Prologue

December 1811
New Madrid, Louisiana Territory

The first earthquake wasn't the strongest – that would come later, in February 1812 – but it must have been the most astonishing. It occurred shortly after two in the morning, and I imagine it awakening the people of New Madrid: the farmers and fur traders, the French Creoles and Indians and American pioneers. More men than women lived in the river town, and few families; the population was probably less than a thousand. The people were lying in their beds on this cold and ordinary night when without warning a tremendous cracking sound interrupted the quiet, a growing thunder, followed by the impossible fact of the quake itself: the rocking not just of their beds or floors or houses but of the land beneath them. Whether they stayed inside or hurried out, they'd have heard their animals crying, heard trees snapping, the Mississippi roaring up; so much fog and smoke filled the darkness that they would have felt the roll of the earth before they realized they could see it, too, undulating like the ocean. In some places, the ground split apart and flung up water, sand, and rocks,

entire trees it had swallowed shortly before, and in turn it devoured horses and cows. Rising out of the cracks and holes was the smell of sulfur, like the wicked breath of the devil emanating from deep underground.

For hours, the convulsions didn't stop, and when eventually their bewildering rhythm changed, it was not to decrease but to intensify: Twice more, at seven in the morning and again at eleven, the earth exploded anew. And daybreak had not brought light. Still there was the chaos of vapors, the bleats and squawks of domesticated and wild animals, the collapsing trees and spewing land and mercilessly teeming river.

Only around noon did the earth settle, and only gradually. But what was left? The people's homes – one-story log or frame structures – were leveled, as were the town's stores and churches. The land was broken, the river roiling. The banks of the Mississippi had simply plunged into the water below, carrying with them houses, graveyards, and forests; canoes and keelboats had vanished under thirty-foot waves, reappeared, and vanished again.

Though it must have seemed, on the afternoon of December 16, 1811, that the world was ending, more destruction would follow. In this same remote area, another powerful quake occurred on January 23, 1812, and two weeks later, on February 7, the last and biggest. In just months, whole towns disappeared not only from the Louisiana Territory – soon to become the Territory of Missouri – but also from the Mississippi Territory and Tennessee. People claimed that the Mississippi River ran backward and that the effects of the quakes were felt hundreds of miles away: that clocks stopped in Natchez,

chimneys collapsed in Louisville, and church bells rang in Boston.

But perhaps these myths were merely that, embellishments more irresistible than accurate. Magnitude scales wouldn't exist for another century, so calculations of the New Madrid quakes came long afterward, and though the highest estimates placed them above 8.0 – stronger than the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, the strongest of any continental earthquake in United States history – other guesses were closer to a magnitude 7. Which would have made them frightening, certainly, but not unprecedented.

My husband would say that such distinctions matter, that there are ways of conducting research and establishing hypotheses based on credible evidence. My sister would disagree. She would say that we create our own reality – that the truth, ultimately, is what we choose to believe.

Chapter 1

September 2009
St. Louis, Missouri

The shaking started around three in the morning, and it happened that I was already awake because I'd nursed Owen at two and then, instead of going back to sleep, I'd lain there brooding about the fight I'd had at lunch with my sister, Vi. I'd driven with Owen and Rosie in the backseat to pick up Vi, and the four of us had gone to Hacienda. We'd finished eating and I was collecting Rosie's stray food from the tabletop – once I had imagined I wouldn't be the kind of mother who ordered chicken tenders for her child off the menu at a Mexican restaurant – when Vi said, 'So I have a date tomorrow.'

'That's great,' I said. 'Who is it?'

Casually, after running the tip of her tongue over her top teeth to check for food, Vi said, 'She's an IT consultant, which sounds boring, but she's traveled a lot in South and Central America, so she couldn't be a total snooze, right?'

I was being baited, but I tried to match Vi's casual tone as I said, 'Did you meet online?' Rosie, who was two and a half, had gotten up from the table, wandered over to a

ficus plant in the corner, and was smelling the leaves. Beside me in the booth, buckled into his car seat, Owen, who was six months, grabbed at a little plush giraffe that hung from the car seat's handle.

Vi nodded. 'There's pretty slim pickings for dykes in St. Louis.'

'So that's what you consider yourself these days?' I leaned in and said in a lowered tone, 'A lesbian?'

Looking amused, Vi imitated my inclined posture and quiet voice. 'What if the manager hears you?' she said. 'And gets a boner?' She grinned. 'At this point, I'm bi-celibate. Or should I say Vi-sexual? But I figure it's all a numbers game – I keep putting myself out there and, eventually, I cross paths with Ms. or Mr. Right.'

'Meaning you're on straight dating sites, too?'

'Not at the moment, but in the future, maybe.' Our waitress approached and left the bill at the edge of the table. I reached for it as soon as she'd walked away – when Vi and I ate together, I always paid without discussion – and Vi said, 'Don't leave a big tip. She was giving us attitude.'

'I didn't notice.'

'And my fajita was mostly peppers.'

'You of all people should realize that's not the waitress's fault.' For years, all through our twenties, Vi had worked at restaurants. But she was still regarding me skeptically as I set down my credit card, and I added, 'It's rude not to tip extra when you bring little kids.' We were at a conversational crossroads. Either we could stand, I could gather the mess of belongings that accompanied me wherever I went – once I had been so organized that I kept my spice rack alphabetized, and now I left hats and

bibs and sippy cups in my wake, baggies of Cheerios, my own wallet and sunglasses – and the four of us could head out to the parking lot and then go on to drop Vi at her house, all amicably. Or I could express a sentiment that wasn't Vi, in her way, *asking* me to share?

'I believe in tipping well for great service,' Vi was saying. 'This girl was phoning it in.'

I said, 'If you feel equally attracted to men and women, why not date men? Isn't it just easier? I mean, I wish it weren't true, but—' I glanced at my daughter right as she pulled a ficus leaf off the plant and extended her tongue toward it. I had assumed the plant was fake and, therefore, durable, and I called out, 'No mouth, Rosie. Come over here.' When I looked back at Vi, I couldn't remember what I'd wanted to say next. Hadn't I had another point? And Vi was sneering in a way that made me wish, already, that I'd simply let the moment pass.

'Easier?' Her voice was filled with contempt. 'It's just easier to be straight? As in, what, less embarrassing to my uptight sister?'

'That's not what I said.'

'Don't you think it would be easier if black people hadn't demanded to ride in the front of the bus like white people? Or go to the same schools? That was so awkward when that happened!' This seemed to be an indirect reference to my friend Hank, but I ignored it.

'I don't have a problem with gay people,' I said, and my cheeks were aflame, which I'd have known, even if I hadn't been able to feel their heat, by the fact that Vi's were, too. We would always be identical twins, even though we were no longer, in most ways, identical.

'Where's Rosie's baloney?' Rosie said. She had returned

from the ficus plant – thank goodness – and was standing next to me.

'It's at home,' I said. 'We didn't bring it.' The baloney was a piece from a lunch-themed puzzle, a life-sized pink wooden circle on a yellow wooden square, that Rosie had recently become inexplicably attached to. I said to Vi, 'Don't make me out to be homophobic. It's a statement of fact that life is simpler – it is, Vi – don't look at me like that. It's not like two women can get married in Missouri, and there's a lot of financial stuff that goes along with that, or visiting each other in the hospital. Or having kids – for gay couples, that's complicated and it's expensive, too.'

'Having kids period is complicated!' Vi's anger had taken on an explosive quality, and I felt people at nearby tables looking toward us. 'And this whole making-life-simpler bullshit?' she continued. While I flinched at the swear word in front of Rosie, it didn't seem intentional – there was no question that Vi sometimes liked to provoke me, but it appeared she was swept up in the moment. 'Children are nothing but a problem people create and then congratulate themselves on solving. Look at you and Jeremy, for Christ's sake. "Oh, we can't leave the house because it's Rosie's naptime, we can't be out past five forty-five P.M." or whenever the fuck it is—' I was pretty sure Rosie had only a vague notion of what these obscenities, or anything else Vi was saying, meant, but I could sense her watching rapt from beside me, no doubt even more enthralled because she'd heard her own name. 'Or, "She can't wear that sunscreen because it has parabens in it" – I mean, seriously, can you even tell me what a paraben is? – and "She can't eat raw carrots

because she might choke," and on and on and on. But who asked you to have children? Do you think you're providing some service to the world? You got pregnant because you wanted to – which, okay, that's your right, but then other people can't do what they want to because it's too complicated?'

'Fine,' I said. 'Forget I said anything.'

'Don't be a pussy.'

I glared at her. 'Don't call me names.'

'Well, it seems awfully convenient that you get to speak your mind and then close down the discussion.'

'I need to go home for their naps,' I said, and there was a split second in which Vi and I looked at each other and almost laughed. Instead, sourly, she said, 'Of course you do.'

In the car, she was silent, and after a couple minutes, Rosie said from the backseat, 'Mama wants to sing the Bingo song.'

'I'll sing it later,' I said.

'Mama wants to sing the Bingo song now,' Rosie said, and when I didn't respond, she added in a cheerful tone, 'When you take off your diaper, it makes Mama very sad.'

Vi snorted unpleasantly. 'Why don't you just toilet train her?'

'We're going to soon.'

Vi said nothing, and loathing for her flared up in me, which was probably just what she wanted. It was one thing for my sister to fail to appreciate the energy I put into our lunches, the sheer choreography of getting a six-month-old and a two-year-old out of the house, into the car, into a restaurant, and back home with no major meltdowns (never in my children's presence could *I* have

ordered a meal as intricately, messily hands-on as a fajita), but it was another thing entirely for Vi to mock me. And yet, in one final attempt at diplomacy, as I stopped the car on the street outside the small single-story gray house where Vi lived, I said, 'For Dad's birthday, I was thinking—'

'Let's talk about it later.'

'Fine.' If she thought I was going to plead for forgiveness, she was mistaken, and it wasn't just because we really did need to get home for Rosie and Owen's naps. She climbed from the car, and before she shut the door, I said, 'By the way?'

A nasty satisfaction rose in me as she turned. She was prepared for me to say, *I didn't mean to be such a jerk in the restaurant*. Instead, I said, 'Parabens are preservatives.'

Fourteen hours later, at three in the morning, our squabble was what I was stewing over; specifically, I was thinking that the reason I'd made my points so clumsily was that what I really believed was even more offensive than that being straight was easier than being gay. I believed Vi was dating women because she was at her heaviest ever – she'd quit smoking in the spring, and now she had to be sixty pounds overweight – and most lesbians seemed to be more forgiving about appearances than most straight men. I didn't think I'd object to Vi being gay if I believed she actually was, but something about this development felt false, akin to the way she'd wished, since our adolescence, that she'd been born Jewish, or the way she kept a dream catcher above her kitchen sink. Lying there in the dark next to Jeremy, I wondered what would happen if I were to suggest that she and I do Weight Watchers together; I myself was still carrying ten extra pounds from being pregnant with

Owen. Then I thought about how most nights Jeremy and I split a pint of ice cream in front of the TV, how it was pretty much the best part of the day – the whole ritual of relaxation after both children were asleep and before Owen woke up for his ten p.m. nursing – and how it seemed unlikely that half a pint of fudge ripple was part of any diet plan. This was when the bed in which Jeremy and I slept began to shake.

I assumed at first that Jeremy was causing the mattress to move by turning over, except that he wasn't turning. The rocking continued for perhaps ten seconds, at which point Jeremy abruptly sat up and said, 'It's an earthquake.' But already the rocking seemed to be subsiding.

I sat up, too. 'Are you sure?'

'You get Owen and I'll get Rosie.' Jeremy had turned on the light on his nightstand and was walking out of the room, and as I hurried from bed, adrenaline coursed through me; my heart was beating faster and I felt simultaneously unsteady and purposeful. In his crib, illuminated by a starfish-shaped night-light, Owen was lying on his back as I'd left him an hour earlier, his arms raised palms up on either side of his head, his cheeks big and smooth, his nose tiny. I hesitated just a second before lifting him, and I grabbed one of the eight pacifiers scattered in the crib. As I'd guessed he would, he blinked awake, seeming confused, but made only one mournful cry as I stuck in the pacifier. In the small central hallway that connected the house's three bedrooms, we almost collided with Jeremy and Rosie, Rosie's legs wrapped around Jeremy's torso, her arms dangling limply over his shoulders, her face half-obscured by tangled hair. Her eyes were open, I saw, but barely.

'Do we go to the basement?' I said to Jeremy. The shaking had definitely stopped.

'That's tornadoes.'

'What is it for earthquakes?' In retrospect, it's hard to believe I needed to ask, hard to believe I had reached the age of thirty-four and given birth to two children without bothering to learn such basic information.

Jeremy said, 'In theory, you get under a table, but staying in bed is okay, too.'

'Really?' We looked at each other, my husband sweet and serious in his gray T-shirt and blue-striped boxer shorts, our daughter draped across him.

'You want me to check?' He meant by looking online from his phone, which he kept beside the bed at night.

'We shouldn't call Courtney, should we?' I said. 'They must have felt it if we did.' Courtney Wheeling was Jeremy's colleague at Washington University – his area of study was aquatic chemistry, hers was seismology and plate tectonics – and she and her husband, Hank, lived down the street and were our best friends.

'It doesn't seem necessary,' Jeremy said. 'I'll look at FEMA's website, but I think the best thing is for all of us to go back to bed.'

I nodded my chin toward Rosie. 'Keeping them with us or in their own rooms?'

Rosie's head popped up. 'Rosie sleeps with Mama!' A rule of thumb with Rosie was that whether I did or didn't think she was following the conversation, I was always wrong.

'Keeping them,' Jeremy said. 'In case of aftershocks.'

In our room, I climbed into bed holding Owen, shift-

ing him so he was nestled in my right arm while Jeremy helped Rosie settle on my other side. I wasn't sure whether to be alarmed or pleasantly surprised that Jeremy was all right with having the kids sleep with us. In general, he was the one who resisted bringing them into our bed; he'd read the same books in Rosie's infancy that I had, half of which argued that sharing a bed with your kids was the most nurturing thing you could do and the other half of which warned that doing so would result in your smothering them either figuratively or literally. But I liked when they were close by – whether or not it really was safer, at some primitive level it felt like it had to be – and the thought of them sleeping alone in their cribs sometimes pinched at my heart. Besides, I could never resist their miniature limbs and soft skin.

Rosie curled toward me then, tapping my arm, and I turned – awkwardly, because of how I was holding Owen – to look at her. She said, 'Rosie wants a banana.'

'In the morning, sweetheart.'

Jeremy had gone to the window that faced the street, and he parted the curtains. 'Everyone's lights are on,' he said.

'A monkey eats a banana peel,' Rosie declared. 'But not people.'

'That's true,' I said. 'It would make us sick.'

Jeremy was typing on his phone. After a minute, he said, 'There's nothing about it online yet.' He looked up. 'How's he doing?'

'He's more asleep than awake, but will you get an extra binky just in case?' Surely this was evidence of the insularity of our lives: that unless otherwise specified, whenever Jeremy or I said *he*, we meant our son, and whenever we

said *she*, we meant our daughter. On a regular basis, we sent each other texts consisting in their entirety of one letter and one punctuation mark: *R?* for *How's Rosie doing?* and *O?* for *How's Owen?* And surely it was this insularity that so irritated Vi, whereas to me, the fact that my life was suburban and conventional was a victory.

Jeremy returned from Owen's room with a second pacifier, handed it to me, and lay down before turning off the light on his nightstand. Then – I whispered, because whispering seemed more appropriate in the dark – I said, 'So if there are aftershocks, we just stay put?'

'And keep away from windows. That's pretty much all I could find on the FEMA site.'

'Thanks for checking.' Over Owen's head, I reached out to rub Jeremy's shoulder.

I felt them falling asleep one by one then, my son, my daughter, and my husband. Awake alone, I experienced a gratitude for my life and our family, the four of us together, accounted for and okay. In contrast to the agitation I'd been gripped by before the earthquake, I was filled with calmness, a sense that we'd passed safely through a minor scare – like when you speed up too fast in slow highway traffic and almost hit the car in front of you but then you don't. The argument with Vi, inflated prior to the quake, shrank to its true size; it was insignificant. My sister and I had spent three decades bickering and making up.

But now that several years have passed, it pains me to remember this night because I was wrong. Although we were safe in that moment, we hadn't passed through anything. Nothing was concluding, nothing was finished; everything was just beginning. And though my powers

weren't what they once had been, though I no longer considered myself truly psychic, I still should have been able to anticipate what would happen next.

Chapter 2

Our routine in the morning was that we'd awaken around six-fifteen either to Owen's squeaks on the monitor on my nightstand or to Rosie chatting with herself on the monitor on Jeremy's nightstand. I'd go nurse Owen while Jeremy showered, then he'd take both children downstairs to eat while I showered. When I joined them, they'd have moved into the living room, which was also our playroom, and I'd be only halfway down the steps before Rosie began making excited announcements about my appearance – 'Mama has a blue shirt!' – or describing her own activities. As I reached the bottom step, she'd fling herself into my arms, as if we were reuniting after many years apart. (How flattering motherhood was, when they weren't smearing food on my clothes or sneezing into my mouth.)

On this morning, Rosie squatted by the bookshelf and shouted, 'Rosie's driving a school bus!'

Jeremy, who was holding his phone and Owen, said, 'The earthquake had a magnitude of 4.9, and the epicenter was in Terre Haute, Indiana.'

'Have you talked to Courtney yet?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'I'll wait until I see her at school.

I'm guessing she's already fielding calls from the media.'

As soon as I sat on the couch, Owen began kicking his legs and reaching for me. I lifted my arms, and as Jeremy passed him over, he said, 'By the way, your dad just called. He wants to know if you can take him grocery shopping tomorrow instead of today.'

'Is everything all right?'

'Well, he said he felt the earthquake, but he didn't seem worked up about it.'

'Since when does my dad call at seven A.M.?'

'Go call him now if you're worried.'

I held Owen back toward Jeremy. He began to cry, and as I walked to the kitchen, I heard Jeremy say, 'Really, Owen? Am I really that bad?'

From our cordless phone, I called my father's apartment. After he answered, I said, 'So you felt the earthquake, too?'

'Just enough to know what it was,' my father said. 'I'm afraid I have to postpone our trip to the store this afternoon. Will tomorrow work for you?'

'Tomorrow's your birthday dinner, Dad.' My father still drove – he wasn't supposed to at night but was fine during the day – but even so, since my mother's death ten years before, I'd taken him grocery shopping once a week. We'd get deli meat and sliced cheese for his lunches and plan out his dinners, for which he'd buy himself only the cheapest cuts of beef and pork.

'I hope you're not planning anything fancy,' my father said.

'I promise it'll be very low-key. What do you have to do this afternoon?'

'I'll be giving a lift to your sister. I'm sure you know she

has a date.' Though my father didn't sound like he was complaining, irritation gathered in me. About a year before, around the time my father's doctor had told him he could no longer drive at night, Vi had stopped driving period. She said she'd had enough of all the jackasses jabbering on their cellphones while going eighty miles an hour; also, not driving was greener. But Vi rarely recycled an aluminum can of Diet Coke, even when a bin was two feet away, and it was obvious that the real explanation was that she'd developed a phobia. I'd meant to get online and do some research, but many months had passed without my doing so. I did get online on a daily basis, usually in the afternoon when Rosie and Owen were both asleep, but once in front of the computer, I'd forget everything I'd meant to do and end up either on Facebook or reading about pregnant celebrities. Meanwhile, Vi showed no inclination to start driving again, and socializing with her and my father, especially during the evening, continued to require elaborate planning.

'Dad, she can take a taxi to her date,' I said. 'She's not destitute.' Vi was always thousands of dollars in credit card debt, as I had once been, too, but surely she could scrape together cab fare.

'I don't mind,' my father said. 'She doesn't think they'll be more than an hour.'

'They're meeting in the afternoon, not at night?'

'At three o'clock, at a Starbucks in Creve Coeur. Not too far off 270, I believe. Vi said I'm welcome to come in and sit at another table, but I'll just bring the paper and make myself comfortable in the car.'

'That doesn't sound like much fun for you.' My father

had also said nothing to suggest that Vi had revealed the gender of her date to him. It was so like my sister to have our almost-seventy-four-year-old father drive her, even to be okay with him following her inside, yet not to bother explaining to him either online dating or her nascent lesbianism. (The first I'd ever heard of Vi being involved with a woman was two summers before, when she'd met someone named Cindy at a spirituality conference in Illinois. Cindy was our age but wore a long gray-and-green batik skirt with a matching flowing shirt and the kind of sandals you'd go river rafting in, and thirty seconds after meeting me, she said in a faux-sympathetic tone, 'You give off a very, very tired energy, and you need to make more time for yourself.' When of course I was tired – I had a six-month-old baby! Vi hadn't introduced Cindy to our father, and a few weeks later, Vi had told me she and Cindy were no longer on speaking terms. Since then, Vi hadn't, to my knowledge, dated anyone.)

I said to my father, 'I have a question for you about tomorrow. It's just as easy for Jeremy to grill salmon or steak, and since it's your birthday, you should decide.'

'Oh, heavens, I'm not picky.' He was quiet before adding, 'Vi seems well these days, doesn't she? She's come into her own.'

My father tended to speak in code, which had to do, I believed, with his midwestern decorum, a discretion so extreme that it precluded direct mention of a wide range of topics. Perhaps the worst thing Jeremy had ever said to me, when we'd been together about six months, was that my father was cold. Jeremy had made this remark after we'd invited my father to hear the symphony and he'd declined without giving any reason, and the way Jeremy

had said it had been as if this view was a shared understanding we had instead of a scathing observation on his part. 'Well, I've never heard him say "I love you," ' Jeremy had added. 'I've never heard him give you a compliment.' When I began to cry, I think Jeremy was shocked. But to me, my father had always been the kind, warm parent. He was reticent, yes, but he wasn't cold.

In this moment, however, I truly had no idea what my father was talking about when he said Vi was doing well: Her job, which I had long assumed was as much a source of discomfort for him as it was for me? The fact that she had a date?

I said, 'I guess she does seem good.' That she and I had had a fight wasn't worth burdening my father with. 'All right,' I added. 'So Jeremy will get you tomorrow at five o'clock.'

Back in the living room, I said, 'My dad is driving Vi to her date, but I don't even think Vi's told him it's a woman.' The night before, I had recounted to Jeremy my disagreement with Vi at Hacienda, including the part where she'd declared that children were a problem people created then congratulated themselves for solving, at which point Jeremy had laughed and said, 'She's right.'

I said, 'I assumed the woman was picking her up, but they're meeting this afternoon at a Starbucks in Creve Coeur.'

'How romantic,' Jeremy said.

'I know, right?' Even though I wasn't exactly rooting for a thriving lesbian romance for my sister, she'd be better off meeting the IT consultant at night for a drink. How could you possibly fall in love off Interstate 270, on a Thursday afternoon? As I dropped to my knees and began

picking up blocks that were strewn across the rug, I said, 'So I think for his birthday dinner, my dad wants steak.'

A few minutes after twelve, Rosie pounded on the Wheelings' door while I unfastened the various harnesses keeping Owen strapped into his half of the double stroller. From the porch, I could hear the television in their living room, which was never on in the middle of the day. Hank had an odd expression – both perplexed and amused – as he held open the door. 'So do you know or do you not know that your sister was just on Channel 5?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Do you ever feel like there are only six people in St. Louis?' Hank said. 'And we're either married or related to half of them?'

'If *you* think that, try having grown up here. Why was Vi on TV?' Although Hank didn't seem perturbed, my pulse had quickened. *Please let it just be a man-on-the-street interview,* I thought. *Something about the Cardinals or the Highway 40 construction*. I followed Rosie inside with Owen in my arms.

'Hey, Rosie the Riveter,' Hank said, and Amelia, who was Hank and Courtney's three-year-old daughter and who was standing on the couch, called out, 'My mom is on TV!'

I turned back to Hank. 'What's going on?'

'Courtney and Vi were in the same news segment about the earthquake.'

'Why would Vi be—' I started to ask, and Hank said, 'I think it's better if you just watch. I DVR'd it for Courtney.'

'Is it good or bad?'

On the wall in one corner of their living room was a large flat-screen TV, and Hank held the remote control toward it. 'It's not that it's bad,' he said. 'But you'll think it is.'

I tried not to grip Owen too tightly as I faced the screen. The segment began with a young brunette reporter describing the earthquake that had occurred during the night and providing an overview of the region's geology. 'San Francisco gets more attention,' she said, 'but heartland dwellers know that one of the strongest continental earthquakes ever recorded in the U.S. had its epicenter in the Missouri Bootheel, just a few hours south of St. Louis.' Courtney then appeared on-screen, Courtney as in Hank's wife and Jeremy's colleague, sitting behind the desk in her office. 'In fact, it was a series of between three and five seismic events, the first of which was in December 1811 and the last in February 1812,' she said, and she sounded calm and authoritative. COURTNEY WHEELING, WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR OF GEOPHYSICS, it said in black letters at the bottom of the screen. 'At this point, we don't know if the second and third events on December 16, 1811, were quakes or aftershocks. As for the question of whether we're living in an active seismic zone right now—'

Before Courtney could finish, the reporter said, 'According to one area woman, the answer is very much so.' Hank laughed, presumably because it seemed obvious that Courtney had been about to say the opposite, and then Vi filled the screen. Seeing her, I flinched. The big, loose purple tunic she wore had seemed unnoteworthy at Hacienda but now appeared garish, and even if she hadn't been in the same clothes,

I'd have guessed she hadn't slept the night before: There were shadows under her eyes, her face was puffy, and she didn't have on makeup. I had never been on television myself, but I knew you at least needed foundation.

'Another earthquake is coming soon. A powerful, powerful earthquake.' In voice-over, as footage showed Vi giving a tour of her living room – the iron candelabra set on the windowsill and the Tibetan prayer flags strung across one wall and the little fountain in the corner, with water bubbling over a pile of stones – the reporter said, 'Violet Shramm, a self-described psychic medium living in Rock Hill, claims that the tremors St. Louis residents felt earlier today were a prelude to a much bigger earthquake. No, she doesn't have proof, but in 2004 she helped Florissant police find nine-year-old kidnapping victim Brady Ogden, she publicly predicted Michael Jackson's death in June – and she says she had a hunch about the quake that happened early this morning.'

'I did a reading for a group last night,' Vi told the camera, 'and the last thing I said to them was, "Be careful, because Mother Earth is very restless right now." '

I glanced at Hank. 'I thought you said it wasn't that bad.'

'Well, I wish they weren't pitted against each other. I'm sure Courtney had no idea.'

'She looks deranged,' I said, and added, as if it were necessary, 'Not Courtney.'

'Shramm knows she'll have her skeptics,' the reporter was saying, 'but she believes that staying quiet could do more harm than good.'

'If I can save just one life,' Vi said, 'that's what's important.'

The shot shifted to an image of a map with a pulsing red circle over the border between Missouri and Arkansas on one side and Kentucky and Tennessee on the other. 'No doubt about it, we're in a hot zone,' the reporter said. 'But according to Washington University's Wheeling, the Big One could come tomorrow – or never.'

'It's no likelier to happen next week than fifty years from now,' Courtney explained, and she looked, I noticed this time around, impeccably tasteful in a gray blouse, a black suit jacket, small silver earrings, and well-applied foundation; her short blond hair was neatly brushed. 'Does it hurt to keep emergency supplies in the basement? Not at all. But in terms of daily threats for St. Louisans, I'd say something like obesity far outranks earthquakes.'

'Oh, God,' I said, and Hank said, 'Yeah, she could have chosen a different example.'

'Every year, GPS instruments record hundreds of instances of seismic activity on and around the New Madrid fault line, yet we feel virtually none of it because it's not that strong,' Courtney was saying on-screen, and she sounded serene and wise and not sleep-deprived. 'The reality is that if you're using seismometers, you'll see earthquakes occurring.' She smiled. 'The earth is always busy.'

The brunette reporter reappeared in front of Vi's house, though blessedly without Vi herself anywhere in view. 'For St. Louisans rattled first by recent events and now by future predictions, let's hope not too busy,' the reporter said. 'Back to you, Denise.'

Hank paused the screen, and I turned to him and said, 'That was awful.'

'So Vi's eccentric,' Hank said. 'It's not illegal.'

'Kate, Owen spit out his binky.' Amelia was pulling on my hand. 'He spit it on the floor.' She held the pacifier up toward me, and I rubbed it against my shirt and stuck it back in Owen's mouth. I glanced at Rosie, who was setting a blanket over a row of Amelia's stuffed animals, and I wondered if she realized her aunt had just been on television.

'Vi must have called the station herself, right?' I said. 'I mean, how else would they have found her? It's not like she's an expert on earthquakes.' No, the earthquake expert – that was Courtney. The feeling that gripped me in this moment was similar to what I imagined the relatives of an alcoholic must experience when they learn that their parent or child or sibling has gone on another bender: that mix of anger and disappointment and lack of surprise, a blend so exquisite, so familiar, it's almost like satisfaction. Of course. Of course Vi had had a premonition about something big, and of course, instead of taking the time to think it through, she'd called a television station, and of course she'd let herself be interviewed while wearing no makeup. Why did she always get in her own way? I was embarrassed, yes, but my embarrassment was mostly for her, not me. After all, we no longer had the same last name, no longer looked identical. People I was close to knew I had a twin sister, but acquaintances – my former co-workers, or our neighbors other than the Wheelings – wouldn't connect me to this strange woman in her purple shirt, with her weird prediction. I said, 'I'll never understand why she likes drawing attention to herself.' After a beat, I added, 'And the reason you think Vi is delightfully eccentric is that

you're not from here.' Hank, Courtney, and my husband had all grown up on the East Coast: Courtney outside Philadelphia, Hank in Boston, and Jeremy in northern Virginia.

'Oh, I'm not arguing that there aren't some small-minded yokels in the Lou,' Hank said, and I realized with self-consciousness that a black man married to a white woman probably didn't need to be reminded by me of how conservative a place St. Louis could be. 'But—' Hank paused and mouthed, *Fuck 'em*. 'Seriously,' he said aloud.

'What about Courtney, though?' I said. 'She must have been appalled by Vi just now.'

'She hasn't seen it yet.' Hank checked his watch. 'She teaches until one-fifteen. But I'm sure she'll be okay being the yin to Vi's yang.'

You mean the rational to Vi's crazy, I thought, but even in my head it sounded too mean to say. Besides, I didn't believe Vi was crazy. I believed she sometimes seemed crazy, and that on a regular basis she exercised bad judgment, but I didn't believe she was crazy; I never had. 'Should we get going?' I said.

Amelia attended preschool in the morning three days a week, at a place where I was planning to put in an application for Rosie for the following fall, so on those days, we met up post-lunch and pre-nap. Our default plan was to walk first to Kaldi's, where Hank and I would get coffee and the girls would split a scone, and then to backtrack to the park – officially known as DeMun Park, though Hank had been greatly amused when Vi told us that everyone who'd ever worked in the row of restaurants along DeMun Avenue referred to it as MILF Park.

As we left the Wheelings' house, it occurred to me that I should call my father, to check if he'd watched the news, but after his comment that morning about Vi coming into her own, I couldn't bring myself to do it; in case he hadn't seen her, I wanted to give him a few more hours of not knowing.

Outside, Amelia and Rosie skipped in front of us, and Hank walked beside me as I pushed Owen in the stroller. Amelia slapped her palm against a lamppost, and when Rosie mimicked the gesture exactly, I thought, as I often did, that Amelia and Hank were like mentors to Rosie and me: Amelia was always beckoning Rosie toward the next developmental stage, while Hank was the person who'd most influenced me as a parent. It was from Hank that I'd learned to give Rosie her own spoon when I'd fed her jar food, so that she wasn't constantly grabbing the one I was using. Hank had told me to put Triple Paste on her when her diaper rash got bad ('Way more than you think you need, like you're spreading cream cheese on a bagel,' he'd said), and to buy a Britax car seat after she outgrew her infant seat, and to go to the Buder library for the best story hour. The way Hank was with Amelia – affectionate and relaxed, unconcerned with getting mud or food on his clothes – was the way I aspired to be with Rosie, and the way Hank answered the questions Amelia asked, which was succinctly but accurately (and definitely not cutely, not in a winking manner for the benefit of another adult), was the way I tried to answer Rosie's when she began asking them.

As we turned onto DeMun Avenue, I said, 'Courtney looked good on TV. How's she feeling?'

'Not too bad. She wants to get the results of her CVS,

just for peace of mind, but she hasn't been nauseous for a while.'

Courtney was eleven weeks pregnant, expecting in April. When we'd gotten to know the Wheelings, they'd been in agreement that they were having only one child, and in fact, Rosie had been the beneficiary of Amelia's pricey hand-me-downs, which Courtney had told me with such certainty they'd never want back that I hadn't worried when Rosie ripped or stained them. And then, the summer after she got tenure, Courtney decided she wanted another child. Not only wasn't it difficult for her to persuade Hank, it was so easy that I suspected he'd have preferred two kids all along. Courtney was then thirty-seven, and when they hadn't conceived within six months, she began taking Clomid; after another six months, she decided to have IVF but hadn't yet started the first cycle when she discovered she was pregnant.

I'd had Owen during the time Courtney and Hank had been trying for a second baby, and I had never spoken to Courtney about their fertility troubles; Courtney herself still hadn't told me she was pregnant, and everything I knew had made its way to me via Hank. Courtney also hadn't broached the subject with Jeremy, though they were closer than Courtney and I were. Once it had seemed slightly strange to me that our friendships with the Wheelings broke down not along gender lines but along professional ones – like me, Hank was the stay-at-home parent – but these days I rarely thought about it.

'So this morning Amelia wakes up at five-fifteen,' Hank said. 'Not like wakes up crying in the night, but *wakes up* wakes up, in a great mood, wanting to eat breakfast. And

she'd slept through the earthquake, but Courtney and I had been up then, too, so I was so tired I felt hungover. It was like all the downside of a hangover without any of the fun. I started thinking about getting up in the night with a newborn, and I seriously don't know if I have it in me again.'

I laughed. 'I think that train has left the station.'

'It's been a while for us,' Hank said. 'And we aren't spring chickens anymore.'

'Oh, please.' Hank and Courtney were only four years older than I was, and they were in great shape. Every Wednesday afternoon and Saturday morning, they saw a trainer together, and they had met because they'd both played varsity squash as Harvard undergrads, a fact I was glad I hadn't known until my friendship with Hank was established – not the squash part, though it was a sport with which I was totally unfamiliar, but the Harvard part, which made Hank not quite the same breed of stay-at-home parent I was.

'Call me when you turn thirty-five,' Hank said. 'I swear something changes.'

'All right, geezer.'

'I will say this: Your son is an excellent advertisement for babykind.' Hank stepped around the stroller, so he was facing Owen, and started walking backward. 'We want to order one just as easygoing as you, O,' he said.

'Not to confirm your fears, but you know he's not sleeping through the night yet, right?' I said. 'He still nurses every three or four hours.'

'For real?' Hank looked incredulous. 'You've got to let him cry it out.' Hank was still walking backward in front of the stroller, and he said to Owen, 'You don't want your

mom to get a good night's sleep, huh? Kate, you should see the shit-eating grin your son has on his face right now.'

I laughed, though beneath the levity of the moment, I felt a sudden uneasiness that wasn't related to our conversation. It was the realization I hadn't allowed myself to have earlier, choosing instead to be distracted by how disheveled Vi had looked on the local news: My sister had received a warning that something bad was going to happen. I wasn't yet entirely convinced that there would be another earthquake, though I wasn't convinced there wouldn't. Either way, she'd sensed something.

I said to Hank, 'Do you and Courtney keep emergency supplies?'

'Not a one. Do you guys?'

I shook my head.

'You planning to go buy a generator now?'

A generator, no, but maybe a crank radio, and definitely water and canned food. Aloud, as if the possibility amused me, I said, 'I might.'

'I have a confession,' Hank said, and I felt a kind of tingle, a nervous anticipation. I was both surprised and unsurprised when he said, 'I know how you feel about Vi's whole gig, but there's a part of me that believes in that stuff. ESP, psychic predictions – the world's a pretty weird and cool place, so why is it impossible?'

Again trying to sound lighthearted, I said, 'Don't let Courtney hear you say that.'

'Ehh—' He shrugged. 'She cuts me slack for being artsy.' Before Amelia's birth, Hank had worked as an art teacher at a private high school, and he made oil paintings, or at least he intended to even if he didn't have much time

these days. The attic of their house, where I'd never been, was his studio. He added, 'My only point is that it's hubris to claim there aren't unexplained phenomena out there.'

Hank and I had been friends for just over two years, which wasn't that long, but we'd seen each other almost every day during this time, and there were ways in which he knew more about my daily life than Jeremy did. Yet every time Hank and I had headed in a direction that could have opened onto the topic of psychicness, of *my* psychicness – conversations about our families or our childhoods or about secrets, even conversations once or twice about the paranormal – I'd always let the opportunity to tell him pass. I'd imagined that I'd immediately wish I could take the admission back. The last person I'd revealed the truth to was Jeremy, because I'd thought I owed it to him. But if I wasn't marrying Hank, was it unreasonable that I wanted to seem to him like a regular person? Growing up, from adolescence on, I had assumed that I couldn't live in St. Louis as an adult because my past would always follow and define me. I'd been pleasantly surprised to discover that I might be wrong. To have settled in my hometown with a husband from elsewhere, to have friends from elsewhere – this was a version of life I hadn't been able to envision as a teenager. Why would I disrupt this fragile balance just for the sake of self-disclosure? Hank and I knew each other well; we didn't need to know each other completely.

And yet my withholding of information, which had previously felt only like discretion, abruptly seemed to be verging on dishonesty. We'd arrived at Kaldi's, and I pulled the brake on the stroller. Amelia, who was

standing with Rosie by the café's front door, called, 'Daddy, can we have a raspberry scone?'

'Hang on, sweetheart,' Hank said.

'I'm sure Vi will be glad to have you in her corner,' I said.

'But does she have you?' Though Hank's tone was casual, he was looking at me so intently that I wondered what he suspected. Surely this was the moment to say, *Of course she does, because we're exactly the same*. Or we had been, until I'd deliberately destroyed my abilities.

Instead, like a coward, I said, 'Of course she does. She's my sister.'

Chapter 3

Vi and I were born in August 1975, less than a month before our parents' first wedding anniversary. At thirty-seven weeks, we were considered full-term, which was and still is unusual for twins, but the truly notable fact of our arrival was that our mother didn't know until the day of her delivery that there were two of us. Twenty-three years old and slim, she had gained seventy pounds during her pregnancy; by her second trimester, her hands and feet were so swollen every morning that the doctor told her to remove her wedding ring or risk needing to have it cut off.

Apart from her dramatic weight gain, our mother had experienced what she understood to be a normal pregnancy. It was at a routine appointment on a hot morning in mid-August that our mother's obstetrician ordered an X ray because he was considering revising her due date based on her size. (Sonograms existed then, but they were still uncommon.) During the X ray, the technician saw right away that there were two babies, announced the news to our mother, then pleaded with her to act surprised when the obstetrician told her. But she didn't have to act – she was stunned. How would she

take care of twins? She had moved to St. Louis a year and a half earlier from the tiny town of Risco, Missouri, and she knew no one who could help her. She'd grown apart from the girl she'd lived with before marrying our father, she was estranged from her family in Risco, and she no longer had co-workers.

The doctor, who didn't want our mother carrying twins beyond thirty-seven weeks, told her to call our father and have him pack a bag and meet them at the hospital. Once there, the doctor broke our mother's water – she said he used a hook that resembled a crochet needle, a detail that as children, Vi found fascinating and I was disturbed by. After several hours, the doctor decided that our mother's labor had progressed enough, and he had an anesthetist administer an epidural. As soon as it took effect, our mother realized only half her body was numb. She needed another dose, she told the nurse, but the nurse explained that the anesthesia just hadn't kicked in yet and our mother should wait. An hour passed, and our mother, with increasing desperation, told the nurse she still was numb on only one side of her body. After the doctor examined her, he said she was too close to delivering to receive additional medication. This meant that while the left side of her body remained desensitized and immobile, the right side was wild with pain; one arm and leg writhed as the other lay inert. She was trapped, and she also was alone; our father sat in the waiting room.

When Vi emerged, our mother felt as if she'd been turned inside out. A nurse whisked the baby away, and as the contractions continued, another nurse told our mother to keep pushing, which our mother thought she

already was doing. I emerged eight minutes later and was similarly whisked away. Our mother had neither held nor even really seen us; she was hyperventilating, and though she soon stopped, she felt flattened, overwhelmed by what she had just been through. She lay motionless in the hospital bed and swore that she would never have another baby.

As for Vi and me, after our Apgar scores confirmed that we were healthy, we were weighed (Vi was six pounds, nine ounces, and I was five pounds, eleven ounces), then cleaned, wrapped in blankets, deposited in bassinets, and taken to the nursery, where we were introduced to our father. Vi was asleep, he said, and I was awake, and he went about memorizing our faces. Vi had been named, but I hadn't. For the next five days, though the nurses and our father repeatedly inquired about our mother's preferences, she declined to answer. Having expected only one baby, she had planned on Violet for a girl and Victor for a boy. What about Violet and Victoria, our father suggested, but our mother shook her head. She had spoken very little since our birth; she did not breast-feed us. Violet and Margaret? (Margaret was the name of our father's mother.) Our mother shook her head again. Violet and Daisy? our father asked, and our mother shrugged. He took this as assent, and we became Violet Kimberly and Daisy Kathleen. Our mother later claimed that Kimberly and Kathleen had been maternity ward nurses, but our father denied it, saying the nurses had merely helped him select our middle names.

As little girls, Vi and I loved hearing about our arrival in spite of the fact that we didn't have a mother who concluded this narrative with lavish expressions of affection.

In retrospect, I'm not sure why we were so enthralled by this story, aside from the fact that we possessed the guileless self-absorption of most children. But it took having babies myself for me to understand just how lacking, how depressing even, the story of our births was, with its absence of any hint of joy on our mother's part. She had looked forward to having one child, was my interpretation of events when I became an adult, but having two did not double her excitement; rather, it extinguished it. Our mother was neither a happy mother nor a happy person. It's impossible for me to know if she was unhappy before she had us, but I suspect she previously must have been able to enjoy herself at least a little or I doubt that my father would have married her. And not only married her but been so smitten that, as a thirty-nine-year-old bachelor, he'd proposed to her within three months of their meeting and left behind a life in Nebraska to move to St. Louis for this beautiful woman seventeen years his junior.

It also took having babies of my own for me to truly imagine what that experience in the hospital must have been like for my mother, how difficult: At twenty-three, she was almost a decade younger than I was when I delivered my first child; her husband wasn't in the delivery room to support her; and the combination of the ineffective epidural and the still surprising fact of there being two babies to push out must have been, in the clinical sense, traumatizing. And things did not improve much, particularly with regard to her isolation, when the hospital discharged the three of us.

That morning, our mother had changed, for the first time since our arrival five days earlier, from a hospital

gown to a dress, and she was shocked when she looked in the mirror. Between giving birth and shedding the water weight that had made her swollen, she had lost at least thirty pounds; her legs were so skinny that she reminded herself of Minnie Mouse. And this, in a way, was the happy ending of our birth story, a happiness Vi and I surely intuited, and celebrated, even if it had little to do with either of us – that in spite of everything she'd been through, on the day she left the hospital, our mother once again looked pretty.

We lived in Kirkwood, Missouri, a suburb twelve miles southwest of the St. Louis Arch. The blue shingled house on Gilbert Street that my parents had bought when they married was the one they stayed in until after I'd graduated from college, and for all that time my mother complained about it. She said that the house was drafty in the winter, that the street smelled of exhaust from trains on the nearby tracks, and that the neighbors were nosy and low-class. The real problem, however, wasn't the house; it was a simple and terrible fact that none of us ever discussed because we didn't need to, which was that our mother didn't like our father. In her crossed arms, the exhalations of her nostrils, the pinch of her lips, she showed us every day that she didn't enjoy his company, didn't find him interesting, and didn't respect him. Part of it seemed to be that she held him accountable for the disappointments life had dealt her, though it was always easier to see that she *was* disappointed than to understand exactly why. (Not that my father was alone in having let her down. Almost everyone my mother encountered fell into one of two categories: low-class or

snobby. Only very occasionally would she bestow her most prized compliment, reserved for a rich person who had pleasantly surprised her: *He didn't put on airs*, she'd say. *He acted the same as you and me.*)

Our parents had met when our father, who lived in Omaha, traveled to St. Louis on business – he was then a salesman for a commercial carpet manufacturer – and my mother was working at the front desk of the Clayton hotel where his employer put him up. He stayed in the hotel for two nights, and on the second, he invited her to go with him to a French restaurant. Our mother never suggested that he outright lied during these initial interactions, but she conveyed that he'd led her to believe he occupied a more senior position in the company than he did, and that he was more worldly than he turned out to be. (Of course, I thought later; he was trying to impress her.) Once a month for the next three months, my father returned to St. Louis to woo my mother – she was living with a roommate on Wydown Boulevard, and he stayed at the hotel – and on these trips they attended a Cardinals game, strolled in the Missouri Botanical Garden, and toured the Anheuser-Busch Brewery, where my mother purchased a tiny beer stein for her charm bracelet, an accessory that in elementary school Vi and I would fight to try on. On his third visit, my father arranged a ride in a hot-air balloon, an outing that so frightened my mother that they asked the pilot to land after just a few minutes. Back on earth, my father proposed, and my mother accepted. In Omaha, my father gave notice to his boss, moved to St. Louis, found a job as a salesman for a lighting fixture company, and married my mother in the late morning of September 5,

1974, at the St. Louis County Courts Building on Carondelet Avenue in Clayton. She wore a sleeveless twill dress with a pattern of interlocking green and black hexagons, and he wore a carnation boutonnière; they went out for a steak lunch afterward, and then they both returned to work.

Why did my mother make things unnecessarily hard? That's the main question I ask myself in retrospect. Our lives weren't glamorous, but they weren't so bad; they were ordinary, and there are many worse ways to be. Though looking back, I see my father's complicity, too. If I were to fault him for falling for my mother, I'd be wishing away my own existence. But I was fairly sure he proposed to my mother, perhaps without really knowing her, for a foolish if time-honored reason, which was that she was beautiful. In photographs from around the time they married, her straight blond hair is parted in the center and falls past her shoulders; her lips are thin but flirtatiously upturned; her cheekbones are high, her eyes big and blue, her lashes accentuated with mascara. She was five-five, the same height Vi and I eventually grew to, but outside of pregnancy, I don't think she ever weighed more than a hundred and ten pounds. She favored snug blouses, dresses that cinched her small waist, jumpsuits with flared pants. In a photo Vi and I especially liked, our mother stands in front of the Arch holding our father's hand. She wears a belted orange wool jacket with an oversized collar and a matching orange beret; he has dark sideburns. Both of our parents are beaming.

That my mother turned out to be difficult as well as beautiful was likely a result of her upbringing. In Risco, she had grown up poor on a small farm, the third

daughter in an extremely religious Baptist family, and after graduating from high school, she'd remained at home and gotten a job at a newly opened rice-processing facility twenty minutes away. For three years, she secretly saved money, and as soon as she could afford to, she and her friend Jeanine bought bus tickets to St. Louis; my mother carried with her a single suitcase containing her clothes, toothbrush, and Christmas records. Although St. Louis was just three hours north of Risco, neither of them had ever been, and most of what they knew, or thought they knew, about the city was that they shouldn't go north of the Delmar Loop because that was where the black people lived.

Given that both the civil rights and the women's rights movements seemed to have entirely bypassed my parents, I never understood why it was my father who joined my mother in St. Louis rather than my mother moving to Omaha; perhaps this decision reflected the more invested party in the relationship. My mother quit her job the day after they married, and they soon bought the house that would evolve from a source of pride to one of disappointment.

I was four years old the night I woke up screaming. Vi and I shared a room, and by the time our mother came to me, Vi was sitting up in her bed. In a dream, I had seen a house on fire, flames soaring and billowing from all the windows; the house was orange with light and terrifyingly alive.

Even after our mother's arrival, I remained inconsolable. There was an impatience to the way our mother dealt with Vi and me that was surprisingly effective, implying as it did that whatever had upset us

wasn't important. But in this case, anything she could have said, any tone she used – it wouldn't have mattered, because the house would still have been consumed by fire. I am sorry to say I remember this feeling well not only because the image of the house was so vivid but also because that dread has returned regularly throughout my life, almost always when I awaken during the night: an anxious kind of certainty, an awareness of the world's menaces that feels like a recognition of the truth, and an awareness of my own vulnerability – of everyone's vulnerability.

As I continued shrieking, my father joined us, and I heard my mother tell him I'd had a nightmare. He sat on Vi's bed; light from the hallway cut into our room. My mother, who had taken several minutes to decipher what I was trying to tell her, kept saying, 'But if there was a fire, we'd smell smoke.'

'Should we sing a song?' my father asked. He began to hum, then to sing the words to 'I See the Moon,' and Vi joined him. Our vulnerability continued to clutch at me; hearing their voices, it clutched at me in a different way. How could our parents protect Vi and me from anything? For the first time, I realized that there was no guarantee that they could protect themselves. But then, as my father and Vi sang, the familiarity of the lyrics was comforting. My mother pulled my covers up before she left, and my father stayed in the room; he continued singing until Vi and I were both asleep.

The next night, a house halfway down our block burned to the ground. My parents, Vi, and I were awakened by the sirens, and the flashing lights from the fire trucks and the police cars reflected on our walls.

Though our parents didn't let us go outside, our father went to confer with neighbors. Vi and I couldn't see the fire because the house was on the same side of the street as ours, but I already knew what it looked like. The people who lived in the house were an older couple.

A few months later, we were eating a family dinner when Vi said, 'Why does Aunt Erma's heart hurt?' She asked this in a neutral tone rather than a distressed one, but our parents exchanged an alarmed look. Aunt Erma was actually our great-aunt, our paternal grandmother's sister, and lived in Grand Island, Nebraska; we had met her perhaps three times in our lives.

'What do you mean, Vi?' my father asked.

'She fell down,' Vi said without emotion, and took another bite of pork roast.

That time, more than a week passed before my father's mother called on a Sunday morning to say that her sister had died of a heart attack. I didn't overhear my father on the phone, but he repeated the information to our mother when he came into the kitchen. Vi and I were playing Candy Land at the table while our mother washed the breakfast dishes.

It was Vi's turn, and I was watching our father as he said, 'It's not just Daisy, then. It's Violet who has the senses, too.'

Our mother's expression when she turned to look at our father was sour. She was wearing yellow rubber gloves, cleaning a pan in which she'd cooked bacon, and she didn't turn off the faucet. She said, 'What do you suggest I do about it?'