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THE
CABIN AT THE **END**
OF THE **WORLD**

A NOVEL



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Dedication

for Lisa, Cole, Emma, and for us

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Epigraph

Then back in the ground / We look at our hands / And wonder aloud
/ Could anyone choose to die / In the end everybody wins / In the
end everybody wins

—Future of the Left, “The Hope That House Built”

Meanwhile, planes drop from the sky / People disappear and bullets
fly . . . Wouldn't be surprised if they have their way / (Tastes just
like chicken they say.)

—Clutch, “Animal Farm”

. . . because when the blanket of death came for us we kicked it off
and were left naked and shivering in the world.

—Nadia Bulkin, “Seven Minutes in Heaven,” *She Said Destroy*

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Come and See

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One

Wen

The girl with the dark hair walks down the wooden front stairs and lowers herself into the yellowing lagoon of ankle-high grass. A warm breeze ripples through the blades, leaves, and crablike petals of clover flowers. She studies the front yard, watching for the twitchy, mechanical motion and frantic jumps of grasshoppers. The glass jar cradled against her chest smells faintly of grape jelly and is sticky on the inside. She unscrews the aerated lid.

Wen promised Daddy Andrew she would release the grasshoppers before they got cooked inside the homemade terrarium. The grasshoppers will be okay because she'll make sure to keep the jar out of direct sunlight. She worries, though, that they could hurt themselves by jumping into the sharp edges of the lid's punched-in holes. She'll catch smaller grasshoppers, ones that don't jump as high or as powerfully, and because of their compact size there will be more leg-stretching room inside the jar. She will talk to the grasshoppers in a low, soothing voice, and hopefully they will be less likely to panic and mash themselves against the dangerous metal stalactites. Satisfied with her updated plan, she pulls up a fistful of grass, roots and all, leaving a pockmark in the front yard's sea of green and yellow. She carefully deposits and arranges the grass in the jar, then wipes her hands on her gray Wonder Woman T-shirt.

Wen's eighth birthday is in six days. Her dads not so secretly wonder (she has overheard them discussing this) if the day is her actual date of birth or one assigned to her by the orphanage in China's Hubei Province. For her age she is in the fifty-sixth percentile for height and forty-second for weight, or at least she was when she went to the pediatrician six months ago. She made Dr. Meyer explain the context of those numbers in detail. As

pleased as she was to be above the fifty-line for height, she was angry to be below it for weight. Wen is as direct and determined as she is athletic and wiry, often besting her dads in battles of wills and in scripted wrestling matches on their bed. Her eyes are a deep, dark brown, with thin caterpillar eyebrows that wiggle on their own. Along the right edge of her philtrum is the hint of a scar that is only visible in a certain light and if you know to look for it (so she is told). The thin white slash is the remaining evidence of a cleft lip repaired with multiple surgeries between the ages of two and four. She remembers the first and final trips to the hospital, but not the ones in between. That those middle visits and procedures have been somehow lost bothers her. Wen is friendly, outgoing, and as goofy as any other child her age, but isn't easy with her reconstructed smiles. Her smiles have to be earned.

It's a cloudless summer day in northern New Hampshire, only a handful of miles from the Canadian border. Sunlight shimmers on the leaves of the trees magnanimously lording over the small cabin, the lonely red dot on the southern shore of Gaudet Lake. Wen sets the jar down in a shady patch adjacent to the front stairs. She wades out into the grass, her arms outstretched, as though treading water. She swishes her right foot back and forth through the tops of the grass like Daddy Andrew showed her. He grew up on a farm in Vermont, so he's the grasshopper-finding expert. He said her foot is to act like a scythe, but without actually cutting down the grass. She didn't know what he meant and he launched into an explanation of what the tool was and how it was used. He took out his smartphone to search images of scythes before they both remembered there was no cell phone service at the cabin. Daddy Andrew drew a scythe on a napkin instead; a crescent-shaped knife at the end of a long stick, something a warrior or an orc from *The Lord of the Rings* movies would carry. It looked really dangerous and she didn't understand why people needed something so large and extreme to cut grass, but Wen loved the idea of pretending her leg was the handle and her foot was the long curved blade.

A brown grasshopper, big enough to span the distance across her hand, with loud, rasping wings flies up from underneath her foot and bounces off her chest. Wen stumbles backward at impact, almost falling down.

She giggles and says, "Okay, you're too big."

She resumes her exploratory swipes with her scythe-foot. A much smaller grasshopper jumps so high she loses sight of it somewhere in its

skyward, elliptical arc, but she tracks it as it lands a few feet to her left. It's the same fluorescent green as a tennis ball and the perfect size, not much bigger than the clumps of seeds at the ends of the longer grass stalks. If only she can catch it. Its movements are quick and difficult to anticipate, and it leaps away the moment before the quivering trap of her hands is in place. She laughs and follows a manic zigzag around the yard. She tells it that she means no harm, she will let it go eventually, and she just wants to learn about it so she can help all the other grasshoppers be healthy and happy.

Wen eventually catches the miniacrobat at the edge of the lawn and the gravel driveway. Cupped in the cave of her hands, this is the first grasshopper she's ever caught. She whisper-shouts, "Yes!" The grasshopper is so slight she can only feel it when it tries to jump through her closed fingers. The urge to open her hands a crack for a little peek is almost a compulsion, but she wisely resists. She sprints across the yard and deposits the grasshopper into the jar and quickly screws on the lid. The grasshopper bounces like an electron, pinging against the glass and tin, and then stops abruptly, perches on the greenery, and rests.

Wen says, "Okay. You are number one." She pulls a palm-sized notebook out of her back pocket, the front page already gridded into wavy rows and columns with headings, and she writes down the number one, an estimate of its size (she writes, inaccurately, "2 inches"), color ("green"), boy or girl ("girl Caroline"), energy level ("hi"). She returns the jar to its shaded spot and wanders back into the front yard. She quickly catches four more grasshoppers of similar size: two brown, one green, and one a color somewhere in the spectrum between. She names them after schoolmates: Liv, Orvin, Sara, and Gita.

As she searches for a sixth grasshopper, she hears someone walking or jogging on the forever-long dirt road that winds by the cabin and traces the lake's shoreline before snaking off into the surrounding woods. When they arrived two days ago, it took them twenty-one minutes and forty-nine seconds to drive the length of the dirt road. Wen timed it. Granted, Daddy Eric was driving way too slowly, like always.

The sounds of feet mashing and grinding into the dirt and stone are louder, closer. Something big is trudging its way down the road. Really big. Maybe it's a bear. Daddy Eric made her promise she would yell for them and run inside if she saw any animal bigger than a squirrel. Should she be