

## THE WRITER

The story on Alice's computer screen had been finding its way into words for more than five years, or maybe forever. Over that time, it had grown, changed, creaked, flown, gone silent and then gained its voice again, its plot taking unexpected paths, its characters turning into people she hadn't thought they would be, just as she had. This glowing screen the one constant. This story, in all its iterations. Now awaiting the last step. Someone to say *yes*.

She was young for a writer, barely twenty-five, but in some ways Alice had always been old. Always been watching, learning, searching for the things that people were not saying. Truth lies below the table; she knew this even as a child. If given the choice, she would have taken her dinner plate down into the cool, dark space beneath the tablecloth, where she could watch her mother's fingers tighten along with the conversation. Watch her older brother's shoes point toward the exit even as their father interrogated him about his latest swim meet. Medals he did or didn't get, effort he did or didn't expend.

Children, of course, did not eat under the table, so Alice had to suffice with a tendency toward napkin-dropping.

*Why can't she keep that thing on her lap?* Her father would say to her mother.

But you could learn so much more, keeping your gaze down. Just as well for Alice, who had never liked meeting people's eyes. It always felt like looking into a jam-packed closet—or opening the door to your own.

In any case, her father preferred children who were respectful.

When Alice had learned how to read, she'd discovered her own world, far from their house and their eastern Oregon town. Her brother called it hiding, but as he'd read the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy three times by that point, he was hardly one to talk. After Alice brought her choices home from the library, she'd open their covers, smelling other children's meals and lives in the pages, and she would put her face in and blow, like a human smudging to make the stories hers.

Her brother caught her at it one day. Peter was eight years older than Alice, and ever so much taller. He was like a great and gentle horse in her life. When she confessed what she was doing, he just smiled.

"Ah Alice," he said, switching into his Bilbo voice. "Just a plain hobbit you look. But there's more about you than appears on the surface."

The year Alice turned nine, an author came to visit her school. It was on that day Alice understood for the first time—in a way that was both slightly depressing and terribly exciting—that books were written by people. Real people, with mascara that flecked down onto the soft pale curves of skin under the eyes, and a sweater that was a bit too long in the sleeves. This woman at the front of the class, this not-quite-finished-looking woman, had written the book she was holding in her hand. Before this point, Alice had never met an actual author, and so it had been possible to pretend that they were no more real, and thus as magical, as the characters inside. But here was this woman, telling the class that she wrote every day, during these hours, using this ordinary pen. That the characters were her friends.

“I live in their world when I am writing,” the author said to the class.

*Yes*, Alice thought, the breath catching in her throat. And in that moment, she changed her allegiance from magic to magician...