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Crewel

Written by

Gennifer Albin

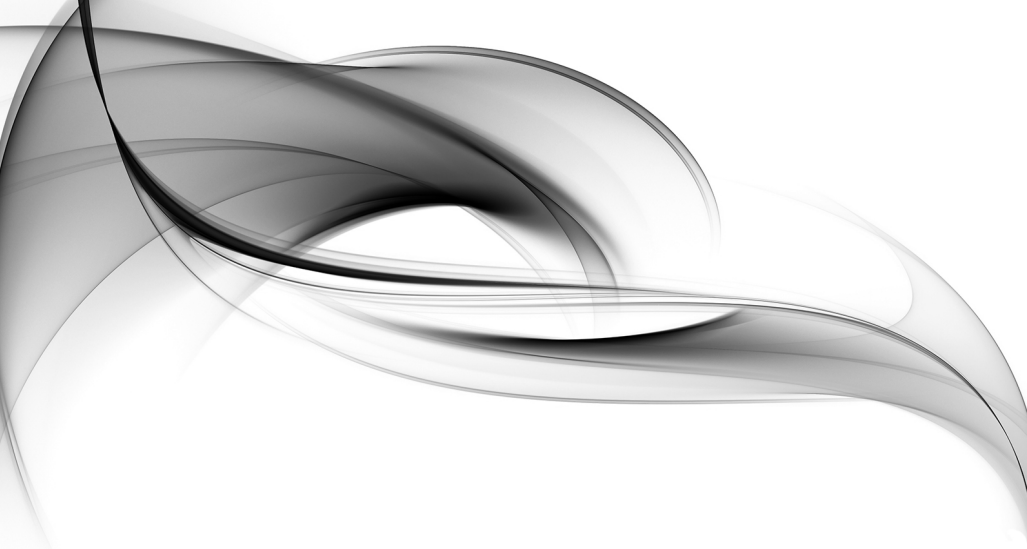
Published by

Faber and Faber

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CREWEL

Gennifer Albin

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First published in the US by Farrar Straus Giroux
Books for Young Readers in 2012
First published in the UK in this edition in 2012
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street,
London, WC1B 3DA

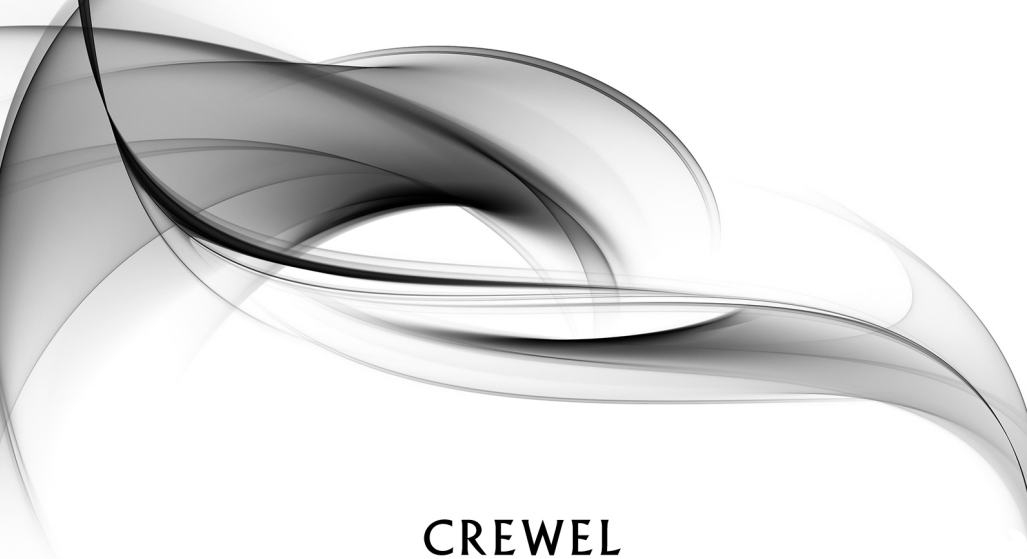
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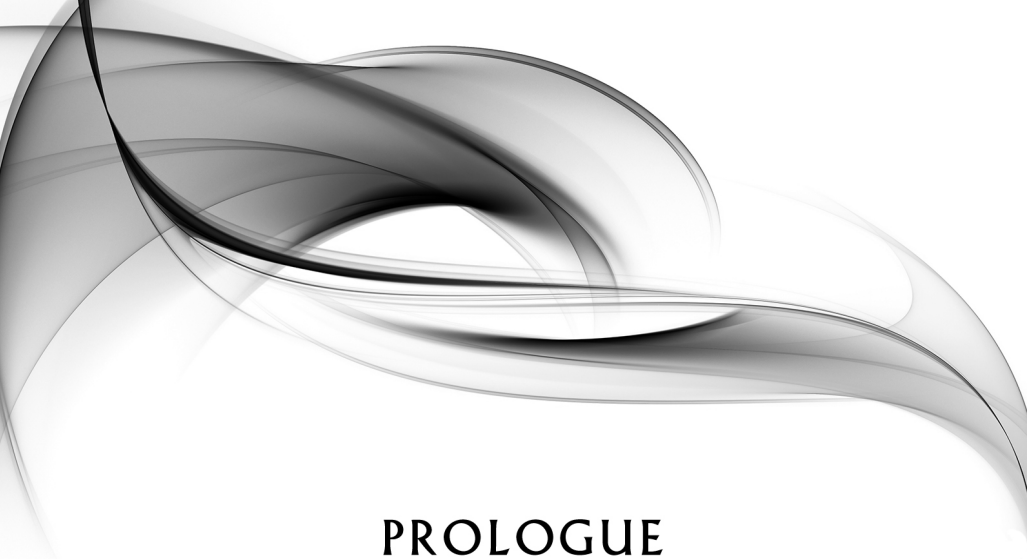
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A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–28289–0



CREWEL



PROLOGUE

They came in the night. Once, families fought them, neighbours coming to their aid. But now that peace has been established, and the looms proven, girls pray to be retrieved. They still come at night, but now it's to avoid the masses with eager hands. It's a blessing to touch a Spinster as she passes. That's what they tell us.

No one knows why some girls have the gift. There are theories, of course. That it's passed down genetically. Or that girls with an open mind can see the weave of life around them at all times. Even that it's a gift only given to the pure-hearted. But I know better. It's a curse.

I've trained at night with my parents ever since they realised I had the calling. They taught me clumsiness, making me fumble until it looked natural when I dropped a bowl or spilled the water jug. Then we practised with time, my parents encouraging me to take the silky strands deftly into

my fingers to twist and tangle them until they were warped and useless in my hands. This was harder than dropping and spilling. My fingers wanted to weave the delicate tendrils seamlessly with matter. By my sixteenth birthday, when it was time for the required testing, the ruse was so effective, the other girls whispered I would be sent away early.

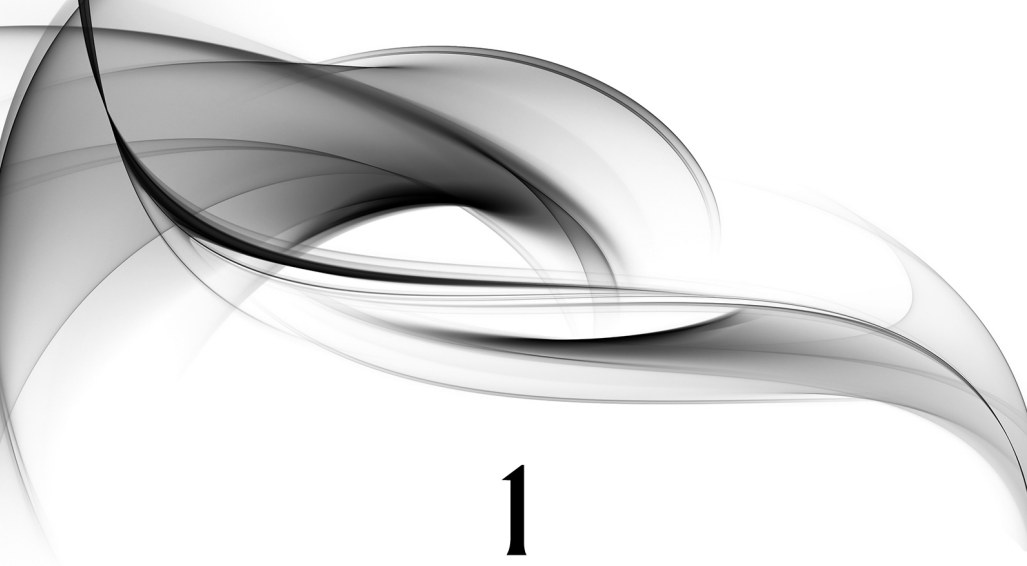
Incapable.

Awkward.

Artless.

Maybe it was their taunts lodging in my back like tiny daggers that poisoned my resolve. Or perhaps it was the way the practice loom sang out, begging to be touched. But today, the last day of testing, I finally slipped – my fingers gracefully winding though the ebbing bands of time.

Tonight they'll come for me.



1

I can count the days until summer draws to a close and autumn seeps into the leaves, painting them ginger and scarlet. Right now, though, the dappled light of mid-afternoon is glorious emerald, and it's hot on my face. With sun soaking into me, everything is possible. When it is inevitably gone – the seasons programmed to begin and end with smooth precision – life will take its predetermined route. Like a machine. Like me.

It's quiet outside my sister's academy. I'm the only one waiting for the girls to be released. When I first began my testing cycle, Amie held her pinkie finger up and made me swear to meet her each day after I got out. It was a hard promise to make, knowing they could call me any time and sweep me away to the Coventry's towers. But I make it, even today. A girl has to have something constant, has to know what to expect. The last bit of chocolate in the

monthly rations; the tidy ending to a programme on the Stream. I want my little sister to be able to count on a sweet life, even if the heat of summer tastes bitter now.

A bell tolls and girls pour out in a surge of plaid, their giggles and shouts breaking the perfect stillness of the scene. Amie, who's always had more friends than me, bounces out, surrounded by a handful of other girls in the awkward stages of early adolescence. I wave to her and she dashes towards me, catching my hand and pulling me in the direction of our house. Something about her eager greeting every afternoon makes it okay that I don't have many companions my age.

'Did you do it?' she asks in a breathless voice, skipping ahead of me.

I hesitate for a moment. If anyone will be happy about my mistake, it will be Amie. If I tell her the truth, she'll squeal and clap. She'll hug me, and maybe for a moment I can leach her happiness, fill myself up with it, and believe everything is going to turn out fine.

'No,' I lie, and her face falls.

'It's okay,' she says with a resolved nod. 'At least this way you get to stay in Romen. With me.'

I'd rather pretend she's right, to allow myself to get lost in the twelve-year-old's gossip, than face what's coming. I have my whole life to be a Spinster, and only one more night to be her sister. I ooh and aah at the right times, and she believes I'm listening. I imagine that the attention builds her up and completes her, so that when I'm gone she'll have enough not to waste her life searching for it.

Amie's primary academy lets out at the same time as the metro's day shift, so Mom is waiting when we get home.

She's in the kitchen and her head snaps up as we enter, her eyes rushing to meet mine. Taking a deep breath, I shake my head, and her shoulders slump in relief. I let her hug me as long as she wants, her embrace flooding me with love. That's why I don't tell them the truth. I want love – not excitement or worry – to be the lingering imprint they leave on me.

Mom reaches up and brushes a strand of hair from my face, but she doesn't smile. Although she thinks I failed at testing, she also knows my time here is almost up. She's thinking that I'll be assigned a role soon, and married shortly thereafter, even if I won't be taken away. What's the point of telling her she'll lose me tonight? It's not important now, and this moment is what matters.

It's an ordinary evening at our ordinary table, and apart from the overcooked pot roast – Mom's speciality and a rare treat – not much is different, not for my family at least. The grandfather clock ticks in our hall, cicadas perform their summer crescendo, a motopact rumbles down the street, and outside the sky fades into dusky twilight beckoning nightfall. It's a day just like the hundreds that came before it, but tonight I won't tiptoe from my bed to my parents' room. The end of testing also means the end of years of training.

I live with my family in a tiny bungalow outside Romen's metro where my parents have been assigned two children and an appropriately sized house. My mom told me they applied for another child when I was eight – before they discovered my condition – but upon evaluation they were denied. The cost to maintain each individual makes it ne-

cessary for the Guild to regulate population. She explained this matter-of-factly one morning as she pinned her hair up into elaborate curls before work. I had asked her for a brother. She waited until I was older to explain that it would have been impossible anyway, due to segregation, but I was still mortified. Pushing my rations around my plate, I realise how much easier it would be if I had been a boy, or if my sister was a boy. I bet my parents wanted boys, too. Then they wouldn't have to worry about us being taken away.

'Adelice,' my mother says quietly, 'you aren't eating. Testing is over. I would think you'd have an appetite.'

She's very good at projecting a calm demeanour, but I sometimes wonder if the carefully painted cosmetics layered until her face is silken with rouged cheeks and plump lips are a ruse to help her stay balanced. She makes it look effortless – the cosmetics, her perfectly pinned scarlet hair, and her secretary suit. She appears to be exactly what is expected of a woman: beautiful, groomed, obedient. I never knew there was another side to her until I was eleven, the year she and my father began training my fingers towards uselessness.

'I'm fine.' My response is flat and unbelievable, and I wish I had a perfectly painted face to hide under. Girls are expected to remain pure and natural – in body and appearance – until they're officially released from testing. Purity standards ensure that girls with weaving abilities don't lose them by being promiscuous. Some of my classmates look as beautiful in this state as my mother – delicate and fair. I'm *too* pale. My skin is washed out against my strawberry hair.

If only it was the brilliant fiery red of my mother's or soft gold like my sister Amie's, but mine is as dull as dirty pennies.

'Your mother made a special dinner,' my dad points out. His voice is kind, but the implication is clear: I'm wasting food. Staring at the potatoes and too-dry slices of roast beef, I feel guilty. This meal probably ate up two nights' rations, and then there's the cake.

It's a large frosted cake from a bakery. My mom has made us small cakes for our birthdays, but nothing like this fancy white cake with sugar flowers and lacy lines of frosting. I know it cost half a week's rations. Most likely they'll resort to eating it for breakfast later in the week while they wait for their next disbursement. The frail white scallops edging the cake make my stomach turn. I'm not used to sweets, and I'm not hungry. As it is, I can barely bring myself to eat a few bites of the overcooked meat.

'This is exactly the cake I want for my birthday,' Amie gushes. She's never had anything like a bakery cake before. When Amie came home from academy today and saw this one, my mom told her she could have one for her next birthday. It's a pretty big deal for a kid who's only had hand-me-downs her whole life, but my mom obviously wants to soften her transition into training.

'It will have to be a bit smaller,' Mom reminds her, 'and you won't be having any of this one if you don't eat your dinner first.'

I can't help smiling as Amie's eyes widen and she begins scooping food into her mouth, gulping it down hard. Mom calls her 'an eater'. I wish I could eat like her when I'm ex-

cited or tense or sad, but nerves kill my appetite, and the fact that this is the last dinner I'll ever share with my family has my stomach in knots.

'Did you get this for Adelice?' Amie asks between bites, revealing bits of chewed food.

'Close your mouth when you eat,' my dad says, but I see the corner of his own curling up a bit.

'Yes, Adelice deserved something special today.' My mother's voice is quiet, but as she speaks her face glows and a faint smile plays at her lips. 'I thought we should celebrate.'

'Marfa Crossix's sister came home from testing last week crying and hasn't left her room yet,' Amie continues after swallowing the meat. 'Marfa said it was like someone died. Everyone is so sad. Her parents are already setting up courtship appointments to cheer her up. She has an appointment with pretty much every boy with an active marriage profile in Romen.'

Amie laughs, but the rest of the table falls silent. I'm studying the scallops in the icing, trying to make out the delicate pattern the baker used. Amie doesn't notice the quiet resistance of my parents to the Guild-approved curriculum and marriage laws, but they haven't exactly been honest with her either. I'm old enough to understand why they don't want me to become a Spinster, even if they've always been careful with what they say to me.

My father clears his throat and looks at my mother for support. 'Some girls really want to go to the Coventry. Marfa's sister must be disappointed.'

'I would be, too,' Amie chirps, shovelling a forkful of pota-

toes into her mouth. 'They showed us pictures at academy. Spinsters are so beautiful, and they have everything.'

'I suppose,' Mom murmurs, slicing small bites of meat with her knife in slow, precise strokes.

'I can't wait for testing.' Amie sighs dreamily, and my mother frowns at her. Amie's in too much of a daze to notice.

'Those girls are very privileged, but if Adelice was called, we would never see her again.' Mom's response is careful. My parents have started trying to plant doubt in Amie's head, although her tendency to rattle on to anyone listening makes it hard to talk to her about important stuff. But I don't mind listening to Amie relate the dramas of every girl in her class or the programmes she saw on the Stream. It's my break before spending every night practising and rehearsing what to say – and not to say. Curling up with my sister before she falls asleep is when I get my only sense of normal.

But a cake can't buy more than a night's happiness. My parents will have a long road ahead of them preparing Amie to fail at her testing. She's never shown an ounce of weaving ability, but they'll prepare her. I wonder if she'll still be eager to go when it's her turn in four years.

'Marfa says when she's a Spinster she'll always get her picture on the front of the *Bulletin* so her parents won't worry. That's what I'd do, too.' Her face is solemn as though she's really thought this through.

Mom smiles but doesn't respond. Amie fawns over the glitzy images in our daily bulletin like most pre-testing girls, but she doesn't truly understand what Spinsters do.

I mean, of course she understands that they maintain and embellish the fabric that makes up our world. Every girl learns that early in academy. But someday my parents will explain what Spinsters really do – that no matter how good their intentions, with absolute power comes corruption. And the Guild has absolute power over us and the Spinsters. But they also feed us and protect us. I listen to my parents, but I don't really understand either. Can a life of providing food and safety for others be that bad? I only know that what's about to happen to me is going to break their hearts, and once I'm gone, I'll never have a chance to tell them I'm okay. I guess I'll have to get my picture on the front of the *Bulletin* like Marfa Crossix.

The meal continues in silence, and everyone's eyes gravitate toward our fluffy white centrepiece. The small oak dining table sits four perfectly; we can pass bowls and plates to one another, but tonight my mother served us because there's room for nothing but the cake. I envy the gleeful sparkle in Amie's eyes as she stares at it, probably imagining how it will taste or building her grand thirteenth birthday cake in her head. My parents, on the other hand, sit in quiet relief: the closest to celebrating they can muster.

'I'm sorry you failed, Ad,' Amie says, looking up at me. Her eyes dart back to the cake, and I see the longing in them.

'Adelice didn't fail,' my father tells her.

'But she wasn't chosen.'

'We didn't want her to be chosen,' my mother says.

'Did you want to be chosen, Ad?' Amie's question is so earnest and innocent.

I barely shake my head.

'But why not?' Amie asks.

'Do you want that life?' Mom asks her quietly.

'Why are you so against the Spinsters? I don't get why we're celebrating.' Amie's eyes stay focused on the cake. She's never been so blunt before.

'We're not against the Spinsterhood,' Mom responds in a rush.

'Or the Guild,' Dad adds.

'Or the Guild,' Mom echoes with a nod. 'But if you pass testing, you can never return here.'

Here – the cramped two-bedroom house in the girls' neighbourhood, where I've been safe from the influence of boys my age. My home, with books stashed in hollowed cubbies behind panels in the walls, along with family heirlooms passed down for almost one hundred years from mother to daughter. I've always loved the radio in particular, even if it doesn't work any more. Mom says that it used to play music and stories and proclaimed the news, like the Stream does now but without the visuals. I asked once why we kept it if it was useless, and she told me that remembering the past is never useless.

'But a Spinster's life is exciting,' Amie argues. 'They have parties and beautiful dresses. Spinsters have control.'

Her last word hangs in the air, and my parents exchange a worried glance. Control? No one granting permission to have children. No predetermined cosmetic routines. No chosen roles. That would be true control.

'If you think they have control—' Mom begins quietly, but my father coughs.

'They have cake,' Amie says with a sigh, slumping against the table.

Dad takes one look at her pitiful face, throws his head back, and laughs. A moment later, my usually stoic mother joins in. Even I feel some giggles bubbling up my throat. Amie does her best to look sad, but her frown twitches until it turns into an impish grin.

'Your cosmetic tokens should arrive next week, Adelice,' my mom says, turning back to me. 'I'll show you how to apply everything.'

'Arras knows, I'd better be able to apply cosmetics. Isn't that a girl's most important job?' The jibe is out of my mouth before I consider what I'm saying. I have a habit of cracking a joke when I'm nervous. But judging from the look of warning on my mom's face, I'm not being very funny.

'And I'll jump right on those courtship appointments,' Dad says with a wink, breaking up the tension between Mom and me.

This actually makes me laugh, despite the numbing dread creeping through my limbs. My parents aren't as eager to get me married and out of the house as most girls' families are, even if I am required to be married by eighteen. But the joke can't elevate my mood for long. Right now the thought of getting married, an inevitability that was always too surreal to consider, is out of the question. Spinsters don't marry.

'And I get to help you choose your cosmetic colours at the co-op, right?' Amie reminds me. She's been studying catalogues and style sets since she could read. Mom doesn't

take us to the metro co-op to shop often, because it's not segregated, and when she has it's been for home supplies, not something exciting like cosmetics.

'I hear they're increasing the number of teachers in the Corps on assignment day,' Dad continues, serious again.

I've always wanted to be a teacher. Secretary, nurse, factory worker – none of the other designated female roles left any room for creativity. Even in a carefully controlled academy curriculum there is more room for expression in teaching than there is in typing notes for businessmen.

'Oh, Ad, you'd be a great teacher,' Amie bursts in. 'Whatever you do, don't get stuck in an office. We just finished our shorthand class, and it was so boring. Besides you have to food-gen coffee all day! Right, Mom?'

Amie looks to her for confirmation, and Mom gives her a quick nod. My sister's too oblivious to see the pain flash across her face, but I'm not.

'I do make a lot of coffee,' Mom says.

My throat is raw from holding back tears, and if I speak . . .

'I'm sure you'll get assigned to be a teacher,' Mom says, eager to change the subject, and then she pats my arm. I must look nervous. I try to imagine what I would be feeling now if assignment day was only a week away for me, but I can't. I was supposed to go to testing for a month, to be dismissed, and then get assigned. It was the first time I'd been on a loom, one of the large automated machines that show us the fabric of Arras. It was the first time any of us Eligibles had even seen a loom. I only had to act as if I couldn't see the weave, like the other girls, and answer the proctor's questions with my practised lies. If I hadn't

slipped, I would have been dismissed, and then assigned based on my strength assessments at academy. For years, I'd dutifully learned shorthand, home economics, and information storage. But now I'd never get the chance to use any of it.

'We need a new teacher.' Amie interrupts my thoughts. 'Mrs Swander left.'

'Is she expecting a baby?' my mother asks in a knowing way. Her eyes dull a bit as she speaks.

'No.' Amie shakes her head. 'Principal Diffet said she had an accident.'

'An accident?' Dad repeats with a frown.

'Yep.' Amie nods, suddenly wide-eyed. 'I've never known anyone who's had an accident before.' Her voice is a mix of awe and solemnity. None of us know anyone who has had an accident, because accidents don't happen in Arras.

'Did Principal Diffet say what happened?' Mom asks so softly that I barely hear her in the quiet dining room.

'No, but he told us not to worry because accidents are very rare and the Guild will be especially careful and investigate and stuff. Is she okay?' she asks, her voice conveying implicit trust. Whatever my father replies, she'll believe it. I long to fall back in time and feel the comfort of knowing my parents have every answer, knowing I am safe.

My father forces a tight-lipped smile and nods at her. Mom's eyes meet mine.

'Do you think it's odd?' She leans in to Dad, so Amie won't hear. It doesn't matter because Amie has returned to worshipping the cake.

'An accident? Of course.'

'No.' Mom shakes her head. 'That the principal told them.'

'It must have been bad,' he whispers.

'Something Manipulation Services couldn't cover up?'

'We haven't heard anything at the station.'

'None of the girls said anything today.'

I wish I had some intelligence to share, because I'm feeling excluded. Outside the dining room night has engulfed our quiet street. I can see the shadowed outline of the oak tree in our yard but little else. It won't be long now, and we're wasting time worrying about Mrs Swander's accident.

'We should eat the cake!' The suggestion bursts from me. My mother, momentarily startled, does a quick inventory of our plates and agrees.

Dad cuts into the cake with an old bread knife, smearing frosting across the blade and blending the vibrant red flowers into dull pink globs. Amie props her body against the table, completely absorbed in the ceremony, while Mom collects the pieces from Dad and passes them around. I'm bringing the first bite to my mouth when Mom stops me.

'Adelice, may your path be blessed. We're proud of you.' There's a break in her voice, and I know how much this moment means to her. She's waited my whole life for this night: my release from testing. I can barely meet her eyes. She motions for us to eat as she wipes a stray tear from her cheek, leaving a smudge of charcoal from her running mascara.

I take a bite and mash it against the roof of my mouth.

The frosting is so sweet that it catches in my throat and makes my nose tingle. I have to wash it down with half a glass of water. Next to me Amie is devouring her piece, but my mother doesn't tell her to slow down. Now that I'm through testing, it's Amie's turn. Tomorrow my parents plan to begin preparing her for her own testing.

'Girls—' my mother begins, but I'll never know what she was going to say.

There's a hammering at the door and the sound of many, many boots on our porch. I drop my fork and feel the blood rush out of my face and pool in my feet, weighting me to my chair.

'Adelice,' my father breathes, but he doesn't ask, because he already knows.

'There isn't time, Benn!' my mother shrieks, her perfectly applied foundation cracking, but just as quickly she regains control and grabs Amie's arm.

A low hum fills the air and suddenly a voice booms through the room: 'Adelice Lewys has been called to serve the Guild of Twelve. Blessings on the Spinsters and Arras!'

Our neighbours will be outside soon; no one in Romen would willingly miss a retrieval. There's nowhere to escape. Everyone here knows me. I rise to my feet to open the door for the retrieval squad, but my father pushes me towards the stairs.

'Daddy!' There's fear in Amie's voice.

I grope forward and find her hand, squeezing it tight. I stumble down behind her as my father herds us to the basement. I have no idea what his plan is. The only thing down here is a dank, meagrely stocked root cellar. Mom rushes

to the basement wall and a moment later she slides a stack of bricks out of place to reveal a narrow tunnel.

Amie and I stand and watch; her wide-eyed horror mirrors the paralysing fear I feel. The scene before us shifts and blurs. I can't wrap my head around what they're doing even as I see it happening. The only constant – the one real thing in this moment – is Amie's fragile hand clutching my own. I hold on to it for life, hers and mine. It anchors me, and when my mother wrenches her away, I shriek, sure I'll vanish into nothing.

'Ad,' Amie cries, stretching out to me through Mom's arms.

It's her fear that spurs me back to this moment, and I call out to her, 'It's okay, Ames. Go with Mommy.'

My mother's hands falter for a moment when I say this. I can't remember when I last called her Mommy. I've been too old and too busy for as long as I can remember. Tears that have been building up wash down her face, and she drops her hold on Amie. My sister jumps into my arms, and I inhale the scent of her soap-clean hair, aware of how fast her small heart beats against my belly. Mom circles us and I soak up the strength of her warm arms. But it's over too quickly, and with a kiss on my forehead, they're gone.

'Adelice, here!' My father shoves me towards another hole as Amie and Mom disappear into the passage, but before I enter he grabs my wrist and presses cold metal near my vein. A second later heat sears the tender skin. When he releases my arm, I draw the spot up to my mouth, trying to blow off the burning.

'What . . .' I search his face for a reason for the tech-

print, and looking back down, I see the pale shape of a flowing hourglass marking the spot. It's barely visible on my fair skin.

'I should have done it a long time ago, but . . .' He shakes off the emotion creeping into his voice and sets his jaw. 'It will help you remember who you are. You have to leave now, honey.'

I look into the tunnel that stretches into nothing. 'Where does it go?' I can't keep the panic out of my voice. There's nowhere to hide in Arras, and this is treason.

Above us a stampede of heavy boots breaks across the wooden floor.

'Go,' he pleads.

They're in the dining room.

'There's food on the table! They can't be far.'

'Search the rest of the house and cordon off the street.'

The feet are in the kitchen now.

'Dad . . .' I throw my arms around him, unsure if he will follow me or go into another tunnel.

'I knew we could never hide how special you are,' he murmurs against my hair. The basement door bangs open.

But before I can say I'm sorry for failing them, or tell him I love him, the boots are on the stairs. I scramble into the hole. He restacks the bricks behind me, shutting out the light. My chest constricts in the darkness. And then he stops. A large crack of light still streams in to the tunnel from the basement. I can't move.

The bricks crash onto the concrete floor and light floods back into the tunnel. Choking down the scream fighting to loose itself, I struggle forward in the dirt, away from the

growing light. I must keep moving forward. I try to forget Dad, and Mom and Amie in the other tunnel, as I crawl through the cold soil.

Keep moving forward.

I repeat it over and over, afraid that if I stop I will be paralysed again. But somehow I do keep moving forward, further and further into darkness, until cold steel clamps down on my leg. I scream as it digs into my skin and begins drawing me back – back to the light and the men in boots, back to the Guild. I tear against the packed dirt of the tunnel, but the claw is stronger and each desperate lunge I make back towards the darkness drives the metal deeper into my calf.

There is no fighting them.