

L'AQUILA, ITALY  
JANUARY 20, 2011

Sara tossed and turned in bed, listening to the noises in the apartment, straining to hear if Concetta was still at home or had already left. She had no time for small talk; her flight back to the United States was only a few days away, and she still had so many things to do, including the task that had brought her to L'Aquila in the first place. She put on her plaid slippers and sneaked into the living area with her laptop under her arm. The room was empty, but she could hear Concetta's voice from the hallway, mixed with the chatter of the other tenants. Sara caught bits and pieces of their conversation—more cold weather in the forecast, cars parked illegally in front of the building, water and electric bills undelivered for months and then, as if by magic, finally arriving all together, and astronomical at that. She brewed herself some coffee and turned on her phone, although she dreaded getting a call from the States—her mother had the uncanny ability to sense when she could be reached. She did need to be reachable, though. The Professor might call at any minute to set up their last meeting. The moment had finally arrived.

She threw the window open, and the fresh air greeted her. The night's snowfall had transformed the barren landscape into a wonderland. Even the abandoned field between the four massive apartment buildings seemed inviting, and the footprints—from a man's weighty boots alongside the light-

er tracks of a dog—indicated that at least a few tenants had already ventured outside to explore its delights. More than anything else, the snow softened the contrast between the soulless buildings and the majestic, impassive mountains beyond them. Sara greeted them all: Pizzo Intermesoli, Pizzo Cefalone, and, farther away, the most striking of them all, Corno Grande—at 9,000 feet, the highest peak of the Apennines. Alessandro had taught her to recognize the mountains from nearly any point in the city. She realized that she would miss that sight, and Alessandro. For a moment, she contemplated the idea of staying. She could change direction and bring her life back to L'Aquila, where everything had started. The possibility flashed through her mind, but it felt like the plot of a novel rather than a real option. The moment had arrived; she could feel it. She rushed back to her room and pulled a backpack from beneath her bed. As she reached in, all she could see was the silver plaque.

*Alice Arienti*

*L'Aquila, May 23, 1930 – Bethesda, October 9, 2010*

“Don't worry, Nonna Ali” she whispered, “we're almost there. We're going home.”

Holding the urn tightly against her chest, she thought she felt a jolt. Impossible. Her heart must have skipped a beat.

“Time to go home. For both of us.”

MOAB, UTAH  
JUNE—AUGUST, 2010

“Why did you start?”

Julia hated her accusatory tone, but she needed more than the few tidbits that Jane, Sara’s mother, had offered when asking that she host Sara “out west” for the summer.

“Because I liked it...”

As for Sara, she desperately wanted out of the conversation, out of Julia’s house, out of the desert. Talking to Julia was even worse than going to her therapist; at least there she didn’t have to speak if she didn’t want to—a nice loophole she had taken full advantage of. She remembered her mother’s best friend differently, less blunt, less determined, but it had been years since she’d last seen her. Julia pushed on.

“You liked heavy liquor? It didn’t make you sick?”

“At first, no, but then I liked how I felt, I was... looser.”

“Looser?”

Sara would have gladly avoided the topic of her alcohol-induced looseness, which had been immortalized in the restroom of one of the most expensive private schools in Maryland. Captured by a single cell phone, her performance had ended up on Facebook. She had the impression that all her friends and even some teachers, though they pretended otherwise, had seen those pictures.

Sara had never seen her mother so distraught.

“How did this get on the Internet?” Jane asked as soon as Sara came home from school.

The question belied Jane's scarce familiarity with social media. Sara for a moment hadn't understood what her mother meant.

"Who was that boy? And who took those photos?" Jane insisted, as if contemplating old-fashioned family dynamics that included arranged marriages and shotgun weddings.

Sara didn't remember enough of that day to be able to answer those questions. She was surprised anyone could identify her as the girl in the pictures, she could barely recognize herself. She tried to reconstruct the events through her mother's incoherent monologue, and little by little realized that Jane hadn't learned of the events from the school but from a stranger, a man so vile that Jane shuddered at the thought of his calling their house to ask not just if, but *when* Sara Westbridge—yes, he knew her daughter's first and last name!—would be available to have a drink with him, and perhaps afterwards visit the restroom in the photos, with the Kohler toilets and the imported tiles. Jane had hung up, as she knew one is supposed to do in such situations, but the man's words had aroused her suspicions. He seemed to be referring to something very specific, a scene he couldn't have invented. She tried to call him back, but his number was blocked. She didn't have to wait long, though, before he called again. This time Jane was more prepared, maybe thanks to the shot of Southern Comfort that she neglected to mention when relating the story. With the information she gathered in the second phone conversation, it didn't take long for her to find those awful images online. At this point, Jane interrupted her tirade and pointed dramatically at the laptop on the kitchen table which, however, at that moment only displayed her screen saver—an elephant and her calf, a particularly fond memory of her safari in the Serengeti. A cell phone ringing in the living room revealed Jeff's presence, and Sara realized that her mother's awkward boyfriend must have played an important role in the Internet search, since Jane by herself was barely able to check the weather.

Jane was taken aback by the sudden changes in her life. From one day to the next, her daughter had grown up and her mother had gotten very ill. Both phenomena struck her as the result of obscure, dizzying, uncontrollable proliferations of cells that left her helpless and confused. Her natural reaction was to fall back on the principle that she stubbornly believed could bring order to human chaos: the law, or rather, the Law, and its representative on earth, Jeff. And Jeff, of course, had not missed his cue. His first, crucial suggestion, was that Jane should not call the police unless she wanted to give the story more publicity and the pictures greater circulation. Threatening to call the police was much more effective than actually calling them, he stated, as if repeating a proverb. Then he sprang into action. His baritone— “This is Jeff Ross of Ross, Justin & Westbridge” —brought everyone at the school to heel, from the principal to Sara’s classmates, with the specter of lawsuits, public shame, and long-lasting repercussions on everybody’s reputation. In less than three hours, the Facebook post had been deleted and the possible culprits suspended. How to deal with Sara was a little less clear, but everyone agreed that an open and honest family discussion should precede any disciplinary intervention. So this is where we are, Sara thought, this ambush must be Jane’s idea of an open and honest family discussion. She wasn’t the only one feeling uneasy. As Jane harped on the importance of communication, Jeff grew more and more restless in his armchair, until, at a lull in Jane’s monologue, he got up and prepared to leave, making a face-to-face confrontation between mother and daughter inevitable.

If Sara was apprehensive about that conversation, Jane, as she accompanied Jeff to his car, was absolutely terrified. She wished she could pinpoint the moment when Sara had started to harbor all of that resentment toward her, stop everything right there, rewind. Sara’s childhood had been, all things considered, serene, mostly thanks to Alice, her ever-present

and caring grandmother. Maybe, in hindsight, Jane's divorce from Sara's father, Xavier, however amicable—as amicable as a divorce can be, really—had upset her more than they all realized. Xavier had been away for so long for his inconclusive missions with dubious NGOs that he was little more than a stranger to Sara. And yet, their divorce and his decision to relocate to East Timor—where, Jane suspected, another woman was waiting for him—had thrown the entire family dynamics off balance. With her other children already grown and far away, perhaps Jane had relied too much on Sara, she had pushed her into the adult world too quickly. She recalled with a certain embarrassment how she had bared her soul to her, sharing doubts and fears that, as the therapist later explained, Sara was not mature enough to understand and process. But even so, what about her, Jane? How come she was always the one saddled with understanding everything and everybody? When did she ever sign up for that role? How come nobody ever seemed to realize that she also needed help? In the space of just a few months, her marriage to Xavier was over—a sham of a marriage, sure, and yet convenient and reassuring, a shield against the brutal dating scene out there—and Alice had started to get sick, withdrawing into herself, unreachable. Sara was the only one left. It felt natural for Jane to treat her daughter as a grown-up, to have some woman-to-woman talk with her. Big mistake! She had overestimated Sara. Despite her mature attitude and all those foreign language books she liked to read, her inability to deal with her mother's revelations proved she was still a child. Take the issue of her birth, for instance. It was true that Jane had gone back and forth between whether or not to carry her third pregnancy to term. After all, she was just beginning to establish herself professionally after sacrificing so much for her family, and she knew she couldn't count much on Xavier's moral or practical support. Eventually, it was Alice's intervention and her promise to help that had convinced her to let nature decide, and Sara

was born. Alice had kept her word, and spent every free moment with the child. The bond between the two had grown so strong that they seemed at times to have their own private code, also because Sara's first language was the Italian she learned from her grandmother, Nonna Alice or, as she called her, Nonna Ali.

If in the end everything had worked out so well, what was all the fuss about? Jane felt her initial hesitation had been human, logical, understandable. And yet, that wavering had become the central pillar of her daughter's identity. For Sara, it explained everything—her loneliness, her need to be loved unconditionally, her rivalry with her siblings, especially with Richard, the first child, the boy, the one who, unlike her, had been desired, cherished, cared-for. It wasn't true that Jane didn't love Sara. Yes, maybe she'd neglected her at times, there was always so much to think about, so many distractions. Yet... ah hell, you can certainly love someone even without paying attention to them all the time. Can't you love someone without paying attention to them all the time? In Jane's darkest moments, the statement turned into a question.

The previous Thanksgiving had been a total disaster. Alice must have seen that coming because, at the last minute, she called to say that turkey didn't agree with her anymore, so she would only stop by for ten minutes to say hello. What a brief, peaceful truce, those ten minutes had been. As soon as Alice left, Sara started again with her provocations. Richard tried everything in his power to play the patient and understanding older brother, but Sara still ended up running to her room. When Jane finally managed to convince her to open the door, Sara immediately brought up their past conversations to punish her mother. It was awful when Sara accused Jane of seeing her only as a failed abortion... If motherhood is more than a biological event, Sara blurted out, then her real mother was her grandmother, Nonna Ali. She was completely beside herself yet articulate as ever, almost technical, really.

She had obviously mulled over those accusations for a while. Jane sought out a therapist, who sat for a few hours in the same room with Sara never managing to extract a single word from her. When the situation seemed to be heading downhill, they all got a welcome and unexpected reprieve. Alice recovered from a second round of chemotherapy. She resumed her routine of baking, walks by the river, and reading. Sara fell back into her grandmother's orbit, and all that drama receded into the background. Jane had stifled her jealousy. It was her turn to feel unloved, excluded, superfluous. The respite only lasted a few months. Jane barely had time to catch her breath when Alice fell ill again, and Sara started visiting her mother's liquor cabinet. Sara's distress seemed to follow the same pattern of remission and relapse as Alice's disease.

Jane reviewed the events of the past year with Jeff, who knew them only too well and was eager to regain the tranquility of his bachelor's condo, though he didn't dare cut her short and nodded politely now and then, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. When he finally managed to drive off, Jane had no choice but go back and resume that painful conversation with her daughter. The living room was empty, though. Sara must have grown tired of waiting, or had just decided to sneak off somewhere else in the house. An arpeggio on the piano coming from her bedroom reassured Jane. She took advantage of the lull in the hostilities to put her plan into action. While she was dragging out her long goodbye to Jeff, she had suddenly remembered her best friend from childhood. Julia, yes, Julia was the only one who could help her get out of this mess. Without a second thought, she dialed the number of *Etcetera*, Bed and Breakfast-Café-Restaurant-Art Gallery in Moab, Utah.

She got straight to the point as soon as she recognized her friend's voice on the other end of the line.

"Listen, Julia, you have to do me this favor."

Jane heard the sound of a door opening and lowered her

voice. Sara, protected by the darkness of the stairway, tried to guess who was on the line with her mother.

"No, Sara is not ready, you know how close she is to her grandmother, she's not taking it well at all."

Jane's sobs startled her as if they came from somebody else in the room.

"No one is taking it well," she continued, "How can anyone take this crap well? No, at this point there is nothing else they can do, the oncologist was clear about that. It's only a matter of time."

Sara held her breath, hoping her mother wouldn't realize she was listening to the conversation. Barefoot at the top of the stairs, she was shivering because the air conditioning was on full blast, just the way Jane liked it.

Dealing with Alice's illness was exhausting. It was proving tough for everybody, certainly, but especially for the youngest in the family. Sara thought she could hide the fact that she was drinking, but her mother was no fool. Julia must have managed to make some kind of objection, because Jane fell silent for a moment before protesting indignantly.

"But at least I'd remember it, right?"

She then mentioned a detail that dispelled Julia's suspicions that it was Jane, and not her daughter, who was visiting the well-stocked home bar. The liquid in the bottles was not going down but was becoming clearer, weaker. Sara was filling up the bottles with water to keep them at the same level, to try and trick her mother! And how exactly had Jane found out about this ruse? Well, one evening, she had poured herself a shot of Jack Daniels and realized right away that it had been watered down. She'd checked the other bottles only to find that they had all been tampered with the same way.

Julia couldn't help smiling. She gently petted her oldest cat, who had jumped onto the shelf next to the phone, with her tattered garden glove. Maybe her childhood friend wouldn't remember drinking the night before, but watering down Jack

Daniels? No way! That would run against her principles. Sara mustn't know her mother very well if she hoped to get away with such an inelegant subterfuge. Julia kept a snide comment to herself.

"You're right," she agreed.

"Can you believe it?" Jane started up again, enjoying the unexpected concession. "An alcoholic at eighteen? Have you ever heard of such a thing?"

Julia did some quick math and concluded that it was some thirty-five years earlier when she and Jane had taken a memorable trip to the emergency room to have their stomachs pumped. They must have been about sixteen at the time. So yes, she had heard of such a thing before, but she also knew Jane could get quite frustrated when specific details threatened her interpretation of events. She decided it was not the right time for nitpicking.

"Never," she confirmed.

"Listen," Jane continued, "I know I'm asking a lot of you. You have your life, your way of thinking, your habits. You had the courage to review your priorities and quit the rat race. You don't know how much I admire your decision, your determination. I know so many people who have been talking about doing something like that for years, but you are the only one who up and did it. I would not be asking you if I weren't desperate."

The sobs resumed and were so loud this time that Jane jumped and looked around, as if surprised by the noise. Pierced by her mother's stare, Sara tried her best to act natural as she walked down the stairs, towards the fridge.

"Are you hungry, dear?" Jane asked, placing her hand on the receiver and instinctively adopting the solicitous tone of a TV ad.

Sara mumbled something as a reply, drank a glass of milk, and quickly retreated back upstairs.

"You see, she just came down, I bet she wanted to go to the

wet bar... Yes, sure, I will lock the cabinet doors, but can you please do me this favor?"

Julia couldn't remember for sure if she'd said yes, but she couldn't recall openly rejecting Jane's plan either. She blamed herself for being so naïve and missing the crucial turning points in the conversation where she could have slowed her friend down. As agitated as she seemed, Jane still remained lucid enough to discuss all sorts of practical details, from the weather to airfare. Julia realized she had basically agreed to host Sara only after hanging up.

What bothered Julia the most was not the fear of having her routine disrupted, the inconvenience of sharing her home with someone, or even the responsibility of taking care of a young stranger, as present and legitimate as these concerns were in her mind. Deep down, what frightened her was the prospect of getting enmeshed again in the neuroses she had decided to leave behind by moving to Moab. She saw the family portrait all too clearly before her eyes: Jane who took the progression of her mother's disease as a reminder of her own mortality; Jeff who surveyed the territory eager to prove useful, or rather, indispensable; Alice who, after keeping everybody together for years, was fading away and needed help herself; and finally, Sara, the most vulnerable of them all. Julia's memory of Sara was vague. It was hard for her to piece together an image from the token answers Jane had provided through the years to her perfunctory inquiries. Sara was fine; she spent most of her time with her grandma; didn't get along much with her siblings, though; Sara did very well in school; she was doing great, actually. Until she wasn't.

In the few weeks that had gone by between Jane's phone call and Sara's arrival, Julia had ample time to mull over her fears. Her first pointless conversation with Sara confirmed all her concerns. She watched the girl in front of her run her fingers along the rim of her coffee mug. She seemed younger than eighteen, with her dimples, her long eyelashes, a sort of

shabby beauty, the exact opposite of the compulsive control that Jane had exercised over her appearance, even as a young woman. Julia repressed a stirring of affection. The more helpless they look, the more dangerous they are, she said to herself. It was imperative that she lay down a few house rules right away if she wanted to avoid trouble.

"Jane must have thought that Utah would be a good place to avoid alcohol, but you can actually find it quite easily around here. I am not one for strict rules, and I won't ask you to stop drinking altogether. However, if I catch you drunk or if you try to pull the same stunts as you did in school, you'll go straight back home."

That had come out a little harsher than she'd intended. Julia looked for a way to soften her words.

"But if instead you adapt to our ways and learn to enjoy nature, hiking, kayaking, the great outdoors..."

She was annoyed at finding herself capable of such banality.

"... if you adopt a healthy lifestyle... Well, I think you'll find plenty of interesting things to do around here."

She stopped abruptly, afraid of sounding like the Utah state brochure: *Life Elevated*.

Sara felt it was her turn to say something.

"If you're concerned about my creating trouble and possibly tarnishing the reputation of your Bed and Breakfast you needn't. I really don't like alcohol, and it's never been a problem, or at least, it's never been my main problem."

Julia knew that line of reasoning from having heard it many times from Jane. Maybe mother and daughter were really alike deep down, in spite of their physical differences. Julia told Sara something that she had never had the courage to tell her friend.

"All alcoholics say the same thing. So, believe me, the first thing to do is to get rid of the alcohol and see what lies under-

neath. Who knows, perhaps you'll get lucky and find there's nothing there."

Sara was somewhat surprised but not offended by Julia's bluntness. A strange serenity had settled over her as soon as she set foot in Moab. She was relieved at the idea of skipping the final weeks of school, graduation, and more useless appointments with her therapist. From a strictly educational point of view, there was no reason for her to go back to school. Her self-destructive bent hadn't prevented her from doing well, so much so that she had already been accepted at Princeton, a springboard, according to Jane, for one of the most prestigious law schools in the country—here's where Jane's imagination and ambition ran wild: Chicago? Columbia? Maybe even... Harvard? The years spent with Alice had helped refine Sara's body and mind, and her recent confusion had not quite managed to destroy everything she had built over the years. Not yet, at least. However, something had changed. Though the show proceeded according to the script, Sara realized she was no longer interested in the lead role, or any role at all, for that matter. Something had cracked within her and she had started to harm herself. She realized that for quite some time her only desire had been to drop out of the performance and enjoy her place in the audience, commenting on the play while pondering if, when and how she would get back on the stage. Unexpectedly, it had been her school principal who'd come up with a solution, during a meeting that she'd done everything in her power to avoid and that had instead turned out to be rather informative.

"I would suggest a gap year."

"A gap year?"

"Yes, a gap year," the principal repeated. Sara listened carefully. She could tell that Jane had suddenly grown very alert too.

"It's a time between your senior year of high school and your first year of college" the principal went on to explain.

"It's a relatively new concept, but it's becoming more and more popular. Many young people are ready academically for college but are not quite there yet in terms of maturity. It may be just a bit too early for them to live alone and take on real responsibilities and obligations. In Europe, students actually spend an extra year in high school compared to the U.S., which makes a lot of sense. A year is a long time at their age."

Jane got instinctively suspicious every time someone brought up Europe as an example. The slight accent—German, perhaps?—that she detected in the principal's speech increased her wariness.

"But... What about the end of the school year and graduation? What about Princeton?"

Jane was already dreaming about the moment Sara would join Ross, Justin & Westbridge. She'd be firm with her associates, the name needed to be changed—Ross, Justin, Westbridge and Daughter. And daughter! She proudly looked at Sara's elegant profile.

The principal had anticipated all those objections.

"Sara's academic record is stellar, I am sure none of her teachers would object if I recommend that she take her final exams earlier and skip the last few weeks. She could still come back for graduation if she wanted to, of course. And as far as Princeton is concerned, you can ask them to defer Sara's freshman year, I think they would accept. Universities, especially prestigious ones, actually regard the idea of a gap year quite favorably because it allows them to build a more mature first-year class and reduce the percentage of students dropping out, along with other more worrisome scenarios such as depression, suicides..."

He stopped abruptly, afraid he'd gone too far. Sara wondered if all that flexibility was a result of his eagerness to get her—and Jane, and that bully of a lawyer who acted on their behalf—out of his school.

Gap, that is: interruption, break. But also, a hole, and worse—a breach, a laceration. This was Jane’s fear: if Sara’s trajectory went off-course, she could very well fall into a world of indistinct dreams and aspirations without being able to regain a direction. But nobody seemed to share her concern.

“A tour of the real world can only do her some good,” Jeff chimed in with his best fatherly tone, relieved at the prospect of a calmer and more productive year ahead for everyone. Between drama and disease, Jane’s family had kept him on his toes. Jane’s older kids, Richard and Kate, agreed, responsible adults that they were. Even Alice, for completely different reasons, approved of the idea of some time off that she felt would help Sara regain her passion for reading. That last year had been a disaster on that front, between the obsession with perfect grades and the time spent on college applications. Alice had even managed to compile a list of authors missing from Sara’s curriculum: Cervantes, Akhmatova, Kundera... Sara listened patiently and respectfully, but for the first time she felt inclined to share Jane’s fear that the disease had ended up discombobulating the brains of the venerable matriarch, as she was known in the family.

Once the decision had been made, everything followed very quickly. It turned out that the principal’s proposal fit well within Jane’s plan to send her daughter away some place for a while. Sara didn’t have the energy or the motivation to put up a fight, and once she arrived in Moab she realized how much she’d needed a change in pace and scenery, a break. Naked under the covers, in the bedroom that Julia had set up for her in the attic, she looked over the body that had grown so hastily, snatching her from an enchanted childhood and tossing her into the midst of a stormy adolescence. A difficult body to deal with, whose desires she wasn’t yet able to divine. She felt like a snake that had just shed its old scales and lay admiring its new skin, stunned and vulnerable on a heated rock. Time to uncoil.

Moab's main street was lined with stores, cafés, and restaurants. Sara learned from Julia and from her work at the café about the city's strategic position as the gateway to two of the country's most famous national parks, Arches and Canyonlands. Mountain bike enthusiasts, lovers of the outdoors, and photography buffs all flocked to the area. When Julia had decided to take her early retirement there, she calculated that between the sale of her home in Northern Virginia and decades of savvy investments in the stock market she could buy one fifth of the town. Another option was to settle for a reasonably-sized home and have enough left to live for about seven hundred years. She opted for the nice home and the seven hundred years, and started taking hikes, watching sunsets and sunrises, and trying to find the best afternoon light to capture the sheen of the apple skin with her paints and brushes, now that she could finally devote herself to art. It took her only a few months of that routine to start dreading the prospect of having to spend seven centuries that way. She then came up with the idea of converting her ground floor into a café, open only until three in the afternoon because she liked to go to bed early. Gradually, she started to showcase Navajo necklaces and rings, then paintings by local artists, and the coffee shop became something between an art gallery and a craft store. In the summer months, some occasional tourist would ask her about room rentals, which gave her the idea of turning a section in the back into a bed and breakfast. She quickly forgot that she had moved to Moab specifically to avoid appointments, commitments, and bookkeeping. The contemplative life did not suit her, as much as she hated to admit that. She had to restrain herself from starting to organize guided tours to the parks, photography trips, and white river rafting. Jane was astonished by her friend's knack of turning everything she came across into a money-making venture.

"You can take Julia out of the business, but not the business out of Julia," she would tease, but she meant no harm,

and there was actually a certain degree of admiration in her words. Who knows, she thought, maybe Julia's attitude would provide a healthy example for Sara.

The first couple of weeks in Moab went by smoothly. Sara, contrary to Julia's worries, didn't seem to be in any rush to strike up new friendships, and adapted nicely to the routine of the bed and breakfast. A large part of the clientele was French because Julia, for some reason, had ended up in one of the most popular guidebooks in France. They were people who preferred a frugal place rich in personality like *Etcetera* over one of the many comfortable but drab hotels along the highway. They were thrilled that Sara spoke some French and occasionally invited her to join them for a night out. The morning after, Julia carefully observed Sara's behavior, but she didn't detect anything suspicious. Every so often, Sara struck up a conversation with the few Italian tourists in the area, and marveled at the difference between the language she had learned at home and this new contemporary version. At first, her interlocutors seemed full of admiration for her mastery of the language, but after a few exchanges they became rather amused at hearing her talking like a book, as one of them said, which she wasn't sure was a compliment. She intended to write to Alice about that, but in the last few months their conversations had become strained, pre-occupied as they both were with overwhelming issues they weren't comfortable discussing. A generic letter didn't feel right, but dealing with her grandmother's illness in writing was even more difficult than doing it in person. Even a generic "how are you?" was problematic—indeed, just thinking of that question, and of the only possible answer, made Sara anxious. And then there was the incident at school that had caused her abrupt departure. Sara didn't know how much her grandmother knew about that, she could only hope that Jane had spared her the details. Not to mention the fact that writing meant, well, writing, because Nonna Ali had only made

some concessions to email when her job forced her to do so, but had reverted to ink and paper as soon as she retired. So, Sara would have had to find paper, an envelope, and a stamp, and then probably type her letter on the computer and copy it in the shaky handwriting of her generation. This was all doable, of course, but also a bit time-consuming, unnecessarily cumbersome, a curious way to spend your time, like hand washing your clothes when you have a washing machine in the basement. And so, after postponing the letter day after day, Sara eventually just forgot about it altogether.

When Sara finally decided to accept Julia's offer and borrow one of her bikes to explore the town, she regretted having waited so long. Some of the restaurants served unusual dishes that made her mouth water, like ginger pancakes with apples and butter. She wanted to try them someday, but for the time being her priority was to gain some independence. She would take advantage of the tiny kitchen in her bedroom—Julia's first move toward a studio for weekly rentals—and get organized so that she wouldn't be stepping on Julia's toes more than necessary. She had been so eager to leave home that she hadn't given much thought to her mother's tendency to dismiss other people's wishes as frivolous. In this particular case, Jane had basically ignored Julia's legitimate desire to shield herself from everything she generically labelled as East Coast Syndrome, from ambition to addiction—in short, everything she had left behind, and that Sara seemed to embody. Sara didn't know how long she would stay in Moab—she doubted she could last the summer there, let alone a whole year—but Julia's welcome speech had been a clear indication that it was important to set boundaries. In retrospect, Sara wondered why she hadn't started to go out on her own earlier rather than spending days in her bedroom—her lair, rather—licking her wounds and trying to put some order to her thoughts.

She quickly found the organic grocery store at the corner of main street. She loaded her shopping cart with hummus,

pita bread, milk, cereal, chicken breasts, and peanut butter. The price of fruits and vegetables was discouraging. She was determined not to accept money from her mother, but it was not clear how much Julia would pay her for her work at the café, since she was already giving her free room and board. She grabbed two tomatoes, looked at the price per pound, and put them back on the shelves. Carrots were a cheaper and more versatile alternative, she decided, good on their own as a snack and great with hummus. She put a package in the cart and proceeded to the dairy section, trying to ignore her grandmother's voice in her head warning her to buy canned goods first and milk last. I am almost done anyway, she said, as if Alice were right next to her. It wasn't unusual for her to talk to her far away grandma like that.

"Excuse me!" someone called from behind her. Sara turned around.

"Sorry, I think that's my cart."

Sara looked into the cart. Hummus, pita bread, milk...

"I think you must be mistaken; these are all my things."

The other woman seemed perplexed.

"That's strange, I could have sworn..."

Sara pointed at another cart in the middle of the aisle.

"Is that yours by any chance?"

The woman looked in that direction.

"Ah, yes, that must be it."

She started walking towards the cart, then turned with a smile.

"Ah, you're right, sorry about that."

"No worries, it happens to me all the time," Sara lied, just to be nice.

She turned back to finish her shopping. She had her hand on a can of tomatoes when the woman with the other cart came up to her.

"I am sorry to bother you again, but I'm almost positive that you did in fact take my cart."

Sara looked into the woman's shopping cart: hummus, pita bread, milk, peanut butter...

"The peanut butter is the culprit! I'm allergic," she said, almost apologetically.

Sara looked at the peanut butter jar and then again at the woman. She had thick jet-black hair that looked still wet from a shower, and a triangular face with sharp, high cheekbones. Her tan made her skin, which must have already been naturally dark, appear even darker in contrast to her small teeth that showed through her slight smile. The unbuttoned top of her linen shirt showed a glimpse of a small, turquoise stone necklace.

Anyway, back to the peanut butter.

"I'm sorry, you're definitely right," admitted Sara, switching to the other cart.

"No problem, it happens a lot, as you said," the woman replied. She then showed her the tub of hummus.

"There's a sale going on, two for the price of one, if you're interested."

The embarrassment prevented Sara from thanking her. She grabbed more hummus before going to the check-out lines, tightly gripping her cart to avoid making any additional mistakes.

That really is a very common mishap in supermarkets. There was no reason to blush.

"This is how we make quesadillas," Julia said while cutting thin slices from a block of cheese. She had finally decided to offer her customers a wider selection of food items, after trying to resist the idea for a long time. It was true that, besides the guests from the Bed and Breakfast, people mainly visited *Etcetera* to browse around and kill the time between one hike and the next, but those who did sit down for a bite sometimes wondered out loud if the menu was missing a page. Julia eventually realized she couldn't just rely on her

coffee, though the beans that came straight from Seattle and her Italian coffee machine had earned her the reputation of best barista in Moab.

"After Starbucks, we Americans no longer have any excuses for making bad coffee," she liked to repeat to Sara, who would nod politely.

Julia had initially been vague about Sara's tasks, reluctant as she was to entrust too many responsibilities to a person she barely knew, but she'd warmed up to the idea of sharing the daily operation of *Etcetera*. And Sara, in spite of the strange circumstances that brought her to Moab, had proven reliable, and on a couple of occasions had shown a surprising assertiveness when minor issues came up in the running of the café. Julia suspected that her presence had even inspired her decision to offer a proper lunch menu. Things just look less daunting when you are not alone.

"So, I'm going to put my clothes in the dryer, while you clean up a little here and keep an eye on the desserts, sounds good?"

"Sure, no worries," Sara responded.

It was a dead hour of a beautiful day, everyone seemed to be out hiking. Sara went to the backroom and turned on the oven light. Divided into twelve equal molds, Julia's famous cranberry orange bread, the house specialty, was taking on a lovely, golden color. She put away the sugar and the flour and wiped down the countertop. The doorbell chime alerted her that someone had entered the café. She returned to the main dining room, picked up a notepad to look more professional, and walked toward the only occupied table.

"Oh hey!"

The woman from the grocery store looked at her with surprise.

"Hi..."

Sara felt strangely happy to see her again. She tried to be funny.

"Good morning, what would you say to a plate of hummus and pita?"

The woman laughed.

"For Heaven's sake, no! That's all I have been eating since the beginning of that sale... Julia's not here by any chance, is she?"

"She's upstairs."

Sara felt she needed to explain her presence in the café.

"I... work for her. Can I get you something?"

"Yes, if you don't mind. I'll have a cappuccino, but..."

"But?"

"...the way Julia makes it."

"And how's that?"

"Well, I don't know exactly, I've never asked. Not much foam, that's for sure..."

"No foam, cream instead of milk, and a splash of vanilla," Julia interjected walking towards them.

"Is this how you guys make cappuccinos around here?" Sara asked.

"Only for very special customers," Julia replied. "Have you already met Una?"

Una, Sara thought, her name is Una.

"Yes, well, no..." she mumbled.

"We met at the grocery store," Una explained.

"We had a little mishap with the carts," Sara added.

Julia stared at Una, who looked away, then took the notepad from Sara's hands.

"You can keep chatting, I'll go make two Una Specials. How does that sound?"

Sara would have preferred skimmed milk for her cappuccino, but she didn't dare give Julia more work. She took a seat in front of Una, still feeling like she had to justify her presence in Moab.

"My name's Sara, I'm here to help Julia for the season."

Una remembered Julia talking about her niece, or rath-

er, a good friend's daughter who had some issues and had unceremoniously been dumped on her. She had imagined a completely different person, though. There was something peculiar about Sara, she had already sensed it during their short meeting at the store.

"Are you from around here?" Sara asked to break the silence.

"Yes, can't you tell?"

"How could I tell?"

"Well, from the color of my skin, for example. No, I'm not Mexican, I'm Ute."

"Ute?"

"Yes, we were here long before the white settlers arrived. The name Utah comes from us, the Ute people."

Sara looked at her with curiosity and a little embarrassment.

"Sorry... I only arrived here a couple of weeks ago and I don't know much about this place."

Una gave her an encouraging look.

"That's a nice condition to be in, and much better in any case than getting here with all these preconceived notions about Native Americans and the Wild West that so many people have."

"Here they are: two Una Specials, as well as two slices of cranberry orange bread straight from the oven!" Julia exclaimed. She put everything on the table, grabbed a chair and sat down with them.

"What are you doing here, don't you work today?" Julia asked Una.

"I just came back from work, if you can call that work. I chased the moon up and down across Canyonlands... with little success."

"I actually work as a park ranger," she continued, looking at Sara, "but about a year ago I decided to become part-time, as long as I can afford it. They want me to spend way too

much time at the office, which is not what I think a park ranger should be doing. So, when I am not working there, I take tourists out on foot or by bike, mostly people who stay here at Julia's. I also try to take photos for my postcards. I hope to publish a whole photography book on our parks someday."

"Which reminds me, I sold a few of your postcards last week," Julia said.

"I saw them!" Sara exclaimed. "I sold a few of them too, I didn't know they were from a local photographer. The night shots are my favorite. Do you visit the parks at night?"

"That too."

"May I just say how much I disapprove of these night excursions of yours?" Julia chimed in.

"Oh, come on! I know these mountains like the back of my hand."

"I am not questioning your expertise. I am more worried about humans than nature. I am afraid you might find somebody on your path who's eager to teach you a lesson, especially now, with all these people just passing through town."

"Teach me a lesson?! What for? I don't bother anyone! And I don't ask anybody for anything."

"Exactly. I am afraid you may run into someone who objects to your being young, being a woman, and not asking anybody for anything."

"Come on, Julia, don't exaggerate. This is the city-dweller in you speaking now. Besides, the season is almost over, you'll soon have fewer reasons to worry about me."

"By the way, if you ever need company, count me in," Sara said instinctively.

"Listen to her! You just started to work, and you are already asking for time off?" Julia chimed in.

"Well, I thought we were talking about night excursions, and the café does close at three p.m...."

"I bet you'd work really well after a night spent chasing the moon, to quote your friend here."

"You know that you're being a real grouch, right? Come on, you won't go bankrupt if you give your employees half a day off, stop playing the boss!" Una said, laughing. She turned back to Sara.

"Agreed, then. Full moon is in a week. I'll pick you up after dinner."

Mulling over that conversation during the week that followed, Sara thought there was a good chance that Una knew the real reason for her presence in Moab. Nobody in their right mind could believe that Julia all of a sudden needed full-time help with her café or that Sara was such an outdoor enthusiast that she had even skipped her last weeks in school, and her graduation ceremony, to rush to Moab. Julia seemed to be on very good terms with Una. Sara thought she'd even detected some complicity between them, especially when she described the scene at the organic food market. It was very likely that Julia had shared the real reason why the daughter of her childhood friend had just turned up in town. But if that was the case, Sara concluded, it was better to give Una her own version of the story, though that meant being asked the same old questions she found hard to answer. In the silence of the starry night, among the dense shadows cast by the rocks, she seemed to have even fewer answers than usual, almost as if she'd been requested to explain a stranger's behavior and not her own.

"And so, what happened after that... episode, the one in high school? I mean, are you still drinking? How are you doing now?"

Una was whispering, as if afraid of disturbing the silence of the night. She placed the camera on the tripod so that she'd be ready to take a shot of the moon rising under Delicate Arch, and then sat down on a rock.

"Well, after that incident my mother started guarding the wet bar like a watchdog. And here, Julia basically has me go through an X-ray machine every time I come home..."

Her words and light-hearted tone sounded forced and hollow. It was the first time she found herself out in the middle of nature at night and she really wanted to say she liked it. Instead she was almost frightened and somewhat lightheaded, and she wondered whether she had made the right decision by joining Una on that excursion. The noises were particularly unnerving—the rustling, the swishing, the crackling. Each conjured a different danger, from rattlesnakes to men lurking in the dark. Now that they were no longer walking, they sounded even more ominous. Sara tried to ignore them as she lay down as best as she could on a flat rock that was still warm from the daytime sun. They had stopped at the margins of the vast sandstone amphitheater. At the edge of the cliff, the outline of Delicate Arch, clearly visible in the full moon night, framed the La Sal Mountains, far off in the distance.

“And there, when you were home, I mean, why did you start?”

Always the same questions, Sara thought. She felt though that the attention that Una was devoting to her deserved a little more, maybe even the truth. Had she known the truth, she would have been delighted to share it with Una, and with that striking landscape that seemed to be listening too.

“I’d like to know that myself.”

And that was the truth, after all. None of the explanations proposed by the therapist, or by Jane when she tried to play therapist, fully convinced her. Now she just wanted to forget about that other version of herself that everybody seemed to be interested in but that she found a bit boring, somewhat predictable. Lying on the rock, with her arm bent under her head, Sara had finally found a comfortable position for her body. Harmony, fragility. Una forced herself to look elsewhere.

“I don’t think it’s a good night for taking photos,” Sara said after a while. “Just look at that cloud.”

Una looked up at the clear sky.

"What cloud?"

"That one."

Sara pointed at the light strip that veiled Sagittarius.

Una moved closer to her.

"That's not a cloud, that's the Milky Way."

Sara feared she had shown herself to be a hopeless city girl. The Milky Way, of course. She must have read about it somewhere. But she had never seen it like this. Perhaps she had never seen it at all, now that she thought about it.

"It's normal to mistake the Milky Way for a cloud, you know," Una consoled her. "There aren't too many places left where you can see the full night sky of stars. You should come hear my presentation one of these evenings, when I am working at the office. That's precisely what I talk about—light pollution, light that hides instead of revealing."

The paradox struck Sara, who looked intently at Una's profile. Everything invited Sara to get even closer to Una—their stillness after the night walk, the darkness all around, the heat of the day slowly escaping from the ground, and the rocks shaped by ancient geological phenomena that seemed to be silently waiting. She closed her eyes, tried to gather her courage. They remained quiet for a few minutes, then Sara was startled by a noise close to her. She opened her eyes and saw Una near the tripod.

"No!"

"What's wrong?" Sara asked, getting up herself.

"I got distracted, or perhaps I made a mistake in setting the tripod, but it's gone."

She pointed to the full moon.

"What do you mean... What's gone where?"

"The moon. It kept rising while we were talking, and now it's impossible to frame it the way I wanted, right under the arch."

She looked up unhappily at the moon.

"I am not giving up, though, I'll see you in a month!"

Sara looked up at the full disc that seemed to be sailing away through the night sky.

"But you are trying to do something really difficult! Why do you have this passion for the full moon? Maybe you should try following its various phases, from when it's barely visible... Follow its path, getting to know it, something like that, I don't know. Then maybe even this appointment with the full moon would be a little easier to schedule, don't you think? It would feel a little less like an ambush."

Una stared at her.

"Do you really believe that?"

"Yes... Well, I mean, it's not like I've thought about it much, but it seems more logical to me. You want to capture the moon, trap it under the arch. Instead, what you should do is follow it with more patience, let it grow. I'm sure it would make for some interesting photos, with or without the full moon."

Una raised her eyes towards the starry sky, then lowered them to the ground.

"I'll think about it... Thanks."

They descended the hill in silence. Una could have walked the path with her eyes closed, but not Sara. When the moon disappeared behind the slope, the night became darker, wrapping them in its sticky embrace.

"Go this way, be careful, you have to jump a little, maybe a foot, a foot and a half even..."

Una went first, then stretched out her hand to guide Sara, who held it as she leapt into the dark, landing on fine pebbles that carried her down several inches.

"Careful!" Una exclaimed, squeezing Sara's hand harder. Sara held on longer than she needed to and even when she regained her balance, she didn't let Una go. For safety, she said to herself. They continued their descent side by side in silence, almost holding their breath. They only spoke a few, awkward words when Una dropped Sara off in front of *Etcetera*.

“Well, goodnight, I’m sorry I didn’t bring you much luck,” Sara said.

“No, that’s not true, you gave me a lot to think about. See you around. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”