There was no environmental impact committee involved, no telling how the ancient land would be ruined. That was what the rumor held.

Was that why she'd been asked to continue refining her models of the ancient ecosystem? To predict just what they were destroying? And was that why she had not been permitted to collect the samples herself? They didn't want her to see what else was out there. The idea that she might have been part of this—helping to ruin the very land that had been the focus of all her academic research—once it occurred to her, she became obsessed with it. She had to know.

The rumor kept simmering through the fall and now winter, and still, no one on the executive team addressed it. Genesis had a punitive policy on the books to prevent employees from speaking ill of the company. It had been enforced in the past and Naomi kept waiting to hear of someone being suspended or fired or held accountable for starting this gossip, and yet no one was.

Naomi assumed this was because Genesis was finally close to their breakthrough. They didn't have to bother with petty rumors. The company had sent out a short brief about it; they would soon seek approval to bring their antiaging procedure to market.

Dr. Dean had been promoted to chief marketing officer, an advancement that Naomi fully expected would be a brief stop on his hoped-for journey to become chief executive of the company.

The "age cure," she learned in the brief, would be an injectable. It would stop the physical process of aging, keeping a person looking the same age indefinitely.

As a secondary use, it was found to be moderately successful at reducing pain. People would need to have the injection monthly. Naomi guessed Genesix could have made it a one-time procedure, had they calibrated it slightly differently, but that was not good for business. To get around some legal requirements, they would brand the procedure as cosmetic. It was almost laughable to remember, but she had thought they were coming up with a *cure* for something.

The girls must be freezing. What was Lionel doing? He was supposed to call them in a half hour ago.

“Time to come in,” Lionel said to them again when, after thirty minutes, Naomi still had not joined them.

A breath of silence.

His daughters looked at him, at each other, at him again, preparing to argue or at least considering it. They wanted to keep playing. But who knew what kind of mood their mother was in.

Back inside, they took off their wet boots and socks and changed into warm pajamas. They meant to write down the rules of their made-up games but they forgot to, and then it was bedtime, and soon they forgot the rules and the games entirely. It did not snow again for the rest of the winter, so it didn't matter in the end.



THE TRAFFIC INTO THE city was worse in the springtime. There were more tourists, plus the snowbirds who'd escaped for the season returned. Naomi's morning commute could take twice as long, and she'd get to the office edgy to a point very close to combustion and desperate for a cigarette. She had mostly quit. She only smoked at work.