

Permafrost

THE RINGTONE OF MA'S PHONE SOUNDED IN THE KITCHEN WHILE NOK and Chati were watching Norwegian television on their tablet. Boots and snow pants lay strewn across the carpet where they'd thrown them after school, and the curtains were drawn against the outside darkness. The sun had set around lunchtime, and wouldn't rise until eleven o'clock tomorrow morning.

Ma's voice was barely audible above the crackle of garlic and hot oil, but Nok could see the tension in her shoulder blades through her hotel blouse, untucked after her shift. "*Takk*," Ma said, banging the wok onto a cold burner, and immediately started swiping the screen to dial again.

As Chati leaned over the dancing puppets on the screen, Nok's eyes went to the crack in the kitchen ceiling. It had been there when they moved into the Tamarind Estates, and at first Nok loved pointing it out to their visitors, the young Thai women from Ma's work who drank tea with condensed milk and left for Bangkok when they became too cold and homesick. She stopped drawing attention to it when she realized how much their decaying apartment embarrassed her parents, but it stayed a cherished secret. Like the doors and closets that jammed if you didn't know the trick of opening them, the little details that demonstrated Nok's authority in their home.

“*God kveld, Cecilie,*” Ma said—Cecilie was the name of the desk manager at the Longyearbyen Rec Centre where their Pa worked at this hour of the day, pushing a broom between the wooden bleachers. “Is Panit available?” Ma listened for a moment, then said with careful pronunciation, “*Jeg forstår.*” She tossed the phone onto the counter and went into her and Pa’s room, closing the door. Nok stared at the blistered paint on the door’s surface, a knot beginning to tighten at the top of her spine.

By the time Ma came out, carrying the suitcase they’d brought with them from Thailand, Nok’s shoulders were aching with tension. Ma plucked the tablet from under their noses with an irritated gesture.

“Put all your clothes in this,” she said as Nok scrambled to her feet. “Both of you. Be quick.”

“What’s going on?”

“The building is collapsing. Don’t be a pest, and do what I tell you.”

She strode away. Nok searched for a question that could keep her mother from disappearing. “Is Pa coming home?” she demanded, but the door was closed again. Through the wall she heard hangers scraping along a metal rod.

Nok shifted the suitcase so she could grab Chati’s elbow and propel him out into the main room where the children slept. The floor here was scattered with half-used sticker sheets and felt markers. Nok’s foot caught on a tangle of yellow fabric, and she dropped the suitcase on the bunk bed so she could free herself.

She picked apart the knotted strips of cloth, unsure whether it should go in the bag or not. It was the collar she’d worn last week for the festival of the sun’s return, when all the classes put on their snowsuits and walked to the steps of the Old Hospital. The kids’ faces had looked grey in the half-light, blond or black hair tucked out of sight under hoods or knitted hats, and even the crayon-coloured houses of Longyearbyen looked washed out beneath the white and black mountain wall. Chati had been clinging to Nok’s arm like an elderly monkey. Nok peeled his mittened hands away so she could climb the hospital steps and crane her neck back. Slowly, then suddenly, the sun’s sliver appeared, like a new star bursting out of the darkness. Nok felt her heart thump, her insides turning over, and knew that a change had happened within

her, something permanent. She thought—and was self-conscious of the maturity of her insight—that it would be impossible for her now to return to the sooty underpasses of Bangkok, its noise and traffic, while this stark immensity lived in her memory.

Six days later their home was collapsing and maybe they were going to leave Svalbard forever. Nok popped open the suitcase. Three or four of her wool sweaters would fill it to overflowing. Everything in Thailand had been less bulky—even the socks had been a mere layer under the Mary Janes Nok wore to the temple, not lumpy wads of wool that itched when her boots leaked.

She wished Ma would try calling Pa again. Nok wanted him to come home, to kiss Ma in the doorway without worrying what neighbours might see, and perhaps pull out a box of candy he'd bought for them. Pa could joke and tease Ma out of her worries. "I'm no good for anything without your father," she was always saying.

Ma had been born in Lom Sak, the youngest of three beautiful sisters. The oldest one married a businessman with an apartment in Bangkok, and the second one married a Canadian and moved to Winnipeg, but Ruthai would marry no one but Panit, whom she met secretly beside the lotus-filled canal, letting him hold her hand as they watched the barges going up and down; and Panit never wanted any wife other than Ruthai.

While they were saving up for their wedding, they had to spend many miserable months apart while Ruthai stayed in a factory hostel in Bangkok and Panit worked in his parents' rice fields. He cried night and day like a turtle on a hot griddle, until he could see her again at New Year's.

They were too much in love. They made themselves sick, and embarrassed their friends and relatives. That was why, when Nok was five and a half years old and Chati almost one, and their grandparents began insisting that the children be sent to Lom Sak instead of going to the neighbourhood daycare, the young couple hatched a scheme to keep them all together. They packed their clothes and toys and took the children to the airport, and after two days of sitting in departure lounges in Japan, Helsinki, and Tromsø, they landed at last in Longyearbyen, Svalbard, the most northerly town on the planet.

There were no visa requirements in Svalbard, and unlike Winnipeg you didn't have to marry a Westerner to live there. All you needed was to want to work.

Tamarind Estates was the second place they'd lived since arriving here, much better than the single room without water pressure where Ma's first boss had put them. The building squatted atop a forest of concrete piles that went down many metres into the frozen soil. Nok would never in a million years have imagined it collapsing, unless there was an avalanche, or perhaps an earthquake.

Last summer, Nok had tied a filthy blanket between two of the posts to make a hammock, the kind that had hung below the stilt-legged canal house where Pa grew up. It was in those months of endless light when Nok and Chati often stayed out hours after their bedtime. The space for her hammock was so small that when she lay in it her butt rested on the thawing mud. Despite Svalbard's piercing summer sun, Nok deliberately layered a coat over her sweater to make herself overheat. She pretended that the sweat around her neck was because of waves of warmth rolling from muddy riverbanks as egrets splashed in the green shallows. Sometimes she imagined a prince travelling up a winding river on a royal barge, glimpsing her asleep and plunging irreversibly in love. She closed her eyes, while the shrill cough of snow-scooter motors came from the direction of the road.

Love could do anything, if it were strong enough. Love was as solid as the mountains of the rocky archipelago where they had travelled to make their home.

NOK HAD FOLDED MOST OF HER AND CHATI'S T-shirts when the phone rang again. Ma snatched it up. "Pa?" A moment later her voice changed, and Nok could hear that she'd made her face into a smile. "Aunt, how nice to hear you."

Nok crept to the kitchen doorway. "Aunt" was Ma's old boss, a woman from Chonburi whose job offer had brought their family to Svalbard. She was constantly urging Ma to leave her new hotel job and come back to her catering company, and just as constantly Ma would turn aside the hints with a gentle laugh, saying, "Surely your customers

don't miss having their sweet buns burned to charcoal!" Now Ma said lightly, "Yes. Yes, we've been turned over like an ant nest. Ten o'clock to get out of the building!" She tilted the wok to look at the bottom. The smell of burnt garlic filled the apartment.

"If you believe them, we've been in danger every minute for the past month, the whole time we were drying our socks and cooking our rice. But now that they've figured it out, it's *out of the house!* and no time even to feed the children." Ma pursed her mouth, listening. "As you say. One doesn't dispute with a river in flood." She began scraping the half-cooked meal into the garbage bin. "*Jing dūuui*, I know your husband could explain it to me."

Aunt was married to a professor at the university, a tall, skinny man with blond stubble who drove his snow scooter out of town, into the stony valleys of the backcountry, and drilled boreholes through the frozen earth into the mountain basalt. He boasted about his beautiful, business-savvy wife, though he claimed to be hopeless at understanding her company's daily operations. His only involvement was to offer snow-scooter rides to her employees' children.

"That man is a fool," Ma said once, and wouldn't explain to Nok what she meant. But he was a famous scientist, and to Aunt that made him an expert in every possible subject.

"At least now we know why we've got so many cracks in the walls," Ma said into the phone. "And why the doors never hung right. If I didn't know that honourable Norwegian construction companies don't take graft, I'd have started to be suspicious!" There was quiet for a few moments. Nok noticed that Chati had shaken his Tekno construction set all over the floor. "Oh," Ma said. "Oh, well, that's . . . You're a brave woman to offer that, Aunt. If you could see the state we're in, you'd keep yourself as far away from it as possible . . . No, no, I am deeply grateful."

Ma plopped down on the edge of the kitchen chair. She hadn't stopped smiling, because, as she'd told Nok, people could hear that on the phone; but her jaw was clenched.

"Aunt, listen. Panit isn't home yet. I can't do anything now. I'm just trying to look after things while my husband is gone . . . Yes, he will be very moved by your generosity. Oh, I couldn't possibly say what he'll decide . . . Yes, men are like that. Like your husband Geir, exactly . . ."

Nok frowned. Ma and Pa were nothing like Aunt and Geir, or any ordinary married couple. Their hearts were so close that Ma could practically feel what Pa was thinking at the same time; thus her words to Aunt must be purposefully deceitful.

There was still at least an hour before Pa got home. Her parents planned their work schedules this way on purpose; Ma did the very early shift at the hotel, so Pa could get the children dressed, reheat rice congee for them, or sometimes bread and butter and two soft-boiled eggs for himself, and check their bags for school. That was how Nok was used to seeing him, relaxed and yawning in sleep pants and an old T-shirt. He didn't get upset about things the way Ma did. He knew how to turn down invitations and how to apologize to the neighbours without losing face when Nok and Chati had been noisy.

"*Laa gòn ná,*" Ma said to Aunt, hanging up at last. She was still distracted when she came into the main room, and her foot landed on one of the metal fins of Chati's construction set. "*Ai,* what's this?" she demanded; but instead of disciplining him, she continued into the bedroom and began carrying out the bags she'd packed. Nok saw that her eyes were red. "Come *on,*" Ma said, beginning to scoop debris up from the floor, action figures, underwear, and Norwegian spelling sheets going in higgledy-piggledy. Nok had to scramble to rescue a handwritten report she'd done on climate change.

They weren't even half finished when the doorbell rang. Nok, who had the best technique for wiggling the latch, ran to open it, then froze when she saw their neighbour Miss Sukhontha under the hallway fluorescents.

Miss Sukhontha was the kind of woman who wore eye makeup and had fancy shoes that she could only wear outside for about two days in summer. Nok knew, though it had never been said explicitly, that she was one of those people for whom Nok could omit the polite *wai* greeting without getting into trouble with her parents; she was disappointed when Miss Sukhontha pushed past without noticing the rudeness.

"*Sawatdee,* Big Sister," she said to Ma, her own *wai* impeccable. Her eyes travelled over the open suitcase and the half-empty drawers of the corner bureau. "I see you've heard the news."

Ma's face tightened. She hated being called Big Sister just because she was married and not even because of any difference in age. "Sawatdee, Miss Sukhontha," she replied. "I could hardly believe it, but as you can see we're packing our things like they told us. It seems it can't be helped."

"Not anymore, it can't. These field inspectors are completely unreasonable."

Nok grabbed the tablet and flopped into the kitchen chair. The clock in the corner of the screen already said 7:16, so they had less than three hours before the deadline. If it was an avalanche, maybe they'd hear a muffled boom from the mountains surrounding the town. Nok suddenly remembered what Ma had said about cracks in the walls, and her eyes flew to the one in the corner. She'd spent so much time looking at it, and now it seemed to her that something in its darkness had been watching her back, waiting to pry the walls open with spidery black fingers.

"Don't touch your Pa's computer, Nok!" Miss Sukhontha's voice made Nok jump. "He'll be angry when he gets home."

Nok wished he would get home, because he had even less tolerance for Miss Sukhontha than Ma did. Once when she'd dropped by unannounced for tea, he'd gone out the door in the middle of her visit and stayed away until very late to be sure she'd be gone when he returned. "If I walk in and see her, it's like seeing a big creepy-crawly in the middle of my living room," he said. "Like a giant centipede. The woman has a poisonous tongue and too many hands."

That made Ma laugh, and she started to be kind to Miss Sukhontha, offering her treats and listening to her talk, as long as she could do it while keeping her out of Pa's way. Later she had come to regret the generous impulse.

"That's the children's tablet," Ma told Miss Sukhontha while Nok swiped through episodes of *Pompeii and Pilt*. "We got it for them for Christmas. Nok, it isn't time to watch shows, you still have all your clothes to pack."

Miss Sukhontha walked over to the portrait of King Rama X that hung above the sofa. She had a picture of the King in her own

apartment; Nok knew because she'd been made to go there and look at all of Miss Sukhontha's modern and Thai dresses and eat disgusting Norwegian licorice. The garland that hung around their portrait was losing its paper flowers, and it hung beside another photo, found in the five-kroner bin of the Longyearbyen thrift store, that showed Ole Sol skjær scoring the winning goal against Munich. Miss Sukhontha raised her eyebrows at the *lèse-majesté* of this pairing. Despite telling everyone how smart and modern she was, she cared a lot about traditions. She had to, Ma said, because she didn't have real people to care about.

Nok thought a lot about traditions and being from Thailand, probably more than her parents realized. In her opinion, you couldn't live in Svalbard but try to act as if you were still in Bangkok. Even basic things were different here. For example, the Longyearbyen cemetery wasn't the rows of delicate spires Nok used to glimpse through the temple gates beside her daycare, but a drab little enclosure in a fold of hills, where a hundred years ago people who died had been shoved directly into the ground. They lay under the icy soil like cod in a freezer, looking exactly as they had when their loved ones brought them to be buried. When Nok's class visited the cemetery, their teacher explained that what kept the bodies unchanging was the permafrost.

After the visit, Nok had a dream in which a woman stood at the end of her bed with clumps of ice in her blond hair, dripping gritty water onto the rug. She looked at Nok in confusion, not knowing that she was dead. Nok told Chati about the apparition, and for a week he screamed and cried every night at bedtime. Finally Ma put them in their snowsuits and took them back to the cemetery. They gathered stones with mittened hands and built a shrine between the patches of snow, leaving a Kvikk-Lunch bar and some incense sticks so the spirits would be peaceful.

It was illegal, nowadays, to keep dead bodies on Svalbard. Nok reasoned that this was because there were always, gradually but unstopably, more of them, and the island would quickly run out of room. If you died, they shipped you back to Oslo, a city of tall, glassy hotels, which in Nok's imagination was inhabited by corpses. She told her closest friends at school, Gao and Kristine, that in Oslo you could see people with their fingers falling off and worms crawling out of their

noses; but after the scolding she'd gotten, she was careful not to repeat this story to Chati.

When Nok's grandmother died, they hadn't had enough money for Ma to fly back to Thailand. Ma cried for many days, lying in their bedroom, and Pa stroked her back and summoned the children to come hug her so that she would have to give them gulping, watery smiles. At the end of the time, Ma got up and said, "I've got all of you. That's what matters." This was something that Miss Sukhontha could never understand, the things they'd given up to come to Svalbard and be together. No other adult that Nok knew had ever done something so extreme; her friend Kristine, whose parents were both professors, thought it was normal to live with only her mother while her father was on sabbatical in Australia, spending months without even talking to him.

When Miss Sukhontha realized that no one was paying attention to her, she came back to the kitchen where Ma was pulling vegetables and condiments out of the fridge. She sat, crossing her legs and kicking her delicate sandal in the air. "Do you know who called the inspectors?" she said. "It was Mr. Chiengkul in 34B. He kept writing to the governor's office telling them this building was a disgrace with the cracks in the plaster and the crooked angles. That man is the kind of person who would go around turning over rubbish to look for poisonous insects. He was nobody at all in Bangkok, you know, that's why he came to Svalbard. But talk about trying to sell fresh coconuts in an orchard—the kind of girls who come up here, we've got too much spine to give him the time of day."

She peered into one of Ma's shopping bags. Worming her lacquer-tipped fingers down through the jumble of objects—toiletries, picture frames, a velvet bag with Ma's jewelled hair pins, and the nylon zip-folder with their passports and vaccination records—she fished out a framed photo. It showed Ma and Pa, radiant in their wedding clothes, releasing a bird from a wicker cage. "This is so lovely," she said. "You went home to your village to be married, didn't you? I think that's sweet. And the dress, *mm*—a little snug around your middle, hey? What a pretty, soft-hearted girl you were, so trusting of your young man."

This was all true, because Ma was both prettier and nicer than Miss Sukhontha, and devoted to Pa, but Nok could hear that there was some

other meaning in Miss Sukhontha's words, needling and elusive. Ma must have known what it was, because she slammed a bag of rice on the counter and snapped, "Nok, if you keep standing around like that I'm going to assume you don't want to see any of those toys ever again."

"Those are Chati's," Nok exclaimed, but she quickly began to dump her art supplies into the suitcase. *Ever again*, Ma had said, so they must really be leaving. It was the phrase Ma used the day she and Pa picked Nok up at the daycare in Bangkok, to take her straight to the airport.

Nok might never see snow again. Never ride a snow scooter into the backcountry and live off the land like the explorers they read about in school. Never see reindeer wandering into the street, staring at the school children with their liquid black eyes.

"Move, Chati," she muttered, giving her brother a shove. He growled in exasperation, and when she wouldn't leave him alone he shoved her back and yelled, "I'm hungry!" Nok wished she was allowed to smack him, but Miss Sukhontha clucked sympathetically and Ma pulled down the special box of Hobby Bars, tore one open, and handed it to him.

"Come here," Miss Sukhontha crooned. Chati, his cheeks full of marshmallow and banana jelly, seemed cautiously willing, but Ma's sharp eyes caught Miss Sukhontha reaching out to ruffle his hair, and she hastily steered him back toward the bunkbeds, saying sternly, "Help your sister."

Miss Sukhontha sighed. "The girls next door to me, you know, the ones from Nodhaburi? They're beside themselves because they don't have a lease, and they're wondering what this will mean for them. I went to them as soon as I heard, just to see if there was anything I could do. I said, poor foolish girls, you won't be the only ones. Mrs. Ongsaran's husband doesn't have a lease either."

"Panit has a lease!" Ma said, dropping the box of refrigerator food beside the door.

"Oh, my mistake. I just thought you might have some advice for these poor girls—better than me, anyway. My house was in Minburi, you know, so I'm very naïve. Any irregular situation makes me break out in hives."

Ma's eyebrows lifted. Nok's parents had loaned Miss Sukhontha some money shortly after they moved here from Bangkok, not realizing

that she was unemployed—a circumstance that was illegal in Svalbard, and could get you deported. They'd had a very difficult time getting it back. "I'm a wild card," Miss Sukhontha liked to say, nudging whoever she was talking to with her elbow, "I mess up everyone's game. But they always forgive me, because of my special flair." By flair she meant her modern dresses, and her exaggerated formal manners.

"They work for your old boss too, standing over a searing wok until their legs give out. I said to them, Little Sisters, be sure you check your pay slips! I don't know if they listened. That woman is smart enough to choose the brainless ones."

Nok yearned to punch the horrible woman so hard she fell out into the hallway. Then Miss Sukhontha said "Has Panit gotten distracted on his way home, or what? He'll be disappointed if he imagines the cold, empty cafés in Longyearbyen have anything to compare to what he has at home. And he knows it, poor fellow."

A strange transformation came over Ma. Her face spread into its warmest, broadest smile—the smile that was also a weapon—and she said, laughing, "Miss Sukhontha, you're going to have to leave now. I really can't spend any time on you when I'm so busy."

Miss Sukhontha's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I don't mind. I didn't come here expecting tea, Big Sister, I'm here out of friendship."

"Yes, *Little Sister*, but it's so bothersome to have a guest when I'm trying to do so much. I know you don't want to be any trouble." Ma risked overplaying her hand and gave Miss Sukhontha a conspiratorial bump with her shoulder that made the woman's eyes widen, disconcerted.

"Well, I have to forgive you for brushing me off," Miss Sukhontha replied, gritting her teeth but trying to smile back as if this sudden bluntness were a good joke that she was in on. "Since I can see hospitality isn't on your mind." She looked around the room, searching for one last thing to comment on, but Ma had actually opened the door and Miss Sukhontha was forced to go through it. One of the girls from Nodhaburi was going past, dressed in a ski jacket, while Mr. Chiengkul helped with her bags. She was one of the girls Ma had served sweet tea to. Ma answered her worried look with a serene *wai* before closing the door and sailing back into the kitchen.

Nok ran after her, delighted by their victory, but she froze in the doorway when she saw Ma sitting with her fingers pressed against her eyes. She was crying in complete silence. Despite throwing their enemy out of the apartment, she looked as if she'd been the one defeated, like a person who'd been beaten until she couldn't get up.

After a minute, Ma glanced at the microwave clock. The numbers read 7:56. Without looking in Nok's direction, she picked up her phone.

Good, Nok thought. The triumph had drained away, leaving a cold feeling. Pa will fix this. She's sad because he isn't here. When she talks to him it will be okay.

But after a few seconds, Ma said, "*Sawatdee*, Aunt, it's Mrs. Ongsaran. Yes. Yes, we're nearly all packed." A tear still clung to her jaw. She turned toward Nok and made a shooing gesture.

7:57 the microwave said. Then 7:58.

FOR A WHILE NOW, NOK THOUGHT she could feel a rumble, deep in her bones. She didn't know whether Ma and Chati could feel it; perhaps Pa, walking along the snowy street, heard the distant thrum and was quickening his steps to reach his loved ones.

It was after nine-thirty, later than the latest time Pa had ever come home from work. None of them could brush their teeth or change into their pyjamas because these things had already been packed. Instead, Nok was eating her second Hobby Bar from the box on the counter. It was the first time she'd ever been allowed more than one in a single day, and although the gluey mouthfuls of chocolate and jelly made her empty stomach queasy, she was determined to finish it.

Chati's spirits had recovered, and he hopped around the bare room with their last juice box in his hand until he spilled it all over himself. Ma tugged on the collar of his winter coat—they were all dressed to go out the door—and confirmed that he'd managed to soak the T-shirt underneath. As she was pulling him into the washroom, Nok heard a key in the door—finally—and the muffled sound of Pa's voice, cursing the jammed lock. She scrambled to open it for him.

"*Hei, vennen,*" Pa greeted her in Norwegian, smiling. He had a handsome face and thick eyebrows that people said Nok had inherited.

He peered at her as he stooped to unfasten his boots. “You okay, little bird? Why is your coat on?”

Without wasting time, Nok grabbed his hand. He let her drag him inside, laughing a little, but when he came into the main room he pulled back sharply.

“Nok, what—” He looked at the suitcases lined up by the door, at King Rama X and Ole Solskjær overlooking a stripped room. “What’s going on?” he demanded, an edge in his voice. It was the voice, Nok thought gratefully, of someone who wasn’t happy with what he saw and would do something about it.

Ma came out of the bathroom herding a freshly changed Chati in front. Her eyes were shadowed with exhaustion, but at the sight of Pa they started to lighten, and Nok felt as if a breath she’d been holding too long was finally being released.

Pa saw them and snapped, “Where are you going?”

Ma’s fingers twitched on Chati’s clean shirt. Before she could reply, Pa strode forward and plucked him into his arms. “You have no right,” he said. “I won’t let you.”

By the last word he was shouting, Ma and Nok were staring at him with round eyes, and even Chati had figured out that he hadn’t been picked up for a game of Humpty Dumpty. Instead of hitting out with his hands, as he normally did when he was upset, he curled them into his father’s uniform shirt and clung there.

“Pa, the Inspectors—” Ma began, but Pa was too angry—bewilderingly angry, when he’d never before shown anger in front of his children—and talked right over her.

“Why are you doing this?” he pleaded. “What do you imagine I could have done, here? Where will you try to take them next, Antarctica?” He wrapped both arms around Chati’s back, staring at his wife over his son’s head.

“No,” Ma said, breathless, “Listen, this isn’t what you’re thinking—”, while Pa was saying, “I love you so much, Ruthai, I want to die for you,” the beautiful words suddenly cracked and horrible in his voice. “I can’t be apart from you, I can’t,” and finally Ma shouted over him:

“I’m not leaving you!”

Every person in the apartment froze, Ma, Pa, Chati, and Nok with her back pressed against the wall as if she could push herself through it. They stared at each other, as all of them realized what had just been admitted aloud.

Ma walked over, took Chati from Pa's arms, and let him go onto the floor. Nok's parents went into their bedroom and closed the door.

With the way sound carried through their walls, Nok could probably have heard every word, but she let the murmur of Ma's gentle voice stay indistinct. Unwillingly, out of the muddy depths of memory, she saw the day her parents had picked her up from the daycare in Bangkok and told her they were going to the airport. Pa was bounding with excitement, telling Nok how she would love playing in the snow, what it would feel like to breathe, "The purest air on this planet, little bird, no more of this carbon dioxide." Ma was holding Chati on her lap as she looked out the window, a grim fold in the corner of her mouth. Because she was sad to leave their grandparents, Nok had assumed. In the ticketing line, Pa wouldn't let her carry anything even for five seconds, played with Nok so his wife could rest, bought her a soda—all the things he did to show he loved her.

All the things he did to make her forgive him.

So soft-hearted and trusting of your young man, Miss Sukhontha had said; but Pa had assumed that Ma was trying to leave him. Pa knew that Ma didn't trust him at all.

The crack in the corner of the ceiling seemed to have gotten longer. Nok wondered how soon it would spider across from end to end, splitting their kitchen open to the dark sky.

Ma came out to fetch a glass of water. Through the doorway, Nok could see Pa twisting his fingers in his hair. "Where are we supposed to go, then?" he said. Some confidence had come back into his voice, and he was working toward indignation. "They can't just evict us. This isn't Bangkok. It's March, and there's snow on the ground. It has to be illegal."

"Aunt Paradorn invited us to stay with her. She's sending her husband with the truck to pick us up."

Nok lifted her head. Aunt's children were rude, and Ma always scolded her and Chati more when they were at her house, but it was still Svalbard. It wasn't the airport.

“Oh, so she’s invited us. That’s kind.” Pa gulped his water. “What does she want for it? We can’t pay two rents, not with the amount of money you sent to Lom Sak last month.”

“She says we’re family. You and I will use the pull-out in her home office and Nok will sleep in Aran’s room. She just wants to help us. It will be fine.”

“Your *aunt* never just wants to help,” Pa said. “She’ll add this to our debt, one way or another. Grocery money for those expensive Norwegian cereals she gives Nok. Making you miss shifts to clean her house. You remember how it was before we got out from under her thumb.”

“I’ve already decided,” Ma said. “I called her back and said yes.”

They were standing on opposite sides of the room so Nok couldn’t see both of them, only Pa fiddling with the burnt incense stubs that littered the top of their dresser, struggling to express his anger without losing face.

“Svalbard is good for the children, you agreed with me,” Ma said. “They’re getting a European education, at no extra cost.”

“Good for them not to be able to go outside half the year, to be cooped up in three rooms like puppies in a cage? Good for them to have no friends, or only ones that leave before the school year’s over?”

“They have friends—”

“Maybe you want Nok to get a blond boyfriend, since you can’t get one yourself?”

They still hadn’t moved toward each other, but the silence fell between them with the violence of a slap, making Nok pull back from the doorway. Black spots were dancing at the corner of her vision, and she closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against the wall. The crack in the corner yawned wider and blacker every moment. She heard the bedroom door slam closed again, but Ma had forgotten that the walls weren’t thick enough to block their words.

“You have a lot of nerve to talk that way, after the little wife you kept in Bangkok.”

“Does it make you happy now, to have dragged us to the North Pole, to be homeless in winter, in the Arctic, because of some harmless fun?”

Nok breathed steadily, trying to find the space in her mind where she kept the immensity of the mountain wall, the icy barrens where the reindeer walked in solemn file.

“All I wanted was for this to work,” Ma said, quietly.

THE DOORBELL RANG. NOK’S PARENTS still hadn’t come out. She’d found the tablet and given it to her brother, to keep him quiet while they waited. When she opened the front door, she saw Aunt’s husband Geir, the scientist, standing in the deserted hallway. His son, Aran, who looked Thai but had his father’s ears and could only speak Norwegian, was with him. Nok stepped back wordlessly, and they came in, their boots dripping slush. She was grateful when Geir didn’t ask where Nok’s parents were, but pointed at the suitcase and asked, “Is that to go down to the car?”

Nok shrugged, not saying *Ja* or *Nei*.

“Do you understand what’s happening?” Geir asked, switching languages so Aran couldn’t listen in. Geir could never get his tones exactly right when he spoke Thai, but his voice was gentle. He practised often, asking the young women in his wife’s kitchen about cooking techniques and their experiences with the cold, and they told him about their favourite movie stars and their homes in Thailand; no one told him about the paycheques that never came, about veiled threats and a certain notebook where the number of your debt never decreased. Geir loved his wife peaceably, without trying too hard to know her.

“The building is falling down,” Nok said. “Is it an earthquake?”

“No, nothing like that. You learned about permafrost in school didn’t you?” Though it was long past ten o’clock, Geir didn’t seem frightened to be standing in their perilous building. He spoke calmly, using his hands to gesture, as though he had all the time in the world to explain his science to the small girl in front of him. “It’s because deep below ground, the soil has been frozen for hundreds of years. Now, because we had such a warm winter, the soil is melting, and it became soft. Part of the building sank lower than the other part, and the stress on the concrete makes it crack.”

That made sense. The rumbling had been Nok's stupid imagination. Everything felt very still now. In her parents' bedroom, the silence was absolute.

"We don't think the building is going to fall down right away," Geir said. "But then, we don't know. It could be tomorrow, or a year from now. But it's very important for you to be safe, which is why you're going to come and stay with us for a while. Maybe I can take you and Aran out on the snow scooter, what do you think?"

Seeing that she still wouldn't respond, he picked up the biggest suitcase, and motioned his son to follow suit. "Astonishing, isn't it?" Geir said. "We walk on the ground all day, and never imagine that it's less than solid."

But Nok, lifting her bag with numb fingers, no longer found it astonishing in the least.