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Prologue

Summer 2003

Thea's scream rips through the clearing, startling the birds from the trees in a flurry of flapping wings.

The sound isn't human; it's high-pitched and desperate, the kind of scream that turns your stomach inside out, makes your ears burn.

She should have waited until they got back to camp. He told her to wait.

But Thea had insisted. Half an hour and three beers since they'd snuck away from camp for some time alone, and she couldn't hold it any longer: 'Don't look at me like that, it's your fault for bringing so many cans. Shout if you see someone coming . . .'

Laughing, she'd walked a few paces away, carefully positioned herself so Ollie could see only the sandy tips of her white pumps, the thin trail of wet already winding through the dusty floor.

The scream intensifies.

Ollie freezes for a moment, but instinct kicks in: he lurches into action, pivoting towards her. But almost instantly, he comes to a halt, a cloud of dried soil and leaves kicking into the air.

A movement: someone stepping out from the tangle of branches.

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The rock on the cliff above, the island's namesake, is casting them in shadow, but Ollie can see right away that this person isn't from camp. They aren't in shorts and a T-shirt like the kids, or the cheery green of the camp leaders; they're wearing something dark and shapeless.

Ollie's eyes dart to Thea. He can now see her frantically thrashing in the dense undergrowth.

He wants to move, to do something, but his body is locked. All he can do is stare, his heart lunging in his chest – hard, knocking thuds against his ribs.

A violent flurry of movement, and then a sound: the sharp liquid crack of something bursting and breaking.

It's a sound he's never heard before.

Ollie closes his eyes. He knows it's Thea, but in his head, he's turned her into something else. A puppet. A mannequin.

Anything but her.

His eyes flicker open and it's then he sees it: the watery trail has become something darker, thicker.

Blood.

It splinters into a fork – the liquid tip of a snake's tongue.

Another strike: this time harder, faster, but it barely registers, and neither does Thea's second scream – blistered, cut off, like it's clotted in her throat – because Ollie's already running.

He darts into the woods, making for the cove he and Thea found yesterday while the others were building the fire. While they'd both pretended they had stopped there just to talk, to drink, it was obvious it was going to become something more.

His hand on the soft band of skin above her shorts, her mouth pressed against his . . .

The thought is too much; he speeds up. It's as though he's running blind – the setting sun flicker-flashing through the trees overhead, his eyes seeing nothing but a blur of shadowy

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green and the grey-brown carpet of leaves. His trainers are slipping out from under him, the dry ground as slippery as mud.

Barbed branches pull at his shirt. One catches his arm, snags the soft skin on the inside of his wrist. Blood flares – a ragged line of tiny red beads bursting through his skin.

It feels like he's done this before – a weird déjà vu, as if in a dream, one of those panicky ones where you wake up sweating and panting, the type that sticks with you for a while afterwards.

A few metres on and the trees start to thin, the woodland floor giving way to sand, the rock beneath, flattened elephant-folds of dusty limestone. He's reached the steps Thea found yesterday, nothing more than wooden treads knocked into the soil. Momentum tugs his body forwards with each step and he's forced to lean back to stop himself from falling.

When he reaches the bottom, he jumps on to the sand and runs towards the small overhang he and Thea had lain in last night, contraband bottles in their hands.

Ollie drops to all fours, hollowing his back to crawl under. Once he's inside, he sits with his knees drawn up to his chin and concentrates on breathing. In and out. In and out. Being still. Staying quiet.

But his body won't cooperate; he's shaking with jerky spasms that he can't control.

Ollie clamps his hands over his head as if the pressure will force away the scream still ringing in his ears. But now it's not just the sound, it's the sight: Thea's body folding, collapsing – like a puppet master had violently jerked at her strings.

He bashes his hand against the rock above him. Bashes again and again until there's ripped-back skin and blood.

Red smears across his knuckles, a sharp thread of pain

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pulling through him that he tries to hold on to, to distract him, but it doesn't work.

The truth is still shouting.

He left her. He left her. He ran.

Ollie puts his head between his legs and takes a long, shuddery breath.

Minutes pass, but no one comes. It's getting late, he can tell. The last of the sun is almost gone, the sand in front of him now in shadow.

He'll wait a little longer, he decides, then he'll try going back to camp. As time ticks by, Ollie half convinces himself that it was a joke, a prank Thea got roped into by the boys. He clutches at the thought: he'll get back to camp and she'll be there, laughing at him for running away like a kid.

A few minutes later, he drags himself from under the overhang. Straightening up, he glances carefully around him, but the beach is deserted; there's nobody there.

As he runs back through the forest, he's still clinging to the thought: *It's a joke. Thea is fine.* But as soon as he enters the clearing, he knows. The dark trail from before is now a stream of blood forming a winding downhill path.

Ollie tries to look at her, but he can't bring himself to see past her white pumps, now perfectly still and streaked with red.

It isn't real. Not Thea. She can't be . . .

He turns away, bile rising in the back of his throat.

It's then that he notices something on the ground, sitting on top of the dusty leaf litter.

A large stone, about thirty centimetres long. The surface is mostly weathered, with tiny scuffs and dimples where it's been battered by the waves and sand, but it's also smooth in places, the outline softly contoured.

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Crouching low, Ollie picks it up. It feels warm, gritty against his palm. Something about it is familiar, he thinks, slowly turning it between his fingers.

It hits him, and he holds the stone still.

Tipping his head, he glances up at the rock on the cliff face behind, then looks back at his hand.

Ollie looks from one to another until his eyes blur.

He realizes that what he's holding isn't just a stone.

The subtle curves and contours resemble the rock above him.

Reaper's Rock.

Thursday, 10:00 am, 2021

@explorewildwithjo

‘So here’s the update as promised . . . we’re at the beach waiting for a boat to take us to the retreat, but what I didn’t realize is quite how remote Cary Island actually is . . . I reckon it’s a twenty-minute boat ride from the mainland at least.’ Jo flips the phone’s view from her face to show the sea, a glimpse of the island visible in the distance.

‘I’ve had loads of people asking about LUMEN, so I’ll explain the vibe. LUMEN’s a luxury retreat on the gorgeous island you’ve just seen, off the South Devon coast. The architect was inspired by Mexican legend Luis Barragán, so we’re talking luxe, candy-coloured villas nestled in woodland with views out to sea. There’s some pretty special stuff: an outdoor yoga pavilion, a glass-bottomed pool, and this crazy rope swing stretching out over the water . . . you can drop straight off into the sea. One of the most spectacular features is an amazing villa on a private islet – that’s for all you honeymooners. I couldn’t get my mitts on that one as it’s already booked, but it looks stunning.

‘I’ll be taking you out on the kayaks with me later today, but to give you an idea of the wellness activities on offer, they’ve got paddleboarding, meditation, kayaking, hydrofoil surfing, and loads more.’ She pauses. ‘Now for the creepy bit: I love the backstory to this place. The rocky outcrop on the side of the island, you can just about see it from here, it gives the island its nickname: Reaper’s Rock. Spooky, right? And according to a lot of the locals, the island is cursed. Apparently’ – she lowers her voice to a hushed whisper – ‘the rock is said to be a manifestation of the Grim Reaper. During the plague, people were quarantined here and then left to die. So the story goes, their

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souls are still wandering and will only be at peace when the Reaper takes a new victim. Stay too long and you'll be next . . . ?

Jo flips the camera again to show her mock-terrified face. 'Eerie, isn't it? But that's not the only thing. There was an old school on the island that burnt down back in the day. Abandoned until it was used by the local council as an Outward Bound centre in the late nineties. All fine and dandy until a group of teenagers were murdered at the hand of the island caretaker, Larson Creacher, in 2003.' She lowers her voice again. 'Is it wrong to say all the spooky stuff kind of adds to the appeal?'

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1

Day 1

As Elin Warner runs, the air feels sticky like gum, catching in her eyes, hair.

Only six a.m., but the heat is already bouncing off the pavement, solid walls of it, with no breeze to sweep it away.

The route she's taking is part of the South West Coast Path – houses on either side, lavish Victorian and Italianate villas that stud the wooded hillside. Gleaming pinpoints of sunlight are bouncing off the windows as her reflection shifts alongside her in the glass – cropped blonde hair mushrooming up and out with each step before settling back around her face.

The exteriors of the houses seem flimsy in the heat, their edges blurred. The verges outside are parched yellow – grass not just suspended in growth, but withering and dying, bare patches opening up like sores.

Summers have been hot before, but none like this: weeks of sunshine; spiking, record-breaking temperatures. Newspapers printing endless images of cracking motorways, fried eggs cliché-cooking on the bonnets of cars. Forecasters had predicted a reprieve several weeks ago, but it never came. Just more sun. Nerves are fraying, people ready to snap.

Elin's just about holding on, but her internal landscape is at

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odds with the external. With each day of blistering heat that passes comes the exact opposite inside her: the cold grip of fear creeping back.

It keeps her up at night, the same thoughts on repeat. With it, the control strategies: the running, relentless exercise. The past few weeks, an escalation – earlier runs, longer runs, secret runs. *Self-flagellation*.

All because her brother, Isaac, had mentioned her father had been in touch.

A few metres on, the houses on the left give way to a green. The coast path runs behind it, hugging the lip of the cliff.

Leaving the pavement, she darts into the opening for the path. Her stomach lurches.

No fence, only a metre of land between her and a forty-metre plunge to the rocks below, but she loves it: it's coast path proper – no houses between her and the sea. The view opens out: Brixham on her right, Exmouth to her left. All she can see is blue – the sea a darker, inzier shade than the chalky pastel of the morning sky.

With each step, she feels the heat from the ground rising up through the soles of her trainers. She wonders for a moment what would happen if she kept moving: whether she'd eventually implode – an engine overheating – or whether she'd simply carry on.

It's tempting to keep going until the thoughts stop, and she doesn't have to try to hold on any more – because that's what it feels like sometimes: as though she's having to grip too hard to normality. One small slip, and she'll fall.

At the top of the hill Elin slows, her thighs screaming, thick with lactic acid. Hitting pause on her Fitbit, she notices a grey car cresting the hill. It's moving fast, engine throaty, scattering the seagulls picking at a flattened carcass on the road.

Something registers as she takes in the shape, the colour. It's

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Steed's car, she's sure of it, the DC drafted in to help her on secondment. It speeds past, a blur of dust-dulled alloy and flying gravel. Elin catches Steed's profile: slightly crooked nose, strong chin, fair spikes of hair gelled into submission. Something about his expression pulls the last bit of breath from her. Elin immediately recognizes it: the quiet intensity of someone flooded with adrenaline.

He's working. On a job.

The car stops at the bottom of the hill. Steed flings open the door, jogs in the direction of the beach.

Pulling her phone from her shorts, Elin glances at the screen. The Control Room haven't rung. *A job, just down the road, and they called Steed instead.*

Familiar worries resurface, the same ones that have consumed her ever since HR and Anna, her boss, decided that she wasn't ready for full duties after her career break.

Steed's a speck in the distance, moving towards the beach. Elin shifts from foot to foot. She knows the right thing to do is to stick to her plan – to run home to breakfast, to Will – but pride gets the better of her.

Running hard down the hill, she passes Steed's car and crosses the road. No other cars; only a cat slinking across the tarmac, fire-striped undercarriage nearly touching the ground. She crosses the scrubby patch of grass to the empty beach beyond. No Steed.

Walking left, along the shore, she passes the restaurant jutting out on metal pillars above the beach. A rustic-looking shack, name emblazoned in driftwood above the door. *The Lobster Pot*. It's shuttered. Last night, the terrace would have been heaving, strings of fairy lights illuminating wine bottles in coolers, baskets of shiny mussels and fries.

A little further on, she finds him; there, beneath the overhang

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of the restaurant. He's kneeling on the sand, muscles straining through the fabric of his shirt. The raw physicality is always the first thing Elin notices about Steed, but he's a dichotomy: the hard, honed body belied by the softness of his features – heavy-lidded, sensual eyes; a wide, full mouth. He's that rare kind of man: the type women simultaneously feel protected by and protective of.

They've slipped into an easy working relationship. He's younger than her, late twenties, but there's none of the thrusting bravado you sometimes get in men of that age. He's astute, has a knack of asking the right questions, an emotional intelligence that's all too rare.

A woman is standing beside him. She looks to be in her late forties, tall and muscular. Her blue swimming hat is still on, the same hue as her costume, the thin layer of rubber emphasizing the shape of her skull. Despite the heat, she's shivering, jiggling from foot to foot in a nervous rhythm.

Steed turns, and as he moves Elin sees it: a leg, splayed against the sand – a pale calf, lettuce-like fragments of seaweed suckered to the skin.

She finds herself stepping forwards to get a better angle.

A teenager. Ugly wounds – slashes to the face, chest, and legs. Their clothes are almost completely shredded, the polo shirt split down the seam, across the torso.

Closer again, and her vision blurs, the syrupy haze of the air giving the scene a sloppy focus. As she takes another step, reaction tips over into realization.

She sucks in her breath.

Steed swivels round to face her at the sound, eyes widening in surprise. 'Elin?' He hesitates. 'Are you—'

But the rest of his words bleed into the air. Elin starts to run. She knows now why they'd called Steed instead.

Of course. **Copyrighted Material**

2

Hana Leger and her sister, Jo, are waiting on the jetty for the boat to take them to the island, suitcases and bags piled around their ankles. Hana rubs the back of her neck. It feels as if the sun were homing in on the soft skin there, direct as a laser beam.

The water is thick with people: paddlers, swimmers, dinghies bobbing, lone figures tracing the horizon on paddleboards. Children splash in the shallows, kicking up spray. Chubby toddler arms punch at froth.

Hana's stomach tightens, but she forces her gaze back to the squatting toddler.

Don't look away. She can't be blind forever.

'You okay?' Jo looks at her through her aviators, blows out over her upper lip. The motion lifts up the thin strands of white-blond hair that have fallen loose from her ponytail.

'Just hot. I didn't expect it to be so bad down here. Sea breeze and all.' Hana's dark hair, cut in a bedraggled bob, is damp, sticking to the nape of her neck. She ruffles it.

Jo rummages in her backpack. It's one of those technical, lightweight ones, covered in zips and pockets. Pulling out a bottle of water, Jo swigs and then offers it to her. Hana drinks: it's warm, plasticky tasting.

Her sister cuts a striking figure. Tall, tanned, she manages

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to elevate the white cotton beach dress and leopard-print Birkenstocks, slightly fuzzy from wear, into something hip and effortless. Every part of Jo is lightly muscled from a regime of yoga and running and skiing.

Hana follows her to the end of the jetty, squinting. The island itself is a blur – the bright circle of sun behind casting it into shadow. Only one thing is clear: the infamous rock protruding from the top left of the island – the side profile that gestures to a hooded figure, a protuberance jutting out like a scythe.

Hana's stomach tightens, the sight a hit to her solar plexus. 'I didn't expect it to actually look like—'

'A reaper?' Jo turns, ponytail swishing against her face.

'Yes.' Despite her sunglasses, a murky shadow of the rock appears every time she blinks. It's a stark contrast to the brochure – all white sandy beaches, lush foliage.

'But you're looking forward to it? The break, I mean.' Jo raises her voice above the whine of a jet ski.

'Of course.' Hana squeezes out a smile, though she's secretly been dreading this trip.

She'd actually said no when Jo first called. The idea of a holiday with Bea, their older sister, and Maya, their cousin, boyfriends included, seemed odd. They hadn't seen each other in months, after steadily drifting apart over the past few years. While Jo said it was all about *getting them together again*, Hana struggled to understand it. Why now? After all this time?

She offered up what she thought was a solid excuse: without Liam, it didn't feel right. But Jo was persistent: phone calls, texts, she'd even turned up at her flat – a rare occurrence – with a hard copy of the retreat's brochure.

Jo wore her down, making Hana feel simultaneously old and prissy for declining. This was Jo's modus operandi: she's a

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leader, not in a bossy way, but by the sheer force of her personality. Somehow, you got caught in her slipstream, unaware you were even being led.

It never bothered Hana as much as it irked Bea. Bookish, and fiercely introverted, Bea found Jo's energy and extroversion overwhelming. Perhaps it washed over Hana more because she was in between: academic, but not Bea's level. Sporty, but not an athlete like Jo.

'I'm going to post a view of the island from here . . .' Jo takes a photograph.

Hana turns away. It pisses her off – this constant documenting of every move they make – but she can't complain. This trip is a result of Jo's frenetic social media activity: as a travel influencer she gets paid in kind with free holidays. She has nearly four hundred thousand followers who like that she's natural, regularly commenting on her 'relatability' – her slightly too-wide mouth, the Streisandesque kink to her nose.

'That can't be ours.' Jo slips her phone back into her pocket. 'Not already.' A boat is making its way across the water, leaving a foamy spume of white in its wake. Hana glances at the blocky lettering on the side. LUMEN. Jo checks her Fitbit. 'Actually, it's already five to. Where's everyone else?' She turns to the beach. 'Saying that, I think that's Seth over there . . .'

Hana follows her gaze. 'Is it?'

'Is it?' Jo mimics. 'Conjure up some vague enthusiasm, Han.' She shakes her head. 'I know you're not a fan. He's too "risky"' – she makes quote marks with her fingers – 'for you, isn't he?' Jo's face tightens. 'I wish I'd never told you now. It wasn't exactly serious.'

A bead of sweat trickles between Hana's shoulder blades. Jo's the master of this: the sudden turn. 'A criminal record *is* serious. We were only looking out for you.'

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‘He got in with the wrong crowd. End of.’ Jo’s eyes flash. ‘Not everyone’s perfect, you know, not everyone can do happy-clappy songs all day, teach kids how to add up.’

Hana looks at her. *There it is. The sting in the tail.* This is why this holiday is a bad idea. Because Jo, as usual, is able to chop her down with a few choice words. The worst thing is, it’s not just a jibe, it *is* what the rest of the family think of her – a reductive cliché, knee-deep in Play-Doh, sing-song saying the register.

They’d never imagine the reality: the kids’ sticky, pinchy fingers in hers, the nitty-gritty machinations of their brains that slip straight from their mouths, no filter, and how, after a term with them, Hana knew exactly what kind of humans they’d become.

Jo puts up her hand, waving, all smiles again as Seth approaches. *Switch flicked.*

‘Yay,’ she shouts. ‘You’re here!’

Hana does a double-take. A well-built man in shorts and a T-shirt is walking towards them. The height, gait, the baseball cap pulled low over his eyes – it’s gut-wrenchingly familiar. With the sun in her eyes, his face is hard to make out, the similarities uncanny. Despite what her logical mind is telling her, her heart leaps before reality hits.

Of course it’s not him. Liam is gone. Dead, dead, dead.

Swallowing hard, she collects herself. It’s then she notices another, slighter figure behind Seth. It’s Caleb, Bea’s boyfriend. But no Bea. She asks Jo, ‘Where’s Bea?’

‘She cancelled.’ Jo’s voice pitches higher. ‘I told you, didn’t I?’

‘No,’ Hana says tightly. ‘When did this happen?’

‘Last week. Something came up with work, I think. A trip to the US.’ *Bea cancelled.* It shouldn’t be a surprise. She’s always

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been a workaholic, but the past few years have taken it to another level.

‘So she sent Caleb instead. A placeholder.’

Jo shrugs. ‘It’ll be good to get to know him.’

‘You didn’t want to rearrange it for when Bea could come?’

‘No. Too late, and besides, we need this, Han.’ There’s a look of quiet determination on her face. ‘To reconnect.’ Before Hana can reply, Jo starts walking up the jetty, long, loping strides. ‘I’ll go and meet them.’ But as she walks past Hana, Jo knocks over her own backpack, balanced on her case. Unzipped, the contents immediately scatter: hairbrush, diary, a purse. A half-empty bottle of water careers across the jetty. ‘Shit . . .’ Jo grabs it, clumsily shoving everything back in before resuming her jog to Seth.

Hana’s about to follow when she realizes that Jo’s missed something: a crumpled piece of paper. Bending down, she picks it up. Her eyes skitter across the page.

It says *Hana*, then three small sentences all the same, but the first two crossed out, and started again.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

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3

When Elin reaches the flat, sweat is pouring off her, a damp ring marking the neck of her vest a deeper shade of blue. Her skin is burning, not from the exercise but the conversation she'd had with Anna walking back up the hill. They'd exchanged small talk, but Elin knew the real reason for her call. *Steed had been in touch. Told Anna he'd seen Elin.*

She replays their exchange in her head: 'Steed messaged you, didn't he?'

'Yes, he was concerned—'

'It's Hayler, isn't it? He's back.'

It's like a pulse in her head: *Hayler. Hayler.* The first case to work its way inside her like a parasite, scrape her clean. Hayler had murdered two young girls, tied their bodies to a boat, let the propeller do its work. She'd let him slip away. It broke her: the Hayler case triggered her career break, the rapid, brutal excision from the MCIT, the Major Crime Investigation Team, the job she loved. Marked the start of her panic attacks, her anxiety.

It was only when she found her brother's fiancée's murderer in Switzerland that the darkness haunting her loosened its grip. Though devastating, the experience reaffirmed the question she'd grappled with for months – that she *did* still want to be a detective. She made the decision to come back,

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but so had Hayler. The worst possible timing: her slow return to the MCIT will become a crawl. They won't want her anywhere near . . .

Her mouth was thick, her words clumsy. 'I can cope with it, Anna. If I come back on the team, I don't have to be involved, I can sit it out.'

A weighty silence. *Anna's embarrassed.* 'No, it's not Hayler. That kid you saw on the beach went missing a few days ago. Suicide. Already dead when the boat went over him.'

It wasn't Hayler.

She'd leapt in, jumped to the wrong conclusion. She'd panicked, like she always did. The thought snags in her mind, but Elin forces it away as she opens the door.

She walks down the hall of the flat. She can't yet refer to it as home, still feels as though she has to treat it carefully, a precious object that belongs to someone else, and she knows it isn't right. Two months in and it *should* feel like hers.

It isn't the flat's fault. It's spacious, beautiful – part of a Regency-style crescent overlooking the sea. They'd made the big decisions together: a simple design, neutral palette, carefully chosen soft furnishings: an L-shaped sofa, jute rug, a love seat in egg-yolk yellow.

All of it, Elin had raved over – wanted to make a fuss of her flexibility, prove to Will that she'd turned a corner, and that this time, there was no looking back. But she *is* looking back, can't help it. She misses her place: her squashy two-seater, watching the rain fall on next door's flat, book time while eating, uninterrupted.

Will's on the sofa, his laptop propped open. Elin catches bits of sentences: '*award prep now the priority . . .*' The phone is pressed to his ear; he's talking in a low, urgent voice.

Will's an architect, his job both a career and a passion. His

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love for his role is one of the things she loves most about him: how he perceives the world in a different way, privy to a level of beauty that for her will always be just out of reach. Walking to the kitchen, she pours a glass of water.

A few moments later, Will turns. 'You're back early.'

'Cut the run short in the end.' She sips her water. 'Who was that?'

'Jack. The project in Stoke Gabriel has passed planning.' Tilting his head, he scrutinizes her. 'Something up?'

He knows her too well. 'Could say that.' Her voice wavers. 'Made a bit of a fool of myself.' She explains what happened: following Steed, the awkward call with Anna.

Will's face softens. 'I wouldn't stress – Hayler was your last case. It'd be odd if you *didn't* think about it.'

'But it wasn't just that, I panicked . . . it made me think about Sam.'

'Elin, you got the answers you needed. You can move on.' Will's right, but while she got answers about her brother's death, they were ones she'd never, in her darkest imaginings, considered – her older brother, Isaac, wasn't there when Sam died as a child, as she'd believed. *It was her*. When he fell in the water, hit his head on a rock, she froze. Did nothing to help. 'No one blames you. You were a kid.'

'But . . . I think my dad did—' Her voice catches. 'Isaac said he's planning a visit. It made me think about something I never thought was significant at the time, but now . . .'

'What?' he says gently.

'The day Dad left, he'd planned a scramble up to these rocks where you could jump into the sea. I couldn't do it, burst into tears at the top, ruined the whole thing. After, Dad said: *You're a coward, Elin. A coward*. Turned out to be the last words he ever said to me. Later, my parents had an argument. Dad left in the night.'

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‘But what he said wasn’t about Sam—’

‘No, it *was*. That’s the real reason Dad left, and he was right. I am a coward. I ran today.’

‘You’re not. You’re making progress. Steady steps.’

Elin nods, but the old her didn’t need steady steps. She was sharp, ambitious. Going places. The old Elin wouldn’t have been on secondment in Torhun. The work is repetitive, grinding; coordinating door-to-door enquiries, CCTV, witness statements. No real meat on the bone.

‘I know it’s not the same,’ he says softly.

She shrugs. ‘Nothing is.’ It would be hard to match the high stakes of the MCIT, the furious pace in the Incident Room, the intellectual rigour in teasing apart the subtleties of a case, identifying strategies, the plan of attack. Nothing else comes close, but what if it’s too much for her now?

Will scans his phone. ‘My last meeting’s at four. Fancy dinner out? Talk properly?’

‘Sounds good. By the way, I heard you mention an award. Good news . . .’

A flush creeps up his cheeks. ‘Oh, a project’s been shortlisted for an award.’

‘That’s great.’ Elin’s surprised to find herself having to force a smile, a small, mean part of her envious. In her head, her career should be soaring like his, but it isn’t. Will’s the one surging onwards, motor at his back, while she’s treading water.

He stretches out, the hem of his T-shirt pulling upwards, trying to be nonchalant, and it all becomes devastatingly clear. *He’s trying to minimize it.* Worse than him being oblivious.

‘Which project?’

‘The retreat. LUMEN.’ He smiles, his pride obvious. ‘Really unexpected.’

LUMEN. Will’s baby; a luxury retreat that he designed on an

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island a few kilometres off the coast. The retreat has given the island a new face, Will's firm bulldozing the past away in a bold mix of blocky, modernist-inspired architecture and Mexican colour. A passion project, one of the first things he mentioned when they met: *'We're reinventing, but we've worked with the landscape too, using stone from the old school, quarried on the island...'*

'National award, it'll put the firm on the map.'

Not only that, Elin thinks. It's the creative recognition – a verification of his vision to turn around people's perception of the island. 'Congrats, and you don't have to play it down for my benefit. My stuff, it shouldn't put a dampener on you. I've got to learn to deal with it.'

'Easier said than done, I know.' He smiles. 'Fancy a quick coffee? I've got time in between calls.'

'Yes, let me write down my times – only got the first half, but...?' Elin reaches for her notebook on the side table. Her watch records her stats, but she still likes putting it down on paper. The one area of her life where she's making tangible progress.

Elin looks up, feeling Will's gaze on her. She finds pity in his eyes.

He looks to the floor – found out, embarrassed.

4

Hana watches the RIB slow as it approaches the dock, a ragged line of white foam kicked out in its wake. The words she's just read are on repeat in her head.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

She was right: this trip wasn't just a way of bringing the family back together. Jo's organized it for a reason and Hana's pretty sure it's linked to the note that fell from her bag.

'Jo Leger?' The driver scrambles out of the boat, sending it rocking against the jetty.

As he ties it up, he greets them from behind polarized lenses, with a practised, enthusiastic smile. He's young, late twenties maybe, clad in a starched white polo shirt, shorts.

'That's me.' Jo steps forwards, smiling. She's relieved, Hana can tell, that the forced, awkward greetings are done – Jo's overenthusiastic bear hugs with Caleb a sharp contrast to Hana's muted half-embrace.

'I'm Edd.' The driver walks towards them.

Seth steps forwards, smiling, vigorous shake of the hand and broad chest stuck out. This is typical Seth. A jock, but a beautiful one, she thinks, taking in the thick line of muscle in his arm.

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Hana remembers the first time they met, at a coffee shop near their house. Seth had introduced himself – all faux humbleness – and then proceeded to semi-flirt with her mother and sisters in turn, holding their gaze a bit too long, throwing out compliments. He'd clearly expected people to find him attractive, and while he is – tall, bearded, muscular – and she did, the expectation was off-putting. The *entitlement*.

She catches Caleb's eye as the handshake finally comes to an end and they share a smile.

It's the first time she's looked at him properly. His safari-style shorts paired with a faded Pac-Man T-shirt display the deliberate, don't-give-a-shit nonchalance of a Silicon Valley tech nerd. It fits somehow; Caleb's an academic, older than them all but still clinging to the student vibe.

Physically, he's the polar opposite of Seth – lean, sharp-featured, with the kind of nondescript mousy hair that makes him blend into a crowd. Hana still remembers her mother's surprise when Bea introduced them last year. Her prior boy-friends had been, to use her mother's cringy expression, 'hale and hearty'.

Her mother's analysis a few days later was undecided: *there's something self-righteous about him*. Over dinner that night, they had glimpses of it: comments about politics and education that slipped under the radar because of the booze. It didn't bother Hana. She admired his confidence in saying the things she also felt but had never voiced. She'd always cared too much about what people thought of her.

When they met again – just the sisters and Caleb this time – she liked him even more. He has a keen intelligence, a dry humour, and the kind of quiet confidence that's often overlooked beside the chest-beating of someone like Seth. Caleb was able to match Bea intellectually and wasn't afraid

to challenge her. Most people were. Bea's ferocious brain intimidated almost everyone – rendered them either mute or defensive.

'So how many are we waiting on?' the driver asks.

'Only one.' Jo laughs. 'In fact, there she is now.'

Maya's coming towards them, a half run, half walk down the jetty, one battered canvas trainer trailing a lace behind it. She's in typical Maya attire: a thin grey dress hanging loose over her tanned, sinewy frame. A hot-pink scarf dotted with a white pineapple print is loosely knotted around her head, only just taming her mass of curly black hair.

'Nearly went without you.' Jo's face splits into a grin. 'I—'

She isn't able to finish her sentence before Maya barrels into them, pulling Jo in and then Hana for a three-way hug, but they clash, elbows bumping. There's an awkwardness to the embrace; the action rusty somehow, underused. As Maya steps back, her bag drops from her shoulder – a battered black hold-all that looks suspiciously light and small.

Jo narrows her eyes. 'Sure you've got everything?'

Hana suppresses a smile. Jo had sent them an exhaustive list of supplies for the trip. *Rash vest. Cap. Water shoes. Sun cream.* It went on.

'Of course. I followed *the list* to the last letter.' Maya winks, catching Hana's eye.

'All right, let's go.' The driver is already striding towards the boat.

As Hana climbs aboard, there's a loud noise. She jumps. A couple of metres away, teenage boys are plunging into the sea from the wall by the restaurant, shorts billowing up as they plummet. The sharp crack as they smash into the water goes right through her.

'You okay?' Jo takes a seat next to her, tipping her head so it's

close to Hana's. There's sympathy in her tone, but it's touched with something. Annoyance? Frustration?

'Of course. Those kids startled me, that's all.'

'Are you sure you're not still—'

'Still what?' Hana asks sharply.

Jo shrugs, but Hana knows what she's thinking. *You're not still anxious?*

Her behaviour this past year, her inability to dust herself off and go back to normal, has, in Jo's eyes, rendered her flawed, broken. And Jo believes that this is in some way *her* decision, as if by now Hana should have snapped out of it.

It's what she remembers most about last year, after Liam's accident. Jo looking at her, not empathizing, but examining, as if she were trying to find a chink in Hana's grief, some kind of signal that this would only be temporary.

Even now Jo struggles to refer to it, deals in euphemisms instead: after Liam's 'accident' she wanted Hana to quickly be 'better'. You could pin a million different woolly words on it, but they all amounted to the same thing: 'Get over it.'

The boat pulls away from the jetty with a sudden jerk as it accelerates, and Jo laughs as she's jolted into Hana, all smiles.

The switch flicked again.

Hana stares at her sister with an intense loathing.

She shouldn't have come. This was a bad idea.

5

‘Not far now.’ Edd raises his voice above the sound of the engine. ‘Few minutes, max.’

Hana glances at her watch, the face lightly speckled with sea spray. They’ve been going for more than twenty minutes. She looks back at the beach; the wooden spine of the jetty is barely visible. Already, the hustle and bustle of the mainland seems far away.

Pulling out her phone, Jo gestures with her hand for Hana and Maya to bunch together. ‘You two, turn to face out to sea.’ They oblige, heads gently knocking together as the RIB bounces across the water.

‘We’re going to hit the back of the island first,’ the driver calls. ‘Never been anything built on this side. The forest’s too thick.’

Caleb lets out a low whistle. Hana narrows her eyes, feeling a little jolt of anxiety as she takes in the dense wall of foliage. She can tell how dark it would be in there – sunlight watered down to almost nothing where the tree branches curve over one another like laced fingers, obscuring the sky.

‘It’s been too long.’ Maya turns to Hana. ‘We’ve been shit at keeping in touch, haven’t we?’

‘I know.’ Hana observes her cousin. Her face, close up, suddenly unfamiliar. She hadn’t remembered how beautiful Maya

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is – the wild, curly hair and tanned skin, inherited from her Italian mother. Maya looks young still, but perhaps it's just Hana's perception – she'll probably always struggle to see Maya as grown up. Six years younger, for ages Maya *was* a child, someone Hana looked after. It wasn't just her personality; there was something uncertain about Maya, as if she weren't yet sure about her place in the world. Maya seemed to drift, travelling light, place to place, person to person.

'I shouldn't say *we*,' Maya continues. 'I've been crap at replying.'

'It's fine,' Hana says, but the words sound flinty, and she makes an effort to soften her tone. 'I didn't expect everyone to keep up the hand-holding.'

Because that's what Maya did, for months after Liam's death. The accident had drawn them back together, albeit temporarily. Maya was her rock – quiet, unwaveringly reliable when everyone else returned to their own lives. Even now, Hana's not sure if the rest of the family got bored or simply forgot, the minutiae of life taking over. It's been one of the hardest things after his death itself – that feeling of being alone at the time she needed people the most.

'How are you feeling about it all now?' Maya meets her gaze. 'Liam . . .'

'I just miss him. I didn't know it would feel like this, so . . . physical.' She can't put the bodily sensations into words; the horrible catch in her throat when she sees his side of the bed, the hollow in her chest when she thinks about the future they'll never have.

Everything they'd lost. Because that's what grief is: loss.

Hana's lost it all: Liam's perpetual five o'clock shadow, the way he made things come alive, talking about the world so viscerally it was like he was spreading out a map in her head. For

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Liam, life was one big adventure. Rivers to be kayaked, hills to be biked down. He made the world full of colour, and without him it is now dark. *She* is dark and she doesn't know how to get back from that.

The driver interrupts her train of thought. 'On your left, you'll see the villas.'

He's right: nestled in the trees are glimpses of buildings – a right angle of powder pink against the blue of the sky, a large square of window, sunlight bouncing off the surface.

The retreat is perched high above the beach, a winding set of steps snaking their way up the cliff from the cove beneath. Several large, low-slung buildings are painted in other vivid tones – blues, peach. Just below on the right, slightly offset, is a glass-bottomed pool jutting out over the rocks.

'So what do you reckon?' Seth nudges Caleb. 'Bea's missing out, isn't she?'

'She is.' Caleb shrugs. 'We'll have to come another time.'

Hana notices Seth's response to the muted reply: how he's subtly examining Caleb. He's clearly discomfited by Caleb's body language, or rather the lack of it – the fact that he isn't trying to be matey.

Maya leans in, lowering her voice. 'So what do you make of that? When Bea cancelled, I thought he would too.'

'You knew she wasn't coming?' Hana picks up on her use of the past tense.

'Yes. Jo messaged a few weeks ago.'

Hana nods and it dawns on her that it wasn't an oversight – Jo not telling her – she withheld the information deliberately so that Hana wouldn't cancel too. She's not sure she would have come if she'd known Bea wasn't – they'd always needed all three of the sisters to balance one another.

Bea and Jo were two extremes – quiet versus loud. Introvert

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versus extrovert. Academic versus sporty. Hana, in the middle, found that if she was with one without the other it felt wrong, like she was pulled too much to either extreme.

‘I’m glad you made it,’ Maya says quietly. ‘I keep thinking, we let the whole promise thing slide, didn’t we?’

The promise: *Stick together. Never forget.* Hana flinches at the naivety in the phrase. They’d made ‘the promise’ as kids, after the fire at Maya’s house during a family sleepover, a fire that devastated not only their house, but their family too. They’d all managed to escape, bar Sofia, Maya’s younger sister. Her room was empty when they searched, so her parents assumed she’d already gone out ahead of them. When they realized she hadn’t, they tried to head back in, but the fire crew stopped them. They were the ones to eventually find her, hidden, frightened, under her bed, but by the time they did her burns were so severe, they led to a devastating stroke. The resulting brain damage and care requirements had proved too much for Maya’s parents, and Sofia now lived in a residential care facility outside of Bristol.

The promise was to stick together, the three sisters and Maya, but their once unshakeable bond didn’t survive late adolescence.

‘We’re here!’ Jo’s already gathering up her bags as the boat approaches the jetty. A member of staff is standing by, holding a tray of juice in tall glasses, the liquid inside a dramatic sunset orange. ‘Those look incredible – just what we need before kayaking.’

Maya looks at her quizzically. ‘Kayaking? We’ve only just arrived.’

‘I’ve booked us a slot in’ – Jo glances at her Fitbit – ‘half an hour.’

‘What about unpacking?’

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