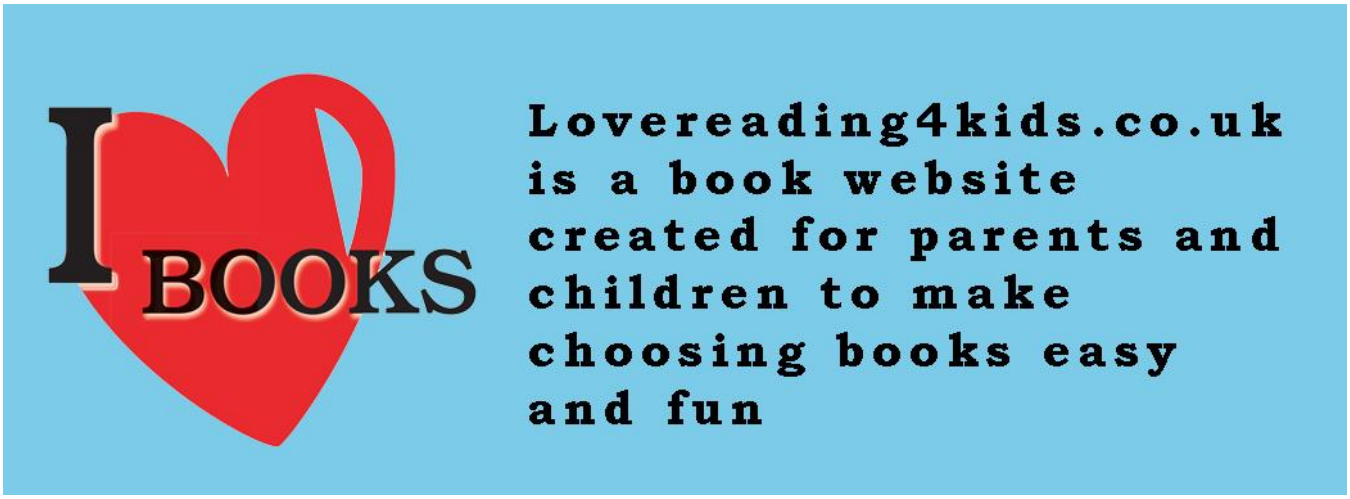


Opening extract from

The Edge of Everything

Written by

Jeff Giles

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Prologue

She named him herself, so it felt like he belonged to her.

He said that where he was from, which he called the Lowlands, they strip your name away like a husk the moment you arrive—to remind you that you're *no one* and *nothing*. When he told her this, she moved a little closer. She should have been scared after what she'd seen him do to Stan, but she wasn't. Stan deserved everything he got and worse.

The lake was frozen, and they were standing way out in the middle. The ice was shifting, settling. It made booming sounds beneath them, as if it might give way. Stan was gone, but drops of his blood had seeped into the lake. There was a dark constellation at their feet.

She refused to look at it. She suggested some names, and he listened in silence, his eyes shy and wounded-looking. She wanted to step even closer, but she was afraid she'd startle him. She teased him instead.

She told him he seemed like either an Aragorn—or a Fred. He tilted his head, confused. She'd have to work on his sense of humor.

Otherwise, there was nothing about him she'd have changed. He had tangled black hair that fell near his eyes like vines. His face was pale, except for bruises high up on both cheeks. It looked like someone had grabbed his face and dug their fingernails in. Over and over. For *years*. She didn't ask who had been hurting him—or why he'd been sent to whatever the Lowlands were in the first place. It was too soon for questions like that.

He told her that even if she gave him a name, the lords of the Lowlands wouldn't let him use it. She'd heard him shout so fiercely at Stan. But with her, he was quiet and unsure. He said he didn't think he even deserved a name after all the things he'd done. Been *forced* to do.

If that didn't break her heart, it definitely tore a little bit off.

He was staring at her now—looking *into* her, like he thought she was the answer to something.

She gave him a playful look.

"Dude, seriously," she said, "*enough* with the eyes."

She told him everybody deserved a name—and that "the lords" should shut up.

She said hers was Zoe Bissell.

He nodded. He already knew. She couldn't figure out how.

She told him she'd call him X until she knew what sort of person he was. X for an *unknown variable*. Zoe was 17, and so many crappy, lonely things had already happened to her that she knew it was insane to get close to even one more person. But maybe X's pain, whatever it was, would help her put aside her own.

She told him that if the Lowlands took *this* name away, she'd just give him another one.

"Such as Fred," he said, and attempted a smile.

He was learning.

part one

A Rescue

one

Zoe met x on a Sunday in February, when there was a storm on its way from Canada and the sky was so dark it looked like someone was closing a giant coffin lid over Montana.

The blizzard wasn't supposed to hit the mountain for an hour, and her mom had gone to get groceries to tide them over. Zoe had wanted to go, too, because her mother couldn't be trusted to choose food. Not ever. Her mom was a badass in many ways. Still, the woman was a hard-core vegan and her idea of dinner was tofu or seitan, which, as Zoe had stated repeatedly, tasted like the flesh of aliens.

Her mother had insisted she and her brother, Jonah, stay home where they'd be safe. She said she was pretty sure she could get down the mountain and back up again before the storm ripped through. Zoe had driven in blizzards herself. She was pretty sure she couldn't.

Zoe wasn't thrilled to be in charge. It was partly because Jonah was a spaz, though she was not allowed to call him that, according to a sign her mother had posted above the gargantuan juicer in the

kitchen: Uncool Words That I Cannot, in Good Conscience, Tolerate. More than that, though, it was because the place she'd lived her whole life suddenly seemed menacing and strange. In November, Zoe's father had died while exploring a cave called Black Teardrop. Then, in January, two of the people she loved most in the world, a couple of elderly neighbors named Bert and Betty Wallace, were dragged out of their home by an intruder and never seen again. The grief was like a cold stone on Zoe's heart. She couldn't imagine how bad it was for Jonah.

She could hear her brother outside now, chasing Spock and Uhura around like the ADHD maniac that he was. She'd let him go out because he'd begged to play with the dogs, and, honestly, she couldn't stand being with him one more second. He was eight. If she'd said no, he would have whined till her ears bled ("Just let me go out for ten minutes, Zoe! Okay, five minutes! Okay, *two* minutes! I can have two minutes? Okay, what about five minutes?") Even if she'd managed to shut him up, she'd have been stuck with his crazy energy in a small house on an isolated mountain with a blizzard coming their way like a pissed-off army.

She went online and checked WeatherBug. It was 10 degrees below zero.

Zoe knew she should call Jonah inside, but kept putting it off. She couldn't deal with him yet. At least she'd wrapped every inch of him up tight: a green skater-boy hoodie, a down jacket, and black gloves decorated with skulls that glowed in the dark. She had insisted that he wear snowshoes so he wouldn't sink into a snowdrift and disappear. Then she'd spent five minutes forcing them onto his feet while he twitched and writhed like he was being electrocuted. He really could be ridiculous.

She checked her phone. It was five o'clock, and there were two texts waiting for her.

The first was from her friend Dallas, who she'd been seeing off and on before her dad died.

It said: *Blizzards be awesome, dawg! You doing OK??*

Dallas was a good guy. He was muscly and dimply in a baseball-player kind of way—cute, but not exactly Zoe's type. Also, he had a tattoo that used to kill the mood whenever he took his shirt off. He'd apparently gone back and forth between *Never Stop!* and *Don't Ever Stop!*, and the tattoo artist had gotten confused and the tat wound up reading, *Never don't stop!* Dallas, being Dallas, loved it and high-fived the guy on the spot.

Zoe texted him back in Dallas-speak: *I'm solid, dawg! Thx for checking. You rock on the reg. (Did I say that right?)*

The second text was from her best friend, Val: *This blizzard sucks ass. ASS! I'm gonna take a nap with Gloria and ignore it. I'm VERY serious about this nap. Do you need ANYTHING AT ALL before nap begins?? Once nap is in progress, I will be UNAVAILABLE to you.*

Val's girlfriend was extremely shy. Val was . . . *not*. She'd been crazy in love with Gloria for a year, and was always doing beautiful, slightly psycho things, like making a Tumblr devoted entirely to Gloria's feet.

Zoe texted back: *Why is everyone worried about me? I'm FINE! Go take your nap, Nap Goddess! I will be soooo quiet!!!!*

Smiling to herself, she added emojis of an alarm clock, a hammer, and a bomb.

Val wrote back one more time: *Love you too, freak!*

ZOE FOUND DUCT TAPE in a kitchen drawer and taped up the downstairs windows so they wouldn't shatter in the storm. Her

mother had told her that doing this in a blizzard was dumb and possibly dangerous. Still, it made Zoe feel safer somehow, and gave her something to do. She peered outside, and saw Jonah and the black Labs jumping back and forth across the frozen river at the bottom of their yard. Their mom had prohibited this activity on another sign she had made: Uncool Behavior That I Cannot, in Good Conscience, Tolerate. Zoe pretended she hadn't noticed what her brother was doing. Then she stopped watching so she wouldn't see him do anything worse. She went upstairs and taped *X*'s on the second-story windows. She threw in a few *O*'s, too, so that when her mother finally drove up it'd look like giants were playing tic-tac-toe.

She finished taping the windows at 5:30, just as the storm finally found the mountain. She made herself a cup of coffee—black, because her mother only bought soy milk, which tasted like the *tears* of aliens—and drifted into the living room, so she could sip it at the window. Zoe stared out at the forest, which started up at the bottom of their yard and ran all the way down to the lake. Her family's land was a mostly bald patch of the mountain, but there was a stand of larch up against the house to give them shade in the summer. The wind had agitated them. Branches were stabbing and scratching the glass. It was like the trees were trying to get in.

Her mom had been gone two hours. By now, the police would have barricaded the roads and, though her mother was not usually someone who took no for an answer, the cops would never let her back up the mountain tonight. Zoe pushed the thought down into a box at the back of her brain labeled Do Not Open. She shouted out the front door for Jonah. She'd been an idiot to leave him out there so long. She pushed that thought down, too.

Jonah didn't answer. She didn't know why she expected him to.

She loved the little bug, but most days it seemed like his sole purpose in life was to make everything harder for her. She knew he could hear her. He just wasn't ready to stop romping around with the dogs. They weren't allowed in the house, even during storms, which Jonah thought was mean. He once protested with an actual picket sign.

Zoe shouted for her brother three more times: loud, louder, loudest.

No answer.

She checked WeatherBug again. It was 15 below.

All she could see out the window was a riot of white. Everything was shapeless and heavy with snow: her spectacularly crappy red car, the compost bin, even the big wooden bear that her mom's hippie-dippy artist friend, Rufus, had carved for the driveway. The thought of having to bundle up and trudge around in the storm just to drag Jonah's butt inside made Zoe so angry that her face started to get hot. And she wouldn't be able to complain to her mom because she shouldn't have let him outside in the first place. Jonah always found a way to win. He was nuts, but he was clever.

She yelled for Spock and Uhura. No answer. Spock was two years younger and a big-time coward. Zoe figured he was hiding under the tractor in the pole barn, quivering. But Uhura was a daredevil and scared of nothing. She should have come running.

Zoe sighed. She had to go find Jonah. She had no choice.

She threw on a scarf, gloves, boots, a puffy blue coat, and a tasseled hat that Jonah had knitted for her when their dad died (actually, Uhura had eaten the tassel and in its place there was just a hole that kept getting bigger and bigger). Zoe didn't bother with snowshoes because she was only going to be out as long as it took to march Jonah back inside. Five minutes. Maybe ten. Tops.

Zoe knew it was pointless to wish that her dad were around to help her track down Jonah. She wished it anyway. Memories of her father swept over her so suddenly it made her whole body clench.

Zoe's dad had been goofy, excitable—and completely, infuriatingly unreliable. He was obsessed with everything about caves, down to bats and flatworms. He was even bizarrely into cave mud, which he insisted held the secret to a great complexion. He used to bring Ziploc bags of it home and try to dab it on Zoe's mother's face. Her mom would shriek with laughter and run away in mock horror. Then her dad would smear it all over his own cheeks, and chase Jonah and Zoe around the house, making monster noises.

So, yes: her dad was weird, as you pretty much have to be to go caving in the first place. But he was weird in a good way. In fact, he was kind of amazingly weird. He was superskinny and flexible, and if he put his arms over his head like Superman, he could crawl through incredibly narrow passageways. He used to practice by bending a wire hanger into an oval and wriggling through—or by crawling back and forth under the car. Literally, he'd be doing this stuff in plain sight when Val or Dallas came over. Dallas was a caver, too, and thought it was all deeply awesome. Val would avert her eyes from whatever bizarre thing Zoe's father was doing and say, "I'm not even noticing—this is me *not noticing*."

Zoe started caving with her dad when she turned 15. (Nobody called it "spelunking"—because why *would* they?) They caved religiously every summer and fall, until the snow blocked the entrances and ice made the tunnels treacherous. Zoe was only semi into it at first, but she needed time with her father that she knew she could

count on. Unless you were going caving, you just couldn't trust the guy to show up.

Zoe had gotten used to his disappearances, just as she'd gotten used to the fact that there were things he never talked about. (His parents, his hometown in Virginia, anything at all that happened when he was young: those parts of the map were never colored in.) Her father specialized in grand gestures—he'd changed his last name to Bissell instead of asking Zoe's mom to change hers—and he could be the coolest dad in the world for weeks on end. He'd make you feel warm and watched-over, like there was a candle or a lantern by your bed. But then the air in the house would change somehow. It'd lose its charge. Her dad's SUV would disappear, and for weeks she wouldn't even get a text.

Zoe eventually stopped listening to her father's excuses. They usually had to do with some weird business he was trying to get off the ground—something about "drumming up the freakin' financing." When she was younger, Zoe blamed herself for the fact that her dad never stuck around for more than a few months at a time. Maybe she wasn't interesting enough. Maybe she wasn't *lovable* enough. Jonah was still so young that he worshipped their father unconditionally. He called him Daddy Man, and treated every glimpse of him like a celebrity sighting.

Zoe knew that she and her dad would always have their treks up to the caves, and she stopped expecting anything else. So that day in November when she'd woken to find that he'd gone caving without her felt like a betrayal.

The cops led the search for his body. Zoe had invented the Do Not Open box to hold back the memories.

* * *

Zoe cursed Jonah under her breath the minute she got outdoors and starting looking for him and the dogs. She couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of her or walk more than a few steps without stopping to catch her breath. The wind, the snow: it was like being punched in the stomach.

The light, meanwhile, was dying fast. The coffin lid over Montana was getting ready to snap shut.

Zoe felt inside her pockets, and had a surprise bit of good luck. She found a flashlight—and it actually worked.

It took her five minutes just to zigzag down to the river where she'd seen Jonah playing. There was no sign of him or the dogs, except for a snow angel already partly filled in by the storm and two weird, blurry indentations nearby, where Jonah had apparently tried to get Spock and Uhura to make *dog* snow angels.

She screamed Jonah's name but her voice didn't travel. The wind pushed it right back to her.

For the first time, she felt dread crawl up into her throat. She imagined telling her mom that she'd lost Jonah, and she pictured her mother's heart blasting apart, like the Death Star in *Star Wars*. If something happened to that kid, her mother would never recover. Zoe tried to push that thought down, too. But the box at the back of her brain could only hold so much, and everything began seeping out.

Zoe finally found Jonah's footprints and followed them around the house. It was slow going because she had to bend down low to the ground, like a hunchback, to see the trail. Branches were breaking off trees and blowing across the yard. Every step exhausted her. Sweat was trickling down her back even though she was freezing. She knew that sweating in the frigid cold was bad news. Her body heat was evaporating. She had to pick up the pace, find

Jonah, and get inside. But if she moved any quicker, she'd sweat even more and freeze even faster.

Another thought the box didn't have room for.

Maybe Jonah was back in the house already. Yes. He definitely was. Zoe pictured him, his face and hands all puffy and pink as he spilled cocoa powder across the kitchen floor. She told herself that all this was for nothing. She followed his tracks, sure they'd lead right to their door.

But ten feet from the front steps, they veered down the hill and got swallowed up by the woods.

Zoe took a few cautious steps into the trees and shouted, but she knew it was pointless. She'd have to go in after Jonah and the Labs. Her cheeks and ears stung like they were sunburned. Her hands, even in gloves, were frozen into little sculptures of fists.

She used to worship the forest. She'd grown up running through the trees, sunlight splashing down around her feet. The trees led to the lake, where Bert and Betty Wallace used to live. They'd been like grandparents to Zoe and Jonah. They'd been there for them even when their dad was off on one of his mysterious trips, and they were a continual source of kindness when he died. But Bert and Betty had been going senile for years. This past fall, Zoe had kept Bert company as he cut photographs of animals out of the newspaper and barked random stuff like, "Gimme a break, I'm just a crazy old codger!" (When she asked him what a "codger" was, he rolled his eyes and said, "Gimme a break, same thing as a coot!") Jonah had sat crisscross-applesauce on the floor and knitted with Betty. She'd taught him how, and it turned out to be one of the few things, besides chewing his fingernails, that eased his ADHD and stopped his brain from

whirring like an out-of-control blender. Toward the end, though, Betty couldn't keep her hands from shaking, and she'd forgotten everything she knew about knitting. Now Jonah had to teach *her* how.

Then, last month, the Wallaces had disappeared. Betty, the less senile of the pair, apparently got away from the intruder for a moment and rushed Bert into their truck. That was the police's theory, based on the blood on the steering wheel. The truck was found smashed into a tree a hundred yards from the house. Its engine was still running. Its doors were flung open wide and there was no sign of the Wallaces, except for more blood. Imagining the confused look on Bert and Betty's faces as someone scowled murderously down at them hurt Zoe's heart so much she could hardly breathe.

The Wallaces' house was left just the way it was, lonely as a museum, while their lawyers looked for the most recent version of their will. Zoe had promised herself that she'd never go near it again. It was too painful. The lake outside Bert and Betty's house was frozen over with cloudy gray ice now. Even the forest seemed scary—dense and forbidden, like somewhere the evil stepmother takes you in a fairy tale.

Yet here she was on the edge of the trees, being pulled down toward the Wallaces' place. Jonah knew better than to walk through the trees in a storm. If the dogs had gone into the forest, though, he'd have followed them. Spock and Uhura had lived with Zoe's family for a month, but they used to belong to Bert and Betty. They might have plunged into the icy trees, thinking they were going home.

THERE WAS LESS THAN a mile of woods between their land and Bert and Betty's house. Ordinarily, it was a 15-minute walk, and

it was impossible to get lost because Betty had made hatchet marks in the trees for the kids to follow. Also, the woods were divided into three sections, so you could always tell if you'd gotten spun around somehow. The first section of forest had been harvested for timber a while back—Zoe's mom preferred the term "raped and pillaged"—so the trees closest to the Bissells' house were new growth. They were mostly flaky gray lodgepole pines. They were planted so close together that they seemed to be huddling for warmth.

The second section was Zoe's favorite: giant larches and Douglas firs. They were Montana's version of skyscrapers. They were only a hundred years old, but looked dinosaur-old, like they'd come with the planet.

The trees closest to the lake had been burned in an unexplained fire before Zoe was born. They'd never fallen, though, so there was a quarter-mile's worth of charred snags just standing there dead. It was a spooky place—and Jonah's favorite part of the woods, of course. It was where he played all his soldier-of-the-apocalypse games.

Walking to Bert and Betty's house meant following the path through new trees, then old trees, then dead ones. Zoe and Jonah had made the trip a thousand times. There was no such thing as getting lost—not for long. Not in decent weather or in daylight.

After Zoe had walked 20 feet or so into the young part of the forest, the world became quiet. There was just a sort of low hum in the air, like somebody blowing across the top of a bottle. She felt sheltered and the tiniest bit warmer. She aimed the flashlight at the treetops and then at the surly sky above them, and she had a weird, dreamy impulse to plop down in the snow. She shook her head to erase the thought. The cold was already gumming up her brain. If she sat down, she'd never get up again.

Zoe shone the flashlight in a wide arc along the ground, looking to pick up Jonah's tracks again. The beam was weak, either because of the batteries or the cold, but eventually she found them. Jonah probably had a ten-minute head start on her and because he was wearing snowshoes he'd be covering ground faster. It was like a math problem: If Train A leaves the station at 4:30 p.m. traveling 90 miles an hour, and Train B leaves ten minutes later traveling 70 miles an hour . . . Zoe's brain was too numb to solve it, but it seemed like she was screwed.

Jonah knew the path to the lake but he must have been following the dogs. Their paw prints were messy and wild. Maybe they were being playful. Maybe they were chasing grouse or wild turkeys, which sometimes rode out storms beneath the skirts of the trees. Maybe they were just flipping out because it was so cold.

Zoe could see Jonah's snowshoe tracks chasing the dogs every which way. She couldn't tell if he had been playing along happily or if he had been terrified and begging them to turn back. In her head, she repeated over and over: *Just go home, Jonah. This is insane. Just leave the dogs. Just walk away.* But she knew he wouldn't abandon the dogs no matter how scary things got, which made her angry—and made her love him, too.

So she just kept slogging through the woods. Which sucked. *Drag right foot out of snow, lift it up, stick it in again. Drag left foot out, repeat. And repeat and repeat and repeat.* Zoe was losing track of time. It took forever to go even a couple hundred feet—and much longer when she had to hike herself up and over a fallen tree. Her legs and knees began to ache, then her shoulders and neck. And she became obsessed with the hole at the top of her hat where the tassel used to be. She imagined it yawning wider and wider, and could feel the wind's bony fingers in her hair.

After Zoe had been in the woods for 20 minutes or so, her cheeks, which were partly exposed to the air, were scalding hot. She thought about taking her gloves off and somehow peeling the skin off her face—and then she realized that that was completely crazy. She and her brain had stopped playing on the same team. Which scared the hell out of her.

The ground started to level off and Zoe saw an enormous old fir tree up ahead. *New trees, old trees, dead trees*. She was almost a third of the way through the woods. She told herself to keep walking, not to stop for anything, until she could touch that first giant tree. That would make everything feel real again.

About ten feet from the fir, Zoe stumbled on something under the snow and belly flopped onto the ground. A bolt of pain tore through her head. She'd hit it against a rock or a stump, and could feel a bruise blooming on her forehead. She took off a glove and touched it. When she pulled her hand away, her fingers were dark with blood.

She decided it wasn't that bad.

She forced herself up onto her knees, then her feet. And, using that first fir tree as her goalpost, she walked the next few yards. When she got to the tree, she leaned against it and felt a wave of relief because, no matter how heinous things are, you gotta love a Christmas tree.

Zoe was in the second part of the woods now, with maybe half a mile to go. The trees were massive—they roared up toward the sky—and set far enough apart that what daylight was left trickled down to her. Here, Jonah and the dogs' tracks were clean and clear. They seemed to be sticking to the path now. She started off again, trying to think of nothing but the rhythm of her steps.

She imagined finding Jonah and marching him home. She imagined wrapping him in blankets till he laughed and shouted, "I! Am! Not! A! Burrito!"

Zoe had been outside for 30 or 40 minutes, and it had to be 25 below. She was shaking like she'd been hit by an electric current. By the time she'd made it halfway through the fir trees, every part of her ached and shivered like a tuning fork. And the storm seemed stronger now. The forest itself was breaking apart all around her. The wind stripped off branches and flung them in every direction. Whole trees had toppled over and lay blocking the path.

She stopped to rest against a tree. She had to. She swung the flashlight around, trying to figure out how far she was from the lake. But her hands were weak and she fumbled and dropped it in the snow.

The light went out.

She sank to her knees to search for the flashlight. It was getting dark so she had to root around in the snow. The shivering had gotten worse—at first it'd felt like she'd touched an electric fence, but now her nerves were so fully on fire that it felt like she *was* an electric fence—but she didn't care. And she didn't care about the bruise or the cut or whatever it was that was pulsing on her forehead. She didn't care that there were thorns and branches hiding under the snow and that they were tearing at the skin beneath her gloves. She could barely feel anything anyway. After a few minutes on her knees—it could have been two, it could have been ten, she had no idea anymore—her hand found something in the snow. She let out a yelp of happiness, or as much of one as she could manage, and she pulled it out. But it wasn't the flashlight.

It was one of Jonah's gloves.

The skull on the back glowed up at her, the empty eye sockets like tunnels.

She pictured Jonah stumbling through the woods, sobbing loudly. She pictured his hand frozen and raw and beating with pain. She pictured him pleading with the dogs to go home. (He *must* have started pleading by now.) His face came to her for a second. He had their father's looks, which still made her wince: the messy brown hair, the eyes you assumed would be blue but were actually a cool, weird green. The only difference was that Jonah had slightly chubby cheeks. *Thank god for baby fat*, Zoe thought. Because, tonight, it might keep Jonah alive.

She found the flashlight, and—miraculously—there was some life left in it. She got to her feet and started out again.

A few feet from the first glove, she found the second one.

Ten feet later, she found Jonah's coat.

It was a puffy black down jacket, patched with electrical tape—and he'd left it draped over the jagged stump of a tree.

Now Zoe imagined her brother dazed and wandering, his skin itchy and hot, like it was crawling all over him. She imagined him pulling off his clothes and dropping them in the snow.

Zoe was exhausted. And freaked out. And so unbelievably mad at those idiot dogs who didn't know enough to stay close to the house—who didn't realize that her beautiful brother would follow them and follow them and follow them through the snow. Until it killed him.

She had to erase that awful image of Jonah. She cast around for a happy thought. She remembered how Jonah used to hide in the exact same place every time they played hide-and-seek with their dad—the old meat freezer in the basement, which hadn't been used in years. She remembered how they'd act like they had no idea

where Jonah was, even though they could see his little fingers propping the lid open for air. And she pictured the ecstatic look on Jonah's face when she and their dad pretended to give up and Jonah thrust the freezer open and revealed himself, like a magician at the end of a death-defying trick.

"It's me!" he'd shout happily. "It's me! It's me! It's me!"

For a few seconds that image of Jonah warmed her. Then it disappeared, like a star snuffed out forever.

Zoe made it to the edge of the fir trees—right up to where the forest died suddenly and gave way to fire-charred stumps and snags. She was carrying Jonah's coat and gloves, hugging them against her chest in a bundle. Did she still think she could find Jonah, or was she just stumbling the last quarter mile to Bert and Betty's house to collapse? She didn't even know anymore. The cold had erased everything inside her. She was blank. She was a zombie, lurching forward because she didn't know what else to do.

The flashlight found something: a dark clump, barely higher than the snow.

Zoe should have been excited at the discovery, but she felt terror wash through her instead. Whatever it was up there in the snow, it wasn't moving.

She didn't want to get any closer. She didn't want to know what it was.

She didn't want it to be her brother.

It took months to walk the next 15 feet. And even when Zoe was only a few steps away—even when the flashlight was shining right at it, bathing it in a sickly yellow light—she couldn't figure out what it was. Her mind refused to take it in, refused to record it.

She forced herself forward. She hovered over it. She peered down. It was a dark, tangled mass. It looked lifeless and still. Zoe held her breath and willed her eyes to focus.

It was the dogs.

Since they were both black Labs, you couldn't tell where Spock's fur ended and Uhura's began: they looked like a dark rug flung onto the snow. Zoe knelt down. They'd dug a shallow pit to shield themselves from the wind. She took off a glove and laid a hand on one, then the other.

They were breathing! Something that felt like birds' wings flapped around in her heart.

The dogs were groggy, halfway between sleep and something worse. It took them a minute to notice that she was rubbing their bellies. Eventually, they began shifting and turning in their icy bed. Spock let out a snort that sent a puff of fog into the air. Uhura craned her head in Zoe's direction. She seemed to recognize her and to be grateful she was there. Zoe felt too wrung out to cry or she would have.

Spock and Uhura wriggled some more, trying to wake themselves up. And as their bodies untangled and parted, as they became two distinct animals again, she finally saw something she should have seen immediately, and what she saw made her hate herself for ever thinking they were idiot dogs. They were beautiful dogs! They were brave and glossy and gorgeous Montana dogs!

Because they were lying on something. On someone. They had dug a pit with their paws and pulled him into it—she could see where their teeth had torn his green hoodie—and then lain down on top of him. On top of Jonah. They had lain down on her brother to keep him warm.