

THE WAYS OF THE BIRD RISING

by © Amy Donovan

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Abstract

The Ways of the Bird Rising centres on a small Scottish island community threatened by offshore fracking. It takes the idea of “community” in the widest sense, extending its reach to the narrative voices of animals, plants, stones and the island itself in an attempt to evoke the consequences of resource extraction on a more-than-human world. The human story centres on Alana, who grew up on the island and is, with mixed feelings, moving back there after years away; and Comgall, a Canadian geologist who comes to the island as an employee of the company in charge of the fracking. In their own ways, both are reconciling their relationship to the land and to their respective rural homes, while being opened to the lively multi-species world around them—a process mirrored in the reader’s experience as the island’s many inhabitants contribute to narrating their home.

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This novel includes quotations from two poems: T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” and Alastair Reid’s “Growing, Flying, Happening” from his book *Weathering: Poems and Translations*. “Growing, Flying, Happening” was a crucial inspiration for this novel. The title, *The Ways of the Bird Rising*, is also borrowed from Reid’s poem.

This novel is driven by thinking and reading in multi-species anthropology, and by my own encounters with the more-than-human world. For the former, thank you to Brian Noble for encouraging me to dream beyond the human during my undergraduate and master’s degrees in anthropology at Dalhousie University; and to the scholarly work of Hugh Raffles, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Eduardo Kohn and Hayden Lorimer. For the latter, thank you to all the friends I’ve met during my work as a national park guide in the Cape Breton Highlands; to the corner of northern Cape Breton I call home, where the land is a constant guide; and to the Isle of Eigg and the wonderful people I met there. Eigg, Cape Breton and Newfoundland have all had their say in how this story took shape, and I am grateful to all of those islands for letting me into their natures.

I live, learn and write on unceded Mi’kmaq territory—land that shaped this novel in ways I can only begin to grasp and for which I am deeply grateful.

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Part 1

Winter

Chapter 1

She remembers the day they stopped singing.

The water was dark below them. Blots of white sunlight spilled from above. A quavering quality to the light, like the sky might suck it back in. When she surfaced to breathe she could feel the winter sun blooming through the wet skin of her back.

They were hungry that morning. They had spent the night in a cloud of jellyfish that filled a hollow along the island's rocky shoreline. They had expected to find food there. Instead: pulsing slime.

The next morning they came across a humming mass of krill. In the bright sunlight the tiny creatures' shells were translucent, revealing amorphous insides. She has tried looking into their hard, black eyes. Flat obsidian; this, she reasons, is why they eat them.

That morning the six of them rushed upward through the water with mouths open and ate. Their baleen became succulently clogged, their skin folds slapped. She forgot the jellied invaders and they carried on. They took up their song again, light at first then careening through the ocean. The song itself a creature independent of vibrating throats and lungs, carrying the pod's stories to places they can only imagine.

Then the youngest one went quiet.

For a moment she assumed something had happened only to *him*: a cough maybe, a barbed

hook snagged on baleen. Something temporary and isolated, a problem the song could carry him through.

From her other eye she saw a skate, reeling, severed from its usual grace.

Then she felt it—a strange low vibration in the water. From deep below, the rocks cried out. Her larynx and the folds within it seized.

Then all their songs went dark.

*

“Testing started this morning,” says Tyler.

“Jesus. I totally forgot that was today,” Comgall answers from his position at the ash-coloured pressboard desk. White Crow has stuck their offices in a small prefab in the middle of the woods—the cheapest land for sale, or the only land for sale, or maybe the location thought least likely to attract vandals. The long slog through the damp forest, or the six-kilometre dirt road, bumpy even in the company’s lifted Ranger.

Outside the prefab’s small windows, sunlight glints off the damp bark of leafless sycamores. Winter moss, Comgall noticed this morning, has begun to cling to the concrete supports. The smell is more and more of forest than of vinyl siding. There’s a squirrel living under the pressure-treated stoop.

There's shale, he knows, below.

There's the feeling of the island settling.

"How long do you think before they start drilling if they find something?" Tyler is Canadian too, a business guy, some kind of accountant maybe. In this life Comgall is more or less a glorified PR man, but there's another part of him that knows tectonic movements and the life histories of shale so well he used to feel them flowing through his own blood. Back then if he stood still enough he imagined he could feel plates sliding beneath his feet, could curl his toes with the ancient roots of trees around bedrock. He could feel the carbon contained in his skin cells, a kinship with shale. The continents move at the same rate your fingernails grow, his first-year geology professor had told the class, and he'd closed his eyes, held his breath.

Now he says: "I read the study. It's there. They just have to find the most economical place to access it."

"And people are pissed, eh?"

Comgall shrugs. "Not as pissed as you'd expect. Offshore stuff is far away."

"But they're all such fucking hippies," says Tyler, slick in a lavender dress shirt, pressed camel-coloured khakis, a Dolce & Gabbana belt.

"Maybe they'll get there," Comgall says. "But fuck. I've been thinking I was going to get there for years, and I'm still not."

"You? Get where?" Tyler looks up.

“Don’t you ever wonder if you’ll get sick of it all?”

“Nope,” says Tyler. “Shouldn’t be talking like that. The walls have ears.”

When it’s windy in the forest, the aluminum and plastic walls seem to have limbs and voices too, an echo of the forest itself. Talking and trembling in the gusts. The island breathing damp wind through the sycamores.

How strange this mildness is compared to home. On Comgall’s last day of work in St. John’s a month ago, he had to strap crampons to his boots to get there. The silence at the office was thick and dark, though they’d all known this was coming. The price of oil had been dropping for more than a year, since before Comgall transferred back to the east coast, but back then everyone figured it was just temporary. It still probably is. Far too perilous, psychically, to hope otherwise—and where would he be without this string of White Crow jobs?

Comgall shakes himself back to the powerpoint. The words his manager had used were weirdly similar to the ones he’s deploying now, stuffing his slide presentation with optimism: Not a layoff if you’re willing to move. *An opportunity to grow with the global economy.* You’re a talented communicator. You’ll have more freedom in a smaller office. *Giving skilled tradespeople the opportunities they deserve. Jobs with benefits close to home.*

He increases the font size on the latter sentence and adds a spring-green rectangle behind it for emphasis.

Some beautiful sights over there, Ken had said.

Offshore work is safe and noninvasive.

A year or two, three, he'd said. They'd build pipelines and Canadian petroleum would bounce back and before Comgall knew it he'd have all the options in the world again. *New technologies allow drilling to be deeper and safer than ever before.*

A new era for Scottish petroleum. Opportunities for unprecedented growth.

Rejuvenating the economy of the Isles in a way never before thought possible.

You'll be able to take those skills anywhere.

Comgall considers making the background white and the text green.

"Why don't you throw in some butterfly clip art," says Tyler, pausing on his way to the washroom to slap Comgall's shoulder. "I don't know if it looks *quite* enough like the Easter bunny came early."

"Maybe a dolphin," Comgall says. "A really happy one."

"Hey," says Tyler. "I saw an orca yesterday. Really close."

"No shit?"

"Yeah. There were a few harbour seals on the rocks off the bay. I'm guessing it was after them but maybe I made it skittish."

"How did you know it was an orca?"

"They're the only whales here year round, and the dorsal fin is pretty distinctive."

"How do you know that?"

“I have a marine biology degree... I’m not a complete idiot.”

Comgall lets it coil around his brain for a minute. “How’d you end up working for White Crow?”

“I started out as a marine mammal watcher. I didn’t want to be offshore but I couldn’t find any work. So I went back to school—U of A has an MBA focused on energy management. White Crow funded me.”

“I turned down funding from Exxon for my master’s,” says Comgall. “Like, as if I thought I wouldn’t end up there—here..”

“Yeah.”

“Do you ever miss it? Like, pure science?”

Tyler hesitates. “There’s no pure science, bro. I miss the field schools. I don’t miss poverty.”

But he’s staring out the west-facing window, the one from which, beyond the trees, you can see the slightest strip of ocean.

★

February in Edinburgh and a fierce chill in the air that cuts through Alana’s heavy wool cloak, through her dress, petticoats, two layers of Under Armour. One hers—she couldn’t afford it but she had to have it; one Gavin’s, quietly unretrieved from her apartment. It still smells a bit

like him even after a couple of washes, but for now she is grateful. She fights the urge to tuck her head into her chest against the horizontal rain. Ray's gravelly voice: *The top of your head won't sell tickets. Crossed arms won't sell tickets. Eye contact sells tickets.*

Come hear my story, Alana thinks in the direction of passersby. *A mere £12. Think of the Instagram posts!*

And if you come with me, I won't have to go into the vaults alone with that man and his whining child and no mobile reception.

And—this she has banished from her conscious mind but still it lingers—her increasingly wobbly perception of reality down there. The porousness of the stones, their wet scent. Mortar and ash leaving a fine layer of dust on her red hair and the grey shoulders of her cloak. Patterns that feel like warnings she won't grasp in time. Walls that make her unsure where she ends and the vault begins.

A fist of tension wraps around her upper spine. The man and his daughter duck into the Starbucks across from the ticket booth.

"Maybe you should see someone." Tegan had been gentle. When Alana told her she didn't want medication Tegan said, "It's not like the old days. They know the doses and things now. It's worth a try, isn't it?"

"Is this Mary King's Close?" asks a large woman in a shiny purple coat. American.

"That one's the next block." Alana points. The woman leaves and Alana is left with the

image of her father's face that came to her during that conversation with Tegan. Greenish in the moonlight, head bent towards his knees. His whisper: "I don't recognize myself when I take them, Mair."

And her mother's soft, scratchy tenor—like Alana's own voice, whispering ghost stories to strangers in a forgotten chamber underground—"I don't recognize you when you *don't* take them."

Alana had sighed. "I want to say I'm scared I wouldn't recognize myself. But then I think, who am I even trying to recognize?"

"What do you mean?" Tegan asked.

But she knew. Tegan has seen Alana at teatime scrolling through Tinder in her bathrobe, and biting her fingernails as she looks at photos on Facebook from her high school friends' vacations, and reaching the bottom of a bottle of Scotch before she reaches the bottom of the job postings lists.

Worse: Tegan has seen Alana not scrolling through anything. Sitting in a ball on the floor, her phone long dead, scraps of abandoned drawings in tatters around her.

"Look for a new job," Tegan had suggested, but they both knew: what job? Alana at a desk is pent-up anxiety, her mind going in blank circles. Her upper back and her neck constantly tight, hanging at the edge of panic.

The clouds are heavy, tinged with a weird purple. Alizarin and phthalocyanine green. What

was the black they used to mix from those? She inhales and the smell is not paint but is moisture, exhaust, gull shit, something plasticky emanating from Ray's new windbreaker.

The chill thickens. The tourists abscond to the New Town to sip lattes, or reconsider the tour of Holyroodhouse, which may be boring but at least is dry. Alana can hardly feel her toes.

The tour will begin in ten minutes.

A gust of wind brings a whiff of the sea, a tangy, heady mix with the Old Town's ancient walls.

The same wind rifled through the croft that night, seeming to toss Alana's insides around too. She was crouching on the garden deck with Beatrix and her father was still alive and her biggest worry was that if his argument with her mother escalated he might skip breakfast. And Alana would have to sit with her mother and her mother's yoghurt and oats and that empty silence.

She was so cold, but she wanted so badly to hear. Maybe she guessed someday she'd have these problems too, but she would face them without someone like her mother to hold her when she shook. How Alana would love, as three o'clock comes and no one else signs up, to have her mother near her now, or Beatrix, her furry warmth and solidity.

Five past three. The sun won't set until nine or ten pm but you'd never know it the sky is so dark, the same deep grey as the pigeons flapping and agitating on the pavement.

The man and child return with an extra white paper cup. Alana hesitates. Is a nineteenth-

century ghost allowed to drink a grande hot chocolate?

Ray gives a slight nod. She takes the cup. “Best be off,” he says.

A host of grey birds bursts before them into the sky.

Alana drops the cup and it bounces back toward her. Hot liquid coats her shin. Half a kilometre into the tour her foot is colder than ever and it’s time to bring father and daughter underground.

They are at South Bridge and the key is slippery in Alana’s hand. The man says “Haven’t changed the locks since 1830 either, have they?”

He’s smiling. She bites her tongue and tastes blood.

The man told her his name but she has forgotten it. They’re all the same: they want something real but if they get it they can’t handle it. They feel that rush of living air, that presence they *know* is animated by something bigger than them—and they stop short. They retreat into mundanity.

But the man’s voice is warm. Alana feels a stab of guilt for her own unapproachability. She pushes the creaking wood door inward.

“These stories are all real things people have experienced,” she begins. The historical events are real.” The air slips along her nose hairs, through her layers of high-tech underwear.

“Whatever feelings this place calls forth in you will be real, too.”

This is the thing she tries not to believe.

The little girl, Jaime, pulls down the hood of her raincoat. Her hair is nearly exactly like Alana's was when she was that age. Silky and long but a tangled mess; colour somewhere between gold and copper. Just like that, there in front of Alana is the girl she was a decade and a half ago. On a ghost tour with her father, the guide telling them to watch out—redheads are far more likely to see the dead. Females, too, he added, and Alana clutched her father's hand.

Her hair is much darker now, though it still hints at vermilion in the sun. Fire underneath sombre raw sienna.

"Below us," Alana says, "there's a little girl's ghost. You recognize her by the scent of burning flesh. Sometimes she gets violent, though that's never happened on a tour." Alana tries to exhale from her neck like Tegan told her to. Exhale from the place where the tension is, and believe in it. "If you see her, she'll be as clear and solid as you or me. But she'll be on fire."

Alana looks at Jaime and she is in her eyes and the hands on her shoulder are Alana's father's hands. She meets her father's gaze—

And he is gone. Jaime's eyes are her own.

Alana is cold and cold.

They descend the ancient, uneven stairs. What air there was in here is gone.

*

Closer to the outside it smells of rain. He goes down, down, down, whiskers tickling stone and the heat it holds from days past. Tendrils of warm come in through his small pink feet.

Through his nose: smells of things living and old, and things dead—new dead and very long dead. A few insects. Tiny bits of sea-smelling shells. Old blood very old. Human blood licked and licked by animal tongues.

There, through that crack: new blood warm and living, and caught in a cloud with something sweet. He is flooded by a memory of salt and sugar, teeth sinking into softness.

He hurries along the warm greenish stone toward it until he senses a drop. The air beyond pulses with mammalian breath. He lifts his whiskers and a paw, tastes it. In silence, he begins to sway back and forth, testing the closeness of things, teasing the contours of the cavern into shapes he can understand.

Two figures—no, three—three figures his eyes see, now. Human flesh sallow in the low light; faces luminous globs of ridges and valleys in shades of green. Otherwise, mostly black, except shining softness on top of the smallest one.

In this smallest one he senses a possible ally. The man, like most humans, is raw danger. The adult female has an electricity about her—a receptiveness that makes him wonder if she senses him in his hole in the cavern wall. Her body tenses as he moves closer. She seems to possess a certain alertness to her surroundings on a level of which most of her kind are oblivious. He feels

some kinship with this human, though he won't trust it.

The figures inundate him with smells, not least of which the salty tempting whiff of blood. But he can't focus on them because of her in his left eye who is now shaking like he himself shakes when there is danger near (a cat; the raggedy, raging, sweet-breathed man; an eagle swooping low; any number of big lumbering beings who could kill him with a single stomp of foot or snap of teeth if he isn't careful or even if he is).

The warm urine of fear trickles into a puddle on the porous stone beneath him. Still he waits, watches, sways. Hoping toward the sugary smell that brought him here.

Humans vocalizing: low, blurry, female.

Her agitation swells and he forgets his hunger in his sudden desire to be anywhere but here. He streamlines his whiskers and goes up, up, up.

★

The feeling begins in earnest in the final vault. Heaviness, blurring edges; Alana's flinching certainty that one of these days she will see the burning girl herself, and then what will she do?

"So many people died during the bubonic plague," Alana says, "no one knew what to do with the bodies. It's said some of them were burned to ash, and the ash was mixed with horse hair and clay to make these ceilings." She gestures upward. "See where it's dripping and

crumbling a little...”

You have to work them into it but in silent places it’s amazing how low a whisper people can hear. How the human ear can attune to the tiniest sounds.

Burning flesh is a theme of this tour. They add to the atmosphere near the end by setting off a small firecracker. A pop and the scent of burning. It is round and solid in her pocket next to the lighter.

Jaime’s face is cool yellow in the dim electric torchlight.

When Alana came here as a child they used torches with real flames. She sees a flicker of orange and shuts her eyes against it.

Jaime calms. It is time to shut off the lights for the final story but there’s a charred smell carrying into Alana’s nostrils—it can’t be—she inhales. The lighter is cool in her pocket.

The man is asking a question but something is roaring, wind, can it be that windy down here?

Alana can’t deny it now, she smells burning.

She grips the lighter, still cool, slippery under her sweating hand.

Her throat tightens. She steps backward. Tips.

The man’s face grows bigger. He leans toward her. His features contort and all of a sudden they are Alastair’s features and Alana is hit with the streaking pain of missing him. She takes a step back, two steps, reaches her hands out, looking for the wall. *It’s not him!* but it’s not the

man who was there a moment ago either. Her palm hits cool rock and she tries to grip but there is nothing to hold onto. He comes closer, some ghastly incarnation of her father, they are going to touch, but in an instant he is shrivelling. His form darkens and goes grainy then disintegrates like vine charcoal beneath a breath.

Alana, she hears her father calling, but that little girl is nowhere to be seen.

She is frozen on the hilltop. She is running.

She is gone.

*

“Quite frankly,” Rick says across the pressboard desk, “this community is small potatoes. There are only a couple of hundred people who live here, and I’d say a good third of them are pleased about the possibility of jobs. And maybe another third just doesn’t give a fuck. The rest will make noise, but remember: it’s only noise.” Rick has flown in from the White Crow head office in Alberta to give these pep talks to his Scottish teams. He arrived this morning via helicopter wearing a pressed suit, periwinkle blue in a fabric so slick and shiny it reminds Comgall of phyllite.

Phyllite on the mountains on the west side of Cape Breton, gleaming like silver in the late-day sun. Comgall thinks of the undergraduate tutorial he lead during his master’s: *Metamorphic*

rocks often look swirly, because the bands of different rocks mix up like marble cake when the rock re-melts. And because metamorphism gives the minerals time to line up, they reflect light.

The helicopter's loud drone startled him; already he is accustomed to the island's soft, human-scale soundscape. Wind, birdsong, surf, the groaning ferry, car engines. Huffing, bleating, scuffling farm animals; here and there a power tool.

When you get those nice lines, he'd told the class, you'll often find the rocks split easily into thin plates.

"There's talk about marine mammals," says Comgall. "What with it being offshore. Any specific language we're using to address that?"

"White Crow adheres to the highest standards of environmental integrity," says Rick. "We will have marine mammal watchers on board as per the regulations." He grins. "And we'll pay them well and I'm sure their eyes will never wander from the binoculars. Right, boys?"

Tyler had told Comgall, late one night after a few beers, that sperm whales can hear sounds underwater as far as sixty kilometres away.

"Aye," says a burly guy from somewhere south. He is staying with his aunt on the island. Comgall can't tell from his stories whether it's the dude or the aunt with the substance problem, but he feels for both of them. His co-worker's vodka sweat; the aunt sitting around the tearoom looking flattened, no spunk left to the purple streak in her otherwise bleach-blond hair.

You can't always tell from the surface, Comgall would say, which rocks will break nicely or at

all. Sometimes the best way to tell the difference between slate and shale, say, is how relatively strong or weak the rock is. How fast it cracks under pressure.

“Anyway,” Rick says, “it’s noise we have to worry about, when it comes down to it.”

Comgall immediately thinks sonar and has a brief moment of surprise before Rick goes on: “We don’t want enough noise to bring in any federal regulators, any national media, any of the big guns. So you just worry about keeping it to a dull roar, and remember—it’s people who make noise and people who hear it. Not whales.”

Comgall glances at Tyler. He’s staring straight ahead.

*

She comes back to life in a ball on the floor. Someone’s hands are on her shoulders. Nothing is burning.

The man—Jaime’s father, not hers—is crouched in front of her. The little girl’s eyes are wide behind him.

“I’m so sorry,” Alana says, and starts to stand. “Sometimes being down here—”

Jaime believes her, but the father doesn’t, he knows she should be locked up. “Sometimes it’s too much.” She meets his eyes and the contact sticks for a moment. Then she leads them upstairs. The firecracker jostles against her thigh.

Outside, the closes and alleyways are darkening. The low sun angles through them, illuminating a window box here, a doorway there. A mangy terrier snoozing, a torn-up crisps bag under his paw and a spider dangling above his nose. Eight legs gripping a long wisp of web that glitters in and out of visibility against the dark stone wall. What would it be like to bet your life on the strength of such a thin filament?

For a moment all of it—the streaks of light, the spider’s lit-up silk, the greasy crumpled foil—catches a sheen of pink. Then it plummets back to grey.

Alana walks as fast as her nineteenth-century heels will carry her back through the Old Town, across Waverley Bridge and home to Stockbridge, the fungusy smell of her half-underground flat. Her mobile bleeps. Ray.

“Where are you? The man you had with you just came by—he was quite concerned—”

“I’m fine. I’m home.”

“He said you broke down and started *convulsing* or some such—”

Convulsing?

“I’m sorry—I just—I lost my grip, I thought I saw my father’s ghost, he died when I was little—” She exhales. “Listen, Ray, I can’t do this anymore. I can’t even keep a handle on what’s real myself when I’m down there. How can I keep other people safe? For that matter”—she is hot now, her heart thumping hard and fast—“it’s just not fucking safe down there!”

“Alana—”

“What do you people expect people to *do*?” She sputters. *This is absurd*, she hears from some rational part of her mind, but it is exploding inside her, all the banality and the bills and the mould on the walls—“Just spend half their lives underground”—the windows the size of laundry baskets, higher than her eye level, the thin duvet and the black-and-white flowery cover she hasn’t liked for years—“in a place where people have been murdered and tortured”—the nights under the duvet with Gavin, each of their anxious insomnia’s feeding into the other’s, *you’ve never been choked? Not even a little bit?* and her scared of lying and scared of telling him the truth—“and not feel *anything*? Is that what your PhD taught *you* to do?”

“My PhD’s in English—”

“Fuck!” Somehow she is standing now and she kicks the chair, the chair she let Gavin tie her to and then panicked, how silly she felt when he freed her right away, what was it she *thought* he was going to do? The chair flies across the floor, hits the bookshelf and crashes backwards.

She places her phone back next to her ear. “Ray. I’m just done. I can’t. Good luck with everything.”

“Oh,” he sneers, “is Gavin back to rescue you?”

Something clenches her. Her iPhone flies across the room. Aluminum and cobalt and quartz make contact with the metal bedpost and shatter. Bits of crystal erupt across the chair, the night table, the ugly duvet. The rest arrange themselves in a glittering spatter on the floor.

Chapter 2

A grain of silt is heavier than air, but not by very much. A gust catches it. Enfolded by weather, the silt glides. Its fall is slow and meandering. It traces a pattern through the air that briefly mesmerizes a beetle coasting through.

It glides and falls and traces and dances and glides and falls and then it lands.

Way above, the beetle registers the tiny noise the silt grain's landing makes. Then it wheels away, full with the witnessing of a thing finding its place.

The grain of silt and all the other grains of silt settle. They sigh. They wedge in next to one another. They brace against plummeting stones. Under the stones' weight the silt grains wedge ever closer to one another.

On it goes for millions of years. Crumble, plummet, settle, wedge. On and on until the silt is way below, until the silt has forgotten air entirely and then until the silt has forgotten itself entirely and is no longer a grain but is contained within a rock. Part of the earth itself.

It can't help being a little porous.

The remains of plants, broken and compressed to shreds and shreds of shreds, tuck into the minuscule spaces between the grains of silt. Lush giant ferns, tall water-loving trees, furred club mosses, feathery horsetails. The silt black already, the plant shards darkening fast. All the breath and air sucked out of them until they are eternal, elemental, bound warm and still and intricate

with the silt.

The island was born a shapeshifter, in heat hotter than fire. Lava seared the ocean, seized up in the cold. It wrestled, it gurgled; it broke off and moved east.

The island remembers being at the centre of all the land on earth.

For millennia now it has moved only in tiny landslides: returning, grain by single grain, to the ocean; other grains making their way into bark and bloodstreams.

Still: the island remembers vibration, too.

It remains alert to the possibility of motion.

★

Hot, crowded, a refuge from the chill she still hasn't shaken. A grungy front room with a long bar, a couple of tables, football posters on the wall. The light somehow reddish, though she can't see where that tonality is coming from. Nineties rap blasting from the back and this is where she goes, slides her own body into the roomful of gyrating millennials, scent of pot and sweat, the music so loud that once she's in there she feels it in her bones. Alana read somewhere that in the ocean humans experience sound through their bones and not their ears—something about the density of salt water and of ear drums—how you could lose yourself in that, she thinks, the body little more than water itself, needing only a place to dissolve—is this what that's like?

Could she paint it, this phantasmagoric experience of noise?—because if it isn't actually sound maybe it can be represented, texture pigment light—a man is touching her arm now, now he is pulling her toward him, now they are dancing and they are a part of the sound too. They dance with the spinning lights, with the crowd, her throat dry and tasting foully of stale beer but she screams along with the rest of them and the man is closer and closer until there is no space left between them, his hand on the small of her back, his hand now suddenly under her shirt, slipping under the waistband of her jeans. “You’re *killing* me,” he says into her ear and his accent is not Scottish but some other colony, New Zealand maybe, a traveller then, soft and shaggy-haired and bold, a marijuana leaf and an old-fashioned snowshoe tattooed on his arm, muscles tensed underneath it. Biggie Smalls and Snoop Dogg blare from the speakers and the cheesy old song lifts them up and they melt, *what’s your name* he’s saying and she’s answering *Jenny*, they’re sliding out through a heavy back door and he’s saying *come with me, you’re killing me* and she slams down the rest of her drink and the glass falls to the pavement, this evening’s second spectacular smash, and she goes.

His apartment is spacious, high up. He goes to the toilet and she stands in the middle of the open-concept living space and she can see the city all lit up below. On the wall there is a framed antique map of the Hebrides, not extensive enough to show the island where she grew up but she stands there and looks at it and she can finally breathe and then she knows.

There is something soothing in the knowledge: here she is, run out of other options, and

contrary to everything she'd expected, she can breathe.

The man returns and his name is something like Zack and the apartment turns out to be an Airbnb and he turns out to be from Australia and none of that matters. He is safe and foreign, he is generous, he is not Gavin and she is going home. The bedroom is far brighter than night should be, no curtains and walls made of windows, a full moon and the city lights. The gleam on the man's forehead as he supports himself with his elbow and with his other hand runs his fingers from her temple to her chin, along her jawbone, the length of her arm. "Shit," he says, "I'm sorry that was so fast," and he moves his hand lower on her stomach. She pulls his arm back up to her shoulder and curls into him.

"You don't want me to," he begins.

And she says, "I think I'm moving away soon."

"You don't like it here?" in a tone that says *you don't like me?* and she pulls his lips onto hers. *Shhh.*

★

"You're who?"

"My name is Comgall Fitzgerald. I work for White Crow Energy. Perhaps you've heard of us? We're doing some exploratory work near the island—"

“Yes. I’ve heard of you. I’m not interested in talking.”

“Well, actually, I was going to invite you to a community meeting we’ll be holding, ah, next Thursday—”

“Where are you from, anyway?”

“Canada. Nova Scotia.”

“What brings you here destroying our island?”

Comgall swallows. The woman holds his gaze but her face trembles. Her right cheek droops disproportionately to the rest of her face. Her grey eyes look unevenly sized.

But her eyes are intelligent. And her hair, like everyone’s hair on this island—like his is becoming—is a frizzy knot.

Comgall tries not to stare at the puzzle of her skin. Maybe it’s the lack of sleep; maybe the dazzling sunlight, a shock to the system after weeks of Scottish grey—but his usual corporately-correct answer has flown from his mind.

“I’m a geologist by trade,” he says. “I got a job offer from White Crow while I was working on my PhD and it seemed more compelling than my dissertation... and when I heard they were offering to send me to *this* island”—he hesitates, the sun is beating down, he’s practically sweating—“When I was a kid I had a very dear friend from here. She lived in my town in Canada for about a year. I can’t even remember why. I had hoped she might still be here,” he says finally, “but it seems that she isn’t.”

Some warmth comes into the woman's face, though her posture remains wary.

"What was her name?"

"Alana. Alana Fyffe, I think."

"Alana!"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"Oh," the woman sighs. "I've known her since she was a wee thing. But she's been gone for ages, lad. She's not interested in us country bumpkins anymore."

Comgall tries to reconcile this with the bouncing child he knew.

"She never was the same, you know," the woman says, "after what happened with Alastair."

"What happened—" Comgall begins, but she doesn't hear.

"Now, please," she says, "don't come back about the fracking. I'll be at that meeting and I won't be friendly, and I don't imagine many of us will be. But if you ever need a cup of tea, dear, my door's always open. Would you like one now?"

He steps back. "I—I don't think—thank you. I have to go."

There was a granite headland at the far end of the beach in front of Comgall's house, and that was where he met Alana. He can't have been more than nine or ten years old. On the east side of the headland there was a cliff with a grassy overhang, which is where he was sitting when he heard a small, rough voice saying hi. When he turned he saw a girl with wispy red hair and a wrinkled nose. "What are you looking at?" she'd asked.

“Those hole things,” he told her, and pointed at several gashes in the turf. “See the shape of all of them together like a spoon?” A ragged half-moon of scrappy earth, a few metres long.

“Yeah,” she said.

“It’s all going to fall off all at once. Like when you bite an apple? That’s what it’ll look like.”

The earth surrendering a piece of itself to the sea.

Back then he had one goal: “I’m going to sit here every day until it happens.” Back then, it seemed like he spent most of his life waiting. He doesn’t feel that different now, really. What *has* he done, in three decades?

“Wow,” said Alana. “Why is it going to fall off?”

“That’s how the world falls apart.”

“What?”

“When the world falls apart, that’s the shape it makes. Like... a spoonful of ice cream. Not the spoonful, but what’s left.”

“But why?”

“My dad says that’s how it makes sand. Maybe that part is dead and you need to get rid of it to grow new stuff.”

“Oh.”

Comgall is walking now, the droopy-cheeked woman and her house fading into the distance. The island’s bright hillside sliding into the sea. He remembers slanting sun on his jeans, rubber

boots that he kicked off. He remembers feeling like the field had absorbed his body. He laid there among the asters and thought about the layers and layers of earth and rock below them. Moles, dens, tiny seeds taking root.

And at the very middle, down and down and down: hot liquid rock.

When he looked over at Alana she was picking at the fuzzy star on her sweater. A dragonfly landed on his knee then—blue-green squiggles etched on shiny black, front legs caressing what he soon realized was a moth caught in the dragonfly's mouth.

“Ew!” Alana exclaimed. “It’s eating it!”

Comgall giggled and the animal shot into the air and hit him in the nose before spinning off. The giggles rose to convulsions. Alana’s laughter was like an explosion, richer than his. He can still hear that big laugh. He can imagine it ringing out across the common grazings, echoing off to his company’s ship, reverberating as deep as the sonar the ship is throwing into the sea. He can recall the feeling like it was yesterday: weightless on the grass and for a few minutes nothing else in the world. Just him and Alana, the nubby turf, scratchy juniper, dying sun.

When Alana got up and announced she had to go home for tea, Comgall discovered the remaining bits of the mangled moth were scattered across his lap. He collected as many pieces of it as he could identify from the bits of caked mud on his jeans, wrapped them in a leaf and tucked them under a couple of small stones.

Then the dragonfly zipped back into his line of sight and alighted on a puffy white flower in

the apple bite.

If the cliff falls she'll go with it, he thought. But she can fly up and save herself.

The dragonfly cocked her head at him.

"Sorry," Comgall said. "I buried your supper. I didn't think you'd remember it."

It's okay, the dragonfly said with her shining huge eyes. I just came back to hang out.

Comgall bounded down the hill to catch up with Alana. Normally when he got to the steep, untrustworthy section of the path, he'd hold onto the firs and alders that clung more successfully than he could to the cliffside. That time he just plunked onto the mealy mix of earth and pebbles, pushed off with his hands and threw them into the air as he slid.

At the community hall a few days later, Comgall explains the project in the plainest terms he knows. "There's a study," he says. Shale gas; blasts of sound to figure out where they can access it best. A few months of testing then they'll drill. No, the ban doesn't cover that far offshore. Yes, they are conscious of whales. Yes, he's heard of those studies, but he doesn't believe they are substantive enough to be trusted. The ocean is big. There's more space than on land.

All the necessary precautions. A hundred jobs for decades.

You'll hardly even notice we're here.

Here's my email address.

We're happy to hear your concerns.

He doesn't mind one-on-one interaction, but public speaking has always made him recoil. He sticks to the lines.

Comgall went to Question Period at home once when he was visiting his old friend Ario, who worked on Parliament Hill. He remembers feeling dismally shocked when the prime minister kept repeating the same bullshit PR line over and over again. The opposition MPs were asking specific questions for which there *had* to be specific answers—answers Comgall wanted to know—but it was like the PM wasn't even listening. Comgall was in the final year of his undergrad and couldn't imagine ever going on that kind of autopilot.

What a joke that was.

"It's standard," Ario had told him. "They stick to the approved line because it's safe. No media outlet is going to broadcast the PM repeating it a dozen times. No one cares about gritty details anyway."

Where is Ario now? Comgall's been through Ottawa a dozen times since he quit grad school. Why hasn't he tried to get in touch?

The hall is stuffy. There's a big banner above his head quoting some kind of nature poetry. Comgall is heating up from the inside. He finishes his spiel by inviting job applications for when the drilling begins. He's got a stack of forms and a stack of shiny pamphlets with pictures of the rehabilitated tar sands in Alberta. There are smiling women in hard hats, sunny fields with daisies. He remembers seeing flowers in the areas around the rigs, but not like that. Dandelions

with leaves that were more grey than green. Lupines, thriving in shitty soil.

An argument breaks out between a couple of attendees. A haggard looking middle-aged guy with only one arm, and a woman about the same age who looks vaguely familiar. Short, rough hair; a soft face. “We need to think about the long term, Chad,” the woman is saying. “That’s why we have the renewable energy grid here, that’s why we compost, that’s why we do half the things we do. For our children. These aren’t jobs that are going to last, and—”

“Bloody hell,” says Chad, lifting his one arm in mock incredulity. “The jobs are just going to poof into thin air and disappear, are they? The world still needs fucking energy. Maybe if you fools had let us build a cable to send the wind power—”

“*And,*” the woman persists, “They’re going to do an incredible amount of damage in the inevitably short period of time they do last. Think of even the habitat we’ll lose if they build a processing facility. Think of the pollution for the fisheries—”

“The fucking fisheries, Mairi! *What* bloody fisheries? We haven’t had a real fishing economy here since—”

“Alright then!” Comgall makes himself chime into the mic. “I think that’s all the information I have for you today. Let’s have some tea. I’ll be over there at the table for whoever has questions. I’m sure there are lots.” Hands begin to go up around the room. “Thanks so much for taking the time to be here today,” he says, and steps off the stage. Maybe he can get a coffee before they figure out it’s over.

Chapter 3

The train comes to a wheezing stop in the middle of a forest. From Alana's rickety plastic seat she can see dappled sunlight, a blanket of dead bracken ferns. "It's a jumper," someone says from a couple of rows ahead of her.

Alana curls her shoulders farther into herself and looks out the window. There's a fallen sycamore, its lower side bound messily to the earth like a half-picked scab, twisted roots splayed around the heartwood. She remembers her father telling her about a certain kind of wasp who lives inside such trees, luring flies into their holes and then eating the flies alive.

She turns away from the window. The carpet on the back of the seat grips at her shirt. Her father used to have her climbing in all manner of contortions over and even into big dead trees when they came across them, looking for nests, newts, lichens.

She hasn't looked closely at anything in a forest since he died.

Alana sinks into her seat's cushion and wishes everything on this train wasn't purple. She wishes she weren't on this train at all, but she's trying not to waste her energy with that kind of wish.

"Bit of a queasy thing to have to wait around for, isn't it?" says the squat lady across the aisle. Small mercies: Alana has her own set of seats to herself.

"Aye."

“I’m Berna.”

“Alana.”

“Have you eaten, then?” Berna rummages in her handbag and takes out a clear plastic container stuffed with sandwiches. “Egg and cress, dear. Enough to share. Will you have one?”

The delay turns out to be because of ice buildup on the tracks. Not a body. Alana is grateful for the sandwich. They rumble into Mallaig just in time for the overnight ferry that will take Alana—she swallows a lump of phlegm—home.

★

The air under the low blanket of clouds is heavy. Each sound hangs suspended for a moment until the moist air lets it drop. The call of a gull. His sister’s daughter’s sweet, low rumble as she falls out of wakefulness. The rasps of the ferry that roars each night through the water, pushing arrogantly forward as if it is blasting through ice or stone instead of a gentle sea.

His last thought as he sinks away from consciousness is that he cannot fathom why the vessel makes things so difficult for itself.

The soft glaze of slumber settles on half of his brain. The other half retains a bare, reductive awareness of his body in the world, gliding next to his mother’s body as he has each night for all the twenty years of his life.

They drift like this, he and his mother and the rest of their family. Each sleeping, each remembering, nonetheless, to breathe. The little formation bobs at the surface of the sea with its chorus of deliberate inhalations and exhalations of the sweet heavy air. All around him the gentle rhythm of these breaths, just slightly off from the ebb and swell of the sea itself.

Their breath and the breath of the water enfold him and hold him.

He keeps one eye open as he sleeps, and with it he sees mostly darkness, mostly stillness. No stars tonight, just the familiar pinprick of light where the boat labours onward.

★

At the ferry's canteen, Alana watches two small grounds of coffee as they dance on the hot liquid's surface.

When they set off a couple of hours ago she'd curled up in a reclining chair but couldn't sleep. Swirling thoughts and such hard work not to spiral with them. She can't support herself in Edinburgh but what will she *do*? Is there no job anywhere that won't send her into this state?

Gavin's voice: "You'll be back. You won't make it on your own."

She gulps coffee too fast, squeaks as it burns the roof of her mouth.

She wanted to shout at him, to slap him, to tell him to fuck off and that she doesn't need anyone. Instead she sat on the floor and wept and he comforted her. And when, in the morning,

he told her *he* was leaving, that he'd wait for her to straighten herself out and come crawling back, she said: "If I need to crawl I'll find someone better than your sorry arse to crawl to."

He said: "Who else would put up with you?"

Yesterday there was a selfie on Instagram of him and another woman. Another redhead. She should have been the one to leave.

Alana's headphones won't stay in her ears. The paperback she grabbed at the train station mocks her from its spot on the window ledge. She can't focus.

She wraps herself in the navy fleece blanket the ferry service provides and goes outside. Her knuckles go white gripping the railing. The pattern of its chipped paint etches itself into the heel of her hand. The wind is subtle but insistent; it's not long before her hair is caught up in the dangly copper earrings she's wearing God knows why. She tears them out. A few hairs pull out with them and some tension releases from around her shoulders.

The boat rocks. Alana feels fuzzy around the edges, has felt this way for weeks. Like the little ghost-girl is inside her and trying to get out. She sits on the deck. The railing shines under the vessel's cold industrial lighting. Jagged slabs of light skim across the waves lapping at the vessel.

Alana slides onto her back. Clammy metal cold against her cheek.

From this angle, the sea is black. The ocean might as well be empty. Might as well not be there at all.

“Alana?” A round, gentle face is leaning over her.

“Alana,” the voice decides. “Alana, come here. You’re okay. Aye, come here.”

Alana scrambles to her feet. She bumps into the stranger on her way up and, in the dim light, feels scratchy fabric and soft hair. Alana shrinks backward.

“You’re shaking,” the woman says, “you must be freezing. Do you remember me?” Her curls seem to bounce in time with her syllables. Her face comes into focus, big eyes made bigger by a lack of eyebrows that seems inconsistent with the rowdy energy of the hair—*Martha MacIntosh!* When was the last time Martha MacIntosh even crossed her mind? Alana feels her cheeks redden. They weren’t friends. Far from it.

Martha is waiting.

“Of course I remember. Martha. How—how are you?”

Martha laughs. “I don’t think you’re in any condition for niceties. Come with me. My cousin works on the boat and he always gets me a berth. You can have the other bunk.”

Alana wants to walk away but when she tries to take a step her vision goes black. She freezes, waits for her head to stop spinning. Martha takes her arm.

Wintry light seeps through her eyelids. When she opens her eyes Alana sees the light is coming from a tiny round window. A berth, how has she gotten—then she remembers: Martha. Her head is pounding, she wishes to be anywhere but here. Still, she feels worlds better than last

night.

“Good, you’ve woken,” comes Martha’s rough voice. “We’re nearly there. Shall I bring you some tea?”

“I—thank you,” Alana manages. The throbbing behind her forehead worsens when she sits up. She squishes an index finger into each eye and rubs hard.

The thing is: Alana became cruel after her father’s death. Martha, even as a preteen, was always wrapped in the durable fleece that marked her as coming from poorer stock, one of the dying breed of old crofting families who kept scraping their living off the land without the help of retirement savings or inheritances or other jobs elsewhere on weekdays. Those families couldn’t afford the brand-name trainers or the home internet connections that, as a ten- or twelve-year-old, Alana decided to require as a condition of friendship. The friends she clung to instead were ones who allowed her, a couple of years later, to slip away from everyone into the wobbly void she lived in for most of high school. They didn’t follow her there and didn’t try to bring her back. She wonders now if Martha would have responded differently.

Martha comes back with tea.

“I know it’s been years,” Alana says, “but I didn’t exactly give you reason to help me—so—thank you.”

“Years, indeed,” says Martha. “So. Coming for a visit?”

“Probably for a while.” Her unpaid credit card bill, her rent two months overdue, the long

list of past jobs on her resume and the short list of possible references from them. Gavin's voice echoing as if all the way from Edinburgh: *Who else would put up with you?*

Her mother will.

"Do you have plans when you get there?" Martha asks. Alana senses a gossipy tone and immediately feels guilty.

"To be honest, I don't," she says. "I haven't been there for more than a week in years—and when I stayed a week it was because there was bad weather and I was waiting for a boat to go." She gives a hollow laugh.

Martha's mouth is half-open with another question. But she closes her round lips to smile and when she opens them again her voice is bright and solid. "Let's find some food and have a look at the island. I'm sure you haven't seen such a brilliant sunrise over it in years."

They descend to the main deck. Alana feels as if she has never been anywhere but on this boat.

"Did you hear about the testing?" Martha asks.

"Yes—exploration only, though, Mum said? Offshore?" She tries to sound interested.

Martha harrumphs. "I suppose. Doesn't much matter. It's incredibly damaging and it'll lead to more if we don't stop it."

"Will you stop it, do you think?" Realizing too late she should have said *we*.

Martha sighs. They queue for muffins. "I don't know. We'll give it everything we've got, but

we've so little control." Alana knows this. The whole island is still owned by a laird, a new one she's heard no one much likes. Such an archaic system, crofting—the twenty-first century and no one owning their own land. Alana knows nothing, and cares little, about jurisdiction over the ocean. She asks for a ham-filled pasty, counts out coins, adds enough for another coffee.

"The company is from Canada," Martha goes on. "I think the community man is from Nova Scotia. That's where your family went that year, isn't it? Cape Breton."

Something in Alana's chest flares up. "Yes," she says. "Yes, I knew some really lovely folks in Cape Breton."

They stand on the deck as the ferry creeps up against the Pier. A couple of dozen people dot the wharf and she recognizes most of them by their stance or by their scruffy hair. Potbellies and Wellingtons, border collies, tall cans of beer. And, standing next to the tearoom door gesticulating at someone who's blocked from view: her mother. A rush of longing wells up in Alana when she sees the collie at her mother's feet. How good it will feel to bury her head in Beatrix's fur.

✱

Comgall drives to the southwest side of the island, the township on the other side of the ridge. He hasn't knocked on any doors here yet and he's been avoiding it for the sole reason that

Tyler told him they're smarter, better educated and "generally more radical" on this side. "They won't take your BS," he'd said. "They'll still make you tea but then they'll have statistics that roll right off their tongues and printouts of hippie Greenpeace shit they take as science."

"What is it," Comgall had asked, "if not science?" Part tongue-in-cheek but part genuine curiosity. He hardly considered the kinds of numbers and facts he'd been pushing lately to be "science," but what was science besides a convincing set of perspectives? Wasn't it only a century ago that Harry Hess was pushing plate tectonics as a kind of poetry? What could we really *know*?

(We could believe, that was the sticking point. Comgall believes in plate tectonics with as much passion as he tries to forget he believes in climate change. He believes in big models because he has been trained to see their reflections in the small, tangible things around him: subduction in miniature in the layering of quartzite; global warming in the sickly gray jays he saw two springs ago in Ontario when he was driving from Alberta back east, not enough refrigeration for their overwinter food supply.)

Tyler had given him another one of those looks. "Propaganda," he said. "You know that." And turned and walked away.

Now Comgall parks the truck at the top of the hill that descends into the village, slings on his backpack (clipboard, water bottle, pamphlets: Rick said it was unprofessional and tried to foist a clunky black shoulder bag on him, but Comgall won him over with *unpretentious, approachable*,

unassuming). He tries to calm his nerves as he begins to make his way downslope.

He pauses next to a group of cows standing in the field next to the road. Seven or eight Red Angus and a few Highlands in shades of copper, coal, sand. Light glances along their matted hair, the hunches of their backs sloped like worn-down mountaintops.

He makes eye contact with a calf. Her gaze is deep and kind and Comgall finds himself stepping off the road and through the narrow line of tangled brown stalks (goldenrod, maybe?) that edges it, taking the few steps required to be close enough to reach out and touch the side of the heifer's face. Her cheek is warm, soft. Velvet.

"You don't care, do you?" he says. "What we do in the ocean."

Her gaze is clear and steady for a moment, long enough for him to grow comfortable in it, and then, abruptly, she pulls her chin upward, opens her mouth and suctions a huge tongue and furry lips onto his palm. Comgall jumps and then laughs at himself. "I'm sorry," he says. "Of course you care as much as the rest of us. You just don't know how to tell us."

The calf keeps at it, not quite chewing his hand but making the same ruminant circles she would if she were. Like she's making a little whirlpool of spittle on his hand.

"The thing is," he goes on, "they just want everyone to be like you. Stand there and chew and let yourself be sent off to slaughter as soon as they say boo. They think you don't know the difference. What do I taste like, girlie?"

A voice from behind him: "Like shale gas, probably."

Comgall jumps again, stumbles on a small rock by his left foot, does a spectacular twist to stay upright but then registers that he has grabbed onto the poor calf's snout for balance. He rights himself and turns around just as the calf reestablishes her grip on his hand and, this time, chomps down.

He's a little chunky now, squinting at her as he seems to try to pretend he's not half-upright and attached to Scruff's prize heifer. But Alana recognizes his eyes, his ruddy cheeks; the square torso and short neck, the shoulders hunched a little too high that make her remember she knew his father too.

Alana stands motionless for a couple of suspended moments, not quite believing it's real. Then a flood of memories start to pile one on top of another in her mind. How fascinated Comgall was by rocks, by the earth; his sense of wonder that has never left her. She's spent the last twenty years envying it, wishing she could get back even a small portion of her own childhood ability to be astonished. Every time she sees a row of sparkling icicles, or late-day light flooding a small shop with warmth, or a caterpillar half-emerged from its chrysalis—each time she encounters one of those moments in which she knows she should be amazed but is met with bland emptiness, Comgall's nine-year-old face returns to her. His eyes a little too deep-set but radiating motion as he told her about how the continents used to all be attached, or that at one time there were giant beavers here, or as they watched humpbacks breaching at the far reaches of

the bay.

Alana once asked her father's best friend, Crane, how he came to the island for the first time. His answer was that this is the kind of place that pulls people. He saw its silhouette in the distance from a boat and he knew he had to come here. That was thirty years ago. The attitude was a kind of weird fatalism she couldn't quite believe in and she told him that. Crane said, "That's not it, love. It's like making eye contact across a crowded room. The island invited me here. And it kept telling me to stay."

"Bloody hell," the girl says finally. "It is you. Mum thought it might be and I told her she was batty."

Comgall manages to slide his hand free and wrings it out, then takes it in his other hand and starts massaging his palm. It's only then that he sees her, really sees her, and he thinks he's going to stagger again.

Her red hair has darkened; it still covers her shoulders with big waves, though the ends are frayed now. It's still tangled, the way it used to get when they played by the ocean. Her nose and ears are still too big. Her skin is greyer than he remembers, a little pockmarked. Her eyes are tired but also wide-open. She still has that energy he remembers, that subtle electricity that would slow but never seemed to stop, but its edge is wilder than it was when she was a kid. More contained and thus, somehow, feral.

Her eyes and her posture are tough, stiffly held, but something about them is also pleading.

She is slight to the point of looking unhealthy.

She is taller than him.

She is, she is, she is here.

“Alana,” he says. Her eyes seem to deepen, some kind of space opening in them. “I thought you were gone.”

“Gone?”

“Someone told me you’d left—”

She sighs and the space closes up again. Her irises darken. “I left and I cocked it up and now I’m back again.” She pauses. “I have to say, though. It’s good to see you.” She hesitates again, makes a small move and then a bigger one toward him and they are hugging and he feels like he might crack open.

When they pull apart he says, “It’s good to see you, too.”

“I have to tell you,” she begins, then stops herself. “Well, I guess I don’t have to tell you but—Dad died. The year after we came home. I’ve been seeing his ghost. Just so you know what kind of crazy I’ve developed in twenty years.”

That cavern in her eyes has reappeared. It’s unnerving. He can’t stop looking at it. “We all have our own crazy,” he says, then amends: “It’s okay to—”

Alana interrupts. “I’m sorry, I’m just a mess, but it is really—I really—I’d like to catch up—

”

And then another voice from behind her, a deliberate throat clearing. “Excuse me.” Comgall shifts his gaze and registers that a small crowd has gathered on the road, ten or twelve people, many with crossed arms. A man at the front of the group goes on: “I see you’ve been busy communing with our common grazings herd, and Alana here is surely itching to get all her island news after however many years’ gone, but some of us have been waiting for some time to have a word with you.”

Comgall feels himself shrink. Alana takes a step back from him.

“Nice to see you making friends, though,” one of the women in the group says. “Both of you, I should say.” She lays a dark look on Alana. “Perhaps you’ll find it in you to help your mother with her own livestock alongside helping the company man get to know Scruff’s. That is, if there’s any greenery left for them to eat come this time next year.”

Alana blanches. Comgall hadn’t thought it possible for her to be any paler. He reaches instinctively for her upper arm and she wrenches it away and flashes him an angry stare. Then she shakes herself. Their observers’ eyes bore into him, all twenty or twenty-four of them fixed on him and Alana. “Sorry,” Alana says. “I didn’t mean that. I’ll be seeing you.” She turns and walks straight through the group without a word or a sideways glance.

“Well,” says Comgall. “Let me take out some information packets for you all.” They seem to all start talking at once, but he can’t distinguish a word. His every sense is trained towards the

shape of the woman walking away, the determination of her gait. Her shoulders so taut he almost expects something between them to snap.

Chapter 4

Velvet light slips across the carapace of a young velvet crab. A witch crab in some parlances, she walks delicately, each joint fitted precisely into the exoskeletal cover of the next. She likes the transient tide pools of the limestone here, salt water mixed with rain. She likes the cool early evening, most of her kind just waking, their eyes brightening as the sun fades. There's a snail clinging to the stone and she pounces, sucks it in. Her teeth are in her stomach and she can feel them work at the tiny animal. The cascade of salty flesh makes her dizzy.

*

A few days and already Alana is becoming used to the long sweep of the land here, the ridge meeting the ocean, water blurring into sky; and the geography of her mother's routine, a series of daily tasks cemented in a way that is both comforting and claustrophobic. On the evening of the third day Alana pulls on trainers and sets off at a light jog. Pain flares up in her side after a few minutes (when did she last do any real cardio?) and she slows and there's a moment during which she is just there: her ragged breaths, the breath of the ocean to her right, the low call of the wind on her left. The scene around her wavering a little. Vibrating. Alive.

She walks downhill toward the coast. In the winter twilight there is a silhouette on the beach

that her body recognizes before her mind can name him. His posture hasn't changed. Alana watches as he sits on the sand. By the time she is near enough to call out he is lying there with one hand on either side of his head, his knees and face pointing up at the soft moon.

She sits beside him.

"It's beautiful tonight," she says. Her voice sounds flat even to her.

"Yeah," he answers. "I didn't really notice. Just had to get out for a few. But yeah. Everything is beautiful here," he finishes with a quick, harsh chuckle. Self-deprecating, perfunctory.

"Why do you laugh?" she asks. But she knows.

The moon brightens a shade, like someone up there just flicked on a light.

"God," Comgall says. Then: "Were you at the information session today?" Alana's mother had told her the company had committed to hosting three. *So it looks like they care that people have the opportunity to be 'informed.' To 'share their concerns.'*

"No. Mum was. She said you were charming and fewer people yelled at you than last time."

Alana hadn't given her mother a chance to say much else. Mairi was flaming angry and Alana couldn't find it in her to care or even really empathize, and she felt like the worst kind of asshole and so she fled.

"They were pretty angry, though. I can't blame them."

"Why do you do it then?"

"Do what?"

“Work here. Work for them.”

“Same reason everyone works somewhere. I need to support myself.”

“But why not work somewhere else?”

“The economy’s shit.”

“Go back to school.”

“I... yeah. I got stuck halfway through my dissertation. My funding is long gone now.”

She moves closer to him. It feels like a forcefield has sprung up around them. Her thigh tingles. “Why don’t you go back and try?” she asks. “You seem like the type who should be—who should be out discovering things. In the world. That’s how you always seemed when we were kids.”

“I don’t know if I ever had the passion,” he says, and she thinks, *that’s not true. You know.* “I mean,” he goes on, “I love rocks, I love geomorphology. But I don’t have the drive for the research slog anymore. You need motivation if you’re going to get anywhere.”

“You had passion.”

“Maybe. But working this kind of job—it’s never eaten at me the way it’s eating at me here.”

“Don’t people in Canada complain about these things?”

“Well, yeah. But not often like this, and I think there’s a larger contingent there that just wants jobs. And—I don’t know.” He turns away from her and looks off at the water. Cape Breton pulling his gaze back toward it even now.

“What?”

“Maybe I’m getting older. It’s freaking me out more.”

The waterline swells, bursts with a breaker, then settles. The sky is rich grey, deep slashes of shadow breaking the clouds. A plastic bag billows against the side of the cliff.

“We’re so small, Comgall,” she says. “Don’t you ever get that feeling—when you’re here by the ocean—that we are just so much smaller than all of this?” This is the thing she wants more than anything else to believe. “And maybe things are changing, but can we know change is a bad thing?”

“Maybe things are more resilient than we think they are,” he says. “But—”

Suddenly she can’t be still. “Hang on,” she says.

Alana stands, turns, and jogs across the marram grass to a little grey house just above the beach. She pushes open the door. “Joe?”

Her cousin Joe is a couple of years older than Alana, strong-minded but painfully shy. He stocks up on canned and bottled goods for months at a time so he doesn’t have to go to the shops on the mainland. Two out of the three nights she’s been here she’s woken in the middle of the night and, lying in bed trying to stop her thoughts from circling, has found herself pulled out of her head by slow, sad guitar music floating through the open window. Mairi said that was Joe playing, that he never sleeps, and Alana remembered hearing the same mournful notes as a child. That sadness was so foreign then. No longer.

Joe hands over a bottle of Jura when she asks and says, nodding toward the beach: “Not as bad a chap as we all think?”

“Oh Joe. I don’t know. I think I don’t care as much as you all do. Is that awful?” She remembers the meekness of her high school boyfriends once they found out she was related to Joe. What was it about him? He isn’t *that* big, isn’t that gruff. But he gives the impression you can never quite be sure what he’s capable of. What would Gavin think of him?

“Could be,” he answers. “I wouldn’t know. Take care of yourself.”

Something has softened about Joe since Alana was in high school. He used to have these outbursts of emotion, where his face would screw up and he would yell or punch someone and then apologize profusely and hardly speak for days afterward. He wasn’t the only boy on the island who was like this. But that doesn’t seem possible with this older Joe. She wonders where all that feeling has gone and if it’s burning somewhere still. “Thanks, Joe,” she says.

★

Joe watches as Alana scrambles back to the beach, her silhouette hazy in the twilight, her steps lighter than he’s felt in years but nerved up too. No one knows exactly why she’s come back. He guesses it isn’t complicated. In his experience cities wear you down. Here, all he has to do when he gets lonely is walk out the door and look at the ocean, listen to its sighing monologue

and wait for a moment of calm to speak back.

And it listens.

*

The water around the leatherback's body is cold. His carapace slackens and goes taut, in and out, rhythmic as it propels his thousand-pound bulk through the north Atlantic. There's glistening above. He surfaces again, takes a breath, dives.

He searches for the telltale glimmer of a moon jelly, or the blood-like purple of the lion's mane. Bulging, viscous, flitting or floating or foraging.

He narrowly misses getting stuck in a tangle of split-end tentacles.

He's seen nets before. Taste of human garbage, tendency to float on either side of him and then suddenly join together so there's no way out. That was what surprised him the first time. He's used to kelp forests you can slip through, to algal blooms that hover at the surface, to schools of fish you can forge a path through, or wait for them to pass you by.

But he's seen so many nets now there are times when he's not always sure whether they are even there. He'll see something long and thin, frayed, light, and it could be a string of bubbles or a streak of moonlight or a tiny jellyfish or a chorus of throbbing plankton. Sometimes it's just a tentacle slipping through the water. But he founders, frozen by the memory of nylon tendons

wrapped around his flippers. His body still bears scars from the lacerations they made on his back. He has probably missed a couple of tasty jellyfish blooms.

But his journey each year is long, and exacting. It's better to set off hungry than late.

*

Comgall's throat is still tight when Alana comes back. It's gotten cold and he's fighting to stop himself from shivering. She sits down next to him and unscrews the top of a bottle. She takes a couple of good swigs. Her shoulders lower with each swallow and Comgall feels his body wishing for release, too. When she hands him the bottle he says, "Are we fifteen?" but he takes a long drink. He swirls the liquid around, lets it coat his mouth, swallows slowly.

"You're making it look wholesome," she says.

He laughs. "I feel anything but. I've been thinking, though," he says. "Things are resilient to a point." This is what keeps him awake at night, what runs around his mind in the early hours of the morning in the cold bothy when Tyler is snoring in the next room and it feels like he and everyone else are a million miles away. "And change is neutral to a point. But I can't quite get rid of my need to see good and bad. It's not for lack of trying. I guess I succeed most of the time."

"But how do we know when change isn't neutral?" She seems actually curious, actually unsure. She passes the bottle back to him and he takes another slow sip. The heat seeps through

him.

“Destruction maybe,” he says after a pause, thinking of the areas around the tar sands, the photos he’s seen of piles of plastic in the ocean. Fishing gear, pop bottles, styrofoam, tires. “Or maybe sameness. When there are no differences left. Strip malls, everyone with the same accent. Netflix.”

“I doubt we’ll have strip malls here.”

“No, but you might have a shale gas processing facility.”

“In one small section of forest.”

“It doesn’t take long to stop being small.” He knows this, has always known this, and still he forges on, PR and bonuses and pensionable years.

She blows out breath and he can smell the Scotch on it. “Why is it all so deathly fucking complicated,” she says, speaking more to herself than to him. “Why can’t we just—”

“Just what?”

She doesn’t say anything, but he gets it.

✱

Alana takes another swig. When she puts the bottle down she lifts her hand again. She’s going to reach for him. She’s going to ask him what he’s been doing for the past two decades and

then maybe she will understand what she has herself been doing, all of it suddenly muddy except for one thing: that it has led her here. The Scotch burns in her chest.

But he gets up and walks toward the ocean. Stands there facing away from her, staring.

She zones in on the quality of the fading light. She pictures dusty charcoal, and an old verse rises up in her mind, her father reading—to her or to someone, maybe to Crane, sitting in the garden. Twilight then, too, and her dad slipping away from her into that other land where Comgall seems to be now. Alastair’s voice tasting each word. Now the words envelop her, as clear as if her father were standing where Comgall is. *Your shadow at evening rising to meet you.*

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The light shifts again. Charcoal and sand and her throat full of dust like the Edinburgh flat and Comgall standing still but getting farther and farther away.

Out of the corner of her eye she sees movement against the grey sky. A large bird, swooping. An owl? This close to the shoreline?

“I have to go,” she says. He doesn’t hear. She makes her voice louder. “Comgall. I’m leaving.”

The bird flashes downward at the top of the cliff, goes briefly beyond her range of vision then loops back upward. Hunting.

Comgall turns around.

“Let me walk you up the hill,” Comgall says. “What was it you were telling me—why did

you move back here?”

“Um, I was hallucinating ghosts.”

“Hallucinating...”

“I was guiding these tours—you know those haunted tours along the Royal Mile in Edinburgh?”

“Yes,” Comgall says, and smiles. “I did one of those. It was great.”

“Really realistic, isn’t it?” She means to laugh but the syllables go too high.

“Super realistic.” He’s quiet now, watching her.

“Well, I started—I started thinking I was seeing ghosts and then one day I had a bit of a meltdown. Thought I was going mental. I thought I saw my father’s ghost and for most of that whole tour, I have this, like, blackout in my memory. I couldn’t face going into the vaults again, and I was already low for rent the next month. I didn’t know where else to go.” It comes out quickly, like it’s been waiting.

“Your father,” he says. “I remember Mum telling me he passed away. I didn’t really grasp it, at that age. What happened?”

“Oh, god,” she says. They begin to walk. “Alright,” she starts. “It was the morning after this huge storm.”

She can picture the scene: her father coming in shining wet all over, sparkly-eyed, pulling off muddy wellies. He filled the kettle and told them about it. *They’re saying at the Pier eighty miles*

an hour! He'd wiped his forehead, rinsed out his favourite mug. Tea-stained with a Celtic FC logo.

“Dad came in all sweaty and enthusiastic. He loved crazy weather, especially after we got back from Canada. I don't know if it made him appreciate the Scottish climate more or if it gave him a bug for wild storms. Anyway, he was going on and on about the damage and Mum wasn't listening to him, she was making applesauce.” They'd filled dozens of baskets the week before the storm, when they saw the forecast and realized none of the almost-ripe fruit would last through the winds.

“Dad told Mum the church went over and she cracked some joke about no one using it anymore. But I think she was scared.”

We're lucky, her mother had said. This island always has been one big wind tunnel. It's quite dangerous if you think about it.

Alastair: Morag lost her new bothy and James' chicken house went down. Those girls are flapping their feathers all over the island, they're in such a state. And the trees! Centuries-old sycamores ripped out by the roots and tossed halfway across the island.

“So I was listening to him going on about all the damage and then I remembered this tree I—well—a tree I thought was mine. It was a sycamore, it was going to be cut down when the laird was building his garage, but Dad and I transplanted it instead. I had these imaginary friends who lived there.” Why is she telling Comgall all this? But he's listening and the air is sweet and

something in her wants to get this right, wants more than *he fell off a cliff*. More than *it's my fault*. "And off we went to look for it. Mum didn't think it was safe, but Dad said the wind was down, nothing would happen."

They'd taken Beatrix up to the hilltop, through the orchard and along the path Alastair used to cut every year through the bracken. Alana can see the sky still: Payne's grey with patches of blue black, a few peepholes spilling white light. The wind was still stronger than she'd ever experienced. She remembers the ferns pitching back and forth, and her hair whipping. She remembers sticks and leaves and uprooted ferns and a couple of flapjack wrappers and a swarm of colourful cattle tags flying around like confused birds. It took years for her not to cry if she saw confetti being thrown.

"And we got to the place where the tree should have been and I couldn't see it. And I panicked." She sighs. She had tried to get close—had shrieked, and started running, and Alastair had grabbed her shoulder. *You stay behind me, love, and we'll have a look*. When he got to the cliff he whistled. *Crivvens!* Then: *Come a little closer, ducky—your tree is alright—not too close, though!* The sound of the waves crashing below was so loud he had to shout. She moved closer and could see bumpy grey bark and reaching branches, tipped sideways—

"The tree had fallen over the side. There was a huge chunk of cliff just gone, a big tear where there was fresh soil and roots sticking out, a big piece of the fence had disappeared—and I thought—" She looks over at the dark, fuzzy shape of Comgall. "Comgall, I thought of you! You

had been telling me about how erosion works. The apple bite. Do you remember?”

“Oh wow, of course I remember!”

It’s a real landslide, Alana! her father had called out. *What a story to tell at school tomorrow!*
Must be forty feet of cliff gone down with it!

She’d begged to come see.

She couldn’t hear him say no but she could see the word on his face. *Stay back, love*, he’d hollered over the wind. *I’m going to see about your tree! It looks like it might be okay!*

Beatrix—the first Beatrix, by far the best Beatrix—was guarding Alana carefully, her blue collie eyes unmoving. Alana had stood up on her tiptoes. Her father pulled gardening gloves out of his pocket and moved toward the cliff. *I think the soil is loose enough I can pull the tree up!*

Alana’s breath quickens now as she remembers how her breath slowed on that day.

“There was some bare rock the slide had uncovered,” she says. They have arrived at Comgall’s bothy. He gestures toward the door and they go in. There’s an old, plush leather sofa with sheepskins tossed across it. She sits. “And I guess there was a hand hold in it. He leaned out—” Beatrix was whining by then, distressed but unwilling to leave Alana. Her father had propped one knee on the ground and stretched his other foot out over the edge. He’d bumped the foot up and down to test it, then leaned that foot toward the tree.

Comgall sits on the couch next to her.

Alastair reached for the trunk of the uprooted sycamore.

“Then there was this huge sound—a cracking—” She’d looked around for the source of it. The colours of the hillside were sharp that day: brilliant green grass, shining grey-brown earth, electric grey-black sky.

“It had seemed to be working, but then—”

Then movement. Then a split second of panicked stillness and then her body launching into motion, her lungs, vocal chords, throat screaming, her legs and feet running, tripping, falling, her body getting up again, running *running*—

“It was the loudest noise I’d ever heard,” she said. “This huge rock just—it was like the hill just spit it out. And”—the howling wind, the rock wavering for a second and then tipping, her father’s arms waving and then disappearing from sight. “And he went over with it.”

Her instinct was to go to him, but she froze. When she ran, it was in the other direction.

“Oh my god,” Comgall says. “God. Wow. I’m uh, I’m just going to get a fire going, okay? Do you want another drink?” He brings a glass, then a box of biscuits and some cheese. “Sorry, my pantry is a little bare still,” he says. “Christ. I can’t imagine you going through that at that age. Especially with how close you were to him. It must have been insanely tough.”

Alana watches as he crumples newsprint and kneels in front of the stove.

“It was insanely tough, yeah,” she says to his back. “I’m still not over it.”

A woodlouse skims along the floor next to the pile of firewood. Half its body is covered in something filmy and white. It hesitates when it approaches Comgall’s knee, alters its course but

does not turn back.

He looks over his shoulder. "I'm sure you're not."

"After he died I couldn't enjoy doing anything I used to do with him," she says. "Which was basically everything. You remember how I never wanted to be indoors. I pretty much moved indoors after that, started playing The Sims all the time on the computer. I drew horrible drawings, really grotesque shit, and then I started painting. Some of those years are kind of blurry... and then I finished school and left as soon as I could."

"Where did you go?"

"Edinburgh. I started uni. I wanted to take a psychology course."

"And?" He comes back to the couch. The stove begins to crackle.

"It didn't work out. I got anxious. I kept drawing and went to college for that. I illustrated a couple of children's books."

"That's awesome!"

She shrugs. "Illustrating by hand with watercolour paints isn't exactly a booming market. That's how I ended up guiding tours. And I guess...I guess in the end that's how I ended up back here. I'm not sure why I'm telling you all this." The firelight flickers across his face and she wonders who he'd be without the beard. "I suppose I'm telling you this to explain why I haven't done anything with myself, why my life has been so useless. I can't seem to get past it. I try, but he's always there."

“Don’t say that,” Comgall says. “No one’s life, least of all yours, is useless.” He hesitates.

“You brought me so far out of my shell when we were kids. I don’t know who I’d be without you.”

You don’t know who you’d be without Dad, she thinks.

She looks away from Comgall, back at the floor where the crustacean was. The animal is gone and in its place is the filmy white thing. Alana leans over to pick it up. It’s a piece of moulted shell, but only half.

She is, all of a sudden, so very tired.

★

His food glints, that’s how he recognizes it: the way their bodies catch light and hold it. But jellyfish are slippery; their edges are not firm, they expand, evade, fade into any of the billion pelagic worlds around them.

The northern ocean quiet slips through the small scales on his ears and melds into the fat underneath them. He passes through it comfortably. Thick quiet, drifting bits of marine snow, darkness.

He sees a splinter of white below him and dives. A hundred metres, two.

He moves through a school of little silvery fish, through a burst of rose-coloured krill. The

white object grows bigger, bouncing back and forth. Its tentacles whip ribbon-like below it. He can almost taste the mesoglea, the sweet soft suck of it filling the cavities between the spines in his mouth. He rushes toward his prey—*snaps*—the spines in his mouth seize—

He chokes.

He knows right away it's not a jellyfish, knows right away it's not alive at all. This isn't the first time he's made this mistake. But too late now: already the spines inside his mouth are gnashing at the thing, pulsing and contracting and pushing it down into his oesophagus where the rest of the spines are aroused and thrashing, too. Waiting.

Sometimes if a jellyfish is particularly venomous he can taste the poison as it's going down, although it doesn't affect him. And some of them are thicker than others. Sludgy. But none of them are heavy like this thing. When the jellies fill up his mouth and throat and oesophagus they never do what this thing does, which is take away the feeling of being able to breathe air.

The plastic bag works its way to the turtle's stomach. He would like to expel the thing back out his mouth, but his throat is one way only. His stomach churns.

When he surfaces he is still hungry. Has been hungrier and hungrier these past few weeks, though there's been no shortage of food.

★

Alana wakes on the couch to rain beating the old glass of the bothy windows, the sound amplified by thick stone walls. She wraps her coat around herself and notices the empty bottle of Scotch. Her head throbs. They were drunk. Well, that's fine.

The rain begins to calm almost as soon as she emerges into the forest. The trees hold water. She sets off down the dirt road the company made. The earth is freshly tumbled and smells pungently of itself. There is a slight aftertaste of petrol.

She hears it far-off first and then closer: the rumble of an old engine, the crush of tires approaching. When she turns she sees an old truck, dark green and caked with mud as if the forest itself spit it up during the night. The truck pulls up beside her. The driver is a guy she used to smoke pot with in high school. In the decade since she's seen him he's aged two. He rolls down the window. Brandon. No.

"Hey," she says. "Brenden, right?"

"That's right. And Alana." His sureness jolts her, not because he remembers her but because everything he said used to be a question.

"Yep."

"You don't look a day over eighteen," he says.

Alana laughs. "When did you start sounding so old?"

"Some days I feel old. What are you doing in this neck of the woods?"

Does he already know? She glances back toward the bothy. "I knew one of the company guys

in Canada. Crazy, isn't it? We were catching up, having a couple of drinks and I passed out."

Innocent enough.

"Nice to have that freedom," says Brenden, and she isn't sure if he's commiserating or judging her. But then he says: "There's a party tonight up at Matty's bothy. Stop by if you like. There'll be loads of familiar faces for you, lots of the old crew." He hesitates. "We'd like to catch up too."

"Thanks," she says. "Maybe." Meaning *not a chance in hell*. "I'm still not really caught up on sleep after all the moving around and whatnot last week. But if I can muster the energy I'll pop up."

Matty's bothy is a low log shack someone built decades ago on a little curve in the basalt ridge that cups the village on Alana's side of the island. As far as she knows no one has ever lived there, but it serves as a common space for people to get smashed when they don't want to have to find their way home from the Pier. It has a wood stove, a pool table and a fridge for beer. Alana can't remember ever partying there without being throwing-up drunk by the time she was stumbling down the field to go home.

She glances down, avoiding eye contact, and sees a big yellow caterpillar inching toward Brenden's nearly-stripped tire. What is that creature doing awake this time of year? She doesn't think it's been unseasonably warm, but then she's gotten used to Edinburgh temperatures.

"Alright," says Brenden. "You need a lift back in?"

There's a strip of silver sunlight glinting across his messy brown hair, then slanting downward along the side of the truck. "That would actually be great, Brenden. Hang on." She leans down and picks up the caterpillar. Holds it out for him as it begins to lump its way across her palm, leaving a tingling wake. The light catches the creature's every hair.

She climbs into the passenger seat. Brenden places his hand on the key but doesn't turn it. "Cute," he says, nodding at the caterpillar. "Listen, Alana. I don't want to be intrusive, but." He pauses. A tiny foot hits some undiscovered nerve in her hand and she catches her breath. "Never mind," he says. "What's he like, the company man?"

Alana knows what he wanted to ask, doesn't know if she should answer the silent question. She thinks of Brenden in high school, earnest but a bit slow, smoking up to calm the ball of anxiety that was always simmering in his chest. Dating girls a little less pretty than him, hugging them like shields. His acne has cleared up but left scars; his skin is older than his years now. But his eyes are as wide and genuine as always. "I like him," she says. "Go easy on him. He's... he's just figuring things out, like we all are. Me anyway."

Brenden starts the engine and sighs. "I don't think I can, Allie," he says, surprising her again. The Brenden she knew didn't disagree with anyone, at least not to their faces. "But that's nothing to do with you." He lets off the brake and they start to bump along the road the company made. "Stop for a second," Alana says, and rolls down the window. Lets the caterpillar drop back to the forest floor.

Chapter 5

Alana doesn't intend to go to the party, wants nothing, she thinks, to do with that crowd of people, with old rivalries and insecurities. But the moonlight slipping through the kitchen window after her mother goes up to bed seems to slide under her skin.

She approaches Matty's bothy from behind, pushing her way through a patch of tall, damp bracken that soaks her jeans to the thighs. When she pulls open the door a cloud of steam billows into the chilly outside air. The small room is packed, with bodies arranged in jostling, chattering clusters of four or five people. Brenden spots her almost immediately and walks over with a little glass of Scotch. She downs it like a shot and Brenden laughs and again there is that confidence she doesn't remember, that diminishes her own. "Welcome back," he says.

Then someone else spots her. Todd Black, who seems now to be friends with Brenden but was the most popular kid in school ten years ago. Todd Black, who Alana lost her virginity with in a haze in her mother's attic and to whom she has hardly spoken since. "If it isn't Alana Fyffe!" He's beside her in a few long steps, wrapping her in a hug. "What a wonder!" Alana laughs and is surprised how easy it feels.

They go outside to smoke and at one point or another Brenden vanishes.

"He's changed so much," Todd says. "Rather incredible, isn't it?" His tone not quite cruel, but Alana registers the edge.

“I guess,” she says. “I wouldn’t have thought he’d be so passionate about these protests.”

Todd shrugs. “It’s not always about environmentalism,” he says. “The ego is involved too.”

“The ego...”

“Easy enough to be a big fish in a small pond, isn’t it?” Todd says. “With most of the rest of us gone.”

“You were gone too?”

He nods. “London. I’m in advertising and—” he gives a little laugh—“I’m indispensable enough they don’t mind me working from away. Dad broke his hip and Jenna—you remember my sister?—was too busy with the kids to move. I’ll have to do a bit of travelling back and forth but for now I’m holding down the fort until we figure out something long term. It’s... I’m adjusting,” he says.

“Good word for it.”

“I’ve always loved this place, these people,” he goes on. “Just sometimes I wish they’d move a little *closer* to this century. You know, not *into* it totally. That would be too much to ask.”

When she doesn’t answer Todd carries on. “You, now.” He places his hand on the small of her back and she registers how nice it is that Gavin is not here. “I can’t tell if you’ve changed or not.”

The wave crests below are dabs of white under the moon. Lead white, she thinks.

“Sometimes I think I have,” Alana says.

Somewhere on the mountain, an owl calls. The hydro generator gives an extra long clank. Somehow they are sitting now, their backs against the bothy's wall. Somehow Todd's hand is on her thigh now and he squeezes it. She feels the muscles there tense and then her whole body relax as she gives in. Inhales. Weed and night air, Scotch and minty mouthwash on Todd's breath.

"That's all it ever really is," he says. "Whether or not we tell ourselves we're different."

She once tried to do a series of paintings of vapours. Steam coming from a pair of wet boots on feet propped next to a bonfire. The puff of heat from fresh sheep shit. Smoke from lips is deeply mundane but there's something lit up about this moment, the two of them here, nowhere else really existing.

"I guess," she says, and Brenden reappears with an armful of beers.

At the meeting the next day—Alana promised her mother she would attend this one, hosted not by White Crow but by the community itself, mostly opponents of the project though the factions are still settling—she feels a warm hand land on her arm as she's pressing the lever on the coffee urn.

"Hey." Todd's voice, warm, city intonations. She turns and there is bright sunlight edging his short hair. His shirt looks fresh, his face energetic, though she knows he was as soused as she was last night and he can't possibly have gotten any more sleep than she.

"Last night was fun," he says.

“Mm,” she answers, and feels a hot wet spark on her thigh as her cup overflows. “Shit.” She lifts it to her lips and takes a cautious but large slurp to make space. Reaches for cream. Swallows the mouthful and feels a sudden spasm of discontent accompanied by a spurt of pain behind her forehead. “Fuck,” she says. Mass-produced instant coffee coats the inside of her mouth. “A percolator. Is that too much to ask?”

“Missing the city, are you?” His voice is mild. Not judgmental, but last night’s commiseration is gone.

Alana sighs. “Wasn’t that clear already?”

“Not really,” he says. “You were pretty quiet. But I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“Because you were such an angel last night?”

“No, no. I just didn’t quite expect you to be... involved. To want to be involved. But I was thinking on the way home last night—we need an image. Something iconic and unique and attention-grabbing. For the media. I remember you making some pretty powerful art in school. What do you think?” He smiles. “Since you’re here.”

She’d been expecting a hand on her waist, an invitation to come over for a drink, and she hesitates. “I don’t know, Todd. It’s been a long time since... well, since I did any art at all.” But she remembers the wave crests, wanting to be painted.

“That stuff doesn’t leave you,” Todd says. “You don’t leave it. You know that.” Todd in high school: wanted to be a novelist, maybe? She’d looked him up on Facebook this morning while

she was trying to talk herself out of bed. He writes advertisements now, well enough to have a flat in Clapham, beach vacations to places she hasn't heard of.

She'd *wanted* to paint those wave crests, enough that she also googled whether it's possible to get lead white artist's oils into the EU via Royal Mail.

"Will you think about it?" Todd cocks his head. She gets a whiff of something like coconut from him, and it comforts her somehow, someone here who doesn't smell like the ocean, like sheep, like their own sweat. The scent is more expensive than it was in high school, but it's not that different, and it draws her to him still: that aura of not being from here. He's smoother, more worldly, less gruff.

"Yeah," she says. "I'll think about it." She rips open another packet of sugar. "They'd never serve this shit in Edinburgh."

"No," says Todd. "But—" placing his hand on Alana's shoulder, turning her gently to face the crowd, "—you wouldn't get this either. This kind of community." The room is full of people talking to one another. Country people in wellies and flannel, a few toddlers running around. The few people who are near her age are paired off in well-established couples. Everyone griping, shaking heads. *What kind of community?* she wonders, but before she can articulate anything to Todd a mic crackles to life and they go to their seats.

"The waters surrounding our island are facing a grave threat," the first speaker begins. Ron, a squat, rattish-looking man Alana's never felt comfortable around, even as a child.

“Don’t base your judgment of this on him,” her mother whispers beside her.

Alana takes another gulp from the paper cup.

Ron’s wife stands and says, “We must act together, and we must act now.” Alana has always liked Ron’s wife, and also felt a bit sorry for her. Her hair is too-blonde, shoulder length, blowdried. Every jumper she owns is lavender. Many have snowflakes on them.

Someone else stands up, a man a decade or so older than her. Michael someone, maybe?
“I’m uncomfortable saying no to this without critical consideration,” he says. “We could really use those jobs, and the tax revenue.”

The light shifts from dull grey to sharp white. There’s a whispered rumble of judgment on Michael Someone. Alana finds herself standing.

“I am too,” she says, then thinks—*what? You are?*

“Alana!” her mother hisses.

“I’m not saying I support the thing,” she says. “I just feel like maybe we’re being a bit unfair to some people. We *do* need jobs. And maybe these aren’t the jobs we want. But maybe in ten or fifteen years when the whole island is a ghost town we’ll be wishing we’d given this a shot.”

The words pour out, indignant. But she doesn’t even think these things. Where are they coming from?

Someone else pipes up. “Maybe we should restrict these gatherings to those who actually *live* on the island.”

Alana is burning.

She sits.

“No. She’s not the only one who feels that way.” Another voice: male, older still. Scratchy.

Alana can feel tears pressing at the back of her eyelids’ thin skin and she tries not to look at anyone.

“Alright. Alright,” says Ron. “We aren’t here to judge and argue with one another. We’re here to take concrete action, and I think that means we should move to discussing the action.

Alana, Mike, Donald. I see that you have a different perspective. This meeting is for those who are *opposed* to the project. We’re not here to discuss the merits of the project itself. I might suggest that if you disagree, there are other forums for doing so.”

He pauses. Donald, the older one, gets up and leaves. His wellies squelch on the tile floor. The younger man, the Michael, readjusts his posture in his chair but does not make any motion to leave.

“I *am* opposed to it,” Alana whispers to her mother, who’s gone red. “I just—I feel like—”

Mairi shakes her head and stares straight ahead.

Then, from two rows behind her, one or two bodies to her left, Alana hears a whisper: “She’s fucking their head man. With the beard. That’s why she’s saying that.”

She whips her head around but doesn’t see Brenden. Just a scrawny kid with a little beard. He looks a little like Brenden did in high school, Alana thinks, and she feels anger pitch her. *Jesus*,

this place.

And fucking Brenden.

Although anyone could have seen her and Comgall on the beach—

She stands again, looks the kid she thinks was talking straight in the eye. He starts off smug but she holds his gaze until he shifts it.

“I’m not fucking him,” she says, and she walks out.

Her whole body has begun to tingle.

She sits on the bench around the corner from the Pier. In spring and summer this bench is occupied by tourists and their aching knees, but it’s far too early in the year for them now. The sky is dark and full of motion, the air cold and light. She tries to calm her breath but a tight fist has settled in her chest. She wants to leave but she should wait for her mother and apologize.

She goes into the tearoom and asks for more coffee. The voices that carry from the hall are becoming louder, a little angry. “Think they’re just fired up?” Alana asks Dana at the counter. “Or arguing about something?” Dana is a bit younger than her and has, Alana thinks, a sick parent she’s taking care of. Or maybe she’s mixing Dana’s story up with Todd’s. Dana doesn’t want to be here either, is the point.

Dana shrugs. “I couldn’t care less about the ocean,” she tells Alana. “That’s why I’m working this shift. All the rest of them are in there shouting. You want anything to eat with that,

love?”

I couldn't care less about the ocean. Alana shivers, glances toward the window. The expanse of churning grey, a thin layer of mist at the horizon. A presence she can feel everywhere here, even shut inside with her eyes closed.

“Please. One of those spinach pasties.”

“I think if they can do something useful with it, more power to them,” says Dana, reaching for the pasty. “I could use a job with a bigger paycheque than this shithole. And if there were jobs, my boyfriend could come back from Glasgow.” She stands and smooths out her skirt. “And it’s not like there aren’t enough *trees* here. More than any other Scottish isle I’ve been on.”

Alana sees the fallen sycamore from the train, or is it the one from her childhood? The trunk covered in moss, light glancing off the tips of the moss’ minuscule leaves, a pattern like shining lace. Cellar bugs crawling in and out of tiny holes across the softening wood. Shedding their skin, too, maybe.

“That’ll be six-forty, love,” says Dana.

The wood itself, spongy to the touch. The scent of old wood mingling with that of new leaves, of wet earth.

The artificial scent of Todd in the next room and how much safer she felt near it.

Alana hands over a ten pound note. It is work to prevent her hand from trembling.

Chlorophyll and blossom, rabbit droppings, dew. A cliff by the ocean.

“Thanks,” she says, and takes the food and the tea to the furthest table. Wraps her hands around the mug to warm them.

Alana is finishing her second cup when a thrum of voice starts up, grows louder, and then three dozen people spill into the tearoom. Her mother is near the end of the throng, looking frazzled and talking to Todd. Alana catches the end of a sentence: “—think it’s something to worry about, Mairi, really—” and then Mairi spies her daughter.

“Well,” she says when she sits down.

“I’m sorry,” Alana says. “I am genuinely sorry. It just—they—”

“I heard what they said,” she says. “And I do realize it can’t be easy for someone in your position, watching us fight this kind of opportunity when you’re perfectly right, there may be no others like it. But—”

“No, Mum, I do get it,” says Alana. “I don’t think I want this place fracked either. But it’s the one-sidedness—and Comgall, I *like* him—and even if we were—” She can’t finish, and then she can: “They can’t understand what it might be like not to want to live here forever, seeing the same couple hundred people day after day, not being able to go sit in a coffeeshop or listen to music or buy a paintbrush. And—”

Alana is out of breath.

“Love, I know,” says Mairi.

“But I *am* sorry I embarrassed you.”

“I know. It’s alright.” She hesitates. “You know, if you and Comgall *were*—I know you had a really special connection as kids.”

“We’re not.”

“But if you were. It might be complicated. But it would be okay.”

That tingling feeling again. “Thanks, Mum. Let’s have some soup.”

“Sure. It’ll have to be quick, though, darling. We’re just taking a half hour lunch.”

“A *lunch*?”

“There are a lot of opinions, and they want to start to do some strategic planning. You’re welcome to head out. I really do appreciate you coming. You take the car home, I can hitch a ride with anyone.”

A light snow has started up. Alana gives her mother a hug and takes the keys. Out of the corner of her eye Alana sees Todd heading toward her. “Love you,” she tells her mother, then slips out onto the tearoom’s deck and doubles back around the building to the car park.

The drive from the Pier usually takes about twenty minutes. The road is narrow and winding, not particularly well-maintained. About five minutes in the snow intensifies and by the time Alana reaches the field at the halfway point, she can’t see anything. “Shit,” she says out loud, and pulls off the road. “*What* is going on with this weather?”

She grabs an old coat from the back and starts to walk.

The snow is almost blinding on foot, too, but she stumbled back from the Pier so many times during high school. Her feet know the difference between road and path, path and field. Her nostrils fill with the smell of snow. Finally she is awake.

“Dad would have loved this weather,” Alana tells her best friend Tegan on the phone later. Tegan is stuck in some city on her way to several months volunteering with an NGO in Kenya, waiting out a snafu in her travel arrangements at an airport hotel. It is hot and muggy where she is and Alana, shivering as she tries to get the fire going, can’t imagine it. “He loved weather more than anyone I know. He liked to say how small he felt when there was big weather, and that that’s how it should be.”

“It *is* how it should be,” Tegan says. “We’d be in much better shape as a species if we could get a handle on that. Your father was woke before his time.”

Alana pauses to look out the window. White flakes swirling everywhere, reflecting in the ambient light of the still-big moon. Her father had these crazy blue eyes, the irises always churning. “Yeah, he got things,” she says. “And didn’t take bullshit, either. It made people uncomfortable. You told him something and he went right in, deep. He used to stand really close to people—and he was short, so he’d just stare up at them—I never really processed that until I was an adult. But it must have weirded people out. I wish you’d known him.”

“Honestly,” says Tegan, “I wish I’d had even a year with my father being as close as you two

were. I know it's not too late for me to fix that. But—" then she stops. Alana tenses. She can hear what Tegan has decided not to say: *Maybe you should be grateful.* "Never mind," says Tegan. "I have to run. Love you, hey?"

On Alana's walk home earlier, she couldn't see the horizon. Almost couldn't believe it was there. Mist like this always made the itch start in her father: to go outside. To be in it. She could feel his presence this afternoon, when she was in it, and she realizes as the line goes dead that the feeling didn't scare her. He was not a ghost but a resonance. Dancing with the snow.

Her phone buzzes. Todd. "Hey, got your number from your mum! She just wanted to check you made it home. Looking pretty nasty out there!"

A few hours later another message arrives from Todd: "We're going to all stay on this side of the island tonight," it reads. "Your mum can stay at my place, we have a pullout. Sorry you aren't here too!" Smiley face, then another message: "It's just too messy out there to try to get anywhere. Can't see a thing."

Alana falls asleep early, thinking of Comgall.

Then she is woken by him knocking.

His frizzy hair is sticking out in all directions, bits of it plastered to ruddy cheeks. The sun that frames his silhouette is blinding white. His expression is sheepish. "Sorry, did I wake you? I was wondering if you wanted to go for a walk. It's pretty stunning up there on the ridge."

“The ridge...” She peers around him. “Did you *walk* here?”

“Yup,” he says. “Couldn’t sleep. They made breakfast for everyone at the hall but I didn’t think I’d be welcome.”

“Let me just make some coffee. Come on in.”

Alana pulls on boots and a coat and they take mugs of coffee and amble toward the hillside. The wind is strong but warm. Still blowing a gale offshore. The roar of the waves doesn’t quite drown out the clap-and-thud rhythm of the hydro generator working overtime from the rush of all the snow and rain and, now, melt.

Higher up, these sounds are replaced by the squishing of their feet in the bleached wintertime grass, by their panting. In this light the remaining mounds of snow are shocking blue-white. They are scattered in delicate patterns across the grass, itself glistening pale gold and streaked with deep brown shadows. There are soft bouncy tufts of moss that make Alana want to fall down into them.

“You being here,” she says. “I still can’t really believe it. It’s surreal. I always thought of you as some—magical friend from another land—a character from a dream almost.”

“I know,” he says. “Remember our twig people?”

She laughs. “Of course!”

Comgall keeps walking but calls, over the wind, “So, you’re here for a while, then?”

The other night by the fire she clammed up as soon as she reached her story’s climax, and

Comgall had taken over, told her about the past two decades of his life: the thrill of getting into grad school, the girlfriend who left him halfway through his dissertation; the state of university jobs these days, the pressure from his parents to make money, the eye-popping figure on the oil company's entry-level job offer, the camp in Alberta. It felt like he was trying to distract Alana from her own old grief, and it worked. Now the balance is off again, she's back to being mysterious. But it's not that she doesn't want to tell him the answers. She just doesn't know them.

She watches as he bends to examine an old section of rock wall and pokes at the black lichen crusting its surface.

"I don't know what I'm doing," she says. "Not much hope of moving out in the foreseeable future. So I suppose yes, I'm here for a while."

"You'll work it out," he says. "People always do. Even if now it doesn't feel like you will." He squints off into the distance and then looks back at her. "Hey—at least you haven't sold your soul to a company committed to killing the planet as quickly as possible. And you've got this beautiful island. It's an amazing place to be, if you have to be somewhere figuring things out."

Alana sighs. "I know."

"You look like you don't believe me. Don't you think it's beautiful?"

She stops walking and gazes across the gold-washed field, out toward the ocean. "I guess we're looking toward Cape Breton," she says, then pauses. The long, wobbly V of the two ridges

and the valley between, the gentle slope to the shore from the V's outer edges—she hardly recognizes these landforms, under this sun, dotted with these shining remnants of yesterday's record snowfall.

She looks back over the houses tucked into the hillside below and thinks she can feel that they are all empty, everyone still gathered at the Pier in a show of solidarity for the ocean. That, for this morning, this is all theirs alone. No witness but Comgall and the land itself.

"I know it's beautiful," she says finally, "and people come to see it and people love it and we should keep it safe. But really, ever since Dad died, I've found it more frightening than beautiful. Like I can't trust it anymore. He loved this place more than anything in the world, he loved it like he loved Mum and me. And it—threw him over a cliff.

"I know it sounds crazy," she adds.

In her head she hears Gavin: *Get over yourself. Those aren't real problems.*

Comgall turns so that he is looking straight at her. "It doesn't sound crazy," he says. "People need to trust their places. Like Cape Breton without coal mines or Newfoundland without cod—you rely on a place and then you fuck it up or something goes wrong and suddenly it's all volatile and you don't know how to know it anymore. Not that you fucked this up." He pauses. "That was really interesting, what you called it. Trust. Maybe I stopped trusting rocks."

Something calming about him—this shocking familiarity maybe, like they did grow up together. A few silent minutes pass, then she asks: "What do you think the risk is, actually?"

It takes him a long time to answer. “I don’t really think drinking water will be contaminated or anything like that,” he says finally. “I trust the technology and it’s going to be far away from aquifers or land, obviously. We have good engineers, and they seem to care about what they’re doing—which not all the companies do... I guess it’s the bigger picture that freaks me out. I’m scared I’m—fuck, I *know* I’m on the wrong side of history. I just don’t know what to do about it.”

What would it be like to know your location in history? Alana can hardly locate herself in this month, this week.

She takes a tentative step toward him but when she lifts her eyes to meet his, his face is angled eastward, toward the shore on the other side of the ridge. His eyebrows are low, troubled. Her first thought is that she’s offended him by not offering him the kind of comfort he offered her. Or perhaps the physical closeness makes him uncomfortable; perhaps this is not what he thinks they can be to one another. Perhaps they *can’t* be this to one another. She moves to get a better look at his expression and he frowns deeper.

“Comgall, what’s wrong?” she asks finally. His skin has paled to the cool, chalky blue of the snow.

Chapter 6

The noise is deafening. It would be less terrifying if she knew what it was, but these are not normal sounds. They don't belong in the ocean she knows.

She has all but lost her faith that grandmother knows what they are doing. The sounds have unsettled their proprioception; they have been moving in random zigzags for hours now. Their big dark bodies jostle awkwardly behind grandmother, and she is sure she isn't the only one who wishes to change course, who would do *anything* to make the awful sounds stop. But no one knows which direction to take to get away. She cannot hear herself think, let alone hear what others are trying to communicate.

She whistles, high and musical. Someone else whistles, too, but it is not a response. It is a panicked outcry like hers. No comfort.

She senses an obstacle ahead and tries to draw back, but there are too many others around her. She flings herself upward instead, every cell in her body saying *out, get out*, and she manages to volley two-thirds of herself into the air above. She gulps it in. There's an earthquake in her ears. What are those huge lumps of rock and why are they so close?

Then she is back in the water. Salty, roiling, swarming with bodies.

She whistles again. *We have to turn around!* They hesitate but she senses that they have heard. *There's danger ahead. Turn around!*

Some of them turn and start to move away. Back towards the open ocean, deeper water, relative safety.

Swooshing sense of some relief.

Then grandmother calls. *Where are you going? We have to stay together!* and grandmother's will is stronger than hers. Slowly the colossal bodies rotate again, back toward the great looming obstacle.

The deafening noise waxes and wanes. Each time it subsides, her senses use the space to scream even louder, *Obstacle ahead! We must turn! ... Now!* But the sounds are sapping her will, too.

Then she hears the piercing cry of one of her siblings: *I've hit!*

And they are heading for the same fate, all of them, they are powerless to change their course, and now grandmother has hit, too, now others, and now her belly *slam, crunches* onto something impossibly hard.

The water and the bodies keep moving around her. But there is no longer any motion within her.

★

Alana follows his gaze toward the ocean. The waves reach as far as she can see offshore.

Thirty or so miles off, the peaks of the next island poke above the clouds. Below them, the beach, normally a stretch of clear white sand, is dotted with big black—*huge* black boulders—has the tide been that fierce? The ferry hasn't come in days, but—

Comgall hasn't answered her. His eyes are wide. His mouth hangs slightly open. "Comgall, what is it?" she asks again.

"Fuck—fucking—" he swallows. "Whales."

They slide and skid down the other side of the ridge, take a detour to Scruff's house, the nearest one. Empty, of course. Alana uses his phone to call the community breakfast and Comgall searches in the barn for buckets. She cracks open a can of kippers while she explains the situation to Katie at the hall.

Back in the front garden, Polly and Midge, Scruff's ancient pet goats, seem to sense their nerves. They run in clumsy circles around the strange humans, bleating.

Alana takes a deep breath and then she tells him. "They can't get here. All that snow melted so fast this morning the valley road is washed out. They're calling the Coastguard but they don't think they'll be able to get a boat in through—" she gestures toward the roiling ocean—"that."

Silence. What more can she say? *They're big. Hopefully they'll be alright until we can get help.*

There's not much we can do.

Why do they matter so much to you?

“H’ooookay,” he breathes finally, all in a whoosh. “We’ll have to try to help them ourselves.”

We will?

But she gathers as many buckets as she can carry and follows him to the beach.

The whales’ smell precedes them.

Alana and Comgall walk into it as they round the bend by the common grazings: a cloud of fetid animal reek, rotting seaweed, who knows what else.

Is it the scent of cold blood, she wonders, and then she remembers: whales aren’t cold blooded. They are like her.

At the beach, the whales’ big draped forms make her feel like she is standing in a graveyard. But she and Comgall count, touch, listen. They stretch to hover their hands over blowholes, hoping for breath.

Seven they think are dead. The rest—nine—heft air in and out, some with whooshing sounds. No way of knowing whether the sounds are a sign primarily of life or of pain.

“Okay,” says Comgall. “Okay. Turn over the ones on their sides. Right?” On the phone, Katie googled what to do with a beached whale. The first thing, she said, is to try to make sure it can breathe, and that it’s not hurting its flippers too much. Alana pauses for a moment, overwhelmed, then shakes her head. *Now is not the time*. And the two of them set to work.

The smaller whales they are capable of flipping. Heft, push. The bigger ones they are not.

They settle into a rhythm, filling buckets, pouring water over the whales to keep them cool.

A beached whale is boiling to death in its own skin, Katie read out.

Alana's own fingers soon become so cold they hurt. She pauses for a moment to try to massage some life back into them. The whales look more like dying gods than ordinary sea creatures, and Alana is struck for what feels like the first time in her life with a sadness larger than she is. Their pain is collective; the air pulses with it. The eyes of the living pull her into their grief.

But she tries to focus on *her* body, what it can do. She goes back and refills her buckets. Brings them over to a whale. Does that again. She and Comgall are both soaked to the thighs now, wading in water knee-deep and deeper. The sun casts streaks of white across the whales' rubbery backs; when Alana faces east toward it, they become heaving, abstract shapes, mountains outlined by a glistening horizon. It is unclear where whale ends and sky and water begin; Alana is beginning to feel fuzzy on where *she* ends and all of that begins. The blurring-edges feeling from the vaults, except this time, it expands her rather than crushing her. Her breath takes on the same jagged rhythm as the whales' breaths. She is only hands, is only water, is only cold, is only dazzling light.

The winter sun gets stronger, higher. The water begins to evaporate almost as soon as it hits the enormous backs.

More time passes and then she stumbles, runs into something—a rock?—twists and falls

sideways into the biggest of the dead whales. She collapses against the creature's side, finds herself spreading her arms and fingers wide across the dark body. Her cheek brushes a rough barnacle, then stills when it finds a smooth spot to rest.

This body is too solid, too *big* to be dead.

Her shoulders start to shake.

*

Pain spears her through her ears, through her stomach, her chest. Her vision—a blur of sea and sky, rock and lichen—goes furry, then dark.

When she wakes she can feel movement vibrating toward her from the direction of shore. She feels a little spasm of hope. She wriggles but feels only scraping. Something is jabbing at her body, pressing through skin and blubber to the organs inside her. Her heart beats hard against it, off-rhythm but insistent. She tries to shimmy backward but that doesn't work either. She becomes aware the water level has changed. No longer nearly as high as her blowhole, now it barely reaches her eye.

She begins to feel warm.

She attunes herself to the presence of tiny creatures all around her: the ones who live on her skin, the ones who huddle under the seaweed. Her fear is a sticky residue on her skin. The

warmth verges on extreme. Her discomfort seems to congeal in it and suddenly each barnacle, each blemish makes her prickle and itch.

Overhead, a gull cries, and she starts crying too, the receding seawater lapping in time with her grief.

★

Through her own tears, and seeming almost to echo out of the whale's cushioned side, Alana hears a strange call. A long, slow, oddly-pitched bleat.

She lifts her head in the direction of the sound, and at the far end of the beach a shape comes into focus. A blip on top of the rocks off the point.

Another whale.

Alana picks herself up and jogs over.

The whale is caught between two stones, a space Alana thinks it should be capable of shimmying out of. But instead it is crying. Its body heaves and with each heave expands painfully into the rocks it is stuck in. There are a couple of abrasions on its face, the blood dark and dried.

When the whale sees Alana, it lets out a louder, more urgent cry. She hauls herself up onto the rock next to it and places one hand on the side of its face. The whale's cheek feels about the same temperature as the rock around it and she has no idea whether that's okay. The lower third

or so of the whale's body droops at an awkward angle into the water. The whale lets out another cry.

"Shh," Alana says, and applies just the slightest bit of pressure with her hand. "It's okay. I'm going to get help."

Under her hand, the whale goes slack.

*

Comgall keeps at it, bucket after bucket, but his hands are starting to slip and so is his resolve. Every couple of steps he trips in his heretofore waterproof Gore-Tex hikers. The water that fills the grey plastic buckets seems to become leaden. What did they think the two of them were going to do with a dozen buckets? Where is Alana?

At first he'd wished for sunglasses, for rope, for better weather so a boat could come.

Now he just wants it to be over. Sometimes he thinks: they're just pilot whales—there are lots of them in the world—imagine if it were blue whales or right whales. Mostly, though: they all matter—how could they not? That so many of these majestic animals would turn up on this shore, that so many would die—each time he pauses it is this thought that sends him bending and dipping for another slosh of seawater, because the thing that it leads to—that stopping to think about all this death leads to—is the shuddering knowledge that this is his fault. He should

have argued. He should have said: the movement of sound. And: the limits of the marine mammal watcher. The limits of the listening devices the company they hired brought from Edinburgh. All limited by the vastness of the ocean, of the cultures swimming and living and trying to survive within it. Seismics and sonar and a whale's panic—like anyone's panic—when assaulted by incomprehensible, unceasing noise at decibels it's never heard.

Stoop. Dip. Stand. Splash. Move to the next animal, and stoop again.

The sun beats down and he is freezing and his head is pounding like never before and his back feels as if it might split in two.

Then a glance back inland, and something on the horizon. Comgall squints. Just blinding sunlight.

But, no: something moving. A dark mass on top of the ridge, growing taller.

It's like watching a miracle unfold. He drops the bucket and gapes as over the hill comes a swarming mass of *people*, moving as if a single body. The heads bob up and down and the sides sway and the swarm gets bigger and clearer as it gets closer. There must be a hundred of them. It must be everyone. The shape becoming stranger and more beautiful as Comgall sees that sticking out of its sides are squarish shapes that can only be buckets, loops that must be ropes.

He thinks of his own hike across the island that morning and swells with emotion. It had taken him nearly three hours, and that was without gear.

The crowd begins to move down the hillside. A massive cloud blots out the sun. In the

absence of glare he can make out some individual bodies. He sees a couple of grey heads on stooped shoulders, several child-sized forms, a hundred pairs of wellies, a hundred raincoats. The buckets and ropes swinging, sometimes colliding, it could almost be a parade. As the one responsible for all this—the face of the operation, anyway—he’s more scared than he thinks he’s ever been but for all that the joy and relief outweigh the fear.

He looks sideways at the closest whale, the star-shaped cluster of barnacles just under its eye and the waterline below it. The tide is going out.

Suddenly he can’t be still anymore and he turns to look for Alana, scanning the scattered bodies until he sees a hunched shape huddled next to one of them at the far end of the beach. He runs to her, grabs her shoulder, pulls her upright and into his arms. “Look!”

Instead she leans her head into his chest, shaking, he thinks she’s laughing but she pulls back and looks at him and what’s on her face is tears. She gestures behind her. “It’s alive. But it’s stuck.”

“Alana, *look*,” he says again. He takes her shoulders and guides them toward the ridge, where the island’s people continue to walk.

Comgall’s heart is so full that the jolt when Alana wrenches her shoulders away feels almost violent. “Will people stop fucking turning me around! There’s another whale over there.” She speaks through closed teeth. Her irises are dark. Something seems to spasm within them. “Will you hand me some bloody rope.”

*

Warm hand against her, cooler than the boiling inside her, tiny but still comforting, life force pulsing within it. Soft sounds, gentle. Her breath is stilted, her mouth so dry it hurts. Wriggling pathways of pain clamour toward her liver, stab at her brain. The rock is rough against her stomach. She tries to draw strength from the water lapping at her tail.

The hand lifts away and she cries out. She feels a short tingle as it brushes her again. *I'll be back*, the tingle says.

She does not know how much time passes.

A din of voices rises up and then water, glorious water, spills down from above, trails in electric ribbons along her sides.

She moves her eye to look up at the source of the hand. A female, small and pale.

Their eyes meet. The human's eye is shiny, wet, furiously alive. A prickle of hope along her spine.

The voices continue.

Then something wraps around her. The human says more soft things. The rope grows tighter. She knows to be afraid of these things, her terror of nets is generations-deep, but she pushes the fear back down and focuses on the woman's hand and the strange reaching tendrils of

solace it sends through skin and skin.

Then she feels herself being tugged. The rope tightens around her. She fights back panic. The human hand presses into her cheek one last time and then slides along the side of her head until it is no longer touching her. The rope tightens more and she feels her body move backward. Tightens more and she feels a small give and then a big one and all of a sudden she is flung backward into the water. The rope gives way.

And she is leaving, she is free.

The salt water is a balm. Her breath settles to a normal register, and she begins to wonder where her family has gone. The ocean feels different. Echoes are longer and emptier. The silence has depth and breadth.

She glides slowly, a starfish, feeling every molecule of water that passes along her skin. She can see the mountains' shadows, layered and articulate, below the surface. They stretch over a shelf of dark rock: the island's solid underwater roots. And there, off to the side, is the sand bar, sediment cascading into the kelp forest.

The algae are dark and thickly populous, evanescent in the haze. She can hear a low, tangled buzz of life from within the forest and this comforts her: that there are things growing and happening and being born way down there. Someday they will fill all the newly empty places up here. The places the ships have poisoned with noise.

She feels like she is the last one. She feels like they have known for lifetimes that it would not

be long before someone was the last one.

A cloud of krill winnows along the bank. She feels no hunger, just a deep ache.

The ships are less alive than rocks. How can they wield such excruciating power?

In the distance: the hard, dark shape of a turtle. Closer: a couple of stray jellies. Closer: the brush of tiny fish as they glide by. Closer still: a million tiny pinches of barnacles on her skin, balance restored now that they are wet again.

It is clear to her that everything is fragile now, but the ocean doesn't seem to know. The fish, the krill, the barnacles, the kelp, the tufts of algae drifting upward, the bits of land plants that have slid off the cliff and are drifting downward—the discomfort that is palpable to her as a shift in the stuff of life registers only as a minor atmospheric blip for them.

Plankton spill out from a sunburst. Light refracts radially around them.

The creamy shoal, the kelp forest, the mountains' shadows: their edges grow sharp-feeling. How long will they last here, in this quiet limbo?

How don't they know?

She circles in frustration. If she could just open her ears a little wider, hear a little more, maybe she could understand—

★

Alana stands dumbstruck, the island's voices a fugue of grey noise buzzing at the back of her neck. The whale's eye is alive in her brain, her heart. Her left palm tingles with the hot memory of its skin.

She hears a voice from somewhere behind her say, "We have to get back to the others before the tide is out completely."

Shadows of clouds puddle across the water. Alana sees the whale surface to breathe, already almost invisible near the horizon. She watches its wake until the blot disappears.

The clouds burst open with rain. The patches of light on the water disappear and she finds herself staring at a flat grey surface.

But the downpour buys them time. Together the community manages to push, tug, rope and cajole all the live whales back out to sea. For a couple of hours Alana can stay immersed in it. Now she stands, out of breath, on the shore as six or seven people give a final shove to the last whale. She is sweaty from the exertion, soaked from the rain. *But we did it*, she thinks, and she wants to cry, for joy because they did it or for grief for the other ones or maybe just for the closeness of all this death, the surprising depth of feeling in the whales' eyes, how the one on the cliff pierced her with its gaze. How it *knew* her.

Crane comes over and gives her shoulder a squeeze. "Good on you, lass," he says. "If you hadn't fucked off from that meeting they probably would have all been lost."

Alana feels a hot tear spurt out with her laugh. “I can’t get over how human their eyes are,” she says. “They’re so expressive. Like there is *definitely* a soul in there and it’s not much different from ours.”

Crane looks at her and she sees the glint in his own eyes. “I don’t know, Alana,” he says. “Maybe what you’re recognizing is the animal in us. Maybe we aren’t that different.” He’s quiet for a moment, then adds, “Your father didn’t think we were.” He gives her another squeeze and walks off.

People start to head for the basement of the old church. There’s liquor kept on hand there for wedding dances, and it’s only a fifteen minute walk away rather than the slog to the real pub at the Pier. Alana starts off with them but then sees that Comgall is hanging back, and in the same instant realizes why. He thinks this is his fault. Maybe it is.

She hesitates. A couple of months ago if she’d been told the ocean around their island was being gutted by fracking exploration she would have shrugged. *Let the island disappear completely*, she would have thought, *as long as Mum can get to the mainland first*. Now—she glances over the ocean, the corpses that line the shoreline. Seismic noise, that was what he said.

But she turns and walks back to him. She takes his hand, and they find her mother, and the three of them walk toward her house. As they walk Alana finds herself gripping both of their hands.

The rain becomes a storm.

Late that night Alana lies on her back next to the wood stove and gazes upward.

The space above her is criss-crossed with strings of drying apple slices, tied at their ends to the rough ceiling beams her father made. Tiny hailstones tap little songs on the window panes, sketch lines of water in webs on the glass. The apple skins have the slightest lustre, a linseed oil glaze with hints of raw umber, alizarin, ultramarine. She reaches over and puts another log in the stove.

She lies back and inhales. Ashes, apples. Rain. A physical exhaustion she hasn't felt in years.

Part 2

Spring

Chapter 7

Three days later Alana is still bouncy and electrified. Todd turns up late in the morning and his fresh face is exhilarating, an antidote to the broodiness she's been feeling from Comgall, from her mother, from the island itself. Unseasonably cold, unseasonably slow.

"Todd!" Mairi says. "What a nice surprise. What brings you to this side of the island?"

"Just stopped by to see your lovely daughter," he answers. "Alana? Do you have time for a walk?"

He wants to know about the painting. They're going to double down on protest efforts, he says, now that we've seen firsthand what the testing is doing to marine life. "Something to make us stand out from the crowd," he says. "Something that will speak to people." They'll share it on social media, display it during the march. "And maybe Scottish Wildlife or someone will get involved," he says, "but we can't put much hope in that." His skin looks like he's never had a follicle of facial hair.

"You found the whales, Alana," he says. "You're connected to them now even more than the rest of us."

"It wasn't me, it was Comgall," she objects, but he waves her off.

"I can see the energy in you," he says, and brushes her upper arm with his hand. "It's touched you. You can't just walk away now."

She flares. “You don’t think?”

The hand again, a grip this time. “Alana. That wasn’t an insult.”

Alana sighs. “I really, really haven’t been doing much of this stuff. I might be completely blocked, or I might make something uninspired and awful. I’ve been totally stuck.”

They are sitting on the low stone wall that separates Mairi’s garden from the potato field, facing away from the house and toward the ridge. Her eye moves up, off, outward. Past her mother’s clothesline, silvery sunlight showing the worn spots in cotton and flannel, wind making the fabrics billow. Past the reaching apple tree and the songbird perched on it, creamy with daubs of rust. Burnt sienna, yellow ochre, nickel yellow. Thick paint to emphasize the infinite thinness of the sky behind them.

“This will be an opportunity,” says Todd. “To get back in. Now that you’re here in this beautiful place and you have time.”

“God.” She sighs again.

“Will you give it a try?”

She thinks of Comgall: where his loyalties lie, and hers. She thinks of the whales, the one she cried over, the one she comforted. She hears Comgall’s voice: *They hear our sonar and they panic. Humans can’t hear the noises, we probably couldn’t even if we could hear underwater. It’s the frequency.*

It had never occurred to Alana that a whale could panic, and she’d told him that. He

shrugged. *Sure, why not?*

“Sure,” she says to Todd. “Why not.”

“Wonderful!” He wraps his arms around her and gives her a tight squeeze. “I can’t wait to see it.” His breath is hot on her ear as his tone drops: “I wouldn’t mind seeing you again, either.”

March slides into April and Comgall can’t stop thinking about Alana. He bakes a tray of lemon tarts and sets out to bring them to her and her mother. About halfway there he comes upon a man kneeling next to a fence, banging a nail into it, his back to Comgall.

“Morning,” Comgall calls, conscious of his earnest Canadian accent ringing out across the field like a foghorn. Because he doesn’t want to surprise the man; because, like home, this is a place where you say good morning.

“Oh, hello there!” The man’s face is brilliant pink, clearly something off about the pigmentation but his neon yellow workout sweater doesn’t help.

“Hi.”

“You’ll be the young fellow with the company, then?”

“Yeah.” He holds in a sigh and grips the foil-wrapped plate of sweets a little tighter.

“You’re brave,” the man says. He looks off into the distance toward the ocean.

Comgall grimaces.

“Don’t worry yourself, lad,” the man goes on. “You’re too young for those lines on your face. It’s dismal, but it’ll blow over.”

“What will blow over?”

“Either the resentment, or the project.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Everything blows over. The human species itself will probably blow over in not too long.”

Comgall cringes again.

“Yeah. Not that pleasant to think about,” the man says.

Comgall squares his shoulders. “We are working to ensure the continued thriving of the ocean ecosystems here. It’s not going to do that much damage,” he says. Then he continues: “Honestly, I’ve seen much worse. This is not that invasive, compared to places where there’s onshore drilling.” This cheers him a little.

“Not that invasive?” the man says. “Have you seen the ocean floor, then?”

Comgall is quiet. He thinks of Alana’s energy after she helped to free that whale. They were standing in the garden behind her house, him feeling useless again, absent, the biosphere quietly dying in his peripheral vision. “Comgall, it *got* it,” she’d said. “There was no reason in the world why it should have kept so still and it *did* because it knew I was trying to help.” She’d been radiant, buoyant. “It just felt so *good* to see it swimming off.” She had her arms bent at the elbows, talking with her hands at chest level. She gave her hands a quick, exhilarated shake that

travelled along her torso too, and then she reached over and hugged him, really hugged him. By the time he thought to hug her back it was over. And still it left him glowing.

And then he went home. Thinking, *she needs a friend. I am now her friend. We were friends as kids, it makes perfect sense.*

The man is watching him through clear blue eyes, intelligent, not quite judgmental. “I thought not, lad. I know, I know. It’s your job to be bright and happy about the whole thing. It’s just there aren’t that many places—that many pockets—that are just let alone, anymore. Seems like rather a shame. But, you know. I do think something will grow up again, out of it all.” He pauses. “I was working in the salmon industry in northern Ireland in ’07 when the jellyfish came. Did you hear about that, over there in Canada?”

Comgall shakes his head.

“We couldn’t believe it. 120 000 salmon, stung to death, some of them just plain terrified to death, overnight. Two million pounds’ worth of fish. It was devastating... there were just piles of floating bodies. And this line of jellyfish that stretched out for miles.”

“That’s... incredible,” says Comgall.

“Mauve stingers, they’re called,” the man answers. “But, the thing is. At the time that felt like the end of the world to all of us who were near. We figured jellyfish were taking over, the economy was ruined, we’d never farm salmon in Ireland again. But of course we would. The industry didn’t come back in quite the same way, but it came back.” He shrugs. “I’m just saying,

lad. Sometimes the things around us seem very big. And sometimes they are. And sometimes the world has its own way of working things out. I'm contradicting myself, aren't I?"

Comgall laughs. It feels good. "A bit."

"Well, that's also the way of things, isn't it? I'd best be going before I put us both in the madhouse. You enjoy your lunch, now." He skips off in the direction he came from. Comgall has a flash of the tailings ponds, a few kilometres into the forest by the camp in Alberta. Oil-streaked sludge, the only visible nature dead or dying, often slick with bitumen.

But that's not what they're doing here. And it's true, he reasons. Something will grow up again. Even in Alberta.

★

Pale green filaments tremble in the restless air. They gauge weight, wetness. They hold or release the water they are clutching, accordingly. The world tumbles around them and they cling to branches, to bark. When it rains they draw in water and nitrogen seeps from their dancing limbs. The fungus bone-white and sturdy, algae blooming across, along, around it. Making food as sunlight glances along it, catching particles of energy as the light filters through to the ferns and mosses and wildflowers below.

There are more of their kind; they are everywhere. Mint and lavender and ivory crust across

bedrock. Hyphae worm into microscopic crevasses between grains of silt. They prod at epochs-old companionships until something gives. When they die they crumble. They cuddle in with their sandy conquests, they gather into soil. They sidle up to shards and shreds: dead leaves and bone, rotten wood and eggshells, half-digested berries and crumbs of ancient quartz. Piling and gathering and clinging until something else can grow in the tuft that's become a forest floor.

They are curling obstacle course, they are tiny cave, they are hiding-spot and gathering-up.

Some of them will live for centuries. They grow slower than the continents move, but keep expanding nonetheless. They stake their claim. They hang on.

Some will only live a few decades, and that will be enough.

★

"You know," Mairi tells Alana, "I tried to leave a couple of times. Before you were born and once when you were very young."

Alana swallows her mouthful of coffee. "What?" Mairi's tea on the honey-coloured table is hot and sallow with milk. Alana is in her fleece-lined Edinburgh uni jogging bottoms. Their porridge bowls are empty save for the thin film of oatly milk caked on their bottoms.

"It was too much for me. The winters were so long, the gales didn't stop... there were fewer people living here than there are now... And I felt like I was always spoiling their parties."

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know me—I don’t drink, I don’t do the Scottish camaraderie business. It’s not in me. It’s hard here when you don’t do that. Surely you’ve noticed that.”

“Do I do the Scottish camaraderie?” Alana asks.

She thinks about the party the other night. The energy seemed to fit on her even though she hadn’t seen anyone here for years and, if she’s being honest, doesn’t like many of them anyway.

“Well,” Mairi says, “you’re more like your father anyway. But at that point I felt so isolated and so lonely, even though your father was here every day, even though I was working away from the croft and he wasn’t—I tried to convince him to move. I tried every couple of years for it must be a decade.”

“Mum,” Alana says. “I had no idea. Why *didn’t* you move?” She tries to imagine being a child in Edinburgh, going to high school there. Full-size Tescos right around the corner, mandarin oranges from Spain whenever you wanted them. Espresso drinks. Patches of grey snow on the streets. The isles a place of wonder rather than the place you slog out force-12 gales while pacing back and forth across a croft house, ceilings still painfully low despite the renovations. Her parents being just across town when she was on holiday from uni.

Her *parents*: because in all of these imaginary Edinburgh-life scenarios, Alastair is still alive. Into her teens, into uni. There to laugh at her and reassure her and ask her, when her job drives her to hallucinating ghosts, if she’s sure she wouldn’t rather be a travelling circus performer.

Or, no ghosts to hallucinate.

“Your father loved it here,” Mairi says. “You’d think it would be the other way around. He was such a people person, always the liveliest man in the room, always looking for the next party. But he said he didn’t feel alone when he was alone here. Out working by himself or on his wanders—you know how he loved his wanders.”

Yes. Alana knows. Alastair was like Beatrix that way, like Callie. Loved to go around and check on things, see what had bloomed, who had hatched.

“I just wanted to be able to go over to the neighbour’s and have a cup of tea, but there were hardly any neighbours, and the ones we did have just thought I was the strangest duck. Couldn’t let loose, couldn’t have a beer. And then you were born and of course I loved you to pieces, and that made it even worse, because now I was a young mother more or less on my own.”

“So *why* didn’t you leave?”

“Well, one year—I think the year after I had you—I put my foot down and told your father I was leaving him if I couldn’t leave here with him.”

“God. What did he say?”

“He said alright. Let’s leave. It was so simple. I couldn’t believe he had agreed to it. He looked frightfully sad, like he was losing his closest friend, but he started getting ready to go. He gave notice for the croft, put the animals up for sale, stopped trying to expand the potatoes.” She takes a long swallow of tea. “And then one day I was standing here with my cup, and the sky

looked—well, exactly the same colour it was out there half an hour ago. There were these huge clouds and behind them was this pale, pale purple—and my heart just filled up. It was early in the morning, before your father was awake. And I looked out there and I knew. I said no. No. This is where I belong now.”

“Mum. I would’ve—things would’ve—”

“You’re right,” she says. “I know. He might still be alive. If we’d moved then. By God. I’d take Glasgow if it meant keeping him. I’d take the Red Road Flats. But we didn’t go, he’s not alive, and I don’t know what a city would have done to him. He came home one day and he said to me, ‘I’ve decided to start naming the rocks.’”

“And I said, what?”

“And he said, yes, he said—in the olden days, before the Clearances, before the clans were disrupted they had a name for every rock in the landscape. Every rock they didn’t or couldn’t toss aside when they were clearing the fields—or that *wouldn’t* be tossed, he had stories about certain rocks rolling back over and over—all of these rocks they named.”

“I think I remember him telling me that when I was a kid.”

Mairi goes on. “I said, Alastair you’re barmy. You can’t name the rocks. You’d never remember. And what kind of names are you going to give them?”

“‘Well,’ he said, and I could tell he’d given it some thought. ‘I thought I’d start with naming them after the old monks. But then I also thought, well. Most of those rocks are plain and

serviceable. Average blokes like me, and a bloke like me wouldn't want to be named after a monk. So, that seagull-shaped one, next to the one they have spray painted to mark the path to the Singing Sands? Well, I named that one Alastair."

Her tone is lightly singsong, but Alana can hear her dad's phrasing resounding through it. *Well, I named that one Alastair.*

"'Alastair?' I said. 'Naming them after yourself, that's creative.'"

"'No,' he said, 'like the poet.' I asked him what poet but he was focused on the rocks—I still don't know who he was talking about. I reckon he *was* just naming it after himself. Anyway, he went on to say he was thinking about naming them all after poets. 'I don't know enough poets,' he said, 'but I figure we could have a Robert and a Norman and go from there.' He was smiling—that big smile. The grin, really."

Alana smiles picturing it. The wild-eyed grin, no body parts moving but his face alight with motion.

"And then he said, 'What do you think, Mairi? They deserve names, don't they?'"

Alana's mother's face greys a little, and she looks away. Out the window at the pale sun, brownish grass blinking with dew, the mountains in the distance.

"I," she begins, then stops. "I was in such a rotten mood that day. I can't even remember why. But I just rolled my eyes and said, 'they're *rocks*, Alistair. No, I don't see why they deserve names.' I don't even believe that! It was like there was a pathetic part of me that wanted to

punish him for being happy when I couldn't.

“But he just went on: ‘Of course they’re rocks, that’s the whole point! They’ve been here for millions of years—billions, some of them—changing, melting, making patterns, *art*, Mairi. Swirling around. They’re going to be here for much longer than we are.’ He said something like he’d been—he’d been walking around and—what was it?”

She stares out the window again, the only one that still has the old wavy glass. There’s always a barely perceptible draft coming from it, a little bit of the outside always slipping in. Today it is streaked with prisms of frost, arranged in parabola-shaped fingers that stretch upward along the glass and peter out where the sun has begun to shine in. Mairi exhales and the tiniest circle of condensation appears on the window.

“He said, ‘those rocks, it’s like we talk.’ And I was thinking, alright, he’s finally lost it. Maybe it’s time he starts seriously thinking about medication. But he really felt like he *knew* those rocks, like they were telling him things. Information, wisdom, but also way marking. For when he was doing his rounds.

“He said he thought they were guardians in a sense,” she goes on. “He thought the island, which is made of the same rock, of course, had sent up this little army of broken-off bits of itself, small boulders, what have you, and according to him they were watching over everything else that happened.”

They are both quiet for a moment. The words sound familiar, and Alana wonders if maybe

she has heard them before. Maybe she was here for this conversation, drawing a picture in the corner or hovering on the stairs, barely awake. Cuddling Beatrix. Sulking about being made to eat broad beans. There were always so many broad beans at a certain point in the summer.

She opens her mouth to ask, but changes her mind. She wants to decide for herself: whether these are memories awakening or stories like all the others she's been collecting in the past few months; whether it even matters.

"Oh, those rocks!" Mairi says, breaking the silence with a big laugh. "I can just picture it. Little rock gnomes on guard dog duty. Can you imagine?"

"He could," Alana says.

"Rock gnomes!" Comgall's voice rings in from the door. "Sorry," he adds. "Beatrix let me in." He looks rather like a gnome himself, Alana thinks, in a striped toque that peaks in a little point, early-spring vitality in his eyes.

"Oh, that's fine, duck!" says Mairi. "It's nice to see you."

"I keep thinking I'm seeing gnomes when I see some of those little hummocks on the bog out by the office," he says. "I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about them that's different than the ones at home, more... well, more like gnomes than hills. Maybe it's all the folklore here. Your ghosts are older. The Celtic ones anyway. I'm rambling." He stops and flushes.

"The bog you're going to cement over for a gas facility, that bog?" says Mairi.

Comgall grimaces. “It’s actually the only part of that piece of land we *don’t* have permission to build on,” he tells her. “But yeah. I know.”

Mairi sighs and when she speaks again the steel has gone out of her voice. “Doesn’t work that way, though does it? Leave the bog alone and everything is alright?”

“Well. No. But the bog is a very important part. I’m sorry I brought it up.” He hesitates but seems unable to help himself. “It’s kind of cool, though, what bogs can do. You know they sequester carbon?”

Alana and Mairi nod.

“Right. So if we cemented over the bog, we’d release a significant amount of carbon... significant even on the scale of an oil company. I know, I *know*,” he says to Mairi’s raised eyebrows, and again he almost stops but forges on: “So wetlands and... technology that works like wetlands... are like, potentially a super interesting tool for dealing with climate change. Geoengineering. I kind of think that’s how we’re going to fix things if we ever do.”

“By manufacturing bogs,” says Mairi. “And... continuing to drill for shale gas... while we do it?”

Comgall blanches. “I know. I’m a shit. I’ll stop.”

“Well,” says Mairi.

“Here,” Comgall says. “I brought something for you both to try.” He deposits a plate wrapped in aluminum foil on the table. “Try these.”

Alana's mind is still tumbling with peat, with greenhouse gases, pounding from an effort she doesn't care about and so doesn't know why she's making. But she peels back the foil. Mairi hates disposable packaging and Alana knows as soon as Comgall leaves she'll clean the foil off, make it into a neat square and tuck it away with the rest of the ostensibly single-use food containers she'd hoarded over the years. Bread bags, frozen vegetable bags, yoghurt tubs. And when the moment comes to use one of them Mairi will pull out something *just the right size* and look so pleased about it Alana will forget to be annoyed about washing off every scrap of food-safe plastic that crosses their threshold; she'll forget to rail about *why do you keep going to those Tupperware parties then?*

Mairi always complained about how Alastair wasn't expected to attend those parties, run by two women on the island but a social obligation for all of them. Alastair's community duties, like the occasional glass of beer or morning spent picking apples or unloading the grocery truck, were things he wanted to do anyway. Hanging out at the Pier for town meetings with cheese and scones made by the wives, and glasses of cheap white wine provided by the council chair. Pulling someone's boat in for the winter.

Underneath the foil are twenty or so delicate round sweets, little bowl-shaped biscuits filled with something custardy.

"What are they?"

"Try them."

She picks one up and bites into it. The biscuit melts more than flakes against her tongue. The filling—“Lemon!” she exclaims. “It’s delightful!”

“They’re my grandmother’s lemon tarts. Do you remember me telling you about them?”

“I do remember,” she smiles. Always the bestseller at the church auction, he’d told her.

“What’s in the filling?”

“Promise you won’t tell anyone in Cape Breton.”

“I promise.”

“Okay.” He takes a deep, theatrical breath. “It’s a can of condensed milk,” he says. “And the juice from about two lemons, and a tiny bit of salt. Mix it up and stick it in the fridge to thicken.”

“You’re joking.”

“I am not.”

Mairi’s been quiet, watching them.

“Try one?” Comgall asks in her direction.

“Right, right, of course. I was just so enjoying listening to you two discussing them that I forgot.”

She reaches over and Alana notices her mother’s hand is starting to look old. She works a lot, Alana tells herself. In the garden. But it’s not just that. Her fingers are thinner than they used to be, and less brown—or maybe they are still brown but with less warmth in the hue, less pink and more grey. Viridian starting to show through.

Then a ray of yellow sun sputters through the frost and her colouring is back to normal.

Mairi takes a bite. “Oh my darling. How did you learn to bake like that?”

“My grandmother.”

“She must have been a lovely woman,” Mairi says. “Did you spend a lot of time with her?”

“She was a lovely woman,” he says. “And yeah, I did. I, um. Maybe you remember—my father was a bit of an alcoholic. My mother and I used to go hide out at Grandma’s place when he was drinking too much.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mum says. “I never would have guessed.”

“It’s alright,” he says. “He stopped drinking when I was—I don’t know, I was pretty young. I was pretty young when I started baking too. Oh, yes I do know.” His face lights up. “It was the summer you guys were there, that he stopped drinking.” He turns to make eye contact with Alana and she feels, again, not up to it. Not up to him. Carbon and peat and *the summer you guys were there* and a childhood trauma that doesn’t belong to her. The crystals on the window pane begin to melt. Comgall’s big voice in this small house.

She gets up to make more coffee.

Comgall and Mairi chat about using coal as a fire starter when the wood is damp. He’s never heard of doing this before, and remarks how strange it is that Cape Breton’s history is built on coal but he’s never touched it outside school.

They move on to something to do with Venezuelan coal and Nova Scotia and wind power

and Alana tunes out. She watches the flickering blue cloud of propane under the burner. More dead plants, Comgall had told her. Hydrocarbons filtered out of other hydrocarbons, petroleum that compresses to nearly one three-hundredth of the size of its gaseous form when it changes to liquid. Transfiguration: she can process it when it's right in front of her, even though it looks anything but vegetal and anything but dead. Relentless motion within the foggy boundaries of the flame.

The lid of the kettle begins to tremble. When it whistles Alana jumps.

She bends close to the French press as she pours and leans against the counter as she waits for the coffee to brew.

They're both laughing at something now.

When they quiet Mairi says, "So Comgall, tell me. What would you say to someone who says that individual rocks are so unique in a landscape, in this landscape, that we should name them?"

"Really?" he says. "Really, that's a thing?"

Mairi laughs. "Yes. Really. It's... a thing."

"I'd want to have a good long chat with that person," Comgall says. "And then maybe I'd marry them."

Alana squeaks.

"What?" he asks.

Alana deals with her student loans. She calls about a mobile bill she's been ignoring for a year and a half. She invites Mairi and Comgall out on walks. She avoids Todd. Finally one morning Mairi asks, "Aren't you meant to be doing that painting soon?"

"Yeah—yeah."

Mairi raises an eyebrow.

"Yes. I'll stop avoiding it. Soon."

It takes some effort to find usable turpentine. She finds a couple of old bottles she can't bring herself to trust. Eventually Mairi thinks to check the lost and found from the artist's residency bothy and finds an almost-new, almost-full bottle.

Now the tube of burnt sienna paint is cold, metallic, heavy in Alana's palm. She cuts a rag from an old sheet, mixes paint with turp and wipes it onto the canvas, blots until the surface is smooth. The turp makes her heady. She works the rag in slow circles.

The cat starts throwing up.

"Ralph," says Alana. He meets her gaze with dizzy eyes. She looks at her phone. She's been at it for forty-five minutes. Ralph gives the puddle of yellow bile an offended look and then wobbles away, tail curled out to the side. Five minutes later he vomits again. Alana's head is pounding.

Then she realizes. "Shit." She cracks the window open, scoops up Ralph and takes them both outside for some air.

Comgall is walking along the road. “Hey,” she calls.

He comes in through the gate. “How are you?”

“Quite well, except I’ve poisoned the house with paint fumes.” She’s warming at the sight of him. The sky is pale, cold blue.

“You’re painting?” He reaches over to scratch Ralph behind his ear.

Ralph issues a weak hiss and Alana deposits him on the grass. “It’s the turp,” she says.

“Don’t mind him. I’m just doing the ground layer. It’ll take four days to dry.”

“Four days? Shit.”

“That’s the beauty of oil paint. It stays malleable for ages so you can really work into it, blend in colours. More time for thoughtfulness.”

“Right...”

“I’m trying to figure out a way to keep it near the stove. Then it might dry in more like two days.” *He doesn’t care*, she tells herself. Why is she explaining basic paint chemistry to a geologist?

“You’re still planning on focusing on that whale? Are you using a photo?”

“Yeah, still the whale. And... I’m sure there are lots of photos, but I don’t know. I’m not sure that’s the point.”

“What is the point?” he asks, then adds: “Sorry, I’m hopeless at art thinking. I’m not trying to offend you.”

“Oh, you’re not offending me. I think the point might be the relationship. I want the whale to look at the viewer the way she looked at me. I want the viewer to understand how meaningful that was. I have no idea whether I can come close to achieving that. But that would be the point.” She lets out a breath. “Anyway. You want to come in and have a coffee?”

He hunches in her father’s armchair underneath the wet canvas, which she’s hung at an angle from the wall that faces the wood stove. He looks like a giant under a low terra cotta ceiling.

“Why orange?” he asks. “Is it going to be mostly warm colours?”

“No, probably the opposite actually. But it’s how I learned to paint—classically—that’s a bit unusual these days, but my prof was dead set that’s how it should be done. He said Picasso knew how to build a proper ground, and by god, so would we before he let us go off into abstract. It’s a science—how you mix the thinner and the paint and then start adding fat, linseed oil and whatnot. And if you want to paint human skin, you almost always start with green.” She kneels next to the armchair and picks up his hand. It’s warmer than hers, in colour as well as in temperature.

“Look.” With her fingertip, she traces a vein that runs from his wrist to his knuckles. Halfway along the top of his hand it branches out like tree roots. “Do you see how it’s kind of greenish? And if you squint or look sideways, the shadows on your skin have green undertones too?”

He squints. “I don’t—” he tilts his head. “Actually, I do. Wow. That’s kind of creepy. Like the grim reaper in there waiting for us.”

Alana laughs. “How so?”

“Death, bad health—we’re not supposed to look green...”

“But we don’t actually start with green on the canvas. We start with this—burnt sienna. The green is just a cool layer on top of fundamental warmth.”

“Fundamental warmth,” he repeats. “Do you believe that?”

“No. But that’s what the great masters did, as my teacher used to say.”

“I wouldn’t have taken you for a classicist,” Comgall says.

“I’m not, usually. But there’s something about this painting—” She cuts herself off and tries again. “I know it’s a pile of shit. But those old guys all insisted on building. That you get depth and meaning from layers on layers on layers, from taking the time to let them dry, to think about each one.”

“That sounds rather stuffy, doesn’t it?” Mairi interjects, coming into the kitchen with a basket full of onions.

“I know,” Alana says. “I know. But you remember all that weird abstract stuff I was doing? There were so many options I went crazy. I tried to get my paintings to say way too much and so they ended up saying nothing.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Comgall says. “Nothing.”

“Seriously. I think maybe there are limits to what we can perceive. How much of someone else’s experience we can absorb, how many emotions at once. Because you’re not—we’re not—like, in life—” She pauses. “At any given moment, you’re feeling a whole pile of things, but you’re usually concentrating on one strain of them, right? There is usually one emotional state that is the most compelling, and that’s the one you’re immersed in. If you’re the type of person to let yourself be immersed.”

“Yeah,” he says. “That makes sense.”

“And what I want to say about this whale, about my connection to this whale, is so intense and complicated I can’t even put it into words. If I overwhelm people with abstraction and wild colour and thick paint, I don’t think I’ll have a hope. I probably don’t have a hope, anyway.”

“Isn’t that the point of abstract art? To communicate feelings you can’t represent?”

“Yes,” Alana says. “Yes—but. It isn’t about my feelings.” She realizes this only as the words come out. “It’s about the whale’s feelings. I’m only involved because I had that interaction with that whale. My feelings don’t *matter* here.”

“Of course your feelings matter.”

“Why, though?” The whale, looking at her. Looking *into* her. Trusting her. “Why should my feelings be the top priority? That whale’s emotions are just as important. And we’ve been ignoring them for centuries. Forever. And now—” All her late night Google searches, the bleak statistics, the piercing guilt that she is a member of this species. “Did you know some whales

absorb so much human pollution into their blubber that when they die they're considered toxic waste? So if they get hungry and start to consume their own fat, they poison themselves?"

"Shit," he says.

"That whale *knew* me," she says. "Like no one ever has. I mattered to her. She needs to matter to all of us." She is staring at the canvas now. Heart full, heart about to explode. "So what I'm going for is to just get a tiny *shard* of that into this painting," she says.

"Okay. So what's the image?"

"I think," she says, "the focal point will be her eye."

Where is the whale now?

The wood stove huffs and sputters, a little burst of heat and with it a flood of turpentine rises into her nostrils. A simple portrait, Alana thinks. She knows how to do that.

Comgall moves to stand and his head bangs into the canvas.

"Oh shit!" His face goes white. "Shit, I'm sorry, is it okay?"

Alana leans in to look at the surface. There's a blotch the size of her hand covered in squiggly hair-shaped lines. She waits for panic but it doesn't come. "I like them," she says. "It's fine. Let's get some turp for your hair." She finds a clean rag and dips the edge of it into the turpentine, reaches to touch the filaments of hair where the paint made contact. She slides the rag along one of them, finger and thumb brushing his scalp.

When she lets the rag fall her hand seems to be magnetized where it is, the heel of her palm

resting against the top of his ear. Then he moves, a tiny shift but enough to make her hand drop.

She stares down at the part in his hair, the bright skin underneath.

Chapter 8

There is a trembling inside her. It spreads through her body, quakes in her furred belly, shimmies out through gossamer wings and into the silk wrapped around her.

Her head emerges first, antennae bursting with a multiverse of scents, sweet new air spreading through her skin. Something green; she crawls onto it, hooks tiny feet on chloroplasts. A whoosh of release as her wings pull away from her body. Her thorax's fine hairs tossed and quavering. Her wings unfurling like a snake rising in slow motion, bronze in the moonlight.

She yearns to lift off but her wings are wet, still being sculpted into themselves. The air is moist but it will take on their moisture too. She can feel it: malleability being sucked away, and in its place, the sturdiness that will let her fly. She waits, patient and motionless on the sycamore leaf. Each hour a year. Each cell a galaxy. Each breath of wind a story seeping into her, beckoning.

On the first night of her winged life the air is honeyed, thick. White petals wave around her, whispering.

*

Vine charcoal. Can't sketch on canvas without it.

Her father used it for everything: for building stuff, for sketching, sometimes even for making notes. He liked the charcoal's bold strokes. He didn't care that all his work could be rubbed out of existence with one falsely placed forearm, or that using the stuff covered his hands in black and often, as a result, ended up streaked down his cheeks too, or across his forehead and always, always on his clothing, which he used in place of rags. He loved that he could write on the wall with vine charcoal if he wanted to and then just whoosh it off.

This all drove her mother mad.

"Why didn't you just order some things from Amazon?" Mairi had asked when Alana started tearing the house apart looking for charcoal.

"Ugh," Alana had said. "I didn't know I was going to feel so anal about technique. And—I mean—there has to be some here somewhere, right?" The outside world, Amazon and credit cards and city streets, fading toward make-believe.

Mairi had shrugged. "Are you going to do the thing with the thick paint you used to love?"

"Maybe. The—the—" The only word Alana could come up with was *antipasti*. The correct term finally appears to her now—almost midnight: *impasto*.

Lying on her bed, brain unable to stop buzzing, she sighs.

Her phone buzzes. Comgall.

"Oh this island. I feel like I'm going out of my tree. How do people survive when it's so grey?"

She writes back: “Drink away the loneliness, as far as I can tell. But I left for exactly that reason.” Which is not entirely true, but it feels true. She swings her legs out of bed, climbs up to the attic and turns on the light. It makes a little shuddering noise before filtering to life through the dust. There’s real mould here, and she wonders how far into the house it’s crept. Mairi doesn’t come up here often.

“I used to love being alone,” reads the little box that lights up her phone. “Or I thought I did. Spending time with myself. Maybe I’m more social than I think or maybe it’s the fog. But there seems to be a moment every day that I don’t know if I’m going to get through it.”

Alana’s throat tightens.

“I know exactly how you feel,” she begins to write, then erases it.

Another message pops up. “Sorry, I shouldn’t put my emotional drama on you. It’s not that bad.”

“No. I understand.”

She hesitates, then adds: “I am in the attic looking through Dad’s stuff for charcoal. It’s mouldy and could contain dead bodies. Can’t sleep. If you want to pop over for a nightcap.”

“Are you sure?”

Is she sure about what?

“Yeah, why not?”

She goes back downstairs and prods at the coals in the stove to rustle up a little bit of heat.

She takes out a saucepan and pours in milk, cream, and a healthy splash of Scotch; adds a bit of sugar and sits the pot on top of the stove, then crouches in front of it with a wooden spoon. The liquid turns in slow circles around her spoon, begins to froth. Steam rises up to her face. Warmth gathers in the belly of the stove.

He shows up in the company pickup.

“How do you feel about sweet, warm things?” Alana pours the drink into two mugs and sprinkles powdered sugar, cinnamon and nutmeg on top.

Comgall takes a careful swig. “Fantastic. What is it?”

“Scotch and milk products. I think it’s called buttercups. The nutmeg is an addition straight from Starbucks, though.”

“We all have our Starbucks tics.” They sip in silence for a few minutes. The milk is boiling hot and can only be swallowed slowly. The heat spreads through her, and the pulse of him standing so close—

He shakes his arms, runs a hand from his forehead back through his hair, and walks over to the table. Pulls out a chair and sits down, knees spread wide apart and jiggling.

“Are you alright?” Alana asks. She curls up in her dad’s leather chair. She can only sit in it at night, when Mairi is asleep and everything is still.

He laughs, a higher pitch than usual. “Yes. Sorry. Does it seem like I’m going crazy?” His eyes seem to swell toward her.

“Not quite. No crazier than I’m going. But what is it that’s wrong, exactly?”

“Oh.” The jiggling intensifies. “It’s just... I think what’s been sustaining me here is the scenery. I’m sure that sounds crazy too. But I don’t know what to do without it these past few days. I’ve been fucking freezing constantly. I feel like the hugest dick for working for this company, but I have no idea where I’d be left if I quit.”

He looks at her and the room fills with what he’s not saying: *Everything feels empty and hopeless. I have been alone for too long and I don’t see a future in which I’m not alone.*

Is she making this up?

But if the only person he has to text at midnight is her—

“Every time I’ve wanted to quit a job or make some big change,” he says, “not that I’ve ever had a job worth keeping—everyone has told me to find something else and then quit. And mostly I have. But the next thing has always turned out to be just as bad, because I never let myself have the space to try something good.”

His knees slow. His chest rises and falls, one good heave.

“I know how you feel,” she says. “And it’s not like I’m doing anything with all this space I have now. But I’m starting to feel like there might be a point to what I’m not doing.” She didn’t know that until she said it and it hits her with surprising impact.

“It gives me an anxiety attack just to imagine being—being—”

“In free fall.” Alana smiles. “It’s okay.”

“No, not that. You don’t seem to be falling, exactly...”

“Floating.”

“Floating. So. The idea of floating freaks me the fuck out. I... don’t think I knew that about myself before.”

“Isn’t that basically what doing a PhD is?”

She was joking, but he’s silent for too long, he pushes his hands along his upper legs towards his knees, and she’s gone too far and she feels a sudden panicky need to fix it—

“Damn,” he says. “Maybe. I mean, there is an end goal, but...”

“But the only one you do it for is you.”

“I guess. Yeah.”

“I don’t really know where I’m going with this,” she says. “It’s not like I’m going anywhere with my life.”

“Are you... learning things?” he asks. “With the... space. In the floating.”

“Uh. I think so, yeah.”

They’re quiet for a minute. The pulsing has started up again inside her. She shifts in the chair and the springs squeak.

“So,” Comgall says after a minute. “You gonna show me this corpse-infested attic?”

She laughs. “Do you want to see it?”

“I *love* mouldy attics. Takes me out of myself. Also, I don’t want to stop you from finding

that charcoal.”

“You know me too well.”

She stands, gulps her last mouthful of milky Scotch. He mutters something. She turns.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

But she’s sure he said, *I wish*.

★

All it takes is breath. Sweat.

The mother had sealed the place up tightly. Stretching plastic over the windows, long silver strips of tape along its edges. The tears pouring down her face, salty, absorbing into the cardboard boxes and leaving tiny stains imperceptible to her flawed human eyes.

We sought them out, these little blooms of moisture. In tiny worlds we blossomed. We branched out. We fed on the processed trunks of trees.

We waited.

The daughter came. She brought a boy.

It was all sweat and skin. Sweetness turning to something a little sickly. The moisture rising off them, little beads of it sticking to the plastic. The smell of wood stove smoke strong that day

but the heat not quite reaching. Their bodies so warm they didn't notice the cold.

Him: "I thought you were going to have a daddy complex."

"You're not old enough to be my father," the girl said after a minute, but he was already gone. Stooping over as he slipped out, the ceiling not quite high enough for him to stand.

"Todd, wait," she said, but he was still gone.

She wrapped her arms around herself and rocked there, between the boxes.

Beads of moisture on the plastic, sweat seeping onto the floor. We luxuriated.

Her tears, too.

She sweat and she cried into the cold. Many lifetimes for us, who knows how long for her.

But our waiting had paid off.

Now, each time they open the hatch: a tiny puff of us into the air.

We do not control this place. But for those of us that survive—neither animal nor vegetable, not moving but extending, expanding, breathing out spores—it sustains us.

★

Comgall's nose clogs as soon as they enter the attic. Mould, but also some charge in the air, perhaps to do with him and Alana and perhaps not. A bit unusual, he thinks, this liveliness in a place so clearly disused, filled, as far as he can tell, almost exclusively with boxes of papers. Alana

points to a couple of boxes. “You can start with those ones if you want to search with me,” she says, “and I’ll keep going over here. I’m sure there was one filled only with art supplies, but I peeked into all of them and I can’t find it. Unless it’s layered over with papers on the top.”

She is bright and pale tonight, bags under her eyes, features a little wild. He wants to wrap his arms around her, swallow up some of that intensity, but can’t begin to imagine how.

He begins sifting through a box. Old tax documents, plus other kinds of unidentified bureaucracy. A couple of photos of misty Scottish landscapes.

He glances over at her. A flush has puddled into her cheeks. Could she—

He places a hand on the floor, uses it to shift just slightly in her direction. Keeping the rest of his body cross-legged and low, hovering just an inch above the floor to create space to move.

He settles again, keeps rooting. A receipt for an old car, a couple of old editions of *The New Yorker*.

There’s a small window, high up. He can feel the moon better than he can see it.

Her hand grazes his forearm. Electric. He looks over his shoulder.

“Sorry, just reaching!” She is even brighter now, lit from within, clumsy as she stretches above him to pull a shoebox off a shelf. When she moves it a cloud of odour comes out. He wonders if he should mention the mould. Maybe they don’t know it’s here. If it’s black mould and it spreads, it could be bad.

A layer of tingling heat has settled on his arm where their skin touched.

He pulls a tissue out of his pocket and blows his nose. His airway is clogging a little now, too, but he can't imagine leaving.

"Comgall," she says.

*

She tips and wheels through the lower reaches of the night sky. The air cool but honeyed still, the moon a soft blue glow from behind a layer of cloud. From high above, a whiff of snow. It will be rain, or gone completely, by the time it gets down this far, but the scent kicks her biological clock into motion. She flies up, then down again, a drunken circle lit by curiosity.

Then she smells something sweet. She dips toward it. The hairs on her body tingle as she lands on a square of peeling bark, her feet absorbing its texture, information about it slipping along her legs to her brain, her antenna. She leans toward the crack in the bark until she is touching the sweet spill. She sucks. Sugar courses through her and with it a burst of life force.

She drinks her fill then reels off again.

The scent of smoke. An obstacle made of rock.

One bright opening in the stone, a yellow glow.

She flies toward it. Antennae alight with midnight energy. Quivering.

At the yellow glow: a hard surface.

Heat.

*

“Yeah?” he says. It comes out as a croak.

“Look.” She holds out a picture, an old Kodak 4x6.

His heart lurches when he recognizes the rosy pink boulders, sees grey crashing waves in the background, the faded purple-blue sky of 1990s photo finishing. She is in a teal-blue swimsuit, he in Power Rangers trunks, his belly rounding out over them. A spray of purple asters in the foreground. Late in the summer, then.

“Did I even *like* the Power Rangers?” he wonders.

“Look,” she says again, pointing to the tiny space where their skin is visible from behind the clump of asters.

He squints. “What?” But he knows already what she is pointing to, not because he can see it but because he remembers.

“We’re holding hands,” she says. “I don’t remember us doing that.”

Comgall shrugs. She takes the picture back, giving his hand the slightest squeeze as she does. He picks up one of the *New Yorkers*—1958—and begins to flip through. The pages are yellowed, brown along the edges. Some are permanently creased from long-ago dampness, and the dank

scent of mould rises off them too.

Then he sees a hand-written annotation. The letters are thick and black. When his finger grazes them they smudge, but the single word is still clear: "Yes!" It seems to be in reference to a poem, printed in the top right corner of a page.

"Check this out," he says. He spreads the magazine on the floor in front of them. She leans in to read it. He can feel her breath on his forearm, can hear the pull of each inhale, the slight catch at the top where she's a little congested, too. Then the warm exhale. He feels every molecule of carbon dioxide as it passes along his skin, lighting up each filament of hair on his arm.

"That's Dad," she says, letting a fingertip hover over the scrawl. "And that's the charcoal I'm hoping to find." She bends closer and reads the poem's title: "Growing, Flying, Happening, by Alastair Reid. Where have I heard that name before?"

She reads the rest out loud, quietly enough that she might be reading it to herself. But he hangs on to every syllable. Her voice is of fairly average pitch, but slightly throaty at times, catching in the middle of certain words so that she always sounds like she is caught by emotion.

Say the soft bird's name, but do not be surprised

to see it fall

headlong, struck skyless, into its pigeonhole—

columba plumbs and you have it dead,

wedged, neat, unwinged in your head.

That that black-backed tatter-winged thing
straking the harbour water and then plummeting
down, to come up, sleek head a -cock,
a minted herring shining in its beak,
is a *guillemot*, is neither here nor there
in the amazement of its rising,
wings slicing the stiff salt air.

That of the spindling spear-leaved plant,
wearing the palest purple umbel,
many-headed, blue-tinted, stilt-stalked
at the stream-edge, one should say briefly
angelica, is by-the-way (though grant
the name itself to be beautiful).

Grant too that any name
makes its own music, that *bryony*, *sally-my-handsome*
burst at their sound into flower, and that

falcon and *phalarope* fly off in the ear,

still,

names are for saying at home.

She pauses and looks up. “Names are for saying at home. That’s exactly something Dad would have said. In fact, I think he did.”

Comgall is filling up with something. “I think he said it to me, too,” he says. “When I was trying to impress him with rock names.”

“Oh, poor you!” She laughs. The poem has lifted the bags under her eyes, lightened her irises. “I’m sure he was still a little impressed. I could never remember the name of anything natural—well, I could hardly remember any names at all. Still can’t.” She turns back to the magazine.

The point is seeing—the grace
beyond recognition, the ways
of the bird rising, unnamed, unknown,
beyond the range of language, beyond its noun.
Eyes open on growing, flying, happening,
and go on opening. Manifold, the world

dawns on unrecognising, realising eyes.

Amazement is the thing.

Not love, but the astonishment of loving.

“Not love, but the astonishment of loving,” she repeats.

“Wow,” Comgall says, and feels truncated, dull.

“Hang on,” she says. She looks up at him again. Sits back on her heels and wraps her arms around her knees. The dusty light glances off her hair, her cheek. Her left side lit up and flickering. The other in shadow, a velvet darkness slicing a blurry line straight through the middle of her right eye. “Alastair Reid. Alastair!”

“Yes...”

“The rock!”

“What?”

“The first rock Dad named. He named it after a poet. Alastair. Mum was telling me about it when you came over, remember? She thought he was batty. She thought he was being funny, naming it after himself and calling it a poet. It must have been named after this guy.” She’s speaking quickly now, every muscle animated. She glances toward the window, so he does too. There’s a low-level shine from the moon. Almost full, he thinks.

“We have to go find the rock,” she says.

“Now?”

He looks at the window again. Against the shine he can just make out the silhouette of a small moth, flitting its wings as it taps and bounces against the glass. Beyond it, bluish darkness.

“Well, I have to,” she amends. “Are you coming?”

He is exhausted on a level that feels existential. He could sleep now, he’s sure. Here, in the musty attic, surrounded by Alastair’s things. A bit like being inside Alastair’s brain, really, and he knows—knows from what she’s told him, knows from the wild energy that radiated from Alastair when Comgall knew him two decades ago—that however often it may trick him, however often his own emptiness spreads like subtle poison, Comgall’s own mind is a more stable place than Alana’s father’s was. Maybe, he thinks, because Comgall himself copes with things by closing himself off. What would it be like to dive in, instead? Even in his fugue of exhaustion and arousal and anxiety, even with her next to him, the memory of emptiness sends a nauseating tremor down his spine. The flickering light, her hair greasy, wrestled into a fraying ponytail, a slight whiff of the milky Scotch on her breath one moment, the next moment a trace of garlic, her dinner maybe. What would it be like to dive in?

“Sure,” he says.

Alana’s phone, abandoned on the floor beside them, lights up. She doesn’t seem to notice the message but he can’t help seeing it and it registers as a clenching in his neck. Todd: “Hey. I’m sure you’re asleep. Just thinking of you and that painting. Let me know how it’s going when you

get a chance.” The screen flickers black again.

Alana shoves the phone into her pocket without looking at it. It doesn’t fit in her jeans.

“Fuck it,” she says. She takes it out again, keeps it in her hand. A lump has risen in his throat.

They climb back down to the kitchen. Alana tosses her phone on the table and leaves it there.

Comgall feels lighter as soon as the night air hits his face, cool and clear. There’s a big white moon (just about full, just as he thought) casting long shadows between the croft houses and lighting the fields up almost blue. The peaks of the next island are blurry but visible, black against the deep blue sky.

“Like charcoal,” he says, nodding in their direction, and she looks up, seeming almost startled that he’s there.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” she says. “It’s amazing—almost every method of art-making, almost every material—often when I encounter something like charcoal for the first time I’m blown away by the effect you can achieve with it. But then two weeks later the exact same effect will pop out at me from the world somewhere. Like the idea that I was making something unique was all just a trick, anyway, so why bother at all.” Then she laughs. “Guess it doesn’t matter. I haven’t tried working with anything new in years.”

They cut across the neighbour’s garden without talking. She opens the gates without making a sound and passes through them ghostlike, then shuts them behind him with the same eerie silence. Like she can sense exactly when the metal latch would speak. She turns left on the narrow

road. The sound of their footsteps a low, solid padding on the pavement. Hers are light. He feels like a thudding giant.

“You know,” he says—not turning his head to look at her, but looking up instead, at the perfect round halo of light emanating outward from the moon; at, beyond its reaches, the millions of bright or hazy stars pulsing out of thick and endless black—“you could see it the opposite way too. That the charcoal being reflected in the mountains is actually a sign of how powerful it is. That maybe all any of us are supposed to be doing is finding the best ways to think with the world, work with it, instead of trying to outdo it all the time.”

“Rich,” she says, “from you.”

It’s like being stabbed. The emptiness awakens, becomes sharp. He says nothing. Looks up and sees fewer stars.

“Sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean that.”

“I think you probably did. But it’s fine. You were right. You are right.”

“I’m not right. *You* were right. You were being smart and—and honest, and actually *thinking*, and trying—and I shut it down.”

He breathes, long and slow, through his nose. His nostrils begin to clear. They turn onto another road and the asphalt crumbles to beaten-down grass. Here and there they hear a suctioning sound and then one of them will feel a boot being sucked downward. Ashes to ashes, he thinks.

“I used to have nightmares about quicksand,” he says. “I guess it started before I understood the earth’s mantle.” Out of the corner of his eye he sees Alana smile at the ground. “But it developed into—or maybe it began with—some weird fascination with it. I’ve always wanted to see the real thing.

“And *then*,” he sighs, remembering, “I learned you can’t even properly sink in quicksand because it’s actually denser than human bodies are. You can only go about waist-deep and then you hover.”

“I can see how that’s disappointing,” she says. A little puff of steam leaves her mouth with the words. He imagines how the steam would feel against his palm. His fingers curl. “You know,” she goes on, “sometimes I’m comforted by knowing there are forces more powerful than humans.” He laughs. “Yeah, might not be the worst thing if the bogs would suck some of humanity away along with the trees.”

They are quiet for another minute. She shoves her hands into her pockets. “Well, there are lots of stories in Scotland about people getting sucked into the bog. And then the bog bodies, of course.” He’s heard of these: corpses that tumble into peat bogs, get preserved like fossils. “Do you know about the blokes they found on South Uist a few years ago?” she asks.

“I don’t think so.”

They’ve veered off the road now, still heading generally toward the water, walking along the edge of a sloping hill. The heather is sparse now that the flowers are gone, and he wonders

whether he is imagining the faint purple-grey sheen to the leaves and the woody stalks. Alana is leading them in a winding path, avoiding swathes of ground he recognizes—too late, if he'd been leading—as grassy bogs. He can't fathom how she knew to choose this slope of all the slopes, how she knows exactly where to step to not get their feet wet.

“They found bog bodies there, maybe fifteen years ago,” she says. “But not like the usual bog bodies. These ones had basically been mummified. Four of them, deliberately placed in the bog and then removed a year and a half later and set up inside a house. They figure it was for religious reasons. The point is, though, that someone *put* them in the bog to preserve them. This was three thousand years ago and they understood the bog would do that.”

“Does that surprise you?” he asks.

“I suppose it shouldn't, given what we know about the ancient Egyptians and Mayans and whoever. But yeah, kind of. I tend to think of prehistoric Brits *as* bog men. Not people who understand how to use the bog.”

“Now who's functionalizing everything for human use?”

“Well,” she says. “Yeah. But—” she pauses, a little ridge working above her eyebrows as she thinks. “I also tend to think of the old Celts as people who had a relationship with the land that... didn't involve functionalizing it.”

“That doesn't preclude them from preserving bodies in the bog if they want to. Wouldn't hurt the bog.”

“I know,” she says. “I was just thinking.”

What were you thinking, he wonders when she doesn’t go on. Maybe he is supposed to know. He wants to touch her so badly it makes him feel sick. “What were you thinking?”

“My dad loved this place so much,” she says. “Oh—this way.” She steers him to the coast side of the toppled-over wire fence that edges the cliff. He tries not to think about the drop to his left, tries to believe that in this state, his body is better equipped than his brain to figure out how not to fall. The cliffside proprioception of a kid or a puppy who wouldn’t think to imagine the tumble over jagged pitchstone.

“He *loved* this place,” she went on, “more than you usually love a place. Or more than we are taught to love places.”

“Did he grow up here?”

“No, he grew up in Glasgow. He wasn’t a big fan of it. He travelled a lot after school, and ended up here and—well—fell in love. That’s how he always put it. I’m a little fuzzy on the details, I think Mum is too. Not because he didn’t want us to know the details, he just didn’t think they were important. The important things were all here. Even the year we were away, I think he was testing himself. Trying to work out how much he needed this place. I guess it turned out he needed it.”

Comgall feels a squishing sensation under the sole of his boot. The smell of sheep manure wafts upward. He would like to stop and scuff it off on the grass, but he doesn’t want her to stop

talking.

“After all, he died for it,” she says, voice gone soft and distant. “That fucking tree. I could—” she bites her lip, cutting herself off, and quickens her pace. “I think we’re almost there.”

They scuttle up a short hill, both a little wobbly. The late hour, the moonlight. His joints aching with each movement, muscles crying for sleep, the throb of hunger beginning, the pounding in his head. They scramble down the other side, which is a little bit lumpier, bulbous boulders or maybe protrusions of bedrock visible through the scrubby grass. They can see the slope down to the singing sands now, marked with splotches of spray paint that are pale and dead in this light, almost colourless though he knows they are light blue.

“The gull-shaped one,” she murmurs, frowning out over the slope.

He points. Tucked in next to the fence, maybe a foot and a half long. “That?”

Alana turns and her whole face springs open. “Yes!” It takes her three long, fast steps to get to the rock. She kneels in front of it. “Yes. This one. Christ! I don’t think I really thought we’d find it.”

The rock is a gull sleeping, head tucked into its body, a small knoll for the eye, a wing-shaped hump on its side. Alana has placed her palms on the gull’s back, has her head bent toward it, into her chest. He feels a surge of necessity—the moonlight, the scattered drifting clouds, dew seeping through his sneakers, how fragile she looks there, suppliant before a hunk of granite—and follows her three long steps. Crouches next to her. He reaches a hand toward her and places

it over both of hers. The sudden warmth of her skin. The smell of her, so close—the sweet drink.

The garlic.

Just perceptibly, she tremors, a single bolt.

“Sorry,” he says, and pulls his hand back.

“No,” she says. And, with great caution, he replaces it. His fingers brush the stone, cold and rough. Utterly unique and yet the same as granite everywhere. The same roughness, the same hardness. Chilled but slightly warmer than the air. Because stone holds heat, he thinks, but it is nothing compared to the heat rolling through him now, radiating from the place where their hands are touching.

She shifts to the left. No more than a twitch, but undeniably toward him. Into him, into this space that was open that his left hand is trying to close. He tries to drift his right arm up along her back. It comes out like an awkward jerk, his sweater sticking to hers, but he manages to cup his right hand around her right upper arm and then she twists around to face him and their lips are touching and they are falling backward onto the boulders and every muscle in the back of his neck and in his core is crying out at holding his body in this position but no pain in the world could make him pull back now.

★

Crane coughs and Callie wakes, in the middle of the night, to the languid air of early spring.

Usually she would curl up and go back to sleep until morning. But that scent- and sex-laden air makes her want to run.

She leaves the house and casts off across the moor. Her feet are light, muscles moving with the breeze. There's a partially exposed juniper root sticking out of the soil and she grabs onto it with her teeth. She yanks but she can't break it off. She thinks about settling in with it, but can't reckon with stillness, so she flings the root in one direction, her tail end in the other, then lets go and starts up running again. The juniper root bounces in her wake.

She springs through heather, through spongy peat moss. The pads of her feet are so sensitive they anticipate how the ground is changing before they've touched down: how saturated the moss is, how deep her feet will sink into it, which spots are dry enough to bound across and which spots are too dry to be interesting. Sometimes there is dark mud. Sometimes she makes a mistake, takes a step that's belly-deep instead of knee-deep.

The moss is nourishing, cool and wet against her fur.

She can smell the cows and the slow rumbling journey they took through here several days ago. She stops to urinate in places where the cow-smells overwhelm her. They aren't her cows; they belong to the rickety white house across the field. But she marks her presence anyway, a history left behind in mud. Seeping, with all the other histories, through the bog, to the water table and deeper. With each inhale she smells them, these tales. Some human, some not.

Callie left Crane safely in bed, rancid whiskey sweat under the feather-filled cover that was keeping him warm last night but now is clogging him up. She nibbles at some berries. The alcohol will clog up his urine too, make it a sickening brownish yellow colour, make the smell unbearable and yet irresistible.

She snaps up more berries, sweet—a little too sweet. Her nostrils flare in and out, in and out. She walks along the top of the ridge. Smells rise up from the sea: a little fishy, salt. A couple of boat smells. Diesel. The ferry, far away still.

She rouses a few dozing sheep. She relishes how they scatter when she circles around them. She loves their bleating. When she makes eye contact with the biggest one, it baas and the whole group of them take off. Their hooves are ineffective in the boggy ground.

Callie trots over to where they were standing. What were they eating? She sniffs at the ground. Does she want to try it? Sniff again. Of course not, she never wants to try it. Still. She likes to know.

Grassy smells, muddy smells, sheep-poop smells. The latter are less interesting than carnivores' droppings but still tangy, full of information. These sheep have been nervy the past few days, bouncing around more often than usual, judging by the wide variety of greens they've been noshing and how they've been digesting them. She tastes it. No. She grinds a piece of clean grass between her teeth to rid herself of the rotting flavour.

When she emerges at the crest of the small hill where the sheep were grazing, she can make

out two forms in the distance. Human forms, close to one another, very close. She approaches with caution. Their scents are all jumbled up together, and in this togetherness have gained intensity.

A few more steps and she recognizes that they're mating. The smell is delicious, delirious. Their movements are a little stiff—like they're not quite sure how—

She sits back on her haunches a little way away from them, cocks her head. Nose active, one ear twitched forward and the other aimed out behind her because you never know what other sounds might puff up.

The humans are half-clothed. One has a shock of red hair and smells of Ralph, the tabby from the other side of the ridge. The male smells—she inhales—she's not sure what he smells like. He has thick hair on his face, a big mossy mess she'd love to rub her nose in. She imagines poking her tongue in the crevasses between the wiry hairs. Her nerves prickly at the thought of the texture, of the food remnants that might be in there. She considers going over to give it a try—are they really *that* interested in one another? Surely a little lick...?

She lifts a paw to set off but hears a loud grunt from the man, and holds back. Eventually there are more smells—maybe they know what they're doing after all—and then the two of them collapse onto the ground, and she can no longer tell one form from the other.

Chapter 9

Alana dresses quickly. Maybe because of the cold—but maybe she wants to get away from him. She huddles into a ball on one of the mounds of bare rock and leans her head into her knees. When she raises it her face is shining and it takes him a minute to figure out those are tears streaking down her cheeks.

“Alana—” He pulls himself upright. “I’m sorry. Is it—what is—?” *Is it me?* A layer of chill sweat sucks the cold from the air into his bones.

“Not you,” she says. He scoots closer, reaches his arms around the little ball of her body, a comfort to be able to touch her. Just a moment ago he was shivering with elation and astonishment. Now it’s something like sorrow. He’s ruined it.

But she leans into him.

“I can’t fathom,” she says, “how I was ever so attached to a tree.”

There’s something in her voice. A waver. “Can’t fucking fathom,” she says again, a bitter murmur totally at odds with how relaxed she feels curled into his chest. Like she’s given up on holding up her body.

If it weren’t so late, if it weren’t for the adrenalin rush of the sex, the urge to fall asleep tempered by the cold air and the hallucinatory second (third? fifth?) burst of desperate energy—if it weren’t for the second slug of Scotch she’d offered on the way out the door—“warm us up

before we go”—roaring hot into his bloodstream, doubling down on his exhaustion—if it were not so near the full moon, maybe, the brightness of the light a bodily shock in this dark-sky place, equally astonishing month after month—if the sky was not so searingly clear, if the ocean weren’t laid out for all the world like a thin, shining membrane between this world and the other—if he had not been naked five minutes ago, if his clothes didn’t feel like they were quietly tearing his skin off as his body begged to move—if she weren’t flopped into him as if she’s either his, or dead—

If it wasn’t for the all-over wavering, the phantasmagoric quality the whole thing has acquired, somewhere between midnight walk and dreamworld fuck—

But there is all that, and without properly thinking about it, he says, “Which cliff was it?”

She looks up, meets his eyes, her own so full he doesn’t know how she can see him at all. Maybe she can’t.

“You’re right,” she says. “You’re exactly right. I do need to go there. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He hesitates, tightens his grip around her. This is not what he meant.

“It’s not far,” she says. She takes his arms and slides them back alongside his own cold torso.

Not love, he thinks, but the astonishment of loving.

It’s coursing through her like a song. She leads him through the patch of sycamores her tree

once belonged to. The trees are bigger now, but not as different as she would have expected. She feels dizzy: the kind of dizzy where if you're driving you take the turns slightly too widely, and usually it's fine but one in a thousand times the car will spin out of control, take on a life of its own, and you will have no idea how it happened except for that sinking knowledge that some part of you wasn't really there. Part of you was fire, was floating. And because that was the part of you that was real in a world, an ocean, a whole life of things that are fake and dead, that was what you paid attention to.

She trips over a piece of abandoned fencing. Comgall grabs her arm and by mistake she tenses up.

He lets go.

They keep walking.

Her father is with them now, her father is telling her *yes*.

Yes. Live.

Her chest tightens when they arrive at the spot. The rip at the cliff's edge has grown over. The grass hunches toward the water.

"There," she says, pointing, "you can see—where it curves inward—the tree was at the furthest-in point of that curve when—when—" she trails off. She wants him to touch her again, but he doesn't.

"Like an apple bite," he says.

She can almost feel the violent wind, taste the fresh, vegetal air after the storm, smell the scent of apples that still clung to them from the applesauce Mairi was making that morning.

And under the moon her father is with them. He is an apparition and not even that. A breath of air, a one-drink-too-many and awake-far-too-long. A cloud slides across the moon.

In this decayed hole among the mountains, she hears him read. In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing.

The cloud draws back.

Her father begins to slip away, out to sea, and she holds out her hand and she thinks *Run to him* and a breath of terror shoots through the odd energy that's filled her exhausted body.

She seizes up, pulls back. Back to this night, this island. This home.

She turns and wraps herself up in the soft frenzy-haired Canadian behind her. His eyes bleary but their gaze the most intent, maybe, she's ever seen in them.

*

Comgall doesn't know how long they stay standing there. He wants to say something useful but he's scared to break into the moment with words.

And then—the Scotch, the sex, the light, the softness of the grass under his feet, the softness of her in his arms, the fuzziness slipping back and forth across the sky, how very, very tired he

is—then he says: “You know, the apple bite, at home in Cape Breton. I sat and waited for that cliff to fall for hours every day for, god, I don’t know how long. But I missed it. You got to see that happen.” He pauses. “It’s just—it’s kind of amazing, isn’t it? Erosion is how the world falls apart, but also how it builds itself up again. Stuff breaking up and sticking together.”

He'd thought he needed to say something. He'd thought it would draw them together.

He knows right away it was a mistake, knows it even before her whole body goes rigid.

“What,” she whispers.

“Well, you know,” he says, knowing he is blathering, not knowing how to stop. “It’s a little bit exciting—and it’s perfectly normal, that it would happen that way after that kind of storm, exactly what you would expect—but just that you *saw*—”

She pushes his arms aside and draws herself back. “*Exciting?*”

“I—I didn’t mean—”

“What the hell else could you have meant? My father fell off a cliff.”

“Well, the cliff fell out from under him, didn’t it? He didn’t actually fall off it—”

“What’s your point?”

“Well—just that this cliff—” He pauses. *You’re an asshole*, he thinks to himself, *stop*, but he’s grasping at something. A little breeze wafts up, oddly milder than the air, and brushes wheezy island humidity along his cheeks.

He runs his tongue along the underside of his top teeth. It’s so cold now that every few

minutes he has to consciously stop them from chattering. He needs sleep—and yet, and yet—

“There’s something incredible,” he says. “That’s all. Something that has nothing to do with your father. Something that the cliff *did*, not human stupidity like these things so often are. I’m not trying to diminish how awful that was for you—how awful it is for you not to have him. Fuck, okay. I’m sorry, I’m a dick. I’m stopping.”

But he is caught in the wonder of it now, a vision of the world transforming, the cliff reshaping itself before his eyes, rocks and soil and grass slipping into the ocean and piling up who knows where. Drifting into the nutrient web, settling along the sea floor. The beginnings of a new island maybe, in a long distance future that—his stomach lurches—might not even exist.

Well, the world will persist in some form, he tells himself. Just maybe not with humans in it, like the red-faced man fixing his fence said.

When did that thought become more comforting than frightening?

Alana is facing away from him, looking at the horizon, the water stretching on forever, the furred streak of moonlight glancing off it. Her arms are crossed over her chest, her shoulders rigid. He wants to wrap her up again and try to warm her, but something has shut down in him. He’s thinking about sediment and oil, glacial till and shale gas, the chemical composition of bitumen. About the lava that shot or seeped out of some long-ago volcano to make the pitchstone ridge behind them; about the deeper, flimsier layers of rock below the pitchstone and how they stretch out under the ocean and about how, all too soon, the company to which he has

given so much of his energy will blast and break apart those deeper layers to suck out a poison the shale layers have been holding safe underground for longer than he or any of them can fathom, longer than anyone except the rocks themselves can fathom. Who does he think he *is*?

He remembers how his mother's face lit up the first time he held up a piece of granite to her. He had just learned the name of mica, and he wanted to show her how it shone in the bright sun. He'd searched the beach for hours, looking for a mica deposit big enough, in his opinion, to impress her.

"It's beautiful!" she'd exclaimed. "Sweetie, I had no idea this interested you so much!"

He'd beamed all over.

He tries to conjure that feeling, but he is too chilled, and too old. There has been too *much*.

Comgall begins to itch urgently all over. His eyes feel like they are pulling forward, out of his head and into the night. This endless night. He turns to Alana and she gives a long sigh.

"Sorry," she says. "It's late. I'm not being reasonable. It's just, standing here—I can see it happening right in front of me all over again, and me not being able to do anything about it. And then realizing that it was my fault. That if it wasn't for me, he wouldn't have been standing there. Because it is exactly as you said it. He didn't fall off the cliff, the fucking cliff fell off. And if I hadn't—" she breaks off.

It's not your fault, he thinks, and he tries to say it but his tongue has gone big and fuzzy and she's started talking again. "If I hadn't been such a brat, maybe he'd still be here. I don't know if

I've ever said that out loud before."

She's looking at him again, sideways, and he opens his mouth to speak, begins, "That's not—" but she cuts him off.

"It is true," she says, "and I just need to say it and fucking get over it. I don't know why I can't get over it."

"Hey," he says, and reaches a hand toward her arm, but she looks back toward the ocean and he lets it fall.

"Am I just mad?" she says, to no one.

"It's late," Comgall says. "You're not crazy. Let's—you need some sleep. Let's go back. We never did find that charcoal."

"Charcoal!" Alana gives a wild, racked laugh. It echoes across the water for what seems like several long minutes, long enough for it to feel a little more than natural.

They turn and begin walking back toward her house. He hopes she has enough clarity of mind to navigate. If it were up to him they'd be spending the night out here.

But she *knows* this place, he reminds himself. She's fine.

He is starving.

They pass in silence between darkly shadowed sycamores.

He is heavy.

"Look," she says, when they get to her door. "Whatever this is. I don't know if I can do it."

And she goes in and closes the door behind her.

His tongue feels like it has swollen to several times its normal size. He has to stand there while he waits for his breath to return to him, enough breath to pick up his leaden limbs and get into the truck.

The sky is lightening as he stumbles down the path to the bothy. He feels as if he is standing at the wrong angle. A light rain has started up.

Whatever this is, I don't know if I can do it.

The air inside his bothy is damp, too, and cold, but he doesn't have the energy to put a fire on. He leaves his shoes and coat in a heap by the door and crawls under the covers, wet jeans chafing at his inner thighs.

Falls asleep thinking, this fucking island.

He wakes to another grey noon. Someone is knocking at his bedroom door—someone is coming in.

“Hey man,” says Tyler. “Just wanted to check in. You didn't make it in today, bro.”

Even after months of working with him Comgall still can't reconcile Tyler's nerviness with his suave appearance.

“Shit.” *Shit*, not because Comgall hadn't shown up at work, but because everything else is flooding back in.

“Are you alright?”

Comgall sits up, flinching at a spark of pain from the irritation on his thighs. “I’m having an existential crisis. But I’m fine.”

Tyler sits on the edge of the bed. “Tell me.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Actually, I’m under strict instructions to bring you to work unless you have a damned good bloody reason—Mark’s words—not to be there. And, hell. It’s quiet enough to make your head split open over there.”

Comgall’s throat feels like a colony of lichen has latched on inside it overnight.

“I don’t know if I can do it anymore,” he says.

“Do what?”

“Watch this happen.”

“Watch *what* happen?”

“Us just—blast everything. Even though no one wants it. Even with the whales.”

“Dude, the whales were a one-time thing. A fluke. It could have happened anywhere.”

“But it happened here. We did that.”

“We don’t know for certain we did it.”

“How certain do you want it to be? Whales panic when they hear that shit. You know that. And we made that shit happen.”

“Not *us*, individually.”

“But we didn’t stop it!”

“We couldn’t have *stopped* it,” Tyler says. “Are you fucked? You think they wouldn’t just fire us at the first whiff of discontent and find some other self-serving millennial fucks to do these jobs?”

“Oh, *god*, Tyler,” says Comgall, and he gets up, walks to the sink and vomits into it.

“What about that girl?” Tyler asks when Comgall has straightened up, has poured a glass of water and is holding it to his forehead.

Comgall throws up again.

“Jesus,” says Tyler. “Are you done? We should really get to the office.”

“I don’t think I’m going back,” says Comgall. The words taste like hot bile.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m quitting.”

“Your visa won’t be valid.”

“So?”

“So you won’t be able to stay here with whoever it is you’re fucking.”

“We’re not fucking. She’s not into me.” He swallows, tastes the rotting aftermath of yesterday’s dinner. “I’m going home.”

He texts her once before he buys the plane ticket. “Hey. Just wanted to tell you I think I’m

going to quit and move home. Let me know if you'd like to grab a coffee before I go." It would only take a twitch of feeling from her to keep him here, job or not. He could change to a tourist visa, it would do for now.

*

Alana takes Beatrix to the beach. Beatrix runs and Alana ambles but she can't seem to relax out of her coiled-up nerves.

She kicks at a lump of kelp. She overreacted. She's an adult; she'll get over it.

Her mobile buzzes. She looks at the message and is suddenly sweating all over. He's leaving.

"Alright," she writes. The message gets stuck in "Sending" mode and she realizes there's no service down here. "Alright," she yells to the cliff. "Alright!" But of course it's not alright, and she quickens her pace and starts to head back to town. Then she remembers Beatrix. Alana calls for her and after a few seconds the dog appears from the other side of the cliff at the edge of the bay, a route Alana hadn't known was passable. Beatrix meets her eyes, cheerful and open-mouthed, then runs back behind the cliff, out of sight. "*Beatrix*, come back here!"

No sign of movement.

Alana sighs. Beatrix the Third is only a year old and not nearly as well acquainted with the island as her predecessors, nor as smart as them. Alana will have to fetch her.

She glances at her phone. Still sending. Is there a way to cancel? But the message doesn't seem to be going anywhere and she sets off. The sand gives way to pebbles and then awkwardly sloped expanses of bare rock, exposed by the low tide.

The far side of the cliff is edged by jagged columns of dark stone, draped at their lower reaches with yellow-green seaweed. On the ground, wave-shaped boulders cradle dark tide pools. She notices a chunk of shiny mineral and scratches at it until a transparent sheet flakes off. Comgall taught her to identify this last week: muscovite.

And suddenly she is back in Cape Breton and he is in front of her, nine years old, clutching a textbook almost as wide as he is, pointing at a black and white picture on a yellowed page. She can hear his squeaky little-boy voice: "*That's* muscovite. A lump of it is called a book because the sheets are like pages and you can tear them off." He desperately wanted to see one of these "books" in real life, but all they ever found were sparkles in the sand.

She's known what this stuff was all along, she thinks, and tucks a piece of it into her pocket to bring back to him. "BEATRIX!" she tries. She begins to pick her way around the tide pools, illusory under the sun.

She thinks of the other argument she and Comgall had, a few days ago.

"I don't know if I could stand this place without you," Alana had said.

"Yes, you could."

"How do you know?"

“This place is yours, Alana. Or, you, you’re its.” He’d paused. His eyes were like the tide pools: clear, unmoving at the surface, yet full of motion underneath. “You belong here,” he tried. “It’s... in you.”

“Fuck that.”

“Don’t you know? Can’t you feel it?”

She still doesn’t know, but she is starting to feel... something.

That day, her torso filled with panic at the thought of him eventually, inevitably leaving. Now the coil tightens. She tries to move faster across the sandstone. “*Beatrix!*” He’d told her sandstone was one of the softest rocks, took out a tiny knife and showed her how easily you could scrape the surface.

He’d kept trying: “When you’re standing out there on that cliff—there’s nowhere else you could be. It’s like you’re part of it.”

Part of it.

Beatrix is chasing waves now. The sandstone has transformed into deep grey basalt.

Alana comes to a tall, narrow opening in the cliff, like a roofless cave.

Part of it.

She reacted badly.

“So I’m just part of the scenery then, am I?” She felt tight and hot. Burning in the vault.

She didn’t want to fight with him but she didn’t know how not to.

The floor inside the cave-thing is uneven, riddled with cracks and unexpected slopes slick with kelp. The opening widens after a couple of metres, but she's stopped by a spider's web of thin branches sticking out from between a couple of boulders on the south side of the cavern. She traces the mass of driftwood with her eyes and discovers it is in fact a root system, joined together by a tree trunk.

Something about the twist of the trunk arrests her—but it can't be—

She peers closer. It's a sycamore for sure; though the bark is long gone, she recognizes its squarish pattern embedded into the bleached, wave-washed wood. She clambers up the boulder closest to her. The surface is smoother than she'd thought. She ditches her wellies and socks so she can use her feet to grip.

When she reaches the top she lies on her stomach and shimmies toward the tree. The rock has caught some warmth from the day's first hours of sunlight. She can feel it even through her fleece and her t-shirt.

She gets to the edge of the rock and leans into the narrow gap where the tree is lodged.

And there it is, nearly two decades later and who knows how many storms, how many waves, how much salt it's withstood but the letters are plain as day, carved into the tree trunk in her father's awkward capitals: ALANA. Underneath, a lumpy heart.

Her own heart has stopped beating.

★

The sycamore's bark knew how to withstand wind and rain, had hardened against salt spray. Pressed against a blade, though, it gave way. The disturbance crackled along its trunk. Cells jostled, confused. A slow-moving electric jolt when the steel broke through the dead outer layer and hit phloem.

Then two more slivers, one short and one long. An A, followed by one clean vertical stroke that stood alone. The blade's movements were slow. A prickle here and there when it cut too deep, and a rush of cool air the sycamore's inner layers have never felt.

The sycamore was vulnerable but a little exhilarated. The cuts were spaces where the world could enter. The cells around them clenched, mingled, bound, repaired. The sycamore felt warm human breath. First stale and masculine, then the energy of a young female and some spark of connection there, girl to tree.

The sycamore has a legacy that is ancient, immutable, unknowable to the humans. Its shape, though, its physical form—these were subject to sculpting. The sycamore felt the damage, felt energy drain in the effort to mitigate it.

But it felt, too, the warm bodies who wielded the blade, their soft hands that touched its rough exterior.

The wound healed. Twenty years later the tree is dead anyway, settling back into the land

that tossed it onto a beach, every day more and more part of that land. Bark and heartwood and sap, the ocean drawing particles of them back. To salt and spit, algae and sand. The sun no longer food but the bleach that turns the sycamore back to dust.

*

Alana worms forward until she can lay her hand flat on the tree's sunny surface. She closes her eyes. She feels warm and full.

Comgall was quiet for a minute, that day. Then he reached for her and held her. They didn't say anything more. She felt such gratitude.

Her breathing starts to calm. Yes: she overreacted. She'll apologize to him, they'll be fine.

She relaxes into the rock. There are a couple of sprigs of greenery growing out of it. Some heather, several clumps of grass. There can't be much sun that reaches the sides of the little half-cave. She feels an upwelling of admiration for the plants, hanging on. The rock walls are damp and there's a bit of slimy green stuff growing on them, too, the kind she associates with the coast. Some half-life between moss and seaweed she doesn't know enough biology to name.

Still, names are for saying at home... The grace beyond recognition.

She traces the letters of her name in the bleached trunk. She pictures bits of herself crumbling onto the beach as the ocean shaves her name away.

The letters blur in front of her eyes, become abstract, their only meaning that they connect her to this dead tree, this cliff, this coast. She is so tired.

When she wakes the light is grey and she is deeply uncomfortable. Beatrix, from somewhere not too far away, woofs. Alana heaves herself up. Her body is sore but singing.

She glances at her phone. It's late afternoon; she's been sleeping for hours. He'll be almost done work. She'll go find him.

She starts walking back along the beach. She doesn't think to look at her messages, the little timestamp (*Today 1:07 pm*) above the word "Alright," the tiny grey letters below it: *Delivered*.

*

Today is energy, is light, is movement. Today pulses with shimmering possibility. Today the waves are big and wild and impulsive. Dozens of tiny fish zip past. A quick nip here and there and luscious cold blood spreading across her tongue. The salt in the water makes the tastes snap. She wants to swim as fast as she can, wants to suck in air and fly downward, see how deep she can go before she needs to breathe. See how dark it gets, if there are new creatures down there waiting for her.

Not in waters this deep, says her mother.

Then she will swim parallel to the surface. She must swim, she needs to move.

We need to find food, they say.

I have eaten, she answers. *I'm not hungry*.

We are going on a long journey, they say.

To where?

South.

Why?

A collective sigh.

A piece of kelp hovers above her, cutting a dark wavy line across the sunlit surface.

She goes for it. She hooks it on her nose then tosses it, and her body, into the air.

The joy!

She flings the kelp again, but this time it sticks to her skin and she rushes downward, into the water, until it slips off. Then she zooms to catch it. Hooks it around her nose again, spins in a circle. She carries on this way as she swims, with the group, on a slight diagonal towards shore, to a place where they say they have heard food milling about. The water grows lighter. She can see patchy sand bars spread out below them.

If you're going to be spinning, be useful about it.

Oh.

She casts the kelp aside, lets it float upward. It will probably never move so quickly again.

She follows it to the surface—she arrives first—and gulps in air. Then she dives.

The fish are buzzing about now, distracted and distressed. She swims straight downward until she makes contact with the sea floor. It is not as exciting as the murky depths further out, where she can't see the bottom. Further out, for all she knows, there might be *no* floor. There might only be thick saltwater to the centre of the earth. To forever. She feels a tingle of frustration at not being allowed to look.

Hello? A low sonar buzz rumbling toward her.

Right.

She pushes her nose into the loose sediment at the bottom, nudges at seaweed, slimy against her smooth skin. She wiggles, dislodging a healthy cloud of it. Silt and sand and scraps of seaweed.

Then she starts swimming in circles. She makes a whirlpool that picks it all up: sediments and bits of kelp and shrimp and crabs and tiny rocks and pieces of buoys and other plasticky creations she can't identify. Her whirlpool becomes a barrier of clouded water around the school of fish. They are panicked now, and stuck. They careen back and forth, unwilling to cross her wall of blindness.

She keeps circling. Zoom zoom zoom. Her zooming is more effective than theirs, it has a point, and this makes her swell with purpose. She returns to the sea floor and roots up another cloud of stuff. Everyone else is eating. Their stomachs will be full soon, and then she will be

allowed to really swim, to spin through the water for the sheer joy of feeling it on her skin.

She circles and twists. Her tail catches on a long piece of rope. There's a moment's burning as it digs into her skin. Her lungs go tight; she twitches her tail; and just like that she is free. She surfaces and takes a long breath. Then she tosses the fear aside and dives back. To family, to food, to motion.

*

"Alright," comes Alana's reply.

He allows himself a couple of seconds to try to parse some emotion out of this, searches for a reality in which him leaving is hurting her, too. He gives her a few minutes to think about it, watches the iMessage screen for the pale grey ellipsis that would show him she's typing something.

Nothing.

He buys the ticket, calls his mother, and leaves on the next ferry.

It is, in the end, pitchstone that Comgall is thinking about as the ferry eases itself away from the pier. It was foggy the day he arrived last winter. He couldn't see the shape of the island.

Today is clear and bright, the first stretch of genuinely blue sky he can remember seeing in weeks. Perched on the horizon, the island is rusty-hued with undertones of green. The ridge

slides along it like a cupped hand, the village held in its palm. The sgurr reaches ruggedly upward. There is an indentation that slides down its inner edge, like someone ran a giant finger down it before it hardened. Probably it cooled alongside a dyke of older, softer rock, and the older rock fell away, as rocks do. Perhaps bits of that old rock are under the boat now, snowing toward the ocean floor.

There's an elderly woman sitting on the bench next to where he is standing. The bench is white plastic, shaped like a coffin. "Pitchstone is glass," he remarks to her. "Volcanic glass."

"Is it, indeed?" She raises her eyes above her glasses to look him up and down.

"Yeah." Glass, even though it's dull, coal-dark and opaque. "A wonder, really. It's very similar to obsidian, except less shiny, obviously. That waxiness and rough texture are because of close contact with water. High water content when the lava is cooling, and then it absorbs some."

"Is that right?"

"Five or ten percent, I think. I mean—not five percent of the water that's present, but its hardened composition is five or ten percent water." A rock that became with the ocean. Comgall imagines ancient water, imagines blasting the mountain and the ridge to extract it. Would it be more difficult than what they're doing to the shale? The thought is more discombobulating here, looking at a real mountain, than it was in the boardroom at White Crow in St. John's, the Southside Hills across the harbour obscured by mist.

"You're the lad who works for the oil company," the woman says, an injured tone to her

voice, as if Comgall has tricked her by knowing things about the island she doesn't. *But you do know*, he wants to say. You know what that rock feels like when you touch it. The roughness, the coolness. The life, water part of all life. You know the minutiae of the caves that dot the edges of this island, intimate geographies I have only begun to mentally sketch out. The ocean eating at the caves for centuries: you have seen those tides lapping in and out. You know how they smell when they are laden with kelp or buoyed higher by a midsummer moon. You know how they change the taste of the air.

"Not anymore," he says.

"Why ever not?"

She's wearing loose denim pants and a tidy black coat, half-zipped with a few threads of embroidery peeping out. Shiny purple on a pale-green sweater. Her skin leathery and more robust than he'd thought at first glance. Her hair white, a soft halo in the sun.

Comgall sits down. The bench is wet and it immediately soaks the back of his jeans. "I couldn't do it anymore," he says. "I used to love the world. I was obsessed with rocks and I studied geology, that's how I ended up in oil. But oil has made me bitter and jaded and I think I realized that awhile ago but I thought I was in love, so I stayed. Turns out—not so much."

"Not so much bitter and jaded, or not so much in love?"

"The love, unfortunately," he answers, but chuckles.

"That's too bad," she says. "But it's easier to live with heartbreak than with bitterness, I

think.”

“And living with both?”

“Oh,” she says. “You’ll find a way to turn them into the same thing. Don’t worry about that.”

He grimaces and she places a hand on his thigh.

“Or,” she says, “if you’re lucky, you’ll be rid of them both. I would try to do it before the ferry lands, myself. You do have all night. I take every ferry ride as a chance to begin anew.

Things always seem brighter on the other side.”

“I wish,” he says, but he leans back against the white steel exterior wall of the ferry and tries to make his shoulders relax. He does like ferries, has always enjoyed the in-transit portions of travelling. Steady movement and the drone or chug of engines sooth him.

“I’m proud of you,” she says. “I know I don’t know you, but there’s something about you quitting that pleases me quite personally.”

Comgall gives a short laugh. Bends his head forward and to the side to try to stretch some tension out of the back of his neck. It is gripping him like a barnacle, hard and tight.

Out of the corner of his eye he sees a dolphin arc out of the water and spin. Flecks of water spray around it during the few fleeting seconds of movement, then it dives back under the surface. He tries to rouse some excitement about this, but feels only the same expanding emptiness as the sea goes still.

Part 3

Summer

Chapter 10

He runs into his childhood best friend at the gas station, one of the few full-serve Irvings left in the province. There's a kid pumping gas—Comgall puts him at around ten years old—under the supervision of an older brother, a creamy-skinned teenager with deep blue eyes and a gangly swagger. “Hey, man,” says the driver of a burgundy F150 parked on the other side of the pumps. “Long time.”

“Christ—Brent!” Brent gets out of the truck and they exchange a cursory hug and go inside to pay.

Inside, the teenager looks at them and says, “All I can say is—fuck. I got this other transaction started, man. Don't know how to stop it. Buddy's in the washroom. Fuuuck.” He casts his big-eyed gaze around the small, grimy lobby, then shrugs and looks down at the counter again. Fumbles with a pen, gives the debit machine a little prod.

“What are you up to now?” Comgall asks Brent, although he knows: Brent has been waiting tables at the local pasta place, a restaurant Comgall is avoiding because a high school girlfriend of his works there too. Comgall glimpsed Brent on the patio while driving by a few days ago, Brent with his big charming smile and the ugly restaurant-issue red polo shirt.

“Been serving over at Pete's.” Brent shrugs. “Tips are good. I was in Toronto for awhile, you knew that? More work there, but I just couldn't do it. We kept saying we were coming home—

and then Lara got a job at child services or whatever that she couldn't turn down, and then she got a policy gig on the side, and I said no. I need to be on the east coast." He sighs. "And she kept saying she was going to come home and then I cheated on her. Met this girl at the pro shop—this was last year—and she kinda stuck."

Comgall raises his eyebrows. "You haven't changed." And he hasn't. Still those eyes, still that fidgety quality if he's not doing anything with his hands. When he focuses on you you're the only person in the world.

"I know, man, I know," says Brent. "What about you?"

A tall, lanky guy with dreads and dark grey coveralls comes out of the washroom and takes out his wallet.

"Fuck," the teenager says to him. "Operation timed out. Gotta start er up again. How much is it I told you you owed me?"

"Uh," says the man with dreads. "One-twenty? A tire?"

"Shit," says the teenager. "I don't know. Dylan!" The ten-year-old comes running in from outside, red-faced. "How much does this fucker have to pay me?" the teenager demands.

Brent and Comgall look at one another and laugh.

"I'm between things," Comgall tells him. "I was working on the rigs for awhile out west, then in Newfoundland, and then the company sent me over to Scotland for a pilot project there and—it got a little sour. I'm hanging out with Mom for a bit. Building new stairs out back."

The man with the dreads leaves. “Okay, bros,” the teenager says. “Which one of you wants to pay first?”

Comgall goes over to the counter. The teenager is holding the debit machine, ready to key in an amount. He’s edgy, pheromonal, and Comgall can’t help grinning. Even a year ago this kind of guy would have sent him into a spine-clenching fury. Now his cockiness and built-up arms seemed more like a symptom of a depressingly hilarious historical moment than a sign of the unfairness of the world. This is what I get for leaving Alberta, thinks Comgall, and he smiles despite himself, despite everything. “How much was it?” the teen asks him.

Comgall laughs.

“Dylan!”

He sticks his card into the machine to pay the forty-one bucks and while the transaction is processing, Brent nods out the window at the guy in the coveralls, who’s now lying on the ground half underneath an old Volkswagen van with a ratty paint job in splashes of iron-grey and olive green. “What’s wrong with his van?” Brent asks.

“There’s nothing wrong with his van,” the teenager says, “there’s something wrong with *him*. He wanted a new tire. I told him we could patch the old one tomorrow, but he said no, he needed a new one. But I can’t do that without Mike. So I called Mike and he was at his mother-in-law’s birthday, so I told this fucker, no, you’re going to have to come back tomorrow so we might as well just fucking patch it. Right? Like, where are you going in that piece of shit rig that

your tire has to be brand fucking new.”

He pauses for a breath. “But he’s like, no, no, I need a new tire and I need it today. So I called Mike up and got him away from his roast pork, and now the tire’s on and the fucker is still out there tinkering with fuck knows what. Bro—” nodding at the machine—“this is gonna time out. I’m going to need your card again. Hope you guys don’t got somewhere to be. This is apparently not the place for fast service today.”

When the machine’s internet connection fails a third time, the teenager offers them a smoke and then a joint. Brent accepts the cigarette; Comgall declines both. They stand outside while Brent lights up and the teenager enlists his little brother to help him reset the modem and restart the debit machine. “This is what Mom and Dad get for raising us in the fucking sticks,” the attendant says to the kid. “Run a business where the internet is such shit the customers can’t even pay.”

“Dude,” the kid says. “Chill. Those wankers don’t care. Anyway, it might be Moneris, Dad said, not the internet... And look at that sunset.”

“*Wankers?*” the teenager says.

“I’ve been watching football with Curtis. Liverpool might take the premier league championship this year.”

“Fucking Curtis. Why do my friends want to hang out with you so much anyway?”

“I know things. I’m wise. I have a grasp of the English language.”

“You have a grasp on being a little fucker, is what you have a grasp on. Why can’t you watch hockey like a normal person? Is that green light blinking yet?”

“I’m an intelligent conversationalist,” the kid says. “Unlike you. You only have your looks... Nope, no light.”

“Ever-loving *frig!*”

“But seriously, look how red the sky is. Did you know the red is always up there—it’s just that at sunset the sun is traveling so far to reach our eyes, there’s no blue light left?”

Comgall walks a few steps away from the building so he can see the sky in the west. It’s blazing pink, with streaks of crimson burning through. The streaks are blood-coloured and almost vein-like in form, arranged radially around an oval-shaped break in the clouds. The light in the oval is searing gold, and Comgall can see that behind the clouds, it stretches far above the ring of pink, pushing at the upper limits of their view plane and fading, somewhere way up, into mauve.

“He’s right,” Comgall calls to Brent. “The sky.”

Below it, the white houses and the small strip of visible ocean reflect the same hues.

Brent comes over, blows smoke into the cooling air. “I know. It’s something.”

“Sure is.” They stand there and just look for a minute or two. Plum-coloured darkness begins seeping in.

“I mean, this is why I came back,” says Brent. “I guess it doesn’t have to be here. But I need

to be somewhere you know the sun is setting.”

“Well, the island I was on in Scotland definitely had that,” says Comgall. The sun gives one last flash, a streak of brilliant yellow that arrests them both for a moment, then disappears into the ridge of white spruce on the far end of the village. Comgall pulls out his phone. “You wouldn’t believe the sunsets there,” he says, opening the gallery app to show Brent a couple of pictures. They sit down on the little concrete barricade between someone’s driveway and the gas station’s compressor.

Comgall is flipping through several photos of the same sunset when a picture of Alana appears. He’d forgotten about this one, though he can remember thinking when he took it that he’d be looking at this photo forever because finally he’d captured her. In the photo, she’s sitting on a rock in a patch of bracken just before sunset. The sky is gold but not yet pink, the low sun lighting up the dying ferns so that they shine in a shade of copper nearly identical to Alana’s hair. Bright yellow light rims all of it—her hair, her shoulders and arms, the ferns.

She isn’t smiling, and she looks exhausted. There are grey circles around her eyes. She’s looking at the camera—at him—in that intense way she has. Like she’s looking straight into his soul and it’s frightening her. Like if he doesn’t say something meaningful *soon* she might spill over.

Her face is in shadow and, he knows, she’d seemed a little faded that day. She *was* tired, he remembers. And—something else. Something else was bothering her, but he doesn’t think she

told him what it was.

Had he asked?

“Shit,” Brent says. “Who’s that?”

“A girl I... sort of fell in love with while I was there. She’s from there. She’d been living in Edinburgh and she’d just moved home.” Brent had known Alana too, that year she spent in the village, but Comgall suddenly wants to keep this strange fold in time and geography for himself.

“She’s gorgeous,” says Brent. “And—”

“And what?”

“I don’t know.” Brent takes the phone, zooms in, studies Alana’s face. “She’s, like, intense. Like I feel like she knows my deepest secrets just from the way her eyes look on your phone. And like she has some deep fucking dark secrets of her own. Did you hook up?”

The memory is like a punch. “Yeah.”

Brent looked up at him. “So what happened?”

“What do you mean what happened?”

“You’re obviously still in love with her. Fuck, if I felt the way about Tasha that you feel about this girl, I’d be all set. What are you doing back here while she’s there?”

“Oh, god, Brent,” says Comgall. He leans his forehead against his palms. “I don’t know. I couldn’t—she had too much—she needed more than me. Someone who could help with her shit.”

“I mean,” says Brent. “I know I haven’t known you super well for the past few years, but—really?” He blows out smoke. “If I had any friends around here who could help with someone’s shit, whatever it was, it was you.”

Comgall gives a little laugh. It sounds bitter even to him. “She got involved in the protests against the oil company. I—well, I stopped being able to live with myself, so I quit, and that meant my visa wasn’t valid anymore.”

“Couldn’t you go back as a tourist?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“But what?”

“I said something stupid. And I think she’s seeing someone else.”

“Fuck that,” slurs the teenager, coming up from behind and startling them both. “Screwing around with some other guy? *Fuck*. That.”

Brent laughs. “It’s not always that simple, eh? You’ll probably figure that out soon enough.”

“Aren’t you Tasha Chiasson’s boyfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, would you put up with that from Tasha?” The boy smirks. “I didn’t.”

There’s a moment of pregnant silence. Comgall can feel the explosive energy that immediately surrounds Brent, can remember times just like this in high school, when Brent would end up bloodied and suspended and someone else would end up unconscious. It was a

mystery of sociology, Comgall knew even at the time, that he and Brent got along so well. Him the rock-obsessed bookworm, Brent the—well—Brent had lost his virginity when, at fifteen, he attended the high school prom with a senior and slept with her twenty-year-old friend the same night.

Without thinking about it, Comgall reaches an arm out, hovers his hand over Brent's upper arm.

Then Brent starts laughing.

Laughing with a mania Comgall has never seen in him before. Brent used to laugh like this sometimes, evilly, when he was being an asshole at someone else's expense and enjoying it. But this laughter is different—this laughter is a spurt of joy, a reaction to small-town hilarity on a beautiful clear night when you have nowhere to be and the nowhere-ness of it all makes it all the more funny and maybe a little magical too because that's when the sense of freedom sets in. When you realize: this could be anywhere.

Brent slaps the teen on the shoulder. "Dude," he says, "I am *living* in her fucking trailer, in her parents' yard. It's probably where she took you to fuck, right?" An affirmative grimace from the kid. "Well, we're *living* there," says Brent. "I'm twenty-nine years old and I'm about to get laid off from my job as a seasonal server and spend the winter watching Netflix with my twenty-year-old girlfriend in her parents' basement once that godawful trailer gets too cold. You're lucky you got out. In fact," Brent goes on, his shoulders straightening, tensing, straightening

again. “Fuck this. I’m breaking up with her. But.”

He pauses, looks the kid straight in the eye, then reaches over and picks up Comgall’s phone, abandoned on the barricade. He unlocks the screen and holds it up for the kid to see.

“Look,” Brent says. “*This* girl. Look at the way she’s looking at him. Look at how much there must be inside her. Those eyes. This girl is the real thing. Isn’t she?”

The kid widens his eyes. “Jesus H,” he says. “She’s intense.” He cocks his head, frowns.

“Yeah,” he says, “yeah—she looks—I mean she looks too intense for me.” He looks at Comgall.

“About right, though. Yeah. She’s the real thing.”

“Someday that’s what you’ll be after,” says Brent. “I am. I don’t know why I’m fucking around. But this guy—” he looks at Comgall and Comgall feels a lurch somewhere inside him—“this guy had it and all that’s in his way is a visa and some other guy who—” he looks at Comgall again—“I don’t really think she loves. Do you think she loves him, Com?”

“No fucking way,” says the kid. Brent keeps his gaze on Comgall. Comgall sighs. Shrugs. The moonlit night on the cliff. *It’s just kind of amazing, isn’t it?* What can he possibly have been thinking? Oh, he is furious with himself still.. *Whatever this is, I don’t think I can do it anymore.*

“Okay, okay,” says the teenager. “I think I got the machine going again. Dude. You gotta come in and pay so you can go back to fucking Edinburgh Castle or whatever.”

He pronounces it Edin-berg, like iceberg. Comgall thinks of the icebergs they saw from Fogo

Island on the road trip across Newfoundland his family made with Alana's that long-ago spring, just before Alana's family returned to Scotland. The bergs' dramatic, abstract-art shapes, and the way when the sun was low the shadows lit up all the crevasses along their sweeping sides. That one clear day when there was no wind and the ocean was still and they saw the biggest, closest berg yet, and it was reflected exactly on the surface of the ocean below it, ridges and angles and hard, harsh white.

Comgall, at ten, knew it would melt in a few days or weeks but couldn't believe it. It was so solid.

Parallel to the top edge of the iceberg, a single gannet cruised by. Comgall had so badly wanted it to come back and dive, but it didn't. He follows the kid into the building.

Back outside it's getting darker and colder. "You have time to stop down the legion for a drink?" Brent asks.

"Does it have to be the legion?"

"Where else do you want to go?"

"Um, the Hearth?" Brent knows as well as Comgall it's the only other place in town that's open past 8pm this time of year.

"It's going to be rich tourists getting drunk on shitty, expensive Nova Scotia wine wanting to talk to everyone about the colours of the leaves. And it's gonna be Joey playing. Do you really

want to listen to Joey?”

Comgall hasn't seen Joey MacInnis in years. He is one of about a half-dozen local musicians who rotate at the Hearth and the pub playing Stan Rogers songs and old Celtic standbys for the tourists. All Comgall remembers about him is his face, steaming and purple with glassy bulging eyes, and the way it never mattered what shirt he wore, his stomach was always visible somewhere, whether it was in an unintended gap between buttons or spilling out from below a t-shirt.

Comgall doesn't mind Joey, but Brent hasn't stopped talking: “Joey's a drunk, and he's tone-deaf, and he'll probably grab your ass and pretend like it's an accident.”

“Please tell me,” Comgall says, “you're not still a homophobe. It's 2016.”

“No, I'm a Joey-phobe. I'd feel this way even if I was grabbing your ass on the regular and loving it. Come on.” Brent climbs into his F150, puts his left hand on the wheel and looks at Comgall.

“Okay, okay. Let's park at my place, and then if you don't want to drive back to your trailer you can crash there.” Comgall gets into his mother's Prius. There's enough of a charge that the engine doesn't start at all and his reverse from the pumps is soundless.

“That freaks me the *fuck* out,” Brent hollers from the window of his truck.

At the legion they sit on rickety orange chairs with metal legs and arms and orange plastic seats and backs with numbers spray-painted on them, on opposite sides of one end of a long card

table. Comgall was probably sixteen the first time he went to the legion to drink, and at nearly twice that age now, he doesn't feel much more comfortable. The fluorescent lights make his temples throb. The few VLT machines in the nook at the far corner—the only place to gamble within two hours' drive—are attended to by several men who drift like ghosts every little while to the bar or the ATM and back to the VLTs.

He half-watches the legion's other patrons as Brent goes to get drinks. Comgall recognizes most of them. Cousins, neighbours, familiar faces from the wharf. Their worn-out eyes are familiar in a way that makes his throat tighten. He can sense their jittery anticipation of winter, seventy percent of the town unemployed and stuck inside. The darkness coming earlier each day now; the fear of what parts of yourself might become evident during months of time to think.

Brent swings himself into the chair opposite Comgall with two bottles of Keith's in one hand. The other hand holds a sweating Guinness, which he plunks in front of Comgall. When Comgall wraps his hand around the mug the cold travels along his forearm.

"Have you ever been on a roller coaster?" Brent asks, taking a long drink.

"Yeah. At Canada's Wonderland. Didn't love it, honestly."

"Do you remember how shy I was as a kid? I used to worry about everything. About riding my bike too fast or going too near the edge of the cliff. And then I was just like, why are there all these things other people can do that I'm too scared to do."

"I remember you being a bit more timid, yeah," says Comgall. He's watching Brent's eyes as

they brighten under the grey light, Brent's arms beginning to move around like a puppeteer's.

"So I just started being angry instead," Brent says. "When I was like, I don't know, nine or ten." Every ligament electric with motion: this is what has always mesmerized Comgall about Brent, and made him envious. "I went to Crystal Palace with Will Warren and his family—you remember Will? He's a lawyer now. Big shot. Gay as a post. Anyway, they were all going on this roller coaster and I was scared shitless. And it made me really angry, and I realized I could replace the fear with anger. I could get angry as hell at that roller coaster and that made me able to ride it. Even though I was still scared."

When he starts talking about something, really talking, Brent often loses eye contact, starts to act almost bored with whatever it is he's saying. If you watch him a little longer, though, you see that the reason he's dropped out of the room is that he's dropped into the story, and expects whoever he is chatting with to have fallen in there with him.

"Right," says Comgall. He doesn't get angry, he gets anxious. Spins, makes himself sick.

"I still get scared," Brent says. "Sometimes. But now I can't stop the anger, and not just when I'm scared. It's how I respond to practically anything that doesn't go right. Anything that doesn't even feel right. And that itself freaks me out sometimes."

"Yeah," said Comgall. "Is this—are you really trying to break up with Tasha?"

Brent sighs, deflates a little. "Tasha."

"You don't seem angry now," says Comgall. "Just—tired."

“Yeah. I am tired. The kind of tired where you can’t imagine ever going to sleep. But I’m not talking about me, man. I’m talking about you. Maybe what you need is to stop being sad and get pissed off instead.”

Chapter 11

Tomorrow is the day. Tomorrow they are going to protest at the company offices.

They've been making sandwiches for days. They're going to march, block off the road. There are people coming from all over the country to help.

And tomorrow her painting will be unveiled.

The whale in it is proportionally larger than life, draped almost dead-looking (but, Alana hopes, not quite) across the whale-shaped island. She made Alana into a new person and Alana made her into a painting, dead and stiff. What trade-offs humanity asks of the world.

Except for the eye. The eye has no tears, but it is deep. The depth of feeling is evident. It is the only part of the painting Alana feels she's managed to do anything with.

"Wow," Todd says when he sees it. "You can really see the humanity in it. It's beautiful, Alana. Brilliant."

"Humanity—that's—that's not really what I was going for." *What have I done to her?*

"Humanness, then," says Todd.

"I was more going for... connection. And to have people see there's as much there as when you look at a human."

"Of course," says Todd. "But a whale is still—well—oh, anyway. Thank you, Alana. It means a lot, and it's more powerful than I'd imagined. So here's hoping."

He leans in and hugs her. He has that surfer-boy scent again, clean and safe. She swallows hard and Todd pulls away, already on the next task. He takes the painting with him and Alana's throat constricts as she watches him lift it onto the truck. He covers it with a big plastic tarp. "It'll be alright behind Matty's bothy overnight, will it, Alana? Temperature isn't going to change that much."

"Oh yes," she says. "It'll be fine. It's not..." Not what? *Not that permanent*, is what she wants to say, but why does she feel that way? The tips of her fingers tingle with the memory of the last coat of glaze. The puddle of linseed oil, how the ocean began to glimmer. Became transient, uncontained, like it might pull itself back in a strong wind. "It's not that fragile," she says finally. "And it dried faster than I was expecting, with all this dry weather. Water would just roll off it."

"Lovely," says Todd. "Thanks, love."

She curls her fingers in and out of fists as he gets into the cab. What if they don't like it? But also—what if they do?

How can she presume to know this whale?

Todd texts around ten that evening to tell Alana they're going to Matty's bothy to relax with a few pints before the big day. It's nearly eleven by the time she sets out to join them. There's still dusky light in the sky. It's unusually warm and not cooling off. Everything is hazy, waiting.

As she's rounding the corner to begin climbing up the hill, she hears cracking on the forest side of the road, and voices. She can make out a small footpath leading into the trees, which she vaguely recalls as a shortcut to the old fish plant. She hears a laugh.

Alana turns onto the path. A hundred metres or so into the forest she begins to catch a slight smell of petrol in the air, and something else she can't identify. The voices go quiet. Alana hears more branches cracking, like someone is running through the forest, someone big, and feels a ripple of fear roll through her, a nighttime-in-the-city feeling she's never quite experienced on this island.

Then she rounds a corner and stops short. The stench intensifies. It takes her a couple of moments to process what she's seeing. There is her painting, leaning against a tree. Todd's truck is nowhere in sight. There's a beat-up all terrain vehicle parked at an odd angle, off to the side. Its headlights are on, casting weird artificial light. In it she can see a petrol can sitting on the ground. She can smell petrol now, too, alongside the vehicle's fumes.

Standing in front of the canvas is a girl who can't be more than sixteen or seventeen. She's holding a barbecue lighter.

She's holding it up to the painting.

Alana hears the click of the trigger, sees a blue flame erupt into life.

In the light of the flame the whale's eye glints.

★

The tiniest ocean dwellers skim the surface in foamy ripples, buoyed by the movement of the water, jostled together and then apart and then a little closer together. They catch the light in sandy-hued streaks. They are almost weightless.

More of them float around as tiny speckles. Here and there a hint of iridescent green, suspended.

When the krill die, they become snow. They sift downward through the water, through layers of white and turquoise and deep midnight and finally into blackness, to where the only things visible are those that glow. They die, sift, nourish.

Or they nourish first: slip through someone's digestive system, through and out, and then the sifting begins again. Perhaps spread out, trapped inside tears of flesh. Perhaps once again in free fall.

The clouds of jellyfish descend on them.

★

The girl freezes when she registers Alana's gaze. Then Alana's whole body lurches and seems to fling of its own accord toward the girl, toward the painting, toward the whale. She's on her in

seconds, she grabs the girl's wrist before she can react, she wrenches the lighter out of her hand.

"What the *fuck*?" Alana spits. "Who are you? What the fuck?" The lighter feels hot and she realizes she has the trigger compressed, is waving around a flame as she gesticulates. She lets her arms fall to her side. The girl is grinning with an abandon that frightens Alana, and she takes a step back. Shaggy dark hair, she looks like—Alana has a flash of a boy she was friends with in high school, what was his name? Sean. His dad had a tractor graveyard and a failing croft, had lost an arm crab fishing. Sean was quiet but fucked up, Alana remembers. He liked burning things too, small things mostly, things he could sit and watch as they turned to char. "Kayla." Alana says the name as it comes to her. Sean's younger sister, a gangly kid the last time Alana saw her, too angry for her years, but who around here wasn't? "Kayla Robertson. Yeah? I went to school with Sean."

Kayla's face falls and, in the half-light of the ATV's headlights, Alana knows she got it right. A gust comes up, a few tree branches rustle and shadows dance unnervingly on the kid's pockmarked face.

"Alana," the girl says. "Fucked Sean over a couple times didn't you?"

Alana doesn't think so, but she stays quiet.

"And now you walk back in here from your fancy city and you're going to reform us with *art*." The girl curls her fingers into a fist.

"I—" Alana begins.

Kayla pushes on. “Some of us need these jobs,” she says. “Some of us need these fucking jobs. Some of us can’t run off to cities and come back as we please and tell everyone else we don’t need to make a living. Tell us to have some bloody *pride*.” Her voice sneers but also wobbles. The words are made less cutting by how much it seems to be costing her to say them.

“Kayla, I—I made this painting because they asked me to. I actually thought people here *didn’t* want this project to go ahead.”

The girl’s nostrils flare. “What people? Todd and his fucking minted bastards back from uni? Not my fucking people.” She looks back and forth from the canvas to Alana, as if judging what kind of damage she could do to either of them with her bare hands. Kayla takes a step closer to her. Alana takes the plastic lighter in both hands, and with strength she didn’t know she had, cracks it in half and tosses it into the woods. Kayla takes another step forward.

Alana sees Gavin in front of her, her shitty Edinburgh flat. One step and then another, his breath sour, not from alcohol but some more generalized reek, or maybe it was only her who could smell it—and the visceral fear that always pervaded her with that scent—one step and then another, and then there’d be a hand around her neck, and he’d hardly ever go further than that but he’d breathe—

Kayla is a foot away from her now, and taller than her, about as tall as Gavin but less formed, unsure what to do with her limbs—

Alana sees her father leaning in to whisper to her, *See that one, diving, straight like an*

arrow?, she feels that closeness, she sees his face and then Gavin's face, looming—

“Don't touch me,” Alana says.

Kayla narrows her eyes, lifts a hand.

“Kayla,” says Alana. “Do you need a criminal record at this point? How much do you think it will even matter if you set that painting on fire? It will just make them angrier.”

She doesn't move.

“Christ, Kayla,” Alana says. “Sean and I were *friends*. I haven't seen him in years, but he wouldn't want you doing this to me.” She's betting on a flicker of feeling she thinks she remembers, a deep-rooted attachment to her older brother. Kayla following them around the island, appearing from behind fences when they thought they were alone.

And everything about Kayla flattens. She lets her hand fall, and then, miraculously, her body too. She drops to the ground, long legs awkwardly crossed, head bowed. “Of course you haven't seen him in years,” Kayla says. “Sean's dead.”

Something rises in Alana, fresh grief the likes of which she hasn't felt in a long time.

She sits down next to the girl. It takes every ounce of will she has to stay composed.

“What?... Where... where was I?”

★

The jellyfish reach out with their tentacles. Their bellies feel the rush of water below, the tiny whirlpool into which they suck the food. Speckled ones or foamy ones, it doesn't matter. The jellies hardly even need to breathe. They drag the tiny ones toward them, they push them into their mouths. Holes in the middle of the body. The rest of their flesh absorptive and amorphous. Swelling and sucking and swelling again, nudging outward, blooming bigger. Hundreds of them, thousands.

They are looking for a place their young can be safe.

It should be solid, and hard.

They suck in more food, they tumble through the water like breakers in a storm. Sunlight cascades straight through their bodies.

They spot something ahead. A dark shape, and long. Reaching straight down and so deep they cannot see where it ends.

They swell and pulse. Their tentacles wave. They aim towards the shape like smoke blowing across the night sky.

Seven million years ago, jellyfish were the first animal to see.

*

"I don't know where you bloody were," says Kayla. "He had cancer and he fell off."

“He fell off—” Alana can picture the stump of Sean’s father’s arm, skin wrinkled and sagging, the purple hue she found so creepy as a child.

“They couldn’t do nothin about the cancer,” Kayla says, her voice shaking a little. “They told him. He couldn’t work. He went out with Dad one day and—”

“Kayla, I—” Alana wants to touch her. She moves a little closer. Everything smells like petrol. Her head feels light. “I’m so sorry. How long ago was this?”

“I was eleven. Six years. He was working in the oil plant on the mainland and when he got the cancer they said he couldn’t work anymore. So he went to Edinburgh for the treatments.” *I was there*, Alana thinks. *God, I was there*. “And when they couldn’t treat it anymore he came home.”

Alana feels weak. She reaches for Kayla’s hand. “Kayla, I’m so sorry.” The girl doesn’t squeeze her hand in return but doesn’t move away either. A few minutes stretch past in silence. Finally Alana says, “Can I call Todd to come help us get this painting back to the bothy?” She’ll need to clean it. Then again: there’s something poetic in the notion of going to protest petroleum extraction with an art piece covered in petrol, liable to go up in flames at any moment.

“Yeah,” Kayla says.

“Do you—Todd’s going to be pissed,” Alana says. “He’s going to want to call the cops.”

Kayla waits. “It’s not like you don’t know who I am.”

“Kayla, go.” Alana waves at the ATV. “You weren’t alone, were you? There were others who

ran off?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Didn’t care,” she answers. It doesn’t sound like the whole story, but who is Alana to ask for details?

“Alright. Go,” she says. They both stand. “I am really, really sorry about Sean,” Alana repeats, one last time. She pulls out her mobile. Kayla starts the ATV and roars away and Alana is astonished, once the sound and light have faded into the forest, at how dark everything has become.

She isn’t in the least bit tired.

She pictures the painting going up in flames and shudders. “Thank god,” she says to the canvas.

Then she thinks of Sean—quiet, good, morbid Sean but what teenager isn’t dismal at times?—and her relief hardens into renewed tension. The breeze has finally gotten a little cooler.

She pulls up her recent calls list.

“Hey,” Todd says.

“Hey. Listen—um, there’s something—well, first, what happened to Sean Robertson?”

“Who?”

“You remember that quiet kid I hung around with a bit in school—tall, weird, sort of

gothic—Chad’s kid? I just found out he died.”

“Oh, right,” says Todd. “Don’t really know. I wasn’t here. Are you upset?”

“I feel weird not having known... not having noticed, or whatever. But I actually need some slightly more urgent help.”

Then there’s nothing to do but sit next to the petrol-coated painting and wait for him to arrive. Finally, the temperature begins to drop.

“I think you should feel grateful you’ve even had the time and space and creative energy for this,” Tegan says the following morning on Skype. Her internet connections are spotty these days; Alana is grateful to have caught her online. “That’s more than a lot of artists get. More than you’ve gotten yourself in the past.” She doesn’t say it, but Alana knows they are both thinking of those months in Edinburgh when Alana was working two jobs that were making her head split open and still couldn’t scrape together enough money for food and rent.

And underneath that: the months and months during which Alana did have piles of free time and had panic attacks every time she sat in front of a blank canvas. Months when to draw anything was to peer farther inside herself than she had the strength for.

“I know,” Alana sighs. “But it doesn’t feel like an accomplishment that I had time to paint a picture while I was living at home with my mother at twenty-seven years old.”

Tegan laughs. “You know, context is important but it’s really not always necessary.”

“Okay,” Alana says, “so outside of context the painting is basically meaningless.”

“Alana.”

“Okay, okay. I just can’t help it, Teg. I feel sick.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I am. But I am also really happy for you. You and I both know being an artist is a pretty integral part of your self-worth. Right?”

“You’re right... Being an activist isn’t, though,” Alana tells her, and realizes that’s the difference she’s been feeling: the jump from art that deals with her feelings to art that deals with the whole island’s feelings. She thinks of the whale again, how her only body part that was touching it was her hand, but she knew that if she were to let go, the whale would have held her even through its own pain. The whale’s eye big and wet and lucid and aware that she was in mortal danger—and still gathering the energy and curiosity and connection to life around her to look at Alana.

Or maybe: aware that Alana was her only hope.

And Alana just sitting there like a fool with her hand on the whale’s cheek as if that could mean something. But on the off chance that it could—she hadn’t been able to talk herself into breaking that connection.

From the crackly connection inside the paper- and wire-strewn canvas tent that’s serving as the headquarters for the NGO she’s working for, Tegan smiles. “I know. But there’s more than one way to be an activist, and I think sometimes just keeping going is one of the most important

things. It's easy for me to come here—way harder than it would be to do what you're doing. To stay put." She pauses. "You need some friends. Why don't you go hang out with Todd?"

"I'd feel like I was playing polo with Calvin Klein's favourite grandson."

"Todd seems sweet."

"Todd is sweet, that's the problem. I'm not sweet. Anyway, Todd's not into me."

"I mean as a friend, Alana. Go hang out with him as a friend."

"Now you're just trying to distract me from the fact that my painting is going to be released to the world in like twenty minutes."

"Is it working?"

"I guess so. I—" And the connection sputters out. "Fuck," she mutters at the black screen.

She hasn't really decided she's going, but finds herself pulling on trainers and a jumper. Then she finds herself sticking her mobile into the back pocket of her jeans, walking to the door and wandering down to the road. And even then she's not really trying to go—she's just standing and watching the sheep. Their wool is bouncing in the wind as they munch at scraggly October grass. They'll need to be sheared soon.

That's always a fucking joy, she thinks. Although she and her father used to have fun doing it.

Of course, someone pulls over. It's Martha in a light blue pickup, rolling down the passenger

side window, leaning toward it. “You’re going, then?” Martha says.

“Yeah, looks like I am, doesn’t it?”

Martha laughs. “Well yes, it does. Were you not sure?”

“I’m nervous,” Alana says.

“What are you nervous about? We’ll be safe, it’s perfectly legal—mostly legal anyway—and they wouldn’t dare—”

“That’s not what I mean. I did that painting, and it’s getting released today, and…”

“Right, right! Haven’t seen it yet. Heard it’s lovely, though!”

“Well, it’s good, I think,” Alana answers. “I’m proud of it that way. It just freaks me out that I did it, and that it’s going to be so public, and—well. Mostly that.”

“Do you do something that might make it a conflict of interest?”

Alana laughs. “No. I don’t do anything.”

“Don’t worry about it then. People don’t pay really that much attention, I don’t think. Half of them aren’t even going to look closely enough to see what’s in it. No offence.” She pauses.

“And half of the other half won’t associate your name with you. You’ve been gone a long while, love.”

Alana thinks of Sean, quietly dying, it seems, forever. How cold the water must have been.

Half of them aren’t even going to look closely enough to see what’s in it. Her mother must have heard about Sean, surely—must have mentioned something—and it must have been on

Facebook. And there Alana was, so worried about her own petty problems she hadn't even absorbed that her old friend was dead. She swallows.

"Right then," says Martha, sitting back up in her seat. "Are you coming?"

A few minutes later Martha pulls the truck into the dirt access road. The forest pulses with clouds of haze. Alana is not sure if the haze is all dust or if some of it is sunlight or maybe some of it is the forest breathing.

They keep driving through the dust until they come up to a line of cars parked along the access road. Martha pulls over, turns the engine off. A few dozen people have gathered. They have a banner, and stacks and stacks of foam signs. Some of the signs are emblazoned with slogans like "Don't Frack Us Over" and some have a designer's rendition of Alana's painting printed on them. The clean lines replacing her messy ones were jarring at first, but she's beginning to like them. Not that that helps the woozy feeling that has overtaken her.

Then people start to notice she's arrived, and they start approaching her, people she hasn't spoken to in a decade. They're beaming, telling her how beautiful the painting is. They're supposed to be angry but they practically glow. Alana starts to feel a little bit of the glow too.

Soon she realizes they are also seeing hope in the fact that the painting was made by her. As in: *her*, of all people.

Steve MacNeill, Alana's high school maths teacher, says, "I think it'll have a real impact, Alana. It's heartwarming, really, after you walked out of that meeting, to see this beautiful

gesture.” He hesitates. “I know it’s been hard since your dad. But he would have been proud.”

Steve was a distant friend of her father’s, she remembers now. He came over to help with the cows or have a beer once in a while. Now he is staring at her and not staring at her. Not seeing her. She shifts. What to say?

I’m not him?

He’s not here?

I’m sure he would be proud, but he’s not because he’s not here?

She swallows. “Thanks, Steve.”

And if her father *were* here, she thinks, this shit might never have gone down to begin with. He would have reasoned with someone, or organized these protests earlier on. They might never have gotten to this point, the forest shredded, seven dead whales, god only knows the state of the ocean.

But then again, she thinks, recalling her conversation with Crane—maybe not. Maybe he would have been as powerless as everyone else. Sitting in the croft house painting pictures, or making signs, or getting angry together and having too much to drink, or just trying to carry on and most often failing.

She wanders toward the flatbed where her painting is tied onto a big makeshift easel that juts up from the back. Todd materializes in pressed khakis, a mint green plaid shirt, a quilted vest. He places a hand on her upper arm. She shrugs it off—“Hey, Todd”—and leans in for a hug instead.

Then he starts talking. “You see that your painting is over on the truck. We figured it would be most prominent there. We’ve had so much positive media attention because of it. We’re all just thrilled. I’m sure you are too. Would you be interested in doing a couple of interviews, or should I let you fade into the crowd?”

His eyes burn so bright compared to everyone else’s here. “We’d love to see you do an interview, of course—”

All that’s visible from where they are is the blank back of the canvas. Four by four feet from a ripped section of the old yurt her father used to lug up the ridge every year. In the yurt you could hear the wind, but you could also feel it. Alana stretched the canvas across a frame Crane and someone else made from a couple of old two by fours. The edges are rough, but, she thinks, that just makes it seem wilder. More alive, more of this place.

“I’d really rather stay out of it, Todd, if you can manage,” she says. He nods, but it’s clear he’s a little disappointed.

A gust rolls up and the canvas begins a slow pulse, puffing in and out like a belly. Light filters through paint and fabric, illuminating the shapes of the images Alana knows are on the other side. Reduced to lights and darks, all that remains is what is essential: the three dimensional bedrock rising out of the ocean and off the canvas, where she knows layers and layers of glaze make it shine like real-life pitchstone after a rain; the thunderclouds glancing across the sky, paint thin but weighty with linseed oil.

“It’s not even so much because it makes me sick to my stomach to think of being that public about it,” she says, “though it does. It’s just—I keep thinking about this whale”—draped, on the painting, front and centre, splayed across the island, setting off the shapes of the clouds—“and how close she came to dying and how she must have known the other ones who did die”—her heft, her pain, her eye—“and how this is her tragedy, not mine. I’ve been dreaming about her. It doesn’t feel right to act like it was me who was responsible for this painting.” The whale’s great, racked breaths. Her crying. “I feel like I was channelling something bigger,” Alana finishes. “Maybe even bigger than her.”

Todd nods, as if considering her words, but then he says, “The other thing is, we’ve received a couple of offers to purchase it. No solid cash amounts, but a couple of generous suggestions. If you’d like, I can—”

“Oh god, I couldn’t, I could never.” The words tumble out of her, an almost physical rejection of the idea. “I don’t even feel like it’s mine to sell.” But then again, whose is it? Surely not the community group that’s come together around the protests; surely not Todd. “I think... it belongs to the island, Todd. Like, the ground under our feet. We can’t sell it.”

Where is the whale now? Somewhere out there. Alana can’t see the ocean but she can hear it. She can feel it.

And the dead ones—but they aren’t dead, not really, she tells herself. They are somewhere at the bottom of the ocean now, dragged out by a couple of boats and released to float to the sea

floor. Already the ocean is leeching nutrients from their bodies. Salt and gnashing teeth are tearing them apart. Pieces of them are floating, placid, through a sun-dappled sea.

“Alright,” Todd is saying, “so I’ll just tell them—”

But Alana is drifting.

She is in the ocean with them. There is one halo of light visible far above and she is floating toward it, meandering on currents. The water fills her but she is fine, she is floating. The cold numbs her but she is warm. Carried. Drifting, and pieces of whaleflesh drifting around her. What does a shale well look like?

She hears Kayla, her voice amplified by the nighttime woods. “Tell us to have some bloody *pride*.”

If gas spilled into the ocean, would you be able to see it? Some discolouration in the water, a shift in texture?

“Are you alright?” Todd is asking.

There’s an image behind her forehead, glowing and ethereal and filled with glaze and oil and light. Blazing white—zinc white—and turquoise—*ultramarine, viridian, cadmium yellow bright*, her brain whispers—and at the very bottom, ivory black. Thin, liquid, filled with movement.

“Alana? Are you alright?” Todd asks again.

Floating through these layers: bits of pink or grey flesh contorting in ribbonlike writhing shapes as they drift. Like jellyfish or tissue paper, like pomegranate seeds busted open between

your finger and thumb. Bleeding and alive.

“Yes—yes—sorry.” .

A couple of months before the storm when she was nine, Alana had a recurring dream about a woman trapped inside a boulder, one of the slabs of porphyritic limestone on the beach. “She’s suffocating,” she’d told her father. “There’s no air in there.” Alastair replied that the stone was full of holes, that she must just be sleeping. Alana knew better.

“Darling,” he’d said finally. “Why don’t you draw a picture of her? Maybe that’s what she’s asking for.”

So nine-year-old Alana drew a picture and it was explosive, like she knew things she’d never imagined she could know. She didn’t remember anything about actually drawing the picture, and for years afterward that’s what making art was like for her. An image would show up in her head fully formed, and she’d sit down in front of a pile of art supplies and go somewhere else until the piece was finished. That got her into art school and art school beat it out of her, with equal doses technique and self-doubt. It hasn’t happened in years.

This image: she can almost taste it. Drag her tongue through the water like it, too, were a drifting, disintegrating bit of animal.

She runs her tongue along the roof of her mouth. It’s electric.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to write that out into a statement we can give to the media—about the painting belonging to the island, and all that,” Todd says, pulling out an iPad. “Are you

sure you're alright?"

She leans in and hugs him again, grinning. "I'm getting there, Todd. That's fine."

And she begins to dictate the words. The words that will relinquish the painting to the island, this whale-shaped lump of pitchstone and soil and grass and sheep and mangy crofters and billows of air. This living, breathing, pulsing lump. Home.

They begin walking.

She slips in with the crowd. Buzzing.

She is the burning girl, upwelling with life.

Part 4

Fall

Chapter 12

The blasts come from the water above, and all at once the rocks are alive with shaking. They shudder and tremble, the disturbance slides across and through them.

Then as suddenly as it began, the great heartbeat clicks off. The kelp forest sighs relief. The whales and hagfish reorient, let go held breath.

But below, the tremors reverberate now; the rocks are electrified. The tremors slide and swell. Like a snake they steal along the boundary of the gneiss, moving in some younger, less sturdy layer of shifting sediments and long-rotted seaweed. Eventually the shock wave settles.

But the heartbeat will reignite.

A few hours in the life of humans, a few breaths in the life of a forest, a shattered moment of seeming pause for the shale below. Then, as sure as the weaker rocks keep trembling, the blasts begin again.

★

All night the sky is close, heavy darkness mingling with murky storm cloud lustre. But as he makes his way toward the sycamore where he will tuck in for the day, the clouds lift. Soft pink starts to spread in.

Somewhere in the distance he hears the voice of the owl. Usually this would alarm him but the call is weak. Its notes wrestle with the air. He wonders who the owl is talking to, wonders if its message is being heard.

His wings weave a wheeling path. He can feel water-laden air molecules working their way through each tiny hair. Prickles of knowledge travel along the thin membrane and through the web of agitating nerve endings to his brain. The layered hairs on his wings know exactly what direction and at what speed the vortices of wind at his back are going.

His ears are closed against the movement of his wings.

He reaches the sycamore and latches on.

★

A late September sky, smattered with indigo-coloured clouds. Alana wakes early and looks toward the ocean. Somewhere out there is the ship that made the seismic booms that sent the whales here; somewhere out there is the bigger ship that's been blasting the sea floor to suck up gas for a few weeks now. Once in awhile it appears on the horizon, a smudge like charcoal struck the wrong way across watercolour. But right now there's a rosy cloud hovering over it, hiding any blemishes.

She turns away from it and heads toward the forest, where things are still a little bit black and

white. She hears the click of tiny wings as a final bat flits between a couple of trees.

Alana cuts into the MacLellans' field. The alders that edge it have hardly any pigment yet: a little Payne's grey, viridian, maybe nickel yellow—but mostly water. Or turpentine.

"Alana?" A voice echoes across the field. She turns and her eyes land on Crane, her father's best friend. He is moving toward her, not as fast as he used to be but God—he must be sixty and still springing like a sleepy puppy across the lazy beds.

"I thought it was you," he says when he's a few metres away.

"It's me."

"What are you doing out of bed so early?"

"Couldn't sleep, walls closing in on me. You know. The usual."

"Don't I know," says Crane—and she wonders. Maybe he does know. Maybe he's been sitting here all this time, across the field, knowing.

"You alright, Crane?" she asks.

There's a moment of silence. "I'm alright."

Crane's eyes are older than the rest of him, icy blue under bushy eyebrows, the whites a little bit reddened. He's half dressed in brand name workout clothes. His bottom half looks more like Alana's father: jeans lined with plaid flannel, old boots.

"Can I make you some coffee?" he asks.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to wake Ravi up, don't worry about it."

“Ravi’s at his sister’s in Edinburgh. Come on, you look like a ghost.”

So Alana finds herself in Crane’s big messy kitchen, boxes from microwave pizzas piled on top of the trashcan, a couple of old newspapers, a couple takeout coffee cups. “Don’t worry,” he says. “I know you’re a city girl now. I know how to make it right.” He pulls out an old fashioned espresso maker and a coffee grinder and spoons in rich, dark beans from a paper bag. The grinder whirrs and when he takes the cover off the smell is the city, Alana’s favourite New Town cafe—hell, Starbucks, even. Alana sighs.

“What is it, lass?”

“It just reminds me of Edinburgh.”

“Proper coffee?”

“Yeah.”

“Mairi doesn’t make proper coffee for you?”

“No, she’s a tea drinker, you know that. I make it for myself. It’s just not the same. What have you been doing with yourself these days?”

“Well, as you remember, I’ve been thinking about bluebells.”

“You’ve been thinking about bluebells since I was a child.”

“I know, I know.” Crane used to work away—oil rig or something, she thinks. He gave up—she can’t remember why—and moved to the island full time a couple years after Alana’s father died. He used to spend only summers here. Two weeks on and two weeks off from work, camp

up on Alastair and Mairi's croft in a tent. "I didn't move here to hurry up," he says. "Those bluebells come back every year. I've got myself a website now for the seeds."

"Are you selling them?"

"I've had a couple of orders."

"And..."

"Well. I'm not quite prepared."

"So you've got a website to sell bluebell seeds you don't have."

"I've got a website to sell bluebell seeds I *will* have... And there's the cows."

"What about them?"

"They've been exceedingly high-maintenance this year. They keep running, getting stuck in storms—I've been chasing."

They both go quiet and Alana knows they are both thinking about Crane's days of chasing cows and sheep with her father. Him and Alastair and Beatrix and Crane's dog Selkie and sometimes small Alana. There's always the odd cow that just won't stay close or can't figure out what to do with herself in a storm.

"Well," says Crane. "I got her back anyway. She'll be going off soon."

"You're selling her already?"

"I'm getting too old to be keeping them over the winter."

"No you're not."

“Okay,” he says. “Too lazy.” He takes the coffee off the burner and clicks the propane off.

“I miss him so much, Crane.” She says it so softly she’s not sure if he hears. He puts a mug in front of her, the contents golden with cream, strong, sweet.

“I know,” he says, just as quietly. “How’s your mum getting on?”

“She seems good. But she’s so tired sometimes. I’ve been helping out a bit with what I can, what I know how to do and what she’ll let me take over. There isn’t a lot she trusts me with.”

“You’ll get there. Are you staying then?”

“I don’t know. That’s probably why she’s not teaching me anything. And I suppose I, I mean, I don’t want to, but I’m feeling—well, I don’t really have any other options right now but there’s part of me feeling like I’m supposed to be here. You know what I mean?”

“I don’t buy into that sort of stuff,” Crane says. Moustache wet with coffee. “But.”

“Me either. But. Here I am.”

“Here you are.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to be putting all this—”

“I invited you, lass. There’s a lot of your dad in you. I’m sure you’re lovely on your own—not that I—but—I can see him. In your face.”

Alana’s jaw goes tight. She forces it to move. “Yes, of course. I just—I mean—it was my—

fault.” She is burning.

“Pardon?”

“The cliff, it was—he was there because I wanted that tree. If it hadn’t been for me the tree would’ve gone over without him.” She takes a slug of coffee and feels like she is boiling over.

“Oh, darling,” says Crane. “You don’t believe that.”

“Of course I do. It’s true.”

“Alana, darling. No. He was, he—Alana, you know he had some problems.” Crane takes a sip of his own coffee and jumps when the heat reaches his tongue. Gulps and shakes his head like a dog.

“You’re not saying it was—he couldn’t have, he was so happy.”

“No, duckie, nothing like that, he didn’t do it on purpose. I am not saying that. I’m just saying, well. He was happy generally. Generally, he was happy. But sometimes he wasn’t. And the thing is—I was there that day, remember? I wasn’t with you, but I was with him that morning. And the thing is that when he was happy, he was so happy. He loved an adventure, that man, your father. He was always driving too fast, taking the boat out in storms. You know. He chased it. There’s no drugs or raves on this little island so he had those thrills, and that day was a day for thrills.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, Alana, that sometimes, some people live more than other people. Some people

live just a little fuller. So full sometimes they burst. And I am saying that, more likely than not, what my belief is, is that it was probably a matter of time. And on that particular day he had been talking about that tree already.”

“No he hadn’t,” she says, but the memory is blurring, and she does remember him saying something—something like—*Alana’s tree*.

Alana’s tree.

Could he already have known?

“He knew that tree was on that cliff long before you mentioned it. He also knew he shouldn’t go after it,” says Crane. “Alana, he went after everything. That’s why you’re here— that’s why your mother has the croft. But it’s not because of *you* that we don’t have him. And you can put your faith in that. Now,” he says, standing up, brushing his hands off on his jeans as if brushing the conversation off too. “You can see I’ve been eating frozen pizzas all week but I did make a lovely loaf of bread yesterday, and I’ve still got some of Ravi’s bramble apple preserves from last year. Can I make you some toast?”

The toast is exactly right. Thick molasses bread slathered in butter, probably from the miscreant cow, then slathered again with thick sweet preserves. The sun from Crane’s big window—Ravi’s doing, she knows, but Alana knows how deeply, secretly grateful Crane is for it—reflects in burning white puddles on the little mounds of jam. She chews. A bite and another, and it fills her.

After breakfast Alana helps Crane lather up the dishes. “I think I need to go work on that painting,” she says. He gives her a long hug.

When the house is out of sight she lies down in the field, her eyes angled toward the edge of the forest. She can feel the wind surging through the treetops, can hear it rustling the wildflowers by her ears. Something scuttles through them. A vole maybe, a grasshopper. She listens. Then she closes her eyes and sees a watery glaze on the sky, thick and deep with oil, a couple of drops of darker paint—ivory black, phthalo—and, she thinks, a small handful of sand from the beach mixed in too. Let this place be a part of it, let it texture the sky.

Crane feels Ravi’s absence keenly as he watches Alana trip off across the lawn. Her gait hasn’t changed in the twenty years since he knew her best, but her shoulders have hunched. He wonders if the weight she seems to be carrying has to do with the Canadian man, who is gone now, or if it’s been there all along, if he’s been too caught up in his own grief to notice. Ravi is back—when? Saturday. Crane wraps his arms around his shoulders and tries to feel Ravi there too. Just a few days.

Crane took a trip to Canada while Alastair was there. Six weeks, he thinks it was, or was it seven? He’d wanted it to be worthwhile. He’d never been to North America before and guessed he wouldn’t go back. He was content to wander between the island and his family home in Ireland, playing music as he went and not even minding the weather. He never gets riled about

the unceasing greyness or the chill. There's something about the cold of the islands that soothes him. And there's something about the inconsistency that keeps him interested. Alastair used to say that once you've seen one force-12 gale, you've seen them all, but Crane always disagreed.

He'd seen the full force of weather in Cape Breton. In August, a hurricane came through and on a couple of nights the temperature went down below five degrees. A day later it shot up to thirty-five. The waves crashing on the small sandy beach were twice as tall as him. "It's the storm offshore," someone told him as he stood waist-deep in the water, staring. The national parks agency put up signs all over the place. Danger, riptide. No swimming. Crane stayed in the shallow water while Mairi and Alana stuck to the big round pool at the inner reaches of the estuary.

Alastair, though, would sit on the beach and nurse a Pepsi bottle with several fingers of whiskey poured in. To work himself up to the cold, he said. Then he would fling himself into the waves. The cold still made him scream.

One time Alastair's forehead collided with a boulder. He said later that he heard it even over the crashing waves: the thud of his temple against granite. "I think it was that quartz," he said when the tide receded, pointing at a big white crystal protruding at a slight angle out of the rock. He was sitting in a lawn chair with more whiskey and a bag of ice draped across his head. Grinning his crooked smile—what awful teeth that man had, Crane thinks, and smiles. Adult Alana is a silhouette in the distance now, at the far edge of the field.

“You’re gonna top yourself one of these days, Alastair,” Crane remembers saying, and Alastair gave him this look. Crane had seen the look many times before but that was the first time he can remember really registering what it meant. Wild and peaceful at the same time, not in the least perturbed about the possibility of accidentally topping himself on a lovely summer’s day at the beach.

“And you’ve got a wife and child to think about,” Crane had added. Mairi and Alana were sculpting an alligator in the wet sand.

“Well,” said Alastair. His jaw slackened a little. He set his mouth, took another sip, then sat up. “I need a snack,” he said. “Alana!”

Little Alana came running, all waggling arm and belly fat, loose teeth in her big smile, springy red hair. Bruises all over her legs from running and falling on the beach cobbles. “Bloody granite,” Alastair had said the first time, then picked up one of the cobbles and started pointing out all the minerals in it until Alana calmed down. “And the other thing that makes it so hard, see, lass,” he’d said, “is that it cools way under the surface of the earth, where it’s still really hot. And because it’s so hot, all these different minerals, they all get nice and organized together. They go find their friends. So the quartz finds all the rest of the quartz and goes, hey, mates, let’s make a big lump—like this one. See?”

Alana had nodded, sniffing. “But when something happens like a volcano erupting, all that nice melty rock, that gets shot right away onto the surface of the earth, in the air, where we are—

and this right now is really cold compared to where the lava is coming from—so the rocks harden really fast and we don't get to see all these pretty crystals. Our rocks at home are more like that. Maybe before we leave we can find a nice little piece of quartz for your mum to make into a necklace for you. What do you think?"

"How do you know all that?" Crane had demanded.

"Read the signs at that lookoff thing."

"You bloody stopped and read the signs?"

"Course. How do *you* find out anything about things?"

Days later, Alana was still talking about granite, pointing out the K-feldspar and getting upset that she could never remember what element K stood for. Now, though, she clapped her hands at the prospect of ice cream.

"Mate," Crane said. "Why don't I go with her. You should stay still for a few more minutes in case you have a concussion. That's a nasty lump you've got building up there." The size of a bottle cap, and growing.

"Och, I'm fine," Alastair said. "Don't you worry." He dumped two-thirds of the ice onto the beach, to make the bag smaller, then he made a show of tying it to his forehead with his kerchief. "Come on, love," he said. He took Alana's hand. Crane sat with his bottle of lukewarm water for a minute or two. Then he muttered "to hell with it," sighed, got up, and followed them into the pounding late afternoon sun. Sun like Crane hadn't expected in Canada; sun like they almost

never had in the British Isles.

By the time he arrived at the small takeout across the road from the beach, Alastair was in fine form, telling some story or other to the young woman at the counter until she practically swooned. Talking about the hike they'd done a few days ago, Crane realized as he got closer.

"I prepared for it," Alastair said, "with three mini pizzas, a whiskey and Pepsi, and a cigarette. And it was exactly right. Exactly the fuel I needed."

Her expression was flat. She didn't seem to get the joke, and Crane couldn't help but giggle. The girl was pretty, but unremarkably so. She was wearing a skinny black tank top that was too tight and too short, gaudy bra straps tangled in it. Fifteen years younger than either of them. "I think I'd die," she said.

"Doing what? Drinking whiskey before a hike?" Alastair had laughed, his big, enchanting laugh, and like it always did, it drew everyone nearby to look at him. "You'd never survive Scotland," he said.

"No," she said. "I'd die going up that mountain. I heard you have to pull yourself up by ropes."

"It's not so bad," Alastair said.

The girl shook her head. "I haven't done many of the hikes around, actually."

Alastair cocked his head and Crane could see even he was at a lost for words. "You live in such a beautiful place," he said. "Why..."

But another customer came up, and the girl looked past Alastair. “I’ll call your name when your burger comes up,” she told him.

Alana was halfway through her ice cream cone and her cheeks and the chest of her tank top bloomed with chocolate. Crane fell into line. He couldn’t get enough of the small-town poutine, dripping with mozzarella and homemade gravy. Everyone said it was nothing like Quebec but he saw no reason to care.

Crane goes back inside and sits at his kitchen table. Maybe he should call Ravi. Nah, Ravi won’t be awake yet. Maybe he should drive to Edinburgh and surprise him. But the prospect exhausts him. The dusty city air, the traffic. The *people*. Crane has clung to this island since Alastair died and for the most part it’s clung right back. Before Ravi, and when Ravi isn’t enough.

That summer in Canada was miraculous. Everyone said so. The air itself felt rarefied, heavy with heat and salt water. You could stick your tongue out and taste salt; you were always sticky with sweat, but it was okay because the ocean was always there to jump into. None of them were used to any of it and that made it feel all the more like a dream. They’d walk down to the wharf to buy lobster; Alastair tried to learn to jig for mackerel, but succeeded only in falling off the wharf and terrifying everyone. They drove the clanking secondhand Jeep down washed-out back roads, hiked long winding footpaths to get to the best swimming holes.

There was a natural waterslide in one of these places. Crane hadn’t really believed the young

man who'd told him about it, a bored cashier at the grocery store. "Just park on the side of the road," the man told him, pointing to a spot on the map. "Walk in along the south side of this river. There's four holes, we call them four irons. At the last iron, there's big rocks on this side"—another jab at the map—"you can jump off those ones, but the waterfall here, you can just sit down and slide. Your trunks will get ripped to shit but better than your arse, eh?"

"I'm not sure how far I trust that," Crane said.

The man laughed. "I'm not dead. I've done it a thousand times. Wish I were fucking doing it right now."

"Must be some Irish in you," Crane said.

"What makes you say that?"

"The mouth on you."

He'd smiled, a little coy, or was Crane imagining it? He couldn't have been more than twenty but Crane couldn't help wondering. "My dad's side," he said, "but everyone around here is Irish. That's why we're all alcoholics. County Cork, I think—my family."

"My folks are from there, too," Crane told him. "Maybe we're cousins."

The cashier shrugged. "Nice chatting," Crane said. He picked up his plastic bag of crisps and hot dogs, took himself back to the Jeep. Alone and alone.

When they arrived, Alastair had squealed like a child. The falls were taller than Crane had imagined, and forceful, roaring down the cliffside into a roundish pool below them. The water

was so deep it was black. Outside the waterfall's immediate point of contact, it was obsidian-smooth.

"Darling, I don't—" Mairi began, at the same time as Crane started to stutter, "I'm not sure—we could have the wrong one—it's pretty steep—"

"Baloney," Alastair said, pronouncing it the American way, an expression he'd picked up from the middle-aged neighbour he chatted with while she was hanging her clothes on the line. He jogged across the rounded rock face they were all standing on, paused for just a moment at the top of the waterfall. Crane removed his trainers, sopping wet from missing a step when crossing a stream half a kilometre or so back. The hot, reddish-brown stone made his feet feel alive and prickly. He bobbed back and forth, lifting one heel and then the next, eyes fixed on Alastair.

Alastair was standing in a cloud of pale haze on another round boulder, water rushing on all sides of it, steaming and brilliant. His body, legs and arms and chest and swim trunks and wild hair, was outlined with scorching white sun. The waterfall so loud it was almost like there was no sound at all, Alastair's mouth and arms moving, he was shouting something at them that they couldn't hear—and then he jumped off the boulder, landed smoothly, somehow, flat on his ass on the top of the cliff, square in the middle of the rushing falls—and he threw his arms into the air and was swept away.

The spruce trees around them glittered, their piercing green shapes wavering in the

stretching arms of light pushing between the branches. The sun splayed along each needle almost like dew. The spruces seemed to hold their breath too, seemed also to cock their ears toward the split-second of sound Crane, Mairi and Alana were able to make out: Alastair's yell as he was sucked down the cliff, into the black pool below.

Crane's phone rings. "Aye?"

"Hello, darling." Ravi's accent has lightened over the years, but Crane still warms when he hears it. He pictures Ravi's words in three-dimensional curlicues, floating into the air and wrapping him up. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm alright," says Crane. "Alastair's girl was over, she couldn't sleep. It feels—I still don't even really feel like he's gone."

"He isn't gone, darling," says Ravi. "He is still there with you. We feel him."

This: a trait that annoys him about Ravi. Crane says nothing, then he says, "Yeah. I'm fine. How is it down there in the world?"

"It's lovely, just lovely," says Ravi. "Avila is blooming in this new job. She is a reinvented woman. I am practically falling in love with her."

"That's great," says Crane, who has never been able to stomach sustained periods of time with Ravi's sister.

"Anyway, love," says Ravi. "I called to ask you for the password for the internet banking. I've forgotten it again."

Crane doesn't ask why Ravi needs to get into the bank account, or what money he's spending that they don't have. Each time Ravi goes to Edinburgh Avila lavishes him with the life of the wealthy, of the urban, and each time Crane has a passing (but niggling) worry that maybe this will be the time Ravi won't come back. He quavers a little at the thought. Tells Ravi the password, then says, "I love you."

Crane doesn't know how Ravi puts up with life on the croft when he so loves the city, how such a man could possibly be fulfilled by his life here, of helping Crane with simple tasks and the rest of the time reading *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* and whatever hot new novel is making headlines.

But lying down in his arms at night. Crane knows it is this that keeps Ravi here, the same way it keeps Crane with Ravi. Is that enough to grow old on? Older?

"I love you the most, darling," Ravi says. "I'll be home soon... What, sweetie?" A big laugh at something said in the background. "Could you hold on a minute, love?" Ravi says back into the phone.

After Alastair slid down the falls they heard a splash, and then they waited. Crane remembers wondering how Alastair could possibly be under the surface for that long, how far down the waterfall's force could possibly have propelled him, whether—with a sickening drop in Crane's stomach—the black water might not be as deep as it looked. Maybe the pretty man at the grocery store was playing a cruel joke; maybe they parked the car at the wrong brook, walked along the

wrong path through the wrong patch of shining, bewitching boreal forest. He thought his throat was closing over; he couldn't move, and then they heard it: the second splash.

The three of them ran to peer over the edge of the cliff, Mairi gripping Alana's arm and trying to keep the child behind her while Mairi looked down below. Alastair was bobbing around in the pool, grinning. "It's fucking fantastic!" he hollered. "Fucking incredible!"

Crane gave a giddy laugh and launched himself off the cliff. Landed a couple of feet from Alastair's head, but whatever angle he was at, his right heel shot into the water and slammed into Alastair's balls. Alastair yelled again, doubled over into a cannonball, gasped for breath. Crane had been sure not five minutes earlier that Alastair was dead and now he couldn't stop laughing. He was heaving water into his lungs with every wheeze and his torso started to cramp and he kept almost sinking, and still he kept laughing.

Alastair recovered and said, "I'm going to get Alana. You should come up and try out the waterfall proper, it's much better." So they hoisted themselves onto shore and wound their way along the side of the cliff to climb back, holding onto warped spruce trunks and tangles of juniper roots. Father and daughter went down the waterfall together. Alastair clutched Alana's back to his chest and cocooned his arms around her torso. His second slide was gentler, and Alana shrieked and gasped and demanded to be taken again and again.

Crane found himself breathless at the sensation of being scooped up and carried—because that was what it was: being carried, not being thrown—by the force of the rushing water. Their

skin yellow under the pool's tannic surface, water lilies glowing along the cliff's edges, a smattering of bright algae catching the sun. Mairi finally giving in, wrapping Alastair's t-shirt around her waist so she wouldn't rip her swimsuit bottom, closing her eyes and not letting out a sound as she slid down the falls. Alastair swam like a madman toward the base of the falls and got there just in time to catch her in his arms from behind. Crane watched as one hand landed, by all appearances accidentally, on a breast, the other on her stomach. Alastair whirled her around and kissed her. Even from the other side of the pool Crane could see the muscles working in Alastair's hands and forearms as he held her there and worked to stay afloat. And Crane can still feel the horrible loneliness he felt all of a sudden, the ache in his chest that drove him to ask Alana if she wanted to go for a walk further down the river.

Above the waterfall, the shoreline was gentle, with small patches of rapids here and there but mostly just the whisper of waves lapping along a pebbly shoreline. They peered into shallow pools edged by larger rocks; found a small cylinder of tiny pebbles stuck together and were shocked to see it moving, inching along almost like a caterpillar. When Alana poked it, a tiny head emerged from the tip of the cylinder, and she jumped and then laughed and laughed as the creature continued its walk.

Later they went to the library and discovered it was a caddisfly larva, walking around in the case it had built to protect itself while growing into an adult. After that Alana found the insects in every lake or quiet river they visited, and sometimes empty cases, which she always tried to look

through. The cases were always made of different things; they looked it up on the then-new internet and found that caddisflies had also been observed making cases out of gold and jewels, string and silk. “That’s sad,” Alana had said, squinting and frowning at the screen.

“Why?” Crane asked.

“They just want rocks,” she answered. “You can tell. Those gold lumps probably hurt. And they probably feel silly all dressed up like that.”

“I’m back, darling, sorry,” says Ravi. “I need to scurry in a few minutes, but how are you? Has anything happened since I’ve been gone?”

“I’m good, I’m good,” says Crane again, feeling mumbly and painfully rural. “It was nice to spend some time with Alana. Distraction from the fracking starting offshore, did I tell you that happened yesterday? They were real quiet about it, but I think everyone’s worn out. They put all that energy into the protest—and nothing. And you can’t exactly lie down in the path of an offshore rig and prevent it from drilling.” He sighs. Saying so many words at once seems to have expended a lot of energy. The idea itself is tiring: the drilling, and the impossibility of stopping it. The lackadaisical legal attitude toward the offshore, a couple of local men hired to work out there, doing god knows what. A tired bunch of humans trying not to look too directly at the new hulking shape just visible on the horizon. Another drink, why not.

“Maybe it’ll be good,” says Ravi. “We can certainly use some jobs.”

“Bloody hell,” says Crane. “I have to go.”

When they got back to the waterfall, Alastair and Mairi were perched on a rock at its base, getting soaked by the spray. Alastair told him the next day they'd had sex there, suspended in the peaty reddish water, Mairi's legs wrapped around his waist, his core muscles working "like bejesus" to keep them afloat. Some of the best sex he'd ever had, except that his balls were killing him the whole time from Crane's heel, and they were still sore and he thought he might never fully recover. And Crane had laughed, whacked him on the arm, said something stupid to cover up the emptiness that flooded him again.

The young cashier in the grocery store. *"Your trunks will be ripped to shit, but better than your arse."*

Don't be stupid, that didn't mean anything.

They established a ritual, every night or every second night, of building a fire on the beach below the house Alastair and Mairi had rented. They'd send Alana and the neighbour's boy—what was his name? Callum?—down the beach to collect driftwood, then sit around the fire with marshmallows and hot dogs on sticks. Crane and Alastair would play and Crane would sing, mostly folky old Gaelic tunes. Sometimes Mairi made bannock stuffed with chocolate chips and raisins, the dough sticky and always full of sand by the time you got it wrapped properly around the stick for roasting. Always after a few songs, Crane would lay his guitar down and Alastair would riff. Wild, rambling notes, improvised but so luminous and full of feeling Crane always caught his breath. They often attracted a few nighttime wanderers from elsewhere on the beach

or from up above, an enchanted crowd of strangers.

More often than not, Alastair would go stir-crazy after an hour or so, and say to Alana: “Let’s run.” The two of them would set off like demons down the beach. When it was particularly dry clouds of sand would kick up behind them, and during that week of brilliant August full moon, these clouds of sand sparkled. Grains of mica flying through the air.

“It’s magic,” Crane used to say to Mairi, and she’d laugh, not entirely pleasantly.

“It would be magic if he didn’t half the nights end up in a drunken temper tantrum,” she’d say.

Crane would say: “No, love, it’s still magic.”

He still believed that. With Alastair it was all magic or all pain. No middle ground. Sometimes Crane felt, watching him, that really there was no need for any of us to have a happy medium.

He always felt that way when he watched Alastair run.

Chapter 13

“Let’s go somewhere you’ve never been,” Comgall’s mother suggests the first weekend in October. Sunrise is burning across the lawn, lighting up the tips of the grass and burnishing the top of the yellow picnic table white. She pours him coffee. They drive half an hour north and start hiking through a hardwood forest, the leaves a million shades of yellow and orange.

When they emerge onto the plateau Comgall stops. The ground around him is red. The leaves of the low-lying vegetation are crimson on crimson on crimson, practically glowing for as far as he can see.

“Blueberries,” his mother says.

“Fuck,” says Comgall.

“Dear.”

The brilliant scarlet leaves lick at the blue sky like flames, luminescent.

“Sorry,” he manages, “I just—How haven’t I seen this before?”

They keep walking. The red is broken only by patches of feathery yellow tamarack. He reaches out and touches one of them. They’ve always been one of his favourite trees, soft and light. A couple of needles brush off into his hand.

They walk for four or five kilometres across the hills and come up to a little rise of bedrock, mottled grey granite. Comgall knows this granite. He can picture it in relation to the other rock

groups in the area, pinks and pale greens and yellows laid out on the map his Earth Sciences 1000 professor showed him when he told her where he was from. He can play through the different volcanic events in his mind, can tell just by sight and tactile memory which of the sedimentary rocks came from before the time of the inland seas and which came after.

He kneels down and runs his hand along one of the boulders. It's a little rougher than he'd expected, and he wonders how long it's been since he actually *touched* a piece of granite rather than sitting around thinking about how best to blast it.

And then they round the top of the hill and he forgets about the granite, forgets even the flaming blueberries.

The barren has begun to shine.

"Oh my god," he says.

"Yes, your favourite mineral, isn't it? I do remember things sometimes," says his mother.

"Oh my *god*. Why haven't you told me about this before?"

"I wanted you to see it at its best. It's not nearly as beautiful when everything around it is green. You haven't been home in fall for years."

The ground is covered in muscovite, silver crystals like a thousand broken mirrors. They crunch under his steps; they light up. He picks up a piece and grinds it in his hand. It leaves sparkles across his palm. Among the patches of muscovite-covered ground are huge outcrops of milky quartz, some as big as pickup trucks, worn to a smooth sheen.

He wraps his hand around another piece of mica. It gives a satisfying snap. He clenches his fist tighter.

The mineral crystal inside it crackles, then gives.

On the drive home he texts Brent. “Are you staying for the winter?”

“Where else would I be going?”

“Do you really think we can do this in the long term?”

“Do what?”

“Live here.”

“We’re doing it already.”

“I’m scared of winter. I’m scared I’ll go crazy.”

“Because no one’s around?”

“And because it’s fucking dark and awful all the time.”

Brent goes silent for a couple of minutes, then a longer message comes in. “No dude, you’ll be fine. Of course we can live here. We ARE here.” Then: “If we don’t live here, who will?”

“That’s reassuring logic,” writes Comgall. He means to be sarcastic but realizes that, in fact, he does feel reassured.

“Never said I was one to be reassuring or logical,” Brent responds.

Comgall checks Facebook. He ignores the little twinge that shoots through him when he sees

the image of Alana's painting (everywhere now, so striking on his phone's screen that he can hardly imagine the impact it must have in person, all light and movement and so much emotion he can hardly look directly at it); he skims past the angry font on the messily Photoshopped publicity piece; his eye goes straight to the text below it: "Despite all our efforts, fracking off the coast of our island commenced without notice overnight. Please sign the petition to save our marine ecosystems here." He sinks back onto the seat and texts Brent again. "You up for a beer later?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Just need to get smashed."

A couple of weeks later Brent stops by, a motorcycle and a couple of ratty suitcases in the back of the Ford. Comgall's banging one of the final treads into the new stairs.

"I did it," Brent says.

"What?"

"I broke up with Tasha. Told her I thought she was sleeping with her ex."

Comgall stands and lets his hammer fall to the dead grass. The lawn is spongy with last night's rain. "Why would you do that?"

"She *is* sleeping with her ex. Didn't seem necessary to explain the rest of it. But listen, man. I got a job for the winter at that ski place in Corner Brook. Starts next week. You want to take the

boat with me, maybe do a few hikes?”

There’s a cold wind coming off the water. The horizon is drawn with a line of creamy thunderstorm yellow.

“What happened to sticking it out here for the winter?”

“Listen,” says Brent. “I’ve put in my time. Been here more than not. You’re the globetrotter. Coming with me or not?”

The air tastes salty and thick. Comgall glances toward the ocean, the northeast. Newfoundland. He hasn’t been to the west coast since that trip with Alana when they were kids. Something tugs at him.

“Yeah,” he says, “why not.”

They take the ferry to Port-aux-Basques and drive to Gros Morne, stopping in Deer Lake to buy steak, mushrooms, potatoes and a bottle of Screech rum. They cook supper and get hopelessly drunk in a small efficiency unit in Trout River.

Comgall wakes early the next morning, feeling thick and too warm under the polyester bedspread. There’s a golden dawn seeping through the curtains. He can hear Brent snoring.

He swallows a couple of Advil and grabs a Gatorade and the keys to the truck. Heads for the mountains.

Up high the morning air is thin. The silence is a palpable presence, buoying him as he climbs. Comgall pants into it. The maple leaves are bright coral red and brimming with sparkling dew. What is Alana doing now? It's early afternoon there. The bracken will have turned copper, the heather holding onto a last thrust of purple against browning needles. That rusty hue, the sunlight on her hair.

He refreshes his Facebook app again. Nothing. She rarely posts anything. He doesn't text, and neither does she. She has forgotten him.

He climbs higher and the maples give way to a barren, the sun stretching long shadows from the few tamaracks that have managed to grow a little bit tall. Their twisty tuckamore shapes wavering, splintering darkness across low tufts of juniper.

And then a shape emerges from the other side of the mountain. It is blurry at first and then it resolves itself into sweeping antlers and then a pair of big and gentle eyes brimming with a wisdom Comgall immediately senses goes far beyond his own cognitive abilities. Then a broad chest, maned by a field of soft ivory. A long torso crinkled with dark patches, mud or shadows or a pattern in the fur. Long slender legs; the slightest buckle in the front left one as the caribou crests the ridge and takes several steps toward Comgall.

The caribou pauses. Braces the left leg for another step, the thigh quivering, but—Comgall can almost feel it, a whole-body grimace of pain—finds itself incapable. A cloud of steam puffs from the creature's nostrils. Comgall is holding his breath with the caribou, his whole body still.

The sky is huge and pale grey and spilling over with sun. The wind stops, the tamaracks go still.

The caribou takes the step, and another. Comgall could be next to it in seven or eight of his own steps, could lay his palm on the animal's fur. He aches to look closely at the hurting leg, a splint or poultice, soothe sore muscles. But he cannot move.

Then the caribou sees him, really *sees* him, meets Comgall's gaze and lets his liquid brown eyes rest there, full of pain and light and depth. The big chest heaves once; the knee buckles again. And Comgall can see it in the caribou's eyes: the giving way. Then the body reflects it too. First the haunches, then the back legs, then the front legs collapse underneath the big torso with care and grace. The caribou lies down, its gaze still locked with Comgall's.

He thinks of the turpentine-soaked air in the kitchen, Alana with the red-brown rag, paint streaked across her temple. *That whale knew me, like no one ever has.*

Comgall crouches for a moment and then settles cross-legged on the ground.

★

This is his thirteenth autumn. He will not die today, but he must rest. His head sways a little with the weight of his antlers and of the pain in his leg. The long hairs on his hooves sink sideways into the bog. The peat swells around him as he lets his body drop into the cool muck. The ache in his leg calms a little.

He has been trailing behind the herd for days, but he can still make out the impressions their feet made earlier this morning in the soft, saturated ground. Almost invisible—a crushed petal here, a stirred-up section in the mud just beyond it, light reflecting off the indentations left by furred hooves as each caribou crosses the barren in the footsteps of the animal before.

But he is not looking at these marks now, or at the spongy lace cushion of lichen spread across the boulders just a few metres away, or at the succulent wild mushrooms tucked into the crevasses below the juniper. Nor is he looking at the juniper itself, its dark, rich green, its scent blooming up through the hazy air. He is not looking at his injured leg, the blackened sore spreading across the knee and up toward his chest, the pain radiating deeper.

He isn't looking toward the horizon, or trying to catch a glimpse of the herd. He isn't attempting to evaluate the terrain or gauge the possibility of food between here and tomorrow, or the difficulty of keeping up his march behind them. He can still hear them. The reassuring clicking of the tendons that slide along the bones of their feet. The padding of their feet on moss. An hour's walk away, if he weren't limping.

But he is not listening for them either, even as their rhythm thrums on in the back of his awareness.

He is listening to the man.

The man's breathing, slowing as his body stills and settles, his thighs evening with the ground.

And he is watching the man: the man's blue eyes, like his own in winter. The man's eyes are intense, generous—and—he identifies it now—they are also afraid. Afraid for him and afraid for the man himself.

He takes in the man's scent, human sweat and food and urine and something a little chemical and the sweet scent of the deciduous trees below, their autumn lustre lingering on the man's clothes and hair.

What is he afraid of?

The man's presence is unsettling, but only just. It is not threatening enough to make the effort of moving.

He lays his eyes on the smaller human eyes in front of him.

Settles.

Breathes.

★

In November the windows of the old house rattle against the wind but don't keep the gusts out. Comgall keeps seeing something like a weasel out of the corner of his eye. He hangs the big wool blanket over the back door to try to keep heat from escaping. He roasts vegetables just to warm the place up, gets to know the daily and weekend programming schedule for CBC radio.

One and two. He goes to the grocery store almost every day and tries to make conversation with the cashiers.

The days get shorter and colder. Every couple of days a big patch of sun splits through the clouds, but it rarely stays. He's trying to rebuild the kitchen cabinets, but it's mostly beyond his skill level. He trips over his cold fingers and measures wrong.

He walks the beach. Every windy day takes away more sand that won't return until spring; this winter, like every winter, the backyard will get at least a few inches shorter as sediments slide back into the ocean.

This evening the wind makes his ears hurt. There's hail stewing in the clouds.

A dog runs up to him, grey with black spots, a squashed-looking face, round eyes, a pink collar. A pit bull, he thinks. He squats. "Hey."

The dog noses toward him, takes a couple of steps backward, then forward again.

"It's okay." Comgall holds his hand out. The dog sniffs it, then comes closer, puts her nose up to his. She snuffles and he can feel the wetness of her snout and the gentle tickle of her whiskers. Her breath smells like seaweed, or worse. Some rotten, irresistible washed-up flotsam.

The dog drags a thick, strong tongue from his beard to his forehead. Then she inserts her snout into his beard and begins to clean in earnest. "You sound like a pig," he tells her, but reaches out to rub her belly with his chilled hands. Under the short, coarse fur he can feel muscle and ribs.

“Pixie!” comes a high, female voice. “*Pixie!*”

A minute later she’s by their side, puffing. “Christ! Pixie!”

Comgall looks up, interrupting the grooming regime. “She’s fine. She’s cleaning my beard.”

“I thought she was eating you!” He’d guess the woman to be in her early fifties, trying to look younger. Harsh, dyed-black hair, stiffly straight but frizzling at the ends. Thick drawn-on eyebrows, lipstick. Tight exercise gear. He’s seen her before. He searches for a name but comes up with nothing.

“Nope. Just loving me. Are you a man-eater, missy?” He looks into the dog’s big eyes as he asks this, scrunches up her ears, one in each hand. She wriggles and tries to get back at his beard.

“Well, we haven’t quite got her out of the biting yet,” the woman says. “And she doesn’t always let go.”

“I’m sure it’s just puppy biting.”

“I friggin hope so. Come on, Pixie.” She takes Pixie by the collar and clips on a matching pink leash, decked out with rhinestones. She begins to leave, then turns back to him. “Late in the year to be visiting. Where you from?”

“Ah, I’m from here. Comgall. Down the beach.” He points toward their house.

“Annie’s little guy.” She says it like a challenge, one hand on her hip.

“Yeah,” he says, although it doesn’t seem to him that there’s enough of an age difference between them for her to put it that way.

“I don’t see you on the beach much.”

“I—” He’s down here almost every day, sometimes for hours. How to answer that?

But she doesn’t wait for an answer. “You been out west,” she says. It makes the village feel claustrophobic, sometimes: everyone’s knowledge of what you’ve been doing with your life, and then their need to have their narrow understandings of your last decade of existence confirmed as-is.

“I was, for awhile. Then Newfoundland a couple years.”

“Where’s next? I take it you’re not settling here.”

“Just finished a contract in Scotland. We’ll see what’s next.”

“Quite the globetrotter.”

Comgall cocks his head. He’s starting to feel simultaneously a little panicky and irked at himself for feeling this way. “I guess.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll all still be here when you get back,” she says. “Nice seeing you again. Take care of yourself, wherever you end up.”

She gives the leash a hard tug, wrenching Pixie away from the spot she’d settled in—laying on top of Comgall’s feet, belly up in hopes of a rub.

“Wait,” he says. “Sorry. I don’t remember your name.” His chest tightens but at the same time a space seems to open up in him. Ever since he can remember he has answered everyone’s questions satisfactorily, respectfully. Rarely if ever asking any of his own. Rarely if ever asking

anything at all of them, when they want the details of every move, every breakup.

How do you become part of a community?

The woman stops and turns around again, more slowly this time. A layer of cloud is dissipating and the diffuse late-day light gives her skin a warmer hue. Makes all of her look softer.

“Karen,” she says. “You went to school with my son. Christian.”

He feels like his throat might close over. “I—I remember him well.”

The boy who drove his father’s—or was it his mother’s boyfriend’s?—motorcycle over the side of the mountain. Three weeks in a coma then paralyzed from the waist down. A jewel-eyed boy, close friends with Brent and a lot like Brent, really. Comgall spent so much time with Brent during September and October. He tries to remember if Brent mentioned Christian’s name, or anything about his current circumstances.

“I—” Comgall leans over to pet Pixie again, so he doesn’t have to meet Karen’s eye. Every nerve in his body wants him to clam up, to leave. “How are you doing, Karen?”

Christian and Brent had argued about who would take the motorcycle for the first ride. Brent won; swung by Comgall’s house and Comgall got on the back. “Like a couple of faggots,” Brent said, but he revved the engine and they rode to the next village and back. It was so thrilling Comgall swore never to do it again.

Brent left. Comgall went back to working on his science project.

An hour later the sirens started going by.

For a second Karen looks like she might cry. “I keep holding up,” she says. “The winters get long. I don’t blame you for leaving, honey. Well—” she sighs. “Well. I do. I blame you for leaving, because before the accident he wanted to leave, and we said no... It’s nothing personal. I blame everyone. And now he can’t—well he *could*, but—”

“Karen,” Comgall says. She’s looking off into the distance. The fog has rolled back in and the mountains are lost in it now.

Christian was gay, came the rumours after the accident. Comgall had already had some inkling of this, though Brent claimed to be shocked. Comgall remembers Christian as a giggly, joyful kid, even into his teens, right up until the accident. He missed a year of school and when he came back they hardly recognized him.

“Karen,” Comgall says again, and finally she looks up and the words come, the ones he couldn’t say in Scotland, and he looks at Karen but it’s not her face he’s seeing. He’s seeing green eyes, freckles. Wide, crooked eyebrows. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Karen meets his eyes, all steel. “I fucking know,” she says. “But the winter is cold and long. Especially for him. Have a good one, wherever it is you’re going. *Leave* it, Pixie!” She jerks her arm and snaps the leash out of Pixie’s mouth. There’s a saliva-frothed rip in the spot in the nylon weave where the dog has been happily chewing for several minutes.

Karen and Pixie walk off. Comgall’s mouth is dry. He becomes aware that he is shivering all

over.

Etched on the darkening sky is a faded grey moon.

The shivering swells to quaking. His teeth chatter.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and heads toward the wharf. He'll walk home along the road tonight. He will not risk climbing back over those boulders in the dark. Not with the rising tide, not with more weather on the way.

The next morning Comgall carries his coffee to the edge of the yard. The sun is rising so late now, nearly eight o'clock. He can see rain streaming down over the mountain but the sky here is clear.

From below he hears something like, "*arp!*"

He steps closer and bends to look over the cliff.

He begins to laugh.

On the beach is a small, pale grey seal, maybe a metre long, with darker grey patches on its back and white under its chin. Big black eyes, prominent whiskers. The seal is flopping in a desperate frenzy across uneven cobbles toward the water, because behind him—chin on the ground, tail and hips wagging in downward dog position—is Pixie. Her colouring almost the same as the seal's. A big, sloppy, open-mouthed pit bull grin on her face.

"Pixie!" Comgall hollers through his laughter.

She straightens and looks up at him. Wags some more.

Then she runs to the seal, does a circle around it, and swats its side with a front paw.

Comgall feels a flicker of sympathy for the creature and walks toward the stairs. The seal has no idea how much it resembles a legless dog. Nor, probably, any idea how much Pixie would love a playmate.

By the time he gets to sea level, the seal has disappeared into the breakers. “You brat,” Comgall says to Pixie. He squints down the beach. No sign of Karen, or anyone. “Come on,” he says to the dog. “Guess I’m going to walk you home.”

She cocks her head at him and lifts an ear.

“Okay, fine,” he says. “You’re right, wouldn’t kill me to throw a stick for a few minutes first.”

The tide is low and the beach is strewn with hummocks of soggy seaweed. Kelp heaped like ancient worn-down mountains, mustard-glinting clumps of bladderwrack that trail skirt-like off the boulders. Feathery clusters of purple Irish moss; the odd papery, neon green shock of sea lettuce. The wind is up and the smell is almost overwhelming. Amidst the seaweed’s entrails—long webs of dirty mint-green rope, hard styrofoam buoys with chunks bitten out of them by the tides, broken beer bottles, a Molson Canadian lawn chair—he finds a ratty spruce branch.

Pixie stares at him, unmoving except for her haunches, which sway in slow motion. He pulls his arm back over his shoulders and launches the stick into the air.

He barely even registers that she is moving and she is halfway to being directly under the airborne stick, two-thirds, three-quarters, and the stick touches down in a little cloud of sand near the marram grass, just inches away from Pixie's snout. She grabs it and flings it like there's nothing else in the world but the stick and its motion.

Comgall laughs into the wind, the roar of the ocean. The cold travels through his hoodie and along the hairs on his chest.

He's brought back to another day in this spot, a calmer one but also cold, before he met Alana. His mother chatting with a stranger on the beach, a wiry man with bright eyes and a foreign accent. "Sweetie, this is Alastair," his mother told him. "He's going to be living in the yellow house with his family for a few months. He's from Scotland."

And Alastair kneeling next to him, saying: "I like marram grass too." Saying: "Do you know what a beach is, lad?" Comgall looking up at him wide-eyed. Of course he knew what a beach was, but *did* he, if this extraordinary stranger thought he might not?

"A beach is a relationship between water and land," Alastair had said. "We think of them as piles of sand, but it doesn't actually matter what's on the shore. And if it weren't for that grass all the sand would whoosh back out to sea."

Comgall knows now how essential these root systems are. Biology, but bigger forces too, a plant holding up the stuff of the earth. Back then he asked *why*, but Alastair had already moved on, yammering something at Comgall's mother, bouncing from foot to foot. His hair was thick,

auburn, always so tangled. One of the first adults to speak to Comgall as if he might say something interesting back.

Pixie drops the stick in front of him. He hurls it toward the horizon.

Then he runs with her. His sneakers sink into the seaweed, become instantly soaked. Fuck it, he thinks, and he pulls his shoes and socks off, tosses them toward the stairs. He runs and the kelp is slimy but its lengths are wide and flat and the piles of it feel sturdy once he has figured out the kind of pressure he needs to exert with his toes. He runs and the wind parts to make way for him. Pixie is running next to him now, nipping at his pant legs and then taking off in wild loops, coming back with the stick and scraping the back of his calves with it and looping off again.

He arrives at the far edge of the cove's curve and collapses into the damp sand, sucking in salt air.

Pixie's huge tongue on his face, in his mouth, in his eyes, lapping at the sweat. She buries her tongue in his beard again, moves on to his ears.

"Okay, okay, I get it!" He covers his face with his forearms and rolls over. Pixie lets out a long groan and resumes panting.

Alastair and his mother had chatted so long the tide came in and by the time they were heading back toward home, the only path was straight through the seaweed, piled up like now but with jellyfish tangled up in it too. It had seemed like there were millions of them. "Take your shoes off," Alastair had suggested. "Those are moon jellies, they won't sting." Bits off them

clumped off in fatty lumps that squished between his toes. Everything wetly glinting, the sun never quite revealing what was jelly and what was illusion.

The water on this quiet side of the point is the murky brown of burned bacon fat. Alastair could be here, reaching out his hand to help Comgall off the rocks—so little does this place change. And so visceral the memory, embedded in muscles that know how to run on a surface at once slippery and sinking, a tangled knot of itself and any number of dangers within: used syringes, broken glass, pinching crabs. A filleting knife dropped overboard, a sharp fragment of cooked lobster shell.

He eases himself back onto the beach.

A beach is a relationship between land and water.

“Come on, sweetie,” he says to Pixie. “Your mother is probably worried.”

★

The November seaweed wriggles, still, with life. The algae, their holdfasts ripped away from the sea floor by violent autumn tides, huddle on the beach and begin to rot. Their rotting is pungent and gaseous; it gives off heat. Sandhoppers burrow into this heat, nestle between layers of kelp that moult, as the year wilts, from dark green to deep rust-brown to black. Tiny, hard, translucent like old glass: as the air above them chills, as the afternoons grow darker and the

waves suck up sand and spit out boulders, the sandhoppers are ready for a long sleep.

When four rough-soled paws bound across the surface of their shelter, some of them sense a predator. The dog's nostrils register their presence too. Although she is focused on other things, her thudding reverberates through their insect brains long after she has gone. The stillness is fragile for them now. An ancient fear rises in their muscle memory, an awareness older than any of their bodies. Riptide: at any moment, possible.

The worms, too, are still here. They, too, are going deeper. A slow wriggle to another pause. In winter their centre of gravity pulls downward and underneath. Gathering into geothermal heat.

The algae pulse. Despite their soaking weight the mounds shudder in the wind.

Here and there is a struggling sea urchin, winnowing with the last of its strength across the drifted piled-up kelp. This one is here because she ate through one holdfast too many, sent the kelp rushing upward. A killing or a setting free.

Human feet run across, oblivious to all of them.

The other sea urchin: he just got caught up in the rush. But he plods along. His many feet suck onto the kelp hills, then release. His spines begin to wither. Every cell of him, every awareness he has, sucking and releasing toward water.

*

At the door Karen is sheepish, hungover, maybe still a little drunk. She gasps, kneels, wraps her arms around Pixie.

“Thank you,” she says, locking her eyes on his. “I really mean it.”

He nods.

“Don’t know what I’d do without this animal,” she adds. “I mean that, too.” She eyes the empty coffee cup swinging from his hand, then sweeps her gaze back to his face. She nods at the cup. “Can I refill that for you?”

“Um,” says Comgall. A small grey cat rushes into the porch, trilling, and rubs against his ankle.

“That’s Muffy,” says Karen. “She’s a monster, don’t pick her up.”

“I can always use more coffee,” Comgall says.

Christian is thinner than Comgall remembers, and although it’s been a decade he hardly looks a day older. He’s sitting in front of a woodstove. The area around it, the whole house really, is impossibly clean. Comgall pulls out a kitchen chair and sits to face Christian. Then he stands again and leans awkwardly into the wheelchair to hug him. “Hey, man.” It’s like Comgall hadn’t known how lonely he was until now. How much the scraps of friendship they had in high school seem to mean now, how powerful this one friendly face. And Christian’s *is* a friendly face. Nothing like the bitter kid he was in the couple of years after the accident; nothing like his

mother. Christian returns the hug with warmth and Comgall feels himself relaxing. When he sits back, Muffy hops onto his lap and curls in.

“Well shit,” says Christian. “You’re the last person I was expecting to see back here. It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too. I can’t say it doesn’t feel weird.”

“This time of year is always weird. You’re not alone.”

Comgall nods.

“You’re wondering what I do the rest of the year,” Christian says.

“I, I don’t—” Comgall begins to stammer but Christian cuts him off.

“It’s cool. I work at the visitor centre. I talk up all the hiking trails. I love it, honestly. I love meeting people.” He shrugs. “I’m not the best at hiking, but sometimes I roll down a hill and pretend I’m on the bike.”

Karen appears with coffee and Comgall is grateful to be able to take a sip instead of responding. “Anyway, Brent tells me you went to Scotland and fell in love,” Christian goes on.

“And now you’re here. Why are you here?”

“Brent?” Comgall asks. He feels a little stab when he thinks about Alana, but also a surge of an annoyance that’s been building in him for some time: “Why does everyone keep asking me why I’m here?” he says. “My family is here. It’s a beautiful place. It needs people. *You* guys are all here—” He realizes too late what he’s said, tries to figure out how to backtrack.

But Christian just laughs. “I don’t think we’d be asking if you didn’t look so damn miserable,” he says. “Like Mum.”

“What?”

“Mum never wanted to be here. She keeps trying to convince us to move, telling me I’d have more opportunities in a city. Public transit and jobs.” He shrugs. “But this place has kept me afloat. I *would* like to land somewhere with more than twelve people on Tinder eventually.”

Comgall sees the first hint of uncertainty cloud into Christian’s eyes. “I’m just not there yet. You know?”

“Yeah,” says Comgall. “It’s not that hard, though. Learning a new place. You’d be okay. I mean, you seem... you seem like you’re doing amazing.”

“You’ve caught me on an optimistic day,” says Christian. “Seriously. Why are you here?”

Comgall thinks for a minute. “I don’t want to say it’s because I have nowhere else to go,” he says. “It’s just... I just came from this small community in Scotland. And I did fall in love there and I did get rejected and I ran away. But I feel like maybe I ran away from here first. And maybe I’m trying to learn not to. Does that make sense?”

The woodstove’s flames reflect on the black-painted metal of his wheelchair. Christian says, “I guess that makes sense. But sometimes running away is also running *toward*. And sometimes staying is backing up.” He chuckles and whacks the arm of his chair. “I know all about grinding gears just to stay still, in a town built beside frigging mountains.

Chapter 14

On the other side of the Atlantic a tiny pipefish flits in discomfort. There's water rushing at her from above, disturbing the smooth ribbon she normally cuts through the small section of ocean she calls home.

The rushing gets stronger and she feels something else, too—something mildly noxious tumbling onto her, impeding her—she gives up on restraint, she jerks and writhes, her tough skin bending at an awkward angle midway down her back. She bumps her small, round nose against a strip of waving kelp, rich green.

She reels backward. She catches a glimpse of a tiny red crustacean suspended in the water off to her right, but it flits behind another kelp frond before she can gather her senses.

The noxious rushing persists and she steels herself against its current. Her sleek, rust-coloured ribbon of a body glows.

The pipefish might have been more concerned about these invasions, but she is drunk with the urge to dance and mate. She pushes forward; she can see him, just there. The strange downward-moving water makes a wall between them but she shores up strength. Desire propels her forward. A wave of ill feeling passes through her as she shoots through the current. But then she is on the other side, and she is pulsing forward, and he is there, and she is dancing for him, wriggling, dancing.

She is impatient now, and exhilarated; she is caught up in her dance and in the tantalizing curve of his body and how it plays against the darkly lit ocean as he cocks his head in a posture of feigned hesitation. This in itself a part of the dance.

She breathes now with energy, puffed up on her own power, wriggling more quickly. She will glide close to him soon, they will rise upward together, she will release the eggs that even now are pressing for escape. As many as he can hold will cling to him, he and they will trade nutrients as he protects them until they, too, emerge as free-swimming fish. They will move through the seaweed forest, slipping between algae nearly the same colour as their bodies. They too will swim and dance, will search for food, will rise and twine in swirling pairs. They will breathe this water.

After today, she will not think of them again.

She will dance again, but her unease will return each time she passes through this alien current. Next time the unease will linger. She will hesitate before dancing. She will maybe release more eggs than usual, just in case.

The time after that, both of them may decide not to bother at all. If the water keeps rushing, if the chemicals keep blooming into the ocean around them.

*

Alana hasn't been keeping track of the letter writing, the interviews with the media people,

the mutterings of just blockading *something*—but what? Blocking off the company road would be a joke to an operation based in the sea. They'd be able to keep the couple of guys who work out there from going to work, but then they'd have to deal with them lazing around at the tearoom ordering pints.

She tries to rouse from within herself some distress about this, but can't seem to move her anxieties beyond her personal life. And there's a new painting beginning to shape in her head. She picks apples with her mother, helps her make preserves. She hangs out with Todd, like Tegan told her to. She lets him kiss her, lets his hands travel, feeling both in need of his attention and indifferent to it. She participates, but just.

Better are the hours she spends walking across the hills, or lying on the sand, feeling a billion grains of it against her back. The mornings spent pushing through the forest, her mobile left at home, listening to her father's voice reciting poetry. Lately it feels like his voice is all around her.

She has been, she tells people, plotting out her next move, but the move always seems to be to stay. Another week, another month, until winter. "You're waiting for something," Tegan said the other night. "Is there something you haven't told me? Or—do you not know what you're waiting for, either?"

There's no room in Mairi's house for a four by four foot canvas, so Brenden hung it—unprofessionally, but sturdier than any gallery job—in Matty's bothy until someone figures out what to do with it. Alana goes in there and sits with it while she sketches. Undulating waves of

charcoal slip across the page, keeping her fingers busy while she waits for an image to settle.

She can feel the whale's presence still.

A dragonfly begins to form amidst the squiggles on her page.

She turns it into a lizard.

Todd walks in. He sits on the couch next to her and gives her hand a squeeze. "That's cool.

What is it?"

Alana shrugs. "I'm just doodling. Waiting for the next thing. What's up?"

"I'm trying to figure out what's next, too. I'm at the point where I need to be in Edinburgh a lot for meetings and I'm thinking maybe I should go back there for the winter. Dad's a bit more stable. But I don't know... do we just give up?" He looks almost haggard. She leans into him.

"I don't know what more there is to do," Alana says. "I don't know about everyone else, but Mum's getting tired. She hasn't said as much but I can see it on her face. She's ready to move on."

"She's not the only one." Todd sighs. "I'm wondering... I'm wondering if you might reconsider trying to sell it. Garner a little more publicity... it's awfully humid in here during the winter. I hate the idea of it just cracking up and going to ruin."

Alana's flash of sympathy disappears and she pulls back and faces him. Before she can speak he says, "Okay, okay, I'm sorry." Alana can feel her heart buzzing but she remains silent while Todd stands up and walks toward the door. "I guess I am in this alone," he says. "See you

around.”

Alana curls into a ball on the sofa and wonders whether he’s right. Maybe she should get over herself.

She opens the Facebook app on her phone and is hit with a photo of Sean Robertson, not looking much older than he was when she knew him. His father Chad posted it—when did she accept a friend request from Chad? In the picture Sean is smiling in his geeky way and holding a can of cheap beer. Drunk enough, she judges, to not hate himself. Underneath it Chad has written: “Sean just before his diagnosis. Today is the sixth anniversary of his death. We miss you more every day, mate. Best son a father could ask for.”

She sees Kayla, defiant next to the gas can, what does Kayla care about marine mammals when the ocean took away her brother? What does Kayla care about Alana, when she didn’t even pay enough attention to the community that raised her—the community that carried her through her own grief—to notice Sean was gone?

Gavin, in the tiny basement flat, both their noses clogged with mould: *Do you EVER think of anyone else?*

What did the painting accomplish, anyway? The project ploughed forward. People are exhausted.

Gavin: *I want to tell you to make a bloody decision for once, but I know you won’t, so why don’t you just stop whining and listen to me?*

How do you make something part of a place?

There are plenty of photos of the painting floating around.

Alana texts Todd.

“I’ve figured out the next protest move with the painting,” she writes.

“What?” comes the response, almost instant.

“Let’s burn it,” she writes. “Let’s throw the ashes into the ocean.”

“Omg!!!! You’re brilliant!”

Chapter 15

All at once, one afternoon it all starts beating at him like rain. Comgall's head pounds as he pulls on his Blundstones, an old down jacket. He stops at the gas station for gas he doesn't really need and coffee he knows will be burnt.

"How's your friend?" the kid asks as he wrenches open the gas cap. "Tasha's latest victim."

"Oh—Brent—he's doing well," Comgall tells him. "He's gone to Newfoundland for the winter. Working at a ski resort."

"That dude in the wheelchair is going to miss him," the teenager says. Comgall feels another wave of shame at how quickly he'd assumed Brent would have abandoned Christian. How quickly he abandoned Christian himself, back in high school.

The kid barrels on: "I'd be so fuckin pissed if I were him."

"Who?"

"Brenton."

"Why?"

"Because of what she did? Going back to Devon? Dev's who she fucked around on me with, too. I don't know why she don't just marry Dev."

"Right. Well, I think she and Brent probably needed to go their own ways anyway."

The teenager shakes his head, looks off across the road. Comgall follows his gaze but all he

can see is bland boreal forest, blurred by fog and starting to look a little dead.

“Know what I seen the other day?” the teen says. “A huge fucking bear. I’ve seen bears before and this one was *huge*. Like comparing a coyote to a fuckin timber wolf. And then a moose showed up, a female or a male with no antlers yet. And these crazy skinny legs, it was almost falling over, like it hardly knew how to walk.”

“At the same time as the bear was there?” Comgall asks, captivated. This small-town storytelling skill—had Comgall missed that day in school?

“Yeah. We were smoking up out behind Colin’s place—well, hadn’t started smoking yet,” he amends, as if to preserve credibility. Comgall chuckles. The boy goes on: “You know, down Doug’s road up in the woods. This huge powerful bear and a little wobbly moose. And the bear up and ran away. It was obviously like *totally* panicked, you could see it on its face. Like it just saw the moose, didn’t even *think* about it, and said get me the fuck outta here.”

“Shit,” Comgall says.

“It just made me think, you know? Like why was the bear scared instead of pissed. He was there first, eating his berries, and this bitch just comes charging up out of nowhere and says run, and he runs? And then—” the boy is building steam, a flush slipping over his smooth cheeks, since when do teenage boys have such perfect skin? Comgall has a vision of himself in high school, acne-ridden and awkward, barely able to say a couple of sentences to anyone he didn’t know well—“then I got my smoke on and I started thinking, who the frig do I think I am—

thinking I know better than a bear? Maybe the bears know it *all*. Maybe we should all be more like them. Who gives a fuck how big he was. He *knew*.”

The kid sighs. “But,” he goes on, “now I’m back down here and the shrooms are wore off—”

“I thought you said you were smoking—”

“Yeah man, that too. Now I’m back down here and the shrooms are wore off and like I can’t even *process* it. I thought I knew it all, for a while there. World peace, learned from a bear. I was fucked.”

“You seem to remember some of it.”

“But I don’t know what it *means* anymore. It felt so clear, like I was going to come back down here and everything would make sense, you know? Now I’m back and I still haven’t even, like, decided what courses to take when I go back to Halifax in January.” The gas tank has been full for some time now, and the pump has clicked off. The kid pulls the nozzle out of the car. The metal is wet and dirty and shines with a slate-like lustre in the dull light. The smell of gas is strong but not so strong that Comgall can’t smell, below it, the sweet, fresh scent of the forest, that sharpness it acquires on cold mornings when the leaves are gone and the air spreads wide through the evergreens.

The kid grimaces at the nozzle and sticks it back onto its hook. Sighs again. “How old are you, man? Do you know what you’re going to do with yourself?”

“I’d like,” Comgall says, and surprises himself with what comes next: “I’d like to be able to

live in a place like this and not have it be assumed that I want to be somewhere else. I'd like this to be a place to come to have a good life... I'm thirty."

The kid stares at him. "Fuck, man. That's..." He nods his head up and down several times, slowly. "I just can't—" He lets the sense of generalized impossibility hang in the thin air for a few seconds.

He opens his mouth to say something else, but is interrupted by a voice coming from behind Comgall, an older, gruffer version of the kid's own voice: "There's nothing wrong with life here."

Comgall turns and it's a man who must be the kid's father—Dennis someone he thinks. A friendly guy with an oval-shaped face, a greasy grey beard and a worn sweater. Dennis makes contact with small but inviting eyes. "It's only you who assumes you want to be somewhere else." He turns and goes back into the building.

Comgall had intended to pay with a credit card, the nearest CIBC two hours' drive south and exorbitant ATM fees everywhere here, but he pulls two twenties out of his wallet. "Keep the change," he tells the kid. Gets back in the car and aims north. He wonders as he drives away why he didn't ask the kid why he isn't doing fall term class, didn't ask him his name. He can picture the bear, can conjure the musky smell of a wild animal too close. He can see the majestic, velvety lumbering hunter taking off at a canter at the mere sight of a weak and antlerless herbivore. And he can see what the boy meant: how there is some kind of unfathomable wisdom in that. How if you could only grasp the trail of logic or, maybe, tap into the deeper bodily knowledge that made

the bear run—if a person could grasp that, small choices like winter term courses hardly mattered, and *bigger* choices—well.

A few kilometres north there is a short trail that runs up the side of a smaller mountain, and this is where Comgall finds himself. The path is strewn with wet leaves, yellow and red, mostly maples. Birches stretch above him, the leaves translucent orange against the luminous sky, the trunks chalk-white.

He comes to a little hollow about halfway up where they used to party in high school, when the beach was crowded with tourists or they'd been kicked out of someone's house. The hollow is surrounded by a rough circle of young spruce. Inside it are several boulders and an ancient, rotten maple lying on its side. Comgall presses a hand against the stripped, spongy wood. When he was a teenager, the tree was solid: a perfect bench.

That hadn't stopped his peers from wanting to burn it.

A wind comes up and from far above, Comgall hears the falling water before he feels it. The treetops rustle: tiny collisions, or caresses. Drops of the cold, sharp rain they've been holding onto fall to Comgall's face and leave brief, intense patches of cold.

That one party—the last one.

They'd made a small fire. Someone had brought a package of slimy Larsen's hot dogs and they were trying to cook them on branches that kept lighting on fire. They had beer, coolers, cheap vodka. Comgall was hunched over at the edge of the group trying to drink whiskey Brent

had stolen from Comgall's dad's liquor cabinet. He'd begged Comgall, who had access to a car, to drive them up here. Comgall kept refusing, until Brent said, "Fuck, man. You think you're ever going to get a girl walking around staring at rocks? Gonna be a virgin when you graduate?"

Probably, he'd thought, but he felt his face grow hot and decided Brent was right. "Sweet friggin mackerel. Fine." (*How* had his brain come up with these sayings? No one, he's sure now, ever said that. They said holy mackerel. Sweet frig. Mother of frig. Jesus Roosevelt Christ.)

He looks now at the light glancing off the moss, green sprinkled with small yellow aspen leaves. He read somewhere that the oldest living organism in the world is a stand of trembling aspen. Somewhere in the States—Utah, maybe. A stand of aspen looks like a group of individual trees, but it's actually one huge being, connected underground.

This is a fact he knew in high school. He had probably tried to share it with someone, the whisky burning in his throat. It was the only way he knew how to make conversation back then, which was likely why he so often stayed quiet.

Comgall was staying industriously quiet when the group realized they were out of wood. Outside of their hollow the darkness was thick, and a northeast wind was cooing. No one wanted to go looking for more deadfall.

"Hey," Kyle Barron said, "Let's just burn that one." Pointing at the maple log.

The day before, Comgall had seen a family of chipmunks climb out from a hole on the side of the fallen trunk. The mom came first, followed by six or seven tiny replicas not much bigger than

Comgall's thumb. They walked in a train, each with its front paws propped on the backside of the sibling in front of it. Comgall had kept so still they walked right in front of him, crossing the path and climbing the little embankment on the other side.

This year's chipmunks would be practically adult size at this point, he thinks. Filling their cheeks for winter, snuffling through the wet leaves, tiny noses alight with the smell of rain.

Seventeen-year-old Comgall clenched his knuckles, because after he thought of the chipmunks he thought of something else too—"Jesus," he said. "You can't burn that tree. Look how dry everything is. You'll burn the forest down. And all of us."

"No way," said Kyle. "It's not even July."

"So?"

"Everyone's burning."

"Yeah, burning *grass*."

Kyle caught Comgall's sarcastic tone and narrowed his eyes. "Think you're smarter than me, smartass?"

Comgall said nothing and felt himself shrink.

"Thought so," said Kyle. He reached over to the campfire, picked up a half-charred branch. Flames rose off its end like a torch.

"Kyle," said Comgall, looking around him to see if anyone else saw the peril. "If that tree lights up, really lights up, it will spread to those other standing dead trees and then possibly the

whole forest. It could burn our *houses* down.”

“Stop being a fucking pussy.”

Comgall was close to tears. He could feel them, hot and wet around the inner rims of his eyes.

Kyle dropped the burning stick into the hole in the trunk.

What would this forest look like now if it had burnt? These young evergreens might have grown to around this height in thirteen years. He can't remember them from high school, but probably they were there, even if they were just tiny saplings getting his socks wet as he walked through them.

But it isn't because of him the forest didn't burn.

Brent had stepped up to Kyle, pushed him away from the fallen tree, grabbed the stick and thrown it back into the campfire. Used his own palm to snuff out the small flame that had begun to bristle and crack along the dry bark. There was a moment of stunned stillness. Kyle staring at his wrist where Brent had grabbed it, Brent lobbing his hand back and forth and saying, “*fuck*, that was hot,” like he hadn't expected it. Comgall swelled with warmth and gratitude for Brent and with another, slower feeling he recognized as shame. He had wanted to do what Brent did, but he didn't.

Then, as if they all sensed the shift in the atmosphere at once, everyone went quiet.

“Motherfucker,” said Kyle, and he pulled back his fist and swung it into Brent's cheek.

Comgall remained motionless.

Thirteen years later he's breathing hard, the hill scraping the bottom of what his lungs are capable of. He pauses and takes in the scene, the spruce needles tipped with drops of water refracting light.

He takes out his phone and tries to take a picture. It's a hopeless blurb of white streaks and purple sunspots, and it's grainy. But he feels a sudden surge and texts the photo to Alana.

He doesn't write anything to go with it—what is there to say?—and immediately regrets it.

Near the top it begins to snow. Fat flakes meander from a low, smoky cloud. The granite bedrock is crusted on the most exposed outcrops by fruticose lichens in mint green or sharp sage.

Comgall never did help Brent that night in the forest, though—he reasons—he certainly helped him with dozens of homework assignments and went on to proofread Brent's essays all throughout their undergraduate degrees. But that night.

Brent punched Kyle back, of course. Both their faces twisted, passionate, half lit in flickering orange and half dark. Like an old oil painting. The blood, when it started to come, was black in that light, and slick as crude oil. "*Fight, fight, fight,*" almost everyone began to chant, forming a circle around the two of them. Comgall felt like his heart was pounding to the same rhythm, getting faster with the chanting, winding up to something—

And then Brent stumbled, and Kyle took advantage. Gave him a hard shove to the chest.

And Brent fell backward. Into the fire.

Then it was like everything went into slow motion. Someone, a girl, Frida Strickland, Comgall thinks, ran over and pulled Brent to his feet. His jacket had caught, and as Frida stepped backward to avoid the flames herself, Brent flailed briefly, both arms suspended in the air, one foot on the ground and one lifted off of it, searching wildly for balance. His torso a black shape lit by flames, framed with thin white birches.

Comgall stepped forward, reached out an arm.

Then Brent seemed to suddenly regain his senses, and flung the jacket off. It landed in the fire. Brent lunged forward and Comgall caught him. Wrapped his arms around Brent's shoulders, gripped him more tightly than he could remember ever gripping anything.

"Homos," Kyle said, but his voice was trembling.

The sound of sirens rose in the distance. Someone had called 911. It must have been Stephanie, the only kid in their graduating class whose parents—her father was the doctor—could afford a cell phone.

When he reaches the top of the mountain, Comgall sits on a little granite ridge and draws his knees into his chest. He pulls the hood of his coat up over his head against the snow, leans his chin on his knees, and looks out. There is the bay. There are the mountains on the other side. These shapes, from this distance, do not change.

There, too, his mother's house. And the gas station, the little cafe that's long closed for the season, the Anglican church. The forest stretching out on all sides of the village, a mix of pumpkin-orange and evergreens so dark they look black. The forest has more dead wood in it now than it did when Comgall was in high school, and still it has not burned. There hasn't been a significant wildfire here since before he was born, though the forest badly needs it.

He thinks of the text to Alana and his heartbeat goes faster.

But then he looks back out over the ocean. Pictures Brent falling.

He can hear the snow now, miniature thuds hitting the hood of his coat.

He stands, unzips his collar and lets the air get at his chest. It is palpable almost as touch. He closes his eyes for a moment. This mountaintop, this snow, these red leaves and green needles and slow and hardy lichens. The air.

"You'll be a virgin when you graduate," Brent had said, and he was right. And how little it mattered now.

When was the last time someone touched him?

Was it her? Can it have been that long?

Of course it can have. But here on the mountain the idea of aloneness seems almost comical. The world is so full of so *much*. It does not matter when he last had sex or whether he will again. It doesn't matter that she hasn't texted him since he left, doesn't matter that all of his friends have gone for the winter, or that he can hardly visualize a day into the future, let alone a year.

His phone pings.

“That’s gorgeous,” she’s written. “Just like how I remember late October there. That light.”

The sun seeps out again, patchy and frail, becoming brighter with each gust of wind pushing aside the fog.

There’s a short balsam fir to his left, clinging to a dramatically angled piece of bedrock, flush with last spring’s bright green growth. Comgall reaches over and breaks off a couple of needles. He crushes them and holds them up to his nose. The smell hits him behind his eyes like tears.

The sting hovers as he begins to walk down the mountain, and the scent stays with him long after he’s tossed the needles into the blueberry plants that line the cliffside. The smell of Christmas, of the forest, the sharp scent of the boreal-lined mountains.

A light rain starts up. Drops roll down his glasses in wild zigzags like each one has a specific place to be. The lenses fog up with his breath and cover his field of vision in a greyish haze.

Comgall takes out his phone and pulls up the Expedia app.

The tiniest smear of balsam sap tugs at the thin layer of skin at the very tip of his index finger.

Chapter 16

He is furrowing into the earth and the earth is wishing for rain. The soil is parched at depths that normally remain moist channels for rain seeking groundwater. It is crumbly but still sweet. His nostrils twitch in the dryness but gulp air nonetheless.

Still: there is an uneasy edge to the air lately. A tension that has something to do with rumbling, above and below. Far below and out to sea.

He scurries, scrapes, scoops. His tiny toes blur with the motion—they move so fast they would be blurry even if he were not nearly blind, even if he did not see nearly everything with his snout, with his feet. He finds water and sucks some up, swills its freshness around his mouth. In the water he again tastes that tension. Snatches up a fleshy earthworm and loses himself in that.

Then he grabs a scent—newly tumbled soil—and off he noses toward it. The distant rumbling starts up again, not too loud this time, and he can't identify it so he bustles on. His eyes never mind the dark and thickness of his surroundings but his body takes on a little extra caution.

The hair of his coat is short and coarse, the same brown-grey hue as the wet earth. He takes in the soil's texture as he scuttles and slides. The soil makes way, urges him onward. Dark and dark, lusciously pungent. The aroma of the long dead mixed with things fresh and ferric, things very much alive.

The soil tells him this, too: up-above the island is brittle, and worried. The soil disseminates the tension in the air.

It's no more, yet, than a gentle push-pull. An atmospheric questioning. But once or twice its presence makes him pause.

*

The ferry comes in late, delayed by wind. Comgall has booked a bothy somewhat near—but not too near—Alana and Mairi's croft and someone named Crane is at the Pier to pick him up. It turns out to be the lobster man from the fence. God, that seems like eons ago.

"Com-gall," the man says as they climb into an old pickup. Pronouncing the name carefully, like he's rehearsed it.

"Yeah."

"I'm Crane," the man says, and takes his right hand off the steering wheel for a moment to shake Comgall's. "There's someone who'll be quite happy to see you, I am suspecting. I was Alastair's best friend."

Comgall nods.

"You look a bit queasy, lad."

He laughs. It seems like the only thing left to do.

When they arrive at the bothy the sky is fully dark. Crane pulls a small baggie out of his pocket and hands it to Comgall. “For your nerves.” Inside is a perfectly rolled joint.

“Wow. Thank you,” Comgall says. Thinking *I’ll shower, then I’ll smoke this, then I’ll go*. He lies down on the bed. Just for a minute.

Deep into the night something wakes him: the groaning of the wind in the eaves, or the moon: full tonight, and big almost beyond believing. Butter yellow. The bay this morning was higher than Comgall had ever seen it.

He pulls on jeans and the lightweight down coat he’s been wearing almost every day for weeks, and slips outside. The moon is surrounded by yellow-white tufts of clouds that make trembling shadows across the field. There’s a cluster of sleeping cows a few metres away from him, soft indiscriminate lumps in the sparse light. The air is thin and quiet.

He hears a long call, a gull maybe, he thinks at first. But the sound takes shape as a far-off, mournful tune. Echoing through the mountains; almost echoing the mountains themselves, their curves, their abrupt ridges.

Comgall feels suddenly, eerily alone and makes himself release a little laugh. There’s a breeze coming from the north, playing with the trees; it must be carrying the music. He walks toward the sound.

A breath of black-hole silence and then another gust of wind rises and with it comes a new song, fast and furious. Obvious by now that it’s fiddle music, reeling and bouncing. More notes

come; more players joining in, he assumes. The music grows clearer and as he crests the top of the hill he can see, in the hollow below: light and flickering movement in and around a cabin-like structure. Of course, he realizes. That's the bothy he peered into a few months ago when he was walking past, with the old leather chairs and the pool table. He feels his heart kick up, a visceral memory of ceilidhs and kitchen parties at home—long lines of musicians, bows flying, hips bouncing. Some part of him expands, pores opening up in the moonlit air.

What would they think if they saw him coming toward them now? His dark figure outlined in moonlight, practically bouncing down the hill. Soon he can make out figures bobbing alongside the cabin. Hearty plumes of smoke billow up from around the structure, not just from the chimney but also from somewhere beyond the building, and as he approaches he sees this is what the figures are gathered around: a huge rippling bonfire.

Comgall hesitates just outside the circle of light. He doesn't know what propels him forward, but it doesn't feel like his own courage. It feels more like there's an energy outside him, around him, driving him.

He takes one more big breath and notices that strung up above the fire, between two rough-hewn poles propped up by an assortment of cement blocks and two-by-fours, are what seem to be the charred, torn-up pieces of Alana's painting. As he watches, one catches a little bit of flame, and a shot of purple sizzles along its ragged edge. The canvas pieces dance, curling and twisting around themselves, flapping in the breeze.

Comgall walks into the light. “Hey,” he says to someone close to him, a plump woman he doesn’t recognize. “Why are they burning the painting?”

She shrugs. “It felt right, I guess,” she says. “Like a funeral pyre for the whales. That’s what she said, something like that.”

“Who said?”

“The artist.”

“Alana.”

“Aye. She’s inside, go ask her.”

He waits to panic, but the feeling doesn’t come. The scene is mesmerizing, not malicious. And it is exactly the kind of thing Alana would decide to do.

Alana.

He glances toward the cabin.

The fiddlers are on the other side of the fire. It’s clear who the main one is. His eyes are closed, his head moves with the music, and the music—a trick of Comgall’s eyes, the light, the evening?—seems to be in time with the motion of the flames.

Comgall feels himself fill with it. His foot beginning to tap. He wonders if it’s a species universal, this reaction to a reel, or if it’s a cultural inclination that lives in his blood, whether or not he wants it.

“Mate,” says someone. Comgall turns to look. A man he recognizes but can’t name, holding

out a bottle.

“Cheers,” says Comgall. The bottles clink, the amber liquid backlit by the fire. He takes a long swallow and then starts jiggling again.

“What’ll you be doing now, mate?” the man shouts over the music.

“Trying not to think about that!” Comgall hollers back.

“We’ve all been there,” he says. “Weren’t you gone home?”

“Yep!” Another gulp. For a moment violent pounding in his head dulls the music. He swallows hard.

The man claps him on the shoulder. “Hang on, mate,” he says. “You finish that. I’ll be right back with something stronger.”

And the music rushes back, fills the hollow that had opened inside him. Comgall does as he’s told and finishes the beer. The man comes back with a bottle of Jura and a small glass. Comgall takes a swig. Peat—muck, really, when it comes down to it—muck and smoke. This is what you get, he thinks, when you work with the earth slowly. It’s the same stuff the oil is made of, but it slides warmly through his esophagus. Unfathomably younger, of course, than the oil—but he thinks of the black stuff he used to cough up on the bus to and from the rigs, the Kleenexes filled with it. That’s what happens when peat becomes oil.

He takes another burning sip. The music quickens. Everyone’s moving now. Arms and legs flying, drinks splashing. Then a wind comes up and even the clouds are pulsing, like some big

hand is batting them across the sky.

“Bruv,” the man says, and Comgall recognizes him as Andy, the Glaswegian boyfriend of one of Alana’s school friends. “Is there a woman at home?”

“No. No one,” says Comgall.

“But here,” says Andy.

“I—I don’t know.”

“You could, you know,” says Andy. “I’m sure. The way she looks at you.”

“Do you think?”

“What have you got to lose?”

Comgall stares into the fire. The wind quiets. The fiddlers take a breath, a gulp of their drinks. Couples melt towards one another.

“What have I got to lose,” he says. “Pride?”

Andy laughs. “You haven’t spent enough time here,” he says. “That’s not the kind of thing you need to worry about losing. You’re from a small town back home, aren’t you?”

Then someone else comes up on the other side of Andy and starts up a conversation in an unwieldy accent Comgall can’t follow. He thinks of the look in Alana’s eyes that last night, the moment when they couldn’t seem to pull apart. *She’s inside, go ask her.*

Another song starts up and he feels that race again. He introduces himself to the woman on his other side. She takes his arm and starts dancing. He’s not sure how long this lasts but then

there is a pause between tunes and she's leaning in to kiss him and he can't. He places one hand on each of her shoulders. "I'm sorry," he says. "I have to go." He pulls away and moves toward the bothy.

Behind him the music slows. Pinkish light begins to seep into the sky.

He opens the door. Inside it's still pulsing with people. He will leave his glass somewhere reasonable, he tells himself, and take off towards his own bothy. He stretches the hand with the glass towards a honey-coloured wood countertop. That's when he sees them—when he sees her, leaning against the wall by the woodstove, a big wool sweater sliding off her shoulders. Wrapped up in Todd's arms.

★

A whisper that will become a roar. She knows this in her blood and bones, her whole body immediately on alert. There are only four of them now, four of them who found one another after the noises. They scare easily now; their sleep is light, wary. Still: this is no startle in the night. It is reminiscent of the noises themselves. It is deep and restless; it moves, swells.

And every cell in their bodies knows.

Almost simultaneously, they turn away from the land. They abandon thoughts of food or sleep. They take deep breaths; they shoot through the water, near the surface. No destination but

away, and just in time. The whisper becomes a rumble and the rumble grows to a deafening boom. Explosive motion in the water. The waves at the surface huge, frenetic, random. A sensation of deep-earth slippage below them.

Sediments swirl through the water; fish reel drunkenly around them.

They do not slow down. She checks, every couple of breaths, that all the others are still with her. They will not lose one another again.

A jab of pain as something, a rock she thinks, hits her side and ricochets off.

The roar is primordial.

The earth is waking.

★

The joint from Crane is still in his jacket pocket. His shoulders and knees buckle as he shoves his boots through the heather, too distracted to find the path he came in on. The undergrowth is dry, brownish-purple, and it crackles under his steps. The web of grey roots grabs at him. “Fuck!” He’s indulging himself, this hollering into the dawn and the empty moor, but the broiling inside his chest is real now and he doesn’t know how else to face it.

He thinks of Brent saying he gets past fear with anger. Comgall was doubtful at the time.

Now he wonders: what is it he’s afraid of? He knew there was probably something going on

with Alana and Todd, knew that was what he was getting himself into by coming back here. He should have warned her first, should have given her a chance to say: don't come back. I'm done. Or: don't come back—I was never where you were.

His whole body is twitching now. His steps are stumbling but have grown longer.

At the top of the hill a rosy sunrise blooms across the horizon. Comgall feels sick. He lights the joint and sucks in a long puff. The seepy, acrid, planty scent of it, the warmth filling his mouth, descending to his lungs. He takes another puff. He slows to an amble, watches the sky light up, pauses to listen to a bird calling.

Then Comgall hears something else, in the distance: a deep rumbling.

His mind goes immediately to bears, but of course this is a Scottish island and there are no bears here. There have, perhaps, never been bears. Not to mention he's never heard what a bear actually sounds like—

The rumbling grows deeper and then the ground is shaking. Shit, he's tripping, there was something in the weed. The rumbling abates and then returns with more intense shaking. *Shit*.

He needs to sit. The only logical thing to do is to stay still until it stops.

But the ground is reeling—the ground is dropping away from him—there's a boulder, he aims for that instead—

And trips, falls to his knees. The joint flies out of his hand. The roaring fills his ears. Somewhere far off, noises that are more like rattling and crashing. And still that shaking, like the

island itself is mirroring, or mocking, his own anxious quavering of a few minutes ago.

Comgall tries to settle himself. He must sit, must wait this out, but as soon as he finds some stillness in his body the shaking moves into his mind and the paranoia makes him feel like his brain is going to boil over if he doesn't move.

He springs upward. He sees the joint, thinks: stamp it out. He stamps it out.

Everything is shaking. Could the island actually be shaking?

He feels dizzy. His surroundings go still. In all likelihood, it's just him. His body finally saying: enough. Saying, this is too much, I am overcome. Comgall sinks back into the academic reasoning that has felt so foreign to him lately and it affirms what he already believes. This part of the world almost never has earthquakes.

But the vibrations begin again and his mind is clear enough, this time, to form the understanding they are coming from below.

Either his stoned brain is a very scientific one, or—

The realization, when it comes, is like a sharp upward jab from his sternum to the deepest centre of his neck.

He takes a moment to steel himself. Steadies his knees, takes one long breath.

Turns and runs for the bothy.

*

Alana is wearing one of her father's old sweaters, the cable knits Mairi never let him throw out but he hardly ever wore. It smells a little musty and a little smoky, some long-accumulated film from two decades in the attic of a home heated with wood and peat. It doesn't smell like Alastair, but she can imagine it does. Now, though, she is here, and she's almost *here*, almost immersed in a present she wants to pay attention to.

But she's sweating, and it's the sweater that's doing it. Tiny filaments of wool poke and nudge at her skin, rustling the hairs on her lower arms. It seems unreasonable—not just that something that is supposed to be so soft has become so churlish, but that she is even thinking about it because even now Todd's got his hand inside her jeans, half-hidden by the sweater he's pulled half-off her shoulders, his hand covering the front of her panties, squeezing, and she is thinking she's alright with it but really only that: alright. But he starts moving the hand around and something shifts inside her and she is moving too—

From outside they can hear the crackling of the bonfire, and above that the kind of wind that is a personality in its own right, adding itself to the party.

She catches something out of the corner of her eye—a familiar figure—*it can't be*, she tells herself, but she feels desire well up at the thought. She reroutes Todd's arm around her waist, presses her pelvis against his, skin and bone and sexual organs under their jeans. She kisses him hard, tooth on tooth hard, the jolt surging like a live wire through enamel and hot smooth gum

tissue to bone. He pulls away for half a second and she pulls him back. Press and suck. Tooth on bone. Their breath a cocktail of Scotch and cider, Todd's skin soft like it's never met weather.

Todd works his way up her back with his hand and she mirrors the movement, allows herself the slightest clench on his shoulder blade, a subtle unkindness he won't mention, or maybe that he likes. A gust of wind rattles the old window and it clatters open. The latch springs apart, cold air spills in and with it a flood of smells, campfire and late-fall tree sap and night sky and a scent she's sure is the wind itself, irreducible to its surroundings.

Todd's whisper is hot and wet. "Do you want to go out back?"

The window bangs. She gets a strong whiff of the painting going up in acrid flames. *I made that*, Alana thinks. *I can make more*. She swells.

And she thinks: *aren't we a bit old for this*, but—"Yes."

The moon is so bright it's casting shadows. They bend back a few branches at the edge of the forest, nudge their bodies between trees until they come to a clearing. The leaves on the forest floor are crackly and dry. She's lying on them before she knows how she's gotten there, they are catching against her sweater like they're trying to say something, and Todd is on top of her, he's doing the kissing this time, and it's softer and better and the leaves whisper and sigh as he slides his hand along her side and begins to work at the waistband of her jeans, the cold bronze button and the zipper that lets go with a small noise, a rush of air and a quickening in her stomach. She goes softer too, she melts into the sweater and the leaves give way, her back furrows a hollow into

them. She pulls him close and slides her hands underneath his shirt where his back is warm and smooth, too, impossibly smooth, and her trousers slide easily and she makes her own small noise and his fingers are going deeper and then he stops.

“*What,*” she hisses. (A flash of Comgall, in the same position, gentle and generous, never fast, never stopping.)

“What was that?” He shifts his eyes sideways, listening.

“I didn’t hear anything. Come back.”

He comes back.

The next time they both hear it: a dull, distant rumbling. A boom. Like the earth is gurgling. It’s less like hearing a sound than knowing a sound. It is at once awesome and disturbing. It leaves them edgy but a little more alive.

“*Come,*” Alana whispers, and she takes her trousers off the rest of the way, and his too, and she pulls him into her and it is quick and urgent. She’s hot and dizzy, she is spreading sizzling fullness, and when he goes to pull away she keeps him inside her; she wants to keep herself full as long as she can, to add the bulk of his body to hers instead of this constant subtracting. Comgall, her father, Sean, this whole island, Tegan, Comgall again and worse the second time. She grips Todd’s smooth back.

And then there is another distant rumble—and then movement. Shaking, underneath them. Todd is up and getting his pants on sooner than she can process it. Her whole body is vibrating

and it's coming from the earth underneath them, the trees quaking too, the rumble growing louder, and she thinks she must be imagining things and then Todd's voice says, "come *on*," and he grabs her and pulls her to a standing position, and then there is one big shudder accompanied by a loud boom. She feels a sinking terror that seems to sweep across the village and the island and gather it all back up and throw it at her in another big shake.

A flurry of tree branches flies through the air in front of them and they both fall back to the ground. Alana yanks her trousers upwards, fumbles at the buttons. Then they both go still. Her breath comes back in painful gasps. The silence of the forest foreboding now, the dull din of the people at the bonfire. Their voices panicked too, their rasping breath.

"An earthquake," she says into the night, to the trees more than to Todd.

"I didn't think we had earthquakes here."

"What else could it have been? I mean—" she gives his arm a playful whack and forces a laugh—"you weren't *that* good." But her teeth are chattering, in fact her whole jaw is shaking and she can't make it stop. She looks around and the forest is strewn with pieces of trees, mostly dead ones—one huge tree has been ripped out of the ground entirely and lies half upside-down, caught on a thicket of brush—and there are a couple of boulders she doesn't think were here before, ones Alastair probably named that are now completely in the wrong places, turned upside down, broken off from slopes or uprooted from under beds of sprawling moss. Hot tears burn behind her eyes and she thinks, *this, this is what breaks me?*

Todd's arms around her shoulders, and he's saying something, but Alana is tuning in to distant sounds. Her left ear *pops* and everything gets louder. There's a sound like a shot, and the crackling of the fire growing louder too, and snapping wood screaming into the night—the bonfire must have livened up again—and someone yelling, the message indistinct but urgent—and Todd saying, "Alright?" and looking at Alana as if for an answer, and so she says "alright," and she stands and they begin to pick their way back out of a forest they have never seen.

Something trickles down the inside of her thigh, cold now, viscous. Uncomfortable.

Shit, she thinks. Condom broke.

Chapter 17

The shaking started far below. A minor slip, but seismic vibrations reverberating upward.

The shale has, of course, been shaking for months now. Controlled shaking, they said. Water pressure forcing rhizomatic cracks at all the wrong diagonals. Spidery and irregular, the miniature fault lines set things just a little off balance. Just a little—but just enough.

This shaking is different. Not expected. No control.

Loose, moss-like sediments tremble. The water roils, filmy with tossed salt. Kelp holdfasts let go and long cords of greeny-brown algae sail off, whirl, spin upward. Sand shakes loose from the sea floor, tiny grains of pale silica suspended in clouds like drifting starbursts.

The deep-sea dwellers scatter. Long oarfish ribbon nearer to the surface than usual. Hagfish slip out from their hiding holes for fear of being buried alive. In their panic they fill the water around them with clear slime, each building around itself a protective globule of goo.

Some will keep swimming, snorting air out through their murk-filled nostrils.

One curls into a knotty nucleus inside her globule, intending to wait out the storm in tightly wrapped passivity. The tossing water buoys the knotted hagfish this way and that. She could watch the goings-on around her, but she does not. Her eyes rarely help her; she experiences the world through her skin and her nose, and these she is protecting by remaining curled up.

She can still smell the tuna carcass she had been tunnelling into. She longs for the comforting

closeness of its rotting organs. She does not see, but she smells, as the carcass breaks apart under the force of the whipping sea. She smells the bits of flesh that sift upward around her, and though she can go a long time without food, she feels hunger. Her tentacles sizzle.

The hagfish is nearly blind; she hears nothing. She tastes only the mildly rancid flavour of her own slime. The tissues that encase her organs—through which she absorbs food, gains knowledge of her predators—throb with the nearness of food. Seeping through these tissues, pressing at her tiny brain, seeming to rise up from her core: the certain and trembling understanding that when the hagfish emerges from this pliant bubble of slime, she will emerge into a transformed world.

★

Comgall is running like he hasn't run since he was a kid, this crazy wind pushing him forward, buoying his leaping steps as he burns through the brush, practically sliding down the hill as the shaking begins again. Really he should be phoning for help but he doesn't know whom to phone and surely to god someone else is doing that, someone who's watching all this from in front of the TV. Unless the houses are falling down around the TVs—it's strong enough that wouldn't surprise him. The distant crashing and booming might be the collapse of the houses or of the world itself but might simply be the crunch and lash of flying branches, amplified by his

panic, by the weed. Yet his mind feels sharper than it has in who knows how long.

The next shudder topples him. He feels himself fly through the air over a little ridge of bedrock, one he could easily have avoided but here it is, the drop not more than a metre but enough to knock the wind out of him when he falls. As he's falling something else is falling too, a long and looming shadow across the moon. Then he is face-first on the ground. His nostrils, mouth, eyes are filled with moss except on the right side of his face which is scraped, hard, against a stick, and just as he is registering this he feels a shock of pain and a weight against his back and the huge crashing shadow comes to a halt.

Comgall's breath comes back in a series of sharp nips. But when he tries to lift his head the thing on his back stops him. Something large and heavy. He twists his head instead and his beard meets bark. A tree has fallen on top of him, has caught, just barely, on the exposed rock. If it hadn't been for that ridge—Comgall swallows. He allows himself a couple of moments of relief: how much worse this could have been.

He is, he thinks, about halfway down the side of the hill, maybe a fifteen minute walk from the cabin. He can hear the bonfire from here. But that's not right—it's much too far away—

Now he can hear some other kind of rumbling, too. It sounds like buildings giving way. Mortar collapsing against stone, against wood and glass and refrigerators and soft upholstery and old quilts and gardens and chickens and—

He wrenches his body back and forth. Needs to get to her. Needs to.

He can't move.

*

They emerge into what feels already like the quiet industriousness of the necessary cleanup after chaos. Someone, Brenden she thinks, is putting the fire out, pouring mixing bowls of water over it, stabbing at the pile of tinder with a long stick.

Alana feels a little sick, too warm, more than a little dazed. "What do we do," she says, though she suspects already there is nothing to do, nowhere stable to set herself down. Everything in her life so far leading up to this suspended moment.

There is debris strewn everywhere. Matty's bothy, Alana realizes with a start, is only half-standing, two walls crumpled to the ground. Impasto clouds splash and mutate across the sky. Their frothing shapes make the moonlight tremble across the strange new lines of a landscape that's hardly changed in her whole lifetime.

"Okay," says Todd. "Okay. Who was in the bothy with us?"

"What?"

"Who was there, Alana? We need to figure out if anyone got stuck under the walls that fell down."

She tries to picture the room and all she can come up with are the blurry shapes of bodies,

Todd a blinder against anyone else.

An image flashes into her mind, a dark shape in the door. A man in a puffy coat, looking around, stopping short, turning. Turning so quickly; little more than an apparition. Her father in the vaults. But the silhouette solidifies just slightly and suddenly she can see it, can see *him* like something she refused to look at before because she was looking at Todd (*why* was she looking at Todd?), a shadow with a coat and—a beard—and a peculiar hunch to the shoulders, a tenseness she recognized—

But it couldn't be. "I don't know who was there," she says.

"You were looking at the room. You were leaning against the wall and I was facing the wall."

"I don't know." The shadowy man on the borders of her mind, those shoulders, she has leaned into those shoulders—

But she can't have. It can't be.

"Goddamn," says Todd. His distress seems less about the disaster unfolding around them and more about his inability to do anything about it.

"Todd," Alana says. "I think they've got things under control here. I need to go check on Mum. You should go home and see if your people are okay."

"You're crying," he objects, suddenly noticing.

"Yes, because I'm fucking stressed because we just had a fucking earthquake. I'm fine, Todd. I'm going." It comes out terser than she intends it to. Because she's not crying because they just

had an earthquake, she's crying because of all the rest of it. The bothy, the trees, the forest foreign and frightening when she'd finally started to feel at ease in it, her father's rocks tumbled to god knows where, most of all the shadow in the doorway that she is surely imagining, her subconscious conjuring a mirage it thinks will comfort her.

Alana sets off toward her mother, drunk and sticky.

She looks down at her hands and they are shaking. Her skin is blue in the moonlight. She clenches her fists and when that doesn't work she pulls the sweater tighter around her and wraps her arms around herself, too, letting her chest absorb the shaking.

When she arrives home Crane is already there. The electricity is out and bits of the fence have toppled over, but Mairi and the house are intact. Alana practically falls into her mother's arms. Mairi holds her hard, and Alana can feel that she's holding back tears too. What a mess Alana must seem to her.

Crane stands quietly at the window. The waves are so big Alana can hear them over the wind, explosive breakers as far out as, when she breaks away from Mairi and goes over to the window, they can see.

"Thanks for coming," Alana says.

"It's nothing, love," says Crane. "Did your man find you?"

"Who?" Do people know about Todd?

“Your Canadian. What’s his name? I can never pronounce his name. Com-gill.”

“What?”

“Comgall. He came by looking for you. I gave him a bit of weed and sent him to the bonfire.

That’s where you were, wasn’t it?”

“*What?*” The shadow man in the door frame.

“You were at the bonfire, weren’t you, love? You remember the man from Canada?”

“Shit, of course I remember him.” She blows out breath. The door. The shadow. It must have been him. And she was—she had fucking Todd in her pants. “Shit!” She looks back out the window. “I think I saw him and didn’t recognize him—where would he have gone?”

Crane shrugs. “If I were leaving a party over at the bothy and I wanted to have a little smoke, I’d be climbing up to that lookoff. Especially on a night like tonight. The moon and all.”

She pictures the slope. The condition of the forest when she left, the sounds higher up, the creaking and cracking of falling trees.

“I have to go.” She springs back from the window, starts pulling on boots.

“Wait,” Crane says. “I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Alana says, “no, it’s fine, I’m—”

“We lost your father to a gale,” he says. “I am not willing to lose you.”

“Crane—”

“Let him,” Mairi says. “I’m coming too.”

Alana tries to ring Comgall on his Canadian mobile, just in case. It goes straight to voicemail and his cheerful, blustery voice.

“Christ, what a night, though,” says Crane as they leave the house. The moon a big yellow circle in the sky, the clouds waving across it like water. The ocean a gurgling otherworld in the distance. She can feel Crane’s and her mother thinking as clearly as she can hear herself thinking, *how Alastair would have loved this.*

She hears the shriek of gulls woken from their sleep, and in the background some indistinct cracking noises. The forest still settling, she reasons, but then something else. A smell. The smell of—

“Smoke,” says Crane, and looks, for the first time all evening, actually concerned. “Where’s that coming from,” he mutters.

“Could it be someone’s stove?” Alana asks. “It’s been chilly...”

“That’s not woodstove smoke,” Mairi says. She’s right, but—

“Well, we were having a bonfire,” Alana says. “We were burning... some painted wood.”

“It’s just...” says Crane.

“It’s *big*,” says Mairi. “It’s everywhere.”

“It’s windy. Let’s go find Comgall.” Alana is impatient now, what if he is at this very moment—

“Well, he left the bonfire,” says Crane. “Why don’t we start from there and climb.”

So they head back along the road, cut up across the same field Alana tore through not an hour ago. The sky is a little brighter now. Could it be dawn?

She’s gazing off toward the water, walking a little clumsily, when she hears Crane say: “Bloody *hell*.” She looks in the direction in which he’s looking, and then he’s running, and then Alana sees it: all along the slope beginning with Matty’s bothy and leading up to the summit of the hill, licking between trees, lighting up the rich, spindly silhouettes of the forest in sickening orange: flames.

*

Comgall squirms until his back is covered in splotches of tender pain, until he thinks he’s crushed a rib, and still he cannot fit out of the narrow opening in which he is trapped. He’s lucky, he knows, that the ground is soft, or all of his ribs would be crushed by now, and maybe his lungs punctured, too.

But this is small comfort when he begins to smell smoke.

At first he thinks this, too, is the bonfire, thinks: they’re still there, that must mean she’s okay. But the smell intensifies and he starts to cough. The coughs are shallow and painful, his back thrashing against the tree trunk with every hack.

Okay, he thinks. Breathe.

He wonders how long they've been without rain, wonders if this is the first wildfire on a Scottish isle, wonders whether they are at all equipped to fight it, how long it will take to get helicopters in, how much—

And then he remembers, and the knowledge hits him like lead in his veins.

The joint. The joint he stamped out on the ground, or thought he did.

The joint he did not check to make sure it was out.

He feels bile rising in his throat, begins to retch but under the tree there's no room for heaving and the vomit sits there, heavy and vile in his throat.

Comgall and Brent hiked along the northwestern edge of Cape Breton once, through a vast provincial wilderness area that began somewhere on the plateau and stretched all the way to the coast. Some of the slopes were so steep they couldn't spare the breath to talk, and they hiked on and on until it seemed to Comgall like they had been plodding through this landscape forever, like their feet were as much a part of it as the hooves whose imprints they saw in each patch of mud.

There was this one patch of black sucking mud—they sunk knee- then thigh-deep into it. It pulled at his legs like a heaving, clayey tongue.

They'd tried to find a way around it, but there was no point. The mud stretched as far as they could see, surrounded by marsh and by lush vernal pools. Impossible to know the depth of the

water through the shimmering surfaces, speckled with waterlily leaves and glinting algae.

There was a moment when he couldn't lift his left foot up out of the mud and thought he was stuck. He toppled from the waist up; for a second his mouth was under the surface too. But he clenched his core and pulled himself back upright. Brent doubled back and yanked on his arms while Comgall pulled on his own leg, and that was the end of the worst section of mud.

When they finally got out of the bog and onto more or less solid ground, they took off their packs and sprawled on their backs on the ground. It was a meadowy area, probably pastureland at one time, and the grass was dry then like the grass is on the island right now. But it was soft, and so warm, and Comgall felt like he could have lain there forever, staring at the cloudless blue sky of the strange June heat wave.

"Close call," said Brent after a long time.

"I guess," said Comgall. "Do you think?"

"Freaked me out a bit," said Brent. "I wasn't sure if we were getting that leg out, to be honest with you."

"I guess."

"Let's stay here tonight," said Brent, though they'd planned on walking into the evening.

"I'd kill for a hot dog."

So they pulled out the tent and set it up, made a fire and cooked hot dogs and potatoes, ate the entire one-kilogram Toblerone they'd intended to last through three days. The food seemed

richer than usual and he remembers wondering if sex felt something like this, perfect physical satiation.

And then morning came and a thick fog had set in, and they had no idea which way to go. They could hardly see one another, could not see their tent if they ventured more than a few feet away from it. They sat and stared. Neither had even seen fog so truly blinding before.

That was when Comgall got scared; it remains the only time he can remember actually feeling frightened for his life. There was the time he rolled his grandmother's car off the road and into a snowbank, but he didn't have time to feel frightened then. He lost control and then he was hanging from his seatbelt.

The fog gave the air around them a wavering quality, and insulated them from noise. They couldn't hear the ocean, or the wind, or the crab boats that should have been coming in, or planes, or seabirds.

They waited an hour, then decided to move carefully in the direction they thought they'd been going last night. There might be no fog at all fifty or a hundred metres downhill. "I don't think there's a cliff near here," Brent had said. "I'm pretty sure there's not."

"Just go slow," Comgall answered, feeling paralyzed but making himself follow.

Brent stumbled onto a scree slope. He caught himself but then a few rocks slid beneath him and it seemed to Comgall for a moment as if the whole slope was giving way. Comgall moved forward, trying not to run, trying not to send more rocks flying, and Brent was moving with the

rocks and Comgall felt his heart lurch, knew his worst fears to be coming true—and then the rocks stopped moving and Brent grabbed hold of a small, ancient, twisted birch that clung, miraculously, to the slope and that, miraculously, held Brent’s weight too. Brent inched backwards up the slope; Comgall reached his hand down and Brent took it, and when they were both back on the more or less stable headland they sat back onto the springy carpet of crowberry bushes and looked at one another.

“We can’t keep going,” said Brent, and Comgall felt a rush of relief that he hadn’t had to be the one to say it.

So they ate lunch. “We’re fine,” Brent kept saying. “The worst thing that could happen is we stay here until tomorrow and then walk home and then maybe we’re a little hungry but we’re still alive. Look—” he picked one of the shiny black crowberries from the heath—“we could eat these.”

Comgall told him you couldn’t eat those berries raw; the information, at the time, felt like it might be a death sentence. Brent asked why.

In the haze of smoke and shallow breaths, the throbbing in his forehead, Comgall knows he knew the answer at the time, knew it as well as he knew his phone number, because cliff-dwelling plants had fascinated him nearly as much as the morphology of the cliffs themselves—but he can’t call it forth now. Why couldn’t they eat the crowberries.

He knew Brent was right about there being no real danger, but couldn’t feel it. He ended up

curled in a ball, frozen.

“Dude,” Brent said. “We’re *fine*,” but it was like he was speaking from behind glass.

Thinking back on it in the years since, Comgall has wondered why that day, why *that* fog, had instilled such terror in him, and this is what he has concluded: it was because of the sheer perfection of the previous day. He was eighteen, and having had a glimpse of the exhilaration life *could* involve, he’d panicked at the fact that *his* life hadn’t seemed to have any yet. And then the fog bearing down on them like the universe laughing at him. The possibility that, having tasted the world, he would be denied the chance to ever do so again.

Fucking funny, he thinks now. As if I changed anything after that.

He’d gone off to university, pushed himself through grad school and into a PhD and into the oil work and somehow that had spit him out here. Here: finally chasing something worth chasing, and stuck under a fucking tree by an earthquake he probably indirectly caused, breathing in smoke from a forward-rushing wildfire he probably quite directly caused. The smoke is closer now and he’s never felt such stinging, piercing pain in his eyes, and he closes them again and tries to ignore his breaths getting shallower, the painful prickling at the back of his throat, the fact that his airway feels like it is getting smaller, the pounding in his head—

Sometime after they’d cooked the last of their hot dogs for dinner that day, the fog finally began to shift from a sludge to more of a mist. The haze let them see several fir trees, a few last gasps of sunlight, a cliff at the far edge of (but not very far away from) the scree slope Brent had

slid on. Comgall's anxiety clenched harder.

And then out of the mist came a small creature, shaggy, the size of a Newfoundland dog and that was what Comgall thought it was at first, someone's pet out wandering. Its fur was wet and under the lit-up mist had an ethereal sheen to it.

Then he met the animal's eyes and saw that it was a bear cub.

"Oh fuck," said Brent. "Oh fuck, fuck, fuck."

"What?" Comgall didn't take his eyes off the bear.

"We don't know where the mother is. Fuck!"

"No one has ever been killed by a black bear in Nova Scotia," said Comgall, reciting the line he'd told so many tourists at his summer job.

"Yeah, and maybe no one has ever met a cub in fog as thick as fucking tar!"

There was fiery panic in his eyes. "Hey. It's probably fine. Just stay still, don't approach it."

"What in the name of Jesus Murphy makes you think I might approach it?"

It brings a wan smile to Comgall's face even now, twelve years later, the smoke making even that much muscle movement painful.

They sat, motionless ghosts in the mist, and watched the cub as it lost interest in them, as it started testing and then nibbling at the dark berries that spread across the whole hillside.

Comgall should have felt uncomfortable; after all, the berries spread underneath where they were sitting too, and the bear, or its mother, might already be smelling their hot dogs, might already be

wondering about the half-block of cheese that was left in Comgall's pack or perhaps even about the animal smell of their bodies, two days' worth of sweat and a long afternoon of fear. But he felt instead that he had stumbled on something wonderful. The whole awful day had been a small price to pay for this window into another world.

Has he felt like *that* since then?

He thinks of the kid in the gas station. That's what he'd witnessed: that magic. Neither of them knew how to articulate it, but if you could feel like that once in awhile, that connected, what did it matter if you knew how to talk about it?

Even now, surrounded by fire, Comgall's fear is dissipating, transforming into something more like hoarse and painful weightlessness. A sense that he is not quite out of his body, but almost, the convulsing in his throat far away now, the stinging in his eyes no longer a problem because he no longer needs them in order to see. The tree trunk bearing down on him but him rising up anyway. The dog-sized bear in front of him, the mother coming to life as a dark shadow in the distance, as she never did that evening among the crowberries—the young bear had simply turned and walked off, and Comgall had lain down to sleep and could not, he was so energized by the encounter—and now the mother bear here, in this forest on this island on the other side of this ocean, a dark shadow beckoning, clear despite the clouds of smoke puffing out of the trees like huge toxic breaths—

Crowberry, he recalls, gives off toxins from small glands on its leaves. When the leaves die

and fall off, the poison continues to seep out, slipping into the soil as the leaf breaks down. The point is to make the soil less habitable for other species. Like jellyfish, he thinks.

He still can't remember if this is why you're not supposed to eat them raw, but it doesn't matter. It is all lifting away. And he is lifting with it, rising on the smoke.

Chapter 18

Mairi, Crane and Alana stand motionless for a minute. The dance of the flames is mesmerizing. Brilliant orange steams upward from the tree line, spreading in ruddy puffs toward the moon.

“Alright,” says Crane. “Alright.” He looks around as if for an answer.

The thing they don’t say out loud is that this is a small island. With a fire this big, there are very few answers. There is a small fire station, which Alana can’t remember being used in her lifetime. Maybe a kitchen fire here and there.

The smell is everywhere now, filtering into their noses, mouths, minds.

“I’m going to phone the mainland and make sure they’re on their way,” her mother says.

“I’m sure someone will have done already, but just in case. They’ll be evacuating.” She says this as a fact, solid, incontrovertible. “We need to go back to the village and make sure everyone is awake and then we need to take the car and get to the Pier and start getting on boats.” She pulls out her mobile and begins dialling.

“Comgall’s out there,” Alana says.

“Love, we don’t know that,” says Crane, shifting his voice to a lower register than Mairi’s on the phone, speaking directly and urgently to Alana alone. “You cannot put your life at risk. In all probability, he is already on his way to the Pier.”

She tries his mobile again. Nothing. She hangs up before his voice kicks in.

“Crane,” Alana says. “We don’t have any time to waste. Mum’s right. Go with her, check the houses, and when you’re leaving in the car, call me and I’ll tell you where I am and you can pick me up. I won’t leave him. You won’t change my mind.” She takes a deep breath. “Call me. I’m going.”

And she goes. It only takes a few seconds until Crane’s voice is drowned out by the wind and the crackling of the fire, growing louder as she makes her way up the hill toward it.

She decides to make her way up the slope from the ocean side. This means she’ll probably have to cross the stream at the top, but it also means there is a stream and a waterfall between Alana and the fire, for now anyway. The smoke coats her skin. A thin film lines her esophagus; she can feel it reaching toward her lungs. She rasps and heaves. It’s almost bright as day now, apocalyptically bright, and she’s looking for Comgall but losing hope she will ever find him. She feels hazy; she keeps having to pause to breathe and each time she pauses she is flooded with memories of him, old and new.

As if he is already lost. As if they both are.

She sees Comgall as a kid, staring at a dragonfly, big-eyed and with that wide, shy smile.

Comgall calling to her the first time she went swimming in the ocean. Comgall shrieking and running away from that friend of his, that wild kid who used to grab jellyfish and throw them.

Sunlight refracting through a hunk of purple jelly as the kid swung his arms in wide circles across the sky. Comgall was terrified of them even though his friend never let a jellyfish hit him, always acting like each miss was a mistake.

Alana is hot now, the fire is making everything hot. She's approaching the stream and even still the vegetation under her feet is crackling-dry.

Comgall on his back against the rock, his skin rougher than Todd's, more substance to it, the ruddiness visible even in the moonlight. His beard scratching at her chin, how good it felt to let all her weight drop onto him.

How she ran away when he told her the truth. When he let just a morsel of wonder seep into her tragedy, *her* tragedy, the story of her guilt she's been clinging to all these years.

She arrives at the stream. The forest in front of her is still not burning. She has no way of knowing how far the fire is. She hears it crack and lick and sear, she can smell it, stronger with each step. But as to the distance from which you can smell and hear a forest fire—

She steps out onto a rock and her foot slips and sails off the bank, comes down in calf-deep water. She wobbles but makes it to the other side. Okay. She is okay.

If she were him, where would she be?

She's pondering this, forging onward up the hill, when she hears another great rumbling. There's no shaking to accompany it this time, but it's loud enough to eclipse the crackling and other fire noises. Alana steels herself and carries on. After what seems like both a very long time

and not long at all, the rumbling stops. When she looks around nothing has visibly changed.

A shaggy figure bounds out of the bushes and Alana jumps backward, wonders for a moment whether this is all a nightmare, the phantasmagoria that's lurked for years somewhere in the back of her brain—cloudbursts of shags, father with no eyes, girl burning from the inside out—all building up to this point of reckoning, and she always thought they were her enemies but maybe they are in fact her army—Alastair's voice, distant but clear: *these fragments I have shored against my ruins—*

She sees Comgall fading away from her at the front door, the first flickerings of dawn behind him, birds starting to call. Her own voice echoing through her mind, *I can't do it anymore*, what was she *thinking—*

Say the soft bird's name, but do not be surprised to see it fall—

The shaggy figure is Crane's dog, Callie. She is barking and barking. Alana can barely hear her but she can see the barks forming and finishing on her snout, her mouth making a hollow, spittle-edged O as she throws back her head and lets out what Alana can only assume is a howl.

Alana doesn't question it. She follows her.

★

The raven glides across a heavy sky, yellow and streaked with dark clouds. Dense gusts keep

him aloft. He twitches a talon, shakes off a couple of grains of silt. Turns and angles back toward the ocean. The water is dark and teeming, quelled for the time being but still spoiling for a storm.

It doesn't matter.

He lets his feet slip into the same angle as the wind. Lets them glide, too. Pays no mind to the rumbling below. It's just another clutch of rocks, sliding down another mountainside, murmuring a conversation with the earth as they crumble and plummet and sail to sea level.

*

Comgall hears the third (fourth?) bout of rumbling as if from a great distance, and as the sound makes its way through his body he feels an internal shift and then he is there: He knows exactly where it's coming from; he has known all along. Has never not been there, himself happening along with it, and it is as terrifying and awe-inspiring as he always thought it would be. He knows, too, exactly how it happened, can link all the little shifts together to the point of the rumbling.

And who would ever have guessed—this train of events in a place like this. A fault that's never shown itself. Maybe hardly even a fault, maybe just the subtlest collusion, a crack in the shale that went a little too far, a vibration just slightly too powerful.

No one could have predicted fire; no one could have predicted that the company man they

thought was gone would come back to deliver this final blow.

But he sees the fire too, as if in his dreams he'd been expecting it. He sees the ridge letting go as the fire bears down on it, vegetation burning, roots breaking, the great rush of land losing grip and pouring down. The slope not such a stable one anyway, and destabilized even more by the quake. The quake that filled his consciousness while he should have been paying attention to movement of his foot against the sole of his boot, against the ground, against the tiny piece of fire under it. The piece of fire that fell from his fingers. The world falling apart after it.

And now the ridge letting out its breath, collapsing under its own weight.

He sees it: soil and stone and trees and rubble hurtling out of formation. Heart and bone and stone, leaf and root and lichen. The slope folding over itself, over the houses and the fences. A wedge of what makes an island sliding into the ocean.

The ocean giving one explosive gurgle when the stuff breaks the surface of the water.

Then sighing, settling. The salt already working at all that is drifting, dropping, floating downward. The ocean lapping up nitrogen from grains of soil. Juniper needles and moss and heather and sycamores beginning to flake apart in tiny, tasty pieces. The bulkier materials alighting in a pile near the edge of the island. The cycle of island-making, build and crumble, stack and press and compress, beginning again.

He registers only peripherally that there are people he should be worrying about down there. He is beyond that. He is fuzzy, he's complacent, his outlines are blurred. He will see her again.

Meanwhile, his airway: smaller and smaller.

*

Soil tumbling over bits of stone.

Soil and stone and root and tree clearing a way to the ocean.

Not so much taking out everything in their path, but gathering it up. Some of the trees and grasses still smoking as they gain momentum. The flames themselves rapidly quenched by the frantic motion and the rushing water, the rubble taking on terrifying speed, puffing out grey breaths like a herd of buffalo kicking up dust.

Running downhill.

And it has the energy of a herd: nothing and no one questioning the movement, just going. Insects flying away or curling up and steeling themselves for the ride. Rodents fleeing, taking shelter where they can. Birds emerging like magic from the failing cliff, their homes subject to the same devastating force as the houses in the human village above theirs. Crumble. Slide.

Tonight, the rocks are alive.

*

Callie knows where she's going. She bounds and Alana follows her. This time she does not stop to check how well Alana is navigating the brush.

She leads her straight to him and Alana's heart nearly stops when they arrive. He is sprawled under a fallen tree, apparently stuck. Eyes closed, no movement. Alana pushes through the undergrowth until she's beside him.

She holds her breath while she searches for his. At first, finger against his throat, she feels nothing. In the wind and the smoke—thicker here, more insistent—she stills her every muscle, and finally feels shallow movement. Deep dip of relief in her chest. “Okay,” she says. “Okay. Callie. Thank you.”

She doesn't know whether it's still possible for herself and Comgall to get away from this, and to stay in spite of the odds seems almost poetic, seems in any case inevitable—but Callie.

“Callie,” Alana says. “Go home.”

Callie cocks her head.

“Go! Go on! Go home! Go!” Her voice rises to a shriek. “Or,” she says, panting. “Or. Go get help. Okay? Get help! Go!”

This time Callie runs off, and Alana pulls out her mobile to call for help, but the device is dead. She considers running back, but where would she find anyone? Would the houses even be standing? Is there even time?

She presses at the tree. Heavy, but not as heavy as she might have thought. Tiny mouths,

beaks, paws have whittled at its density. The forest crumbling even before the fire.

*

The ancient oak's surface is all but motionless now. The peace unusual, unsettling. The oak stretches above the struggling humans, the panicked dog, the clouds of fleeing insects.

Some of the less mobile worms have burrowed themselves deep inside the trunk, staking their bets on the resilience of heartwood, the strength of bark. Some of them have gone below: into the earth, down and down, as far as they are able.

The oak feels the heat, will remember it.

*

Then Alana sees the problem: the tree's biggest intact branch is hooked under an outcrop of newly exposed rock, and so Comgall, presuming he wasn't already unconscious when he fell, would not have been able to get out by pushing upward. He probably wasn't able to turn far enough to see if he pressed sideways he might have had a chance.

The fire is a giant bellowing breath of heat. She allows herself one glance over her shoulder. The trees in her immediate vicinity are still not burning, though the orange glow is stronger now,

closer, louder.

She grips the stuck branch and pulls. It doesn't give. She plants her feet, steels her torso and pulls again. This time it snaps back toward her and she falls to the ground and for a second she thinks this tree will kill them both, but she scrambles up. The tree is still more or less in the same spot, but at a different angle, and she thinks—

She runs around to the other side of the tree, places one foot on either side of Comgall's slackened legs, bends to press her hand against the tree's trunk, and pushes. She pushes through her knees, her feet and thighs, her core and her chest and she makes herself breathe—

And it gives. Just like that. She's prepared this time; she doesn't fall. She leans down to check that Comgall is still breathing too. How do you treat smoke inhalation? Does she even remember how to do CPR?

She rolls him over. No bumps on his head, no bleeding, no limbs twisted at awkward angles.

She tries to lift him. He is dead weight, probably ninety kilos of dead weight. She's much smaller and despite all the farm work this past year, she's not strong.

The orange glow licks closer.

Alana picks his shoulders up off the ground, manages to pull his head almost to the height of her waist, her elbows hooked under his arms.

She starts to drag.

Sweat trickles down her neck, drips off her forehead. She sees one droplet land on his

eyebrow.

They move slowly, and slower.

The flames lick closer.

*

The elderly shag was jolted awake when the cliff began shaking, and shot immediately into the air. Pumping her wings, trying to garner some stability against the wind, gusts pitching themselves and her in all directions. She tired quickly and let herself drift. A quick start, and therefore her body colder than usual, her wings stiff and ungraceful. She watched the others as they lifted higher. They, too, reeled. No one flies in a straight course in this kind of wind, in the middle of the night.

And so when the island quieted, she let herself drift back down. Let herself sink back onto a ledge in the cliff, tuck her head into her body, feathers slick with preen-oil resting against dry stone. Drier than usual—dusty. The dust clings to her, has been clinging to her for days. But she tucked her head in and let herself slip into a light sleep. She is getting old. Flying away under the moon to no certain safety is no longer in her blood.

She flew away the last time this cliff shook. Twenty years ago. Nearly a lifetime. Afterward she remade her home in the newly exposed slope.

It's been a good lifetime.

★

A roaring and a series of large huffing *woofs* from somewhere behind them and Alana smells something like diesel and at first she thinks it is the fire and it is here. They will be consumed by sound as well as heat, by toxic fumes as well as flames.

Then the roaring stops and she turns and it is Kayla. Skinny, pockmarked Kayla, standing half-upright on her ATV and grinning like she hasn't had this much fun in her entire life. Teenage adrenaline dripping off her, and—Alana finally registering the presence pushing against her calves—Callie weaving in circles around Alana's legs. Panting, eyes reddened, but wagging her tail and looking proud.

“Oh god, god, Kayla! You shouldn't be here!” *Oh god, oh thank god she is.* “What are you doing here?”

“Let's get that guy on here,” says Kayla, nodding toward Comgall, slack at Alana's feet. Kayla hops down, hands Alana a helmet. Alana looks at it. Kayla takes it back from her and drops it onto Alana's head, clips shut a buckle under her chin. Appears to think for a second, then takes her own helmet off and puts it on Comgall. “In case we drop him.”

“Kayla, no, you take this—” Alana moves to take off the helmet, and Kayla takes her hands

and stops her.

“Fuck that. I hardly ever wear one. Help me lift him.” She picks up Comgall’s feet.

“Please don’t drop him,” Alana says, and receives as answer a look dripping with condescension. “Alright, alright.” They pick him up and heave him onto the back of the ATV.

“Alright,” says Kayla. “I’m going to put Callie on the seat between us, and I’m going to tie this”—a piece of ragged rope looped into Callie’s collar—“around my waist. And then I want you to sit sort of sideways, like—yes, like that—so you can hold onto him. It’s going to be rough.”

When did this kid learn how to be so effective in a crisis?

Kayla is more skilled at navigating the vehicle and the terrain than Alana would have expected. At first the ride is bumpy but is not in itself frightening. The engine drowns out most of the noise around them. Alana places her feet on the narrow plastic step, one hand gripping her seat, one hand draped across Comgall. Also gripping.

She’s settling in, has closed her eyes against the pain from the smoke, is starting to think the worst might be over, when Kayla hollers from beside her, “bloody fucking *hell!*” and Alana looks behind them and she is looking into a wall of fire, moving toward them. Travelling in the same direction as they are—faster.

★

When the shag wakes again, it is to a more immediate shaking and a loud and painful booming. Rocks are sliding around her and then her own rock jolts, groans and begins to slide, too. She grunts. The inside of her mouth is a brief dot of bright blue against the orange glow. She launches herself into the air just as a huge crack rings out and the slope gives out.

All she can think is *away*, and she flies, she beats her wings toward the butter moon, but it is so exhausting and she is slipping, slipping. She lands on the rollicking ocean, sucks in air and dives below the surface and it is as if her body can finally breathe again. She tucks her wings against her body, paddles her webbed feet to the motion of the water. Her glide downward is smooth and sure. Her feathers become heavy with water, attuning themselves to the difference between sea and air.

*

The fire heats Alana's face, painful heat like leaning over boiling water, only the scalding steam is everywhere, they are in it, they are breathing it, they are—

“Hold on!” yells Kayla. The engine growls underneath them. The vehicle begins to vibrate, an up-close echo of the island's own quaking.

The earthquake. It feels like it happened years ago.

The vehicle shudders, accelerates.

Lunges forward.

★

Rubble drifts like aimless ghosts through a sea freshly empty of food and life. She does not wonder at the strange hollowness around her. She isn't hungry. She surfaces again, calmer, and at last finds equilibrium floating on the surface of the sea. The island's silhouette is transformed. She sees a gasp of bright orange. Then she closes her eyes to wait.

Chapter 19

The oak's outer layers are charred and crusted. Some bits of these will flake away. Brittle and bruised, they will soar off on the wind. They will join the billions of other tiny pieces that make up the soft blanket that covers the island, or the spongy one on the ocean floor.

The heartwood is still strong. Around it, new green growth still pulses. Water sighs upward from the roots, rehydrating what the fire parched. The oak will share this water with the smaller trees, will share food, will remember this heat in the little efficiencies it weaves into its offspring's DNA.

Already, underneath the black soil, rhizomes are beginning to tie things back together; already, insects are returning. The oak's branches become heavy with snow and many of the insects wonder why they woke up.

A wind picks up. Damp snow shuffles off the oak's branches. The tree responds with soft crackling sounds. There is a tiny vibration when each clump hits the ground.

The scuttle flies take shelter. The beetles go back to sleep.

The peat continues to smoulder; carbon seeps out. But this bog revels in fire: how it snuffs out the seeds of encroaching trees, how it makes the bulbs of orchids burst open. And these Highland plants are used to being tough. They survive on surfaces that are little more than a dusting of soil on pitchstone.

The fungi do not wait. Spores settle over thirsty trees. Tiny hairs thicken to stalks. The fungi spread across the many surfaces of the burned forest like this, in wild and fantastical patterns and shapes, lacework and lump and honeycomb and petal. They make structures that could house and feed a kingdom full of scuttle flies for winters on winters to come. Their energy is frenetic: a universe of colour and texture in a single night. When the temperature drops and ice crystals form around them, they bask in their own heat. Latched onto dead trees, they begin the work of breaking the wood down, of making soil. The work of rebuilding.

Around and inside them, the winter insects whirr.

*

Comgall is floating when he wakes.

The last thing he can remember is dreaming there was a landslide, and even his foggy mind knows this is ridiculous. There was a minor quake, and then—and then—

He opens his eyes. He's in a hospital bed. Pale light filters through green curtains. The room seems oddly old-fashioned, and then he remembers: he's not in Canada.

Then the full force of his last remembered hours hits him and he feels his whole body slump as the worst memory of all returns: it was his fault. He dropped that joint. He'd thought he'd put it out, but he must not have. And now—

He lets the feeling sit for a few seconds. Then he starts to shift. No IVs or anything like that; he is just lying in a bed. A little gauze pad on his wrist where maybe there was an IV at some point. His lungs hurt, and the inside of his mouth and his throat. His breath is raspy. There's little to smell here besides the general antiseptic scent of a hospital room, but his body is filled with a physical memory of smoke.

He sits up, then stands. A wave of dizziness. When did he last eat?

He balances himself with a hand on the chair beside the bed, and takes three slow steps to the window. Pushes back the curtains and looks out.

The scene before him is of a place he doesn't recognize. A parking lot on a hill, then what looks like a small village sloping down to a grey coastline, the horizon blurred out by fog.

So he's not on the island anymore.

Is there still an island to be on?

He places his hand on the cool glass and breathes. A patch of steam forms on the window. Outside, spread across the cars and dumpsters and pavement and leafless trees and rooftops, is a light dusting of snow.

*

Not long after the shaking, the shapeshifters move in. A mass of wobbling, wavering,

undulating light pulsing in fantastical shapes like ink in water.

Perhaps they have been waiting. Perhaps they have a sixth sense for open, food-rich spaces.

It's not like they have much else to think about. They spend most of their lives drifting.

When the sea floor shakes and the ocean roils, they go with the flow. They float, they nudge, they billow. In and out and back and forth and sucking in and chowing down on whatever food the quaking throws their way. Where others flee, they revel. Expand, pounce, contract, kill. They are here and there and going everywhere. Pulse and writhe, eat, excrete. Pulse, writhe, multiply.

They come in small numbers, first. Hundreds, perhaps. Spherical, fist-sized hunks of gelatin divided into sections marked by little indentations. The sections meet in a dark knot at the top: each creature's personal epicentre, the point of reference from which it swims. The spot looks like a heart or a brain; in other jellyfish it might be the sexual organs, an indicator of a more complex reproductive plan.

In this jellyfish it is the mouth, and procreating is simple: ten thousand eggs per day and no need for sex. Each one of them is male and female both. Cut off a piece of anyone and they will grow into another. Drifting, swimming, catching the light. Eating until full, doubling in weight each day.

Continuing to kill until the food is gone.

And their food, the plankton, is about all that's left in the wake of all that trembling.

The snow on the burned heath is almost more than Alana and Crane can handle.

The vegetation is blackened, trees have toppled, half the forest is reduced to ash. The other half buzzes with life now, birds and rabbits and cows and sheep. The farm animals huddle together in frightened clusters.

But the snow fresh and new on top of the devastation, the sun making a slurry of the topmost millimetres of it, then cooling to freeze it so that a layer of bright ice encases the white. The shapes are otherworldly, a thousand malformed fingers reaching and twisting up out of the networks of charred heather roots. The soil has gone slate grey, clumps of it so fragile they disintegrate if you so much as touch them.

Devastation, but not quite. Something breath-stopping in it. Expansive.

“Remember Dad always quoting that poem?” she asks Crane. “The really long one. I always remember it in bits and pieces. ‘These fragments I have shored’...”

Crane gives a little laugh. “Appropriate. *The Waste Land*. It’s only one of the most famous poems there is. Hell, it would have to be, if I know it.” He reaches over and pulls her into him.

“‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins.’ I always thought it made it an optimistic ending. Ravi says I’m just naive, I don’t understand literature.”

“I’m not one to ask,” says Alana, but in her mind she sees a canvas. She sees a vast array of

all the bits and pieces of things the past day's events have torn up and uprooted, affixed to the canvas by thick, slimy glue. She sees a dusting of sea salt over all it, a few scattered sycamore leaves, still green. These fragments.

They stand together in silence for a few moments, looking at the scene before them. Alana is shivering a little. The cold and damp. The largeness of it all.

"So," she says finally. "Why—?"

Crane shrugs. "They assume the seismic work. Disturbs things, you know. I don't think we know yet for sure. I think they'll deny it. Shite like this happens sometimes, don't you know, lass? I'm only grateful Ravi wasn't here. I don't know—he's not tough like us Brits—" his voice falters and she sees her father, falling out of sight.

His voice:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish?

Him rubbing at her hair, "are you warm enough, love? Are you bored?" They were on the beach, leaning against a boulder, nearly sunset and an autumn chill in the air. He'd stuck the little beat-up volume in his chest pocket. It hadn't been a good day; he'd been almost breathless with anxiety, and after tea he'd torn apart half the house in search of the book.

"Crane has a copy, I'm sure," Mairi had said.

"You don't understand," Alastair had answered. "I just—I just need to hold it—"

“Alana, darling, why don’t you stay here with me?” her mother said when he finally found it, when he asked her if she wanted to come to the beach. Alastair let out a low guttural sound, somewhere between a growl and a cry, and Alana clung to him. She was cold, and she was bored, but—and, twenty years later, just south of the same beach, she feels a flash of gratitude for this—she would never have told him that. She would never have left him.

...Son of man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats...

As for the fire, of course, Alana already knows everyone suspects the bonfire at the bothy. Todd, who organized the party and abandoned it, and by association Alana and everyone else who was there. The thought of Todd makes her squirm.

Mairi had opted out of visiting the island. She told them their house was gone; said she didn’t need to see it. Crane and Alana scoffed. Technically no one was allowed back yet, but Crane had a small boat he’d left on the other side of the sound and they took that across.

And Mairi was right. The house is a pile of rubble.

Alana tries to focus on what was not lost: Comgall, even if she is pretty sure he is still lost to her. Her mother. Kayla. Callie. Crane. Herself. In fact, no human fatalities that they know of. It turns out the community knows how to rally together in an emergency; knows how to take to the sea.

Crane goes to check on his own house, and Alana finds a rock to sit on. She huddles with her arms folded. Snow gathers in the creases of her sleeves. She wonders about the sheep, Kip and Scrooge and Sally and Hedgehog, Molly and her two little ones, and the cows, but can't begin to think how to look for them or what she would do if she found them. Mairi will know; someone will know; someone will begin to deal with it all—soon. Alana feels clenched up and scared. But it would seem the worst has happened. It would seem, now, that they will have to do something else.

She managed to charge her mobile at the hospital last night and it rings. She jumps, sees the caller ID, and feels another jolt. “Hi.”

There's silence for a moment.

Then: “Hi.” Dull-sounding, not like him at all.

She is bursting. “You're awake! How are you feeling? I'm sorry I left—I didn't think you'd want to see me, and we wanted to see what had happened over here—I'm back on the island now—have you talked to anyone yet? You're at the hospital on the next island over. It's small—they won't be keeping you long—they took the worst cases to the mainland, of course, but everyone seems to be surviving—” She makes herself stop.

“I'm okay,” he says. “I am so, so sorry.”

“What are you talking about?”

He's quiet for so long she wonders if the connection is dead. “Comgall? Are you there? I'm

just looking around here, and then I'll probably have to talk to the police, they've been wanting everyone who was at the bonfire—" Her voice wavers. It wasn't her fire, but—

"The bonfire," he says, and her chest tightens another notch. Had he forgotten? "Alana," he says, "I don't remember—how did I get out? The last thing I remember I was stuck under a tree and I thought I was dead."

"Callie found you," she says. The memory makes her feel a little warmer. "Callie brought me to you, and then this kid with an ATV—I think Callie went to get her, this kid Kayla, she got us all out on the ATV. Otherwise, yeah. We would both have been dead." The statement hangs in the air between them, seeming to gain physical thickness as they breathe into their mobile phones on either side of this disturbed channel between these two small islands in the north Atlantic. Alana thinks of Sean, of cancer and the dark, cold ocean. Human flesh and marine snow. But of course they would have pulled his body out, she thinks. Would he have wanted that?

"Callie," Comgall says. "Is she okay?"

"Yes."

"And they think it was the bonfire that... that started...?"

"Yeah. I mean, I guess they're pretty sure. It's badly burned around that area, and—well—we were all scared by the quake and we knocked things over and the earthquake may well have knocked something into the fire or knocked the pile of wood over on its own. Someone was

trying to put it out, I guess not well enough. We should have been watching it, but—”

“You were looking for me.”

“We *all* should have been watching it.” *Todd didn’t come looking for you with me*, she wants to say, but can’t.

“Will they—” he sighs. “Okay. Alana. I’m not calculating enough to not tell you. I was smoking and I dropped the joint and I may not have put it out well enough.”

She feels suddenly dizzy. The entire hill is decimated—the complete length of the path he likely walked to the summit; the vegetation on the summit itself; the tree that was holding him down.

“Well,” she says. “Wow. But our fire was a lot bigger than a *potentially* half-lit joint. In all likelihood, that’s what it was. I think—” She stops. Something heavy lifts away from her, and the very impossibility of certainty takes that thing’s place. The cool sun glows more gold than silver as it climbs higher in the sky. The waste land under it takes on just a hint of gold too, like a memory of warmth. What is it that she thinks?

She doesn’t shrink away when the wind hits. It is cold, but not unbearably so. It is cold and they are alive.

“So this is how it feels,” he says.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry I didn’t say your dad wasn’t your fault. Of course it wasn’t. I

don't know why I didn't say it."

"I think," she says, "we're going to have to tell ourselves it was none of us. Or, or." She bites her lip, feels a tiny worm working its way up her esophagus, wriggling out. "Or it was all of us."

"Can we believe that, do you think?" he asks.

"I don't know."

"I don't think I can. You know—you know that the earthquake—you know that fracking—
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"I know."

"So."

"So. We move on. We do what we can."

"We do what we can," he repeats, his voice dry, a little hollow, a little sarcastic.

"Yes. We."

"Alright then." He pauses. "How's your house?"

"Gone."

"Fuck. I'm sorry."

"Yeah. We'll be okay." And suddenly she believes this. The sun on her skin, the air, the smell of the fire mixed with the smell of the sea. Salt and life and all the rest of it.

"Right. *Shit*," he says, the word more like spit than speech, a hissing epicentre of emotions released with it and then silence. She wishes she could see his face.

“Hey,” Alana says. “It happened. The worst is over. We’re all safe. Mum’s looking into the insurance and those things. She’s okay. Like surprisingly okay. Everyone is together and that’s helping. And they’re saying—they’re hoping maybe the project will get shut down. If it is deemed to have caused this.”

Comgall sighs. “They never get shut down.”

“I’m just going to wait for Crane and then we’ll be back, okay? I... I’ll see you then.”

She waits for it, for him to tell her not to come, that he doesn’t want to see her, but all he says is, “yeah,” and the word makes it sound like he’s not even there anymore, or maybe never has been.

★

The leatherback rides out the quake’s booms with grace. His kind have been swimming through these waters for a hundred million years. It is difficult to rattle him.

When the water calms, he surfaces. His lungs gather briny air. Sometimes he can spot food from up here, especially in light like this.

But he sees nothing, so he dives. The water is steely grey with shots of black in the ripples, splashes of white where the sun spills through.

Then he sees it. Far off, next to one of those shapes he would usually avoid—a dark, hulking

thing, jutting up out of the water and hovering at the surface. A single thin tentacle extending straight downward from its midsection, down and down into the sea until it merges with the blackness.

But next to it, around it: one of the biggest groups of them he's ever seen. Writhing and undulating, glowing. A feast. More than he could imagine eating in an entire season.

He points himself towards them. His own body midnight blue against the grey, light blue patches scattered across it, chaotic like the marine snow that drifts constantly around him, with its countless tears of flesh or spore and their restless slow-motion energy. Its random magic, like the ocean sighing.

Sometimes, when things feel balanced, when there is food to eat, the spots on his carapace seem to be part of this kaleidoscope too, his shell flexing and contracting with the waves. More often they lump and plod with the rest of him. The roughness of his rubbery skin, the craters and scars.

Today, though, he speeds toward the giant black tentacle with confidence. With grace.

With a stomach that has space for so few jellies he will fill it and still go hungry.

★

The fog has lifted by the time they dock. She can see the silhouette of the island now, an even

watercolour wash against the sky. Payne's grey. There's a visible difference to the shape of the side where the slide was. A chunk taken out, a rough bite left behind.

"Why did you come?" Alana asks when she arrives at the hospital.

"I showed a kid in a gas station a picture of you," he says. The stalemate in his eyes breaks and it's the way she imagines the slope must have broken. A surge, then a rush, then a crumbling. He covers his face with his hands for a couple of minutes. He'd been sitting on the edge of the bed facing her, and now he lets himself fall backward. She lays her head on his chest.

"Thank you," she says.

"Can we go for a walk?" he asks. "I'll be slow. But I need to move."

They walk down the hill into town and buy cheddar and onion sandwiches, then make their way along the harbour. The narrow road winds past wharves and small fish houses on the water side. On the other side is a steep reddish cliff, the tops of houses barely visible above it. The sun has gone low; the sky is cotton candy-pink. It makes everything else look a little rosy, too, and Alana feels calmer. The solidity of him at her side, his steady pace in spite of everything.

They sit on a small wharf and let their legs swing over the edge. Little waves lap beneath their feet, the blues in them fading to grey as the sun sets. In the water she can just make out a few stray fronds of kelp, a couple of lumpy moon jellyfish, a couple of crisp packets that make her feel hot and angry. She makes herself breathe. Moves her sightline beyond the litter and toward the horizon. Her mood quiets and she thinks she can feel the tides, can feel the breath of all the

whales who swim in there, their exhalations careening along the water's surface. She can feel oxygen coursing through gills, fins through water, plankton buoyant on the current. She can sense dulse and Irish moss and all the algae. She can see the last gasps of sunlight moving through their fronds. She can see the strings of plastic twined around them too, the six pack yokes and rubber gloves, the errant unidentifiable garbage. She'll paint it all someday, she knows this with sudden certainty.

Then another certainty: Comgall's hand on her thigh. "Look," he says, nodding toward the horizon. Somewhere in the distance, along the surface of the water—a strip of something glowing.

Then they start to see, along the surface of the water, a weird glow off in the distance.

Alana notices it and then she dismisses it: it's the last of the sunset; it's a reflection of the sky; they are both so tired. It's a cloud they can't see exactly because of the angle from which they are looking; it's a light from a boat, it's someone out for an evening cruise. She's finished with mysterious glowing in the night, she wants nothing more than to curl up next to Comgall and sleep for days.

But as the sky grows darker, the glow grows stronger. It is as if that bit of ocean has been lit up from within, brilliant purple rising from the depths.

"The fuck," says Comgall. Then: "Bioluminescence. Shit, that's amazing." She thinks of fireflies, of fungi, and a small spark lights in her.

Then he says: "That's where the fracking op is, isn't it?"

“Yeah. I guess.” She squints and can see it: the silhouette of the rig, a dark hulking creature against the last rays of reflected light in the sky. “Yeah, that’s where.”

“It’s bioluminescence,” he says again. “It has to be. But what...” His voice trails off. But a slow smile has grown on his face.

Then the glow spreads through her, too. The destruction of the past couple of days, but the ocean still there, twinkling with luminous life. That big beautiful spread of light, thousands and millions and maybe billions of tiny plankton glowing together maybe just for the sheer joy of it. “Makes me feel small,” she says.

“Yeah.”

She feels wild energy building in her. She could run. She could jump off the wharf and swim out to the glow. She could glow purple, too.

“Yeah,” he says again, and this time his cheeks slacken into a smile with real warmth. He leans closer. The ocean glows and she feels something glowing inside herself, drawing her into it. Something in her impossibly and miraculously animal, herself somehow finally part of it all. Out there where it is glowing they are blasting and sucking up the very marrow of the earth and her home has just fallen into the sea and yet, even now, here they are. And there is the sea, and the life in it has light.

Chapter 20

The shapeshifters were not the first to feel the seismic jolt, but they were the first to take note of the space it made: the island's quiet retribution on behalf of shale.

The jolt originated deep down, and as it reverberated upward, some of the movement made contact with steel—and hung on. Shooting upward along the metal, giving a little shake. A jolt that became a slip and then—as the shaking abated—a point of weakness. Then, finally, a little gap in the steel cylinder.

And they might not have filled the gap, if there were not so many of them. If the eggs were not tumbling over one another to hatch, if the plankton and krill were not so plentiful, their scent tantalizing as the tumbling water tossed them about.

The small jellies and the eggs slide in nicely.

None of the others notice that they choke as soon as they go in there. There remains, after all, a gap to fill; and after that, an ocean.

So they keep going until there's no space left.

There are hundreds of shapeshifters now.

Thousands.

Millions.

Too many.

The steel cylinder chokes.

The ones still outside barely register the poison seeping out of the cylinder and into the water around them. An invisible geyser of gas roused so recently from a long, long sleep.

The chemicals blooming outward. Not just seeping into the ocean. Pouring.

Part 5

Winter

After the sea floor stopped shaking the water smelled different. The light refracting through the countless jellyfish was like nothing she'd ever seen. The bay felt smaller. Sounds lost their movement. They warped, bounced off the gelatin, or slid into it and got stuck there. She couldn't see any food.

They decided to sleep; they decided to be grateful, at least, for the relative quiet. For the million tiny salt crystals rough on their skin, soothing them.

And then morning came. Oh, morning.

Morning of brightening eyes, of sunlight blooming brighter than the jellyfish, of swimming at exhilarating speed toward a distant cloud of krill. Morning of darting light, full stomachs, the song of the underwater cliffs ringing through their bones.

The little creatures looked sinister all massed together. Unnerving, too, that they had no eyes she could focus on. No way in; no way to know if they were watching her or just carrying on.

But the creatures are small. The ocean is big. They reproduce in large numbers, but they die in these numbers too. They die without fighting; they seem hardly to possess the barest of will.

And so the whales agreed: they would go further offshore for the winter, as always. And when the waters began to warm and the sun stayed in the sky for longer, they would come back again.

After they had eaten, they headed west with the sun. The top layer of water warmed her, the ocean's memory of autumn. She felt such a rush of energy and she slipped upward, shot out of

the water and spun under the sun, a sparkling trail of water droplets whirling around her. For a moment she forgot she was mourning, forgot she was running away. For a moment she was only spinning energy, herself surrounded by dancing water and air.

Now: they sing.

There is nothing else to do.

They sing.