

LUKE



JENNIFER THORNE

LUTE

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THORNE



NIGHTFIRE

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
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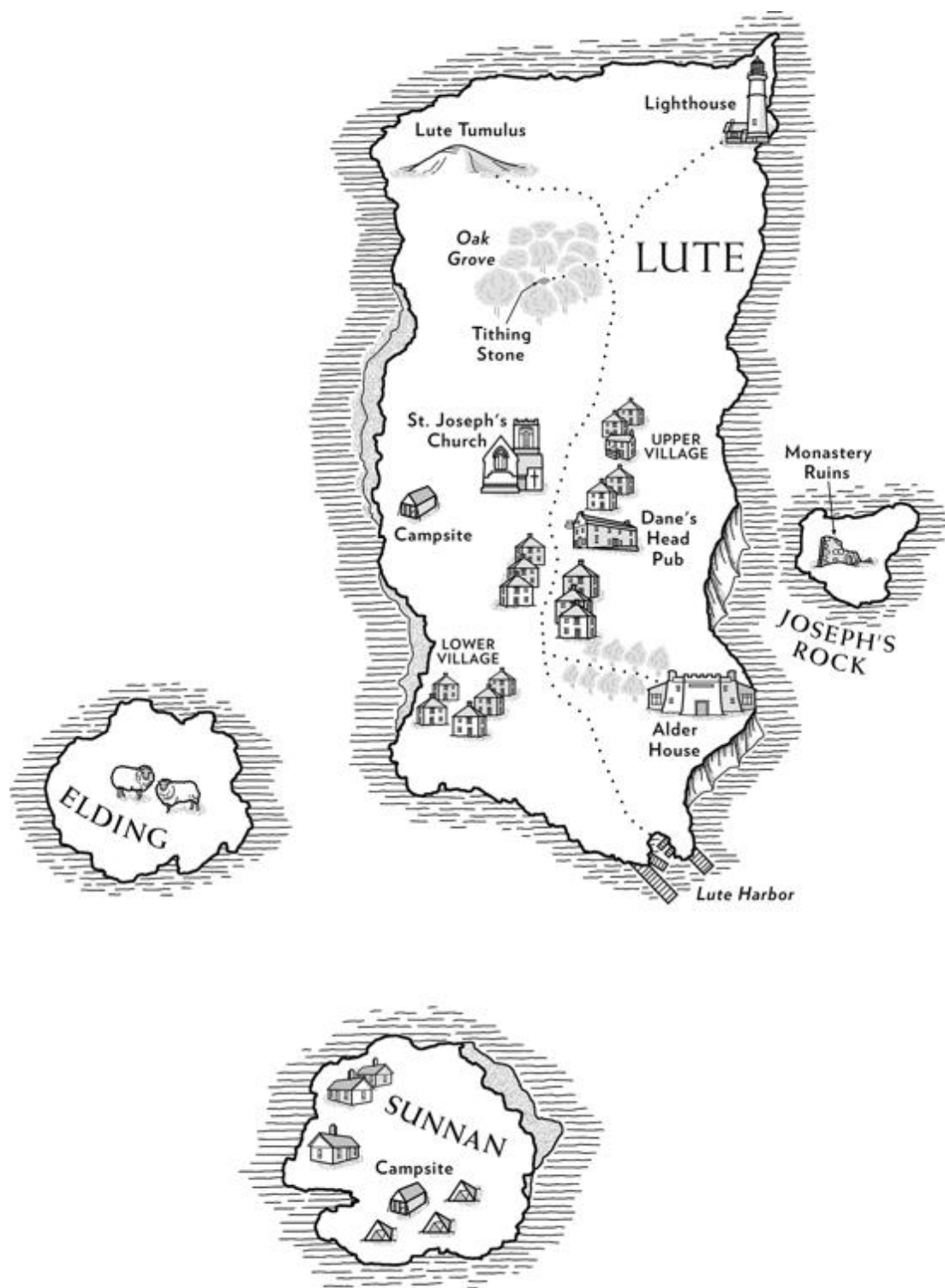
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For my George, the bravest of all of us



The endlessly charming **Isles of Lute** rank high among Britain's best-kept secrets, and once you've arrived, it's hard to understand the reason for all

that secrecy. Despite Lute's murky reputation on the mainland, so far as this writer could tell, the greatest risk these isles pose to visitors is the temptation to chuck it all in and become a local yourself.

From the picture-perfect central village to the low-key, cheery welcome offered by the islanders, Lute appeals to bird-watchers, neo-pagans, and amateur historians alike—along with anyone wishing to escape the relentless dread of the news cycle. Come for ancient superstitions, stay for a well-poured pint at Dane's Head pub and a peek at one of the last puffin nesting sites in southern England.

(Top tip: whatever rumors you may have heard about Lute, don't bring them up to the locals. Any mention of "the Day" will result in a frosty reception and a

THREE DAYS BEFORE

The glare from the sea is pure white, too blinding to see any distance from the back door, even with my hand stretched above my eyes. All I can do is scream loudly enough to reach across the lawn.

“Charlie?!”

Everybody on the island can probably hear me. How undignified. How American.

Emma starts hollering in imitation. “Chaaaaarlieeee!”

Oh, that voice of hers—lovely, adorable, way too much for me right now. The pitch is so high, my brain feels like it’ll burst.

I crouch, squinting, and idly tickle her to get her to stop, but she keeps trying to screech again between fits of giggles. I draw her in, kiss one sticky cheek, and glance up past her tangled curls, worry needling me.

A drifting cloud lessens the glare, but I still don’t see Charlie. He’d have come at the sound of his name if he were safe and within earshot. He does like to wander but never far, and he always comes back. He stays in orbit.

Sally is already pulling the enormous, brocaded living room drapes shut when I come through, as if we were heading out for six months instead of a few days’ break. Emma runs into the living room, and Sally startles, hands in the air, bracing for the three-foot-tall tackle.

I picture our housekeeper as a linebacker and stifle a smirk. She’d probably be good at it.

“John Ashford’s around the side, milady,” Sally says, ignoring Emma’s attempts to scale her leg. “He thought you might like the use of his pickup truck to get down to the harbor.”

She always says *pickup truck* like it’s a foreign delicacy.

I smile. "Awesome, that'll be helpful."

I didn't flinch when I heard *milady* this time. Sally hardly says it anymore. It slips out when she's busy. It has the ring of a joke, like calling Charlie "Esquire" or Emma "Dr. Treadway" when she's playing checkup with her dolls.

How am I a *milady*? How is anyone in this day and age?

"Have you seen Charlie?" I ask.

Sally frowns, thinking. "Isn't he at the landing with Lord Treadway?"

"You think so?"

"I'm sure I saw them go off together." She wipes her hands on her trousers. "Do you want me to have a look around?"

"No, no. It's fine, you're busy enough as it is." I smile another goodbye, but my heart's still pounding like there's something wrong.

It's fine, he's fine, he's with his dad, calm the hell down, Nina.

Outside, John Ashford's green pickup is idling on the drive, the driver himself nowhere to be seen.

"John Ashford," not just "John." Sally uses his full name because on an island with a population of less than two hundred, there are somehow seven Johns to differentiate between. Five of them have been off fighting for the past four years, but John Ashford remains John Ashford, and ancient John Jones is still John Jones. You'd think new parents would get it together among themselves to vary the names they give their babies, but that's not the way of things here, and if I've learned anything in the past seven years on Lute, it's that "the way of things" likes to stay put. Even in wartime. Everywhere around us, life's been upended, but here, it's only seemed to shift.

I wonder if things are still the same in Florida. Strip malls extending their reach like concrete kudzu, theme parks whirling, playgrounds flash-drying in the summer sun. I feel a little pain behind one eye at the thought of my childhood home, flat and glaring, and then blink it away as I reach for my daughter.

I hold Emma back from the growl of the running engine, and then John Ashford's head pops up past the hood.

“Seen this one before?” He’s got his hand out low, careful. He turns to wink at Emma. “This is a proper mini-beast. Fancy saying hello?”

She’s flying past me before I can think to grab her. At the sight of whatever John’s holding, she goes very still, a near-silent *oh* falling from her mouth. My placid *sorry, I’ll handle her* smile becomes a real one when I lean over John’s hand too and see a glossy green beetle with a red face.

“Not invasive?” I ask quietly.

“Nah, I should think not. Looks like a bloody-nosed beetle to me, as Lute as they come.” He grins, and his face explodes with creases. “I’m not using profanity in front of your daughter, Lady Treadway, that’s honestly what they’re called. I’ll snap a picture and find out for sure. That’s what they’re paying me for, after all.”

“Is that what they’re paying you for?” I grin back. “Not the paperwork and repairs and cataloging and protecting endangered birds and—?”

“Oh, you stop. There are far worse jobs.” The light in his eyes dims a little.

This is the way we reference the war, in asides, quiet gratitude, and humility, sharing postcards and emails we’ve gotten from those off fighting, well-tended vegetable gardens, and meticulous ration books. Never directly. But maybe that’s just how people behave around me because of my American accent, the voice of the enemy. *Don’t mention the war.*

Or maybe it’s more that we can’t face the full reality of it, the images we get in the news—all those occupied countries, cities gone dark in military curfew or reduced to rubble, bloated bodies washing up on the shores of practically every continent, refugee camps growing and burning down and growing again, rows upon rows of draped soldiers ready for sorting and sending home.

While here on Lute, everything is perfectly fine.

Partly to reassure myself, I pat John Ashford on one broad shoulder on my way to scoop Emma up. Her eye has turned to track some seabird or other down the drive—John’d know the taxonomy—and if I don’t grab her now, she’ll be chasing it, and I’ll be chasing her the whole way to the docks.

“I’ve got your bags loaded if you ladies care to ride along.” John motions to the back of the truck. I hadn’t even noticed our luggage lined up inside.

“Oh, gosh.” My stomach drops the way it always does when someone goes out of their way to be nice. “Thank you. You really didn’t need to—”

“It is my pleasure. What else is she good for?” He slaps the roof of his pickup with obvious affection. There’s a grand total of two motorized vehicles on our easily walkable Lute Island, and given that the other is a motorbike, this is the only one with a usable flatbed. He takes pride in showing it off, even if the name emblazoned on the side is NATIONAL TRUST, not JOHN ASHFORD, WARDEN AT LARGE.

A muffled *huh-woof* resounds from the house a second before our half-feral Labrador comes barreling outside, and I curse myself for forgetting to shut the door. Usually Max would be off at a wild tear, halfway across the island by the time I can so much as shout his name—not that he listens to it—but today, the truck has his attention. When he tries to jump in with the luggage, frothing happily, I seize the opportunity, pulling him gently by the collar back inside where Sally waits with a headshake.

“Daft creature,” she says. “Come on, Max. You’re stuck with me this week, but I’ll give you some treats.”

By the time I’ve got the door shut, Emma has decided to emulate the dog, trying to clamber inside the truck, pulling and falling, shouting, “Up! Up!”

Oh, my sweet fully feral thing. I round the truck and kiss her on the head, smelling strawberry shampoo, and pull her with me as I climb into the passenger seat.

“Milady. M’junior lady.” John Ashford’s Scottish accent always pops out more when he’s speaking in grandiose terms. Which is often.

He shuts the door for us, ever gallant. Everybody does everything for us on Lute. It’ll never not be disconcerting. We Treadways are like permanent resort guests, and most of the people who help us aren’t even on the Alder House payroll. After nearly seven years, I still struggle to see how we’ve earned all this goodwill.

John Ashford's truck bumps us out of the tidy lines of wych elms penning in the drive, and I wince again from the afternoon light off the sea. Emma's hanging too far out the open window, arms outstretched like she's trying to catch a drift and fly away.

"I hear the pony!" she shouts.

I tug her carefully back into my lap and answer John's questioning smile with a shrug. "She *really* wants a horse."

He chuckles. There aren't any horses on Lute. Never have been. It's not the way of things—they get skittish here, apparently—and I'm not going to be the first Lady Treadway to upend tradition just because my preschooler begs me to. She can go out riding with her aunt and cousins when we get to Surrey tomorrow.

We rumble past the school and down to the island's landing bay. I scan every inch of horizon along the way but can't spot Charlie or anyone else of his size, probably because all the other children are already on their way off the island.

The coast looks calm today, thank God, so at least our boat won't be battered by waves all the way across the Bristol Channel like the last time we traveled to the mainland, almost a year ago. They say these waters are safer than ever now, patrolled and well out of the action, which does make sense. It's not just for our little archipelago's sake that the warships are placed where they are. An undefended Bristol Channel would allow the enemy deep into the belly of Britain.

I hold Emma tighter. We've made it through four years of war without incident. Last week's cease-fire seems to be holding. We'll be fine today.

I can't yet see the dock where our boat is waiting, but I do see the much larger *Pride of Lute* cutting smoothly through the water, every inch of its deck packed with passengers. It reminds me of photos I've seen of trains packed with children evacuating London during the Blitz.

God. No. Stop. If anything, it looks like a spring break party yacht.

They've got to be uncomfortable packed in like sardines, but then, they're in for a quicker ride than we are, twenty minutes tops to get over to Sunnan Island versus hours to the mainland. It'll be a rustic weekend for everybody, even the ones who've snagged the moldering holiday cottages.

Tents and bonfires for the rest, but a little discomfort is a small price to pay to indulge Lute Island's favorite superstition one more time.

I wilt a little watching them go, like a child who hasn't been invited to the party, but that's not strictly fair. Just the other day, two of "the mums," Wendy and Jenny, asked if I was coming with the kids to Sunnan now that the decision had been made to send them away. When I said we were leaving too, for our anniversary, they looked more disappointed than I'd expected.

"If you're still here, you can wave us off, then," Wendy said, which only made me feel awkward, not knowing that that was a thing.

I wasn't there this morning as they boarded, after all, but I doubt anybody really noticed. I did debate going, standing on the dock and watching—Sally asked me, carefully, lightly, whether I planned to—but nobody explicitly said it was one of my responsibilities, least of all Hugh, who was completely preoccupied with getting us ready to go. We still weren't packed until an hour ago, and Charlie was restless and Emma was whiny and then hyper, and in the end, I couldn't get my head around the *why* of it. Why should any of them care that Nina Treadway turned up to wave from the shore as they set off on a boat?

It's not like I'm close with any of the island parents. All our children are slightly different ages, so we never had that playgroup-bonding experience, and most of the mums have known each other since they were all kids themselves. Their families are dug deep in the community. It's hard to break into their local shorthand, to keep up with their social rites. Even so, "*You can see us off, then.*"

At least I know that seeing the children off to Sunnan isn't a Lute tradition, since this is the first time they've done it. The custom as it stood for millennia was for every single islander to remain on Lute for the Day, irrespective of age or condition. Not this year. There was an official island-wide vote, and this was the decision. Given the war, our diminished numbers, etcetera, etcetera, the children would be excused from taking part, along with a few adult caretakers, including Rev. Warren. He usually stays on island, apparently, which surprised me, given how pagan it all feels.

It's kind of amazing that they're keeping this tradition going, even in wartime. In other places, they call it Midsummer or Alban Hefin. Here, we usually just call it "the solstice," and have cream teas out in neighbors' gardens, but not this year. This is the *seventh* solstice, which makes it "the Day."

It's all so sincere in its fraught-ness, but who can fault them for their flights of imagination? It'll probably be a helpful distraction, frankly, with so many loved ones still off fighting. I just hope the weather stays nice for everybody here while we're away.

As we continue bumping along the dirt track, John Ashford whistling with gusto from the driver's seat, I spot Matthew Clare, the lighthouse keeper, walking north along the cliffside, scruffy black hair blowing wild, shoulders held high against the wind, like it's ten degrees colder for him than for anybody else but he still refuses to wear a jacket or even roll down his sleeves. Like he's punishing himself.

No motorbike today. He must have been at the docks, helping get the kids off the island. I guess he's staying, then.

As we pass, Matthew gives a rote wave to the truck, thinking it's just John. I would wave back if I didn't suspect he'd find a way to twist the gesture into an insult.

I'd like to say I've given up trying to figure out why Matthew Clare has despised me from the day Hugh first brought me to this island, but the annoying, sticking-point *thing* of it is: Matthew may not be a ball of sunshine, but he is nice and good and helpful and completely beloved here. He's the one who fixes people's bird feeders if they fall down in a storm, delivers grocery orders to elderly neighbors, stops to pet cats, and checks on the goats. He's, by all measures, lovely. And he hates me.

I try not to think about him. It should be easy enough when he's not around, but every so often, I remember it so vividly, as if I were right back there in that church—the glare he'd fixed me with when Hugh introduced us and I tried to offer condolences, as if I'd spat at him. That glare has evolved as the years have worn on, but it's never lessened in intensity.

It shouldn't bother me as much as it does. It's not like this is a first. I've never been like Becca, my neon-shiny sister, a magnet for friends. Mom

told me often enough how unlikable I am—a *taker*, a *killer*—and I learned to shrink, to be uncontroversial, to go unnoticed. Even here, tucked away, that’s how I operate. And still, I’ve offended him somehow, the man everybody sees as the best of us.

God, it gnaws at me.

The road sinks lower, curving back around toward the shore. I lean past Emma, searching for Hugh and Charlie, but I only see my husband with his back turned, his elegant hands tangled in his gray-flecked hair, then gesticulating, then back in his hair. He’s got his sleeves rolled up, holiday ready. Maybe Charlie’s already on board, flipping switches he’s not supposed to touch.

“Suh-moke,” Emma says.

“Sure enough.” John chuckles, amused by her growing vocabulary, but his eyes aren’t laughing.

I turn to see what they’ve seen, an inauspicious gray cloud issuing from the stern of our cruiser. Now I can see that Hugh’s sleeves are rolled up practically, not jauntily. He’s got oil stains on his linen shirt, which is not like him. He’s been trying to fix something. This has never once gone well in the entire seven years I’ve known him. He begins to pace the dock, pointing wildly at a burly, bearded man who seems to do nothing but shrug. It’s not until John pulls up and cuts the engine that I recognize the guy. He’s a mechanic who’s come out a few times all the way from Devon to see to the island’s small power station.

“I’m not the expert here,” he’s saying, and something in his tone tells me this isn’t the first or even fifth time he’s had to recite that over Hugh’s shouting.

“But see, you are the expert here, because all other experts are gone. You know engines. You know your own boat. Can’t you just take another look at this one?”

Hugh can’t stop moving his hands, into his thick hair, his pockets, picking at each other, balling, releasing. It’s no wonder the mechanic perches there unmoving, like a rabbit in a field deciding which way to run.

“Out. Want get *out*.” Emma starts crawling through the open window too quickly for me to grab her.

Just in time, two hands appear as if from nowhere and snatch her into the parking lot while she wiggles wildly. “You can’t fly, fairy princess. You haven’t got your wings yet!”

“Oh my God.” I practically keel over with relief as Joanna opens the door for me. “This child is going to kill me.”

Jo grins, adjusting Emma onto her hip. “I have her. You go talk to Hugh.”

I hesitate. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“Engine trouble.”

Worry sinks into my stomach, but it’s tempered with excitement of a different sort. The truth is, I was disappointed when Hugh suggested we get away this week. I’ve been so curious about the local traditions, so damn patient—waited nearly seven years for the mythical Day to come around—but Hugh seemed desperate to go.

It didn’t take me long to realize why. His father passed away seven years ago, on the Day, by some sick coincidence, and Hugh wasn’t there to say goodbye. He was in the middle of the Atlantic, on the deck of an ocean liner, meeting me for the first time. Falling in love while his father died.

If there are memories for him to weather this year, regrets to process, I’m sure he’d rather do it far from home. I understand, but I wonder if it’d be better for him to mourn here among people he’s known all his life. That seems to me to be the very purpose of this odd ritual, after all, remembering all the Lute islanders who’ve passed, generation after generation, from Neolithic times to now.

“So much for our anniversary trip.” I sigh.

“I hope Hugh thought to get a refundable travel package.” A glint of humor flashes over Jo’s expression, too quick for me to interpret.

Emma reaches out with both hands to frame Jo’s Afro like a halo. My daughter loves me, I know she does, but when she draws stick figure queens and fairies, they have my friend’s dark skin and cloud of curled hair and sometimes even a cup of tea, a nod to the café that Jo runs up-island.

“You’ll fall, darling. Careful.” Jo laughs as she sets Emma gently down.

She’s always helped me with the children implicitly, like this, following Emma as she toddles off to climb the low jetty wall without even a blink

back to see whether I need the extra hands. It's the way of things here, I know, but her help feels different from everybody else stepping in to cater to us as the Lord and Lady of Lute. Jo has always felt like another family member, a new big sister to blot out my real one.

"Maybe they can fix it," I murmur.

Jo's glance back is almost pitying.

I draw a breath as I walk to the dock and exhale peace, kindness, support, archetypal wifey-ness. I'm exhausted by the time I climb on deck.

"It's the same damn fuel we've always used," Hugh is saying. I reach for his shoulder, a calming touch, but he barely seems to notice. The mechanic gives me a respectful nod, wincing as if with a sudden headache as Hugh launches in again. "I don't understand—"

"The engine's overheating. That's all I can say. There 'int no rhyme nor reason for it." The mechanic swipes his brow. "You know. It might be..."

His face floods. He shakes his head.

"What? It might be *what*?" Hugh's eyes go wide. He glances at me as if noticing me here for the first time.

"Might be the island playing tricks? All those folks just left for Sunnan over there, maybe that's it, that's all it'll allow."

Hugh stalks away with a snarl, and the man stares down at the deck, still shaking his head, muttering something like he's cursing himself.

I watch the mechanic for a moment, surprised by the dark sincerity in his frown. He isn't joking. That's really his theory. *The island's playing tricks*. He's from the mainland, from Devon, but they know about Lute's superstitions there too. And apparently they believe in them.

Well, no, *he* does. Not exactly an adequate sample size for a comprehensive study. I wonder what else this guy believes about Lute.

"Hang on." Hugh whirls around, pointing past the man to his small speedboat, tied up next to the launch. "You've got *your* boat."

The man goes wan beneath his beard.

"How much?" Hugh starts digging through his pockets, as if he ever carried a wallet. He glances at me wildly. "Nina, how much cash have we brought?"

I sputter. "I, we, I mean, we could write a check?"

“We’ll write a check, that’s what we’ll do. Name your price.”

The man grips his chin. “I’m not so sure. Three more bodies on that boat might be a little tight.”

“Oh, *come on*.”

“All right.” The man glances at his boat. “We’d need to leave right now. I don’t want to risk...” He swallows. “I’ve got to get back, so it’ll need to be now.”

“Four,” I murmur, mentally correcting the mechanic’s body count. “*Four* more bodies—wait, where’s Charlie?”

Hugh blinks quickly, annoyed. “Why would I know?”

I seethe through my smile. *Because he’s your son?* “I thought he came down here with you. He’s not at the house.”

“Well, get him. We’re going.” Hugh extends a hand to the mechanic, beaming at last, a sunburst after a rainstorm. I know that smile well, how effective it can be. “Thank you, mate. I’ll write you a check, whatever you like as soon as we’re underway, and several rounds of drinks at the Eagle once we arrive, how’s that?”

They laugh, buddy-buddy, ha ha ha.

I turn around, teeth clenched, too irate to speak. Hugh and I don’t argue that much. The irony of our situation as a high-profile couple on a speck of an island is that we’re really only free to argue at home, and I never *want* to argue with him at home. He only ever infuriates me in public.

But panic starts to stir in my chest again, drowning out any irritation. Charlie is *six*. Charlie is missing. How could we have let this happen?

I’m sweating by the time I climb up the rocks to get to John’s truck, only to watch it driving away already, the bags unloaded in a neat line on the wharf. I sprint to catch him, like I could possibly hope to outpace a truck.

Way ahead, along the dirt road, I see Jo stooping next to Emma, picking a wildflower. Jo turns, rising, and noticing my panicked pace, waves over her head for John to stop. He does, a few yards past her. I keep running in these pointless vacation boat shoes, gathering pebbles and burrs in my arches.

I get to Jo first, too winded for my voice to carry as far as the truck, where John's got his head stuck out the window.

"Charlie. Nobody knows where." I huff a breath. "Jesus."

Jo's already jogging back to John, shouting, "We've lost Charlie!"

John slaps the truck door, calling back to me, "Jump in. Can't have gone far, you know!"

He laughs, and my mood lightens, a little, as much as it can. Yeah, this is a small island, but it's also surrounded by churning Bristol Channel water, and Charlie is not a strong swimmer and ... I cannot think about that. How could this have happened? He's not like Emma; he never wanders off. There's a tether between us, always, but something's broken it today.

"Will you look after Emma?" I shout to Jo.

"Of course!" She scoops Emma up to watch us drive away.

"Can't have gone far," John Ashford says again, this time more to himself.

We pass the house and come up the narrow main road through the little village. I crane my neck, looking back at the expanse of our lawn, hoping he'll have materialized back home. There are only gulls there, landing and lifting in a scattered cloud.

"I'll just ask around," John murmurs.

I nod tightly.

He pokes his head out the window as Mrs. Tavish passes, her little gray terrier clutched to her chest. "Seen Charlie about?"

"What?" She looks down to cross the cobblestones.

"*Charlie Treadway.*"

She adjusts the dog, with effort, and cups her ear.

John breaks into a smile, waving her off, then turns to me. "She'd have told us if she'd seen him."

Blue fills my window. I gasp, startling back against my seat, but it's only Brian Rowe in his police constable sweater. We're idling in front of the customs office, aren't we? We probably should have come to him first anyway.

"What's this now?" PC Brian leans low, frowning over his steaming mug of tea like it's a crucial piece of evidence.

“Charlie’s missing,” I blurt.

“Can’t have gone far.” He snorts at his own joke.

I manage to hang on to a pained smile, inwardly screaming. I’ve been here long enough to know that humor is Brian’s default mode—it doesn’t necessarily mean he isn’t taking this seriously.

“Yep, I’ll call around. Signals are a bust, but the landlines...” Brian swipes at his forehead. “I’ll have a little walk about. I’m sure you’ll find him first, though, Nina. Don’t fret about it.”

Everybody’s so cavalier here. Nothing bad could possibly happen on Lute, don’t you know, except for that *one* day. It’s illogical. But I play along, as ever, waving gratefully to Brian before we continue on.

Charlie’s not invincible. He’s soft and slight and sensitive to everything. And it isn’t like him to vanish. The thought keeps bobbing back up to the surface. This is wrong. Emma’s my imp, but Charlie’s my satellite, ever orbiting, and I don’t even remember the last moment I clocked him this morning. Out on the lawn, maybe, just after breakfast? What kind of mother am I?

The voice I hear when I berate myself these days sounds more and more like my mother’s, that hissing whisper through a smiling mouth, quiet enough that other parents could never hear. Whatever kind of parent I am, I’m a hell of a lot better than she was. She doesn’t deserve any space in my head.

John’s whistling an old song I vaguely recognize.

“There’s no way he got on the boat to Sunnan, is there?” I ask. My heart beats more frantically just thinking about the possibility.

“No,” John says. “The vicar wouldn’t have let him on, even if he did get a wild fancy to go with them. They know Charlie’s got to stay.”

We’re not staying; we’re leaving on that mechanic’s boat within the hour. But I know what he meant.

We roll past the last of the stone cottages and Jo’s outlying tearoom and village shop, and then we hit the dirt track up through the heath, passing nobody else to ask. Everybody’s cleared out, off to Sunnan or away at war.

God, how many people are left here? I scan the horizon, and it feels more than ever like a desert isle, like we’ve been marooned. I like that

feeling most of the time, the sense of having escaped the chaos and cruelty of the rest of the world, but today, it makes me cold down to my bones, like I'm swimming in a dark current of water.

I can't help but make a list of dangers, one for every direction. The cliffs lining the east side of the island with their crumbling edges. The rocky beach to the south where the puffins gather, where the sand sucks ankles tight as the tide rolls out and won't let go unless you've got someone tugging you back.

Drowning is the easiest hazard for me to imagine. All those years of picturing how my sister must have looked as they dragged her out of the swimming pool have made that image spring readily to mind.

I drive the thought away now and think of the northern tip of the island, the cell tower and barrow. That area isn't all that dangerous, just eerie.

It was so lively up at the barrow when I moved to Lute and all those archaeologists and cheerful young students were here digging, cataloging, publishing, but they left when the war began, and now, apart from the grazing goats that have turned wild and overrun the place, it's just the ancient grave it always was, silent and half-exposed. It looks like an open wound now. *Desecrated*. Jesus, that's a strong word, but it does feel like the right one.

I went up there on one of my morning walks a few years ago, but at the edge of the hill, something crawled into my stomach and urged me away. I haven't been to that corner of the island since.

I hope like hell Charlie hasn't somehow made his way to the barrow.

As I squint west past John's head, my eye catches on a trio of brightly colored figures headed down toward the beach. They look so reassuringly ordinary.

"Are those tourists?" I point out the window.

John looks blank. "Holidaymakers, yeah. They're Scandi. Don't know which country."

It matters which country. Finland surrendered to the Russo-American armies a month after the war began, the first big domino to fall.

"Should we—?"

"Yep, let's see if they've seen him."

He honks. The tourists jump comically at the sound of it, like three neon marionettes. John chortles. Even I muster a faint smile, but mostly at John. John Ashford likes his toy truck. He likes his life, all of this, his job here as warden, overseer of plants and animals and relics and everything else that falls under National Trust. “Beats retirement,” he always says, and I believe him. Lute would be the best place in the world for someone like him even if there wasn’t a war decimating nature preserves and historical sites practically everywhere else.

The hikers amble over, and very slowly, I realize they shouldn’t be here. The sight of campers on this stretch of the heath isn’t unfamiliar, but Jo said we never make holiday rentals or camping permits available in the week leading up to the Day. It’s a locals-only kind of deal. Maybe that’s why the tallest man of the group is striding forward alone while the second man turns away and the woman in cargo pants hangs back to examine a tuft of heather.

The man has snow-blond hair and chalk-white teeth. Before he even speaks, I start trying to figure out what country he’s from.

“Nice weather!” He looks up at the sky as if to demonstrate.

Overeager. Yep, they’re squatting here.

John won’t rat them out for camping without a permit. He’s not the type. Sure enough, he just smiles. “Lady Treadway here’s looking for her son. Seen anybody of the seven-year-old persuasion wandering—?”

“Six,” I correct, my pulse ratcheting up again. “Sorry, he’s six. He’s got dark hair, same color as mine, three and, um, three and a half feet tall? Maybe more?”

“Meters?” the hiker asks wryly, noticing my accent, testing me.

My mind goes blank. I’m still useless at metric conversions. Failing the British test here.

The Scandinavian guy laughs, waving his hand. “No, no, we saw him.”

My heart leaps. He turns, pointing.

“Small kid, headed straight down this path.” He kicks the gravel to demonstrate. “Straight into the forest there. Small forest.”

“Yeah, the grove.” I squint hard, like if I strain enough, I might be able to see through the tufted hill and past the thick oaks and snatch him up, safe

and close.

God, this *terror*. It's always there, isn't it, waiting for a reason to bubble over. From the moment he was born, I've had an endless store of fear held ready, just in case, and having a second child only quadrupled it.

"Righto." John knocks on the door of the truck, and the man backs affably away. "You kids have..." His grin pinches a little. "Yeah, you be safe."

He drives us off with a nod. I turn back, watching clouded bemusement dissipate from the hiker's expression. The woman waves. Even though I detect sarcasm in the gesture, I wave back. I have to, in this case. Comes with the title, and you never know who's a journalist. The British press is vicious, even in wartime.

Weird that they're here, though. We've had hardly any tourists this year, and for them to linger *now*, of all weeks, feels suspect.

As soon as my eyes find the grove again, my relief at having a solid lead is laced with a wash of hot anger. "Why would he have taken off like this? For the grove of all places?"

"It's an area of outstanding cultural interest," John says, a twinkle in his eye.

"Not when you're six. And it isn't like him."

"No, it isn't, is it." John's voice gets quieter as we approach the thick line of trees and pull to a stop at the line of split logs and woodchips that serves as a parking lot.

We step silently out of the car and, side by side, enter the grove. The oaks suck us in. I hold my breath in the abrupt darkness, feeling, as ever, like something has shifted here, like I'm breathing different air, older oxygen. I can't remember if I felt this way before I knew what the grove was, before hearing Ian Pike recounting the old legends from the bar at the Dane's Head. The ghosts who drift out of the grove to celebrate on Christmas Eve. The ancient oaks created by Celtic gods, still standing sentient, waiting for their planters' return. The stone. The deaths. Hundreds, thousands, nobody knows how many human sacrifices.

Maybe I always shivered here, maybe not. But I'm susceptible now.

The grove, the only wild collection of trees on Lute, too small to even call it a wood, but once inside, it may as well be a forest.

I draw my canvas coat closer around my waist as the wind blows, sliding against the rich green leaves above us. I could walk this path with my eyes closed by now. I can smell which season it is, the sharp scent of growth of sap, the lurid aliveness of summer. The track narrows, and I let John take the lead, glancing furtively at the dipping oak branch where I sat mere hours ago. The whispers from the oaks get louder, closer, as if to tell on me, what I get up to in here. John would not approve.

Then, above the din, I hear voices, and my pulse thrums in my throat.

John is already nodding down the path, setting off toward the sound. “What did I tell you? Young historian. He’s gone straight for the area of outstanding...”

The next gust smothers his voice.

I see Charlie’s back first, his sweater with the thick red and blue stripes. My little boy is sitting down on a pile of leaves, scratching his head. His hair has gone brown already, but in the light falling from the canopy, it looks blond again, like when he was a baby. He’s peering up, talking to someone, but there’s no one there. He’s talking to the air.

“Charlie?” I call out, my pace quickening.

A man steps into view, and a silent sob of relief drops out of me. What did I think it was, a ghost? The man pats Charlie on the shoulder before rising to greet me. I’m about to shout, “Thank you,” when I realize it’s Matthew Clare.

He’s still in shirtsleeves despite the chill, muddy boots pulled up over worn-out trousers, stubble framing a wind-worn face. Gray eyes shining with kindness, sadness, resentment, who knows.

He’s just a person, middle-aged, weary, but there’s something striking about him here. He looks like he belongs in the grove. King of the Wood.

“Lady Treadway.” The greeting jars me back to reality. He says it with a tight jaw, as always, like he can’t bear the sound of the words. He should just *fucking* call me Nina, like I’ve asked him to a million times.

He doesn’t even look at me as I rush to Charlie, and I don’t care. The world forms a tunnel around my son until he’s in my arms, and I’m kissing

the top of his head, whisper-shouting into his hair, “What are you doing here? What were you thinking? Oh my *goodness*, you scared me so much, baby boy.”

Charlie blinks, dazed as I pull away to peer at him, like he’s waking up from a dream. “Why would you be scared?”

I laugh, shrill, unnerved by the look on his face. “I didn’t know where you were!”

“I wanted to see the rock. I told you.”

“The what?”

“I had a dream about the rock, so I wanted to see it. I needed to see it today.”

I shake my head. “You—?”

“The tithe stone,” Matthew says.

He’s only forty-two, same age as Hugh, but there’s something endlessly old about Matthew Clare, now more than ever. For all his Lute traditions, Hugh is a modern guy. He watches movies and checks the stock market and texts with his friends on the mainland during televised football matches. It’s hard to imagine Matthew doing any of those things. Sometimes when Ian Pike tells his stories about the Romans or the Saxons or the Normans coming here, I find myself picturing Matthew Clare among the watchers on the shore. I don’t even have to change his clothing too much.

I turn to find him staring at the long, flat, mossy rock at the edge of the clearing, a tiny plaque, oxidized green, marking the spot for visitors to reference on their island maps.

“He had his hands pressed to it when I followed him here.”

“You followed him?” I don’t mean to make it sound accusatory. My voice was just tight. All of me is tight.

Matthew flinches, his dark eyes darting away again, while John shifts uncomfortably a few yards down the path.

I force a smile. “I’m glad you did, thank God, but—”

“He was wandering along the road by himself. Looked like he needed some help.”

Now he sounds accusatory. Fair enough.

I stand, dusting myself off. “And then you came here and—why didn’t you bring him back?”

Matthew scratches the stubble on his jaw. “Like I said, he was standing by the tithe stone. Wasn’t more than a minute or two ago that I got here.”

I blink, disoriented. How is that possible? It’s felt like half the day I’ve been looking for Charlie, but of course, for Matthew to have caught up on foot would have taken longer. Still, everything feels bent, too fast and too slow at once.

“Can we go home?” my son asks brightly from the ground, and I feel at least that I’m here in the present moment. “I want some orange juice.”

John lets out a great, rumbling laugh. “Well, there we have it. He wanted to see the rock, now he wants orange juice. Mystery solved.”

It takes holding my breath to keep my voice from rising. “You can’t just wander off, Charlie.” I reach out to pull him up. He wraps his skinny arms around my waist and nestles in, and all the anger wafts out of me. “And we can’t go home. Daddy’s got a boat for us.”

Charlie’s head darts up. “Why a boat?”

Patience now, he’s only six. “You know we’re going on holiday, Charlie, and we’re holding everything up now, so—”

“I’ll shuttle you back,” John offers, glancing at his watch.

“In your truck?” Charlie asks, fully himself again, eyes electrified.

I turn to thank Matthew for staying with Charlie, briefly, politely, but he’s already left us, heading up the north track out of the grove. I watch him stride away, watch one of his hands drag against the trunk of an oak as if greeting a friend. It’s not until he disappears completely that I let out that breath.

Back at the truck, Charlie refuses my lap, kicking, so we squeeze side by side in the passenger seat and grin every time John slows down to shout a hello to the islanders we pass. It feels like we’re already on vacation, heading out into the sunshine, trouble behind us. My shoulders loosen with every bump of the road.

Charlie turns to look at me, his cheek squishing against mine. “When we get home, could I have some orange juice, please?”

Oh, good grief. “I told you, we’re not going home, Charlie. Our bags are already down at the launch. We’re going to head straight—”

“We’re not, though.”

I lean forward to peer at him. The mistiness in his expression has been replaced by stone-still certainty. He’s caught the island’s superstition, hasn’t he? Somebody’s been filling his head with nonsense. Matthew, maybe, or one of the village kids.

“Why would you say that?”

“I just feel like we’re not going to go.”

He shrugs, but he doesn’t seem particularly bothered by the prospect of staying. Unlike the other kids, who practically sprinted from the village past our house on their way to the docks this morning. Not like they were excited about going on a camping trip. Like something was chasing them.

“Ho there,” John says low as we turn out of the narrow village.

Hugh’s standing in the lane. He isn’t walking toward us, just waiting, hands on hips. Jo and Emma are nowhere in sight.

John stops the truck, and I squeeze past Charlie to get out.

“You stay here for a sec,” I tell Charlie, sensing an edge to my husband’s expression that I don’t like much. Not even an edge—the lack of one. His face is a flat surface, no notches, no nicks, no entry point whatsoever.

“He left,” Hugh says, the instant I’m within earshot. “Where was Charlie?”

He asks the question like he’s reading a roadside sign.

“He was...” I peer past Hugh and see a boat drawing a white line in the sea—away from Lute, fast. “He was in the grove. What do you mean he left? What happened?”

“Didn’t want to risk leaving it this late.”

“It was high tide an hour ago! We had plenty of time! And the sun won’t set for...”

My voice dwindles, sensing no one’s listening to it. Hugh stares past me at the village, his brown eyes utterly dulled. Then he starts walking, off the road, into the heath, away from home.

Hugh? I think his name but don't call it out. Let him take a nice long walk if he's going to be like this.

Charlie scrambles to open the truck door and get out, but Hugh keeps going, not even looking at him, hands in his pockets, away.

Squinting south, I can make out a line of colorful rectangles. He left the goddamned bags in the middle of the road.

"Need me to haul them back?" John Ashford steps one foot out of the truck, ready to help.

"No," I say quickly. "No, we'll manage. You've done so much for us today. Thank you so much. I won't take up any more of your time."

"I just have to peek in at the north station," he says, nodding. "If they're too much for you, leave 'em. I'll round back this evening."

"No, no, no. Please, John, you've already—"

"I'm headed to the pub tonight!" He laughs. "This'll make me feel I've earned another pint."

I manage a smile as he drives away, while Charlie digs for pebbles in the road, throwing them and catching them and losing them as we make our way down to the dock.

"Okay."

I put my hands on my hips, staring down at the ridiculous amount of luggage we were planning to take on a weeklong excursion. I used to travel light. Wherever I was, I used to be ready to go at a moment's notice.

"You take your Trunkie. I'll get this one. Then we'll find Daddy and get him to help. Plan?"

Charlie nods solemnly and starts away with his load.

"Charlie?" I call after him, my legs locked in place. "What kind of dream did you have? Why did you want to see the stone?"

He shrugs. Doesn't turn back.

The dock is empty now. The sea rises and falls. The *Pride of Lute* has made it over to Sunnan. Out west, little Elding shines gold in the afternoon light, with no people there at all, only sheep dotting its hills, like tiny clouds. Behind me, Joseph's Rock sits stoic, lonely, buffeted by crashing waves. And this, our main island, is quiet.

If I were as traditional as everybody here, I might say that Lute is waiting.

I'm not from here, so I'll say it's nice and peaceful. Lute is the same as it ever was.

TWO DAYS BEFORE

“I knew it would happen.” Jo slides a piping mug across the table—she’s given me my favorite cup from her motley collection, slender and curved, a Welsh dragon curling around its base.

I run my finger along the sharp rim. “What, are you psychic now?”

“Not a bit, to my everlasting dismay.” She smiles out the tearoom window at the village lane beyond, but her eyes are distant. “No, it’s just the way of it here. Hugh left last time, bless him. It simply wasn’t going to happen again.”

“He’s still trying to leave.”

For the first time this morning, Jo looks surprised. “You’re not going to get a boat to come here now.”

“I’m realizing that.” I try a sip. Too hot. I put it down. “He’s trying to get one of his old boarding school friends on the phone. Harry Enston’s wife is an MP, so Hugh thinks she might be able to wrangle a helicopter, requisition one, whatever. Since we gave ours to the RAF.”

“He should know better,” Jo says quietly, resting her chin on her hand.

“It’s embarrassing to even ask. We’re in the middle of a freaking war.”

I glance out the window just as, on cue, a trio of fighter jets roars past to the west. We tense, listening. We can tell from the pitch that they’re ours and relax back against our creaking wooden chairs. It’s a patrol, I hope, not a battle. There’s been a cease-fire for more than a week now. If the cease-fire leads to talks, the talks could lead to a peace agreement, but everything feels so tenuous. The press dubbed the past four years of global conflict the *Water Wars*, not *World War III*, like they’re holding out that name for

another worse conflict to come. Maybe we'll at least get a nice long break in between. Everyone will come home long enough to forget.

I scratch the edge of that dragon with my fingernail, over and over, irritation returning. "It's a waste of time to even try. If they weren't allowing helicopters here at the beginning of the war, they're certainly not going to do it now. Even if the cease-fire is holding. Even if you've *gone hunting with an MP*."

My voice has deepened in imitation of Hugh. Jo pretends not to notice.

I know she shares my aversion to snobbery, the clannishness and entitlement of the upper classes in Britain. The way class works here is subtle, not in your face at all, but sometimes it's that subtlety that bugs me the most, the sense that they find their own superiority so obvious that it need not be mentioned. You can tell who's old money here by how shabby their furniture is, how muddy their boots, how overrun their houses are with animals. You can tell by the little glances they give each other. Who they talk to and who they ignore.

Hugh's not a "toff," thank God. I wouldn't have married him if he were. He's got a polish to him mixed with landowner earthiness, but not that aloofness I see in so many of his friends. He cares what people think of him. He doesn't use that title as a shield; in fact, I didn't even find out he was landed gentry until after his dad died and I saw the obituary. Maybe he's a little more normal because he grew up here, in this tiny, tight-knit community jutting out of the ocean. Even so, I do notice snobbery sneak in from time to time, especially when we're visiting his sister in Surrey or meeting his friends in their country homes and London town houses.

I dread going to the mainland, is the truth. They tease me, thinking I'm too provincial, too *American* to notice, and all I can do is stay polite and play along to avoid making the waves that will only prove them right.

I never complain about it outright to Jo, only in oblique ways, a valve to relieve the pressure. And she never criticizes Hugh either, never complains about the upper classes directly. She talks about *Britishness* and how ridiculous it can all be, apologetically, as if she and the rest of the middle class were complicit, which in and of itself is extremely British.

Jo was born in Bristol, like her parents, but all four grandparents were Jamaican immigrants. I wonder if she feels like she's got one foot out of the UK by virtue of her ancestry. I suspect she likes me better for being American, even though I find being American pretty darn embarrassing, especially now that we're the ones on the wrong side of a global war. I do hold on to my language, my accent, and American vocabulary out of vague stubbornness, but the truth is I'm much happier living in Britain. It's only little annoyances that niggle at me sometimes. Food packaging that's tricky to open. References to sitcoms I've never heard of. Moments of cultural ambiguity—is she really inviting me in for tea or just being polite? Moments where I wonder if I'm being too loud, too honest, too much myself. Private jokes between Hugh and his friends. Ancient customs that are impossible to wrap my brain around.

“I hope no one tries to fly out here on the Day.” Jo's brow furrows. “That could end it right there.”

Before I can ask if she's serious, the shop bell rings, Mrs. Wickett shuffling in for her midday cup of tea. Jo stands to greet her, offering an arm to help the tiny old woman sit. I wave to Mrs. Wickett and am favored with a dignified nod.

As Jo goes into the tearoom kitchen to put on the kettle, I gaze around at her cozy business, the cream lace curtains, low ceiling with beams painted white, cheerfully crooked walls, zigzag cracks where damp's getting in, and mull the look on my friend's face before that bell rang. I've always assumed she's playing along with everyone else. Jo's sensible. If I were asked to describe her in a single word, that would be it. She's only in her fifties. She wasn't brought up here like most of the others were. But with every day closer to *the* Day, I wait for her to break, to wink, to show that it's a tradition, no more, and so far it hasn't happened.

Jo seems worried. Industrious as ever, but with a weight to it, not unlike that certainty Charlie had in his face yesterday.

I sip my tea, too fast, again. I haven't been in this country long enough to adapt to the heat of their beverages. I set the dragon cup down clumsily, and a dribble spills over the edge onto the white lace tablecloth. I dab it

with my napkin as Jo sets the teapot and cup in front of Mrs. Wickett and flumps back down in the chair opposite me.

“We got your biscuits in before we shut down orders for the week. Forgot to tell you, but they’re in the shop.” She nods over her shoulder.

“Oh, that’s great.” I try to match her light tone. “Charlie doesn’t mind my baking, but Hugh’s been missing his digestives.”

I don’t know why I said *my baking*. Sally does all our cooking. Maybe it just felt like something a mother would say. I catch myself sometimes, aiming for normal and missing the mark.

Jo pretends not to notice that too.

I take two more careful sips, and then: “What did you mean about flying in on the Day?”

“I don’t expect it’ll happen,” Jo says quickly as if to reassure me. “Everybody knows not to fly here this week, even when it’s not restricted airspace, as it were. But I’d hate for anybody unsuspecting to get wrapped up in all this. It’s why we shut the cottages down and the campsites, you know. T’wouldn’t be fair.”

“So you think it’s fair as it is?”

I smile so big I’m practically winking, broadcasting the fact that I haven’t been taken in. This conversation is for the fun of it. My stomach isn’t clenched, my foot not tapping peevishly under the tearoom table.

She considers the question thoughtfully. “It’s fair in its way. It’s a deal that was struck a long time ago, and we do see the benefit of it. Especially in times like these. I’ve never lived anywhere so peaceful, so safe. Can’t beat the views either.”

Mrs. Wickett murmurs something I can’t make out, and Jo laughs.

“Should we go sit with her?” I whisper.

Jo shakes her head, still smiling. “She likes to be alone, where she and Fred used to sit for tea. It’s her ritual.”

And this is mine. Escape while the kids are occupied, tea with a friend, and then something all my own.

Jo reads my mind, psychic or not, sliding a folded napkin over the table with a complicit glint in her eye, like we’re thirteen. She starts to whistle, overdoing the innocence, and I swat at her. As Mrs. Wickett looks away,

staring at a porcelain plate hung on the wall, I pull my contraband out from under the napkin and stick it in my pocket.

One cigarette a day. It hardly counts as a vice, but Jo's the only one who knows I do it. I could buy a pack and hide it, but that would feel more like an actual addiction, especially with the gory photos they cover the packaging with here: diseased toes, rotting gums. I hardly ever even finish smoking the things before stubbing them out and depositing them in the hollow of the tree trunk that serves as my hiding spot in the grove. It's a nothing habit.

Still, I wouldn't want the kids to find out. Not Hugh either. He'd lecture: "Now that we're parents, we have a responsibility to look after ourselves." At least he never frames it in terms of motherhood, the ideal of female self-effacement. We're co-parents, both of us equal. *He's* been good, so I should be good.

I really should. Just not yet.

"Thank you," I mouth, then, "I'll grab those biscuits now."

Jo heads toward the glass door that leads into the shop.

I stand to join her. "The kids'll be almost as excited as Hugh. It's gonna be hard to ration them."

"Oh don't ration too much." She says it abruptly, like she was considering not saying anything at all and then dared herself. "Not this week. Just let them enjoy themselves."

I realize what she means and swallow hard, willing the words *You don't believe in all this* back into my throat. It would be rude to say it aloud with Mrs. Wickett here. Elsie Wickett's in her nineties, a Lute by birth. I'm essentially a guest here, compared to all the others. I would hate to act disrespectfully toward her beliefs.

But I have to find a way to press Jo a little. It makes me feel queasy, not knowing where she stands, like I'm on a raft alone, drifting farther and farther out to sea while everybody else stays on land.

The glass door hisses shut, and we're alone in the shop. Before I can find my voice, Jo reaches behind the counter for a pack of digestives and murmurs, "What have you told the children about the Day?"

“The children?” I echo, surprised. “Nothing.” I shouldn’t have to justify myself, but I find myself scrambling for an excuse. “It feels like Hugh’s story to tell.”

I pull out my ration book and set it on the counter.

Jo keeps her eyes on me as she flips it open and marks it. “And has he told it?”

“He, well, he doesn’t like to talk about it. Understandably.” I feel like I’m defending us both to a detective. “We’ve just said there’s a special day here, so we’re going on vacation to celebrate.”

She lets out a breath, nostrils flaring. “You’re not going on holiday now, though.”

I look away to put my ration book in my jacket pocket. It slides in above the cigarette, but I pretend it needs more nudging so I can keep my eyes averted. “I told them we’ll celebrate here.”

“If he won’t tell them, you need to.”

“Tell them what?” My voice comes out in a shout. “Emma’s *three*. She doesn’t even know what *dead* means.”

Jo backs up half a step. “You may be right.”

“I’m sorry.” My skin prickles as I register what I’ve said. I forget sometimes that Jo’s a widow. Her husband died from a stroke long before I got here; that doesn’t mean her grief is dead too. “I shouldn’t have—”

“No, you’re probably right. You can talk to Charlie about it after the Day—he’s bound to have questions—and of course Emma doesn’t need to know until she’s older. She’ll hear about it from the other children anyway.”

I let out a desperate laugh. “Not to be puritanical, but I have to say, it doesn’t really seem like an appropriate custom to celebrate with children!”

Jo turns away, mouth open. She bites her lip. “I’m sorry, Nina. You know I love you, but you’ve got to stop saying *celebrate*.”

She stops talking, abruptly, breathes, and I can see her reeling emotion back in like a fish on a line. It’s rage, actual rage, at me. I don’t know what to say that won’t make this worse.

This is the closest I’ve come to a fight in years, and Christ, my heart is thudding.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. It takes me a second to catch my breath. “This has been the hardest adjustment.”

“Because you don’t believe in it.” She turns, busying herself with rearranging her stores of tinned fruit and beans. “But why would you? I have to keep reminding myself that I didn’t believe in it either when I moved here. I was so angry with Peter when I realized it was true. My God, that he’d married me, brought me here, made me fall in love with the place only to...” She shakes her head. “You’ll understand it soon, and when you’re one of us, you’ll come to value it as we do. It’s a fair trade.”

When I’m one of them.

“A fair trade.” I dare echo Jo’s words because her expression has, thankfully, lightened.

“Look around!” She beams, glad as I am for the slight change in topic. “Look at the weather, for starters. Gorgeous, isn’t it? Rain just before dawn, more sunny days than the UK average.”

“It’s a lucky fluke of geography,” I argue, smiling back. “That’s what John Ashford says.”

“He still believes that?” Jo muses, then she leans on the counter, her expression shifting. “You know about the Graveyard.”

I do. It’s one of my favorite spots here. The Graveyard is a spot off the northwest shore where the waves break in a long white line. When I first moved here, I’d mistaken it for a natural shoal, but Hugh set me straight—it’s a massive reef formed by the combined wrecks of ships trying to invade Lute over millennia, from Vikings to Nazis. Our pub, the Dane’s Head, is named for one unfortunate Viking who, in attempting to invade, hit the reef and swam to shore, only to have his head removed and set on a pike for children to lob rotten vegetables at, presumably on the spot where the pub now stands.

Nobody has ever successfully attacked us—not even the Normans, really. They sent the first Lord Treadway over, and he promptly fell in love with the place, assimilated, married a Lute girl, refused to pay taxes to the Crown, and somehow got away with it.

It’s all a trick of history and geography. A patchwork pattern that proves nothing. There’s a lot of history here to pick and choose from. The currents

around these islands are treacherous.

And yet, I do have to admit, we've never had any trouble navigating to the mainland or to Sunnan or Elding or even Joseph's Rock for a day trip. The only time our plans have ever been scuppered, in fact, was yesterday.

Jo is watching me. "We're all comfortable financially, aren't we? Untouched by ups and downs for the most part."

This I do know more than a little about, as the fortunes of Lute are so tied up with the wealth of the family I've joined. There are books on the shelves of Hugh's study about the Treadways, old leather-bound tomes I found amusing enough to crack when I was pregnant with Charlie and too tired to do anything but patter around the house. It seemed like some ridiculous vanity printing, but after I started reading, I couldn't stop. The history was fascinating enough that I couldn't believe I hadn't read about it elsewhere.

The legend of the blessed islanders was what gave Lute notoriety in Britain through the centuries and, funnily enough, money. From the moment ships were crossing the Atlantic or heading north on fishing and whaling expeditions, Lute sailors were sought after for their luck. They said in the Bristol harbors that a ship with a Lute islander aboard was unsinkable, so sailors from here were paid well over standard wages, with larger shares in the bounty—and whether it's history or legend talking, they say that Lute-blessed ships always wound up with hefty takings.

The Treadways managed it all, their own tiny East India Company. They got a share of the receipts from the islanders and invested it weirdly well, never taking much of a hit from any of the recessions or depressions in the past two centuries. That's why, along with all the technical contract work that comes with owning four islands—managing tenant agreements, making sure nobody's violating environmental regulations, shoring up old buildings, doling out land rights for sheep grazing on Sunnan and docking rights to visiting fishermen—most of Hugh's day-to-day consists of moving money around and watching it grow. Reinvesting, donating. It takes him all of two hours in the mornings, leaving him time for his real job, visiting with neighbors and learning about what they need, or what they'd like him to

communicate to officials on the mainland. His job is really just being present, being human, making sure everybody's happy.

And everybody is happy. Safe, comfortable, but none more the Treadways, and I'm Lady Treadway of Alder House with not even a single hour of work to do in the mornings. There's no way to answer Jo's question that wouldn't sound smug.

Jo, thank Christ, moves on to her next piece of evidence. "Have you never noticed anything odd about the war memorial?"

Okay. Now I'm stumped. The thing is, I never grew up seeing war memorials outside of the large displays we toured on school visits to D.C. The day I figured out that there was a memorial in every single village in Britain, Hugh explained that the death toll here in the great wars was much greater. I realized then how insulated I'd been from the concept of war back home. Americans move on quickly from tragedy. We think of it as a strength, but I wonder if it's a sign of immaturity, of an unwillingness to grapple with hard emotions.

I picture our little memorial square here beside the school and the church, and it hits me, for the very first time. "There aren't any names on it. Just the dates of the wars."

Jo raps once on the counter. "Because no one from Lute has died in any war. Not a single soul."

That cannot be possible, I think, but what comes out is, "Well, that's good!"

Jo laughs in agreement, then shoves herself off the counter and away, poking her head past the tearoom door. "You all right, Mrs. Wickett?"

"I'm ready to go," the old woman says quietly.

My heart clenches. She probably means she wants to settle up, but she's been talking about death more and more these days, saying she's been praying that the Lord will take her soon.

Lute is a seriously morbid place of late.

Jo speaks to Mrs. Wickett in a close murmur that I can't make out, then helps her up and out into the lane. I watch the old woman walk home past the shop window, adjusting her collar with shaking fingers, her milky eyes

relentlessly mournful. This is the emotion she wakes up to every day and the one she settles down with at night. It has to be exhausting.

“Anyway!” Jo bursts back into the room at top volume. “By the end of the Day, you’ll understand.”

“By the end of the Day.” I eye her. “Does that mean I don’t have to worry?”

“I don’t get to make that decision, do I?” She looks a little sad, even as she jokes back.

Something in her expression makes me wonder how truthful she’s being.

Then she sighs. “Just don’t be too cross with Hugh. He did try to get you away, after all, fool that he is.”

I should probably be offended by someone calling my husband a fool, but I know she means it as an endearment. Jo’s not a mother, so she takes it upon herself to mother everybody here, even people much older than she is, even me, now that the last link binding me to my American family is gone.

My adoring grandmother, the one who fought for me as a child, snuck me gifts and books and compliments and jokes, who took me in as an adult and offered me safe haven. Who took me on that ocean crossing where I met Hugh. It’s still so hard to believe the last image I’ll have of Gran is watching her behind the glass security partition at JFK International Airport, leaving without me, looking so confused, so hurt, but waving back anyway. Hugh’s arm warm around my shoulders, steering me away to the international gate.

The door to the shop squeaks open. The bell sticks to the damp wall for a second before it swings loose and rings. I watch Matthew Clare walk in with the same feeling I always get in his company—mortification from my scalp to my feet.

He looks equally pleased to see me. “Oh. I’m ... I can come back.”

Jo laughs. “What’s the matter with you? You’d think you walked in on us naked.”

He goes ghost white, and even I have to stifle a smile.

“I wanted to ask about your radio,” he blurts, inscrutably enough, but Jo straightens, seeming to understand.

I zip my jacket, pat the pocket with the cigarette and biscuits safely lodged inside, and edge my way to the door.

"I'm off," I say, the polite self-dismissal. "Kids'll be rowdy soon."

"Enjoy your *healthy stroll*," Jo says with a wink.

"I will." I add, "Bye," sheepishly, in Matthew's direction, but he doesn't glance back. My voice resounds in my ears, high-pitched, so thirsty for approval that I have to stop myself from taking off at a light sprint as I emerge onto the cobblestone lane.

It's a hazy afternoon, the air dangling thick and damp around me, far from the perfect weather Jo was just extolling. I skirt a row of terraced cottages at the edge of the village before the road relaxes into a dirt track heading north to the grove.

Mr. and Mrs. Tavish are headed back from a walk with their equally ancient terrier, Pixie, and give me a formal salute as I start past with a wave.

"Where's Max got to?" Mr. Tavish asks. His hearing is better than his wife's. They come to the pub sometimes for dinner and shout the place down just to carry on a conversation.

"He's home!" I say. "I'll walk him later!"

I wave again and continue on, wondering what they must be thinking, seeing me head away from my house, taking *myself* for a walk. Then I curse myself for wondering. They'd all respect me more if I didn't care. I know that. But I don't even want them to respect me. It feels unearned. I want them to like me, which is far more pathetic.

I told Jo once after we'd had a few drinks that I knew Matthew didn't like me. She'd been calling him Matty, telling some funny story about how much of a hermit he'd become up in that lighthouse, and I blurted it out, "He hates me." She looked uncomfortable but didn't deny it, and I realized it was one of those things you weren't meant to say out loud. It was childish. I never admitted it again.

My self-consciousness certainly isn't helped by Hugh, who can talk of little else but what everybody thinks of him here—how they compare him against the legacy of his father and his grandfather and so on for all eternity. I listen, I'm sympathetic, I absorb it, drip by drip. I am a Treadway too, after all.

The portraits cluttering the walls of Alder House include generation upon generation of Lady Treadways, here in a Tudor bodice, there in ruffles and lace, my favorite, up on the second-floor landing, painted in oil in smart wartime tweed. Stories about these Treadways of the past are threaded into every anecdote here, every place. Here is the bench Hugh's father put down as a resting spot for old folks on their strolls. There, the harbor wharf with stones laid by a nineteenth-century Lord Treadway, laboring in the shallows alongside all the others. I've even heard the story of that 1930s Lady Treadway fighting a massive seal off the beach to keep him from trampling the puffin nests.

There are expectations of me, of Hugh, and I still don't feel like I've got a handle on them. They seem to be all tied up in the Day, whatever the Day even is. Maybe I'm imagining it, putting pressure on myself where there is none. Maybe not.

I walk unseeing now, wound tight as a trigger by the time I hit the edge of the grove. John Ashford's truck isn't parked here. With the island practically deserted this week, I won't have to be so ridiculously furtive. I slink among the oaks, let them welcome me with their summer whispers, and find my spot tucked just far enough away from the footpath to be inconspicuous. One held breath and a quick glance back, listening, and I pull my lighter from its hiding place in the hollow of my low-bent oak. The trees are so familiar that on days like this, it's easy to imagine some sort of consciousness for them, a sense that they're waiting. Watching. Forming opinions.

The hole in the tree is full of stubs. It's time for me to clear it out again. I sink onto my haunches, thighs burning, light up, and drag slowly on my single precious cigarette.

It's asinine. That's the only word for it. I hardly smoked before I got married. Just socially, and that was rare, because, let's face it, I hardly ever socialized. I wasn't addicted. But something about getting married, having children, deciding never to smoke, ever again, ate at me.

This feels like a little pocket of time that doesn't belong to my family. It's just mine, and if I want to kill myself a little for five minutes every day, it's my goddamn right.

I think of the stone.

It's a natural segue. All those people volunteering to die only a few steps from here. If they wanted to kill themselves, the people of Lute were only too willing to help.

My mouth goes mossy, the taste of the cigarette hitting me wrong today. I find myself quickly stubbing it out and wandering north through the wood to the center of the grove, the place I found Charlie just yesterday.

Dread sinks deeper and deeper into my bones, even as I keep going, but when I reach the little clearing, it dissipates like a lost sneeze. I've been here so many times before. I've been everywhere on Lute Island so many times before, apart from the dig site, and this spot has been the one I've felt drawn to most often. There's the oak with one bough bent low as if in deference, there's the glimmer of light peeking from between the branches, jumping from one inlet to the next, there's the bit of maroon string someone tied to a trunk that nobody ever bothered to remove, and there, finally, the rock. The tithe stone.

There's nothing remarkable about it. If it weren't for the plaque, it would look like someone put it there last week, flat and long, dug deep into the bank of the hill, a makeshift table for a picnic. The dip in the center looks naturally formed. Maybe water pooled there from a falling rivulet, persistent over millennia. If it had been dug out with blood all this time, surely it should still be a little, I don't know, rusty looking.

I touch it, the dip. I've never done that before. No chills ripple through me. Nothing to indicate that this was the spot where people gave up their lives in a barbaric ritual, the exact place where the sacrificial rock descended time and again, smashing through hair, scalp, skull, brain matter, orbital bones, all the way down to the tithe stone. And for what god? Nobody even seems to know.

I read all about the ancient Celtic deities when I first moved here—that old academic instinct to research more and more in order to assimilate—and the irony was, I wound up knowing more than anybody else around here. I was taken with it, though, with the names, their connections to other gods, Irish, Roman. They died out through disbelief, neglect, the wave of Christianity that swept through the Isles and washed them away. But once,

there was Taranis the thunderer for good weather, three-faced Lugus for good trade, horned Cernunnos for good health, the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Shining Ones, buried in the earth, sleeping, waiting.

Something ripples through me, thinking about them. Some memory, frustratingly vague. A tickle, like a dream I've forgotten.

I close my eyes and press my hand down; I do it, idiot that I am, but it doesn't help me remember. I feel, hear, smell *nothing* to give me the impression that anything greater or stranger than myself is present here.

With my other hand, I'm still pinching that stubbed-out half-smoked cigarette. And before I know what I'm doing, I start grinding it into the stone, my jaw set at a painful angle, so incongruously angry.

I wait, again, for the judgment of the spirits here. For truth. *Something.*

I swipe the ashes away with a flat palm and sit cross-legged in the gravel. I feel dull, leaden.

I asked Charlie at breakfast this morning why he came here. He shrugged, went nonverbal, as he does sometimes. I didn't press, not with every other tension brewing in the house, but maybe I should have, because the only answer I can think of now is the one Jo gave me over tea an hour ago.

Charlie came here to keep us on the island.

A chill starts to ripple up my arms, down my back. The wind blows—not an omen, the wind is always blowing on Lute—but it's enough to make me turn and leave this pseudo-sacred spot without looking back. "Me time" is over.

The kids are up when I get home, running circles around the downstairs spaces while Sally looks on. I wave and set down my bag, swallowing the last bit of a mint I had ready.

"Where's Hugh?" I ask, glancing around. Sally isn't meant to mind the children. It's not that I don't trust her with them, just that she has enough to do around here.

"Upstairs," Sally says. Her voice is light enough to worry me. "I wanted to ask you about the menu for this week. Kitchen's a bit sparse."

"No, yeah, we're meant to be away, aren't we?" I say. "Oh God, I'm sorry. Don't worry about us! Take a few days' holiday if you like? We can

fend for ourselves for once.”

Sally looks stricken. Like I’ve fired her.

“Just for a few days,” I say again.

Charlie plows into my leg and hangs on, grinning up at me. I pat his head. Max joins us. I pat his head too.

“The thing of it is, I think I’d rather keep busy, if it’s all the same?” Sally’s cheeks have turned very red. “Keep my mind off things.”

She clamps her lips shut, her eyes darting upstairs. She must sense that Hugh doesn’t talk about it and doesn’t want to cross that line, but I can see in the tension in the corners of her lips that it’s on her mind and has been for some time.

She believes in the Day.

“No, of course. Whatever you’d prefer,” I say brightly. “I mean, the kids will be grateful not to have to eat my cooking, to be honest.”

“You’re cooking?” Charlie says, aghast. He lets go of my leg and backs away. “Nooooooo!”

I shrug broadly. We’re a regular comedy routine around here.

Sally winks, her color returning to normal. “I’ll get to it, then. Avery’ll be over shortly to see to the little ones, and I can bury my head in the larder and see what we can put together.”

“I can manage them,” I say, laughing lightly. *I’m their mother, after all.* And yet Emma’s climbing the furniture and Charlie’s trying to push me into the wall and Max is drooling onto my boots and I’ve been home less than five minutes and I’m already ready for a break.

Sally’s eyes crinkle. “She likes to do it. And *she* wants the distraction too.”

They’re not related by blood that I know of, but Sally’s always doted on Avery like a substitute grandmother. It’s the way of things here. When there are vacancies, we fill them.

I turn toward the tall western windows and see Avery making her way across the long lawn in a blousy floral sundress, the overgrown grass turning her usually elegant gait into the clomp of a normal teenager.

She was a promising ballerina until a few years ago. I remember her as a reedy tween, practicing stretches against the school fence, toe to her ear,

everyone's jaw dropping. She went off to study at an elite school in Cardiff, still going despite the war, but two weeks in, a boy dropped her, and her ankle snapped in a way that'll never be fully repaired.

Poor Avery's been a little adrift since she got back. Her on-off local boyfriend's away at war and not always able to answer emails, and her future's a question mark. She works part-time at the village school, but right now, all the kids are gone except for mine.

Except for mine.

My heart flips. Avery picks her way toward the stone steps, her blond hair blowing behind her like a banner.

It's the first time I've realized it in any practical sense. That's why it's so quiet here today. Everyone else sent their children to Sunnan. Only my children are still here. And Avery herself, eighteen now, still practically a child. There's a wrongness about it. They're not where they're meant to be.

Or maybe it's the opposite. A sick sense of rightness. John said the reverend would never have allowed Charlie on the boat. He had to be here, and he is.

"Do you have any thoughts on the Day?" Sally asks behind me, and I startle. I nearly confess that I'm starting to think it's a pretty dubious holiday when she gently puts in, "A dinner for the islanders or something of the sort?"

"Oh!" I blink, seeing Emma perched too high on one of the armchairs. "Down, Emma, on your bottom." I turn back to Sally. "Is that the tradition?"

"It was once."

I wonder how many years ago "once" indicates. Time is a funny thing on Lute, all those centuries smudged together in the stories, in the landscape.

Emma's still teetering. I nod as I go retrieve her. "I'd be up for it, definitely, but let me put it to Hugh and I'll let you know."

Sally hums to herself as she disappears down the hall. At the mere prospect of a dinner party, all the tension seems to have leached from her step.

We should do it, then. Keep up the tradition.

“Yeah, hello?” Avery’s voice echoes like a gong the second she opens the conservatory door from the west lawn.

Max stiffens next to me with a deep, startled bark.

I smile, glad that she’s finally giving in to my insistence that she come straight in, make herself at home. A few years ago, I found her shivering on the porch in the rain, waiting for somebody to hear her faint knocks. That was after the war started and most of the staff, all those people who answered doors for us, packed up and shipped out for the front lines.

It’s funny how shorthanded we feel even now, after four years of war, considering that when I moved here, I found it ludicrous how many people worked for us. Indoors: housekeeper, two maids, valet, chef. Outside: groundskeeper, three gardeners. It felt in those first few days like I’d wandered into *Downton Abbey*, and if I didn’t learn my lines quickly enough, I’d be fired and sent home.

Alder House itself, sprawling and cobbled together and strange, actually warranted the number of staff filling it, and I fell in love with it right away. The gaping entryway with its grand, oblique staircase. The east section’s sunken kitchen and staff quarters, built into the remnants of the old Norman manor house, with Romanesque archways overhead and carved faces peeking from unexpected corners. The dining room so massive I laughed when I first laid eyes on the table, built to seat *thirty-two*. It isn’t the glossy burnished palace antique you’d expect but an unbelievably gnarled and scratched expanse of oiled oak, so old it might even predate most sections of the house. The rest, built up in sections: the small rooms Tudor, the more elegant ones Georgian, the ones with tons of glass Edwardian, and here and there, surrounding the house, an unassuming ruin of a stone wall that, they tell me, was once a castle battlement.

For all its weirdness, Alder House seemed to welcome me. I probably would have settled in right away if I’d been hired as a maid.

It wasn’t the first time I felt that way. Sophomore year of college, I tagged along with my roommate for spring break at her house in the Outer Banks. She hadn’t warned me that they had a live-in housekeeper and round-the-clock staff—people to clean the pool, trim the edges of the lawn, see to the fish in their giant saltwater aquarium. My friend Kate walked past

the people who worked for her with barely a look, as if they were appliances, but their personhood struck me in heat waves every time they came into view. I found myself making my bed in a hurry every morning, folding my towels in just the same triangular pattern their housekeeper used so that she wouldn't have to do it, picking up Kate's empty soda cans and busing them to the recycling.

That was how I behaved when I first moved to Alder House—stifled, restless, guilty. In time, nothing changed except me, and the lively air about the house became surprisingly cheery, the way it had been during those years I lived with Gran in her condo, her friends or nurses popping by whenever they felt like it. Eventually, having staff here was just the way of things.

And then, with one BBC News alert, it wasn't the way of things anymore.

Most volunteered before the draft was even instituted, with a handful of fighting-age adults left to maintain Lute as a strategic outpost, set as we are in the gaping mouth of the Severn. Matthew Clare stayed as well, to do some top secret communications work nobody really understands or asks about. Hugh, just under the age cutoff, agonized over whether to register for service, but when I got pregnant with Emma, he took the loophole that allowed him to stay. When the draft opened up to include women two years ago, I was ready to plead parenthood, but my immigration history meant that I was never even asked. They wouldn't have trusted an American soldier among the ranks of the European army.

From time to time, we get letters from our staff and neighbors who are off fighting, emails when they have access, letting us know they're all right. We're the place the notices come to first when something happens to any of them. We've had only one injury so far, a gardener I don't know well. It sounded horrible—he was hurt by an IED that killed four other men from his squadron—but Hugh brought the message to his sister in the village and came back looking none too bothered by it. It wasn't much of an injury, apparently, and everybody seems to buy into what Jo was saying: no one from Lute ever dies in war.

It doesn't mean they're not impacted. Lute islanders have lost limbs. Friends. Our gardener will come home with shrapnel scars and PTSD, but everybody acts so blasé about it all, like there's some force field protecting us and our joining in with the war effort is just a jolly show of patriotism.

I don't know why it's taken me so long to realize how strange that is.

Avery's footsteps echo nearer and nearer in the hall, and I'm struck with fresh relief that her injury kept her from going off to war with the other young women of Lute once she turned eighteen. I'm glad she's home, safe and sound.

Emma disappears around the corner in a flash and returns dragging Avery by the hand. "Ayvey! Did you see the pony?"

Avery glances back at me, laughing in confusion. "Um."

I shrug, just as bemused. "She's obsessed."

Thankfully, Emma's mind switches channels quickly. She leads Avery up to the costume closet, Max hot on their trail, his whole body a wag.

Charlie starts away to join them, but I grab him first and whisper, "Seen Dad?"

"The study," he whispers back. "He's cross."

"What's he cross about?"

"Technology."

He squirms, and I let him escape, snorting under my breath. *Technology* is the usual answer. But when I start tromping up the stairs, I hear an uncharacteristic pitch to the growling coming from the direction of Hugh's study. The rumble of it stalls my step just before I get to the top. Even with the thick oak door shut, I can hear Hugh muttering, swearing, tossing things around.

My hand lingers on the doorknob for a heartbeat before I decide to turn it.

His face is sickly white, sweat beading on his forehead, his brown hair slicked to it. There are electronics piled on the desk. Cables, old adapters, and more—thick leather-bound books from the shelves, an open-lidded wooden box that looks like a fancy junk drawer. What is he doing?

He doesn't seem to recognize me for a second when he glances up, and then anger floods his eyes.

He holds up our modem like he's accusing me of breaking it. "I can't tell if it's this or the bloody router."

"It could just be the signal today," I say, my eyes drifting to that wooden box. "It's been in and out all month. All year, really."

The war's wreaked havoc on utilities here, which weren't that dependable to begin with. All maintenance goes to the war effort. Consumers have to muddle through; fair enough. It's nothing like what they went through in either great war, I know, but if the cease-fire falls through and this drags on longer, it'll get worse than bad internet and drops in cell phone service. From what Jo tells me, food shipments have now become quite the negotiation, wait times for medical supplies and prescriptions longer and longer, and, up until last week's cease-fire, the front lines inching closer and closer.

"I don't think you understand, Nina," Hugh says slowly, like I'm one of the children. My breath goes reflexively toxic in my lungs. He doesn't often talk to me like this, but *lord*, when he does. "We need to get online. This could be our last chance to..."

He swallows, neck bobbing hard, physically obliterating the rest of the sentence. These are tough days for him. A looming anniversary, and not just ours. I get it.

I reach for his hand. He pulls it back. "Did you have any luck with the airfield in—?"

"No, I didn't have any luck. My phone cut out the second I managed to finally get somebody on the line, didn't it? And it won't come back, no signal whatsoever." He leans on the desk with his fists.

"Let me try mine."

I turn away for the lighter air of the corridor, but Hugh shouts, "Nobody's phone is working! I've asked around. Mobile tower's down."

That startles me into stopping. "*Down?*"

I picture that tower up by the barrow, no longer rising over the scarred landscape where they dug out the old graves, but tumbled, ripped down from beneath.

"Not knocked down, Nina, just not working." He slides into a leather armchair, slumping in defeat. He looks desolate, but it's a small

improvement.

I slide back inside, shut the door behind me, and find a perch beside him. “Jo said this kind of thing tends to happen.”

I roll my eyes, smiling.

He doesn’t smile back. “She’s wrong. I can’t ever remember phones breaking down. Internet. Aerials.”

Panic shoots through me. “You think it’s to do with the war?”

It’s always hovered in the periphery of my regularly scheduled anxiety—the possibility that they were all wrong. That we’re not safe. That we will be invaded, and this time, we won’t be so lucky. If we’ve got all those warships lined up to protect the Bristol Channel, there must be an equal force to attack.

But Hugh huffs, swatting the idea away like a gnat.

“No, God, it’s nothing to do with the war.” He leans forward. “Have you seen Matty?”

I’m so surprised to hear him call Matthew Clare by his nickname that I don’t immediately reply.

He flinches as if remembering the last seven years in one blink and corrects, “Matthew Clare. He’s the only actual technician we’ve got left here. Maybe he can help.”

“He was at Jo’s earlier,” I offer. Hugh looks blank. “Asking about her radio.”

My body reacts before my mind catches up. The radios are out. He was checking on them. It’s normal Matthew Clare behavior, and yet I feel like I’ve just painted a target on him.

I stand, sloughing off my worry. “I could go find him.”

“No.” Hugh gets up with a groan, then leans against his knees like he’s just run a marathon. “I will; you shouldn’t have to.”

I step forward for a cursory see-you-in-a-bit peck, but his hand slides to my waist, firm, and his kiss lingers longer than usual. He pulls away, watching me. He looks sharper now, less sweaty, more himself. I take in the parenthetical curve at the corner of his lips, the golden brightness of his eyes, and my heart hammers. Even after seven years, sometimes it just *hits*. He’s Hugh, and implausibly enough, he’s mine.

Nearly our anniversary now—we met and married a year apart, June 22. We tell people we happened upon each other at a bar on that ocean liner, but the truth is a little bit different. I remember standing with my hands pressed to the railing of a forward deck, wind whipping through my hair, staring back at the man who'd just said, "Don't do it." He was embarrassed, pretended it was a joke, but I saw the terror in his eyes. I took in his trembling hands, how they contrasted with his almost lazy, elegant posture, leaning against the railing in his tuxedo. He was handsome, his features blunt in the light from the upper decks, more of a charcoal sketch than an oil painting. There was something vaguely desperate about him. It took accepting his offer of a drink in one of the first-class lounges, seeing him lit in velvety red and gold, to soften that perception.

I hadn't planned to meet anyone that night, least of all him.

I hadn't dreamed I'd wind up so blessed.

My husband presses his mouth to my forehead, breathing out slowly, pulling me closer. My arms twine around his neck, eyes darting to the closed door. The kids are below, with Avery. Sally's three stories down in the kitchen, meal planning. Hugh's hips edge into mine, and I lift my chin to kiss him again.

His eyes are open, distant, fixed on the door like mine were but looking way past it. His body's here. He isn't.

"Sorry," he says, leaning to kiss me again on the forehead, briskly—the usual goodbye. "I won't be long."

He practically flies through the door.

I lean on Hugh's leather chaise longue and finally take in the disarray surrounding me, pile by pile. He's unplugged absolutely everything, turned each piece of electronic equipment over. The books he's stacked by the desk look like Lute histories, family books, county rolls, the kinds of things you store for safekeeping because it's part of the job but never bother looking at again.

The contents of the box, however, have the look of things that *should* be seen, treasured, but have been hidden instead. There's a photo of a woman I recognize as Hugh's mother. She's turned away and smiling, pointing to something we can't see, her blond hair weightless in the sea wind, glowing

in the backlight. Why would he hide this? There are hardly any framed pictures of her or his father around the house, just those moldering oil paintings of distant ancestors. There are greeting cards in here too, but those feel too personal to look at too closely, written messages, none of them from or to me. I slide my fingers deep into the box and pull out another photograph at random: three small boys in primary school uniforms. One is smaller and darker-skinned than the other two, grinning widely. I flip it over and see a little penciled-in description: “Hugh, Matty, Andy starting Rec.”

Rec will mean Reception, the first year of school. Hugh, Matty. Who is Andy? He must have left Lute. What a shame.

A ledger lies open on the desk. I put the picture away inside the box and lean over the book, expecting, I don’t know, the estate’s accounts written out, even though I know Hugh does all our accounting online. Maybe he’s using it because the internet’s down. Who knows.

But it’s a list of last names. Familiar names. Lute Island families.

There are small red dots beside some of them. Black *X*s next to others.

Rivers is an *X*. Tavish is a dot. Tinker, dot. Tompkins, *X*.

Treadway, dot.

A dot.

I flip a page back. Clare has an *X*.

Emma sprints into the room. I jolt back from the desk, blocking the book with my back, though there’s nothing offensive written there and, even if there were, hello, Emma can’t read. She sure can pull, though.

“Want this!” She starts to heave the lines out of the modem. I just manage to reach her in time. We leave the room in a duet of wails and promises of just-remembered biscuits! From the mainland!

It’s only once she and Charlie are in the kitchen eating, tantrum forgotten, that I realize I’ve gone clammy, sprinkled with sweat beads, just like Hugh.

We’re a dot.

A red dot.

THE DAY BEFORE

I'm back on Joseph's Rock, staring across the small stretch of sea that separates this island from Lute, which is how I know I'm not really here. The smallest of our four Lute islands is inhospitable—a jagged, unsheltered place, too small, too windy, too deserted for visitors. And the ruins of the old Benedictine monastery pit the ground in hidden traps, where the rock gives way to loose soil. No one comes here. Except me, apparently, in dreams.

It occurs to me, every time I have this dream, really, how strange it is that I never remember it after I wake up. When I'm in the dream, it all comes rushing back, but never in waking life. How is that possible? It's nice to be here, though. Everything is out of my control when I'm asleep, and I find that strangely comforting. Like being on an ocean liner, a set crossing, the relief of having my life taken gently out of my own hands.

I look around, wondering where I've landed this time. Or rather, when.

Sometimes the monastery is here, setting me in the thirteenth century, but not today. I remember it, though, the way the light falls on the kitchen garden, the sound of the bells in the morning and the singing. I remember the feeling of rough linen on my knees and my shoulders, dirt in my fingernails, the glad soreness of service. I like those dreams.

It's not daytime in this one. The sky is black as tar apart from a smattering pinprick of stars. The wind lifts my hair, my nightgown, in a billowing wave. I pick my way across the bare ground, toes bare, arms outstretched, catching damp gusts from the ocean between my fingers.

It occurs to me that I should stop walking. The island ends on a cliff face. I could drop right off like a pebble, lost to the sea, and no one would

ever know.

Like Gran. She died confused. Where had her Nina-girl gone? I won't go now. Not like this.

I turn, knowing what I'll see.

Two figures. I can't say *people*, only the semblance of a man and a woman, unclothed, standing in the center of a hillock ringed with a—what is it called? A *menhir*. A dozen or so waist-high standing stones. I've gone very far back tonight. A white horse runs wild, tracing the outside edge of the ring, but I keep my eyes on the figures because I feel their eyes delving deep into me—and besides that, I cannot look away.

They're dazzling. Drenched in light, lurid, sticky with it. It shocks me every time. It issues from them like liquid, pearly in one wave, golden in the next, not so hot as the sun, just dim enough that I want to keep looking, even as the horse canters past, so close that its bristly tail grazes my cheek.

They raise their hands to greet me, and the light grows and I can't catch my breath. I feel my heart swelling, beating too quickly. It will burst. They never grow familiar to me. Every time, I think this is the last time. I'm not meant to see them. No one could survive this.

It's brighter than day now, vivid as the inside of a flame, and when the next ripple of light extinguishes the figures and buffets me where I stand, it fills me up.

I feel such joy that I can't even let out the scream in my throat.

★ ★ ★

I take in what feels like an hour's worth of oxygen in one sharp gasp and sit up, pressing my fingers to my cheeks. It's dark again, but I'm home, Alder House, Lute Island, my room upstairs. Hugh's side of the bed is empty, covers pressed neatly flat, pillow undented. I clutch at the dream, halfway to waking, where even reality feels slippery, but my mind can't get a grip on anything. It's never been this bad before.

The bedside clock reads 12:04 a.m.

The dream is going. I grasp at memories like dandelion seeds. I remember light. Something running, maybe.

And then it's gone.

A shriek down the hall jolts me alert. Emma.

Fear slicks over me before I realize she must be having a nightmare too. Jesus. This week is getting to me.

I'm halfway down the dark hall before I think of Hugh. The lights are off in his study. I have no idea where he is.

Emma's standing up in her toddler bed, the way she used to when it was a crib, waiting for me to rescue her. Her small shoulders are shaking, fists balled.

"Oh, baby." I gather her up and let her slump against my chest, watching the light from her aquarium night-light dance blue over her curls. "Bad dream?"

She nods. Her breath stutters on the way in.

I hesitate before asking. Some part of me is afraid of the answer. "Do you remember what it was?"

She nods again but presses her lips into my shoulder.

I kiss the top of her head. "Can you use your words, Emma, and tell me what you saw? Sometimes it helps to—"

Her body turns to cement.

I rub her back. "Okay, baby girl. No worries, Mummy's here."

Within a few minutes, she's asleep again, sweaty and peaceful. I doubt I'll get back to sleep that easily. I scratch my face and walk back to bed, careful not to squeak the floorboard outside Charlie's room as I pass.

An impulse makes me pause. I turn back, silently open his door, and peek inside far enough to see his arm dangling off the side of his bed, his mouth parted, drawing even breaths over his Spider-Man pillow.

He's here. He's fine. Of course he is.

I want to pick up that arm, protect it from being bitten off by the monsters under his bed. I leave him be.

I slip into bed beside Hugh and drift off, realizing just before I go under that he's back from wherever he went in the first place.

It's weird for me to sleep more than Hugh. I've been extra alert all my life. I guess it's insomnia, but that feels like the wrong word. What do you call it when you never picked up the knack for resting in the first place?

Gran, who used to stay up with me in the night, called it *fairy blood*. My mother called it the demon in me. She blamed that demon for all sorts of things. Car accidents. Drownings. All my fault.

I used to watch Hugh when he slept, marveling at how quickly he could put his day away, setting all his thoughts on his bedside table and picking them up in the morning like his mind was a worker clocking in and out. If there were a course in compartmentalization, he could teach it, and I would take it.

When I wake up again, Hugh's lying on his back, facing the dawn-lit ceiling, eyes open and unblinking, his lips pressed into a white line.

"Morning," I murmur.

He blinks but doesn't answer. I slide out of bed with a sigh, reaching for my hairbrush.

I like to stare out the window at the sea first thing, stretch and breathe and brush my hair before duties call. Usually Hugh yawns musically and starts a conversation—about the day ahead, the idea he's mulling for the grounds or the village or the cottages on Sunnan, what we should have for dinner, whether Charlie's reading is coming on quickly enough.

This morning, he dresses quickly and leaves the room without a word.



I stop Sally in the entryway on her way down to the kitchen. The kids are eating breakfast in there with the television on—recorded shows only, now that the antenna's out too—so it seems like a good moment to slip away and find my missing husband. He's nowhere on the grounds so far as I've been able to tell from peeking out various windows over the past hour, and Max is snoring loudly in a square of light in the sitting room, so if Hugh's off taking a walk, it's for his own purposes, which is a much more me thing to do.

"Didn't see him in town," Sally says with a frown.

"I did!" Avery rounds the corner, carrying a crate of windfall fruit inside. "You mean Lord Treadway? He was headed into the church maybe fifteen minutes ago?"

“Thank you.” I notice Sally shoot the girl a sharp look, and my own smile pinches a little by the time Avery’s glanced back at me.

“Are Charlie and Emma downstairs?” Avery’s voice is high and hopeful, like she’s here for a playdate. At my nod, she beams. “I’ll watch them this morning, if you like? It’s no bother.”

“That would be great, Avery. Thanks.”

I watch her follow Sally into the kitchen with a faint sting of regret. I wish I could strike up more of a natural connection with Avery. She seems lonely here with almost everyone of her generation gone. I remember her at twelve, so eagerly interested in our wedding plans, the dress, my hair, everything about my life before I came here. She’s more reserved since she came back from her dance studies. I guess I am too in a way.

The past seven years have made me almost as self-contained as I was during those three years I spent living with Gran, strolling the paved edges of the golf course in our retirement community every night at five thirty sharp, our outings consisting of poolside lunches with the other seniors, cocktails on her screened-in patio, and if we were feeling particularly wild, trips out to the local Target. My life now has different walls and borders. I know the basics of the script—the exclamations about weather, the asking after family and pets, remarking glancingly on current events. Safety lives in routine, so every day, I smile and pass Avery, just like I do with most people here. The important thing seems to be not riling anybody up.

I slip outside and suck in a briny breath, setting my mind to my quest: source my husband, reassure myself of his general well-being, and then march onward into the regular programming of a perfectly ordinary day.

Sunlight strobes from between elm branches as I walk down the drive. I have to blink hard every few steps to keep from getting vertigo.

It’s not just the light. Everything feels ten degrees off this morning. My routine’s been slipping all week, like a record slowing once the player is shut off, the music sinking lower and lower.

Hugh might have gone up to see Matthew about fixing the mobile mast.

My feet scuff up a wall of dust the second they hit the dirt track to the village. It’s been weirdly dry this past week. We’ll have to water some of the plants on the back veranda.

But Avery said Hugh's at the church. He wouldn't be meeting Matthew at a church. Even so, the very idea of the two of them having a conversation has set my nerves on edge. Yeah, it's a small island. We all see each other almost every day, and if we don't see someone around, we wonder if they're sick. But Hugh and Matthew Clare are very good at not speaking to each other. It's like they've had a contract drawn up and both observe the terms of it to the letter.

The last time I remember them interacting one-on-one was nearly seven years ago, two weeks after the Day, right after Hugh's dad's funeral. We were walking back to the house from the churchyard, and Hugh's older sister, Jessica, was introducing me around. I was so cowed by her sporty elegance, hyper-focused on the impression I was making myself, that I didn't notice the fight break out until people started shouting. By the time I turned, they'd pulled Hugh and Matthew apart. Hugh's lip was bleeding, but Matthew Clare was a car wreck. The pain in his eyes, the hollowness of him. He'd dressed in his best suit for the funeral, I'm sure, but he looked ragged. Like he wanted to sink into the earth and take Hugh with him.

By all accounts, they'd been best friends until that day. It's still impossible to understand. Men can be so stubborn.

Not just men. My mother was even worse. *Is* worse. She's alive. Why do I always refer to her as if she were dead?

Wishful thinking.

What a shitty thought. Mom's right, I am awful. A killer, if only in my head. It would have been so much easier if she'd gone ahead and nailed the door shut on our relationship, instead of opening it and slamming it over and over again. That last message she sent by mail, the bracelet Gran left me with a Post-it stuck on top: "*Call me when you get a chance,*" and her number, as if I didn't already have it.

Still haven't called her. I doubt she's waiting by the phone.

I rub my eyes, rustle my hair to shake the past out. I blink around me, taking in the war memorial, covered in gulls. They crap all over it, and we take turns cleaning it off.

I say *we*. I've never done it.

When I get to the bit where the dirt road becomes what we call the “high street,” I look down, literally watching my step. The Lute “high street” could just be called “the street,” since it’s the only paved one on the island, and by “paved,” I refer to the centuries-old collection of cobbled rocks sunk deep into the dirt path, which risks more sprained ankles and popped tires than any of the wild areas of Lute.

The tourists just love the cobbled street, though, when we manage to get tourists. There were a ton before the war, families coming out on school breaks, retirees checking us off their bucket lists, hordes of historians, bird-watchers and other nature enthusiasts, the odd—and I mean *odd*—neo-pagan, but they’re all few and far between these days. What visitors there are arrive on the supply boat now that our helicopter’s been requisitioned by the military, and those who come that way are die-hard Lute lovers, familiar faces. The helipad’s completely overgrown already. We have to air out vacant houses to make sure animals aren’t moving in.

It feels quieter and quieter here, like the world has been forgetting us. Usually I don’t mind so much. It’s quiet, comforting. But today, it unsettles me.

Maybe we’re like those ancient gods. If you stop believing in Lute, it’ll stop existing. It’ll disintegrate into an imagined thing, and so will all of us.

As I pass Lucy and Martin Tinker’s cottage, I see movement in the window and cross the lane to the house. They’re youngish, only a little older than Jo, I’d guess, but traditional in a lot of ways, one of which is their heartfelt dedication to kitschy front window displays. In the past year, they’ve had felt bunnies around an Easter basket, ceramic hounds chasing a brightly painted fox, tiny wooden insects on a green-check picnic blanket, a gilded nativity, an Alpine ski scene, and the latest, a collection of silk songbirds on an artificial potted shrub.

They never mind me peeking in. It’s there for people to enjoy, in the same way that the flowering window boxes people keep are partly there for the wild goats to eat. But when I give Lucy a small wave through the glass, she doesn’t acknowledge me, and I realize as she turns that she’s not putting anything up at all, just wrapping the last silk bird in newspaper, stowing it away in a shoebox with the others. Something tells me to keep walking, but

I freeze as if caught, wondering for the first time in years whether I'm intruding by looking in.

The front window sits bare for a moment. Lucy turns back, waves quickly, surprised, swipes the dust off with her forearm, and closes the shutters with a clack. Exhibition closed.

I keep walking.

Four houses down, the pub at least is open. It's not until I reach it that I remember how early it is, nine in the morning, and yet a couple old men, Tim Blanchard and Lannie Joiner, sit playing chess at one of the picnic tables in the front, pints already mostly finished.

They lift their glasses to me. I smile as if nothing were off.

It's a holiday already, I guess. They think this might be it for them, after tomorrow. Mrs. Wickett certainly does, but she still tends to stick to tea, at least in public spaces.

When I'm old, I'll drink beer whenever I damn well please.

I don't dare day drink these days. You can't exactly lie in bed with a hangover, eating cheese-drenched pasta and watching movies when you're thirty-seven and a mother of two—even if you are Lady Treadway of the Lute Island Treadways and everyone climbs over one another to wrest all life responsibilities out of your soft, useless hands.

People might talk. People already talk. I should go have a swift half with Tim and Lannie.

I'm still looking back toward the pub when I hear the tinny jangle of a bell, turn, and gasp to a halt seconds before a bicycle slices past, inches from running me down.

Of all the crazed cyclists, it's PC Brian. At the sight of him, police-uniformed, astride what looks like an old lady's bike, complete with wicker basket, I burst out laughing.

He puts a foot down and tips his cap to me. "Apologies, Lady Treadway! You'll find we're all a bit wild round here 'til the Day's over. Then it'll go quiet round here for a few months." He points at me. "Enjoy the madness!"

"I ... uh." I hold my chest, catching my breath until my giggles subside. "Yep!"

Brian careens away, straight past the pub, despite Tim's and Lannie's shouted entreaties. Where is he going? Just riding around Lute ringing that bell for the fun of it?

There's no madness to enjoy in the churchyard. It's crypt quiet as ever, a few scant birds jumping from arch to arch on the front edifice of the gray stone building, warbling as they wander.

This church was the very first thing I spotted when we arrived here by helicopter nearly seven years ago. I saw St. Joseph's from the air, a great, gray, slicing spire, much taller than any of the other buildings on the island, even Alder House with its three high-ceilinged stories.

It's blasphemous to think it, I know, but it has always looked to me like a middle finger raised high to the sky. A five-hundred-year-old fuck you to the old religion, or at least a sharp stake shoved into pagan ground. A message: the Christian God lives here too, not just on the Day but *every* day.

God rises above Lute Island.

It might feel more reassuring if I were a person of specific faith instead of someone who only turns up for holiday services, sitting in the front pew marked with a plaque of dedication to all the Treadway women who prayed there before me. I wonder what they really believed in. The old gods, the island as a spirit unto itself, the Church of England's version of God and Jesus, the saints before that. They believed in everything. You'd kind of have to, to believe in any of it. They might even have bought into the legends that bring Arthurian buffs here, that story about Joseph of Arimathea founding the monastery on Joseph's Rock after washing ashore and dreaming of being visited by bright angels.

I shiver and wrap my hands around my arms as I pass through the lychgate.

St. Joseph's Church is never locked, as a matter of philosophy or lack of necessity, but I still hesitate before pushing my way through the enormous oak entrance. The abrupt darkness of the chapel stuns my eyes as the door sweeps shut behind me. I blink a few times.

Someone else is in here, three pews from the front. The light spilling from the eastern window catches on their profile, obscuring more than

illuminating them. Not Hugh. Too small. Too still. The figure turns slowly toward me, and a memory comes to me. A dazzling, bright figure.

I stumble backward, landing against the center slat of the great oak door.

Jesus *Christ*, it's Mrs. Wickett. The gloom in here is playing tricks on me.

She fixes me with a milky stare.

"Good morning," I get out.

She doesn't reply. She looks too tired to even try. She turns away again, her head stooping as she picks up her prayer where she left off.

I wonder what she's praying for. With anyone else the day before the Day, it would be obvious, but Mrs. Wickett has been suffering for a very long time.

The air in here feels thick with other people's thoughts, wishes, anguish. I heave the door open and slide outside again, leaving her to her prayers. Gasping for air, I lean against the archway for a moment while my eyes adjust to the daylight.

Would she pray to die? She talks about it so often. She misses her husband desperately, and maybe death feels to her like the next logical step in her life, one that she's eager to get on with.

Everyone feels like that sometimes.

I close my eyes, remembering where I was seven years ago, how impossible it felt to imagine any sort of future for myself. No career, academic or otherwise, no lasting friendships, no family apart from Gran, no hope.

Well, a *little* hope. Enough to make me put on an evening gown and venture out of our third-class cabin alone. Enough to go up on deck and stare out at the undulating sea, at the moon drawing a shaky line across the waves, at the endless, glossy black. I remember seeing past it, imagining a world below, a teeming afterlife beneath the waves.

I always was good at thinking up escape routes.

Seven years ago. On the Day. Different place, same time.

My eyes flash open, stinging dry. I'm so swarmed with graves that for a second they're all I can see, and the church itself feels like the largest monument in the collection. One more dead thing, and I'm standing on it.

I stumble numbly down the steps and pick Hugh out in a sudden blink, materialized from nowhere. He's in the graveyard, staring down at one of the stones in his family plot. I'd mistaken him for a statue.

I swallow down something sharp. Of course he's here. This is it, the anniversary of the day his father died.

He glances up at me. I pick my way over to him, careful not to step on the more ancient gravestones, sunk deeply and unevenly into the loamy dirt, until I reach the section of the churchyard where the graves are fancier, for lack of a better word, more widely spaced, ornamented with angel statuary and carved crosses. The name *Treadway* surrounds me.

Looking down, I expect to see his father's wide, crisp headstone or that of his mother, but it's a much smaller stone than either of theirs.

"Oh." I stoop beside Hugh's feet, tracing the letters on the stone with the tips of my fingers.

Frederick Andrew Treadway.

I know the name, obviously not the person. Hugh never knew him either. His brother died before he was born.

I pinch lichen from the carved dates and brush off the stone, neat and tidy.

"Mum used to bring us out here," Hugh murmurs, his voice catching. "We always came out the day before, as a remembrance. That was the only time Dad would set foot in the graveyard, but Mum would bring us any time she was having a bad day. Whenever grief overcame her. It seemed to help her. She'd stand here."

He motions with both hands to the space to the left of him, where his mother's grave now sits.

"Jess would stand here." He nods to his feet. "And they'd both cry. And I'd get so *cross*. I never even knew him. Why did I have to be here? Even when I was tiny, I had the sense that Mum wanted some kind of performance out of me. Tears. Grief. Christ, I was only three. We resented each other for it, but she kept bringing me and I kept coming, even when I was old enough to say no. It's hard to shake tradition. It's a bloody *battle*."

His hand has fallen on his mother's gravestone as if it were her shoulder, all of this directed at her.

I never knew her either. When Hugh went off to Cambridge and his sister got married and moved to Surrey, his mother took the opportunity to set up a new home for herself in London. Not a divorce from Lord Treadway, just an amicable separation from Lute Island, and a brief one as it turned out. She was diagnosed with cancer within a year, dead within two. She died in London, Hugh said, but his father insisted she be buried here.

It hasn't escaped me that the locals like to suggest that the last Lady Treadway died having lost the dubious protections of Lute, conveniently ignoring the fact of Hugh's sister, alive and well on the mainland.

My eyes fall again on the smaller gravestone.

"He came off the cliff." Hugh's voice is hoarse, forcing the words. "In case you're wondering how. Got out of the house, down the lawn, tumbled off the cliff face, onto the rocks."

I try like hell not to picture it.

"The date." I let my fingers hover.

"Twenty-first of June."

I shake my head. "That's today. Not—"

"No, it was the Day." Hugh breaks a twig beneath his shoe. "I see what you're thinking, but the summer solstice isn't always on the same—"

"Oh, right, of course."

"It varies. Very slightly."

"Yeah."

"He was six." Hugh squints up at a passing cloud.

Charlie is six.

"Wow," I say.

Tears prick my eyes. I press my hand to the stone. It's cold. It's just a rock. They're all just rocks.

"Come here." Hugh's voice has gone low. He reaches both hands down and gathers me up. Heat radiates off his chest like a bonfire. I feel his pulse through his shirt and press my ear to it, letting it slow my heart. "I didn't mean to upset you. I really didn't."

His voice rumbles through me, soothing as a purr. His hand passes over my hair once, and then again, slowly.

Just as I start to breathe easily, I feel him tense again.

Mrs. Wickett is coming out of the church. She grants us a slow nod and wends her wobbly way out of the churchyard.

When she passes through the lych-gate, I smile up at Hugh, but he's looking over my shoulder. I turn, curious. There's a small grave there, not as well tended as most of the others. Not that old either—crisp carvings on the tombstone. ANDREW BLANCHARD. Another child. How many years between birth and death—seven, eight?

Same birth year as Hugh.

Hugh, Matty, Andy starting Rec.

Hugh moves to stand behind me, his arms sliding around my waist.

“Let me make it up to you.” He bends low to whisper in my ear. “Cheer us both up.”

I smile, confused. “How?”

“I have some ideas.”

Good lord, we're at a church and it's ten in the morning, but I can tell from his voice, from the way he's pressing into me, exactly what he's promising. I clasp his arm and we walk out at double pace, my mouth sneaking to his shoulder for a quick graze before we pass through the village.

The party outside the Dane's Head has tripled. PC Brian's there now too, with a half-drunk pint, his bike propped against the front door.

“All right?” Hugh calls out. “Tim, I think I've got a new grazer for Elding this autumn, a farmer from down in Cornwall.”

Tim Blanchard squints thoughtfully over his ale. “How many?”

“Fifty merino, give or take. Come and meet the chap with me when this is all done.”

Tim looks pleased, but Lannie Joiner rises from the table, shouting, “Enough business! Come and drink, lad!”

Hugh grins, shrugging broadly. “Later! That's a promise.”

Ian Pike sticks his bald head out the window, a bar cloth tossed over one shoulder. “Who's that calling Lord Treadway *lad*? How long you gonna keep that up, you old geezer?”

Lannie lifts his pint. “'Til the day I die!”

That gets a shout out of the assembly. As we pass, they all raise their glasses, a messy, collective toast: “’Til the day we die!”

I gawk over my shoulder, catching their giddiness.

The only one not keeling over laughing is PC Brian, who sips his ale with a thoughtful squint. This must be his version of enjoying the madness. Monitoring it more cautiously than anybody suspects.

“Easy for me to say, *last standing* and all,” Lannie chuckles, his chest puffed out.

Tim hits him, hard. “Don’t test Lute. Lute’ll test you back.”

Last standing. I wonder what he meant by that.

The din of the party doesn’t subside until we step onto our long drive.

Hugh’s hand slides into mine. Our fingers slip against each other’s.

We walk in lockstep past the old castle walls, only shoulder-high now, mottled green with lichen, but solid. A barrier. I feel something relaxing in both our bodies now that we’re back on our own property. I can’t see the front lawn through the line of elms, but I can hear the children shouting happily and Avery calling back. It sounds like they’re kicking the ball in the back garden.

“Should we...?” I glance back at Hugh.

He’s stopped walking, a small smile playing on his face.

He steps backward, tugging me with him, veering us off the drive, past the tidy line of welcoming elms into the tall grass and the brambles. I stare at him, dizzy with the strangeness of this moment, but he doesn’t look back. He’s like a blinkered horse, hurrying us onward, not a word spoken.

I don’t breathe until we round the half-decrepit potting shed.

Hugh turns to me, not smiling, nothing but predatory. He cups my elbows and backs me against the trunk of a beech, his mouth already gliding along my jaw, down my neck, and lower, biting at the buttons of my starchy blue shirt.

My arms loop around his neck, and as he tugs at my jeans, I scan for potential onlookers past the shed, but everything’s gone blurry but him, the low, leafy branches waving green around us, morning light baking the soil, the tree trunk digging into my spine, his warm, wet mouth.

He sits me in the crook of two low branches and steps into the circle of my legs, my ankles bound by my crumpled jeans. I hold on to a higher bough while he pushes gently into me. My fingernails cut divots in the tree, over and over, until I smell sap.

I dig my mouth into the dip above Hugh's collarbone. I try not to make any noise.

In the distance, I hear the children laughing. Sunlight glitters past my shut eyelids, and I can't control myself. I let go of the tree, pull him closer into me, and cry into his neck, barely muffled. Everything scatters, reforms.

We breathe for a moment. His head lolls against my cheek, sweaty and sweet. I watch a songbird jump from branch to branch high above us.

He sighs, kisses my shoulder, reluctantly pulls out and away. I start to slide my underwear up again, wondering not for the first time today whether I'm in a dream. We're not exactly middle-of-the-day-while-our-kids-are-nearby romantics. And since Emma, we always use protection.

I zip up and murmur, "We trying for a third, then?"

It's a joke. Hugh doesn't laugh.

"No harm, is there?" His fingers rove under my shirt, grazing the skin beneath my navel. "Another life."

Ten minutes ago, I might have argued with him, but there's something so peaceful and balanced about this moment that, yeah, the prospect of another child seems manageable, possible, perfect, even. It's a longer conversation for a different moment than this one, but maybe. And if what just happened leads to something else happening, we'll take it as it comes.

I reach up to brush my fingers through Hugh's thick hair, but he stiffens with a sniff and moves away, staring past the shed, the tenderness bleached from his expression. His eyes are coldly pensive. It's the same expression he wears when he's pacing his study trying to get around a tariff problem.

I'm getting emotional whiplash looking at him, and suddenly, those gentle words resound in my head. *Another life.*

I think of the books scattered open on his desk. The lists of people left on Lute.

That cannot possibly be what he meant.

I yank my shirt down and start back toward the drive, forcing a chipper clip into my step. “Kids’ll want lunch soon. Should we do a picnic?”

“You go ahead. I’ve got a few things to see to.”

Incredible how quickly I can pinball from lust to irritation. We’re a far cry from those dizzy first months together, those manic days on the ocean crossing, strolling the decks with Gran, sneaking away to his queen suite every chance we got, burying myself in him and his grief when he learned his father had died, putting Gran on her airplane to Florida and flying to Lute together for the funeral, those hedonistic months that followed, a whole summer and autumn spent in a blur of sunny European towns, barely leaving our hotel rooms except to eat. Back then, sex led to more sex, squabbling over small hurts but always in a progressive, getting-to-know-each-other way. Little cuts to seal the pact.

Sex didn’t lead to indifference back then and hardly ever *a few things to see to*. Now, even sex behind the woodshed is a to-do list item.

I keep walking.

Hugh’s stride catches up with mine. “I’m sorry. Just ... you’re right.”

“About?” I’ve said nothing.

“I should spend time with you all today.” He frowns so deeply his mouth looks like it’s etched in stone. “It’s hard to look at them. Hard to look at you.”

I cough up a laugh. “Hard to look at me? What were we just doing, then, exactly?”

I kick up pebbles as we walk until he slows and stops. A stubborn part of me wants to keep going, dogged, but I don’t. I turn to face whatever he needs to say.

“I can’t lose you.” He spreads his arms wide. “Any of you. Can’t do it. Won’t survive it.”

I cock my head the way I do when one of the children is screaming over nothing. “Shush. Stop it. Get it out of your head.”

“I’m glad you don’t believe. I am. Honestly. Bu—”

“*Stop.*” I don’t want to hear the *but*. I turn away.

“Mummy!”

Emma's on the loose, sprinting up the drive in a rhino charge, tilted so far forward I swear she's about to skin her face.

I kneel to catch her. She shoots past me, her squeals morphing into, "DaddyDaddyDaddy!"

Hugh scoops her up—and up and up—until she's upside down, giggling wildly and swatting at him. Her blond curls dangle like wind chimes. One more swing and she's on his hip, nestling in with an enormous grin, and Hugh looks peaceful at last, all creases gone from his face—the sunlit Hugh I see on vacation.

More than actual relief, I feel like I *should* be relieved, relaxed, calm. As we walk back to the house, all is good, fine, settled, happy, but our feet keep even time on the gravel, left, right, left, right, like a clock is ticking beneath us.

We find Charlie perched on the edge of the long wooden table in the back garden. He hands Sally a strawberry from a plastic bowl and watches, rapt, as her thick fingers form it into a cute little spiral with a paring knife that glints in the sun. She's already set out cheese on toast, salad, and a jug of black currant cordial with mint from the garden. Max sits tall beside Charlie, waiting for food to fall, a silver stream of drool extending from his hopeful jaw to the grass. It's all so picturesque.

A few yards past them, I see Avery walking the bricked edge of the flower patch barefoot, one elegant stride after another, her path a perfect curve. When Sally calls out, "Heyo," not looking up, Avery hurries back to the table as if she were meant to be one of the staff today instead of an invited loiterer.

Sally glances up at us finally. "Ah. You've found each other, then."

I'm fumbling for an answer—just how loaded is that knowing glint in her eye?—but Hugh sets Emma down, plucks a strawberry from the pile, and pops it into his mouth. "We have indeed."

I motion to the spread. "Can I help?"

"No," Charlie groans. "You'll ruin it."

"It's fruit! How can I ruin it?" I am actually offended.

"It's all handled. You relax!" Sally means it as a comfort, but I feel silly. Superfluous. Of course it's all handled. Everything's handled. Emma's

found a seat and a plastic plate, and Charlie's barely even glanced at me since I got back.

I rustle my son's messy brown hair. He swats at me. I smile and stop, trying not to feel even more stung. I get it, I do. Charlie's temperamental where affection's concerned. He comes to me when he needs holding, soothing, cuddling, and then he inches away again, secure in his own space. None of this is new. But maybe I need soothing.

It's a selfish thought. The kind my mother would have had.

I swear to God, you were put here to torture me, Nina.

Stop. You're nothing like her.

I gasp at the clap of a shutting door and turn to watch Hugh walk quickly, casually, through the conservatory and into the house—off to *see to a few things* after all. My eyes wander up the house's façade to the window of his study. Reflected clouds drift across the glass. I can't see him, but I know that's where he's gone. So much for family time.

"Have some salad." Sally nudges the bowl in my direction.

I'm starving and the salad looks amazing, but a sour feeling settles into my stomach at her gesture, drowning out the hunger. I hate feeling like I'm a guest here. I don't know what to do to change it.

Sometimes I can stand the awkwardness of my position—Lady Treadway, whatever the fuck that means—but not today.

I'm not so different from Hugh, really. All I want to do is run. Some things never change.

Sally's watching me. She leans in with a wink. "We could add Pimm's to the cordial, if you fancy it?"

I force a laugh and a lie. "Oh God. Later, maybe. I've promised Jo a visit."

"Did you?" Sally looks confused for a blink, then turns smartly away and starts doling out food to the kids. "Right, then, who's hungry?"

I kiss the kids on their humid little heads, one after the other, half hoping they'll cling, show a little need for me, but they're too busy reaching for their drinks. Max noses my leg, then returns his attention to the table, ever vigilant.

Emma will need a nap in an hour and a half. I'll be the one to draw the curtains and sing to her, but in the meantime, it won't hurt to go see Jo. A ten-minute walk, a cup of Earl Grey, a sense of normalcy restored, then home.

As I turn onto the village track, I ready myself for a public appearance, facing the gathering outside the Dane's Head, but this time, the whole village has gone queasily silent. The shutters are still closed at the Tinkers' house, and the pub looks shut now too. The sign swings back and forth as if somebody smacked it, making the Dane look like he's nodding. There's a line of red at the bottom of his silhouette—his neck, severed. Funny I never noticed it before. How grim.

I peek in the wide window of the police station. The lights are on in there, but nobody's manning the desk. Sandra, who keeps the office, is over on Sunnan with her kids, but Brian should be around. Maybe he's in the back of the station with a cup of coffee, sobering up.

I glance at all the cottages I pass, searching for signs of life. One of Janet Murrow's cats sits in the lane, licking its butt, and I stare at it longer than is strictly appropriate, comforted by the sight of a fellow creature going about its business as usual.

I can tell even before I get there that Jo's shop is closed. The lights are off and the only thing moving is the iron weather vane on the roof, a running horse tilting this way and that.

It all makes an inverted kind of sense. Why *not* open the pub early and shut it down before midday? Why on earth would the tearoom keep advertised hours? Why bother doing anything expected in a place like this the day before the Day? *We're all mad here, Alice.*

I slip through the narrow iron gate into the side alley of Jo's cottage and knock a few times on the back door that leads to her living space above the shop. As I wait, I pick at the chipped green paint around the doorknob. Bad habit. Not my door.

I squint down at my hand, the bit of green stuck under one fingernail.

I'm intruding. Maybe Jo wants some private time today, but then, it's not like Jo to hold her breath inside, waiting for me to leave. She'd open a

window and tell me to bugger off. The house is empty. She's gone like the rest of them, but where? Can't have gone bloody far.

I'm more disappointed than I have any right to be. I don't want to be alone today. I could and probably should wrest Hugh from his study, spend time with my kids, let Sally and Avery spike their own glasses with Pimm's, but there's something so oppressive about the house this morning. I can't explain it. I want nothing to do with it.

I shut Jo's gate with an echoing clang and stare out at the lane. The heath shimmers in the warm wind. The gorse is beginning to flower, sunny yellow. It's a beautiful day, and I have half a stubbed-out cigarette waiting for me in the hollow of my oak tree.

It's probably better that I not see anyone. They're all so contagiously scared, and fear makes me angry, and when I'm angry, I'm not in control of myself, and I've got to be, always.

I don't want to be the bad guy. I don't want to hurt anyone.

One quick break, and then I'll go back.

I walk quickly, almost a jog. Halfway across the heath, I spot the illegal campers. It's too distant to be sure, but I sense them turning toward me, their bodies going still like caught animals. They don't wave, and neither do I.

I glance back one more time, and it finally hits me—why it felt so strange when I met them yesterday. They're *young*. Fighting age. I've gotten so used to our population change here, all the old folks and children, so many people in the middle now gone abroad. Half the population of Lute, at this point. In the weeks after the second draft, it had felt like I was back at Gran's retirement community.

These campers are in their twenties, healthy, fit enough to travel here, to hike and build fires. Why aren't they in the war?

I close my eyes and pick up my pace. It's not my business, not my problem. None of this is.

By the time I reach the grove, there's a roaring in my ears, the wind and my pulse shouting over my thoughts, shoving them away.

I slide between the trees, blink blearily at the leaves shining like stained glass above me, and locate my little stub. Lighting it with a match, I lean

against the smooth trunk of a neighboring oak and draw several quick, woozy drags.

Only then do I hear it.

The sound. A low drone, so soft and uniform it feels like it's coming from the ground. The hair on my arms rises.

My fingertips sear sharp—the match has burned down too low. I bite my lip, wave it until it's dead, drop it, and suck my finger, all in silence.

When I shift my weight, I feel a stick crack under the ball of my foot. I hear my own breath and I hear *them*. More than one person. Their voices don't waver, don't pause for breath, one unnatural, long note.

I peek through the trees, dizzied by the shifting light. I can't see anything but grove, but I know where they are. My stomach clenches, turns over, roiling with fear and something else. Familiarity. This tune that's not a tune, I've heard it before.

I feel, strongly, that I shouldn't be hearing it now.

Still, I have to see.

I don't use the trail. I pick my way in silence between wide oak trunks, holding my breath, exhaling slowly. I press my white fingers against the oak bark, begging it for protection as the figures emerge like spirits taking form.

Not spirits. Neighbors.

I see five, no, seven men and women, dressed all in white. If they'd been wearing robes, I might've fainted dead away or, more likely, burst out laughing, but these are normal clothes, trousers and button-down shirts, all plain starched white.

The noise they're making, though, that drone—it's unnerving. They form a loose, rotating circle, hands raised skyward with every step, then dropping down to their sides once more. Some of them are slower than the others, and with good reason. They're so very old. I haven't seen Mrs. Morris display this much energy in the seven years I've known her, and even Diana Shaw is keeping pace on her prosthesis, loping along with an elegantly slow limp, like the waves of the ocean.

Jo steps into view. Of everyone here, she looks the most practical about all of this, hands up and down, step, step, as if she's tidying up the shop

after closing for the evening. This is very clearly some kind of arcane rite, but there's no ecstatic fervor in her expression. Her brow is furrowed, like she's trying to remember the last item on her order list. It's enough to make me forget I'm hiding behind an oak tree, watching uninvited.

They didn't want me to know about this.

Jo turns. I freeze, my head still jutting past the trunk, but she keeps spinning, eyes lifted, locked on the canopy of oak leaves. She hasn't seen me. I shrivel back into hiding.

You'll understand everything by the end of the Day.

I'm not meant to understand today, and I don't. I don't understand.

I close my eyes and breathe, listening to that ungodly drone until I can hardly bear it. I'll let out a wail of my own if it goes on a second longer.

It breaks. The chanting stops, replaced by a few sheepish chuckles, and then the normal chatter of a Sunday afternoon down at the pub.

Was this a social gathering?

My shoulders drop, clench, drop again. I dare one more peek, and I'm glad I did. They're out of formation, smiling and laughing as if at themselves. I find myself attempting a grin too, in a weak, tentative way. I could pretend I just arrived. Give a bemused wave, maybe even admit to my little nicotine habit as a bit of currency, a fair trade for an explanation.

Lannie Joiner shifts to the right, offering an arm to Diana, exposing the view through the clearing.

There it is, behind them. What they're here for.

That flat, dented, jutting, gray nothing.

The tithe stone.

It's not completely gray today. There's something clotted on top of it. Dripping down the side. Livid red.

My throat locks iron tight.

I need to go, I need to go. I wait until all their backs are turned, one, two, five, seven, my mind listing each neighbor so quickly the names no longer land, then I slink backward through the grove, stealthier than I ever thought I could be.

I hit the open heath and fight the urge to run, forcing myself to walk instead along the dirt path with loose, languid strides, nothing to see here,

nothing to have seen. Let them think I hiked past the grove on my way from the archaeological site. No, the lighthouse. Maybe I was up having a cup of tea with Matthew Clare, two old chums. There is no explanation that isn't ludicrous! I have to get home.

That last glimpse of the grove clearing is printed in my brain, that bright crimson smear on the altar stone.

A car honks. I gasp so hard I nearly fall over, but as I clutch my chest, I realize it's only John Ashford in his truck. He wasn't part of that gathering back in the grove. At least I didn't see him there. He's wearing his usual forester blue. No white. He's fine. It's fine. They're all fine people! I just need to breathe.

"Want a lift?" John sticks his arm out the open truck window.

I shake my head. "I need the exercise!"

He gives a jolly wave and continues on his ramshackle way. Something in his flatbed is rattling around, bouncing up every time he hits a rut and smashing back down against the metal.

I realize too late that I should have let him take me. Then nobody would know I was here.

Who cares if they know? Defiance spikes through me, even as my step quickens into a jog. I have a right to see it. I've lived here nearly seven years.

That *nearly* is so damn important to them.

I wonder if Hugh knows. This might actually be a custom reserved for people who aren't titled. A peasant thing. Holy shit, I really just thought those words.

I glance behind me and feel more than see figures leaving the grove, over the hill, out of view. Real or imagined, I feel pursued, and so I keep going.

I bet they do this every time, the day before the Day. It seemed practiced, like a square dance, or, what are they called? Morris dancers, with their bells and sticks? Hugh took me to see a troupe at a village fête on the mainland before we were married. Silly old men, I remember thinking, but you could hardly fault them for enjoying it, even if you didn't understand it at all. It wasn't my culture. This isn't either.

I stop jogging, my lungs on fire, and grip my loose hair with two fists.

For the first time since those fraught early years here, I feel certain I don't belong on Lute. I never belonged at home, in Florida. I managed to briefly convince myself that I was less of an alien at college, but after I did what I did—no, once everyone knew what I did—that bubble was popped. The only place I've ever actually belonged is nowhere. In between. In cars and airplanes and ocean liners.

And with Gran. Anywhere with Gran.

When I was on the boat, Hugh consumed my every waking and sleeping thought. Now when I think of that ship, I think of Gran, my champion with her dry, sarcastic laugh, the way she'd point at me when I said something funny, her collection of hats she bought and never wore, her passion for fruit salad, her fierce, unwarranted devotion to me from the moment I was born.

I let her down. I didn't fight for her. I introduced her to Hugh, she loved him instantly, his courtesy, his charm, and we made a lively trio for four whole days before I ditched her at the airport. I called her from here, of course I did, but our chats weren't much more than an item checked off my to-do list, and I initiated them less and less frequently as I sensed her mind slipping and knew what it meant. I ran. I always run. I squirmed backward from my guilt and all the poisoned memories she couldn't help but carry with her, until it was a nurse answering every time, telling me she was sleeping.

I'll never see her again.

Sometimes I wonder if she would have liked it here on Lute. And sometimes, even though it makes no sense, I feel like she's been here this whole time, walking beside me. Like she never went back to Florida to be bullied into submission in her last days. It's a pretty lie.

I pull my shirt collar around my neck. I need a jacket. It's getting cold. Glancing back one more time, I don't see any Lutes. They must have stayed behind, chatting. Maybe they brought a picnic.

I had wondered if I'd see something like that ritual on the Day. A less creepy version, I guess. But if they did that today, then tomorrow they'll do something else.

The Day, the day after today, the stupid Day. I think it might be driving me crazier than anybody else.

★ ★ ★

I'm back on Joseph's Rock, gazing out to Lute. Steady lights beam from cottage windows in the village. Electric bulbs. This dream hasn't taken me very far back at all.

The wind is fierce, circular, like I'm at the center of a cyclone. I look down, expecting to see my nightgown whipping around me, but there's no nightgown to whip, only bare flesh. I'm naked, entirely, and when I look up in surprise, I see the lights have all gone out on Lute.

Something is glowing here instead.

I turn and see them. The Shining Ones. They stand a pace apart from each other, and something tells me to join them, to form the third point of a triangle. I do it, averting my eyes from them, taking in everything around us so I don't have to face them.

We're surrounded by a ring of pyres. There are people milling about, men and women with long braided hair, naked bodies painted in streaks of brown and blue and red. They let out a keening wail that rivets my heels into the cold dirt beneath me, and then they flicker, transparent, and fade away into nothing. The pyre flames vanish, as if blown out, and then in the next blink return, and all the while, the wind gusts around me and the Shining Ones stand unmoving.

Behind me, I hear, but don't see, the thunder of that wild horse's feet as it whips past. It's circling us, calling up the wind.

I see the stone circle for a breath before it's half-gone, rocks tumbled.

I see a man among them, old, bearded, digging his hands into the soil and weeping.

I see the monastery rising, rock by rock, the monks blurring as they build, fevered. I smell apple blossoms and then fire, and then the monastery is gone.

I watch the chaos around us, and the Shining Ones watch me. They're waiting for something. For me to understand.

The pyres return. The monastery. The stone circle. Bare ground.
Joseph's Rock flickers like a film reel, endlessly changing, except for the
beings in front of me.

They're constant. And so am I. I am the center.

I wrench my eyes forward and take them in at last.

THE DAY

I'm awake. All at once. I know what time it is. In my stomach, I know. Still, when I finally roll over and see the numbers 12:01 staring back at me, I wish I hadn't looked.

Has it started, then? No, they say it waits for the dawn. Sunup to sundown.

Hugh's not beside me, but I knew that too. Even before I woke up, I knew it. He hasn't come to bed yet tonight. He has been in the room, though. I woke briefly, soon after falling asleep, and saw him at the window, staring out at the sea. I sat up, blearily curious, saw a glimmer of firelight and thought it was Sunnan, that they were keeping the campfires lit late for the children. Hugh turned and said, "Sleep, sweetheart," and somehow I did, comforted.

But it wasn't Sunnan. Of course it wasn't. Our bedroom window faces north.

It's 12:03 now. I slide out of bed and reach blindly for the long cardigan hanging over my vanity chair, wrapping it around me like soft armor. I stretch my arm out before I reach the window sash, afraid to get too close. Then I peel the curtain away and peer out. The moon is smothered by clouds tonight, so the view is almost pure black, except for bright flickering orange in exactly the right spot.

There are fires burning on Joseph's Rock.

There's something about Joseph's Rock I'm meant to remember. A dream. Or maybe not, a memory. A fact. *Something*.

I shudder, blinking, and when I open my eyes, both the thought and the fires are gone.

Not blown out, one by one, not fading away. Gone. They never were. The moon creeps out from behind a cloud, lighting up the waves in silver ripples. I can see the dark silhouette of the island, but nothing on it.

I imagined it. I must have. Maybe I'm asleep even now.

The window jerks. *Bang.*

I jump back, breathing hard. Something's slammed into it—a branch. It's that hawthorn tree. I keep meaning to ask them to prune it back. It taps the window in storms and frankly creeps me out even on normal days. So pretty when it's flowering, but even then, I get the pervading sense that it's asking to come inside the house. There's no storm right now that I can see to blow it so forcefully, and there's no one to prune it because they've all been in the Arctic and the Pacific and North Africa and Eastern Europe fighting for their lives and ours.

And ours.

I yank the curtain shut without daring to look at the window, something telling me to go back to bed, urging me away from the glass, back into softness and oblivion. *You're not ready for this yet. Rest up.*

Sleep, I order myself, pulling the covers high. Hugh won't sleep. None of them out there will, for all I know. But I will. I'm not from here. I'll sleep.

And I do.

7:00 A.M.

Sometimes I wake up tangled in the loose threads of my dreams, other times in memory, thick and abrasive.

This morning, my sister is sitting on my chest. I'm seven, so much scrawnier than she is. We're in the closet with the door shut, and I can't breathe as she pinches and twists and hisses in my ear, "*I drowned because of you, so now I get to do whatever I want.*"

Usually Hugh is lying here, ready to cocoon me with his arms and rock me back to reality, but this morning, as I fight to breathe, to sit up, to blink, I find my husband sitting on the end of the bed. He's staring at me as if curious. The light is stretching across the bedroom carpet through the curtains the way it always does on summer mornings.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Seven." His voice cracks slightly, like a dry branch falling. "Two hours in."

What if we always talked this way about time? Noon would be midway through; 11:00 p.m. would be "almost over!" As if all of life were something to survive, minute by minute.

I sit up. "Where are the—?"

"Still asleep, believe it or not." He swallows, his neck bobbing. "They're fine so f—"

He bites back the word, and I fill it in silently. *So far.*

"So don't worry."

That little edit isn't much better. I can't take this.

I bounce out of bed, whistling defiantly, some song from the show the kids were watching last night. Instead of standing at that window, brushing

my hair, my calming morning ritual, I open the wardrobe and shove the hangers to one side, my fingers flitting through bright patterns, flowers, stripes, paisley. It's going to be a sundress day, damn it. I pull out my favorite one, white with huge printed impatiens, and start getting dressed.

Hugh watches me the whole time, grim.

"Weather looks clear." I twirl to the window, feeling my silk skirt graze my thighs. My hand hesitates a beat before it dares to pull back the curtains, welcoming the sun into the room. No firelight out on Joseph's Rock now. I doubt there ever was. Just another disappearing nightmare to add to the list.

"It's always clear," Hugh says behind me.

I freeze for a second before I realize what he means. It's always clear on the Day. Isn't that lovely, then! A nice, bright day to die.

I smother the laughter bubbling in my chest. I need to stop thinking this way, even as a joke. It isn't healthy. It's me catching this contagion.

Hugh doesn't move, just sits there on the bed, looking like he's carved in marble, heavy enough to drop straight through the mattress, through the floor, through the ground below.

As I tug on my slippers, I lean against the window, and Hugh leaps from the bed, hand outstretched. "Nina, *stop*. Don't push on that."

I stare at him. "Is this how the whole day is going to go? Keep away from windows and falling objects?"

Warning flashes in his eyes. "Don't mock it, Nina."

"I..." I turn away, staring out at the sunlight rising gold on the sea until it stings my eyes blurry. "I am not trying to mock anything. I know this is the—"

I hiss, pulling my hand back.

Hugh grips the bend in my waist more tightly. "What?"

"There's a crack. Do you see that? In the window." I back away and point, watching nauseous as it spreads quickly across the pane. "The branch did it. Last night."

Hugh pulls me away from the glass, into what feels like the precise center of the room. His jaw is tight, top lip shiny with sweat.

"I forgot, and then I just leaned on the window. Jesus. I could have..." My hands are shaking. I ball them and let them go. "Can we fix it? How do

we fix it?”

“We don’t. Not now. We have breakfast.” He kisses me briskly on the forehead. “We’ll wake the kids and have something special. I doubt Sally’s slept much either. She’s probably desperate for something to do.”

I can see the strain in his smile, but he’s trying to be breezy, for the first time in days. It’s strangely moving.

“It’s our anniversary,” I say, remembering.

He laughs a little. “Huh. So it is.”

I wait for the “Happy anniversary, darling,” but it doesn’t come. “Happy” is a stretch for him today.

“You look nice in that dress,” he says quietly, running his fingers along one sleeve. “When did you get this one? Tavira?”

I lift onto my tiptoes and kiss his clammy cheek. “Yep.”

“That little shop with all the parakeets in it.”

“Yes! That crazy bird lady, do you remember?”

“I’m surprised I remember, frankly. We’d both had so much vinho tinto at lunch.”

Normalcy. There. Remembering holidays, talking about outfits.

“You should wear that dress more often.” He traces the impatiens pattern with one finger, then slides his arm all the way around my waist.

We step into the corridor, bodies linked.

“Hey, if the weather stays nice today, we could climb down to the puffin beach,” I say. “Charlie’s been pestering—”

“No.” Hugh’s arm tightens around me. “Nowhere far. If we can keep it to indoor activities. Ground floor. It’s no guarantee, of course, but reassuring to try. I want them to feel safe, even if they ... You understand.”

I want to scream. I’m going to scream. I smile. “Right, yeah, of course.”

I can hear Max downstairs scratching at the door. *Scratch*. Pause. *Scratch*. Sally must not be up after all.

Hugh opens the door to Emma’s room and murmurs a singsong good morning. When she answers, that gleeful “Daddyyyy,” something clenches in my chest, clawing deeper and deeper.

There is no way the Day is real. It’s a stupid, toxic joke. It’s like Santa, but ghoulish. I’ll get to the end of the Day, and they’ll say, “All right, Nina,

you're in on it now," and I'll be one of them, and that's that.

Hugh heads for Charlie's room. He turns the handle, and I can't breathe. Then I hear my child sit up and murmur a good morning, and my body restarts.

Two hours in, Hugh had said, and the corridor feels twice as narrow.

I close my eyes tightly and open them wide and call over my shoulder, "I'm gonna let the dog out!"

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I see Sally standing on the foyer rug wearing boots and an overcoat, patting Max's upraised head. She sucks in a slow gasp when she sees me, then shakes her head, embarrassed. Well, she's certainly on edge.

"Just back from the village," she says.

"Okay." Our eyes stay locked longer than usual. I blink first. "Everyone doing all right?"

"No one yet," she says.

This is not a normal conversation. This is no longer a normal place.

I smile. What the hell else can I do? "Well, that's good."

Sally doesn't exactly look like she agrees. "What shall I fix for breakfast, then?"

"Ask Hugh, if you don't mind?" I turn away, leading Max by the collar toward the side door, into the high-fenced part of the garden. His little prison yard. "I might pop out and see how Jo's doing. Didn't catch her yesterday."

"No, I think milord would rather you stay put today, Nina."

It takes me a second to turn and look at her.

She stares back, unwavering.

This is the first time in seven years I've minded being called by my own name. He's *milord*, but today I'm just *Nina*. If he's got the title, he calls the shots. He can order me into house arrest, like Max, who begs to be let out the front seventeen times a day, only to be led again and again to the fenced back garden, never the heath.

Sally must see red rising in me. She blinks, softening. "It's just the one day. You'll understand when—"

"When the Day is done. Yep."

My tone is sharp, but Sally seems pacified. As she clomps down into the kitchen, I stare into Max's eyes, wide as ever with misplaced hope. I know what he wants. He wants to tear out of here straight to that rocky beach and terrorize a protected colony of puffins, just like every other time he's gotten loose since we brought him here as a puppy.

"Shhh," I whisper, and pad silently back to the front door, to freedom. "Don't tell."

Max keeps pace with me, head pressed to my leg. I pull the door open a crack, considering. He shifts weight and whines, tail wagging. I let go.

I take one step away, leaving enough room for him to nose his way out. He glances back at me, unsure.

Regret hits with that glance. Even Max thinks this is a dumb idea.

I reach for his collar to pull him back in, but a split second before I can connect, a fat wood pigeon flutters up from the front drive, and that's it, too late, he's off like a shot.

I hear the kids' footsteps upstairs through the floorboards. I hear Hugh's voice, cheery, pretending everything is just another happy morning. Because it is!

"Ah crap!" I shout upstairs. "Damn it. Max got out! I need to..."

I wait a beat, then jog to the boot room down the hall. I fish thick socks out of the dryer and tug them on, scramble into walking boots, tie them tightly. Grab my green hunter coat in case the wind's up. Mornings are cold here, even in midsummer.

As I hurry back to the front foyer, I see a head peeking around the corner of the stairwell. Not Hugh's.

Charlie stares down at me, placid.

"Hey, buddy, tell Dad I've gone to get Maxy? Somebody must have left the door open." It feels like one lie too many to name Sally specifically, even if I'm implying it. "I won't be long."

Charlie doesn't answer. I feel sweat prick my armpits.

"Go tell Dad," I say more firmly.

"Be careful," he whispers, then darts away.

And before I can second-guess myself, I'm out too. Like a shot.

I can breathe again. The air smells sweet and briny. There's a hint of woodsmoke in the wind, a different scent from the logs we burn in fireplaces here. Maybe it's from the Sunnan campfires. Or from whatever I saw on Joseph's Rock.

You didn't see anything. Let it go.

I'm prepared for the possibility of getting all the way to the bay before I catch the dog, but I spot him at the edge of the village, fixated on a clump of Merlin's foot flowers. Mrs. Tavish's terrier must have marked it sometime in the past week. Max sees me coming but can't stop sniffing, his brow furrowed in helpless, obsessed panic. I grab his collar almost reluctantly, then I crouch and stroke his back.

"Shhh. S'okay. We're not headed back quite yet, bud."

I let him go, and after a deeply confused stare, he trots off down the cobbled high street.

It's too quiet today. Even more than yesterday. Stagnant. I walk through the village, listening for sounds that I usually take for granted. This house usually has a radio drama going or the news, and Janet Murrow's mid-terrace cottage next door has cats that she likes to talk to. Even when the pub's not open, there are normally noises behind the closed door, chairs scraping against the bumpy wooden floor, casks of bitter being heaved into place. There are always early risers with their dogs or their walking sticks for company. I've got my polite face on, ready to smile and nod in a carefully carefree way, but nobody's here.

It's like I got the Day wrong. People don't die, they vanish.

Maybe I'm one of the dead and I don't know it. I've been hit by a tumbling branch and my body is back there on the drive, and whatever's left of me has walked away, oblivious.

Stupid thought that gives me a stupid chill down my stupid arms. I stop and rub them, staring into the darkened window of one of the northern cottages butting up against the lane. The curtains, white with little red roses embroidered throughout, are so tightly shut that they look more like a photo of curtains plastered onto the glass.

My eyes adjust until all I can see is myself in the window, transparent. I'm not looking for proof, I know I'm not fucking dead, but I can't stop

staring.

There's a small noise behind the cottage door, a rumble and hiss. Someone's put the kettle on. I break, smiling, my reflection smiles back, and I continue on before anybody catches me being myself.

I scan the road ahead for Max, but he's wandered. Probably headed out for the heath, drawn by the intoxicating smell of wild goat poop. I swipe my hair back, regretting this little jaunt already. It's all fun and games until you have to drag your seventy-pound dog out of the pile of dung he's rolling in.

I shield my eyes as I step out of the village and peer out to the heath. I can't remember the last time it was so cloudless here for so many days running. Everything is glittering sharp, like my vision's been corrected after a lifetime of not knowing it was blurry, but even once my eyes adjust, I can't see any movement in the distance that looks like Max.

"Can't have gone far," I mutter, the go-to line for when anything goes missing here on Lute, apparently.

Where are all the villagers? Can't have gone far.

I still don't know what possessed Charlie to go exploring on his own. Even he doesn't seem to know, and that bothers me even more.

Hopefully finding Max will be a quicker proposition. I step onto the rutted dirt track headed north, pulling a hairband off my wrist to tie my hair back, realizing as I do that I haven't brushed it yet today. Or my teeth. Everyone's probably holed up in their houses avoiding my breath.

I hear a sudden rumble and a deafening squeal behind me—so close it makes my heart stop.

I turn.

John Ashford's front bumper glints six inches from my back. A cloud of dust rises above the pickup's tires.

John tumbles out of the cab. "I didn't see you. Lord above, that was a close one!"

He lets out a huffing laugh, swiping his hand over his balding head. Then he laughs louder, a single "Ha," doubled over. "Jesus!"

I laugh too, convulsive, my brain screaming, *It's not funny. What is so damn funny? I nearly got hit by a truck.*

"I swear to Christ, you came out of nowhere. Somebody beamed you down there."

"I was ... No! I stepped—"

"I don't doubt it, completely my fault." His face falls grave. "It's early."

"It is."

"You headed up to see Matty, then?"

In the past seven years, that has never once occurred.

"Um. No." I glance behind me. "I'm chasing the dog. He snuck out the front door when we weren't looking."

I roll my eyes, convincingly, I think. Lies are easier the second time.

"Well, go on, hop in, if you can trust my driving at all after that." He jumps back into the driver's seat, and I don't see any earthly reason to turn him down. We'll grab Max, stick him in the back, just like the last time he got loose. We found him on the beach a month ago trying to catch crabs caught in the tidal pools and agitating the nesting puffins. Daft bloody dog, as Hugh says daily.

John puts the truck into gear, and we bump companionably along, windows open despite the chill. Bright days fight the cold here. The sun feels inches away when it comes out, bearing right down on you.

"You must have thought you were a goner." John chuckles. I'm not sure how to respond, but he turns to me with a wink before I have to, and I realize that this is him calming himself down. That near collision shook him as much as it did me. "But I'm guessing you don't go in for all this nonsense any more than I do."

"Oh thank *God*!" I bark a relieved laugh. "I thought I was the only one!"

He's a local, as far as I'm concerned. He's lived here longer than I have, was here last time, and he still doesn't believe. I could *sing*, I'm so thankful.

"Far from it." He frowns. "Eh, 'far from it' is a bit of an overstatement. May well just be the two of us. Seems the longer you stay here, the harder it is to resist the siren call of local myth. It's the backbone of this isle, part of the reason I came in the first place. Makes you feel a bit of a traitor to call it all a load of hogwash, doesn't it? If you don't accept the Day of the Tithe, you don't accept the blessing—the protections, the trade, the good weather, all that jolly nonsense."

“So you don’t believe in any of it?” I smile, leaning my elbow against my open window. “You gotta admit, we do get good weather.”

“And no air raids, thus far.” John looks to the sky. “But no, madam, I cannot in good conscience ascribe to such theories.” I take his sniff for a comedic affectation until he swipes at his nose with his elbow and I realize it’s his allergies. “I am a man of science, after all. That’s what the job description says anyway.”

“Is that what it says?” I nod slowly. “I’ve always wondered. Not drive around in an American truck, scaring the locals?”

“No, no, that’s listed under perks! Tasks include the maintenance and development of scientific studies of flora, fauna, protecting historical sites of national and cultural importance, and above all that, helping find lost dogs before they eat all the endangered animals. It’s right there at the top, if you look it up online.”

I peer out the window with a smile, feeling the wind fighting to loosen my bound hair. It smells sweet and alive, like heather and salt and soil, mixed with that hint of wood fire. Those campers must be having their breakfast, judging by the skinny column of smoke I see to the west. Normal, lovely.

Foreboding filters out of my body with every breath. The landscape flitters past, the sea steady in the distance.

John starts to whistle, and I look at him—then past him, pointing out to sea.

He flinches, surprised. The truck veers a bit.

“Oh God, sorry!” I pull my hand back. “Do you see that ship?”

He slows down, squinting. “Would you look at that.”

It’s big, old-fashioned, sails half-up, others flapping, lowering. Two masts. It doesn’t seem to be going anywhere quickly.

“A brigantine,” John murmurs.

The man knows everything.

“Warship.”

I stiffen. “Oh no.”

“*Old* warship,” he puts in quickly, looking at me. “Eighteenth century.”

“How weird.” I try to see past him, but the angle’s wrong now. “I hope it hasn’t gotten caught on the shoals.”

“The Graveyard,” he echoes, then turns to check. “Huh.”

I lean to see past. The sea is clear.

No ship at all, not anywhere on the horizon.

“Gone,” he says. “Trick of the light.”

“But we both saw it?” I cock my head, smiling.

He doesn’t answer, goes back to whistling, unbothered, so I decide I’m not fussed either.

“What’s on your agenda today?” I ask on impulse. “Would you mind an audience?”

I could stay out. Just never go back. Hang out with John, my fellow skeptic, as long as the Day allows.

John raises his eyebrows. Keeps whistling, eyes on the track ahead. I feel my color rising, like I’ve suggested something wildly inappropriate.

There she is. There’s the demon in you.

“I could bring the kids up,” I chirp. “I’ll keep Emma from getting underfoot. I just think it would be better for them, us, to be away from the village. And all that.”

“All that indeed.” John drums a quick beat on the steering wheel. “I don’t mind a bit. We can pick ’em up when we deposit Max. Unless the dog would like to tag along too.”

He hasn’t mentioned Hugh, I notice. He knows damn well Hugh won’t leave the house.

“I’m sure the dog would, but I think he’s had enough thrills tod—”

I see him. I stretch my arm through the open window to point.

“There. The grove.”

Max is sprinting toward the oaks, a streak of brown fur, head low like he’s being hunted. To be fair, I guess he is.

“Well spotted, Lady Treadway.” John cuts the wheel sharply to turn us across the bumpy heath toward the trees.

The grove looms larger with every lurch of the pickup. My skin feels raw, remembering yesterday.

“So, I’m curious,” I blurt, distracting myself. “How do you explain the war fatalities? The fact that there aren’t any, I mean. Jo swears up and down we’ve never—”

“Ah yes, the war memorial with no names on it.” He slows the truck. “I’ve never investigated myself, but I’d take Jo at her word. She’s no liar. Good head on her shoulders, that one.”

His eyes go twinkly, and I wonder if he has other thoughts about Jo that he’s less inclined to share. I face away to smile, picturing the two of them together. Where the hell would they go for a date on Lute?

I smother a smirk and turn back to him. “So? What’s your theory?”

“It’s a statistical curiosity.” His tone gives no ground whatsoever. “It is curious, I admit that, but you can cobble a theory from any set of data, provided you leave out all contradictory evidence. All the people who’ve died on other days. Months when the weather was absolute rubbish. They conveniently forget those things here. It’s a question of confirmation bias. Somebody should study it, really, but I’m not volunteering to stick my neck out there!” He laughs heartily. “I like it here. I’d rather stay than be shipped off on a bit of driftwood by an angry mob of pensioners.”

I grin along, squinting past the dusty windshield in search of Max. I’ve lost him among the trees.

I’m going to have to go in there. I do not want to go in there. Not after yesterday, not ever again.

John stops the pickup along the edge of the grove, cuts the engine, yanks up the hand brake. We’ve parked in a funny spot outside a fenced area, and the downward slope here is steep. My heels slide when I get out of the truck, and it takes me two swings to get the door to shut.

“You know, the overall census records are actually not unlike other island communities.” John rounds the truck, still expounding, oblivious to my clumsiness. His voice is a comforting, pleasant hum, like a radio playing in a café. “Skye, the Isles of Scilly.”

He strolls easily down the hill, hands in his pockets, as I lope awkwardly after him, my ankles wobbling on a loose rock or three.

“People die everywhere,” he says. “Others move, the population stays much the same. And as far as the weather, I think my predecessor did a fine

job demonstrating that it has far more to do with the jet stream than any supernatural intervention.”

He gives a sharp nod to the treetops as if in apology.

I jog up the path to catch up with him, not slipping this time. It’s dry in here and muffled, like a blanket’s been draped over the entire grove. When I draw a breath to reply to John, I’m not even sure my voice will carry.

“But what about the Day? All those identical death dates in the churchyard? Groups of seven.”

It feels cathartic to air my doubts and hear them systematically put to rest. I should have done this a week ago.

“Seven people, no more, no less.” He turns. “I suspect you can chalk that up to somebody doctoring the records. Keeping up tradition is a tradition unto itself.”

My mind immediately lands on that big leather-bound book in Hugh’s study. The names of everyone on Lute written by hand, one by one, Xs and dots.

Doctoring the results. Or engineering them.

John waves at me. “You’re American, so you probably don’t think that way. Everything’s so new over there.”

I stare up at the strobing light between leaves. “I always thought the Pledge of Allegiance was a weird, archaic tradition, forcing children to recite mass oaths. Seems normal compared to this.”

Silence settles, our conversation’s first lull.

“Well. We’ll find out for ourselves, won’t we?”

John’s posture doesn’t betray the slightest hint of tension about the day to come, but something in what he’s said makes me stop walking.

“What about last time?” I ask.

He pauses too. “Ah. Well, I wasn’t here, was I?”

But—no, he’s been warden here for the past twelve years. I was sure.

He smiles over his shoulder, kneeling to pick at a bit of loose bark on a tree. “I was part-time, you see, seasonal, until the war started and transportation grew irksome, shall we say, and it had to become a permanent post, with some added responsibilities that I’d be court-martialed for revealing.”

My eyes widen enough to get a chuckle out of him, but I'm not actually surprised. I knew some of the others here had military or surveillance responsibilities, but I never let the thought go much past that. It would feel too treacherous in every sense for the only American resident here to pry into wartime matters of national security.

"Lost some friends, I have to admit." John stands with a slow sigh. "I do have to admit that."

It takes me a moment for my mind to pivot back to the topic at hand. Last time, seven years ago. He would have known people here who passed. Hugh's father. The men and women who died in the pub. Matthew Clare's family.

John swipes at his nose, peering upward. "Sometimes I wonder whether they don't bring it on themselves, steer the course of it with their own superstition, but even that seems a wee bit woo-woo to me. Don't like it much."

Me neither. I don't say it.

"Ach, would you look at that?" John tuts, his brow furrowing as he heads off the path, stooping to peek into a tree hollow. *My tree hollow.* "Some bampot's been leaving ... No! Worse! Christ on a bike, to pick a place like this to have a smoke!"

He holds up my stub, mouth agape.

"Whole thing could be set ablaze! Poof!"

"Especially given this dry stretch of weather," I commiserate.

So easy, not me, couldn't possibly be me. I wonder how many lies I'm going to tell today.

Before my face can betray me, I hear Max snuffling in the near undergrowth. I creep down the path, leaving John to his investigations. I can't see Max but hear him, parallel to me, keeping time with my every step.

That's not Max.

As my skin goes icy, my dog thunders up the path from a completely different direction, jumping up to plant two muddy paw prints on my thighs. I groan, shouting, "Off! *Down!*" The other noise, scrabbling, snuffling, was probably just a rabbit or a lost goat, but it's still going, and I find myself

letting go of Max so I can listen, more frightened than any rational person should be.

The second my hand leaves his collar, Max sprints ahead again. I chase him straight to the clearing.

Not just the clearing. The stone.

I walk slowly closer, not daring to breathe for fear of what I'll smell. It's still sticky and red. I don't want to know what they did yesterday, but I have to. I live here too. I need to understand.

Max jumps in front of me, paws scrabbling against the tithe stone until he's standing, licking the red, over and over, frantic.

I tug him back, again and again, a scream lodged in my throat. "No! Stop it. Bad boy, *bad dog!* Leave it!"

When he finally succumbs, staying down, I look at his brown muzzle, stained maroon, and recoil a few steps, sickened, before I suck in a breath and smell it—sweet, cloying, rotting.

It's fruit.

John steps past me to peer down at the tithe stone.

"Ah, jam," he says. His finger hovers like he's tempted to confirm. "Someone must have had a picnic." He shoves his hand back into his pocket and chuckles. "Not the place I'd pick! Another reason we need a bigger plaque here."

He kicks at the little oxidized rectangle the National Trust finally provided a few years back.

I turn away. I can't catch my breath. Not blood, of *course* not blood. I crouch, petting the spot on Max's back over and over where I'd dragged him forcefully away. No harm done. Poor guy just wanted some jam. Way better than what his nose usually burrows into.

So this was the ritual I saw. A simulation of sacrifice—only a simulation. It shouldn't unnerve me at all. There is nothing as innocent as jam, but despite my relief, I still feel desperate to get out of here. The memory of that thrumming moaning sound they all made yesterday is replaying in my ears as if it's coming up from the earth even now, asking me to join in, keen loud enough to rend my throat apart.

I clutch Max's collar and stand. "The package is secure. Shall we?"

John starts off in a sideways gallop. “I’m just going to fix that fence post quickly while we’re here, if you don’t mind. Won’t take but a minute. Then we can grab Charlie and Emma and tackle the fun stuff.”

“Fun stuff?” I call. I try to catch up, but the low limp I manage, holding on to Max’s collar, won’t allow it. “What do you have in mind?”

“We could count the eggs at the beach, if Max is staying home. I’m meant to be tracking the nesting, but I’ve been a bit distracted by war nonsense.”

He says *war nonsense* jauntily, over his shoulder like it’s a game, then disappears around the bend.

Max lets out a high whine, digs his paws into the dirt, and starts to squat.

“You have got to be kidding me. Now?” I shake my head, laughing. “Daft. Dog.”

I reach for a leaf and start sweeping the mess off the path before I think better of it. Bad enough that I apparently nearly burned the grove down at least five times a week for the past seven years; I should probably at least see if John’s got a bag I could use. Can’t have the Lady of Lute acting this irresponsibly.

I hobble back with Max, wearing a sheepish smile in readiness for the request, but I hear something and stop. It’s a near-silent rumble I feel in my stomach more than my ears. Did John move the truck? Maybe there were tools he needed to—no.

A jolt.

The birds have all stopped chirping. I can only hear my breath now.

He left. It was the truck hitting that ridge, rattling the flatbed.

My back starts to cramp. I can hear my heartbeat now too.

It’s fine, he’ll come back. Or we’ll walk home, me and Max.

It’s fine. It’s fine.

I need to rig up something to tie to Max’s collar. One of the ivy vines on the old stone wall, maybe.

I scan for bindweed as I pick my way over the roots, across the little stream, back out of the grove.

A natural leash. John will laugh when he—

I stop. Everything.

Stops.

The truck is here.

It's got him. John.

It's got John pinned to an oak. There is no break between the bumper and the wood. There is no middle of John.

His eyes are open.

Mouth open.

Blood trickles from it. A slow creep.

"John?" I can't hear my voice. It's not a question. It's a plea.

I've never seen a dead person, but I've seen wax figures in a museum, and that is what John looks like. His eyes are not real eyes. He's gone, my friend is gone. The truck.

It rolled.

That was the sound; he must not have put the hand brake on.

I scream this time, long and loud, and I run. I need to check, I have to check, this isn't something you just assume, I run to him, press my hands to his cheeks, check for a pulse. How do you check for a pulse? Fuck, fuck, fuck—

"John," I say, "John," like he might just draw a breath and answer. "Oh no, John, no..."

The bumper crushed his chest.

He's, how, how? I touch his cold cheeks, pat his wild gray hair down like he's a child, like he's alive, my fingers getting numb and numb until I can't even bend them, and I finally hear Max right next to me.

He's barking at John. Over and over. Just barking.

I walk away backward, up the hill, mouth open, no sound, no breath, like a rock is caught in my throat.

I spin, see the village chimneys so far off, impossible, impossible, the sea, the rocks, the grove staring. Staring at me.

I did this, I think, I'm a killer, she was right, it was me, but that's insane, I'm going insane.

I spin and spin, eyes so dry they hurt, and I see the lighthouse.

"You headed up to see Matty, then?"

I run for it.

8:00 A.M.

I stumble, sprint, scream soundlessly down the craggy path to the lighthouse and pound on its flaky blue door. No one answers, but Matthew Clare's motorbike is parked in the grass, and faint noises issue downward from a window high in the tower.

I pound again. "Come on, come on."

Two heartbeats of hesitation, and I try the door. It opens easily, ricocheting against the granite wall inside.

No one locks anything here. No one's afraid of anything but one thing, this thing that is happening right now.

The stairs are impossibly narrow and steep and in terrible repair. I cling to the rope railing, panic smearing my vision, until I reach the keeper's room at the top. I take it in between frantic blinks: unmade bed, tidy desk, table crammed with radios, signal devices?—*electronics*, I have no idea which—and him, black curls, wide back slumped over a machine that is doing nothing but shrieking static.

He's not moving. *No*. This cannot be happening.

"Matty," I call out.

He startles upward, turning to stare at me in apparent shock.

I'm shocked too. *In* shock, shaking, but—why did I use his nickname? It just came out. I thought he might be dead and that was the name I reacted with, as if I knew him at all.

He's alive. That's good, obviously, but his eyes are red-rimmed, broadcasting pain so raw it makes me want to flee.

I don't. We stare at each other. Our silence is louder than the static from that machine.

He turns it off. "It's started, then."

"Yes," I get out. "I mean, I don't ... It's John. He's been..."

I can't say it.

Matthew nods, stands. Then he closes his eyes tightly, physically absorbing the news. "John...?"

"Ashford. John Ashford. It was his car, truck, pickup, it rolled down that steep bit where he parks, I don't know how." I can't stop spewing words. "It's not like him to be careless, and I'm sure—I'm *sure*—I saw him pull the brake, I heard it click. It must have been broken."

Matthew passes me, pulling on that frayed jacket he always wears. "Take me to him. We'll get this sorted. I'll show you what to do."

He doesn't offer me so much as a glance, but his voice is so uncharacteristically gentle that it takes me the entire spiraling descent and exit into glaring blue to register what he said: *show me what to do*. Like there's been a job assigned to me and this is my training.

We walk so briskly I can hear the scrape of breath in my throat. My eyes graze the landscape in a blur until they land on the cell phone tower and the great pitted hill beyond. The tower's metal door is open, clanging against the side of the building in each gust of wind. For a second, in a trick of light, the excavation site is transformed into a green, smooth hill, nothing moving. It just watches us.

I blink it away and look eastward, seeing the skeletal remains of Matthew Clare's old cottage, charred wood and crumbled stone, cleared of belongings but never restored or razed, just abandoned. A sparrow hawk sits like a gargoyle on one of the exposed walls. There's a burned trampoline frame in the back.

Of all the many things I'm terrified of in this moment, silence feels the most dangerous. Like something's waiting in it, even out here in the open.

I fill it as we hurry south. We're alive, we make noise, I have to talk. "You didn't want to take your bike?"

Matthew lets out a breath of a laugh. "Not today."

"Oh. Of course." Of course *what*? None of this is even remotely in the realm of *of course*. "What were those machines on your desk?"

“They’re for the war effort.” His voice is curt now. More than usual, even. “I’m, ah, not really meant to discuss—”

“Right! Sorry. I’m not a spy. I swear. In case you were wondering.”

He turns quickly, startled, I’m sure, by the inappropriateness of me cracking a joke at a time like this, but if I stop and face this head-on—the truck I see now jutting from the grove, my dog locked in place as if possessed, bristled, barking and barking, and the object of Max’s fixation. Not an object, a man. My friend.

John. His pockets of herbs, his bug of the day, that great juddering laugh smashed out of him.

I double over, vomit. No warning, just ejection, my body saying no.

My throat is fire when I stop, finally able to suck in breath. I feel the vague sensation of a hand, soft against my shoulder, before Matthew backs up.

“It’s all right, Lady Treadway.” He stares at the dirt between his boots. “It’s normal. You’re reacting normally.”

I can’t speak yet. I swipe at my mouth with one wrist, swallowing sour, and step around the mess.

Matthew turns and continues at a jog to where John’s body stands pinned, slumped, eyes flat and empty.

I drop into a crouch a few yards away, holding my head like it’s going to fly apart. Matthew leans against John’s truck, looking down at the hood, away from the body. *The body*. He scrunches his eyes shut.

I cover mine with two fists, tears streaming past my fingers.

“Okay,” he says after a moment. “Okay. Do you know where the...?”

He leans far into the truck’s window, and I find myself holding my breath tightly, waiting for the vehicle to willfully reverse direction, alive and malevolent.

When Matthew emerges again, safe, I stand up, prickling with relief.

“He left the keys. Right. I’m going to reverse. Carefully. Why don’t you take—Max, is it?”

Everyone knows Max’s name. He snuck into every single garden on the island when he was a puppy and tore up the lighthouse steps one morning when Matthew left the door open. Matthew’s pretending unfamiliarity,

creating distance. It always felt aggressive before, but right now, for the first time, it strikes me as courteous. Why pretend we're friends with everything else going on? What a relief not to fake it.

I nod and clasp Max's collar, pulling him away.

"Farther, I think," Matthew calls from the driver's seat.

I've got to be twenty feet away, well out of range, but I back up more. It's the Day; he's being cautious. He doesn't want me to die.

The realization surprises me more than it should. I'm a human being. Of course he doesn't want me to die.

The pickup's engine starts up. Its purr rumbles in my stomach like a threat.

Matthew doesn't look intimidated. He rolls it back.

John's body makes a sucking noise as it uncouples from the hood and falls like wet lumber onto the ground. His head lolls to face me as he falls.

He looks surprised. That was the last emotion he experienced. Not shock, even. More like wonder.

It's not the worst end for someone like John Ashford.

My eyes sting hot and flood again. I turn away, fighting off a scream. I don't want Matthew Clare of all people to see me like this.

I breathe, stroke Max, once, twice, and turn back with a sharp sniff and huff to brace myself as the engine cuts out, the pickup door slams shut.

"What do I need to do?" I ask.

Matthew's hands unclench by his sides. "First thing is to get Brian."

"That makes sense. Of course."

"Then I'd say visit his family, but—"

"Right." They're in Scotland. A daughter, two grandchildren. Due to visit once the war ended.

I could call them. Maybe he has his phone in the truck—but there's no reception now. Once the lines are restored, then. The tower and everything else that's gone out this week.

I get the wild feeling I should find a piece of paper and start writing this down, that this is my first day at a new job. I'll either have a long list of things to do once the Day is done, or none at all, ever again.

Stop. Don't be crazy. This was a horrible coincidence. Horrible, horrible.

A gust from the south lifts my hair. I shudder, wrapping my arms around my ribs.

Matthew turns away. "I smell fire."

"We saw it on the way up. A campfire. The tourists, campers, the, um, Norwegians."

I can't even get a sentence out around him.

It doesn't help when his eyes fill with rage so forceful I'm surprised the ground doesn't start shaking. "We didn't evacuate the tourists."

"I didn't know we were meant to."

He turns away, cursing under his breath. "What time is it?"

"I don't know." I glance at my bare wrist as if I've ever worn a watch there. "Eight, maybe? Nine?"

"Yeah. Okay, you need to see about this. I'm going to guess it's no longer a campfire. I'll take you. Where is Hugh?"

The question is abrupt. Furious.

I blanch. "He's home. With the children."

"With you out here?"

"I didn't tell him I was going."

"You—" He spins in a circle, hands in his mess of curls.

"The dog ran off! I..."

My voice trails away the second his gray eyes fix on mine. He sees through me. "Well. It's lucky you were here."

It's not at all what I expected to hear him say. The words jangle in my ears. "Lucky."

His gaze doesn't waver. "Good. Helpful. His last moments—"

"No." I have to cut him off. Panic rises. A wave of truth. I'm a killer. I killed my father, and I've killed him. "What am I doing out here?"

Matthew's forehead furrows for lack of an answer.

"John is here because I was chasing Max. If I hadn't needed some air, some fucking air, he would still be—"

"No." Matthew reaches me in two quick strides. "He wouldn't." He grips my shoulders so tightly that fresh tears fill my eyes. "He would be

dead. Nothing you do or did would change that. *Do you understand?"*

The ferocity in his expression dries up all the words left in me. I realize, with a perverse thrill, that this is the first time he's ever touched me. He refused a handshake when I first met him. And now, years later, he's got his hands on me, physically holding me together.

I nod, and he lets go, turning away like he's used up all his energy, can't stand the sight of me a second longer.

He starts off through the heath. Max bolts away from my slack grip and past Matthew, clipping his leg with his tail. I watch the dog run, too exhausted to chase him.

"He's fine; it's an island," I mutter to myself. "He can't go far."

Matthew glances back, so quickly it looks like a tic. I have to stop talking, filling the silence, the occasion doesn't call for it, and I sound, well, crazy. I feel crazy. I wish I were crazy and this hadn't happened.

Matthew Clare probably wants to check on the tourists' bonfire, and that's probably a good decision. It might worry the islanders to see flames on a day like this. I follow him at a distance, over the heath, down dips and up hills, off the road, who knows? I just watch his back, that dusty jacket, and walk. Watch Max running ahead and back to Matthew, ahead again, manic in his confusion. Why isn't he circling *me*? I'm his human.

He doesn't trust me. I don't trust me.

I smell the fire. It's sharper than before. Sour and acrid and—oh no. Visible. I look up to find the blue sky streaked with murky gray. Something lands on my shoulder.

Ash. I pinch it between my fingers, numb, and then I hear the fire growling. The scale, the rage of it. This can't ... this can't be happening.

Matthew has started running toward the campsite. When Max doubles back toward him again, Matthew shoos him away, kicking out, shouting.

I run past them both, my throat burning, hand raised over my eyes against the smoke.

There's no campsite there, not anymore, nothing but a wall of fire, confetti of brightly colored fabric dancing outward from the flames, burning in tiny curling triangles in midair.

Someone is screaming in a language I don't know. One of the hikers, the girl, woman. A man stands with her, one hand on her shoulder while she points at the flames, jumping and shaking. It's not her friend, it's Brian—took me a second to recognize him in plainclothes. He's got no radio, nothing to communicate with, but people are spilling up from the village now with tiny fire extinguishers and sloshing buckets, so he must have mobilized them at some point, Lannie and Ian and John Jones, bless him, carrying the largest bucket of the bunch.

They're all three walking, though. Not running. Like they already know there's nobody to save.

The tourist is hollering. "Just ... help! Why do you not help?!"

"I am very sorry." Brian's voice sounds robotic. He says it again, trying for a better delivery. "I'm very sorry." His brow creases. "Did you know about the Day?"

"What?" She tears at her blond hair. "I don't understand these words!"

Matthew reaches Brian and points toward me. I force myself to stand still instead of shrinking back, away from the smoke, the acrid meaty smell, the awful knowledge of what's causing it.

There's some expectation here, a role I have to play. I need to at least learn what it is before finding a way of avoiding it. This is all so beyond me.

Brian raises a hand, then strides quickly over, leaving the tourist to crumple into a crouched ball on the ground, rocking, rocking.

"Two dead, milady." There's an odd briskness to Brian's voice, like he's giving a satisfactory progress report to a superior. "Hikers."

I picture them now, the two smiling men. Those bright teeth. She's still rocking, face covered.

"Do you have their names?" My voice shakes a little. I force it steady. "We should inform their families."

Matthew and Brian exchange a glance. I can't read it.

"Perhaps you could ask her." Matthew squints away, seaward, but I can tell by his stiff tone that he's talking to me.

This woman. She looks like a wounded animal. Part of me wants to cradle her, and the rest wants to run fast in the other direction.

Run, Nina. You're good at running.

I start toward her, then peer back at Brian, one finger pressed to my throbbing temple. "Three."

Brian squints.

Matthew turns to him. It takes him a pained second to nod. "John Ashford."

"Fuck." Brian spits onto the ground, rubs it out with his boot. "Yep. Right."

They stand in silence as I reach the hiker. I crouch and press my hands lightly against her bare shoulders. She's wearing hardly anything, a tank top, fleece sweatpants. They were sleeping when this happened.

She's shivering hard but doesn't look up until I lean in.

"Let's get you warm," I say.

As I say *warm*, her head darts to the fire, the men throwing desultory buckets of water onto it, and she lets out a burst of shrill laughter.

"Come on, take my coat." I slip out of it and wrap it around her, then shudder myself. "And tea. A cup of tea. I know a place."

Her red eyes go as wide as Emma's. She nods, lips clenched tightly. I can see a sob bottling up behind it. She slides her arms into the coat, one, the other.

I offer her a hand up, and she takes it. Her palm is dry and calloused.

"Where are your shoes?" I ask.

"Everything was in the tent." Her face crumples, her body falling with it.

I catch her by one armpit, pulling her upright again. She's a good three inches taller than I am, but I somehow find the footing to keep her standing. "You're going to be okay. We've got you now."

I glance at Brian and Matthew, including them in that *we*. Matthew's only answer is a slight rise of his head before he walks away toward the line of fake firefighters.

His wife and daughter died in a fire. How can he stand to watch this?

I watch him take a bucket and heave it onto the flames, then I blink hard and rope my arm around the hiker's waist. She leans against my shoulder, heavy as a landslide, and we plod together up the gravel track to the village.

We don't talk. Our footsteps are loud and rhythmic and soon begin to sync, left, right, left, right, soldiers marching away from battle.

"Tea," I repeat, mainly for the comforting banality of the word. We're in Britain, and this is what we offer. This is what we do. "Not far now."

9:30 A.M.

Lute's minute cluster of gray stone buildings looms larger with every step, and my eyes grow blurry. I stare instead at the sky, a gull circling high in the blue. This stranger begins to cry against me, a low, wavering moan like a song.

There's a puffin standing in the lane. I've never seen one in the middle of the island before. It seems confused. Maybe it's looking for John.

I start crying now, and the tourist stops, abruptly, her song finishing. She straightens, lessening the pressure against my shoulder.

I glance at her bare feet. "Are you all right?"

"What do you mean?" She stares straight ahead.

I look back and see flecks of red on the path behind us. She's cut her foot. Doesn't even feel it.

Ahead, the puffin's gone. Must have flown off fast.

The light is off at Jo's tearoom. I rap on the door anyway. The hiker's shaking in earnest now, her teeth chattering like a windup toy. She stares up at the weather vane on the roof, the running horse.

I'm struck by the sight of it. The sky stings my eyes, and I get the sense of a negative image: a horse, black in the bright sky, glowing white against black. Everything's giving me déjà vu these days.

Mummy, I want see the pony. Is this what Emma keeps talking about?

I knock again hard enough to peel the skin back from my knuckles. "What's your name?"

"Marit," she croaks.

"I'm Nina."

I glance up the road. Still a ghost town. Where the hell has everyone gone? Maybe they're all hiding in their houses like Hugh.

Up in Jo's living area, the curtains are open, but the lights are off inside. I know like I did yesterday that no one is here.

"You're the lady, aren't you?" Her English isn't as halting now. "Lady whatever, up at the big house."

"Yep." I don't know why, but that makes me smile. "Lady Whatever. How about a cup of tea at the big house instead of here?"

I reach to help her. She shrugs me off, rubbing her hands together, sniffing hard against her tremors.

When I start off through the village, she follows.

"You're American," she says behind me. Her voice is a little too loud, like it takes blunt force to get the words out.

"I am. I've got dual citizenship, but yes."

"They don't hate you here, for starting the war?"

"Well." I let out a surprised laugh but don't turn to look at her. "I didn't start the war. That I know of."

"It's difficult for Americans in Norway now. Even though they left the States for a reason, you know? I feel bad for them, but I don't say anything."

I try my best not to show my relief at how much she's talking now. Talking is good. Talking is alive.

"Maybe I should stand up for them," she goes on. "Nils is better about that. He'll speak up, get between people and—"

She goes abruptly silent, then walks more quickly until she's ahead of me, that keening noise rising from her throat again. I hear her gulp around it, not quite smothering it.

"Nils was in the tent?" My voice is careful as still water.

"And Christian. My brother. My *little*..." She says something in her language. An expletive, I think.

She leans down, fingers taut against her legs like she's trying to rip off her kneecaps.

"Almost there." I point at Alder House.

Something about the sight of it makes her shake her head.

“Thank you,” she says. She’s limping now.

My mind races ahead to our first aid kit, the best place to clean her feet, the warmest spot in the house.

Max is waiting at the top of the lawn, tail wagging as if nothing’s wrong, as if he hadn’t just spent the past hour barking at a corpse. When we get closer, he races ahead of us, up the curved steps to the front door.

It’s open. I can see Hugh standing shadowed just inside the house, still as a statue.

I nearly call out to ask him to help, but the way he’s staring at us, my step falters.

“Let’s go around the side to the kitchen.” I veer Marit left to the service door. “I’ll give you a tour once we get settled, if you like?”

It’s a better plan. This way is easier on her feet. The kitchen’s the best place to warm her up, get her some food and tea, clean her shredded toes, ask her some questions when she’s ready. Hugh can find us there.

I hear the front door slam.

Okay, well, he’s angry. I’m not ready to deal with that. There are more important things right now.

Sally flies across the room to open the kitchen door the second I pass the window. She starts to sputter something, a kind scolding, I’m guessing, a “We were so worried,” when she sees Marit behind me and her face falls slack.

She extends her arms. “Oh no, love, oh no no no. Were you visiting?”

Marit nods, mute, and staggers straight to the glowing hearth. I wince, wondering whether it’s safe for her to sit so close to fire on a day like this, especially given what’s just happened. Tempting fate.

I catch myself with a jolt.

There’s no fate. This is tragic happenstance. Stop feeding it. It’s belief that makes days like this happen. I’m not going to be sucked into superstition. I can’t lose myself to this.

I stand leaning against the thick kitchen table. Sally uncurls my fingers, opening my hand so she can slide a cup of tea into it. I hadn’t realized I’d had it balled so tightly.

“Sit down, Nina.” Sally nods to Marit, by the fire. “She needs a minute to herself before we fuss over her.”

I fall onto a stool. “Where are the kids?”

As soon as I ask the question, the multitude of possible answers triggers a wave of nausea strong enough to double me over.

“Up with Tinker Bell.” That’s her nickname for Avery. “Safe and sound.”

I watch the steam swirl up from my teacup and think of the fire, whether they’ve put it out by now, found the bodies. What will they do with them? With John? Leave them for tomorrow, or go ahead and catalog them? I’m picturing Brian with seven mortuary beds laid out ready in the police station. If this has really been going on this long, surely they have practical procedures in place.

“Who is it?” Sally asks, leaning against the counter. A sad smile is fixed on her face, a shield against sorrow. I’m not sure it’ll work.

“Two hikers,” I whisper first, nodding to Marit’s slumped back. It takes me a second to get past the easier answer. “And John Ashford.”

“Oh. *Oh*. That hurts.” She looks skyward, pressing her fingers to her forehead. “It always does. But.”

She lets out a huff. Shakes her head.

“Quick, though,” she says. It’s not a question.

“I think so,” I say, my eyes filling up again. “The truck rolled.”

She laughs. Loud.

I’m too shocked to even blink.

“That damned lorry! He loved it like a tarted-up mistress, and just look how it repays him!”

I shake my head at her. “Sally!”

She nudges me. “Come on! John’d be the first to appreciate the irony.”

Footsteps thud behind us. I press my lips together before I turn.

Hugh glowers at me from the other side of the low kitchen doorway.

Sally brushes her hands off on her apron. “I’ll just get some antiseptic for her feet. Won’t be a minute.”

She bustles out of the room and past Hugh like he’s a sleeping guard dog.

Hugh doesn't even look at her. He's glaring at Marit. "Who is this?"
I stand. "*Hugh.*"

Marit glances over her shoulder, as startled by his tone as I am.

I grab his arm and murmur, "She's just lost two friends."

"So you bring her into our home. Near our children." He's not even bothering to lower his voice.

I draw him forcefully out into the corridor and shut the kitchen door.
"What is the matter with you?"

He looks away instead of answering.

"Of course I invited her in. That's what you do when someone needs help."

"Not on the Day—"

"I would think especially on the Day!" I grip his arm, fighting the urge to physically shake sense into him. "This isn't like you."

"This is exactly like me—ask anyone here." He turns, eyes gliding away, around, anywhere but at me. "And it's just bloody like *you* to act so cavalier, waltzing out like you have no responsibility to any of us. To Charlie. Emma. You're just an island unto yourself, aren't you, Nina? You could take all this or leave it."

His hands are in his pockets, but it feels like he's shoved me.

"Right. So. You're trying to start a fight."

I will coolness into my voice. It's not easy—my hands are shaking—but I've had years of practice. Mom used to turn on a dime, in unpredictable moments, try every angle she could to get me to snap.

"Can you hear me? Are you deaf now on top of everything else?"

"Becca says you embarrassed her at school. She's very upset. What do you have to say about that?"

"Your father would be alive if it wasn't for you."

And when I did snap, when I shouted back, defended myself, cried, there it was, proof that I was the problem. She'd grin, slow, and finally relax.

"There she is," she'd say.

I learned to go numb, to stay rational, look for the quickest door out.

The quickest door right now is behind me.

“I don’t know why, but you’re stabbing around for any hurtful thing to get me to react, and I’m not going to do it, Hugh. I am not interested.” I turn my back and step brightly into the kitchen. “Another cup of tea?”

I close the door behind me. Let Hugh have the rest of the house. He’s right in one sense. Today, I could fucking leave it.

Marit stands, wincing as her bleeding feet connect with the cold stone floor. “I will go.”

“No. What? Go *where*?” I throw my arms up, breathless now.

I picture Lute Island without a sea, just high walls surrounding us. A prison. Or, no, an arena. Somebody’s watching us. I can almost picture them, and then they slip away.

I reach for Marit. “Stay. Please. We want you here.”

Her eyes lock on mine, and even if she’s never heard of the Day, of the danger that’s hovering over this place, an understanding passes between us: there’s safety in numbers. Even if it’s just the illusion of safety, it’s comforting.

I think of Hugh, alone here all morning, wondering where I’d gone, whether I would make it back.

Sally bustles in with bandages and hydrogen peroxide. “All right now, let’s have a look at you.”

I say, “Excuse me for a second,” and swing past her into the hall.

If some gee-whiz part of me expected my husband to be waiting for me out there, maybe even ready with an apology, it’s quickly eviscerated. He’s not in the living room or the study. I follow the glittery trickle of giggles upstairs to the children’s playroom, and that’s where he is, standing in the doorway. Past him, I see Emma and Charlie climbing all over poor Avery like she’s a piece of playground equipment. She still has that incongruous dancer’s strength. She hoists Emma on one arm while arching her back into a horse for Charlie to ride and makes it all look like art. What a shame she couldn’t make a career out of it.

Hugh watches them just as he watched me from the front door. His body is softer now, but every time the children’s feet leave the ground, he tenses like someone’s prodded him with a Taser. Their toes touch carpet and his shoulders drop. Safe, ease. Unsafe, terror.

We've always felt this way, to some degree. Since the moment they were born, a sense of looming disaster. It's the same thing, only amplified today. The realization is a strange comfort.

After a long moment, Hugh looks back at me.

"I'm sorry I left," I whisper.

He slides the door to the playroom softly shut.

I back farther into the hallway, and he walks to meet me, slowly.

"It's not your fault." This is a huge concession coming from him, this early in an argument. "You can't understand. When you grow up here, when you've seen it—"

"I know." I reach for his face as if I could smooth the worry lines away and with them all his panic.

He grabs my hand roughly, pulls my palm to his mouth to kiss it.

I close my eyes. "I swear I didn't mean to frighten you. I just..."

"You wanted to escape."

There's no blame in his voice this time. Only sadness. He'd wanted all of us to escape. Even as late as last night, he was scrambling for a phone connection, desperate to get us out.

We press our cheeks together for a moment before our mouths slide into a kiss, brief, halting.

It's beyond oppressive, the superstition here, every awful thing amplified into inescapable fatalism. I understand completely why Hugh left last time, why he was on that ocean liner, on that deck, ready to meet me. Nobody in their right mind would want to be trapped here on the Day. And yet the rest of them always stay, despite their belief. Because of it! Every seven years, they ride it out. What is it that makes them do it? A sense of family obligation, tradition, maybe. Fear of breaking the ancient pact and losing whatever blessings they believe this place offers. Or a kind of religious fervor, which seems less likely somehow. I don't know. I can't understand it, but confusion seems to be the point. You get so dizzy you just give in.

Maybe it's knowing that if they left, others would stay, and they'd then have to bear the weight of their neighbors' deaths as if they themselves had killed them. And the judgment of their friends and neighbors. Forever.

If Hugh feels that, would he admit it, even to himself?

He presses his dry lips to my forehead. "So?"

It takes me a moment to understand the question. Then I take his hand and squeeze it. "Yeah. Three."

"Her friends." He nods down the stairs. "Bloody stupid of them to have stayed."

I flinch at his tone. "I'm not sure they got the memo, honestly. She doesn't seem to have heard of the tithe."

Don't I sound like an islander now.

Hugh leans on the wall, scratching his head. "They weren't warned, evacuated. It really isn't right to involve outsiders in this."

There's a grudging note in his voice, like he's trying to convince himself of what he's saying. Then he sighs.

"It's my fault. It falls to me to make sure."

"Not Brian?"

"He tried, I'm sure, but at the end of the day, *we* are the island."

He sounds less proud than he does exhausted.

A chill runs down my bare arms like a sweater sliding off. No wonder they were deferring to me out there. Lady Treadway. Centuries ago, such titles mattered, and on days like this, they do again.

I should have seen the boat off to Sunnan. I didn't get it.

You'll understand when the Day is done.

Hugh starts away, but I grab him gently. "It wasn't just the hikers. John. John Ashf—"

My voice hitches.

Hugh leans down to peer into my eyes. "You saw it. Oh, darling."

"I didn't see it happen. I found him, though." *And I was the only reason he was there.*

He holds me closer. I shut my eyes and breathe into his shoulder. Aftershave and detergent. He smells like every ordinary day.

"This is why I didn't want you out there," he murmurs into my hair. "You shouldn't have to face these things, Nina. You should be sheltered from them."

“Sheltered.” I lean back to peer at him. “I know you mean well, but people have died in my life, Hugh. This isn’t—”

“Had you ever seen a dead body before?”

His voice isn’t accusatory, just curious. It’s funny how in seven years of marriage, this one specific question has never popped up.

Had I seen a corpse before today? I wasn’t much more than an infant when my father died, too young to remember his face, let alone his funeral. I wouldn’t be surprised if I learned that Mom did, in fact, shove me in front of his dead body, given how much she blamed the demon in me for killing him.

Gran’s service was open casket, but I wasn’t there. I wasn’t there for the funeral, I wasn’t there in the month before she passed, even when she was asking for me every day. Even Becca felt compelled to call and ask me to fly back. The war hadn’t started yet, so there were still plenty of flights, but I was eight months’ pregnant with Charlie. The doctor said it was too risky to travel. But the truth was that I hadn’t wanted to leave my bubble. I was safe here. Liked and loved. I hadn’t wanted to see Becca or Mom. I hadn’t wanted to see Gran like that, diminished, confused, under their control, so she died without seeing me one last time.

You’re a curse, Nina, a leech. All you were born to do is take.

“Hey.”

I look up, at him, my husband. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re in shock.” He smooths my hair back. His hands are trembling. “Have you eaten anything?”

“Not yet. The kids are probably getting hungry too. Let me just, um, go check what the plan is for lunch.”

“Nina?”

No, I flee, down the stairs, back into routine. Lunchtime will mean we’re halfway through the day. And then will come afternoon tea and cookies, a meal for the children, bath time, lullabies, dinner for the grown-ups, drinks, conversation, sleep, done, and then tomorrow will be partly cloudy again with a midafternoon rain shower that will keep us from putting the clothes out on the line. The other children will come back from Sunnan. School will start again soon.

“Careful,” Hugh calls tightly, watching me go down the stairs.

I’m walking too quickly, he thinks, and maybe he’s right, if only on the Day. There’s a razor edge to his voice, his muscles tight as coat hangers, but he’s trying to hide it now. It’s a compromise, I know. If we all stay home, hide from this, he’ll help us pretend it’s not happening.

It doesn’t seem right to pretend when others don’t have that luxury. It doesn’t seem very effective either.

If it’s chosen us, it’ll find us. That’s what everybody says.

10:30 A.M.

I hear the comforting cadence of chitchat in the kitchen and follow it downward, my hand trailing behind me along the wainscoting. I pick out Jo before I open the door, that copper kettle voice of hers. She's sitting at the kitchen table, along with Marit, who's been bundled into a thick sweater, my coat hanging neatly folded over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. Why hadn't I thought to bring her a sweater when we came in? Shock, maybe, like Hugh said, or maybe I've just always been a useless hostess.

Taker. Leech.

Shut up.

Jo has a canvas bag at her feet full of clothes. She glances at me with a soft smile. "I heard. Caught out in her pajamas." She nods at the bag. "Good of you to bring her here."

"We went to yours first." There's a note of accusation in my voice.

I'm a raw nerve today. Wonder why.

"I was checking on the old blokes down at the pub."

"Oh." I smile. "They're drinking already?"

She shakes her head. "They gave it a jolly good go, but too many memories of last time. And Matty came and told us about John and the others."

She reaches out and takes Marit's hand. Marit squeezes back, grateful, and I marvel again at how natural Jo is. She doesn't seem to feel any separation between herself and others, even strangers. Any reserve is for the sake of politeness. She gives so freely of herself. It's such *work* for me to open up to people, like putting on a mask instead of removing one.

"He was helpful," I say. Jo cocks her head. "Matthew."

“He *is* helpful. To a fault.” She sighs. “He told me you came to get him. I think he’d have stayed up there with them all day if you hadn’t pulled him out.”

I think for a second that the “them” she’s talking about are the strange assortment of machines littering his bedroom, but then I remember the photos, the way he’d sat slumped over the table like he was hoping to fall into the images.

His wife. His daughter. Today is an anniversary for him, the next tithing day after the one that took them. Jo said “pulled” him out as if I’d rescued Matthew from something, but now I feel a fresh stab of guilt. He was mourning them in peace, and I interrupted.

“He said you saw his contraptions.” Jo’s mouth quirks.

“The machines?” I rub my eyes, too tired to fully commit to feigned obliviousness. “I shouldn’t have asked him about them. An American, prying about the war effort of all things. Just what he needed today.”

“You’re not that kind of American,” Sally interrupts from the stove.

I crane my neck to smile at her. “Thank you?”

Jo nudges me with her shoulder, but it’s Marit who pipes up.

“No, I know what she means. There are Americans who go and see the world and move to different places. They’re ... I don’t know, they have a certain positive thing that is nice, people like it or don’t like it.”

I laugh, surprised. “*What?*”

“You know.” She tosses her hair in imitation. ““Everything is so *awesome*! This fountain is *amazing*, this is the best ice cream *ever*, we’re gonna go do seven museums today!””

“I’m so glad you haven’t met any ugly Americans,” I say, shaking my head. “Is that what I’m like? Everything’s *amazing*?”

Jo winces, making a *little bit* sign with her fingers. I whap her and she snorts, but Marit considers the question thoughtfully.

“Better that than those Americans I’ve seen on the news, the people who are really weird, right? They have like eighty-seven guns and tattoos of, what’s the English for a ... like a big bird?”

“Eagle?” I offer, laughing in surprise.

“Those are the ones that I think start the war.” Marit blinks, concentrating. “*Started* the war. Or got tricked into it.”

By the Russians, she means. They rolled out “evidence” of a Euro-Chinese conspiracy to control the world’s fresh water and used it to justify their invasion of Finland. Some people think they blew up their own passenger jet so they could blame the Chinese. I don’t know what’s true, just that there were plenty of Americans primed to believe any theory they read on the internet.

I remember my brother-in-law, years ago when he was new to the family, singing the praises of the Russian government, how they’d be our next big ally, times were changing, we needed to change with them, that it was Europe and China who were the biggest threats.

“They’ve always been jealous of us,” he said. “They can’t stand our freedoms.”

Gran burst out laughing, and I had to leave the room to keep from joining in.

I wonder if he enlisted. Maybe he got drafted. Maybe he found a way to dodge it, for all his supposed patriotism. My sister’s probably safe since she has kids, but the realization that I don’t know for sure hits me square in the stomach. It’s been that long since we’ve spoken. That long since I cut myself off from my old life.

They could all be dead for all I know. I could die today and they’d never find out.

“You’d never have been tricked if you’d stayed,” Jo says, and it takes me a second to remember that we’re talking about me. “You’d be an objector like those people marching, getting sprayed.”

I can’t tell if she’s being charitable or she really believes that about me.

Somehow, I can’t picture myself marching, putting my body in front of a line of armed police. If I were back in Florida, still stuck in that old life, I’d watch the news in horror, sign angry petitions from the safety of my laptop, maybe even pluck up the nerve to pick up the phone and call my senator’s office. No more.

My instinct has always been to freeze, hide, run. Survive.

Marit's gone quiet again, staring at her feet. I'll have to bring up ugly Americans again, get her back in her comfort zone, poor thing.

"Why has Matty got contraptions?" Sally blurts. "I thought we were out of all that."

"That's *why* we're out of it." There's a gleam of pride in Jo's eye. "He agrees to monitor the air and sea and God knows what else, and in exchange, the navy stays offshore."

"This is the reason we came," Marit says, all the forcefulness of a moment ago dispelled. Her voice creaks out of her now like she hasn't spoken in months. "Nils was on leave. We wanted to go someplace peaceful. No tanks, no blockades. We forgot for a bit. We really did forget."

She slumps, and my instinct is to let the room fall into silence, but Jo sets down her tea as if this were any normal gathering.

"He was on leave? I'd thought you were Norwegian, neutral."

"Nils is, ah, a dual citizen," Marit says, nodding to me. "Finnish. He signed up. He is, *was*, very—it mattered to him. The world. But the war was war. You know? He was sent to Lithuania. Had to go dig out bodies, little dead children from a school that got bombed. His captain got shot, Nils had to hold his—what do you call?—intestines inside his body. They went by farms, burned, everybody starving. People would try to make them take their babies. Scream and beg."

We sit in weighted silence, unable to look at each other.

"He made a promise, but sometimes promises change. They have to change."

Their furtiveness. The lack of camping permits. They're deserters. Nils was, at least. He hid from the war and died anyway.

Tears glitter in Marit's eyes without falling. She's strong. I can't fathom what it takes for her to say these things.

"What about Christian?" I ask.

"He was an idiot!" She giggles, but it erodes instantly into sobs, and we all reach out for her.

A floorboard creaks behind us. I turn to see Hugh hovering in the doorway and realize he's been listening for quite a while. Anger glimmers behind his eyes as they meet mine.

The sting of it hits me. It's a familiar reaction, this vague, confused guilt, the sense that I've done something wrong just by existing. That I'm somehow even more horrible for not realizing what I've done.

I haven't felt like this for years. Not since meeting Hugh. He's supposed to be my safe harbor.

Jo turns to him in greeting, a single worry line creasing her forehead.

Instead of waving hello back, Hugh says, "Matty has radios, then."

Jo smiles at me, pleading for help switching gears.

Hugh inches forward. "I heard you mention monitoring equipment. Old tech, is it? Analog?"

"I would think he has radios," Jo answers briskly. "Everybody's using everything in this war."

"He had them this whole time."

I shake my head. "Why does that—?"

Hugh makes a fist. Hits the doorframe in slow motion. "I *asked* him. I was desperate, and I forced myself to ask him if he had anything that we could use to communicate with." His jaw goes stiff, jutting. "I should have known not to trust him."

Jo half rises, glancing between all of us. "I'm not sure he's strictly permitted to use his government issue for personal—"

Sally tuts, nodding. "Could be treason."

Hugh stalks out, slamming the door behind him like a petulant child.

I follow, shoot the room an apologetic grimace, and follow. Again.

Hugh stops mid-corridor and whirls on me. "What other equipment does he have there?"

My mouth hangs open as my mind shuffles moral rules like a casino dealer, frantically sorting them according to rank. Lie to my husband. Refuse to answer. Hitch my dress a little lower and hope he gets distracted. It hardly matters—I don't have the technical know-how to tell him anything substantive.

"I'm not sure."

"You know, I went to the mobile tower," he interrupts. "Two days ago. I walked up there with my tool belt, like I could fix anything, just hoping, and inside, it was all ripped apart, boxes removed, wires dangling."

“What?” I shake my head. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying this isn’t just the island’s tricks. Someone’s well and truly fucked with us.”

It takes me a second, and then my body goes cold. “Someone sabotaged the cell tower?”

“And the internet. And—”

There’s a quiet click and the hall goes dark, the row of wall sconces extinguished. Hugh laughs softly in the darkness as if vindicated.

I fumble for the switch, like that’s going to do anything. “Power’s out?”

“Somebody wants us dead, darling.”

“Come *on*, Hugh.”

He starts away.

I grab his arm. “Don’t be ridiculous. How would turning the power off put us in danger? It’s a sunny day, plenty of light. None of us are on life support.”

He grabs my shoulders and shakes so hard that I bite the corner of my tongue. “This is not a joke, Nina.”

“I know.” I try to wriggle loose.

“Someone has done this, and I need to know why.” His fingers dig into my shoulders.

“Let me go.”

“What did you see?”

“Fucking let me go!” I shove him away, shaking.

He stands, panting, watching me.

“I didn’t see anything! I’d just come from John. I was in shock. But if you want my opinion, Matthew is the last person I would suspect of trying to kill us. He doesn’t give a shit about us. He’s just trying to live his life.”

“You’ve said yourself he gives you the creeps.”

Have I said that? *Creeps* isn’t the right word.

“He makes it fairly obvious how much he resents us.”

“That’s different from...” I huff, then slow it down, calming myself. “Nobody is trying to kill us. Okay? Except the island, if you believe all this bullshit.”

“You still call it *bullshit*. Three people are dead, Nina.”

“Okay, well, talk to me when it’s seven, no more, no less.”

“I may not be able to. Have you fucking considered that?”

I pass him at a furious clip, out of this dark corridor, up into the light. I cannot take this legend for a second longer, his paranoia, his rage. I need air, and I need to pee.

I go upstairs to my own bathroom and lock the door and piss, a blessed relief. I wash my hands and my face and brush my teeth and stare at my reflection, its component parts, none of them connecting into anything that makes sense. I feel better, though. Cleaner anyway.

The kids are with Avery in the living room. When I come downstairs, I find her hitting buttons on the remote, scowling in confusion.

She glances at me. “They wanted a movie. Is that okay? I can’t get it to work.”

“Power’s out.”

“Oh.” She draws into herself as she processes that, crossing her arms tightly. She’s as unnerved by that bit of news as Hugh was. She turns to the kids, brightening. “Shall we read a book, then?”

Emma lets out a disappointed whine, the prelude to what promises to be an epic tantrum. I scoop her up and tickle her before it can take hold.

She giggles wildly, her forehead scrunched like she’s trying to stay angry. “I want ride on the pony!”

“Oh my *God*,” I groan. “Baby! There’s no pony!”

Avery grins in apology. “She might mean me?”

“*No!* The pony out dere!” Emma points out the window so forcefully I nearly drop her. I set her down gently and let her crawl away. “It’s your pony, Mummy.”

I shake my head. “Well, that’s nice, I guess.”

“It’s pretty.” She presses her hands to the glass.

Charlie does a headstand on the sofa and watches me upside down. “I want some orange juice.”

His neck twists to one side, and I fight a surge of panic.

“Yes, sure, and how about a picnic?” I ask him. “Out on the lawn. American-style. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—”

“Peanut butter and *jam*,” he groans. I am, somehow, already embarrassing. I’m going to have to succumb to the British vernacular sooner or later.

“*And jaaaaaam*.” I smile. “Raspberry?”

“Blackberry, please.”

Emma whirls around, imaginary pony forgotten. “Buh I want a jelly!”

“If we have any jelly powder, you can have jelly.” I give an exaggerated groan of my own, the trials of motherhood played for comic effect, everything normal, day-to-day life, nothing awful, nobody dead, nothing wrong.

Avery grins. “I’ve never tried peanut butter and jam.”

“You’re joking!” I nudge her with my shoulder. “Oh my gosh, we need to fix that, don’t we?”

She looks so dubious, I let out a surprised laugh.

“You don’t have to try it, Ave. Have whichever sandwich you want. Raid the kitchen, seriously.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s, Lord, ah, your husband said to stay in the house.”

Charlie sits, watching me.

“Oh,” I say.

“We could spread a blanket in here, maybe?” She gestures to the hearth rug.

“Absolutely not. No. It’s gorgeous outside.” My voice comes out harsher than I’d intended. I force another smile. “It’s a wide, flat lawn. As long as we stay on it, it seems as safe as the house to me.”

“Has anybody died yet?”

I stare at Avery’s young, open face and everything around us takes on an air of unreality, like I’m looking at a portrait of her or a close-up of an actress in a TV show. She just asked that. Out loud. Right in front of the children, with the same level of emotion you might use to ask what the chance of rain was today.

Emma doesn’t seem to have noticed. She’s picking apart the edge of a throw cushion with her feet kicked up, but Charlie’s still watching me intently, waiting for an answer.

“Three people.” I say it lightly, but I do say it, and I glance at him so he knows he’s included in this conversation. It might carry more darkness or weight if I tried to hide it from him. Charlie’s smart. And like it or not, three dead is a fact.

“Who?” Avery worries a corner of her bottom lip with her teeth.

Charlie’s staring out the window now, but I know he’s still listening.

“I’ll tell you in a bit,” I whisper to Avery. “Would you mind just popping down to Sally to see whether we’ve actually got anything to make jelly? I’m happy to do it.”

Avery laughs. “You know she’ll never let you.”

It is literally stirring powder and water together. She’d let one of the children do it before she’d let me.

I need to make some changes around here. But not today.

Avery bounds away like she’s on a trampoline, long legs defying gravity. I picture her two years ago in her recital video, dancing Giselle with that company in Devon, light as air. Truth be told, she seems just as happy now. They’re resilient, these Lutes. They pick themselves up and carry on.

At the window, Charlie peers slowly over his shoulder at me. “Can we do bubbles?”

“Bubbles.” I let out a breath. “Yeah. Of course.”

I hurry to hunt for bottles of bubble liquid, to do it, do something. They should be in the chest on the far side of the room. I lift the lid, take out a wadded badminton net and rackets, a long splintered box with boules inside. Images flash—someone being bludgeoned by heavy balls, strangled by the net—each more ludicrous than the last.

Maybe peanut butter sandwiches weren’t the best idea. They wad up more than other foods. We could choke on them.

“There!” I locate three full bubble bottles and toss one to Charlie.

He misses the catch, but that’s the worst thing that happens. It falls on the hardwood, not his foot. We’re safe.

I pick up his bottle, add it to the pile in my arms, and herd the kids outside.

Sally’s already on the front lawn spreading a blanket, which I choose to take as tacit approval of my breaking house arrest.

“I’ve got peanut butter and raspberry jam coming and cucumber salmon for the grown-ups,” she announces.

“How are you so fast?” I laugh from the top step.

“I can see the future.” She waggles her fingers at Charlie and gets a laugh out of him. “I’ve commissioned Jo and that Norwegian girl.”

“Sally.” I pause on the steps to gape at her. “You didn’t. Her feet!”

“Her feet are bandaged up, and she wants something to do. Gets her mind off things.” Sally starts away, waving her hand at me. “Best thing for all of us.”

I have to admit, I agree. The kids will keep my mind off things. I smile over my shoulder at them, Emma scooting down the stone steps on her bottom, getting her dress filthy, Charlie gripping the etched banister more tightly than usual. He’s so cautious. Today, it fits the occasion. Even so, it’s a picnic day, a bright day, a distraction day, a quickly over day.

I dump the bottles in the grass and notice a wet spot on the waist of my dress. Sticky. One of the bottles leaked on me.

The kids are already unscrewing the tops.

“Careful not to spill it. Keep it upright, see?” I say, knowing full well at least one of these things will get kicked over within ten minutes.

Charlie blows bubbles straight in Emma’s face, and she laugh-pouts, “Stop it, Charlie.”

I check the bottles and quickly find the offending one, the plastic cracked along the bottom, probably from Charlie missing that catch. This one’s mine, then.

I sit on my butt and blow a giant bubble that Emma scrambles over to pop. Charlie’s the best of us at bubbles. His creations float around us like fairies.

Avery trots out the back door with a pitcher of orange juice.

“Oh! Forgot cups.” She pirouettes.

Something slips.

Her foot slides off the step as if it had vanished from beneath her.

Her body goes graceless, disjointed, falling. The glass pitcher shatters as her hand hits the flagstones, and a second later, the rest of her hits with a thunk, her hand breaking her fall.

I let out a startled, “Oh no,” before I realize that her hand is still holding the broken pitcher.

Behind me, little Emma lets out a needle-sharp scream, and only then can I run, up the stairs, calling, “Avery, Avery, are you all right? Oh my God, oh my God.”

I nearly lose my footing as I run, my own ankle turning. I look down and back and see it, a slick of bubble liquid. It trickles down another step.

I shriek behind me, “Stay still, Charlie! Grab your sister!”

He’s just blown bubbles. The wand falls slack onto the grass.

Blood drips in a stream down the stairs. It reaches me before I get to Avery. Her eyes are porcelain saucers, glassy, round, open. The glass she was clutching from the pitcher went straight through her neck into her head. Blood streams from her throat, her open mouth.

I swallow vomit, spit to the side, check for a pulse as I did with John, because I have the stubborn, fierce conviction that that’s what you do, you *have* to do it, have to try, even though she is dead. She is obviously dead, as quickly, unambiguously dead as John.

Avery. Avery. She is eighteen years old.

A bubble drifts onto the step and pops.

I’m wailing. I hadn’t realized it, only felt the scraping inside my throat. The noise has drawn Sally and Jo and Marit to the door. Marit makes a choked sound and flees back into the house.

Jo runs to me, shushing, drawing me away, running her hands over my hair over and over again like I’m her child.

I point past her at Avery. My fingers drip red. “Help *her*. *Help* her!”

“You know better,” Jo murmurs. “Now, shhhh, calm down, my love, think of the children.”

I do. I think of them. I turn to stare at them. The green lawn. The bright sea. Bubbles drifting away in the wind.

Charlie is covering Emma’s eyes with his hands while she fights to get loose. He has gone ghostly pale.

Emma breaks free, running for me, and I see dark wet blooming from the crotch of Charlie’s trousers.

On the steps behind me, I hear Sally sobbing, murmuring, “Oh, you poor child, poor child. Careful now.” She sits beside Avery and draws her head into her lap, her apron pooling crimson, then draws the glass out of her neck as gently as she might tweeze a splinter from Charlie’s foot. “You perfect thing. You angel.”

I pick up Emma and clench her tightly, away from the slick steps, those evil, insidious traps. I want to run with them, every muscle in my body is primed, but to where? Everything is a hazard. Every single thing on this cursed island is lurking, ready to strike.

That girl, oh God, that brilliant girl could balance on a toe, leap and land and twirl, but I stood there and watched her turn clumsy. I saw it take hold—choreography not her own, like she was a Judy puppet, dangling while Punch struck her down.

I reach for Charlie. He buries his face in my shoulder, all of him shaking.

It’s real. It is.

Four dead now. Four of seven.

MIDDAY

People gather from the village. They've heard me screaming. Some dim part of me wonders whether I should feel embarrassed. Aside from my three-year-old, no one else has reacted the way I did, but nobody seems to judge me. They're making allowances. This is my first time navigating the Day. And there are the children to consider.

Jesus Christ, my poor children.

I clutch them a little more gently, smooth my hand over their shoulders, heads, so small, breakable, tiny jutting hard bones under impossibly soft skin. When I open my eyes, I see Sally laying the picnic blanket over Avery. The little river of blood still drips down the steps.

I turn the kids away.

"What happen, what happen?" Emma drones. It's the same phrase she says when she's wondering anything, but it fills my brain in a mantra loop, the only thing I can think right now. "What happen?"

Charlie's voice cuts through it, tight. "Avery went to heaven."

That answer makes me physically seize, dreading the aftershock, but Emma has the exact opposite reaction. I feel her muscles soften against me as she gazes up at the sky, looking for Avery. I envy how literal she is. Even Charlie's lost that level of innocence. Looking at him now, those sad, wide eyes, I wonder if he even believes what he just said.

Sometimes I think Charlie knows more than all of us here. Sometimes I worry that I only cling to that idea because it excuses me from adequately parenting him. Even so, he doesn't need to bear witness to this, to scattered villagers wandering up, asking each other who it is, their quiet keening as

they hear her name, and the next question, old Mr. Rivers in his too-loud drone, “How many accidents still to come?”

I nudge the children away and force myself to breathe until I can muster my mom-voice, brisk and solid. “Let’s go to the kitchen. Sally has those sandwiches waiting, and you need a change of clothes, sweetie.”

Charlie looks down at the wet patch on his trousers, face crumpling. After everything else, it’s shame that’s made him cry. Oh, my sweet boy.

“It’s okay.” I kiss the top of his head and breathe him in. “I’ve got you.”

We start away in search of lunch and clean, dry laundry. It feels like a war crime to carry on like nothing’s happened, to even consider eating at a time like this, but I have to make sure their day continues with minimal turbulence; it is well and truly the only job I have.

That and protecting them. Once I’m confident they’re safe in the kitchen—Sally reassuring me about every single pointed edge of every hard surface—I tour the house, trying to meter my urgency with calm, cautious movement, extending my breaths with a mantra of *Fuck, fuck, fuck*.

Downstairs half bath: I make sure there’s no water on the floor to slip on. I check for chemicals, cleaning supplies under the sink, and find none. Sally must have done a sweep already. Those carved Norman arches feel much too low today. Somebody could smack their head, but at least it wouldn’t be one of the kids.

The conservatory doors are already locked, but I still drag a chair over to block the way. We are not setting foot inside an all-glass room today.

Upstairs: tidy away anything that can be tripped on. I take down a large painting of a horse that never sat right on its hook. The children play near it, and if it fell ...

Nothing I can do about the TV or the china cabinet or the children’s bookshelves upstairs.

I stop on the stairs and try to, try to, try to breathe.

The boot room. The guns. Oh my God, there’s so much.

I mustn’t run, but I do hurry, around to the far end of the house, nearly tripping over a sleeping Max in my haste. When I open the boot room door, he jumps up and runs in circles, thinking we’re going for a walk.

Ignoring him, I scour the shelves—the random tools have been tidied away. The old shotguns are still on their stands. No worries there, I guess; when we first moved here, I asked about shooting skeet, half joking, and Hugh said they'd been out of bullets for them since he was a teenager.

Hugh does, however, have ammunition for the Enfield No. 2 revolver one of the Treadways brought home after fighting in the Second World War. The box of bullets was a wedding present from one of his boarding school friends, a strange and macabre gift, I'd thought then, and now even more so. It must have been a joke about the Day, the kind only an outsider would make. A nonbeliever. Doesn't matter, though; the Enfield's gone, tidied away.

Between Hugh and Sally, this house is as danger-proofed as it can be. It's so old, though, such a Frankenstein's monster of a house. I'm not sure which would be most likely to collapse—the wing that's been slowly sinking into Lute's soil for a thousand years or the extensions that were popped up a century ago. Nothing and nowhere is safe.

I sit on the floor of the mudroom, gathering my knees to my chest until I can't take Max's attempts to lick me anymore. I use his back to hoist myself upright and head out the mud-spattered boot room door without him. He jumps up and peers through the window at me, despondent, but I can't be responsible for him bounding around right now.

I can barely breathe.

I walk around the side of the house, the gravel track between bushes where we keep the trash bins, and I lean against the hard stone of the house. My chest is caving in. I'm dying. It's taking me.

No, I'm panicking. This is a panic attack. I know because I've experienced it before.

I wasn't a mother then. I had no one to look after, not even a dog. It was just me and my guilt and Gran calling to check on me, not giving up, the phone ringing and ringing.

Breathe.

Okay. I do. I straighten. The stars that have gathered in my vision dance away, and I keep going, skirting the oldest, roughest edge of the house,

hiding from the reality of the back garden. From up on one of the ledges, a carved face leers down at me.

“Nina?” I hear Jo’s voice behind me, not shouting but insistent. “There you are.”

I take another step, instinctively fleeing, before I remember myself and turn.

“Someone needs to tell her parents.” She’s following me along the gravel path, limping heavily. “I’ll look after the children.”

The two statements don’t seem to connect.

“Yes, of course, they’ll need to know,” I say. “What happened?”

I nod to her ankle, noticing she’s not putting weight on it.

She grimaces. “Twisted it coming out of the kitchen just now. It’s nothing. Stupid.”

I turn to stare numbly at the crowd scattered around the lawn like refugees. “Who do you think would be best? Who are they closest with?”

Avery’s parents live west of the village above the beach where the puffins roost, a house with green awnings they roll out when it’s sunny. They still have a play set in their small back garden, even though Avery’s their only child. Maybe they kept it there in hopes of grandchildren.

I blink hard, staving off a rising tide. “Brian lives two down from them, doesn’t he? But he’ll need to see to the ... the body.”

“It has to be you.”

I’m knocked dizzy by the *chosen one* fervor in her voice.

“You or Hugh, but I don’t think he’s coming down. You tell me.” She nods irritably to an upper window.

The study. When I step back, I can make out my husband’s outline between two thick curtains, his arms bent like the window frame is keeping him from falling. Does he know everyone can see him? Does he care?

“This is the tradition, then.” I lower my voice. “One of us visits loved ones after people die? Nobody told me. There should be a manual.”

The panic tightens in my chest, like fingers closing.

“It’s not that complicated, Nina.” She brushes her hands off on her hips. “Your life is easy for seven bloody years, and then you step up. For *one day*. Can you manage that?”

I reel, physically. God knows it doesn't take much to bowl me over right now, but Jo's never spoken this way to me before. Even now I can see her spooling her anger back in, reassembling it in her head into something more palatable, but I'm not sure I want her to. I'm angry too.

I want to scream with rage, at this place for doing this to us, at all of them for fucking accepting it for millennia, just taking the hit and expecting me to do the same. I'm mad at Jo. *Step up*, she says. Under these circumstances.

I'm mad that I'm apparently the weakest person here. At my mother, my sister for making me this way, at Hugh for leaving me out here alone, but mostly I am sick to death of myself, my fear, my inaction.

Something in me has got to die today.

"I'm sorry," Jo says, eyes closed. She can't look at me and say it.

"No." I cross my arms, tight, tight. "You're right."

"I'm blaming you for things that are not your fault. He should be doing this, is the truth. That's the tradition. He should be doing a lot of things."

I can do it, though. I can do more.

I peer back up at the window. Hugh's not framed there anymore, but that certainly doesn't mean he's on his way down here. I picture him filling the leather chair in the corner of his study, his knuckles curled white around the metal studs in the arms. Maybe that old box of photographs is in his lap and he's doing what Matthew was doing this morning, staring down at the faces of ghosts.

"I'll speak to him," I say. "Even if he won't go, he can give me a script, anything he picked up from his—"

Jo interrupts with a rasping laugh. "More likely, he'll wind up convincing *you* not to go, and then where will we be?"

As insulted as I feel about the picture she paints of me, she's right again. If I go up there, he'll do everything he can to lock the door behind me. And I don't know how much energy I have left to stand up to him.

Right now, the front door hangs wide open. From inside the foyer, I hear the clock chiming the half hour. So much time left in the Day and only four gone.

Only four gone. Jesus, listen to me.

Jo waves to someone over my shoulder. I turn to see Matthew standing on the gravel drive, not one toe touching the green of the property. He looks like he's only staying awake through sheer force of will.

"Matthew can walk you over, help you decide what to say," Jo says. "He's good with words."

I shoot her a side-eye. "Is there another Matthew here I've never met?"

"When it matters," she amends, sighing. "Be quick; you don't want the Smiths wandering over here and finding out this way."

I walk with her back to the kitchen door and peek in at Charlie, resting his head on his elbows, staring at the light dancing on the wooden tabletop, Emma peeling stickers from a sheet and gently placing them into her sticky curls. She sips orange juice from a plastic cup, and a little dribble slides down her chin and I need to go in there, to wipe it up for her, but then I'll never leave.

"I will protect them with my life." I've never heard anyone say this so fiercely as Jo. "You know I will."

"I know." I walk away, backward, watching them disappear from view, the kitchen door getting smaller. "Oh God. I can't."

I curse and breathe and curse again, my heart flapping, frantic. This could be the last time I see them. It defies logic, even parent logic. I cannot imagine leaving my children or losing my children. Even as my eyes well up, my fear goes numb. My brain won't allow the idea of it.

I cannot imagine what Avery's parents are about to go through, what I'm about to put them through. They'll need someone who understands. In that way, I'm glad he's coming.

Matthew scratches the back of his neck as he watches me cross the lawn. When I reach him, he nods to the house. "He left this to you, then."

"I took it on myself." We walk up the drive, a few yards separating us. Meters, whatever. I cross my arms against the sea breeze, but breathe it in deeply. I feel impossibly awake. Everything looks sharply edged, vivid, jewel colored. "You don't have to come with me. I know the way."

Instead of determined, my voice comes out prickly. Maybe it always does. It's no wonder he avoids me. Maybe he can see me more clearly than everybody else here.

“Do you want to be alone?” he asks.

That’s a more complex question than it should be.

“No,” I finally say.

We pass into the empty lane of the village, our footsteps crunching. The pub is closed—vacant, it seems. The terraced cottages are quiet and dark. It seems that people are either at home hiding from the Day or up at the house, facing it. Matthew and I are alone out here together, and I feel it.

Breaking the silence between us is like stirring concrete. “How should I put it to them?”

“They’ll know already when they see you coming.”

His voice is more gravelly than usual. I wonder if he inhaled too much of the smoke at the site of the fire. I’ll see if Jo will make him some honey tea when we get back.

“Don’t give details, nothing like that. Put it simply. Then be there while it works its way through them. You’ll know when to leave.”

I’m not so sure I will. I stopped trusting my instincts a long time ago.

We leave the village and cross the small southern heath to the few houses clustered along the beach. Past their slate roofs, the sunlight glimmers off the sea. To the east, I see a trio of heads in the distance. Jenny Pike’s short blond hair is recognizable enough for me to identify the three women all the way from here. Jenny, Wendy, Liz. I’d thought they’d gone to Sunnan, but instead they’re on Lute, staring out at it.

The voices from Sunnan carry a little over the water here. You have to stop and really listen, though. I hear kids, high. One of the teachers calling to them.

I wish I knew them better, the mums. I was the outsider coming here, but I still should have made more of an effort to join in or at least return their small efforts with more enthusiasm. I was too confused about my role here, where I fit, and I hadn’t made new friends since college. I was rusty. I needed to warm up. Now it feels too late. There was a window, and I missed it.

Liz pours from a thermos into Jenny’s outstretched cup. They’re having tea, the three of them. I wonder what they’re talking about. Maybe they’re close enough to be honest, to say out loud what they’ve all got to be

thinking, wondering whether this is the closest they'll ever again be to their children.

I can't believe they stayed on Lute. I *can* believe they sent their children off. It's a postcard-perfect day, a day for paddling and tree climbing and harassing crustaceans in rock pools and skipping stones. They should be with them. Their responsibility is to their kids, living things they created, not to a bit of land jutting out of the channel.

As I follow Matty up an incline, losing sight of the mums, I try to soothe myself by picturing their children playing here again, but instead I find myself imagining that photograph come to life, *Hugh, Matty, Andy starting Rec*. Three boys with broad sunny-day grins.

"Were you friends with Hugh when you were little?" My throat closes up with panic as soon as I get the question out.

Matthew doesn't react one way or the other.

I fill the silence with a forced laugh. "I've just seen pictures of you is all, arm in arm, your little school uniforms. And somebody named Andy? I guess he moved away?"

It could be true. This could be a different Andy from the one buried in the churchyard.

Matthew frowns now. He thinks I'm teasing him. I should have just asked directly.

My hair drapes my face in the fresh wind. I scrape it back behind one ear. "Hugh finds ways of avoiding the question. That's why I'm asking you. It's frustrating."

The way Matthew stares at me now makes it clear how inappropriate he finds this conversation, and okay, yeah, I have to agree. I've just admitted to communication problems in my marriage, like he's my therapist, like I'm waiting for him to tell me what to do. Jo's right—I'm a piece of tissue paper, a flower on the heath, bending in the wind, not a person at all.

I should push back more with Hugh. When he goes icy, I always choose to inch away, tiptoeing back to warmer ground. I'm good at being careful. It's partly self-preservation to play by Hugh's unspoken rules, and it's hard to know how much is him and how much is cultural. I need to fit into this

marriage, this country, this island, or I'll be disliked and rejected. Or *ejected*. I'll have to go back home to a place that's never felt like home.

I hate fighting. That's the truth. I hate the irrational feeling of it. The violence of confrontation. I hate how naked anger makes me feel.

That's not moral purity. Just cowardice.

Matthew has stopped walking, and I think for a second it's because he's too exasperated by my question, confession, and subsequent silence to continue along with me another awkward step.

Then I see the green awnings rolled up, the peonies in their cheerful little window boxes. I see Gemma Smith standing in the window already, watching our approach. Her gray-blond hair is tied up in a messy bun. Her hands are pressed against the glass of the window, holding her steady as her body sinks out from under her.

I should wave. Raise one hand, no smile, a hint of what's to come. Before my body catches up with my thoughts, she calls behind her and starts away from the window, face in her hands.

She knows. My eyes sting hot, my lungs hard as iron. I have to be strong, an authority, some sort of a balm here.

I glance back at Matthew, an unwilling reflex. He smiles tightly. There's sympathy in his eyes, maybe even support, but I can see from his stance that he's not coming in with me. This is my job.

The door opens. Avery's father, Tom, fills the entryway.

"She's gone, then?" His voice is very high. "She's gone. I know."

I start to cry, and so does he. He leans against the door while his wife waves me in, lips pressed tightly together, unable to speak for fear of wailing.

It's a small cottage, and as I enter into a colorful, crammed sitting room, I'm reminded that they run a photography business from their home. Glossy postcards sit stacked on their coffee table, business as usual—puffins, seals, the lighthouse, sunlit and cheery, Lute Island, an impossible idyll.

Gemma waves for me to sit in a high-backed chair by the window as she lowers herself carefully onto the wine-colored sofa, but I hear the grumble of a boiling kettle in the kitchen and freeze.

They saw me coming, they knew what it meant, and the first thing they did was put the kettle on to offer me tea. My God, the graciousness of that.

I start toward the kitchen.

Tom stands.

I shake my head. “Please. Let me.”

There. An instinct.

I’ve never been in this house before, and it feels both familiar and strange to take it over, like I’ve stepped into a brand-new corner of my own home. I’m being intrusive, acting like I know my way around their bright tiled kitchen, but I know that this is the right thing here. It’s a simple action that I am more than capable of performing. Three mugs, three pyramid bags from the tin, pour, wait, remove, milk—they won’t take sugar, I’m guessing; Avery’s healthy diet had to come from somewhere—walk two mugs carefully into the living room.

Avery. Healthy. I’m going to be sick again before this day is done, but not here. Not in the face of their larger grief.

They take the mugs from me, cradling them silently while I go back for mine. I draw a breath at the threshold to the sitting room, then take the offered chair.

Gemma moves her lips. She forms a word, with effort, and holds it in place, then she slumps, like she’s given up on saying it. Her husband puts a hand on her back, his eyes locked on his mug, the steam.

She closes her eyes at his touch and swallows. Then she tries again.

“You know that it might happen.” Her words are tightrope careful. “From the moment they’re born.”

Her face contorts, and I see what she’s seeing—Avery, born, just a child, just possibility, a new thing, red with need and life and hope. It wasn’t that long ago.

Why didn’t you leave? I wonder, but I will never ever ask it.

Will you leave, Nina? Knowing what you know now?

Go on and run.

They want me to say something.

“Was it—?” Tom stops himself.

I can't tell them details. If we can all manage to spare them that, at least for today, it might ease the blow. They might want to see the body. Everyone mourns differently. I won't be the one to describe it, here in their sitting room, where they work and curl up together, where Avery left her shoes strewn by the TV set, canvas flats with purple stitched flowers.

"She was happy," I say. "All day. We were going to have a picnic out on the lawn. She wanted to try a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She was bringing juice out and the kids were waving at her and she was smiling."

I stop there. It's enough, it's a picture. A true one.

Gemma's eyes are glittering. "She loved them so much, Lady Tr—"

"Nina," I cut in, insistent.

She nods. "Nina, I have to tell you, she came home every day just full of stories of them. Little silly things Emma did or how clever Charlie was. She was just proud, like she was their big sister. They were a real light in her life, and we are *so grateful*."

I reach over and take her hand. She holds on like I'm keeping her from rushing away in a current, and I marvel at how she's gone straight into past tense, just like that. Avery is in the past. I can't hear any effort in the blend, pain paired with instant acceptance.

I can't accept it. Maybe there's something to the fact that they're both from Lute families, generations old, and everything is tangled up in the past here, everyone is lost eventually, and some part of you is saying goodbye from the moment of hello, but I don't understand this, it's not working its way through me very quickly at all.

Gemma's head slumps and Tom starts to cry and—no. I'm wrong. They're not used to this. They may know the script, but no one ever gets used to this.

Gemma's hand slips politely away, smooths the edge of the sofa beside her. Matthew was right; this moment would be clear to anyone with sense enough to see it. It's time for me to go, to let them react the way they need to, together and alone.

"Our door is open up at the house," I say as I stand.

They rise too, forcing smiles with incredible strength of will.

“If you’re up for company today, if you need anything at all, please come and join us.”

“Are you doing the dinner?” Tom asks, and Gemma stiffens, shooting him a look, like he’s being incredibly rude.

“I’m not sure,” I say, realizing as the words come out how useless they are. The last thing anybody needs today are tentative plans. “I just need to check with Hugh. We probably will, but either way, we’re hoping people will gather.”

Gather doesn’t seem like the right word. Huddle. Convene. Shelter. Not that Alder House is safe. That illusion’s been stripped from it forever. It’s a place of horrors now, just like everything else here.

“Thank you,” Gemma says. “We’ll see how we ... Yes, we’ll see.”

She holds the door, and Tom waves goodbye from the sitting room, leaning on the sofa like his legs are giving out.

The door shuts, and I exhale. I walk away with smart little steps, job done, but my hands have begun to shake, my teeth chattering, the June day gone Siberia cold.

Job done, and what’s next? Who’s next?

Matthew is waiting for me on the path, staring away at the northern sky. As I approach, he falls casually into step beside me.

“You didn’t need to wait,” I say. “I’m fine.”

I draw my arms around myself to mask my shudders.

He glances at me, quickly away.

“Thank you,” I say.

He nods.

We walk in silence for a few minutes, then I think, *I hope I handled that well*, and when Matthew answers, “I’m sure you did,” I realize I’ve said it out loud.

I hear something behind us. A *clip-clop*.

“Pony,” I murmur, turning.

Matthew squints at me in question.

“I heard a horse,” I say. I still hear it. *Clip-clop, clip-clop*, approaching the high street, just out of view. “Do you hear that? There aren’t any horses on Lute.”

“There aren’t,” he agrees.

He listens, shakes his head. Nothing.

The sound drops away, and I blink, bewildered.

He’s watching me. “That’s not to say you didn’t hear it. Lute goes a bit funny on the Day.”

The pub is dark, but the door is a little ajar, I see now. I peek inside as we walk past. Nobody’s there. There are a few casks of ale sitting in crates by the side of the building, untouched.

“People were there earlier?” I ask.

“It wasn’t a good idea,” Matthew said. “They were trying their best, but.”

“Too many memories,” I say.

He scratches his beard in answer.

“I would guess there aren’t many places left without bad memories on this island.”

He keeps walking.

I speed up to catch him. “This was last time, though? The pub?”

“Three dead. Back to back to back, all within...” He thinks. “An hour. Less.”

“Not yours.” I’d always assumed his was the burned-up cottage by the lighthouse, but maybe I was wrong.

He glances at me. “No. We were ... No.”

That’s all I’m getting and more than I have any right to expect.

“Was it a fire at the pub?” I remember burn damage when we came for Hugh’s dad’s funeral. Roof repairs, charred stone, all fixed up and freshly painted by the time we moved here permanently a few months later.

“The third was from fire. Sam, that’s Lannie’s son, he died from choking. He’d gone to the toilet and latched the door, the poor fool, so no one could help.”

I never knew Lannie had children. I’m tempted to ask, but don’t dare interrupt. This is the longest stream of consecutive words I’ve ever gotten out of Matty Clare.

“As they found him,” he goes on, “Mary Whitmer brushed up against a bad socket. That killed her and started the fire that took Gus.”

“So that was three, and then yours, and Hugh’s father, and...?”

“Last one was drowning. The American.”

I jolt to a stop, staring at him. “There was an American here last time?”

“A poet.” He points to the upstairs of a timber-framed cottage to the west, a holiday rental that’s hardly ever occupied. “Lived up there.”

“Nobody told me another American had lived here.”

“He wasn’t here long. He knew about the tithe. He was taken by it; it had a certain romance for him, I don’t know. I think he probably killed himself, to be honest. That’s the only way I can figure it, why he would have been out there, his clothes all folded on the beach, no towel, no note. I don’t know for sure. He was an odd one. But Lord Treadway...” He glances at me, a queasy look in his eye. “Hugh’s father, that is. He tried to save him. Pulled him out, gave him CPR, did everything as if we were on the mainland on any other day.”

“Was that wrong?” I feel weirdly defensive of a relative I never met. “You make it sound like a stupid thing to do.”

“Not at all. It was absolutely the right thing to do. Even if you can’t change the outcome, if it’s all set and settled in advance like some folks here think, you’ve still got to try, haven’t you?”

The question brings me right back to college, my old philosophy lectures. If fate exists, can it be fought? Should it be? It was all so theoretical then.

“I think he felt some guilt too that this should happen to a *guest*, as it were.” Matthew sighs. “Someone not even English. I understand it. But I regret it. Wish he hadn’t done it.”

“Because that’s when he died.” I can connect almost all the dots now. Hugh had told me his father slipped on the rocks on the beach, and it had never made sense, how someone could die that way. Such a silly little thing. A foot out of place, a jutting innocent weapon in place, and life gone, hope gone, orphans made, parents not parents anymore.

I glance at Matthew. He doesn’t glance back.

Ernest Withers is standing in his front doorframe, staring out at the lane, tapping his heel on the floor. I give him a wave as we pass. He looks like he wants to wave back but doesn’t dare move a muscle. A college friend from

California once told me that the best place to stand in an earthquake was in a front doorway, sturdiest part of the house. Or maybe she was telling me that was debunked. I can't remember now. Ernie is a fisherman and built like a fishing boat, sparse, overgrown blond hair over a tublike frame. He goes out in all weather, sometimes alone, and his nets are always writhing and taut when he comes back to dock with an eager grin. I hardly recognize him today. There's no blood in his cheeks at all.

His family has been on this island longer than Hugh's. It obviously doesn't make him any more cavalier about all this.

"Be careful!" he shouts, so suddenly it sends a jolt through me.

"And you," Matthew calls back.

I nearly call back to Ernie too, something about joining us at the house, but not knowing what exactly I'm offering, I stop myself.

Matthew and I trudge up to the house's long drive.

"Do you think we should have a dinner? Sally says it's tradition, but Hugh hasn't mentioned a thing and I feel like it falls to me to—"

"Stop asking my opinion." Matthew shakes his head, jaw locked tight. "It's naught to do with me, Lady Treadway. This is your house, your decision."

He starts walking again.

"Why do you hate me so much?"

Any other day, the question would have made me shrivel with shame as I thought it, let alone voiced it, but not today. This seems like as good a time as any to ask *why*. And I've asked it calmly. No emotion spilling loose.

He turns, sputtering wordlessly. "You..."

I could wind it back, blush, laugh as if I'd been joking—it might be kinder—but before I can decide one way or the other, his chest deflates and he starts away again, muttering behind him, "I can see why you would think that."

It's confirmation, a slap, but I asked for it, didn't I? No, in fact, I asked for an answer as to why, and he hasn't provided it. I'm gathering my expression back into what I think must be the very closest reaction to the right one, neutral, icy, when he turns fully back around, planting his feet, committing to the conversation.

“It’s not, I’m not ... You don’t need to worry about me.”

Something about the grind in his voice, the dark sharpness in his eyes, even as they’re studiously trained away from me, does make me worry.

“I’m not sitting around stewing,” he says. “I have a life. You know?”

“Of course,” I supply, something to say, anything.

“I make damn certain I’m not thinking about you. So—”

“But that’s exactly ... *Why?* Why should it be so hard?”

I should let it go, I know, but this nagging thing, we’re at it now. Finally. If the tithe is good for anything, it’s for stripping away all the layers of politeness that stand between us and the truth.

I strip away all my coolness, while I’m at it. Fuck the right facial expression, the right words, the right action.

“What’s so horrific about me?” I ask. “I’m just...”

Oh, I hear my mother: *a taker, a killer, a demon, a mistake.*

“—a *random person.*”

“No. No, you’re not.” He shakes his head, fast, frowning deeply. “You’re Hugh’s wife. And my wife, she’s gone. It’s just me now, but—”

He bites back something, some word, some curse as his voice is smothered by grief. I understand it as clearly as if he’d given a four-hour lecture.

I’m an insult to Julia’s memory. Me here, her dead. Julia, with her pale curls and apple cheeks and laughing eyes. Every time I see her photo on Jo’s sitting room wall, I think she was someone I might have been friends with. Instead, I arrived on the day of her funeral. And here we are—Hugh, blithely enjoying family life, and me, oblivious to the pain around me, the foreign lady with her erratic strolls and her cluelessness and her untrained dog and her beautiful, living children. The very fact of me is repugnant.

He’s still watching me, breathing unevenly like he’s winded from a fight, and then he laughs.

It transforms him. He looks ten years younger. He throws his hands in the air.

“Are you really going to ask me to spell it out? I didn’t take you for one of those girls who feigns ignorance to rake in flattery, but maybe you are.”

He swallows hard. “Maybe I will start to dislike you. God *bless*, Nina, I’m begging you, give me a reason to dislike you.”

My name. He’s said my name.

He’s said it like an incantation, and his eyes, when they finally land on mine, aren’t cold at all. They’re warm as candles, wide and plaintive and unblinking. He could be kneeling before me in prayer. In desperate awe.

The thought of Matthew Clare kneeling close to me, expectant, his head tilted, lips parted. Jesus, what an image. Every cell in my body is suddenly bubbling.

He is much more dangerous than I knew.

I’ve mulled it for years, and I was wrong, and why have I kept mulling it? I think of him when he’s not around, wondering, replaying odd glances, looking for answers. When he’s near me, it’s fraught, but worse somehow after he leaves. I watch him from the corner of my eye when we pass each other. Turn and watch his back as he keeps going. I’ve always told myself it’s because I’m wary of him, but wary is very different from aware.

I’d wanted to know his opinion of me, and some part of me must have wanted this to be the answer.

I’m horrible. I’m *thrilled*.

“Okay,” I say.

He laughs again, but this time, it’s defeated. There’s a note of finality in it. “Right. Well. That’s that.”

In mutual silent decision, we walk on, he ahead, me behind, my eyes trained on the curved pediment above the house’s tall front doors. Even forcibly holding him in my periphery, I am aware of every step Matthew takes, the cadence of it, the swing of his legs.

I have a strange sense of vertigo, of the world tilting beneath me, as we walk.

I felt this same sensation seven years ago when I met Hugh and figured it was just excitement coupled with the rocking of the ocean liner. I was physically pulled to Hugh the night we met, in the booth of that jewel-dark lounge, in his suite, as he strode up behind me and I knew exactly what we would do next. I felt like I was sliding off the edge of the world. Only in

hindsight did I realize it wasn't the ship giving me that feeling. It was my body knowing before I did that everything was about to change.

Matthew's different from Hugh, so different. My husband is smooth, and he's jagged. Cool and hot. Stone and wood.

And I'm just a flimsy flower bending with the breeze. *Enough.*

At the lawn, I reach out to Matthew, just a quick gesture to pause him, but he stares at my hand, and I glance back at the house, hoping no one saw.

"Let's have the dinner," I say.

He nods, then squints. Digs at the gravel with the ball of his boot before looking up. "You asked about Andy Blanchard."

"Oh." I blink. "Yes."

"Tim's youngest. You might have guessed that. And you've obviously guessed that we were mates, the three of us. Did everything together for as far back as I can remember." He screws up his mouth like he's tasted something bitter. "The first tithe we were old enough to take part in, be conscious of—I don't know what the right word is—we were all seven. Andy was a bit older, bit braver. He had a certain swagger. For a little kid anyway."

Matty grins now, laughing to himself.

"He ... I don't know what possessed him, but he went out to ride his bike on the heath. Hollered down the island for us to come with him, but it took some time for Hugh to sneak out of Alder House, and for me, there was no chance. My mum was too protective. We didn't even eat on the Day when I was growing up, just sipped cold water and read books and played cards and went to bed when the bells rang up at the church to let us know it was done. Anyway, Hugh was the one who found him."

He scratches his forehead, his back rising as he breathes. I wait, my own breath held.

"Andy's wheel had caught a rut, maybe. He was thrown a few meters and snapped his neck. Just like that, gone. His face had turned green, Hugh said. He'd had sweets in his pocket to share with us—Andy, that is—and the goats were swarming him, biting at his clothes to get at them, and Hugh started to fight them. He panicked, might have gotten it into his head that they'd killed Andy. He ripped the throat out of one with his hands. He was

covered in blood when he got back to the village and didn't say a word to anybody, not even me, for weeks after that."

He never said a word to me either. Never even mentioned the name *Andy*.

A muscle works in Matthew's jaw.

"I know why he runs. We all know. We all feel what he feels. We all have stories like his, and that's the truth. First body you see, first time the Day becomes real—you don't forget it. But Hugh's the only one with the luxury to make so many bloody excuses. He's had to sit exams or he missed the train or was too ill or hungover to come back. And maybe there was a reason for it last time, like Sally says, maybe he was meant to meet you out there and bring you back."

My cheeks go hot, and he's not even looking at me anymore, just staring down at his dusty boots.

"But the fact of the matter is, this last time, Lord Treadway told him if he ran, he wasn't welcome back on Lute. If you leave, don't come home. Told him right there in front of all of us at the Dane's Head. And what did he do? Heard his father was dead and came straight back with not one word of apology. Hugh thinks he can share in the spoils and not the sacrifice of this place, and I'm sick of it. I'm done making excuses for him."

I inhale, with effort. It's all I can do. There's so much I didn't know. That his last conversation with his father was a fight. That last time wasn't the first time he'd missed the Day, that he'd found a way to be off Lute *every* Day since Andy died. That there was an Andy to mourn in the first place. I feel like I'm trying to keep my footing as waves buffet me.

"I'll let the folks back in the village know about the dinner." Matthew marches past me and back up the gravel drive before I can attempt another word.

I'm alone for the moment. I don't hurry home. I wade down the path, filing away everything I've just heard.

The night I met Hugh, he'd seemed strangely familiar, but it took two rounds of drinks in an upper-deck lounge to realize why. I saw his face reflected in the dark ship window, and a memory connected.

When I was twelve, we were traveling across Florida to see Gran, and we stopped off at a Shell station. Mom went inside to pay, and Becca started laying into me—I was being too quiet or not quiet enough—so I went outside and paced, waiting, breathing in gasoline fumes. I walked by what I'd thought was an empty parked car and peeked in, the way kids do, and a man stared back from the driver's seat. He looked almost terrified at the sight of me, but he kept staring, unblinking, like he was daring himself. And of course, I got rattled, hurried back to the car. I had the sense that something very wrong had just happened. When we got to Gran's, the six o'clock news was on, and there he was, his mug shot. The police were looking for him.

I never said a word. I was twelve—who would have believed me? Or if they did believe me, would I then be blamed for putting our family in danger? I got blamed for everything else, after all. And the truth was, some part of me didn't want him to be caught. I had no idea what his crime was—he could have been a child murderer for all I knew—but on a basic, bone-deep level, I wanted everybody who was running from something to get away from it.

I don't know if he ever got caught. I'd half convinced myself over the years that I'd imagined it. It was a different person. A coincidence.

In appearance, Hugh couldn't have been more different from that man in the car, but there was something about him that brought that day in Florida to mind. He had a furtiveness. A haunted shade about him. He looked like a fugitive. And that same old instinct rose in me, the salute of a fellow survivor. I wished him a successful escape.

If I'd known all of this that night, I wonder if I'd have felt the same way.

I listen for voices around the house in the back garden but hear only the wind shaking the leaves above me.

A branch—not even, a twig—falls down a few feet in front of me, and I gasp, holding my chest to keep my frantic heart in place. It could have been a branch. It could have been farther back, or I could have been walking faster. Twigs fall all the time, but this feels like a warning.

I have to see my children. Now. I pick up the pace, away from the tree-lined drive, a beeline to the servants' entrance.

Before I reach the kitchen door, Jo flies out to intercept me.

Her voice is carefully hushed. “Another.”

It takes me a second to meet her eyes and realize she’s scanning my face with worry—asking, not telling. Relief washes through me.

“Oh, I ... No! Not that I know of. Not—” I can’t bring myself to say, “Not yet.” It doesn’t need saying.

“Thank God.” She squints past me, to where Matthew disappeared beyond the converging lines of wych elms. “You looked like something had happened. It’s all hitting you in waves, isn’t it?”

So much of it. Not all of it. Not yet.

2:30 P.M.

They're coming now, the people of Lute, and the garden is filling with voices. Word has spread, and now my neighbors are gathering to help what can't be helped while I watch, mute, knuckles pressed to my lips so hard my teeth cut into them. They're dressing the body that was Avery mere hours ago, wrapping her in pure white bedsheets, lifting her with gentle care, and, four to a corner, bearing her away.

I still don't know to where. A staging post outside the police station, maybe, awaiting an official reckoning from the mainland tomorrow.

No. There's nothing official about the Day.

I picture them—I'm sure of it, somehow—laying her down in the grove beside the tithe stone, beside John, identically shrouded, and the strangers or whatever remains of them. It's the right place.

I imagine something else now, as vivid as a memory. A procession of islanders walking from the village to the grove. They volunteered to be sacrificed, John told me once, insisting almost gleefully that the forensic evidence proved there was no struggle before the blow. I picture them honored, garlanded, all in white, fighting to keep their chins up, their feet moving forward, willing their eyes to keep shining with pride instead of terror.

A sound makes me turn. Not even a sound—a vibration, a feeling in my stomach, my legs, the sense of people marching. It's not the men carrying Avery, probably just my mind filling in the imagined procession, but there's something more rigid about it. Thump. Thump. Thump. Like an army.

My heart pounds as I cover my eyes, straining to scan the horizon. No ships. No planes, no invading force. We're fine.

And now the sound's gone too, like it never was.

Lute goes a bit funny on the Day.

Down the drive they go. Where did they even find that pure white sheet? Someone offered it from their linen closet. Not us; Hugh wouldn't offer a damn thing today. They probably have seven folded up neatly somewhere, bleached and reused every seven years. I might know the answers to these things if I'd believed before today. But I never would have believed. This is just the way of things. They were right; I had to experience it, and it's not over yet.

I see that white flash through the line of trees once, twice, and I keep watching, even though I know that every bit of Avery is gone now.

My heart feels like something is handwashing it, wringing it out, over and over. Maybe half the people die from accidents on the Day and the others die of grief.

Ian and Jenny Pike have come with a few other villagers. They hold each other tightly, watching Avery go, then whisper something to each other and slide apart. Ian looks over at me with a sad nod, and I nod back, not just *hello*, but *yes, I see it now, you were right*.

He knew I didn't believe that night at the Dane's Head when he leaned on the bar and told me the story of the first Day, nearly two thousand years ago. The day the sacrifice was changed from voluntary to random.

The pub was hushed that night, completely rapt, though the others must have heard Ian's retelling dozens of times before.

"They say it was many years after Caesar took Britannia that a Roman legion finally made its way to Lute."

He pulled pints while he talked, which I found impressive.

"They had infrastructure to lay down all along the way, you see—long, straight roads and villas and spas, temples to their gods, and the odd Boudicca to fight. When they got here, they must have expected the Lutes to put up a similar fight, but to their great shock, there was a welcoming party waiting for them. Not a weapon in sight!

"Can you imagine that? These war-weary men, ready for bloodshed yet again, offered food and shelter and music and rest. What a massive relief that must've been. In those months that followed, I'm sure they turned their

minds to the work of civilizing the Celts, but eh, maybe not. I like to think they were just enjoying a nice, long holiday.

“Then came the Day.”

No one so much as breathed when he said that. I remember how the room went still, like all the air had been sucked out of it.

“Now, back then—two thousand years ago, it was—the Druid priests oversaw the sacrifices of the Day, and it was a huge honor to give up your life. People asked for it. It was a reward. In other places in the Celtic world, I’ve heard tell, it was kings who laid down their lives, and so it was here. Seven people, one for each year of blessings, ready to go. They’d have been feasted the night before, been given herbs to calm them down on the morning, and then would come the procession, up the island to the stone.

“Now I’m thinking of those poor Romans.” Ian laughed here, pushing off from the bar. “They must have loved the party and been right confused the next day to see everybody heading up for the oak grove. They’d seen it before, in Gaul, in Germania, and they knew their orders. Human sacrifice was barbaric, it was un-Roman, it was simply *not on*. So, a bit sleepy from the feasting, bit worse for wear perhaps, they scrambled into their armor and weaponry and set off right quick to put a stop to it.

“They barred the way to the grove, they say. Made a little phalanx with their shields and swords, and nobody really knows how it kicked off, but kick off it did.”

Nobody knows any of this, I remember thinking, hiding it with a smile.

“Somebody tried to get past. A Roman objected. And before you knew it, it was a right scrap. A sword fell as if flung downward by the gods themselves, a spear was thrust to prevent the swell of bodies, and when clearer minds prevailed and everyone stepped back, seven people were dead, bleeding into the heath. Not just the ones who’d signed up neither. Random folks. Men and women stabbed. One Roman, bludgeoned by his own shield.”

He’d shrugged there, an admission of his flights of fancy.

Then his face went slack. “A child. Trampled.”

Sadness saturated the room, so thick I felt it ripple against me. This wasn’t a history lesson anymore.

“And that was it. Like it or not, Lute was taking its seven. The priests stepped aside, and so did the Romans and everyone else. No use fighting it. The sacrifice was set, and from then on, it was Lute alone that would decide who and how.”

There was a silence, a heartbeat, before I asked, “What happened to the Romans? Were they driven out?”

Ian laughed. “No! We’re likely part Roman. Jenny’s got that fiery Italian blood still.”

His wife whapped him, rolling her eyes.

At my bemused expression, Hugh filled in the rest. “The legionnaires stayed, they say. Married into the community. Gave up their allegiance to Rome.”

“Once you’ve been through the Day,” Jo had said, “you’re one of us.”

I clench my fists now, looking around.

Sally is scouring the steps, and I nearly shout for her to leave it, to flee the scene, to stop working for five minutes, for fuck’s sake, but then I realize she needs it gone. She’s got her teeth gritted as she scrubs. She won’t let me help, so I stay outside, at least, and bear witness, keeping the children in close range. I watch their every single minute move, making sure they’re not heading toward the edge of the green, where the island ends in a cliff face, watching the trees for falling branches, the sky for birds, the people passing for loosely held pointy objects—I can’t think of anything else, but I try with every blink. In the end, I force myself to imagine a protective dome around Charlie and Emma, just to get my breath back.

They should stay away from that hawthorn. I glare at it as it shifts in the wind, in the light. Its shadow has started to creep onto the lawn like a great clenched hand.

I sit on the grass with the children after they have a run around, Charlie picking at the hem of my dress, Emma resting her head in my lap, letting me pull my fingers through her warm, damp hair, and I catch myself thinking maybe it’ll be me. It would be so much easier if it were me.

It’s not only a selfish thought but a stupid one. There are three left to go. It could be all of us, and that’s not even counting Hugh.

My husband, Lord Treadway, still watching from the bow window upstairs. Even when I can't see his dark profile, the movement of the curtains, I can sense him standing there, and something bitter surges through me. I wish he would come down so I can get a good look at him, see if I still recognize him after everything I've just learned.

I don't want to leave the children again, and I don't dare physically move them more than I need to. I will not walk them up those stained steps. Not today. God, maybe not ever.

I think of Matthew. I don't know why. I shouldn't think of him. I don't know where he is right now, if he'll come back tonight or return to his hermitage to stare at those photos in peace, and it bugs me. I'd thought I would feel better, clearer, but I feel worse knowing. I ache and fidget like I'm coming down with something.

Maybe it's the panic. That's mounting too. I can't sift through all the tangled yarn.

The day drifts onward, every minute a picture-pretty agony. Sally leaves and comes back with more sandwiches for everyone who's gathered now. Jo limps out bearing blankets that she lays out on the lawn with swift efficiency, along with a Snakes and Ladders box that the children pounce on.

The islanders smile vaguely at the food but don't step forward, and that's when I see Sally staring at me, prompting.

I stand, carefully, everything so cautious now. "Please, if you have any appetite, help yourselves. We'll serve a proper meal around..." I turn to Sally. "Seven? Is that doable?"

"Of course, milady," she says.

My title was voiced more loudly than usual, I notice, brassy with pride. I'm glad she's had the chance to be bolstered by that, at least, even if I still don't understand it.

PC Brian's here, taking a quick break. He's chosen an egg sandwich, bless him, slowly chewing every bite to a pulp with a thick line creased into his forehead. He's frightened of choking. Smart of him.

I wait until he's swallowed to ask him for the time.

He checks his frayed leather watch. "Three twenty-two."

The vicar's wife, Mary Warren, wanders over, staring at the sky. I hadn't realized she'd stayed behind rather than leaving with her husband to supervise the children. She blinks down at us with a sad smile. "I'm trying to work out the maths."

"Six hours, sixteen minutes left," Charlie says.

Mary was Charlie's teacher for a year before she retired, so I think for a second he's trying to show off, but when I look at him, I see that he's folding a blade of grass in half like a whistle, over and over, concentrating hard on it.

He doesn't look up.

"Still a clever lad, I see." Mary raises her eyebrows, her eyes distant, checking his work.

"You know, I think that's right." Brian says it lightly, but he looks as troubled as I'm beginning to feel. "Sunset's ... what?"

"Nine thirty-eight," Charlie answers.

I wish Charlie's mind were as quiet as Emma's right now. She's curled up exhausted in my lap, eyelids drooping, while he sits up straight, crisscross applesauce, hands flat on his knees. He's stoic as a statue, that boy, but he's taking on the weight of this. I can see it pinning him to the lawn.

I watch him until his blue eyes turn to meet mine, and smile: you're safe, Charlie, I'm here.

He only stares back. "Where's Daddy?"

"He's inside."

Charlie stands and starts jogging toward the house so quickly my heart lurches.

"Oh!" I let out a strangled cry, rising to reach for him. "Careful!"

He turns back. Emma tumbles from my lap with a start, and I gasp from the thud she makes. *She's fine, she's fine*. She begins to cry, reaching for my neck, but Jo swoops in, my hero again, taking Emma in her arms so I can stand and reach for my firstborn.

"Stay here, Charlie, please; it's safer out here."

"Why is it safer?" His forehead scrunches.

I have no answer. "I'll go get Daddy, okay? He can join the picnic."

This at least seems to make sense to him. He examines the sandwiches as I walk past the platter.

"I'll save him a ham one," Charlie says, nudging a cut triangle into a napkin.

"You eat too, sweetie," I call over my shoulder. "Have a cheese sandwich."

"I will," he murmurs. "Just not 'til you get back."

"Okay."

I close my eyes for a second against a waft of pain. As much as he seems to be taking in, as old as he seems for his age, Charlie still believes he's safer with me here. I'm his mother, and he has absolute faith in my ability to prevent harm. I don't even know the Heimlich maneuver or basic CPR. I don't know anything that can help anyone here. I have never felt more useless in my entire life.

"Okay, won't be a second. Guard those sandwiches."

I'm careful climbing the steps, but the image still blooms once I reach the top—me lying there in place of Avery, my head impaled, no one else hurt. Oh God, if only. If I could take it on for everyone, I would.

I keep thinking this, like a mantra. *It should be me.*

Seven years ago, crossing the Atlantic, I imagined myself sinking beneath the waves, my body sliding past the great gleaming hull, sucked into the froth. But this feels different. This feels like running toward instead of away.

Maybe it's just my way of pretending I have any control over this at all.

Once the great front door is shut behind me, I let my voice spill into the void. "Hugh?"

"Here."

He answers more quickly than I'd expected. He's on the ground floor, not upstairs after all. I'd been imagining his silhouette lurking behind the bay window curtains this whole time. There go my infallible instincts again.

I find him in the old leather armchair in the sitting room, his hands resting on his knees. He stares at his open palms as I come around the corner, fingers opening and closing, over and over.

"How many?" he asks, not looking up.

“Four.” I’m surprised he doesn’t know. How ridiculous, that I’m the one staying on top of all this. “You saw—”

“Avery, yes, I was just hoping there would have been more by now.”

“*Hoping.*”

He stares at me like I’m a stranger. “Of course. To lessen the odds.”

I turn away as the air is sucked from my chest. The silence between us grows roots and tendrils.

I think of the pictures upstairs. His mother. His friend. All the other silences between us.

I think of that great leather-bound book.

“What do the red dots mean, Hugh?” I address the question to the curved banister of the stairway, knowing that if I look at my husband, as angry as I feel right now, I still might not have the courage to ask it. “And the crosses?”

I hear him behind me, his foot tapping against the wooden floor. He doesn’t answer.

“The Xs,” I clarify.

“I know what you mean.” His voice is bone dry. “I am only trying to process the fact that you’ve been in my study, looking through my ledgers. How long have you been wondering, Nina? And you’re only just now asking me.”

Now I turn, forcing myself to look at him.

“What do they mean?” My throat is tight, but I push myself on. If all of this can hit me, it can hit him too. “Matthew Clare had an X through his name.”

I don’t know what kind of accusation I’m making, only that I’m making one.

Hugh blinks twice, quickly, then stares right back as if daring me to flinch first. “A cross ... beside ... his *family* name.”

He’s not usually so pedantic. He’s on the defensive, and he’s not answering the question. He’s got the master key ring dangling off one of his belt loops for some odd reason. He jangles it idly with his fingers as he watches me.

“Hugh—”

“You don’t need to know,” he says sharply.

He lifts his fists to his eyes, pressing his knuckles hard against them. The gesture softens him somehow, and me along with him. He looks like a little boy hiding in a corner from the monsters under his bed.

His hands drop as he sighs. “I will tell you tomorrow. I promise. All right?”

“No. No!” There might not be a tomorrow. “What is happening? Just—”

“Things have a way of coming true when you say them out loud, especially today, and I’d rather not tempt fate. I am leaving it at that, Nina, and that is final.”

I start away, steaming at the patriarchal tone ringing through his voice.

I cannot face him right now, cheeks flaming. I will lose my temper, the emotional high ground, the logic of the argument.

There she is, he’ll be able to say.

What hurts the most is not that this is out of character for us—Hugh patronizing, me giving in. It is us, isn’t it? This is our relationship. I’m Hugh’s dependent. I’m like a pretty souvenir he picked up on vacation and brought home with him. Not even that pretty! I’ve always wondered why me, what did he see in me above all others, but I haven’t wanted to face it full-on or push against it for fear of it all disappearing.

For seven years, I’ve allowed this dynamic to grow, to fester, and yet I cannot fight him now. Especially not now. For my entire life, I’ve been the finger in the dike that prevents the flood. All I can do is leave the scene with my composure intact.

“You’re holding the dinner, then,” he calls behind me, casual. “They got their way.”

I whirl back, my face reddening even more. “Who is *they*?”

He doesn’t answer. He jingles his key ring instead. I want to rip it off him.

“Yes, we’re doing the dinner. Which I didn’t even know was a tradition. Did you say no to it?”

Scant hours ago, that last question might have been an apology, a concession—“Sorry, dear, I didn’t realize!”—but right now it’s another accusation.

“It doesn’t matter.” He looks out toward the sea. “Let them come. Let it *all* come, have it out in the open. Come out of the shadows, you bastards. I’m sick of waiting for you to pounce.”

Who is he talking to? The only one I can see hiding in the shadows is him. He’s making less and less sense. I edge closer and breathe in, catching the whiff of whiskey on his breath. I see now that there’s a bottle on the floor just past him, empty, on its side.

He mistakes my approach for a conciliatory gesture. His arm glides outward, reaching for me, touching nothing.

A headache blooms under one of my temples. I close my eyes and press it. I’m overreacting. It’s the Day, that’s all. This man isn’t coherent, isn’t reasonable. My real husband will come back tomorrow, and if there’s any tension left between us, we’ll deal with it. We just need to wait out the Day. Six hours to go now or close enough.

What does Charlie say? “Are we nearly there yet?” Nearly *nearly* there, I always say back.

“I didn’t mean myself.” His voice rings out just as I reach the hall. “When I talked about the odds, I was talking about you and the children. Don’t get me wrong, I’d bloody well like to live too, but you matter more. I hope you understood that. Our family is everything.”

It’s no use quoting philosophers at him, he’s never been much interested, but surely it should be obvious to anyone with any sort of moral compass that you can’t pick and choose who suffers, who dies. If you accept this, this day, this *tithe*, then you’re subject to it.

“What about Sally?” I ask it quietly, listening hard to make sure she’s not coming up from the kitchen. “Do you care whether she lives?”

He stands from the chair, wobbling. “Of course. Sally too.”

“And Jo? Ian? Lannie? The Tavishes? The Tinkers?”

“I...”

I hope for a second his head is clearing, then I see him steering a course to the corner liquor cabinet, tumbler in hand. That stupid key ring wobbles back and forth against his hip like chimes.

“Brian? Tim?” I don’t know if I’m still talking in order to jar some sense back into him or just to get this raw, insane feeling out of myself. “The

Smiths. Did you care that Avery died? Are you sad at *all*?”

He pours, hand shaking.

“What about Matthew?” I say it even louder. “He was your best friend from, what, infancy?”

Along with Andy Blanchard.

The mention of Matty alone is enough to stop him, his whole body pausing for a single beat, but he doesn’t look at me. “Matthew is not my friend. Far from it.”

I feel unsafe in here. Good lord, of course I do, any rational person would. It’s the Day, the Day, the Day. I take in the carved chandelier above me, the tiles lining the doorjamb, the roof, the floor, all so jagged and slick and unsteady now, but the truth is that none of them frighten me as much as the man across the room.

“They keep asking about you.” This is it, what I’ve wanted to say since I walked into the house. “Wondering whether you’re going to come out.”

He doesn’t answer.

“Charlie’s saved you a sandwich.”

Still nothing.

I go.

The crowd outside is larger now, but still doesn’t include everyone. Our neighbors have brought offerings of their own—bottles of wine, even some South American ones from before the war, biscuits, cake, bottles of Pimm’s, and salads picked from gardens. I find them laying their offerings out on the grass in a long row. It feels ceremonial, like the duties paid to the lord in the olden days, when the vassals would come and pay their tithe. Or maybe that was only to the church.

We’re paying today, all of us. Whether it’s to gods or nature, something rules over us, and we’re paying.

I scan the group, thanking islanders here and there, all the while looking for my children.

They’re not out here. Jo’s gone, they’re gone.

Something’s happened.

I take Mrs. Morris by the arm, gently; she’s so frail these days. “Have you seen—?”

“Inside, sweetheart. It’s all right. They’ve only gone to the kitchen.” She pats my own arm just as carefully.

I sink with relief. “Okay. Thank you.”

She takes my hand and kisses it. “You’re doing so well. We’re proud.”

“Oh. God. Thank you.” Tears spring to my eyes. I shake my head and start toward the side entrance, careful on the steps down into the kitchen.

There they are, perched at the counter, just like it was any other day.

“That’s true, Charlie, yes, very *much* so.”

I hear Sally’s voice through the glass and back up a step, curious. I’ve so often wondered what they talk about down here when I’m not around. She sounds like a teacher, and I don’t want to interrupt her lesson by barging in, especially not while I’m in this state, anger and terror still toxic in my veins.

“But you know...” I hear the clang of a metal spoon against a dish. “I don’t think it’s just about taking. I have my own little theory. Would you like to hear it?”

“Which theory is this now?”

My ears perk. Jo’s in there too, closer to the door. She sounds dubious.

I press my lips together to keep from bursting out laughing. From rage to fear to church giggles. What a lunatic I am today. Another second, then I’ll go in.

“Oh, you know the one,” Sally teases. “I just think that today, *the* Day, is a chance for the island to rearrange things just *exactly* the way they’re meant to be.”

My teeth cut into my lips. I feel the doorframe paint peeling against my fingertips. This is what Matthew was talking about—“*A reason for it, like Sally says*”—but hearing her say this, now, in the thick of things, to my child, is more than jarring.

“So there’s the sad today, the very, very sad, but there’s also the good.”

“Why?” I hear Charlie ask. “No, I mean, how?”

“Oh, in little ways.” Sally sighs. “And very big ways. It’s like Lute looks at all of us over seven years and then decides how to move us around. I’ll admit it’s sometimes hard to see how it’s better, but when you’re *old* like I am...”

I hear Emma giggle. Oh God, yep, my three-year-old is in there too, listening to this bullshit. I need to interrupt but I cannot move.

“—you look back and can’t imagine it having been any other way. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of,” Charlie says. He does sound comforted.

“Not so bad, eh?” Sally’s voice rings out louder.

“It wasn’t the theory I was thinking of. Even so.” Jo sniffs. I hear her turn. “Little ones?”

Charlie murmurs vaguely as Emma shouts, “I not little!”

“Enormous children?” Despite the teasing, Jo’s voice is somber. “I wouldn’t go around sharing this theory of Sally’s with anybody else.”

There’s a pause before Charlie asks, “Why not?”

“Well, it might make some people feel better, but it would probably make other people feel even sadder.”

Silence again. My hand fumbles for the kitchen doorknob.

“It’s not better that Avery’s gone,” Charlie says.

“No,” says Jo. “It isn’t.”

As I open the door, the kids turn on their stools at the kitchen counter, letting out happy squawks at the sight of me.

“Mummy!” Emma puts her arms out for a hug. Her fingers are grimy from potato peelings, but I let her press into my bare back, squeeze and squeeze. Oh, my girl.

“We’re helping,” Charlie says quietly, and lets me ruffle his hair.

I catch Sally shooting Jo a quick apologetic look before her expression washes into the neutral cheeriness I’m used to seeing on her face.

“I’m not letting them chop,” Sally calls to me brightly. “Knives are well away.”

“No harm in a peeler,” Jo says, with a wink in my direction. “Cup of tea?”

They’re changing the subject now that I’m here. I’d assumed they would, but it still makes my stomach turn. I can’t keep going on like this, like a hotel guest. This is my house, my family, my life. I’ll talk to them, both of them tomorrow, if we get to tomorrow. Not in front of the kids, no matter how much I’m seething.

I smile tightly. “Tea. Yes.”

Sally lights the burner for the stove-top kettle, then tosses handfuls of minced carrot into the gargantuan stockpot she’s been stirring.

“How many are you cooking for?” I ask, reaching to help Emma angle the potato peeler the right way. “Will we have enough?”

“Plenty, plenty.” Sally salts the pot. “Even if everybody left on Lute came, which they won’t—some people prefer to shelter all day, and there’s no changing that—it’d be what?”

She looks to Jo.

Jo thinks, mouthing names. “Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight? Did Jenny Pike go to Sunnan?”

“No, she’s here,” I say. “I saw her down near the—”

“Anyway, it’s simple fare.” Sally talks over us. “We’d have done something grander if we’d planned it, but, next time!”

Jo smiles conspiratorially at me.

I return it. “Next time.”

We plan in defiance of death.

This is what drives ambitious people, whether they know it or not: I can’t possibly die without achieving this goal, taking this holiday, making this much money, and the goals keep changing, so I cannot die. We stave it off, but only in our imaginations. My ambitions were modest but constant. I would survive long enough to leave home. I’d get into a small liberal arts college hundreds of miles away. I’d find a way to pursue a higher-level degree so I could stay. After screwing it all up, I’d pack up, get out, find a haven among retirees—and even then, I was ready to run. To Hugh. To this.

I can’t die. I’ve got to plan a dinner party seven years in the future. I’ve got to watch my kids grow up.

“Ah!” Charlie lifts his hand.

Blood trickles down his thumb in a thin red line. He’s nicked himself, the tiniest shave from the peeler, but panic claws up me, ever ready.

I rush to him, grabbing up tea towels to stop the flow.

“It’s all right,” Jo says quietly. “Where do you keep your plasters?”

She’s asking me, but Sally answers, “Down the hall, over the loo.”

Jo ducks out to fetch one.

Briskly, Sally gives the pot a stir, then takes the peelers from the children. "Perhaps not today, kiddies. You've done very well; I'll finish up."

Emma's stool wobbles as she kneels atop it, and I can see it happening, tipping at just the wrong angle, neck snapped like Andy Blanchard's. *No*.

I take her carefully by the armpits and place her in a nice, low, safe chair at the round kitchen table in the corner.

Before she starts to protest, I grab a potato and a peeler back from Sally and place them in front of her. "Easier here, see?"

Sally looks impressed that I'm letting them peel after all.

I pick up Charlie next, though he's more than old enough to get down himself. He hangs limply as I kick at a chair to put him in. He's gone pale, still staring at his bundled hand.

Emma's lip begins to tremble. "Will he die?"

"Oh God!" I kiss her forehead. "Sweetheart, no, he's fine."

"Will *I* die?" Now she's crying.

"No! You won't." I say it firmly, angrily. "Not for a very long time."

Sally meets my eye for a quick blink, and all that approval is gone. I sense that fog of disappointment rolling back in.

I don't give a single shit. They've heard just about enough out of her for one day. They can listen to their mother now.

I kiss her again. "Today is strange, I know, but tomorrow, your friends will be back, and it's school again on Thursday. And we're having the whole island over tonight. Won't that be fun?"

"For dinner," Emma says, sniffing back to liveliness. "And we helped."

"You did help, darling," Sally says dotingly.

Out in the hall, the downstairs clock begins to chime.

I suck in a breath, fingers curled around the back of Emma's chair as if the next sound might knock a leg loose.

We all hold the silence until it finishes.

4:00 P.M.

Jo limps back into the kitchen with Band-Aids for Charlie—she’s on it enough to have picked out the ones with superheroes on them instead of dinosaurs, last year’s obsession now deemed “babyish.”

Charlie stays slack and quiet while I put it on him and dab away the rest of the blood with a wet paper towel.

He doesn’t even blink. It starts to rattle me.

“What are you thinking, sweetie?” I run my fingers through the sweat-damp hair on the sides of his head. “You don’t need to worry, you know.”

“I’m not worried,” he says. “Everyone dies. And everything. And we die when we’re asleep. I die all the time; it isn’t scary.”

We three women in the room go very still. Even Sally appears at a loss as to how to respond to that.

Jo is the one to break the tension. “Little philosopher you’ve got here.”

“I’m a phisser too!” Emma’s face twists and reddens. “I like what Charlie likes.”

At that, Charlie lets out one of his trademark groans, and oh God, it makes my heart beat steadily again, hearing him act like a beleaguered big brother instead of some ascetic monk.

“You both get it from your mummy.” Jo strokes Emma’s plait. “She’s Lute’s resident academic, don’t you know.”

There’s a mischievous gleam in her eye. She hasn’t teased me about my degree in ages, so I guess I’m overdue.

“You’re what now?” Sally whirls around, gawping.

A laugh bursts out of me at her expression. “Don’t sound so shocked! Anyway, I’m hardly an academic.”

“You’ve got your master’s.” Jo shrugs.

“Master’s schmasters. I left before I got my Ph.D.” I turn to Sally to explain. “I studied philosophy at a tiny liberal arts college a million years ago.”

“You’ve never said a word about it!” Two red fluster circles appear on her cheeks.

“Because it’s so boring,” I say, but I’m secretly exulting. *You don’t know everything about me. I’ve achieved things. Both good and bad.*

“Speaking of philosophy,” Jo cuts in, a note of apology in her voice. “Typically, the lord gives an address to open the meal on the day of the tithe.”

“There needs to be an instruction booklet for moving to this place,” I huff. “An orientation, I swear.”

Sally laughs. “You’re a bit past the orientation period, my dear.”

The children have begun to squabble over the Band-Aids.

I pull the box away from them and set it onto the counter behind me. “So tell me, just lay it all out for complete novices, what are *all* the traditions today? What do I need to do from now until, I don’t know, bedtime?”

Sally and Jo glance at each other as I turn for the crafts bin, laying out paper and crayons for the children. The next activity, then the next and the next until bedtime. I really like the idea of bedtime.

“Well,” Sally says. “You might let Hugh know—”

“Hugh is not going to be in any state to do anything today.”

My shoulders loosen at having said it. It’s embarrassing, but it’s not my shame to bury anymore. His choices are his own.

I scoot Emma’s chair far enough away from Charlie that he can’t swat at her.

“He’s not handling it well,” I say, avoiding eye contact. “He’ll be fine tomorrow, apart from the headache, but anything that needs doing is going to fall to me. Which is fine.”

I look up.

Jo smiles faintly at Sally. Nods at me. “Good. Right. It’s not much. Just keep an eye on everybody throughout the Day and say a few words at the

beginning of the meal. Welcome everyone in a way that makes them feel..."

She tenses, hunting for the word.

"Welcomed," I offer.

"Safe. As mad as it sounds."

"No. No, that makes sense." That's what anybody sane would want to feel. I blink, looking around. Speaking of safe: "Where's Marit?"

"In the garden," Sally says, turning down the fire under the pot. "She needed some alone time. Without us hovering."

"Right. I'll check on her in a little while. Do you think Matthew will come tonight?" My heart beats a little faster. "Speaking of alone time. I'm not sure what he needs."

"He'd better come," Jo says darkly. "I said if he didn't, I'd march up to that lighthouse and mess with all his dials and wires and drag him back here at great personal peril, busted ankle and all. And he knows I will, so I expect he'll listen."

I smile, picturing the possibility only too vividly, and sip my tea, warm currents running through me.

When I look up, Jo's watching me.

"Come outside for a minute," she says lightly. Too lightly. "We'll pull some herbs for the supper."

"Some thyme would be lovely!" Sally shouts, but I hear it as *time*, and my heart starts thudding too fast again.

All these reminders. Three to go, any minute now.

Jo heads for the herb garden, glances about at the gate for onlookers, shuts it behind us, and leans against it, arms crossed.

"He told you he's sweet on you, then. Matty."

I blink, surprised. "How could you know that?"

"I had a feeling it would come out. Today is fraught, and he's..." She snorts. "Even more transparently emotional than you are. How you missed it all these years, I'll never know. Probably for the best, but I'm glad he got it off his chest now. He's been carrying it around for far too long."

"I mean." I perch myself next to her along the gate. "I feel *terrible*."

The fence gives a little under my weight. I edge away, picking splinters from my palms.

“Don’t pity the man, whatever you do. Pity’s the last thing he wants.” Jo sighs. “But maybe he’ll stop berating himself quite so much now. It was killing him, feeling like he was betraying Julia, betraying Hugh.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong. Not ever.”

“And he never will.”

Her eyes are sharp on mine. She needs me to know this. But people don’t speak this forcefully about things they’re convinced of. Maybe she thinks she’s saving me from myself.

“There are lines he will not cross. He’d have made a good grail knight in a prior life, let me tell you. Pure as a lily.”

I cannot help but laugh. “A lily. Matthew Clare.”

“How would you describe him?” She cocks an eyebrow, but doesn’t wait for me to answer. “You’re not so different yourself, you know. You radiate innocence.”

“Oh *God*.”

Her grin stretches wider. “That sounded worse than I’d meant it.”

“Gormless.” My favorite British word.

“Not *gormless*. More *butter wouldn’t melt*. If you’re hearing anything in my voice, it’s envy. Most of us don’t make it to our late thirties with that ingénue glow still intact.”

“It’s all that moisturizer I stockpiled before the war.” I snort.

She swats me. “It’s more than that. You ... What is it? You’re a careful sort of person. You tread lightly.”

She’s noticed, then. It is true in the most literal of senses—I look out for snails, even—and yet my stomach twists with shame. It hasn’t always been true, has it?

Killer.

“Not always.” I shoot her a playful glare, latching onto a subject change. “And now you’re punning.”

“Treadway. Drat.” Jo lifts her eyes heavenward. “I’m not, I promise—when have you known me to pun?!”

“Disappointingly rarely.”

“You do know what I’m saying, though. You’re at least somewhat self-aware.”

“No. I...” I pick at a bit of rosemary, rubbing the oil between my finger and thumb. “You’re not wrong. I try not to make waves.” Should I admit it? Oh, why the hell not? “The thing is, it’s more out of a sense of constant guilt than innocence. But that’s okay. I’m glad that people see me that way here.”

“Did you do something terrible back in America, then?” Jo narrows her eyes. “Kick a puppy? Rob a bank?”

“Neither of those. I did have an affair with my thesis advisor when I was studying for my Ph.D. He was married.”

It comes out so simply. Just a sentence. Not something locked up tight for a decade, just an interesting anecdote.

“Oh.”

Jo looks surprised, and I don’t blame her.

I’ve never admitted that to anyone here. Not even Hugh. *Especially* not Hugh. And yet here I am now, press embargo lifted, still somehow talking.

I pull my hair back and braid it. “It was, obviously, a mistake. It came to a somewhat public end, along with my academic career, and yeah. Now I tread really lightly. I was reckless and selfish and stupid, and that was my youth. All done. I’m not doing it again.”

A bright oriole stares at me from an empty feeder. I need to tell John I’ve spotted one.

No. No, he’s gone.

I let go of my braid and feel it unravel.

The bird flies away.

“I can’t believe I just said all that out loud.”

“I can.” Jo slings an arm around me. “It’s part of the Day. Everybody gets like this.”

“Like what?”

Fevered, childish. I swipe at my damp forehead.

“Confessional.” She smiles, stooping to pinch off a few sprigs of thyme, then squints up at me. “This was your...?”

“Ethics professor.” I shake my head as she muffles a surprised snort. “That was my focus, ethical philosophy, and yes, thank you, I do recognize the irony.”

“One day soon, I’m going to have you over and we are each going to drink an entire bottle of wine and you are going to tell me the whole story.” She stands and rolls her ankle, wincing. “But for now, focus all that confessional energy on preparing your speech.”

“So now it’s a confessional speech? This just keeps getting better.”

“It needn’t be unduly personal. Only heartfelt. You’re good at that.”

I wonder whether she’s right about that. The trick to treading lightly is that it involves a layer of varnish over your emotions. Reason ruling passions. I’m surprised Jo used the word *innocence* instead of *iciness*. I’m not careful because I’m kind but because I’m terrified. Because I was raised by a scorpion.

“And any word from a Treadway is a comfort; just remember that.”

She straightens and starts toward the kitchen without another word of her own, of reassurance, of judgment, nothing. She acts like you’d hope a friend would, like her opinion of me hasn’t changed.

I peek through the kitchen window as she goes in and spy the children happily coloring printed-out pages from cartoons we used to import from America before the war rendered them offensive. I could go in, finish my lukewarm cup of tea, but I feel exposed now, laid bare for Jo to see. I’ve known her for seven years minus a week now, but it’s still terrifying to have admitted that tidbit from my past. And on a day like this, loose lips all around.

And then there’s Matthew. Matty. Pure as a lily, sturdy as an oak. She guessed all that too. What’s to stop Hugh from guessing the same?

I look up from the window just as Jo comes back around the doorway. “Would you check on Elsie Wickett? Just see if she’s in the assemblage.”

She pronounces *assemblage* with a French accent, light and jovial, as if we were prepping a wedding.

I smile and duck away, drawing a few cool breaths while I walk back around the conservatory, scanning the crowd through panes of glass, like an old flickering movie.

I pick out Marit right away, sitting on a sunny patch of the lawn, staring out across the sea toward Sunnan. I don't see Mrs. Wickett among the throng of older folks, though, or anywhere else. No sign of Matthew either.

When I come back, Jo's still leaning against the brick windowsill, rubbing her ankle.

"Not here," I say. "Do you want some ice for that? You're not taking care of yourself."

She lets out a slow breath. "I'm fine."

"Are you concerned?" I ask. "About Mrs.—?"

"I am." She blinks hard. "At this point, yes, I think I am concerned. I'd best go check on her."

"No. You need to rest."

"I'm fine!" She straightens, abruptly Olympian. "I got here, didn't I?"

"Jo. Stop. I'll be twice as fast."

She looks annoyed, which means she's about to give in.

"I would worry about you," I say. That convinces her. "I'll go. She might just be home waiting to be invited here, and it's better that I do the inviting myself."

"You be careful."

I laugh. She laughs.

It's a shared joke now, this awful day, our complete powerlessness. And it is funny. It's ridiculous.

"Take your coat," she says, reaching into the kitchen to grab it for me. "It gets brisk mid-island."

I know. I live here too. She means well, though. She means everything.

As I pass the crowd on the lawn, I glance over my shoulder, telling myself not to look for Matthew, but still a little deflated not to see him back here. Part of me wondered if he was watching me come and go, vain thing that I am.

Whatever he thinks he feels, I'm not worthy of it. I should let him get to know me. That'll clear it right up. I am not the paladin he seems to be.

I picture him as a grail knight, how can I help it, and *damn*, that's an image. Matty Clare in full armor. *Watch your step, Nina*. I'm infecting the

air around me with giddiness. A pebble ricochets off my toe and along the drive.

I pass the little grassy path that Hugh led me down two days ago and don't even blush with the memory. It feels like a year has passed since that afternoon.

He feels like an entirely different person.

I think of Hugh, how he looked the night I met him, those eyes, that tuxedo, the pull I felt to him right away. And then my mind goes back even further.

I think of Michael. Professor Winthrop for the first week, "call me Michael" after that. It feels fair game to think of him now, when for so long, he was locked behind a thick mental door. The memory of him isn't as nauseating, not in the face of today.

I walk up the drive, listening to my steps crunching, dread breathing down my neck, and I remember something Michael said the night I overstayed his office hours and he shut the door and offered me whiskey, sitting on the edge of his desk, just two work buddies having a chat.

"In my experience, students of moral philosophy arrive in two camps—the ones who think they're good and want a nice firm pat on the back, and the ones who think they're *bad* and want to know how to change. Or want an excuse not to. They count for the second category as well." He'd swirled his chintzy tumbler and watched me drink. "I can't figure out which one you are."

In the blank expanse of my early twenties, it sounded like the highest of compliments—I was unique, inscrutable—but now I know he was just trying to find his angle. He had two ways to get grad students into bed, and he wasn't yet sure which would work on me. He needn't have agonized over it. The way was simple: notice me. Say anything to me at all, especially if it was complimentary. Make me feel more solid than shadow. I was an unwanted second child. I wasn't good or bad. Not a killer, not really, I knew that by then, but I wasn't a martyr either. Only lost. An easy mark.

I felt so extraordinary that semester. We all did, I'm sure, the litany of young women; that was how he maintained these things. He would argue philosophy with us. This brilliant, award-winning academic! He'd listen

and raise his eyebrows, lean back, take off his glasses, and then, incredibly, concede the point. And we—well, I anyway—felt like a bright spark. A future contributor to Great Western Thought.

I was young, briefly happy in the way that you'd hope all young people get to be happy. Yes, my happiness was contingent upon gross ethical misdeeds, but life had opened for me. I was able to ask myself the same questions I always had but with no sense of impending doom attached. Instead of lying in my bed, listening to Mom and Gran arguing about my welfare out in the living room, I could drown out the noise of it with endless philosophical questions: *Why was I born? If I died, would everyone be happier? What good could I do, even as a grown-up, that would cancel out the death of my father? How do you measure that good?* I could now write entire essays. How do you define a life well lived? What does it mean to be moral? What is the worth of an individual life? What do you owe to your family, to your community, to yourself?

I was onto something, I thought. My questions weren't being answered, not even close, not even after my master's thesis was published in a reputable journal, but the questions I was arriving at were sharper, more crucial. I was becoming wiser, more morally conscientious, while I was sleeping with my married professor, and at the time I did not, in fact, realize how ironic that was.

It ended at a campus Starbucks on a Thursday morning, three of us catching up at a corner table between the undergrad classes we were teaching, cracking jokes about what it took to get tenure—for some reason, this is the most painful part of the memory, those jokes—when the dean of our college passed the window, spotted us, stopped walking, and doubled back.

The moment Michael's wife changed direction, I knew the vague shape of what was coming, if not the force of it. I knew I deserved a reckoning. Given that, you'd think I would have been better prepared to weather it.

After the confrontation—loud, detailed—there was a blessed shocked beat before humiliation flash-flooded, during which I wondered why the hell she didn't leave him. Why keep accepting the same fate, over and over? When she left the Starbucks, so did my colleagues, not friends, I realized

later, not with their academic careers on the line, and I left too, the campus, academia, the world of the living.

I wasn't lost anymore. I was the Other Woman, clichéd in my immorality. I was the demon my mother always accused me of being, someone who left chaos in her wake. *A taker.*

So I made one last moral decision: hide. Tuck myself away in a retirement community with Gran and do as little harm as possible. I stayed there for as long as I could stand it. Three years in stasis. I might have stayed in Florida forever if not for Gran insisting we check off her biggest bucket list item, crossing the Atlantic in a Cunard ship. I might have gone back to Florida forever if our cabin hadn't been so small, if Gran hadn't gone to sleep at nine o'clock every night, if she hadn't snored loud enough to make me throw on a cheap evening gown and venture out alone.

And meet Hugh. And feel the world tilt.

It's tilting now. Fuck. The wind blows panic into me, so fierce I wonder if my heart will give out.

From the corner of my eye, I see someone slumped against the bumpy edge of the old castle wall. Another death. I turn, hands pressed to my chest, but there's nothing there. A trick of the light against the uneven stone, and yet I could describe to you exactly what I saw—the corpse of an old woman dressed in gray linen with a thick cap on her head, blood pooling out from the edge.

Not there, I confirm again. I'm imagining things. Lute goes funny on the Day.

I breathe in the salty air, blinking hard against the light. Stay calm. Alert but calm.

And here comes that marching sound again. This time to the north. There and then gone. I'm losing it.

I'm approaching the war memorial from the southeast, treading the same footpath through the rocky green as everyone always has, for as long as this place was occupied, maybe. I could walk anywhere, there's no rule, but every day, I keep to the path. Even Max, when he escapes his lead, sprints straight down the path until a smell leads him astray. We're pulled to a

place, to a path, without knowing it's happening. Without any compelling reason why except that it's the way of things.

The war memorial stands in the meadow, forming the third point of a triangle with the church and the edge of the village. It mirrors the church, a miniature spire. I feel the need to see it again, to take it in, the blankness of it, so I walk closer, enough to press my hands to it.

The north face is etched with a poem, a copy of the one on the cenotaph in London, Hugh said.

*Not here they fell who died a world to save;
Not here they lie but in a thousand fields afar.
Here is their living spirit that knows no grave;
Not here they were—but are.*

It takes on a different meaning here. Not here they fell. No one here fell. Not in the wars.

I run my fingers along the side. No names, no etchings, no marks. We have twenty-six young people serving in the war effort right now. Heading home soon, we pray, but today, they're much safer where they are.

Today, this is the war zone.

I want to dig my fingernails into this stone. Tear grooves into it. Scrape Avery's name there and John's, deep and indelible.

Here is their living spirit that knows no grave.

I can't face walking through the village again, seeing it so deadened, so I skirt the edge, passing a staggered line of back gardens with bright washing hung out like bunting, vegetables growing, ride-in toy cars and bicycles left on their sides like their drivers have vanished mid-roll.

It's not quite as quiet as I'd expected. I hear someone singing inside one of the terraced stone houses. There are a lot of windows open, letting the woman's voice waft out, but I don't recognize who it could be, or even pinpoint which cottage it's coming from. The tune is unfamiliar and the words heavily accented, sometimes English, sometimes incomprehensible. It's strange but pretty. I walk on.

Mrs. Wickett lives north of Jo's tearoom. I veer west toward a small strip of cottages, squinting into the searing blue of the sky and breathing in

the green and the salt and the stone. Roses climb across fences and walls along with exotic imports, jasmine and honeysuckle, a single towering sunflower.

I hear a bleat behind me and stop walking.

The goats are coming. They're funny things, a small stubborn herd, shaggy and aloof. They come and go, vanish for days, only to turn up as if from some wormhole to eat all the flowers in somebody's window box and wander off again. I'm always charmed by the goats, delighted to see them, but not today.

Today, I think of Andy Blanchard. Maybe Hugh was right to fight them. Maybe they did kill a little boy.

One of them, taller than the rest, with curly horns and a black spot stretching from his back down his left flank, emits another bleat—shrill, insistent. They all stand watching me and I watch them right back, my breath held, for what must be a good minute. Then I suck in air, and they dip their heads to munch at the grass, bleating again, but now at each other.

I edge away from them slowly and head west into the village.

As I turn, the wind kicks up. A wall of air buffets one of my shoulders from the front and then shifts to shove against my back, like I'm a sailboat making a turn. The wind nudges me forward to the lane. I widen my stance, but the hill is steep here and the gust is incredibly strong.

My breath comes quickly, with panic or exhilaration, I'm not sure which. They're indistinguishable at this point. Has it found me, then? Has the island chosen me?

Maybe this really is why I was picked, Nina No-one of Nowhere, to move here among the select few. All those dark suspicions I've harbored from the beginning of my marriage, wondering whether I was a placeholder bride, whether Hugh picked me up and carried me home as a convenient excuse for not being here seven years ago, but maybe it wasn't him at all.

Maybe Lute chose me as a sacrifice.

It feels like truth.

Another gust, and this one roars in my ear, quiets to a whisper, screams again. I clap my hands over my hair, my ears, holding myself in place, my

feet unsteady on the rocky ground, as I make my way around the corner of the tearoom.

When my boots hit the lane, the wind stops. Gone, never there, and all the world is still. I feel weightless.

Matthew Clare stands in the lane, ten feet away, staring at me as if we'd arranged to meet here, as if he'd been expecting me to join him for hours. Or longer. Seven years.

"I was looking for..." My voice trails out.

I can hear the sea battering the beach, the screech of gulls dancing in the wind, the goats out on the heath.

"Elsie," he offers. "I checked. She's not at home."

He nods to the cottage with its bare little window boxes. Her pale green door is ajar.

"It was like that when I got here," he says. "I had a peek. Nobody there. She seems to have had a rummage around her kitchen. Several of the drawers were open."

"That doesn't sound good." I take one step closer. "Should we...?"

The we seems to affect him. A lightness comes into his expression.

"Should we what, Nina?"

My name. Oh my God, the sound it makes. All this time calling me Lady Treadway—he shouldn't be allowed to say it. It's too dangerous, the way he drapes it over his tongue before releasing it.

He stands so still, his feet rooted into the gravel of the lane, hands relaxed by his side for once, fingers hanging open like he's surrendered after a fight. His eyes on mine. He looks like an illustration in a children's book for "brave."

The wind brought me here, Lute wanted me right here, standing in front of Matthew. A deep sense of rightness ripples through me.

I open my mouth, to say what, I don't know, when the wind gusts again, no preamble, just a shove, then up and away.

I hear the faint screech of metal against shingle above me and peer up in wonder as that running horse on top of the tearoom bucks and rears and breaks loose in the wind.

The pony bounces once, hard, against Jo's gutter, then finds its intended course.

To me. To an ending.

BETWEEN

I'm here. I'm never not here, except that everything belonging to now slips, fades. Matthew looks like a ghost for a moment, translucent, and then he's gone. The cottages, the road, blurred and vanishing.

Only the horse remains. It carves a shining line through the air on its way to meet me. It moves so slowly now, glowing white, its mane blowing wild.

I know what I'm going to see when I look around. I remember them now. Every dream that wasn't a dream.

I'm on Lute. Not Joseph's Rock, but this island, I think, is where they're buried, these Shining Ones. Deep under the grove.

They rise from the ground like white slicks of oil and slide into the shape of two people, as if for my sake, to help bridge the cognitive difference between me and them.

They wait. I have a choice to make, which is no choice at all. There are no exits from here. There's no hiding, no more running. All those decisions I made, even in America, I was only ever clinging to the illusion of control over my life. I see that now. It didn't matter what I did. I was always going to wind up here.

The only thing that surprises me is how glad I am for it. The world is shining, not just with their searing light but Lute itself, impossibly, vividly green, blue skies that sting, golden shining gorse flowers. Even the wind has color. It curls violet around my shoulders, an embrace.

They wait. I walk to them, saying, Yes, with every step.

Yes, until the grove grows up around me from saplings to ancient oaks and I find myself at the stone.

I kneel. The tithe stone is cool against my forehead.

Charlie, I think, dimly. *Emma*. I'm a mother.

I do this for them.

The gods stand beside me, two bright columns, and I weep for joy, even as they raise the rock over me, even as it smashes down and down and down into my skull, and I feel fierce pain, nothing but light bleeding from me, such beautiful obliteration.

5:00 P.M.

The impact, when it comes, is not as expected. The blow isn't to the front of my head, the direction of the great galloping metal horse, but the back, so sharp that I see light burst against my eyelids, blue to white to red.

It isn't until I open those lids that I realize why I'm seeing anything.

I am not dead.

I am on the ground. My skull has struck dirt. Out of the far corner of my eye, I can see the iron horse rolling past along the lane. The lane is back, and the cottages, and the distant bleat of the goats, the shriek of the gulls.

Directly above me, inches away, hands flanking me, Matthew Clare is back too.

He pushed me out of the way. Saved me.

"I saw them." I blink away the pain in the back of my head. It isn't much. An egg, at worst. "I accepted it. I gave in. They killed me. I should be dead."

Matty's eyes haven't left mine, sadness and hope and desperation swirling like an eddy in the depths of them. "What? Saw who? You're here, Nina; you hit your head pretty hard. I'm sorry."

I'm suddenly not quite sure what I mean—who they are, what exactly I saw. Did I see anything at all? I can't remember. I remember the weather vane flying at me, but I'm fine and Matthew is above me, his narrow hips settling against my wider ones. He smells like soil and sweat, and I know what the island wants me to do.

I know.

"You don't need to be sorry," I say.

I tilt my chin until it connects with the prickles on his. He lets out a slow sigh, sliding more heavily against me.

No. Stop.

I don't know what the hell I'm doing. This is wrong, I'm married, I hardly know him, but Lute put him over me and me under him and some dim part of me is trying to fight it, but I can't. I don't want to. Lute doesn't want me to, and I am Lute, I belong here.

"Nina." This time, my name is a warning, a *we shouldn't*, but his body is responding to mine.

I whisper, "Thank you for saving me," and loop my arms around his neck, and that's it. We've tipped over the edge of the world.

When our mouths connect, my confusion evaporates. The kiss has intention. We've been put here for a reason. It would be selfish to stop, to fight. There's a reason for all of this, and we have to submit.

I dig my fingers into his tangled hair and hold him to me, my own head grinding into the gravel. My legs wind up around him, as, beneath my hunter coat, my sundress bunches up and up, pooling around my waist. I can't stop.

His tongue slides against mine, and I drink him in. He tastes sweet, spiced, like nutmeg.

Nothing exists but this, right now. My bare thighs tight around him, my eyes closed, both of us burning white.

The wind howls above us as we inch apart, gasping in the chalky air. He peers at me for a moment, then dives back, kissing my throat, my collarbone, the tops of my breasts. I drag him up again, our lips bruising each other's.

He stops to breathe again, sweetly reluctant, and perches above me, staring down at me as if in wonder, and it's too much—it hurts. I touch his cheeks, neck, shoulders, the lines of his waist, his hips, pulling him against me, while he burrows his mouth in my hair, sighing my name.

Matthew, Matty—he's Matty now, my Matty. Lute was right, this is right. We have to keep going. I hold him tighter with one arm as I reach with the other to shove down the waistband of my underwear, when my ears prick.

There's a sound up the road. A shuffling. Muttering.

Matty's heard it too. His body's turned to cold marble against mine. He slides away and up, offering me a hand.

I stand and shrink back with him against the bumpy iron railing encircling Jo's house.

Shock ripples through me. Reality returns, bit by bit.

We wait a meter apart now like two magnets that have been flipped to repel. What the hell was that about? I can't look at him, so I stare instead at the iron horse lying in the lane. The sun is hitting it strangely, making it bright around the edges. When I blink, I still see it burned into my retina.

I wasn't myself just then. I try out the thought. It doesn't ring true.

I was completely myself, all restraint removed.

That shuffling murmur grows closer, coming from the north, until the sound finally forms into a recognizable voice.

Matthew's eyes widen. He steps into the road.

Mrs. Wickett is dragging her feet as she walks down the lane. She's dressed in a light summer dress that looks like the one she wore at the grove ceremony, only this one has the image of a large poppy on the chest. She looks more dazed than usual, clutching her hands to her stomach over and over in a strange motion and staring down as if speaking to them.

"All right, Elsie?" Matty calls out, arms crossed tightly.

She glances up and down again, keeps shuffling closer, still talking to herself.

I can make out words now.

"It's not working ... Why won't they ... just take me, I'm ready ... Can't get it to..."

I recognize the movement in her hands now—a sawing motion. The sun glints bright against something she's holding.

I realize something else too. The pattern on her white dress. That's not a poppy.

Horror fills my throat before words burst out of it. "Stop her! Matty, she's got—"

He's already running, prying the knife from her curled fingers. "It's all right, Elsie. No, no, no, you're going to be all right."

“I don’t want to be!” she wails.

I sprint to join them. Her dress and arms are covered in blood. I hold her wrists and let her lean against me as Matthew tosses the weapon away.

It’s nothing more than a butter knife. I gently lift one of her arms, and she hisses in pain. Her wrist is shredded, a tartan pattern of shallow wounds. For all the mess, she doesn’t seem to have cut any major arteries.

“I want to go, but they won’t take me!” she cries. “Why won’t they?”

“It’s not your time, Els,” Matthew says.

“But why?” She lashes out, shoving him away from her, then wails, wincing from the pain in her wrists.

Matthew turns to me, unfazed. “We need to dress her cuts.”

I pull off my coat and rip out the lining in strips, then set to work wrapping them around her wrists and tying them in place. When I’ve finished, I glance up to see Matthew staring at me.

“This is her house,” he says, nodding to Mrs. Wickett’s open door. “I was thinking we’d go look for bandages.”

“Oh.” I stare down at my ruined coat. “Shit.”

“That worked too.” His eyes sparkle.

A snort bursts out of me. “I panicked!”

Mrs. Wickett giggles along, wild, and suddenly, I’m laughing so hard that my eyes are streaming. Matty’s deep-throated laughter echoes off Jo’s tearoom wall, and it hits me that this is the first time in seven years I’ve heard that sound come out of him.

“Why are we laughing?” Mrs. Wickett asks, still giggling through her nose.

“I do not know, Elsie.” Matthew’s chuckles subside, but a smile remains. “Maybe we just needed to. Come on, let’s get you up to Alder House. Everybody’s gathering there. This isn’t a day to be alone.”

He glances at me, too quickly for me to read anything real into it, but long enough for me to imagine all manner of things. Our interlude has ended, for now, forever, I don’t know. I don’t even know why I did it. I was compelled, but that feels suspiciously convenient. I could get away with anything today with that excuse.

One might expect to feel some degree of shame, some shriveling, weighty compunction, after cheating on one's husband in the wide-open middle of a country lane not a mile from one's own house, but as we turn and walk Mrs. Wickett northward, each of us assigned to one of her elbows, I feel a child's giddiness bubbling inside my chest. I have to keep batting down the helium-buoyed grin that keeps rising. I've gone insane. But the sky is such a deep, vivid blue, and the ground is sturdy beneath us, and the wind smells like life.

We are here. Alive. Maybe not for long, but for now. I hope Mrs. Wickett can catch this sensation, pull it into herself, drown out the pain and grief and know that this is why she's still here, for the sheer joy of walking up the heath with Matthew Clare on her arm.

Something is happening to me.

When we reach the old castle walls, I keep my eyes trained on the track ahead, and I see her again, that impression of a dead woman in the far corner of my right eye. I hold my breath and dare a glance, and she's still there, a stranger in apron and cap, blood spilling down over her cheek, eyes empty and staring. I can see through her to the stacked stones of the wall. The wind blows, I blink, and when I look again, I'm not surprised to find her gone. Even when she was visible, that woman was gone, dead, vanished.

Dead is dead whether it happened five minutes ago or a thousand years past. Time changes nothing. No wonder it's so layered here, the past so present.

Matty doesn't say a word as we approach Alder House. He doesn't serve me with a look of caution, because he knows he doesn't need to. I draw a swirl on Mrs. Wickett's back with the palm of my hand, murmuring, "We're so glad you're here," and set myself a new course along the lawn, away from them and into the next dream of this impossible day.

On the edge of the garden, someone's laid out long folding tables for a makeshift bar. Lannie and Will Miller are hauling wheelbarrows down the gravel drive behind us packed with beer kegs and cider casks. I haven't seen this many people here since the wedding when there were over three hundred guests and none of them mine. These are mine now.

Brian waves to me from across the lawn, then sticks his hands back in his pockets with a worried expression. I know what he's going to ask by the time he lopes over. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not." Intuition, it's kicking in. I've never felt it so strongly in my whole life. I need to be the glue for them, set the tone. I have things to do, a reason for being. "Mind if I help myself to a pint?"

"As many as you need, milady; that's how things work on the Day!" Brian's face is so wide open with relief that I think for a moment he's going to give me a hug. Instead he turns to Ian Pike and shouts, "First pull of the Breakwell Bitter for our Lady of Lute!"

"And a fair lady she be!" Ian shouts back.

Again I'm struck by the strange vertigo of not knowing what's spontaneous and what's a tradition lost in translation. It hardly matters—it's happening now and it feels like it's rippling through time, so it's both. This instant is everything that has ever happened, this pour, the bubbles and froth, the light through the ale, the discolored shadow it casts on the lawn.

It's a party. This is all one big, marvelous, horrifying party, and I'm the hostess.

I lift my pint glass in a silent toast, and all around me, my neighbors raise their own with wordless shouts. They were watching, waiting for me to do it. I move, and they move. I hesitate for a beat before sipping, remembering that it's heady stuff. Even breathing it in makes my head spin. Have I eaten today? Not much. Not anything. I've sipped neglected lukewarm tea. But I sense eyes on me. If I'm one of them, I will finish this pint down to the foam residue, and I have to be one of them. It's the condition of my survival.

I don't know that, but I feel it. What was sacrificed back there was the Nina who wasn't useful, who was still stuck in the closet in Florida with her sister's knees digging into her chest. That Nina's head was crushed by the Shining Ones, and what's left of me has a job to do.

I drink, they drink, we all relax, the world gets sunnier, blurrier, sharper, and duller at once—sharper in the sunrays and the smiles, duller where it hurts. I've drunk half this pint in one sip, too fast, but no matter. It's not like I can choke on it.

I won't die today, will I? The island made its decision. Or maybe it was simply delayed in that first attempt and is content now to wait. I cannot think about it—where are the children? I spin toward the kitchen, and all around me, others turn. The people of Lute walk in a spiral around the lawn, don't they? There are strings connecting me to all of them. I am the center.

It feels like I'm glowing, but that's just the ale mixing with the sun.

I'll need to nurse this. I've already lost my head and have to hold what's left of it together, especially with Hugh in hiding.

I look up to the study window, surprised to see my husband standing in the front doorway instead, leaning against the casement, feet crossed at the ankles, like he's overseeing work being done on the property.

Now the guilt comes. Here it is, as heavy and murky and queasy and panicked as I remember it. I'm sure Hugh can see it all over my face, but he just raises his eyebrows, nodding at my beer.

I start to look for Matty, then realize how incriminating it would be for me to stare at him right now. It's nothing Hugh needs to know about. My God, it's nothing at all. It's just the Day, like they say, a sixteen-hour sequence of errant, erratic events. There will be no reckoning until tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow, and if not, there will be no fallout whatsoever.

I raise my pint to Hugh across the distance, an offering. *Join me. Shake me out of this. Hold my hand and root me to the ground.* He lowers his head, and I see an empty lowball glass at his feet. He's still at the scotch, drinking alone. He blinks hard, staring over my shoulder, but I don't feel rejected. There's something in the strain of his expression that suggests double vision. He doesn't see me standing here.

He wobbles when he stoops to pick up the glass and disappears with it back inside.

The moment he's gone, I wish fervently not that *he* was out here but that his father was. I never knew him, the late Lord Treadway. I wish I had. At his funeral, everyone said how earthy he was, how much a part of daily life here, playing with the schoolchildren, attempting to fix people's plumbing, their cars. He and John Ashford worked together on repairs when the pickup's engine broke down, and now they're both gone.

Yes. There will be a reckoning tomorrow. The kind that will last forever.

I finish my beer to approving nods from the men beside the makeshift bar and stare at the gathered party, the people trickling in—Avery's parents, holding each other by the waist, joining the group, thank goodness—and feel myself overtaken by wonder that any of this was possible in the first place. We live. We remain. We don't know when it will all end, but right now we breathe and drink and smile and laugh and color printed-out pages and salt the pot and roll around snogging near strangers in gravel lanes, and pour another pint, and breathe and breathe and bear it. And isn't every day like this, really? We sit on the knife's edge, enduring this gift for as long as it's given to us, but this is the first time I've fully felt it in my blood, how brief it is. How horribly miraculous.

"Look at you." Marit slows as she passes me, rubbernecking.

I examine my hand in case I really am glowing, but it looks the same as yesterday.

"You're a mess," she says.

I peer down at myself for the first time in hours. Under my shapeless hunter coat, my sundress, the Tavira holiday memento, is streaked with dirt and grass, speckled with drops of blood, like a field of poppies seen from above.

I could change, but no. This feels right.

I'm the Lady of Lute.

6:00 P.M.

“So what are we supposed to do now?” Marit asks, looking around. “Just wait? It’s like a, what do you call it at an airport?”

“A gate.” I try to smile, but I don’t like the analogy. It’s too apt.

Down the drive, I see the mums arriving.

I need to stop calling them that. It’s as bad as thinking of me as “that American.” They’re people, women and mothers, more like me than they are different: Wendy and Jenny and Liz.

I’m glad they’re joining in. Frankly, I’m just glad they’re all still alive.

No more gone, as far as we know. Somebody might have quietly passed away in their home, but I’m not sure who we’re missing. We need a roster, a checklist.

A book. Bound in leather. Names of families, crosses and dots.

That’s what that was. A checklist.

I scroll through my memory, desperate to understand. The Pikes, Ian and Jenny and their two kids on Sunnan—they were a dot, like us, I’m sure of it. Matthew was an X. I didn’t check Jo or Sally, but why would I have? I don’t know what the difference is.

It means something that we’re a dot and Hugh is frightened. The crosses must be safer than the dots.

“You brought it!” Tim Blanchard shouts.

“As requested,” Liz calls back, and I turn to see that she’s holding a violin. She teaches music here on the island and seems to know every instrument, but it’s the fiddle that comes out at Christmas.

Without preamble, she begins to play—old dancing songs, cheerful and bouncy. No one goes so far as dancing, but I notice cheeks lifting, toes

tapping.

“I need a drink,” Marit says.

“Yes.” I grip her shoulder. “My God. You do. I’m sorry, you should have been the first.”

“You lost people also.” Her voice is flat. “Your friend with the truck. And the girl. Why do you do this?”

Her tone has sharpened, and her eyes are more alert than I’ve seen them, like she’s only now fully woken up.

“Are you drunk?” she asks me.

I laugh. “No. I don’t think so. Why, am I acting drunk?”

“No,” she says. “Just different. You seem different.”

I motion to Ian. “Could she get a pint? Shall I open a tab?”

He laughs, waves me off. “Everything’s gratis on the Day.”

“If this is real, why don’t you go?” Marit shrugs in the direction of Sunnan, tearing her eyes away from scrutinizing me. “I see people out there, on the ... by the water. Are they dying there too or only here?”

“Only here, on Lute,” I explain falteringly. “Sunnan’s safe. The island’s children are over there and, I don’t know, a handful of adults who are looking after them. There was a vote, and they—we—um, decided that the children should be excused today.”

Excused. Like they finished dinner early and didn’t want to sit through adult conversation.

Ian hands Marit a beer.

She thanks him and chugs it back with a wince.

“We had heard there was a midsummer festival here. And that you ... there was no army or navy, which was the big thing for us, but we thought that it might be like home a little.”

Oh God. “Where did you hear that?”

“I don’t know; it was Nils’s idea. He was the one who was in trouble, and I guess he did the most of our deciding. It was a little like that with us.”

I can relate.

“Trouble?” I already know, but I sense she wants to confess it.

“Yeah, he—what do you say? He deserted from the army, and they sent police to us at our home, so.” She finishes the beer, swirling the last drop in

a circle in the bottom of her glass. “We needed to have a holiday, and we came here until it was all clear. I thought they would get bored of watching our house with everything else that is going on, you know? And then, it’s nice here, it was fine, but the customs man wouldn’t let us have a permit and then there was no party! We waited for the party, and it was very dull here. Meaning no offense.”

Dull here. What irony.

“So we were calling ... *fy faen*, when was it? It was yesterday. We were calling home, but there was no phone connection at the postal office, and our mobiles didn’t work.”

“The tower’s down,” I say, that same image forming in my mind, the metal tumbled, heaped on the dig site.

“The mobile tower is where we camped first, in the—what do you call it?—barrow? Is that the word in English?”

“It is,” I answer as understanding dawns. They’d been hiding at the dig site. No wonder I hadn’t noticed them for a few days. I cannot imagine spending a night there, but to each their own.

“We saw the customs man looking around...” Marit nods warily in PC Brian’s direction. “So we moved, and when we were coming down, I saw that boat leaving for the other island. That’s when I got the first bad feeling. Thinking something was wrong.”

She puts down her beer with a thud.

Ian raises his eyebrows, I nod, and he refills it for her.

“Why just the children and not everybody?” she asks.

It’s a fair question. “I suppose it’s because they’re too young to be able to rationally consent.”

She frowns, nods, looks around. “Some of these people are too old to rationally consent.”

Liz starts another song on her fiddle, this one slower, more plaintive. A cloud passes over the sun.

I pull my coat tighter around me. “Some are ready, though. They’ve lived through a lot of days like this one, and now they want to be the one to go.”

I was ready. When it comes to it, what other choice is there but acceptance?

Matty's crossing the garden with a plastic cup of red wine for Elsie.

He was just at the bar, and I missed him. I wonder if he looked at me. I'm like a teenager at a dance. I have to stop; it's over now.

"Line them up, then," Marit snaps, startling me back into the conversation. "Get your volunteers and, you know, do it. This is barbaric."

I raise an eyebrow. "That's what the Romans thought."

"The Romans were right."

They weren't in the end, though. They were the ones to break up that tidy procession of volunteers with violence. Chaos. They set the new tradition, not us.

"Where are you sleeping tonight, Marit?" I reach for her arm. She flinches. "We've got plenty of guest rooms. You're more than welcome to —"

"Does the pub have rooms over?" She stares at her still-unshod, bandaged feet, then back up at me. "Thank you. I'll get a room, I think. After everything is all clear."

"Of course," I say. I don't look back, but I feel Hugh behind me. He's polluted the whole damn house today. She doesn't feel safe inside because of that warm welcome he provided her.

"The Dane's Head. The Dane, like, you cut off his head?" She's found her refilled pint. She sips it more slowly now, grinning around the rim. "We should have known when we saw that."

I hear voices rising into shouts behind me.

I turn, heart pounding.

No death, only Max sprinting gleefully through the crowd. He's escaped his jail cell. He dances around people's legs, a little more manic than is strictly safe on a day like this, but everyone smiles at the sight of all that exuberance. Pure joy, what a tonic.

The kids are following on his heels, sprinting, yelling for him to come in voices that sound like imitations of Hugh's.

"It's okay!" I shout. "Let him play. And stop running! Oh God, be careful!"

They've reached me by the time my panic crests, landing hugs around my waist, Charlie's head pressed to my back, and the relief that sweeps through me is close to euphoria.

I beam as Charlie squeezes me tighter and tighter and tighter still.

"Did you see your pony?" Emma asks, and I can't breathe.

I pry Charlie's hands a little looser.

"I did," I say, trying a new tack. "But he's gone now."

That appeases her, but Charlie blinks up at me as if startled.

"You saw them," he whispers. "The bright people."

I squint, confused, but as I shake my head and start to answer, it comes back to me, dimly at first. I can't look at them directly in memory, but there they are in the periphery.

The dreams. The encounter. All of it.

I stare down at Charlie, and the shock must show on my face because he squeezes me again in sympathy.

"Have you been dreaming about them?" I ask him.

He nods, silent.

I crouch beside him, letting Emma clamber on my shoulders. "For how long?"

"Forever."

I turn, my nose pressed to my daughter's cheek. "Sweetie? Have you been having funny dreams?"

Emma shakes her head against me.

"She thinks she can see them in the daytime," Charlie says. "I used to get mixed up when I was little too."

"I not little!" Emma reaches under my arm to try to hit him.

Charlie flinches away, but I draw him back. This is important.

"So you two talk about this? The bright people? The pony?" I peer down at Emma.

She nods, a little reluctantly.

"We're not supposed to," Charlie says, staring at his feet. "When I told Daddy about the dreams, he got really, really cross. He said I shouldn't ever talk about them out loud or they'd watch us all the time and try to hurt us. But if I didn't talk about them or think about them, they'd go away."

My breathing comes fast. “How long ago was this?”

Charlie shrugs. “When I was little.”

You’re still little, I want to scream.

I press his hand to my lips and kiss it. “Don’t listen to Daddy. You can talk to me about anything. *Anything*. Okay?”

A shadow falls on Charlie’s face before he can answer. I turn, and my eye catches on Diana Shaw’s prosthetic leg before I manage to gather my polite smile and look up at her.

There’s strange intensity in her eyes, but that’s par for the course today.

She kneels beside us, with such obvious effort that I nearly object.

“I’m so sorry, it’s just I heard what you were saying,” she hisses, and I shrink a little, wondering what I’ve done wrong. She sits down beside me and beams, not angry—eager. “You’ve seen them, haven’t you? The spirits of Lute.”

She’s staring holes into Charlie, and he’s staring holes into me, desperate to get away.

I let him. “Go and play, sweetie, not too far.”

Diana watches him go, glowing like an acolyte. “The old lords had the visions. Lord Treadway what died last time, he had the dreams, you know. Same as Saint Joseph had on his rock, but those weren’t no angels. We don’t get to see them, only you Treadways. And you have! You’ve seen them! We didn’t know how it would be this time, after the late lord’s passing, but it looks like everything’s just the way it’s always been. Thank goodness.”

She offers me her hand to squeeze, and I take it, stunned. I’m full of questions, but before I can ask any, she leans in.

“Who are they?” she whispers. Her eyes are perfect circles. “Tell me. Please!”

I can only stare at her. “You don’t know who you’re sacrificing to?”

“No!” Her hand shakes in mine. “We’ve never known.”

She glances over her shoulder, and I see Mary Warren standing with Janet Murrow, both of them watching Diana with a hint of disapproval in their eyes.

“Nobody wants to ask,” Diana whispers and leans back with a wink. “They think it’s rude. And not for us to know, but I’ve got to know more. Are they beautiful? They must be so lovely to give us all they do. Tell me, my lady, please, anything you can.”

She’s like a child, a beggar. I hunt for scraps of memory to share, but all I can think of is that light, blotting out everything else. “They’re—”

A noise resounds from inside the house, sharp—breaking glass.

Diana gasps. I stand and help her up, my stomach lurching.

“Be careful,” she says, nudging me gently toward the door. “God bless you.”

I look around. Everyone’s heard and fallen still, silent. They’re staring at me like a herd of deer caught in a field. Waiting for me to go investigate.

Jo’s out here, holding on to Max, watching me with all the others, so that noise was either Hugh or Sally.

I swallow and go up, clutching the stone rail, careful, so careful, through the doorway into the gaping hall.

It’s Hugh.

He’s fine.

I nearly scream with furious relief.

My shit-faced, shithead husband is leaning against the doorway into the living room, staring at the shattered scotch bottle on the floor, waiting for somebody else to deal with it. Maybe he figures if he doesn’t talk about it or think about it, it’ll go away.

Wait. It’s not laziness. He’s terrified, and as he peers up at me, finally registering my arrival, his eyelids droop. He’s about to pass out.

I grit my teeth and pick my steps carefully around the wet floor, the glass. Sally pokes her head up from the downstairs stairwell, her cheeks wan with worry.

“I’ve got him,” I say, taking his weight on my shoulder with a grunt.

“I’ll tidy this up,” she says gratefully.

It occurs to me as I stagger with Hugh up the ornate stairway that I should have just dropped him on a sofa downstairs to sleep it off, but halfway up, we’re in for a penny, as the locals say. He’s still got that big ring of house keys on his hip, and they dig into my ribs as I half carry him.

I hope he doesn't pass out and crush me. That would be a hell of a way to die on the Day.

He murmurs, "Love you, darling," in my ear when we make it to the top and lets me lead him to our bedroom. I take the key ring from his belt, pry off his shoes, and settle him on top of the covers. He's snoring before I make it to the door.

I watch him for a second, tender, like he's my child.

But he's not my child. He's a grown man. Lord of Lute, passed out in the middle of the afternoon on the damn Day.

I shut the door to the bedroom, softly, and start away.

Then I stop, considering. I riffle through the ring for the skeleton key that fits all the bedroom locks.

I've never used this key before. I use it now.

There. He's safe. He's stored away, he's not glaring at us from the doorway, unnerving everyone in sight.

Hugh's simply not up to this. The best thing for him is rest.

7:00 P.M.

“The wood was full of fairy folk going about their business. They took no notice of the children.”

Charlie lies faceup alongside my knees, folding blades of grass, listening to me read. Emma sits nestled in my lap, staring out to the elms, hard, determined to find a fairy there. And hey, if there are ghosts on the Day, phantom corpses and horses and armies, who’s to say fairies won’t show up? Magic mixed with the awful.

I haven’t felt so peaceful all day. I get the sense of everything being exactly where it should be. Every person, perfectly placed, my children, here, snuggling. They will stay with me for every remaining second the sun remains in the sky. I’ll make damn sure of it.

“I haven’t read that for ages!” Jenny Pike leans down to see the cover, then waves to Brian. “Dad, do you remember reading me this?”

“Vaguely.” He laughs over his shoulder. “Something about a big tree.”

“*The Faraway Tree*,” Jenny fills in. “My kids grew up too fast for all the books I wanted to foist on them.”

“You should reread them yourself,” I suggest, smiling. “That’s my plan.”

“You’re right. Life’s too short.” She continues on with a wry wink and joins her husband behind the bar, peeking at the old frayed leather watch on Ian’s wrist.

“Seven of the clock,” she calls out to general cheers.

Close now.

Two and a half hours to go, we do not say. Three people here among us will die in the next one hundred and fifty minutes. We do not say it.

It takes Jo limping from around the corner of the house, her shadow stretching like an opera cape behind her, for me to actually realize what time it is. We should be inviting everyone inside for dinner.

I'm about to eject Emma from my lap to rise and ask Jo if we're ready when Brian raises his pint glass and the gathering falls into a sudden hush, like a field of crickets when a cloud passes over.

"Shall we salute them?"

In the little universe surrounding me, people raise their glasses. Every little bit of party chatter has slipped into a silence as smooth and firm as marble. Even Pixie and Max stop chasing each other, sensing the change.

Brian pulls a folded piece of paper from his pocket and opens it against his hip.

"John William Ashford!" he shouts.

Everyone repeats, "John William Ashford!" his full name, all shouts combining in one strong, resonant voice. All shouts but mine.

I feel pierced that I hadn't known this custom, that I've just missed the chance to speak my friend's name. There is so much I wish I'd known.

Brian's eyes return to the paper. "Nils Larsen."

"Nils Larsen," we all say.

I hear a pinched voice joining in behind me and see Marit sitting on the ground, her glass raised like everyone else's.

"Christian Dahl," Brian reads, and we all repeat it, our shouts linked into one great cry that seems to erupt from the ground itself.

Diana Shaw is crying silently. She only met the hikers once, she said earlier, when they popped into the post office asking to use the phone, but they're ours now. They belong to our tradition, our history.

I'm not ready for the next one.

"Avery Jane Smith." Even Brian's voice breaks on this one.

I feel like I'm going to collapse, but an arm slips around my waist, bearing me up. It's Jo. She rests her forehead against mine, and we stand together, a lean-to, as we say her name, all of us together. Avery Jane Smith.

Her parents shout the words. Not defiantly but almost proudly, lips white with pain. They lift their glasses, but they don't drink. When silence

falls again, they stare ahead of them as if the party's dropped away and there is nothing left to see.

We need to get them fed.

I glance behind me and see Sally in the doorway. She catches my eye and nods. I scan the house for Hugh before remembering where he is, what I did.

Blood rushes to my face, but I breathe it away. He's fine, sleeping. I'll check on him once everybody's settled. Make up some excuse for why he's not coming to join us.

"Everyone? Friends?" I call out. "Please come inside. Dinner's ready when you are."

They file across the lawn, nodding graciously to me as they come. I try to name them in my head as my eyes land on them. We should all be named in our lives and not just our deaths, shouldn't we? Names matter. We were here. We *are* here.

"That wasn't your speech, was it?" Jo whispers, elbowing me. "What do they teach you at these American universities?"

I laugh, really laugh, and shush her.

As the villagers mount the stairs to the house, Pixie and Max scrambling up between them, I say, "Careful on the steps," in the same voice I use for the children.

Ernie Withers climbs up slowly, clinging to the stone banister.

"I'm so glad you made it!" I crow when he gets to the top.

"I am too," he says sardonically, his forehead shiny with sweat. "Believe you me."

Jo lingers. Together we scan the horizon for stragglers, but see no one, just a murder of crows trading places in the trees lining the drive, Janet Murrow's cats licking their paws out on the grass. They must have followed her here, bless them. The shadows of the elms stretch out across the lawn like pointing fingers.

Seven of them. I wonder if that's a coincidence.

Elsie Wickett and Matthew are the last to make it up the steps. He keeps a gentle hand on the center of her back to steady her. A small smile plays on

her lips; he's managed to distract her, then, with wine and company. I only hope I can do the same for the rest of them.

He nods at Jo as they pass, his eyes smoothly eluding mine. Something in me sinks, but I hide it behind my smile of welcome. That moment's passed. This one is here.

Jo watches me, says nothing.

We step inside with one last glance at the empty garden, empty drive, Lute empty of all human life save the souls in this house, then I shut the oak door with a thud that echoes in the hall. I turn away to the brighter sound of the guests.

A voice bleeds through the door. "Nina-girl?"

I turn back, hairs prickling.

"Gran?" My hand is slick on the doorknob. I grip tightly and open it.

There's no one there, not even the cats. I still peek down at the hedges framing the stairway. My heel slips a little on the edge of the doorframe. I catch my breath and turn back inside.

Lute's tricks, I know, but I leave the door ajar. Just in case.

She could only be a ghost, but my God, how Gran would love to see this house, to haunt it. She'd get such a kick out of it.

I can do this. *Hugh's under the weather*, I'll say, and they'll know what that means and accept it, gracious. They're lovely like that, these people of Lute.

I round the corner into our enormous dining room, the vast, ancient table ready to seat thirty-two, set with our very best red-and-white Wedgwood soup bowls.

"I'm sorry," I start to say, getting this out of the way quickly. "Hugh is —"

Hugh is here.

He's sitting at the head of the table with his back to me. He doesn't turn, just the slightest incline of his chin as I fall silent.

I approach, careful.

He's wearing the same tuxedo as the night we met. He doesn't look at me, but as I walk past, he reaches out and grabs my hand.

"Hello, darling," he says. "Happy anniversary."

I'm terrified to look at him, but when I do, I find nothing sinister in his smile. He's sleepy, a smidge sheepish. Maybe the door didn't lock after all.

I feel a wash of relief, but in its wake comes fresh unease. He looks so serene it scares me, and putting on a tuxedo for this dinner is a hell of a choice.

"Happy anniversary," I answer.

I lean down to kiss him, buffeted by coos of *aw* from all the sweet old ladies, avert my eyes from Matthew, and continue down the room to assume my own head seat, miles away at the far end of the table. There's a seat with a booster cushion next to me, and Emma clambers blithely onto it, utterly nonplussed by the fact that we're about to have the entire island's current population seated in motley chairs around the formal table, the one we've never, ever used. Charlie's eyes are saucers as he sits to my right, taking everyone in, slowly, individually. I could swear he's doing what I did as I watched everyone come in—committing them to memory.

Once everyone is settled, more offerings begin to emerge, mostly of the alcoholic variety. I see Tempranillo and Sancerre and Bordeaux, cherished imports, so rare for the past three years. They've saved them for today.

There are wineglasses on the table, ready. I push mine out of range of Emma's chubby grip, trying my best not to picture them shattered, weaponized, embedded in skin.

Hugh accepts his glass of red, filled nearly to the brim, and drinks from it deeply. I hope he doesn't pass out again at the table. Not much I can do to prevent it.

"Ladies and gents, I bring you..." Sally lumbers in carrying an enormous tureen to a smattering of delighted applause. "Soup! The safest option!"

As laughter rolls across the table, I think of a book I read when I was little, soldiers making stone soup for a village in a time of war, everyone adding one ingredient until all were united in fellowship. Soup was a perfect choice today.

"It's puréed to within an inch of its life, I'll have you know," Sally announces, setting it down in the center of the table, "but dine carefully nonetheless! Take extra care with the bread. I've got another batch of

everything ready, so don't you worry. And for those brave or reckless or last standing among us, I have also prepared a salad."

Lannie Joiner raises his glass with an "Eh-oh!" and a few others around the table echo the gesture. Someone elbows Matthew, and he lifts his glass, not mustering as much of a smile as the others.

Last standing. I heard someone say that before. Lannie, at the pub. Matty must have something in common with him, with all the people raising their glasses.

They're Xs. All of them. I didn't see Joiner, but Clare, Rivers, Blanchard, Janet Murrow.

They all live alone. They have no families left that I know of, no living children.

The last of their names. The Xs are safer.

Emerging from my fog, I realize that no one's reaching for the bread or the salad, and Sally's hand is resting, expectant, on the soup ladle.

They're waiting for a speech.

Jo slips out of her seat and perches beside Charlie's chair, pulling the children closer with warm whispers so they won't interrupt me.

I rise, ignoring the sensation of standing in a plummeting elevator.

"All right," I start, to myself. "A few words."

I look up. They're listening, even Hugh. Especially Hugh. I can't look at him and get through this. He should be the one speaking tonight.

No. He shouldn't. He should be upstairs sleeping. This is meant for me.

"I want to thank you for being here," I say. "Not just here, in this house, at this dinner, but here on this island. Thank you for being here for Lute."

I see nods around the table, sense everyone settling into their seats, approving.

"I haven't prepared words today." I glance apologetically at Jo, who shrugs, snorting. "And I think if I had, I would have tossed them out already. So many of you have told me I couldn't understand this, couldn't understand *Lute* until the end of the Day. And ... well, I had no idea what you were talking about!"

They laugh, I laugh, all of us linked.

“The Day isn’t done, and I’m sure these words will feel inadequate as soon as the sun sets, but I wanted to tell you that I’m beginning to understand, more than Lute. Understand everything. The world beyond this, the agreement we’ve made by virtue of being alive.”

I feel dizzy. I lean on the table as Janet murmurs, “Yes, exactly that, yes,” which is reassuring because I’m not even totally sure what I mean. The words are just spilling out of me.

“Growing up, I never really understood what people meant when they talked about home. I never experienced home, as a child, as an adult. In fact, it’s only now, today, that I feel the word inside me, how it breathes around us. *Home*. We’re home.”

I motion at the room, at the gathering. They nod. There’s a humming of agreement, like a beehive.

“Home is a choice and sometimes a hard one. What you choose to accept. What you embrace. When I first moved here, I felt so *welcome*, more than I’d ever known to hope for.”

My eyes sting. Mary nods at me, encouraging, ever the teacher.

“I looked around at Lute, and I loved it instantly. Of course I did; it’s beautiful here, almost always—that’s why we get tourists—but I don’t think I really knew it as my home until today. I valued you all, as individuals, as a community, but I didn’t know you. How could I have known how brave you all are? I’d felt the warmth of home here but not the weight of it, and the weight of this home is extraordinary. You get up every day and choose to live *here*, despite what Lute has taken from you and will continue to take. The courage it takes to bear the loss, to weather the grief, to face it down instead of running.”

At this, I sense a stiffening, a silent intake of breath from the table.

I say it again, louder, a nail driving into Hugh’s head. “Instead of *running*, you open yourself to it. You let it in, let your blood run, and let its blood run into you.”

“Yes!” Lannie Joiner shouts back.

“We’re all one here.” My voice is clear and loud. I hear it echo in the hall. “We are Lute, and Lute is us. We pay, but we gain, and we lose nothing because the island holds it all forever. On Lute, we live well for a time. We

love one another until we're gone. We receive the blessings of our daily existence, the prosperity, the peace, but only if we're willing to watch it end."

I think of John Ashford, the astonishment on his vacant face, and a sob rises again in my throat.

"Today has been a difficult day," I get out. "Even so, I am grateful for the gifts of Lute, and, like you, I am willing to accept the costs. I am you. I am the island. Let it take what it wants."

I look around at tearful eyes, hands clasped to hearts, fevered smiles, and feel so glad to have spoken, to have stood at the head of this table with the people of my island around me.

And then my eyes land on the two small people beside me, and I have to swallow down bile. Charlie is still and pale as a block of ice, listening hard, but Emma squirms, confused.

Let it take my children. What a vile agreement.

I had to say it, though. It's the core of this toast. It's what Hugh and I are meant to provide. Come and kill the garlanded king. Take from us the most.

I let my eyes blur, wrap my fingers carefully around my crystal wineglass, and lift it high.

"To all of you and to Lute. To all it gives and all it has taken."

I drink, long and deep, as the shouts of "To Lute!" repeat scattered around the table like the cries of jackdaws.

I sit and peek up to see glittering eyes still watching me around the table.

Brian, our town crier, sets down his cloth napkin and stands, shouting, "To the Lord and Lady of Lute!"

"To the Lord and Lady of Lute!" comes the response, wineglasses raised.

All the way down the table, I see Hugh holding up his full glass, staring at me through the red. His face is blank, but his hand has begun to shake, wine sloshing to one rim and then the other without falling out.

I look away, to Emma, to Charlie, to Jo.

She shoots me an approving wink, then says, "Bit long."

I make to strangle her, laughing, then realize it might be too threatening a joke for a day like this.

She deposits the children in their chairs flanking mine and goes back to her seat. Sally comes over to fill our bowls, then settles into her own place between Brian and Jenny Pike with a contented sigh.

And so, we eat.

It's almost normal. Spectacular, if I'm honest. I didn't expect much from a puréed dinner, but I've never tasted soup quite like this, shining against the tongue like liquid gold, intensely delicious. I have dared the salad and had to close my eyes at the aliveness of it, the green crunch, the gift of it, to have grown and given of itself to nourish us. Food is a treasure. All of this is.

As the sunlight softens, I half rise to switch the overhead lights on before remembering that the power is still out, but no matter. There is ample daylight, really, there is conversation, there is me convincing Emma not to throw a strop about the very existence of salad, whispering for Charlie to stop trying to eat the soup with his fingers, for goodness' sake, and then keenly regretting it—what if that was the last thing they ever heard me say to them?

Down at the end of the table, Hugh hasn't touched his food. His spoon is clean on his folded napkin. He smiles faintly, sips his wine, breathes so hard I can see the rise and fall of his chest from here.

The mantel clock chimes in the living room.

8:00 P.M.

I feel a strange mix of pride and regret looking around the table at neighbors we haven't properly socialized with in the past seven years, now mixed up together like a single family. We should have invited them in sooner, it seems to me now. This should have been their shelter all along, not just today. If the grove is the heart of Lute, Alder House is the mind. The house feels vibrant with them in it, purposeful, alive, the ancient oak table, the echoing Tudor hall, the carved medieval archways chatting now too, all of us in conversation.

Even Marit has been drawn in, the Tavishes regaling her with talk of their terrier, bless them. I peek around the corner and see why—Pixie rests in Mrs. Tavish's lap, well behaved and placid. Max stands beside Marit, wedged between chairs with his head in her lap, while she slowly strokes his brown fur. I'd scold him for begging for scraps, but I don't think that's happening tonight. They say dogs know when people need comfort. I'm glad he's chosen her.

Everyone processes this differently. We all have our way of submitting to what's inevitable.

There are those like the Pikes and the Tinkers, drowning their fear in an overabundance of merriment, and there are those who remain silent among us like Ernie Withers, listening hard to the chatter with a forced smile to stave off terror, or Gemma Smith taking one small spoonful of soup at a time, a swallow, a breath, hands pressed against the tablecloth.

Matthew is not among the silent ones. He sits next to Mrs. Wickett and engages her in conversation throughout the meal, his expression so light and relaxed I hardly recognize him.

He glances up at me and, this time, doesn't look away. Something communicates, so fervent I swear everyone at the table can see it. There's a connection between us still. A shining thread.

He turns back to Mrs. Wickett, offering her more wine, and everything is normal again. Her wrists are thick with gauze, and if anybody takes note of it, they don't let on. I hope she's glad to be here after all, to taste the soup and laugh with Matthew for one more night at least.

"All present and accounted for?" I hear Tim Blanchard ask Brian down the table.

Brian chews his bread and carefully swallows before answering. "Yep, we're all here, by my tally."

There are more than a few furrowed brows at this. Ernie Withers dabs sweat from his forehead with his napkins. I connect the dots, the red dots, the crosses. Everyone here means that no one's sheltering in place. No one's died without us knowing while we ate and laughed and made speeches. Still three to go, like it or not.

"It was a late one last time," Jo says, to nods.

She looks to Matthew, and he replies with a faint, pained smile.

His family must have been last, seven years ago. He must have thought they were safe, or nearly. So close to the end, to sunset, and then that fire swept through, too fierce for his wife to escape, his little girl, four years old, pinned, suffocating, burning. Jesus, I hope it was faster than what I'm imagining.

"Time before that," Lannie Joiner says, his words slurring a little, "we were all wrapped up by five o'clock. Got a bit sloppy at that dinner, didn't we?"

"Because we could," Janet Murrow laughs. "That was a night."

"I'll never forget," Mrs. Wickett starts to say, and everyone quiets, grateful that she's joining in. "All the candles we lit."

Brian beams. "We went on well into the night, didn't we? Out there in the garden."

"The garden?" I'm not sure why, but that surprises me.

Sally leans over to me. "Oh yes, time was, we would carry this table and others out onto the green, and everyone would come, close to a hundred of

us.”

“You carried this table down the steps?” I shake my head. “That doesn’t seem safe!”

“We set it up the day before, didn’t we?” Matthew laughs, his eyes warm on mine. “And we didn’t eat until the Day was done.”

“I was able to do a roast two times ago,” Sally goes on, reminiscing. “No worries about using the oven, because the seven had gone early. That was a lucky year as far as the tithing days go. Lucky for we the living anyway.”

I wonder how they’ll rate this year, this dinner, these memories.

“What about last time?” I ask. “Was that out in the garden too?”

Sally falls silent. Everyone falls silent.

Jo says, “There was no dinner last time.”

It takes me a moment to realize why.

Lord Treadway died. Hugh was gone.

The house sat empty, no one to host.

The room’s gone stale with sadness—the first lull of the evening.

I look to Hugh. He lifts his wine in a weird little toast before sipping it.

“I’m finished!” Charlie’s voice rings out, shattering the awkwardness. He brandishes his empty bowl to an approving smile from Sally, then crawls into my lap as conversation resumes around us once again and Emma instantly launches into a snarling tantrum.

“I want Mummy! My mummy!”

Down the table, Jo rises again, noticing, but I smile and wave her off. They can both cling to me. I will not push them away, and I don’t choose favorites. I am not my mother, my poor, tortured, bitter mother.

I wish suddenly someone had stepped in to help her after she had me. To let her sleep. So much might have been different.

“When’s bedtime?” Charlie asks.

It’s already passed. Everything’s gone loose. This morning, I clung to the idea of our routine, checking the boxes, but now all our normal structures have fallen away, and it feels right and good. I don’t even know what time it is now, except that it’s past bedtime. No wonder Emma’s gotten fussy, though less than I would have expected at a huge gathering of adults.

Charlie's waiting for an answer.

"You get to stay up late tonight. Aren't you lucky?" I say.

He buries his face in my neck. "What about tomorrow?"

I laugh, rustle his hair. "Hmm. We'll see."

"There's three more left."

It's so abrupt a subject change that I blink down at him, recalibrating.

People. He means three people.

I reassess his question. What *about* tomorrow? Will he get to stay up late? I don't have an honest answer.

"We'll see," I say again.

"Want you," Emma moans, trying to shove Charlie away. A few seats down, old John Jones waggles his fingers at her, laughing the laugh of someone who's seen all of this before, but Emma scowls back yet more fiercely and tugs at my hair like I'm a rope to climb.

I negotiate her back into my lap with Charlie and fire mental arrows down the table, freshly infuriated by how completely marooned I am tonight. It's one thing for Hugh to be upstairs, sleeping it off, for me to know where I stand, but if he's here, he needs to fucking do something. Is he really so far gone that he can't entertain Emma for a bit, dandle her on his knee at the very least instead of sitting there, half-catatonic?

But when I catch sight of my husband, any intention of communicating with him drops away.

He's staring at Matthew. Unblinking. Smiling as he stares, a snake before the strike.

The mantel clock chimes.

I know what time it is, but I still listen to every single clang.

This is it. The last chime before sunset.

9:00 P.M.

The sun is sliding away quickly now. Soft summer light filled the room a few minutes ago, but it has reached its limit, the edge of the southern windows, casting a line that cleaves the dining table, brightness and shadow. The back of Jenny Pike's head glows, beatific. Light lands on Sally's arm, Brian's hand, a discarded napkin.

Hugh is in shadow.

He knows. He must. He's got fury written into the lines of his sweat.

At the same time that I notice it, the shift, Matthew does too.

He blinks over at Hugh and sets his napkin on the table, a muscle in his jaw working. "Is there something you'd like to say?"

Matty's voice is low, but not so low that I can't pick it out among the rest of the table's din.

"As a matter of fact, there is," Hugh says.

His voice is more than loud enough to carry. Loud enough to silence the table once again. I expected his words to be incoherent, but they're crisp. Sober.

"I was moved as you all were by my lovely wife's words."

"Hear, hear!" Brian says, the soul of jollity, even now as the room's tension thickens into cold porridge.

I feel Matthew's mouth, hot on my neck, the gravel under my head, the wind whipping around us. It seems like years ago.

Hugh raises his glass, squinting at it. "But I'm not sure it counts as the Lord's speech, does it? And I wouldn't want to shirk my responsibilities."

The vitriol in his voice. The resentment.

Hugh stands.

Matthew grips the arms of his chair like he's going to rise too, then glances at Mrs. Wickett, at Jo, at me, and remains still.

It takes effort for me to breathe. Charlie wraps his hand around my arm and squeezes.

"My father often spoke of the duties that would fall upon me once I took up the mantle of Lord of Lute, chief among them the grave necessity of protecting you—my friends, my neighbors—from falling into chaos." A smile dances over Hugh's mouth, fleeting, then sinks into a deeply etched frown. "And so it is my duty to warn you all that we have a killer in our midst."

My throat turns to lead. How dare he turn those words on me like this—he knows what my mother accused me of all those years. *You're a killer, Nina*. And how I believed her, for so long.

But I'm not a killer. It wasn't my fault my father went out after seven beers and crashed going the wrong way on Interstate 4. I was a baby, not a demon, and it wasn't my fault I had colic, that I couldn't sleep. I didn't tire my mom out on purpose so she'd let Becca fall in the pool and need to be revived. Tragedy might follow me, but that doesn't mean it's my fault, and Hugh fucking knows that.

He's angry at me for something else, to have weaponized those words like that.

For kissing Matthew. He knows.

"A *saboteur*," Hugh adds. He leans in like he's just played a checkmate move on a chessboard.

I'm confused.

He doesn't mean me at all. He's back to the power outage rant. I feel like the wind is lifting me, but *relief* is the wrong word for it. Something in me suspects this is worse.

Jo rises, gliding silently to me. "Why don't we get the kiddies to bed, Nina? It's after nine, if you can believe it."

The time ripples through the room. Less than thirty minutes to sunset. Three left.

"Yes," I say, my eyes locked on Hugh as he swigs his wine. "Let's—"

“Oh no, darling, stay; this concerns you more than anyone,” Hugh says smoothly.

I hazard a smile, trying to defuse this as Charlie did the last awkward moment. “Oh, I suppose they can stay up for a few more minutes.”

Perhaps if they all were to think this was our usual banter, a little inside humor, nothing to worry about at all. Perhaps if Hugh were to realize that the children, *his children*, are sitting right here, listening to this.

Hugh turns to Matthew. “Matty, my old friend, admit it.”

My heart tries to burst out of me, to flee.

Matthew closes his eyes.

“You hate her, don’t you?” Hugh knocks hard on the table, like he’s calling a point to order. “You despise my wife. You resent her.”

I have to clap both hands over my mouth to keep from cackling in astonishment.

“Lord Treadway,” Sally starts, skittish as a mouse, but braver than anybody else at this table.

“No, no, the truth comes out on the Day.” Hugh walks slowly over to Matthew and stands behind him, watching with apparent pleasure as Matthew’s jaw stiffens. “You want her dead. Don’t you?”

Hugh presses his hands to Matthew’s shoulders and begins to rub.

Matthew’s hands ball up against the table, his teeth gritted tightly.

“Go on, you can admit it. No more secrets.”

“I think...” Matthew draws a breath, reining it in. “That you’ve had a bit too much to drink. Not that I blame you.”

“Oh, but you *do* blame me, don’t you?” Hugh lets go and crouches beside him, so close their noses are almost touching. “I didn’t kill your wife, Matty. I didn’t kill my father, I didn’t kill Julia, and I didn’t kill—”

Matthew’s fury bubbles over. It pulls him up, out of his chair. “Do not say her name.”

“There it is!” Hugh laughs, opening his arms wide as he stands to face him. “The truth! That’s why you did it. Admit it. You tinkered with our boat’s engine, and those, those machines of yours, those war contraptions, you used them to dismantle our communications, to keep us here, to trap

my family in this hellscape and watch us die. Just say it, mate. Just say it and let's have it all out today."

"Why is Daddy cross?" Emma whispers.

I gasp at the sound of her voice. Jo was right; this is no place for them. I turn and nod to my friend, but shake my head when she moves to take the children.

I grab Charlie by the right hand and Emma by the left and whisper, "Okay, bedtime-time-time," our old joke, and they don't laugh, but they don't protest either.

People are rising from their seats around the table now, carefully, trying to intervene. I blot out their voices and focus on each of my steps and each of my children's. I'm still in my walking boots, but the little ones are barefoot. We round the corner carefully, we stop on each step so that I can physically feel their weight settling evenly, no slips, no disasters, until we're up, we've nearly made it.

I look down the hall, scouting hazards, and stagger back a step.

The door to our bedroom isn't where it should be. It's on its side, jutting onto the carpet, the splintered remnants of a chair piled beside it. Outside was noisy with chatter and music, and Sally was down in the bustling kitchen, surrounded by thick Norman walls, so none of us heard Hugh beating the door with the chair before he thought to take off its hinges.

He knows I locked him in. He's known this whole time.

I bundle the kids into Emma's room, onto the soft carpet and seat them, one after the other, in the exact center of the room, far from anything that can tumble or break. I feel my pulse like a war drum in my ears. I pick out a book for each of them—there are only picture books—and place one in each lap.

Charlie stares at the book, something about construction vehicles and zoo animals, too young for him by years. "Why am I in Emma's room?"

"I'll be back to get you ready for bed in a minute," I say. "But stay here. Both of you. Do you understand me? Do not move from your spot."

"Okay," Charlie whispers, and even Emma nods, her lips pressed together pale white.

I shut their door, but not all the way, only enough to drown out whatever noises come from downstairs, then pad, carefully, hand tight on the slick banister, or is it my hand that's slick?

No mistakes, no slips, no dying, not allowed.

I hear their voices again and feel like throwing up, feel like running away. I straighten my back, my face, and keep going.

"I've done nothing to stop you from leaving." Matthew is snarling. What a sound. "If you wanted to be a coward again, you were free to do so."

"You know, I didn't take you for a liar, Matty," Hugh says. "Even at the end, you let me down."

I walk back into the room, and only a quarter of the faces still gathered around the table turn to me. The rest are locked on Hugh, petrified.

Matthew sees me. He pushes his chair back and steps away from the table with a shallow bow. "Lady Treadway, thank you for your gracious hospitality. I think we'd all better—"

"You're not going anywhere," Hugh says, and the collective gasp the room responds with echoes in my ears before I see that he's holding the Enfield No. 2.

I thought he'd scoured the house for dangers, stowed it away to keep us all safe, but he's had it in the pocket of his dinner jacket this whole time. Has he loaded it, or is this just for show?

I think of his rants, his paranoia, his *I can't lose any of you*. That shattered door upstairs.

He's loaded the fucking gun.

Everyone shouts and starts scrambling haltingly away from the table in panic—their steps awkward with caution, three to go, after all—but Hugh has only one person in his sights.

He means to do it. Dear God, I see it, the calm seas behind his eyes, like this is all planned, like he's intended to do this for days, from the moment the wharf's engine broke down.

Matthew extends his hands as if he's trying to calm a horse, but his face has the dark rage in it I saw this morning, strong enough to shake the island.

“Hugh? *Hugh*. This is not who you are. Take a breath. Think about your family.”

He motions with one hand in my direction, eyes locked on his old friend.

Hugh laughs. “Like you give a single shit about my family! You want them dead. It’s vengeance. I understand it, Matty, it’s what I would do, but I’m not going to let you. I will protect what’s mine better than you did.”

“Stop it!” My voice is a slap, so forceful I don’t fully recognize it. “Hugh, enough; you have gone insane.”

No more decorum, no more peacemaking, there is no space for that in the next twenty minutes, but he doesn’t even glance at me. His eyes, his gun barrel remain steady on Matthew—even when Brian stands and clinks his wineglass with a spoon as if he’s proposing another toast.

“All right!” Brian laughs, tries to. His eyes are panicked even as he swallows around a smile. “Let’s just have it all out, right? *I did it.*”

That gets Hugh’s attention.

Even Matthew reels. “Brian?”

I thought I’d lost the capacity for shock today, but PC Brian has just knocked the rest of the air out of me.

“Not Matty. Not anybody but me. I put bad fuel in your boat, cut the fiber lines, disabled the mobile tower. No more than a few hours’ trouble and well worth it, doing the island’s work. I didn’t even cut the power, you know. That was Lute, and you can’t fight Lute, so just listen to what I’m saying and get that gun off your friend. You don’t want to do this, Hugh. Not to Matty Clare.”

“*Why?*” My voice echoes in the leaden silence.

Brian turns to me, one hand still stretched out to Hugh.

“Why would you do that?” I ask.

Hugh watches Brian like a hovering raptor.

Matty has been forgotten. I gather my wits enough to glance quickly at him and at the front door, eyes wide in entreaty. He understands. He starts to edge away toward the foyer, but Mrs. Wickett grabs his arm.

“What’s happening?” she asks, shaky. Matthew crouches to reassure her.

“You needed to stay,” Brian says to me, his voice pitched high, begging. “Your speech was beautiful, Lady Treadway, and I do think you understand it better than your husband does. He left us last time. T’wasn’t right. It’s not our way. If you go, Godspeed, but you stay gone. And the lord? By God, he *stays*. We all stay who can stay. It’s our covenant with the land, and I won’t risk it for anything. Or anyone.”

There’s a clear apology in his eyes as he says it, but firmness too.

He’s not lying to save Matthew. He did it. He is the law here, and he broke it. He doesn’t regret it.

“Not even one so—”

Brian’s head bursts.

Red. The inside of his skull is spilling outward like a poppy opening.

I hear high ringing in my ears before I realize that what’s deafened me is the antique revolver’s blast.

Brian falls, and Jenny Pike careens sideways to catch him. Ian instinctively moves between her and Hugh, staring at the smoking barrel.

Jenny dabs at Brian’s head, whimpering, “Daddy? Daddy?”

“Daddy?” Someone else’s voice.

No.

Charlie stands in the hall holding the picture book. He drops it onto his feet and looks at me.

“You said a minute. It’s been more than a minute.”

“No, no, no, Charlie, go!” I hiss.

Sally runs to him, arms outstretched, to bundle, to hide.

I crouch beside Jenny, helping her hold what minutes ago was Brian, and stare up at what minutes ago still felt like my husband of seven years. He looks the same, smoothly handsome, but I can see it now, the rot inside him.

Hugh’s peering at his gun like it’s an object of wonder. A curiosity from a museum.

“That’s what?” He frowns. “Five?”

9:27 P.M.

I turn to my neighbors, my guests, the remaining population of Lute Island. They look like the bodies cast into statues at Pompeii. Their muscles are primed for flight, but they don't dare, whether it's because they're afraid of death by stumbling or bred to be stoic, I don't know, but when I shout, "*Run!*" they do.

It's not orderly. They stumble over each other, some fleeing the room, some helping friends, and I worry for them, but I cannot do any more than that now.

Ernie Withers is the first to reach the front door. He pulls it wider, into his leg, lets out a shout of pain, then escapes. He's created a bottleneck, though—only so many people can fit through even so grand a doorway as Alder House's.

Hugh turns casually toward the crowd in the lobby, his revolver waving this way and that like a divining rod seeking water.

I scramble to stand in front of him. He stares through me. The gun barrel crosses my chest.

The room is emptying too slowly.

His eyes land on Marit. His gun follows.

And they stop.

"I'm sorry," Hugh says, and seems to mean it. "I don't know you."

Marit tries to run. She's barefoot, she's injured. She slips in the exact wrong direction. Hugh's bullet rips through her neck, life spilling out of her in great gushing spurts onto the parquet floor.

I crawl to her, pressing my hands firmly around her neck. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." There's no way to stop it; she's drowning. "Oh God, Marit,

no!”

She tries to say something, but only gurgles come out, only blood.
Her eyes scream for help, flash with one last plea, and then flatten.
Blank. Gone.

“And that’s six. One to go and the Day is over, the Day is over, the tithing day is done.”

Hugh sings it like a nursery rhyme as at last everyone spills from the house like ants, descending the stairs while clinging to the stone banister, sprinting across the darkening lawn.

Hugh follows them out onto the steps, humming to himself.

I look back through the dining room, everything blurring, and I see Sally’s left hand clutching Max’s collar as he rears up and barks, her right holding Charlie tightly. His face is buried against her, but oh God, he’s seen it all, my baby has seen his father do these things.

I have to stop this.

9:31 P.M.

I run out the door. Hugh has paused in the middle of the steps, scanning the crowd. I head straight for him, knowing the risk I face in intervening, a wild shove down the stone steps, a blast, my death the seventh sacrifice.

I stand behind Hugh for one blink, taking in the world for what might be the last time. Purple clouds skim the horizon. The wind plays in my hair, and the setting sun lights up the sea. It looks like Elding is on fire. I'm struck with fierce certainty: I want to die on Lute. My home.

Whatever happens, I accept it. I agree.

As I breathe in the velvet salt air, I reach for Hugh, grabbing his arm, not tightly, an attempt to soothe. He turns to me, his gun sinking, thank God. With his free hand, he reaches out and strokes the hair on the side of my head, and I think I've reached him, I've calmed him, but before I can grab him more firmly, he darts down the remaining steps.

He's headed for the green, revolver ready. I've accomplished nothing.

The older folks are moving slowly in the near distance. One—Mr. Rivers?—has fallen, and Martin Tinker has doubled back to help him.

I'm going to have to find a way to wrest the gun away from Hugh. If I run down the steps and hit him low—

“Shoot me!”

I turn in horror.

Matthew approaches from the middle of the drive, arms wide as if he has any hope of blocking the way to the others.

“You wanted me dead all along, so do it! Do it, you bloody coward!”

His shadow stretches endlessly behind him.

“You’re cocky is what you are!” Hugh screams back. “Last of the Clares, so you think you can’t die?”

Last standing. The X. He’s the last of his family, so the island protects him.

A chill of relief shoots through me.

Hugh mutters, “Lute won’t kill you, but I sure as hell will.”

“Then fucking do it!”

“Matty, *don’t!*” The scream rips out of me.

Hugh turns to peer up at me, eyes like the sky above us, colors shifting by the second. He looks bewildered more than anything.

I turn back to Matthew. “Please. Let me talk to him. It has to be me; it’s why I’m still here.”

Matthew closes his eyes in agony—and runs away, into the darkness of the drive.

“This isn’t you,” I call to Hugh.

I take the steps three at a time, heedless of my safety. I could end this, after all. One slip and it’s done.

“Oh, it’s me.” He laughs, icy. “It was always me. From the moment Andy Blanchard died. From the first time Mum dragged me to my brother’s grave. This was me. I’m a *fighter*. Don’t you know me at all?”

“I thought I did.” There are sweeter, more persuasive words, but all I’m left with is the truth.

“I’ve spent my whole life watching people give in, accept this, lie down and take it, and I swear to you now, I never will. I didn’t ask to be born here. I didn’t ask for any of this.”

He’s walking backward, around the side of the house, weeping. He swipes at his face with his wrist, so much like Charlie in that moment that my heart aches.

“Jessica left. Why shouldn’t I?”

I follow him, carefully, past the fenced yard to the green. I don’t point out that he hasn’t left. He stayed happily for seven years, until it came time to pay the tithe.

“I was running when you met me,” he calls out.

“I know,” I answer. “I knew it then too. I saw it in you.”

“Did you?” He waves the gun. I stagger back. “And why do you think I was on that deck that night, Nina? Why do you think I went there?”

To be alone, I’d thought. And then he found me there and thought I was going to jump, but why was that his assumption? I’ve often wondered, and now I know. I see it in his stance, the way he’s daring himself to leap even now.

“I couldn’t face being here on the Day, and I couldn’t face having left.” He waves his gun feebly in the direction of the lighthouse. “He’s right, you know. I am a coward. I’m a goddamned coward to have thought of killing myself, of running from it that way. Not this time. I’m going to live. *Fuck* the island!”

He screams it, wild, and it echoes off the house.

He’s crying harder now. My eyes are dry.

“This has to end!” he cries. “I have to stop the tithe!”

“Yes,” I say, approaching slowly. “Let’s stop now. All done, okay?”

He lowers the gun an inch. Then another.

“Only a few minutes to go,” I say. “Come and watch the sunset.”

He laughs in defeat. The gun slips slack in his hand. He crouches to lay it gently in the grass.

He steps away. I breathe out.

And something above us shatters.

The shriek that follows is high. A child.

I spin, wrenching my neck to see her in the day’s dying light.

Emma’s tiny body dangles from the outside ledge of our bedroom window, a fairy that’s lost its wings. Her fingers scrabble for purchase, her legs kicking, her mouth screaming and screaming and screaming and—

The crack from this morning, Emma must have pushed at the window while watching us, and it spread and opened wide and flung her out. It was a trap this whole time. For her. For my little girl.

“Hang on, Emma! Do not let go!” I scream. “I’m coming!”

Hugh snatches at my shoulder, turning me around. “There isn’t time.”

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He's right. I won't reach her in time.

Not by running.

Hugh lurches for the gun on the grass, but I'm faster. I snatch it from the tips of his sweaty fingers and hoist it. I don't know what I'm doing yet, apart from taking it away from him, but he backs up, hands hovering.

"Were you going to jump off the ocean liner?" he asks abruptly.

I swallow. It tastes like blood. I've bitten my tongue.

"I don't know," I lie.

"When I saw you there, I felt there was a reason for all of it. I was meant to be there, to stop you, to save you." He laughs, desperate. "But it was you who saved me. Do you see that?"

My eyes dart to Emma and back.

"You've always known, haven't you?" His eyes shine with clarity, with kindness. "Have you wondered why you were brought here? Lute wanted you, Nina. When we met, you had nothing, were nothing, but Lute gave you seven extra years of life. Beautiful years, weren't they? The ending you deserved, my love, not tossing yourself off that ship. I am so fucking grateful for you." That smile of his. Golden eyes crinkling. He's Hugh, and he's mine. "You gave us all the gift of these children, and now you're here to save them. It's all been leading to this. You feel it, don't you?"

He steps closer, pleading, and I do feel it. It's true. It resonates. I understand—here, now, at the end of the Day, I understand all of it.

This is the first time I've ever felt true purpose. This is why I exist.

Hugh reaches for me, as careful as I was a few minutes ago. Takes my hand, the gun, and guides it to my temple.

“Lute wants you,” he says.

“It does,” I say. “You’re right.”

Emma screams again.

Hugh lets go, glancing back at her, desperate. “Quick, Nina, now!”

I pull the trigger.

The blast knocks me back, but I have to look, up, up, as hands reach out of the window and wrap around Emma’s wrists, pulling her carefully past the shattered glass, inside, to safety.

Jo’s got her. She’s got her.

Only now do I pick myself up. Kick away the gun.

Go to Hugh.

I hit him in the heart. An amazing shot for someone who’d never before fired a gun, but he was standing so close. I don’t know if it was instant or just enough of a foregone conclusion for Lute to spare Emma, but he’s gone now. His eyes are closed and his shirt is red, and when I lie down beside him, I can almost pretend that we’re resting.

It’s dark now. Lights are coming on in the house.

The solstice. The longest day of the year. Safe for seven years more.

I can feel the poison of the Day in my blood like strong wine, bitter and heady and sweet. I feel it altering the last of my cells, rewiring my brain in its image, until I know beyond a doubt that I’m a part of this place, planted like the oaks.

I will never belong anywhere else but here.

I hear her calling out again. “Nina?”

“I’m here, Gran.”

“Nina.” The voice is closer now and clearer. It isn’t Gran’s at all.

Jo kneels beside me, tears cascading in twin strips. She looks at Hugh and then at me and stoops to kiss my forehead. Her hand shakes against my shoulder. She’s suffered today. Always so strong, my Jo. She needs caretaking too.

“The children are safe,” she says. “It’s over; the tithe is done.”

“Don’t let them out here,” I whisper. “I’ll tell them when I come inside. Just let us stay a little longer.”

“Of course,” she says, and either I hear or imagine the faintest *milady* in its wake.

Hugh’s blood spills over the grass and settles in the crook of my elbow. It’s still warm. I clutch his hand and close my eyes as the church bells ring out, sending the news out over the land and the water.

We’ve paid. We’ve paid.

THE DAY BEFORE

The ferry is small on the horizon. The gathered crowd spots it in scattered bursts, with relieved gasps and murmurs of excitement mingled with sympathy—for them, the passengers, the guests.

Charlie stands beside me, still as a pond, no sign of the frantic drama of two hours ago, when he couldn't decide what to wear for the occasion. A suit and tie, too formal, a polo shirt, too posh, until I convinced him to settle for shirtsleeves, rolled for the warm midsummer day, trousers, sensible shoes. Boarding school has been good for his thinking—it's helped to sort through, classify, and direct his thoughts—but it hasn't quelled his philosophical instincts. I'm glad for that.

And he's as tall as I am now. I'm struck with the painful urge to keep him here, to stop him from returning to the mainland after today. But there's a world out there he needs to know in order to be the leader Lute requires.

Emma stands waiting with her school friends in starched white dresses. It was her idea to weave the garlands they hold, bright with local wildflowers, primrose and bluebell and bright Alexanders. Who knows if it was really an ancient tradition, but it creates a nice effect, and when the boat draws up to the wharf and Ian and Tim stride up to take the lines, I can see the looks on the faces of the guests and their carers, spotting this line of girls with their offerings, and I know it was a lovely touch. A humane one.

Ernie Withers hooks his ramp to the dock so that those with wheelchairs can disembark first. Matty climbs aboard to help people off, and I count them—I can't help it, my breath slow as honey until I'm sure.

Marta Rennis, terminal lung cancer. Mathilde Bernard, advanced ALS. Harold Sherman and Klaus Fischer, terminal brain cancer. Alison Johnson,

advanced multiple sclerosis. Thomas Volk, Ebba Larrson, no reasons given.

Ebba is the oldest among them at one hundred and two. She's also the only one here unaccompanied. But their reasons are not for me to pry into. She doesn't require a wheelchair. Matthew takes her hand and walks her down the ramp.

We've smoothed the road as best we could without outright paving it. We want today to be comfortable for them, as painless and peaceful and quietly joyful as possible. It's what we've promised. They can sit in the garden or beside the sea and be fêted at our feast. They'll sleep in warm beds in Alder House, wake before dawn, and as the Day begins, an ending.

It's a long way to the house when you're in pain. We've got a golf cart to ferry those who need it, but I see a few of our guests waving it off. They want the slow procession. They want to breathe the sea air and take in the birdsong one more time. Others are too far gone to notice. The pain shows plainly on their faces, lightning bolts under their temples, daggers in their guts.

Emma and the other girls gently place the garlands on their heads, one by one, whispering, "Welcome to Lute. Thank you and bless you."

One of the carers—a young man, a relative perhaps—has begun to shake and cry.

Matty looks to me. I press a hand to Charlie's back. He's ready. He's thought about this for half his life.

A few months after the Day, when I felt he could talk about it, I asked him why he'd gone to the stone on the day we were meant to leave. Had Brian whispered in his ear, another of his schemes to keep us on the island? Charlie told me no. The Shining Ones told him to go to the grove and see it for himself, and he knew he had to obey. They speak to him with words, even now. With me, it's only light.

"As Lord of Lute, I welcome you," he says now, his voice a little too loud. "We thank you for joining our ancient tradition. For our peace. For our safety. For all our blessings here. We cannot begin to repay our debt to you, our visitors. But please join in our feast, in our traditions, in our wine, if you ... if you like."

One woman slumped in her chair rouses enough to smile and murmur, “I do like,” earning an appreciative laugh from the welcoming crowd.

Matty joins in. That he can laugh on the day before the tithe is a fresh marvel, though the sound of it isn’t uncommon on other days. It’s as familiar as the gulls, Emma’s scales on the piano, the roar and hush of the waves on the rocky beach.

“It is my great honor, our honor, to be with you, to share your final moments, to speak your names in one voice. Thank you, and bless you.”

It’s a bit stilted, formal—one might easily guess that Charlie’s been reading classics at school—but he’ll grow into it, find his footing. He’ll have time to do it, if tomorrow goes as planned.

It was Jo’s idea, in a way. It took Mrs. Wickett four more years to pass. Jo was the one to sit with her through long nights, keeping vigil in case she woke up crying out for her husband or her son, others whose names were unfamiliar. When Elsie finally slipped away, peaceful, relieved, I told Jo how good she was to have taken such care of her.

“No,” Jo said. “It was cruel. We should have let her go when she wanted to go.”

The conversation unspooled from there. We made some discreet calls, and in the end, there were more volunteers than we could take.

None from here. When we put the idea to the council, there was initial resistance, cries that it should be us, an outburst that ended when Jo stood up and asked for volunteers. We left it a month. No one stepped forward. It wasn’t long before I overheard hushed talks at the Dane’s Head about how in keeping this plan was with the old pact. Diana Shaw focused that keen curiosity of hers into endless web searches, hunting for clues about the very first tithes. Who knows whether all those ancient sacrifices were taken solely from among the people of Lute, or whether they included Celts of faith from Britain and Brittany as well? Perhaps some of our blessings would be bestowed upon families from the mainland in their turn.

Hard to call any of this right with any conclusiveness, but it’s right enough for now.

Harder to say whether it will even work. Lute might not accept outsiders alone. We’ve timed it as close to dawn as we can, but the island plays tricks,

gets funny, holds all the cards, and we know it. We offer—it's up to Lute to accept. And if it all goes wrong, if we wind up among the dead, we accept that too.

Jo's waiting at the house with Sally and the others. They've gone straight back to the old ways, poring over books for solstice feast recipes, for the most authentic rituals, not the invented one they used to perform like a dance. They're still hoping to grasp some ineffable element from long ago, something true. It helps that our new warden holds a Ph.D. in neolithic British history from Cambridge, and that, unlike John, she believes. We pray to the Shining Ones now, the Tuatha, the doorway they hold open between worlds. We made our procession, and each of us, even the children, cut open our hands and spread our blood on the tithe stone, hoping it would be enough.

The old ways are in place, as much as we could revive them, but the method of human sacrifice is completely modern. It will end at the red-stained stone, not with a bludgeoning rock but with a physician in plainclothes and a small, painless needle.

The procession moves on without me, Charlie at the helm, Emma and her friends in the tail, a white flock. Something quiets in my heart, watching them.

Then I hear a shout. "Daddy!"

"I kept him as long as I could, I swear." Jenny laughs, chasing after Andy. "He's a curious little chap, isn't he?"

"Takes after his mother," Matty says, touching my back as he passes me to scoop up our three-year-old. "Can't keep her nose out of anything."

"Oh, stop." I kick his shoe, grinning.

He leans back to kiss my cheek, and Andy reaches over so he can hug us both, then he's scrambling down again, running toward the dock.

My heart clenches. His chubby legs can't keep up with the rest of him, and he's so reckless and determined. The fear, it hasn't left me. I hold my breath until Matty's snatched him up again and carried him back to solid ground. I'll hold my breath all day tomorrow too, I'm sure I will, no matter how well it all goes.

“You go ahead,” Matty says, tickling Andy until he’s giggling upside down. “We’ll get out some energy and then meet you at the house.”

He still calls it “the house,” even after five years living there.

We didn’t rush in, despite the way we started. We were cordial, platonic, for two full years.

It changed, at last, one afternoon in September. I’d snuck out for a walk with Max to see the archaeologists resuming their work on the north site and found Matty there chatting with the new National Trust warden. She wasn’t a young woman, but not elderly either, and a completely new kind of terror gripped me.

I needn’t have worried. Matty walked me back down island and laughed when I told Max off for chasing birds. “He’s a dog. What do you expect?”

“It’s a delicate ecosystem!” I protested. “I do not want to mess with it.”

“You know, this was probably the first thing I noticed about you.”

My breath stalled as I waited for him to go on, but he hit me with an unexpected wry smile instead.

“You don’t even step on insects, do you?”

“Not if I can help it.”

I nudged him. He nudged me back.

“This is why Lute loves you,” he said.

I looked at him. “You think Lute loves me.”

“I know it does.” He smiled back. “That doesn’t mean it won’t kill you.”

Sally and Jo have the house’s greeting well in hand, so I take the long road back, through the village with its cottages standing sentinel in a jagged row, past the fence where Mrs. Murrow’s cats still bask, past the tall church, its bell tower silenced for today, the graveyard, where Hugh lies next to his parents and the brother he never knew and the friend he never recovered from losing, through the waving heath, past grazing goats and other daily wonders, until the cluster of oaks is in sight.

I still dream of those figures, bleeding light.

I wonder if we’ll see them at the end.

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LUTE

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The Day Before

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