One of those nights when the sky ran deep and the cosmos was flung from horizon to horizon like handfuls of diamond sand, Mae’s grandfather took her tiny fingers in his and pointed upward, saying, “It looks big, sweetheart. But remember, nothing’s forever. Even stars die.”

“They do?” Something in her voice must have trembled because her grandfather laughed and hugged her close.

“Don’t you worry.” He lowered his voice to a whisper, leaned in so that his whiskery lips scratched her ear. “Nothing’s lost. Those old stars spark and flare and fall to earth. And that’s where we come in.” He dug in his shirt pocket and after a moment produced something between his thumb and index finger, waving it once like a magician before bringing it to rest before her eyes. The object was dark, the size of a grape, though it seemed unlikely her grandfather would carry a grape over his heart. He unfolded her hand and placed it carefully on her upturned palm. “This,” he told her, “is a fossil star.” It sat with a pleasant weight, still radiating his body heat.

At first she didn’t know what to do. If she should drop it in this field, it would be swallowed in the long grass, lost forever. She held her breath and stood statue-still, her hand out as though presenting the dead star on an invisible platter. Just as she was starting to panic with responsibility, she saw merriment in her grandfather’s eyes. He bumped her shoulder, chased off her trepidation with a playful quirk of his eyebrows. She inhaled. Began to relax. Finally bent her neck to get a better look. The star was hard and smooth. She saw now that it wasn’t as perfectly shaped as a grape. One side was fatter than the other, its surface scarred and dimpled. As she turned her hand to examine it from other angles, something deep inside caught the moonlight and shimmered, glowing with intense blue life.
Before she could really lose herself in that mysterious glow, her grandfather interrupted by mussing her hair. “It’s something you have to understand, Mae. Most people just get by on this earth. They pick a trade, settle into some kind of work, do whatever they can to make ends meet. Doctors, lawyers, garbage men—it’s all the same.” Here he crouched, plucking the star from her hand as he settled onto his heels. Before she could protest, he’d wrapped it in a handkerchief and returned it to her. “But that isn’t our lot. We’re different, you and me. We have a purpose.” He looked long and hard into her face.

Mae gripped the handkerchief, unsure if she was supposed to answer.

“We’re here to find those old stars,” he continued. “And when we do, we give them back their fire.”

This was a moment that had settled upon Mae like a fine dust, almost unnoticed when it first coated the skin of her being. But long after she discovered that her grandfather’s stars were not stars at all, the fairytale clung to her. All through her adolescence and five semesters of college, through a failed marriage, a child, and another failed marriage—for nearly all her life—she had continued to think of herself as a bearer of celestial fire. And then one day she found herself in the shop standing over a steel and glass display case filled with nothing more remarkable than sparkling rocks.

It was a Saturday in late spring, the time of year when her business yawned and stretched, waking to the busy season that hovered just around the corner. Traffic through the shop had been sporadic, mostly regulars who lived in Helena and came out several times a summer with the hope of striking it rich. They laughed and chatted and pretended familiarity with her. Their faces gleamed with pleasantries. More than one asked if she had found the next Queen Marie or Logan Sapphire yet. Then they bought a bag or two of gravel and left. She watched their backs as they shouldered through the door, wished they would leave more quickly.

By the time Dan came in with the mail, she had been more than an hour without a customer and was beginning to allow herself the hope that she’d seen the last of them for the day. “Hey, Mae.” Dan gave her his usual understated wave.

She returned the greeting.
He slid the bundle of envelopes across the countertop. Neither a large nor a small man, not chiseled or particularly strong in appearance, he conveyed an overall impression of rounded edges and a lack of corners. But he had a solid, dependable presence. Offhand she couldn’t remember exactly how long ago she had hired him to oversee the Anvil Bar Mine. Sometimes it seemed he’d always been around. While she flipped through the mail, he half-leaned, half-sat against the counter, hands in the pockets of his dun jacket, gaze directed toward the toes of his boots.

For the most part it was the standard mix: junk, bank statements, bills. She pulled out a packet from the faceting service and set it aside. She also pulled out a letter with her son’s name on the return address line and, below that, an inky red stamp proclaiming, “This was mailed by an inmate confined at a Washington State Department of Corrections facility. Its contents are uncensored.” Thin and almost weightless, it couldn’t have contained more than a page or two of her son’s cramped handwriting. She shuffled it to the bottom of the pile.

“Well.” Dan pushed himself off the counter.

Something in the way he paused made Mae fear she was about to hear yet another aphorism meant to pick up her spirits. But all he said was, “Guess I’d better shove off,” and then he was through the door and gone.

She had never had romantic feelings toward Dan, but in that moment, she loved him. Loved that he spoke little and kept his thoughts to himself. Loved that, unlike everyone else she knew, he didn’t try to distract her or bury her in clouds of sympathy and manufactured cheerfulness.

The building breathed, filling her nostrils with the scent of old unfinished wood. Now that she was alone, she retrieved the envelope with her son’s name on it. Such a slight thing. After letting it linger a moment in her hand, she stuck it with the others, all unopened, way back in the dark part of the drawer beneath the counter. The drawer shut with a soft click.

She turned her attention to the packet from the faceting service, slitting its top with a pair of scissors. When it was upended, five faceted stones spilled from its mouth, each in its own miniature ziplock bag, plinking one after another onto the glass of the display case. Four were a matched set: one carat each, step
cut, a nice medium blue. Pretty enough, but nothing special. The true gem was the fifth stone, a seven-point-three-carat Portuguese round that shone brilliant orange. She removed it from its bag and placed it on the bare glass. Using her fingertip, she rolled it on its pavilion, watching the light from the display case below dance and refract through its crown. Once, such a sight would have filled her with a near religious reverence. Even now, though she no longer felt she was brushing against the edge of some transcendent mystery, she couldn’t help but admire the stone’s beauty and the skill that went into cutting and polishing it. Still, it wasn’t on a par with her grandfather’s work. In his time he had turned out wonders. A six-hundred-forty-two-carat topaz he’d cut was on display at the Smithsonian, noted for both the flawlessness of the gem and the perfection of his artistry.

As she stood there, in the building that had once been her grandfather’s combined workshop and toolshed—stood, in fact, almost on the exact spot where he had sat so many hours bent over his jamb-peg lap—Mae reflected that she must now be close to the same age he had been when he took her out into that moonlit field all those decades ago and placed a raw sapphire in her hand.

She scooped up the five new stones, bent to unlock the display case door and slide it to one side. The case was six feet wide and three feet tall, standard jewelry counter stuff. Of all the items in the shop, it was the most conspicuously modern. Inside it had two glass shelves plus an opaque base. On the top shelf sat the green and blue sapphires, the colors most common to the placer gravel deposits beneath her land, ranging in hue from the palest periwinkle to the deepest cobalt. The shelf below held the less common yellows and pinks, the rare oranges, a single ruby. Also on the second shelf were the garnets, the topazes, and five gold nuggets. The very bottom she used for purely decorative purposes. It was covered with a dark, gleaming bed of hematite pieces upon which rested two of her grandfather’s dopsticks, partially faceted sapphires still cemented to their ends. They were the last two stones he’d been working on.

While she was in the middle of rearranging the display to create space for the new pieces, she heard the crunch of tires pulling up in the dirt lot outside, followed by the slam of car doors. A family of four filed into the shop, spreading themselves amongst the
little merchandise she stocked. The father was drawn to the rough-hewn shelves on one wall that held mesh screens, gold pans, books about the geology of Montana. The mother, like most women, went straight to the display case. The two boys—maybe eight and ten—rifled through the single rack of t-shirts and twirled the spinner filled with postcards before joining their mother at the case where, one to either side of her, they pressed their foreheads and fingertips against the glass.

“Isn’t this a quaint little place,” the father said, running his hand along one of the plank shelves.

The mother peered at the gemstones. “Mmmm,” she said.

They were young parents, slender, clad in close-fitting outdoorsy gear and designer sunglasses. A ridiculous number of carabiners hung from their belt loops and camera straps. They were the kind of people, Mae thought, who probably ran marathons for fun on weekends. Their boys were blond and wore their hair like it had been arranged by a magazine photographer to appear windblown. In fact, the whole family could have stepped out of an advertisement for mountain bikes or camping equipment.

The father joined the rest of his family near the counter just as the boys were beginning to argue over which of them would find the biggest sapphire. Neither parent stepped in to quell the squabble. “You gotta love their enthusiasm,” the father grinned. “Joey. Hey, Joey. Tell the lady about the opal you found at Spencer.”

Neither boy responded. Their argument escalated to pushes and shoves.

“Guess we’d better get them out to the sapphire mine before they break something,” the father laughed, pulling out his wallet.

Mae glanced at the clock over the door. She wanted to tell this man to take his brats away and never come back. She wanted to tell him that no matter how deeply he looked into his sons’ eyes, there were seeds in their brains that would remain invisible until they bloomed into adulthood. At the very least she wanted to tell him that she was closing early today and that he was out of luck.

But she said none of that. Instead she said, “I close shop in two hours, so you’ll have to be quick about it.”
Mae’s own son, Bentley, was serving his first month of a life sentence. A long list of convictions had been read at the end of the trial. She couldn’t remember them all, much less the various degrees of offense. What stuck out in her memory was this: seven counts of rape, possession of a chemical used to drug the women, and filming the women without their consent. There was no doubt about his guilt. The evidence against him was both plentiful and overwhelming. The jury had returned with a verdict in what seemed a matter of minutes. Yet for all the legal certainty surrounding the case, Mae was left with nothing but questions—an unchartable, ever expanding galaxy of them.

After the trial, an image of Bentley as a child would find her at odd moments of the day, peeking around the corners of her routines. She couldn’t shake it. She might be driving into town, or filling orders her customers placed online, or talking to Dan about mine operations, and suddenly she would be remembering that disproportioned boy with the undersized body and the overlarge head, eyes turned round and owlish by a pair of glasses with thick lenses. It was an unfortunate appearance, but it fit. From an early age Bentley had been more interested in keeping ant farms and growing sugar crystals than he had been in fishing and playing catch. Most of the time he spent outdoors was devoted to gathering leaves and flowers of various plants, which he pressed between the pages of the dictionary, the world atlas, any volume of size he could reach. Lifting a book in their house was likely to result in a shower of flaking plant matter.

Bentley’s father had worried they were raising a sissy. In addition to his bookish pursuits, Bentley was given to bouts of crying. He cried when other children teased him at school; he cried at the sight of a dead raccoon beside the road; he cried after the Discovery Channel aired a show about dwindling rainforests. “That kid cries,” his father had said, “if his Rice Krispies don’t snap, crackle, and pop just right. We’ve got to toughen him up, or the world will chew him to pulp.” And yet, there grown Bentley had sat in the courtroom, straight-backed, sharp-jawed, awful, the last person in need of hardening.

Mae picked through memories of her son’s boyhood, peering into them the way her grandfather had peered into facet rough, looking for fractures and inclusions that might ruin the finished
product. Yet no matter how many memories she held to the light, turning them this way and that, she found no serious flaws, no red flags, no smoking guns, nothing that explained how her sensitive boy with dark eyes could grow into a man capable of such crimes. She and his father had divorced, but the split wasn’t bitter, and it hadn’t seemed to affect Bentley much anyway. He had continued to do well in school. He became more outgoing and accumulated friends. Eventually he went on to earn two degrees in botany and take a job with a nonprofit in Seattle where he worked to preserve the ecosystems of the Pacific Northwest. In his spare time he volunteered in community outreach programs at local museums.

It simply didn’t make sense.

Her friends took her out for breakfast, for dinner, for drinks. It’s not nature versus nurture, they told her during these outings. It’s nature and nurture, in equal parts. There were some things, they told her, that couldn’t be anticipated, couldn’t be curbed. It wasn’t her fault. It was nobody’s fault. Some things just were.

Now letters from Bentley arrived several times a week in the mail. She had read the first two. In them he wrote about books he borrowed from the prison library and books he wished the library owned. He described his quest to start an heirloom vegetable garden under the auspices of the Sustainability in Prisons Project. He joked about his cravings for a slice of huckleberry pie. In both letters he sounded so much like the Bentley she knew, so exactly like her son, that waves of dizziness and nausea washed over her. How could her boy and the monster that had been revealed in the courtroom be the same person? How could they be? When the next letter came, she held it pinched between her fingers until her entire hand trembled. Finally, unable to open it, she had consigned it to the drawer. Only gradually did the tightness in her chest loosen.

* * *

Open to the sky, the Anvil Bar Mine sat on the bluffs above Hauser Lake. The mine itself was not impressive, a relatively shallow excavation as these things went, running between twenty and thirty feet from the surface to the pay level and spanning about three-hundred-by-one-hundred feet. In its bottom waited a pair of waist-high rocker boxes and a handful of shovels and pickaxes. It was dusty and dry and looked like an ordinary gravel pit. More
than once Mae had heard first-timers standing on its lip whisper to their companions, “That’s it?” But for all the awe it failed to inspire, the mine was framed by stunning vistas. To one side, warm grassy expanses swept off toward Helena. To the other, across the glittering waters of Hauser Lake, the Big Belt Mountains hunkered, chewing at the skyline. Sometimes Mae came out here to be alone. To sit and to breathe and to remember the time in her youth when the world had seemed without limits.

It was maybe a two-minute drive from the shop. Mae led the way in her truck, parked well away from the mine’s edge when they got there. The family followed suit. Everyone exited their vehicles.

“Would you look at that,” the father said, facing the Big Belts.

The mother came around the car to share his view. After a moment she said, “Kids, get the camera. I want some pictures of you just there.”

Once the mother had photographed the boys in a number of poses and had filled probably half their camera’s memory, Mae led the family down into the mine. They took the graded ramp that Dan used for the loader and other machinery. Under his arms the father carried two five-gallon buckets for collecting the material they mined. Usually, as she walked down the ramp with customers, Mae talked about how the Missouri River had carved this valley, depositing gem-rich gravel bars along its banks thousands of years before Hauser Lake was created by a dam. Today, however, she said none of this. To this family she said only, “Being heavy, gemstones tend to settle low in the deposits. You’re most likely to find sapphires close to bedrock.” The boys were already out of earshot, having raced down the ramp, skidding now and then on loose dirt before ping-ponging out into the flat mine bed.

This particular quarry was not the first belonging to the Anvil Bar Mine. The deposits her grandfather had mined had long since been reclaimed, filled in and planted over with native vegetation, just as this one would be before another was dug further along the gravel bar. When Mae and the parents reached the bottom, she took them across to the opposite edge where Dan had removed the overburden, leaving a shelf of sediment that stood four-and-a-half feet off the mine’s floor. The boys, who had rejoined the group, had to jump to see over it. “This is the gravel deposit,” she
told the family. “What you want to do is dig down from the top, running every shovelful through the rocker boxes as you go.” The rocker boxes were wooden frames that sat on four legs, each with a hinged cradle that held two mesh screens, one atop the other with a few inches between. She demonstrated how to sift gravel through the devices, swinging their cradles back and forth to separate out material that was either too big or too small. “Once you’ve run it through the rockers, you’ll want to save everything that’s left in the screens.”

The father squatted, filled his palm with loose gravel. With the index finger of his other hand he sorted through it. “Looks like rocks to me. How do we tell if there are any sapphires in there?”

“You won’t know till you get the gravel home and get it washed,” Mae said. “Everything comes out of the ground covered in dirt.”

The younger boy ran up to her with a piece of milky quartz. “Is this a sapphire?”

“No,” she told him. “Sapphires are glassy. They’ll be real clear.”

The older boy held up a slightly less milky piece of quartz. “What about this? Is this a sapphire?”

“No. Gemstones radiate light,” she said. “Look for something that gathers light and holds it.”

The boys ran off to search elsewhere around the pit, their faces flushed and feverish. She didn’t care if they understood what she meant about the light. They scooted from one pile of detritus to the next, yelling stories to one another about the treasures that must surely be lying just inches away.

The mother stood with one hand on her hip, watched as her boys’ search gradually transformed into a game of tag. “You say most of the sapphires are at the bottom of the deposit?”

Mae gave her a close look. “They’re scattered all through the gravel bar,” she answered. “You want to dig top to bottom so you don’t miss anything. There are no shortcuts. You have to go through all the material to get what you’re after. Cutting corners will get you nothing but trouble.”

The mother didn’t reply. She gazed off toward her boys, who were now beginning to throw rocks at each other. After a moment she waved her hand as though in dismissal.
Mae was happy to leave these fools be. She climbed the earthen ramp out of the mine, pausing near the top to watch the family begin their digging. The father had picked up a shovel and was pointing with it, trying to direct his family’s efforts. The others seemed to be ignoring him. The mother hadn’t moved from her place, still stood with one hand on her hip as though she was above it all, and the boys hadn’t yet given up on running and throwing rocks and shouting.

Lately Mae had taken to wishing ill on people. She saw the postman and thought, *I hope you get dog bit.* She saw a young mother playing slots at Frontier Pies and thought, *I hope you lose every last thing to your name.* She saw her own face in the mirror, hiding behind wrinkles and sagging flesh, and she thought, *I hope the wolves get you. I hope a grizzly tears you limb from limb and leaves your bones to bleach in the sun.* Mae didn’t seriously want any of this. Every time one of these thoughts came to her unbidden, it was followed by a tingle of shame on the back of her neck. Yet still the thoughts came. She saw this family in her mine, the boys running wild, their behavior unchecked by the parents, and she thought, *I hope your boys shout and fight and hit each other until their noses are bloody. I hope you blame each other for their shortcomings as you age. And I hope you find nothing here. I hope you carry all those pounds of gravel back to your home, only to discover the weight of failure in every worthless pebble.*

Mae’s grandfather once told her every gemstone was a window that opened onto the universe. This was maybe two years after that night in the field, and she’d been spending regular periods of time in his workshop ever since, observing the process by which he returned the fire to his fossil stars. Of course she knew by then that the stones were really sapphires, but in her mind they still glimmered with the vestiges of sidereal light.

She sat at a right angle to her grandfather, watching a wooden lap spin and spin, polishing the table facet of the stone he held to its surface. *“What do you mean, window?”* she said.

Her grandfather lifted the sapphire off the lap and set it aside, then leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. For a long time he looked into her face, appraising. She stuck her chin out,
determined to meet his gaze. Finally he clapped his hands and said, “Okay. I think you’re ready.” He turned the lap off and pushed himself up from his stool.

Ready? For what? She watched as her grandfather bustled about, cleaning up. After he straightened his tools, he brought over a variety of finished gems on a black velvet tray and handed it to her. Then he turned to rummage through the cupboard where he kept his saws and grinding stones. She peered over his shoulder, trying to guess what he was looking for. Maybe he was going to let her facet a stone herself. Ever since she’d started seeking him out in this little wooden building that smelled like rocks and machine oil, he’d been talking her through the process, telling her as he worked how he started with the crown, then cut the girdle, finished on the long pavilion facets. He’d told her dozens of times about the angles involved. Mae looked at the glowing stones on the tray she held. The thought that she might create something so beautiful stopped her breath.

But when her grandfather emerged from the cupboard, he didn’t have the equipment for pre-shaping facet rough. Instead he held a clunky and strange-looking microscope with two eyepieces jutting from its head and an electrical cord running from its blocky base. This he plugged into the same outlet that fed his lap. After setting the microscope up on his workbench and fiddling with its knobs and levers, he turned back to Mae. She thought he was going to explain now, but all he offered was a wink as he plucked a light blue sapphire from her tray. He placed the stone on the platform above the base and pushed a button. A light came on, leaking from louvers in the base’s walls and shining upward through the gem. He bent to peer through the eyepieces, made final tweaks to the settings. Then he pulled a chair over that she could stand on to see into the microscope. “The universe awaits,” he said.

Half-certain this must be some kind of trick, some sleight of hand he’d rigged for her benefit, she climbed onto the chair and fitted her eyes to the viewers. It took a second to adjust to her new magnified vision. Below, she encountered an ice-colored field filled with indeterminate streaks and specks and, right in its center, something iridescent that looked like a strange lily-pad. She knew this was no trick. The lily-pad’s core was dark, but it was surrounded by a delicate leaf with edges of pure, sharp light.

“What is it?” she whispered.
Her grandfather chuckled, whispered back, “That’s a halo fracture around a zircon crystal. See how the break catches all those colors?”

They spent the next several hours putting one sapphire after another under the microscope, magnifying the bits of matter frozen inside. Her grandfather was right: it was like looking into the far reaches of outer space. These were regions populated by striking formations and curious nebulae. She saw rounded garnet grains hanging in clusters. She saw six-sided flecks of colorless mica and six-sided slabs of black hematite. She saw shimmering curtains of rutile silk that made her think of halls of mirrors. And all of it suspended in the hearts of stones she had previously thought were perfectly clear.

It was in a yellow sapphire that she first came upon the variety of inclusion that would become her favorite. Her grandfather had just switched out the stone under the microscope, and he took some time refocusing the apparatus on the new one. When at last it was ready for her, she put her face to the viewers. By now she was used to the random spots and flecks. Her eyes went straight to the elliptical disk of bubbles floating just off center in the sun-colored expanse. The bubbles were fine and clear and densely packed, arranged in tight curves and whorls.

“They call that a fingerprint inclusion,” her grandfather told her.

Once he said it, it was unmistakable. The thing was a fingerprint—not one belonging to a human, clearly, but a fingerprint just the same—preserved like an insect in amber inside one of her grandfather’s fossil stars. Its very existence seemed a miracle.

He smiled when she said this aloud.

“It’s no miracle, sweetheart,” he said. “They aren’t even rare. You see them all the time in corundum.”

And yet, she never tired of them. From that point on, every chance she had, she spent over the microscope, looking for those intricate clouds of bubbles. Like real fingerprints, their variety was endless. In some, the bubbles were almost uniform pinpricks. In others, the bubbles stretched into long, thin tubes. Some prints occurred in isolation. Others were crowded by guest crystals. They came in ovals, in irregular shapes with rounded edges, in long smears and smudges, in veils that condensed in one place and broke apart in another. No matter how they manifested themselves,
Mae had for a long time found their presence reassuring; she saw in them the personal mark of God, or maybe of the universe itself—the mark, anyway, of some vast and nearly eternal thing that she could only vaguely conceptualize. But following Bentley’s conviction, the idea of fingerprints in sapphires had started to seem to her like a cruel joke, a bit of dead-end evidence, the mark of a canny criminal who had no record. Sure, they had the print, could photograph it and put it on file. They knew someone was responsible. But there was no way to trace that print to its owner.

This was what Mae was thinking about as she stood behind the counter in her shop watching the clock over the door count down to closing: fingerprints and fault. About how all the choices she had made and not made over the course of her life had winnowed down to this one exact place and time. About how, at this moment, there was no other place she could be, no other self she could inhabit.

She tapped a pen on the counter. Thirty minutes to go and the family of four still hadn’t returned. She changed the roll of paper in the credit card machine and waited. When the family still hadn’t come back after another ten minutes, she grabbed her keys and went to retrieve them.

* * *

When Mae parked at the mine, the mother and one of the boys were already at their car, the boy sitting sideways on the backseat with his legs out the open door while the mother inspected one of his shins. A first-aid kit sat by her side. As Mae approached, she saw the boy’s leg was raw most of the distance between his knee and ankle. Though he was no longer crying, his eyes were red, his breath coming in chokes and gasps. A glob of snot hung under his nose.

“Is he all right?” Mae asked.

“It’s just a scrape.” The mother daubed some kind of ointment on the leg. “He slipped playing king of the mountain.”

Now that she was closer, Mae saw the wound was a shallow abrasion, not as severe as it first looked.

The mother pulled a gauze pad from the first-aid kit and applied it.
“It was time to call it a day anyway,” Mae said to no one in particular. Then, to the mother, “Where are the others?”

Without looking up the mother said, “Still down there, dig-ging.”

Mae left the mother and the boy to their bandages and walked to the top of the ramp that led into the mine. In the background Hauser Lake shone like a mirror, reflecting an upside-down image of the Big Belts folding back on one another. Slanting sunlight cast the entire scene in soft, warm colors. It was a postcard landscape, the kind she sometimes held in her memory until it became hard and crystalline, a cut and polished reminder of the majestic things in this world. Of course, included in that diamond memory would be flaws—herself, the father and boy in the pit, the mother and boy in the car—impurities that were small but ugly, impossible to ignore.

Something like an ache settled over her bones. Below, in the cool shadows of the mine, the father stooped over a rocker box, sifting gravel with manic furor. From this distance he appeared to have remained clean, free of sweat and dust and the grime of dig-ging, entirely out of place. He was shouting, “Bring me some more of the good stuff, Joey!”

The boy he addressed was nowhere in sight, probably still running willy-nilly through the mine.

Mae gathered herself and started down the ramp, ready to be done with these dilettante treasure hunters. She should have chased them off at the start. It wasn’t until she reached the mid-point of the descent that she finally spotted the boy lying on his belly against the gravel deposit, so coated with dirt he could have passed for a natural feature. With one hand he was scraping at the lowest layer of sediment, his arm sunk past his elbow into the earth. He’d obviously been at it for some time. Mae felt a sudden and overwhelming urge to slap both the mother and the father. How could they allow one of their children to undercut the wall? Hadn’t she told them to dig from the top?

She drew her breath, started to yell at the boy to get away from there, but her warning never reached him. While her voice was still caught between her teeth and tongue, a section of the wall above the boy’s prone figure gave way, dissolving into gravel and loose dirt. It wasn’t a dramatic collapse. There was no giant plume
of dust. No thunderous clap. Really almost no noise or dust at all from where Mae stood, only a soft whump, as though someone had dropped a sandbag on the ground. And just like that, the boy was buried. It happened so fast it was as if she had imagined it. As if that pile of rubble had always been there and she’d only mistaken it for the shape of a boy digging.

Everything froze. Mae stood on the ramp, dumb, her joints wooden and stiff. The father leaned on the rocker box, head turned toward the source of the noise, a blank expression on his face. All of creation seemed muted. The moment stretched and stretched, pulling tight against itself. Finally, just as it was getting unbearable, something snapped, and a jerky, unnatural motion returned to the world. Even as Mae started running, a part of her remained distant, almost dispassionate. It was like she was watching herself in a silent film. She saw herself stumble, slip once as she reached the mine floor, slip again in the crossing, taking a fall that would probably turn her hip sore and blue. The observing Mae felt nothing. She watched as she pushed herself up, shouted something to the father, then resumed her ungainly, unpracticed run. While this was taking place, she tried to calculate how much earth had fallen on the boy. Certainly the weight of it would have forced the oxygen from his lungs, but it probably wasn’t enough to crush him outright. Which meant it wasn’t too late. The boy still had time, if they were quick.

The father reached the pile of earth first and attacked it with his shovel. Mae got there a few seconds later, diving onto her knees to plunge her hands into the dirt. It was the sensation of rocks scraping the flesh from her knuckles and breaking her nails that finally brought her back to herself. The film ended, and all the panic and adrenaline and noise flooded back in. “God, no,” the father was saying, over and over in time with his shovel strokes.

Mae scrabbled and scratched, willing herself to push her hands through all the worthless stones and dirt and fossil stars. There was still time for this boy. If only she could find and grasp his wrist, his finger, they would be able to get him out. It wasn’t too late. This was a boy she could save.